

What Does It Mean to Be “Mexican”?

Social Construction of an Ethnic Identity

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To better understand the impact of ethnic identity, it is important to examine people's social construction, or definition, of that identity. In this study, the social construction of ethnic identity of predominantly low-acculturated, first- and second-generation U.S. Mexicans and Mexican Americans was examined by asking focus group participants to talk about what it meant to them to be members of their ethnic groups. These open-ended responses then were coded along Phinney's aspects of ethnicity. Several interesting patterns emerged, some of which have not been emphasized in previous literature, such as conflict with African Americans and Chicanas/Chicanos. Discussion centers on the value of listening to people's social constructions of their ethnic identity to better understand their social realities.

An ethnic group is the reference group with whom people share a common history, physical features, and culture, and it is through interaction with reference group members that people identify themselves as members of a given group and incorporate an ethnic identity (Phinney, 1996). People's personal realities or social constructions of their ethnic groups can have implications

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for their self and collective identities, relations with others, and behavior (Hurtado, Gurin, & Peng, 1994). In the present article, the social constructions of the ethnic identity *Mexican* is explored with self-described Mexicans in Houston, Texas, an urban city whose population is approximately one third Latino (Romo & Rodriguez, 1993). We begin with a literature review on ethnic identity.

Tajfel and Turner (1986) conceptualized social identities as those based on groups that are a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement, and achieve some social consensus about the evaluation of their group. In this sense, a social identity includes aspects of people's self-image that are derived from the social categories to which they perceive themselves as belonging. Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory also includes the proposition that people's evaluations of their own group are based on their perception of how their own group compares to out-groups. This type of in-group–out-group comparison implies that it is important to understand how individuals understand and identify with their social groups.

Tajfel's definition is consistent with that of Mainous (1989), who conceives of the self-concept as multiple role identities. He states that self-definitions shape the self-concept by defining for the individual what he or she is and, consequently, providing expectations for role behavior consistent with a given identity. Thus, to understand how people arrive at their ethnic self-images, we must have some knowledge of people's perceptions of their ethnic group identities. Garcia (1982) identifies this perception as *ethnic consciousness*, the broader ethnic concept that includes ethnic identification, a psychological process, and ethnic identity, the cognitive product of identification. Therefore, ethnic consciousness entails socially constructing an ethnic identity.

Ethnic consciousness, especially that involving in-groups and out-groups, also may make salient a group's cultural model—"the understanding that a people have of their universe-social, physical or both, as well as their understanding of their behavior in this universe" (Ogbu, 1990, p. 523). The foundation of this cultural model is in the perceived (or socially constructed) reality of the people. Ogbu (1990) states that the nature of a group's cultural model can be socially constructed from what group members say as well as from what they do. As such, it is important to listen to how people say they identify with and make attributions about their ethnic groups. This free-response information may be organized in numerous ways, depending on how the concept of ethnic identity is defined.

Until the last two decades, most social scientists operationalized *ethnic identity* as one's self-label, with rare attempts to ascertain how people defined

those labels. More recently, the complexity of the ethnic identity construct, its different aspects, and implications of a given identity have been examined. For instance, in her review of the literature on ethnic identity, Keefe (1992) summarizes ethnic identity as (a) the perception of differences between ethnic groups, (b) the feelings of attachment to and pride of one ethnic group and cultural heritage as opposed to others, and (c) the perception of prejudice and discrimination against one's own ethnic group. Note that Keefe's definition overlaps with Tajfel's definition of social identity, especially with regard to intergroup comparisons. Phinney (1996) argues that at least three aspects of ethnicity may account for its psychological importance: (a) cultural values (ethnicity as culture), which refers to the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors typical of the group; (b) the subjective sense of ethnic group membership (ethnicity as identity), which refers to an enduring, fundamental aspect of the self that includes a sense of membership in an ethnic group and attitudes and feelings associated with that membership; and (c) experiences associated with minority status (ethnicity as minority status), which refers to struggles to gain equality, recognition, and acceptance in the larger society. As such, people's social construction of their ethnicities may be affected by their levels of acculturation (Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, in press; Phinney, 1995) and their socioeconomic statuses (SES).

