“Hispanic”-“Latino”: True Representations of an Emerging Identity?

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Introduction

After much debate and controversy, the year 2000 census opted to categorize Latinos as “persons of Hispanic or Latino origin.” Responding to criticism of previous census questionnaires, Census 2000 differentiated among ethnic, racial and national categories. Therefore, Hispanics were asked to include themselves under the all-encompassing multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-national category. The categorization scheme adopted by the Census meant that individuals could provide information about national origin or heritage, but in essence, they, once more, were treated as one monolithic group.

Categorizing individuals to whom we now refer to as Latinos has long been a complex and contentious topic. There are questions as to who should be included in the category (i.e. only people from Latin America and the Caribbean or Iberians as well?). In addition, the importance of nationality has also been hotly debated (i.e. why not simply allow people to indicate their country or birth or heritage?) Yet, probably the most controversial of all issues has been that of the use of an all-encompassing category (i.e. what term should be used? How does one term capture the diversity of the population? etc). The use and/or acceptance of an umbrella term that captures numerous nationalities, cultures and languages are central to the notion of the existence of a Hispanic or Latino identity. For some, that notion is simply a myth.

Using semi-structured interviews among individuals in the three religious communities in Paterson, NJ, and survey data, this chapter will attempt to answer some of the following questions: does a pan-ethnic identity exist? How and under what context is this identity constructed and articulated? What do the terms Hispanic and Latino mean? Does use of Hispanic or Latino identity substitute or complement national identities? In this chapter, I will argue that Hispanic or Latino identity is a true identity that does not replace, but exists alongside national identities. Hispanic or Latino identity is neither primordial, nor instrumental. Instead, it must be understood as an ongoing social construction process that responds to such factors as immigrants’ previous identities, the adaptation experience, and the multi-national, multi-cultural character of the receiving communities.

Origins of “Hispanic” and “Latino/a”

Before embarking on an investigation of the questions raised above, it would be appropriate to briefly discuss the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino,” as used by the media, US Census Bureau and other government and non-government agencies. According to Grace Flores-Hughes, who was Chairman of the Executive Board of the Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy, the term “Hispanic” did not originate from the Census Bureau. Instead, she argues that the term emerged in the 1970s from the Office of Education of the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW). HEW requested opinions from representatives of the “Hispanic” and Native American communities on an educational study it had published. Although the study did not address ethnic categories, both groups refused to cooperate with the government agency until the issue of ethnic categorization was addressed. This refusal led to the creation of the Task Force on Racial/Ethnic Categories, in 1973, whose purpose was to generate appropriate ethnic categories to be used in data collection by HEW (1996).

The Task Force grappled with some of the same issues that academics and members of the community, alike, still debate today. The Task Force discussed and later rejected the term “Latino,” primarily due to its relation to the Latin language and the Roman Empire. The term

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1 For the purposes of this discussion the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino/a” will be used interchangeably, except when using direct quotes from interviews.
Latin was also discarded because its inclusion of some Mediterranean groups was seen to dilute the impact of Civil Rights legislation intended to protect historically discriminated groups in the US. The term “Hispanic” was proposed as a means of limiting the intended category only to those individuals of Spanish ancestry. It was the adoption of the term “Hispanic” by HEW that prompted the term’s use by other federal government agencies, including the Bureau of the Census. Jorge del Pinal, chief of ethnic and Hispanic studies at the Bureau of the Census, notes that the adoption of the category Spanish/Hispanic origin “was just a way to come up with a term to fit this amorphous group” (New York Times p. E6 in González, 1992 as cited by Jones-Correa and Leal 1996: 216).

Pinal’s reference above to Hispanics as “this amorphous group” has important implications for the discussion of a pan-ethnic identity. As we shall see below, the notion of a pan-ethnic identity has been challenged from numerous fronts. First is the assertion that the term “Hispanic” was created by government agencies and thus does not constitute a true identity that emerged out of the group it intends to represent. Instead, Martha E. Giménez argues the “Hispanic” category is a “racial label used as a code word for behavioral patterns associated with poverty, destitution and deviant/criminal behavior” (1992: 12). Second, a Hispanic or Latino identity is said to eliminate the rich cultural, linguistic, historical and racial diversity of the people of Latin America (Oboler, 1992: 22). Finally, some scholars do not dispute the existence of a pan-ethnic identity, rather view it as concerted choice on the part of individuals to extract resources from the state (Padilla, 1985: 63). In the following section, I examine these three perspectives and their implications for the study of Hispanic or Latino identity.

