Title
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Pigments of Our Imagination: The Racialization of the Hispanic-Latino Category

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Race is a pigment of our imagination. It is a social status, not a biological one; a product of history, not of nature; a contextual variable, not a given. The concept of race is a historically contingent, relational, subjective phenomenon, yet it is typically misbegotten as a natural, fixed trait of phenotypic difference inherent in human bodies, independent of human will or intention.

Racial categories (and the supposed differences that they connote) are infused with stereotypical moral meaning. What is called "race" today is chiefly an outcome of intergroup struggles, marking the boundaries, and thus the identities, of "us" and "them" along with attendant ideas of social worth or stigma. As such, "race" is an ideological construct that links supposedly innate traits of individuals to their place in the social order.

The dominant "racial frame" that evolved in the United States — during the long colonial and national era of slavery and after it — was that of white supremacy. But how do persons classified as Latinos or Hispanics fit into the country's racial frame today?

Are Hispanics a "race" or, more precisely, a racialized category? In fact, are they even a "they"? Is there a Latino or Hispanic ethnic group, cohesive and self-conscious, sharing a sense of peoplehood in the same way that there is an African American people in the United States? Or is it mainly administrative shorthand devised for statistical purposes; a one-size-fits-all label that subsumes diverse peoples and identities?

This chapter considers these questions, focusing primarily on official or state definitions—such as those being considered for inclusion in the 2020 census—and on the malleable way the categories of Hispanic and Latino are incorporated into the psyches of those so classified.

The Hispanic-Latino Population Today

The groups included under the label "Hispanic" or "Latino" — Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Salvadorans, Colombians, and the many other nationalities from Latin America and even Spain itself — were not "Hispanics" or "Latinos" in their countries of origin; rather, they only became so once they arrived in the United States. As such, the labels of Hispanic and Latino have a particular meaning only in the US context in which it was constructed and is applied, and where its meaning continues to evolve.
The Hispanic population of the United States reached 50.5 million in 2010, comprising 16.3 percent of the US population. (This total excludes the population on the island of Puerto Rico, who are US citizens by birthright but not US residents.)

Hispanics surpassed African Americans in 2003 to become the largest pan-ethnic minority in the country. According to the latest estimates of the US Census Bureau, by 2050 the Hispanic population is projected to grow to more than 130 million people, or 30 percent of the national population. By comparison, the non-Hispanic black population in 2050 is projected to comprise about 13 percent of the national total, and the Asian population 8 percent.

Hispanics or Latinos are a diverse group, made up both of recently arrived newcomers and of old timers with deep ancestral roots in what is now the United States. But it is also a population that has emerged seemingly suddenly, its growth driven both by accelerating immigration from the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America — above all from Mexico — and by high rates of natural increase. Indeed, over 40 percent of Hispanics in the United States today are foreign born, while about one-third consists of a second generation of native-born children of immigrant parents.

Creating a "Hispanic or Latino" Category in Official Statistics

Although certain methods of identifying and counting people of Mexican ancestry in the United States were in place as early as 1850, efforts to distinguish and enumerate the "Hispanic" population as a whole using subjective indicators of Spanish origin or descent date back to the late 1960s.

At that time — in the context of surging civil-rights activism, new federal legislation that required accurate statistical documentation of minority groups' disadvantages, and growing concerns over differential census undercounts — Mexican-American organizations, in particular, pressed for better data about their group.

The White House ordered the addition of a Spanish-origin self-identifier on the 1970 census "long-form" questionnaire and, to test it, the question was added to the November 1969 Current Population Survey (CPS) — the first time that a subjective item such as this was used in the collection of government statistics.

Later analyses comparing the results nationally of the (subjective) Hispanic self-identification in the CPS against the (objective) use of Spanish surnames in the identification of Hispanic households found significant differences between the two measures, raising questions of validity and reliability.

For example, in the Southwest, only 74 percent of those who identified themselves as Hispanic had Spanish surnames, while 81 percent of those with Spanish surnames identified themselves as Hispanic. In the rest of the country, 61 percent of those who self-identified as Hispanic had Spanish surnames, and a mere 46 percent of those with Spanish surnames self-identified as Hispanic.
Then, in 1976, Congress passed a remarkable bill "relating to the publication of economic and social statistics for Americans of Spanish origin or descent" — the first and only law in US history that defines a specific ethnic group and mandates the collection, analysis, and publication of data for that group.

The law asserted that there was a need to identify the "urgent and special needs" of the 12 million Americans who identified themselves as being of Spanish-speaking origins in the 1970 census, a large number of whom "suffer from racial, social, economic, and political discrimination and are denied the basic opportunities that they deserve as American citizens."

