

Hispanics: Does Our Language (Spanish) Define Who We Are?

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Abstract: Use of the pan-ethnic denomination *Hispanic* to refer to Spanish-speakers assumes a homogeneous group. Hispanics literally constitute 20 national origins with different characteristics and idiosyncrasies. Because individuals' national origin may influence their traditions, customs, values, and beliefs, differences in nationality should be considered in designing research.

The day I left Peru and landed in the United States, I automatically became a Hispanic, a student of color, a minority. During the 31 years I lived in Peru, I only referred to myself as *Peruana* (Peruvian). As I started adapting to my new environment as a graduate student at FIU and as an immigrant in Miami, I met people from very diverse backgrounds, mostly from Central and South America. It was by being exposed to this multiplicity of cultures that I became aware that Peruvians, Argentineans, Cubans and so forth were in fact very different people, with very distinct cultural traits and varying dialects of Spanish. Conversely, every textbook, research article, and magazine I read for my classes referred to all Spanish-speaking people as Hispanics.

The Hispanic population is growing at a fast rate both through immigration and through birth rate increase. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by the year 2050, the Hispanic population will have grown to 97 million, comprise 24.5% of the United States population, and comprise the largest minority group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). In California, Hispanic children are close to becoming the predominant group of school children, and they are an important and growing presence in a number of school systems in major metropolitan areas in other states as well (Sullivan, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to examine and critique the use of the pan-ethnic label, *Hispanic*, broadly used among researchers and scholars to identify a very diverse group of Spanish-speakers in the U.S.

Method

A literature review was conducted. Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Education Full-text and Omnifile Full Text Mega were selected as most representative of education. The search included publications from 1999 to 2009. Databases were searched for the following descriptors: Hispanics, Hispanic Americans, Latino, and Spanish-speaking students. Each term was searched individually and then paired with English as a second language. Then, individual nationalities were used as descriptors paired with English as a second language. The descriptors were: Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban American, Dominican American, and Colombian American. The results in number of articles found are shown in Table 1.

Who are the Hispanics?

Despite these significant demographic trends, our society has failed to recognize the diverse nature of this important segment of the population and has continuously treated Hispanics as if they were a homogeneous group. Hispanics represent 20 Spanish-speaking nationalities as well as some of the earliest settlements in what is now the United States (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). Ninety percent of all Hispanics in the U.S. trace their origins from eight countries: Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador--plus Puerto Rico. The remaining have their origins in Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Spain.

Mexicans and their descendants are the largest Hispanic group (66.9%). In fact, most of the research on Hispanics has concentrated on this group which renders generalizations about the Hispanic population problematic as they may be characterizing the experience of Mexican as a group dominated by large numbers of low-skilled, low-income immigrants. Puerto Ricans are the second largest group (8.6%) and Cubans (4% of the U.S. Latino population) are the third. Other countries of origin are grouped into Central and South American (14.3% of the Latino population), and "other Hispanic origins" (Thierren & Ramirez, 2000, p. 1), which include other Caribbean countries, representing 6.5%.

Table 1

Number of Articles Found According to Database Descriptors

Descriptors	ERIC	Education Full-text	Omnifile Full-text
Hispanic-American	75	10	79
Latino	70	44	48
Spanish-speaking Students	295	206	211
Mexican American	64	8	9
Puerto Rican	53	4	4
Cuban American	3	0	0
Dominican American	1	0	0
Colombian American	0	0	0

The Misleading Term Hispanic

The term Hispanic was introduced by the government in the 1970s and has been used in all subsequent census schedules. During the Census of 2000, the term *Latino* was added and since then has been used interchangeably, although there are marked preferences. While the term Hispanic highlights a linguistic commonality among all members, the term Latino suggests a closer connection to Latin America and may include non-Spanish speakers, such as Brazilians (Portuguese), Surinamese (Dutch), and Guyanese (French). Hispanics are only Hispanics in the U.S.; in their home countries, the term is neither embraced nor used (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006).

Policy makers and scholars now have access to data that classify these people by their Hispanic origin. However, in many cases, the term Hispanic confuses our understanding of this population. Spanish-speaking individuals are referred to as Hispanic, which is an umbrella name

that homogenizes different people under the same identity label. However, in each of these groups, there are sub-populations. Not only do these sub-populations differ with regard to socioeconomic status, educational achievement, and geographical concentration, but they also vary greatly in terms of language background and length of residence in the United States (Mow & Nettles, 1990). Data often fail to break Hispanics into important national-origin groups, such as Colombian or Dominican. Furthermore, the term Hispanic is used to describe people in the United States who are descended or have migrated from countries in which Spanish is spoken, who might speak English only. Because the term is rooted in the use of language rather than in ethnicity, Hispanic is a term that includes White, Blacks, mestizo/mulato (i.e. the mixture of African, Native American, and European).