**Imposing Hispanic or Latino identity?**

The expansion of Spanish-language media and the rise in popularity of Hispanic singers, actors and athletes have fueled the assumption of a common bond uniting persons of Latin American origin living in the US. Media companies and marketers have recognized the purchasing potential that lies in the Latino community. Using language, along with cultural, historical and value-oriented references, they have engaged in a process that aims to coalesce distinct national origin groups into one target population. The media uses the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino/a” interchangeably to: 1) refer to all persons of Latin American origin, 2) as a differentiating factor from the dominant Anglo population and 3) to ignite the bonds of language and history in an attempt to congregate the distinct national representations of the same culture. Borrowing from Benedict Anderson, Daniel Matos notes that, in essence, “Univisión is participating in the social construction of an imagined community” (2 as cited by Alcoff 2000: 29).

It is difficult to argue that the availability of Spanish language media has not had an impact on pan-ethnicity. At the very least, it has disseminated the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino/a” to a much larger audience in a short period of time. In addition, Spanish-language media, particularly television, has taken advantage of the national popularity of celebrities, like Jennifer López, Ricky Martin and Sammy Sosa, to claim them as Latino stars who have “made the cross-over” to an Anglo audience. Claiming these icons as Latino (as opposed to Puerto Rican or Dominican) makes these individuals models for all persons of Latin American background, not just for those of the same national origin. In addition, using these celebrities as representatives of all Hispanics attempts to reverse the negative connotations of poverty and crime associated with these pan-ethnic terms. Thus, now, being Latino is “in.”
Even if one agrees that the media has made the usage of pan-ethnicity more widespread, one might still question whether it constitutes a true identity. The fact that marketers promote a Hispanic or Latino identity does not mean individuals of Latin American heritage self-identify that way. Giménez, notes,

The inclusion in the census of a self-identification question that forces Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central and South Americans and Spaniards to identify themselves as “persons of Spanish/Hispanic origin” has resulted in the political and statistical construction of a new minority “group” whose origins can be traced to statistical manipulation and the pursuit of immediate political advantage rather than historical foundations (10).

According to Giménez, it is the United States’ “[obsession] with racial/ethnic politics” (7) that has resulted in the use of terms “Hispanic” and “Latino,” which perpetuate negative views of persons of Latin American origin as racial minorities. In addition, the terms eliminate the intended results of Affirmative Action policies by allowing employers to hire persons with Latin American heritage as if they were members of historically discriminated groups.

Giménez’ assertion of the “statistical construction of a new minority group,” although stated in a somewhat inflammatory manner, is an important one. If we are to believe in the existence of a Hispanic or Latino identity, should we treat it as a statistical construct with little or no meaning or as a representation of collective views of self? My interviews, as well as other research on the subject, point towards an explanation that Hispanic or Latino identity is in fact a US construction, but one in which Latinos are agents and not passive recipients of an imposed identity.

Pedro is a recent immigrant from Chile. He recently moved to Paterson with his wife and children to work in the Christian Reformed Church. In the surveys, both he and his wife, Eva, self-identified as “Hispanos.”2 During our interview, I inquired about why they had chosen that category and what it meant to them. Pedro stated, “Through the census we became more aware of the concept of being Hispanics. When we were in Chile, we really didn’t speak much about being Hispanics, but instead Latinos. In Latin America you really didn’t hear about Hispanics.” Eva adds that they learned this identity in the US. She states,

I have to give up some of my own identity and be able to insert myself, without going with my flag before me and saying, this is who I am. No. There isn’t really a need to say it. I am always going to be Chilean. I will continue being Hispanic. What is important is how I am going to insert myself … I am coming to work. I am coming to bear fruit for this country too.

For both, the notion of being “Hispano” is something that the acquired in the US. This confirms that the terminology is a US government creation. Yet, Eva’s statements make the explanation more complex. Adopting the Hispanic or Latino identity is related to her ability to incorporate herself into this new society and the contributions she wants to make. Now, being Chilean and

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2 All of the interviews were conducted by the author and tape-recorded, if permitted by the interviewee, during the year 2000. The names of the informants have been changed to protect their confidentiality. Most of the interviews were conducted in Spanish. The words used are either the author’s translation or, in the case of English interview, direct quotes from the informants.
Hispana is about her dreams and goals and her efforts to achieve them in the US. She has appropriated the term “Hispana” and uses it to express her visions of how she will fit into this larger society.