In 1977, as required by Congress, the Office of Management and Budget issued Directive 15: Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting to standardize the collection and reporting of racial and ethnic statistics and to include data on persons of "Hispanic origin."

Directive 15 specified a minimal classification of four races ("American Indian or Alaskan Native," "Asian or Pacific Islander," "Black," and "White") and two "ethnic" backgrounds ("of Hispanic origin" and "not of Hispanic origin"), and allowed the collection of more detailed information as long as it could be aggregated within those categories.

Since that time, in keeping with the logic of this classification, census data on Hispanics have been officially reported with a footnote indicating that "Hispanics may be of any race."

Later criticism of the ethnic and racial categories led to a formal review of Directive 15, beginning in 1993 with congressional hearings and culminating in revised standards, which were adopted in 1997. The changes stipulated five minimum categories for data on "race" ("American Indian or Alaska Native," "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander," "Asian," "Black or African American," and "White"); offered respondents the option of selecting one or more racial designations (an option used for the first time in the 2000 census); and reworded the two "ethnic" categories into "Hispanic or Latino" and "not Hispanic or Latino."

The notice in the Federal Register of these revisions to Directive 15 pointedly added that "The categories in this classification are social-political constructs and should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature... The standards have been developed to provide a common language for uniformity and comparability in the collection and use of data on race and ethnicity by Federal agencies."

Nonetheless, Directive 15's definitions of racial and ethnic populations are used not only by federal agencies, but also by researchers, schools, hospitals, businesses, and state and local governments — and are conflated, abridged, and diffused through the mass media, entering into the popular culture and shaping the national self-image.

**Nation, Race, and Place in the 2000 Census**

Much has been made in the media and even in academic discourse about "the browning of America," a misnomer based on stereotypes of an appearance presumed to characterize people of Spanish-speaking origin.
But does the Hispanic population differ significantly from non-Hispanics by race, as it does by place, socioeconomic status, and national origins?

The American system of racial classification, employed variously since the first census of 1790, has been the epitome of externally imposed, state-sanctioned measures of group difference, primarily distinguishing the majority-white population from black and American Indian minority groups, and later from Asian-origin populations.

Yet Hispanics were incorporated in official statistics as an ethnic category, and considered as being of any race. Moreover, prior to 1970 Mexicans were almost always coded as white for census purposes, and were deemed white by law (if not by custom) since the 19th century.

How then are racial categories internalized by Hispanics? Are there intergroup and intragroup differences in their patterns of racial self-identification? Since 1980, the census has asked separate questions for Hispanic or Latino origin and for race, permitting an examination of how Hispanics or Latinos self-report by race and country of origin.

**Intergroup Differences in Racial Identification**

Despite increasing immigration from a wider range of Latin American countries over the past few decades, persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban origin comprised 77 percent of the 35.2 million Hispanics counted by the 2000 census, with Mexicans alone accounting for 63 percent. (This trend is sure to continue when the detailed data from the 2010 census on the specific countries of ethnicity within the Hispanic/Latino category are released. The proportion of persons of Mexican descent almost certainly increased to account for two-thirds of the 50.5 million Hispanics counted in 2010.)

Much of the remainder of the Hispanic population in 2000 was made up of six groups of relatively recent immigrant origin: Dominicans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans comprised 7 percent of the total while Colombians, Peruvians, and Ecuadorians made up nearly 4 percent.

Hence, nine nationality groups accounted for nine out of ten (88 percent) Hispanics in the United States in 2000. Persons who trace their identities to the ten other Spanish-speaking countries of Central and South America, plus Spain, comprised only 4 percent of the Hispanic total. And only 8 percent self-reported as "other Spanish, Hispanic or Latino" in the 2000 census, without indicating a specific national origin.

Overall, only half of the 35.2 million Hispanics counted by the 2000 census reported their race as white (48 percent), black (1.8 percent), or Asian (0.3 percent). In contrast, 97 percent of the 246.2 million non-Hispanics counted reported their race either as white (79 percent), black (14 percent), or Asian (4 percent).

Most notably, there was a huge difference in the proportion of these two populations that chose "other race." While scarcely any non-Hispanics (0.2 percent) reported being of some other race,
among Hispanics that figure was 43 percent — a reflection of more than four centuries of mixed European and Native American heritage in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as differing histories and conceptions of what race means.

In addition, Hispanics in the 2000 census were more than three times as likely to report a mixture of "two or more races" — 6.4 percent of Hispanics compared with only 2 percent of non-Hispanics — although among Hispanics who listed this option, the overwhelming majority (85 percent) specified "white" plus another race.

Still, the main divide among Hispanics was between the 48 percent who self-identified racially as "white" in 2000 and the 43 percent who rejected all the official categories and reported "other race" instead. (The corresponding aggregated figures have widened to 53 percent and 38 percent in the 2010 census, but the main patterns analyzed below continue to apply a decade later.)