Identification of Hispanics in the United States is often based on an assumed shared native language—Spanish. However, many Latin and Central American people speak indigenous languages (i.e. Quechua, Aymara, and Mayan) as their native language and they have little or no proficiency in Spanish. Moreover, to many, the term Hispanic has colonial overtones, which reminds us of the oppression exerted by Spaniards after the colonization of the Americas.

The Diversity Among Hispanics

Latino national groups differ markedly from each other on a number of dimensions. For example, Census 2000 data indicate that, whereas 36% of Mexican households are composed of five or more people, only 14% of Cuban households demonstrate that characteristic (Thierren & Ramirez, 2000). Similarly, whereas 73% of adult Cubans have graduated from high school, only 51% of adult Mexican Latinos have done so. Furthermore, the percentage of individuals who have earned a bachelor's degree varies from 7% of Mexicans to 23% of Cubans. When Latinos are examined as a pan-ethnic group, however, the following generalizations have been made:

Hispanics live in family households that are larger than those of non-Hispanic Whites. . . . More than 2 in 5 Latinos have not graduated from high school The proportion with a bachelor's degree or more was much lower for Hispanics (10.6%) than for non-Hispanic Whites (28.1%). (p. 3)

On careful examination of data for Latino national groups, however, the data for Cuban Latinos do not match the statements that are made for Latinos as a whole. In fact, the figures for Cubans are more similar to the figures for non-Hispanic Whites than they are to the figures for Mexican Latinos. Thus, the generalizations that are often made across Latino groups are at times inaccurate and could be misleading (Umana-Taylor & Fine, 2001).

Hispanic immigrants have entered the country with different socio-economic statuses than other immigrants groups such as Indians, Taiwanese, or Nigerians (Jeria, 1999). Latin Americans have higher rates of labor force participation but lower-collar employment. However, the breakdown by national origin indicates that there are differences among countries. South Americans from Colombia, Peru, Argentina, and Chile show higher economic status and higher educational level when compared with other Latin American immigrants (U.S. Census, 2004)

College completion rates for Latino immigrants are an indicator of future economic advantage. There are significant differences among immigrants from various countries and regions. South American immigrants are most likely to complete college, with over 30% having completed a bachelor's degree. The immigrants from Central America (not including Mexico) are the least likely to complete college education, with less than 20% possessing a bachelor's degree. An analysis of the countries of origin reveals that those who have migrated from Brazil, Argentina, and Peru are the most likely to have completed a college degree (Lowell & Suro, 2002). These data illustrate that Latinos continue to lag behind other racial or ethnic groups in

their educational attainment and that students from Caribbean and Central American countries are the most likely to experience difficulties in completing college degrees. Low educational attainment also limits the economic level that these populations can achieve.

Research on Adult Hispanic Learners

Because Hispanics/Latinos are often considered a homogenous population in demographic reports such as the U.S. Census, most research has focused on a collective Hispanic/Latino population, and little distinction among Hispanic/Latino populations is evident in existing research (Jeria, 1999). An area of research in which this homogenous grouping is especially evident is in research concerning adult Spanish-speaking ESL students. In many of these studies, researchers discuss the Hispanic or Latino population in their study without acknowledging the nationality differences among the Hispanics/Latinos included in their samples (Gault, 2003; Menard-Warwick, 2004). Furthermore, regardless of the sample characteristics, the results of those studies are often generalized to all Hispanic/Latino populations. How can research be effective in addressing the needs of adult language learners if the definition of the target population is blurry?

It is claimed that learners from different cultures learn in different ways, and that they differ in cognitive styles, self-expression and communication styles (Bennett, 2006). Furthermore, previous studies in language learning strategies, have suggested conducting further research with learners from particular cultural backgrounds to examine ways in which culture influences the use and reporting of strategies (Lunt, 2000; Oxford, 1996). Because individuals' national origin may influence their traditions, customs, values, and beliefs, learning should not be examined without considering differences in nationality.

The research literature in adult ESL education mostly uses the terms Latinos or Hispanics, but in reality much of this literature is based on the Mexican American experience. Although this research can be translated to those from other countries, it is important to recognize the diversity that exists among Spanish speakers to examine within-group differences and consider how they affect the adult learning experience for students from different countries of origin. What is shared among these countries of origin is a legacy of Spanish colonization and subsequent establishment of the Spanish language over indigenous languages, which provide a basic link between peoples, resulting in a common group identity (Fitzpatrick, 1971).