Eduardo provides another example of immigrants’ agency in the reconstruction of pan-ethnic terms. Eduardo arrived in Paterson in the early 1970s in search of a better future. He quickly established a network of friendships with other young Peruvians. During his free time, Eduardo and his friends enjoyed partying, which resulted in him evading his responsibilities to his wife and children. Eduardo’s lifestyle took a dramatic change when at the urging of his wife, he began actively participating in the Catholic Church. Today, he links his ethnic identity to this lifestyle change and his new community. “After being in the Church, I don’t have the same friends. The Church changed my friends… They are from different nationalities and lead a different life… I am Hispano… I don’t want to use Peruvian because it is negative… This is my community and they are Hispanos.”

For Eduardo the change in lifestyle that resulted from his Church participation also produced a change in identity. His Peruvian identity is rooted in what he now understands as his irresponsibility to himself and his family. He associates his drinking and other destructive behaviors with his Peruvian friends and with being Peruvian. Transforming his life in the multicultural, multi-national context of a Hispanic church enabled him to adopt a new identity, which he has reconstructed into a more positive view of self. These examples validate the notion that a Hispanic or Latino identity is a US creation, but they also illustrate that the adoption of that identity is not a passive process, but instead one in which there is both individual and collective agency. As Eduardo Mendieta notes, “in the process of learning to become Latino or Hispanic what were originally artificial and imposed labels now take on a different character” (48).

**Hispanic or Latino identity – the Cultural Homogenizer**

A Hispanic or Latino identity rests on the notion that peoples from Latin America share a common history, language, and culture. Moreover, those common characteristics bind those who share them and distinguish them from those who don’t. Yet, one of the most common criticisms of the idea of a pan-ethnic identity is that it eliminates the diversity inherent in the populations it intends to represent. Latin America is a region of many languages (from native languages to Spanish), many cultures, and many religions. Some argue that a label that attempts to encompass this diversity only misrepresents its peoples’ heterogeneity. Suzanne Oboler, reminds us that,

… it is important to ask to what extent the appeal to the legacy of the Spanish colonial rule can justify the homogenization under the label Hispanic of the subsequent experiences of at least 23 million citizens, residents, and immigrants of Latin American descent. Can this appeal account, for example, for the legacies of Mexican Americans/Chicanos and Puerto Ricans, whose respective post-Spanish colonial histories and cultures has since been differentially shaped by their experiences in the United States? … And is it rooted in an accurate perception of the diversity of Latin American populations in their own countries of origin? (1995: xiii).
Giménez would answer “no.” In fact, for the scholar, using such labels “[reveals] a racist or at best ethnocentric understanding of the characteristics of Latin Americans and of the populations of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent forcibly brought under US hegemony” (10).

Even a cursory understanding of Spanish colonial rule in the Americas lends credence to Oboler’s argument. The Spanish system was one in which strict racial, religious and class hierarchies demarcated social, economic and political status. Thus, is it justified to use the culture of a system so characterized by inequality to represent individuals whose ancestors experienced it so differently? Moreover, doesn’t utilizing the “Hispanic” justify and even glorify the Spanish conquest? These criticisms are valid, but my interviews indicate that while immigrants recognize the negative aspects of the Spanish conquest, most of those interviewed expressed pride in their Spanish linguistic, cultural and behavioral roots. In essence, the term “Hispano/a” only labels the pride they already feel in their Spanish cultural heritage.

Mercedes is the first female President of the Hermandad del Señor de los Milagros at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. She states,

I consider myself Hispana or Latina. Peruvian, because I come from South America… I am from Peru, but wherever I go, for me it is a privilege to say that I am Latina… [Latina means] The roots that were brought to me by the Spanish conquistadors, the blood that runs through us. I mean Hispanic blood.

Mercedes is equating being “Hispana” with Spanish rule and the cultural, ethnic, racial and class hierarchies that it established in its colonies in the Americas. This can be interpreted as discounting the impact of those hierarchies and the contributions of the subordinated and exploited ethnic and racial groups. Though this may be the case, this argument does not discount the appropriateness of the use of pan-ethnic terms.

