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Communication Experiences of Latina and Latino Immigrant Custodial Workers within a University Setting

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COMMUNICATION EXPERIENCES OF LATINA AND LATINO IMMIGRANT
CUSTODIAL WORKERS WITHIN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

by

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The final copy of this dissertation has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Abstract

Alvarez, Wilfredo (Ph.D., Communication)

Communication Experiences of Latina and Latino Immigrant Custodial Workers within a University Setting

Dissertation Directed by Professor Brenda J. Allen and Associate Professor Lisa A. Flores

The organizational communication subdiscipline has made great strides in theory and research in recent years, but little is known about the workplace communication experiences of Latinas and Latinos in the United States. Even less is known about these sociocultural group members’ experiences when they work in lower status, blue-collar roles in organizations. To fill this gap, this research study examined everyday communication experiences of 25 Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers at a large public university in the southwestern United States, for the purpose of generating theoretical and practical knowledge about routine organizational communication from the standpoint of these traditionally marginalized social actors.

In-depth interviews were conducted with custodians to gain a deeper understanding of their everyday communication experiences with supervisors, coworkers, and customers. Additionally, this study sought to gain knowledge regarding the extent to which socially significant social identity categories, such as race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status, and occupation, played a role in custodians’ communication experiences.

Findings showed that language use played a vital role in Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communication experiences in and out of the workplace. Participants cited daily communication challenges, host society members’ unwillingness to accommodate them, and their desire to integrate into U.S. society as issues connected to language use. Communication
with supervisors was mostly negative, whereas interactions with coworkers were mutually supportive and affirming. Communication with customers yielded both negative and positive outcomes. Regarding social identity, participants felt that their race-ethnicity (i.e., Latina/o) was a primary reason for the verbal and nonverbal hostile communication directed at them from host society members. Participants also stated that social class, immigration status, and occupation were equally related to host society members’ aggressive communicative behaviors toward them.

Keywords: Latina, Latino, Immigrant, Custodian, University, Race, Ethnicity, Social Class, Co-cultural Communication, Language, Supervisor, Subordinate, Coworker, Customer, Occupation
Dedication

To Maria, my beloved and incomparable life partner.
Acknowledgments

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Arriving in Nuebayol

The exchange that I depict below took place on my third day as a newly arrived 17-year-old immigrant from the Dominican Republic, now residing in the United States. It was a hot summer evening and my father, my two uncles, and I were chatting in the living room of our apartment in the Bronx borough of New York City—a rundown coop apartment owned by my father’s brother in a crack-infested area where teenage mothers, drug dealers and abusers are the order of the day—having what, at the time, seemed like a mundane conversation. I vividly remember the following exchange that has become more meaningful to me over the years:

Uncle Jonathan (pseudonym): Bueno tu sabes que este es un pais donde hay muchas oportunidades, pero tu tienes que trabajar duro para conseguir esas oportunidades.
Me: Bueno, ayúdeme a conseguir un trabajo. Yo trabajo donde sea; donde puedo comenzar a buscar?
Uncle J.: No te apures, yo voy a preguntar en el golf club. Pero pregunta en otros lados.
Me: Ok, sí no hay problema. Yo le empiezo a preguntar a otras personas.
Uncle J.: Una cosa si te digo, si tu te vas a quedar a viviendo aquí en los Estados Unidos tu tienes que aprender Ingles.

Translation:

Uncle Jonathan: Well, you know, this is a country [United States] where there are a lot of opportunities, but you have to work hard to reach those opportunities.
Me: Well, help me find work; I’ll work wherever. Where can I start looking?

1Slang term that Dominican nationals use to refer to the city of New York.
Uncle J.: Don’t worry, I’m gonna ask at the golf club, but ask in other places.

Me: Ok, no problem. I’ll start asking other people . . .

Uncle J.: I’ll tell you one thing though: if you are staying here in the United States, you have to learn English.

This brief exchange with my uncle is a relevant opening point for a discussion about several important themes that this study addresses: (a) the social experiences of Latin-American immigrants and their cultural transition and adaptation process in the United States, (b) the role of language and communication in a new culture, (c) and significant relationships of the workplace to the last two themes. My uncle and I were not aware of the significance of our conversation at the time, but today, that conversation becomes a point of departure for the story that unfolds in the following pages. Unbeknownst to my uncle and me, we were having a conversation about my sociocultural and economic integration (Kim, 2005). Additionally, we were talking about an immigrant’s need to learn English. Lastly, our conversation’s subtext was about the relationship of work to social and cultural integration as well as language acquisition.

The conversation with my uncle suggests that many Latina and Latino immigrants, as well as other non-English-speaking immigrants, enter organizations in the United States having serious communication challenges. Furthermore, many Latina and Latino immigrants have to settle for blue-collar jobs that people in the lower rungs of society typically occupy. In the context of the U. S. sociocultural system, Latina and Latino immigrants are subaltern “subjects” through the lenses of language use, race-ethnicity, and immigration status. This situation positions Latina and Latino immigrants working in the role of custodian at a predominantly white U.S. organization as socially pertinent “subjects” to explore issues of difference and communication in the workplace (Aldama, 2001; B. J. Allen, 2011).
Therefore, this research study explores everyday communication experiences of 25 Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers at a large public university in the United States. This study attempts to generate theoretical and practical knowledge about routine organizational communicative practices from the standpoint of traditionally marginalized social actors. The participants are, thus, mostly persons who migrated to the United States as young adults (16 years old and older) or later in their life, lack formal education, and do not speak English fluently. The study employs in-depth interviewing to investigate the custodians’ routine communication experiences.

In this introductory chapter, I present an overview of the background and context that provide the basis for the study. I then outline the research problem and the study’s purpose. I continue with a description of the rationale for, and significance of, the study as well as my standpoints (i.e., subject positions) and assumptions as a researcher. I close the chapter with an outline of the key definitions of the main terms used throughout the study.

**Background and Context**

Contemporary shifts in internal demographics and immigration patterns have contributed to the increase of Latinas and Latinos in workplaces across the United States (e.g., as service workers; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Specifically, over 50% of people who hold service positions in the United States are Latina and Latino immigrants or U.S.-born persons of Latin-American descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). In 2006, the percentage of Latinas employed in service occupations (e.g., housekeepers, maids, food service, and custodians) surpassed the number of native-born women by 10%, 30% to 20% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). In that same year, the percentage of Latino service workers was 7% greater than native-born men, 20% to 13% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Given the large number of Latina and Latino immigrants who
continue to enter the United States each year, these numbers are expected to rise. United States’ workplaces are beginning to see larger numbers of Latinas and Latinos, not just in lower status occupations but also across organizational hierarchies. Organizational communication research, however, does not reveal a body of work that has paid particular attention to the workplace experiences of Latina and Latino immigrants.

In spite of the previous statistics’ clear relevance, Latinas and Latinos’ workplace communication experiences remain understudied within the organizational communication subdiscipline. Consequently, organizational communication researchers may know little about Latinas and Latinos’ workplace communication experiences. For instance, a search in two of the main online databases for communication studies yielded only seven relevant articles when I entered the keywords “Latina/o,” “Organizational,” or “Workplace,” and “Communication.” This outcome suggests that organizational communication scholars have not seized the opportunity to conduct research that illuminates the workplace communication experiences of Latinas and Latinos in the United States.

Organizational communication scholars claim that we are interested in understanding shared meaning in goal-oriented collectivities (B. J. Allen, 2011; Buzzanell, 1994; Mumby, 1993, 1996; Putnam, 1990), but the lack of inclusion of socially marginalized persons suggests that there are specific agendas within the subdiscipline (Parker, 2002). For instance, organizational communication scholars have emphasized issues related to gender (with a particular emphasis on white women’s experiences; e.g., Acker, 1990; Parker, 2002; Wood, 1992), but we have overlooked other social identities, such as race-ethnicity, with much of this research focusing on the experiences of blacks and whites interacting (see, e.g., B. J. Allen, 2005; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003; Orbe & Allen, 2008). Furthermore, other social identities that historically have mattered in U.S. society have been overlooked, such as social class and
immigrant status (for exceptions, see Amason, Watkins-Allen, & Holmes, 1999; Gibson & Papa, 2000), thus limiting the ability to more inclusively understand and address everyday workplace communicative processes occurring among persons who are different from the traditional focus on white workers.

Although communication studies of Latinas and Latinos is a burgeoning area of study in the communication discipline, organizational communication appears not to be an active participant in this contemporary scholarly surge. Nevertheless, it is important to note that there have been some attempts from communication scholars to study Latinas and Latinos’ experiences in organizational contexts (e.g., Alvarez, Orbe, Urban, & Tavares, in press; Delgado, 2009). In spite of these recent efforts, a review of communication research that is inclusive of Latinas and Latinos reveals a subdisciplinary commitment that somewhat excludes organizational communication scholarship (e.g., Amaya, 2007a; 2007b; Avila-Saavedra, 2010; Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Kopacz, 2008). In this scenario, the present study represents a unique contribution to the organizational communication subdiscipline because it responds to communication scholars’ calls to action regarding studies of race-ethnicity and more specifically because it explores Latina and Latino communicative experiences in the workplace.

Scholars like B. J. Allen (1996) have claimed that studying traditionally marginalized groups is critical to enhancing knowledge of organizational communication processes. As B. J. Allen (1996) argued:

Knowledge available from the study of women’s [and minority groups’] lives might enable women and other oppressed groups to improve the conditions of their lives because, as “strangers” or “outsiders,” they can identify patterns that are not easily identifiable by “natives” or “insiders.” (p. 259)
Such observations indicate that a need exists for organizational communication theory and research to proactively engage issues related to communication between nondominant and dominant social groups (Orbe, Allen, & Flores, 2006). Knowledge obtained from studying traditionally disenfranchised groups is highly valuable to the organizational communication subdiscipline. Engaging in such efforts would push those who study organizations to diversify their scholarship and, thereby, understand a wider range of experiences across organizational hierarchies. Thus far, organizational communication scholarship has been limited in terms of who is studied and the issues that have been studied.

Scholars such as B. J. Allen (1995) and Parker (2002) have advanced invitations to expand the ways in which race-ethnicity and social class are studied in organizational communication. Few scholars have embraced these calls to action to study the workplace communication experiences of racial-ethnic groups such as Latinas and Latinos (see Amason et al., 1999; Gates, 2005, 2006, 2008; Pompper, 2007). Social class is particularly important because this present research study’s participants occupy positions in organizations that traditionally have been occupied by persons of low socioeconomic status. According to Jackman (1979), traditionally, a person’s occupation has been regarded as a key element of socioeconomic status (Jackman & Sheuer-Senter, 1980). The way that social actors tend to associate occupations with social class suggests that they are more sensitive to socioeconomic hierarchies based on occupational status, skill, income, and job authority than they are with blue-collar–white-collar binaries (Jackman, 1979).

Organizational communication scholarship too often has focused on middle and upper management employees; consequently, there is a need to examine how processes, such as relationship building, play out in different hierarchical locations and with historically
marginalized organizational actors (Sias & Cahill, 1998). According to Martin, Hammer, and Bradford (1994), people who share ethnic-socialization patterns develop similar expectations about competent communicative behaviors, whereas people who experience different ethnic-socialization patterns may not share those same expectations (Collier, 1991; Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989; Hecht, Ribeau, & Sedano, 1993). In a United States diverse workplace where persons come from vastly different ethnic socialization patterns, workplace interactions can potentially be highly asymmetrical and, thus, filled with communicative complexities.

In this communicative uneven setting, the social-dominant organizational members tend to possess cultural, symbolic, and social capital, as well as institutional power, whereas nondominant organizational members have far fewer resources (Blommaert, 2001; Bourdieu, 1991) and, consequently, their interactions can result in negative outcomes, the burden of which typically is on the nondominant social group member. The task to understand the other person’s intention and (re)act accordingly tends to be placed more heavily on nondominant group members than on dominant social group members. This type of communication context is germane if the organizational actors involved are people from a different culture. For instance, Jian (2008) found that the degree to which employees adjust to their host cultures influences the perceived quality of the relationship that they have with their supervisors, coworkers, and mentors. This finding suggests that it would be in the best interest of organizational communication scholars to expand understanding of both horizontal (i.e., peer to peer) and vertical (i.e., superior–subordinate) communication in contemporary multicultural organizations.

This present study constitutes a start in gaining deeper understandings of organizational experiences across organizational hierarchies. Organizations are hierarchical in nature and, historically, labor charts tend to reflect societal hierarchies (Wood, 1992). This observation
suggests that communication dynamics in the workplace may pose challenges for vertical communication. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) ideas about social actors’ position within social structures suggests how people’s roles within these social structures can influence their communication: “the position of a given agent in the social space can be defined by the position he [or she] occupies in the different [social] fields, that is, in the distribution of powers that are active in each of them” (p. 230). This argument and similar observations tend to inform scholars’ ideas about how communication happening at the top of organizational hierarchies may be qualitatively different than vertical communication or communication occurring at the bottom of organizational hierarchies (Sias & Jablin, 1995). As a result, this study investigates communication occurring both vertically and at the bottom of organizational hierarchies to assess the nature and processes involved in those interactions.

The historical, institutional, cultural, and relational contexts overlapping in this study position custodians within regular dominant–nondominant communication episodes where communication challenges could potentially arise (Drzwiecka, 2000). Communication researchers point to some specific communication challenges that the custodians in this study may face in their work contexts (Hopson & Orbe, 2007; Orbe, 1998). For instance, in cross-cultural interactions, if the social-dominant cultural group has negative attitudes toward nondominant ethnic groups, these attitudes can function to shape mundane communication situations, even if the nondominant group members are competent communicators (Meewis, 1994). These negative attitudes also could influence the dominant group members’ motivation to accommodate the minority group member’s communication style (Scollon & Scollon, 1995; S. W. Smith, Scholnick, Crutcher, Simeon, & Smith, 1991). Two other potential communicative challenges across organizational hierarchies are nondominant group members’ (in)ability to
deploy commonly accepted competent communicative strategies (Shi-Xu, 1994), and their resistance to ethnification in their interactions with dominant group members (Day, 1994). These communication challenges are relevant to examine from the standpoint of historically marginalized social groups.

Organizational communication research has produced a considerable body of knowledge that allows scholars and practitioners to understand a variety of communication experiences in various organizational contexts (Mumby, 1996), but little knowledge exists about the communication experiences of particular organizational members (e.g., Latinas and Latinos). Given the growing number of Latina and Latino immigrants who enter the U.S. workplace every year, it is important to know what types of communication experiences these persons have. Additionally, these immigrants are persons who make significant contributions to the labor force in this country. This lack of information prevents scholars and practitioners from effectively understanding and addressing communication issues concerning those lower status organizational actors, especially persons who work in culturally invisible jobs and lack the cultural capital necessary to thrive within organizations in the United States. Such a scenario can create a great deal of room for grave communication challenges and potential workplace mistreatment and abuse.

The purpose of this research study is to examine the routine communication of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers at a large public university in the United States to gain a deeper understanding of these persons’ communication processes in the work context. This study specifically focuses on how the custodians perceive and talk about their everyday interactions with supervisors, coworkers, and customers. Drawing from the body of research in organizational communication, it appears that acquiring in-depth understanding of Latina and
Latino custodians’ communicative practices from their standpoints would strategically advance organizational communication research, theory, and practice. For this reason, the current study is significant to this communication subdiscipline.

**Rationale**

Scene 1 – “If he doesn’t learn English now . . .”

A conversation with a counselor when I was enrolling in high school in the Bronx, NY:

Counselor: How many credits does he have?

Uncle Ramiro (pseudonym): Cuantos creditos tienes? [*Translation: how many credits do you have?*]

Me: No se, mire el record de notas. . . [*Translation: I don’t know; look at my record . . .*]

Counselor: Ok, he should do 2 years here . . .

Uncle Ramiro: El dice que tu deberias hacer dos anos mas por lo menos. . . [*Translation: He says that you should do 2 more years at least . . .*]

Me: Por que? Yo termine el bachillerato en Santo Domingo. . . puedo hacer un ano mas y ya? [*Translation: Why? I finished high school in Santo Domingo . . . can I do one more year and that’s it?*]

Counselor: Here’s the thing, I think he should spend the time here in high school and learn English. If he doesn’t learn English now, professors are not going to wait for him to learn in college . . .

Scene 2 – “English, English, English! You must learn English! It is very, very important . . .”

A conversation with my English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in her office:

Mrs. Dunbarn (pseudonym): I like your progress in the class so far; you are doing very, very well. I am proud of you.
Me: Ok, thank you. I see so many other students who do not look very interested in learning . . .

Mrs. Dunbarn: I know, I know, they don’t know how much harm they are doing to themselves. If they don’t learn English they are going to hurt their future. But you are not, because you are learning a lot . . .

Me: Thank you. I just feel that I want to have a voice. I don’t want to live in a place where I can’t express my voice . . .

Mrs. Dunbarn: That is why learning English is so important. That’s why I tell the students all the time: “English, English, English! You must learn English! It is very, very important . . .”

My experiences learning English and communicatively navigating this society serve as part of the impetus for conducting this research study. Reflecting on these experiences led me to ask questions about what living and working in the United States is like for Latin-American immigrants who did not have the educational opportunities that I had and, thus, do not have a similar linguistic competence. I wanted to explore ways in which persons who lack cultural capital communicatively navigate U.S. society, and what the outcomes are of these communication experiences for them and for the people with whom they communicate.

This research study contributes to organizational and intercultural communication theory and practice. For example, this investigation illuminates whether, and, if so, how, cross-cultural language use shapes everyday communication for nondominant language speakers living and working in the United States. Such findings can inform organizational practices and can lead to improving the working conditions of historically marginalized workers (e.g., blue-collar workers, recent immigrants, and uneducated persons). Traditionally, in the United States, people who do not speak the dominant language (i.e., English) are marginalized and discriminated against in social contexts, such as the workplace. This investigation contributes to communication theory
and practice by highlighting the particular complexities involved in everyday communication processes between traditionally marginalized group members and dominant social group members. Specifically, this study’s results could potentially expand co-cultural communication theory.

This study contributes to theory building in organizational and intercultural communication. Co-cultural communication theory, for instance, has been widely used to better understand communication experiences of nondominant group members within and outside of dominant social structures (e.g., predominantly white organizations). The present study’s focus on language and social identity can stretch some of co-cultural theory’s assumptions about dominant and nondominant persons’ communicative practices. For example, the theory assumes that social actors have the ability to select a particular communication orientation in a given situational context, and, thereby, have access to the dominant verbal currency (i.e., English) and, therefore, are able to select from the dominant verbal repertoire. I believe that deepening understandings of lower status organizational members’ communication experiences can illuminate communication theory and practice related to how people orient towards those who work in historically stigmatized occupations.

As immigrants from Latin America, the custodians in this study occupy a traditionally nondominant position in the U.S. social hierarchy, and, as history shows, this subject position has had grave material consequences for people in this situation (B. J. Allen, 2011). This study seeks to affirm them by creating a discursive space where their voices surface and where they have a moment in the social spotlight. A byproduct of this endeavor is developing scholarly and practical knowledge about communication for scholars, practitioners, and organizationally and linguistically marginalized persons. Furthermore, understanding the communication strategies
and challenges that Latina and Latino immigrant custodians face every day can contribute new perspectives and knowledge about communication processes in various social contexts among different racial and ethnic group members. In the spirit of remaining true to qualitative research epistemology, I explicitly foreground my initial assumptions and perceived subject positions within U.S. society. This foregrounding gives the reader a better understanding of my background and relevant factors that shape how I interact with and interpret the data used to advance and support my research claims.

Assumptions

Based on my experiences and background as a Latino immigrant and organizational member at various U.S. higher education institutions, I entered this project with several assumptions regarding this study’s participants and their mundane communication experiences. These assumptions are germane because they are taken-for-granted knowledge that initially informed my perception of the custodians. The assumptions represent significant issues related to this study’s subject that I believe to be true as I embark on this research project. In the final chapter, I revisit and reflect on these initial assumptions in relation to the study’s major findings.

Assumption 1. Spanish-speaking Latina and Latino immigrant custodians struggle to communicate in the workplace. This assumption is partially based on my experiences as a recent Latino immigrant and, thus, someone who is well aware of some of the communicative struggles Latin-American immigrants who do not speak English experience in the United States. For instance, I have regularly witnessed friends and family members struggle to find work and communicate with others in the most mundane of circumstances due to their English language deficiency. Additionally, during my time living in the United States, there have been numerous occasions when I could not clearly communicate my thoughts and ideas in English to another
person, which led to exceptionally uncomfortable situations. Moreover, even though I have acquired a considerable amount of cultural capital in the past few years, I still struggle linguistically and communicatively in various social contexts.

**Assumption 2.** Latina and Latino immigrant custodians communicatively rely on same-culture and same-language persons for comfort, affirmation, and coping when faced with communicative hardship in the workplace. Consistently throughout my experience as an immigrant and as a higher education organizational member, I have found solace during times of hardship in my interactions and relationships with my same-race and same-language peers. I believe that there was a commonality of experiences that pushed us to support and affirm each other during stressful circumstances as “out-group” members in U.S. society. Furthermore, those same-culture/same-language peers often were the only people with whom I felt safe disclosing certain thoughts and feelings related to institutional challenges that I encountered. I felt that some people viewed me as an outsider or even someone who could not be trusted because of my social differences. In these circumstances, same-race peers tended to understand my perspectives because they could relate to my lived experiences. Lastly, my same-race peers still are the people who consistently affirm me in times of identity crisis and relational struggles with cross-cultural others.

**Assumption 3.** The third assumption is based on my continuous identity struggles as I fight to view myself as someone who is worthy of others’ acceptance and affirmation. Even within my privileged subject positions as a doctoral candidate and a college professor, I experience tremendous struggles due to my perceptions of how other people view me. Although I have acquired cultural and social capital, other people’s constant verbal and nonverbal messages, which straddle the fence between hostility and fear, constantly push me to reflect on
the sources of their communication orientations. Therefore, the third assumption is that within the social parameters of their intersections of social identity, Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers routinely are discontent with their circumstances because they tend to view themselves negatively. These negative views are shaped by dominant discourses of their occupation as being socially undesirable or stigmatized. Furthermore, because of their negative self-perceptions, such workers actively desire better socioeconomic circumstances for themselves. Their social location shapes how others perceive and communicate with them, which, in turn, shapes how they perceive themselves in and out of their organizational role.

**Assumption 4.** Assumption four is that universities can be unwelcoming and difficult spaces to navigate communicatively, especially for a foreign-language speaker. Because of who they are (i.e., the identities that they embody), Latina and Latino immigrant custodians are the target of rejection and mistreatment from other organizational members. In other words, the romanticized notion of the “ivory tower” distorts many people’s perceptions of the university, leading them not to view the university as a place that can be as harsh and unwelcoming as any other type of organization. Throughout my tenure as a member of various universities, I have encountered as much rejection as in any other social context in which I have participated.

**Assumption 5.** The last assumption is based on the premise that, historically, in the United States, people who embody one or more of the participants’ social identities have experienced tremendous hardship in various social settings (B. J. Allen, 2011). Specifically, because of their race-ethnicity, social class, and immigrant status, as well as their occupation, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians may experience regular verbal and nonverbal rejection and offensive behaviors from other organizational members. People’s communicative behaviors toward different others are shaped by dominant discourses about individual differences in the
United States (B. J. Allen, 2011). Briefly (no more than two sentences) conclude the assumptions section here before you connect it to the next one. As a Latino immigrant, I can personally relate to people who have experienced verbal and nonverbal rejection due to their subaltern racial–ethnic subject positions. For this reason, I foreground my subject positions and how they might influence my interpretations as a researcher.

**Subject Positions**

Location: Bronx, NY – my apartment’s living room

Scene 1 – “I’m sorry but I don’t speak English.”

Me: Que yo le digo entonces si me preguntan algo?

Uncle Ramiro (pseudonym): Si te preguntan algo tu le dices “I’m sorry but I don’t speak English.”

*Translation:*

*Me: What do I tell them if they ask me something?*

*Uncle Ramiro: If they ask you something you tell them “I’m sorry but I don’t speak English.”*

Scene 2 – “Stop talking that shit!” (Location: Bronx, NY – standing in a hallway at my high school)

Having a conversation in Spanish with a classmate:

Me: O si tu sabes que eso es lo que tu tienes que hacer . . .

Raul (pseudonym): No, yo se; eso fue lo que el maestro dijo en la clase. . .

*Translation:*

*Me: Oh yeah, you know that’s what you have to do . . .*

*Raul: No, I know; that’s what the teacher said in class . . .*

A student walks by Raul and me, and yells: “Stop talking that shit!”
I begin this section with these two scenes because they depict some of my experiences as a Latin-American immigrant in the United States. The first scene shows my uncle coaching me as I was preparing to begin high school only a few weeks after I had arrived from Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. The second scene shows one of my early experiences with social rejection. As a Latino immigrant, I found, and, still find, myself constantly rehearsing my lines before I deliver them in social situations. These are common struggles that many Latin-American immigrants face as they transition from a native to a foreign culture. For instance, because of my struggles with language, I have experienced a great deal of rejection in various social contexts, including educational settings.

My background as a Latino immigrant endows me with a unique perspective that I bring to this study. That perspective is my experiential education, as I have walked the walk that many immigrants walk before they enter the United States and during their time here. I had to learn a new language, go to the Office of Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) to take the written and oral tests, and have been asked many times “What are you?” by “curious” native-born English speakers. I have had to communicatively navigate a European-dominated host society that seems to be more concerned with sustaining its ethnolinguistic vitality and strengthening its dominant group identity than accepting and welcoming different others. As a result, I believe that my subject position helps me to view and understand the phenomenon that I study in ways that other persons may not.

In addition to my lived experiences as a Latino immigrant, I have extensive and diverse experiences in various organizational roles in five higher education institutions. I have been involved with small private, midsized, and large public universities that are geographically dispersed across the United States. These experiences inform the perspectives and knowledge
that I bring to this study. Furthermore, I have been involved within university settings in a variety of roles (e.g., student, staff, and faculty member), which enrich my observations about the subject of inquiry. In sum, I bring the “real-world” experiences of a Latino immigrant who has navigated higher education institutions in the United States for the past 13 years.

At the outset of this study, I acknowledge that my personal experiences and related assumptions may direct attention to certain issues and not to others. However, these same experiences equip me with perspectives that significantly enrich the insights that I bring to the research process. Additionally, although my experiences could constitute a problem because they may shape my judgments regarding research design and interpretation of findings, I remain self-reflexive throughout the evolution of this manuscript. Throughout this research experience, I remained engaged in critical self-reflection through my conversations with my relational partner, mentors, and colleagues. Furthermore, to create “check points” throughout the research process, I asked others for feedback regarding coding the data and interpreting the findings. I close this chapter with an outline of definitions of key terms and concepts that I use throughout the manuscript. I believe defining these concepts helps guide the reader and deepens her or his understanding of the purposes and goals of this project.

**Definition of Key Terms**

In this section, I define relevant terms that are used throughout this manuscript. These terms help the reader to understand who the custodians are, contexts in which the custodians’ communication experiences unfold and the social identity categories that are pertinent to custodians’ communication experiences in the organizational context in which the study takes place.
Latina/Latino Immigrant—A person who traces her or his ethnic origin to the Latin-American region of the Western hemisphere and whose native language is Spanish. This person also relocated to the United States as a young adult (16 years old) or later in life and made the United States his or her permanent country of residence. In this study, I refer to Latinas and Latinos as racial-ethnic beings (see explanations of these concepts below).

Custodial Worker—A person whose primary work duties include cleaning institutional facilities that serve the needs of various organizational members. Such duties include cleaning restrooms, office spaces, hallways, cafeterias, and other physical facilities.

Communication Experiences—Any verbal or nonverbal meaningful symbolic exchanges between two or more persons; specifically, communicative exchanges with organizational members, such as supervisors, coworkers, and university customers (i.e., students, faculty members, and administrative staff members). These exchanges could occur in any situation or context, such as walking through a hallway or in a supervisor’s office.

Race—A socially constructed category system used to classify human beings (B. J. Allen, 2011; Nicotera, Clinkscales, Dorsey, & Niles, 2009). In the United States, for example, this system distinguishes “white” and “black” races (U.S. Census, 2006). For the purpose of this study, I refer to “Latinas” and “Latinos” as raced because “race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (Omi & Winant, 1986, p. 55). In the United States, historically, Latina and Latino “bodies” have been at the center of conflict and competing interests from the time of the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 to current debates about illegal immigration and discourses of national identity and citizenship. Furthermore, in the United States, “We view race as an aspect of identity based on physiological features known as phenotypes including skin color, hair
texture, body type and facial features (B. J. Allen, 2011, p. 66). These phenotypic features, historically, have denoted race in U.S. society. For these reasons, this study’s participants (Latinas and Latinos) are considered to be racial-ethnic beings. However, as per the 2010 U.S. Census (final numbers are still in progress), the Hispanic/Latino category was placed under ethnicity and not race.

**Ethnicity**—A person’s national/cultural origin or heritage based on geographic location, language, customs, traditions, or religion (Nicotera et al., 2009). I use the term “race-ethnicity” to refer to Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, to acknowledge both the socially constructed classification systems that have existed in U.S. society and the latest official U.S. census classification of Hispanic/Latino under ethnicity (U.S. Census, 2010).

**Social Class**—“An open (to some degree) stratification system that is associated with a systematically unequal allocation of resources and constraints” (Henry, 2001, p. 1). A person’s location in this stratification system can stem from ascription or achievement (B. J. Allen, 2011). For example, ascription is related to one’s birth conditions (e.g., family background, sex, race, and location). Achievement has to do with personal merit over time (e.g., earning a college degree or amassing wealth through business ownership). Social class is also determined by people’s amount of “capital” (Bourdieu, 1987). Bourdieu (1987) differentiated economic, cultural, and social capital: *Economic capital* has to do with financial assets, *cultural capital* is tied to linguistic abilities and cultural knowledge, and *social capital* is a person’s social network’s density. In this study, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians represented members of the lower classes or working class, according to the U.S. class stratification system. For example, the participants did not have a college education, worked in a lower status occupation,
and had a low annual income. These combined factors placed them in a lower social class or gave them a low socioeconomic status.

**Immigration Status**—A person’s status pertaining to when he or she relocated from his or her native country to the United States. Specifically, the term refers to people who were born outside of the United States and who made this country their permanent place of residence, regardless of citizenship status and length of time living in the United States. Immigration status, traditionally, has been a contentious concept in U.S. society, because although most people in this country are considered to be “immigrants,” those who have migrated most typically are marginalized and perceived as second-class citizens by the majority of the populace (Rodriguez, 2007).

**Occupation**—The formal roles and behaviors that accompany those roles, which an individual enacts within the structures of an organization. Historically, in the United States, a person’s sex/gender, race, and social class have shaped who enacts those roles and how they are enacted (B. J. Allen, 2011). Furthermore, sociocultural relationships between social identities, dominant public discourses, and occupations have conditioned some persons to view themselves as able or worthy of occupying certain roles (e.g., women pilots or Latina professors). Occupation is also closely tied to a person’s social class, as it is a central element of socioeconomic status. In U.S. society, occupation, historically, has been tied to social class, and people perceive their social class status and that of and others through their occupation (Jackman, 1979). In this chapter’s closing section I outline how the rest of the manuscript is organized.
Organization of Chapters

According to organizational communication scholars, organizations are a fundamental part of the nucleus of social life (Mumby, 1993, 1996). Organizations typically are conceptualized as goal-driven social collectivities made up of interdependent social actors and constituted in the actors’ everyday communicative practices (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2001; Mumby & Stohl, 1996). These basic and enduring characteristics make it imperative that organizational scholars engage in research that highlights how persons interact with and relate to others in organizational contexts. This study extends existing organizational communication research (a) by gaining insights into everyday workplace communication experiences of Latina and Latino immigrants working as custodians in the United States and (b) by exploring salient relationships between Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ social identities (e.g., race-ethnicity, social class, and immigration status) and the intersections of those social identities and custodians’ workplace communication with superiors, coworkers, and customers.

To accomplish this study’s goal, this manuscript is organized in the following manner: Chapter Two offers an overview and critique of scholarly literature related to the main issues addressed in this study. That review of the literature addresses topics such as superior–subordinate and coworker communication, as well as issues related to communication and social identity—specifically, immigrant status, social class, race-ethnicity, and occupation. Chapter Three explains the qualitative research methods employed to answer the research questions posed. Chapter Four describes the research site, the organization’s history, and relationship with the Latina and Latino immigrant custodians. Additionally, this chapter also highlights the organization’s structure and cultures. Chapter Five outlines the study’s major findings discovered from participants’ narratives about their communication experiences. Chapter Six
presents the analysis of the data collected, discussing the interpretive framework chosen for the study to analyze how the interviews captured the communication experiences of Latina and Latino custodians within the organizational setting of a university. Finally, Chapter Seven revisits the issues that initially lead to the study and presents the conclusions and theoretical, practical, and methodological implications of the study, as well as the study’s limitations and directions for future research.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews pertinent literature on organizational communication and social identity; specifically, literature on superior–subordinate, coworkers, and co–cultural group members’ communication. These research areas are reviewed because this study focuses on the vertical, horizontal, and co–cultural communicative practices of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers. For instance, positive superior–subordinate interactions are linked to employees’ satisfaction, organizational commitment, and relational satisfaction with coworkers (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Sias, 2005). Coworker relationships help employees to cope with work-related stress and job burnout (Teven, 2007). Finally, a co-cultural communication framework informs workplace interactions between nondominant and dominant social group members from the standpoints of nondominant group members (Orbe, 1996; Orbe & Spellers, 2005). Furthermore, the latter conceptual frame informs asymmetrical co-cultural interactions with in-group members and communicative practices and issues related to meanings attached to individuals’ social identities.

Because this study focuses on members of a historically nondominant social group employed in working class occupations, research is reviewed about organizational communication and social identity; specifically, literature on race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status, and occupation, as well as their intersections. This study presumes these social identities to be salient in the research site. This literature review is based on the notion that understanding the nature and processes in the workplace interactions of self-identified Latina and Latino immigrants—those in working-class occupations, such as custodians—organizational scholars will deepen their knowledge of organizational communication processes, in general.
This review also advances scholarly knowledge about salient relationships between social identities and their intersections and workplace interaction processes (B. J. Allen, 2011). Workplace communication is conceptualized as everyday communication processes between superiors and subordinates, between coworkers, and between co-cultural group members (Orbe, 1998). Additionally, this chapter addresses how researchers who study superior–subordinate, coworker, and co-cultural communication have treated social identities in their research.

**Workplace Communication**

*Workplace communication* is defined as engaging in verbal and nonverbal interactions in specific relationship types, such as superior–subordinate and coworkers, in addition to communication between co-cultural group members (Orbe, 1998; Sias, Krone, & Jablin, 2002). *Superior–subordinate communication* is message exchanges between two organizational members, one of whom has formal authority over the other (Campbell, Martin, & Wanzer, 2001; Jablin, 1979). *Coworker communication* is dyadic message exchanges between organizational members who are located on equal hierarchical locations (Kram & Isabella, 1985). *Co-cultural communication* is defined as communication processes between nondominant and dominant social groups in various social contexts, including the workplace (Orbe, 1998). Each subsection of the literature review is organized in the following manner: (a) central terms and concepts are defined, (b) an overview of literature is presented; (c) the collective body of research related to the present study; and (d) the body of literature reviewed is summarized.

**Superior–subordinate communication.** Workplace interpersonal relationships are crucial for the effective functioning of both organizational members and organizations (Bartoo & Sias, 2004; Fix & Sias, 2006; Jablin, 1979; Mills, 1997; Teven, 2007). One of the most significant relationships that people have in the workplace is the relationship with their
superior(s) (Krone, 1992; Sias & Jablin, 1995). Most formal organizational structures have
superior–subordinate role attachments. In this review, superior–subordinate interaction is
deﬁned as “exchanges of information and inﬂuence between organizational members, one of
whom has formal authority to direct and assess the actions of the other organizational member
(as deﬁned by ofﬁcial organizational sources)” (Jablin, 1979, p. 1202). Katz and Kahn’s (1966)
classic model of superior–subordinate communication identiﬁed ﬁve basic types of downward
communication from superior to subordinate: (a) job instructions, (b) job rationale, (c)
organizational procedures and practices, (d) feedback about subordinate performance, and (e)
indoctrination of goals (pp. 239–241). In contrast, upward communication from subordinate to
superior is: (a) information about the subordinate him or herself, (b) information about
coworkers and their problems, (c) information about organizational practices and policies, and
(d) information about what needs to be done and how it can be done (p. 245). This model, as
well as other models (see, e.g., Eilon, 1968; Melcher & Beller, 1967; Yoder, 1970), in addition to
Graen, Dansereau, and Minami (1972), Dansereau, Graen, and Haga’s (1975) research on
leader–member exchanges, serve as the impetus for the scholarly study of superior and
subordinates’ organizational interactions.

Tracing its genesis in the organizational behavior ﬁeld in the early 1970s, the study of
superiors and subordinates’ interactions has focused on supervisors’ communicative behaviors
and the outcomes associated with those behaviors (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Fix & Sias,
2006; Graen, Dansereau, & Minami, 1972; Teven, 2007). This line of work has been inﬂuenced
by its origins in leader–member exchange theory (LMX). According to LMX theory and
research, supervisors have distinctive relationships with their subordinates and, therefore,
subordinates receive different amounts and quality of resources (primarily, material resources),
from their supervisors (Dansereau et al., 1975). These origins might explain why subsequent research on superior–subordinate interaction has had underlying assumptions of linearity or cause-and-effect. For instance, much of this body of research has focused on effects of supervisors’ behaviors on subordinates’ job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Fix & Sias, 2006; Muchinsky, 1977), and the amount, quality, and consequences of downward information-giving (Sias, 2005). Additionally, other works have focused on superior–subordinate relational quality (Falcione, McCroskey, & Daly, 1977; Gates, 2008; Infante & Gordon, 1985; Waldron, 1991), and dyad–organization relationships (Sias & Jablin, 1995).

Particular themes, theories, and methods have been salient in superior–subordinate communication research. For instance, much of this work has been postpositivist in nature and has continued to be that way throughout the years, relying primarily on experimental and survey–based research designs (Fix & Sias, 2006; Teven, 2007). Empirical research in this area of study seems to overlook the use of interpretive methodological frameworks (for exceptions, see Fairhurst, 1993; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989; Gates, 2008); instead, the focus has been on testing hypotheses regarding population samples, this research has relied primarily on European-American white–collar employees and excluded racial–ethnic minorities and blue–collar organizational members (Abu Bakar & Mustaffa, 2008). Additionally, this line of research has a strong emphasis on individual differences, such as sex and communicator style and abilities and organizational outcomes (Abu Bakar, Mohamad, & Mustaffa, 2007; Schriesheim, Castro, & Cogliser, 1999). In terms of theories, social exchange and equity theory have played a central role in informing superior–subordinate workplace communication scholarship (Sias & Jablin, 1995). When viewed through these theoretical lenses, researchers have claimed that superior–subordinate relationships evolve over time based on interactants’ perceived costs and rewards.
Early LMX research focused on the so-called “average style” of leaders and not on dyadic leader–member interaction processes (Graen, Dansereau, & Minami, 1972). This average style assumed that leaders had relationships with groups and not with individuals. LMX research shifted this paradigm to show relational differences that existed between leaders and each of their followers. For instance, Graen and colleagues’ research brought attention to the vertical dyad linkage (VDL; e.g., Dansereau et al., 1975). VDL suggested that a leader’s relationship to his or her group was made up groups of vertical dyads. Instead of viewing two entities as the unit of analysis (leader and group of followers), researchers began to view the leader as one entity in a relationship with various groups, which were called in–groups and out–groups. In–groups were made up of individuals who had better relationships with their leaders, whereas out–group members had poor relationships with their leaders. From such research studies emerged the notions of “leadership” and “supervision” (Jacobs, 1971). Leadership meant that the “basis of influence is anchored in the interpersonal exchange relationship between a superior and a member,” whereas supervision focused “the nature of the vertical exchange is such that a superior relies almost exclusively upon the formal employment contract in his exchanges with a member” (Dansereau et al., 1975, p. 49). Supervision also was called “role-taking,” whereas leadership was called “role-making,” which referred to the notion that superior–subordinate relational outcomes need to be negotiated in everyday interaction. However, this research did not emphasize communication processes as much as the outcomes produced by the superior–subordinate dyad’s interactions.

Since its early days, a central focus of superior–subordinate communication research has been outcome variables (e.g., employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment; e.g., Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987). This research has demonstrated that both
employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment are positively related to superior–
subordinate relationship quality (Graen et al., 1972). Additionally, studies supported the notion
that the better informed employees were, the more satisfied and committed they were at work
and the better their relationships were with both superiors and peer coworkers (Allen, 1996).

Dansereau et al.’s (1975) study of 60 managers at the housing division of a large public
university is an example of the relationship between leader–member interaction and job
outcomes. These researchers used interviews and four sets of instruments that, among other
things, assessed “various outcomes of the exchange process” (p. 51). The findings indicated that
the in-group members (those individuals that were closer to their leaders) expressed higher
satisfaction with their jobs than did out-group members (employees who are not part of the
supervisors’ inner circle). Additionally, in-group members reported better personal relations
with their supervisor and higher value of their job performance rewards. These findings suggest
that more and higher quality information exchanges between superiors and subordinates cannot
only engender better job outcomes for subordinates but also better relational quality.

Since the time of early LMX studies, researchers have learned that the superior–
subordinate interaction processes and outcomes are not simply causal but recursive. This idea
captured the attention of communication scholars, who saw this research area as ripe for
investigations that focused on communication processes. Similar to pioneering interpretive
research by Fairhurst and Chandler (1989), the present study expands communication-focused
interpretive research about superiors and subordinates in organizations. However, unlike much
of the previous research conducted, the focus of this research project is on working class
employees who, traditionally, are marginalized societal members.
It was not until Fairhurst and Chandler (1989), and Fairhurst’s (1993) research studies of LMX in the late 1980s and early 1990s that superior–subordinate research took a turn towards more communication-oriented investigations. These studies found that high–quality, superior–subordinate relationships (in-groups) were characterized by greater information breadth and depth than were low-quality relationships (out-groups). These research studies also served as the impetus for many communication studies that followed in subsequent decades (e.g., Abu Bakar et al., 2008; Fix & Sias, 2006; Gates, 2008). Many of these studies focused on employees’ information experiences, relationship quality, and superior and subordinates’ individual variables (e.g., sex/gender). For example, Sias (2005) examined the relationship between workplace relationship quality and employees’ information experiences with their superiors and coworkers. Sias sent a questionnaire to 400 faculty and staff at a large public university. The results indicated that superior–subordinate interaction dynamics were strongly associated with both the amount and quality of information that employees reported receiving from their supervisors. These findings also showed that employees in supervisor’s in-group have an information advantage compared to out-group members. These results raise questions about whether individual variables, such as race or gender, affect who becomes part of supervisors’ in-groups. Interpersonal communication research has shown that people tend to be attracted to individuals whom they perceive as being similar on various levels (e.g., race-ethnicity, class, gender, education level, and religion; Duck, 1994).

Furthermore, Teven (2007) analyzed the impact that supervisor biological sex, power use, and nonverbal immediacy have on subordinates’ satisfaction, liking for their supervisor, and perceptions of their supervisor’s credibility. Four hundred and eight employees of various organizations were randomly assigned to one of eight video scenarios in which the supervisor–
subordinate interaction revolved around a meeting setting benchmarks for the company’s goals in the upcoming year. The videos were manipulated for supervisor immediacy, supervisor power, and supervisor biological sex. The results showed that supervisors, regardless of sex, produce more positive subordinate perceptions of credibility by being more nonverbally immediate. This means that certain communicative orientations with subordinates might be perceived as more effective to enhance superior–subordinate rapport in the workplace. These results also indicate that subordinates find nonverbally immediate supervisors to be more trustworthy, caring, and competent than supervisors who are less nonverbally immediate and who are antisocial. These relational outcomes can, thus, have a positive effect on the organization’s functioning as a whole.

Teven’s (2007) results are similar to Fix and Sias’s (2006) research, which employed several instruments completed by 120 employees from seven organizations to assess relationships between person-centered communication, superior–subordinate interaction, and employee job satisfaction. Fix and Sias found that the extent to which employees anticipated that their supervisors would use person-centered communication was positively associated with their perceptions of the quality of their superior–subordinate interactions. These results, in addition to Fairhurst’s (1993) findings, suggest that communication processes are central to the study of superior–subordinate workplace interactions. However, demographically diverse population samples have been largely absent from this line of research—especially diverse racial-ethnic samples. Moreover, this line of research has focused on white-collar occupations and college students, and it has neglected blue-collar occupations.

Superior–subordinate interaction research has a rich history that has evolved into the study of more communication-oriented foci (Abu Bakar et al., 2008). Early research focused on
positive superior–subordinate relationships and the tangible outcomes that those relationships engendered (Dansereau et al., 1975). Later, research focused on the processes that lead to organizational outcomes, and, as a result, an emphasis emerged on information exchanges, relational quality, and sex/gender differences (Sias, 2005). Although significant, an exclusive emphasis on individual differences, such as sex or gender, does not give a full picture of organizational processes. Additionally, relying primarily on white participants excludes other experiences that would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of organizational actors’ routine interactions. By taking into account historically overlooked organizational members and occupations, the present study seeks to enhance scholarly knowledge about vertical dyadic communication.

Empirical analyses of issues related to everyday workplace interactions, race, ethnicity, and social class in lower status work contexts appear to be limited in the superior–subordinate literature. That is unfortunate, for, there are significant relationships between individuals’ social identities and their organizational interactions (B. J. Allen, 2007; Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Hopson & Orbe, 2007). Another problem is that most studies of superior–subordinate communication overwhelmingly have used white participants (for an exception, see Gates, 2008), with the implicit assumption that findings from such research are applicable to racially homogeneous populations. These omissions suggest that studying particular groups of people and individual and situational variables (e.g., language-use ability, people working with culturally different others, and the university setting) might not be as relevant in organizational communication research. To stretch the paucity of research on superior–subordinate communication that is inclusive of lower status blue-collar workers, the present study seeks to understand the nature and processes of organizational interactions focusing on traditionally
neglected organizational members. Finally, much of the superior–subordinate communication research also suggests that there are strong links between positive superior–subordinate relationships and positive peer-coworker relationships; consequently, research on peer-coworker communication processes is reviewed below.

Coworker communication. Workplace peer relationships, also called “equivalent-status” relationships (Sias, Krone, & Jablin, 2002), are relationships between coworkers with no formal authority over one another. Because most organizations traditionally have had hierarchical structures, these relationships represent the majority of organizational relationships (i.e., most people have a supervisor and many coworkers). According to Sias (2005), these relationships serve various functions in organizations because “peer coworkers are the most likely, and most important, sources of emotional and instrumental support for employees, primarily because coworkers possess knowledge and understanding about the workplace experience that external sources do not” (p. 379). Hence, constructive coworker relationships are significant for all organizational employees, but especially for peer coworkers (Allen, McManus, & Russell, 1999). Most persons’ everyday workplace interactions are with their coworkers, however, coworkers’ communication has received less attention from researchers than has superior–subordinate communication (Sias & Cahill, 1998).

Research about coworker communication has primarily focused on: (a) typologies of peer types and their functions in organizations according to career stages (Kram & Isabella, 1985), (b) identifying relationships between superior–subordinate and coworker communication (Sias & Jablin, 1995), and (c) studying interaction processes according to peer types (Gordon & Hartman, 2009). Kram and Isabella’s (1985) pioneering research on the role of peer relationships in career development inspired many scholars from across many disciplines to
study coworkers’ relationship formation, development, and outcomes in organizational contexts (see, e.g., Fritz, 1997; Odden & Sias, 1997; Spillan & Mino, 2001). Although this research originated in organizational behavior studies, communication scholars also have conducted such research (e.g., Fix & Sias, 2006; Sias, 2005; Sias & Jablin, 1995), with early research continuing to influence subsequent studies. The peer-coworker literature generally presumes that most employees go through similar career stages. However, investigators have focused almost exclusively on white-collar organizational members. Peer coworker communication research also assumes that there are certain message types that are exchanged in each career stage such as workplace information sharing, advice, and social support. As a result, much of the research on peer relationships emphasizes the functions of peers in each career stage (Spillan, Mino, & Rowles, 2002). A brief look at Kram and Isabella’s (1985) original work illustrates these observations.

Kram and Isabella (1985) studied peer coworkers’ communication across their career stages at a large manufacturing organization. The purpose of their study was to understand how peer relationships provide alternative support for organizational members compared to mentoring relationships. These researchers used a biographical interviewing method to study 25 pairs of peers in early, middle, and late career stages. The interviewing sequence consisted of 2 to 2.5-hour sessions with each pair of participants. According to Kram and Isabella, “The results of this study suggest that peer relationships offer an important alternative to conventional mentoring relationships by providing a range of developmental supports for personal and professional growth at each career stage” (p. 116). The significance of these findings was that they provided the foundation for one of the most widely used typologies of peer relationships in the workplace.
Kram and Isabella’s (1985) typology of peer workplace relationships and functions emerged from the findings. The authors found that *information peers* are those individuals whose primary function is workplace information sharing, *collegial peers* are those with whom people not only exchange job-related information but with whom they also have a friendship, and that *special peers* are with whom organizational members are emotionally the closest and provide emotional support, friendship, personal feedback, and confirmation when needed. Moreover, according to Kram and Isabella, different peers serve diverse functions during four career stages: establishment, advancement, middle, and late career stage. For example, Kram and Isabella (1985) noted that the function of information peers during the establishment stage was aiding others in “learning the ropes and getting the job done” (p. 125). In contrast, the function of special peers during this career stage was to help peer coworkers to create a “sense of competence, commitment” and discuss “work/family conflicts” (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 125).

What this and subsequent studies on peer relationships seemed to assume was that most if not all organizational actors go through similar career stages. However, the question could be raised about how research has accounted for those employees who historically have remained on a linear career path, such as janitors, housekeepers, and domestic servants, to, with respect to their work experiences and “career progression”? The present study addresses that need by examining how service workers interact with their peers in the workplace across time. By doing so, this study extends the body of research that has investigated links between superior–subordinate and peer-coworker relationships (e.g., Sias & Jablin, 1995).

Peer-coworker research that focused on communication processes did not surface until the mid-1990s (Sias & Jablin, 1995; Sias, 1996). At that time, much of that research had a strong LMX flavor and, thus, was conducted by organizational behavior and management scholars.
Sias and Jablin lead the way in studying peer-coworker communication, seeking to understand, among other issues, how organizational actors talk about differential treatment and how their communication is related to workplace relational outcomes. Much of this research advanced the notion that workplace relationships do not happen in a vacuum and, thus, what happens in organizational dyads has the potential to affect other parts of the organizational system (Sias & Jablin, 1995). Similarly, Ambrose, Harland, and Kulick (1991) argued that information regarding the outcomes of other individuals’ interactions and relationships is a central attribute of any social context and, thus, can affect all actors in that context. Nevertheless, researchers have not paid comparable attention to relationships between social groups’ variables such as race, ethnicity, and social class, and vertical and horizontal communication in organizations. Although Sias and Jablin, and others, have been interested in systemic relationships, they somewhat overlook how individual features, such as race, ethnicity, or social class status, potentially could shape not only dyadic interaction processes but larger organizational outcomes. Additionally, this line of research, like that on superior–subordinate communication, has continued to show a bias toward the experiences of white-collar organizational members. Scholars such as Jablin and Sias also continued the research legacy that placed LMX theory at the center of their investigations, thus embracing the theory’s underlying assumptions and tenets.

Sias and Jablin (1995) examined significant relationships between superior–subordinate and peer coworker communication and workplace differential treatment. For instance, Sias and Jablin interviewed 29 respondents in various organizations in the southwest United States to identify relationships among differential superior–subordinate relations, perceptions of fair treatment, and coworker communication. Respondents completed an LMX scale to measure the perceived quality of the relationship with their supervisor (Graen & Cashman, 1975). The results
indicated that employees who were perceived to receive preferential treatment from their superiors tended to be isolated from coworker groups, whereas employees who were perceived to be fairly rewarded became part of the in–group. Moreover, employees who were perceived to be punished fairly tended to be isolated from coworkers, whereas those who were unfairly punished were drawn into the coworker group communication network. Many participants reported that negative differential treatment from a supervisor often instilled feelings of vulnerability in the rest of the coworker groups. In a similar study, Sias (1996, 2005) found that organizational members’ perceptions of differential treatment are often socially constructed by coworkers through communication. Also, Kramer (1995), in a longitudinal study of job transferees, found that organizational members who perceive that they are in a high-quality relationship with their superior (e.g., high in trust, support, and openness) also developed collegial and special relationships with their peers that were characterized by trust, self-disclosure, and open communication.

Taken together, these findings suggest that perceptions of superiors’ differential treatment and communication about differential treatment may be related to coworkers’ attitudes about the quality of their superior–subordinate relationship (Axley, 1996; Mueller & Lee, 2002). Simultaneously, perceptions regarding the quality of subordinates’ relationships with superiors may relate to how subordinates perceive the fairness of their superiors’ behaviors and how they communicate with their coworkers about such behaviors. Additionally, these findings suggest that organizational members often perceive that they can trust coworkers to vent their emotions, providing opportunities for coworkers to voice their problems when they cannot do it with their supervisor. In summation, these studies offer some evidence that superior–subordinate
interactions affect others outside of the dyad; in particular superior–subordinate relationships affect interactions with coworkers.

Another major topic in peer coworker research is coworkers’ communication in the peer types identified by Kram and Isabella (1985). Much of this research has investigated differences and similarities of information, collegial and special peers’ communication, and outcomes associated with these interaction processes (Myers & Johnson, 2004). For example, Sias and Cahill’s (1998) classic study of peer coworker relationship development showed key factors (e.g., context, type of communication network) related to the transition from coworker to becoming good friends. Myers and Johnson (2004) found that coworkers’ perceived similarity and trust were lower with information peers than with collegial or special peers.

Together, these studies offer evidence that there are qualitative differences among the types of peer coworkers. However, this line of research primarily has relied on students and white-collar workers of European descent, with little mention of social identity categories other than sex/gender and, sometimes, individuals’ occupations and age (Fritz, 1997; Odden & Sias, 1997). Moreover, there seems to be a methodological bias towards positivism (Gordon & Hartman, 2009; Sias, 2005) in that cause-effect frameworks appear as the norm. The current study moves away from these trends by examining Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communication with their coworkers through an interpretive lens, to offer new insights into organizational communication processes. A relevant related concept to the present study is how peer coworkers negotiate degree of liking towards each other. The line of research on affinity-seeking strategies helps inform how these communicative strategies play out in the workplace.

To illustrate how coworkers enact affinity-seeking strategies, Gordon and Hartman (2009) examined peer coworker communication in relation to open communication and the use
of affinity-seeking strategies (e.g., providing feedback and job-related support). The researchers surveyed 153 participants from human resources databases in the Northeast and Western United States. They sent three questionnaires to approximately one third of participants: one on information peers, one on collegial peers, and one on special peers. Two instruments were used to measure communication openness (Rogers & Kincaid, 1980) and affinity-seeking strategies (Bell, Tremblay, & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987). There was no mention of demographics with the exception of age. The findings supported two out of four hypotheses. These hypotheses were: special peers were more likely to use affinity-seeking strategies than were informal peers. However, special peers did not use affinity-seeking strategies more often than did collegial peers. The second finding supported in this investigation is that communication openness is used more by special peers than by informational peers. Because the main purpose of communication with informational peers is to exchange work-related information, communication focusing on building more intimate relationships would not be expected. Unclear in this line of research is how communication openness differs in level and depth based on peer type, although communication openness can lead to more cohesive work environments, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, and can lead to better communication among coworkers (Meyers, Know, Pawlowski, & Ropog, 1999).

Taken together, the literature on peer coworker communication suggests that peer types have different functions in organizations. What this research does not address is how certain factors (e.g., social identity differences, occupation, and cultural capital) might shape the formation and evolution of these relationships. Because most of this research has used white-collar occupations with persons of European descent, other voices and occupations have been excluded. Those overlooked voices could provide useful insights into the workplace experiences
of a culturally diverse nation. The research methods used to examine peer coworker communication have not provided participants with opportunities to deeply explore their relational dynamics with their superiors and subordinates. The present study adds to this body of research by looking at workplace interactions through an interpretive lens. Moreover, this study of blue-collar employees’ narratives of their everyday communication provides useful alternative information from that of traditional methodological frameworks. Finally, of significance to the present study, is exploring relationships between organizational actors’ social identities and their everyday workplace interactions. For that reason, as explained below, this study considers Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ workplace communication through a co-cultural communication conceptual framework.

**Co-cultural communication.** *Co-cultural communication* is defined as interactions within and between underrepresented and dominant group members (Orbe, 1998). In this review, I discuss co-cultural communication theory’s philosophical and theoretical foundations; summarize the communication orientations and practices that, according to the theory, nondominant group members’ employ in their communication with dominant group members; and provide examples of research studies that employed this framework to examine nondominant, co-cultural group members’ communication.

Co-cultural communication theory offers a practical conceptual framework to identify and assess Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers’ communication experiences. In the context of U.S. social hierarchies, Latinas and Latinos traditionally have been marginalized or perceived as a nondominant social group. Working-class, lower status employees also have been considered nondominant in formal organizational structures and communication systems. These combined factors suggest that Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers’ workplace
communication could be better understood using Orbe’s (1998) model of nondominant group members’ communicative practices and orientations. As Orbe and Spellers (2005) explained, “Co-cultural theory offers a framework to understand the process by which individuals come to select how they are going to interact with others in any given specific context” (p. 174).

Co-cultural communication theory was founded on standpoint theory and muted group theory’s central tenets and ideas (Kramarae, 1981, 2005; D. E. Smith, 1987). Muted group theory advanced that societies have social hierarchies where some groups are privileged over others, with the groups at the top of the hierarchies establishing the communication system of that society (Ardener, 1975, 1978). Over time, these communication structures become (re)produced by both dominant and nondominant members’ discourse and, thus, the dominant communication systems remain in place. As Orbe (1998) explained, “This process [of social reproduction] renders marginalized groups as largely muted because their lived experiences are not represented in these dominant structures” (p. 4).

Co-cultural communication theory also advances that because asymmetrical power relations exist in all societies, there always is a muted group framework in place (Meares, 2003; Meares, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs, & Ginossar, 2004). Additionally, persons who have been “muted” often engage in communicative practices to resist the system’s attempt to keep them muted. Within this framework, I examined the communication experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers with superiors, coworkers, and customers.

Feminist standpoint theory also informed this research study. Standpoint theory was the result of feminist scholars’ work (e.g., Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1983; D. E. Smith, 1987; Wood, 1992), and addressed the significance of acknowledging a special societal positioning and the subjective perspective of persons as they interact with themselves and with others. This theory is
an epistemological stance that argues that all perspectives are critical to fully understand social phenomena (Collins, 1986). Additionally, this conceptual framework argued that even though group membership provides some commonalities, not all group members have the same standpoint (Buzzanell, 1994). Essentially, the framework suggests that for people to gain a deeper understanding of social phenomena, socially marginalized voices should be included (Collins, 1986). According to Orbe (1998), it is “through this process of inclusion, [that] alternative understandings of the world that are situated within the everyday/every night activities of co-cultural and dominant group members can be revealed” (p. 235). Because all “truths,” in essence, are standpoints, it is important to include and recognize various social actors’ perceptions of their daily communication experiences.

Both muted group and standpoint theory informed co-cultural communication theory and the present study, which follows a line of theorizing from the margins that has deeply enriched communication theory and research (Buzzanell, 1994; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Ray, 1996). According to these scholars, theorizing from the margins contributes to understanding of communication processes because “the oppressed can see with the greatest clarity, not only their own position but . . . indeed the shape of social systems as a whole” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 8). Additionally, Orbe (1998) claimed, “the unique contribution of the ongoing research termed co-cultural theory is that it explores the common patterns of communication both across and within these different marginalized groups” (p. 3). The present study contributes to this line of research by examining the everyday communication experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians in a predominantly white organization.

Co-cultural communication research has yielded influential factors and communication orientations that served as the basis for co-cultural groups’ communicative practices. These
factors are: (1) preferred interactional outcome, (2) field of experience, (3) situational context, (4) communication abilities, (5) perceived costs and benefits, and (6) communication approach. These factors, in turn, determine the orientations that co-cultural groups use to communicate within dominant cultural systems. The following statement by Orbe (1998b) best summarizes the central idea behind co-cultural communication theory:

Situated with a particular field of experience that governs their perception of the costs and rewards associated, as well as their capability to engage in various communicative practices, co-cultural group members will adopt certain communication orientations—based on their preferred outcomes and communication approaches—to the circumstances of a specific situation. (p. 19)

From these influential factors, it is important to highlight, for the purpose of the present study, the primary communication orientations and practices that co-cultural theory proposes co-cultural group members employ in their interactions within a dominant society.

According to co-cultural communication theory (Orbe, 1998), co-cultural group members’ communication orientations stem from their preferred interactional outcomes and communication approaches within particular situational contexts. Nondominant group members use certain communication orientations to assimilate, accommodate, or to separate. Persons who prefer to assimilate employ communicative behaviors that attempt to erase their cultural distinctiveness to fit in with the dominant societal structure. Those persons who primarily choose to accommodate retain their cultural uniqueness with the goal of creating a pluralistic society that is accepting of cultural differences. Finally, persons who employ separation communicative behaviors tend to resist forming any common ties with dominant group members and advocate for the maintenance of cultural communities that reflect their values and norms.
In addition to these three preferred interactional outcomes, nondominant co-cultural group members employ three primary communication approaches when communicating with dominant group members: nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive (Wilson, Hantz & Hanna, 1995). *Nonassertive communicative behaviors* display communicative inhibition and avoidance of confrontation. Persons who employ nonassertive behaviors tend to place others’ needs before theirs. The opposite of nonassertive communicative behaviors are *aggressive communicative behaviors* that demonstrate highly expressive and controlling behavior. People who employ that style also tend to put their needs before others’ needs. In between nonassertive and aggressive communicative behaviors is *assertive communication*, where people use self-improving, expressive communication that includes the needs of both self and others. These communication approaches, tied with the preferred interactional outcomes, yield specific communication orientations and practices that co-cultural group members employ in their everyday interactions.

*Co-cultural communication orientation* refers to the communicative stance that nondominant group members adopt during everyday interactions with dominant group members. Co-cultural communication theory offers nine co-cultural orientations based on people’s preferred interactional outcome (assimilation, accommodation, or separation) and communication approach (nonassertive, assertive, or aggressive). Co-cultural theory outlines various communicative practices tied to each communication orientation. The nine co-cultural communication orientations that co-cultural theory outlines are: (1) nonassertive assimilation, (2) nonassertive accommodation, (3) nonassertive separation, (4) assertive assimilation, (5) assertive accommodation, (6) assertive separation, (7) aggressive assimilation, (8) aggressive accommodation, and (9) aggressive separation.
Nonassertive assimilation is when people use communicative practices that allow them to blend in with the dominant society. Communicative practices associated with this orientation are censoring the self and averting controversy in interaction. Nonassertive accommodation involves seeking out change nonconfrontationally; communicative practices associated with this co-cultural orientation are strategically increasing people’s visibility in social contexts and actively dispelling stereotypes. Nonassertive separation is when co-cultural group members use subtle communicative practices to stay distanced from dominant group members. Persons who employ nonassertive separation practices distance themselves from places inhabited by dominant group members and maintain psychological barriers through verbal and nonverbal cues.

Persons who use an assertive assimilation orientation also try to blend in to the dominant society, but these persons adopt more proactive communicative practices, such as manipulating stereotypes, overcompensating, and preparing extensively prior to interaction. Those who employ an assertive accommodation orientation attempt to maintain a balance between self needs and others’ needs, with the goal of changing dominant societal structures. Assertive accommodation practices include communicating in an authentic and open way with dominant group members, as well as educating others about people’s cultural group. Finally, assertive separation is when people make a conscious attempt at sustaining communities that exclude dominant group members. People who use assertive separation communicative practices typically exemplify their cultural group’s strengths and to embrace stereotypes.

Co-cultural group members who employ an aggressive assimilation orientation make proactive efforts at fitting in with the dominant group. For those persons, being considered as a dominant group member is very important. Communicative practices associated with this orientation are dissociating from one’s cultural group, mirroring dominant group members’
behaviors, and ridiculing self. An aggressive accommodation orientation involves co-cultural group members trying to become part of dominant structures to change them, using communicative practices, such as confronting and gaining advantage over dominant group members. Finally, aggressive separation is a proactive orientation that persons use when co-cultural segregation is the main goal; communicative practices related to this orientation are attacking and sabotaging dominant group members to diminish their social privilege. In summation, these communication orientations and practices illustrate how co-cultural communication theory attempts to develop an understanding of nondominant group members’ communication with dominant group members. The following research studies exemplify how scholars have applied co-cultural communication theory to study communicative phenomena in various social contexts.

Urban and Orbe (2007) studied how international students’ positionality as cultural outsiders and, thus, as co-cultural group members affected their communicative experiences. The researchers analyzed essays written by international students over a 2-month period from online discussion groups, universities’ websites and newsletters, and search engines. Sixty-two international student essays were analyzed using McCracken’s (1988) qualitative data analysis guidelines, along with Owen’s (1994) criterion for extracting salient textual themes. Several themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the texts. The first one, “assimilating into dreamland,” showed how the international students felt pressured to assimilate into the “dreamland” that they had made the United States out to be before they arrived there. Consequently, this idea encouraged the students to adopt U.S. customs, habits, and communicative behaviors. The second theme was that the students had a skewed notion of life in the United States stemming from exposure to media messages, which made their transition
more difficult because what they found once they arrived was far from what they expected. Another related finding was that the students thought that their language abilities would be enough to navigate U.S. culture, but they found that this was not the case for the most part.

Another salient theme from this study was the notion of educating self and others beyond the classroom. The international students felt that if they were going to be successful in accomplishing their educational objectives, they needed to be very knowledgeable and fully acquainted with their host culture. The students read everything American and immersed themselves in U.S. media. They also found themselves constantly educating others about their native countries and about themselves. The students saw each intercultural interaction as an opportunity to dispel stereotypes about foreigners and their countries.

Although the population samples are different, this study relates to the present study and speaks to the usefulness of co-cultural communication theory for understanding the communication experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers. For instance, the present study examined how a group of people “foreign” to their current cultural system negotiated their differences in everyday intercultural interactions. The international students in Urban and Orbe’s (2007) study felt a need to educate others about their native countries, language, and customs, but they were sojourners in the United States. The Latina and Latino immigrant custodians that I interviewed were permanent residents and, thus, may be perceived differently by host-culture members. Additionally, the international students were in a higher education context where intercultural experiences may be more welcomed and even expected by native college students, whereas Latina and Latino custodians may need to negotiate their immigrant status with less formally educated organizational actors (e.g., uneducated supervisors
and coworkers), which also speaks to the significance of context in the everyday negotiation of selves.

In a related study, Burnett et al. (2009) used a co-cultural communication framework to study how date rape was communicated at a Midwestern U.S. university on cultural, social, and individual levels. The researchers set out to gain deeper insight, through a phenomenological and methodological framework, into how a rape culture is communicatively created and sustained on college campuses. The researchers framed women as co-cultural group members in a traditionally patriarchal society, such as that which exists in the United States. Students from communication classes were recruited to form nine focus groups; five were comprised of women only, two of men only, and two of both women and men. The research team developed a topical protocol to guide the focus group moderators. Topics discussed included reasons for rape, definitions of rape, the role of alcohol in rape, and options after rape occurs.

The results demonstrated that there exists ambiguity surrounding date rape and, thus, actual and potential date rape victims become “muted.” This study also exemplifies how communication systems are created in ways that mute certain social actors and that privilege others. Moreover, date rape culture marginalized meaningful discourse on the subject and further ingrained rape culture on campus. According to the Burnett et al. (2009), “Both male and female students contribute to muting women, thus perpetuating a rape culture in which rape becomes an expectation, or part of the social milieu” (p. 479). Additionally, the results indicated that the mostly female date rape survivors often are muted before, during, and after their experience. The assimilation communication orientation (Orbe, 1998) was the most salient one in the participants’ narratives. Participants reported the use of nonassertive assimilation strategies, such as self-censorship and averting controversy.
In a similar study, Camara and Orbe (2008) examined ways that diverse groups of people respond to discriminatory acts based on their race, sex, age, sexual orientation, and disability status. These scholars surveyed 957 persons from diverse racial, sexual, gender, age, and disability backgrounds at two state universities. Their analysis indicated that people primarily respond to discriminatory acts through communication orientations, such as assertive accommodation (51.5%); this communication orientation refers to people asserting a strong self-concept by pointing to discriminatory acts and alerting perpetrators that such acts would not be tolerated). Nonassertive assimilation (25%); this orientation refers to a stance that fails to address discrimination; people remain silent and avoid controversial subjects). By focusing on Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers’ communication experiences, the present study gains insights into the communication orientations that these workers employ in interactions with dominant group members. Such insights expand co-cultural communication theory, specifically, and organizational communication research, in general (see, e.g., Ashcraft & Allen, 2003).

Co-cultural communication theory is useful in understanding processes whereby members of traditionally underrepresented groups enact communicative practices in contexts where people’s membership in one or more social groups makes them nondominant (Orbe, 1994). This theoretical framework also is useful for understanding participants’ lived experiences because it focuses on their communication experiences within and outside of their co-cultural group membership. Additionally, this framework offers six important factors that are related to co-cultural group members’ communication experiences in various social contexts (field of experience, situational context, communication abilities, perceived costs and rewards, preferred interactional outcome, and communication approach). The preceding literature review
illustrates how co-cultural communication theory can be valuable in understanding the everyday communicative practices of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers.

In sum, the present study contributes to co-cultural communication theory by uncovering how historically underrepresented persons in blue-collar occupations enact communication from their standpoints. Moreover, extant research using co-cultural communication theory has studied various groups, such as women (Buzzanell, 1994), people with disabilities (Orbe & Greer, 2000), and gays/lesbians/bisexuals (Kama, 2002), but it has not emphasized as often co-cultural perspectives, such as immigration status and social class, which deserve more attention than they have received thus far in co-cultural communication analyses.

**Communication and Social Identity**

Numerous researchers have advanced knowledge about significant relationships between individuals’ social identities and organizational communication processes (e.g., B. J. Allen, 1995; Nkomo, 1992; Ochs, 1993, 1996). However, there are salient issues concerning how researchers have approached organizational processes and social identities (Orbe & Allen, 2008). For example, when studying race, a continuing scholarly emphasis is placed on black and white people and their communication differences (Parker, 2003; Shuter & Turner, 1997). Conceptual choices imply underlying assumptions that theories, concepts, and research findings (i.e., consisting primarily of white participants in white-collar occupations or as college students) are generalizable to other racial and ethnic groups. Second, social identity research shows that scholars have studied race in isolation from other identities (e.g., social class, gender, and sexual orientation; B. J. Allen, 1995). The present study seeks to advance organizational communication and social identity scholarship by emphasizing the communicative experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers. Therefore, it is germane to review scholarly
literature that addresses issues related to organizational communication and race, social class, immigration status, and occupation. Although the bodies of research about each of these social identities are addressed separately, I am mindful that they cannot, and should not, be examined in isolation. I, thus, agree with other scholars who claim that it is necessary to produce scholarship that explicitly addresses issues of intersectionality (e.g., considering race, gender, social class, sexuality, and ability status together; B. J. Allen, 1995; Crenshaw, 1992; Nkomo, 1992). As a result, the present study examines communication processes related to race, as well as to social class, immigration status, and occupation.