In summary, it is argued here that an understanding of how people socially construct their ethnic group identities can best be achieved by directly asking persons what it means to them to be members of a given ethnic group. Such a methodology is consistent with Ogbu's (1990) cultural model theory, which states that a group's cultural model is derived in part from what the members of a population say about their group. It is also consistent with Keefe (1992), who states that "in the end, an individual's identity is based on the meaning of each ethnic group as interpreted by the individual" (p. 38). This study will focus on ethnic group descriptions of predominantly low-accultured, first- and second-generation U.S. Mexicans and Mexican Americans, most of whom are members of the lowest SES groups.

Method

Acculturation measure. The Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans-II (ARSMA-II) (Cuellar et al., in press) measures those phenomena that result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous firsthand contact, resulting in changes in original cultural patterns of either or both groups. The scale reliability has an alpha of .87, and concurrent validity is assessed at .90.

Respondents. Forty-nine participants of Mexican descent were recruited with announcements that researchers were interested in talking to persons about issues pertaining to ethnic identity. The targeted locations included the following: (a) a community park center in a predominantly Latino American part of Houston, (b) a Mexican restaurant whose workers were primarily Mexicans, (c) an inner-city school whose custodian staff was of Mexican descent, (d) a learning center where U.S. Mexican men and women attend night classes to gain competence in several vocational specialties (e.g., air conditioning repair, word processing), and (e) the student meeting room of the University of Houston Mexican American Studies Program.

Demographics of participants were as follows: 24 females (49%), 25 males (49%); mean age, 31 years, with a range from 15 to 57 years. Of the respondents, 42% had between 0 and 8 years of formal education, 50% had between 9 and 12 years of education, and 8% had some college. The generation level is as follows: 78% were first generation (not born in the United States), 18% were second generation (born in the United States), and 4% were third (parents born in the United States) or fourth generation (grandparents born in the United States).

Acculturation scale results were scored on the ARSMA-II computer-generated scoring system and then further analyzed using SAS. Acculturation levels of participants were as follows: 52.4% of participants were Level 1 (not at all acculturated), 28.6% of participants were Level 2 (very little or not very often), 19% of participants were Level 3 (moderately), and no participants were rated at Level 4 (much or very often) or Level 5 (extremely often or almost always). The acculturation and demographic data indicate that 81% of respondents were not at all or only slightly acculturated and were first or second generation and had less than 12 years of formal education.

Focus group procedure. Eight focus groups, averaging 6 persons each, met at different locations in the inner city of Houston, with conversation facilitated by two Mexican American male members of a psychology research team. Several of these focus groups were conducted in Spanish. Participants were assured anonymity and convenience (focus groups were held at the recruitment locations, and respondents' names were not recorded). Participants first were asked to complete the ARSMA-II Acculturation scale in either Spanish or English and to provide demographic information. Thirty-three respondents completed the scale in Spanish, 16 in English; 8 respondents indicated they did not know English. Facilitators then asked participants to talk about what their ethnicity meant to them.

The vast majority of our respondents, including most of those born in the United States, talked about being Mexicans or Mexican Americans and used

the term *Mexicanos* synonymously with those terms. Brief responses were followed up with prompts for elaboration. Care was taken not to lead the group in any direction. We wanted to know how respondents constructed their ethnicity without input from academic representatives. All focus groups were tape-recorded with the permission of participants, although participants were guaranteed complete confidentiality because they were not asked to identify themselves. Each focus group was intended to last only 1 hour, but several of them extended to 2 hours, as respondents seemed eager to talk about their lives as Mexicans in the United States. Respondents were thanked for being generous with their time and forthcoming in their responses and were given \$5 coupons to a local grocery store. These coupons were not used as an enticement for participation and were mentioned after the focus group interviews were completed.