Mercedes’ case, as well as the examples that follow, suggests that at least among first generation immigrants the ethnic and racial hierarchies from the country of origin are transplanted and then used to reconstruct pan-ethnic labels and identities. As Jones-Correa reminds us, “Latin American immigrants’ identities are shaped not just by the choices they make in the US, but also by the weight of the choices made in the past. Previous constructions of identity have a kind of inertia to them, they become the raw materials for ethnic choices …in the US” (1998: 123)

Pedro identifies himself as Puerto Rican, but he is also “Hispano.” When asked what “Hispano” means to him, he states, “[it] speaks to the Spanish language and is related to the conquest because that is where the language comes from. We have different cultures but the same language… The cultures are very similar. We have the same heritage… that separates us from North Americans.” Pedro’s use of the word “conquest” is significant because it carries with it a recognition that the mixture of cultures he refers to happened by force. Yet, his explanation for his identity emphasizes the results; a culture and language in common which differentiates him from North Americans.

Hector echoes Pedro’s explanation of the term “Hispano.” “Hispano means speaking the same Spanish language. Having the same heritage, black, Spanish and indigenous. We share the same ancestry.” He adds, “when you are in a group with English-speakers, you seek out Spanish speakers because la sangre Hispana jala [Hispanic blood draws you].” Like Mercedes, Hector’s views are interesting because for him a Hispanic or Latino identity is primordial; it is something
innate (carried in the blood). This notion of the apparent primordial character of identity is an important one and will be addressed further on in this chapter.

Most interviewees shared Pedro and Hector’s opinions. Even when they did not choose to self-identify on the basis of some pan-ethnic term, they tied the term “Hispano/a” or “Latino/a” to first a shared language and second a shared ancestry based on Spanish colonialism. However, a few respondents chose to link the terms to more than language and ancestry. Being “Hispano” in the United States was also related to patterns of behaviors and beliefs. This lends support to the notion that there is a process of reconstruction and negotiation of pan-ethnicity, where the dominance of Spanish culture is not the sole unifying factor behind a Hispanic or Latino identity.

Carmen considers herself Dominican and “Hispana” and she relates being “Hispana” to a “shared sense of morality, for example the importance of the family… of the extended family.” Isabel concurs. She first acknowledges the importance of speaking Spanish in defining “Hispana,” but adds that it also refers to “shared traditions and a way to raise your children, which differentiates us from Anglos.” As an example of shared traditions Alberto notes that there is “the expectation that women will enter marriage as virgins.” This is also part of being “Hispano.” Finally, Alma says she used to identify herself as Honduran, but now sees herself as “Hispana” and for her that means “a shared language, history, food, music and a sense of humor.” I asked her to explain what she meant by a sense of humor. She described situations in which she tried to joke with a North American and received a look of confusion, where had she been joking with a Hispanic/Latino, s/he would have understood her immediately.

Pan-ethnicity as an Instrumental Identity

Published in 1985, Felix Padilla’s study of Puerto Rican and Mexican-American political cooperation in Chicago became one of the first scholarly works on Hispanic or Latino identity. Padilla used instrumentalism to explain how Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago constructed a Hispanic or Latino identity to extract resources from the state. According to the instrumentalist approach, ethnicity is a tool used by political leaders and individuals for political and economic gain (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972, Bates, 1983, and Hechter, 1986). In their study of New York City politics, Glazer and Moynihan described minority groups as political interest groups who, in a context of limited and unequal distribution of resources, employ ethnicity to gain concessions from the state apparatus (1970). Using this approach, Padilla argues that “Latino/a” ethnic consciousness,

… represents an apparent mechanism to pursue, in some instances, the collective interests of some Spanish-speaking groups. This will then mean that as Spanish-speaking people to begin to adopt a consciousness as “Latinos,” they appear to represent a distinctive, all-embracing interest group population (66).

Thus, in the context of Chicago, Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans’ shared disadvantaged position, vis-à-vis other groups in the city, united them in an attempt to improve their communities’ economic and political status.

Padilla’s instrumentalist or strategic view of Hispanic or Latino identity is supported by the fact that leaders of the Hispanic/Latino community have been central to the proliferation of the terms. Calderón agrees with Padilla’s instrumentalist interpretation and notes that the term “Hispanic” emerged from government agencies and “politicians at the federal level.” He
differentiates it from the term “Latino/a” which he explains was “popularized to symbolize the commonalities in issues and collective action when national coalitions involving Puerto Ricans and Chicano movement groups developed” (1992: 39). Finally, Hernan Badillo, a one time Puerto Rican Congressman from New York City, indicated that Latino politicians promoted the use of the term “Hispanic” since they “stood to gain more political representation and government services as a result of the designation” (González, 1992: E6 as cited by Correa and Leal, 217).