In this review, social identities are defined as “aspects of a person’s self-image derived from the social categories to which an individual perceives him/herself as belonging” (B. J. Allen, 2011, p. 10). I specifically examine relationships of workplace communication and persons’ social class, immigration status, occupations, and race-ethnicity, and, thus, define each of these social identity categories. Due to its polarizing and contested nature, the term “race” can be difficult to define. However, a large number of social scientists now agree that race is not a person’s biological feature but a socially constructed category used to classify human beings (see, e.g., Nicotera et al., 2009). Social class is “an open (to some degree) stratification system that is associated with a systematically unequal allocation of resources and constraints” (Henry, 2001, p. 1). I define immigration status as people’s standing pertaining to when they relocated from their native country to the United States. Specifically, I refer to people who were born outside of the United States and who made this country their permanent place of residence, regardless of their age upon immigrating, citizenship status, or their length of time living in the United States. Finally, occupation is defined as the formal roles that individuals enact within the structures of organizations. This study also considers how enacting these and other social
identities can overlap in the organization where the study takes place. I begin by reviewing relevant related research on race-ethnicity and organizational communication.

**Workplace communication and race-ethnicity.** Almost 2 decades ago, Nkomo (1992) persuasively argued that studies of race in organizations “reflect and reify particular historical and social meanings of race” (p. 487). Her pioneering work represents an initial, contemporary call to action for organizational scholars to engage the construct of race in ways that move beyond superficial perspectives of race as biological. Specifically, Nkomo (1992) advanced that what was needed was “a ‘re-vision’ of the very concept of race and its historical and political meaning is suggested for rewriting ‘race’ as a necessary and productive analytical category for theorizing about organizations” (p. 487). According to Nkomo, research on race in organization contexts has been “narrowly focused, ahistorical, and decontextualized; [also], in this research, race is mainly treated as a demographic variable” (p. 497). A few years later, B. J. Allen (1995) claimed that “conducting research about race-ethnicity would allow us to confront a momentous social issue, while also providing insight and direction for developing and refining theory about organizational communication processes” (p. 144).

Unfortunately, since these scholars made these claims almost 20 years ago, there has been little follow up, especially in organizational communication research. A review of literature reflected some of the concerns raised by Nkomo (1992) 18 years ago and, more recently, by Allen (2007). Communication research and theory still appear to espouse a Eurocentric bias that is narrowly focused and that perpetuates one-dimensional perspectives for studying communication processes (B. J. Allen, 2007; Orbe & Allen, 2008). Consequently, these perspectives tend to exclude the experiences of nondominant social group members (e.g., Latinas and Latinos) and persons in blue-collar occupations. Therefore, more research is needed
that emphasizes historically marginalized persons who work in the low-status occupations of organizational hierarchies. Scholars such as B. J. Allen and Nkomo originally cited many salient issues and concepts that subsequent scholars have emphasized in their scholarship (e.g., Gates, 2008; Pompper, 2007). Some of these central issues and concepts, centered on the study of race in organizations and other social contexts, frame this literature review. I also present exemplary research studies that move forward research on race and communication. Throughout the review, I discuss how the present study fits into this body of research.

One of the most significant issues in communication and race literature is the pervasiveness of what Orbe and Allen (2008) called “white scholarship” (p. 205). Orbe and Allen advanced, in their race scholarship typology, that white scholarship is that which studies the communication of European Americans without acknowledging that the white experience is a “particular” knowledge among various knowledges” (p. 205). In other words, for years, social scientists have advanced knowledge that universalizes the white experience and passes it as generalizable to “others” in any social context (see Nicotera et al., 2009). Most studies of race in organizations, up until the 1990s, viewed race as neutral and, thereby, centralized the experiences of whites (Nkomo, 1992). Race primarily was assigned to racial minorities in particular contexts and to examine differences between blacks and whites (Cox, 1993). This tendency implied that whites were devoid of race, and, therefore, racial minorities were the only ones that were raced. This ideology is evident in the scholarship of mainstream communication journals, such as the Journal of Applied Communication Research between 1975–2005 (Nicotera et al., 2009; Orbe & Allen, 2008). This ideology also is evident in research participant samples, as those studies that considered race primarily use black and white participants who are in white-collar occupations or were college students (Parker, 2002, 2003). Consequently, scholars began
to question the soundness of theories and research that generated “generalizable” principles and results based on racially inadequate samples (i.e., whites only; Cox, 1993; Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Nkomo, 1992). Other critics claimed that within this backdrop, difference is not properly addressed, race remains essentialized, and whiteness becomes “an invisible, homogeneous standard” (Ashcraft & Allen, 2003, p. 15).

For the reasons cited previously, it is important to highlight central arguments that have recently emerged from the burgeoning field of whiteness studies. A brief look at these arguments contextualizes how the idea of race has been understood and treated in organizational research studies. First, it must be acknowledged that research on whiteness and organizational communication has received little attention thus far (for an exception, see Groscurth, in press). Few scholars have devoted time to explore ways in which issues related to whiteness are present in organizational processes (Grimes, 2002). However, communication scholars who study whiteness have devoted much time and attention to the notion of interrogating whiteness (Flores, Moon, & Nakayama, 2006; Grimes, 2002; Moon & Flores, 2000; Segrest, 1994), generating understanding of what constitutes white identities (Nakayama & Martin, 1999) and macrolevel power and difference issues tied to the social construction of whiteness in the United States (T. W. Allen, 1994; Burr, 1995; Frankenberg, 1993; Lipsitz, 1998; McIntosh, 1998; Ore, 2006).

Much of the conversation about interrogating whiteness centers on generating a re-writing of white people’s histories through critical analysis and self-reflexivity about assumptions of whiteness (Grimes, 2002). In other words, these scholars aim to raise consciousness regarding the traditional, taken-for-granted views of whites as lacking race. For instance, Flores and Moon (2002) argued that there exists a pervasive racial paradox in communication scholarship. According to Flores and Moon (2002), some communication
scholarship fails to represent race as a socially constructed concept based on a white supremacy ideology that has significant social effects such as discrimination and privilege. Other scholars have expended a great deal of energy to bring issues of whiteness to the surface (e.g., Bulkin, Pratt, & Smith, 1984; DuBois, 1935/1992; K. J. Madison, 1999).

Scholars also have sought to understand the meanings associated with white identities. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) and Shome (1996) have studied white identities. As a collective, these authors have articulated the invisibility and pervasiveness of white identities in U.S. society. This means “white” remains as the unquestioned racial center of society. The lived experiences of racial minorities (e.g., blacks, Latinas/os, and Asians) become constituted only in relation to dominant white experience. The lived experiences of racial minorities acquire social meanings primarily when being compared or contrasted with meanings of whiteness. Additionally, K. J. Madison (1999) compellingly argued that “anti-racist-white hero” films (e.g., James Cameron’s popular film Avatar) help to create and sustain more acceptable collective memories, for whites, of past racial struggles, and, thus, help them to create and sustain more favorable views of themselves. Finally, the work of scholars such as Frankenberg (1993) has enhanced knowledge regarding issues of power and difference as related to whiteness. One of Frankenberg’s central scholarly claims is that, historically, systems of racial differentiation not only shape those who are oppressed but also those whom they privilege (i.e., whites). Early and current whiteness research has elucidated understandings of race, which, in turn, have shaped how some scholars now approach studies of race in various social contexts (e.g., Parker, 2001; Pompper, 2007).

The body of research on whiteness suggests that there is an inextricable link between traditional understandings of race and research approaches to it and the social construction of
“white.” Consequently, without the construct “white,” there probably would not be racialized “others,” and, thus, how scholars construct knowledge regarding race would be much different than what it has been up to this point (Nkomo, 1992). As a result of these traditional views on race, some critics argue that among the slowly growing communication studies about race, the emphasis tends to be on blacks (B. J. Allen, 1995; Orbe & Allen, 2008). For instance, contemporary discourses about race in U.S. society tend to pit blacks against whites, and, thus, it would make sense that when people began to dispute the pervasiveness of white models, the knee-jerk reaction was to include more black participants in research studies.

Communication research has centralized the experiences of whites and neglected various social groups such Latinas and Latinos. Communication scholars consistently highlight the need to centralize the experiences of marginalized social group members (Bell, Orbe, Drummond, & Camara, 2000; Orbe, 2000). These commentators, however, present an interesting caveat: The need to centralize diverse voices, but to beware of continuing the practice of essentializing identities, and especially of essentializing persons’ races (Bell et al., 2000). For instance, scholars such as Orbe (2000) have argued that traditional theoretical and methodological frameworks “have fostered a ‘universal iconography’ for members of racial/ethnic minority groups whose intragroup diversity is ignored” (p. 604). In other words, essentialist views of race have engendered a surface-level view of race that has negatively affected how scholar conceptualize and conduct research studies (Collins, 1990). Strine (1997) best articulated this issue:

Efforts to adequately represent voice in scholarly discourse resist the reifying tendency of conventional social research. Under the guise of academic disinterestedness a typical research article suppresses individuating features of the researcher’s voice while
foregrounding protocols that signal methodological rigor. Similarly, the voices of informants or research subjects are reduced to predetermined categories for analysis or behavior variables for testing. (pp. 449–450)

Furthermore, much of the criticism about essentializing race centers on conventional epistemological and ontological assumptions that represent the foundation for how scholars conduct research in the social sciences. For instance, Mirande and Tanno (1993a) stated that social scientific research has historically “stultified caricatures of ethnic cultures” (p. 152). These observations suggest that the practice of ascribing identities to custodians keeps scholars bound to traditional conceptual frameworks, and, thus, it is imperative to break away from such practices. To that end, the present study emphasizes the experiential rather than the experimental; that is, it focuses on people’s lived experiences (Houston Stanback, 1989). The present study also engages another salient issue that is continually raised by race scholars: the need to conduct research that focuses on complex intersections of identity (Nkomo, 1992).

In communication research, race is often treated as a concept that operates in isolation from other social identity categories and is relevant primarily in conversations about cultural differences (Nicotera et al., 2009). This may be a reason why some communication studies appear to show a predisposition towards studying black and white custodians. It is possible that because of the historical relations between these two racial groups, discourses and meanings of race have been transplanted to social science research. Consequently, communication studies about race have focused on black and white communication differences and similarities (Parker, 2003). I add to this issue that a ubiquitous reduction of race to a black–white dichotomy in the communication literature further confounds important issues that deserve attention. An example of such an issue is the need to emphasize the extent to which intersections of identities may
affect everyday interactions in social contexts, such as organizations. To meet this need, the present study analyzes how the custodians’ race, in tandem with their occupation, social class, and immigration status, shaped their routine workplace interactions.

Hence, the present study contributes to the body of research that Orbe and Allen (2008) called multifocal relational scholarship. The current study aligns with Orbe and Allen’s characterization of this type of scholarship, specifically, with those scholars’ call to conduct research that “engages in the process of discovery by exploring race as one of many aspects of a person’s complex identity” (p. 211). Similarly, Berard (2005) found that social identity categories, such as race, when studied in isolation, might not be as relevant as when they are analyzed in combination with other identities. As Berard claimed:

Even when they are [identities such as race], their relevance cannot be properly understood without an appreciation for the multiplicity and diversity of identities which become relevant in particular contexts and courses of action . . . Identity can be respecified more widely and more finely by situating identity within natural language use and social interaction. (p. 1)

These observations illustrate the need to conduct research studies that emphasize race, but also other identities that may be contextually significant for participants. For this reason, in the present study, I accept the call to action by Nkomo’s (1992), B. J. Allen (1995), and other scholars (e.g., Houston & Wood, 1996; Parker, 2003) to advance social identity scholarship. One way that this current study fulfills this mission is by employing methodological and theoretical frameworks (i.e., interpretive frameworks and co-cultural communication theory) that advance race-related communication scholarship (B. J. Allen, 2007; Orbe, 2000). The following
studies exemplify constructive ways in which communication scholars have attempted to break away from dominant approaches of studying race and organizational communication processes.

Several communication scholars recommend that researchers employ conceptual frameworks such as standpoint theory (Wood, 1992) and co-cultural communication theory (Orbe, 1998) to frame studies of race in organizations. For instance, Wood (1992) advanced that standpoint theory can be useful because it “uses marginalized lives as the starting point from which to frame research questions and concepts, develop designs, define what counts as data, and interpret findings” (p. 12). Similarly, B. J. Allen (2007) proposed that researchers should use conceptual frameworks, such as co-cultural communication theory, to continue advancing theorizing about communication and race. Drawing from these suggestions, the following studies are presented as exemplary of these alternative ways of conceptualizing and conducting race-related communication research.

Pompper (2007) studied how Latinas working in public relations firms communicatively negotiated their race and gender with cultural in-group and out-group members. The researcher conducted focus groups in various regions of the United States with 25 Latina public relations practitioners. The focus group facilitator used a topic guide to ask questions that probed about participants’ experiences with workplace racism and sexism. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 59 years old, with an average of 9 years of public relations experience. Most were college educated with at least a BA degree. The findings were very revealing of the workplace experiences of Latina women and relationships of race and everyday interactions. From their standpoints as Latina professionals, participants said that Latino men did not respect their expertise but, rather, viewed Latina women as “objects,” by focusing on their physical appearance. Second, participants expressed that they often experienced ethnic discrimination
from Anglos. Some of the participants said that they were often overlooked for jobs because they did not look “Hispanic” enough. Furthermore, the findings indicated that Latinas’ identities as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters often conflicted with their work identities. They felt pressured to follow traditional gender roles, and this pressure caused identity crises because they wanted to have careers as well. This study, thus, shows how alternative conceptual frameworks, such as standpoint theory, can uncover useful experiences that add to knowledge of organizational communication processes. Similar to the present study, Pompper’s study focused on the experiences of a neglected social group in the communication literature, Latinas. Pompper’s findings also illustrated how dominant societal discourses of social identities may be closely related to microlevel interpersonal interactions.

In a related study, Hopson and Orbe (2007) examined the dialectical tensions that black men negotiate in oppressive organizational structures, predominantly white organizations. The researchers analyzed three texts—Twelve Years a Slave, Invisible Man, and Rage of a Privileged Class—to study dialectical tensions that black men experienced in their respective contexts. These texts were chosen because they embodied organizational and societal experiences of black U.S. Americans. Hopson and Orbe primarily were interested in understanding the men’s experiences from their standpoints as members of a co-cultural group in a given time period in the United States. Moreover, these scholars analyzed how the black men communicatively negotiated oppressive institutional and organizational structures. Hopson and Orbe found several themes, framed as dialectical tensions, which described the experiences of the black men. Some of these salient themes were somatic perceptions–cerebral realities, rational–irrational, and inclusion–opposition.
The first theme refers to black men’s physical stature and the ways in which it was manipulated to produce skewed images. As a result, these messages countered the men’s avowed identities, which forced them to constantly work to negotiate their identities in oppressive contexts. The second theme refers to the men’s continuous confrontations with racism. According to the Hopson and Orbe (2007), this tension moved from conceptualizations of normal–abnormal and rational–irrational behaviors, among others. Finally, the third theme refers to how the men, as nondominant group members within organizations, constantly negotiated feelings of opposition and inclusion. Dominant group members constantly questioned black men’s competence and integrity and, thus, the black men felt that they were not part of the organizational context. In other words, the men were constantly negotiating feelings of inclusion and feelings of opposition or exclusion. This study, thus, illustrates how engaging issues of race and communication with new conceptual frameworks, such as co-cultural communication theory, can advance knowledge of race and organizational processes. Hence, research that is inclusive of the experiences of marginalized group members can be useful in understanding overall organizational processes.

In sum, the body of research that addresses race-related issues in organizations suggests that there still is a need to approach race differently in communication scholarship (B. J. Allen, 2007; Orbe & Allen, 2008). This body of literature shows that Eurocentric conceptual frameworks and theories still pervade communication research (Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Nicotera et al. 2009), and, as a result, continue to influence research studies. This line of research positions whites as race neutral and their experiences as universal and generalizable to other groups (B. J. Allen, 1995; Nkomo, 1992). The research also shows a bias towards white and black samples in white-collar occupations or in the role of college students (Parker, 2002,
The present study breaks away from traditional conceptions by emphasizing an overlooked racial group in the literature—Latinos and Latinas. Specifically, this study focuses on communicative experiences of custodial workers, an occupation that has not been researched in the discipline. Second, the communication and race scholarship suggests that researchers would enhance race research if they centralize rather than essentialize race-related issues, meaning that habitually essentialized views of race perpetuate conventional theoretical, methodological, and conceptual frameworks (Bell et al., 1999; Orbe, 2000). The present study contributes to advancing race research by engaging race in tandem with other contextually salient social identities (i.e., social class and immigration status). Moreover, the present study uses scholars’ suggested conceptual frameworks, such as co-cultural communication theory, to advance knowledge on intersectionality in organizations. The extent to which intersectionality issues have been ignored in the discipline is further exemplified by the paucity of organizational communication scholarship that addresses immigration status and social class issues.

**Workplace communication and social class.** The term *social class* has been defined generally as “an open (to some degree) stratification system that is associated with a systematically unequal allocation of resources and constraints” (Henry, 2001, p. 1). This definition suggests that social class is a concept that permeates people’s lives because social class is reflected wherever hierarchical structures exist. For example, organizations are known to reflect society’s hierarchies of race, gender, and social class (B. J. Allen, 2000). However, research on organizational communication processes and social class appears to be limited, at best. A review of communication related research yielded two broad topical areas: (a) communication differences based on social class status (Schatzman & Strauss, 1955); and (b)
research examining individuals’ social class prejudices based on others’ linguistic abilities and communication (Giles & Sasson, 1983).

Social sciences, such as sociology, anthropology, education, and psychology, have studied social class issues for decades (e.g., Bernstein, 1971, 1974; Jackman, 1979; Schatzman & Strauss, 1955; Willems, De Maesschalck, Deveugele, Derese, & De Maeseneer, 2005). However, organizational communication research appears to overlook issues related to communication and social class (B. J. Allen, 2011). In communication, one treatment of organizational communication and social class is B. J. Allen’s (2011) book *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*. In that book, B. J. Allen addressed, among other issues, how individuals’ class status has had both discursive and material consequences within and outside of organizational structures. Like B. J. Allen’s, Bernstein’s (1971, 1974) work on communication codes has influenced contemporary ideas related to social class and everyday interpersonal interactions. Bernstein’s theory of elaborated and restricted communication codes represents one of the best-known treatments of relationships between communication processes and social class. Bernstein famously argued that individuals from different social classes tend to communicate using different types of codes: elaborated and restricted. The difference between these communication codes is that restricted codes have shorter sentences and simpler syntax, whereas elaborated codes generate meanings that are explicit, context-independent, and universal (Bernstein, 1971).

Bernstein’s (1974) theory of elaborated and restricted codes has made a significant contribution to the study of human communication. The theory’s tenets can be summarized by the following statement: “Social classes are reproduced largely as a consequence of the meanings, values, and significances of class life being transmitted through class-specific
“communication codes” (Huspek, 1994, p. 80). In other words, lower and working–class persons tend to reproduce their class status because they primarily have access to restricted codes, whereas middle and upper class individuals have access to both restricted and elaborated codes (Bernstein, 1971). A major implication of this work is that persons who use elaborated codes are better equipped with the skills necessary to perform successfully in social contexts, such as at school, work, or other places where elaborated codes tend to be the preferred codes. However, Bernstein’s work has been widely criticized because of the way that the theory stratifies individuals and overlooks how these codes are (re)produced in interaction among social classes.

Bernstein treated social classes as if they existed in isolation from each other (Bisserte, 1979; Gregersen, 1979). The theory did not take into account that although social class systems are systems of stratification, individuals interact across classes and meanings, and codes are highly dynamic and relationally driven (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003; Jackson, 1999). Additionally, because someone belongs to a lower class does not mean that he or she does not have the ability to linguistically deploy elaborated codes. These criticisms have direct implications for the current study. First, although Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers occupy traditionally lower class organizational roles, this does not mean that they are unable to use elaborated codes. For instance, a few custodial workers were persons who came to this country with postsecondary degrees and, thus, had the ability to generate elaborated codes, albeit in their native language. Second, perceptions of persons’ social class status may lead middle or upper middle class persons who have attained a higher education degree to “code switch,” to accommodate lower class persons. This scenario suggests that interclass communication is a dynamic process that is (re)produced in and through interaction.
Similar to traditional race research and its foci on blacks and whites, social class research has adopted a dichotomous approach to understanding relationships between communication and social class (Schatzman & Strauss, 1955). For instance, research has focused on investigating differences between lower and middle-class individuals (e.g., Huspek, 1994). Although this line of research has been influenced primarily by Bernstein’s work in the 1960s and 1970s, some earlier work focused on relationships between social class and communication. For example, Schatzman and Strauss’s (1955) study of 340 lower and middle-class persons found several communication differences regarding number and types of perspectives taken when communicating with others. Findings revealed that middle-class persons exhibited a greater ability to take listeners’ role, and use communication styles to implement specific interactional strategies (e.g., information seeking). In Schatzman and Strauss’s words, “differences between the lower and upper groups were striking” (p. 330).

Willems et al.’s (2005) meta-analysis of physician–patient interactions illustrates some of the ways that social class can shape interpersonal interactions. These researchers found that patients from lower social classes received less positive socioemotional messages from their physicians and a more directive and less participatory consulting style. Physicians gave much less information to lower class patients and gave fewer directions regarding future treatment. A major finding of this study was that physicians’ communication styles were strongly related to their patients’ communication styles. For example, patients from higher social classes communicated more actively and showed more affective expressiveness, eliciting more information from their doctors. Conversely, patients from lower social classes were often disadvantaged because their physicians perceived that they had a lower desire and a lower need for information due to their asking fewer questions and showing less affective expressiveness.
Willems et al.’s findings suggest that there are clear communicative differences between persons from high and low social classes, which presents lower class persons with disadvantages in various interactional contexts, such as in a healthcare organization. These findings tie to the second topical area of enacting social class prejudices based on linguistic and communication styles.

B. J. Allen’s (2011) work on organizational communication and social class illustrates some of the central issues related to prejudicial views based on social class. B. J. Allen (2011) advanced that “members of society use communication to disseminate and internalize ideologies and myths about social class” (p. 108). This claim suggests that individuals form class-related ideas about who they and others are through their communication with self and others. In other words, people are constantly communicating social class. This observation is significant considering that communication systems tend to privilege the middle-class experience and subjugate lower class persons (Ardener, 1975; Kramarae, 1981). These observations also have implications for organizational structures, as “most organizations reflect the class system of society” (B. J. Allen, 2011, p. 108). Furthermore, the workplace is a context in which individuals constantly communicate across social classes and, thus, have daily opportunities to (re)produce larger societal class structures.

The previous research relates to the current study because Latina and Latino custodians work in traditionally lower class organizational roles. Their occupation is riddled with ascribed meanings of social class status and, thus, some of the negative perceptions that come with such ascription. Those perceptions of social class are rooted in an historical hierarchy of social superiority. People perceive others negatively or are prejudiced because they feel that they belong to a higher class and, consequently, interpret lower class people as being “less than”
(Giles & Sasson, 1983; Mallison & Brewster, 2005). Additionally, class prejudice based on communication style reflects a linguistic, class-based hierarchy where some people are perceived as being superior to others (B. J. Allen, 2011). In the case of the present study’s participants, this issue becomes exacerbated due to their challenges with speaking the dominant language in the United States (i.e., English). Their workplace narratives yield useful information about how they negotiate their class status in their everyday interactions at work.

The contention that there exists a great deal of class prejudice based on persons’ communication abilities has been the subject of several research studies. For instance, Giles and Sassoon (1983) studied the effects of speakers’ accent, social class status, and communication style on listeners’ social judgments about the speakers. In an experimental design, the researchers exposed 120 college students who spoke “Standard English,” and who came from middle-class backgrounds, to audio recordings of persons who spoke in standard and non-standard English. Students then rated both language style versions on 7-point rating scales that measured intelligibility, fluency, and standardness of the speaker’s accent. The findings showed that there exists a language hierarchy based on persons’ linguistic abilities and communication styles. The findings indicated that the students assigned a lower class membership to the speaker with the nonstandard accent. What is significant about this study is that the students were told in advance that the nonstandard speaker was of a middle-class background, but they still assigned them to a lower class status based on the non-standard utterances. These results also imply that social actors tend to “read” persons’ communication styles vis-à-vis the sociocultural dominant communication style and, consequently, they form negative assumptions and stereotypes about those persons. These results show that there exist linguistic/communicative hierarchies, and that these hierarchies tend to be replicated in organizational contexts—in the previous study’s case, a
higher education institution was the backdrop. Such findings have direct implications for the everyday work experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, as they have to negotiate their status as lower class and lower status organizational members, as well as their status as Spanish-speaking Latin-American immigrants.

Mallison and Brewster’s study of a Southeastern U.S. restaurant (2005) gives further insight into issues related to organizational communication and social class. Mallison and Brewster examined how restaurant servers categorized patrons by drawing on racial and class stereotypes related to language use. The researchers conducted 15 in-depth, semistructured interviews with restaurant servers who were all white and full-time employees. The sample consisted of seven women and eight men, ages 21 to 42, with 13 servers having completed at least a year of college. The interviews covered topics concerning work experiences, such as interactions with their supervisors and customers. The researchers found that servers talked differently about blacks and “Bubbas” (white, lower class “rednecks”). Their discourse about blacks, as the servers categorized and stereotyped them, relied primarily on race, whereas “the servers derogation of redneck patrons draws on many regional and/or class-based characteristics that are manifested in markers of cultural capital (such as linguistic behavior, table manners, and style of dress, which may be similar to class status markers)” (Mallison & Brewster, p. 799). These findings reflect a class and linguistic hierarchy in which the servers perceived themselves as being superior to the patrons, both in terms of language use and class status.

A related study by Sherwood (2004) found that people tend to symbolically create intraracial boundaries based on class status along economic and cultural lines. Sherwood’s findings indicated that organizational actors tend to draw on dominant discourses to form and develop stereotypes—in this case, about race and social class. Moreover, “by engaging in
strategies to separate themselves sociopsychologically from stigmatized social groups, mark social distance from them, and emphasize positive characteristics about themselves, the servers create what Wodak (1997) called a ‘discourse of difference’” (Mallison & Brewster, 2005, p. 801). In sum, collectively, the previous research findings illustrate how individuals negotiate racial and class identities in a workplace environment. These results are relevant to the present study, which explores narratives of persons who are stigmatized in macrolevel societal and organizational structures. Additionally, the present study contributes to the scholarly literature in organizational communication and social class by seeking deeper insights into how Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers negotiate their social locations with people who might perceive them as merely immigrant “bubbas.”

**Workplace communication and immigration status.** Like social class, immigration status is a social identity that has not been studied enough in organizational communication, although intercultural communication, media, health communication, and rhetoric scholars have done a better job of studying it (see, e.g., Cisneros, 2008; K. R. Chávez, 2009; Flores, 2003; Ginossar & Nelson, 2010; Kim, 1977, 1980, 2005). The present study contributes to communication scholars’ understanding of workplace communication processes when recent immigrants are a vital part of the organizational context (Solomon, 1993). *Immigration status* is defined as a person’s condition pertaining to when he or she relocated from his or her native country to the United States, regardless of age upon migrating, citizenship status, and length of time living in the United States. In particular, I interviewed people who were born outside of the United States and made this country their permanent place of residence.

A review of the communication literature related to immigration reveals two broad categories that are germane to the present study: (a) cultural transition and adaptation, and (b)
macrolevel societal messages about immigration and Latina and Latino immigrants, specifically. Within the first category, and pertinent to the present study, scholars have focused on issues related to language use and competence, communication experiences in a host society, and accessibility to interactions with host members (Kim, 1977, 2005). In the second category, communication scholars have focused on dominant mediated messages and macrolevel societal discourses about Latina and Latino immigrants, and the potential relationships of those dominant messages with microlevel interactions (e.g., Cisneros, 2008; Ono & Sloop, 2002; Santa Ana, 1999).

Although the social sciences have studied cultural adaptation processes since the 1930s (Kim, 2005), it was the groundbreaking work of intercultural communication scholar Young Yun Kim (1977) that firmly established a link between communication and cultural transition and adaptation processes. Cultural adaptation is defined as “a multidimensional process resulting from intergroup contact in which individuals whose primary learning has been in one culture take over characteristic ways of living from another culture” (Hazuda, Stern, & Haffner, 1988, p. 690). Kim (2005) advanced that “by placing adaptation at the intersection of the person and the environment, the present approach views cross-cultural adaptation as a process that occurs in and through communication activities” (p. 379). Consequently, cultural transition and adaptation is closely linked to the present study, as cultural adaptation also focuses on how communication facilitates immigrants’ social and economic integration into a host society (Alkhazraji, Gardner, Martin, & Paolillo, 1997). That is, immigrants typically attain economic integration into a host society through their employment, and, in their routine workplace interactions, they also learn about the host culture (Alkhazraji et al., 1997). Kim’s work is especially relevant to the present study because she pointed to the importance of interpersonal interactions in the process of social
and economic integration. Kim (1977) advanced several significant factors that are directly related to people’s communicative behaviors in any social context: language competence, acculturation motivation to learn and participate in the host society, and accessibility to interpersonal and mass communication channels of the host society.

Kim’s (2005) work established a theoretical link between immigrants’ communication experiences in a host society, and accessibility to interactions with hosts in the process of achieving social and economic integration. First, Kim (1977) argued that these factors are highly significant for immigrants’ transition and adaptation into a new cultural system. Second, Kim (1977) claimed that “no matter how strongly motivated and fluent in English an immigrant is, [she or he] will find it difficult to form any meaningful relationship with Americans unless [she or he] is provided with some opportunity to approach or to be approached by Americans” (p. 70). This observation suggests that even with linguistic abilities and motivation, it can be difficult for immigrants to create healthy relational bonds and adapt to their new society if they are isolated from other individuals or do not belong to any social networks. Kim (1977) additionally advanced that although education, sex, age of migration, and length of stay in a new culture determine language competence, acculturation motivation and accessibility to host communication channels and to interpersonal interactions are more influential in forming and “developing a complex and refined cognitive system in perceiving the host society” (p. 75; see also Alvarez, Orbe, Urban, & Tavares, in press).

Berg’s (2009) study of core networks and whites’ attitudes toward immigrants is a good example of how persons’ communication within their interpersonal networks may be related to their communication with and about immigrants. Berg examined data from the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) and the 2000 U.S. Census using a multilevel model to evaluate whether a
network perspective predicted whites’ attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy. The GSS draws a nationally representative sample of English-speaking adults, 18 years of age and older, currently residing in U.S. households, with the groups stratified by race and income selection. The findings showed that native-born whites who are embedded in educated core networks (individuals and their close associates) with nonwhites are likely to hold pro-immigrant attitudes, whereas those who are embedded in older and tighter core networks are likely to hold anti-immigrant attitudes. Additionally, educated core networks mediate the effects of perceiving immigrants as a threat and, thereby, mediate one’s willingness to interact with immigrants. These findings suggest that interpersonal relational contexts (in people’s private and work lives) and broader societal contexts may be related to attitude formation. Furthermore, Berg’s study suggests that if persons remain embedded in their racially similar networks, a good chance exists that they will not experientially learn new information about culturally different others and, specifically, about immigrants, and vice versa. This situation can perpetuate surface-level interactions and the continuity of negative dominant discourses and stereotypes. These issues, therefore, can affect people’s interpersonal interactions in contexts such as the workplace (Harlos & Pinder, 1999; Marra & Holmes, 2008).

To date, few studies have explored immigrants’ experiences related to their workplace communication (Zoltniski, 2003). Two recent studies in organizational communication are Alkhazraji et al.’s (1997) study of the acculturation process of Muslim immigrants and ways that they learn U.S. national and organizational cultures. Amason, Allen and Holmes (1999) examined cultural differences in employees’ perceptions of social support received from various sources in the organization. Alkhazraji et al. surveyed 339 Muslim employees to inquire about the processes through which they learn about the U.S. national and local organizational cultures.
This study found that the employees preferred to remain among culturally similar others both in and out of the workplace, but they also tended to accept and adapt to U.S. organizational cultures. Cultural value orientation (e.g., collectivism—giving groups priority over individuals), religion, gender, education, and length of stay also related to their acculturation into U.S. culture, and cultural value orientation and perceived discrepancy in work cultures related to acculturation into organizational cultures.

Amason et al. (1999) used mixed methods, interviewing and surveys, to examine how Hispanic immigrants reported receiving social support to cope with acculturative stress. The study found that the Latina and Latino workers reported receiving more social support from their Latina and Latino coworkers than from their Caucasian coworkers. Employees reported that receiving social support from their Caucasian coworkers was significantly related to positively coping with emotional acculturative stress. Coworkers and supervisors’ praise and help with personal problems also were positively associated with emotional acculturative stress.

These two studies suggest that workplace communication is vital for immigrants’ transition and acculturation processes, and for coping with the everyday burdens of work life. Alkhazraji et al.’s (1997) findings have implications for acculturation and, thus, for social and economic integration into U.S. society. For instance, if immigrants remain surrounded by culturally similar others in and out of the workplace, this may obstruct their ability to learn the host society’s dominant language. Even after many years of residence, immigrants may not possess the cultural knowledge that would allow them to become integrated into their new culture. Kim’s (1977) research closely aligns with the previous inquiries, such that if immigrants do not possess the linguistic abilities and if they do not have the motivation to interact and access host society members, they probably will have a difficult time adapting to their new society and
forming and developing a healthy psychological well-being (Kim, 1977, 1980; Walsh, Shulman, & Maurer, 2008). Immigrants’ lack of motivation to adapt to their host culture also may function to feed persistent negative messages about foreign immigrants. Dominant messages and narratives about immigration, as history shows, tend to reside in social imaginaries through popular culture, and they become perennially embedded in the national psyche (L. R. Chávez, 2008; K. R. Chávez, 2009; Flores, 2003).

Communication scholars also have studied the role of public discourse in constructing and perpetuating negative images of foreign immigrants; specifically, Latina and Latino immigrants (Flores, 2003; Ono & Sloop, 2002; Santa Ana, 1999). According to Flores (2003):

Contemporary images of immigrants, such as that of the illegal alien, do not emerge in a vacuum. Instead, they are part of our nation’s history of immigration, race, and nation; they bring with them varied meanings, reflecting their origins and uses. (p. 363)

The concepts of nation, race, and immigration are bestowed with meanings stemming from their origins, meanings that become perpetuated through their use in society. Several meanings that immigrants have been historically assigned in U.S. society are those of “outsiders,” “illegal,” “dangerous,” “polluted,” and “animals,” (L. R. Chávez, 2008; Cisneros, 2008; Santa Ana, 1999). According to K. R. Chávez (2009), immigrant bodies are “translated” from pervasive dominant discourses (e.g., oftentimes embedded in metaphors), through embodied interpersonal interactions, to mean abjection and unintelligibility. In this vein, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that metaphors are critical to how social actors think and make meaning in their lives. Metaphors, thus, are fundamental to national social imaginaries. This argument is significant because a social imaginary is not just a set of innocuous ideas; it is a discourse that shapes and enables a
society’s set of dominant practices (C. Taylor, 2002). In modern-day United States, the (Latina and Latino) immigrant as a social imaginary is filled with tension and disapproval.

Dominant social discourses can have serious implications for immigrants in various social contexts. L. R. Chávez (2008) persuasively argued that there exists in the United States a Latino threat narrative (LTN) that infuses Latina and Latino immigrant bodies with negative meanings, which affect how these individuals are perceived in the “biopower” of the U.S. body politic (Aldama, 2001; DeChaine, 2009). According to L. R. Chávez (2008):

The Latino Threat Narrative (LTN) works so well and is so pervasive precisely because its basic premises are taken for granted as true. In this narrative, Latinos, whether immigrant or U.S. born, are a homogeneous population that somehow stands apart from normal processes of historical change. They are immutable and impervious to the influences of the larger society and thus are not characterized as experiencing social and cultural change. (p. 41)

L. R. Chávez (2008) raised the concern that these discourses construct a Latina/o “subject” who is perceived as un-American and as an outsider, and, thus, is unassimilatable. L. R. Chávez’s argument has direct implications for the present study, for according to communication scholars (B. J. Allen, 2010; K. R. Chávez, 2009), these discursive deployments have negative discursive and material consequences on microlevels for persons who are the target of those discourses.

In particularly, K. R. Chávez (2009) argued that a link exists between dominant societal discourses and interpersonal interactions. K. R. Chávez claimed that through mediated metaphors, the immigrant body gets “translated” as text and, thus, is “read” by individuals who draw from those dominant discourses to make sense of and to interact with immigrants. In other
words, the target group of the discourse becomes the embodied representation of those discourses, and, consequently, this group is the target of groups and individuals who loathe the fundamental ideas that those discourses advance.

K. R. Chávez (2009) used the Chandler roundup as a case study of how law enforcement officers treat and talk to presumed migrants. The Chandler roundup was an immigration raid that happened in Chandler, AZ, in July 1997. Through illustrations of discourse between law enforcement agents and presumed migrants, K. R. Chávez (2009) discussed the role of history in shaping those interactions, especially in historically conflict-ridden contexts such as the state of Arizona (i.e., conflicts due to Mexican immigration). K. R. Chávez’s (2009) exposition of potential relationships between dominant societal discourses and discursive currency in interpersonal encounters is useful in developing scholarly understandings of relationships between macrolevel messages and microlevel interactions.

K. R. Chávez’s (2009) theoretical framework can inform how Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ workplace communication may be tied to broader dominant narratives about Latina and Latino immigrants. Additionally, this theoretical framework helps to inform potential connections between custodial workers’ narratives and the concept of a social imaginary, as these ideas tend to be influential for self and others because they oftentimes inform how people send and receive messages at the interpersonal level (Butler, 1995; Collier, 1991; Drzewiecka, 2000). As a whole, these observations suggest that when a group consistently is demonized in popular culture, it typically is the case that we hear about aggression towards those group members on microlevels (B. J. Allen, 2010; Flores, 2003).

Although communication scholars have studied these broader messages, they have not concentrated as much on how microlevel communicative exchanges play out in social contexts,
such as the workplace (Zlöniski, 2003). K. R. Chávez’s (2009) work addresses immigration-related issues focused on communication processes and, thus, advances theoretical knowledge that can be applied to workplace communicative practices. K. R. Chávez’s (2009) research, like Kim’s (2005) are relevant to the current study in that the communication processes that both theorists studied can be useful for understanding workplace interactions between Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers and cross-cultural group members (e.g., the role of language competence and accessibility to interpersonal interactions with the host society’s group members). What seems obvious from this literature review is the absence of research that focuses on Latina and Latino immigrants’ communication in organizational contexts. Because of this absence, I presented relevant research that illustrates the extent to which organization communication researchers have discussed social identities (specifically, race and social class). Finally, broader societal discourses also can affect how cross-cultural group members perceive the participants of the present study, especially because the participants inhabit traditionally lower class organizational roles.

**Workplace communication and occupation.** Scholarship related to occupation and occupational identity is highly multidisciplinary, with contributions made by those in social psychology, sociology, and communication, as well as in occupation therapy and occupational science (e.g., Ashcraft, 2005, 2007; Fine, 1996; Hebson, 2009; Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006; Laliberte-Rudman & Dennhardt, 2007; Meisenbach, 2008). As previously indicated, *occupation* is broadly defined as the formal role(s) that individuals enact within the structures of organizations. The word “enact” within this definition implies that “occupation” is a construct that is implicitly communicative. For instance, occupation as a social construct is intimately linked to many other socially relevant constructs, such as economic and sociopolitical systems,
as well as to individual and group categories of social difference, such as gender, class, and race (Laliberte-Rudman & Dennhardt, 2008). The concept of occupation is one to which individuals, groups, and nations assign varied meanings; through those various meanings, social actors understand and talk about the world of work and their place in it. A person’s occupation communicates to others his or her social class status. Furthermore, in U.S. society, historically, occupation has been closely linked with a person’s race (B. J. Allen, 2011; Meisenbach, 2008).

The scholarly literature about occupation yields two major areas: (a) the relationship between sociocultural structures and occupation, and (b) socially significant symbolic features of the occupation construct. This section discusses scholarship related to these two broad areas, and offers a critique of that literature. Throughout this literature review, the present study is positioned within this body of research.

Hughes (1951, 1962, 1971) and his research team at the Chicago School of Occupational Sociology were pioneers in advancing social scientists’ understanding of the formation and roles of occupations in society. Hughes (1971) notably claimed that:

a man’s work [sic] is one of the things by which he is judged, and certainly one of the more significant things by which he judges himself. Many people in our society work in named occupations. The names are tags, a combination of price tag and calling card. One has only to hear casual conversation to sense how important these tags are . . . it happens over and over that the people who practice an occupation attempt to revise the conceptions which their various publics have of the occupation and of the people in it. In so doing, they also attempt to revise their own conception of themselves and their work. (pp. 338–339)
This statement illustrates that occupation is a social construction that is fluid and can be “revised” through interactions in and out of the workplace (Berger & Luckman, 1966). The present study contributes to research regarding the communicative aspects of occupations and how persons in lower status occupations (e.g., custodians) negotiate their occupational identities, examining a specific area that has been overlooked in occupational studies: understanding of occupational identities as they intersect with immigration status. The literature shows that researchers have focused on race, social class, and gender, but not on immigration status (Adkins & Lury, 1999; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Huws, 2006).

*Society, culture, and occupations.* Scholarship about occupation has devoted some attention to how macrolevel (e.g., cultures) and microlevel contexts (e.g., organizations) overlap to shape how societies and social actors understand and use understandings (i.e., create knowledge) about occupations (Iwama, 2003; Laliberte-Rudman & Dennhardt, 2008; Whiteford & Wilcock, 2000). Research in this area suggests that cultures and societies are filled with complex competing social processes and meanings about what counts as the “truth” and which meanings are most pervasive and privileged. However, the communicative aspect of occupations is implied but not explicitly explored. This line of research additionally suggests that occupations are discursive and, thus, fluid and dynamic constructs. In other words, the meanings and understandings about occupations are varied and fluctuate historically. Furthermore, “the narrative construction of occupational identity is depicted as occurring within specific cultural ways of understanding human development” (Laliberte-Rudman & Dennhardt, 2008, pp. 154–155). Although the communicative dimensions of occupations are implicitly addressed, they have not yet been explicitly researched across disciplines. The present study attempts to alter
this trend by engaging communication as a unit of analysis within the workplace experiences of custodians at a large public university.

Adding to the groundbreaking work of Hughes (1971), Laliberte-Rudman and Dennhardt (2008) advanced a notable framework to connect sociocultural processes and occupational identity. These scholars used Kluckhohn and Strodebeck’s (1961) seminal research about cultural value orientations to illustrate the cultural underpinnings of the concept of occupation. Laliberte-Rudman and Dennhardt (2008) argued that the values of Western cultures are deeply embedded within contemporary conceptualizations of identity, and that such conceptualizations are articulated through a variety of macrolevel and microlevel processes (e.g., through how a specific culture views person–nature relationship, time, activity, and relationships). These conceptualizations are consistent with what Sokefeld (1999) attributed to the “Western” self (i.e., egocentric, autonomous, integrated, and able to pursue its goals). In other words, dominant cultural values, discourses, and ideologies permeate microlevel interactions. Laliberte-Rudman and Dennhardt’s work has direct implications for organizational communication. For example, the custodians in the present study originated from collectivistic cultures where the needs of the social group is emphasized over the individual’s needs and, thus, their image of occupations might run counter to the individualistic Western self that Sokefeld (1999) described.

In an individualistic culture, such as the United States, the individual is placed above the group and, thus there exists a dominant discourse about individuals being the “masters of their fate.” As a consequence, people in certain undesirable occupations, and not the system, are blamed for creating their current circumstances (Grosfoguel, 2003). In contrast, Awaad (2003) explained how in Middle-Eastern culture the “interests of the clan are placed above interests of individuals, who subsequently have little autonomy” (p. 410). Additionally, Kashima et al.
(2004) showed that the Japanese word for “self” means that the self is part of an interdependent whole. This culture–self relationship suggests that dominant cultural discourses about social constructs, such as occupation, shape people’s understandings of self and others in embodied occupations. This perspective enhances understanding of dominant discourses about immigration and how such discourses might be related to microlevel interactions for social actors such as Latina and Latino immigrants. However, although research on occupations has addressed issues of race, class, and gender, research has not been conducted on certain lower status occupations.

The body of research that links culture and occupation, as exemplified by theoretical models, such as the one by Laliberte-Rudman & Dennhardt’s (2008), locates and reveals common assumptions and beliefs about how individuals and occupations are detached from social and cultural systems. This research enhanced scholars and laypersons’ sensitivity toward the idea that there is a fundamentally interdependent relationship between culture and occupational selves (Haraway, 1991). The present study well illustrates the relationship between culture and occupation, as gaining a better understanding of how ascribed meanings of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians intersect with organizational microlevel practices, such as routine interaction, is important to amplify ideas about the intersections of race, class, immigration status, and occupation. Additionally, “recognizing occupation-based knowledge as ‘situated knowledge,’ that is as not separate from the social and cultural contexts in which it is produced, opens exciting perspectives on producing and sharing this knowledge” (Laliberte-Rudman & Dennhardt, 2008, p. 160). As explained below, scholarship about the occupation construct as “symbolic” illustrates such exciting perspectives (such as how occupation is used as social currency to make meaning about and for occupations).
The symbolic dimension of occupations. Research on occupations and occupational identity implies that this social construct is intrinsically and extrinsically symbolic. Occupation as a social construct creates many complex and overlapping meanings about categories of social identity, such as race, class, and gender. Sociologists’ work on occupation and stigmas exemplifies the inherent symbolism in the notion of occupation (Kreiner et al., 2006). This research area examines how social stigmas shape meanings about the persons who perform “socially tainted” or “dirty” work. Hughes (1951) used the term “dirty work” to describe occupations and tasks that are perceived by the larger society as being degrading and repulsive to the people performing them. Although this research has emphasized dirty work and stigmatized occupations, it has overlooked the particular racial group that this present study addresses (i.e., Latinas and Latinos), which is regrettable, given that Latinas and Latinos hold many of these stigmatized occupations in U.S. society (L. R. Chávez, 2008; Grosfoguel, 2003). This section, thus, addresses research on dirty work and social stigmas, occupational rhetoric, and occupational identity negotiation research.

Scholarly literature about dirty work broadly frames this type of work as a necessary evil (Kreiner et al., 2006). In this line of research, some occupations are conceptualized as being socially tainted (e.g., garbage collectors, prison guards, and prostitutes); indeed, they are referred to as socially stigmatized. Kreiner et al. (2006) defined a stigmatized group of people as “one whose identity or image calls into question the full humanity of its members; in the eyes of others, the stigmatized group and its members are spoiled, blemished, devalued, or flawed to various degrees” (p. 621). This definition has implications for communication studies because as persons embody these occupations, they learn who they and others are within the workplace and
within the broader societal context. However, the nature of these occupations appears to be in tension with persons’ needs to be part of social structures.

Holmer-Nadesan (1996) conducted a research study at a Midwestern U.S. university and found that the position of service worker seemed to be somewhat romanticized. A custodian’s job description at this particular university’s employee handbook illustrates this point:

You, as a Service Worker, are vital to helping make our Residence Halls a success. The service staff help provide the strong foundation to our organizational structure that enable us to be successful and continue our tradition of excellence.

A job description such as this one seems to almost idealize a job in which individuals’ primary duties are cleaning up other people’s waste. Nevertheless, this occupation is much needed and seemingly essential to the organization’s continued “success.”

For people who do dirty work, their occupational selves automatically become symbolic. In the United States, cleaning staff, for instance, tend to embody the “evil” in the phrase “necessary evil,” which often is attached to their occupations (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Elsbach, 2001). Research on occupations suggests that dominant discourses about the United States as being a “classless” society are paradoxically juxtaposed with discourses and images of occupationalism (Kreiner et al., 2006), which can be defined as the prejudicial attitudes that people hold toward other society members based on their occupations. Consequently, for people such as Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, the macrolevel (dominant societal beliefs) and the microlevel (everyday interactions) intersect during mundane organizational microlevel practices.

According to occupation research, this reality can have negative outcomes for individuals in stigmatized occupations (Kreiner et al., 2006). Such studies suggest that doing dirty work and
being stigmatized potentially can result in negative in-group stereotyping, out-group preferential treatment, internalized inferiority, low group self-esteem, and in-group disidentification (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, 2001; Jost & Elsbach, 2001). A question that has not been addressed in this research area, however, is how the permeable boundaries of immigration (i.e., crossing cultural boundaries) become part of the relational work context once an individual enters a new cultural system. The present study expands this line of research by inquiring about immigrants’ daily occupational experiences in cross-cultural workplace situations. Additionally, the organizational literature shows that individuals use a “generalized social creativity” to cope with the threats of their stigmatized status.

According to the literature on occupation, “stigmatization” is an “interactive” process in which those who are stigmatized use tactics to cope with their “condition.” Stigmatizing is a group-level phenomenon and, thus, this reality gives group members an opportunity to strengthen their “in-groupness” such that they can collectively cope with the threat of stigmas (Ellemers & Wilke, 1993). Ludwig (1997) asserted “the very qualities that serve to alienate you from the world around you serve as a bond among those in your group. You no longer need to feel isolated and different” (p. 77). This generalized social creativity tends to manifest itself through groups’ ideologies, social weighting, and behavioral and cognitive tactics (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Cahill, 1999; Trice, 1993).

Individuals in stigmatized occupations tend to rely on belief systems (i.e., ideologies), social weighting, and behavioral and cognitive tactics to cope with the threat of social stigma (Kreiner et al., 2006). According to Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), stigmatized occupations often are tied to belief systems that reframe, refocus, and recalibrate the meaning of work. As Kreiner
et al. (2006) explained, “Reframing imbues the work with positive value or negates its negative value” (p. 627). Kreiner et al. also defined recalibrating as a process in which the individual adjusts the implicit standards used to evaluate the magnitude (how much) or value (how good), or both, of various components of the stigmatized occupation, magnifying a seemingly insignificant and desired part or minimizing what most would consider to be a major, undesirable part. (p. 627)

An example of recalibrating is a custodian who talks about his or her “expertise” as an “environmental services specialist” and downplays his or her cleaning duties as “facilities maintenance.”

Finally, “refocusing shifts attention from the stigmatized aspects to the nonstigmatized aspects; it is the ideological version of the shell game” (Kreiner et al., 2006, p. 627). According to these scholars, the more tasks that are stigmatized within the occupation, the more refocusing those individuals need to do to deflect the threats of stigma. In other words, individuals tend to focus on the extrinsic aspects of their occupation. For instance, a prostitute disclosed to Hansen (1999) how she approached her work, saying, “We have a swimming pool [at the brothel]. . . . We get drunk sometimes. We have fun. But when it comes down to it, we’re all in it for the money” (p. 226).

The other two mechanisms through which stigmatized groups “defend themselves” against social stigmas are social weighting and behavioral and cognitive tactics. Social weighting has to do with the stigmatized groups challenging outsiders’ credibility regarding what they do and, simultaneously, embracing the affirming views of supporters (Cahill, 1999; Crocker & Major, 1989; Dutton, Debebe, & Wrzesniewski, 1996). For example, Cahill (1999) found that trainers in the mortuary discipline encouraged their students to attribute the public’s criticism of
funeral work to public ignorance and a denial of death. Similarly, Dutton et al. (1996) found that hospital cleaning staff received support from their positive interactions with patients and their families, and that they had to “weight” this support against their mostly negative interactions with physicians and nurses. The present study adds to this line of research by focusing on how a university cleaning staff interacts with faculty, staff, and students.

According to the organizational studies literature, people in stigmatized occupations use behavioral and cognitive tactics that bolster their belief systems and social weighting strategies. This type of tactic is similar to practices found in the stress management literature (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997). An example of a behavioral and cognitive tactic used to fight stigmas is to attack the sources and the symptoms of dealing with the negative effects of stigma. For example, in an interview study of 18 dirty work occupations, Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, and Fugate (2007) found that managers employed tactics, such as confronting clients and the public about offensive stereotypes; encouraging stigmatized clients to behave in less stigmatizing ways; avoiding others’ attributions of dirt or elements of the occupation that appear dirty (cf. covering and passing; Goffman, 1963); using humor to diffuse stress associated with problematic tasks, blaming and distancing themselves from clients; and separating themselves from the job itself (cf. psychological disengagement; Major & Schmader, 1998). This research suggests that the need to resolve these behaviors and tactics, in part, is the result of the highly negative socially ascribed meanings that these occupations possess.

Beliefs and socially “agreed on” views about occupations within social structures are other aspects that give occupations a symbolic dimension. Fine (1996) argued that occupational rhetoric and occupational identities are communicatively negotiable. These two areas are, of course, conceptually interrelated. For instance, all social roles are discursively constructed and
manifested through everyday interactions. Organizational members’ views of such roles shape how they understand themselves and others within those roles. To inform how people view themselves in organizational roles, some researchers have studied occupations as “rhetorical” by looking at occupational identity negotiation (Fine, 1996; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Misenbach, 2008). Regarding occupational rhetoric, Fine (1996) argued that organizational members define themselves in particular ways through a process of fitting work into a meaning system, which constitutes an occupational rhetoric. In this sense, how people communicatively situate themselves and others is what is deemed in society to be an occupation. This idea is closely related to how people negotiate their occupations within everyday, routine interactions at work. Although there appears to be a close relationship between the concepts of occupation and communication, little research has explicitly examined how people doing dirty work communicatively negotiate their occupations with others. This study expands ideas this area of research by exploring custodians’ workplace interactions.

When people enter organizations, they have a predetermined notion, or set of worldviews, of who they are as they embody their given role within that organization (Fine, 1996; Haas & Shafir, 1982; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Therefore, a person’s identity and communicative competence help reify a person–organization and occupation fit (Haas & Shafir, 1982). Individuals tend to view their place in organizations through the lens of the meanings attached to that occupation and how people have come to understand those meanings (Burke, 1969). Burke implied that individuals who hold certain occupations see the world through the tasks and activities associated with those occupations (e.g., lawyers interpret the world legally and physicians medically). Within Burke’s paradigm, custodians would interpret the world “cleaningly,” although this term does not tell much about how custodians, for instance, interpret
what they do. The idea, itself, suggests how little communication scholars know about the
communicative experiences of marginalized persons who occupy lower status jobs within U.S.
organizational structures. Expanding research on occupational rhetoric would deepen knowledge
about the interrelatedness of bodies, occupations, and organizations as these entities intersect
through social actors’ interactions.

Research on occupational rhetoric and identity has direct implications for the present
study. According to researchers, a dominant schema exists in U.S. society that organizes how
people places themselves vis-à-vis a single set of occupational standards (Fine, 1996; Hughes,
1971; Snow & Anderson, 1987). This is a significant and problematic idea because it suggests
that people position themselves and others within organizational structures based on dominant
“rhetorics” of those occupations. However, many other self-schemas, which are a reflection of
other life spheres, such as the family or what people do in their free time, overlap within the
organizational context, and this idea can shape how people view others and themselves within
the workplace. This research suggests that people’s worldviews of occupations (i.e., their
occupational rhetorics) are diffused with their worldviews about other notions of who they are
(e.g., father, mother, or pianist), and that these overlapping worldviews can play out in the
workplace through interactions with others. In other words, people’s “occupational rhetoric”
gets enacted as they visualize and send messages that correspond with their self-schema vis-à-vis
the occupation that they personify (Gergen, 1991; Snow & Anderson, 1987). Within dominant
societal views about certain occupations, custodians, for example, individuals are stripped of
their agency to visualize themselves as being anything beyond “someone who cleans.”

U.S. society, historically, has constructed occupations based on activities, status, prestige,
or as Bourdieu (1987) called it, “symbolic capital.” In the United States, there is variability to
occupations akin to the variability that exists within other social identity categories, such as race, class, and gender. U.S. society, thus, has totalized work roles in ways that simultaneously totalize the people who hold those roles. In U.S. society, people have taken-for-granted assumptions about occupations and the persons who embody them. This idea that all people in an occupation do the same thing is a mistake that groups people together simply based on their “tag” or official title. The implication of this knowledge is that people fail to perceive others as being dynamic, complex beings within those work roles, which is similar to how people tend to group people based on race, social class, and gender identity categories. According to Fine (1996), “not all doctors, lawyers, painters, or cooks do similar things—a function of organizational and client demands, the choices of workers, the specialized knowledge of subgroups, and career stage” (p. 91).

Finally, according to research on occupational rhetorics, few occupations have a single “rhetorical stance”; instead, persons communicatively convey various occupational rhetorics through their many interrelated and complex ideas about how they and others act within their work roles (Alexander & Wiley, 1981; Stone, 1962; Strauss, 1988). As Fine (1996) explained: “These rhetorics are not objective depictions of a single work reality but represent articulation work that is done to construct meaning linked to a worker’s sense of self” (p. 92). Nevertheless, worker’s sense of self derives from dominant discourses about the many social identities that make up their “self.” Hence, as people draw from dominant societal discourses, they learn about their place and that of others within the social and organizational structures (Burr, 1995). This reality situates persons in certain occupations (e.g., custodians) in highly disadvantaged social locations that permeate and shape how persons located in a “one-up” social or organizational position might perceive and interact with them. Consequently, research related to the notion of
occupational rhetoric relates to how organizational members negotiate their occupational identities.

Identity negotiation studies in organizational contexts have expanded tremendously in the last decade with an emphasis on the professions (Ashcraft, 2005, 2007; Dyer & Keller-Cohen, 2000; Jorgenson, 2000). Organizational identity negotiation has emphasized issues related to identity negotiation and gender (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003; Jorgenson, 2002; Tracy & Scott, 2006), narratives (Dyer & Keller-Cohen, 2000; Holmes, 2005), power and control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ashcraft, 2005), and discourse (Ashcraft, 2007; Kuhn, 2006). This research conceptualizes identity as socially constructed, processual, and dynamic, with much of it embracing a poststructuralist stance towards the concept of identity, such that identities tend to be conceptualized as shifting, fragmented, and lacking consistency (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Kondo, 1990; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). These dominant perspectives within identity-negotiation research have strongly challenged the notion that people have stable selves that are static in nature.

Tracy and Trethewey (2005) explained the strong poststructuralist orientation within this line of research that has informed theory building about gender-related issues in primarily professional organizational contexts (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003). To elucidate identity-negotiation research, Tracy and Trethewey employed the metaphor of a “crystallized identity,” arguing that organizational actors’ identities can change, develop, and reveal themselves differently at different times. Essentially, these scholars argue that people apprehend various selves at different times and, thus, this reality continually creates spaces for self-empowerment and emancipation.
Holmer-Nadesan (1996), in her study of women service workers at a large, public university, showed how the service workers’ discourse disrupted dominant discourses of patriarchy, bureaucracy, and capitalism. Holmer-Nadesan’s ethnographic case study, based on interviews, advanced that “the women’s experiences of the contradictions and antagonisms that rupture these discourses generate a sense of ‘lack’ that has the effect of opening up alternative possibilities for action and self-understanding” (p. 49). Holmer-Nadesan’s study aligns with the present study in that it moves away from “professionals” and offers an alternative type of occupational experience that emphasizes marginalized, blue-collar occupational identities. It is important to have a wider breadth and depth of knowledge to enhance scholars and practitioners’ understandings about social processes of identity negotiation, not only within managerial or professional ranks but also in lower status occupations. Developing research that emphasizes such occupations also could advance understanding of power and control processes across occupational hierarchies and power dynamics within individuals’ interactions and relationships.

Identity negotiation research also has attended to issues related to power, control, and resistance in organizations (Alvesson, 2000; Meisenbach, 2008). Within the poststructuralist paradigm that seems dominant in this line of research, a focus on power and control processes makes sense. For instance, Alvesson (2000) persuasively argued that identities “are developed in the context of power relations” (p. 1105). Additionally, Karreman and Alvesson (2001) posited that identities are “partly a temporary outcome of the powers and regulations that the subject encounters” (p. 63). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) also advanced that identity regulation and identity work are central pieces of the identity negotiation process.

Identity regulation centers on how discourses engender and control individuals’ self-identities, whereas identity work characterizes persons’ understandings and responses (such as
resistance) to discourses. It would be noteworthy to assess whether salient discursive strategies exist that individuals use to position themselves as dominant or nondominant in microlevel interactions. As Alvesson and Willmott explained regarding identity negotiation in organizations, individuals constantly seek “opportunities for microemancipation as well as openings for ‘new’ forms of subordination and oppression” (p. 638). The present study seeks to elucidate whether organizational actors’ marginalized locations within organizations lead to the discovery of discourses of subordination and oppression. Such knowledge illuminates potential avenues for individuals’ self-empowerment and disrupts systematic disempowerment in the workplace. Communication and social justice research is one avenue that communication scholars have embraced to address such issues of inequality (Frey, 1998).

More recently, organizational research has focused on the role of discourse in the identity negotiation process (Kuhn, 2006; Musson & Duberley, 2007). Mumby (2004) defined discourse as a “material, embodied, performative process through which social actors construct their identities in a dynamic, contradictory and precarious fashion” (p. 247). Kuhn (2006), however, argued that even though organizational communication scholars are beginning to focus on the wide breadth of discursive resources that are available to organizational actors and relevant to identity negotiation, researchers rarely have considered how “organizational discourses influence identity formation, and even more rarely attend to discourses beyond the artificial boundaries of the organization” (p. 1342). The present study attends to if and how dominant discourses about race, class, and immigration status shape, in any way, the work experience of the custodians. This research, thus, focuses on how identities are negotiated when dominant societal discourses overlap with micropractices in organizational contexts.
Research on identity negotiation in organizations has generated knowledge that responds to questions about the lived experiences of organizational actors’ identity negotiation processes. This research area illuminates understandings of everyday microlevel practices in organizational contexts. Additionally, this line of research suggests that everyday workplace interactions are embedded within power relationships and overlap with larger societal discourses about who are the organizational actors. The need to further understand the identity negotiation processes, when individuals embody traditionally marginalized occupations, partially serves as the impetus for the present study. Research that includes traditionally marginalized organizational members and their communication experiences is of increasing importance as the racial-ethnic diversity of the United States continues to rise. The topic is additionally important because, historically, large numbers of individuals who occupy a marginalized social location also occupy marginalized spaces within organizations.

**Summary**

This review presented research on workplace communication processes and issues between superiors and subordinates, coworkers, and co-cultural group members. Literature also was reviewed about social identity and, specifically, the social identities that are relevant to the custodians’ work experience. In general, superior–subordinate communication tends to be lopsided, as superiors tend to adopt role-taking stances that often lead to autocratic and transactional leadership styles. Additionally, superior–subordinate communication can also affect coworkers’ interactions. For instance, under highly autocratic supervisors, coworkers tend to see each other as equals and communicate for social support. Little research, however, focuses on communication between individuals in service occupations and their clients or customers. This research topic, thus, is ripe for organizational communication scholars.
Research on social identity shows that, first, race still is a misunderstood concept among communication researchers. Second, little organizational communication research has emphasized social class. Third, some communication scholarship has emphasized immigration, primarily in the rhetoric and mass communication subdisciplines. Finally, researchers who are studying occupations and occupational identity view these constructs as closely tied to the culture in which occupations exist. Occupations also inherently are communicative, as they have various meanings and people exchange those meanings from their occupational standpoints.

Due to the lack of research about the communication experiences of historically marginalized groups employed in lower status occupations (e.g., Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers) and the need for more research studies that focus on workplace communication and issues related to organizational actors’ race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status, and occupation, the following research questions are advanced:

RQ1: What are Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers’ communication experiences within a higher education organization?

RQ2: To what extent are social identities, such as race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status, and occupation, relevant to the communication experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers within a higher education organization?
CHAPTER III

METHODS

This chapter explains the design of the research study. In this chapter I discuss the rationale for using an interpretive conceptual framework. I briefly discuss why the selected research site was useful for this study. Third, the data collection and analysis procedures are explained. Fourth, I situate myself within the research site, explaining my relationship with the research site, how I see my role as a researcher and participant, and how who I am and my assumptions shape my research in this site. Finally, some ethical considerations and the study’s limitations are offered.

Situating Latina and Latino Immigrant Custodians’ Communication Experiences within an Interpretive Framework

An interpretive framework was useful for conducting this research study because “for interpretivists, it is axiomatic that we need to see social action from the actors’ point of view to understand what is happening” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 31). The philosophical principle that undergirds this research study is what Wilhelm Dilthey called Verstehen. I centralized the notion of “seeking to understand” as I attempted to broaden and deepen my understanding of the communicative experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers within a higher education organizational setting.

The interpretive paradigm is also useful for fruitfully developing research agendas on issues related to social identity and qualitative scholarship (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Social scientists have advocated the need to conduct qualitative research studies, in general, due to their emphasis on localized, situated meaning making among social actors and between social actors and researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Stanfield & Dennis, 1993). As
Denzin and Lincoln (2000) explained, qualitative research “locates the observer in the world . . . It involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world and involves researchers making sense of phenomena in terms of meaning people bring to them” (p. 3).

This research project aimed to make sense of the meanings that custodians co-constructed with others through their everyday interactions. This study embraced an interpretive framework because, according to Hecht, Ribeau, and Sedano (1990), interpretive research methods have “a unique ability to capture the actor’s point of view and allow the cultural perspective to emerge from the participant’s own words” (p. 35). Hence, this research paradigm was useful for examining the workplace lived experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers. Interpretive approaches have strategically equipped scholars to take on certain historically neglected topics in the academy (e.g., race and ethnicity issues; Clair, 2003). An example of this paradigm shift (from positivistic to interpretive approaches) in communication studies is the recent trend to use interpretive frameworks to study communication and social identity issues (B. J. Allen, 1995, 2007, 2011; Orbe, 1998, 2000; Stanfield & Dennis, 1993).

Concerning relationships between interpretive research and studies of race and ethnicity, Orbe (2000) explained that there is “a clear need to extend beyond social scientific research methodologies. In order to advance current conceptualizations of racial–ethnic minority groups in intercultural scholarship, research must begin to focus on the ‘experiential’ as much as the ‘experimental’” (p. 604). The present study represents an effort to answer such calls to action for more experiential research about communication and social identity, by investigating relationships between communication processes and social identities, such as race-ethnicity and social class.
Qualitative research methods. This study employed qualitative methods to collect, analyze, and interpret data to answer the research questions posed. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), qualitative researchers’ primary goal is to “seek to preserve and analyze the situated form, content, and experience of social action, rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations” (p. 18). Qualitative research has no specific defining method but, instead, uses a variety of methods. For instance, whereas naturalistic inquiry almost always relies on researchers’ immersion in the world of the social actors’ being studied, and ethnographers almost always use participant observation as a methodological strategy, qualitative research is a broad umbrella term that can employ various strategies, such as participant observation, interviewing, and document and artifact analysis. This study employed in-depth interviewing as a primary methodological strategy to examine Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ workplace communication.

An interpretive framework was suitable for this project because this framework’s philosophical tenets advanced that social actors’ realities are constantly created, sustained, and modified through their interactions as they create and exchange, and make sense of, localized meanings and communicative performances (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The strength of this paradigm is that it functions inductively to produce knowledge; as Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explained, in this paradigm, “theory should be developed inductively through the iterative testing of tentative explanations against the experience of ongoing interaction with group members” (p. 11). The implications of such a conceptual stance are that the knower can seek to understand social actors’ communicative practices and meanings through a deep textual reading of their symbolic performances, as they simultaneously participate in meaning co-construction throughout the research process.
Such a research approach implies that the researcher does not have to be a passive observer, as required in some positivistic paradigms, but an active participant in social actors’ situated, localized, and emergent realities. As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explained, “True knowledge is gained through prolonged immersion and extensive dialogue practiced [by researchers] in actual social settings,” and “intimate familiarity with the performance and significance of social practices . . . is a requirement for [their] adequate explanation” (p. 11). Therefore, within an interpretive paradigm, “the researcher is the instrument” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 11). Because I wanted to be an active participant in the participants’ lived experiences, using qualitative methods provided the opportunity to proactively and symbolically engage the people studied in their world. In other words, I actively sought to understand custodians’ perspective. This research goal robustly aligned with Dilthey’s notion of Verstehen.

Several additional characteristics of the interpretive paradigm further highlight its usefulness for the present study. First, the position, background, and researchers’ choices tend to inform interpretations, such that researchers’ values are unavoidably instilled in the research. Second, researchers’ knowledge of their position and values allows for an understanding of issues that lead to certain choices being made and to achieve intersubjective understanding with those they study. This strategy allows for reliable findings and constructive interpretations of research claims (Goodall, 2000; Van Maanen, 1988). Third, researchers’ reflexivity is important during the research process and when reporting findings. By reflecting on the choices, positions, and values that are at play during data collection and analysis, researchers can offer specific and useful accounts of actual relationships between them and the persons they study (B. C. Taylor & Trujillo, 2001).
The Research Site

Before deciding to conduct a research study about Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communication experiences, I had already been in a research site for more than 2 years. I was a student at the University of Colorado at Boulder for 2.5 years when I decided to explore these organizational actors’ communicative experiences. At the time, I was debating whether I wanted to compare Latina and Latino custodians’ experiences across organizations or just focus on one organization. I made the decision to immerse myself in custodial work life, and I thought that a large, public university in the Southwestern United States where I was located was a practical location for such an endeavor. The University of Colorado at Boulder (henceforth CU) was such a place. CU employs 6,000+ persons and serves the educational needs of 30,000 students. The university faculty, staff, and student body, as well as the custodial staff, represent a diverse set of people that made it useful for the present study. For example, of the approximately 1,100 full-time faculty members, 13% are members of racial minority groups, 40% are women. The staff offers even greater racial, gender, and educational diversity (CU website). Regarding the student body of approximately 30,000 students, 47% are women and 53% are men. Additionally, 70% are in-state residents and 30% are from out of the state; 14% are racial minorities and 4% are international students. This organization had the potential to be rich with symbolic currency, especially with regard to exploring the everyday communication experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians. In this section, I briefly discuss how I gained entry into the research site and then provide three specific reasons why CU was a useful research site in which to study workplace communication.

I became interested in issues of communication and social identity during my graduate studies in organizational communication and difference. After immersing myself in scholarly
literature related to organizational communication and difference (i.e., notions of identity, such as race-ethnicity, gender, and social class), I became interested in understanding the communication experiences of occupationally marginalized organizational actors. Subsequently, I conceptualized those persons as working on the lower levels of U.S. organizational hierarchies. That conceptualization, and the idea for the present project, came to me one evening as I was at home brainstorming about issues and concepts on which to focus my research agenda. I set out to find a way to put such a project into motion. Less than a year later, I was working as a custodian in the department of Facilities Management at CU. The chain of events that lead to such an opportunity was having a one-on-one meeting with one of my faculty mentors.

My mentor and I were discussing my current research interests, and he referred me to two staff members in the department of Human Resources (HR); they were both in the area of organizational development and training. I met with both of the HR officers and they gave me information that spring boarded my entry into the research site. What was critical to getting a position as a custodian was that one of those two officers connected me with another staff member, the staff coordinator in Facilities Management. Once I met with that staff member, I explained to her my goal of understanding Latina and Latino custodians’ communication experiences and how, to achieve that goal, I wanted to work as a custodian. I would sporadically set up meetings with the staff coordinator to check on the status of my request and to revisit the goal of my study. She communicated with her superiors about the possibility of hiring me as a student employee within this department. About 5 months after our first meeting, I got an e-mail from the staff coordinator that informed me that I had been approved to start working as a part-time custodian. I began working as a custodian soon thereafter.
**Size and location.** CU’s size and geographic location made it a practical site to study Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ workplace communication. First, CU is a large public university, which serves the public higher education needs of the state and the country. CU has a diverse faculty, staff, and student population (in terms of race-ethnicity, social class, gender, occupation, and education level). Although the majority of CU’s faculty, staff, and students are white, its demographics reveal a certain variety of organizational actors, with, for instance, over 50% of the CU full-time faculty being made up of women and 14% of the student population belonging to a racial minority group. These demographics give CU a variety of organizational actors that made it a suitable organizational setting to study workplace communication. CU’s relative variety of organizational actors offered a context in which the custodial workers had opportunities to come into contact with a variety of individuals, which is practical for a study about communication and social identity.