Focus group coding. The focus group interviews were transcribed professionally by paid transcribers who were unaware of theories or hypotheses for the study. Tapes were transcribed first in the language spoken by participants, who spoke English, Spanish, and a combination of both. Then, all tapes were transcribed into English by the professional transcribers. A coding list was developed by the researchers based on Phinney's (1996) theoretical conceptualization of ethnicity as culture, ethnicity as identity, and ethnicity as minority status. The individual items were derived from Phinney's definitions of each category along with the addition of an "other" category for those items that did not fit clearly into Phinney's organization. Research assistants, consisting of an eight-member diverse team, coded the content of the transcribed interviews for their fit into appropriate categories. For purposes of reliability, three different assistants coded each focus group, and their final tallies then were averaged across coders. This procedure allowed us to quantify the discussion in a manner that added objectivity to our reporting of the most frequently discussed responses. The quantitative results facilitated a comparison about the extent to which our respondents constructed their ethnic identity with respect to the overarching categories of ethnicity as identity, minority status, or culture. This coding further allowed a comparison of which specific constructs within each category our respondents considered most important for Mexican identity.

Results

The mean values for cultural components were as follows: ethnicity as culture, 30.24; ethnicity as identity, 11.71; and ethnicity as minority status, 15.17. These data indicate that when asked what it meant to be Mexican,

aspects of culture constituted respondents' major construction of ethnicity and were mentioned almost twice as often as were aspects of identity or minority status. However, a significant proportion (25.5%) of responses did not fit clearly into any one of Phinney's categories and were grouped under "other." These responses included how ethnicity shaped respondents' views of America, attitudes toward bilingualism, and conflicts with Anglo-Americans and African Americans. Following is an elaboration of responses under each overarching category. According to the results from the quantitative coding, these were the most extensively discussed responses in the focus groups.

Ethnicity as Culture

Familialism. A value that respondents said differentiated them from other ethnic groups is their relationship with and attitudes toward their children. They stated that Mexicans like to keep their children close, physically and emotionally, and to teach them through discipline. Overall, respondents perceived Anglo-Americans and African Americans as being much colder to their children in terms of family unity. For example, they discussed the perception that Anglo-Americans and African Americans start letting go of their children as early as age 13, often by giving them too much freedom. Respondents also believed that Anglo-American parents are much more willing to hire baby-sitters, whereas Mexicans take children with them when possible. They also stated that unlike Anglo-Americans, Mexicans believe that parents alone should decide how to discipline their children, with no nonfamily interference in parents' disciplinary decisions.

Another example that was provided of the emotional closeness between Latino parents and children was that even after children are married, they still seek advice from their parents, and this advice is respected. Respondents also agreed that it is common for many Anglo-American children older than 18 to go for months without speaking to their parents, whereas that lack of communication was indicative of disrespect and would be unthinkable in the Latino way of life. Respondents stated that the Mexican family is united, for better or for worse. They seemed to agree with one person's statement, "I am here for my children. . . . My children and my family are my life, and I place them ahead of everything else in life."

Mexicans in our sample reported that they also respected grandparents and great-grandparents. This difference between U.S. Mexicans and other cultures was noted as a source of pride. They reported that it would not occur to self-respecting Mexicans to put their parents in a nursing home and that in their culture, older family members died at home with their family caring for them.

Regarding marriage, respondents noted that the stability and endurance of their marriages were important values. Women reported that women do not leave their husbands unless the situations are absolutely unbearable. However, respondents were also quick to point out their perception that Chicanos/Chicanas (whom they see as more “American” than “Mexican”) are not adhering to this tradition and that this shift in family values was a loss to the culture as a whole.