As Badillo mentions political leaders have a vested interest in promoting a strategic Hispanic or Latino identity because it has the potential to translate into more voters, more supporters and more resources for these communities. The same can be said for community activists, who recognize the value of larger numbers in pushing for concessions from the state. The Padilla and Calderón studies both relied on community activists and leaders for interviews. Given the studies’ participants it is not surprising that both authors’ results support the view of Hispanic or Latino identity as a strategic choice. These individuals’ participation in the public sphere and/or in the political arena inevitably affects their sense of collective and individual identity as they are directly involved in the distribution of state resources. It is precisely involvement that does not make them representative of the community as a whole. Thus, in considering the conclusions of both studies, we must wonder how the results may have been different had the samples been drawn from more representatives segments of the Hispanic population.

The strategic calculations found by Calderón and Padilla were virtually absent from my interviews. While nearly all of the informants linked notions of pan-ethnicity to language and culture, only two tied the term “Latino/a” to a political agenda. Ivan, a young educated Mexican, identifies as “Latino with non-Latinos and with other Latinos, as Mexican.” He differentiates between “Hispano” and “Latino.” He notes, “Latino is political, not cultural, but the argument between the two terms is useless.” Claudia, a young woman of Puerto Rican descent, shared this view. She related the term “Latino/a” to individuals, who are trying to make a political statement. These individuals were both young professionals educated in the US higher education system. Both referred to the term “Latino/a” as an awareness of the political incorrectness of using “Hispano/a” because of its links to the Spanish conquest. Even though both referred to “Latino/a” as having a political meaning, neither related it to the extraction of resources from the state or to any political mobilization strategy.

Using data from the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS), Michael Jones-Correa and David Leal also dispute the instrumentalist view of a pan-ethnic identity. Jones-Correa and Leal correctly note that if one were to accept the instrumentalist explanation of Hispanic or Latino identity, it would be necessary to see a connection between political concerns and attitudes and pan-ethnic identification. In other words, that there would be a significant correlation between measures of political beliefs and self-identification on the basis of a Hispanic or Latino identity. No such relationship was found in the scholars’ analysis. They write,

Panethnic identity does not lead to greater recognition of cultural or political commonalities… contradicting both culturalist and instrumentalist explanations of Latino panethnici...
Jones-Correa and Leal make two important points. First, the available national data do not support the idea that pan-ethnicity is a strategic choice made with the intention of receiving benefits in return. Second, and most important, is that the notion of a constructed identity does not invalidate the “truth” of individuals’ affective attachments to that identity. This is a significant conclusion rejects the instrumentalist bias against the emotional authenticity of ethnic identities. More over, acknowledging that identities are social constructions does not mean that those identities are less real for those who hold them.

Primordialism and Pan-ethnicity

I have argued that the instrumentalist approach does not adequately explain the emergence of a Hispanic or Latino identity. Given that some respondents provided what could be understood as biological interpretations of pan-ethnicity, we may question whether primordialism may provide a more adequate framework for analysis? Primordialism focuses on the emotional and psychological aspects of identity. For primordialists, identities are inherited by birth and persist through time. This approach emphasizes the physical as well as the cultural ties that bind individuals and distinguish them from others (see Barth, 1969, Geertz, 1973, Van de Berghe, 1978, Ballis Lal, 1995).

Due in part, to primordialism’s emphasis on physical markers and the fixed nature of ethnicity, few scholars today, use this approach. However, this author believes understanding why Hispanic or Latino identity is not primordial is important to finding a more useful theoretical framework to study it. In fact, examining my interviews suggest that primordialism cannot be simply discounted. As previously mentioned, Mercedes and Hector, both described being “Hispano/a” in terms of characteristics that are carried in one’s blood. In addition, virtually all interviewees’ definition of the terms “Hispano/a” and were related to 1) the Spanish language and 2) cultural traits, i.e., food, music, values, religion.