At the macrolevel, CU is located in the southwestern region of the United States; specifically, in Colorado. Due to its geographic location, the university offers an institutional context that exists in the middle of continuous contentious debates and discourses about Mexican illegal immigration. This context is relevant because most of the custodians were self-identified *Mexicanos.*\(^2\) Moreover, CU was an appropriate site considering the tense past and bloody history of race relations in this region of the United States and, specifically, between Mexicans and Anglo-Saxons (Aldama, 2001; Rodriguez, 2007). In sum, both the organization’s size and geographic region within the United States contributed to informing custodians’ workplace communication.

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\(^2\)Spanish word for “Mexicans.”
**Organizational actors.** Although CU, on the surface, appeared to be an organization that lacks what is commonly understood to be diversity, a careful inspection revealed that this organization is diverse with respect to other aspects of social difference besides race-ethnicity (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, social class, occupation, and education level). As the statistics outlined above suggest, CU displays some diversity specifically in terms of gender and organizational role. CU is a relatively diverse institution if one considers various social identities, not just race-ethnicity.

The people who were studied for this research project (Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers) also represented a diverse group of people. For instance, participants exhibited differences in terms of regional origin, age, socioeconomic, educational, and occupational backgrounds. Participants originated from different parts of Mexico and other Latin-American countries, such as Peru and El Salvador. The large majority of Mexican participants originated from the Mexican states of Michoacán, Zacatecas, Durango, and Chihuahua. Three participants originated from El Salvador, and two participants originated from Peru. Participants’ ages ranged from 33 to 65 years old, with the mean age being 46 years old. Most participants migrated to the United States as young adults (in their mid to late teens) or when slightly older. The majority of participants was married and had children. The large majority of participants had lived in the United States for at least 10 years. These differences made for diverse and rich perspectives and lived experiences.

In addition to regional origin and age difference, the people studied came from varied socioeconomic, educational, and occupational backgrounds. Participants came to their current custodian jobs from occupations as diverse as hotel housekeeper, factory worker (including turkey, tire, and canned vegetable factories), dishwasher, nongovernmental organization
administrator, kitchen helper, landscaper, secretary, and accounting assistant. This job diversity also reflected participants’ educational diversity. Whereas some participants had achieved some college education, others never went past the fifth grade, and some could not read or write. The large majority of participants’ formal education was in their native countries. Several participants were highly articulate and used sophisticated words to communicate with me, whereas others consistently used restricted codes.

CU’s various departments and services also contributed to the organization being a practical site for this study. The custodial staff worked in departments or units that were very distinct and, thus, the staff members had different structural and cultural experiences. These departments made the Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communication experiences qualitatively different. In this project, I included the four major departments that provide custodial services to the university: (a) Facilities Management, (b) Housing Services, (c) Recreation Services, and (d) the University Memorial Center. Each of these departments has a culture, goals, and customer needs. Hence, CU’s structural diversity was an asset for this study.

Organizational structure. Through interviewing participants across departments, this study indirectly explored whether there were any salient similarities and differences across custodians’ departments and their communication experiences. CU’s mixture of organizational substructures also contributed to making CU a constructive research site. First, the department of Facilities Management serves the cleaning needs of various buildings on campus—primarily classrooms, offices, hallways and conference rooms. Second, Housing Services is in charge of student dormitories and other housing units for graduate students and faculty and staff. Third, Recreation Services serves the student recreation centers on campus (i.e., gymnasiums and
recreational facilities). Lastly, the UMC is the university’s “living room,” where the university community comes for activities, speakers, meetings, and food.

Custodians working in these departments can have very different communication experiences because the facilities and the people that they serve vary. For example, Housing Services custodians (whose official name is housekeepers) rarely interact with faculty members because they work in the student dormitories. In contrast, Recreation Services and UMC custodians have opportunities to interface with the campus community at large, as do Facilities Management custodians, chapter four provides a more elaborate description of CU as an organization, to further substantiate its usefulness as a research site.

Methods

Data collection. Data were collected using the qualitative technique of in-depth interviewing to acquire custodians’ perspectives and lived experiences. However, participant observations and documents also helped to contextualize participants’ experiences. Much of the information in Chapter Four (the research site), and throughout the manuscript, was obtained from my participant observational notes and from university documents. The data collected came from these various sources because qualitative “research should privilege deep understanding of human actions, motives, and feelings. It should illuminate how cultural symbol systems are used to attribute meaning to existence and activity” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 11).

Interviewing. Interviewing is critical to understanding the subjective knowledge and meanings of those whose experiences scholars seek to understand. As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explained, “Interviews are particularly well suited to understand the social actor’s experience and perspective” (p. 173). Interviewing was employed in this study because it allowed me to co-
construct meaning with participants about their lived workplace experiences. Paget (1983) eloquently described the value of the interview process for interpretive research:

> What distinguishes in-depth interviewing is that the answers given continually inform the evolving conversation. Knowledge thus accumulates with many turns at talk. It collects in stories, asides, hesitations, expressions of feeling, and spontaneous associations . . . The specific person interviewing, the “I” that I am, personally contributes to the creation of the interview’s content because I follow my own perplexities as they arise in our discourse. (p. 78)

This observation suggests that the interview process is an interactive and dynamic discursive process of co-construction of meaning between knower and known.

Before conducting any interviews, custodians needed to meet two criteria: (a) be a self-identified Latina or Latino immigrant, and (b) have some experience working in the organization by being employed there for at least 6 to 12 months as a custodian. This timeframe was chosen because, as a study about everyday communication, time was necessary for the person to have some interactions in the workplace. After identifying those individuals who met these criteria, I constantly sought out their knowledge through various types of interviews, including informant, respondent, and ethnographic interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

The first interview type, the informant interview “inform[s] the research about key features and processes of the scene—what the significant customs and rituals are and how they are done” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 176). This type of interview provided an opportunity for me to gain knowledge about happenings and situations in the scenes. During respondent interviews, I encouraged interviewees to “express themselves on an issue or situation, or to explain what they think or how they feel about their social world” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p.
The last type of interview conducted, in addition to formal in-depth interviews, was ethnographic interviews, which were informal and impromptu interviews conducted during my time on the “frontlines.” In concert, interviews helped to gain a deep understanding of the social actors’ lived experiences, as well as the departments’ cultures and everyday activities.

Interviewing was employed as the primary method of data collection for the study because, when done well, it creates a discursive space where participants narrate their behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. Interviews allowed participants to verbally recreate their lived experiences in ways that other forms of data collection such as surveys or experiments may not have achieved. Such situated narratives are rich in description and, thus, ideal for an interpretive study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). According to Fontana and Frey (2000), “Interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results” (p. 646). One key feature of contemporary forms of interviewing is that they have become a more interactive process than traditional positivistic ways of interviewing. Because of these new approaches to interviewing, interviews offered a valuable tool to collect the data for this study.

In essence, I employed a conversational approach with the custodians. Contemporary interpretive researchers are moving away from traditional forms of interviewing where linearity of communication and rigid structure was the norm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Contemporary perspectives on interviewing strongly advise researchers to create comfortable climates where interviewees are seen as the holders of knowledge and addressed as equals (Clair, 2003). Orbe’s (2000) observation illustrated some of the alternative ways of engaging custodians: “Unlike traditional research interviewing, ‘subjects’ are able to ask questions of those conducting the research. In this regard, all individuals are committed to investigating their perceptions of
intercultural relations resulting in a shared responsibility for the discovery of knowledge” (p. 612). Approaching interviewing as an interactive process where knowledge is co-constructed with participants, thus, can yield powerful narrative texts about their lived experiences.

The custodians with whom I conducted formal, sit-down, in-depth interviews were recruited through a snowball sampling strategy ($N = 25$). The snowball sampling strategy allowed various experiences to be collected from individuals who worked in the four departments and with whom I did not have the opportunity to interact. To reach various participants across departments, I asked custodians with whom I had built relationships to connect me with CU-employed friends and colleagues. I then contacted those referrals via e-mail and telephone to set up dates and times to meet for a sit-down interview. The interviews were conducted between January 2010 and April 2010.

The initial group of interviewees was acquaintances with whom I had formed relationships during my time as a student at CU. I interviewed eight custodians from Housing Services, five custodians from the UMC, four from Recreation Services, and eight custodians from Facilities Management. I asked semistructured, open-ended questions that gave interviewees opportunities to share their narratives about their lived experiences in an unrestricted way. I created the interview guide to align with general criteria recommended by interpretive scholars (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; see Appendix A). Some of these criteria were: (a) keeping the topics and questions broad such that the interviewer can ask the questions differently to participants, (b) that the interview guide should not rigidly dictate the order of how questions are asked, (c) that the guide should provide the interviewer the freedom to ask optional questions, and (d) that the interview guide should allow the researcher to reframe questions and adapt to interviewees’ verbal style as the interview unfolds (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Some of
the questions included in the interview guide were: (a) During a regular work day/night, who do you talk to regularly? (b) Do you feel that language affects your day-to-day communication with others? (c) Has anyone ever asked for your suggestions about tasks, problems or particular situations at work? (d) Please describe some of the relationships that you have formed and developed at work and with whom.

Regarding sample size, the guideline that I followed was to conduct interviews until no new information was gained in relation to answering the research questions; that is, until the point of “theoretical saturation” was apparent (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This point was reached at 25 in-depth interviews. I conducted the interviews in classrooms, break rooms, lobbies, and at custodians’ homes. The interviews lasted 90 to 105 minutes on average. All interviews (including informant, respondent and ethnographic) were, at interviewees’ request, conducted in the custodians’ native language of Spanish. With interviewees’ permission, in-depth interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim in Spanish. I transcribed half of the interviews and a professional transcriber transcribed the other half. I use pseudonyms for all participants in all data texts. In total, the interviews yielded 234 pages of transcribed text. I translated the portions of the interviews and all translated text in the manuscript from Spanish to English. I was able to translate the interviews because I am a qualified translator, given my background as a native Spanish speaker and my formal education in both English and Spanish. These abilities allowed me to record respondent, informant, and ethnographic interviews in English and Spanish in my field notes at the time that the interviews were conducted.

Conducting interviews in participants’ native language (Spanish) was important for the study’s purpose and outcomes, as I wanted to acquire participants’ voices in their raw form. For instance, I wanted to effectively understand participants’ experiences and communicate it to
English- and Spanish-speaking audiences. Interviewing participants in their native language and then translating the text to English best accomplished that goal. For ethical considerations, I employed plain diction that was free of regional colloquialisms and idiomatic phrases during the interviews (see the interview protocol in Appendix A). Furthermore, although using two languages added time and labor, doing so meant that this project would contribute to translinguistic qualitative communication research. For instance, according to Lopez, Figueroa, Connor, and Maliski (2008):

> Currently, cross-cultural qualitative studies conducted in languages other than the investigator’s primary language are rare and especially challenging because of the belief that meaning—which is at the heart of qualitative analysis—cannot be sufficiently ascribed by an investigator whose primary language differs from the study’s participants. (p. 1729)

Because participants’ native language was my first language, I effectively straddled the bilingual fence to manage how the data were obtained and interpreted.

Interviews were conducted in participants’ native language for two additional reasons. First, research that is inclusive of English as a Second Language (ESL) populations is virtually nonexistent in the communication discipline. Second, this research study highlights potential challenges that might be encountered when conducting research with ESL populations. Marshall and While (1994) supported these ideas by asserting that:

> Subjects with significant English language difficulties have been traditionally excluded from research studies due to this language barrier. However, they have a unique contribution to research since their needs, views and perceptions might be very different from others in a sample. (p. 566)
Nevertheless, Marshall and While also explained that “this can, however, pose several challenges for a research study, both in terms of the methodological problems that can arise and interviewer skill” (pp. 566–567). The goal of qualitative research is to understand lived experience, and social actors’ language is a fundamental conduit of how they interpret and understand those lived experiences. I admit at the outset that conducting interviews in a language other than English and translating the text can pose some methodological challenges, but I had confidence in my bilingual abilities to translate text from Spanish to English, and vice versa. Furthermore, I was well aware that even though standards of rigor exist for qualitative research, there are not similar standards for translating text. In this vein, this study also serves as a “conversation starter” regarding what standards of rigor scholars should have in place when conducting qualitative research with ESL persons.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish because this approach represented a contribution to organizational communication studies and it had the potential to highlight challenges in cross-linguistic qualitative research. In communication, the health communication subdiscipline has addressed communication experiences of ESL individuals (disciplines, such as health and nursing, seemed more concerned about being inclusive of ESL persons in their research (e.g., Lopez et al., 2008; Marshall & While, 1994; Twinn, 1997). These disciplines have highlighted several pre- and during-interview issues that also were apparent in the present study, such as participation in research studies, probing, understanding, and nonverbal behavior. Specifically, according to Marshall and While (1994), ESL participants tend to be apprehensive about participating in research studies in which researchers do not speak their language. This was the case during the present study, as a large number of potential participants declined to participate in this study. I am not sure why this happened, but one potential reason might be that some
people perceived me as an out-group member although we originated from Latin America and spoke the same language. I chose to conduct the interviews in Spanish because of the probing nature of interviewing. If I had conducted the interviews in English, I probably would not have been able to probe as deeply as I was able to do using participants’ native language.

**Participant observation.** Participant observations allowed me to witness social actors’ communicative performances in their environment as they happened. Participant observation, as a mode of data collection, was a useful tool in identifying and describing performances and happenings within the organization. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), “The validity of participant observation derives from researchers’ *having been there*” (p. 135). I used participant observation to immerse myself in custodians’ work lives. I also wanted to intimately get to know what it is like interacting with others from a custodian’s perspective. My primary goal was to develop a deep understanding of Latina and Latino custodians as they communicatively enacted their organizational roles with culturally similar and dissimilar others. When employing participant-observational methods, researchers can accomplish their goals by embodying one of four roles: complete participant, participant-observer, observer-participant, and complete observer (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

In the first role, participant as observer, I entered the field with the clear expectation that I was in an investigator role. I studied the scene from my vantage point of working as a part-time custodian who was in the building learning about custodian culture and individual and group symbolic performances. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), in this role “participation is part of a ‘deal’ negotiated with gatekeepers (or sponsors) and usually involves a special status—usually a part-time, temporary, voluntary, and/or ‘play’ role” (p. 147). In this role, I worked as a part-time custodian and was not expected to master all the cleaning duties that veteran custodians
mastered. I was in this role for a total of 3 months, from April 2009 to June 2009. I typically worked 4-hour shifts two to three times a week for a combined total of approximately 10 to 12 hours a week. Sometimes, I would only work twice a week due to changes in my student schedule.

I worked in various buildings on campus, including the School of Business and the Administrative Center. My work duties consisted primarily of dusting and wiping down top surfaces in offices, classrooms and meeting rooms. I also swept and mopped floors several times. During that time, I was fully engaged in performing the duties of a custodian, but without having all the expectations and responsibilities that affect full-time custodians. For instance, I did not have to finish a certain number of offices by a certain time. Additionally, I could take, although briefly, some time off to write field notes and to ask the supervisor and coworkers questions about their work activities and specific happenings in the scene. In total, I spent approximately 110 hours in the field, which yielded roughly 30 pages of handwritten field notes. Halfway through the data collection, I came back into the field and spent several hours with the custodians, this time in an observer-participant role.

In the observer-participant role, “participation derives from a central position of observation. In other words, the agenda of observation is primary, but this does not rule out the possibility that researchers will casually and nondirectively interact with participants” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 149). I came back to the field almost a year later because I wanted to re-engage custodial work life after spending months reconceptualizing the study. As the project unfolded, and as I continued to engage research topic-related texts and data, I decided to go back into the field and observe firsthand how scholarly literatures and data texts related to custodians’ lived experiences. Another important reason for returning to the field was that as an iterative process,
qualitative research allows researchers to leave and come back to the field to better capture and understand the social actors’ *lebenswelt* (lifeworld) and symbolic performances (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In total, I spent an additional 25 hours in the field gathering information to additionally support my research claims.

Participant-observation data were collected from three scenes in the research site: (a) staff meetings, (b) breaks, and (c) during work hours or on the “frontlines,” as being on the clock is formally known across campus units. These three scenes displayed custodians’ routine interactions with supervisors, coworkers, and customers. The staff meetings gave me an opportunity to observe custodians’ conversations with their supervisors and coworkers in a decision-making and collaboration context. During breaks, custodians displayed their communication in a more relaxed atmosphere with their peers. On the frontlines, I observed custodians’ interactions with supervisors, coworkers, and customers as they encountered these individuals during a regular work shift. Spending time in and studying these three scenes was a useful experience that amplified my understanding of custodial work life.

First, I observed staff meetings lead by the supervisor. I participated in seven meetings, in which, typically, the supervisor discussed upcoming events and miscellaneous work-related activities with custodians. Staff meetings were regularly scheduled, every other week or so, and mandatory. These staff meetings usually took place before the beginning of custodians’ work shift. The meetings typically lasted no more than half an hour and took place in a classroom in the School of Business (I spent most of my working hours in this building). As a scene in the research site, these staff meetings provided a discursive space where I could observe superior–subordinate interaction and decision-making and collaboration processes. I saw how the supervisor verbally addressed the workers and how workers responded to the supervisor and to
their colleagues. Staff meetings also allowed me to glance into the department’s culture, as I could observe behaviors related to leadership style, as well as organizational discourse. In sum, staff meetings offered a discursive space where I could examine department-specific attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors within the work group being observed.

In the second scene, I observed custodians interacting with others during their break hours. I had various opportunities to sit down and “break bread” with the custodians. I observed custodians when their “veils” were down, with custodians typically relaxed, joking around, and sharing food with each other. In that scene, I, thus, saw a “laid-back” side of the workers. We also talked about their dreams, fears, personal lives, and their feelings about their work. It was during breaks that I conducted some informant interviews (meant to inform researchers about key features of scenes) and ethnographic interviews (casual conversations that happen spontaneously; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). It also was during break hours that I learned about custodial work, in general, as well as the department’s culture and custodians’ perspectives about their supervisors and the department’s leadership. These casual moments led to many conversations that deeply enriched my knowledge about custodial work.

The third scene that I observed was “the frontlines,” the official name that departments gave the work of cleaning the physical facilities. I spent most of my time in the field doing custodial work, but also observing custodians doing their jobs and interacting with other people. Custodians, including myself, spent most of the time on the frontlines isolated, with some rare, brief, and casual encounters with coworkers and customers (i.e., faculty, students and university staff). In the time I spent working as a custodian, I experienced constant boredom and felt the monotony of custodial work. I recall thinking to myself, “I could not do this for very long.” I constantly thought about the communication isolation in which I was immersed for those hours
that I spent cleaning facilities. However, I gained valuable insights into custodians’ day-to-day communication during those hours, as I experienced firsthand with whom they talked and what they talked about, as well as the frequency, breadth, and depth of their conversations.

**Documents.** Organizational documents were acquired to contextualize custodians’ workplace communication experiences. I collected organizational documents before, during, and after my time as a participant observer. I also collected documents from gatekeepers and sponsors as I built relationships with those individuals. I collected documents to strategically supplement the information obtained from interviews and participant observations. Additionally, documents strengthened my ability to make research claims because they helped me gain a deeper understanding of how

it [the organization] categorizes events of people (e.g., membership lists); how it codifies procedures or policies (e.g., manuals); and what ways it informs or instructs the membership (e.g., newsletters and shareholder reports), explains past or future actions (e.g., memoranda), memorializes its own history or achievements (e.g., yearbooks), and tracks its own activities (e.g., minutes of meetings). (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 117)

In collecting documents, I adhered to general criteria about suitable document selection for interpretive research: (a) documents should be “linked to the talk and social action contexts that the researcher is studying;” (b) documents should help the researcher “reconstruct past events or ongoing processes that are not available for direct observation;” and (c) documents should embody the organization’s social rules “that govern how members of a social collective should behave” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 117).

Documents collected for this study included both text-based and visual materials: (a) e-mails; (b) flyers; (c) posters; (d) employee handbooks, policies, rules, and responsibilities; and
(e) family and medical leave policies. Some documents were available on the university’s website (e.g., employee handbook, policies, rules, and responsibilities), whereas others were obtained from staff members (e.g., posters and flyers). These documents provided a snapshot of the organization’s relationship with the custodians and the organization’s culture. In total, I collected over 80 pages of documents in Spanish and English from the four departments that were part of the research study.

**Data analysis.** To analyze the data texts, I employed an inductive conceptual framework to let the data inform the research claims and theory development. This analytical framework is based on a process that examines and produces concepts and themes that emerge from the data. This is a simultaneous inductive and deductive process where themes and categories emerge through researchers’ immersion in the raw data. The data analysis and collection occurred almost simultaneously “by identifying some important issues that guide the collection of data” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 12). Preexisting theories, concepts, and issues sensitize researchers to specific questions and orientations in an iterative process of observation and analysis during the research project; therefore, “theory is built up from observation . . . . Theory is ‘grounded’ in data” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 12).

Two central characteristics guided the process of data analysis:

1. Theory is grounded in the relationship between data and the categories into which they are coded; and
2. Codes and categories are mutable until late in the project, because the researcher is still in the field and data from new experiences continue to alter the scope and terms of his or her analytic framework. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 218)
This second characteristic might suggest that the coding process could last for an indefinite period of time, but according to Glaser and Strauss (1967), research endeavors, in general, reach a point of “theoretical saturation.” Furthermore, according to Lindlof and Taylor (2002):

What keeps the process under some control is the fact that the analyst is comparing each incident to other incidents in order to decide in which categories they belong. Thus when considering any new incident, the analyst compares it with incidents that have already been coded into categories. (p. 219)

It was within this iterative analytical process that raw data in the form of interview texts were analyzed for this study.

Data sources provided a well of information that was coded. Themes and concepts from the literature reviewed and research questions also guided the process of coding the raw data. I took this approach to ensure that the coding process was accurately oriented toward these theoretical themes and concepts. Throughout this process, I constantly discussed initial and subsequent findings with my advisors and colleagues, and I reflected on scenes and interviews, as well as on my positioning as a researcher. The data-analytic process was a constant part of my sense-making process throughout the study. This process also allowed me to hone in on salient coding categories that shed light on the issues under investigation. Throughout the coding process, I paid attention to data that informed the everyday communication experiences of the custodians and how they perceived themselves, others, and their interactions. Keeping these sensitizing concepts in mind helped to identify the concepts when they emerged from the data. Such a process also was useful in helping to understand my position as a researcher studying the research site and the people in this study.
Positioning myself as a researcher. Even though I formally spent 3 months in the research site working as a custodian, in actuality, I spent 4 years as an active participant within the organization in different capacities. For instance, I enacted several organizational roles beyond part-time custodian at CU: graduate student, student faculty, and student leader. This circumstance gave me additional knowledge about the organization and its history, culture, and people. Hence, I had a developed relationship with this organization and the people that I studied that is much longer than the time that I spent officially “studying” it. This relationship gives me a vantage point that was useful in researching the phenomenon under investigation. For instance, my role as a researcher and as a participant is not that of the traditional researcher who comes into an organization because she or he is interested in studying symbolic processes in that organization. I already had been immersed in the organization and, therefore, was more sensitized to the day-to-day happenings of the organization. This circumstance, of course, presented me with both advantages and disadvantages.

My role as a graduate student at CU may have shaped how the custodial workers perceived me in that context. Although I am Latino and an immigrant, I also have acquired much cultural capital (i.e., learning the dominant language and about U.S. culture) during my time in the United States, and this capital has allowed me to climb various “social ladders” (e.g., educational and socioeconomic). In this society, I am part of an elite group of people—the educated elite. This reality might have shaped whether the custodians viewed me as an in-group or out-group member. Additionally, age difference might have been an issue for some custodians, as I was an early 30s college student, whereas most participants were middle-aged (45 years old or older). These circumstances might have shaped how the workers oriented toward me and the information that they chose to disclose. In contrast, participants also could
have seen me as a positive role model or as someone who is motivational for other Latinos, regardless of age and occupation. In fact, several participants explicitly communicated to me that they were proud of me and “all my accomplishments.” Many custodians even encouraged me to “continue representing Latinos well.” Such perceptions might have motivated them to open up to me, to help me meet the study’s goals. In sum, who I am within this research site may have had both positive and negative consequences due to my relationship with the organization and its members. As a result, my role as researcher and participant may have been affected by my other role as a student within this university.

My relationship with the university and my graduate student role partially shaped my assumptions and what I saw as I prepared to engage the custodians. From my student perspective, I had the idea that the Latina and Latino custodians were unhappy, and that they were likely suffering and living a despondent life because of the jobs that they held. I came into the site ridden with assumptions about who the custodians were and what their feelings were about work and life, ready to discover all the wrongs that were being committed against them. Those views, however, partially were shaped by me “watching” them from my privileged role as a graduate student within this organizational setting. Throughout the research process, I had to reposition myself and my views about who the custodians were and their work experiences. Additionally, I learned that it is critical to enter a research site and approach people with an awareness of the assumptions and standpoints that cloud our perceptions, working hard as a researcher to “suspend” preconceived assumptions. Through building relationships with the custodians before and during the data-collection process, I heightened my awareness and better understood my role as a researcher.
**Ethical considerations.** Ethical issues related to custodians’ protection should be highlighted, as these were persons who some may consider to be vulnerable “subjects.”

Therefore, as a researcher, part of my responsibility was to inform and to protect participants. I carried out my responsibilities by explicitly expressing to participants that their cooperation was strictly voluntary. Additionally, I thoroughly debriefed participants about the study’s purpose and their role in it.

Another aspect important to consider when working with human beings is what researchers do with the information obtained. For example, as a study that required translation, I needed to be careful in how I represented participants’ statements in a different language. Although this study had minimal risk for the participants and their well-being, I used several precautions to protect the participants.

First, I used informed consent throughout the study. Participants were informed well in advance of the study’s purpose and of their participation. Each participant had the opportunity to read and sign informed consent forms written in participants’ native language of Spanish. For those participants who could not read the form, I read the form to them. Second, all pertinent documents (e.g., interview guide) were translated into Spanish to provide participants with access to any information pertaining to their participation in the study. Third, all information regarding participants was kept confidential throughout the final manuscript, with, as explained previously, all names being pseudonyms. Fourth, to the extent of possible, I translated all interview text in participants’ exact words. I strategically employed plain diction such that all questions and answers were free of regional colloquialisms and idiomatic phrases that might not be understood by a larger audience. I knew that translating information from one language to another could represent ethical issues, and, for that reason, I was sensitive to what participants
said and to how I represented their words in the manuscript. Lastly, all information related to the research study is in the research or is in the possession of my advisor and dissertation committee members. Nobody, other than these individuals, has access to this information.

Summary

This chapter explained the epistemological foundations and methodological approaches that guided data collection, analysis, and interpretation. After discussing the significance of the interpretive paradigm that framed this study, the research site and its practicality to support the research project’s goals was explained. The types of data and the data-collection and analysis procedures then were explicated. I also positioned myself as a researcher within the research site. I talked about my relationship with the research site and how I viewed my role as a researcher and as a participant, as well as how the person that I am and my assumptions shaped the research in this organization. Finally, I mentioned some ethical considerations relevant to working with human beings.

In chapter four, I describe the research site in more detail, providing a vibrant picture of the organization. This description is useful because understanding the organization’s relationship with participants aids in understanding participants’ communication experiences. Specifically, I give an overview of the organization’s history, its people, and its physical layout, as well as its salient organizational structures.
CHAPTER IV
THE ORGANIZATION

The university setting is a practical research site for this study. Although organizational communication research has focused primarily on corporate settings, some communication scholars have argued for investigations that explore communication processes in university settings (B. J. Allen, 1996, 2000; B. J. Allen, Orbe, & Olivas, 1999). The university exhibits many of the characteristics of corporations. For instance, universities are highly complex social systems with intricate hierarchies and communication networks, and, as such, they deserve as much attention as corporate settings. This study, thus, contributes to communication research in general and organizational communication research specifically by expanding scholarly understandings about Latinas and Latinos’ experiences in U.S. organizations (Delgado, 2009).

This chapter sketches a portrait of the organization, the University of Colorado at Boulder (CU), drawing from my experiences as a graduate student, part-time custodian, and researcher. The following pages provide a detailed overview of the organization, including a brief history (of the university itself and Latina and Latino custodial workers at the university), demographics, and physical layout. Additionally, I offer an overview of the four organizational units involved in this study and the type of work that custodians do within those units. To further illustrate custodial work life within each unit, I present a sketch of custodians’ regular workday that come from my experiences shadowing three custodians during their work shifts. This chapter contextualizes everyday communication experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians by offering a depiction of the place where they come to work every day and night.
**History, Demographics, and Physical Layout**

In 1876, the Rocky Mountain region state legislature passed an amendment to the state constitution that provided money for the establishment of the CU and other higher education institutions in the Rocky Mountain region. The doors of the university opened officially the fall of 1877. At the time that CU was built, there were few high schools in the state that could adequately prepare students for university work; consequently, in addition to the university, a preparatory school was created on campus. In fall 1877, the student body consisted of 15 students in the college proper and 50 students in the preparatory school. There were 38 men and 27 women, and their ages ranged from 12 to 23 years. These events marked the beginning of what would become one of elite public universities in the United States.

Since those days, CU has been one of the leading public higher education institutions in the Southwest region of the United States, the nation, and the world. The university is known as a *Public Ivy*[^1] and boasts of being one of the universities in the United States that has sent more astronauts to outer space than any other university. The university has grown exponentially since those early days. Today, CU is home to approximately 30,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students who come from all over the United States and the world. Additionally, the university has a highly distinguished faculty that includes several Nobel Prize winners. Overall, the university holds a solid reputation as being one of the best public universities in the United States. This history is illustrated not only by the events that led to its formation but also by its unique location, architecture and demographics, which shape its beginnings and its modern-day identity.

[^1]: Term coined by Richard Moll in 1985 to refer to U.S. public universities that offer an Ivy League-like higher education experience for much lower tuition rates.
CU is the flagship institution of the state of Colorado three-campus public university system. CU is located at the foothills of the U.S. Rocky Mountains in the city of Boulder. The 600-acre urban campus offers more than 150 academic programs within nine colleges and schools. The student body is comprised of 53% women and 47% men. Sixty-seven percent of the students are in-state residents and 33% are from out of the state. Eighty-two percent are white/Caucasian, 14% belong to a racial minority (black/African American, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, or Native American), and 4% are international students. CU employs approximately 1,100 full-time faculty members, of which 13% are racial minorities and 50% are women. Over 90% of the full-time instructional faculty members hold doctorates or other advanced terminal degrees.\(^4\)

The CU campus is located near Boulder’s downtown and offers quick access to the downtown’s amenities of shops, restaurants, and art galleries. The university campus houses academic and residential buildings, as well as research facilities. The East Campus is located near the main campus and is comprised mainly of athletic fields and research buildings. The University Hill, also known as “The Hill,” borders campus to the west and is a central location for shops and restaurants. The Hill also is prime real estate for students, given its central location and immediacy to campus. The majority of Greek fraternities and sororities are on the Hill.

In the early part of the 20th century, the university underwent substantial growth. This infrastructural growth generated debate over the architectural style of the campus. The agreement was that the university should be built in a consistent style, but which style was the

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\(^4\) Retrieved from http://www.colorado.edu
center of the debate. Some wanted to follow the style of the main auditorium, which was Neo-Gothic, whereas others wanted to use the Collegiate Gothic style of many East Coast schools.

Architect Charles Klauder presented the president at the time with drafts of buildings in Italian Rural Architecture developed in the mountains of northern Italy. Klauder and the university president at the time, George Norlin, thought that this study was a good fit with the city’s mountainous backdrop. The recognizable aesthetic characteristics of this style on the campus are the rough, textured walls and the slanting, multileveled roofs with red tile. The architecture had both a rugged and classical feel, fitting for a university in this location of the country. Klauder’s vision for the campus took almost 2 decades to complete and laid the foundation for the future design of the campus. This widely recognizable college campus design would become one of the “unforgettable” aesthetic features that also make CU an “unforgettable” kind of university (CU Alumni Association Brochure).

Besides aesthetic splendor and higher learning, other daily happenings take place at CU. Among the rarely mentioned and acknowledged happenings are the daily activities of the people who maintain the facilities that students and faculty use in their pursuit of higher level thinking. I refer, specifically, to CU’s custodial staff, whose duties include cleaning offices, classrooms, dormitories, lobbies and all the areas that other organizational members use to perform their daily activities.

In the next section, I discuss CU’s relationship with custodians, CU as a workplace, and Latina and Latino immigrant custodians. I provide an overview of demographic and statistical information, as well as the organizational structures that arrange everyday work life for custodial workers.
Custodians and Custodial Work

Beneath the majestic landscape and unique college campus architecture lays the work experiences of those who help keep CU running through their everyday silent efforts—custodial workers. Custodians, also called housekeepers, frontline workers, or environmental services staff, maintain CU’s picturesque facilities such that they are inhabitable and in good working condition for people to carry out their intellectual undertakings. Of the approximately 400 custodians on the CU campus, 150 are considered to be Hispanic/Latina/o (University Office of Planning, Budget and Analysis). In the pages that follow, I describe these organizational members’ historical relationship with the university, their chief duties in their organizational role, and the organizational structures in which they work.

According to several veteran custodians interviewed for this study, the relationship between Latina and Latino immigrant custodians and CU has varied enormously over the last 30 years. The relationship between Latina and Latino immigrant custodians and CU is an interesting one because it seems to be directly affected by the larger social climate of the time. In the last 30 years, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians at CU have lived through U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s controversial amnesty program in the 1980’s, drastic shifts in this racial-ethnic group’s presence within the custodial staff across departments, and the persistent racism on campus, to name a few significant events.

Several of the custodians that I interviewed have worked at CU since the 1980s. That decade brought notable experiences to them. For example, according to one of the custodians “esos eran tiempos mejores; eran mas tranquilos” [Translation: Those were better days; calmer days]. She said: “La mayoria eramos Latinos entonces nos llevavamos bien todos” [Translation: There were mostly Latinos on campus, so we all got along well]. That person also said that
people wanted to work and worked hard, in contrast to today’s workers. In an event that
reflected the circumstances of the time, she shared that she had moved to the United States
illegally and that someone reported her at work, which led to her losing her job at CU. This
happened a few years before President Ronald Reagan pushed for an amnesty program that
would legalize persons living illegally in the United States. When the amnesty program came
into effect, this custodian became legal and asked for her custodian job back, which she got. She
told me that although this happened to her, Latinos took care of each other and worked hard to
preserve their jobs. She said that those days were much different than today. She also said she
has witnessed a big shift in the number of Latina and Latino custodians on campus.

Several custodians expressed that this decade has brought a shift in racial-ethnic
demographics within the custodial staff across departments on campus. Several participants
shared that Latinas and Latinos used to be the majority of custodians on campus, but that this
trend had changed and they believed this change has been calculated and premeditated. For
example, 30 years ago, two of three custodians on campus were Latina or Latino, whereas today,
those numbers have decreased dramatically and that other racial-ethnic groups have gained a
stronger presence on campus, with the main racial-ethnic group originating from Southeast Asia.
According to several participants, this shift in custodial workers demographics is mainly due to
administrators having blatant prejudices and biases against Mexicans, specifically. Some
custodians believed that administrators’ prejudicial feelings align with modern-day larger
societal feelings about Mexican immigrants. Several custodians agreed that this seemed to be
the case at CU.

Other events that have transpired in the last 2 decades support custodians’ perceptions of
the campus negative racial climate. From the moment that I arrived at CU, I listened to people’s
stories about racism and acts of racial hatred on campus. It, thus, was not surprising to hear custodians’ stories about overt communicative acts of disrespect and racism in places such as student dormitories. This negative climate seemed to reach its peak in the past 10 to 15 years when students would do things such as spit in custodians’ faces and utter racially charged statements, such as “Here, clean my shit you fucking Mexican!” This well-known incident on campus occurred when a white student yelled that statement to a middle-aged Mexican woman in a bathroom at one of the student dormitories on campus. Other incidents included students knocking down trash bins and saying, “The Mexicans would clean them.”

Acts of racism against custodians paralleled incessant racially prejudiced acts against black, Latina and Latino, and Asian faculty members and staff across campus. Students’ racially hateful verbal deployments escalated to such a degree that some residence hall staff members organized what became known as the Dialogues on Immigrant Integration. Part of the reason why these dialogues got started was because residence hall staff wanted to address intercultural issues, such as students’ treatment of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers. Several custodians mentioned during the interviews conducted with them that the dialogues have helped to alleviate the racially charged climate that once existed on campus. These dialogues started several years ago and they still continue to take place today. According to custodians and residence life staff, the outcomes of these dialogues have yielded positive results for all CU organizational stakeholders.

Two residence hall staff members started The Dialogues on Immigrant Integration program at CU. These staff members/instructors got the idea from the community services office in the county where the university is located. The county had a similar program where local citizens had discussions with immigrants about divisive social issues. The chief goal of
both programs was to bring people together to discuss issues that affected them to foster intercultural understanding. When asked about the program’s goal, one of the program organizers stated, “They [the dialogues] got people with very different points of view to sit and talk with each other . . . the whole idea was this respectful exchange of viewpoints on the issue of immigration” (Talbott, 2009, para. 20). The second organizer added, “There isn’t a position or an agenda. It is really about opening a discussion about immigrant integration” (Talbott, 2009, para. 25).

Furthermore, according to the program’s website:

The dialogues at ______ Hall take place in two formats: 1) Dialogue Days that provide day-long conversations/activities for groups of 60+ students and workers and 2) classroom dialogues that engage 3–4 workers in conversation with one group of students during a class period.

The daylong conversations consist of about 60+ students and 30 immigrant workers discussing issues pertaining to immigration. The room is set up with people sitting around tables in groups of 8 to 10 persons, with each group having a language interpreter to facilitate communication.

These sessions have been deemed a major success, as illustrated in some of the feedback that organizers received from both students and immigrant workers. For example, according to the program’s website, “The dialogues broadened students’ awareness of the major issues surrounding citizenship and immigration.” The dialogues also became part of university-level courses on ethical and civic engagement taught by the program organizers.

Dialogues also take place in smaller classroom settings as part of courses on ethical and civic engagement, as well as other courses on campus. These sessions bring together three to four immigrant workers in conversation with a small group of students. The set-up is similar to
the larger daylong session but more intimate. In the classroom setting, the students and immigrant workers sit around a circle, with an interpreter and the program instructor also joining them. In winter 2009, the program organizers expanded the reach of the dialogues beyond the one daylong sessions and into other contexts to reach more students. For instance, the Dialogues on Immigrant Integration curriculum is now part of any course in residential academic programs. According to Talbott (2009), program organizers were working to continue expanding the program. Students and custodial workers’ recent responses indicated that “in-class dialogues have deepened their understanding of the immigrant experience; one student wrote that hearing the stories of the workers made immigration “come to life” for her (Program website). These dialogues, according to several custodians, have made a tremendous difference in how students communicate with them.

Particular events and circumstances in the last few decades have shaped the relationship between Latina and Latino immigrant custodians and CU. This employee population has had endured ups and downs during that period. After surviving the experience of migrating to the United States illegally, seeing friends and family members leave the country and getting fired, and dealing with racism on campus, Latinas and Latino custodians continue to have a strong presence at CU. This presence partly is due to the enduring relationship that this organization has had with Latinas and Latinos in various service roles on campus. With regard to custodians, specifically, although many of them openly expressed that they were underpaid, they said that they are mostly satisfied working at CU, primarily because they have had other occupations that were much more severe on their bodies (e.g., dishwasher, hotel housekeeper, factory worker, and landscaper). Therefore, working as a custodian and the work tasks that come with this role is a reality that they gladly accept.
I asked Ramon what his custodial duties were and he replied, “Basicamente todo lo que tiene que ver con limpieza” [Translation: Essentially everything that has to do with cleaning]. This statement captured the work that custodians do at CU. Of course, there are more nuances to this work than just cleaning. Although the specific duties of custodians vary depending on the department in which they work, the following duties give an overview of what most custodians do at CU. For example, custodians across campus have a variety of duties that they must perform during any given day. The Facilities Management Duty Statement shows that the primary duties that custodians execute include light duties, vacuum duties, restroom duties, and utility duties. Additionally, some departments’ custodians must carry out special duties, such as snow and ice removal, and specialty and emergency work, such as attending to floods.

As Ramon’s statement suggests, a custodian’s job at CU is to clean. Cleaning duties are as mundane as removing waste contents from an office’s trashcan to using high-tech specialized machines to clean a greater number of restrooms faster. The overall description below summarizes the primary duties that most custodians perform each day. First, custodians perform what is called “light duties.” According to the Facilities Management Duty Statement, such duties include:

Empty and remove the contents of all waste or desk side recycling receptacles and properly dispose of trash and/ or recyclable materials in the appropriate containers, reline receptacles, if necessary, and leave extra bags in the bottoms of receptacles. Dust and/or wash windowsills, blinds, woodwork, doors, clean elevator walls and control panels. Dust overhead pipes, light fixtures and all unobstructed horizontal and vertical surfaces. Wash door glass, blackboard frames and chalk trays and erasers, dust and polish all furniture.
May be responsible for washing blackboards every other Monday per schedule and floor plans.

Some departments use a rotation structure in which custodians rotate certain tasks daily and/or weekly. In some departments, the tasks are the same every day. Another major custodian duty is vacuuming floor surfaces both inside offices and classrooms and in the hallways. Vacuuming floors is a primary duty that is carried out by most custodians on campus. Such duties include, but are not limited to,

- thoroughly backpack vacuum all floor surfaces and stairwells and vacuum upholstery as needed.
- Vacuum erasers and chalk trays in classrooms and conference rooms.
- Vacuum entryway mats and elevator door tracks daily.
- Ensure that all trash receptacles were emptied by light duty specialist, if not, remove trash bag and reline receptacle, then inform light duty specialist of the location of the missed container.
- Close all open windows, turn off lights and close and lock doors. May be responsible for washing blackboards every other Monday per schedule and floor plans.

Within Facilities Management, specifically, there are rotating specialists who specialize in vacuuming all floor surfaces for a certain period of time, usually 3 or 4 months for each rotation period.

The next general task is restroom duties. Those custodians whose responsibility is to clean restrooms typically perform the following tasks:

- Use specialized “touch free” restroom cleaning system to consistently provide cleaning to restrooms.
- Close restrooms and post closed restroom signs and wet floor signs; pick up debris from floors, empty feminine waste receptacles and regular waste receptacles; restock all supplies daily; spray light mist of disinfectant on fixtures, partitions and
floors; using deck brush—scrub at least one restroom floor per night; next use high pressure spray to remove dirt and bacteria from fixtures, partitions and floors; scrub insides of sinks at least once a week with Ajax and scouring pad; scrub insides of toilets and urinals with toilet bowl cleaner and brush as needed; using cloth or paper towels dry hose and properly wrapping up and place back on machine; use squeegee tool to clean off partitions, mirrors and counter tops; Use vacuum hoses to vacuum up dirt and debris and water from floors; using cloth or paper towels dry vacuum hose and properly wrapping up and place back on machine; if time allows use blower feature by directing the air onto the fixtures to dry them further as necessary; keep restroom closed for an additional 10–15 minutes to allow floors and fixtures to dry before use; remove closed restroom signs.

Clean drinking fountains daily with disinfectant and scrub with scouring pad at least once per week.

In addition to these three major responsibilities, custodians have to be available to do miscellaneous tasks, called “utility duties.” Such duties are described as:

Entrances of facilities daily: sweep, empty ashtrays, clean entry door glass, clean out leaves and cobwebs from corners, clean entry door handles, push and kick plates; Run auto scrubber on tile floor surfaces and required in hallways; high speed burnish entry level hallways once per week; mop all hard surface floors per floor plans and schedule; spot mop spills daily; assist with stocking closets as needed with necessary supplies for the facilities; take out bulk trash, from designated spots within facilities, take it to trash dumpsters; wash blackboards and chalk trays per schedule. As necessary remove graffiti, spot clean carpets and remove gum from floors.
The preceding duties are performed in addition to other miscellaneous duties. Duties also vary depending on the department. For instance, some custodians do floor work such as stripping and waxing floors and shampooing carpets. In this study, I chose four specific departments or units where custodians work.

**Departmental structures.** The four departments in this study are under the supervision of different organizational units and leaders: Facilities Management falls under the leadership of the Vice Chancellor for Administration, and Recreation and Housing Services falls under the leadership of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. Each department is different in that it is responsible for maintaining facilities that have different uses on campus. In the pages that follow, I present a description of each department’s inner workings. After each department’s rendering, I offer a brief narrative of a custodian’s workday based on a “shadowing” experience in that department.

**Facilities management.** The department of Facilities Management, according to its website, is responsible for “the overall physical development and maintenance of the campus. The mission of the department is to provide a safe physical environment that promotes the advancement and transfer of knowledge.” Within Facilities Management, there is an intricate web of hierarchies and services that meet diverse needs on campus. For example, services, such as Environmental Services, Planning, Design, and Construction, Outdoor Services, and Facilities Engineering, fall under the Facilities Management organizational umbrella. For this project, I worked closely with individuals situated under the Environmental Services umbrella.

Environmental Services is partially responsible for “custodial services to general fund and to several auxiliary funded facilities. Facilities are cleaned on a set schedule. These schedules can be obtained from the building proctor or directly from the custodial supervisor of
the facility.” According to its website, Facilities Management is guided by a specific mission, vision, and values (see Table 1). Under custodial services, there are several clusters and each cluster is made up of approximately 14 custodians (officially Custodian I), one Lead Custodian (officially Custodian II) and one supervisor (officially Custodian III). I focused on the communication experiences of Custodian I staff members. The custodians that I interviewed and observed in this department have to perform various specific duties. An overview of these specific duties is outlined below.

Table 1

CU Department of Facilities Management Mission, Vision, and Values Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mission</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To plan for and provide a physical and operational environment that supports the University of Colorado at Boulder’s mission of education, research and outreach.</td>
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<th>Vision</th>
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<td>To be a progressive, customer-focused organization that is recognized as a national leader in service and the stewardship of resources for the 21st century.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Values</th>
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<tr>
<td>We value our campus community, our employees and our institutional heritage.</td>
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We achieve organizational excellence through the following core values:

- A safe environment
- An engaging workplace
- Staff development
- Teamwork and partnership
- Integrity and accountability
- Open and respectful communication
- An inclusive community
- Quality, competitive, value-added services
- Innovation and continuous improvement
- Environmental sustainability
The primary duties of Custodians I in the Facilities Management’s Environmental Services unit are rotating cleaning duties, such as light duties, vacuuming, restroom duties, and utility duties. In a typical workday, custodians drop off their belongings in their break room or custodial closet and pick up their keys from their supervisor’s office. After getting their set of keys (used to open doors across campus buildings), custodians proceed to get their cleaning equipment and head to their cleaning area. Custodians’ cleaning procedures are somewhat different in Facilities Management than they are in the other three departments, relying on an approach that the unit calls “Team Cleaning Program.” This program is described the following way on the department’s employee handbook:

Employees will rotate through the different specialist positions. Perform these duties as scheduled on the area floor plans. Rotation through different specialists may vary team to team. Some employees will be multiple specialists at the same time and some employees may be on a team of 1 performing all specialist duties. The position must also perform area substitution duties in vacant areas or to cover for employees on leave and perform emergency clean up duties as necessary. Employees must wear proper personal protective equipment as required.

Within this team cleaning model, custodians take turns doing the following tasks: light duty, vacuum, restroom, and utility specialists. Light duty specialists primarily empty trash bins and recycling receptacles, dust and/or wash windowsills, blinds, woodwork, doors, clean control panels and elevator doors. These persons also wash door glass, blackboard frames, chalk trays and erasers. Vacuum specialists vacuums floor surfaces, stairwells, and upholstery.

Custodians vacuum erasers and chalk trays in classrooms and conference rooms, entryway mats, and elevator door tracks. Restroom specialists use a specialized “touch-free”
cleaning system to clean restrooms faster. Additionally, custodians pick up debris from floors, empty regular and feminine waste receptacles, restock supplies, remove dirt, clean mirrors and counter tops. Lastly, utility specialists are in charge of cleaning facilities entrances, sweeping, emptying ashtrays, cleaning entry door glass and handles. Utility specialists also mop hard surface floors, assist with stocking custodial closets, removing graffiti, spot cleaning carpets and removing gum from floors. All these duties are added to other tasks, such as snow and ice removal, and specialty and emergency work (e.g., emergency floods and snow storms).

The following custodian workday depictions illustrate what Van Maanen (1988) called “impressionist tales,” which invite readers to experience the site as researchers experienced it. In other words, these “tales” allow readers to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste what researchers experienced. I tell these “tales” through descriptions of a typical workday in the life of a Facilities Management custodian.

**A Day in the Life . . .**

As part of the research process, I shadowed a custodian in three of the four departments that are part of this study, to further contextualize the work experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians and to supplement the interview data. I observed Mariana for one of my shadowing days at Facilities Management. The work shift was from 3:30 pm to 12:00 midnight. One of the things that I noticed during the night shift was that this nocturnal time period presented custodians with a unique scenario regarding opportunities for interaction. For instance, during the night shift, isolation oftentimes was custodians’ only companion. Salient differences existed between communication experiences during night and day work shifts. Additionally, custodians such as Mariana said that they prefer working the night shift because they could get their work done and go home. The night shift is appealing to some custodians
because it gives them more opportunities to spend a little bit of time with their families during the day.

Mariana is a night-shift custodian who has been working in that role for almost 30 years. Mariana shared with me that she hopes to retire soon; when asked about her age, she replied, “48 years old.” Mariana has three children and five grandchildren and will retire before she is 50 to spend more time with her grandchildren. Many of the custodians with whom I spent time shared similar stories. Some of the custodians are in their fourth or fifth decade of life, and they confessed that they are just tired of working in labor-intensive jobs. Some of them have been working since they were pre-teens. When I worked as a part-time custodian, my supervisor, for instance, was a man in his early 50s. He shared with me that he also was retiring soon to run a wine company in his native country.

I found these stories poignant because when I think of work, I think of a longer career path that typically ends when people reach a traditional retirement age in this country, 65 to 70 years old. Many of the custodians with whom I worked at CU were as young as early to mid-40s and spoke often of retirement aspirations. The career path for many persons who work in these service-oriented and intensive physical labor occupations is that they work extremely hard for 30 years and retire at a young age with aspirations of enjoying many years still remaining in their lives. Mariana’s case is especially fascinating because she was the longest tenured custodian that I met. I remember her telling me when I asked about her age, “I am 48 years old; I know I look older but that’s what this job can do to you in 30 years [laughter].” Highly energetic, extremely outspoken, and short in stature, Mariana is one of the most fascinating persons that I met during my participant observations at CU. The following narrative depicts a day in the work life of Mariana.
Mariana’s Labor

It is around 3:15 pm and a group of Latina and Latino, as well as Laotian, custodians assemble outside a custodial closet in the Business School. The cacophony of sounds is simultaneously delightful and chaotic as people speak to each other in English, Spanish, and Laotian. The custodians’ racial-ethnic and linguistic diversity represent the multicultural 21st-century U.S. workplace. The United States is increasing in cultural diversity across organizational levels, but principally at the lower levels. Mariana speaks to her coworkers in Spanish but code switches to English to address her Laotian coworkers. “Hola como estan todos?” “Hola Marisa, como te fue ayer en __ edificio?” [Translation: Hi, how is everyone doing? Hi, Marisa, how did it go yesterday in ____ building?]. Mariana addresses everyone very energetically, including me. The Lead Supervisor shows up and opens the custodial closet door. The custodians grab their keys and go on their ways as the Lead Supervisor wishes them a good day.

Mariana and I set out to begin her shift. Mariana opens a closet door and grabs a restroom-cleaning machine. The restroom-cleaning machine is about the size of a large supermarket shopping cart, but its surface is covered and has two tanks on it. One tank holds cleaning chemicals and the other tank holds water. The water tank has a gun attached to it with hoses that release water with very strong pressure. As she prepares the cleaning machine, Mariana says “I am on restroom duty today.” “Oh, Ok” I responded. “I have to clean bathrooms with this machine and by hand depending on the size and location.” “There are some bathrooms that are too small to be cleaned with the machine,” Maria continues. I cannot help but wonder about Mariana’s feelings as I notice the lackluster surroundings in the old and dilapidated bathrooms of the football stadium. “Do you ever get lonely/bored here by yourself?”
She replied, “No, the job doesn’t allow me to.” “When I first started in 1981, I got lonely all the time; I found the buildings to be old and scary at night.” I nod my head and continue watching Mariana spray toilets and urinals in a large bathroom. “Esta aburrido Wilfredo?” [Translation: Are you bored yet, Wilfredo?] Mariana asks. I insist, “No, I’m not.” I lied. I watch Mariana clean bathrooms, and assist her as well, for two hours and boredom takes over me. Taking notes and conversing with Mariana keeps me distracted yet focused. In the blink of an eye, it is 5 pm and I notice that my lower back is sore from standing up for the past hour and a half. I also have noticed that up to that point in the shift, Mariana has just exchanged a couple of casual greetings with two of her coworkers.

During the shift, Mariana shares some stories about her personal life. One of those stories is about how she has not seen her dad in 20 years. We arrived at this conversation topic because the last time that I saw her, about a week prior, Mariana was preparing a trip to Mexico to pick up her elderly mother who was coming back to the United States after a trip home in Guanajuato. “How long is the bus ride?” I asked. “Twenty-four hours” she replied. “Twelve hours to El Paso and 12 to Guanajuato.” Mariana also shares that her mother is 87 years old and is getting sick from old age. She then told me about her lack of contact with her father. “He never wanted me,” she said about her father. “He had many kids and I remember the last time I saw him, he did not seem to care about me, so I don’t care much about him either,” Mariana said as she “shot” urinals and toilets with the “gun.” Mariana looked at her watch and said that it is time for a break. We skipped a 15-minute break earlier, at 5:30 pm, to take a longer break for dinner, 45 instead of 30 minutes. Mariana and I clean bathrooms and talk until about 7:45 pm, when we walk over to one of the dormitories’ cafeterias on campus to grab some dinner.
In the cafeteria, we grab food and run into two of Mariana’s coworkers who are sitting in a booth. We join them and talk, laugh, and eat for several minutes. The other custodians seem curious about me and my motives for joining them at work. They say to me, “I have been here for so many years and no one was ever interested in us and what we do; you are the first one.” Such statements are both heartbreaking and gratifying, cementing my desire to work with the custodians. Mariana, her two coworkers, and I laugh as we joke and poke fun at each other. Mariana’s effervescent personality floats up even higher as I get to witness her outside-of-work persona. I also get exposed to Mariana’s personal life when she shares a story about taking her mother to the doctor and her perception that the doctor perceived her mother as being insignificant because of her inability to speak English:

I have rarely felt so humiliated; he [the physician] noticed that my mother spoke no English and his demeanor towards her completely changed. I truly felt like he perceived her as insignificant. I noticed it but I don’t know if my mom did. We left the doctor’s office laughing because I had translated something the doctor said to her and it was the wrong translation so when it was translated to Spanish it sounded very funny [laughter].

We all laugh out loud as Mariana’s two colleagues look at their watches and announce that it is time to go back to work. They leave and Mariana and I talk for a few more minutes before we leave the cafeteria and walk back to her work area.

It is 8:30 pm and the task that awaits us is the same one that Mariana has been performing for four hours—cleaning restrooms. Mariana continues to spray urinals and toilets as she simultaneously explains custodian rotations within Facilities Management: “The custodian rotation changes every month. Primarily each team is responsible for utility, trash, vacuum, and restrooms. Utility usually clean hallways, blackboards, and staircases” At that moment, one of
Mariana’s coworkers walks by and interrupts her narrative by saying, “Hi, how are you doing?”
“Good, how are you?” “(Custodian’s name) has been my coworker for over 20 years now.
“Her and I have worked together on different teams on campus” Mariana says. Many of her
coworkers are originally from Laos. The large majority of custodians on campus are from
Mexico and Laos. Mariana does not finish her explanation of custodial rotations in Facilities
Management. Instead, Mariana and I proceed to count the number of bathrooms that she cleaned
in the stadium as she prepares to relocate to another building. We count 25 bathrooms in total.
It is around 9 pm, so in 5.5 hours Mariana has cleaned 25 large and small stadium restrooms; an
average of five restrooms per hour. Mariana puts away the restroom-cleaning machine and
walks over to her next assignment.

As Mariana prepares to continue cleaning restrooms in another building, she asks me,
“What stood out for you when working as a custodian?” I responded:

The time alone. I felt that this job would be difficult for me to do as I did not have much
contact with others. I am a social person. However, there was also something enticing
about being alone all the time; I can’t quite explain it.

Mariana replied, “Really, OK; I can see how that’s the case. I don’t really feel that way because I
am focused on the work and getting it done.”

Mariana and I continue to talk about work, personal life, and other miscellaneous topics
as she continues to spray the bathroom. “Please tell me a little bit more about how you feel
about loneliness in your job” I inquire. Mariana responds, “Like I said, I don’t really feel
isolated working. If anything, I actually like that I don’t have to talk to a lot of people all the
time.” I ask her, “Really, why is that?” Mariana responds:
Look, for example, the language thing. My English is OK but not that good. For example, I have problems giving people directions; I usually struggle telling people how to get places when they ask. So I usually take people to places because I can’t give instructions in English. Also, where there are more people, there is more gossip; you know how Latinos are; we love gossip. So I am OK being away from a lot of people. I stay away because of gossip. You see, I don’t see not having contact with a lot of people as such a bad thing sometimes.

I nod my head as a signal that I empathize with what Mariana had just said as she wipes the bathroom sink. We approach break time once again as Mariana finishes cleaning one of the last few bathrooms of the evening. We continue talking about interacting with people at work. I ask her, “So Mariana, you talked about how more people means more gossip. How are your relationships with your current coworkers?” She said: “They are OK for the most part; we must make it work and keep the place tidy. I spend more time here with them than with my family at home.” It is time for her break and we walk over to a classroom where we talk some more about workplace relationships and other miscellaneous topics, such as religion and philosophy.

“The report for today is going to be boring [laughter] bathrooms, bathrooms, and more bathrooms [laughter],” Mariana says as we enter the last few minutes of her work shift. She, once again, comments on the boring aspect of her work. I try to brush it off by saying, “No, I have great respect for the work that you do” and I meant it. Mariana finishes the last three bathrooms of the day; each one was cleaned using exactly the same procedures. We count the total number of bathrooms that Mariana cleaned: 35 bathrooms; 25 bathrooms in the football stadium and 10 bathrooms in the mathematics building. Thirty-five bathrooms cleaned with the same process over and over again for eight hours.
In one of our engaging conversations about faith and religion Mariana asked me, “What do we pursue in life?” She added:

I see what I do here [at CU] as a small part of my life. Some people have reacted in a funny way when I told them that I clean bathrooms for a living. But I enjoy my life, I go dancing, I go to the casinos on the weekends; I like my life. My job is only part of my life.

Mariana cleans her last bathroom of the evening. I think to myself how her ideas are poignant and her observations full of wisdom; the kind of wisdom that only life experience brings. I realize that I am in the presence of someone who, on the surface, appears to be simply a person who cleans bathrooms, but beneath the surface, there is a person who can have an intelligent dialogue about work life and some of life’s most important matters.

After finishing with her last bathroom, Mariana puts the restroom cleaning machine and other supplies away in the custodial closet in the mathematics building. We walk over to the supervisor’s office where the custodians assemble to clock out. We continue to talk about miscellaneous topics and we walk over to the custodial closet.

Like the beginning of the workday, I find myself standing in a hallway filled with a rich assortment of sounds and people. The mostly Mexican and Laotian custodians chat with each other as a cacophony of sounds once again engulf the hallway. The custodians prepare to leave as I hear words in English, Spanish, and Laotian. “Hi, how was your day?” Asks Mariana to several of her coworkers. “Good, how was yours?” Some people respond. “Good, schooling this boy today about bathroom cleaning, [laughter] . . .” Another day in the life of a custodian has come and gone. Another day that for many may have seemed like another mundane set of performances that resulted in cleaner facilities for others to occupy. For me it is much more than
that; this day is part of my life’s education. Getting to know some of the custodians with whom I worked vastly expanded my horizons and disrupted my assumptions about work and the people who work in particular jobs (i.e., low-status jobs).

“What are we pursuing in life?” is not the only thought with which I walked away that night. I also walked away with a sense that by getting to know people like Mariana and the work that they do, I got a little closer to what I am after in life. After that work shift I learned not only about custodial life, but also about what I myself might be after in life. I got some clarity concerning my own life pursuits. A significant life pursuit for me is teaching people to be more open and learn about who other people are and what they do for a living. It is not enough just to watch others from a distance. As people get closer to the person or object, his/her/its shape may change drastically. Oftentimes, our encounter with this person or object from a more intimate/closer perspective may be exactly what we need as the person or object causes us to change in a way that was unimaginable up until the moment that we decided to engage him/her/it. As I reflect on my workday with Mariana, she and I walk out towards the parking lot where her car is parked. I express to her my deep gratitude for letting me be part of her world. She says that it has been her pleasure getting to know me and that she is happy to help with anything that I need. I nod my head in sign of gratitude as she walks to her car and says goodbye one last time.

Mariana’s department, Facilities Management, is the only department that resides under the office of the Vice Chancellor of Administration. The other three departments reside under the office of the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs. According to this division’s website:

Student Affairs' primary focus is to create a positive learning environment that fosters successful learning and personal development, both inside and outside of the traditional
classroom. Student learning and success is enhanced when the academic environment and community support students' full development as individuals—not just as isolated intellects—and when students are seen as important partners in the learning experience. The first priority of Student Affairs is students' development as successful, intellectually curious learners, and as healthy, competent, active citizen participants in our American democracy. The division provides, in collaboration with other members of the campus community, educational opportunities, resources, and support to help each individual student reach his or her goals. They work to create a learning environment that eliminates barriers standing in the way of student learning, development, and success.

The departments under Student Affairs are Recreation Services, Housing Services and the University Memorial Center. I provide a structural overview of each department and describe the custodians’ responsibilities within each department. I follow each department’s description with an impressionist tale (Van Maanen, 1988) about a custodian’s workday within that department.

**Recreation services.** The department of Recreation Services falls under the leadership of the Associate Vice Chancellor for Health and Wellness and the Director of Recreation Services. One of the primary responsibilities of the department of Recreation Services is to run and manage the Student Recreation Center. The Recreation Center is a member of the Health and Wellness Team located within the Division of Student Affairs. Other Health and Wellness Team members are: The Health Center, Counseling and Psychological Services, The Office of Victim Assistance, and Alcohol and Other Drugs. Recreation Services worked closely with these and other programs within the Student Affairs Division to plan programs, events, facilities and
services for students, faculty, and staff. The Recreation Center facility is described on the
department’s website:

Recreation Services manages a complete recreation facility with a swimming pool and
diving well, ice rink, climbing wall, aerobic studio, fully equipped fitness system rooms,
free-weight room, tennis courts, racquetball/handball and squash courts, gymnasiums,
and an indoor track. Recreation Services also manages intramural sports, collegiate club
sports, outdoor recreation, and fitness and leisure classes, and is one of the top-rated
programs of its kind in the country. The center is open to all members of the university
community through a membership program.

Recreation Services is divided in the following branches: program coordinators, facility
coordinators, office staff and directors. The custodial staff falls under the facility coordinators
and this branch consists of the custodial staff supervisor and approximately 7 to 10 custodial
workers, most of whom self-identified as Latina or Latino. On a typical workday, most
custodians come in at four in the morning and leave at twelve thirty in the afternoon. The
structure of the work within this department is simpler than Facilities Management’s.

Custodians within Recreation Services principally work in one building, whereas Facilities
Management custodians work in several buildings. Within Recreation Services, custodians have
a similar work routine every day. These custodians, according to several of them, do not have a
need to interact with their supervisor regularly. Recreation Services custodians’ duties include
cleaning restrooms, vacuuming carpet surfaces, and sweeping and mopping hard floor surfaces.
Custodians in this department also wipe down water fountains, doors and windows’ glass, as
well as various top surfaces.
Comparatively, Recreation Services and University Memorial Center’s custodians have relatively simpler work structures than Facilities Management and Housing Services’ custodians. Based on my experiences with the four departments and custodial workers’ narratives, Housing Services housekeepers (official name for custodians in this department), for instance, have a “very dirty job” as a housekeeper put it. To illustrate the daily activities of a Recreation Services custodian, I shadowed Rodrigo. The following narrative depicts Rodrigo’s workday as a Recreation Services custodian.
[Working] Out at the Rec

“I thought that I knew but I really had no idea,” I whispered to myself as I shadowed Rodrigo during his work shift at the Rec Center (as the Student Recreation Center is known to CU community members). As someone who frequented the weight room, I used to observe Rodrigo all the time. I perceived Rodrigo’s existence to be almost despondent because that was what his body language communicated to me. As I got to know Rodrigo during my observations and interviews, I realized that my perceptions could not be more misguided. My skewed perception of Rodrigo’s work and how he felt about it illustrates the importance of going beyond the surface and “digging deeper” before we form assumptions about who others are. I also wondered about the sources that had shaped my views of Rodrigo. Where did I get the idea that he must be miserable in his custodian job? What came to mind right away was popular culture and dominant messages about hierarchies based on occupations that exist in the United States. Why would I think otherwise if all I knew was that people who do low-status jobs must be miserable because they are in those “undesirable” jobs? My experience with Rodrigo obliterated my notions of who he was and how he felt about being a custodian. The following sketch illustrates the communicative experiences of Rodrigo in a regular workday.

It is pitch black outside as I make my way to the Rec Center before the break of dawn. I enter the building and walk downstairs to the men’s locker room where I proceed to place my belongings. I look for Rodrigo who is just finishing picking up basketballs that some players had left lying around the court. By my arrival time, almost 6 am, Rodrigo had already swept the whole gymnasium, picked up basketballs off the gym floor and cleaned the floor. Rodrigo’s next task is to wax the basketball courts with a waxing machine. Rodrigo looks at me and asks with a grin on his face “you are not used to getting up this early, are you?” I smile and nod my head
signaling that he is correct in his observation. Rodrigo is roughly a 5’5” dark-skinned man from Mexico, with a long salt and pepper head of hair, and shy in demeanor. A few days prior to my observation, I heard through the grapevine that Rodrigo was the mayor of his small town in Mexico before moving to the United States. He tells me that he migrated to the United States 10 years earlier. Rodrigo goes into a closet and grabs the wax machine to start his next job.

“Que sera de ti mi amor!” Rodrigo belts out really loud as he drives up and down the basketball courts in linear motions. Rodrigo listens to Rancheras on his headphones as an empty set of basketball courts look on. I sit on the side as I watch Rodrigo go up and down the courts. That part of the building is empty with the exception of one runner and some ROTC students who left a few minutes after we arrived. The room is very silent and the only sounds are Rodrigo’s loud singing and the wax machine’s engine. This scene goes on for about an hour; it felt like long hours to me. I simply sit, take notes and watch as Rodrigo continues to go up and down several basketball courts. Rodrigo and I have already spent over an hour together and the only contact he has had with another person is with me. After Rodrigo finishes waxing the basketball courts, we put the waxing machine away and move on to the next assignment.

The next assignment is cleaning the men and women’s restrooms. Before he grabs his cleaning instruments, Rodrigo passes by a student staff who is having some problems with a vending machine. Rodrigo is on the third hour of his shift and this is the first time that he exchanged words with another person besides me. Rodrigo and the student talk casually about the issue with the vending machine and he walks over to the men’s showers where he cleans the wax machine. Rodrigo grabs his cleaning supplies and we walk over to the restrooms. He puts up his “bathroom closed” sign and in a very systematic way begins to clean the men’s restroom; the women’s restroom followed. I could tell that Rodrigo had done the same procedure over and
over many times before. Rodrigo briskly walks into the restroom like a person committed to getting the job done and done well. In that order, Rodrigo empties out the trash bins and replaces the plastic bags in the bins, wipes down sinks, mirrors, and trash bins, brushes down toilets, and mops the floors. I notice that there has not been much verbal communication between Rodrigo and I, and I have been with him for several hours already. Furthermore, Rodrigo has not had any contact with coworkers or supervisors. It is now time for Rodrigo to take his lunch break; it is 7:50 in the morning.

Rodrigo’s lunch is from 8 am to 8:30 am. Right before his lunchtime, Rodrigo informs me “I hope you don’t mind, but I take my lunch upstairs with my coworker and I would like it if you do not observe me during my lunch break.” I do not think much of it, as it seems that this lunchtime is a sacred ritual for Rodrigo and his coworker. Before Rodrigo goes to the upper floor, we go back to the custodial closet where he stores his food. He microwaves his lunch. This roughly 6 x 6 room functions as supply storage room as well as food storage for the custodians. This room is Rodrigo’s hub throughout his shift. This room is where he came whenever he needed to restock or refill any liquids. Rodrigo and I say goodbye and agree to meet within half an hour back in the closet. After several hours of standing and walking around the Rec Center, my lower back and feet feel sore. I take this break opportunity to rest my lower back and feet and to jot down some notes.

The rhythms of custodial work at the Rec Center seem linear, monotonous; it feels almost like a delicate yet somber atmosphere. There is little noise, besides the irregular weights clacking with each other in the weight room; it feels as if the building is empty even though people have already poured in several hours earlier. Rodrigo and I meet back in the closet at 8:30 am and resume our activities. The next task consists of vacuuming carpeted and hard floor
surfaces in lobbies and weight room areas. Throughout the shift, Rodrigo describes the job that he is working on at that moment. After about an hour of vacuuming, Rodrigo goes on to wipe down several water fountains. He continues doing this task until he is finished with about 8 to 10 water fountains in the weight room and adjacent areas. After wiping the water fountains, Rodrigo mops several staircases. As he mops the staircases, something interesting occurs. His supervisor approaches him and tells him that someone had asked Rodrigo to pick up his trash from his office and Rodrigo never did. So the office staff member inquired why Rodrigo had not picked up his trash. This is the first time that Rodrigo has had contact with his supervisor. Rodrigo is clearly upset that the staff member did not take out the trash himself and waited for Rodrigo for hours so that he could pick up his trash. Rodrigo, who is very upset, goes to the staff member’s office, removes his trash and continues working on his current assignment. At 10:30 am Rodrigo takes a second break and we use this time for a brief interview.

I ask Rodrigo several questions related to language use and workplace interaction:

Wilfredo: Do you feel that the nature of your work influences with whom you interact at work and how often?

Rodrigo: No, I don’t think it influences it. We can talk to whomever we want to but we are also very busy doing our work.

Wilfredo: So it sounds likes like the work duties do prevent you from talking with people throughout the day.

Rodrigo: No, it does not. I talk to whomever I want to talk to but I am here to work and talking is something that primarily happens when you are off the clock.

Wilfredo: Ok, so you primarily engage with other people during your breaks and at the clock in and out times?
Rodrigo: Yes.