Work ethic. Another important value that emerged for U.S. Mexicans was the emphasis on the work ethic. There was general agreement that Mexicans could be proud of being hard workers who came to the United States to achieve more in life. As examples of their strong work ethic, they pointed out that U.S. Mexicans were willing to take a job in the hot sun, which others were unwilling to do. They gave examples of being nearly “worked to death” from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. on construction jobs, for practically no money but still working with pride.

Food and celebrations. Respondents said that U.S. Mexicans like to have big celebrations for many occasions, such as the Day of the Dead (Halloween), and big birthday parties with piñatas, mariaches, a lot of festivity, and “not just a little birthday cake.” Food also was cited as another important element in celebrations and overall ethnic identity.

Ethnicity as Identity

Heritage/roots. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that being Mexicano was a source of pride for them and facilitated a sense of belonging and that it was important to pass on this pride to their children. Respondents stated that those group members who do feel inferior to Anglo-Americans likely have suffered some trauma and their spirits are very low; otherwise, they would recognize the beauty of the culture. Pride in being *raza*—pride in their Indian heritage as well as in their Spanish heritage—also was considered important, as respondents felt that it was of great importance that individuals have a sense of their ethnic roots. This value was associated with a preference for associating with in-group members.

Ethnicity as Minority Status

Discrimination while shopping. Several of the female respondents said that they had been treated poorly by store clerks because of their ethnicity. They reported being treated rudely or not being helped by store personnel.

Male respondents reported that they are followed in almost every kind of store they enter because store clerks assume they are thieves.

Police discrimination. Respondents reported that police stop them only because they recognized the black hair of Mexicans and therefore suspect them of crimes. Respondents felt that police like to frighten them and make money for the city by ticketing Mexicans for anything they can get away with. Some male respondents reported losing jobs because they had to be in court fighting unjust tickets or fines.

Low group status. The men's voices demonstrated a keen awareness of how U.S. Mexicans are used politically in the United States. For instance, they noted that politicians will claim they will remove all Mexican immigrants from the country to get votes but then, of course, cannot follow through because Mexicano workers are desperately needed in the United States. Respondents agreed with the sentiment, "Where would they be without us? Who would do all this dirty work for practically nothing? They'll never be able to do without us and they know it, but it sounds good, it gets votes, and Anglos end up hating us even more because we're still here, even after all the promises from politicians." They also perceived workplace inequalities; for example, they reported that Mexicans must work harder than Anglo-Americans for the same paychecks or other rewards.

Struggle for justice. Respondents reported that they realize that if they united in complaint, they could facilitate change. However, they report that due largely to the threat of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), many in their group are afraid to complain. They reported that although they may be in the United States legally (or may be U.S. citizens), they do not want to be harassed by having to prove that all their papers are in order or by having to produce a birth certificate on a moment's notice. They believe that they cannot complain about injustices with the freedom with which Anglo-Americans and Blacks can.

New Voices

Negative view of America. A relatively unexamined perspective found here is that several respondents had a negative view of America. Individuals feel that they have worked hard and still have not succeeded or had their children succeed the way that they envisioned.

Bilingual. Respondents reported pride in their ability to speak Spanish and want their children to be bilingual (English and Spanish). They discussed what a tremendous loss it would be if their children were unable to communicate with relatives from the homeland. Unlike the stereotype of the monolingual Mexican American, respondents noted in particular the importance of their children speaking both English and Spanish. They felt that to retain the culture, their children should learn Spanish and that for them to succeed in America, they needed to learn English.

Although speaking Spanish was a source of pride for many respondents, there were also indications of in-group conflict around the issue of language. For example, some respondents felt that Mexicans who do not speak Spanish are ashamed of their race and are putting down their race. They stated that they had an understanding of why some parents, who themselves suffered great discrimination because they did not know English, stressed the importance of knowing English, and not Spanish, to their children. However, they do not understand how this same group of persons now cannot have compassion for those who do not understand English.