In an attempt to test this belief of a shared culture, my survey asked respondents whether all persons of Latin American heritage in the US shared cultural characteristics that united them as a Latino community. Table 1 shows that of those respondents that agreed with the question, 18.9% preferred national origin as their identity, 14.6% used a combination of national origin and pan-ethnicity and 66.5% chose a pan-ethnic term. Of those that disagreed with the notion of a shared culture, 76.5% preferred the terms “Hispanic” or “Latino, while 5.9% used a combination and 17.6% used national origin.

It must be noted, that in contrast to the Latino National Political Survey (de la Garza et al, 1992), my survey results indicate a strong preference for pan-ethnicity. Sixty-six percent of the respondents preferred pan-ethnicity to other forms of self-identification. Yet, even with the apparent tendency towards pan-ethnicity, the notion of a shared culture does not seem to affect whether respondents chose to identify on the basis of a Hispanic or Latino identity. The key finding is that 76% of the respondents who disagreed with the question on a shared culture identified pan-ethnically. Moreover, no significant relationship was found between the two variables.
Table 1: Shared Culture and Self-Identification – 3 Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Respondents</th>
<th>Self Identification</th>
<th>National Origin</th>
<th>National Origin and Hispano or Latino</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Opinion</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=214</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The data above illustrate that there is more to pan-ethnic identification than just a perceived shared Spanish culture. This result confirms those of Jones-Correa and Leal in their examination of the LNPS data. They report that, “Pan-ethnic identity doesn’t have a profound effect on how respondents perceive cultural commonalities” (230). These conclusions defy a primordialist explanation of ethnicity. In addition, as mentioned above, the primordialist perspective views identities as fixed. Both my results and those found by Jones-Correa and Leal indicate the presence of multiple identities. The primordialist approach cannot account for these findings and thus does not provide us a theoretical framework to understand Hispanic or Latino identity.

Identities as Social Constructions

If Hispanic or Latino identity is neither primordial nor instrumental, then what theoretical framework can best explain it? In my view, the constructivist approach is most useful in explaining Hispanic or Latino identity. It is my argument that Hispanic or Latino identity is a social construction which is the product of a combination of state promotion, transplanted identities from the country of origin, the immigrant experience and the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-racial context of the receiving country.

Immigrants bring with them a set of values, traditions, beliefs, languages, etc, all of these elements, along with the state’s categorizations and the experiences of adapting to a new environment, are involved in the process of ongoing identity construction. Expressing this view, Eduardo Mendieta states, “The construction and development of new identities is partly a process of negotiation that includes acceptance and assimilation, but also rejection and disavowal…. For us, Hispanic and Latino are not fate, but a quest, a choice and even an alternative… It is in this sense that Hispanics are a people in the process of becoming” (46-47).

If Latinos are “people in the process of becoming,” one may wonder whether they are leaving something behind? Does “becoming” Latino or Hispanic mean that an individual is no longer something else? The data collected during this research illustrate that adopting pan-ethnicity does not necessitate a denial or rejection of other identities, particularly national identities. On the contrary, findings suggest that a Hispanic or Latino identity functions as one among multiple situationally-specific identities.

As Table 2 illustrates over 66% of the individuals surveyed in Paterson preferred to identify using the terms “Hispanic” or “Latino.” Yet, an examination of the breakdowns for each community reveals a more important trend. Over 34% of the respondents in Communities 1 and
3 chose some combination of pan-ethnicity and national origin. In other words, over one third of the individuals surveyed in two communities did not feel that it was necessary to choose between pan-ethnicity and their nationalities. For these individuals, it was perfectly acceptable use both simultaneously.

Table 2: Self-Identification – 3 Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Respondents</th>
<th>National Origin</th>
<th>National Origin and Hispano or Latino</th>
<th>Hispano or Latino</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community 1 N=64</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community 2 N=64</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community 3 N=13</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison Group N=97</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>90.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N=238</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>66.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For Community 2 the number of persons identifying in both pan-ethnic and national terms was significantly lower, 17%. This can be explained by looking at the internal dynamics of that Church. This community had the highest percentage of pan-ethnic identification of all three churches, which is in part related to how the leadership has until recently fostered pan-ethnic sentiment. In addition, this church, as well as the neighborhood it inhabits is undergoing a demographic change. The displacement of older Latino immigrants with very recent immigrants (from different countries) results in an continued attachment to nationality (see Community 2 – 29% preference for nationality).