Wilfredo: would you like to have more contact with people at work? Why? or Why not?
Rodrigo: No, I think that we talk with enough with people throughout the day. You can talk with everybody, but you are busy working and that’s what you should be doing.
Wilfredo: So the nature of the job does not allow you to talk with people very often?
Rodrigo: No, I talk to people but we have work to do anyways so we just talk to each other [the coworkers] during breaks. I feel that we have enough opportunities to talk to people; it’s just that when we are working we are focused on the job.
Wilfredo: how often do you talk with your supervisor?
Rodrigo: here we don’t even have to touch base with the supervisor. I mean, he’s my friend; we leave together every day. But we know what we have to do every day so I don’t have to touch base with him at all. I know it’s different in other departments where supervisors assign tasks to the custodians every day.
Wilfredo: Oh, I see.
Rodrigo: It is more independent here. That’s why we get along so well.

Several custodians echoed Rodrigo’s feelings about having opportunities to talk to other people during a typical workday. However, other custodians vehemently disagreed with such feelings and expressed that the nature of the job does not make much room for interactions with people. The notion that little interaction creates an opportunity for people “getting along so well” is an interesting observation that has clear communicative implications and that I explore further in chapter six. After the break is over, Rodrigo and I walk over to the custodial closet to collect the supplies needed to finish his last hour of work.
The last work hour consists of “light duties” such as throwing out trash from the weight room and lobby areas and also wiping door glass. Rodrigo and I spend the last hour of his work shift doing what we did the previous seven hours—I watch as he works, as he describes his current work task. If I were to summarize my experience with Rodrigo at the Rec Center I would say that it was very educational in the sense that I, even if momentarily, truly gained a custodian’s perspective. My assumptions about people like Rodrigo and the work that they do were completely thrown out of the window. I left that day with a newly found respect for people who do the work that Rodrigo does.

As Rodrigo gets ready to depart, I notice something; unlike other departments, Recreation Center custodians are not required to clock in and out or wear uniforms. This department’s structure is qualitatively different from the other departments’. One thing that stood out to me was that Rodrigo seemed more relaxed and worked at a slower pace compared to custodians in other departments. Maybe the looser structures in Recreation Services result in better and more efficient work conditions for custodians in this department. The last image of my day at work with Rodrigo is watching him joyfully fellowship with this coworkers and supervisor in the supervisor’s office. I wait out in the hallway as they make their way out of the office. With a firm handshake Rodrigo says goodbye as he turns around and walks away. Before Rodrigo turned his back towards me as he walked away, he says, “I hope it was beneficial to you.” To which I replied, “of course it was.” The time is 12:22 pm.

**Housing Services.** Housing Services is a sub-branch of the Housing and Dining Services department. This department exists under the leadership of the Associate Vice Chancellor and Dean of Students and the Director of Housing and Dining Services. According to the department’s website:
Housing & Dining Services provides a residential living and dining environment that supports students' academic and personal development. Many programs, services, and activities are provided to help students who live on campus. The department is committed to providing quality, supportive, and timely service through dining programs, facility services, social and educational programs, and academic support services.

The Housing Services department oversees several units. These units are Residence Life, Family Housing, Housing Administration Employment, Conference Services, Children’s Center and Information Technology Services. The custodians interviewed for this study work under the Housing Services unit, specifically Housing Facilities Services (HFS). According to this unit’s website:

Housing Facilities Services (HFS) provides a safe, clean, and well-maintained environment for students and guests. HFS-Maintenance provides routine maintenance for all housing facilities and grounds, and HFS-Environmental Services provides housekeeping for all residence halls and family housing common areas and community bathrooms. Service that meets and exceeds expectations of diverse customers is a top priority of HFS.

The workers whom I refer to as custodians within this department are formally called housekeepers or frontline employees. These custodians are part of clusters that like Facilities Management consist of Lead Supervisors and Supervisors. Each cluster is made up of approximately 7 to 10 custodians who are in charge of cleaning one to two buildings every day. The nature of these custodians’ work is different than Recreation Services custodians in that the latter clean areas that require less contact with human waste (e.g., feces and urine). Housing
Services custodians are primarily in charge of cleaning students’ dormitories and, thus, are constantly in contact with human waste.

Housing Services housekeepers are responsible for cleaning restrooms, specifically closing them and putting up “restroom closed” signs, wiping down mirrors, sink tops, urinals and toilets, mopping floors and dusting top surface areas. Additionally, these custodians clean common areas such as lounges, hallways and kitchens/break rooms. Custodians perform these duties daily during the regular academic year and in the summer months custodians also clean dormitory rooms and all other areas that during the academic year would invade students’ privacy. Housing Services’ custodians’ duties illustrate how their job mainly consist of cleaning lavatories and other often-used areas within dormitory facilities.

To complete my shadowing experiences in all four departments I attempt to shadow a Housing Services housekeeper, however my effort was unsuccessful. After many days of negotiating with one of my sponsors, she informs me that the Housing supervisor expressed to her that she could not have someone shadow one of the custodians because they enter students’ private areas and, thus, it is not a good idea to have a graduate student accompany a custodian as he or she carries out his or her duties. The leadership informed me that the students’ privacy was at stake; I understood and accepted the reason for their denial. My sponsor’s e-mail (read below) shows the formal reason given for why I could not shadow a Housing Services housekeeper.

**Due to their Privacy . . .**

Housekeepers are part of the Operations and Maintenance arm in the Housing Services department. What differentiates custodians in this department from the other three is that this department deals mostly with students’ living needs. Custodians in this department deal with unique circumstances that are structurally different than other departments. Housing Services
custodians safeguard students’ privacy and living spaces. Custodians in this department have access to students’ private spaces and, thus, management appeared to be more sensitive about their customers (i.e., the students). The other three departments primarily deal with public spaces and, therefore, have fewer restrictions regarding access to areas within the facilities that they serve. Hence, I was not very surprised when after several days of negotiation to gain access to shadow a Housing Services custodian; I received the following e-mail from one of my sponsors:

Buenos Días Wilfredo,

Recibí este mensaje de (supervisor name) y lo siento mucho pero no será posible que tu seas la sombra de (custodian name), el departamento no acepta que nadie este dentro de las áreas residenciales debido a que el departamento tiene la obligación de proteger la seguridad y respeto a nuestros residentes.

También pienso que no es apropiado que (supervisor) o (custodian) acepten que un invitado este en nuestras áreas residenciales. Por que ellos tienen el siguiente objetivo en sus evaluaciones:

[Translation]:

Good Morning Wilfredo,

I received this message from (supervisor’s name) and I am sorry but it won’t be possible for you to shadow (custodian’s name). The department does not accept that people enter the residential areas due to the department having an obligation to protect the safety and respect of our residents.
I also think that it is not appropriate that (supervisor’s name) or (custodian’s name) accept a guest in our residential areas. They have the following objectives in their evaluations:

Customer Service: The employee works effectively with internal/external constituents to satisfy service expectations.

Measurement Factors:
- Provides prompt and friendly service to internal and external customers
- Helps identify customer needs through courteous questioning and a sincere desire to be helpful
- Follows up with customers, as appropriate, to make sure customers feels safe and secure

Safety:
Provide a safe working environment for students, staff, and visitors by adhering to agency guidelines, procedures, policies, and codes.

Thank you,

Housekeeping Supervisor

After I received this note from my sponsor I expressed to her that I understood the situation and thanked her for her assistance with this project. I understood the set of constraints under which both the sponsor and the Housing Services supervisor were working. This situation illustrates how work structures shape the work experiences of organizational members. In this regard, Housing Services stood in stark contrast with the structures of Recreation Services and the University Memorial Center.
**University Memorial Center.** The University Memorial Center unit is under the leadership of the Associate Vice Chancellor and Dean of Students and the Director of the UMC. Compared to the other three departments, the UMC is different in that the department’s name is also eponymous with the building in which services are offered. Additionally, whereas the other three departments focus on areas where the university community members live and work, the UMC services, in addition to work spaces, the university community’s psychosocial needs—that is, where community come to “play” to supplement work duties. According to the UMC website:

Known as the campus "living room," thousands of people visit the University Memorial Center (UMC) every day to grab a bite to eat, enjoy free entertainment, catch some sun by the fountain, shop the retail stores, study with free wireless Internet, check e-mail at the computer lab, or just hang out. With a wide variety of student services and student group offices in the building, the UMC is an exciting center for community interaction and activism. At the UMC, diversity is celebrated through food, dance, art, music, and the free exchange of ideas. A number of student services are located here, and the UMC offers a wide array of events including concerts, visual arts, bowling, and billiards. Opened in 1953, the UMC gets its name from its designation as the state's official memorial to veterans of war, honoring those who served from WWI to present day. The UMC has several administrative branches, each in charge of specific duties within this organizational umbrella. These branches are: the Director’s Office, Business Office, Food Service, Events Planning and Catering, Operations and Maintenance, Services, and Student Programs Office. The custodians that are part of this study work within the Operations and Maintenance unit under the leadership of a Custodial Supervisor and a Lead Supervisor. Like in
the other three departments, custodians in this department have a variety of duties that they perform.

Most UMC custodians have morning shifts that begin at 4 am, 5 am, and 6 am. These shifts end at 12 pm, 1 pm, and 2 pm respectively. On a regular workday, UMC custodians walk into a custodial closet to drop off their belongings and pick up their key ring at the supervisor’s office. The main bulk of work happens early in the morning. The UMC opens at 7 am and the building needs to be clean before it opens. UMC custodians have to clean restrooms and vacuum floor surfaces so that customers find these areas clean. Once the building is actively in use, custodians primarily sweep and mop floors. Before sweeping and mopping, custodians set up the main cafeteria. Custodians bring down chairs placed on tables by the evening cleaning crew to clean the carpets. After sweeping and mopping their designated areas, some custodians clean more restrooms and perform light duties such as dusting, wiping down surfaces, glass and emptying out trash and recycling receptacles. I primarily observed custodians who work outside of conference rooms and offices. Those custodians are in charge of hallways and public areas. Other custodians are responsible for cleaning meeting rooms and staff offices.

The following narrative depicts the regular workday of a UMC custodian. I followed Luis for a day to gain some insight into the daily tasks that a custodian in this department executes. I observed Luis for a work shift that went from 6 am until 12:30 pm (Luis’ actual shift is from 4 am to 12:30 pm).

**Hanging Out with Luis in the “Living Room”**

Luis’s work shift starts at 4 am and once again I struggle with getting up that early in the morning. I thought of all the people who have to do it every day; including my friend Luis. Luis is a middle-aged man who recently migrated to the United States from South America—just
three years prior. A friend of mine who was also a graduate student at the university introduced him to me. Luis works in the University Memorial Center (UMC) as a custodian. Luis attained some formal education before having a long career in government agencies. He won the visa lottery in 2007 before deciding to move to the United States with his wife; he left an adult son behind. Since migrating to the United States, Luis has experienced a great deal of hardship in the workplace including working as a contracted dishwasher at a buffet restaurant and sleeping in a friend’s living room for several months. When I met Luis he had already been working at CU for almost three years and expressed that he felt very blessed to have found his job. His current job, he expressed, had brought much needed stability to his life.

Luis is an exceptionally well-read and well-spoken man whose life’s circumstances landed him working as a custodian at CU. I was constantly in awe at this man’s intelligence and wondered how someone as prepared as he was would wind up cleaning floors and bathrooms at a university. During our many conversations he answered my internal question many times. The reason why he was working as a custodian? “Language” he often said. His stories of hardship with the English language include struggles with asking bus drivers where certain stops are to giving university customers directions. For Luis, his inability to speak English was a grave issue. I must admit that hanging out with Luis was more than I what bargained for as the man eloquently talked about the recent political history of his native country and other related subjects that kept us both engaged during our time together. Hanging out with Luis turned out to be quite an experience; one that I will never forget.

Luis is a very active man at his 58 years of age. He is constantly on the move and his cell phone is his favorite vice. Ring! Ring! His cell phone goes off and I ask him “what is that for?” He replies, “It’s an alarm that I set up to inform me when it is time to begin and end a task.”
Vastly different from Rodrigo’s, Luis’ workday has constant reminders of what he should be doing and when. Rodrigo, on the other hand, seemed to leisurely finish a task and move to the next one. Right away, I become aware of organizational culture differences; time is something that is perceived as very valuable in Luis’ department. When I arrived at 6 am, Luis had already cleaned several bathrooms with the machine-based system. He had actually disclosed to me that he came to work at 3:30 am because he needed to get some tasks done with specific machines that he had to relay to other coworkers by a certain time. Clocking in and out must be punctual at the UMC or custodians get disciplined. When I arrived at the scene, Luis had already been at work for two hours. Our next work adventure took place in the university’s game room.

Very Tasmanian Devil-like, Luis moves energetically and cleans, cleans, cleans. The notion of time is well steeped in his head as he mentions how important time is throughout the day. In my first hour with him, Luis empty out trash bins, sweeps and mops floors and vacuums carpets. We are in the university’s game room now. The building is empty and its big bright ceiling lights overpower the twilight that engulfs the building outside. During this time, Luis takes some time to introduce me to his supervisor and coworkers. He proceeds to explain all cleaning procedures as he vacuums carpeted floors. We talk about miscellaneous topics over the vacuum cleaner’s loud noise. Luis explains how UMC custodians rotate their areas based on people’s days off during the week and whether people call in sick—in that case, their areas need to be covered by someone else. Luis later explained that the reason why he was moving so fast was because certain parts of the building needed to be clean before it opened at 7 am. Luis continues to steadfastly wipe down table surfaces and I continue to observe him. As he wipes down table surfaces he explains “here the supervisor does not assign tasks daily; workers have areas that they clean every day and week.” Similarly to Recreation Services, custodians at the
UMC essentially do the same tasks every week and there is no team rotation model like in Facilities Management. Luis gives me additional details about work life at the UMC:

Luis: Aquí los trabajadores tienen que ponchar con sus ID’s. [Translation: here workers have to punch in and out with their ID’s]

Wilfredo: oh, ok. Y si usted poncha tarde? [Translation: oh, ok. What if you punch in or out late?]

Luis: No puedes ponchar tarde porque disturbas las tareas del día [Translation: you can’t be late because it disrupts the flow of tasks for the day]

Wilfredo: ok, y que pasa si alguien disturba las tareas del día? [Translation: ok, so what happens if someone disrupts the flow of tasks?]

Luis: te reprimen y si continua te pueden despedir [Translation: you get reprimanded and if it continues it can lead to termination]

Wilfredo: wow, es así tan rigido, ah? [Translation: wow, it’s that rigid, uh?]

Luis: Si, puede ser [Translation: yes, it can be]

This conversation happens as Luis finishes wiping table surfaces before he has to move to the cafeteria to rearrange chairs. Luis confesses to me that he would like to have his weekends open to go to church and enjoy family life. I ask him if his schedule could be changed to just weekdays and he replies “maybe in the future.” At that moment he signals that it is time to walk over to the cafeteria.

As Luis and I enter the cafeteria suddenly a massive rush of custodians walk into the cafeteria as well. Everyone is vigorously grabbing and putting down chairs. I ask Luis if I can help and he says no because if I get hurt the UMC is liable. Luis tells me about a student that helped them once and got hurt badly. “This is our work; we are the ones who are supposed to do
it and no one else” Luis explains. I say, “I understand.” Soon after the job is completed, Luis continues giving me his perspective about the inner workings of custodial work life at the UMC:

Aqui los trabajadores tienen que limpiar nieve cuando neva afuera. Aquí tenemos que ponernos uniformes y otros departamentos no. Me imagino es porque tenemos que trabajar en este edificio de alto tráfico. Otra cosa, aquí hay mucho chisme e imadurez todo el tiempo. A la gente les gusta hablar por la espalda del otro y ha empujado a muchas personas a mantenerse distanciados de los trabajadores.

[Translation]:

Here workers have to shovel snow when it snows outside. Unlike other places we also have to wear uniforms; I am assuming it’s because we work here in this high traffic building. Another thing here is that there is a lot of gossip and immature behavior all the time. People like to talk about other people behind their backs and this has led many people to keep their distance from their coworkers.

I asked Luis what the leadership does regarding the gossiping and immature behaviors among custodians. He answered:

Esta es la cosa con los supervisores, muchos de estos supervisores son promovidos por los años de trabajo que tienen y no porque ellos saben como bregar y relacionarse con otras personas. Hay además una cultura de que nos rascamos las espaldas que tu vez en otros sitios.

[Translation]:

This is the thing with superiors, many of these supervisors are promoted for their years of work and not because they know how to deal and relate to other people.
There is also a culture of I scratch your back and you scratch mine that you see in other places.

It is 7 am and Luis informs that it is time for a coffee break. Luis says that the 7 am coffee break is not an official break—most custodians on campus have one half-hour break and two 15-minute breaks. Luis meant that the brief 15-minute coffee break is not considered part of their regular work breaks, which is a welcomed perk of working at the UMC. Luis goes to the closet where he placed his belongings and pulls out a plastic bag. We sit at a table in the game room; the building is now officially open. We sit and talk about work and other life matters. Luis pulls out a bologna sandwich and hands it to me, I refuse to take it and Luis fervently insists that I must take it, “mi esposa lo hizo para it” [Translation: My wife made it for you] he says. At that moment I thought there is no way I could say “no” to Luis’ wife kind gesture. Luis and I eat, drink and talk about miscellaneous topics but mostly about his work:

Luis: mi esposa hace estos sandwiches para mi la noche anterior.

[Translation: Luis: my wife makes these sandwiches for me the night before.]

Wilfredo: oh, de verdad? Que buena persona es su esposa.

[Translation: oh, really? that’s very nice of her.]

Luis: si, yo se. Que tu piensas del trabajo hasta ahora? El trabajo mas pesado es de 4am a esta hora 7am.

[Translation: yes, I know. What do you think of the work so far? I have to say the heaviest work probably happens between 4 am and now 7 am]

Wilfredo: oh, ok; entiendo,

[Translation: oh, ok; I understand]

Luis: la razon es que el edificio necesita estar limpio cuando abre a las 7 am
Wilfredo: tiene sentido.

Luis: tu sabes, este no es el trabajo mas glamoroso pero es un trabajo que provee para mi y mi esposa. Honestamente, a mi no me gusta levantarme tan temprano en la manana pero teno mis tardes libres para hacer otras cosas, etc. Entonces no es tan malo en ese sentido. Yo simplemente lo hago; trato de no pensar mucho en el. Es mucho mejor de lo que hicimos anteriormente mi esposa y yo; lavando platos en un buffet restaurante. No teniamos beneficios y el trabajo era inestable. Algunas veces llegabamos al trabajo y el manejador nos decia “no work today; come back tomorrow” y algunas veces “tomorrow” se convertia a varios dias. Entonces comparado a eso este es mucho mejor. Por lo menos este trabajo nos permite rentar un sitio y pagar nuestro billes.

Wilfredo: wow, suena que este trabajo le trae mucha estabilidad.

Luis: si
[Translation: yes it does.]

Wilfredo: pero todavia no es la situacion ideal, o si?

[Translation: but it is still not an ideal situation or is it?]

Luis: no, me gustaria hacer otra cosa, pero el idioma es mi principal impedimento

[Translation: no, I would like to do something else, but the language is my main impediment.]

Wilfredo: entonces si su Ingles fuera mejor usted perseguiria otras oportunidades de trabajo?

[Translation: so if your English were better you would be pursuing other work opportunities?]

Luis: absolutamente. Y mira compadre, por lo menos yo se que a mis 58 anos de edad yo puedo tener otras oportunidades aqui (en EEUU), porque en Peru es virtualmente imposible a mi edad.

[Translation: absolutely. And look compadre, I least I know that at my 58 years I can have other opportunities here (in the United States), because in Peru it is virtually impossible at my age.]

Wilfredo: Entonces . . .usted . . .

[Translation: so . . .are you . . .]

Ring! Ring! Ring! Luis’ cell phone alarm goes off to announce that the coffee break is over. He says that it is time to sweep and mop floors and staircases. He puts the sandwich leftovers in a plastic bag and fervently gets up from the chair and asks me to follow him. He sprint out of the game room and I sprint after him.
We walk over to the custodial closet on the top floor as he collects the instruments that he needs for his next tasks: broom, mop, bucket, etc. Luis begins to sweep the top floor and I follow him around. The next several minutes are very silent as Luis sweeps and I observe from a distance and take notes. Luis sweeps the fourth floor and five floors of staircases before he prepares to mop them. Between sweeping and mopping, Luis empties out trash bins throughout the floor. Luis sweeps, sweeps, sweeps and I follow, follow, and follow. Up and down floors we go as he sweeps and I follow. Once the stage is set, it is time to grab the mop, bucket and arm strength to mop floors and staircases. Mopping is a bit different than sweeping as with the former it seems like Luis and I are able to interact a bit more.

Mopping floors and staircases is as monotonous as the previous activities. Luis mops and talks, mops and talks and I watch and listen, watch and listen. A sign of Luis’ intelligence and education level is when he eloquently speaks of Peru’s recent political history, from Alberto Fujimori to Alan Garcia and everyone in between. He tells me about how in Peru age and physical appearance are great determinants of job acquisition and career progression. He says that although it is somewhat similar in the United States; there are more opportunities for career progression in this country. What he says about age and work in Peru really concern me, as it is a blatant form of discrimination that cuts across race, social class and sexual orientation. Luis also mentions that although he struggles with English and he misses his paisanos, he feels a sense of stability here in the United States that is invaluable even if working as a custodian. Luis keeps busy mopping and I keep busy listening to his stories. It is almost 9 am and I realize that Luis has had very little contact with other people besides me. Just the casual “hi” and “bye” with coworkers and customers. 9 o’clock arrives and he explains that at this time he usually
takes a nap and talks with his wife on the phone. He tells me to meet him back in the custodian closet in 30 minutes after he naps and talks with his wife.

Luis comes back at 9:30 am and we spend the rest of our time with him mopping staircases and floors as we discuss more of Peru’s governmental history, with me listening to his stories. Another break comes at 11 am and we sit down to talk about his work and additional life matters. When I ask Luis whether he thought that his work influences interaction with others he says, “claro que sí” [Translation: of course it does]

He continued:

Este es un trabajo que requiere que tu que apegas al horario. Tu puedes hablar con personas aquí y allí pero van a ser conversaciones superficiales porque tu tienes que terminar tu trabajo dentro de un dado tiempo. Entonces la estructura del trabajo no te permite conectar mucho a travez del dia.

[Translation]:
This is a job that requires you firmly stick to your schedule. You can talk to people here and there but it’s going to be superficial because you have to finish your work duties within a certain time. So the work structure won’t allow you to connect much throughout the day.

Luis’s statement captured many of my assumptions before I entered the research site. As an outsider looking in, I felt that this was possibly a job that did not allow for any substantial interactions with others due to its traditional organization and structures. I also asked Luis if he would like to have more contact with other people at work to which he responded:

Si me gustaria. Yo soy una persona muy social y cuando comence aqui yo estaba dolido.

Estaba dolido porque en mi carrera en Peru yo estaba constantemente interactuando con
otras personas inteligentes. Aquí en este trabajo, y tengo que decir desafortunadamente, ese no es el caso. En las pocas oportunidades que uno tiene de conectar con otras personas es todo ordinario y superficial. Definitivamente me gustaría estar en un trabajo que me permite entrar en conversaciones mas profundas con gente inteligente.

[Translation]:

Yes I would. I am a social person and when I first started here I was hurting. I was hurting because in my career in Peru I was constantly interacting with intelligent people.

Here in this job, and I must say unfortunately, that is not the case. In the few opportunities that you have to connect with other people, it’s all mundane and superficial. I would definitely like to be in job that allows for more in depth conversations with intelligent people.

Ring! Ring! Ring! Luis’ cell phone alarm goes off to signal that our break is over. It is 11:30 am and Luis is entering the last hour of his work shift.

The last hour of Luis’ shift consists of, as he puts it, “light, mundane activities.” Luis needs to ensure that before the end of his shift certain areas are tidy for people in later shifts. Luis makes the rounds through several bathrooms to restock paper supplies, empty out paper bins, flush toilets and pick up any debris from the floor. Luis does this routine in about six bathrooms. As the shift comes to an end Luis continuously asks if “I had found the experience boring?” His question is interesting because several other custodians had asked me the same question. Many of them seem to perceive that other people might find their job boring. I reiterate to Luis that I do not find his job boring and reaffirmed that I have much respect for people like him who work on his kind of job. Luis and I walk over to a custodial closet on the first floor and grab our belongings. We take the elevator to the fourth floor where Luis’ time
clock is located. We walk into an office/supplies closet and wait for a few minutes. Other custodians pile in and wait until 12:30 pm to clock out. Luis clocks out last and walks me out of the building. He says goodbye and tells me that he hopes that the experience was helpful. I tell him that it was. He walks away with some of his colleagues. I stand there and watch him walk away until he is out my sight.

Summary

This chapter offered an overview of the inner workings of the organization where this study takes place. I discussed CU’s history, demographical information, and salient physical features. I described the historical relationship of custodians and CU, as well as custodial work. Additionally, I described the four departments where the custodians who participated in this study worked. To conclude each department’s overview, I provided an impressionist tale (Van Maanen, 1988) of the work life of a custodian in that department. Such tales helped contextualize the work experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians at the research site. This chapter laid out the foundation for the following two chapters, chapters five and six, which describe the data collected at the research site and their analysis and interpretation. In the next chapter I describe the data collected through in-depth interviews.
CHAPTER V
FINDINGS

This chapter lays out the major findings obtained from the 25 in-depth interviews conducted to address the research questions posed. Five main findings emerged that address the first research question about Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers’ communication experiences with supervisors, coworkers, and customers within a higher education organization. For the second research question, four overlapping findings emerged related to each of the social identity categories foregrounded in this research study (i.e., social class, race-ethnicity, immigration status, and occupation).

The discussion of the findings is based on participants’ narratives of their everyday workplace interactions. This chapter brings out the voices of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers as much and as vividly as possible such that the reader can gain an understanding of the workers’ everyday social reality. I seek to capture their voices in raw form to illustrate their lived experience accurately (i.e., from their standpoints). Additionally, one of the study primary goals is to hear the voices of the ESL speakers and, therefore, it is important to present their responses in their natural language. I also present the data in English so that English speakers have access to these words. In short, I present the data in both English and Spanish to give both audiences access to the information in this study. Illustrative quotations from the interview transcripts display participants’ perspectives regarding the subject under study (i.e., their everyday workplace communication experiences).

The Language Dilemma

The first major finding demonstrated that linguistic ability strongly shapes everyday communication experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers in and out of the
workplace. The overwhelming majority of the participants expressed that language use is a social barrier that causes much frustration and concern in their everyday communication. Among salient issues related to language use are the relationship of language, interpersonal networks and finding work; sociocultural and economic integration (cultural transition and adaptation); ethnic groups’ discursive maintenance of fluid cultural spaces; everyday communication challenges, communication accommodation; and perceived social consequences of not learning English.

Language use seems to be a major source of frustration for most Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers. This is a noteworthy finding considering the large number of Latina and Latino immigrants who live and work in the United States and who may be going through experiences similar to these individuals. Custodians’ narratives about language use suggest that speaking the dominant language (i.e., English) is a major problem for immigrants during the job search process and after they enter U.S. organizations. Consequently, they transport their communication challenges to their places of employment. For instance, language use is a grave problem for Latina and Latino immigrants as soon as they enter U.S. territory. Communicative struggles due to their inability to speak the English language pervade every area of their lives and affect their ability to find jobs and move up the socioeconomic “ladder.”

This reality keeps a large number of Latina and Latino immigrants “caged” in a “steel prison” from which they have a hard time escaping. According to some of the custodians, and I paraphrase, some of the “bars” that hold this “prison” together and keep Latinas and Latinos “locked-up” principally are the failure to speak English, not attaining higher levels of formal education, age upon arriving to U.S. soil, lack of resourceful social networks, and some U.S.
Americans’ pervasive negative attitudes toward Latinas and Latinos, in general (and Mexicans, specifically).

Considering the high level of importance that the United States, as well as other industrialized nations, bestows on its dominant language (e.g., recent heated public debates about English Only), it is apparent why language is such a precarious issue for those who do not speak it. Regarding Latina and Latino immigrant custodians and their communication experiences related to language use, six themes emerged that answer the first research question: (1) relationships among English language use, interpersonal networks, and finding work, (2) Latinas and Latinos’ sociocultural and economic integration (cultural transition and adaptation), (3) Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers’ discursive maintenance of fluid cultural spaces, (4) custodians’ everyday communication challenges; (5) experiences with communication accommodation, and (6) custodians’ perceived negative consequences of their lack of ability to speak the English language.

**English: A primary source of communicative difficulty.** This section reports some participants’ thoughts and feelings about their English-speaking proficiency levels. These narratives serve as a strategic departing point and contextualize subsequent points regarding relationships between language use and other important social issues.

Many custodians described their inability to speak English as very traumatic and isolating. Participants described their struggles with English in the following ways:

Creo que es una cosa traumatica mas que todo; en el area de la gramatica no siento problema alguno. Lo veo no facil pero no complicado. Tengo libros de gramatica en Ingles y lo leo; el problema es cuando me empiezas a hablar y no lo entiendo; se oye como un garabato (Rodrigo)
[Translation: I think it’s traumatic more than anything; I feel that I have no problems with the grammar. I don’t see it as easy but not complicated either. I have grammar books in English and I read them; the problem is when you start talking with me and I don’t understand it; it sounds like gibberish]

Fíjese que también me he sentido, he ido a varias fiestas me cohibo de ir, porque digo no, yo me siento como, que soy menos, porque no hablo el idioma, y no puedo llevar una relación ni platicar con las personas, y por eso me aparto. No voy a muchas partes que me invitan, no voy, por que no fuiste? Pos no, no me sentia bien les digo. No fuiste a la fiesta de fulana, no le digo porque pienso que no, de si no pensara, pa que piensa me dicen, es que si no no te hubiera invitado, yo se pero, no se le digo, no (Maribel)

[Translation: Look, I have also felt . . . I’ve been to several parties, I convince myself no to go because I say, I fee like, I feel like I am less than others because I don’t speak the language. I can’t carry a relationship or talk with other people and for that reason I stay isolated. I don’t go to many places where I am invited, why didn’t you go? I didn’t feel well, I tell them. You didn’t go to that person’s party? No, I tell them, ‘cause I think no what is there to think they tell me. If not, I wouldn’t have invited you, I know but no, I tell them, no]

Pues mi primera es Espanol, todavía no, todavía mi primera y mi segunda Espanol, si, Espanol, si. Muy malo [mi Ingles], no del uno al diez pues el uno, si, si, si, veo que uno quiere hablar verdad? Quisiera uno hablar y explicarles y no como no sabe uno no puede, a senas si asi hablamos a veces pero como podemos, uno quisiera saber como sabe el Espanol (Alfonso)
[Translation: My first language is Spanish, still, still my first and my second language
Spanish, yes, Spanish, yes. Very bad [my English], on a scale from 1 to 10, a 1, yes, yes,
yes, I see that one wants to speak it, right? One would like to talk and explain and
because one doesn’t know one can’t. With signals yes, that’s how we talk sometimes but
because we can’t, we would like to know like we know Spanish]

These statements exemplify how most participants felt about their English-speaking
proficiency level. These narratives display not only custodians’ self-perceived proficiency with
English but also their frustration regarding everyday language use. Jesus’s statement further
illustrates participants’ disappointment with their ability to speak English fluently: “Yo se hacer
muchas cosas pero por el Ingles no me he movido. Le echo la lucha pero la cabez la tengo bien
dura. He sido tonto; si a seguidas se habia puesto uno a aprender, aprende.” [Translation: I know
how to do a lot of things, but because of the English, I haven’t moved forward. I put on a fight,
but I have a really hard head. I’ve been foolish; if I would have really tried to learn I would
have learned]. Another custodian added: “No, la verdad que no, no me siento competente como
para hablar asi, no pues seria un tres yo creo, si.” [Translation: Truthfully, no, I don’t feel
competent enough to speak [English], on a scale from 1 to 10 a 3, I believe, yes].

Some participants offered several reasons for why they have a hard time learning English.

Jose’s comment shows some of these reasons: “No lo he aprendido porque, bueno, pa empezar,
yo pienso que para aprender Ingles hay que ir a la escuela. Pues si tambien, pero tambien cuando
aprendes mas Ingles es cuando uno habla con personas que hablan el Ingles.” [Translation: I
haven’t learned it because, well, to begin, I think that to learn English you have to go to school.
Yes, also, also you learn more English when you talk with people who speak English].

Comments like Jesus’ and Jose’s highlight two major issues for some immigrants, the lack of
formal education that follows them to the new cultural context and a salient negative outcome of remaining communicatively detached from host society members. Custodians’ English language proficiency level seems to affect their interactions at work. The following statement displays how some custodians communicate in meetings and how language use affects vertical communication:

Si, pero muy poco, porque yo no se, con interprete solamente. Si, porque yo no, o sea a veces cuando tenemos alguna cosa nos hacen una junta aquí y ellos viene para aca y aquí hablamos les exponemos lo que, las cosas que no nos gustan y, pero casi con el mero mero no hablamos. No hablamos con el porque todos, como que se tapan, si no mas como esta la supervisora, y luego esta el otro, y no mas con ellos hablamos pero con el mero mero no. Pues si supiera Ingles viera que si me gustaria pero no se Ingles y me detengo (Noelia)

[Translation: Yes, but only a little bit, because I don’t know, with an interpreter only.
Yes, because I don’t, sometimes when we have something and we have a meeting and they come here and we talk and we express things that we don’t like and, but with the big boss we don’t talk. We don’t talk with him because all of them. . .they cover each other.
Yes, it’s only the supervisor, and there is another one and with them we talk, but with the big boss no. If I knew English I would like to [speak with the big boss] but I don’t know English and I become apprehensive]

Custodians’ inability to speak English fluently appears to be an issue that permeates their social lives. According to many participants, from the moment they began to seek employment in the United States, they realized that language use would play a key role in the jobs that they could find and their experiences once in those jobs.
“Must Speak English:” A Central Precursor to Landing the Job . . . or is it?

The struggle with language use that many Latina and Latino immigrants experience in the United States do not start when they enter organizations, but before. Most participants, when I asked them how they landed their current job, indicated that they found it through a close friend or a family member (i.e., through their interpersonal network). This situation directly relates immigrants’ experiences finding work in the United States and their English-speaking ability. Due in part to language differences, finding work in the United States is challenging even if the person came to this country with a higher education degree from their native country—most of the participants did not. For this reason, immigrants’ interpersonal network oftentimes becomes their only source to find employment, as most occupations require people to be proficient in English. Language use, therefore, becomes closely tied to immigrants’ ability to become employed in U.S. organizations—even if it is a lower status blue-collar job. As a result, for many Latina and Latino immigrants, their interpersonal network becomes the “ticket” that grants them entrance into the U.S. employment “game.” The following comments show participants’ descriptions of their experiences to acquire their current job and the role of interpersonal networks in Latina and Latino immigrants’ ability to find work in the United States:

Como empeze aqui, mi cunada trabaja aqui; la hermana de mi esposa. Ella me dijo “mira a ver si hay algo en la Universidad.” Y a raiz de las experiencias con otros lugares mi objetivo fue buscar trabajo en lugares mas estables. Todo lo que tiene que ver con el estado lo veia como mas estable. En unas me pedian el idioma, dije: “el idioma es mi problema.” (Ramon)

[Translation: My sister-in-law works here; my wife’s sister. She told me “look, come see if there is something at the university.” As a result of my experiences in other
workplaces, my objective was to look for work in more stable places. Everything having to do with the state I perceived it to be more stable. In some instances they asked that I spoke the language, I said: “the language is my problem.”]

Vine en el 1980, ya trabajaba un hermano y una cunada aquí; fueron ellos los que me metieron. Yo entre sin papeles; con un seguro arreglado. Me desocuparon; alguien me reporto y me llevaron a la oficina y me pidieron mis papeles. Me fui porque no tenia papeles. Estuve trabajando en restaurantes lavando platos y fabricas. Se me hacian bien pesados. Entonces ahi nos iban a dar la amnistia del 1986 (Teresa)

[Translation: I came here in 1980, my brother and my sister-in-law already worked here; it was them who got me in here. I came in without papers; with a fixed social security card. They fired me; someone reported me and they took me to the office and asked me for my papers. I left because I didn’t have papers. I worked in restaurants washing dishes and factories. Those jobs were very hard. Then, they were going to give us amnesty in 1986]

Custodians’ dependence on their interpersonal networks illustrates the role of language use in their ability to find employment in the United States upon arrival. The previous comment also highlights another major issue for many Latina and Latino immigrants—legal status. Such situation is another reason why interpersonal networks are vital for Latina and Latino immigrants to find work in the United States. Related to the role of interpersonal networks, a research participant adds: “Yo llegue aquí por medio de mis amigos. Me dijeron de donde venir a encontrar trabajo.” [Translation: I got here through my friends. They told me where to come to find work]. Most participants made similar comments regarding how they arrived at their current custodian position: “Por una amiga que trabaja junto conmigo en otro diferente trabajo; ella fue
la que me dijo, hay trabajo aqui en la Universidad, hay Buenos beneficios. Ella fue la que me animo para trabajar aqui.” [Translation: It was a friend who works with me in a different job. It was her who told me that there was work here at the university; there were good benefits. She encouraged me to work here].

Such comments about job acquisition abounded across interviews and casual conversations with the custodians. The previous narratives illustrate the role of interpersonal networks for Latina and Latino immigrants in their quest for work in the United States. Language use and legal struggles force Latina and Latino immigrants to rely on family members and friends to land their first job in this country. Consequently, language use seems to be closely related to the custodians’ interpersonal networks and their ability to gain employment in the United States. The moment that Latina and Latino immigrants become part of the U.S. labor force, they take a tangible step toward sociocultural and economic integration into U.S. society.

**Bienvenidos a America: Language, work, and sociocultural integration.**

Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ desire to become part of U.S. society, primarily through learning English, became apparent across interviews. The workplace is a significant element of the sociocultural integration process because immigrants partially learn about and become socialized into their new culture through their mundane workplace interactions. According to Kim (2005), it is through interpersonal interactions that immigrants learn not only the language of that country but also about the culture itself. Many custodians indicated that they desire to learn English so that they can talk with other people to learn about them and U.S. culture, in general. Roberto’s comment vividly captured the sense of urgency and frustration that many custodians feel regarding learning English and integrating into U.S. society:
Yo creo que si afecta mucho. En el entorno donde uno vive, trabajo, vecinos, centros comerciales; todo lo que nos rodea que es algo cotidiano de la rutina de uno se maneja el idioma Ingles. A veces he querido tener dialogos con compañeros de trabajo en Ingles y me siento frustrado porque no puedo ir mas alla de mi limite; es “hi” “hi” y ahi quedamos. Yo quisiera ingresar un poco mas; entrar y aprender un poco mas de su cultura, como piensan ellos y no puedo hace ese tipo de cosas. Voy a un centro comercial y se lo basico; para hacer las compras lo basico. Cuando te piden bolsa de plastico o de papel. Pero si quiero indagar sobre algo entonces tendría que ir preparado. Bueno esto se dice en Ingles asi. Pero aun me ha pasado que he ido preparado y no me entienden, jajaja. Si me afecta porque aspiro a tener un trabajo distinto y por el idioma Ingles se me hace imposible. Una, porque incluso ni siquiera podría llevar un curso que me podría crear un piso para poder aspirar a otro tipo de trabajo.

[Translation: I believe that it does affect me a lot. In the context where one lives, the workplace, neighbors, shopping centers; everything around us that is routine involves the English language. Sometimes I’ve wanted to have dialogues with coworkers in English and I feel frustrated because I can’t go beyond my limit. It is “hi” “hi” and it ends there. I would like to integrate a little more; learn more about their culture, how they think and I can’t do those things. I go to a shopping center and I know basic things; to buy the groceries, what is basic – when they ask you for paper or plastic. But if I want to ask about something then I have to prepare; well you say that like this in English. I have experienced that I go prepared and they don’t understand me (laughter). It affects me because I aspire to get a different job and it becomes impossible. First of all, I can’t even take a course to create a foundation to aspire to have a different kind of job].
Roberto’s comment captures the thoughts and feelings of many custodians. Custodians experience great frustration at work and in other social contexts as they struggle with mundane interactions due to the language barrier. The following comment further illustrates participants’ perceptions of their social and cultural integration: “porque tenemos que aprender el idioma es muy importante aquí estamos en otro lugar que no es el nuestro, que no es nuestra lengua y eso tambien ayuda a que nos esforcemos para aprenderlo y queramos salir adelante” [Translation: Because we have to learn the language [English] it is very important here we are in a different place that is not ours, it is not our language and that also helps us to work harder to learn and move forward] In this comment, the idea of “moving forward” symbolizes some custodians’ desire not only to adapt culturally but also to advance socioeconomically, which is also a primary goal for many immigrants.

Custodians’ comments illustrate their perceptions of the need to learn English to integrate into U.S. society. For example, Arturo stated, “El asunto es que si nos gustaria tener amigos; sobre todo amistades en la iglesia. Nos gustaria estar participando en obras beneficas o en algunos trabajos sociales pero el idioma es el problema.” [Translation: The problem is that would like to have friends; especially friends at church. We would like to participate in charity functions or in some social functions but the language is the problem]. Similarly, another custodian responded, “No tenemos amigos y el lugar en que podría darse es en la iglesia pero el problema esta en que no vamos a una iglesia hispana, una porque en esta ciudad no hay y otra porque seria una barrera, nos estancariamos en el idioma.” [Translation: We don’t have friends and the place where this could happen is at church but the problem is that we don’t go to a Hispanic church, first because in this city there isn’t any and second because it would be a
barrier, we would get stuck with the language]. These comments illustrate some of the challenges related to language use that pervade custodians’ social life.

Participants’ comments suggest that they have feelings of guilt due to their inability to speak English after living in the United States for many years. These comments also illustrate the pressure that some participants feel due to their perception that some people might view them as unwilling to integrate and even rejecting of U.S. culture. For example, as one participant put it:

Me siento bien y a la vez me siento mal. Con todos mis anos aqui deberia hablar Ingles. Gente me ha dicho que deberia hablar mejor. La gente tiene que superar; vivimos en un pais que habla Ingles y debemos aprenderlo. (Raul)

[Translation: I feel good and at the same time I feel bad. With all my years here I should speak English. People have told me that I should speak better. People have to progress; we live in a country where people speak English and we should learn it].

Digo eso es un pensamiento que tu tienes que tu crees que tu sientes, pero no es asi. Estamos hablando y les digo estamos hablando de esto y me vuelven a decir pero tu y el resto deben de hablar Ingles porque vives en este pais en los EEUU por ahi es donde viene y me siento mal me frustro y me da miedo y a veces cuando no es necesario no lo uso. (Carlos)

[Translation: I say that’s a thought in your head that you think you have, but it’s not like that. We are talking and I tell them we are talking about this and they tell me again but you and rest should speak English because you live in this country in the USA that’s where it comes from and I feel bad I get frustrated and I become afraid and sometimes when it’s not necessary I don’t use it [English]
Consistent negative experiences with communicating in English seem to push Latina and Latino immigrants to create their own fluid cultural spaces. That is, they remain in a linguistic space that affirms them and that does not present constant threats of rejection. For instance, in this study, custodial workers view their time spent with their coworkers in the break room as a safe haven where they can freely interact with culturally similar others and “be themselves” without little fear of miscommunication or hostile responses from others.

“Es como si estuvieramos en un pedacito de Mexico” (It is as if we were in a little piece of Mexico): The Communicative Construction of Culture in the Workplace

Participants’ narratives show that they group together with other Spanish speakers to create a cultural space that fosters their native language and other national culture elements such as food and music. These fluid cultural “platforms” mainly come to life in break rooms during break hours. Many participants indicated that they typically feel most comfortable talking in Spanish with their coworkers during their breaks. Feelings of comfort get amplified as custodians reminisce about their homelands and miscellaneous subjects related to their cultural commonalities. The following comments illustrate how participants discursively construct such cultural spaces:

Bien, pero en el circulo que nosotros estamos es como si estuvieramos en un pedacito de Mexico. Si, porque todos hablamos Espanol, la supervisora habla Espanol, la otra muchacha habla Espanol, la como que todos hablamos Espanol. Cuando se necesita hablar Espanol es cuando hablamos con las companeras de trabajo. (Rafaela)

[Translation: Good, but in the circle where we are it is as if we were in a little piece of Mexico. Yes, because we all speak Spanish, the supervisor speaks Spanish, the other girl]
speaks Spanish, it’s like we all speak Spanish. When we need to speak Spanish is when we speak with the coworkers].

Mis companeros de trabajo, hay dias que coincido con mis companeros que hablan Espanol y en la hora de lunche platicamos. Ah, platicamos de por ejemplo, de que platicamos, asi de temas por ejemplo los companeros de Mexico sacamos el tema de como esta la situacion de Mexico ahorita muy dificil, si se piensan regresar a Mexico algun dia. (Jose)

[Translation: My coworkers, there are days that we coincide with my coworkers who speak Spanish and in the lunch break we talk. Ah, we talk about, for instance, what do we talk about, about topics, for example coworkers from Mexico we talk about the situation in Mexico, right now very difficult, if they think about going back to Mexico someday]

Most participants expressed that their coworkers and some supervisors are the only people with whom they talk at work and it is in Spanish. This situation creates communication challenges that force some custodians to remain in these Spanish-language discursive spaces.

For instance, Ramona discussed her everyday language use at work:

Ah, con companeros de trabajo pues hablamos en Espanol, todos hablamos en Espanol no mas. Cuando hablo en Ingles es a veces en meeting, en la Oficina. Es que a veces estamos en meeting y hay veces que hablo Ingles con ellos, pero no, pienso que me entienden y les entiendo.

[Translation: Ah, with coworkers we talk in Spanish, we all speak in Spanish only. When I speak English is sometimes in a meeting, in the office. Sometimes we are in a meeting}
and there are instances that I speak English with them, but no, I think that they understand me and I understand them]

Other participants stated that the main reason why they have positive relationships with their coworkers is because they speak the same language and are able to talk fluently about anything. This situation reinforces and sustains custodians same-language and same-ethnicity clusters. As the following comments illustrate:

Con companeras de trabajo pues. Pues yo creo porque hablamos el mismo idioma y porque tenemos buena comunicación y nos llevamos bien las compañeras de trabajo. Pues porque no se meten ellas conmigo ni yo con ellas. Tenemos una buena relación si porque platicamos una cosa si estamos si nos parece están bien y si no pues no nos enojamos. Decimos, sabes que eso no me gusto, vamos a hablar de esto, vamos a hablar de esto otro, y sí, sí, sí. (Josefina)

[Translation: With my coworkers. I think because we speak the same language and because we have good communication and we get along well. Because they don’t bother me and I don’t bother them. We have a good relationship because we talk about something if we are in agreement it’s fine and if not then we don’t get mad at each other. We say, you know what I didn’t like this let’s talk about this, let’s talk about this other thing, and yes, yes, yes]

Hum, es buena, con ellas es muy buena, tenemos buena relación, buena comunicación y todo. No hay ningún problema porque hablamos Espanol y ahí nos entendemos. Tenemos ya desde que empecé a trabajar somos casi los mismo trabajadores. Como un buen factor para tener mejor relaciones principalmente el idioma y el tiempo que uno tiene de convivir. (Noelia)
[Translation: Hum, it’s good, with them it’s really good, we have good relationships; good communication and all. There aren’t any problems because we speak Spanish and we understand each other. We have since I started working here it’s almost the same workers. A good aspect to have better relationships principally the language and the time that we spend together]

Another reason that may have pushed Latina and Latino immigrant custodians to (re)produce these discursive cultural spaces is the daily barrage of communication-related issues and challenges that they encounter with superiors, coworkers, and customers due in part to language differences.

**Communicating in English and everyday communicative challenges.** Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ language-related communicative challenges seem to pervade throughout a typical workday. The large majority of participants indicated that language-use functions as an Achille’s tendon to their routine interactions with English speakers. The following quotes illustrate some of the daily difficulties that participants face even with the most mundane of circumstances when communicating with their supervisors, coworkers and customers:

Si, con los estudiantes. De las cosas que le quiero decir a los estudiantes. Cuando está el sign y ellos entran y les quiero decir que no entren pero no puedo. Le puedo decir algunas cosas pero ellos creen que no entiendo nada. Y les digo no ves el sign y ellos dicen sorry. Ellos creen que uno no sabe nada. Pero si afecta no saber Ingles, definitivamente. Me afecta con los clientes; a veces cuando vienen los papas de los estudiantes y me preguntan donde está este salon de clase y uno no le puede decir. Yo
solamente los llevo eso es lo que afecta. Si uno pudiera decir vete a la derecha y despues a la izquierda pero a veces no puedo. (Miranda)

[Translation: Yes, with the students. The things that I want to tell the students. When the sign is up and they enter [the bathroom] and I want to tell them don’t go in but I can’t. I can tell them some things but they think that I don’t understand anything. And I tell them can’t you see the sign and they say sorry. They think that I don’t know anything. But yes it does affect not knowing English, definitely. It affects me with the clients; sometimes when the students’ parents come and they ask me where is the classroom and I cannot tell them. I take them there; that is how it affects. If I could say go to the right and then left but sometimes I can’t]

Es como digo no hablo much ingles y el no habla nada de espanol. No mas hablamos cuando necesitamos algunas cosas necesitamos las vacaciones, y tenemos que hablar por telefono, si se necesita una cosa para trabajar no mas le hablo por telefono; pero en veces cuando ando haciendo los banos pido el supply porque se enoja. (Raul)

[Translation: It’s what I am saying, I don’t speak much English and he [the supervisor] doesn’t speak any Spanish. We only talk when we need some things, we need vacation and we need to talk on the telephone. If we [he and his coworkers] something for work we talk to him by telephone but sometimes when I am doing the bathrooms I ask for supplies and he gets upset]

No, porque no sabemos mucho ingles y ellos no saben mucho espanol. Pero no importa la gente que sea blanco o negro, mexicano sea lo que sea somos trabajadores, queremos hablarnos y tener buena comunicacion; no queremos que unos sean mas que otros.

(Antonio)
[Translation: No, because we don’t know much English and they [his coworkers] don’t know much Spanish. But it doesn’t matter the people if they are white or black, Mexican whatever it may be the case we are all workers, we want to talk to each other and have good communication; we don’t want some to be more than others]  

The preceding quotes reveal some of the everyday communication struggles that the majority of the participants said they encounter at work. These everyday challenges even force some custodians to keep their distance from English speakers. Ricardo’s statement suggests that he would like to speak English to interact with others without fear: “Pues me gustaría tratar, no, tratar. Saber mas ingles para o sea estar mas pendiente y darle la cara a otros.” [Translation: I would like to try you know, try. Know more English I mean to be more attentive and face others]. Mariela talks about seeing others but not being able to talk with them: “Pues con los que miro son como son como el supervisor, la supervisora, o sea los miro, pero casi no hablo con ellos por tambien por el idioma.” [Translation: The ones that I see are the supervisor, the other supervisor I mean I see them, but I almost never talk with them because of the language]  

Many custodians made similar comments regarding why they choose to keep a distance from people who do not speak their native language. Carlos indicated: “Si, yo creo que si, porque digamos que si aunque yo quisiera platicar con ellos, si ellos no me entienden lo que yo les digo.” [Translation: Yes, I believe so, because let’s say that even if I wanted to talk with them, if they don’t understand what I tell them]. Similarly, Jose Luis mentioned: “El Espanol de ellos es diferente al mio; no nos entendemos bien. Los de Laos no hablan mucho Ingles; hablan su idioma entonces no nos entendemos. Entonces a veces tenemos problemas cuando nos comunicamos.” [Translation: Their Spanish is different than mine; we don’t understand each
other well. The ones from Laos they don’t speak much English; they speak their language so we don’t understand each other. Sometimes we have problems when we communicate.

The next two quotes show how some custodians want to learn English to connect with people and change how they feel that others perceive them:

Pues tengo mas contacto si yo hablara ingles pudiera tener mas contacto, porque cuando menos con mis estudiantes, porque a ellos les gusta platicar conmigo y yo con ellos y no mas nos reimos, porque mas no se, no mas los saludo, good morning y asi, pero no mas, y a veces si me siento mal porque me hacen preguntas las ninas y no puedo contestarlas. (Mariela)

[Translation: I have more contact if I spoke English I would have more contact, at least with my students; because they like to talk with me and I with them and we only laugh, because I don’t know anything else. I only greet them, good morning and things like that, but not beyond that; and sometimes I feel bad because the girls ask me questions and I can’t answer them]

Porque toda la gente Americana se te queda mirando como si tu fueras un monstruo, un ser humano de otro planeta, como si yo no fuera igual que ellos, simplemente el idioma es y yo a veces si estoy muy cerca de gente asi trato de usar el ingles, puro ingles. (Julio)

[Translation: Because all the American people stare at you as if you were a monster, a human being from another planet, as if I was not their equal simply the language is and sometimes if I am near people I try to use English pure English]

Language-related communication challenges seemed to pervade custodians’ daily interactions. These communicative challenges and their ensuing interactional hardship make custodians aware of the necessity to learn English. This necessity becomes clearer to the
participants as they reflect on their struggles to communicate at work. The reality that learning the dominant U.S. language is an impediment to advance socioeconomically heightens Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ awareness of this necessity.

**Learning English and related social outcomes.** Custodial workers candidly expressed that they are well aware of the need to learn English to communicate with others. Custodians also seem acutely aware of how the language barrier has negatively affected their work and social life. Many participants said things like speaking a different language in public is disrespectful to others and in a diverse country like the United States, there should be a language that everyone speaks. The following quotes show participants’ perceptions about learning English and how language use affects their lives:

Si hablará inglés y que hubiera personas que hablen inglés, pues no se sentirían incomodos pues porque sabrian de que esta hablando uno, y yo tampoco me sentiría incomodo porque pues, esta hablando uno algo claro. En lo que aca hablar palabras o platicas que, que no se escuchan mal, a la gente que esta escuchando. (Vladimir)

*Translation: If I spoke English and if others spoke English, they would not feel uncomfortable because they would know what one is talking about, and I would not feel uncomfortable either because one is talking about something understandable. In the things that one has just said, words or conversations that, that do not sound bad to the people who are listening]*

Depende de cada persona. Si a esa persona le gustaria aprender Espanol entonces esta bien. Depende en las ideas o lo que quiere esa persona aprender. Me gustaria en cierta forma, en verdad, no, me gustaria porque se que estoy en un pais donde no se puede
hablar nada más que un lenguaje. En realidad no se puede hacer eso porque hay diversidad. (Aurora)

[Translation: It depends on each person. If that person would like to learn Spanish then it’s fine. It depends on the ideas or what that person wants to learn. I would like it in some way for real, I would like to because I know that I am in a country where you can only speak one language. In reality we can’t do that because there is diversity]

Participants’ narratives about language use yielded two additional themes. These themes are the custodians’ awareness of the need for a “lingua franca” in a multicultural society and their feelings of guilt and embarrassment for not speaking English after many years of residence in the United States. For instance, Noel expressed that immigrants need to “Que hablen ingles, estamos en los Estados Unidos y nuestra responsabilidad es hablar el Ingles, y yo entiendo, a estar bien, a no claro estaria bien, me parece muy bien. [Translation: Speak English, we are in the United States and it is our responsibility to speak English, and I understand, that would be good, of course it would be good, it would look good to me].

Other participants expressed their perception of their lack of English language fluency in the following ways: “Mmmm, pues no mal, pues es mi primera lengua, pero claro si supiera ingles, pues yo me sentiria pues mas mejor siento que me sentiria mas util; pienso que seria mas importante aqui si pudiera comunicarme pues seria diferente diferente.” (Braulio)

[Translation: Mmmm I mean not bad it is my first language, but of course if I knew English, I would feel better I feel that I would feel more useful I think I would be more important here if I could communicate it would be different different]. Angelina’s comments represent many custodians’ feelings regarding language use:
No, no definitivamente hablo algo, este hablar, lo hablo muy poco pero lo hablo como lo decia anteriormente, por verguenza, por miedo o no se porque, hablo, trato en presente, pasado, future, presente continuo, no se, hablo muy poco, pero trato de hablarlo segun yo muy bien, pero hablo muy poco.

[Translation: No, no definitely I speak it a bit, speaking, I speak it very little but I speak it like I said previously, embarrassment, for fear or I don’t know why, I speak, I try in the present, past, future, gerund, I don’t know, I speak it very little, but I try to speak it I think very well, but I only speak it very little]

Such feelings are also expressed through the participants’ awareness about how language use affects their social lives in general, not just at work. Several participants spoke vividly and candidly about how they perceive language use has engendered mostly negative outcomes in their social lives. The following quotes exemplify custodians’ awareness and feelings about how language use affects their lives:

Pos me hace mucha falta el ingles porque a veces he querido ir aplicar a un, otro trabajo, y me detengo, quiero ir al doctor y lo mismo tengo que buscar quien hable espanol, par air al doctor, si, es una frustracion para mi, una barrera si, para muchas cosas, si. (Marta)

[Translation: I really need to learn English because sometimes I have wanted to apply to a, another job, and I stop myself, I want to go to the doctor and the same; I have to find someone who speaks Spanish, to go to the doctor yes, it is a frustration for me. A barrier for a lot of things, yes]

No me ha quedado otra alternativa. Pues no estudie Wilfredo; no hablo ingles. Estaba abierta a hacer lo que sea y habia limpieza. En mi pais es algo negativo limpiar. Aqui uno limpia y es normal. Aqui no tenia alternativa. Otros trabajos eran muy pesados.
Limpia turkeys en una fabrica en ______. Era muy duro el trabajo porque tiene que estar uno rapido, rapido sin parar. (Amelia)

[Translation: I haven’t had another alternative. I didn’t study Wilfredo; I don’t speak English. I was willing to do anything and there was cleaning. In my country cleaning is something negative. Here you clean and it’s normal. Here I did not have another alternative. Other jobs were too demanding. I used to clean turkeys at a factory in ______. The work was too hard because one had to be going fast, fast without stopping]

Pues yo pienso que seria, seria bueno verdad pues si hablaramos bien verdad ingles o ellos espanol y todo, pues es muy importante porque muchas veces por ejemplo uno quiere subir mas arriba de housekeeping y por el idioma no le dan a uno el trabajo, uno quiere ganar mas verdad dinero trabajar un poco menos a lo mejor verdad y por el ingles no podemos subir. (Ermenegilda)

[Translation: I think it would be, it would be good you know if we spoke English well or they Spanish and all. It is very important because many times for instance one wants to move up beyond housekeeping and because of the language they don’t give you the job; one wants to earn more money, right, work a little less and because of the English we can’t move up]

Oportunidades que tiene uno. Me falta mas el Ingles; si yo supiera ingles tuviera en un puesto mas arriba. Y donde yo estoy hay oportunidades para subir y no puedo. Yo he aprendido mas el ingles oyendo que iendo a la escuela. (Josefina)
[Translation: Opportunities that one has. I need the English; if I knew English I would have a higher position. And where I am there are opportunities to move up and I can’t. I have learned more English listening than going to school]

The preceding narratives display participants’ awareness and perceptions of how language use affects their social lives. This heightened sense of awareness regarding the need to communicate in English is clear, however, most participants expressed a need to communicatively accommodate one another when people who speak different languages interact.

**Language and communication accommodation.** Custodians candidly talked about the need to learn English in an English-speaking society. However, most of the participants explicitly expressed that there should also be a willingness from interactants to at least attempt to accommodate persons who do not speak their language fluently. The following narratives represent the majority of the participants’ views on communication accommodation:

Que tratan de hablar se ve el acento, que batallan para comunicarse, entonces yo hablo en Ingles con ellos para que me digan mas fluido lo que tratan de decir estan batallando para tratar de preguntar algo simple entonces cuando yo les contesto en Ingles, si una persona digamos son de aqui, muy bien en Ingles y Espanol yo les contesto en Espanol. (Ramona)

[Translation: That they are trying to talk and I notice the accent, that they are trying hard to communicate, then I talk in English with them so that they can tell me more fluidly what they are trying to say if they are trying hard to ask something simple then it’s when I respond in English. If a person let’s say is from here [US], then in English and if Spanish then I respond to them in Spanish]

Si, que hablen Espanol para entenderse mejor uno. Por ejemplo acabo de terminar mis clases que dan aqui de parte de la Universidad, clases de ingles y tuve una maestra muy
bonita que ella casi habla muy bien el Espanol, ______, y habla muy bien el Espanol. Si trataran de hablar el Espanol un poquito tal vez se entenderia mejor uno.

[Translation: Yes, others should speak Spanish so that we can understand each other better. For example, I just finished my classes that the university offers, English classes and I had a nice teacher who almost spoke Spanish very well, ______, and she spoke Spanish very well. If others tried to speak a little bit of Spanish maybe we could understand each other better]

Custodians’ narratives suggest that they try very hard to accommodate to others and, thus, they expect others to somehow reciprocate their communication accommodation moves.

Alberto’s comment illustrates this point: “Ah, pues le hable en Ingles para que mire que yo tambien tengo ese problema de que no hablo Ingles perfecto y el o ella no hable el Espanol perfecto y entonces unas palabras que ella pueda ayudarme y yo ayudarle a ella. [Translation: Ah, I talked to him in English so that he could see that I also have that problem that I don’t speak English perfectly and he or she does not speak Spanish perfectly and then some words that she could help with and I me help her]. Similarly, Jonathan said: “si la persona de habla Inglesa me responde en Espanol yo le respondo en Espanol. Le hablo mas despacio porque se complican porque hablamos rapido. Y creo que estoy colaborando para reforzar su Espanol. [Translation: if the English-speaking person responds in Spanish I reply in Spanish. I speak more slowly because it can get complicated if we talk fast. And I also think that I am collaborating to reinforce their Spanish].

The following quotes summarize custodians’ views related to their everyday workplace interactions and communication accommodation:
Si, los customers, si los estudiantes, contenta, porque como que a ellos les interesa
nuestro idioma, nuestra cultura, me siento mas en casa, o sea que a ellos cuando me
hablan espanol yo les contesto espanol, cuando ellos me hablan en ingles yo les contesto
en ingles, eso trato de conectar de alguna manera con otras personas y tener buena
comunicacion. (Paulina)

[Translation: Yes, with the customers, yes the students, happy, because they seem
interested in our language, our culture, I feel more at home, when they speak to me in
Spanish I respond in Spanish, when they speak in English I respond in English. I try to
connect somehow with other people and have good communication]

Katrina said the following about her relationship with a customer in her building:

Si, [nombre del cliente] fue un tiempo a [nombre de un pais] a hablar Espanol. Y le dije
cuando vuelvas nada mas te voy a hablar en Espanol. Y hablamos y cuando no puede
entonces yo le hablo en Ingles. Si, yo hablo con ella en espanol y yo me siento contenta
porque esta tratando. Yo usualmente respondo en espanol y cuando veo que no puede yo
le digo en ingles. O si dicen una palabra en Espanol no bien so trato de corregirlos,
riendome y ellos se rien tambien.

[Translation: Yes, [customer’s name] went for awhile to [Latin-American country’s
name] to learn Spanish. And I told her when you return I will only speak to you in
Spanish. And we talk and when she can’t I speak to her in English. Yes, I talk to her in
Spanish and I feel happy because she is trying. I usually respond in Spanish and when
she can’t respond I tell her in English. Or if they say a word in Spanish and
mispronounce it I try to correct them, laughing and they laugh back]
The preceding narratives illustrated some of the Latina and Latino immigrants’ workplace experiences with language use. Language use emerged as a powerful feature of the participants’ social life in and out of the workplace. The majority of the participants expressed that language use is a major issue in their lives. Specifically, issues related to language use and job acquisition through interpersonal networks, social integration, everyday communication challenges, and communication accommodation became apparent throughout the interviews. What also became apparent throughout the interviews was that Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ routine communication experiences with the persons with whom they interact at work showed some salient differences. For instance, communicating with supervisors appeared to be a challenging endeavor for most participants due to supervisors’ inability to effectively manage interpersonal episodes with their subordinates and their tendency for verbal aggression.

**Communication Experiences with Supervisors**

The second, third, and fourth major findings related to the first research question showed that Communication experiences vary significantly depending on the persons with whom the custodial workers interact (i.e., supervisors, coworkers, or customers). The majority of the participants said that their supervisors are authoritative leaders who employ aggressive and dominating communication styles. Among other issues, supervisors’ autocratic leadership style engenders a communication climate where employee feedback is highly discouraged. Within this environment, employees carefully monitor their communication and avoid conflict. Additionally, superior–subordinate relationships exist under a cloud of mistrust and disregard for the subordinate.

According to the majority of custodians, supervisors lacked effective leadership and communication skills. The following narratives depict how the majority of the participants perceived their supervisor’s leadership style:
Si, simplemente cuando han venido vendedores al trabajo. Estaban vendiendo [maquina de limpiar] y una persona voto si le dije que no era buena. Todos opinamos que no la queríamos porque no vale la pena. Muchas veces las opiniones salen sobrando. Los supervisores son canijos no acceptan su opinion. El supervisor nos dijo “les guste o no les guste yo voy a comprarlas.” Eso es lo que digo, quien las va a usar el supervisor o nosotros? (Roberto)

[Translation: Yes, simply when salespeople have come. They were selling [a type of cleaning machine] and one person voted and I told them that it was not goo. Everyone said that we didn’t want it because it was not worth it. Oftentimes, opinions are extra. The supervisors are scrubs who do not accept our opinion. The supervisor told us “whether you like it or not I am going to buy it.” That’s what I’m saying, who is going to use it, us or the supervisor?]

Y si dices ya sabes y si te reusas, ya sabes y esta la amenaza te mando el jefe mas grande y te mando aca y alla y eso es una manera de yo asi lo entiendo no estan preparados par ser ejercer el liderazgo. Yo creo que un trabajador hay que analizarlo si tiene una actitud negative hay que pensar de como hacerle cambiar poco a poco esa actitud y que no afecte al resto del grupo. Pero como no tenemos la visualizacion de como hacerlo este tiene que cambiar porque yo digo; y porque asi es y porque. (Miguel)

[Translation: If you say you know and if you refuse, you know there is the threat I’ll send you to the bigger boss, I’ll send you here and there that is a way of, that’s how I understand it they are not ready to be enact leadership. I believe that you have to analyze a worker if he has a negative attitude you have to think about how to make him change little by little that attitude and don’t let it affect the rest of the group. But we [the
Some custodial staff supervisors seem to personalize the workplace and show blatant favoritism towards particular individuals, which creates a severely defensive communication climate:

Tambien he percibido que se personaliza el trabajo. Por ejemplo, si hoy tengo un reclamo porque hay algo, jefe me siento que esto esta mal; le esta haciendo el trabajo facil a otros y a mi me esta complicando. Si hago eso me puedo ganar antipatia o lo puede personalizar. Ni el empleado debe personalizar cuando un jefe le llama la atencion, ni un jefe puede personalizar cuando un empleado respetuosamente le hace una observacion. (Juan Carlos)

[Translation: I have also perceived that work gets personalized. For example, if today I have a grievance because something happen; boss I feel that this is wrong; others are having an easier time and I am having very hard time right now. If I do that, I can gain the boss’ antipathy or he can personalize it. Neither should the employee personalize things when the boss calls him/her out, nor should the boss personalize things when an employee respectfully makes an observation]

According to some custodians, personalizing routines become evident when some supervisors blatantly display preferential treatment or favoritism toward some workers and not others. Ramona’s statement portrays such view:

Aqui en la Universidad hay mucho de eso, mucha politica y mucha preferencia de los supervisores a los trabajadores. En el tiempo que tengo y lo que platica una a veces cuando uno va a otras partes, otros edificios, que convive uno con los diferentes
trabajadores y ve uno lo mismo, o sea se platica lo mismo que aquí, estos tienen mucha preferencias con ciertos trabajadores y les demuestran en la forma que les exigen menos trabajo. . .o ve uno ciertas diferencias, ciertas preferencias cuando le dan a uno las evaluaciones, en las evaluaciones se ve que uno es todo diferente. . .

[Translation: Here in the university there is a lot of that, a lot of politics and preference between supervisors and workers. In the time that I have here and the conversations that one has with others in other parts, other buildings, when one spends time with other workers, I see the same thing as here, these people have much preference with certain workers and they show it by asking less work of them, or one notices certain differences, certain preferences when one gets our evaluations, in the evaluations one sees that some of us are different]

This system of preference and favoritism seems to affect the work group in negative ways. Rodrigo sums up how most custodians feel regarding the leadership approaches that they would like to see in their workplace:

Si, es que una cosa es ser líder administrativo y otra es ser líder en medio de la gente. Sabes porque? Si tu ere slider administrativo desde aquí giras las ordenes y no mas dices: dile a la gente esto y esto yo giro, pero crème que yo me atrevo a decirte y sin temor a equivocarme que creo que yo seria mejor líder que ti, sabes por que? Porque yo se manejar los caracteres, las actitudes, la manera de comportarse de la gente yo estoy trabajando de una manera directa con ellos el administrativo no lamentablemente, no consiste el trabajo en que todo este limpio; hay personas que tienen que limpiarlo y ahí es que esta el asunto.
Yes, it is one thing to be an administrative leader and it’s another thing to be a leader among people. You know why? If you are an administrative leader from you give your orders and you only say tell people to do this and that. If I were to give orders, believe me and I would dare to say unequivocally that I am a better leader than you, you know why? Because I know how to deal with people’s characters, attitudes, their behaviors I would be working directly with them, the administrative leader is not. Lamentably, the work is not just about everything being clean; it is people who have to do the cleaning and therein lies the point]

In addition to perceiving supervisors’ leadership style as authoritative, most custodians perceive that their supervisors communicate with them in dominant and aggressive ways. The following quotes illustrate custodians’ perspectives about their supervisors’ communication:

Maltratada, si porque de la forma que le hablan a uno que la ven a uno menos pues por decir, los supervisores y este que solamente estan tras de uno chequeando y este tenia una supervisora de que a cada momento estaba hablando, que donde estas, que estas haciendo, a donde vas, que vas a hacer, necesitas hacer esto y aquello era injusto, injusto las cosas que hacen y si hay maltrato de parte de los supervisores hacia los trabajadores ella tenia la voz muy fuerte yo entiendo que tenia la voz fuerte pero ella como que se aprovechaba de eso. (Ramona)

Mistreated, yes because the way that they talk to us they see us as less than because, the supervisors and the other one is always after us checking and this one I had supervisor that was talking all the time, where are you? What are you doing? Where are you going? What are you going to do? You need to do this and that, it is unfair, unfair the things that they do and yes there is mistreatment from the supervisors to the workers
she had a very stern voice; I understand that she had a stern voice but it seemed that she would take advantage of that]

Tiene algunos pleitos el, se pone a discutir, se pone a pelear, y hasta lo que yo se yo he sido mayordomo, y yo he trabajado no debemos estar discutiendo sino viendo como, como hacer resolver el problema y como hacer entender a la persona que trabaje, con buenas palabras buen entendimiento la gente. Es el mayordomo que tiene que estudiar a esa persona, todos somos diferentes y todos venimos a trabajar y somos trabajadores.