In-group conflict. Respondents reported much discrimination at the hand of Mexican Americans (whom the Mexican respondents often referred to as *Chicanas* and *Chicanos*), individuals who were born in the United States or who are from several generations of family born in the United States. They report that some Chicanas/Chicanos call them “wetbacks,” pretend not to speak or understand Spanish, and generally treat them worse than do Anglo-Americans in many situations. Respondents talked about the hurt of this kind of discrimination “from our own kind” and discussed their lack of understanding of how some Chicanos could treat U.S. Mexicans so poorly. Respondents also reported that one of the biggest barriers between Mexicans and Mexican Americans is that some speak Spanish, some do not, and some pretend not to speak Spanish.

Conflict with Anglo-Americans. Respondents reported that they think that Anglo-Americans seem almost eager to generalize or to stereotype one bad Mexicano to all Mexicans. They stated that neither Anglo-Americans nor Blacks want Mexicans or Mexican Americans to call themselves “American.” As one respondent said, “They always correct us and say, ‘No, you’re Mexican.’”

Male respondents reported anger and frustration at having been injured on the job and then discarded by their Anglo-American bosses. They stated that

they know Anglo-Americans like Mexican workers because they report to work even when they are sick, and “they can use us without even thinking about providing health care for us.” And still, “they blame all the problems on us.”

Conflict with African Americans. Much of the discrimination from African Americans reportedly was experienced firsthand by our respondents. They stated that African Americans are employed at places where the poor receive services, for example, Women, Infant, and Children Program (WIC), food stamps, Aid for Families With Dependent Children, health clinics, and so forth. Respondents said that “the Blacks pretend they don’t see the Mexican women waiting for services; they ‘talk down’ to them, treat them disrespectfully, and claim they don’t understand them, even when they speak English.” In a particularly emotional exchange, one woman gave the example of having had her child go hungry during school, although he had a lunch card. The women in our groups stated that one of the biggest differences between Mexican and African Americans and Anglo-Americans is that Mexicans would never let a child go hungry if they could help it; they would find a way to feed the child, even if they had to sacrifice their own lunches to do it. This difference was attributed to discrimination and cultural values.

Ambitions. Respondents believed that as a group, Mexicans and Mexican Americans are less educated than are Anglo-Americans and that this comparative lack of education was one of the things keeping the group from advancing. In general, this group of respondents believed that it is necessary for Mexicans to remain ambitious, with the goal of learning and advancing the group.

Discussion

People’s social constructions of what it means to be members of their ethnic groups speak to their experiences and social realities. Results of this study indicate that for low-aculturated first- and second-generation U.S. Mexicans and Mexican Americans, this reality is shaped by complex forces that include culture, aspects of ethnicity, and discrimination as well as realities that do not fit neatly into a given typology or organizational structure. Consistent with identity issues noted by Tajfel and Turner (1986), much of this social reality was expressed in terms of contrasting the experience of U.S. Mexicans and Mexican Americans with that of Anglo-Americans and African Americans. It is also important to note that our respondents used the

terms *Mexican*, *Mexican American*, and *Mexicano* synonymously. Although some response patterns were consistent with previous research (e.g., familism and strong work ethic), some new patterns also emerged, as discussed below.

An aspect of ethnic identity that was emphasized by respondents but that has not received much attention in previous ethnic identity research is that of conflict between Mexicans and Chicanas/Chicanos. Recall that Mexican respondents expressed much pain at this discrimination “from our own kind.” This aspect of our findings also may be a function of regional populations. In Houston, the research setting, the Latino immigrant population is now slightly larger than the Latino citizen population (Romo & Rodriguez, 1993). As such, as these groups come into contact with one another, it is likely that they perceive that they are competing for resources such as jobs. On this issue, the authors have made a personal observation that Chicanas/Chicanos often express the belief that Mexican immigrants are keeping them from advancing, and they often blame negative stereotypes on these immigrants. This between-Latino group conflict and its relationship to ethnic identity warrants further examination.