It must be noted that for the Comparison, there were no reported instances of self-identification using both national origin and pan-ethnic identity. Data analysis suggests that the manner in which this set of surveys was conducted affected the results. Therefore, had this interference not been present, I would expect to see similar results to those discussed above. These results support the argument that a Hispanic or Latino identity does exist. Yet, more importantly, the data provide evidence that national and pan-ethnic identities co-exist with one another (Jones-Correa and Leal, 1996). In essence, Hispanic or Latino identity operates as a complement to, not a substitute for national identities.

This conclusion is confirmed by my interviews. In most cases, when informants self-identified as “Hispano/a” or “Latino/a”, they always specified their country of origin. Mateo says “I am Hispano here, in Puerto Rico, I am Puerto Rican.” David provides another example,

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3 The Comparison Group received the surveys via telephone, while the other three communities received the survey in person.
“I am Dominican first and Hispano second.” Katia identifies herself as “Hispana, but I am Dominican too, and very proud!”

Ismael, a Honduran pastor beginning his own Spanish-language ministry, provides another example. He notes, “I never considered myself Hispano until I came to Paterson. Then I met other Latin Americans and learned about them and began using the term Hispano. But asking someone where you are from is important because it makes people feel comfortable.” Another informant, Manuel, says, I consider myself “mestizo and Hispano, but if the question is specific, I say Peruvian.”

Nadia, a young Colombian student illustrates who distinct identities co-exist and operate in specific contexts. She comments that self-identification depends on the question and context, but also “on the person’s education.” According to Nadia, the person’s education level determines whether they can understand that as a black Colombian, who lived with her white mother, she never was exposed to her African roots. In the US, she has been able to learn about that aspect of her heritage and thus she states, “on applications I write black Hispanic… I am exploring my blackness, which I never got to do before [while living in Colombia].”

Finally, it is Rosa, a Dominican woman, who best describes the idea of multiple situationally-specific identities. She explains, “when I arrived in 1973, I would have said Dominican, but now I understand that I am part of a larger mass as Hispana… [being Hispana means that] I am also Puerto Rican, Cuban, etc.” Rosa has not substituted her Dominican identity for pan-ethnicity. Neither has she replaced her Dominican nationality with that of Puerto Rico or Cuba. For her, the “Hispana” label contains a multiplicity of identities that she now can experience. In a given context she can feel Cuban, Puerto Rican or Dominican. Those identities don’t compete with each other. Rather, identities co-exist and depending on the context, “in the process of becoming” Rosa and other immigrants, negotiate the salience of each.

The co-existence of national and pan-ethnic identities has already been documented in Jones-Correa and Leal’s analysis of LNPS data (1996). They uncovered higher indices of pan-ethnic identification when they examined not just primary but also secondary identities. Ranking identities has the benefit of enabling scholars to gain a sense of the weight that a particular identity may hold. While ranking identities allows scholars to view the complexity of identity formation, if one accepts the argument that multiple identities co-exist and are negotiated, then placing worth on one or more of those identities appears contradictory. In a particular context, one identity may be more salient than another. Therefore, taking a snapshot of the value of one identity at a particular time may tell us very little about the importance of others in other settings. Therefore, I prefer to think of identity construction as, “a complicated process whereby Latinos retain multiple identities, multiple interactional settings and diverse ‘situated selves’ at one point in time” (Trueba, 12)

Which Term Should We Use? “Hispanic” or “Latino/a”

Since I have argued, that a Hispanic or Latino identity is a true identity, co-existing with national identities, it is important to address one final issue. Which term “Hispanic” or “Latino/a” is best to represent this identity? In this discussion, I have used them interchangeably, unless my informants have differentiated between the two. In addition, in mass media and everyday language the terms are used as synonyms. However, much of the scholarship on the topic and on the community, in general, favors the use of the term “Latino.”

David Hayes-Bautista and Jorge Chapa argue that they prefer the term “Latino/a” because it encompasses all Latin American nationalities. For them, “Hispanic” links Hispanic or Latino
identity to Spain and they correctly argue that some Latin American societies, like Brazil, have no ties to that country. Furthermore, “Latino/a” is seen to include not just immigrants, but their descendants, who in some cases have lived in the US for three or four generations (Oboler, 4).