(Pedro)

[Translation: He likes controversy, he likes to argue, he likes to fight, and for what I know I have been a supervisor and I have worked we should not be arguing but trying to figure out how, how to solve the problem and how to make the person work, with kind words and understanding the people; it is the supervisor who need to study the person, we are all different and we all come to work and we are workers]

Ahorita, esto es algo muy reciente con nuestra supervisora tenemos problemas serios. Todo el grupo este de maltratos si, verbales de ciertos abusos ya ahorita se presentaron del grupo de nosotros; si no me equivoco son cuatro o cinco compañeros que ya se quejaron con la zona administrative y no hacen nada. Hoy la gente tiene miedo, esta estresada, esta frustrada, no quieren hablar, estamos metidos en un problema bien serio y no podemos decir nada, si hablas ya sabes. (Rodolfo)

[Translation: Right now this is something recent with our supervisor we are having problems serious the whole group of mistreatment yes, verbal abuse. Some of us complained already; if I’m not mistaken four or five coworkers complained with administration and they don’t do anything. The people are afraid, they are stressed out,
frustrated, they don’t want to talk; we are steeped in a very serious problem and we can’t say anything, if you say anything, you know what happens]

The preceding quotes exemplify how most participants felt about their communication experiences with their immediate supervisors. The data also reveal that such leadership and communicative orientation foster a defensive communication climate where superior–subordinate relationships existed under a cloud of fear, suspicion, and disrespect. This is what some participants said related to the communication climate in their work group:

Um, este, pues hay meetings en veces la gente no habla, pero yo veo pos tienen miedo, porque si usted acusa a un mayordomo despues el mayordomo va a viene detrás de usted y va a querer a regañarlo o darle mas trabajo. Ahora ultimo hubo un meetin y me digo, no mas esta hablando porque la gente no quiere hablar pos lo que necesitamos es que hablar para eso son los meeting para hablar; hay algo malo que esta pasando. (Juan)

[Translation: Um, there are meetings and people do not talk, but I notice that they are afraid, because if you accuse a supervisor then the supervisor goes after you and reprimands you or gives you more work. Recently, there was a meeting and he told me, no more; I was talking because people don’t want to talk; what we need is for people to talk, that’s what meetings are for; there is something wrong happening here]

Y yo soy honesto en decir yo cuando hablo en las juntas a veces tienen temor como en el team meeting que tenemos. Tienen miedo porque a veces suelto cosas dique la gente dice lo necesitamos. Usted habla casi por todos; yo digo yo hablo por mi. Yo no hablo por nadie para que los jefes no sientan de que yo estoy formando complot y todo eso.

(Rogelio)
[Translation: And I am honest when I say when I speak up in the meetings the coworkers have fear like in the team meetings that we have they are afraid because sometimes I say things that people say we needed that. You almost speak for all of us; I say no I speak for myself. I do not speak for anyone so that the bosses don’t feel that I am forming a plot and all of that]

Era hostigante, uno hacia el trabajo y para ella nunca estaba bien. Era agresiva siempre cuando tenemos meetings a veces le dicen si tienen preguntas y no me siento comoda opinando. Muchas veces mejor evitar uno hablar, jajaja. Pero no hay clima para dar sugerencias porque no tengo confianza. (Ofelia)

[Translation: She was exasperating, one would do their work and for her it was never enough. She was always aggressive when we have meetings sometimes they ask if we have questions and I don’t feel comfortable giving my opinion. Many times it’s better to avoid speaking up, (laughter). But there isn’t a climate to give suggestions because I do not trust it]

In such communication climate, superior–subordinate relationships form and evolve in a context where communicative exchanges can be destructive for the organizational members and the workplace alike. These are some of the comments that many participants made regarding their relationships with their supervisors:

Aquí hay mucha ese tipo de actitud de que yo pienso yo creo y esto se va a hacer así y no acceptamos como la sugerencia; este no queremos ser corregidos pero si queremos corregir a otros. Entonces yo parto de eso, si no estamos dispuestos a acceptar nuestros errores porque voy a tener el derecho de señalarle los errores a otros. Yo creo que ahí no
estamos educados. Eso es como lo negativo; esas son relaciones que no han crecido.

(Ramon)

[Translation: Here there is that type of attitude that I think, I think this is going to get
done this way and we don’t accept others’ suggestions; we don’t want to be corrected but
we want to correct others. Then I depart from there, if we are not willing to accept our
errors then what gives me the right to point other people’s errors. I think that we are not
educated in this regard. That is the negative thing; those are relationships that have not
grown]

Percibimos que la mayoría de los problemas eran con mujeres; hostigamiento. Siempre
estaba encima de uno “mire aquí hay polvo” cositas asi le molestan; eran insosportable.
Yo estaba sentada tomandome el luncne y me dijo “no termino el luncne ya?” y yo le dije
porque no sabe que agarramos 15 minutos mas. Y ahi era la lucha. Son muchas las
historias como esa. (Josefina)

[Translation: We perceived that the majority of the issues were with women;
exasperation. She was always on top of us “look, there is dust here” things like that
would bother her; they were unbearable. I was once sitting down taking my lunch break
and she told me “is your lunch over yet?” and I told her don’t you know that we take 15
more minutes? And then there was the fight. There are a lot of stories like this one]

I asked one of the custodians to tell me about her relationship with her supervisor and she
responded:

Ummm, este que le dire como que, por ejemplo, no se, es que se me hace como
imprudencia mia, o sea platicar decirle cosas que pasan asi, y que uno ve que es una
realidad y, y se me hace, se me hace como imprudencia de mi parte, o sea no puedo
platicar, si, como que no puedo decirle a usted.

[Translation: Ummm, what can I tell you, I mean, for instance, I don’t know, I feel that
that would be imprudent on my part, I mean to talk about things that happen and that one
sees that it is a reality and, and I feel, I feel that it’s imprudent on my part, I mean I can’t
talk about that, yes, it’s like I can’t tell you]

In this relational climate, employees feel that their feedback/suggestions/opinions are
discouraged and, thus, many employ a communication and conflict avoidant interactional
posture. The following quotes illustrate custodians’ perspectives on giving feedback to their
superiors, and communication and conflict avoidance:

No, nunca. Tengo 5 años aquí y nadie me ha pedido sugerencia para algo. Todo es hazlo
asi y asi es. Si esto es una raya y por ahí te tienes que ir y no te vas a salir. Y no me
gusta porque tengo voz. Entonces a veces doy mi opinión sin que me la pidan; siempre
que puedo decir algo yo lo digo porque no es para mal. Hay un guion y hay que seguirlo
aunque sea 20 años atrasados. (Teresa)

[Translation: No, never. I have been here for 5 years and nobody has ever asked for my
suggestion for something. Everything is do it like this and that’s it. If this is a line and
that’s the path you have to follow and do not deviate. And I don’t like it because I have a
voice. Therefore, I give my opinion without it being asked; every chance that I get to say
something I say it because it’s not bad. There is a script and you have to stick to it even
if it is 20 years behind]

Claro pero con esta opcion; con disposicion a que ellos escuchen buenos y malos
commentarios y sugerencias. Si no estan dispuestos, entonces si tu tienes un amigo y lo
buscas y le cuentas algo y no recibes lo que esperas de él, pues te vas triste y no lo vuelves a buscar. Yo no busco simplemente que me escuchen si no proveer a la necesidad. (Pedro)

[Translation: Of course, but with this option with their disposition to listen to good and bad commentaries and suggestions. If they are not willing, then if you have a friend and you seek him/her out and you disclose something and you don’t receive what you expect from them, you then leave them and don’t seek them out again. I not only seek simply that they listen to me but to fulfill the need]

Regarding communication and conflict avoidance, most participants expressed the following:

Desde que yo entre aquí, como soy una persona que no me gustan los problemas, y a veces trato de, por ejemplo si a veces veo algo malo, me callo, para no entrar en problemas y eso es lo que me ha ayudado a llevarme bien con todas la gente, porque no me gusta nada me gusta el conflicto. (Josefa)

[Translation: Since I came here, I am a person that I don’t like problems, and sometimes I try, for example if sometimes I see something wrong, I keep my mouth shut, so that I don’t have any problems and that is what has helped me get along with people, because I don’t like it; I don’t like conflict at all]

Si he hablado a veces. Ya tengo como un año que hable la última vez ya no. No me gustan mucho los problemas; si a veces hablamos por las reuniones que ellos hacen. Pero uno escucha casi no hablan, yo prefiero evitar las cosas. (Roberto)
[Translation: Yes I have talked at times. I have like a year that I last talked. I don’t like problems very much. Yes, sometimes we talk because of the meetings that they have. But we listen and almost do not talk; I prefer to avoid things]

Some custodians invoked time spent at work as a primary reason to avoid conflict with superiors. The following comments illustrate this point:

Pues porque aquí estamos de diario; tenemos más comunicación, estamos mucho más que en la casa. Veo aquí más a la gente que a mi propia familia, que a mi esposo, porque mi esposo trabaja de noche y yo en la manana, no, y aquí veo más a la gente y sería frustrante pelear o tener conflictos todos los días. (Ramona)

[Translation: because we are here everyday; we have more communication, we are together more than at home. I see people here more than my own family, more than my husband, because my husband works nights and I work mornings, no, I see people here more and it would be frustrating to fight or have conflicts all the time]

Hay veces que discute uno por cosas que le dan mucho trabajo y equis causas pero bien. Yo pienso porque siempre estamos juntos y comemos juntos y nos combinamos la comida. El tiempo que tenemos juntos; que ganamos como estar como el ratón y el gato si pasamos tanto tiempo juntos. (Manuel)

[Translation: There are times that we have arguments due to things that work us up and such but well. I think that because we are always together and we eat together and we share our food. The time that we have working together, what do we gain by being like the mouse and the cat if we spend so much time together]

Communication challenges related to social and cultural differences emerged as salient to the communication experiences of Latina and Latino custodians with their superiors.
Differences in ethnicity, language, customs, and educational level pose significant communicative barriers for many participants. The following quotes exemplify some of these challenges:

Diferente idiomas, diferente costumbres y a veces se nos hace muy facil senalarle los defectos a la gente de otros paises que tu hablas muy feo, por que tu acento es fuerte, que por que tu acento es muy suave, que tu espanol no sirve, pues a veces recibe uno y eso hace a veces no mantener una buena relacion entro nosotros. Tambien lo que ahí influye mucho es el egoismo. (Pedro)

[Transition: Different languages, different customs and sometimes it becomes very easy to point out the people from other countries’ faults oh that you talk ugly, because your accent is strong, you accent is too soft, your Spanish is bad, sometimes one receives and that sometimes makes that we don’t maintain good relationships among ourselves. Also what influences this is egoism]

Bueno diferente por su cultura las personas que son de [otro pais] y bueno la diferencia que he encontrado yo es que ah! Por decir cuando les habla uno son como le dire, ah si usted no los conoce al principio cree que estan a al defensiva y constestan asi, hablan asi como muy fuerte, y siente uno como que estan enojadas y como que no les gusta que le pregunte uno algo, al principio, pero si despues uno observa se da cuenta que asi ellas son. (Carla)

[Transition: Well different because of their culture are people who are from [another country] and well the difference that I have found is that ah! Let me see when one speaks to them they are how can I tell you, ah if you don’t know them initially you think that they are being defensive and they respond like that, they talk kind of like stern, and one feels
like they are upset and they don’t like it if you ask them something, initially, but afterwards you observe that that’s how they are]

El problema es que ellos tienen una barrera bastante enorme y no ven más allá. Yo pienso que tiene que ver con su nivel de educación. En cuestión de trabajo le digo esto y aquello y ella dice “lo hemos hecho por 20 años;” y digo pues estamos en el siglo 21. Y se lo digo y no me entiende las palabras; no me entiende los términos. Y digo a mi misma callate y trata de hablarles con los términos que ellos entiendan. (Josefa) [Translation: The problem is that they have a huge barrier and they don’t see beyond. I think it has to do with their education level. Regarding work I tell her this and that and she says “we have done it for 20 years;” and I tell her we are in the 21 century. And I tell her and she doesn’t understand the words, the terms. And I tell myself, shut up and talk to them with terms that they understand]

In addition to social and cultural differences, workplace gossip also appears to be a communicative hindrance for custodians. Gossiping was present among supervisors and also coworkers. Several participants indicated that they tend to remain distant from their supervisors or choose not to talk to various people because of the rampant gossiping that takes place in their work areas. This situation creates an atmosphere where people are apprehensive about opening up to others, which may lead them to remain superficial in everyday interactions. The following statements illustrate how custodians felt about workplace gossip:

Fue chocante, lamento decir esto pero no fue agradable. Tuve que lidiar conmigo mismo, mis emociones. Las personas que encontre tenian un carácter muy dificil; mucho chisme. Conversan contigo, se ríen contigo, te volteas y te estan dando duro. Si yo llego y a la
semana me entere de la vida de todos. Ningun trabajo es perfecto, siempre existen
personas complicadas pero aqui fue alarmante. (Rodrigo)

[Translation: It was shocking, I’m sorry to say this but it was not pleasant. I had to deal
with myself; my emotions. The people that I found here had difficult personalities; a lot
of gossip. They talk with you, laugh with you, you turn your back and they hit you hard.
I got here and a week later I knew everyone’s lives. No job is perfect, there are always
complicated people but here it was alarming]

Cuando una persona que le tengo que decir una cosa se la digo. Pero hay muchas
personas que no converso con ellas. Nunca me han llevado a chismes. Hay gente que
tiene chismes todo el tiempo. A [nombre de persona] si la han llevado por chismes. No
me gusta meterme con ninguna persona. No tiene razon que le esten llevando a la oficina
por chismes. (Amelia)

[Translation: When I have to tell someone something I tell them. But there are many
people that I do not talk with them. They have never reprimanded because of gossiping.
There are people who are always gossiping. They took [custodian’s name] [to the office]
because of gossiping. I don’t like clashing with anyone. It doesn’t make sense to take
you to the office because of gossip]

Siempre hemos estado 2 o 3 y no hay muchos problemas. Cuando hay mas gentes hay
mas problemas. Entre muchos te pones con tu gente y te pones mira que chisme aquel y
esto. Nosotros los Latinos mientras mas gentes mas problemas; los Latinos somos
canijos. (Roberto)

[Translation: We have always been 2 or 3 and there aren’t many problems. When there
are more people then there are more problems. Among many Latinos you side with your
people and start gossiping this and that. Us Latinos the more people more problems; us Latinos we are hard headed]

Although a tense communication climate seems to exist in some departments, custodians have good relationships with many of their coworkers and a few supervisors and customers. However, coworkers are their primary source of interaction. Custodians said that they mostly talk with coworkers during breaks and they talk about a variety of topics including their faith, native countries, and families.

**Communication Experiences with Coworkers**

The third finding showed that the large majority (22 of 25, 88%) of custodians indicated that they talk to their coworkers often and they typically talk during their breaks. The following quotes represent what participants said related to how custodial work shapes their interactions with their coworkers:

> No mas hablamos en el tiempo de descanso y la hora de tomar el almuerzo. El resto del tiempo pues solo que sea una emergencia; van y me preguntan algo y voy con ellas, a veces las maquinas “highback” estan funcionando mal y me hablan y me dicen por favor venga y me ayuda en esto. Entonces, este, ah es cuando a veces platicamos asi en horas de trabajo y de ahí a la hora de descanso. (Marcelino)

*Translation: We only talk during rest hours and and lunch time. The rest of the time, only if we have an emergency they go and ask me something and I go with them, sometimes the “highback” machines aren’t functioning properly and they tell me please come help us with this. Therefore, ah it is when we sometimes talk during work hours and from there to the break]*
Con mis compañeros de trabajo y estudiantes que me conocen. A diario durante el día no es mucho porque cada quien se mantiene en su área de trabajo. En la hora del break convivimos en la hora del lunche. Cada quien está en su área y puedo estar caminando hola como estas y eso todo. (Matilde)

[Translation: With my coworkers and students who know me. Daily during the day it’s not a lot because everyone stays in their work area. During the break we spend time together in the lunch hour. Each person is in their area and I could be walking around hi how are you and that’s all]

Compartimos mucho, hablan de Mexico, de cosas que tenemos en común, si. Pues es como le digo hablamos todos los días pero no mucho, no mas en las horas de los breaks, y en las horas de los breask estamos comiendo, tomando café y pues no me acuerdo de que tanto hablamos pero estamos contentos, como muy bien muy contentos y muy unidos. (Ramona)

[Translation: We share a lot, we talk about Mexico, of things that we have in common, yes. It’s like I’m telling you we talk everyday but not a lot, just during the break hours and in the break hours we are eating, drinking coffee and I don’t remember how much we talk but we are happy, like very well very happy and very united]

The preceding quotes exemplify how the nature of custodial work seems to promote a workplace where the custodians primarily interact with their coworkers and during particular times during their work shift. The next statements display how most custodians feel about their relationships with their coworkers:

Buena, platicamos, pues le paso algo a mi nina, me paso algo, me siento muy decaída o estoy muy triste. Vengo a trabajar porque tengo que trabajar pero me ha dolido lo que me
ha hecho mi hijo. Hay mucho soporte entre unos a otros aquí con los trabajadores. Y hasta había un muchacho que era Americano y nos trataba muy bien y hasta hablaba español. (Josefina)

[Translation: Good, we talk, something happened to my daughter, something happened to me, I feel down or I am sad. I come to work because I have to work but it’s hurt what my son has done to me. There is a lot of support among the workers here. And there was even a man who was American who treated us very well and he even spoke Spanish]

Pues hablamos muy bien; hacemos el trabajo y todo bien aquí. Es un ambiente muy unido con todos nosotros. Conversamos de la familia; ya tenemos tiempo trabajando y nos conocemos de años. Compartimos la comida como si fueramos familia todos. (Manuela)

[Translation: We talk and all is well; we do the work and everything is fine here. It is a very united environment with all of us here. We talk about the family; we have a long time working here and we know each other for years. We share our food like we are all family]

Ah, pues me siento muy unida a mis compañeros de trabajo. Este porque pienso que no porque no los veo ni mas ni menos que yo; me gusta la igualdad en el trabajo entonces yo pienso que tengo muy buena relación con mis compañeros de trabajo. Ehhh, me respetan como persona. Ok, pero yo creo que he creado buena relación por el respeto; el respeto que debemos darle a cada persona. (Maria)

[Translation: Ah, I feel very united to my coworkers. Because I think I don’t see them as more or less than me. I like equality at work and then I think that I have a very good relationship with my coworkers. Ehhh, they respect me as a person. Ok, but I think that I
have created a good relationship because of the respect; the respect that we should give everyone]

The preceding statements show how most custodians feel regarding their relationships with their coworkers. For the most part it seems that coworkers have positive relationships with each other. However, oftentimes this is not the case especially when the custodians interact with customers (i.e., the persons who utilize the facilities that they clean: administrative staff, students, and faculty).

**Communication Experiences with Customers**

The four finding showed that Latina and Latino immigrant custodians have both positive and negative communication experiences with customers (i.e., students, faculty, and administrative staff). Participants cite customers’ negative attitudes, having harmful encounters with customers, and language barriers as the chief reasons for avoiding communication with customers. In contrast, some custodians reported that they have mostly pleasant communication experiences with customers. For instance, custodians practice their English with customers and even refer to some of them as family. Custodians’ communication experiences in the department of Housing Services and University Memorial Center yielded most of the mixed results. Various participants within these departments shared that their experiences are both positive and negative. Custodian–customer communication in the other departments, Recreation Services and Facilities Management, seem to be mostly positive.

The following statements show the views of some custodians who feel that customers’ negative attitudes and language barriers push them to avoid interacting with them. For example, Roberto’s comment vividly exemplifies some of the negative experiences some custodians have with customers:
En cierta ocasión alguien me dijo “me das verguenza el trabajo que haces.” Un estudiante y le dije yo no, le dije yo no te estoy robando nada a ti. Le dije yo no te estoy robando a ti, y el penso que yo no hablaba Ingles. Yo le conteste, le dije yo no te estoy robando a ti, yo hago un trabajo le dije, y esto es un sueldo y me siento orgulloso de mi trabajo y le dije no tienes porque decirme eso.

[Translation: In one occasion someone told me “I am ashamed of you and the work that you do.” A student and I told him, me, no I told him I am not stealing from you. I told him I am not stealing from you and he thought that I did not speak English. I responded, and I told him I am not stealing from you I do a job here I told him, and this is a salary and I feel proud of my work and I told him you have no reason to tell me that]

Ramona shared the following about an early morning experience she had with a student:

Que los veo y no les hable. Pues con algunos estudiantes porque a veces ellos estan tan apurados ando yo como ellos y luego se levantan, vienen de levantarse todos encamotados a las 6:30 de la manana y le hablan a uno como si fuera basura y eso es cuando tienen el animo de dirigirse a uno.

[Translation: That I see them and I don’t talk to them. With some of the students because sometimes they are in a rush and so am I and then they get up, they come from getting up all upset at 6:30 in the morning and they talk to you like you’re trash and that is when that have the energy to even address you]

Several custodians said that they avoid interacting with customers due to the language barrier. For example, Carla said: “casi no hablo con ellos, casi nunca, mas bien por el idioma verdad? Pero si trato de saludarlos si me contestan tambien. Como le digo, no todos, hay algunos que nunca le van a hablar a uno.” [Translation: I almost don’t talk with them, almost
never, it’s because of the language, right? I try to greet them and if they answer fine. It’s like I’m telling you, not all of them, there are some that they’ll never talk to you]. Morelia adds:

“Uh, pos no muy frecuente, de vez en cuando hablo con ellos a veces no mas hola, dos o tres palabras, la mayoria de las personas que trabajan en las oficinas no hablan espanol.”

[Translation: Uh, not very frequently, every so often when I talk with them and it’s just hi, two or three words, the majority of the people who work in the offices do no speak Spanish].

Additionally, Juana says: “Pues mire es que mire lo mas es que no puede comunicarse uno con ellos, es que no les entiende, y muchas veces trata uno mejor de no verlos para que no le pregunten, jajaja.” [Translation: Well, look, look one cannot communicate with them, I don’t understand them, and many times one tries not to see them so that they don’t ask you (laughter)].

In contrast to the preceding experiences, a number of custodians expressed that they are very content with their communication experiences with customers. These custodians said that both they and the customers take advantage of the positive relationships they have with each other and use them as a laboratory to practice their language skills. Furthermore, custodians enjoy their relationships with customers so much that some of them refer to them as family. The following narratives show how some participants feel about their communication with customers:

Ah, no mucho, o sea que ellos pasan me saludan, y si tengo como dos o tres estudiantes que platican conmigo, como estas, como hoy le he preguntado a un muchacho, que paso con tu cabello, dice oh me lo corte porque tenia que, un amigo tiene un nino que tiene cancer, y el tambien, sus amigos tuvieron que cortarse el cabello, fue lo que ahorita yo platicaba con el. Y ellos son muy amables cuando yo comence aqui me daba un poco de verguenza; si un estudiante me regalo una taza de cafè. Si se siente uno a gusto cuando
alguien le regala un; o sea que se siente uno muy importante y todo eso, y siempre estan diciendo muchas gracias por trabajar con nosotros, no gracias a ustedes que tenemos el trabajo nosotras, jajaja. (Marta)

[Translation: Ah, not much, I mean they pass by and greet me and yes I have two or three students that talk with me, how are you, like today I asked a boy, what happened to your hair? He says I cut it because I had to, a friend has a child that has cancer, and he does too, his friends had to cut their hair too, this was what I talking with him about.

And they are very pleasant when I started here I was a bit embarrassed; yes, a student gave me a mug. Yes, you feel good when someone gives you; I mean you feel important and all of that, and they are always saying thank you very much for working with us, no thank you we have our job because of you (laughter)]

Si, a veces se pone uno a platicar y dicen trata de aprender un poco mas y yo le respondo, practica tu espanol conmigo, estudiantes principalmente, principalmente estudiantes que trabajan aqui, que son los estudiantes con lo que mas se comunica uno con los que trabaja, entonces muchos tratan de aprender espanol, pero a veces no quieren hablarlo porque dicen que no es bueno, entonces les digo practica tu espanol que yo practico mi ingles. (Ofelia)

[Translation: Yes, sometimes you start talking and they say try to learn a little more and I respond, practice your Spanish with me, students primarily, primarily students that work here, those are the students that we talk the most with the ones that we work with, then many try to learn Spanish, but sometimes they don’t want to speak it because they say that it’s not good, I then tell them practice your Spanish and I practice my English]
Lastly, Denira spoke about her feelings towards her “muchachitos” [Translation: Kids].

This participant considers the students in her building to be like her children:

Los estudiantes, yo les digo mis ninos a los estudiantes que tengo en mi area. Si, yo los veo como mis ninos, que les digo hay mi nino mi muchachito; los considero como si fueran de mi familia. Ahora salieron buenos, este ano salieron muy buenos los ninos, se portaron bien. Si porque siempre nos habian hecho mucho destrozos, este ano nos han dado dialogo y han cambiado mucho los ninos. Mantienen sus areas limpias, sus banos bien, si, yo estoy muy contenta con mi trabajo porque se han portado bien.

[Translation: The students, I tell them my kids to the students that I have in my area. Yes, I see them as my kids; I tell them oh my kid, my little kid. I consider them to be like a member of my family. This time they came out ok, this year my kids came out very good; they behaved well. Yes, because they had always caused much destruction; this year they gave us dialogue [referring to residence halls sponsored programs that had students and custodians talking about issues pertaining to their communication] and the kids have changed a lot. They keep their areas clean, their bathrooms in good condition, yes, I am very happy with my job because they have behaved well]
Custodial Work and Communicative Isolation

The fifth major finding under the first research question showed that relationships emerged between the nature of custodial work and communicative isolation and superficiality. Most participants indicated that they sometimes feel isolated but that they need it to complete work tasks and, thus, cannot spend time talking with other people. Participants also expressed that, in addition to language use, their work does not allow for much interaction during work hours.

The majority of custodians (18 out of 25, 72%) reported that they do not have time to talk with people because they need to get work done within a certain amount of time and this impedes substantial interactions with others. The following statements illustrate relationships between custodial work and everyday communication:

Si, en realidad nos enfocamos en nuestra area, y eso es lo que pasa. Como que cada quien tiene su trabajo, nos enfocamos en el trabajo y como que hay que terminar el trabajo y hablamos muy poco, no se si, y probablemente el que no hablamos la misma lengua es tambian, sino usted cree que habria mas, definitivamente si. (Ruben)

[Translation: Yes, in reality we tend to focus on our area, and that is what happens. Every person has their job, and we focus on the work and we have to finish the work and we talk very little, I don’t know I, and probably because we don’t speak the same language is also, if not you think that there would be more, definitely yes]

Digamos si, porque la mayor parte de mi trabajo, pues estamos estar yo solo haciendo mi trabajo, y no hay muchas personas con quien platicar, pero esta bien si voy a desatender mi trabajo por estar atendiendo a otras personas, nada mas por tener mas contacto,
digamos si y no, porque mejoraria la comunicacion entre todos, y no porque no haria mi trabajo por estar. (Julio)

[Translation: I would say yes, because the majority of my work, it is us, me by myself doing my work and there aren’t many people with whom to talk. But it’s ok if I am going to stop paying attention to my work to be paying attention to other people, only to have more contact. I would say yes and no because communication would improve among us and no because I would not do my work to be]

Sinceramente solitaria en mi trabajo, pero me siento triste, no me siento triste porque por ejemplo en mi break, me gusta leer, pero hay veces que digo, hay me siento como solitaria. Y ya digo yo este trabajo es como solitario, asi me siento en ocasiones pero no estoy asi deprimida por eso, no, no (Ramona)

[Translation: Truthfully lonely in my job, but I feel sad, I don’t feel sad because for instance during my break, I like to read, but there are times that I say, I kinda feel lonely and then I say this job is kinda lonely, that’s how I feel at times but I am not depressed or anything for that, no, no.]

In tandem with language use, the nature of custodial work seems to create an environment in which communicative superficiality becomes the norm. Many participants indicated that due to their work tasks they could not have any substantial conversations with people:

Hum, digamos puede ser que si, porque no, porque yo digamos soy una persona que, no tengo mucha comunicacion asi que este platicando todo el tiempo, tengo comunicacion pero no asi mucho tiempo, dos o tres minutos, y tiene uno que seguir su trabajo. El tiempo si afecta un poco en la relacion digamos la comunicacion, que no tiene uno mucho
tiempo para convivir con las demás personas que estamos separados, cada quien trabaja en su área. (Jose)

[Translation: Hum, let’s say yes, because, because I am a person that, I don’t have much communication like chatting all the time, I interact with others but not a lot of time, two or three minutes and then one has to continue doing his work. Time does affect in the relationships let’s say the communication with others. One doesn’t have much time to live together with other people that we are separated; everyone working in their area]

Con los mismos compañeros, no es que yo cuando ellos hablan conmigo yo sigo trabajando, me detengo cuando los saludo, buenos días, los customers o las secretarias ellas o las muchachas que trabajan limpiando el otro lado, pero yo sigo trabajando no me afecta pues yo no me siento a platicar con ellos, de vez en cuando pero no mucho. (Paula)

[Translation: With my coworkers, when they talk to me I continue working, I stop to greet them, good morning, the customers or the secretaries, they or the girls who work cleaning on the other side, but I continue working and it doesn’t affect me because I stop to chat with them, every once in awhile but not much]

Lastly, several participants made similar comments related to their daily work activities and communicating with others. Some custodians discussed how their schedule affects the degree to which they interact with others:

Como en la manana uno se apura para limpiar antes de abrir el building y casi no veo a nadie. Cada quien esta en su lugar mapeando. Para las 6am tenemos que tener el edificio limpio cuando la gente entre. Después, a veces pasan las gentes y es “Buenos días” y es todo. (Gisela)
[Translation: in the morning one is in a rush to clean before the building opens and I almost don’t see anyone. Everyone is in their place mopping. By 6am we have to have the building clean for when people start coming in. Afterwards, sometimes people pass by and it’s “good morning” and that’s all.]

No, porque en la tarde no hay nadie. Y casi siempre ando sola. No me gustaría tener más contacto pues no tiene uno mucho tiempo porque hay que hacer el trabajo. Es mejor solo; me gusta más. Me gusta la soledad. Si tiene muchas áreas uno no va a tener tiempo.

(Rogelia)

[Translation: No, because in the afternoons there is no one here. And I am almost always alone. I would not like more contact because we don’t have much time because we have to do the work. It is better to be alone; I like it better. I like isolation. If one has several areas then one would not have time.]

The preceding narratives show how work structures such as tasks and schedule affect the extent and communication frequency between custodians and supervisors, coworkers and customers. These narratives illustrate the major findings for the first research question, which addresses the Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers’ communication experiences. The three major findings related to this question are the pervasiveness of language use in the custodians’ work and private lives. Second, communication experiences vary significantly depending on the person with whom the participants interact. Communication with coworkers seems to play a central role in providing some support for the workers in stressful work environments. Communicating with customers is both satisfying and detrimental. Lastly, salient relationships seem to exist between the nature of custodial work and custodial workers’ communication isolation and superficiality.
Social Identity and Communication Experiences

In the following pages I present the narratives of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers regarding their perceptions of relationships between particular social identity categories and others’ communication with them. Similar to the first research question, the purpose here is to let the participants’ voices speak about their workplace experiences from their racial-ethnic, immigrant, social class, and occupational standpoints. Largely, the participants who indicated that one of these social identity categories is relevant to their communication experiences said that the other three are also relevant. The goal of presenting these narratives in copious detail is for the reader to get an understanding of the custodians’ workplace experiences from their vantage points.

Race-ethnicity and Communication Experiences

Over half of the participants (13 of 25, 52%) expressed that their racial-ethnic identity shapes how they perceive that others perceive and communicate with them. Of the 13 participants who said that race-ethnicity is relevant to their communication, five indicated that they have had issues with same-race individuals (particularly supervisors). These participants said that some supervisors and customers have deployed racially prejudiced messages during mundane interactions at work.

Race-ethnicity is the social identity category that most custodians reported as being relevant to their everyday communication experiences. These participants describe some experiences that display racial prejudice against persons of Latin-American descent. According to some participants, they feel that they suffer discrimination because they are Latina or Latino. Participants perceive that race-ethnicity is a significant issue due to some people’s apparent disregard whenever they are in the custodians’ presence. Simply put, the participants feel that
their humanity is rarely acknowledged. Several participants said the following regarding their perceptions of communication experiences that seem to be related to race-ethnicity:

He percibido discriminacion racial por ser Latino; he percibido discriminacion laboral.

Gente de oficina, estudiantes. No te saladan, no te muestran nada. En el game room hay personas que trabajan ahí y para esas personas no existe. Cuando llego aquí si percibo eso. Si hemos encontrado personas amables en todos lados pero he venido a percibir la discriminacion cuando entro a trabajar, cuando ya tengo un contacto mas cerca. Es duro, no es extraño. (Rafael)

[Translation: I have perceived racial discrimination for being Latino; I have perceived work discrimination. People in offices, students. They don’t greet you, they don’t show anything. In the game room there are people who work there and for them you do not exist. When I got here I did perceive this. Yes we have found affable people everywhere but I have perceived discrimination when I started working here, when I have closer contact with people. It’s hard, it’s not strange]

He, digamos que es Hispano, Brasileno, lo que sea, pero este que no sea blanco, y por ejemplo, yo estoy digamos esta es mi oficina y usted entra y me dice, buenos dias este senor, o con permiso voy a sacar la basura, y como esta? Y yo como que nadie entro verdad? Como lo tomaria usted? Le hago yo la pregunta a usted. Si de eso estamos hablando, si así lo tomo, a uno lo toman como nada pues mas bien. (Raul)

[Translation: He, let’s say that you are Hispanic or Brazilian, whatever, but that you are not white and for example I am let’s say in my office and you come in and you say good morning sir or excuse me I am taking out the garbage and how are you today? And it’s as if no one walked in, right? How would you take that? I ask you the question. That is
what I am talking about, yes that’s how I take it (as racist); they see us as nothing pretty much]

Pues si pasa, siempre va a pasar, no me acuerdo pero si pasa, si he tenido pero no me acuerdo específicamente, pero que pasa pasa o sea supongamos con estudiantes. Si he percibido que algunos estudiantes, si si como cuando estaba en el gym es que entran diferentes o simplemente que uno los saluda y no le contestan como si no la vieran a uno, pero así que entran a un bano y les doy los buenos días, y como que no oyen pero yo se que me oyeron. (Morelia)

[Translation: Yes it happens, it will always happen. I don’t remember but it happens; yes I have but I don’t remember specifically but that it happens happens. I mean let’s say with the students. Yes I have perceived that some students, yes like when I was at the gym and different ones come in or simply I greet them and they don’t respond as if they don’t see you, but like that they come in the bathroom and I say good morning, and it’s as if they don’t hear you but I know that they heard me]

Another way that participants feel that racial-ethnic identity is a relevant issue is how they feel they are generally perceived and treated in addition to being overlooked for jobs. For example, some participants stated:

Somos los mal queridos; los Latinos. No hay de mas el comentario que hizo la senora aquella. La gente aplica a los trabajos y no nos lo dan se los dan a los de Laos. Por eso somos minoria en la Universidad. Yo soy el unico Latino en un grupo de nueve. Donde esta la diversidad? Y tambien como los supervisores le hablan a uno. Como le dije el hecho de que no hablemos ingles no quiere decir que somos tontos; somos listos. Ese es
el gran error que hace aquí. No se trata así la gente; hay que notar sus otras cualidades que tiene. Somos los mal queridos de la Universidad. (Aurelio)

[Translation: We are the disliked ones; the Latinos. Just look at the comment that woman made (referring to a comment made by one of the department’s administrators “I prefer 20 Laotians over one Mexican”). People apply for jobs and they don’t give them to us they give them to Laotians. That’s why we are the minority at the university. I am the only Latino in a group of nine. Where is the diversity? And also how supervisors speak to us. Like I told you, just because we don’t speak English does not mean that we are stupid; we are clever. That is the great mistake that they make here. You don’t treat people like that; you have to notice the other qualities they have. We are the disliked ones at the university]

Si nos habla como que fueran niños porque yo veo como que la es discriminación es racismo yo no se como llamarle es preferencia, yo no se, no nos quieren a los hispanos, yo creo que es eso. Los Hispanos, principalmente a los Mexicanos, ellos tiene preferencia y quería hablar una vez que los mayordomos debe así como nosotros nos van corriendo; que a los mayordomos también los corran porque también ellos. En veces agarran preferencia con la gente, unos mas que otros hay preferencia. (Arturo)

[Translation: They talk to us like we are children because I see that it’s like the discrimination it’s racism I don’t know what to call them it’s preference, I don’t know, they don’t want us Hispanics, I think that’s what it is. The Hispanics, principally the Mexicans, they (supervisors) have preferences and I wanted to speak up once that supervisors should just like us they fire us; supervisors should also be fired because they
also. Sometimes they have preferences with people, some more than others there is preference]

Of the participants who said that race-ethnicity plays a significant role in their workplace communication, five indicated that same-race individuals are the main people that they perceive as being racially prejudiced and biased. Some participants said the following:

Injustamente si como le dije de __________. Me ha hecho hacer cosas que yo percibi “por que a mí?” y eso fue lo que yo dije y ahí empezo bla, bla, bla. Y empezo que tu no me vas a decir a mí como hacer las cosas. Y además el tiene resentimiento contra los Mexicanos (el supervisor es de otro pais Latinoamericano). El ponía sus trabajadores a hacer el trabajo y el cobraba el dinero y no lo corrieron en la Universidad es pura política y la política que es? Corrupta. Jajaja (Jose)

[Translation: Unjustly, yes like I told you about _______. He’s done things to me that said “why me?” And that’s what I said and he started blah blah blah. And he started you are not going to tell me how to do things. And also he has resentment towards Mexicans (supervisor is from another Latin-American country). He made his workers do jobs and he would take the money and they didn’t fire him in the university is pure politics and politics is what? Corrupted (laughter)]

Te voy a decir algo que oí en la radio el locutor preguntó “sabes cual es el peor enemigo de un Mexicano?” “otro Mexicano.” Y es cierto dije. Te sacrificas para echar hacia adelante y tienes las envidias. Pues me reportaron en ese tiempo. Y después me dijeron que era una Mexicana que me había reportado. (Ramona)

[Translation: I’m going to tell you something that I heard on the radio the disc jockey asked: “you know who is a Mexican’s worst enemy?” “Another Mexican.” And it’s true
I said. You sacrifice to move forward and there is jealoausy. They reported at that time.

And later they told me that it was a Mexican woman who had reported me]

En cuanto a mi raza he sentido mas rechazo. Nos hicieron un picnic y salen dos
secretarias y le digo a ______ a mi me gustaria vestirme asi si yo trabajara en una oficina.
Y ______ me dice “por eso dios no les da alas a los alacranes;” es un dicho Mexicano.
Queriendo decir que yo no estaba a su altura. (Mildred)

[Translation: Regarding my race I have felt more rejection. They had a picnic for us and
two secretaries come out and I tell ______ I would like to dress like that if I worked in
an office. And ______ tells me: “that’s why God didn’t give wings to the scorpions;” it’s
a Mexican saying. She was trying to tell me that I was not at their level (the
secretaries’)]

Immigration Status and Communication Experiences

Some participants (11 of 25, 44%) indicated that immigrant status is relevant to their
everyday workplace communication experiences. They spoke about, among other things,
dominant public discourses about Mexicans (the majority of the custodians are Mexican) and
historically prejudicial attitudes from U.S. Americans.

The second set of findings illustrates how some custodians feel about their status as
recent Latin-American immigrants and how others perceive and communicate with them.
Custodians’ narratives capture their intense feelings about their lived experiences as immigrants.
The following quotes illustrate what some custodians had to say about the relationship between
their immigrant status and their communication experiences:

Alli si; en esa forma si. Hubo una occasion que trabaja en los pisos. Andabamos
estripeando los pisos y entonces _______ hizo un comentario estupido. Una
administradora dice “y los mexicanos dale una patada en el culo y se van.” Y yo oí y me prendí y no dije nada. Un comentario estupido. She’s the boss and prefers los de _______. Se supo que ella dijo que prefería a 20 _______ a un Latino. Tiene sentido una persona que es un jefe alto estar hablando esas tonterías. Es una gente ignorante de estar diciendo esas cosas en la posición que esta. (Roberto)

[Translation: That yes, in that way yes. There was an occasion that I was working on the floors. We were stripping the floors. And then ______ made a stupid comment. An administrator said “and the Mexicans kick the in the ass and they leave.” I heard it and got heated and didn’t say anything. A stupid comment. She’s the boss and prefers the Laotians. We found out that she said that she preferred 20 Laotians over one Latino.

Does that make sense for a person who is a higher up boss to be talking that nonsense? It is ignorant people to be saying those things in the position that they are in]

Yo pienso que si. Por ejemplo, con mis supervisores Mexicanos, siempre estaban detrás de uno “ya hiciste esto lo otro” el otro supervisor lo mismo. Siempre nos andaba viendo el trabajo específicamente a nosotros (los mexicanos). Como diciendo me caes gorda y resiento que tengas mas conocimiento que yo y aquí me las desquito. Le pregunte a ______ por que tenemos que aspirar? Y tambien han habido ocasiones que le he extendido la mano y me ha dejado la mano extendida. (Mildred)

[Translation: Yes I think so. For example, with my Mexican supervisors, they are always after you “did you do this that?” The other supervisor the same thing. They were always looking at our work specifically our work (the Mexicans). Like saying I don’t like you and I resent that you have more knowledge than me and so I take it out on you this way. I
asked _______ why do we have to vacuum? And also there have been instances that I have extended my hand and they left me hanging]

No le voy a decir que no, si porque recien llegado yo aqui habia uno hubieron personas que me atacaron muy feo asi de esa manera y como uno recien llegado no asimila muy bien la cultura aqui entonces este pero, pero como ha, poco a poco uno va conforme uno va quedandose aqui va conociendo va uno asimilando pero uno continua viendo el trato de otros y tu sabes que es porque tu eres imigrante hispano. (Antonio)

[Translation: I’m not going to say no, yes because when I was recently arrived there was one, there were people who attacked very ugly that way and one as a recently arrived you are not assimilated very well to the culture here and then, but, but little by little one conforms one starts staying here and you start to know and become assimilated, but you continue seeing the treatment of others and you know it’s because you are a Hispanic immigrant]

Custodians commented on their perceived reasons as to why some people treat them condescendingly. For example, Manuel’s comment shows why he feels that Latino immigrants are mistreated in the United States: “En realidad si, toda mi vida. Aunque uno es ciudadano, uno siempre sigue siendo lo que es pude ser en las personas que lo ven mas en la television.”

[Translation: In reality yes, all my life. Although we are citizens, one continues to be what one is it could be in the people that they see it more on television]. Similarly, other custodians expressed:

Pues si somos immigrantes. Casi la mayoria que venimos de Mexico los gueros no nos quieren. Todos los Mexicanos aunque no tengamos papeles uno viene a trabajar duro y los gueros dicen que uno viene a quitarles los trabajos. Nosotros los mexicanos
trabajamos duro y prefieren a los Mexicanos para trabajar que a los gueritos. No todos tenemos la misma oportunidad. Uno como mexicano viene a trabajar en lo que venga. Y los gueritos quieren que le paguen más y no trabajan. (Jesus)

[Translation: But yes we are immigrants. Almost the majority of us who come from Mexico the whites don’t want us. All the Mexicans even if we don’t have documents we come to work hard and the whites say that we come to steal their jobs. Us Mexicans we work hard and they prefer Mexicans to work over whites. We all don’t have the same opportunities. As a Mexican we come to work at anything. And the whites want to get paid more and they don’t work]

También por los medios, los medios de comunicación este, quejas que se oyen de otras partes o también de ellos mismos este despectan a la gente también hablan de este, por ejemplo ha habido programas de radio en la que los blancos, le, le tiran a uno hispano y luego lo hacen menos, entonces uno no entonces en esto pues viene ya desde cuantos años, siglos atrás, me entiende pues entonces no mal aquí, nunca yo voy a ser este a quererle caer bien a la fuerza a una persona que me, que me detesta como decimos así.

(Aurelio)

[Translation: Also through the media, the mass media, complaints that you hear from other parts or themselves that despise other people also talk about, for example there have been radio shows that the whites, throw hard at Hispanics and the make us less, then, then but that comes since how many years, centuries ago, you understand so badly here. I’ll never, I’ll never be liked by force from a person that, that detests me like we say]
Social Class and Communication Experiences

Some custodians (11 of 25, 44%) reported that social class is relevant to their workplace communication experiences. These custodians stated that social class appeared to be important for some people with whom they interacted at work. Custodians indicated that they believe that many customers perceive them as belonging to a lower social class and, therefore, those customers often directed hurtful verbal and nonverbal messages towards the custodians.

Some custodians (11 of 25, 44%) felt that some persons perceived themselves as better than they were or being of a higher social class status. Custodians had the following to say regarding how they perceived social class shaped routine communication at work:

Es sencillo pues la clase social a veces uno la da a, pues yo la doy a conocer simplemente con el trabajo que hago. Se dan cuenta a que clase social pertenescos; a la baja entonces por ahí, si es un supervisor, si es un jefe grande administrativo, por ley me da a conocer de quien soy yo. Si es un supervisor el no va a tomar una relacion conmigo, un administrativo menos, un jefe menos, es sencillo que tiene que aprender de mi entonces el estatus social, pues, al menos yo me siento muy afectado, muy señalaado, a manera directa pues se siente la, la superioridad en su manera de ser que no deberia. (Carlos)

[Translation: It’s simple because sometimes the social class one exposes it simply with work that I do. They know to which social class I belong; the lower one so it’s from there, if it is a supervisor, if it is a higher up administrative boss, by law they communicate to me who I am. If it is a supervisor he won’t have a relationship with me, an administrative boss even less, a boss even less, it’s simple what do they have to learn from me therefore, social status, at least I feel very affectd, very out in the open, in a very
direct way so you feel their, their sense of superiority in their way of being and it shouldn’t be the case]

Si, si. Hay gente ricachonsita. En el área ________, en el piso ________ andaba con la nieve y vienen bajando y te llevan así y no dicen ni sorry ni nada. Así de manera corporal es que pasa mayormente. Se da cuenta uno. Una cosa es que no hablemos 100% Ingles y otra cosa es que no sepamos como le demuestran ciertas cosas a uno. Pues la gente de oficinas también a veces hay gente racista por el hecho de que uno no le cae bien hubo un señor que casi me atropella, se me tiro encima. Ese señor se comporta diferente a todos los demás (demuestra físicamente). Ese señor no me deja hacer mi trabajo a gusto; siempre me quiere atropeyar. (Rigoberto)

[Translation: Yes, yes. There are rich people here. In the area ________, on floor ________ I was with the snow and they come down and they run you over and don’t say sorry or anything. In a very physical way that’s how it happens mainly. One notices. One thing is that we don’t speak 100% English and another is that we don’t know how they demonstrate certain things to you. So the office people as well there are racist people simply due to the fact that they don’t like you. There was a gentleman that almost ran me over, he threw himself on me. He behaves differently than the others (demonstrates physically). That man won’t let me do my job in peace; he always wants to run me over]

Pues si claro, se siente rechazado uno porque ellos creen, pienso yo no, que uno es de baja clase. De rechazo, de maltrato, pero a veces este, pero si me van a contestar con una grocería mejor que no me contesten, me entiende? Porque hay un dicho que dice a veces duelen mas las palabras que los golpes. Y así de facil, si pues es obvio se siente
rechazado uno cuando entra a una oficina y digamos, porque supuestamente es una persona estudiada la que esta sentada ahí, es una persona que tiene que tener respeto pues le infunde mas el respeto hacia los demas y yo le hablo una persona supuestamente intelectual y actue de esa manera para mi es ridículo. En darle un saludo que no se le niega a nadie y si ellos son, si ellos no me contestan o se quedan en silencio pues como lo voy a tomar yo. (Ricardo)

[Translation: Yes of course one feels rejected because they think, I think, that one is of a lower class. Rejection, mistreatment, but sometimes if they are going to respond with an insult it’s better if they don’t respond at all, you understand? There is a saying that says that words sometimes hurt more than hits. It’s that simple, it is obvious that one feels rejected when you walk into an office and let’s say because supposedly it is an educated persons sitting there, it is someone who is respectful someone who is respectful towards others and I address someone who is supposedly an intellectual and acts that way to me it’s ridiculous you don’t deny a greeting to anyone, and they are yes, they don’t respond or stay in silence, how am I supposed to take that?]

Other custodians feel that their (lower status) occupation is directly tied to dominant perceptions of social class in U.S. society and, thus, such perceptions shape how people communicate with them:

Si, si. Primeramente por la expresion de la cara y por el comentario. Le contesto que trabajo muy a gusto; yo he trabajado en hotels y aqui gano mejor. Pero les digo a la gente que trabajo en CU y me preguntan “que haces, eres maestro de Espanol o que?” “limpio pisos.” “Que?!?” pero la expresion de las caras es lo que te deja saber como se sienten acerca de ti. (Brunilda)
[Translation: Yes, yes.  Firstly because of the facial expression and the commentary. I’ll tell you that I am fine with my job; I have worked in hotels and I get paid better here. But I tell people that I work at CU and they ask me “what do you do there, are you a Spanish teacher or what?” “I clean floors.” “What?!” But the facial expressions is what lets you know how they feel about you]

Si. Porque yo pienso que hay gente que dicen “el custodian no importa” ellos se me hacen muy pobres de valores. Una persona no se valora porque es custodian o la ropa pero por la calidad de persona que es. Una persona en una oficina nos decia que no toquen nada en su oficina; otras personas nos daban donuts. No es el estudio pero los valores que tenga. (Rafaela)

[Translation: Yes. Because I think that there are people who say “the custodians don’t matter.” They have very poor values. A person’s value is not gauged because they are custodians or the clothes that you wear but because of the person’s qualities. A person in an office used to tell us not to touch anything in their office; other people would give us doughnuts. It’s not the studies but the values that the person has]

Lo unico seria el mal concepto que porque una persona trabaje en limpieza ya automaticamente puede ser ignorante. Ya eso se trata de la discriminacion intellectual, laboral o social. Ciertas situaciones que pasan, por ejemplo si una persona me pasa por el pasillo sola me saluda; si esa misma persona pasa con otras personas ni me mira.

(Andres)

[Translation: The only thing would be the mistaken idea that because a person works in cleaning automatically that person is ignorant. That has to do with discrimination, intellectual, work related or social class related. Certain situations that happen, for
example if someone walks by me in the hallway and greets me; that same person would walk by me with other people and doesn’t even bother to look my way]

**Occupation and Communication Experiences**

Some participants (11 of 25, 44%) reported that their status as a service worker was relevant to how some people communicated with them. Participants said that they primarily had negative experiences with customers because of the organizational roles that they embody. According to these participants, their occupation is also closely related to how others perceive their social class status. Participants feel unacknowledged and mistreated simply because they were custodial workers. This is what some of them said related to their occupation and mundane communication experiences:

Yo soy un trabajador de limpieza entonces otra persona de que no trabaja de limpieza no me va a ver, para empezar, del nivel de esa persona me va a ver diferente. Yo creo que hay un... tu bien percibes eso cuando las cosas pasan. Y aquí es igual; un jefe grande no te saluda; no toma ese tiempo. Pienso yo que han de decir para que? Es un trabajador de limpieza. Por ejemplo en cierta ocasión, un jefe fuimos al hospital y el ahí andaba y yo lo vi y me sentí contento de verlo; aquí el bien contento, como estas y jugamos y alla yo me le acerqué y le dije hola como estas y sabes que me dijo? No puedo hablar contigo aquí; yo sentí el desprecio que me hizo. (Augusto)

*Translation: I am a cleaning worker and, thus, another person who does not work in cleaning is not going to see me to begin, from that person’s level she is going to see me differently. I think there is a; you see that when things happen. And it’s the same here, a big boss doesn’t greet you; they don’t take the time. I think they probably think, for what? It’s a custodial worker. For example, in one occasion, one of the bosses we went*
to the hospital and he was there and I saw him and I was happy to see him; here he is always nice how are you, we play around all the time and over there I approached and I said hi how are you and you what he said? I can’t talk with you here I felt his rejection]

Afecta. Pues si, si influye porque pues si es una “custodian” de la limpieza lo peor de la limpieza. Pues si porque, porque tienes que limpiar las vomitadas, las pupus que, o sea, es trabajo que es honesto, pero sucio y yo creo que la gente piensa entonces que uno es sucio. (Isaura)

[Translation: It affects you. Yes, it influences because yes you’re just a “custodian” who cleans, the worst of the cleaning. Yes, because, because you have to clean vomits, feces that, I mean, it is honest work but dirty and I think people think then that we are dirty]

Si, porque inclusive a veces le he hecho preguntas y me ignoran, de verdad, y son las mismas personas, no, o sea ellos trabajan en la oficina y yo trabajo en limpieza y es cuando estamos en meeting los de la oficina y los de la limpieza es cuando uno esta con ellos, lo percibe uno que no quieren tartar de comunicarse con uno, lo tratan de, un poco de evitarlo a uno. (Migelina)

[Translation: Yes, because even sometimes I have asked them questions and they ignore me, for real, and it is the same peopple, no, I mean they work in the office and I work in cleaning and it is when we are in meeting the office staff and the cleaning staff it’s when we are with them, one perceives that they don’t want to try to communicate with you, they try to, a little bit to avoid you]

Si iba a salir, asi me digo, una persona me digo como se dice, yo no los miran estan a mi espalda, como se dice excuse me, se dice con permiso, get out of my way, y sigui, si me ha preguntado como se dice quitate de mi camino, esa palabra era diferente, es o sea uno
siente de esas personas, de tener menos contacto con ellos, varias veces desde que empecé a trabajar dos o tres personas por lo menos. (Matilde)

[Translation: I was getting out, and he told me, a person told me how do you say it, I could not see them they were behind my back, how do you say it excuse me, you say excuse me, get out of my way, and they kept on going, yes he had told me get out of my way, that word was different, I mean you feel those people; to have less contact with them. Several times since I started working here two or three people at least]

Other custodians made similar comments about their perceptions of how their occupation functioned as a trigger for how others perceived and treated them at work.

Summary

This chapter presented the study’s major findings. I organized the findings according to the research questions that this study advanced. Data from in-depth interviews showed how Latina and Latino custodians felt about the issues raised in the research study. Custodians’ voices revealed significant insights into their lived work experiences.

The primary finding under the first research question showed that language use powerfully shaped everyday communication experiences for Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers in and out of the workplace. The second major finding revealed that the person with whom custodian interacted significantly shaped their communication experiences. For example, the majority of the participants said that their supervisors were authoritative leaders who employed aggressive and dominating communication styles in their dealings with their subordinates. The last major finding under the first research question showed salient relationships between the nature of custodial work and communicative isolation and superficiality. The majority of the participants indicated that they felt isolated but that they
needed this isolation to complete their work tasks and, thus, cannot spend much time talking with people.

The second research question addressed possible relationships between social identity categories like race-ethnicity, immigration status, social class and occupation and Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ routine communication experiences. The results from this research question were split almost evenly across participants. Race-ethnicity emerged as a social identity that some participants felt shaped their mundane interactions with other people. Across the four social identities under the second research question, participants who said that one of these social identities was relevant also said that the other three were relevant. This finding suggests that in this organizational context, social identities such as immigrant status, social class, and occupation were interrelated. In the next chapter (chapter six) I discuss my analysis and interpretations of these major findings.
CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION

This chapter presents an analysis and interpretation of the findings that were reported in chapter five. This chapter is organized into two major analytic categories and nine subcategories tied to the two research questions that guide this study. The two analytic categories are: (a) Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers’ communication experiences, and (b) Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers’ race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status, occupation and communication experiences. The nine subcategories are: (a) The English language dilemma, (b) Communicating with supervisors, (c) Communicating with coworkers, (d) Communicating with customers, (e) Custodial work and isolation, (f) Race-ethnicity, (g) Social Class, (h) Immigration Status, and (i) Occupation. This chapter focuses principally on identifying salient themes and patterns within the findings. Throughout this process, I also interweave how the findings approximate or move away from extant interdisciplinary research and theory.

Chapter five reported the main findings through a coherent narrative of the custodians’ voices. In this chapter, I offer interpretive insights into the findings. The previous chapter presented separate chunks of data to “objectively” show custodians’ everyday communication experiences, whereas the current chapter interprets what the data reveal. This construction process is accomplished through a synthesis of extant scholarly literatures, research studies, and the present research study’s findings. Specifically, this chapter examines: (a) the findings within and across salient themes and concepts, (b) participants’ discourse about their communication experiences, (c) significant connections and relationships to related scholarship, and (e) how the findings of this study extend related literatures. The analysis considers relevant literatures such
as superior–subordinate, coworker, and co-cultural communication, in addition to scholarship on race-ethnicity, social class, immigration, and occupation.
The [English] Language Dilemma

Latina and Latino custodial workers perceived that not speaking the dominant language in the United States (i.e., English) is a major problem that affects their communication experiences in and out of the workplace. Custodians expressed that not speaking English impeded them from forming and establishing meaningful relationships at work and beyond. Custodians energetically expressed their frustrations with their inability to communicate in English. Danilo’s comment illustrated custodians’ frustration with acquiring the dominant language spoken in the United States: “Es desconcertante que uno no puede hablar con otras personas. Imaginese vivir en un lugar y estar rodeado de personas y que uno no puede hablar con ellas; es bien frustrante a veces.” [Translation: It’s discouraging not being able to talk with other people. Imagine living in a place surrounded by people and one can’t talk to them; it’s very frustrating at times]. This finding suggests that for Latina and Latino custodians’ language use is the basis for their ability to communicate in the workplace. The inability to speak English seemed to shape custodians’ social life from the moment that they entered U.S. society. According to Aldama (2001), language barriers become a serious social and communicative barrier for Latina and Latino immigrants when they enter the United States. For instance, some salient outcomes stemming from language-use (in)ability is Latina and Latino immigrants’ reliance on interpersonal networks to find jobs, challenges with everyday communicative exchanges, the creation of safe linguistic zones for social survival, the constant need for host society members to communicatively adapt and accommodate to their communication needs, and sociocultural and economic transition and adaptation.

The language–interpersonal network connection. Language use seems to be a major communication problem for Latina and Latino immigrant custodians before they enter a U.S.
organization. Most custodians indicated that they found their current job through a close friend, romantic partner, or a family member (i.e., their interpersonal networks). Juana’s comment illustrated this situation: “Pues si, mi cunada me dijo que venga a aplicar que estaban conjiendo jentes y yo vine a postular.” [Translation: Yes, my sister-in-law told me to apply, that they were taking people and I came and applied].

It is not news that people in the United States rely on their interpersonal networks to find jobs. However, for traditionally marginalized persons (e.g., racial minorities, low-status organizational members, and immigrants), these networks appear to be much more significant. Due to pervasive social hierarchies in the United States, power imbalances that place underrepresented persons at the bottom of organizational hierarchies persist (B. J. Allen, 2011). As a result, whites occupy the large majority of middle- and upper management positions in organizations.

This situation has implications for Latina and Latino immigrants. Some of the implications are that immigrants have mostly direct contact and access to associates in the lower levels of organizations. Consequently, their job pipelines (people in their interpersonal/social network) are persons who typically hold positions in the lower levels of organizations. Furthermore, Latina and Latino immigrants might struggle to expand their social networks in any significant way because many of them never learn English and, consequently, they remain within their reduced and oftentimes underresourced social networks. This reality contributes to circumstances where usually poor and uneducated Latina and Latino immigrants remain in the same lower level job for decades (Grosfoguel, 2003).

The types of jobs to which Latina and Latino immigrant custodians have access when they enter the United States further demonstrate the language–interpersonal network relationship.
Most custodians expressed that custodial work is not as harsh on their bodies as were previous jobs they held, such as being a landscape worker, factory employee, hotel housekeeper, restaurant dishwasher, and/or bus person. Comparing her current custodian role with her previous factory worker position, Ramona said: “Pues es mas suave en el cuerpo. En el otro tabajo era rapido, rapido, rapido y si uno no producia lo echaban.” [Translation: It’s much easier on the body. In the other job, it was fast, fast, fast, and if you didn’t produce, they would kick you out].

The list of jobs that custodians held in the past reveals an interesting common theme: little requirement to communicate regularly with people. Those jobs require minimal to no communication and, thus, the people holding them do not need to be fluent in English to execute them effectively. In short, the list of jobs that custodians mentioned represents what might be called “communicatively superficial and/or isolated occupations.” Many of the jobs that custodians mentioned typically exist within organizational structures where communication is minimal. Those occupations tend to have night shifts, and the daily tasks associated with those jobs are predominantly routine and monotonous. Consequently, there is no need for regular verbal communication (e.g., receiving complex instructions or giving explanations, such as explaining what is on the menu to a group of people at a high-end restaurant, or discussing complex procedures).

This seemingly traditional matching of Latina and Latino immigrant bodies with communicatively isolated jobs is socially significant because such practices might contribute to perpetuating public perceptions that some jobs belong with certain bodies. Historically marginalized groups of people have embodied certain occupations based on their race-ethnicity and gender (e.g., janitors, hotel housekeepers, and construction workers). Labor-intensive jobs that do not require persons to talk regularly with anyone or a high communication skill level
subtly perpetuate an unequal social system in which certain people (e.g., uneducated and lower class Latina and Latino immigrants) tend to occupy those jobs. Based on custodians’ narratives, the majority of their jobs have been primarily of this communicatively marginalized type. This situation suggests that a person who does not speak English fluently can only aspire to hold certain position within U.S. organizations (i.e., lower status jobs), creating an environment in which the dominant language becomes a highly valued social commodity.

The circumstances in which Latina and Latino immigrants often find themselves illustrate a system of social inequality based on dominant language use (in)ability that illustrates the multiple social hierarchies existing in U.S. society. Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ experiences with the dominant U.S. language illustrate that speaking English is a valuable commodity, the lack of which hinders people’s ability to move up the socioeconomic ladder. In contemporary U.S. society, a person’s inability to speak English can function as an instrument for occupational segregation and marginalization. This finding suggests that as U.S. society continues to change, due to shifts in internal demographics and immigration patterns, the social system (i.e., the people who hold most of the economic and political power) develops other ways to discriminate against social groups that moves beyond race-ethnicity or gender. The language–interpersonal network relationship and its consequences exemplify the reconfiguration of a social system that gives Latina and Latino immigrants specific (and little) choices in job opportunities. Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ inability to communicate in English permeate every sphere of their social life. This reality is also evident in the challenges that they encounter with mundane interactions once they enter U.S. workplaces.

**Everyday communication challenges.** For Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers, their inability to speak the dominant language is a significant problem because
mundane verbal exchanges become a constant, oftentimes unavoidable challenge. For example, Roberto discussed his experiences with the simple task of giving directions to customers:

“Algunas veces no puedo dar direcciones en Ingles. Se me hace bien dificil porque no tengo las palabras para explicar los sitios y como decirle a las jentes como llegar a ellos.” [Translation: Sometimes I can’t give directions in English. It becomes really difficult because I don’t have the words to explain the places and how to tell people how to reach them]. Furthermore, another custodian shared that she was not interested in moving up the organizational ladder because she would need to fill out forms to order supplies and talk with the people who bring the supplies, which she could not do because she could not speak English. Latina and Latino immigrant custodians perceive that learning English is virtually impossible because everyday communication is often very difficult for them. Ramiro’s comment illustrated many custodians’ beliefs about the impossibility to learn English: “Ya no aprendo; tengo la cabeza muy dura. Son cincuenta y nueve anos que tengo y muchos anos en Estados Unidos. Se me ha hecho muy duro aprender.” [Translation: I can’t learn; my head is too hard. I already am 59 years old and I have many years in the United States. It has been very hard to learn [English].

Custodians’ daily communication challenges, coupled with their lack of education and contact with host members, appears to plant and foment a seed in custodians’ minds that learning English is simply too demanding. Many custodians stated that not knowing English and lacking a formal education lead to believing that their current job is the best occupation to which they can aspire. The consequences of such beliefs are that custodians distance themselves from English speakers, a communicative stance that prevents them from forming and developing relationships at work. The custodians, thus, use avoidant communicative behaviors to maintain their distance from dominant social group members. Simultaneously, this example illustrates
how language use issues obstruct nondominant group members’ ability to select verbal strategies to negotiate dominant social structures. The people with whom the custodians have positive relationships are typically their same language and ethnicity coworkers. In many cases, those coworkers are the people who brought them to the organization. Custodians’ interpersonal networks oftentimes get transported to the workplace and their opportunity to learn English is lessened because they do not have much contact with English speakers. This situation shows how speaking English relates to custodians’ interpersonal/social networks’ role and configuration, as well as the hardships that they face accomplishing daily mundane communicative activities.

The transplantation of custodians’ interpersonal networks from the private to the public sphere (the workplace) illustrates a cultural and language-based fluidity that, on the surface, may seem positive, but which, underneath the surface, yields negative outcomes. In other words, custodians’ communicative practices cultivate a context that strengthens their ethnic identity and pride, as well as their (native) linguistic vitality by remaining in close contact with their friends and family members in and out of the workplace. However, custodians’ disconnect from host society members, and the cultural capital that custodians could obtain from those people, is out of their reach due to partially self-imposed linguistic boundaries.

I observed custodians’ distance from host society members during my time working with them. Custodians actively approached and engaged their same-language coworkers, whereas the opposite occurred with people who did not speak their language. Custodians’ cultural and linguistic relocation to and from their private and public spheres seems to hinder their opportunities to learn English and to form and develop relationships with host society members. Custodians’ choice to remain culturally embedded is simultaneously advantageous and
damaging. A possible alternative response to this situation would be adopting an accommodating communication orientation (Orbe, 1998) by making a more concerted effort to learn English and to learn about U.S. culture, even as they maintain strong cultural roots. However, for this scenario to transpire, host society members must display a willingness to accommodate and reciprocate Latina and Latino immigrants’ eagerness to learn about them and integrate into U.S. society.

**Constructing safe linguistic zones.** Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ struggles with English seem to be a chief reason why most of them primarily interact with same-language coworkers. Linguistic and cultural similarities emerged as primary reasons why custodians have mostly positive relationships with their coworkers and why they are the people with whom they interact the most. These discursive cultural spaces provide a communicative safe haven for custodians where they can be themselves and talk with others about things they have in common and topics that are important to them. Additionally, in these discursive cultural spaces, custodians enact their ethnic identities without fear of rejection from culturally dissimilar others. As one of the participants put it, “Las relaciones son buenas pues porque por lo menos me puedo comunicar con estas personas. Pos ahi afuera muy poquita gente te habla si se fijan que no hablas el Ingles.” [Translation: The relationships are good because at least I can communicate with these people [coworkers]. Out there, not many people talk to you if they notice that you don’t speak English].

Bernstein’s (1970) work on elaborated and restricted codes supports this participant’s assertion, for, when people find themselves in a setting where their identity is not supported by the environment, they tend to form clusters to strengthen their group identity. This seems to be the case with many custodians at this predominantly white higher education institution.
Custodians seem to find immense comfort with people of a similar ethnic background who speak their native language. Many custodians perceive that English speakers are not willing to linguistically accommodate to them, which is a major reason why many custodians prefer to stay with their same-language cohorts.

According to communication accommodation theory (CAT), individuals remain linguistically distanced due to social perceptions fueled by stereotypes. This research study’s findings align with CAT in that they support the notion that social stereotypes create a communicative chasm that separates host society members and Latina and Latino immigrants, for instance. Based on the narratives obtained, custodians perceive that some host society members (primarily whites) perceive that they cannot communicate with the custodians before they even attempt to communicate with them. In such cases, it seems that perceptions of other people’s communication abilities shape whether persons communicatively engage one another. This finding additionally reinforces research on the role that social stereotypes play in human communication across social and cultural contexts (Alvarez et al., in press; K. R. Chávez, 2009; Pompper, 2007). Stereotypes appear to create a perceptual barrier that blocks persons’ ability to look beyond the surface and to engage other people without preconceived notions of who they are and their communication abilities. For effective cross-linguistic communication to occur both parties have to be willing to accommodate each other.

**Language use and communication accommodation.** A large number of Latina and Latino custodians expressed a longing for English speakers to communicatively reach out to them. Latina and Latino custodians stated that English speakers tend to linguistically orient towards them in visibly uninviting ways. Berta’s comment illustrated this point: “Pues es personas de todas las edades; uno se siente mal querido aquí a veces. No le hablan a uno y
Custodians’ communication with culturally and linguistically different others, consequently, are filled with negative encounters due to both sides’ inability to communicate interculturally. As Orbe (1998) explained in his co-cultural conceptual framework, nondominant co-cultural members may choose to separate, accommodate, or assimilate when interacting with dominant co-cultural group members. This study’s findings reinforce the idea that custodians intentionally communicatively separate and oftentimes keep their distance from non-Spanish-speaking supervisors, coworkers, and customers. Many custodians said that they embrace this communication approach because they perceive that other persons are not willing to accommodate to them. On the other hand, many participants could not articulate the extent to which they accommodate to others, indicating that they used their broken English to communicate with others. Some participants said that many people respond to their broken English in somewhat aggressive ways (e.g., “What?!” “What are you saying?!”). Such regular responses forced the custodians to communicatively separate from some host society members.

Custodians’ communication experiences with culturally different others contributes to research on communication accommodation. For example, through the instantiations of the ways that host society members’ communicatively accommodate towards immigrants. CAT informs much of this type of research (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987). CAT advances that individuals adjust their communicative behaviors (often mediated by stereotypes) in ways that reflect their desire to belong to, or to differentiate themselves from, others (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991), and to attend to the needs of the message receiver (Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988). Based on this research study’s findings, many of the people with whom the
custodians interact want to assertively differentiate themselves from the custodians. Reactions such as “What?!” or “I have no idea what you are saying!” might discourage Spanish-speaking interlocutors to continue interacting with those persons. At the same time, such discourse creates a linguistic boundary that functions to strengthen host society members’ ethnolinguistic vitality. It is also possible that at a predominantly white institution in the southwestern United States, a region where discourses of illegal immigration pervade, the influence of those discourses can shape how some persons perceive Latina and Latino immigrants. As a result, some people might enact negative feelings toward immigrants in mundane interpersonal encounters with those persons (K. R. Chávez, 2009).

The findings from this study illustrate potential relationships between communication and social meanings of identity intersectionalities in the United States (e.g., immigration status, race-ethnicity, and social class). Dominant societal meanings ascribed to social identity categories can be identified through a careful inspection of how media construct messages about particular human bodies and how the dominant social group (European Americans) tends to communicatively orient toward those bodies (i.e., history of discrimination and acts of hate toward racial-ethnic minorities). According to L. R. Chávez (2008), the media play a critical role in shaping people’s perceptions of other individuals and, thus, how people react to others in interpersonal encounters. Some scholars particularly address the role of media messages to construct the Latina and Latino immigrant as a subaltern subject that shape how societal members respond to them (Aldama, 2001; L. R. Chávez, 2008).

According to K. R. Chávez (2009), dominant discourses about immigrant bodies become embodied in microlevel interactions within and across ingroup and outgroup members. K. R. Chávez’s (2009) framework advanced that immigrant bodies are “translated” in embodied
contexts through dominant discursive meanings in U.S. society. In other words, people enact dominant discursive meanings via their communicative behaviors. This study’s findings support Chávez’s (2009) arguments. For instance, Latina and Latino custodians expressed that they perceive not only underaccommodation (lack of accommodation) but also blatant rejection from supervisors and customers who do not speak their language (i.e., Spanish). In today’s immigration climate, and with the recent debates about the controversial Arizona immigration law, it is possible that many U.S. Americans feel that they do not need to accommodate Latinas and Latinos. Therefore, some people might reject any attempts to linguistically accommodate during interpersonal encounters. Furthermore, within the current contentious immigration climate, custodians’ experiences with others’ lack of communication accommodation may be related to contemporary dominant discourses about immigration perpetuated by media messages (Flores, 2003). These dominant media messages can permeate various social contexts including the workplace.