There is a considerable lack of research about Hispanics as adult learners in the field of adult education. The few studies that have been reported have employed a deficit perspective to interpret the Hispanic experience in adult education. The educational experience of Hispanics is described as needing remedial language in order to assimilate culturally into U.S. society (Young & Padilla, 1990). This only serves to perpetuate the damage done to learners in alien educational settings. Furthermore, Hispanic adult education is discussed as an instance of *minority education* in order to indicate the marginalized status of Hispanic Americans. Thus, Hispanics are frequently viewed as aliens who have come from another country and who do not fit neatly into U.S. society. Hispanics do not share equitably in the political, wealth, and material benefits of the United States (Jackson, 1995).

Jeria (1999) argues that what is offered to the Hispanic population through adult second-language classes is "training in a language in which they are asked to reproduce cultural symbols that teachers of adults think they do not have, in other words, they are working from a deficit" (p. 58). He contends that such a view, from a deficit and minority perspective, makes Hispanics invisible in the field of adult education. Mainstream adult educators do not incorporate Hispanic socio-cultural factors and historical issues that define the experience of Hispanics in the U.S. in

developing programs that serve this population. Rather, adult educators tend to employ top-down, authoritarian, assimilationist models of education, rendering the Hispanic experience invisible to the practice and research in adult education.

Cultural Diversity Research on Learning

Some scholars interested in cultural diversity research on learning (Orellana & Bowman, 2003) argue that there are significant problems in using preset social categories in research. Often, researchers merely label their populations (e.g., working-class Hispanic women) or use pan-ethnic labels such as *Asian* and *Hispanic*. These labels lump together individuals and groups that vary widely in histories, languages, immigration status, cultural practices, and political and religious affiliations (Conell, 1987).

Another problem with focusing on static differences between groups is that such differences are easily interpreted as deficits (Orellana & Bowman, 2003). The cultural learning styles approach (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) is a way of talking about cultural differences rather than deficits among different ethnic groups. It arose as an attempt to leave behind deficit-model thinking, in which cultural ways that differ from the practice of dominant groups are judged to be less adequate without examining them from the perspective of the community participants. . Work on cultural learning styles, however, is sometimes used in ways that are overly static and categorical. Treating cultural differences as traits makes it harder to understand the relationship between individual learning and the practices of cultural communities and this, in turn, sometimes hinders effective assistance to student learning. Therefore, ethnic and other cultural descriptors “may fruitfully help researchers examine cultural practices if they are not assumed to imply the essence of the individual or group involved, and are not treated as causal entities (Gutierrez & Rogoff 2003, p. 23).

It is argued that in order to do social science research without having some notion of social categories from which to work is nearly impossible. Orellana and Bowman (2003) suggest that

researchers take more control over the categories they name and over which ones they use for comparisons. For instance, instead of simply noting the race or ethnicity of participants, they might record others such as language and/or language preferences; immigration status, countries of origin, and regions of origin within those countries; current and past social class positioning; and other cultural practices. (p. 27)

In other words, rather than assuming a priori what defines entities as social groups, and comparing these groups to mainstream norms, researchers can discover empirically the meanings of social categories and define groups through practice rather than through bounded identity markers.

As qualitative research approaches often emphasize the role of the socio-cultural context where language learning occurs (Davis, 1995), language learning is viewed holistically with a focus both on micro-level phenomena, such as interaction within the classroom, and on broader socio-cultural phenomena including the experiences of the participants and the ideological orientations of the community. In an ethnographic study of classroom language use in a Native American community, Philips (1983) drew connections between communicative behavior in the classroom and learners’ cultural background. She found that the children’s cultural backgrounds strongly influenced their interactional patterns in the classroom, underscoring the importance of a thorough understanding of learners’ cultural experiences for interpreting learning behaviors.

Conclusion

Research can play a significant role in exploring how culture affects learning outcomes and processes. In addition to research using samples of specific national origins (instead of the pan-ethnic label Hispanic), researchers can look at similarities and differences within and among Spanish-speaking nationalities to better understand the role that culture plays in ESL learning. Educators and researchers need to learn about and understand the social, cultural, political, and economic history of Hispanics, especially of the particular ethnic or national group being served. Other learner characteristics need to be considered in designing research, especially for adult ESL learners. Besides cultural background, other variables such as prior educational experiences, socio-economic status, and beliefs about learning can provide a clearer picture for designing studies that aim to enrich our understanding and to provide culturally relevant adult education.

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