Respondents also emphasized their perception that they are discriminated against by African Americans. The findings also illustrate the importance of focusing on regional differences in intergroup relations. It could be, for instance, that the perceived negative relationship between African Americans and Mexicans has not been emphasized in previous ethnic identity research because much of this research has been done in areas in which there are not large numbers of both Mexicans and African Americans. In areas in which both groups coexist, the struggle between these two groups manifests itself and shapes ethnic identity.

In terms of Anglo-American discrimination, the keen awareness of institutional, political, and individual racism expressed by this group of relatively uneducated persons has not been a part of previous ethnic identity literature. Our respondents clearly were relaying the information of which they were aware and thus expect discrimination as an inherent part of their identities and lives as Mexicans and Mexican Americans. These data are consistent with Garcia’s (1982) argument that ethnic consciousness is associated with heightened political consciousness. It is interesting, however, that respondents also believed that they experienced some of the discrimination because they had not yet “proven” themselves as members of U.S. society, indicating these low-aculturated first- or second-generation traditional respondents may have had a cultural model of voluntary, as opposed to involuntary, minorities (Ogbu, 1990).

Applications

The results of this study have implications for development of ethnic identity measures. It seems reasonable that the most accurate measures of ethnic identity can be developed by asking a cross-section of group members to discuss, in their own words, what it means to them to be members of a particular ethnic group. That lay persons can so eloquently discuss what their ethnic identities mean to them also has implications for future research on the process of ethnic identity development of Mexican Americans, an area that remains to be examined. Effects of ethnic identity on the self may be a matter of how the given ethnic group is evaluated (Phinney, 1995). This evaluation can be ascertained by examining people's understanding of their ethnic identities across geographic regions of the United States.

In addition to having implications for information about the self, research on the social construction of ethnicity also has implications for assessing regional aspects of race relations. Our respondents saw themselves as highly racialized, especially in terms of relations with other groups. This finding is consistent with that of Pizarro (1997), whose study of identity formation found that lack of power becomes critical to people's understanding of their places in the world, and "this is the means by which they then defined their own identities" (p. 165). This interpretation is also consistent with work that indicates that internalization of ethnic group stereotypes may be a function of the particular social ecology of the respondents (Niemann & Secord, 1995).

Interaction of Affect and Cognition

Although Garcia (1982) made a distinction between psychological and cognitive aspects of ethnicity, our respondents' dialogues indicated that there may be an interaction of affect and cognition in the process of experiencing their ethnic realities. For instance, respondents spoke eloquently and emotionally about wanting to have their children physically close to them but were also cognizant of possible outside interference with regard to disciplinary decisions, indicating that cognition and affect are intertwined for this issue. Similarly, respondents' experiences with police discrimination also indicates that they know they are targets of police and fear consequences of this tension-filled relationship, an interaction of emotion and cognition. Thus, there seems to be no clear dividing line between affect and cognition for U.S. Mexicans' social construction of their ethnicity.

Conclusion

The most important contribution of this research is that respondents had the opportunity to freely define and discuss the meaning of their ethnic identity, whereas most previous research has simply assumed a definition. These discussions yielded social constructions of ethnicity not previously explored (e.g., in-group conflict), indicating that by using free responses, researchers may tap into the complexities of the experiences of U.S. Mexican and Mexican American identity.

Finally, the respondents in this study spoke passionately about their lives as U.S. Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Indeed, some of the focus group discussions extended to 2 hours, although a 1-hour discussion had been planned. Respondents' emotional involvement in the topic seemed to move them to share with facilitators and with one another aspects of their lives and their views on how they are treated and perceived. It was poignantly evident that respondents were eager to be listened to and grateful for having been asked to discuss their lives as Mexicanos in the United States. Our experiences with these groups led us to the conclusion that examining people's social constructions of their ethnic identities, in their own words, is critical for understanding their social realities.

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