The workplace is a social context where individuals experientially learn about one another. Latina and Latino custodians’ narratives about people’s unaccommodation, hostility, and rejection may be related to relationships between media and interpersonal communication (L. R. Chávez, 2008; K. R. Chávez, 2009). Viewed through this conceptual frame, it is possible that U.S. Americans’ interactions with Latina and Latino immigrant custodians are shaped by exposure to media messages about Latinas and Latinos in general and immigrants specifically. For instance, Kim (2005) argued that new immigrants and host society members learn about each other through mediated stereotypes of each other and interpersonal encounters. Moreover, a disproportionate amount of negative message about Latinas and Latinos continue to saturate U.
Therefore, it is not farfetched that such negative messages can shape people’s ideas and perceptions of who Latinas and Latinos are (Grosfoguel, 2003).

Custodians’ narratives about students’ verbal mistreatment reinforces the notion that relationships between dominant discursive constructions and perceptions across social differences might exist. Some custodians discussed CU’s history of students’ (customers’) verbal mistreatment of custodians. Custodians indicated that they had been victims of mistreatment and that they knew other people who had also been mistreated at work. This finding is significant because, according to communication scholars (Meares et al., 2004), workplace mistreatment can happen at both the interpersonal and institutional level, and it can have damaging ramifications for both the perpetrator and the victim leading to depression, anxiety, and hostile behaviors (Meares et al., 2004; Namie, 2000; Richman et al., 1999). These issues can seriously disrupt employees’ productivity, which affects people’s ability to perform work tasks and can ultimately lead to job loss. For years, Latina and Latino custodial workers at CU have worked under a dark cloud of verbal mistreatment mostly perpetrated by students. The situation at CU was so serious that Residence Life staff and faculty got together with community members to form the Dialogues on Immigrant Integration—a name that suggests that the immigrants are the only ones who need to integrate. According to some custodians, these dialogues have alleviated the stressful climate in which Latina and Latino immigrant custodians work on campus.

Only recently has a turnaround happened regarding student treatment of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians. Many people with whom I discussed this research project, including custodians, staff, and students, said that the reason for such improvement is the creation of the service worker–student dialogues. These dialogues provide opportunities for
students and service workers to come together and talk about issues related to immigration and intercultural communication. The dialogues consist of a daylong session where people discuss, among other topics, the sources of information that shape their interactions and perceptions of each other. Ramona’s comment illustrated the importance of the dialogues for custodian–student interactions: “Pues fijese, antes tiraban pupu y pipi en todo los pisos y hasta le decian a uno “mira tu ven a limpiarlo.” Pero ya estan mas tranquilitos los chiquillos. Si yo diria que por los dialogos.” [Translation: Look, before they would toss feces and piss all over the floors, and they would tell you, “Look, come here and clean it.” But they are more calm the kids. Yes, I’d say it’s because of the dialogues].

The improvement in service worker–student relations created by the dialogues suggest that some students might have had certain ideas about Latina and Latino immigrants that influenced how they perceived and treated them. After the dialogues were implemented, students appeared to gain a different understanding of the custodians and, consequently, shifted their attitudes toward them. As Ramona’s comment indicated, certain proactive approaches can be taken that lead to social improvements regarding how individuals communicate interculturally. Students’ attitudes toward the custodians may also be a reflection of U.S. Americans’ negative perceptions of non-English-speaking immigrants as outsiders or outgroup members (L. R. Chávez, 2008; Rodriguez, 2007). In such a situation, dominant language use becomes a colossal barrier for job acquisition; it promotes communicative marginalization and impedes immigrants’ sociocultural and economic integration.

The discussion about communication accommodation suggests that it is possible that the people with whom the custodians interact might orient towards them in uninviting ways because they are Latina and Latino immigrants. Hence, a person’s immigration status may be related to
whether people choose to accommodate them. However, such attitudes can also be related to other individual or group characteristics, such as racial-ethnic background. Consequently, host society members’ communication accommodation may be related not just to immigration status per se but to a certain type of immigrant (i.e., whether the person is from Mexico or other stigmatized (from a U.S. perspective) Latin-American country). This observation additionally suggests that social hierarchy formations and maintenance come in different forms and materialize in different ways with different people. In the case of Latina and Latino immigrants, those social hierarchies are significant because they determine whether newcomers become fully integrated, socially and economically, into U.S. society.

**Communication and sociocultural integration.** Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ struggle with English has direct implications for their sociocultural integration (cultural transition and adaptation). Immigrants become socially integrated into the fabric of a new society through communicative exchanges with the host members (Kim, 1980, 2005). Hazuda et al. (1988) defined the concept of *cultural transition and adaptation* as “a multidimensional process resulting from intergroup contact in which individuals whose primary learning has been in one culture take over characteristic ways of living from another culture” (p. 690). This definition suggests that individuals cannot become integrated into the new culture’s fabric without intergroup contact and required secondary learning. People’s ability to speak the new culture’s dominant language is fundamental for their social integration into that culture.

Furthermore, according to Kim (2005), “By placing adaptation at the intersection of the person and the environment, the present approach views cross-cultural adaptation as a process that occurs in and through communication activities” (p. 379). Existing research and theory, coupled with this research study’s findings, suggest that without the ability to speak English
fluently, Latina and Latino immigrants have had a very difficult time integrating into U.S. culture, as expressed by Raul’s comment: “Pues que somos si no aprendemos la lengua? Si somos Latinos pero tenemos que aprender la lengua si queremos que los gringos nos tomen en serio; de otro modo no vamos para ningun lado.” [Translation: What are we if we don’t speak the language? Yes, we are Latinos, but we have to learn the language if we want Americans to take us seriously; otherwise, we are not going anywhere]. Language use issues are at least twofold because immigrants need to interact with others to learn the dominant language and, at the same time, it is through learning the dominant language that persons get opportunities to interact with others.

The failure to learn English means that some Latina and Latino immigrant custodians remain primarily connected to their country of origin and disconnected from U.S. culture. In the context of a predominantly white state and workplace, the custodians may perceive a vast communication rift between them and host society members that impedes constructive communication. Custodians’ perceived circumstances align with Kim’s (1977) research findings concerning links among immigrants’ cultural capital, communication experiences with host society members, and accessibility to interactions with hosts in the process of achieving social and economic integration. This research showed that the greater the immigrants’ disconnect from the local culture, the higher the probability that they remain connected to their native country and culture. Furthermore, if immigrants regularly find rejection by host society members, this situation might force them to primarily interact with same culture group members to strengthen their group identity. In the case of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, their inability to speak the English gives them little choice but to remain within their co-cultural spaces, as the process of integrating into U.S. society reaches a screeching halt. This stoppage
has implications for custodians and the rest of the country, as society at large benefits from having persons who are fully integrated and who have opportunities to maximize their contributions to this society.

Noteworthy from this research study findings concerns host society members and their communicative practices, which subtly and not so subtly appear to display some resistance toward contemporary immigration developments and immigrants. Social scientists focus chiefly on macrolevel discourses about immigration and immigrant bodies, but how much is known about microlevel communication experiences when immigrants are part of the scene? Communication scholars have somewhat neglected ground-level studies about people’s communicative orientations, willingness to accommodate to immigrants, and workplace mistreatment and injustice towards immigrants. This study, thus, expands organizational communication research concerning social actors’ immigration status.

Communication scholars claim to study how people connect or fail to connect with others. What seems to be overlooked in that research, however, is people’s willingness or unwillingness to connect with others based on notions of identity, such as immigrant status, social class, and occupation. Scholars may intend to understand how people communicate with each other and the processes involved in such meaning-making activities. However, have scholars examined how rejection and communication apathy, from one group to another, at the macro-societal level become enacted in microlevel practices, such as mundane, everyday workplace interactions? In other words, how much is known about relationships between the social forces that shape people’s perceptions of immigrants and how those perceptions become communicatively enacted in various social contexts?
The findings from this study suggest that significant relationships exist between Latina and Latino immigrants’ lack of cultural capital, their immigrant status, and their workplace communication experiences. In this case, language use is a social sine qua non without which Latina and Latino immigrants do not get opportunities to enact their voice in various social spheres. This reality renders custodians powerless and vulnerable in a cultural context where their status as immigrants maintains them as always already subaltern subjects (Aldama, 2001; Butler, 1995; L. R. Chávez, 2008; Flores, 2003). Dominant societal perceptions of Latina and Latino immigrants as subordinate subjects legitimize message deployment and treatment toward them in interpersonal encounters.

According to the findings of this study, dominant language use is a major problem for Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers, which permeates every aspect of their social life. Language use shapes custodians’ social network makeup and the types of jobs to which they have access. Language use also structures custodians’ everyday communication activities, as well as communication accommodation processes between them and English speakers. Finally, dominant language use poses a gargantuan barrier for custodians’ sociocultural integration into U.S. society. As a complex symbol system, language is at the core of what makes people human. Without the ability to deploy and exchange the linguistic symbols of the society in which people live, they run the risk of becoming marginal elements of that system. Based on this research study’s findings about language use, this seems to be the case with Latina and Latino immigrant custodians within this particular higher education organization.

**Communicating with Supervisors, Coworkers, and Customers**

The second major finding addressing the first research question shows that most custodians perceive that their interactions vary significantly depending on the person with whom
they interact. First, communication with supervisors is often harmful. Most custodians expressed that their supervisor is almost like a dictator in his or her leadership approach. Custodians perceived their supervisors to be people who relied on an aggressive communication style during routine interactions. In contrast, interactions with coworkers were mostly positive. Most participants expressed that relationships with coworkers were somewhat superficial, but mostly positive, as these were the persons with whom they talked the most. Finally, interactions with customers, which are primarily with students, were both constructive and harmful.

Communicating with supervisors. The supervisor–subordinate is one of the most important workplace relationships (Dansereau et al., 1975; Sias & Jablin, 1995; Teven, 2007). Most traditional organizational hierarchies rely on vertical dyadic leader–member interactions for the day-to-day processes of the organization. Superior–subordinate relationships are essential because they produce positive outcomes that benefit both organizational actors and organizations, whereas negative relationships can be detrimental to both. The results from this research study reinforce the central tenets of leader–member exchange theory (LMX), which posits that supervisors have different relationships with subordinates, and therefore, subordinates receive differing amounts and quality of resources from their supervisors (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975). Custodians reported that they perceive varying degrees of favoritism from their supervisors. Manuel’s comment illustrated these perceptions of employee preference: “Todos sabíamos que el (supervisor) tenía preferencia por ese empleado. El le decía a otros; _____ es el empleado como todos deben ser. Y sus acciones lo demostraban consistentemente.”

[Translation: We all knew that he had a preference for that employee. He’d (the supervisor) tell others _____ is the employee that everyone should be like, and his actions showed it consistently]. Blatant showings of preferential treatment from supervisors pushed some
custodians to embrace a nonassertive separation communication orientation toward their supervisors. According to most custodians, they often chose, unless necessary, to avoid any type of interaction with their supervisor.

The majority of custodians indicated that their superiors often addressed them in condescending and disrespectful ways. Custodians expressed, almost across the board, that supervisors simply did not know how to treat the people who worked for them. Participants agreed with each other when they said that supervisors’ interpersonal skills were not up to par with the demands of their organizational role. Based on the custodians’ narratives, similar supervisor communication patterns exist across departments. Most custodians interviewed for this study stated that their supervisor has been verbally aggressive toward them. This finding suggests that supervisors’ leadership approaches demonstrate some similarities across departments. Comparable patterns in leadership and communication styles, across departments, suggest that supervisors may not be properly trained to communicate effectively with their subordinates. Additionally, these similarities in leadership style suggest that supervisors might be indoctrinated somewhat equally into their departments’ culture. Based on the findings, departmental cultures display some overlap regarding leadership approaches and what leadership means for persons in supervisory roles.

Superior–subordinate communicative practices at CU exemplify what Jacobs (1971) called leadership and supervision. According to Jacobs (1971), leadership focuses on interpersonal exchanges and relationships between superiors and subordinates, whereas supervision relies on the formal employment contract between them. Supervision relates to what Dansereau et al. (1975) called role-taking, which supervisors at CU seem to embrace in their relationships with their subordinates. In this leadership approach, influence is based on what the
formal roles state and not on everyday interactions. This approach can be detrimental to the superior–subordinate relationship because it creates a rigid set of boundaries where subordinates’ one-down location on the hierarchy does not present opportunities for contributions or participative collaborations with superiors. Instead, Dansereau et al. (1975) would strongly suggest that supervisors at CU engage in role-making leadership that focuses on the negotiation of everyday outcomes through communication. Role-making offers more fluidity in organizational roles negotiation than does role-taking. A role-making approach can lead to more participative collaborations and enhanced decision-making outcomes.

Latina and Latino immigrant custodians indicated that they perceive that several persons became supervisors due to their seniority status and by knowing the right person. These observations point to issues related to who gets to become supervisor in this organization and what qualifies them to hold such position. Communication experiences with supervisors reflect that custodians are not satisfied with their immediate supervisor. Custodians expressed that they were happy to have a job but that they were very unhappy with the leadership of the organization. This finding shows the significance of understanding organizational communication experiences beyond middle- and upper management levels (i.e., white-collar employees). Supervisors at CU may not perceive any tangible rewards for having respectful equal exchanges and relationships with their subordinates. Based on LMX theory, these supervisors treat employees differently based on what each person provides for them. Supervisors’ distributive (win–lose) treatment toward their subordinates creates a defensive communication climate that is harmful to their workplace relationships.

Superior–subordinate relationships at CU may also be influenced by factors such as everyday relational challenges associated with intercultural communication ineffectiveness.
Many custodians indicated that their supervisors are European-American males. Many supervisor–subordinate relationships at CU are cross-race in that most custodians were either Latina/o or Asian and their supervisors were white, which is significant considering that CU is a predominantly white university that is located in a largely white state. Supervisors’ communication with their subordinates potentially exemplifies the embodiment of negative attitudes based on prevailing discursive constructions of race-ethnicity, social class, and occupation in U.S. society. These research findings suggest that supervisors, being white and of a higher social class status, may perceive themselves as occupying a higher level not just in the organizational hierarchy but also in the macrolevel racial-ethnic hierarchy in the United States.

Such perceptions of social location can give individuals a sense of entitlement that becomes enacted in various contexts of social life. Therefore, it might not be a coincidence that the majority of custodians indicated that their supervisor had verbally attacked them. Within prevailing U.S. social hierarchies, and coupled with current public discourses about Latin-American immigration, it is likely that CU supervisors act out feelings of rejection and racially prejudicial attitudes toward Latina and Latino immigrant custodians. These findings, thus, expose some of the communicative practices of low-status organizational actors with cross-race supervisors.

Most custodians stated that their supervisors were white European Americans, which has direct implications for language use and intercultural communication. Participants indicated that they perceived some supervisors as being unwilling to attempt to negotiate some degree of politeness during their interactions. Such unwillingness to accommodate their subordinates, in addition to employing aggressive communication styles, suggests that supervisors could be enacting prejudicial biases against Latina and Latino immigrants. Such communicative
behaviors can also be related to dominant societal discourses and how these discourses shape supervisors’ perceptions of Latinas and Latinos (K. R. Chávez, 2009). It is possible that many supervisors view their interactions with their Latina and Latino subordinates through a prejudicial lens. Some supervisors might believe that they are not there to teach their subordinates English but simply to impart orders to them.

Results about custodial staff supervisors’ communicative behaviors reinforce findings from previous research studies (L. R. Chávez, 2008; K. R. Chávez, 2009). Such scholarship posits that dominant societal discourses shape how people perceive and communicate with the people who are the target of negative discourses. The information that people receive from dominant societal discourses functions as the antecedent of interpersonal contact. For example, according to several custodians, an administrator in one of the departments that were part of this study was once heard saying that she preferred 20 Laotians to one Mexican. Several participants also indicated that this administrator’s interactions with them matched her alleged comment, in that she was disrespectful and unpleasant toward Latina and Latino custodians. Additionally, when asked how often they interacted with administrators, most custodians said almost never. Custodians’ negative perception of the leadership of the organization suggests that they work within a defensive communication climate where they do not give feedback because their supervisors would not welcome their input. Second, in this environment, custodians often did not go to their superiors for resources, opinions, or advice. It is not surprising, therefore, that most custodians mainly sought out support from their coworkers, which reinforces research on coworker communication (Sias & Cahill, 1998).

Custodians’ relationships with key organizational leaders made them feel powerless and voiceless, working in a toxic communication climate. These feelings were evident in custodians’
narratives, which displayed feelings close to paranoia. Although most custodians said that they felt stable in their job, they also said that they live in constant fear of losing their job. Consequently, Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers experienced regular feelings of permanence and impermanence. Custodians felt that they could not openly communicate with their superiors. Custodians also felt that language barriers created a communication void where some of them retreated or remained distanced from their supervisors. The organization’s culture forced some custodians to engage in self-subordinating behaviors (Foucault, 1977). Supervisors’ communicative behaviors engender an atmosphere where supervision and not leadership is employed (Jacobs, 1971). Additionally, custodians have little to no voice in such a communication environment, with dissent getting suppressed and feedback discouraged. This type of workplace atmosphere reflects what Deetz (1992) called “discursive closure” (p. 187). Once the culture is established and set in motion through everyday communicative practices, custodians learn through socialization, storytelling, and lived experiences that enacting voice is an unwelcomed practice, which disciplines them.

Latina and Latino immigrant custodians exist in CU’s organizational interstices, which makes CU a microcosm of the larger society (Aparicio & Chávez-Silverman, 1997). Latina and Latino custodians at CU seem to be stuck in limbo, a socially liminal space that is disciplined by the discursive mechanisms operating around and on them. Custodians are powerless, lack opportunities to enact their voices, and exist in a dialectical tension of permanence–impermanence (L. R. Chávez, 2008; Foucault, 1977). Custodians’ proactive communication and conflict avoidance symbolize those feelings of powerlessness and voicelessness. Several custodians indicated that they avoid communicating with their superiors and engaging in any conflict, in general. They viewed conflict as destructive, rather than productive, and constantly
feared that conflict would ultimately lead to their termination. For many participants, lacking a formal education and the ability to speak English, such outcome would be catastrophic. Within this context, for some custodians, less interaction with others meant a lower probability of getting into a conflict either with a superior, coworker, or customer. For custodians, the costs heavily outweighed the rewards of having a serious conflict with anyone. This self-imposed communicative suppression functioned as a mechanism through which participants’ voices were kept silenced. Daniela’s comment about conflict suppression illustrated this point: “Pues a mi me gusta quedarme en mi esquinita. Pos no vale la pena meterse en problemas con nadie. Ahi botan a uno y se queda uno en la calle. A mi me gusta evitar problemas.” [Translation: I like to stay in my little corner. It’s not worth getting into trouble with anyone. They kick you out and there you are on the street. I like avoiding problems].

In line with LMX research, this research study’s findings suggest that constructive superior–subordinate relationships tend to be characterized by information breadth and depth in routine communicative exchanges. Many participants perceived a strong preferential treatment toward specific workers and that supervisors interacted with those workers more often.

According to several custodians, there was little to no exchanges with their supervisors and, not surprisingly, they perceived their relationships as low-quality ones (Abu Bakar et al., 2008; Fix & Sias, 2006; Gates, 2008). The findings also suggest that the organization’s leadership perceived custodians as being expendable and, thus, treated them as low-valued commodities. Some organizational leaders’ communicative behaviors suggest that some of them view subordinates as being easily replaced. These leaders’ communication orientation engenders a climate in which employees are unmotivated and less productive (Jablin & Sias, 1995).
This study’s results support Fairhurst’s (1993) claims that examining communication processes within the superior–subordinate pair in organizations is vital for understanding organizational communication processes. Such research is important because organizational communication scholars do not know enough about relationships between individual differences (e.g., social class, race-ethnicity, immigration status, and occupation) and communication processes in the workplace. The findings from the present study show how such individual differences relate to how social actors perceive and communicate with each other. For instance, many custodians believed that race-ethnicity is a salient individual characteristic that shapes how their supervisors communicate with them. Ruben’s comment vividly illustrated this point: “Quienes somos? Tu dime a mi; quienes somos? Somos los mas bajos de abajo. Si tu eres Latino e imigrante; vamos a ser honesto; tu eres comida de puerco para ellos.” [Translation: Who are we? You tell me; who are we? We are the lowest of the low. If you are Latino and immigrant, let’s be honest, you are the pig’s feed to them]. Ruben’s comment illustrated the importance of studying organizational communication processes beyond gender and race-ethnicity. This study’s findings also show that immigration status, social class, and occupation are salient identities deserving of scholars’ attention.

Custodians’ experience with verbal mistreatment is not unusual for Latinas and Latinos living in the United States. Historically, Latinas and Latinos experience mistreatment in various social contexts. The experiences of Latinas and Latinos with mistreatment partially stems from a historical context in which the relationship between the United States and people from Latin America has been hierarchical in nature (United States-up/Latinas/os-down). Moreover, popular cultural discourses perpetuate perceptions of Latinas and Latinos as primarily bodies to be used for their labor (Navarro, Black, Thomas, & Nava, 1984; O’Brien & Loach, 2000). Such ideas
foment a climate where Latinas and Latinos are stripped of their humanity. The United States, however, needs the labor that people from Latin-American countries provide (Aldama, 2001; Grosfoguel, 2003). The main message that emerged from the custodians’ experiences at this organization is “we welcome the labor but not the laborer.” Rodrigo’s comment illustrates the disconnect that superiors display through their leadership approaches: “Estas gentes no piensan que estan manejando personas, pero maquinas. Es lo que te digo; muchas no tienen el nivel necesario para manejar a nadie. Estan ahí yo no se por que.” [Translation: These people don’t think that they are managing people, but machines. It’s what I am telling you; many of them don’t have the level needed to manage anyone. They are there I don’t even know why]

The relationship between the core economic power (the United States) and the laborers from poorer Latin-American countries can also be characterized as a tension between three forces. The first two forces are the need for the United States as a superpower to have the jobs done and, simultaneously, resent the people doing the jobs. The third force, which is in tension with the first two forces, is Latin-American laborers’ need and desire to work, to feel socially included, and to be treated with dignity and respect. Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ interactions with their supervisors display the tensions between these forces.

The organizational context is important because it is located directly within the labor social sphere. Popular culture artifacts, such as the films El Norte (Navarro et al., 1984) and Bread and Roses (O’Brien & Loach, 2000), have also depicted the tensions among these three forces, by eloquently articulating a Latina or Latino “subject” that exists in tension with fundamental social forces operating in U.S. society. Some of those social forces are historical relations of race-ethnicity, social class, and immigration, and how these social differences play out in microlevel interactions.
Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers’ communication experiences with their supervisors seem to be mostly negative. This finding does not suggest that this situation is an epidemic but it does suggest that some individuals might have negative attitudes toward some organizational actors. Such negative attitudes might be tied to the antecedents of interaction (i.e., socialization processes, racial prejudices, and biases). For example, it is probable that many white supervisors did not learn about Latina and Latino custodians experientially through interactions with them but, rather, through information that they obtain from social institutions, such as their families and the media (B. J. Allen, 2011). Not all supervisors were white, however, as several supervisors were of their same race-ethnicity. This situation causes serious cognitive dissonance for some custodians, as they wonder why that person, who is supposed to be one of them, would treat them so badly. This finding suggests that organizations tend to represent societal microcosms. For instance, most supervisors are white, and traditionally, many white U.S. Americans have displayed negative attitudes toward Latin Americans and, specifically, toward Mexicans (Flores, 2003). This finding is not farfetched from the lived experiences of many Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States. Fortunately, for Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, coworkers act as buffers to cope with some of the daily hardships brought upon them by their supervisors’ communicative practices.

**Communicating with coworkers.** Latina and Latino immigrant custodians indicated that they customarily have positive communication experiences with their coworkers. Custodians said that their coworkers are people with whom they interact the most during a typical workday. Although these relationships are not considered to be friendships, custodians talked about topics such as social issues in their homelands, their sons and daughters, and faith. This finding is significant because, first, coworker communication has been much less
researched than has superior–subordinate communication (Sias & Cahill, 1998), and second, research shows that most people typically interact with their coworkers during their work hours (Sias, 2005). Furthermore, coworkers are a primary source of social support in the workplace. The present research study’s findings reinforce these findings.

Latina and Latino immigrant custodians find safe havens in break rooms and hallways when they interact with their coworkers. I experienced firsthand the camaraderie that coworkers display with each other. In the hallways and in the break rooms, coworkers are typically cheerful and happy to be around one another. This finding is not surprising considering the language barriers and superior–subordinate communication issues that characterize this organization. In a work context where dominant language use is problematic and where superiors address their subordinates aggressively, reaching out to their peers is an obvious choice for many custodians. According to Sias (2005), “Peer coworkers are the most likely, and most important, sources of emotional and instrumental support for employees, primarily because coworkers possess knowledge and understanding about the workplace experience that external sources do not” (p. 379). Custodians believed that because of their language-use struggles, they have more social constraints than does the average U.S. American and, thus, they perceived their Latina and Latino immigrant coworkers as people who were in the same boat. Ramiro’s comment illustrated this point: “Pues no, los veo igualitos a mi. Somos todos Latinos y por lo menos hablamos la misma lengua. Con los Asiaticos es diferente porque no nos podemos entender.”

[Translation: I see them as equal. We are all Latinos and at least we speak the same language. With the Asians it is different because we can’t understand each other]. Some of these social constraints are issues with the dominant language and race-ethnicity (with most custodians being non-English-speaking Mexicans). Therefore, custodians mostly rely on their peers for
interactions that are affirmative. This situation has implications for language acquisition and sociocultural integration.

Latina and Latino immigrant custodians enter organizations, such as CU, with some clear obstacles: Some of them are illegal, do not speak English, and their racial-ethnic identities are perceived disapprovingly in U.S. society. Additionally, if custodians’ interactions with supervisors and customers are sometimes marked by negativity (e.g., supervisors and/or customers being aggressive toward them), it makes sense that they would seek out affirming relationships with their same-culture/language peers. This situation poses both a blessing and a curse for custodians. First, custodians remain disconnected from U.S. culture and the organizational context, preventing custodians from integrating into U.S. society. As a result, many custodians expressed that their circumstances hurt their ability to move up the socioeconomic ladder. Manuel’s comment illustrated this point: “Pues yo quiero hablar mas con otras personas pero este Ingles se me ha hecho dificil. Y no me ayuda que na mas me la paso hablando con mis companeros, oyendo el radio y mirando la tv en Espanol.” [Translation: I want to talk more with other people, but this English has been difficult for me. And it doesn’t help that I’m always talking with my coworkers, listening to the radio, and watching TV in Spanish]. Other custodians also indicated that they felt most comfortable with their coworkers because they are just like them. These narratives show that custodians’ communication experiences relate to dominant language use and that supervisor communication causes them much stress. Coworkers’ supportive communication, thus, allows custodians to cope with work-related stress.

Findings about custodians’ communication with coworkers are in line with research on supportive communication in the workplace (Ray, 1987). According to communication scholars, supportive communication is a prevalent process that organizational members employ to cope
with job stressors and burnout (Cahill & Sias, 1998; Ray, 1987, 1991). Other scholars have argued that because people’s lives revolve around work, it is important to examine social support in organizational settings (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2001; Sias & Cahill, 1998). For example, Eisenberg and Goodall (2001) suggested that access to a network of support is vital for dealing with work-related stress. Regarding work-related problems, coworkers offer a unique type of emotional support (Etzion, 1984). This finding also seems to be an example of custodians’ assertive accommodation orientation (Orbe & Spellers, 2005), which is partially characterized by communicative practices where nondominant group members use intragroup networking to negotiate dominant social structures,

Custodians’ narratives about coworker communication suggested that they receive support from their coworkers. Most custodians said that they mainly have what Kram and Isabella (1985) termed “collegial peers” (peers with whom they exchange work-related information but also other personal information, such as about religion, their homeland, and their family). The findings also suggest that coworkers are people with whom the custodians has more in-depth interactions compared to their supervisors and customers. This finding additionally suggests that having conversations with people minimally provides a space where interactants can decide whether they want to continue engaging other people. As House (1981) observed, “Flows of social support occur primarily in the context of relatively stable social relationships rather than fleeting interactions among strangers” (p. 29). Therefore, it is not surprising that participants find their relationships with coworkers as the most stable and positive ones in the workplace.

The findings from this study about coworker communication align with scholarly literature regarding relationships between superior–subordinate and peer coworker
communication (Sias & Jablin, 1995). Researchers have found that superior–subordinate differential treatment is related to coworkers’ perceptions of themselves and others. For example, if coworkers perceive that a supervisor treats a coworker with preferential treatment, that employee can be cut off from the group (Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989). Custodians in this study indicated that supervisors blatantly showed preferential treatment toward some employees.

Supervisors seemed to strategically rely on employee gossiping networks as a mechanism through which they stayed informed about issues, events, and situations in their work unit (Doyle, 2000; Michelson, van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010). According to some custodians, negative gossiping occurred constantly among coworkers and between coworkers and supervisors. Johan’s comment illustrated this point: “Yo dije ya no quiero estar cerca de ellos porque no me tare nada bueno. Esa gente se la pasan chismeando acerca de otros. Todo el tiempo le digo.” [Translation: I said no more, I don’t want to be around them because it doesn’t bring me anything good. Those people spend all their time gossiping about other people. All the time, I tell you].

Gossiping occurs when two or more parties exchange positive or negative information about an absent third party (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010). Organizational gossiping research shows that this type of informal communication happens with familiar, trusted coworkers and that it reinforces insider–outsider group dynamics (Mills, 2010). In general, organizational members engage in gossiping behaviors to entertain, inform, and influence each other (Rosnow, 1977). Some of the positive functions of workplace gossip are information sharing, enabling cultural learning in the organization, and encouraging the development of social networks (Doyle, 2000). However, gossiping has also been vilified in scholarly and popular literatures because it affects employees’ productivity, and when it is
excessive and inappropriate, it can ruin people’s reputations. Gossiping is also used to spread judgment and accusations about other people (Michelson et al., 2010).

Research on gossiping explains some of the everyday communicative practices of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians at CU. Specifically, custodians at CU viewed gossiping very negatively. Custodians perceived workplace gossiping to be dangerous and inappropriate, and those who engaged in it as people from whom to stay away. Instead of viewing gossiping as a communication activity that maintained group identity and organizational culture (Mills, 2010), custodians felt that gossiping promoted attention-seeking, self-interest, and a positive self-image through social comparison and discrediting others (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Although scholarly and popular literatures have viewed gossiping as useful to maintaining employees’ relationships during their free time (Grosser et al., 2010), custodians in this study had a much different perspective. Custodians’ perspectives about gossiping might be a product of the toxic, defensive communication climate in which they work. For example, custodians might view gossiping as a communicative practice that was vital to maintaining the negative climate that seemed to exist within their work unit.

According to custodians, the negative gossiping was partially a byproduct of supervisors’ deliberate favoritism toward some employees. Gossiping seemed to provide supervisors with important information that enhanced their ability to orient differently toward employees. Gossiping became a discursive resource that reinforced group norms and the organization’s culture, as the supervisors conceived it. Supervisors might have used gossiping to know who was a foe or an ally, and subordinates might have used it to gain supervisors’ deferential treatment. In other words, tapping into employee gossiping networks equipped supervisors with a strategic power and control mechanism (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). This control
mechanism, according to some custodians, sustained a defensive communication climate that blocked group cohesion among some coworkers.

Custodians’ communication experiences with coworkers yielded information that aligns with research on coworker communication, but this study’s findings also illustrate how, in certain circumstances (i.e., when presented with communicative adversities), individuals form particular relational bonds with similar others. Researchers have not substantively addressed how communicative difficulty pushes people to form discursive enclaves in the context of a hostile social environment. This study’s findings, thus, expand notions of coworker communication by showing the significance of these relationships in a context of communicative adversity. Such reality appears to compel Latina and Latino immigrant custodians to pursue only certain types of jobs (i.e., where little communication is required) and to remain inside their same-culture and language circles, which keep them secluded from the larger society. This study’s findings provide a rebuttal to arguments that Latina and Latino immigrants are unassimilatable (Aldama, 2001; L. R. Chávez, 2008; Rodriguez, 2007) in that social systems have embedded mechanisms in place that keep them socially excluded and linguistically marginalized. Dominant social discourses about Latinas and Latinos’ inability to assimilate enter the U.S. social imaginary and people accept such discourses as taken-for-granted truths (L. R. Chávez, 2008).

Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ choice to remain in their coworker enclaves within the boundaries of a predominantly white organization is not surprising, but the significance of this finding resides in the ways that social systems create and sustain communicative marginalizing mechanisms through microlevel interactions. Latina and Latino immigrant custodians find themselves at a communicative disadvantage, and their coping
mechanism is to rely on people who speak their same language (e.g., through intragroup networking). This social survival mechanism simultaneously acts as an instrument for liberation and subjugation. Latina and Latino immigrants get tangled up in a social web where doing jobs, such as dishwasher or custodian, for some permanently, is the only way to survive. Simultaneously, those jobs kept immigrants socially marginalized.

**Communicating with customers.** Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers expressed that they experience both rewarding and harmful interactions with students, faculty, and staff. According to some of the custodians interviewed, they avoided interactions with the university’s customers, primarily with students, because those interactions have been mostly negative. In contrast, other participants indicated that their interactions with students were very positive and consider many of them to be like their family. Custodians who cited negative interactions with customer interactions said that some people disregard them, run them over in public spaces, and insult them. For instance, a custodian stated that one student approached him and told him, “I am ashamed of you.” Custodians who had positive interactions with customers stated that students wanted to learn about them and their cultural background. Furthermore, some students were interested in learning Spanish, and custodians enjoyed practicing their English with students. The findings suggest that customers become a vehicle through which the custodians attempted to gain cultural capital (and to integrate socially into U.S. society).

Findings about custodians’ communication experiences with customers yielded divided responses, with some custodians opting to separate and others opting to accommodate customers. In this organizational context, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians represent nondominant group members (e.g., as employees in a predominantly white institution). Therefore, I discuss custodians’ communication experiences with customers through a co-cultural communication
framework (Orbe & Spellers, 2005), which, as previously explained, studies interactions within and between nondominant (in this case, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians) and dominant group members (in this case, upper middle-class white students; Orbe & Spellers, 2005).

Custodians who had negative experiences with customers disclosed that customers often dismissed or ignored them. Morelia’s comment illustrated this point: “Le pasan por el lado y ni lo miran a uno. Uno trata de saludar o algo pero mucha gente ni siquiera voltea la cabeza. Ellos si saben que uno esta ahí; ellos nos ven.” [Translation: They walk by you and they don’t even look your way. You try to greet them, but many people don’t even bother to turn their heads. They know that you are there; they see us]. Custodians’ experiences with public rejection may be the result of their social location as marginalized subjects in a context of white dominance. Custodians are also situated in a communication system that is dominated by whites’ control of communicative practices (both nonverbal and verbal). For instance, as Latina and Latino immigrants, custodians’ expectations of greeting behaviors might not be acknowledged by most white persons who walk by them. This finding supports muted group theory’s idea (Ardener, 1975; Kramarae, 1981) that within any society there exist asymmetrical power relations and, thus, a muted group framework is in place. It is also within this dominant social structure where custodians enact communicative strategies to cope with their environment (e.g., avoiding and intragroup networking communicative practices).

Many customers might perceive non-English-speaking custodians as “muted.” Customers’ communicative responses toward custodians appear to produce a nonassertive separation communication orientation from custodians. It seems that some customers do not feel the need to give custodians the opportunity, or invite them, to interact with them. White customers’ communicative stances may be related to perceptions that, due to their privileged
social location, they do not need to reach out and connect with Latina and Latino custodians. In other words, many custodians perceived that some customers viewed them as people whose voice and presence were not to be acknowledged. Custodians’ location as nondominant in the white-dominated communication system made them vulnerable to messages that did not support their “face” (Goffman, 1967). Moreover, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, because of their subject positions, were open targets of “face attacks” (Goffman, 1967). Roberto’s comment illustrated this climate: “Les repugnamos. Es como si le diéramos asco a ellos. Yo no entiendo porque tantos gringos se sienten de esa manera. Debe ser bien difícil llevar su vida así. Per no nos beneficia a nosotros tampoco.” [Translation: They find us repulsive. It’s as if we are repugnant to them. I don’t understand why so many Americans feel that way. It must be hard living their lives that way, but it doesn’t benefit us [Latinos] either].

Co-cultural communication theory embodies some of the communicative processes in co-cultural group members’ communication with customers. As Orbe (1998) explained:

Situated within a particular field of experience that governs their perception of the costs and rewards associated, as well as their capability to engage in various communicative practices, co-cultural group members will adopt certain communication orientations—based on their preferred outcomes and communication approaches—to the circumstances of a specific situation. (p. 19)

Based on the findings, custodians’ memberships in their racial-ethnic, immigrant, class, and occupational groups render them marginalized. Custodians perceived that customers viewed them negatively based on custodians’ social identity intersections. Within this interactional context, both parties, nondominant and dominant group members, orient towards the other based on their field of experience (their knowledge about each other’s cultural/ethnic backgrounds),
and, thus, they have specific preferred interactional outcomes (separation, accommodation, or assimilation) when interacting with the other.

This study contributes to research on historically underrepresented persons, such as Latina and Latino immigrants, and their communication with dominant social group members within organizational contexts. Co-cultural communication theory proposes that nondominant group members have specific interactional outcomes (to separate, accommodate, or assimilate) in mind when interacting with dominant group members. Additionally, nondominant group members use specific communication orientations, which are shaped by the situational context, persons’ field of experience and interactants’ communication abilities. Based on the findings, custodians primarily employ two types of communication orientations: assertive accommodation and non-assertive separation when communicating with customers (Orbe, 1998).

Assertive accommodation occurs when nondominant social group members interact with others in authentic, open, and genuine ways, whereas non-assertive separation occurs when nondominant social group members maintain a distance from dominant group members. Custodians seem to have developed these interactional outcomes and communication orientations based on the feedback that they receive from customers and their experiences in the organization. This finding suggests that custodians’ interactional outcomes and communication orientations are not unilateral acts but co-constructed with their customers. This finding also substantiates social constructionist ideas about social actors attaining meaning from the social matrices in which they are embedded (B. J. Allen, 2005). Customers’ communication with custodians shaped the custodians’ desired interactional outcomes and communication orientation toward their customers. This finding contributes to co-cultural communication theory by showing salient interconnections among persons’ interactional outcomes, fields of experience,
situational context, communication abilities, perceived costs and benefits, and communication orientations. Additionally, little co-cultural communication studies have explicitly addressed communication exchanges between immigrants and host society members. This research study, thus, expands co-cultural communication theory by demonstrating how language use and immigration status complexify communication processes, and how social actors adapt and respond to their communication environment.

Custodians provided split responses regarding their communication with customers, with some said being mostly positive and others being mostly negative. Custodians who had positive experiences with customers seemed inclined to accommodate and, thus, exhibited an assertive-accommodation communication orientation (Orbe, 1998), which focuses on maintaining one’s cultural pride and keeping their identity intact, and, simultaneously, communicating a competent self openly and honestly. Maria’s comment exemplifies this communication orientation: “Pues si yo siempre les digo; mira yo te enseno Espanol y tu me ensenas Ingles. Asi pues aprendemos cada uno de nuestras culturas.” [Translation: Well, yes, I always tell them, “Look, I teach you Spanish and you teach me English.” That we can learn about each other’s culture]. Similarly, Margarita’s comment illustrated this approach: “Me gusta hablar con los que muestran interes en mi como persona. Pero yo siempre les sonrio y les hable muy cordialment aunque no me miren. Con amabilidad y respeto todo se puede lograr.” [Translation: I like to talk to the ones who show interest in me. But I always smile and talk to them very cordially, even if they don’t look my way. With kindness and respect, we can achieve anything]. This finding shows that both nondominant and dominant co-cultural group members make efforts to create a communication environment in which everyone has the opportunity to enact their voice. These interactional outcomes are mostly positive, with participants feeling that some customers are like family
members. Moreover, Maria’s comment also exemplified how some custodians have an assertive accommodation communication stance; in this case, Maria attempted to educate others about her language and culture.

The significance of the previous finding resides in custodians’ narratives about their negative experiences with customers. Some of these experiences consist of constant feelings of disrespect and direct verbal insults. Approximately half of the participants indicated that negative exchanges with customers compel them to separate from them by adopting a nonassertive separation orientation. As Pedro said, “Yo ni los miro yo ya en los pasillos; y para qué? Cada vez que trata uno de hablar con ellos na más le responden con grocerías. Yo ya ni pa que; digo yo, no?” [Translation: I don’t even look up when I am in the hallways; for what? Every time that you try to talk to them, they respond with rudeness. I said to myself, what’s the point?]. This finding highlights the significance of expanding organizational communication research to more explicitly address low-status organizational members and their communication experiences. Custodians’ choice to separate from customers suggests that struggles with the dominant language and social identity intersections can create a communicative chasm between nondominant and dominant group members in organizational contexts. As custodians’ narratives show, organizational actors’ circumstances can sometimes create the illusion that communicative barriers are impossible to overcome.

Over half of the custodians indicated that interactions with customers were hurtful and, consequently, they preferred to remain distant from them. This finding is troublesome because it highlights issues related to intercultural communication. For instance, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians already exist in sociocultural structures where they are communicatively marginalized. Negative perceptions of social and cultural differences further exacerbate persons’
ability to reach across those differences and to have positive interpersonal encounters. Based on participants’ narratives, it seems that their racial-ethnic and immigrant identities shape their younger, white, middle-class customers’ perceptions. These findings suggest that custodians’ communication experiences with customers perpetuate custodians’ marginalized subject positions through sophisticated contemporary (e.g., language use) and traditional (e.g., race-based) mechanisms of social exclusion.

Customers and supervisors’ verbal mistreatment of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians show how persistent negative attitudes get enacted in a social context. Discourses about social identity categories continue to permeate social life. Sometimes people make communication choices that have the potential to affect others negatively. Organizations are fundamental social contexts where the communication choices that people make can have immediate and long lasting repercussions. Custodians’ narratives illustrate that supervisors and customers’ communication choices upset them in significant ways. Such interactional outcomes can powerfully affect subsequent interactions at work.

Custodians believed that their race-ethnicity, immigrant and occupational identities lead people to address them in negative and prejudicial ways. These observations align with B. J. Allen’s (2011) claims that in U.S. society, people represent the social groups to which they belong. Depending on the context, people need to communicatively negotiate with others the ascribed meanings associated with each of their social identities. In the case of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, they have to constantly negotiate their racial-ethnic, immigrant and occupational identities with customers. In the institutional context where this study took place (a predominantly white organization), these negotiations can be very contested because socio-fundamental group members may have preconceived negative attitudes toward nondominant
group members, and vice versa. In such an interactional context, the burden almost always falls on the nondominant group member to accommodate dominant group members (Jian, 2008). The findings show that Latina and Latino custodians, instead, communicatively separate from dominant group members.

The findings about customer–custodian communication highlight noteworthy communication processes. Dominant language use seems to have a critical function in custodians’ everyday communication experiences. For instance, it appears that custodians’ separation stance works against their ability to learn English, which has linguistic, social, and cultural implications. Custodians’ communicative choices deprive them from integrating socially and culturally, and keep them linguistically marginalized. The news from this finding, and a theme that seems present throughout custodians’ communication experiences, is that social actors’ communicative practices in public places feed a system that creates a communication chasm that gives the impression that reaching a point of cross-racial/cultural understanding is virtually unattainable. Such perceptions can produce feelings of public apathy where those who are most marginalized have the most to lose and experience feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness. For example, many Latina and Latino immigrant custodians feel disrespected and dismissed; essentially, that their humanity goes unacknowledged.

The findings complement research that shows that individuals discursively create systems of communicative marginalization (Kramarae, 1981). As persons from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds continue to join U.S. society, the higher is the probability that people will have culturally dissimilar neighbors, coworkers, spouses, and sons- and daughters-in-law (U.S. Census, 2006). The present study’s findings illustrate that there could be pockets of discursive resistance to people who embody intersections of traditionally disadvantageous identities (e.g.,
recent immigrant, Latina, lower class, and service worker). As the United States shows signs of progress and moves forward with social justice issues, this country must not simply modify systems of discrimination. The United States cannot afford to move from racial or sexual orientation discrimination to systems in which people are linguistically discriminated and communicatively marginalized.

**Custodial work and communicative isolation.** The last finding under the first research question shows that the nature of custodial work appears to be related to custodians’ communicative superficiality and isolation. This finding suggests that the nature of custodial work contributes to a system that maintains Latina and Latino immigrant custodians in a discursively suppressed space. For example, as Ramona stated, “Mire, vengo, hago mi trabajo y me voy. La verdad es que no hablo mucho con nadie; hay mucho que hacer.” [Translation: Look, I come, do my job, and leave. The truth is that I don’t talk much with anyone; there is too much to do]. Based on this finding, it seems that significant relationships exist between organizational structures and custodians’ agency within those structures. This finding complements previous findings from this study about relationships between superiors’ communication, defensive communication climates, and custodians’ communication suppression. This censoring communication climate engenders a complex system in which several elements operate to discipline Latina and Latino immigrant custodians (and they blame it on the work itself). In this section, I discuss the findings related to the nature of custodial work and custodians’ experiences with communication superficiality and isolation.

Many Latina and Latino immigrants enter the United States lacking English-speaking abilities. Immigrants oftentimes rely on their interpersonal networks to find jobs. This research study’s findings suggest that Latina and Latino immigrants seem to have access to jobs where
little communication is expected. Consequently, communication with host society members is also nominal. Findings also show that custodians’ previous jobs were monotonous and repetitive. For instance, the jobs that custodians held in the past (e.g., kitchen helper, dishwasher, and factory worker) did not require much communicative exchange such as receiving or giving complex instructions. Primarily having access to and experience with jobs that are harsh on their bodies, custodial work became highly desirable. Custodial work seems to function as both a means for survival and a mechanism for subjugation.

Custodial work gives custodians the stability that they sought when they arrived in the United States. This reality produces an allure of freedom from past almost slave-like occupations. Custodians often cited job benefits as the main reason for their feelings of stability. However, at the same time, custodial work unbeknownst to the custodians continues their trend of working in communication-deprived occupations. Latina and Latino immigrants become catalysts for perpetuating social structures that confine their own and other people’s future socioeconomic opportunities. This (re)production of the social system relates to Giddens’s (1984) ideas about the structuration of society (i.e., the relationship between social actors’ actions and the creation of ensuing constraining social structures). In other words, by settling or comfortably staying put in jobs that do not encourage them to learn English, transition and adapt to the United States, and move up the socioeconomic ladder, their presence in those jobs complements pervasive images of Latinas and Latinos as the personification of service work in the United States.

Latina and Latino immigrants’ ability to integrate socioeconomically becomes hindered by the “choice” to remain in occupations such as custodial staff at a university. Based on the participants’ narratives, it is evident that many of them desire to be in jobs other than custodian.
Some custodians said that speaking English and education level are the two main barriers that prevent their lack of upward social movement. Many custodians perceive that their communicative seclusion in the workplace is of their own design and many even said that they do not interact with people because they prefer it that way. Felindo’s comment illustrated this point: “¿Qué mejor para uno pues? Aquí no le piden a uno que hable el Inglés mucho. Uno no estudio pues; nos quedamos brutos. Para mucho de nosotros este trabajo es como mandado del cielo porque no hablamos la lengua.” [Translation: What would better for us? Here they don’t ask you to speak much English. We didn’t study; we stayed illiterate. For many of us this job is like Godsend because we don’t speak the language].

For Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, communicative isolation becomes part of a process for which their work environment is the outcome. Custodians have a perceived and real need to do work that keeps them communicatively isolated. A job where communicating in English is not required becomes very enticing.

Custodial work’s appeal becomes evident when I learned that the custodian position is highly coveted at the university, especially by Latinas and Latinos. This finding suggests an interconnection among the findings regarding Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communication experiences. Custodians seem to have primarily positive interactions with people who speak the same language, who are on the same organizational level, and belong to a similar cultural/ethnic background. This reality illustrates a system of quasi-seclusion where the participants, perhaps because of their identity intersections and lack of cultural capital, remain “trapped” in a space of a little cross-language communicative activity. In other words, custodians’ subject positions and inability to speak the dominant language creates a “perfect storm” that contributes to everyday communication experiences of superficiality and isolation.
from English-speaking organizational actors. The complex interlocking of organizational actors’ negative attitudes towards Latina and Latino immigrants and the communicative enactment of such attitudes, the nature of custodial work and custodians’ inability to speak English functions as a barrier that obstructs custodians’ sociocultural integration. This reality shapes custodians’ perceptions about the attainability of substantial social progress. Such perceptions are reflected in Oscar’s comment:

Mira, you hize un quinto grado en Mexico. Vine aqui majorcito ya. El Ingles se me ha hecho dificil. Sin Ingles y sin educacion la verdad es que que mas crees que vaya a hacer. Me gustaria abrir mi business de landscaping pero eso es todo ya; no mas de ahi.

[Translation: Look, I completed a fifth grade in Mexico. I came here (the United States) older. It’s been difficult learning English. Without English and an education the truth is what else can I do. I would like to start a landscaping business but that’s it; no more after that]

The last finding under the first research question yielded salient relationships between the nature of custodial work and custodians’ superficial interactions and isolation. This finding suggests that Latina and Latino immigrant communication experiences do not happen in a vacuum, but are related to a variety of complex antecedents such as job access and language acquisition, which shape their present communication experiences. For example, the reason why a communicatively isolated job such as custodial worker is appealing to many Latina and Latino immigrants is because compared to other jobs available to them this job is not as harsh on their bodies. As an added bonus, much communication is not expected from them. This situation creates a “perfect storm” where you have the “usual suspects” (i.e., Latina and Latino immigrants) lining up job for this type of job (i.e., custodian). Unbeknownst to the social actors,
custodians become part of a social system where they participate in their own subjugation.

Latina and Latino immigrant communication experiences do not appear to occur in isolation from other complex factors. For this reason, the second research question sought to examine the extent to which individual characteristics (i.e., race-ethnicity, immigration status, social class and occupation) might shape Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communication experiences.

**Social Identity and Communication Experiences**

Research findings for the second research question propose that custodians perceive their race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status, and occupation to be more relevant with certain persons than others (e.g., customers). This finding lines up with participants’ descriptions of their communication with customers. When asked whether race-ethnicity, class, immigrant status, and occupation are relevant to their interactions, participants indicated that those social identities are relevant primarily when interacting with customers. This finding suggests a consistency across participants’ responses and how they perceive their communication experiences with specific organizational actors. The news of this finding is that over half of the participants perceive that U.S. Americans often communicatively orient towards them in hostile ways. Additionally, more participants perceive race-ethnicity as being a greater issue than the other three social identity categories. This finding reinforces extant research on race-ethnicity. Specifically, research that supports the notion that race-ethnicity is a fundamental social identity category that structures persons’ lived experiences in U.S. society (B. J. Allen, 2010; L. R. Chávez, 2008; Frankenberg, 1993; Ore, 2006). In this section I discuss the findings related to race-ethnicity and communication experiences. I continue with a discussion of major findings related to social class, immigration status, occupation and Latina and Latino custodians’ communication experiences.
Race-ethnicity and communication experiences. According to sociologist Ruth Frankenberg (1993), systems of racial separation shape the experiences not only of the oppressed but also the people in dominant positions. Based on the Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ narratives about race-ethnicity and communication experiences, it seems that perceptions and understandings about race-ethnicity shape how some people communicatively orient towards them. Eduardo’s comment about race-ethnicity and his interactions with others illustrates this point: “Tiene que ser eso; yo no me puedo imaginar que mas puede ser. Si tu tienes un intercambio con ellos y continua pasando regularmente; que mas puede ser? Ellos no me conocen a mi y yo no los conozco a ellos.” [Translation: It must be that (racism); I can’t imagine what else it could be. If you have an exchange with them and it continues happening regularly, what else could it be? They don’t know me and I don’t know them]. This finding highlights the need for investigations that explicitly address service workers communication. In this regard, this study advances knowledge about communication between service workers and customers (Callahan, 2006). Communication scholars simply do not know much about the types of interactions that individuals located in marginalized spaces have with dominant group members and specifically those who embody marginalized racial-ethnic identities in tandem with immigration status, social class, and occupational identities.

The presence of Latinas and Latinos is almost nonexistent in studies of organizational communication and race-ethnicity (for an exception, see Pompper, 2007). In her study of Latinas in public relations firms, Pompper (2007) found that Latina public relations agents have to negotiate their racial and gender subject positions with white men who view them as unqualified for their job and Latino men who view them as sex objects. The results showed that Latinas perceive themselves as having low status or now power, navigating identity crises or
dealing with self-contained opposites (i.e., enacting both oppressive and resistance behaviors).

The present study’s findings substantiate Pompper’s (2007) findings by suggesting that Latina and Latino custodians often find themselves having to negotiate their racial subject position within a predominantly white society. For Latino and Latina custodians, communicating in English is a challenge and, thus, retreat is often their primary communicative approach. In contrast, in Pompper’s (2007) study, the custodians were college-educated women who are fluent in English. The present study contributes to scholarly understandings of Latinas and Latinos workplace experiences by showcasing interactional outcomes when the social actors lack cultural capital (specifically ability to speak the dominant language).

The findings from the current study are revealing because they relate to Pompper’s (2007) findings. In Pompper’s (2007) study, Latina professionals experience disrespect from Latino men and racial discrimination from whites. Latinas’ experiences in Pompper’s (2007) study illustrate white supremacy ideologies that pervade in U.S. society. White male public relations professionals, possibly unconsciously, displayed racist behaviors towards the Latina public relations professionals. According to Deitch et al. (2003), “Even people who are strongly motivated not to be racist are subject to automatic cognitive activation of stereotypes that can unconsciously influence behavior” (p. 1317). Similarly, the present study’s findings show how Latina and Latino immigrant custodians feel verbally and nonverbally discriminated from both other Latinos and whites alike. Several custodians expressed that they feel discriminated by both supervisors who are Latina or Latino and white, as well as customers of various ethnic backgrounds, but mostly whites. This finding implies that there is no single antagonist when it comes to people who are the source of racially discriminatory messages. Rather, “Subtle versions of racism encompass a complex, multifaceted, interlocking system that pervades many
levels and contexts of society, involving individuals [of all races] as well as institutions” (B. J. Allen, 2009, p. 170).

Findings contribute to scholarly understandings of organizational communication between Latina and Latino immigrants (lower status employees) and dominant co-cultural group members (i.e., white customers). Race-ethnicity is still a social issue that powerfully shapes human communication in various social contexts. Over half of the custodians feel that race-ethnicity is the main reason why some people address them negatively. Rogelio’s comment illustrated how some custodians felt about race-ethnicity and communication: “Yo nunca voy a entender porque los gringos nos tratan así. Pues que le hemos echo? Yo no se; tal vez es porque no fui a la escuela, pero te tratan refeo a veces. Te hablan como pura basura.” [Translation: I’ll never understand why Anglos treat us that way. What have we done to them? I don’t know; maybe because I didn’t go to school, but they treat us pretty bad. They talk to us like pure trash]. This finding contributes to what Orbe and Allen (2008) called “multifocal relational scholarship” (p. 210). That is, this study examined race-ethnicity as one of many salient identities in the organizational context. In other words, this study moved away from traditional scholarly conceptualizations of race-ethnicity as a person’s biological trait, which determines how participants communicate with other people. Results highlight that race-ethnicity is interwoven with other symbolically complex social identities to shape how persons relate to each other in organizational contexts. The findings illustrate salient relationships between intersections of marginalized identities and communicative practices in the workplace.

The results support the idea that marginalized social actors view communication processes from a unique perspective compared to dominant social group members (Hartsock, 1983; Collins, 1986; Wood, 1992). Custodians feel “muted” because they embody a racial-
ethnic category that is undesirable in U.S. society (Kramarae, 1981). In the context of a predominantly white organization, custodians feel that the identities that they represent are perceived as marginal and those perceptions guide people’s communicative behaviors. This result proposes that the idea that the United States is in a post-racial period may be nothing more than a social imaginary (Flores, 2000). This social imaginary perpetuates the idea that racism primarily has to do with overt communicative behaviors (e.g., overt racist comments/slurs). However, this type of overt racism is less socially accepted today and, thus, persons now engage in new, less conscious, forms of racism (McConahay, 1986). These new forms of racism still display negative attitudes towards traditionally marginalized social group members (e.g., verbal dismissal/neglect and hostile nonverbal behaviors; B. J. Allen, 2009). Some of the custodians’ narratives show that these new subtle ways of enacting racist behaviors are present in U.S. society.

The results reveal that Latina and Latin supervisors exhibit discriminatory communicative behaviors towards Latina and Latino immigrant custodians. When scholars address race-ethnicity from nondominant groups’ perspectives, we should not assume that whites are the primary perpetrators of racist behaviors. This finding substantiates claims that individuals become socialized to believe that their race-ethnicity is inferior to whites’, especially in a society immersed in white supremacy ideologies. This internalized belief acquired through socialization experiences is known as “internalized oppression” (B. J. Allen, 2011). Internalized oppression can be enacted through mistreatment of same-race others in various social contexts. For instance, many custodians expressed that their Latina or Latino supervisors mistreat them worse than any other person as Pedro’s comment shows: “Ese hombre era una bestia con los Latinos; y era Mexicano el. Todos sabíamos que ese señor no tenía nada de respeto por su
propria gente. Y digame usted, como explica eso usted? No tiene nada de sentido.”

[Translation: That man was a beast towards Latinos; and he was Mexican. We all knew that he did not have respect for his own people. You tell me, how do you explain that? It doesn’t make any sense].

Half of the custodians who said that race-ethnicity is an issue in their daily interactions also said that same-race individuals are the principal sources of racially discriminatory messages. The significance of this finding resides in that most of those Latina and Latino supervisors were custodians prior to reaching supervisory roles. Therefore, some custodians could not understand why someone who look and sounds like them would verbally mistreat them regularly. Several participants reported that this phenomenon caused much cognitive dissonance and they thought that it should be further explored. For instance, Joel stated that: “La situacion se puso fuera de control en el sentido que esa persona abusaba de los trabajadores Latinos. Simplemente nos hablaba como animales y nadie hacia nada; uno se sentia como si fueramos animales y a nadie le importaba.” [Translation: The situation got out of control in the sense that that persona abused of Latino workers. He would simply talk to us like animals and no one did anything. We felt like animals and no one cared]. This finding lays important groundwork for future research in organizations that addresses the notion of “internalized oppression” and how behaviors associated with that concept are communicatively enacted in everyday interactions.

Relationships between participants’ race-ethnicity and communication experiences cannot be divorced from other social identities (i.e., social class, immigration status and occupation). For instance, the participants who indicated that race-ethnicity is relevant to their communication experiences also said that the other social identities are relevant. Across the board, these participants say that they perceive all four social identities shape their interactions
with customers (primarily with students) and same-race/different-race supervisors. Custodians perceive that race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status and occupation strongly shape customers’ orientation towards them. In addition to customers, participants feel that their supervisors, including other Latina and Latino supervisors, orient negatively toward them because of their social identities.

As a collective, findings related to race-ethnicity and custodians’ communication experiences suggest that race-ethnicity is still a significant social problem in the United States. For this reason, studies that focus on how individuals deploy messages to racially different others in organizations are ripe for investigation. In addition to race-ethnicity, the current research study focuses on whether race-ethnicity intersects with other social identities to shape Latina and Latino custodians’ communication experiences (i.e., social class, immigration status and occupation). The results suggest that race-ethnicity does overlap with other marginalized identities to shape custodians’ workplace interactions.

**Social class, immigration status, occupation, and communication experiences.**

Latina and Latino custodians’ responses to questions about their social class, immigration status, and occupation show that racial-ethnic identity seems to overlap with their social class, immigration status, and occupation. The participants who indicated that one social identity is relevant to their everyday communication experiences also indicated that the other three were as well. For example, 11 of 25 participants expressed that social class, immigration status and occupation are relevant to how other people communicated with them. These findings imply that focusing our research agendas on specific social identities in isolation is counterproductive for scholarship and the persons that we study. Scholars must, therefore, address intersections of identities to address socially significant issues related to communication and social difference
(Allen, 1995; Crenshaw, 1992). For this reason, in this discussion of research findings related to social class, immigration status and occupation, I address these social identities as a cluster. I support my claims with pertinent scholarly literature and the data obtained from the participants’ narratives.

Historically, in the United States, a pervasive rationale for oppression and discrimination has been a person’s ability. Ability has been used as a vehicle to discriminate and oppress groups of people based on their race-ethnicity and gender for example. The present research study’s results are noteworthy because they highlight how people orient towards others whom they potentially perceive as unable based on the intersections of identity that those people embody (Crenshaw, 1992). Results show that custodians’ marginalized identities might overlap to produce unintelligible bodies (Butler, 1995). Furthermore, the participants’ inability to speak the dominant language adds another layer of “incompetence” that seems to render them as socially disabled in the eyes of many people. For instance, this situation may be related to participants’ observations that they feel completely dismissed by customers in offices and in hallways. Custodians’ perceptions of their social class, immigration status, and occupation as being connected to each other suggest that those identities work in tandem to produce complex meanings about who the custodians are. This idea is known as social identity intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1992). Custodians’ perceptions align with basic assumptions of social construction; specifically, that individuals make meaning with and about each other from dominant sociocultural discourses about their identities (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Burr, 1995).

These results have implications for social class and communication. According to some scholars, social class is communicated through people’s interactions (Huspek, 1994). Research and theory demonstrate that custodians’ lack of cultural capital (language) may be related to host
society members’ negative perceptions of them (Kim, 2005). This finding has direct implications for immigrants’ encounters with host society members because many immigrants come to this country unable to speak English and this situation creates a communication chasm that requires people to compromise and accommodate. This finding is additionally significant because according to Huspek (1994) “social classes are reproduced largely as a consequence of the meanings, values, and significances of class life being transmitted through class-specific communication codes” (p. 80). In other words, individuals (re)produce social class through their use of elaborated and restricted codes (Bernstein, 1974). In the case of the present study’s participants, they do not have access to the societal linguistic currency (i.e., English). For this reason, custodians are mostly qualified to be in occupations where communicative codes of any kind (i.e., restricted or elaborated) are minimally needed.

Host society members’ familiar stereotypes rise up like an army ready to combat its enemy when people who embody marginalized identities enact voice in public. Negative perceptions about social class, immigration, and occupation status come to life the moment that linguistically, racially, and occupationally marginalized persons utter a word. The current study’s participants embody various historically marginalized identities, which render them muted (Ardener, 1975). However, several custodians are able to deploy elaborated codes with ease albeit in their native language. Studies that are inclusive of marginalized workplace experiences are thus ripe for investigation.

Researchers can tap into rich knowledge sources by reaching out and engaging different-language speakers. I believe that such research studies can address socially significant issues such as Hispanicphobia, homophobia, and social class phobias. Second, custodians’ lack of ability to speak English often leads to perceptions of lack of intellectual ability. In a society
where ability matters, being perceived as lacking intellect primes others to perceive the message target negatively. Aurelio’s comment expresses such sentiment: “Creen que uno es bruto porque no habla Ingles. Yo pues no tengo mucha educacion pero no es que soy retardado mental tampoco. Me molesta como le habla a uno porque no sabe uno Ingles.” [Translation: They think that you are dumb because you don’t speak English. I don’t have much education but I am not mentally retarded either. It bothers me how they talk to you because you don’t speak English].

When we consider social class, immigration status, and occupation in addition to language use in the context of Aurelio’s comment, we could be in the presence of a new underclass that lives in the shadows of America’s lowest classes. Case in point, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians bear the “burden” of not speaking English as well as their marginalized identities. This situation relates to research on social class, which illustrates that people who use elaborated codes tend to orient toward people who use restricted codes differently than they orient towards other elaborated code users (Bernstein, 1974; Huspek, 1994).

The present study results parallel previous research findings about social class and communication (e.g., Giles & Sasson, 1983; Mallison & Brewster, 2005; Willems et al., 2005). Willems et al. (2005) found that patients’ communication style shaped physicians’ communication style, which typically varied based on the person’s social class. For instance, patients from lower classes were disadvantaged because physicians perceived that they had a lower need for information due to the patients asking fewer questions. Giles and Sasson’s (1983) findings illustrated that there was a dominant/nondominant language hierarchy based on persons’ dominant language competency and communication style. Those findings suggested that there is a link between class and linguistic-based hierarchies, as participants perceived people with nonstandard English accents as belonging to a lower class.
Those findings directly relate to the present study’s findings. For instance, supervisors and customers’ communication style used with custodians may have been shaped by their perceptions that the custodians do not want to engage them (due to their inability to speak English). In this case, it seems like all interactants need to make an effort to minimally try to accommodate to the other person. Based on the custodians’ narratives, the problem seems to be that those in a privileged linguistic position are oftentimes unwilling to accommodate to the person in a less privileged position. Such communicative orientations sustain intercultural, interclass, and interoccupation chasms existing in U.S. society. This finding reinforces Willem et al.’s (2005) findings. That is, individuals in more privileged linguistic/communication positions should at a minimum try to accommodate to those in disadvantaged positions. Such shift in orientation would represent a shift towards a more compassionate, empathetic, and caring human society. Making different communication choices can bring about a social shift in which humans resist systems of social inequality where classism and occupationalism sustain imbalanced power dynamics.

As microcosms of the society in which they exist, “most organizations reflect the class system of society” (B. J. Allen, 2011, p. 108). If this is true then it could also be true that they reflect immigration, racial, occupational and language systems (intersectionality). Custodians’ narratives substantiate how intersectionality operates in the workplace. For example, Marcelo stated that: “Yo no creo que es porque yo soy Latino nada mas; es otras cosas tambien. Yo limpio para ellos, la ropa delata mi nivel social. Soy Salvadoreno; no soy de aqui. Son muchas cosas las que influyen.” [Translation: I don’t think it’s only because I am Latino; it’s other things as well. I clean for them; my (work) clothes reveal my social status. I am Salvadorian; I am not from here. A few things are influential]. This comment supports the idea that this
organization reflects various social hierarchies present in U.S. society. The findings further reveal that systems of oppression can be discursively formed and sustained, although, as Allen (2011) noted, those systems can be dismantled. Furthermore, according to Allen (2011) a linguistic class-based hierarchy—and I add, immigration status-based hierarchy—exists where bodies are, indeed, stacked up in ways such that those on "top" are more privileged than those at the "bottom." Based on the present study’s findings, it is evident that dominant language use acts as a catalyst for discrimination that permeates various social life activities. This observation further implies that research that includes traditionally marginalized groups also should include analyses of language use and how it might sustain systems of inequality. This study’s findings indicate that a language hierarchy could be an instrument for marginalizing people and sustaining systems of inequality (see, e.g., Aldama, 2001; L. R. Chávez, 2008; Drzwiecka, 2000).

The findings about custodians’ communication experiences and social class suggest that social class is a complex phenomenon that affects immigrants in a unique way because it relates to issues of linguistic hierarchies. As the custodians’ narratives show, social class cannot be divorced from immigration status and occupation. Many immigrants from Latin America tend to be uneducated and lower class, which primarily gives them access to lower status occupations in the United States. The current study’s findings contribute to understandings of how intersectionalities of identity have material consequences for persons who embody marginalized identities. In the case of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, intersections of immigration status, social class, and occupation seem to locate them in a disadvantaged social location that becomes exacerbated by their lack of cultural capital. This lack of cultural capital appears to be
closely connected to their status as immigrants and their sociocultural and economic integration into U.S. society.

Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ immigration status is a social identity category of central concern to this study. The findings related to immigration status suggest that participants view their immigrant identity as closely linked to their social class and occupation. 11 of 25 participants indicated that their immigrant identity is relevant to their communication experiences in the workplace. Those participants cited dominant public discourses about Latina and Latino immigrants, Mexicans specifically, as fuel to maintaining prejudicial attitudes from U.S. Americans. Such observations relate to existing research about communication and immigrants, which has primarily focused on mediated messages about immigrants and communication’s role in immigrants’ cultural transition and adaptation (L. R. Chávez, 2008; K. R. Chávez, 2009; Flores, 2003; Kim, 2005). Germane to the present study’s overall findings is how dominant language competence is central to immigrants’ transition and adaptation process.

The findings tied to immigration status are directly linked to previous findings on language use. The main research link to the present study is that without language acquisition, immigrants struggle to integrate into U.S. society. The work of communication scholars, such as Kim (1977, 1980, 2005), established a strong connection between language use, communication and sociocultural integration. The present study’s findings reveal significant connections among those three concepts. For instance, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communicative isolation functions to prevent them from acquiring the dominant language, which hurts their chances to fully immerse themselves into U.S. social life. The following comment illustrates this point: “Todo me trae anciedad porque no puedo hablar Ingles. Ir de compras al supermercado me trae ansiedad porque no sabe uno si va a poder constestar alguna pregunta. Es bastante
frustrante; no puede uno formar parte del entorno social” (Isaias). [Translation: Everything causes me anxiety because I can’t speak English. Going to the supermarket causes me anxiety; you don’t know if you’ll be able to answer a question. It’s very frustrating; you can’t become part of the social environment].

Research shows that when immigrants move to a new culture they rely on media and interpersonal interactions to acquire the cultural capital essential to become members of that society (Alkhazraji et al., 1997; Berg, 2009; Kim, 1977, 2005). Latina and Latino immigrant custodians disclosed that they primarily expose themselves to their culture’s media and do not have constructive interactions with host society members. Those choices shape their ability to communicate with host society members and increase their probability of remaining in the social periphery. Custodians’ communication choices seem to engender socially harmful outcomes. The harm resides in that this society appears to have created a system where large segments of its population live in the shadows. Like a cancer, this situation could yield exponentially negative consequences in the form of increases in uneducated masses and perpetual second-class citizenry.

Projected population demographics show that the number of Latinas and Latinos, Blacks, and Asians will grow significantly (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Therefore, it is possible that in the not so distant future we might have a society akin to South Africa’s apartheid where the small white minority controlled the resources and the black majority was poor and uneducated. This type of social system can become self-defeating if it continues to perpetuate discourses that people in the social periphery are there because it is their fault and, thus, that is where they belong. Such a system highlights the disconnect between systemic mechanisms tied to lack of education and opportunities that engender inequality and the individuals’ actions (Grosfoguel,
Fostering language inacquisition through our organizational communicative practices takes away individuals’ opportunity to join society and (re)creates a self-regenerating system of inequality based on social difference (i.e., racial, class, and linguistic).

Latina and Latino immigrant custodians learn, through their interactions, that their immigrant status is not well received by many, which causes some of them to lose motivation to learn English and further integrate socially. In those microlevel interactions, the person becomes part of a recursive discursive system where they are exposed to messages that feed their apathy and simultaneously shape host society members’ perceptions of immigrants as lacking interest or even desiring to separate (Orbe, 1998). These circumstances nourish dominant discourses of Latinas and Latinos as being unassimilatable (L. R. Chávez, 2008). Additionally, this state of affairs creates an atmosphere where the immigrant does not learn about the host society, which perpetuates feelings of anxiety as Rodrigo’s comment illustrates: “Le tengo que preguntar todo a mi esposa; que aprendio un poco de Ingles. Que es esto/aquello? Cuando voy al centro comercial tengo que estudiar lo que voy decir. Es un estado bien critico hermano.” [Translation: I have to ask my wife about everything; she learned a little bit of English. What is this/that? When I go to commercial centers I have to study what I’m going to say. It’s a critical state brother].