**Table 1. Hispanic/Latino Ethnic Identity by Self-reported "Race," 2000 Census Ranked by Proportion Identifying as "Other Race"**

Examining the results for each of the main Hispanic nationality groups, the proportions who identified racially as "white" ranged from a low of 22 percent among Dominicans to a high of 84 percent among Cubans.

More than half of Dominicans (59 percent) and Salvadorans and Guatemalans (55 percent) reported "another race," as did 46 percent of Mexicans, 42 percent of Peruvians and Ecuadorians, 38 percent of Puerto Ricans, 28 percent of Colombians, and less than 8 percent of Cubans. The most likely to identify as "black" were Dominicans (8.2 percent), while the "other Spanish, Hispanic or Latino" were the most likely to identify as multiracial (10.7 percent).

**Intragroup Differences in Race and Place**

Self-reported race varies not only between origin groups, but also within them — and over time and place as well.

An examination of 2000 census data on self-reported "race" for the largest Hispanic groups broken down by the largest states — California and Texas in the Southwest (where Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans are most concentrated), and New York-New Jersey and Florida along the East Coast (where the Caribbean groups are concentrated) — is quite revealing.

In California, 40 percent of the Mexican-origin population reported as "white" and 53 percent reported as "other race," compared with 60 percent who reported as "white" and 36 percent who reported as "other race" in Texas. Similar, if less pronounced, patterns were observed for Salvadorans and Guatemalans in those two states: they were significantly more likely to be "white" in Texas and "other" in California.

**Table 2. "Race" Self-reported by Largest Hispanic Groups in Selected States, 2000 Census**
Even more striking is the degree of difference in the geography of race among Caribbean groups: all were far more likely to be "white" in Florida than in New York-New Jersey. For example, 67 percent of the Puerto Ricans in Florida reported that they were "white," compared with only 45 percent in New York-New Jersey; the respective percentages for Cubans were 92 and 73 percent; for Dominicans, 46 and 20 percent; for Colombians, 78 and 46 percent.

If race were a biological and permanent trait of individuals, no such variability would exist. Instead, these data exemplify how race is constructed socially, historically, and spatially. Lingering historical prejudices in the former slave states of the American South and the relatively more-open social dynamics of the Northeast and West coasts may invite varying degrees of willingness to self-identify in different ways.

Such contextual differences are supported by other relevant data. A census conducted by the United States when it occupied Puerto Rico in 1899 found that 62 percent of the inhabitants were "white," as were 65 percent of those counted in the 1910 island census. That proportion grew to 73 percent in 1920, and 80 percent by 1950 — an increase that could not be accounted for by demographic processes, institutional biases, or other explanations, and has been attributed to changes in the social definition of whiteness and the influence of "whitening" ideology on the island.

The 2000 census conducted in Puerto Rico found that 81 percent of the population on the island self-reported as "white" — notably higher than the 67 percent of Puerto Ricans who self-reported as "white" in Florida and the 45 percent who did so in the New York region.

**The Malleable Meaning of "Race"

While the Census Bureau has established "Hispanic" and "Latino" as ethnic categories and not racial ones, the meaning of "race" to individuals seems to vary depending not only on social and historical contexts, but also on the way in which questions are asked and the response format provided in conventional surveys.

In a survey of more than 400 Dominican immigrants in New York City and Providence, Rhode Island, the adult respondents were asked a series of three questions about their racial self-identification.

First they were asked in an open-ended format how they defined themselves racially. Next they were given a close-ended question, asking if they were white, black, or other (and if other, to specify). Finally they were asked how they thought that "mainstream Americans" classified them racially. All three questions were basically getting at the same thing: the respondent's racial identity. The results are summarized in Table 3.

In response to the first open-ended question, 28 percent gave "Hispanic" as their race, another 4 percent said "Latino," and still others offered a variety of mixed "Hispanic" or "Latino" answers; 13 percent said "Indio," and another 13 percent gave their Dominican nationality as their race. Of
all respondents, only 6.6 percent chose "black" and 3.8 percent "white." The rest of the responses showed the extraordinary range of racial categories and labels common in the Spanish Caribbean.

### Table 3. Dominican Immigrants' Answers to Three Racial Self-identification Questions Survey of Dominican immigrants in New York City and Providence*

When asked to choose their race in the close-ended format of the second question, the largest response remained "Hispanic" (written in by 21 percent of the sample, in addition to 3 percent who chose "Latino"), though the categories "black" and "white" now more than doubled to 16.8 and 11.6 percent, respectively.