Other scholars, like José Calderón, argue that the fact that the term “Hispanic” emerged out of US government agencies rules out the appropriateness of the term. In contrast, for the scholar “Latino/a” is more appropriate because it draws attention to all Latin American nationalities and has been used by activists in addressing issues of concern to all persons of Latin American heritage. As support for his argument Calderón provides evidence that individuals using “Hispanic” were of higher socio-economic status and “were protecting their property and managerial positions.” Whereas those preferring “Latino/a” “tended to build panethnic unity around issues that threatened the interest of the entire Latino community and to form coalitions with other oppressed groups around structural issues they had in common” (43).

My interviews do not support the difference that Calderón calls attention to. Overwhelmingly, those who self-identified pan-ethnically preferred the term “Hispano/a.” It was that term that represented the Spanish language, culture and traditions that as discussed above are seen as uniting Hispanics in the US. While the majority defined “Latino/a” as a synonym for “Hispano/a” (i.e., a person who speaks the language, and adheres to cultural, behavioral and at times moral norms), some respondents expressed some confusion as to the meaning of “Latino/a.”

Manuel defined “Hispano/a” as a term describing people “who share same history, the same Spanish culture and language, but not always.” When asked about “Latino/a” he states, “that is a more modern word. I think it refers to everyone from South America. It doesn’t include people from the Caribbean.” A few other informants, including Fatima, who like Manuel is from a South American country, related “Latino/a” to Latinoamericano. For them Latinoamericano described the South American continent. Nadia, along with another respondent, noted that “Latino/a” included other Romance languages. Thus, “Latino/a” was a much broader term that also embraces Italians.

Finally, as was mentioned above, only persons interviewed attached some political meaning on the term “Latino/a.” This may be the result of the non-politicized character of Hispanic or Latino identity in Paterson. Yet, the fact that the terms have not been politicized does not mean that Latinos are not aware that the terminology associated with identity is politically significant. As Jesus states,

I became Hispanic here. I learned to be Latino here… The multiplicity of categories causes confusion. It leads people to say ‘they don’t even know what they are.’ Hispanic roots exist. I don’t understand the difference between “Hispano” and “Latino.” The lack of a unifying term is the problem of the Latino leadership. It shows a lack of identity. Anglos know that and exploit that. Where is the courage to recreate an atmosphere of development in this country?

Jesus, like Claudia and Ivan who linked a political meaning to “Latino/a”, is a young professional. Jesus has also been an activist in his community, in particular, addressing deficiencies in the local public school his children attend. Perhaps, Jesus, Claudia and Ivan’s interpretations of the term “Latino/a” and identity, more generally, provide a view of how Hispanic or Latino identity may develop in the future. However, regarding the differentiation between the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino/a,” all expressed their frustration at the pointlessness
of the debate. Thus, in the context of Paterson, the polemic over the terminology is essentially absent. This result suggests that individuals view the discussion as one in which only academics and political leaders are engaged and more importantly, as a frivolous issue when compared to the day to day realities of life in the inner city.

**Conclusion**

Arguing against the existence of a Hispanic or Latino identity is becoming a more futile enterprise. The proliferation of the terms in the media, in government circles, among the Hispanic political leadership and in common speech make it increasingly difficult to ignore. In addition, the research presented here, as well as that of Jones-Correa and Leal, among others, provides evidence that for some communities around the country, a pan-ethnic identity is at least one among multiple identities an individual may hold.

Some scholars view a Hispanic or Latino identity as a mechanism for Latin American immigrant communities to mobilize politically (Trueba, 1999, Jones-Correa, 1998, Oboler, 1995, Calderón, 1992, Hayes-Bautista and Chapa, 1987, Treviño, 1987, Padilla, 1985). That politicization of Hispanic or Latino identity is absent in the context of Paterson. While national origin groups use pan-ethnic terms, it has yet to be the cement that holds together a successful multi-national political coalition. However, the cases of Jesus, Ivan and Claudia, may provide a window into the possibility of future politicization.

Still, what I believe to be most significant about this research is first, that it provides empirical evidence of the existence of a Hispanic or Latino identity. Second, this analysis illustrates that pan-ethnicity is best understood as the product of an ongoing social construction process. Finally, these data suggest that identifying as Hispano/a involves negotiation among multiple identities. Thus, re(creating) a Hispanic or Latino identity is part of a dynamic process that involves bargaining from a menu of identities and selecting that which is most salient in a given context. This more complex understanding of Hispanic or Latino identity defies primordialism and transcends mere instrumentality.
REFERENCES