Many custodians expressed feeling anxiety similar to Rodrigo’s. Custodians’ lack of cultural capital seems to have created feelings of paranoia where the person feels like he or she is stuck in the middle of a permanence–impermanence tension. In this context, workplace interactions become significant for custodians because their outcomes yield feelings of belonging or rejection. Conversely, positive workplace interactions can strengthen a sense of belonging and social integration (Alkhazraji et al., 1997). These observations illustrate the connection
between language use and socioeconomic integration. Language use emerged as a vital element of custodians’ communication experiences and it seems that their immigrant identity functions as a vehicle that creates grave difficulties for them to acquire the English language. This reality produces a ripple effect that reverberates through their social life.

The findings about immigrant status and communication expand scholarly knowledge about immigrants’ communication experiences (Alkhazraji et al., 1997; Amason et al., 1999). The present study’s findings stretch existing knowledge about the organizational experiences of immigrants. For example, Alkhazraji et al. (1997) found that the workplace functions as a source of learning both the national and the organization’s cultures. Amason et al. (1999) found that Hispanic immigrants who worked at a manufacturing plant felt that they received social support primarily from their Hispanic coworkers. Findings regarding immigrants’ communication experiences are relevant for two reasons. First, the present study’s findings illustrate that in the context of a higher education institution, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, when offered the opportunity, learn about the culture and the English language (i.e., acquire cultural capital) through communication experiences with customers (mostly students). Second, this study’s findings corroborate Amason et al.’s (1999) findings that Latina and Latino immigrants mainly obtain social support from their Latina and Latino counterparts.

Amason et al. (1999) found that Hispanic workers at a plant in the central region of the United States reported receiving more social support from their Hispanic coworkers than their Anglo coworkers. These authors interviewed people from many countries in Latin America (Mexico, Peru, and El Salvador) and found that Hispanic workers coped with emotional acculturative stress through their coworkers’ praise and help with personal problems. These results relate to the present study’s results in that the Latina and Latino custodians interviewed
for this study reported that they primarily receive social support from other Latina and Latino coworkers. Custodians reported that help with personal problems, supportive messages, and venting to their coworkers are the main ways that they receive social support from their Latina and Latino peers. Similar to Amason et al.’s (1999) findings, some custodians reported that receiving support from their Anglo coworkers was very helpful when dealing with stressful circumstances.

Comparing the findings from Amason et al.’s (1999) study and the current study, dominant language use and social support processes are significant in Latina and Latino immigrant organizational experiences. These findings propose that different organization types (a factory and a university) show similar systems of discursive marginalization where Latina and Latino immigrants feel that their main recourse when dealing with stress is other same-race coworkers. The present study’s results are newsworthy in the sense that their communicative experiences push immigrants to create their own discursive cultural spaces. These discursive cultural spaces become subsystems that prevent sociocultural integration and perpetuate systems of linguistic and cultural separation.

Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers feel that public discourses about Latinas and Latinos, primarily Mexicans, shape how others perceive them (Flores, 2003; Ono & Sloop, 2002; Santa Ana, 1999). Custodians’ observations tie to research on immigration and communication, which collectively has argued that public discourses play a central role in constructing and perpetuating negative images of Latina and Latino immigrants (L. R. Chávez, 2008). The public consumes those distorted images, which can influence how people communicatively orient towards immigrants “on the ground” (K. R. Chávez, 2009). Participants’ comments regarding immigration are significant because they substantiate extant
research. Custodians’ narratives help materialize what communication theorists have said about the relationship between public discourse and microlevel interactions (Aldama, 2001; K. R. Chávez, 2009).

According to Flores (2003), “race” and “immigration” operate in tandem, as U.S. Americans sometimes understand these concepts as two sides of the same coin. Based on the current study’s findings, I would add that race-ethnicity, immigrant, and occupation go together in U.S. society. For this reason, it is no surprise that the participants who said that their immigrant status is relevant to their communication experiences also said that their race-ethnicity, social class, and occupational identity are also relevant. Flores (2003) additionally argued that the concepts of nation, race-ethnicity, and immigration are assigned specific meanings that become perpetuated through their everyday discursive uses in society. The findings relate to immigrant identity and communication experiences support the idea that individuals’ perceptions of social group members influence their communication (K. R. Chávez, 2009). Additionally, the current study’s findings support the idea that discursive acts of rejection do not necessarily happen based on one salient identity but intersections of identities, which create interlocking systems of subjugation (hooks, 1989). Dominant images of the Latina and Latino immigrant are oftentimes negative and this reality has potential negative ramifications for how people address those persons (C. Taylor, 2002). Almost half of the custodians perceive that immigrant status is relevant to their everyday communication experiences. This situation suggests that public discourses may play a role in shaping persons’ ideas about immigrants. Some people, thus, deploy messages in line with their conceptions of the individuals who embody those stigmatized meanings.
Occupation is the fourth social identity category examined in this research study. I sought to explore whether occupational identity shapes how supervisors, coworkers, and customers communicate with Latina and Latino immigrant custodians. 11 of 25, 44% of the participants said that their occupation does shape how others communicatively orient towards them. Lucia’s comment illustrates how these participants feel: “Los estudiantes a veces le faltan el respeto a uno. Yo creo que si es porque uno trabaja de limpieza aquí. Tal vez se creen mejores que uno porque uno les está limpiando a ellos.” [Translation: The students are disrespectful sometimes. I think so because we work cleaning. Maybe they feel that they are better than us because we clean after them]. Participants who perceive that occupation shapes how others communicate with them also feel that their immigrant status and social class are germane. The news of this finding is the custodians’ descriptions of supervisors and customers’ hostile verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors. Carlos’s comment is an example of such behaviors: “Le digo que mucha de esta gente lo ven a uno como menos de basura y porque irían a tratar a uno como gente. Le digo ese supervisor se dirigia a nosotros como si no fueramos gente. Y los estudiantes ni más; peor le hablan a uno.” [Translation: Many of these people see us as less than trash so why would they address us like people. That supervisor addressed us as if we weren’t human. And the students forget it; they talk to us even worse]. In the pages that follow I discuss the findings related to communication and occupation informed by the participants’ narratives and pertinent scholarly literature.

About half of the custodians stated that their occupation shapes their interactions with other social actors in the organization. Extant literature on occupation together with custodians’ narratives provides the analytical framework for the discussion about communication experiences and occupation. The literature on occupation addresses relationships between
occupations and sociocultural structures (Laliberte-­-Rudman & Dennhardt, 2008). Occupations have been historically ascribed specific meanings and values or symbolic features (Fine, 1996). According to several custodians, their occupation has been perceived as dirty work in this society and, thus, people’s reactions may be related to their understandings of occupations based on dominant discourses about this social construct. Ramiro’s comment illustrates how custodians feel about others’ perceptions of them in their role of custodian: “Juntan el trabajo con la persona. Pues si el trabajo es sucio la persona tambien. Pues que hace uno? Limpiar lo sucio; lo que quiere decir que uno esta sucio tambien y miran a uno como eso.” [Translation: They mix the work with the person. If the work is dirty, the person is as well. What do we do? We clean what’s dirty, which means that we are also dirty and they see you as such].

Latina and Latino immigrant custodians perceived that their occupation cannot be divorced from other overlapping social identities—most salient in this context, social class and immigrant status. The consistency across those three social identities suggests that participants view them as interconnected. Research on dirty work advanced that people who do this kind of work are perceived as degrading by the larger society and as subjects who do socially tainted work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Based on the current study’s findings, I would add that participants’ immigrant status works in concert with their occupation to construct a socially tainted subject. This hyper-subalterrn subject position, thus, shapes participants’ everyday workplace interactions. Custodians’ narratives reflect awareness of their position as subaltern subjects who occupy lower ranks of organizational and societal hierarchies (i.e., cleaning staff and Latina and Latino immigrants). Ramon’s statement illustrates such awareness: “Nunca pense que alguien me veria de esa manera pero es verdad, el Latino no es nada en este pais. Pero imaginate tu no solamente Latino pero Latino y trabajando en limpieza.” [Translation: I never
thought that people would see me this way but it’s true; Latinos are nothing in this country. Imagine, not only are we Latinos but we also work cleaning].

Custodians’ sense of themselves in their occupation suggests some feelings of repulsion and the work that they do. Custodians believed that people value them only because of their labor. Arturo’s comment highlighted this sentiment: “No les importa la persona para nada. Mientras hayan dos manos para limpiar que importa si la persona esta bien o no. A ellos no les importa. Somos maquinas pues.” [Translation: They don’t care about the person at all. Although there are two hands to clean, it doesn’t matter if the person is okay or not. They don’t care; we are machines]. This comment illustrates how the subject, in this case, the custodian, has a kind of contextual signification. In other words, her or his body has different value-laden meanings in different social contexts. This comment also shows how some people perceive others based on dominant sociocultural meanings attached to individuals in lower status occupations and furthermore attached to race-ethnicity, social class, and immigrant status.

This situation suggests that in different social spheres the signified (the person) embodies various historically devalued signifiers—mediated by social identities such as race-ethnicity, gender, and class—that shape their material realities and lived experiences (Butler, 1995). Additionally, when custodians crossed cultural boundaries (migrated to the United States), they involuntarily interpellated the current meanings associated with persons who have membership in that immigrant group (Aldama, 2001; L. R. Chávez, 2008; Drzewiecka, 2000). When custodians entered into U.S. territory their unintelligible identity intersections automatically became imbued with their localized meanings. Consequently, social actors’ communicative behaviors towards Latina and Latino immigrants shifted to reflect that society’s dominant values in how it regards those identities.
Research on occupations in U.S. society has addressed relationships between society, culture, and occupations (Iwama, 2003; Sokefeld, 1999). Occupations are classed, gendered, raced—and I would like to add “immigrant-ed”—within the society and culture in which they exist. Custodians’ narratives about occupation suggest a relationship between their status as immigrants and the work that they do. They realize that as adult migrants, they had obstacles that prevented them from learning English (e.g., lack of education opportunities, need to work, and families to support) and, thus, they perceived that they only had access to certain types of jobs. In that situation, immigrant status, dominant language use and occupation became inextricably linked. The moment that the immigrant entered U.S. culture they are assigned values based on the occupation that they personified. The Latina and Latino immigrant custodians that participated in this study interpellated the groups of meanings around their occupation, and other intersecting social identities, in the workplace.

To conclude, the current study’s findings align with extant research about relationships between society, culture, and occupation. However, the current study moves away from this body of knowledge in that this study privileges communication processes as its unit of analysis. This specific research focus lacks in existing research about occupation. Regarding relationships between culture and occupation, the present study’s findings show that dominant cultural values relate to occupational hierarchies. Findings show that meanings attached to occupational hierarchies can shape how people perceive and direct their communication toward people who work in lower status occupations. Consequently, there might exist significant relationships between dominant cultural discourses and ideologies that converge in everyday micropractices. The present study uncovered microlevel interactions’ contours when Latina or Latino immigrants in lower status occupations are part of the communication context. Results illustrate that the
consequences of identity intersectionality can yield negative outcomes depending on the interactants, overlapping historical, institutional, relational and situational contexts.

This study sheds light on organizational communication processes when organizational actors are persons who embody traditionally marginalized identities. Extant research has advanced that studying the perspectives of marginalized groups from their standpoints is socially significant (Collins, 1986; Orbe, 1998; Wood, 1992). The news of this study is that according to half of the custodians, their marginalized identities shape their workplace interactions. For example, narratives about customers’ public dismissals (i.e., some customers only addressed custodians in certain places and not others) and custodians’ perception of self in the role of custodian (i.e., a person who does socially tainted work and feels unacknowledged based on other people’s nonverbal behaviors and lack of communication or seemingly unwillingness to communicate with them) are significant communication experiences.

These findings are significant because they elucidate how macrolevel issues play in an organizational microcosm. This study is contextually relevant as most organizations have a cleaning staff. Bringing awareness to the ways that people communicatively orient towards those staff members and highlighting potential reasons why people orient in those ways can help tackle other related issues such as communicating across social difference in a variety of contexts and interactional levels (e.g., community action groups and interpersonal relationships in organizations). Promoting ideas that reposition how individuals interact with people who have been occupationally marginalized contributes to a communication system with more considerate meanings attached to certain occupations.

Several custodians expressed that people perceived them negatively. Latinas and Latinos hold many occupations that are deemed as dirty in U.S. society. Through constant exposure to
Latinas and Latinos in such roles, and with the support of social institutions like the media, the Latina/o social imaginary becomes reified in the minds and hearts of U.S. Americans. These reifications are enacted in contexts such as the workplace. Therefore, the present study functions as a text that helps de-reify communicative practices that become perpetuated by the presence of Latinas and Latinos in roles such as custodial worker,

The present study’s findings align with research that conceptualizes occupations as symbolic. Much of this line of research articulates that people who do dirty work are a necessary evil (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Elsbach, 2001). Findings help support such ideas because some of the custodians feel that many people perceive them to be evil. Manuel’s comment illustrates custodians’ beliefs: “Estoy contento porque tengo trabajo pero el ambiente no es bueno. Aquí los estudiantes, los jefes ven a uno no como ser humano pero como otra cosa. Algo negativo.” [Translation: I am content because I have a job, but the environment here is not good. Here, the students, the bosses, see you not like a human being but as something else. Something negative]. These comments suggest that in the phrase “necessary evil” the signifier “evil” gets attached to the body or the person who performs the job. In contrast, the term “necessary” gets attached to the work that person does.

Custodians’ experiences in the present study can be characterized the following way: in U.S. society, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, or immigrants who do dirty work in general, exist in the interstice of three forces that are in tension with each other. These forces are: (a) U.S. society’s need for certain types of jobs (e.g., construction, gardening, nanning, cleaning, and dishwashing), (b) host society members’ resistance to the bodies performing the jobs (e.g., societal members may tolerate Latina and Latino immigrants doing certain jobs but may feel justified in being verbally aggressive towards these individuals in certain contexts and
situations or discursively resisting to them living in “their” neighborhoods, attending their children’s schools, or marrying them), (c) immigrants’ need and desire to integrate socially and economically into U.S. society. Additionally, immigrants, like most people, want to feel included and be perceived and treated like a human being with a certain degree of respect. Based on their responses, several Latina and Latino immigrant custodians feel that they exist in such interstice, stuck between those three forces. Living in such interstice sometimes challenges the custodians’ sense of self and their identities and, thus, as the findings reveal, these workers perceive themselves negatively in their organizational role.

According to research on dirty work and stigmatized occupations, for the people who perform those jobs the results can oftentimes be negative in-group stereotyping, out-group preferential treatment, internalized inferiority, low group self-esteem and in-group disidentification (Jost, 2001). These social outcomes may have been manifested in the present research study through supervisors’ verbally aggressive treatment toward their same-race subordinates (i.e., internalized inferiority and in-group disidentification) and some of the custodians’ behaviors (e.g., in-group disidentification—enacted by their distancing from others). The present study also highlights how permeable boundaries (language) that surround immigrants follow them to a new cultural context and shapes their social dealings within the new culture (Aldama, 2001). In this sense, immigrant status intersects with other marginalized identities and shapes communication in various social spheres. When the person perceives that he or she exists in a communicative hostile environment then he/she devises discursive plans to cope with that environment.

According to research on stigma and dirty work, stigmatizing is a group-level phenomenon and, thus, people may perceive their personhood threatened and find ways to
strengthen their in-groupness (Hardin & Conley, 2001; Korn, 1996). Ludwig (1997) argued that because the world is “out to get you,” people tend to bond with those that they perceive to be “on the same boat” (p. 18). This appears to be the case for this study’s participants and their relationships with their coworkers. In a context where communication with different others is virtually nonexistent, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians devised a plan that allow them to create “un pedacito de Mexico” [*Translation: a little piece of Mexico*]. The plan was to create safe communication spaces where they could be themselves without the hardship that the linguistically challenging world “out there” brought to them. Not surprisingly, same-race coworkers are the people with whom custodians interact the most and have mostly positive relationships. As Latinas, Latinos, immigrants and custodians, they perceive each other as being members of the same club and the findings reveal how such processes play out communicatively.

In other words, the findings expand work on stigma and dirty work by illustrating how people use communication to strengthen their degree of in-groupness to cope with alienating social environments.

Related to the notions of occupational rhetoric and identity negotiation, this study’s findings reveal some pertinent themes. These concepts relate to how social actors form and sustain conceptions of the occupational self (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003; Fine, 1996). Related to these areas, the findings reveal that Latina and Latino immigrants sometimes foCUlate conceptions of self that denote a feeling of subalternity shaped in part by their immediate discourses about who they are. Several participants interpret themselves as being in a job that is considered dirty and, therefore, perceive themselves as also being dirty. Gloria’s narrative is a case in point: “Hay no, limpiamos todo lo feo. No me gusta pues esta tan sucio. Uno se siente sucio a veces en este trabajo.” [*Translation: Oh no, we clean everything that is dirty. I don’t like*}
it because it’s so dirty. You feel dirty sometimes in this job]. Custodians’ conceptions of self, or their occupational rhetorics, get communicatively enacted as they send messages to others visualizing themselves within the occupation but also as the occupational identity overlaps with other identities from other life’s spheres.

Custodians’ agency becomes compromised as their lack of cultural capital severely impedes them from attempting to interactionally create consensus with others about the “face” that they present to them (Goffman, 1963). In other words, the inability to speak English suppresses participants’ capability to construct and negotiate an occupational self that goes beyond the totalized idea of who or what a custodian is in U.S. society. The inability to speak English suppresses participants’ ability to show other people that they are more than just someone who cleans. Within this context, the inability to speak English functions to suppress systematically custodians’ agency within dominant social structures.

Virtually unable to communicatively negotiate positive identities with others, custodians perpetuate the image of their bodies and occupation as the opposite of how identity-negotiation scholars conceptualize the modern occupational self (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). That is, a work self that is fragmented, dynamic, fluid, complex and shifting. In contrast, the lack of ability to speak English deems custodians as stable and static or totalized beings. This study’s findings reveal that social actors have qualitatively different experiences depending on their social or organizational locations. Therefore, it is important to enhance our understandings of a wide array of organizational experiences. Second, the participants’ lack of ability to speak English functions to close off debate with others. Custodians’ inability to speak English sustains imbalanced power relations by rendering the custodians in a hyper-vulnerable position where
they exist in a constant state of defenselessness and, thus, their constant feelings of impermanence.

Latina and Latino custodial workers are in a position where language use minimizes and suppresses resistance to repressive forces. The results suggest that to have a more comprehensive understanding of organizational experiences across hierarchies, it is imperative to look at the experiences of people who occupy lower status positions. Those standpoints can provide alternative perspectives of how particular social systems work (Hartsock, 1983; Collins, 1986; Wood, 1992).

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings obtained from interviews with Latina and Latino immigrant custodians about their everyday communication experiences. The findings illustrated that Latina and Latino immigrant custodians have communication experiences that are powerfully shaped by language use. Speaking English is a factor that permeated custodians’ communication with supervisors, coworkers, and customers. In addition to the influence of the dominant language, custodians said that they had different types of communication experiences, depending on the person with whom they interacted. The nature of custodial work related to custodians’ superficial interactions and degree of isolation at work. The other major findings shed light on how intersecting identities of race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status, and occupation shaped custodians’ communication experiences.

Communication with supervisors seemed to be generally detrimental due, in part, to supervisors’ role-taking approach to leadership and hostile communication style. According to the large majority of custodians, supervisors’ communication style engendered a defensive communication climate where individuals were often apprehensive about interacting with people
and proactive about avoiding conflict. Most participants indicated that they interacted the most with coworkers because they had the most positive workplace relationships with them. This finding is strongly supported by a large body of interdisciplinary research that shows individuals fostering in-groupness when a social environment is not welcoming (Kreiner et al., 1999). Third, communication experiences with customers were both positive and negative to a similar number of participants. Nonverbal dismissals and verbally insulting episodes marked custodians’ negative experiences, whereas positive experiences were marked by interlinguistic exchanges and uncertainty reduction information exchanges. Finally, custodians indicated that they did not have much time to interact with others in-depth or at all due to their work routines.

The study’s second research question asked whether and to what extent social identities (e.g., race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status and occupation) shape Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers’ communication experiences. Over half of the participants said that race-ethnicity shaped their communication experiences. Some of the main reasons offered were that people (including faculty, staff, and students) often did not acknowledge custodians’ presence, which custodians attributed to people’s negative attitudes toward Mexican immigrants. Participants who said that race-ethnicity shaped their communication experiences also perceived that social class, immigrant status, and occupation were relevant. For instance, in the context of this study and for these organizational actors, these social identities appeared to be closely related, which speaks to the importance of conducting research studies that directly address issues of intersectionality (B. J. Allen, 1995, 2011; Crenshaw, 1992). This study’s findings contributed to research on intersectionality by exploring how intersectionalities of identity shape persons’ communication in an organizational context.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

This study investigated communication experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers at a large public university in the United States. This study’s primary goal was to gain an understanding of custodial workers’ routine communication with other organizational members—specifically, supervisors, coworkers, and customers (i.e., students, faculty, and staff) from their standpoints. This final chapter is organized around a focal theme centered on the study’s major findings: this study illuminated significant complexities of communication and social identity in organizational life. The results herein merit the attention of organizational scholars and practitioners alike. Following a discussion around the major findings and the focal theme, this chapter addresses implications for theory, methods, and practice, as well as limitations and directions for future research. Throughout this chapter, I interweave narratives of three salient themes that emerged during the research journey: arriving, being here, and life tracks. These themes are significant because they highlight common threads in the participants’ and in my lived experiences: language and communication, immigration, and sociocultural integration. Lastly, I present some limitations, directions for future research, and closing remarks.

Arriving

I arrived in Nuebayol 15 years ago, and, at the present time, I arrive to the occasion of writing this final capítulo (i.e., enacting my voice). I have had time to reflect on this research journey, on the lessons I have learned, and on important themes that resonate with both my personal and research experiences. During my journey, several themes have surfaced that I interweave throughout the narrative of this concluding chapter. These themes have common
threads running through them: immigration, language and communication, and sociocultural integration. The first theme is arriving. Arriving typically means reaching a place at the end of a journey or a juncture. Arriving could also mean that a person has accomplished a goal that he or she had in life. Coming to this closing chapter embodies both of those meanings for me. However, as I have learned since my arrival in Nuebayol fifteen years ago, arriving means much more to me and to many other Latina and Latino immigrants. For instance, at this moment, I have arrived at a place where I can use the opportunities that life has given me to empower others, but also to enact my own voice in self-empowering ways. After experiencing this research project, I have also had time to reflect on how many Latina and Latino immigrants have not arrived, or, even worse, may never arrive.

To explain what I mean by arriving, I have set up a dichotomy between the physical and the metaphysical, or the ability to enact voice. Clearly, the Latina and Latino immigrants who participated in this study have physically arrived in the United States. They came with the intention of bettering their lives, and, in many ways, they have. Holding a job with benefits in this country constitutes a major success for most of them. Simultaneously, arriving has to do with having a presence, not just in the physical sense, but also in the metaphysical sense. For example, many custodians felt that they had arrived physically but had not transcended their physical or material presence in this country. Arriving also means a person’s ability to enact voice in her or his social surroundings. Arriving means to have the power to present oneself to others in a way that one’s presence is acknowledged.

In essence, this idea of arriving goes beyond mere physical presence. Arriving gets enacted in the form of compelling discourse that lets the world know that one is here. Such a compelling discourse plays out in microlevel contexts (everyday talk) and macrolevel contexts
mediated messages). For many immigrants, including myself, simply arriving is not enough; we must arrive so that we feel that we are part of our sociocultural environment. For instance, based on the findings of this present study, it appears that most Latina and Latino immigrant custodians have not arrived. Language is the main reason for their liminality or layover. To further illustrate this point, fifteen years ago when my uncle anxiously expressed to me: “Tu tienes que aprender Ingles” [Translation: You have to learn English], he appeared to be asking me to move beyond just the realm of the physical and to arrive in the sense of becoming an acknowledged member of U.S. society. My uncle was referring to the importance of acquiring the English language to integrate into U.S. society and to augment my ability to perform discursively and compellingly in my everyday life. My uncle knew that arriving meant being on a certain type of immigration life track.

To arrive, I needed to be on a life track that would bring me to this point. My immigrant life track in the United States is education. Had I not gotten onto this life track, my immigrant journey might have gone in a completely different direction. My immigrant life track began the very moment that my father and my uncle invited me to register for school. Many immigrants commonly receive an invitation to find a job (often doing hard labor) when they arrive in the United States. I was fortunate to receive an unusual invitation by my uncle and my father: “go to school.” For me, that request was momentous, and it placed me on a life track that would lead to my consequent arrival. My arrival at this present moment has been dictated by my take off.

My father and my uncle’s invitation to consider education instead of work served as the catalyst that propelled me to a place different from that of the Latina and Latino custodians whom I interviewed for this study. Education shaped my immigrant life track because it introduced me to the dominant language of the United States (i.e., English), and it gave me the
ability to enact voice in ways that most of the custodians in this study cannot do. At this very moment, my subject position symbolizes both arrival and commencement. I have arrived at the pinnacle of my education journey as I prepare to commence my life as a highly educated person. For many Latina and Latino custodians, arriving has not been an option; it never has been. This situation presents them with a future that is much different than mine. Many of them may never have the opportunity to arrive in the United States in this sense. Language still remains an obstacle in their path to getting there.

**Ingles/English: Latina and Latino Immigrants’ Social Dilemma and U.S. Society Sine Qua Non**

Not speaking the dominant U.S. language (i.e., English) fluently is a significant communication impediment in various social contexts for Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers, and several conclusions may be drawn from this finding. First, Latina and Latino immigrants’ motivation to learn English has to align with U.S. society’s desire and with its social structures to promote immigrants’ language acquisition. Second, the first conclusion has important implications for immigrants’ interpersonal networks. Third, linguistic ability and social and cultural integration are inextricably linked. This conclusion suggests that if host society members are unwilling to engage new cultural members, then cultural neophytes would have a difficult time integrating into that society. Fourth, because social actors’ actions are interdependent with how that society is structured, social actors (e.g., Latina and Latino immigrants) often bear the burden of responsibility to proactively adjust to and/or shift the social status quo to be able to participate in that society.

The relationship between immigration, language acquisition, and cultural transition suggests that immigrants must learn the society’s dominant language if they are to advance
socioeconomically. The present study illustrates that persons who migrate to a new country have a serious need to take tangible steps toward acquiring the dominant language of their new cultural context. Otherwise, persons who do not acquire the dominant language can potentially remain socioeconomically stagnant. In the case of the Latina and Latino immigrants who are part of this study, when asked why they had not learned the language, several responded with answers like “Es que tengo la cabeza muy dura” [Translation: I have a hard head] or “Pues es que vine aquí muy vieja ya y no tuve educacion” [Translation: It’s because I came here too old and I did not have any education]. Although immigrants have vastly different antecedents before migrating, such justifications for not learning a country’s dominant language may not be entirely reasonable.

Some immigrants may be very motivated to learn their new culture’s language, but that society and its main social institutions, including host society members, must also have a positive attitude, as well as the willingness to support those immigrants’ desires to learn the dominant language. In a country such as the United States, which fervently values its dominant language and its ethnolinguistic vitality, often “outsiders” or “foreigners” who speak a different language other than English may be viewed as persons trying to acquire something that belongs to “us.” Paradoxically, recent contentious debates about English Only imply that this country wants immigrants to learn English and to speak only English in public places. This reality reinforces scholarly claims that language is inextricably linked to national identity and group membership (Aldama, 2001; Grosfoguel, 2003; Rodriguez, 2007). Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ everyday communication experiences show some of the complex dynamics that inform immigrants’ lived experiences in a new country. In this case, the participants in the present study appear to continuously find themselves in situations that might diminish learning English.
The workplace structures and host society members of Latina and Latino immigrants appear to act unsupportively of the participants’ inclinations to learn English. For instance, work overload not only does not allow custodians to form and sustain substantive relationships with people outside of their same-language coworker group, such work structures also impede them from learning English. A heavy workload does not give custodians time for professional and personal development (e.g., learning the country’s dominant language). Some custodians expressed that the institution attempts to support them by offering once per week/one-hour-long English classes. The small amount of time invested for the language acquisition of the custodians does not reflect a good effort from a large public university in the United States. As a higher education institution, it appears appropriate for this organization to make better efforts to provide educational opportunities for its service workers. For example, currently CU has a strategic plan called Flagship 2030 in which the university outlines a set of initiatives to improve its long-term standards and goals. One of the seven “core initiatives” states: “7. LEARNING FOR A DIVERSE WORLD. We will develop, implement, and assess university strategies to improve the diversity of faculty, students, and staff, as well as to foster a supportive, more inclusive community for all.” Based on the participants’ experiences at CU, it appears that their work experiences do not match CU’s self-professed value for diversity. This is relevant because it appears that the university is not addressing the needs of all of its stakeholders. This situation additionally suggests that when the organization refers to stakeholders, it appears to privilege students and faculty and not non-administrative staff members. The lack of resources that the university puts into the personal and professional development of its service workers appears to support this observation.

5 Retrieved from http://www.colorado.edu/flagship2030
Second, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ narratives about their communication experiences imply that many of the people with whom they interact do not appear to be interested in linguistically engaging non-dominant language speakers. Such an uncooperative communication orientation could potentially discourage immigrants from attempting to learn the new language because they might perceive that language acquisition is too difficult due to incessantly mundane communication challenges. Results imply that host society members need to appear more inclined to meet non-English speakers halfway. The foreign-language speakers might then feel that their efforts to learn the language are welcomed and supported. This situation suggests that within social systems such as CU, all stakeholders are in some way responsible for perpetuating foreign-language speakers’ lack of English language skills. Host society members’ communicative orientation toward non-English speakers should communicate to them that host society members are interested in the new members’ well-being and progress. I propose that one way in which we can accomplish the goal of promoting people’s progress is by reaching out to them when in mundane interpersonal encounters. This reaching out can take the form of simple exchanges whereby people leave the encounter feeling better about their chances to learn English. For example, a simple exchange could be a brief teaching moment in which words are exchanged and translated into English or could be one in which the other person’s native language might prove useful. Host society members’ attitudes toward immigrants’ English language acquisition efforts can also have significant consequences for immigrants’ interpersonal and social networks.

For immigrants living in the United States, the ability to speak English fluently often relates to the density of their social network. If the individuals in the immigrant’s interpersonal/social network are proficient in English then this may mean that those individuals
may also have access to a variety of job opportunities and know a large number of people with additional social capital. Under such circumstances, the immigrant enters the new country and finds a circle or network of English-language speakers, and, thus, the person may feel more encouraged and motivated to learn the new language. In other words, if, after an immigrant arrives in their new country, people with cultural capital receive the immigrant, then the immigrant would quickly have access to human resources that would potentially provide access to those other persons’ cultural capital. Cultural capital could translate to extended social networks and access to various types of jobs and occupational opportunities for immigrants. In summation, many immigrants’ desire to learn English must be matched by the new society’s willingness to have mechanisms in place that aid in that language acquisition process. Language acquisition is partially an interdependent process in which a society depends on social actors to sustain its linguistic vitality, but, at the same time, social actors depend on social structures to support their linguistic practices. For Latina and Latino immigrants, becoming embedded in this interdependent social process has significant ramifications.

Immigrants integrate socially through exposure to domestic media and interpersonal encounters with host society members (Kim, 2005). This assertion suggests that for immigrants to integrate socially and to acquire a new language, the people with whom they come into contact must be willing to engage them communicatively. History shows that Latina and Latino immigrants have not always been welcomed and supported by U.S. host society members. Under such circumstances, the new immigrant faces the challenge of finding ways to create opportunities for learning. However, a chief problem could be that learning opportunities often come from people whom the immigrant knows, and, therefore, the immigrant has access only to
the resources to which those persons that they know have access (i.e., interpersonal/social networks).

Regardless of their social antecedents, Latina and Latino immigrants have some agency to shape how their U.S. experience unfolds. These immigrants can make strides toward acquiring the English language, and thereby they could possibly place themselves in a position where they would be prepared to take advantage of educational and work opportunities. Making such moves is critical for the immigrant’s ability to move up the socioeconomic ladder. Some ways that Latina and Latino immigrants can accomplish this forward movement are by exposing themselves to English-language media, signing up for free weekend English courses offered by community organizations, and finding conversational partners with whom they feel safe talking. Based on the participants’ statements, it is clear that they are well aware of the negative outcomes that not speaking English causes in their social lives. Many participants appear not to have taken tangible steps to move in a direction where they become semi-fluent or fluent in English. This reality also illustrates why a person’s interpersonal/social network is essential. Some of the participants, for instance, may not have been aware of available opportunities and, thus, they provide insufficient reasons as to why they cannot improve their English language skills.

Many Latina and Latino immigrant custodians remain transnational citizens even after many years of residence in the United States. These persons remain connected to their countries of origin and disconnected from U.S. culture and society. This circumstance further affirms that immigrants have some agency in the choices that they make to shape their lived experience. Although many participants indicated that they want to learn English, they also disclosed that they rarely watch English-language television or listen to the radio in English. Consequently,
this lack of action helps to structure their current social reality. Unlike European and Asian immigrants, Latina and Latino immigrants are in close proximity to their countries of origin and, therefore, they have easier access to their familiar cultural products and artifacts, as well as having close proximity to their native language. With the exception of some “tropicalized” spaces (Aparicio & Chávez-Silverman, 1997) like Miami, FL and parts of New York City and Los Angeles, CA, for example, Latinas and Latinos who do not learn English tend to remain on the social, cultural, and economic fringes of U.S. society. It can, thus, be concluded that context is highly relevant to Latina and Latino immigrant communication experiences. In the case of the participants in the present study, the overlapping historical, institutional, and relational contexts in which the participants exist do not appear conducive to their English-language development and, consequently, do not appear to support their social and economic integration into U.S. society.

The history of the western United States shows tense relationships between Mexicans and Europeans (Rodriguez, 2007). After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, when the United States seized the land where the state of Colorado is located, tensions surrounding land acquisition, language, and citizenship have been part of the southwestern American experiences of both Mexicans and European Americans (Aldama, 2001). CU itself is a university steeped in a history of past racial discrimination against non-whites. CU’s history includes active Klu Klux Klan participation on campus through the 1940s. It is within these overlapping historical and institutional backdrops that Latina and Latino immigrant custodians (primarily Mexicans) exist today. Moreover, continuous contemporary debates about illegal immigration might cloud interactions across racial-ethnic differences (e.g., interactions between a white and a Mexican
As a result, historical, institutional, and relational contexts may powerfully shape Latina and Latino immigrants’ routine communication experiences in this organizational setting.

Due to their status as transnationals, for many Latina and Latino immigrants, linguistic segmentation appears more sustainable. This means that not only their close geographic distance to their home countries, but also several other factors contribute to some immigrants’ sustained inability to learn English. These factors might be the core communities (e.g., immediate interpersonal networks) that receive them in the United States, the formation of ethnic co-communities (e.g., New York’s Washington Heights neighborhood, Miami’s Little Havana and Chicago’s Humboldt Park neighborhood), and advanced transportation systems. These combined social factors function to convey to Latina and Latino immigrants that they can build a life in the United States without much knowledge of the English language. Many Latina and Latino immigrants live in ethnic co-communities, are primarily exposed to the media of their native countries, and work in places and jobs where they primarily interact with same-language coworkers. The increase of Latin-American immigration, coupled with anti-immigrant and specifically anti-Latino immigrant sentiment, may potentially lead to a bilingual state similar to the Quebec model, in which there could be conflict around issues of identity and around access to resources, with language at the center of such a conflict. These situations could potentially play out through persons’ mundane communicative exchanges in social contexts such as the workplace.

**Being Here**

In some ways, the present study is about learning how people communicatively negotiate their multiple subject positions with others. This study’s findings show how complex and multifaceted such processes can be in everyday interactions. To effectively negotiate one’s
subject positions, the person must first “be here.” Being here is about the experiences of day-to-day struggles to negotiate one’s existence (mainly with culturally and linguistically different others). Being here represents the everyday interactions that give life to our lived experiences. Although arriving is about one’s ability to enact voice, being here is about the mundane micro practices a person engages in to negotiate one’s voice with others.

The present study illustrated that to be here, some persons must first grasp the society’s dominant language in ways that are acceptable to the socio-fundamental group. I propose that for people who cannot perform such a task, being here becomes a gargantuan challenge. This situation begs the question, how can one be here or negotiate his or her being with others besides those with whom he or she shares a language? Such was the case of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians at CU. These persons, in many ways, could not be here because they could not negotiate their subject positions with English speakers. For example, custodians’ struggles communicating with culturally different supervisors, customers, and coworkers represent their struggles to “be” in a society where they are positioned as nondominant. Their narratives of struggle with the English language display the custodians’ struggles to be here. These persons’ perceived inability to be here creates doubts about their self-worth and leads them to question why others would want to acknowledge (or value) them.

For like Latina and Latino immigrant custodians at CU, negotiating their right to be is often a struggle that plays out in intricate ways in the drama of their daily lives. Language use is profoundly fundamental to the process of animating those lived experiences. This reality suggests that without the ability to use the dominant language of one’s society, one feels as if he or she is not here. For instance, when that student in high school yelled at me “stop talking that shit!” he was communicating to me that I was not being recognized because I was speaking in
Spanish. The statement “stop talking that shit!” symbolized the dominant society’s desire to suppress my ability to be because my being did not match what that society so strongly valued (e.g., the English language). That moment represented my daily struggle to be during my early days as an immigrant.

Often when persons’ struggle to be, they create mechanisms that give them temporary moments of respite or at least create the illusion that the person is here. The story of my uncle coaching me in my living room fifteen years ago represents my experiences with being here. When my uncle told me “learn how to say ‘Sorry but I don’t speak English,’” he was teaching this discursive move so that I could cope with the challenges ahead of me during my early days in a new country. In retrospect, my uncle was teaching me to say: “I am here, but I am really not here for now.” During those days, I could not even engage in the struggles to negotiate my being because I totally lacked the discursive currency to convince others that I was indeed here. Latina and Latino immigrant custodians create discursive safe zones so that they can temporarily be here with each other. It is during those moments that they feel that they can be here, even if fleetingly. When I think back to my early days as an immigrant in this country, when I lacked the ability to speak English, I come to a place of deep understanding as to why custodians construct those discursive safe zones at work.

**Communicating with Supervisors, Coworkers, and Customers**

The persons with whom custodians interact shape the type of communication experience they have in the workplace. Custodians have qualitatively different communication experiences with their supervisors, coworkers, and customers. The most significant finding here is that the participants in the current study appeared to have more positive communication experiences with their same culture and language peers. In contrast, communication with many supervisors and
customers (mostly people from different racial-ethnic backgrounds) appeared to be consistently negative. A significant conclusion drawn from this finding is that this situation might constitute a microlevel example of how ethnic co-communities form and develop in the United States. Additionally, this same situation might exemplify how communicative practices that resist outsiders play out in everyday interactions. For instance, host society members might be choosing to strengthen their group identity by rejecting different others, or they may simply be indifferent or oblivious, forcing Latina and Latino immigrants to remain within their ethnic enclaves. As this study shows, if immigrants, most of the time, feel welcomed and supported by their same culture/language peers, then they may also feel the need to remain in these safe zones.

Conversely, if mundane interpersonal encounters with cross-cultural others are supportive, understanding, and welcoming, immigrants may feel more included and thereby be more inclined to become part of the larger society. This finding illustrates how these relational push/pull dynamics may play out in the workplace. It can also be concluded from this finding that investigations of service workers’ communication experiences can provide a useful perspective to better understand organizational systems as a whole (Collins, 1986).

**Communicating with supervisors.** The large majority of custodians perceived that their supervisors’ communication styles were aggressive, which appears to have created a harmful work environment. Most participants expressed that communication with their supervisors was mostly negative because supervisors perceived their role to be that of an authoritative boss whose approach was best fit to yield the work productivity that the supervisors sought. This finding yields several significant conclusions. First, it appears that as an organizational leader, most of the burden of responsibility fell on the supervisor to create and foster a supportive communication climate with her or his employees. Second, managerial organizational roles
appear to have been approached as rigid scripts that guided interactions with subordinates. Third, even if an employee is unruly, it appears inappropriate and ineffective for leaders to communicate with hostility toward their subordinates. Fourth, based on the findings concerning the verbal mistreatment of subordinates, it appears that organizational administrators should have done a better job at screening who became supervisors.

Many participants expressed that their superiors treated them condescendingly. This perception reflects poorly on the supervisors’ leadership approaches. Under most circumstances, an effective leader would try not to address his or her subordinates in a verbally aggressive way. Organizational leaders bear the burden of responsibility to promote a communication climate that is supportive and conducive to a productive work environment. If employees feel that there is a problem with how they are addressed, and no action is taken, this situation suggests that the leader is not open to feedback. This leadership style can be problematic because unhappy workers can, for instance, engage in sabotaging behaviors. In such cases, the supervisor may need training to heighten their awareness of effective interpersonal skills. Custodians across departments stated that their supervisors exhibited verbally aggressive behaviors, and these behaviors are problematic for the workers and for the organization as a whole. Generally, it appears that supervisors embrace a role-taking approach where they see their role primarily as an authoritarian figure (Dansereau et al., 1975). Organizational roles appear to determine how supervisors treat and communicate with their subordinates.

Supervisors at this organization showed that they preferred a role-taking rather than role-making leadership style. Leadership research shows that engaging in role-making, rather than in role-taking, produced more positive outcomes regarding employee satisfaction with their work and with the organization (Dansereau et al., 1975). Role-making occurs when leaders form and
develop more interpersonal relationships with their subordinates, rather than assuming a role-taking approach where the leaders remain distanced from employees and primarily see themselves as people who give orders. Furthermore, based on the participants’ narratives, supervisors appeared to embrace supervision rather than taking a leadership approach (Dansereau et al., 1975). This supervision leadership style clearly affected how the employees perceived supervisors. Custodians’ narratives about supervisors’ communicative behaviors suggest that supervisors may be socialized through various mechanisms to enact supervision leadership styles. Supervisors’ leadership styles at this organization appeared to be in a hyper-autocratic style, in which some leaders believed that workers are lazy, and if one does not monitor them carefully, then they won’t work as hard.

The large number of custodians who perceived that their supervisor was verbally aggressive suggests that this type of behavior most often occurs without the employees prompting it. This finding implies that supervisors use a hostile communication style because they feel that it is an effective way to get their workers to work. However, leaders bear most of the responsibility to sustain a work environment where people do not feel threatened or fearful about losing their jobs. For example, most custodians appear to work in highly stressful work environments. The custodians in the present study consistently stated that they just want to do their work in peace and would prefer that their supervisors did not engage in micromanaging practices. However, supervisors caused custodians a great deal of stress concerning their not doing enough work or not doing good enough work. This situation prompted custodians to feel that they could lose their jobs at any moment. Supervisors’ communicative behaviors denoted that they may not have been properly trained in how to talk to subordinates, or in how to enact behaviors that foster supportive, rather than defensive, communication climates.
The custodial workers in the present study felt that work experience alone appeared to be the primary criterion from which custodial staff supervisors were selected. Based on the custodians’ narratives, it appears that there was a great deal of nepotism in the organization. People were often promoted because they knew some of the decision makers in addition to having years of experience working as custodians. Custodians felt that people were promoted without being prepared to effectively manage a group of subordinates. Some custodians cited verbal mistreatment, lack of organization, and work exploitation as the main reasons why some of the people promoted did not appear ready to be in the role of supervisor. As one of the participants said, “Nuestro trabajo es limpiar pero son personas las que limpian y eso es lo que algunos supervisores no entienden.” [Translation: Our job is to clean, but it is people doing the cleaning and that’s what many supervisors do not understand]. This statement shows how most custodians felt about communicating with their supervisors. This situation suggests that some organizational leaders perceive custodial workers primarily as laborers and dismiss their humanity.

In sum, supervisors in this organization appeared to not be held accountable for their regular verbal aggressions and their promoting of defensive communication climates. Such a situation reflects poorly on administrators who appeared to receive little feedback about what takes place between some of their staff members. Second, supervisors appeared to approach their roles as rigid scripts. The number of custodians who expressed having negative experiences with their supervisors suggests that this may be part of the organizational culture. Third, supervisors appeared to promote an environment where open and honest communication was discouraged, and even sometimes punished, which was something that several participants expressed. Supervisors appeared to rely on verbally aggressive communication styles and these
practices appeared to engender defensive communication climates in which people were afraid to offer their opinions and suggestions about work-related endeavors. Lastly, participants felt that many supervisors relied on their own buddy system, which created an organizational culture in which supervisors were not held accountable for their negative actions. According to the custodians, such hostile communication styles produced resentment toward the departments’ leadership and also created a stressful workplace.

**Communicating with coworkers.** The majority of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians perceived that communication experiences with their coworkers were mostly positive. Participants indicated that their same-language coworkers were the people with whom they interacted the most. The primary conclusions drawn from this finding are that the participants perceive their peer coworkers, who speak their language and have a similar ethnic background, as representing safe zones in a sometimes unresponsive and hostile workplace. Second, under this type of circumstance, custodians are pushed into a space that is simultaneously positive and negative. For example, remaining in same-language discursive spaces prevents custodians from practicing and learning English. Finally, whether custodians are successful in not relying communicatively on their same-language coworkers appears to be a function of how supportive people in the workplace are of their efforts to learn English. This conclusion highlights the custodial worker—organization interdependence, and, thus, the organization’s need to support organizational members at all levels (i.e., providing opportunities for personal and professional development).

Latina and Latino immigrant custodians expressed that they frequently relied on their same-language peer coworkers for positive interactions and affirmation. Although some participants desired to speak with English speakers within the organization, when they perceived
that these others did not want to accommodate them linguistically, the participants retreated, most of the time, to communicating with people with whom they could communicate. The workplace appears to play a critical role in socializing the Latina and Latino immigrant custodians into the organization and into society at large. Social transition and adaptation is not a solitary endeavor where the social actors make all of the effort to become integrated (Kim, 2005); the receiving culture must also be receptive to the social actor’s desire and attempts to integrate socially. If the immigrant perceives that the social–cultural context is hostile toward his or her attempts to adapt, then the person may retreat and remain in his or her cultural quarters. This appeared to be the case for several participants who, when faced with a perceived unwelcoming environment, appeared to find comfort in their same language and culture peers. This situation caused the custodians to interact and seek out same-culture coworkers more often than any other workers in the organization did.

Such a reality had direct ramifications on the custodians’ ability to learn English. Custodians sought out and interacted most often with their same-language peers, and this created a simultaneously positive and negative state of affairs. Participants relied on their coworkers for social support and comfort, but also relied on them to strengthen ethnic pride and group identity. In this kind of situation, the participants are responsible for becoming mindful and for breaking away from their comfort zone to stretch their sociocultural boundaries. According to Kim (2005), language acquisition is a firm first step toward expanding one’s social and cultural capital, which can lead to upward socioeconomic mobility. Immigrants often find themselves in situations where they must weigh the pros and cons of remaining in their cultural quarters rather than venturing out into the oftentimes harrowing halls of a different linguistic world. In this sense, language represents a ticket toward self-empowerment, which simultaneously helps to
reform the status quo and the taken-for-granted, essentialistic beliefs about race and ethnicity in U.S. society. Language acquisition, for the immigrant, can become a vehicle of liberation.

Immigrants’ immediate surroundings must be supportive of their language acquisition practices. Custodians perceived that many people were not willing to accommodate them linguistically, and this created their perception of a heightened difficulty to learn English. The receiving society, therefore, has as much responsibility as the immigrant to help the person transition and adapt to that society. Both the immigrant and the host society member exist in a state of interdependence in which one needs the other to thrive. However, custodial workers are in the more precarious position because their bosses and clients do not need them to speak English to do their jobs. The present study illustrates the material and potential consequences of such a social impasse. For example, custodians’ linguistic safe zones constitute both jail and liberation. For host society members, this might engender general feelings of dislike and mistrust for people like the participants of this study.

In sum, the custodians perceived that their environment was not supportive of their lived experience and, thus, created linguistic and cultural spaces to survive socially. These discursively constructed safe zones meant both liberation and oppression because they helped the immigrant remain linguistically secluded. Staying in the safe zones, the person deprives him or herself of the opportunities to expand his or her social boundaries in and out of the organizational context. As this study illustrates, one way that these dynamics might unfold is through everyday interactions in the workplace. If immigrants perceive that host society members are unreceptive to their being part of that society—through enacting resistant communicative behaviors—immigrants’ perception of the level of difficulty to learn the new language can become heightened, and, consequently, they may retreat to circles of cultural and linguistic sameness.
Communicating with customers. A similar number of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians expressed that they had both very positive and very negative interactions with customers (mostly with students). Some of the negative experiences custodians had with students on campus became public knowledge, and this led to the formation of the Dialogues on Immigrant Integration. I drew several conclusions from this finding. First, specific practices can be employed to bring awareness and improve intercultural communication and understanding. For instance, the use of terminology such as “customer” may shape how students, faculty, and staff view the custodians. Instead, such terminology could be removed from organizational literature and instead use alternative terms. Second, all stakeholders have a responsibility to be open minded and willing to deal with ambiguity if organizations such as CU and the United States, in general, are to make strides regarding intercultural relations. For instance, if an immigrant constantly feels forced to adopt a separation communication orientation (Orbe, 1998), this communicative stance might engender negative attitudes from host society members. This orientation is one in which co-cultural group members reject the idea of forming bonds with different group members and instead remain in their own cultural communities. Lastly, this finding highlights the need for research studies that focus on service worker–customer communication. This appears to be a fruitful area of study because organizational communication scholars’ knowledge about this type of workplace interaction is limited.

The history of customers’ verbal harassment toward custodians at CU illustrates why it is necessary to implement practices for more effective communication processes on campus. The Dialogues on Immigrant Integration were created due to the residence halls’ history of verbal harassment from students toward Latina and Latino service workers. These dialogues brought together service workers and students, led by faculty and staff facilitators, to bridge the
communication chasm that existed between the two groups. Based on the participants’ narratives, it appears that such proactive actions ameliorated long-standing perceptions and attitudes toward people who are culturally different than members of the dominant culture. The dialogues’ positive results, as exemplified by participants’ comments, suggest that opening up communication channels might lead to the breakdown of barriers erected by long standing ignorance about groups of people.

In this case, a formal medium was crafted and employed to bring parties together to engage each other, with the goal of reaching mutual understandings of each other’s lived experiences from each other’s respective social locations. The dialogues’ outcomes also suggest that informal avenues can be taken, for example, by peoples’ deciding to interact with different others, not just in passing, but by making an effort to acquire deeper experiential knowledge about who other people are (Genao-Homs, & Hull, 2010). Additionally, people can become part of cultural groups and organizations to increase their cultural capital within those groups. In sum, formal and informal avenues can be taken to improve intercultural communication, which, in turn, can create space for intergroup empathy and compassion.

In addition, communication scholars are well aware of the power of language to influence perception and social interaction. Communicative practices can be improved at CU by examining how language is used in the organizational literatures (e.g., employee handbooks, policies, rules, and procedures). For instance, the use of the term “customer” to refer to students, faculty, and staff might function to reify traditional business practices in the United States. Some of these practices are potential customers’ perceptions of those who serve them as being below them on the social hierarchy (Callahan, 2006). Furthermore, students at CU might perceive that because they are the “customers” that means that the custodians are there to “serve”
them. Therefore, the customer–server binary might influence students’ negative perceptions of custodians. Instead, the use of terms such as “community members” or “campus citizens” might create alternative perceptions, communication climate, and relationships between custodians and the people with whom they interact in the workplace. The CU communication department’s expertise could be used here to help CU’s leadership examine and improve the language that appears in the organization’s literatures.

The second conclusion drawn from this finding is that although some host society members adopt a separation communication approach (Orbe, 1998), this stance might not change their attitudes, but perpetuate them. If change is to occur, persons from different cultural groups need to be open minded and willing to deal with ambiguity. The first step in reaching this stage is embracing an other-orientation or a willingness to genuinely and respectfully invite culturally different others to engage in constructive dialogue. This idea suggests that all stakeholders are equally responsible, which additionally supports previous statements about social parties being interdependent. If all stakeholders genuinely and respectfully reach out to each other, the result could be a win–win situation as people experientially learn about others and bypass the overgeneralized stereotypical messages about different others. Additionally, for Latina and Latino immigrants, positive intercultural interactions can aid in the English language acquisition process as well as in their sociocultural integration.

Finally, this finding (customer–custodian communication) and the major conclusions drawn from it suggest that more scholarly knowledge is necessary to enhance scholars’ understandings about service worker–customer communication dynamics. The present study elucidates some of the complex communication dynamics that occur daily in organizational life. Research in this area would enhance scholarly understanding of the organizational experiences of
the largely immigrant-occupied lower status occupations and of organizational systems as a whole. I posit that increasing our understanding of lower status employees’ communication experiences can also improve communication across organizational hierarchies. This information would be useful for both organizational communication scholars and practitioners.

**Custodial Work, Communicative Superficiality, and Isolation**

The final major finding for research question one is that the nature of custodial work appears to be related to Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communicative superficiality and lack of interaction with people at work. The main conclusions drawn from this finding are that custodial work appears to function as a mechanism that keeps custodians communicatively secluded. Second, there appears to be a symbiotic relationship between these types of communication-less jobs and Latina and Latino immigrants who struggle with the English language. Lastly, significant relationships appear to exist between persons who hold communication-less occupations and between the occupation itself and the persons’ ability to attain socially approved communication skills. This scenario has serious ramifications for the immigrants’ present and future as members of U.S. society.

Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers disclosed that they ended up in their current jobs as custodians because they did not have a formal education and because they lacked knowledge of the English language. According to the participants, these antecedents serve as a precursor to the types of occupations to which they have access in U.S. society. I previously discussed that some of these occupations tend to be communication-less occupations or occupations where the person does not regularly communicate with others to carry out her or his job tasks. The combination of immigrants’ inability to speak English and the types of jobs available to them makes those jobs catalysts for immigrants’ communicative isolation. These
occupations act as traps for immigrants who do not speak English because immigrants perceive that these are good jobs, and, therefore, they get the impression that they have arrived or even reached the American Dream. A byproduct of the union of the immigrant and communication-less jobs is that the person does not get opportunities to discursively engage host society members. This situation is exacerbated by the nature of many of these types of jobs, which require night shifts and long hours. This state of affairs creates a system that harms both the individual and societal members, as both miss out on each other’s existences and mutual contributions.

A symbiotic relationship seems to exist between Latina and Latino immigrants who struggle with the English language and communication-less occupations. The convergence of the uneducated Latina and Latino immigrants who do not speak English, the immigrants’ need for work, and U.S. society’s need for their labor engenders a system that sustains the status quo and sustains public perceptions that certain bodies belong to certain occupations. Additionally, the convergence of these three factors (i.e., the immigrant, his or her need for work, and the society’s need for their labor) supports a self-sustaining system that feeds dominant U.S. social imaginaries of Latinas and Latinos as representatives of blue-collar, lower status organizational roles. As many Latina and Latino immigrants enter U.S. society, they do not just get hired in blue-collar occupations, custodian being one of them, but, unbeknownst to the immigrants, they become complicit in the maintenance of a system of social inequality. In this sense, some occupations function not only to discipline Latina and Latino bodies, but also to feed dominant narratives about who belongs in certain jobs. This social reality acts as a discourse that shapes societal members’ perceptions of their own and others’ social locations within U.S. social hierarchies based, for instance, on race, class, and gender.
Social Identity and Communication Experiences

The second research question yielded four findings related to each of the social identity categories highlighted in this study (i.e., race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status, and occupation). In this section, I discuss the major conclusions related to Latina and Latino immigrants’ race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status, occupation, and communication experiences.

Race-ethnicity and communication experiences. Several Latina and Latino immigrant custodians discussed that they feel that race-ethnicity plays an important role in how other people perceive and communicate with them. The participants indicated that they perceived other people’s appearing to be racially prejudiced through those persons’ enactments of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors. The conclusions drawn from this finding are that race-ethnicity appears to still function as a divisive social-identity category, which operates in particular ways in our society. Furthermore, persons’ everyday communication experiences play out in complex ways in social spheres such as organizations. Adding to this complexity are the individual person’s social identity dynamics and how these add to the communication intricacies.

Second, prejudicial attitudes based on race-ethnicity can be difficult to assess with certainty, but race-related assumptions are not far-fetched within U.S. historical, social, cultural, and institutional contexts. For example, participants who expressed to others that race-ethnicity is an issue invoked pervasive public perceptions of Mexicans as illegal immigrants who are breaking the law. Participants who said that race-ethnicity is not an issue might be exemplifying subjects who are part of a system of oppression in which they are unable to discern this one particular social identity category (i.e., race-ethnicity) as shaping mundane communication with others. For instance, for many of the participants, being employed in the United States signifies
a step up from their circumstances prior to coming to this country. They may be in a place where
the perception of stability clouds some of the negative realities that might be present at times
(e.g., people being prejudicial toward them). Finally, because almost half of the participant
sample did not indicate that race-ethnicity is an issue, I was led to two somewhat paradoxical
conclusions. First, there may be some palpable social progress regarding perceptions of race-
ethnicity in U.S. society. On the other hand, these persons could possibly be in a state of denial
or be oblivious to prejudice and discrimination, especially because many of them had limited
interactions and did not understand English.

Race-ethnicity is a social identity category that appeared to matter to some people with
whom they interfaced at work. Participants provided evidence to their claims through
descriptions of communication experiences in which they concluded that some people’s
reactions resulted from recognizing that the participants were Latina and Latino immigrants.
This finding reminds us that race-ethnicity is still a contentious social-identity category that
shapes many people’s everyday lived experiences. Participants expressed shock that such
behaviors could come from so-called educated people. It appears that race-ethnicity can still
engender compulsive hostility and uncivil behaviors from some people. For example, one of the
participants reported that a customer had approached him, invaded the participant’s personal
space, stared directly into his eyes, and said, “I am ashamed of you. How could you be in this
job?” The participant simply responded that he was not stealing money from anyone and that
being a custodian is a respectable way to make a living. In a society currently immersed in
public discourses of a post-racial era, fueled in part by the election of a black president, this
experience sheds light on how racially prejudicial communicative behaviors can play out in a
higher education institution.
Race-ethnicity issues in communication research can sometimes be difficult to observe and assess. Race-ethnicity is such a controversial concept in U.S. society that perceptions of mistreatment based on race-ethnicity may be skewed. Some people might refer to race during an incident that has to do with something else. Consequently, gauging the extent to which social identities shape people’s perceptions of others and how they respond to those others in mundane social situations can be a difficult phenomenon to study with one-sided, in-depth interviews. However, overlapping historical, institutional, and relational contexts, coupled with the participants’ social identity composites, make the idea that some social identities shape everyday communication not a far-fetched proposition. For example, the participants’ experiences with racially different others might illustrate how some people feel about Mexicans and illegal immigration. CU is located in a region of the country close to the southern border with Mexico. In addition to this, interracial communication in mundane encounters still represents a challenge for many U.S. citizens.

Fourteen out of 25 custodians expressed that race-ethnicity did not appear to shape their everyday interactions. This finding led me to conclude that it is possible that this is a sign of progress regarding race relations in the United States. However, these participants may have remained distant, and their inability to speak and understand English may have prevented them from experiencing any form of rejection, as several others did. It would be difficult to assert, with certainty, whether race-ethnicity definitively played a role in participants’ interactions within the circumstances surrounding participants’ communication experiences. What the present study does accomplish is that it reveals the perspectives of organizational stakeholders who have historically been oppressed and marginalized in both the larger society and organizational contexts. According to several scholars, these perspectives are important because
they help to understand how complex systemic issues play out in social systems (Collins, 1986; Wood, 1992). As a result, such perspectives empower us to find ways to address these issues to improve social systems such as organizations. A related accomplishment of this study is that it additionally illustrates some of the complexities present when individuals embody overlapping social identities, such as occupation and immigration status, and how these overlapping identities add complexity to everyday communication experiences.

**Social class, immigration status, occupation, and communication experiences.** The second, third, and fourth major finding from research question two yielded that 11 of 25 (44%) participants perceived social class, immigration status, and occupation as relevant social identities that shaped their everyday communication experiences. Participants who said that these three social identities matter also stated that race-ethnicity is influential in their everyday interactions. The main conclusions stemming from these findings are grouped into one discussion, as are the discussion of findings in chapter six. I chose this approach because it seems significant that the participants who expressed that one of these social identities shaped their communication also indicated that the other three did.

This set of findings yielded several conclusions. For instance, social class, immigration status, and occupation appear to be inextricably linked for the participants who claim membership in specific areas within those social identity categories. Historically in the United States, predominant discourses about working class people, immigrants, and blue-collar occupations (e.g., custodial workers) have been mostly negative (i.e., stigmatized; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Such discourses can create complex environments that shape workplace communicative dynamics for people who embody those marginalized identities and those with whom they interact (Ore, 2006). For instance, applicable research shows how Latina and Latino
immigrant custodians’ workplace experiences at CU relate to the experiences of blue-collar workers, custodial workers, and immigrants in general (Bridgewater & Buzzanell, 2010; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Mills, 2002; Segal, 2002). Second, the intersectionality of social class, immigration status, and occupation can have material consequences for persons who symbolize those social identities (e.g., shaping how people perceive and communicatively orient toward them, and discrimination). Finally, the participants’ social location, defined by their social identity composite, renders them muted in the organizational context.

This study results are significant because they substantiate previous research related to blue-collar workers’ organizational experiences (e.g., Gibson & Papa, 2000; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004). For instance, the four CU departments in this study seemed to display strong cultures of consent (Burawoy, 1979). Burawoy found that blue-collar employees tend to become socialized and strongly identify with their occupations (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). In such environments, employees constantly justify why they put up with the tediousness and monotony of their work tasks. This identification process happens through internalizing the norms and values of their occupation and the organization’s culture through everyday communicative practices, stories, rituals, metaphors, and rites. In this process, routine communication is fundamental to forming, maintaining, and altering the organization’s culture of consent. Based on their narratives, custodians at CU seemed to adopt some of the norms ingrained in their workplace culture (e.g., avoiding conflicts). In this sense, custodians, through their everyday discourse, appeared to be complicit in sustaining the cultures of consent that circumscribed their communication experiences.

Results also suggested that the four departments’ cultures at CU seemed to systematically compel custodians to adopt their norms. Some of the key ways through which this process
unfolded were gossiping, storytelling, and repressing dissent. These cultures of consent also represent a form of concertive control where the workers symbolize docile bodies with rigidly dictated sets of habits and behaviors (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Custodial workers often justified their actions (i.e., repressing disagreements) by citing their commitment to the customers and job benefits. Similar to the experiences of the factory workers that Gibson and Papa (2000) studied, custodians in this study seemed to espouse an ideology that is supported by their interactions with coworkers and customers. This ideology is used by the organization to keep custodians disciplined.

Discourses of success are another mechanism through which organizations control blue-collar workers, and simultaneously, these discourses help blue-collar workers maintain their dignity in the sometimes dirty work that they perform. Lucas and Buzzanell (2004) demonstrated that miners maintain their dignity by focusing on the positive aspects of the work that they do, having pride in their occupation, and the social benefits of being employed. Similar discourses of success emerged from custodial workers’ narratives in the present study. For many custodians at CU, working as a service workers is a sign of upward social mobility because their previous jobs were more physically arduous. Therefore, custodians often talked about the arduousness of their previous jobs and how maintaining a less physically demanding and stable job with benefits was very lucrative. Custodians’ workplace experiences at CU show some of the differences that exist among different types of blue-collar jobs.

Mills’s (2002) ethnographic study of factory workers at a manufacturing firm showed how the physical and social environments influenced workers’ perceptions about communication. Mills’ findings illustrated how workers in the transportation, processing, and container departments communicated much differently based on the relations between their
physical environments and social relations. In other words, the type of work that they did seemed to create particular kinds of communication boundaries. For example, workers used jokes, teasing, and talking in hallways as a way to foster a climate of collaboration or sense of community in the container department. In contrast, in the transportation department, workers thought the work had to be solitary and they had no time to fellowship with each other. This example illustrates how the type of work that workers do can influence their communication patterns.

Similarly, custodial workers at CU seemed to rely on their brief encounters with each other in hallways and breakrooms to nurture a sense of community. For custodians, constant movement was part of their everyday experience, so ephemeral exchanges with coworkers seemed to foster their sense of community or feeling that they were not completely isolated. In the case of custodians, the work tasks also created communication boundaries that powerfully shaped their routine communication patterns. This result is in line with extant research about blue-collar workers’ communication experiences (Mills, 2002). CU custodians’ experiences showed that many custodians tried to connect with people to cope with the communicative silence of their job. Nevertheless, CU custodians’ workplace experiences parallel other custodial workers’ organizational experiences.

The extant body of research on custodial workers’ organizational experiences shows that the increase in Latina and Latino custodial workers in various organizational sectors has caused a restructuring of janitorial work in the United States (Cranford, 1998; Smith, 2010; Waldinger, 1996). This restructuring affects other races’ access to janitorial jobs and it also had implications for labor unions. Second, Latinas and Latinos appear to be more proactive than other racial groups in recruiting other Latinas and Latinos for custodian jobs (Waldinger, 1996). Research
shows that Latinas and Latinos expanded social capital has fueled their increase in numbers in the service industry (Cranford, 1998). Third, structural elements such as organization type and work shift directly affect custodians’ overall work experiences and interactions with customers specifically (Hood, 1988).

Research on custodial workers in U.S. organizations reflects that the increase in Latina and Latino immigrants is causing a shift in the structuring of janitorial work (Cranford, 1998). This research mostly resembles the present study’s findings. For instance, since the 1970s, Latinas and Latinos account for most of the growth in janitorial jobs in the United States (Cranford, 1998). This growth has led to a major overhaul of the janitorial industry. Between 1980 and 1987 the janitorial industry went from mostly unionized workers to nonunion contractors controlling 83% of the business services market (SEIU, 1998). Nonunion workers made as little as $4.00/hr. In addition, as Latinas/os and Asians entered service industries, blacks went from representing 48% of the janitorial population in 1970 to 14% in 1990 (Cranford, 1998). Latinas and Latinos’ integration into the janitorial industry has had several implications for all custodians and Latinas and Latinos specifically.

The restructuring of the janitorial industry due to the integration of Latinas and Latinos into this market has produced a swelling of workers who are willing to pay for low wages and under inhumane conditions. This situation has led to the detriment of unionized protection. It was not until the mid 1990s when SEIU (Service Employees International Union) fought for more union representation for service workers across the United States. This union restructuring has caused many years of ambiguity and anxiety for most janitors. This ambivalent state has led men to leave janitorial jobs and for women to take them up. According to the literature, janitorial work is becoming feminized (Cranford, 1998). As the status of janitorial work
decreases, poor uneducated Latina immigrants have been filling these jobs. A possible reflection of this scenario is that out of the 25 custodians interviewed for this study, seven were men and eighteen were women. The number of Latina and Latino custodians at CU, as well as Asians, reflect a type of social reproduction that research shows is due to several interrelated factors.

For example, network recruiting is more prevalent among Latinas and Latinos than other race-ethnicities and even more so when compared to blacks (Smith, 2010; Waldinger, 1996). Latinas and Latinos tend to be more proactive than blacks in matching jobseekers with open positions in their service jobs. Latinas and Latinos who recently migrated to the United States strongly rely on other Latina and Latino immigrants to refer them for a job. Latinas and Latinos have a more collaborative orientation because they perceive that as nonnatives they have to work harder to get the jobs and gain the status that U.S.-born citizens have (Smith, 2010). In contrast, blacks were found to be skeptical and distrust other blacks who asked for a job referral. Apparently, this was the case because many blacks tend to live in neighborhoods with high unemployment rates, whereas many Latinas/os live in neighborhoods with high underemployment. The difference is that, whereas many blacks do not have jobs, many Latinas/os are employed in low-wage, low-status occupations (Smith, 2010). These research findings align with the experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians at CU with network recruitment. Moreover, research on custodial workers shows how the type of organizational structures directly affect custodians’ work experiences.

When custodians at CU indicated that the custodian position was highly coveted by many people it initially did not make much sense to me, but later I learned why. This is the case

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6CU janitors are unionized, which might be another reason why they view their job as stable and desirable, and why some of them endure constant disrespect from their supervisors and customers. On paper, union protections are supposed to guarantee workers’ protections, such as safe work conditions and benefits.
because as research shows janitorial work can very satisfying but this satisfaction level can depend on the type of organization where the custodian works and whether this person has the night or day shift. In a longitudinal ethnographic study of black and white custodians working at a university, Hood (1988) found that custodians’ work experiences changed dramatically when they got moved from the night to the day shift. Hood found that the work shift mediated the stigma of dirty work. For instance, at night, custodians did not have to interface with many people and this communicative distance gave them a sense of ownership in their job. Custodians had “ownership” of the buildings because they had them all to themselves and when they finished their shift, they left all their buildings completely clean. In constrast, the day shift was an exercise in status management. Custodians had to learn to work around customers and also get used to higher surveillance and frequent supervisor and customer disrespect. Whereas the night shift seemed to create feelings of pride in cleaning “their” buildings, the day shift made the custodians confront the reality of their dirty work by being reminded of it from disrespecting customers.

Custodians’ experiences in Hood’s (1988) study parallel the experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians at CU. In the case of stigmatized, dirty work; occupation seems to overshadow race and social class as a cue to which people orient in negative ways. Even in the case of U.S.-born blacks and whites, these workers felt more comfortable when they went “under the radar.” Hood’s study illustrated how custodial workers felt the need to use their work shift as a mechanism to protect their self-esteem and dignity by avoiding contact with reminders of their stigmatized and dirty occupation. In addition, Hood’s study illustrated how the organization type can play a significant role in the kind of experience that custodians have in the workplace. For example, some custodians have to interface with higher status customers even if working during
the night shift. In contrast, universities are typically less occupied at night and this means less contact with their customers.

Based on CU custodians’ narratives, it seems that the university setting is an ideal place, especially at night, for a custodian who does not speak English. The present study findings’ are useful because they provide information that can be used to compare CU custodians’ experiences to the experiences of other racial-ethnic groups. For this reason, it is also useful to situate the workplace experiences of immigrants, in general, to compare other experiences with the experiences of Latina and Latino custodians at CU.

The workplace is a fundamental social context where immigrants learn to negotiate their overlapping social locations in their host society. Research on the experiences of immigrants in their new culture’s workplaces shows that challenges related to intercultural communication (e.g., negotiating difference and identity), and cultural transition and adaptation are two central areas of significance. For example, Mills’s (2002) study of Polynesian immigrants in New Zealand illustrated how everyday communication episodes can be challenging even if the immigrants speak the dominant local language. Mills’ study showed how new immigrants have to learn not only the dominant language but also the use of localized vernaculars to minimize bypassing. Immigrants’ cultural transition and adaptation processes have also received much attention from communication scholars (Alkhraji et. al, 1997; Kim, 2005; Amason et. al, 1999). For example, CU Latina and Latino immigrant custodians stated that they learned about the United States through their interactions with student customers. Overall, research on immigrants and their communication experiences suggests that CU custodians’ experiences appear to be mostly similar to other immigrants going through similar processes.
When a person relocates to a new country, typically, this individual has to learn how to negotiate localized multiple discourses of identities (i.e., raced, gendered, and classed). These negotiation processes have been the research focus of several scholars (Bridgewater & Buzzanell, 2010; Drzewiecka & Steyn, 2009; Mills, 2002; Pio, 2005). This research has shown that immigrants particularly struggle to position themselves as dignified “subjects” in a new cultural context (Pio, 2005). For example, Bridgewater and Buzzanell (2010) found that Caribbean immigrants often invoked notions of difference (e.g., race and immigrant status) to subjugate and assert themselves during workplace interactions. The authors analyzed the stories of 25 West Indian immigrants working in the United States to illustrate how immigrants discursively positioned themselves as reproducing outgroup members’ dominant perceptions or resisted those stereotypes. Similarly, Drzewiecka and Steyn (2009) found that Polish immigrants used discursive tactics to situate themselves as outside the dominant construction of “White” that exists in post-apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, Pio (2005) found that Indian immigrants experienced a variety of communicative challenges during their adaptation process in New Zealand workplaces including negotiating and sustaining a positive self-concept. Similar immigrants’ experiences with cultural transition and adaptation have been well documented in scholarly research.