And when asked how they thought others classified them racially, the category "black" dramatically increased to 37 percent and "white" decreased to 6.4 percent. "Hispanic" was still selected by almost one-third of the sample (30.4 percent) as the racial category that they perceived others used to classify them. Indeed, "Hispanic" was the label most consistently given by the respondents to characterize their own racial identity, whether self-asserted or imposed upon them by others.

### The "Race" of Immigrant Parents and their Children

Another study found that, in addition to significant change in their ethnic self-identities over time and generation in the United States (as measured by open-ended questions), the offspring of Latin American immigrants were by far the most likely to define their racial identities differently than their own parents.

During the 1990s in South Florida and Southern California, the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) surveyed a sample of more than 5,200 second-generation youths representing 77 different nationalities, including all of the main Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America, and their immigrant parents. In one survey, the youths (aged 17 and 18) were asked to answer a semi-structured question about their race, and were given the option to check one of five categories: "white," "black," "Asian," "multiracial," or "other." If the latter was checked, they had to specify the other race.

Among the Latin American-origin youths, less than a fourth of the total sample checked the conventional categories of white, black, or Asian; 12 percent reported being multiracial; and over 65 percent checked "other." When those "other" self-reports were coded, it turned out that 41 percent of the sample wrote down "Hispanic" or "Latino" as their race, and another 19.6 percent gave their nationality as their race.

The explicit racialization of the Hispanic-Latino category, as well as the substantial proportion of youths who conceived of their nationality of origin as a racial category, are noteworthy both for their potential long-term implications in hardening minority-group boundaries and for their illustration of the arbitrariness of racial constructions. It is indicative of the ease with which an ethnic category developed for administrative purposes becomes externalized, diffused, accepted, and finally internalized as a marker of social difference.
The latter point is made particularly salient by directly comparing the youths' notions of their race with that reported by their own parents. The closest match in racial self-perceptions between parents and children were observed among Haitians, Jamaicans, and other West Indians (most of whom self-reported as black), among Europeans and Canadians (most of whom labeled themselves white), and among most of the Asian-origin groups (except for Filipinos).

The widest mismatches by far (and hence the most ambiguity in self definitions of race) occurred among all of the Latin American-origin groups without exception: about three-fifths of Latin parents defined themselves as white, compared with only one-fifth of their own children.

Table 4. Self-reported “Race” of Children of Immigrants and their Parents, by National Origin Groups

The results of this survey point to the force of the acculturation process and its impact on children's self-identities in the United States, providing another striking instance of the malleability of racial constructions. More fully exposed than their parents to American culture and its ingrained racial notions, and being incessantly categorized and treated as Hispanic or Latino, the children of immigrants seemingly learn to see themselves in these terms — as members of a racial minority — and even to racialize their national origins.

If these intergenerational differences between Latin American immigrants and their US-raised children can be projected to the third generation, the process of racialization could become more entrenched still.

Conclusion

Although a single label implies otherwise, "Hispanics" or "Latinos" are not a homogeneous entity. Many families classified as such can trace their roots in the United States back many generations, and even the newcomers differ notably in national and social-class origins, legal statuses, cultural backgrounds, and phenotypes (many mixing indigenous pre-Columbian ancestries with European, African, and Asian roots).

And, as the data show, there are vast differences in the way in which these various groups see themselves racially and ethnically, and in the way in which they are perceived by others. Divisions are evident between regions and groups, within groups, and even within families.

Nonetheless, despite sometimes profound group and generational differences among them, the tens of millions of persons classified as Hispanic do share a common label that symbolizes minority-group status in the United States. This is a label developed and legitimized by the state, diffused in daily and institutional practice, and finally internalized — and racialized — as a prominent part of the American mosaic.

That this outcome is, at least in part, a self-fulfilling prophecy, does not make it any less real. But the reliance on "Hispanic" or "Latino" as a catch-all category is misleading, concealing the multiple origins and the uncertain destinies of the peoples so labeled.
This article is based on the essay, "Pigments of Our Imagination: On the Racialization and Racial Identities of 'Hispanics' and 'Latinos'," in How the U.S. Racializes Latinos: White Hegemony and Its Consequences, edited by José A. Cobas, Jorge Duany, and Joe R. Feagin.

Sources and further reading


Dear Professor Rumbaut,

Hi. I am written to request permission to include your essay, “Pigments of Our Imagination: The Racialization of the Hispanic-Latino Category” in a forthcoming publication of our “The Hispanic Question and the 2020 Census.”

We will publish it soon, once an introduction is completed, in PDF form in order to promote a discussion of the Census Bureau’s proposal to combine the race and Hispanic questions for 2020. Your essay seems like a great way to provide our reader with a well thought out background to the issues involved. We will be distributing this little reader free of charge.

Un abrazo,
Angelo Falcón