Cultural transition and adaptation research studies demonstrate that the experience of CU custodians is not much different from other immigrants in similar circumstances (e.g., Mills, 2002; Pio, 2005). Most people who relocate to a new country must learn how to communicatively negotiate their social locations with host society members. Much of this everyday negotiation happens in the workplace (Kim, 2005). Alkharaji et. al’s (1997) study illustrated how Muslim immigrant employees communicatively negotiated their acceptance of
the organizations’ cultures, but kept their national cultures intact in their private lives. Similarly, Amason et al. (1999) illustrated how Latinas/os negotiated acculturation stress in the workplace with their Latina/o and white coworkers. Results showed that supportive communication with their coworkers mediated the Latina/o workers’ ability to cope with acculturation stress. These research studies help situate the experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians at CU.

Collectively, these studies suggest that immigrant experiences with communication in the workplace are fraught with challenges due to language use and processes of negotiating difference with host society members. What might be unique for CU custodians is the particular communicative tactics that they employed in their everyday negotiations (i.e., educating others and avoiding conflict) within this specific organizational context and the factors influencing such communicative tactics (i.e., highly defensive communication climate). In this sense, this study represents an important contribution to organizational communication scholarship.

The above-mentioned research studies reflect how social identities such as social class, immigration status, and occupation position people in ways that shape their communication experiences with cross-cultural out-group members. Results suggest that Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ social class, immigration status, and occupation engendered negative material consequences. Several participants candidly expressed that they felt that they represent much of what is undesirable in U.S. society. Roberto’s comment is a vivid example of such feelings: “Les repugnamos. Es como si le dieramos asco a ellos. Yo no entiendo porque tantos gringos se sienten de esa manera. Debe ser bien dificil llevar su vida asi. Per no nos beneficia a nosotros tampoco.” [Translation: They find us repulsive. It’s as if we are repugnant to them. I don’t understand why so many Americans feel that way. It must be hard living their lives that way. But it doesn’t benefit us [Latinos] either].
This situation foments a communication system in which intersecting marginalized identities shape not only how others perceive the person, but also how the person perceives him or herself. Such a situation may also create cognitive dissonance in the person, which can also shape his or her intercultural communication competence. The person’s avowed identity exists in constant tension with the society’s ascribed identities and with their intersections. People who are uneducated and who do not speak English may regularly find themselves at a disadvantage in mundane social encounters. For individuals who embody intersections of marginalized identities, a significant material consequence is difficulty forming and developing healthy relationships with culturally dissimilar others. The nature of custodial work adds an additional barrier to accomplish such relational goals.

Traditionally, in the United States, the public’s perception of persons who are lower class, immigrant, and work in low-status occupations has been shaped by pervasive messages that carry with them stigmatized connotations. For example, immigration is often tied to Mexican illegal immigration, which provides a skewed sense of reality about contemporary immigration to the United States. The media are a significant social institution that plays a key role in perpetuating the public’s perception about immigrants, lower class persons, and blue-collar occupations. For instance, we rarely see television or movie characters who are poor and hold lower status occupations as central to story lines. Some people might draw from those dominant meanings to form ideas that influence how they communicatively orient toward persons who personify those stigmatized identities. People can, therefore, deploy messages that align with their conceptions of people who remind them of stigmas in ordinary interpersonal encounters.
Finally, identity intersectionalities can shape persons’ social location and render them muted in specific social contexts. For custodians, language functions to render them muted, but also their social class, immigration status, and occupation work in tandem to further support their mutedness. Although this present study is a type of case study that focuses on a specific organization, it would not be far-fetched to assume that the participants’ mutedness carries over to other English-language dominated social contexts like hospitals, their children’s schools, and the shopping center that they frequent. Collectively, these conclusions suggest that complex social mechanisms work in concert to mute Latina and Latino immigrants, and, thus, shape their communication experiences in social contexts such as the workplace. These social mechanisms overlap and their degree of impairment shifts as the immigrants move through the different social spheres that they inhabit in U.S. society. For some participants, their workplace in a predominantly white southwestern state and university appears to be a space where they feel muted due to the intersectionality of specific elements of their social identity composite. This outcome illuminates complex dynamics in that particular identity intersections might contribute to routine communication in organizational life. These complexities have implications for communication theory, research methods, and practice.

**Implications for Theory, Research Methods, and Practice**

The findings of this study have implications for communication theory, research methods, and organizational practice. Communication theory can be employed strategically to highlight some of the complex relationships between communication and social identity present in organizational life. For example, co-cultural communication theory is useful to elucidate Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ everyday communication experiences. Second, this study illustrates some of the intricacies involved in conducting research with marginalized
persons. Negotiating trust and a supportive communication climate in the initial phases of the research project is a critical foundation upon which to build the researcher–participant relationship. Lastly, Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers’ subpar access to developmental resources such as language acquisition programs, educational opportunities, and advanced job placement does not appear to align with the organization’s professed commitment to diversity and its commitment to all of its community members.

**Theoretical implications.** Findings illustrate that communication theoretical frameworks would be useful to deepen scholarly understandings of communication processes and social identity (e.g., immigrant blue-collar workers’ communication experiences in U.S. organizations). Particularly, co-cultural communication theory (Orbe, 1998) appears valuable to understand Latina and Latino immigrant service workers’ communication in a predominantly white organization. The primary goal of co-cultural communication theory is to develop understandings of traditionally marginalized persons’ everyday communicative practices. Findings also reveal that social identity intersections appear relevant to Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ routine communication experiences. Therefore, the findings also contribute to conversations about social identity intersectionality and how identity intersections can have material consequences for social actors in routine interactions (e.g., verbal mistreatment and discrimination). Finally, findings display salient relationships between culture, power, and communication dynamics. Critical lenses could, thus, be helpful to advance our knowledge about communication experiences of historically marginalized organizational actors.

**Co-cultural communication theory.** The present study contributes to intercultural and intergroup communication theory in general and to co-cultural communication theory specifically. Co-cultural communication theory focuses on explaining nondominant societal
members’ communication experiences in dominant social structures. This theory offers various communication orientations and practices that nondominant group members employ in different situational contexts. Findings reveal situational contexts and circumstances that shape Latina and Latino service workers’ adoption of specific communication orientations and practices (e.g., assertive accommodation and nonassertive separation communication orientations, such as educating others and avoiding; Orbe & Spellers, 2005). A particularly significant contribution that this study makes to co-cultural theory is introducing language use complexities when nondominant/dominant co-cultural members communicate. For instance, Latina and Latino immigrants’ inability to communicate in English shape their everyday communication experiences in powerful ways. Communication theories in general and co-cultural communication theory specifically appear to assume that social actors have choices when deploying and interpreting verbal messages. This study demonstrates that under certain circumstances social actors are deprived of such communicative choices.

Co-cultural communication theory (Orbe, 1998) conceptually emanates from standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1987; Wood, 1993) and muted group theory (Ardener & Ardener, 1975; Kramarae, 1981). Muted group, like standpoint theory, aims to elucidate the lived experiences of traditionally marginalized societal members. Co-cultural theory stretches these theories by explaining how marginalized group members communicatively negotiate their subaltern subject positions within dominant societal structures. Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ routine communication experiences exemplify specific communication orientations and practices that co-cultural theory invokes. This present study represents a contribution to stretching co-cultural theory by highlighting how lack of linguistic skills in a specific culture virtually sterilizes nondominant group members’ capability to engage in various communicative practices. For
instance, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communication challenges with English illustrate how language operates to mute those persons in an organization where English is the dominant language.

In their explication of co-cultural communication theory, Orbe and Spellers (2005) discuss how non-dominant co-cultural group members “select” some communicative practices over others. Invoking the notion of a communication “selection” process suggests that social actors have choices regarding which practices to use in a given communication context. In this vein, it appears that co-cultural communication theory assumes that everyone speaks the same language. The present study’s findings bring a new dynamic to nondominant and dominant co-cultural group members’ communication experiences. This new dynamic emerges from nondominant and dominant language users’ interactions in routine communication episodes. Co-cultural theory advances that nondominant group members sometimes employ nonassertive accommodation orientations and use practices such as “increasing visibility” (i.e., maintaining a “co-cultural presence” in the dominant social contexts that they inhabit). The present study shows that for people who do not speak the same language as the dominant population in that society, they might be forced to decrease their visibility due to their inability to communicate in that society’s dominant language. Under such circumstances, for example, Latina and Latino immigrant custodians might have desired to seek accommodation, but their linguistic inability pushed them to adopt a separation communication orientation instead. Language use adds a layer of complexity to the communication experiences of this co-cultural group that allows us to view co-cultural theory from an alternative perspective.

Findings related to language use in everyday interaction illuminate how Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ (co-cultural group members) communicative choices play out in
situations in which interactants do not speak the same language. The results lend important insights into such communicative negotiation processes. In this social context (the research site), it appears that the dominant language (English) trumps the communicative choices co-cultural communication theory implies that social actors possess. Results additionally show that dominant language use prohibits the custodians from thinking that they have many choices. Participants’ uniformity across narratives suggests that they often felt communicatively impotent when interacting with dominant language speakers. Danilo’s comment is an example of how custodians feel about their inability to speak the dominant language: “Es desconcertante que uno no puede hablar con otras personas. Imaginese vivir en un lugar y estar rodeado de personas y que uno no puede hablar con ellas; es bien frustrante a veces.” [Translation: It’s discouraging not being able to talk with other people. Imagine living in a place surrounded by people and one can’t talk to them; it’s very frustrating at times]. Although co-cultural communication theory appears to assume that co-cultural group members speak the same language, the present study’s findings corroborate several of the theory’s central assumptions.

Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communication experiences related to language use illuminate various issues embedded in co-cultural communication theory’s main epistemological assumptions. First, co-cultural theory is founded on the idea that hierarchies exist in society that privilege the experiences of certain groups of people. The present study shows that some social actors’ (e.g., nondominant language speakers) lived experience is less privileged than those who speak the dominant language. This scenario creates a context where those persons who do not speak English are embedded in a social context where they are always already subaltern subjects. For instance, “dispelling stereotypes” (i.e., countering oversimplified generalizations about one’s cultural group) is a type of communicative practice that co-cultural
theory outlines in its conceptual framework. Many custodians are not able to engage in this practice due to their inability to speak English, and they inadvertently might reinforce dominant stereotypes about Latinas and Latinos instead (e.g., Latinas and Latinos cannot speak English). Such a communicative disadvantage can shape perceptions of self and others. Consequently, nondominant/dominant co-cultural group members’ routine communication can potentially (re)produce a linguistic hierarchy that tends to privilege the dominant group member’s lived experience.

According to co-cultural theory, dominant societal members use their privileged positions to create communication systems that reflect and sustain their lived experiences (Orbe & Spellers, 2005). Some of the present study’s major findings corroborate this assumption. Participants overwhelmingly expressed that they felt that dominant language speakers appeared unwilling to linguistically accommodate them. Participants perceived that the English speakers with whom they interacted felt that the non-English speaker needed to accommodate them in any mundane interaction episode. Participants described many instances in which they sought linguistic accommodation from dominant language speakers, and, in these instances, they found that this approach was not well received. For example, according to the custodians, they constantly attempted to enact what Orbe (1998) called “assertive accommodation” practices, such as communicating self and educating others with customers. Alberto’s comment is an example of such an orientation: “Ah, pues le hable in ingles para que mire que yo tambien tengo ese problema. . . de que no hablo ingles perfecto y el o ella no hable el espanol perfecto y entonces unas palabras que ella pueda ayudarme y yo ayudarle a ella. [Translation: Ah, I talked to him in English so that he could see that I also have that problem that I don’t speak English perfectly and he or she does not speak Spanish perfectly and then some words that she could
 Alberto’s comment illustrated how many participants attempted to communicate their authentic selves and also educate others about who they are.

Co-cultural theory’s third assumption is that dominant communication structures hinder the progress of nondominant societal members. It appears clear that Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ lived experience is not reflected in the dominant communication system. Based on participants’ narratives, they feel that their social location as nondominant language users keeps them from advancing socioeconomically. Several participants indicated that their inability to speak English prevents them from getting higher positions within the organization and from seeking out educational and other career opportunities. Those narratives illustrate that for those whose lived experience is not reflected in the dominant public communicative system, their ability to advance is negatively affected. The following comment illustrates these feelings: “porque tenemos que aprender el idioma; es muy importante aquí. Estamos en otro lugar que no es el nuestro, que no es nuestra lengua. Y eso tambien ayuda a que nos esforcemos para aprenderlo y queramos salir adelante.” [Translation: because we have to learn the language; it is very important here. We are in a different place that is not ours, it is not our language and that also helps us to work harder to learn and move forward]. Custodians’ circumstance of not speaking the language additionally compounds their perceptions of themselves as people of no value within the dominant social structure.

Lastly, co-cultural communication theory assumes that co-cultural group members employ strategic communicative behaviors to negotiate their subject position within dominant societal structures. Based on the participants’ narratives, this is best illustrated through their communication experiences with customers. Participants embraced a separation preferred interactional outcome by enacting nonassertive separation communicative practices such as
avoiding. According to several participants, they embraced those approaches in response to constant verbal mistreatment and rejection from customers. In contrast, some participants indicated that they typically used assertive accommodation as interactional outcomes by enacting communicative practices such as communicating self and educating others. Social actors who enact these practices attempt to present themselves in an authentic and open way, and, simultaneously, they attempt to teach dominant group members their cultural norms and values. Participants discussed how they employed some communicative practices verbally as well as nonverbally. For instance, avoiding behaviors were primarily enacted nonverbally, whereas communicating self and educating others were enacted verbally (typically in the participants’ native language—Spanish). Furthermore, assertive accommodation orientations were also enacted in the context of the immigrant dialogues mediated by an interpreter.

Findings about Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communication experiences have theoretical implications for communication theory. Co-cultural communication theory appears to assume that all social actors have access to the same linguistic repertoire when selecting strategic communicative practices within dominant social structures. Language use powerfully permeated the participants’ communication experiences and these experiences illustrate how linguistic hierarchies play out in U.S. society. The participants’ communication experiences also illustrate how dominant group members enact their privileged subject position through mundane interactions with nondominant group members. Such power dynamics hinder the progress of nondominant group members, which sometimes leads them to employ communicative practices to survive within oppressive societal structures. This discussion of theoretical implications outlines how results expand and corroborate central tenets of co-cultural communication theory. These theoretical implications also show relationships between
communication, power, and culture. Such relationships have implications for social identity intersectionality theory.

**Social identity intersectionality.** Intersectionality studies are still scarce almost two decades after scholars like Allen (1995) and Crenshaw (1992) argued that such studies are necessary to inform scholarly research and organizational practice. The findings of the present study show that those calls to action are still relevant. According to Latina and Latino immigrants’ narratives of their communication experiences and social identity, identity intersections can function to shape societal members’ lived experiences. As the United States continues to be immersed in dominant discourses that shape our perceptions of social difference, research that informs how those perceptions might be outwardly enacted by social actors is highly significant for communication research and practice. The present study highlights four specific identities and their intersections: race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status, and occupation. These identities have been somewhat neglected in communication research and in studies that explore how communication constructs them and, in turn, how they shape everyday communication.

Identity intersectionality theory is still in its infancy (Crenshaw, 1991). The present study contributes to continuing scholarly conversations about relationships between communication and intersections of social identity. This study’s findings highlight complex ways that such relationships can play out in an organizational context. Though somewhat slow, the movement toward a focus on intersections of identity, rather than on studies of race or gender, has begun to gain some traction. The present study acts as a starting point for future projects that embrace and develop how intersections of identity oppress and marginalize persons within dominant societal structures. This study’s results establish a foundation for explorations
that seek to contribute to conceptual frameworks such as intersectionality of identity (Crenshaw, 1991) and matrix of domination (Collins, 2000).

Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communication experiences in a predominantly white university show significant complexities related to communication and social identity. I believe that my research contributes to conversations about intersectionality theory, for instance, findings about communication and social identity show that participants perceived that their social class and immigration status worked in tandem with their occupation to hypermarginalize them. This finding reinforces Crenshaw’s (1991) observations about how different identity categories interrelate to form and sustain a system of oppression, or what hooks (1989) called “interlocking systems of oppression.” This finding suggests that these social identity categories do not necessarily act in isolation from the other categories, but, according to the participants’ narratives, they are equally significant and interconnected.

The findings of the present study illustrate that identity intersections and context are also inextricably linked. In the context of a predominantly white university in the southwestern United States, occupying nondominant social identities of race-ethnicity, class, immigration status, and occupation appears to produce a particular kind of everyday lived experience for some of the participants. Particularly, this finding reinforces claims about the relationship between social identity, context, and communication (Orbe, 1998). An additional contribution of the present study is an investigation of communication and social identity that has virtually gone unexamined within communication research (i.e., social class, immigration status, and occupation). Therefore, this study plants seeds for future harvesting about these three social identities and about communication in organizational contexts.
The data also suggest important issues related to power and communication. Within U.S. hierarchies of social class, immigration status, and occupation, communication plays a key role in sustaining or eradicating these hierarchies (B. J. Allen, 2011). Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ communication experiences show how the hierarchies could be communicatively sustained. For instance, custodians’ situations make it difficult for them to advance socioeconomically. Their inability to speak English makes it challenging for them to move up socioeconomically and attain higher status occupations. The data also contribute to conversations about the politics “games” played in various social contexts, which deal with power and privilege based on social identity. For example, people’s social identity composites carry with them social currency that shapes people’s lived experiences. Findings suggest that the communication experiences of persons who occupy lower social class and immigration status, as well as lower status occupations, need to be studied more explicitly. Intersectionality theory can be stretched by research that emphasizes the lived experiences of poor immigrants working in lower status occupations. Learning about those persons and their interactions can enhance both communication theory and intersectionality theory, as well as enhance those persons’ experiences.

Critical theory. Data suggest that it would be useful to continue building on these findings through the use of critical theory frameworks. The aim of critical theory frameworks is to identify and eradicate existing uneven power structures to emancipate subaltern subjects’ socially constructed realities (B. J. Allen, 2011). The present study’s findings suggest that critical theoretical frameworks are useful to gain a deeper understanding, and, potentially, to change the organizational experiences of nondominant group members, such as non-English-speaking Latina and Latino immigrants. Based on the participants’ narratives, it appears clear
that some “isms” still exist in U.S. society, and, therefore, critical communication scholars can use critical conceptual frameworks to identify and change power imbalances in organizational contexts.

Study findings show that power dynamics are sometimes enacted through uneven communicative encounters, and such unevenness can function to suppress persons’ communication, and, thus, their ability to enact voice. In the case of the participants in the present study, the way that they showed resistance in a dominant communication system, where their voices were disadvantaged, was by engaging in avoidance. They remained distant and, thereby, separated themselves from this system. Critical theoretical approaches can be employed to study how organizational structures perpetuate systems of powerlessness and inequality. The present study shows that supervisors used aggressive communication styles to discipline and control their subordinates. The defensive communication climate to which the supervisors’ communication styles contributed additionally supported a workplace where subordinates avoided dissent and conflict. These types of dominant structures, where voice and agency are repressed, become exacerbated by situations where social actors lack the ability to speak the dominant language.

The present study implicitly contributed to critical theory by examining how subaltern subjects, such as Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, negotiate their various marginalized subject positions in a dominant social structure. The findings illuminated issues of language and oppression, marginalization and discrimination. Language surfaced as a contentious factor that positions some persons in a more powerful and privileged position in this specific social context. The present study highlighted a somewhat neglected cultural group in critical communication theory (i.e., Latinas and Latinos) and their communication experiences. According to my
findings, critical theory can examine the lived experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant low-status employees and create spaces where those persons have opportunities for social progress. These findings contribute to critical theory building by looking at specific intersections of identity and how these intersections become axes of oppression for some persons in certain social contexts. The knowledge obtained from such research contributes to critical perspectives such as postcolonial, critical race, and feminist theories. For instance, the present study can inform processes related to race and gender inequalities. Additionally, this study can illuminate future investigations that examine macrolevel dynamics, such as relationships between the United States and Mexico.

**Methodological implications.** The study yields several methodological implications. One important implication is that, when dealing with human beings, it is useful to work on building affirming relationships with the persons who are studied. Data corroborate scholarly observations about researcher–researched relationships. For instance, feminist scholars have argued for researchers to become more sensitive to those they research by adopting even interactional patterns (e.g., more conversational interviewing styles; Bernal, 2002; D. S. Madison, 2005). For example, I initially experienced some issues of trust and confidentiality with my Latina and Latino participants. Therefore, I believe that establishing and developing good relationships with my participants helped them to become more open with me. Second, this research experience elucidates research issues related to language use. At the beginning of the project, I thought that because I speak the same language as the participants, the process would be somewhat simple and straightforward. I learned however, that I had to communicatively negotiate my researcher, national, and ethnic identities with the participants. Finally, building trust and showing commitment toward the participants’ lived experience led to
a consistent search for commonalities and community. As the project developed, I sensed that participants became as interested in me as I was in them—I refer to this as relational synergy.

Contemporary feminist scholars suggest that relational development with participants is crucial to interpretive research projects (Bernal, 2002; Clair, 2003). My experience with the present research project corroborates feminist scholars’ claims about researcher–researched relationships. The results of the present research study illustrate that relationship building with those one seeks to learn more about or from is a significant step before and during the research process. This project’s results have implications for methods because the results show the benefits of relationship-building for interpretive research studies. One of the most important implications is that relational history appears to be very important when it is time to interview the custodians. Before I interviewed the participants, I made an effort to form and foster positive relationships with them. For instance, I worked with them as a custodian for several months before I asked them in-depth questions about their lives and their work.

Building positive relationships with the custodians was one of the most important decisions that I made during the research process. Establishing good relationships with the participants created a climate that was supportive of interviewing. In other words, building a positive relational history with the participants was highly beneficial for collecting data (interviewing). This was especially the case because I was dealing with a vulnerable and marginalized population. In the early stages of the project, many participants expressed their concern that I might use the information that they gave me to harm them. I noticed that the participants appeared concerned about losing their jobs because of the information that they shared with me. I constantly found myself reminding them that I would not do anything to harm
Toward the end of the project, I knew that we had reached a place of trust, because participants appeared to feel that they could be open with me.

In the context of studying marginalized and vulnerable persons, I knew that I needed to foster an air of trust to get the participants to be open with me. I believed that I was prepared for the task, because I knew that if I wanted to collect rich data, I would need to develop relationships with the participants. This methodological implication reinforces feminist scholars’ advice to be mindful of reconstructing larger societal power dynamics in the qualitative research process (Clair, 2003). Therefore, I entered the research site with a certain degree of awareness that I would approach participants as persons whose knowledge I respected and needed. I believe that these findings reveal that relational processes are central to the research project. This situation engendered a foundation that allowed for positive interactions throughout the research process. During those interactions, I also learned that I needed to negotiate language-use differences and similarities with the custodians.

During the conceptual phase of this research project, I held the assumption that, because the participants and I shared the same language, we would understand each other without much difficulty. During the research project, I learned that the participants and I had to learn how to negotiate language use differences. Some of those differences were different language dialects and speech rate. Some people might perceive that racial-ethnic similarities automatically lead to simple or easier data collection processes. However, I learned that when conducting research, racial-ethnic similarities do not sterilize other potential issues that might arise during a research study (e.g., negotiating language or ethnic differences). Although having similarities in social identities can be valuable opportunities in terms of research, I feel that scholars have missed being attentive to other intersections of social identity. I posit that the present study yields
noteworthy implications for methods because it appears that it is relevant to consider various social identities, besides race, when conducting qualitative research studies (e.g., social class status, occupation, and age).

Language use emerged a salient methodological implication as the project unfolded. The custodians and I had to learn to negotiate our dialect and speech rate differences during the interviews. Before the data collection phase started, I believed that because the participants and I spoke the same language, communication during interviews would be a fairly simple process. However, the participants and I soon recognized that although we spoke the same language, we came from different countries and, therefore, had some language differences (e.g., different dialects). For example, the participants would often use words that I could not understand, and vice versa. When this happened, we had to find ways to understand what the other person meant. The participants and I adopted perception-check mechanisms to gauge whether we had understood what the other person said. For example, several times during the interviews participants would ask me “usted me entiende lo que le digo, verdad?” [Translation: you understand what I am telling you, right?]. I found myself asking the participants similar questions to ensure that we had shared meanings. Additionally, I had to use those perception-checks to keep up with the participants’ rate of speech. Many participants spoke at a fast speech rate and sometimes I could not keep up with what they said. The custodians’ and my native vernaculars, as well as our speech rates, became recognizable communication differences that both parties had to negotiate during our interactions.

Traditionally, communication research on social identity has focused on gender issues (Buzzanell, 1994). A smaller body of research has emphasized race-ethnicity (Orbe & Allen, 2008). The emphasis on gender has led scholars to miss other intersections of social identity,
such as occupation and immigration status. For instance, although the custodians and I spoke Spanish, we realized that we had linguistic and ethnic differences that we needed to negotiate in our interactions (e.g., I am from the Dominican Republic, whereas most participants are from Mexico). The present study illustrates how those differences are negotiated by researcher and researched. An important implication of negotiating relational status and linguistic differences is that the participants and I created a space where commonalities and community could be explored for the sake of mutual understanding and relational synergy.

The custodians and I worked to build open and honest relationships, and we worked our way through our linguistic and ethnic differences. I believe those communicative processes created a climate of trust and commitment to one another. Within this climate, all parties were able to foster a state of synergy in which we became more than just researcher and researched. According to feminist scholars, paying attention to relational aspects of researching is important during the research process. During the research process of the present study, participants consistently indicated that they were proud of me and proud of the work that I was doing. Additionally, many participants expressed that they were at first suspicious of my research because no one had ever been interested in their work experiences before. I responded that I cared about their experiences, and I also thought that they had many valuable things to say and to contribute to the organization. It was through these dynamic exchanges that the participants and I fostered a supportive communication climate.

The custodians in this study became committed to the project because I showed them that I was interested in and cared about their experiences. Their level of commitment led the participants to search for places of commonality and a sense of community with me. I suggest that comments like the following illustrate this community building: “continua haciendo lo que
estas haciendo; que padre, es tan bueno ver a uno Latino así como tu haciendo lo que tu estas haciendo.” [Translation: continue doing what you are doing; that is cool, it is so good to see a Latino like you doing what you are doing]. I believe that the participants saw themselves in me, and vice versa. Their state of joy when commenting on my experience also suggests that, at some point in their lives, they had aspirations greater than being an underpaid service worker at a university. Some of their comments additionally suggest that many participants still desired to do better in life. My research experience highlights the importance of creating and sustaining positive relationships with custodians. Such a research choice can establish a firm foundation that facilitates negotiating other issues that might arise, such as issues of language use and negotiating trust and privacy.

**Practical implications.** Organizations benefit from having practices in place that promote intercultural understanding and the development of all stakeholders. The present study shows that CU could do a better job at promoting intercultural understanding and the development of all staff members across hierarchies. This study highlights the need to continue focusing our research on the higher education context. This type of organization appears to have taken a back seat to other organizational contexts (e.g., corporate and nonprofit organizations). This study reveals that the complexities of higher education contexts provide a rich arena in which to study communication processes related to leadership, difference, and group interaction. Third, this study elucidates the importance of considering investigations that focus on the work experiences of low-status employees. Applied communication research seems particularly well suited to address issues regarding how to improve communicative practices for low-status employees.
The University of Colorado at Boulder can display a stronger commitment to the personal and occupational development of the Latina and Latino immigrant service workers who participated in this study. CU represents a complex social system in which all stakeholders are responsible for the systems’ outcomes. An important issue for the administrators of CU to consider is the extent to which they act upon the values to which the university is committed (e.g., diversity and education for all community members). For example, most custodians indicated that they do not feel that CU administrators emphasize the custodians' occupational and personal development. This reality suggests a different orientation toward the participants than toward other members of the organization. According to the participants’ narratives, service workers receive less attention from the university administration, which translates to lesser benefits and less emphasis on their development.

A stronger commitment by the CU administration toward Latina and Latino immigrant service workers’ development would be reflected in more opportunities for learning English and advancing their education. However, CU is not alone in its administrators’ apparent lack of commitment toward providing occupational and personal development opportunities for custodial workers. I conducted a search for educational and/or occupational opportunities for custodial workers at peer universities, and I could not produce any specific practices that were tailored to assist custodial workers in their development. My study illuminates the need to pay attention to the work experiences of low-status employees. Many of those employees are immigrant and, thus, may require special attention regarding opportunities to learn English. This study exposes the lack of commitment that the university administrators appear to have in regard to developing all of their employees, regardless of their location in the organization hierarchy.
This study highlights the need to study university settings and low-status employees’ communication experiences. Organizational practices that address the occupational development needs of these workers are virtually nonexistent. The benefits of focusing our research on university settings are that we can advance practices that would benefit all stakeholders. Moreover, researchers could act as whistleblowers regarding unjust practices that affect particular groups of people in organizational settings. For instance, if an organization’s leadership claims that it has a particular mission or value, and they do not appear to fulfill it regarding some stakeholders, then it is our duty to raise questions about how that organization is addressing those persons being left out. This study reveals that Latina and Latino immigrant service workers might not be reaping all the rewards of being part of an organization such as CU. The apparent lack of attention toward custodians’ occupational development suggests that the university leadership places less emphasis on those organizational members than it does on other members.

In any organizational system, all stakeholders should be responsible for the well-being of each other, as well as for the well-being of the organization. Paying attention to the issues that I address in this paper would yield benefits for all organizational stakeholders at CU (i.e., administrators, faculty, staff, and students). One way that CU’s leadership would show a stronger commitment toward all of its stakeholders is by making the most out of its human capital (e.g., faculty and students’ expertise) to address important internal issues such as the ones that I indicate in this study.

For example, CU has one of the top-rated communication departments in the country. Furthermore, CU can tap into its ethnic studies department for expertise about cultural groups’ experiences and interethnic understanding. One the practical implications of this study is that we
have some information regarding how some service workers feel about their experiences working at CU. Bringing its resources to bear would mean for CU to conduct a thorough self-study where it analyzes in depth work practices across organizational units. For instance, surveying custodians and supervisors to better understand what can be done to improve how supervisors communicate with customers. CU’s communication and ethnic studies departments can be consulted to provide expert advice on matters related to interethnic communication.

Many custodians at CU felt that higher administration might not be concerned with their well-being. Custodial employees continually cited time as a factor that prevented them from pursuing educational opportunities. One way that the organizational leadership could address these employees’ developmental needs would be by making room for them to pursue those opportunities. However, according to many custodians, the main issue might be lack of resources. Custodial workers at CU have to cover a lot of ground in a given amount of time, and this work structure impinges on their ability to pursue developmental opportunities.

CU administrators recently introduced a strategic long-term plan, called Flagship 2030, to develop the university’s ability to meet organizational goals. The university administration outlined a long-term vision to make CU one of the leading higher education institutions in the 21st century. With this plan, university leadership hopes to create a place that “exemplifies the power and promise of diversity, intercultural understanding and community engagement . . .”7 Although this strategic plan has outlined diversity as one of its main goals, the plan does not appear to address service workers and their potential long term needs. This reality prompts me to raise the question, what is the strategic plan for that employee population? The university leadership appears to address students and faculty in this strategic vision, but what about other

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7 Retrieved from http://www.colorado.edu/flagships2030
staff members, including lower status employees? How will their work experiences be met in the next quarter century? This exception suggests that those employees are not as important as other organizational members. These observations reveal why it is important to focus communication research on university settings.

Studying organizational practices in higher education contexts would benefit scholars, practitioners, and organizational stakeholders. Applied communication research seems well suited to address some of the issues raised in this study. Applied communication research is when communication scholars use methodological and theoretical tools and resources to alleviate or solve a practical, communication-related social problem (Cissna, 1982). The main goal of this line of research is to create spaces where individuals can empower themselves to deal with problems in the context where they occur.

The continuum of observation–intervention applied research symbolizes the work of applied communication researchers (Frey & Sunwolf, 2009). Observational applied communication research is conducted when scholars describe, interpret, explain, and, sometimes, critique a communication problem in a specific communication site, with the purpose of informing other scholars, practitioners, and the public. The present study would fall on this side of the continuum. On the opposite end of this continuum is the intervention-oriented scholarship, which takes a more involved and engaged approach to doing applied research. Interventionists come into research sites with the intention of creating tangible changes that help people to deal with a communication problem (Frey, 1998; Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, & Murphy, 1996). Although the present study represents the observational type, its topic has great potential for intervention-oriented research.
Interventionists have to provide practical implications and insure that the stakeholders apply the tools that they have been given and that some visible changes result from the application (e.g., Hartnett, 1998). One component of the intervention-oriented side of the continuum is the communication activism for social justice approach. A social justice approach produces knowledge that attempts to change a dominant discourse into discourse where underrepresented individuals have an equal voice. This type of scholarship also attempts to change the grammars that, historically, keep individuals in a socially dominant position. In the communication activism approach, researchers not only point to a group of people who are socially, politically, and culturally marginalized, but they take a vigorous and direct approach to producing positive change in the contexts that they study (Artz, 1998). Embracing these conceptual tools has clear practical implications for the present study.

Although this study falls on the observational end of the applied communication continuum, I will move it towards the intervention side when I present the findings to university administrators to start courses of action to improve custodians’ work environments. Specifically, I will create a final report that outlines the major findings and practical recommendations and present it to key organizational leaders, such as the heads of each of the four departments that were part of this study. Presenting the findings to key administrators can lead to action regarding how supervisors communicate with their subordinates. Workshops to address interpersonal communication skills could be implemented to improve communication between supervisors and subordinates (custodians). Supervisors’ communicative practices can be changed if organizational leaders take actions to remedy such problems. Moreover, I will continue to stay active in conducting research that highlights the work experiences of lower status employees, in general, and immigrants, specifically. As I continue to design a research agenda, I will explore
ways to conduct interventions in places that need them. Some of the organizational practices at CU and custodians’ communication experiences elucidate why this type of research is important.

CU administrators’ possible lack of interest in the custodian’s occupational and personal development might translate to other organizational members’ orientations toward these persons. Custodians strongly expressed that supervisors and customers verbally mistreated them, which led some custodians to see themselves as less than human. Additionally, the custodians constantly questioned why others perceived them negatively. According to their narratives, the answers reside in their race-ethnicity (Latina/o) and their occupation (custodian). Those perceptions appeared to lead to questions such as, “Why would anyone be interested in a custodian?” Custodians’ mundane interactions with other organizational members illuminate the reasons why, in addition to considering the university as an organizational context, organizational scholars should also consider low-status employees.

Systemic issues appear to be present regarding how immigrant blue-collar employees are treated at CU. CU administrators’ lack of attention to custodians’ occupational development, their treatment of custodians, and the custodians’ negative experiences with customers suggest that there is a systemic problem in place. The problem may be that custodians are perceived as unimportant to the organization, its leadership, and other organizational members. The university’s lack of commitment to create opportunities (e.g., accommodating custodians’ time constraints) and to ensure that custodial staff supervisors have the appropriate interpersonal skills to deal with their subordinates leads to this conclusion. In short, it appears that many of the problems that custodians encountered regarding customers’ verbal mistreatment may be a reflection of systemic issues surrounding public perceptions of Latina and Latino immigrant service workers.
In sum, the findings of the present study suggest that the administrators of the research site may not have a strong commitment to promoting custodians’ personal and occupational development. Although the organization had some practices in place (e.g., English as a second language classes), those practices appear to be more superficial than to be a real effort to improve the custodians’ conditions. Consequently, it would be beneficial for organizational communication scholarship, practitioners, and stakeholders to emphasize the university as an organizational setting that matters. The issues that custodians face in the workplace suggest that organizational communication researchers’ familiarity with their experiences is somewhat limited and that learning more about them appears to be important to advance organizational communication theory, research, and practice. Finally, in addition to advancing organizational practices and studying the university context, learning about lower status employees’ experiences would benefit organizational communication scholars, practitioners, and stakeholders. Lower status organizational actors have been overlooked in research, which emphasizes upper level employees, such as managers and supervisors. These practical implications illuminate the need to continue studying particular communication experiences (e.g., traditionally marginalized cultural group members) in higher education organizational contexts.

**Practical Recommendations**

In this section, I offer practical recommendations to improve organizational practices at CU and similar organizations. One of the main conclusions that surfaced from this study is that the organizational leaders who oversee the custodians do not seem to promote a supportive communication climate. These organizational leaders need to address some of the problems that surfaced with factions of its leadership (e.g., custodial staff supervisors). CU administrators could also take tangible steps to display that they are committed to including and developing
lower status employees such as Latina and Latino immigrant custodial staff. I also offer particular practical recommendations for the custodial staff. Finally, I believe that organizations, such as CU, should support specific units and departments that serve roles beyond classroom instruction. At universities, a department such as ethnic studies serves the key purpose of educating the campus community on issues that deeply affect traditionally marginalized organizational and societal members. If CU leaders engage in these practices, they would greatly benefit custodial workers, faculty, staff, and students.

First, CU is a university that possesses a great deal of human capital, and, thus, its leadership could tap into this capital to reach organizational goals. For instance, university administrators could tap into the university's communication and ethnic studies departments whereby faculty experts could present workshops to organizational leaders about the benefits of promoting supportive communication climates, showing commitment toward subordinates, and showing commitment to cultural sensitivity issues. Furthermore, university leadership can maximize its use of other units, such as the Center for Multicultural Affairs, the Women’s Resource Center, Human Resources, and modern languages academic departments. In short, CU administration does not appear to be maximizing their resources to ensure that stakeholders such as custodians are receiving the best work experience possible.

Additionally, the human wealth that CU possesses can be put into use to offer knowledge that could be used by other staff members to train supervisors on interpersonal and intercultural skills (e.g., information-seeking, requesting feedback, and the importance of listening to foster positive relationships). I believe that the outcomes of the present study are a reflection of the top leadership of each of the departments in this study. If CU’s administration makes serious efforts to capitalize on its own human resources to raise awareness of the internal issues that affect its
functioning, and if it implements practices to address these issues, then the university would be
displaying a commitment to all of its stakeholders and not just to those at the top of its hierarchy.

Second, CU’s administration could engage in regular practices that communicate to
service workers that they are valued community members. The university leadership can
accomplish this goal by offering educational, occupational, and personal advancement
opportunities. Although the university offers the participants English courses, these courses are
brief, once a week for one hour, and do not provide a real opportunity for language acquisition. I
am aware of some of the impediments present to achieve such goals—many participants in this
study could not read or write, and this situation hinders their development from the start. For
this reason, CU should offer some opportunities for educational development that include
reading and writing courses at the participants’ levels. Creating such opportunities would
communicate to custodial workers that the organizational administrators care about their
development. Language acquisition classes are useful, but these classes should be more
intensive than one hour a week lessons. Classes could be offered during off hours to
accommodate people’s work schedules. Obtaining basic English reading and writing skills
would create a stronger foundation for the service workers to envision better occupational
opportunities. Many participants expressed that they felt hopeless due to their inability to speak
English and/or read and write.

In addition to basic English acquisition, reading, and writing opportunities, I believe that
CU administration should invest more resources into advancing educational and career
opportunities for the participants. I was happy to learn that CU offers free bilingual courses that
lead to a high school diploma equivalent. The School of Education implemented this program
several years ago. However, once there are opportunities in place to help Latina and Latino
immigrant service workers learn how to read and write in English, I suggest that there should be opportunities for them to continue to advance their formal education and career paths. The university could provide vouchers for the custodians to take college courses as degree-seeking students; the custodians could take courses part time. I believe that these opportunities would give participants hope that they can improve their current conditions. Once participants attain a GED with the university’s assistance, they can pursue college and the occupational opportunities that come with attaining a college degree. These skills would prepare the service workers for advancement within and/or outside of CU’s organizational hierarchy. Nevertheless, custodians should become proactive to empower themselves and to take full advantage of any opportunity accessible to them.

To advance their current state of affairs, custodians need to take tangible steps that would put them on a path to learn English, further their education, and potentially improve their socioeconomic status. This project taught me that many of the Latina and Latino custodians did not provide substantive justifications as to why they had not learned English and obtained their General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Many custodians expressed that they primarily exposed themselves to Spanish language media and did not seek out interactions with people who spoke English. Rather, custodians should expose themselves to English language media to aid them in the process of acquiring the English language. Custodians should seek out interactions with English speakers even if those interactions are a bit uncomfortable. Moreover, for the custodians who have children who are proficient in English, they should practice speaking in English with their children. Learning English is the base that would create opportunities to advance their education.
Education is the key for the Latina and Latino custodians who participated in this study. Taking tangible steps to learn English functions as the foundation to advance their education level. Custodians should proactively seek out opportunities for personal development. For instance, *Intercambio de Comunidades* is a nonprofit community organization that helps immigrants transition to the United States and learn English at an affordable price. This organization sends teachers to the students’ homes for their convenience. After setting in motion improving their English language proficiency level, custodians should take advantage of CU’s School of Education program that provides GED courses for nonnative English speakers. After acquiring their GED, custodians should look into taking college courses at CU. The university offers nine free college credits a year for full time employees. The aforementioned are just some of the opportunities that custodians can tap into to learn English and advance their education. However, the workplace environment must also contribute to and nourish the custodians’ desire for personal development.

Perhaps the main issue discovered in the present study regarding organizational practices is that an environment of ethnic intolerance appears to still exist on the CU campus. I previously discussed the cross-cultural dialogues that take place on campus and their usefulness to foster intercultural understanding. However, this practice appears to be insular, and I propose expanding it to the whole campus community. Those dialogues that happen in the residence halls appear tailored to the experiences of residence hall custodians. Custodians in Facilities Management and Recreation Services, for instance, should also be part of those dialogues. Campus wide dialogues should be advertised and implemented every semester to show service workers that the organization’s administration is committed to their well-being. In the context of a predominantly white organization, those dialogues would be highly beneficial for all
community members. Many universities apply intergroup dialogue approaches, but these approaches tend to focus on students, and sometimes faculty, and upper level staff (see Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). Instituting such practices would help create a climate of intercultural understanding and an awareness of different lived experiences. The aforementioned organizational practices would enhance Latina and Latino immigrant custodians’ experiences at CU and potentially beyond the university, into other spheres of the custodians’ social lives.

Finally, universities such as CU should show a commitment to supporting campus departments and units such as the department of ethnic studies and Centers for Multicultural Affairs. I believe that the existence of these units should not merely represent good public relations, but they should become a central part of the university culture and community. From my experiences as student, staff, and faculty at various universities, I have learned that individuals within units, such as ethnic studies departments, tend to do more than just teach and research; the service component is very strong in such departments. CU leaders should tap into their ethnic studies department for advice on how to address issues pertaining to cross-cultural understanding and sensitivity. Additionally, the ethnic studies department is active in the CU campus community by exposing the plight of less privileged societal members, such as Latina and Latino immigrants, through panel discussions, documentary film showings, and through on and off-campus community involvement. This department’s role is important because it educates stakeholders (the campus community), and, thus, holds these people accountable for their actions. I suggest that CU administrators should support campus units and departments, such as the Ethnic Studies department, and also make use of departmental members’ intellectual resources to address issues pertaining to “isms” and intolerance.
Organizations such as CU could perform practices that show a commitment to all and not just to some stakeholders. From a social justice and equity standpoint, some of the practices that I discovered at CU should be of some concern to all stakeholders (i.e., faculty, staff, students, administrators). For example, I believe that the university privileges the experiences of faculty and students, and it downplays staff members’ experiences and needs. In the context of this implicit hierarchy, lower status employees receive less attention than other staff members due to their social meanings and status. CU’s organizational practices should reflect the organization administration’s commitment to stakeholders across the organizational hierarchy. Within many U.S. organizations, and within society as a whole, the United States’ claim is that its citizens support justice and equality for all, but apparently, this is not the case for the custodians who are part of this study. I posit that how people treat less privileged others is a reflection of their prevailing societal values. People like poor and uneducated Latina and Latino immigrants do not appear to be “free” in the United States. I believe that we can take tangible steps toward rectifying this social inequity. Citizens within organizations such as CU, and citizens in general, can help change the status quo by looking inward and taking concrete steps to create social justice in their own backyards. In my own life, I have made an effort to look inward so that I can be self-reflexive about my own actions with regards to others who have fewer resources than me. I give because I constantly reflect on how much has been given to me.

**Life Tracks**

I began this chapter with a narrative about the theme “arriving” or moving beyond a physical/material existence. I believe that my arrival, my gaining of the ability to enact voice, put my life on a track that allowed me to reach the present juncture in my life. Conversely, most of the Latina and Latino immigrant custodians with whom I worked on this project never got on
this life track, and, as a Latino immigrant, I had opportunities that they never had. The notion of a track suggests many things, but foremost it suggests that the place where you begin on a certain life journey helps determine where you end. Comparing my study participants’ life experiences with mine illustrates that I began my immigrant journey on a privileged track, which was receiving a formal education. In contrast, the custodians who participated in this study began on a much different track, working blue-collar jobs that did not require them to use the dominant language of the United States (i.e., English). With this study, the participants’ and my lives converged as we found ourselves in the same place and time. However, the artifacts on our bodies partially symbolized material outcomes from the outset of our immigrant life tracks; they wear custodial staff uniforms, whereas I wear my graduate student “outfit.”

The notion of life tracks suggests a beginning, a point of departure, but also going forward, the future. When the high school counselor fifteen years ago was explaining to my uncle and me that “if he doesn’t learn English now, professors won’t wait for him,” that counselor was communicating to us that I needed to get on a particular life track, a track that would dictate how my immigrant story would unfold. That counselor knew that many youths before me chose not to learn English, and their stories did not turn out as glowing as mine could turn out to be. He knew that English was the key, not only for education, but also for the aspiration to have a decent life in the United States. For instance, in one statement, the high school counselor invoked language and education as important components of a bright future for a recently arrived Latino immigrant. The high school counselor knew that language would lead to an education, and an education would almost guarantee my cultural transition and adaptation into U.S. society. When Mrs. Dunbar (pseudonym) yelled at me “English, English, English!” she was communicating to me that language was central for me to get on a more auspicious life
track than many of my peers had. Mrs. Dunbar was convinced that some of my peers were “hurting their future by not learning English.”

The counselor, Mrs. Dunbar, and fate all played a role in the life track that I got on in my early days as a Latino immigrant in the United States. The counselor and my teacher knew what life could be like for me if I did not listen to their advice. They had already met many Latina and Latino immigrants who had chosen not to learn English and/or continue their education. They knew that these immigrants’ future might be similar to the Latina and Latino immigrant custodians at CU. However, the difference is that custodians at CU never had a chance to sit across from Mrs. Dunbar, they never had that conversation with a high school counselor, and they never took ESL high school classes at seventeen. They came from their native countries and went straight to the factories, upper middle-class families’ gardens, hotel rooms, or restaurants’ kitchens. For many of them, their life track was not education, but hard labor, and with it came the pressure to support family members back home and in the United States. Unlike me, custodians never had an uncle and a father who sent them to school and waited for them at home with a warm meal every day. Their story is a story of struggling to arrive, to be here, and to get an opportunity to get on a favorable life track like I did when I arrived in the United States fifteen years ago.

From Watching to Doing

After a long, challenging, and rewarding journey conducting this research project, its ending is bittersweet. In this reflection, I share some lessons learned from this experience. I reflect on my experience as a researcher, but also on the persons who are at the center of this study, the people whose lived experiences prompted me to embark on this journey. I organize this reflection in two parts. First, I turn the lens inward and reflect on my assumptions and
subject position at the outset of the study. Second, I share my thoughts and feelings about the people who are the heart of this study; the Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers, whose voices and experiences give life to this study, and who eternally inspire me to live always to serve others.

Watching from a distance, as I always did before I embarked on this research journey, did not give me a complete picture of the persons I watched. I continued to watch and make assumptions about who they were and what their work lives were like. Those persons are Latina and Latino service workers. At the time, I was not aware that I was looking at them through my privileged, middle-class, and graduate student lens. I was somewhat unaware of my social location in relationship to theirs. I just contemplated from a distance the question, “How miserable must they be?” and, at the same time, I wondered what it was like to be them. These were the thoughts running through my mind, because I simultaneously perceived myself as being one of them, but, in reality, I was not one of them. Many of the workers had to go through harrowing experiences to get to that place where our lives converged. I had arrived at that moment propelled by the privilege that my status as a graduate student afforded me. As I watched from a distance, I thought that I was one of them, and I could easily have been one of them. Had I made different decisions in the past, and had others not sacrificed so much, I would have been just another Latino service worker. However, I was not a service worker but, instead, a graduate student who wanted to understand what it meant to work and communicate with others as a Latina or Latino immigrant service worker who does not speak English.

The primary lesson that I learned during this research journey was never to assume that the lenses through which people see others are accurate. Accuracy has nothing to do with perception and has everything to do with subject position. In this sense, I learned a valuable
lesson about subject positionality. I was not certain why I had the thoughts I did about the workers but now I feel that my subject position had something to do with it. I perceived them to be miserable compared to me and to where I was positioned. The reality was that, considering their antecedents and the difficult pasts that most of them had experienced, their jobs at that organization symbolized not only progress for them but stability and relief. As I learned, being a Latina or Latino custodian was not a misery but a satisfaction to most of them. The satisfaction of having a stable job with benefits meant that they at least had an opportunity to live a decent life here in the land of opportunity. I quickly learned that the custodians were much more complex than I imagined, even before I uttered a single word to any of them.

Watching people from a distance may give a person a certain impression about who are those people. In the case of these custodians, anyone could have easily thought that they simply were uneducated people who clean buildings for a living. Among many other things, I learned that when I watched them, I only got a superficial view of these highly multidimensional and complex beings. It was no different with the Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers who accompanied me in this journey. I learned that, although they did not have the letters PhD at the end of their names, they were as complex, funny, witty, complicated, theoretical, practical, and interesting as any of the degree-holders whom I have met during my time at the university. The implications of this observation are that, if given opportunities to grow personally, imagine how far they could go? Could these workers have become PhDs?

My observations also inspire me to continue devoting my time to listening to the voices of immigrants in the United States. This is important work because immigrants are often perceived as undeserving or as robbers of the American Dream, especially those who entered the United States illegally. Immigrants tend to be negatively perceived and are often mistreated.
How we all treat those who got to this country last constitutes a measuring stick of this country’s dominant values. Those who live in a country that boasts about being a beacon of freedom and equality for all must not give life to hypocrisy through the mistreatment of immigrants, especially if they work in occupations that are stigmatized but essential to the functioning of organizations. For these reasons, Ramon, Rodrigo, Maribel, Carla, and Maria (pseudonyms) inspire me to continue writing for them, to continue giving them opportunities to enact their voice, because they and others may perceive that they cannot be heard.

Finally, before beginning this study, I perceived myself as being culturally similar to my partners in learning; I learned that my perceived similarities were challenged during our interactions. This result illustrates the complexity of people’s humanity. I was similar to the workers, but also very different. At the outset of the study, I overlooked that human beings might be different in multiple ways. My perception of the participants as similar, and my realization of our differences, highlights the need to move beyond watching into doing. I learned that when people engage in doing, glimpses of hope surface. Brief encounters with people who are perceived as different can provide people with a lifetime of hope and inspiration about how far they might go regarding their ability to make connections with other people. Through my research experience with Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers, I moved from watching into doing. Because I did this, and did not just watch, Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers provided me with a lifetime of hope and inspiration, and I take this with me to pass on to others.

**Limitations**

In this research study, I encountered several limitations. First, although this study is about communication experiences of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers, the large
majority of the custodians in the study are Mexican nationals. Second, I offer a unilateral perspective that does not include the voices of supervisors, culturally and linguistically dissimilar coworkers, and customers concerning their perceptions of their communication experiences with Latina and Latino immigrant custodians. Additionally, custodians’ perceptions of their interactions with customers and faculty and staff were not parsed out. Third, because the focus of this study was the subjective knowledge of Latina and Latino immigrant custodians, I relied on one primary research method (interviewing). Research method triangulation could yield comprehensive and robust findings about the organizational experiences of lower status, blue-collar immigrant workers. Finally, as a case study, this project focuses on the experiences of a particular group of people in one organization, and it would be useful to do an interorganizational comparative study to look at communication experiences in different organization types.

In the present study, Mexican nationals make up the majority of the custodians, primarily because the study took place in a predominantly Mexican-populated state in the southwestern United States. Furthermore, Mexicans comprise the majority of self-identified Latinas and Latinos living in the United States (over half of all Latinas and Latinos in the United States are of Mexican origin). Therefore, the mostly Mexican population sample might not have yielded a comprehensive perspective of the work experiences of Latinas and Latinos in the United States. As a highly heterogeneous ethnic group, Latinas and Latinos come from different countries and customs, and they have had different immigration experiences in the United States. Therefore, this study may be limited in the evidence that it provides about communication experiences of Latina and Latino immigrants. Nevertheless, the study offers useful insights into a specific group that other researchers can build on.
The present study focuses on the standpoints of Latina and Latino immigrant custodial workers and, thus, I interviewed this population only. My choice poses a limitation to the claims made about custodians’ communication experiences, because those claims are based on just this one population within the social system (CU). Additionally, custodians’ perspectives regarding customers were mostly about students, and custodians’ communication experiences with students were not analyzed in relation to interactions with faculty and staff. Although the findings of this study have heuristic value, an analysis of the narratives of the different organizational members with whom custodians interacted would provide a more comprehensive view of Latina and Latino immigrant communication experiences. The study would benefit by including the voices of custodial supervisors, culturally dissimilar coworkers, and university staff, faculty, and students.

As a research study that primarily relies on one type of research method (i.e., in-depth interviews), this study has some blind spots. These blind spots could be minimized by the use of other data-collection methods. Although this study partially includes participant-observation and document-based data, these data were mainly incorporated to contextualize the study. For instance, I worked as a custodian for 3 months and this information could have been employed in more depth to reinforce the research claims. Furthermore, due to schedule conflicts, I did not conduct ethnographic participant-observation at some of the Dialogues on Immigrant Integration. Adding this component to the research process would have enhanced interpretations of the custodians’ communication experiences.

Interview data are the chief data source used to answer the study’s research questions. Research method triangulation would make the study’s findings more robust because multiple methods would provide a wider perspective of communication process in this organizational
context. For instance, autoethnography would have been useful to systematically engage my experience as a Latino immigrant conducting research about other Latina and Latino immigrants. Further exploring my subjective experience throughout this research project would have enriched my perspectives about why I made certain assumptions concerning the custodians, and about how those assumptions shaped my understanding of the research site and them. Furthermore, a more in-depth textual analysis could have allowed for a deeper reading of organizational discourse, which could have also augmented this study’s outcomes.

Finally, this study focused on only one organization. Although doing so is not a major limitation for a qualitative study, conducting a multiorganizational study would have augmented this study’s findings. Studying multiple organizations would have potentially yielded a wider window into how different work structures, for instance, might complexify Latina and Latino custodians’ routine communication experiences. This is not to say that these experiences are consistent across the board in similar organizations or even in this one but this is a chief reason why the present study could benefit from multiorganization studies that explore differences and similarities in cultural manifestations, such as leadership styles and communication climate. Such studies could greatly enhance communication scholars’ ability to make claims about blue-collar immigrant populations’ workplace experiences.

**Directions for Future Research**

This research project produced several avenues for future research studies. Future inquiries could focus on the perspectives of the organizational members with whom Latina and Latino immigrants interact (i.e., supervisors, coworkers, and customers). Additionally, multiple organizations could be studied to appraise any salient convergence and divergence in regard to relationships between organizational cultures and communication experiences. Another exciting
line of inquiry related to the topic of this dissertation would be to explore the communication experiences of Latina and Latino immigrants in both lower status and higher status occupations. Lastly, it would be useful to examine the communication experiences of blue-collar immigrants from other historically marginalized world regions, such as Southeast Asia and Africa.

Future similar studies could collect not only the narratives of blue-collar immigrant organizational members but also narratives of the persons with whom they interact. More than one organization can be studied to explore how differences in organizational structures might shape Latinas and Latinos’ communication experiences. One of the main limitations of the current study is that it includes only the voices of the custodians’ self-reports and, thus, other voices are excluded. Conducting studies that are inclusive of all elements within the communication system could constitute one way to address this limitation. Such studies could follow the form of longitudinal ethnographies. Comparative studies of various organizations could bring in evaluations of differing organizational cultures and structures, which could deepen knowledge about communication processes.

Continuing with this line of inquiry, it would be interesting to explore everyday interactions of Latinas and Latinos who work in lower status and higher status occupations (e.g., project managers, doctors, and other highly regarded organizational roles). These studies could further be supplemented by studies of blue-collar immigrants from other parts of the world. This line of research could be constructive because it would serve to deepen our understanding of organizational actors across hierarchies and work experiences. Additionally, such work would contribute to the work begun in this dissertation, which is partially about understanding how immigrant identities are communicatively negotiated in the workplace. Comparative analyses of Latina and Latino immigrants with other blue-collar immigrant communication experiences (e.g.,
Southeast Asian and African) would also supplement this line of research. In general, such a line of inquiry offers further insights into the workplace communication experiences of immigrant employees who occupy a lower status in the socially constructed hierarchies of the industrialized First World.

Closing Statement

Racial and occupational groups deemed as belonging to the fringes of U.S. society have had to endure a long history of stigmatization and discrimination. The communication discipline has situated itself as being at the forefront of addressing socially significant communication-related issues (Frey, 1998). Many of these issues demand action to reconfigure longstanding uneven power dynamics within U.S. social structures. This study makes a contribution to scholarly conversations about the communicative experiences of historically marginalized social groups—in this case, immigrants, Latinas/os, and service workers. In the rapidly changing 21st-century U.S. sociocultural landscape, fostering such conversations is not just useful for understanding those neglected lived experiences but a social imperative.
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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Hello, my name is Wilfredo Alvarez; I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado at Boulder. I appreciate you taking your time to be here with me today. The reason for this meeting is for us to have a conversation about your work experiences. The information gathered from our conversation is to be used for a student research project. My aim in talking with you is to gain an understanding of your communication with other people at work. Please share as much as you feel comfortable sharing and know that this information will strictly be used for this research and you will have complete anonymity in the written report. Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study.

*First, let me get a little bit of information about you (demographics):*

1. What is your race-ethnicity?
2. How long have you lived in the United States?
3. How old are you?
4. What is your marital status? Any children? How many?
5. Native/First language?
6. What is your highest level of education attained?

*Now, let’s talk a little bit about work, and your job:*

1. Where are you working right now?
2. How long have you been there?
3. What do you do in that job?

*Now let’s talk about your relationships and everyday talk with other people at work.*

*Workplace Interactions*

1. Please tell me about your everyday experiences with other people at work:
   a. *During most of your workdays (or nights), who do you talk to regularly?* (prompt: supervisor, coworkers; titles, names)
   b. *[for each person:] How often do you talk?*
   c. *What do you usually talk about?*
d. *Is there anyone at work with whom you do not talk (or rarely talk with)? If so, why not?*

e. *If ESL, do you ever talk in your native language? (If yes, probe for details).*

2. Describe the relationships you have developed at work and with the people we’ve just discussed? *(Prompt: Supervisor? Coworkers? Customers?)*

   a. *Why do you think those relationships have formed and developed that way? (probe for each)*

   b. *How do you feel about those relationships at work? (probe for each)*

3. Has anyone at work ever asked for your suggestions about work-related tasks, problems, situations?

   *If yes, how did you respond?*

4. Have you ever offered suggestions to anyone at work on your own about work-related tasks, problems, situations?

   a. *Why or why not? If yes, please explain.*

   *I’d like you to tell me more about the people you interact with at work. . .*

5. Of the people with whom you talk/come in contact with at work, who seems similar to you in any way (describe further how if co-researcher needs more information)?

   a. *[For each person]: Tell me who they are, their positions, talk a bit about their background. How is ____[each person]____ similar to you?*

6. How would you describe your communication with these people who you perceive as similar?

   a. *Please provide some specific examples of what your everyday interactions are like.*

      i. *What is it like talking with this/these person/persons?*

      ii. *How do they tend to respond to you when you talk?*

      iii. *How do you tend to respond to them?*
iv. *As you think about conversations with people like you at work, do any particular conversations/events stand out in your mind? (ask to role play if necessary)*

7. Of the people with whom you talk/come in contact with at work, who seems different than you?
   
a. *For each person, please tell me who they are, their positions, talk a bit about their background. How is each person different than you?*

8. How would you describe your communication with these people who you perceive as different than yourself?
   
a. *Please provide some specific examples of what your everyday interactions are like.*
   
i. *What is it like talking with this/these person/persons?*
   
ii. *How do they tend to respond to you and you to them when you talk?*
   
iii. *Any particular conversations/events that stand out in your mind? (ask to role play if necessary)*

As you continue to reflect on your communication with others at work, I now want to ask you about your sense of how others respond to who you are as an individual... 

**Org. Comm. & Social Identity**

1. Do you feel that there is anything about you as an individual that influences how you interact with others and how others talk with you at work?
   
a. *(*Probe*): how others perceive you; their impression of you and vice versa as related to:*
   
b. *Race/ethnicity- influence how you communicate with supervisors, co-workers, and customers? If yes, why do you think this is case? Can you please provide some examples?*
   
c. *Immigration status- influence how supervisors, co-workers, and customers communicate with you at work and you with them?*
   
d. *Social Class status- influence how supervisors, co-workers, and customers perceive and communicate with you at work?*
2. Have you ever felt that anybody mistreated you/treated unfairly at work? (Probe: supervisors, co-workers, customers).
   
   a. If yes, please tell me about it.

3. Have you ever felt that someone at work treated you with preference over others?
   
   a. If yes, why do you think that happens?
   
   b. Can you please describe some of these experiences?

**Final Questions**

4. Do you think that your workplace relationships and interactions affect your quality of life outside of work? If so, how?

5. Are there any changes that you would you like to see regarding the way anyone at work talks to you? If yes, who? What would these changes be?

6. Are there any changes that you would you like to see regarding how you talk to anyone at work? If yes, who? What would these changes be?

7. Have we missed anything that would be important for me to know about your work experiences regarding how people communicate with you at work? If so, whom and what? Have we missed anything that would be important for me to know about your work experiences regarding how you communicate with people at work? If so, whom and what?

**Farewell Statement:**

That concludes our conversation ______________. I want to thank you very much for your candor, time, and attention. I want you to know that this information will be used with much integrity and also that I will not use your name in any written reports related to this research. I can give you a copy of the final report if you so desire. Once again, thank you for your time and have a good day.
Hola, mi nombre es Wilfredo Alvarez. Yo soy un estudiante de postgrado en el Departamento de Comunicacion en la Universidad de Colorado en Boulder. Gracias por tomar su tiempo para entrevistarse conmigo. La razón por esta entrevista es para nosotros tener una conversación acerca de su experiencias comunicándose con otras personas en el trabajo. Esta información solamente será utilizada para el propósito de este proyecto, el cual es entender sus experiencias comunicándose con otras personas en sus experiencias diarias de trabajo. Por favor, comparta toda la información que se sienta cómoda compartiendo conmigo. Sepa que usted tendrá anonimidad total en el reporte final. Gracias por participar en este estudio.

Primeramente, dejeme hacerle unas preguntas de sus antecedentes:

7. De cuál raza o antecedente etnico se considera parte?
8. Cuánto tiempo ha vivido en los Estados Unidos?
9. Cuál es su edad?
11. Cuál es su primer idioma?
12. Cuál es el nivel más alto de educación que ha obtenido?

Gracias, ahora vamos a hablar un poco acerca de su trabajo:

4. Donde trabaja corrientemente?
5. Cuánto tiempo tiene trabajando ahí?
6. Describame que tipo de tareas hace en ese trabajo?

Ahora hablemos un poco acerca de su comunicación y relaciones con otras personas en el trabajo. . .

Comunicacion en el Trabajo

9. Por favor, hableme un poco acerca de sus experiencias diarias con otras personas en el trabajo:
   a. Durante la mayoría de su día de trabajo, con quien usted habla más regularmente? (Por ejemplo – supervisor, compañeros de trabajo, clientes. Puede nombrar títulos y nombres si quiere)
b. Por cada persona: que tan frecuentemente ustedes hablan?

c. De que tipo de temas ustedes hablan?

d. Hay alguna persona con la cual usted no habla o casi nunca habla? Por que si o no?

e. Si Ingles es la segunda lengua: usted alguna vez habla en su idioma native en el trabajo? (hablar de detalles)

i. Que tan bueno usted cree es su Ingles?

ii. Usted cree que el uso del idioma afecta su comunicacion diaria con otras personas? Si aplica, como afecta? Si no aplica, por que no afecta?

iii. Cuando habla usted Ingles con otras personas en el trabajo?

iv. Alguna vez habla Espanol en el trabajo? Si aplica, con quien? De que tipo de cosas hablan usualmente? Como se siente hablando en Espanol en su trabajo?

v. Alguna vez personas que no hablan Espanol como primera lengua le hablan a usted en Espanol? Si aplica, deme un ejemplo por favor. Cuando esto ocurre, como usted se siente cuando esta persona(s)le hablan en Espanol? Cuando esa persona(s) le hablan a usted en Espanol, usted usualmente responde en Espanol o en Ingles? Por que si/no?

vi. A usted le gustaria que mas personas alrededor suyo en el trabajo hablaran su idioma nativo? Por que si/no?

10. Por favor describa los tipos de relaciones que usted ha podido desarrollar en el trabajo con las personas que hemos discutido hasta ahora? (ejemplo – supervisors, companeros de trabajo, o clientes)

a. Por que usted cree que esas relaciones se han formado y desarrollado de esa manera? (discuta cada relacion individualmente)

11. Alguna vez alguien le ha pedido su sugerencia/opinion acerca de tareas, problemas o situaciones relacionada con el trabajo?

a. Si aplica, como usted ha respondido?

12. Alguna vez ha ofrecido su sugerencia/opinion acerca de tareas, problemas o situaciones relacionada con el trabajo sin que nadie se la pida?

a. Por que si/no? Si aplica, por favor explique me...
Ahora hableme un poco acerca de las personas con las cuales usted interactúa en el trabajo. . .

13. De las personas con las cuales usted tiene contacto diario en el trabajo, a quien usted percibe como similar a usted?
   a. [Por cada persona]: Por favor digame quién es, sus posiciones, sus antecedentes. Como es cada persona similar a usted?

14. Como usted describiría su comunicación con estas personas que usted percibe como similares a usted?
   a. Me puede proveer algunos ejemplos de sus interacciones diarias con estas personas?
      i. Como se hablan el uno al otro?
      ii. Como ellos tienden a responderle a usted y vice versa?
      iii. Hay algunas conversaciones o eventos en particular que resaltan?

15. De las personas con las cuales usted tiene contacto diario en el trabajo, a quién usted percibe como diferente a usted?
   a. [Por cada persona]: Por favor digame quién es, sus posiciones, sus antecedentes. Como es cada persona diferente a usted?

16. Como usted describiría su comunicación con estas personas que usted percibe como diferente a usted?
   a. Me puede proveer algunos ejemplos de sus interacciones diarias con estas personas?
      i. Como se hablan el uno al otro?
      ii. Como ellos tienden a responderle a usted y vice versa?
      iii. Hay algunas conversaciones o eventos en particular que resaltan?

Ahora me gustaría que hablemos de cómo usted percibe como otras personas le responden a usted como individuo. . .

Comunicacion Organizativa e Identidad Social

8. Usted percibe/siente que hay algo acerca de usted como individuo que influye como otras personas se comunican con usted y vice versa en el trabajo?
   a. Por ejemplo – con otras personas lo/la perciben a usted; la impresión que ellos/ellas tienen de usted y vice versa relacionado con su:
i. **Raza/grupo étnico** – usted cree que su raza influye como otras personas se comunican con usted y vice versa? (supervisores, compañeros de trabajo, clientes). Si aplica, por qué usted cree que eso pasa? Me puede dar algunos ejemplos?

ii. **Estatus como inmigrante** – usted cree que porque usted es un inmigrante Latino, esto influye como supervisores, compañeros de trabajo, o clientes se comunican con usted y vice versa?

iii. **Clase Social** – usted cree que su clase social influye como otras personas, incluyendo supervisores, compañeros de trabajo y clientes, lo/la perciben y se comunican con usted en el trabajo y vice versa?

iv. **Ocupacion** – usted siente que su ocupación como trabajador de servicio influye como otras personas se comunican con usted y vice versa?

   1. **Cómo usted consiguió su trabajo como trabajador de servicio/conserje?**
   2. **Cómo se siente con su trabajo?**

9. Alguna vez ha sentido que alguien lo/la ha maltratado o lo/la ha tratado injustamente en el trabajo? (por ejemplo – supervisores, compañeros de trabajo, clientes)

   a. Si aplica, por favor hableme un poco acerca de esta(s) experiencia(s)

10. Alguna vez ha sentido que lo han tratado con favoritismo en el trabajo?

   a. Si aplica, porque usted cree que este ha sido el caso?

   b. Puede describir alguna(s) de esta(s) experiencia(s) por favor.

**El Lugar de Trabajo (Estructuras y Cultura en la Organización)**

1. Que tan frecuentemente usted interactúa con personas mas altas en la organización? (ejemplo – los jefes de su jefe)

   a. Si no frecuentemente, le gustaría? Usted siente que tener contacto con estas personas es importante? Por que si/no?

2. Como usted percibe la Universidad como lugar de trabajo? (es importante para usted que trabaja en una Universidad? Como compararía la Universidad con otros lugares en que ha trabajado?)
3. Como percibe su departamento (Housing & Dining Services, Facilities Mgmt., UMC, Student Recreation Center) como lugar de trabajo?
   a. Usted sabe acerca de otros trabajadores de servicio y sus relaciones/comunicación con otras personas en esos departamentos?
   b. Como se compara(n) con la suya aquí en su departamento?
4. Me puede describir los lugares donde usted pasa su tiempo en un día típico de trabajo?
   a. Areas que tiene que limpiar?
   b. El cuarto o sala de recreo?
5. En un día típico de trabajo, cuanto tiempo pasa en estas áreas?
6. Usted siente que el tipo de trabajo que usted hace influye con quie usted habla y que tan frecuentemente? Como?
7. Le gustaría tener mas contacto con otras personas en el trabajo? Por que si/no?

**Preguntas Finales**

11. Usted siente que sus relaciones con otras personas en el trabajo afectan su calidad de vida fuera del trabajo? Si aplica, como?
12. Hay algunos cambios que usted le gustaría ver en cuanto al modo como otras personas se comunican con usted en el trabajo? Si aplica, quien? Cuales serian los cambios?
13. Hay algunos cambios que usted le gustaría ver en cuanto al modo como usted se comunica con otras personas en el trabajo? Si aplica, quien? Cuales serian los cambios?
14. Hay alguna(s) otra(s) cosa(s) que seria(n) importante que nosotros hablemos de ellas relacionadas con sus experiencias de comunicación en el trabajo? Si aplica, por ejemplo que? Con quien?

**Declaracion de Despedida**

Aqui concluye nuestra conversacion Sra/Sr._____________________. Muchas gracias por su tiempo y atencion. De nuevo, esta informacion sera usada solamente para este estudio y su nombre no sera usado en el reporte final. Le puedo proveer una copia del reporte si asi lo desea. Finalmente, muchas gracias por su tiempo; tenga un buen dia.