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Latinos and the Color Line

CLARA E. RODRÍGUEZ, NANCY LÓPEZ, and GRIGORIS ARGEROS

Abstract

This essay reviews the issues and current literature on how “race,” skin color, and/or phenotype operate as stratifying agents among Latinos in the United States. We review the trends and emerging issues in this area with regard to health, housing and segregation, and socioeconomic status (SES), including education and criminal justice. We do so in the context of the Census Bureau’s release of its 2010 Alternative Questionnaire Experiment (AQE) study. This 5-year study focuses on how to best ask the race question. One of the key findings of the study was that including “Hispanic/Latinos” as a race in the combined questionnaire format did not reduce the number of people identifying as Hispanic/Latino; however, it did reduce the number of Hispanics/Latinos reporting detailed information on specific national origin. The AQE also recommended further testing of the combined question format. The only time that a Hispanic origin group was included in the Census as a racial category was in 1930 when “Mexican” was included as a race. If the Census recommends the inclusion of Hispanic as a race, it would mark a significant departure from the 1997 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidelines and the Census’ current policy of thinking of Latinos as an ethnic group, composed of many races, to a racial group similar to Whites, Blacks, or Asians in the United States. We also examine works that assess the importance of collecting data on race and ethnicity as analytically distinct concepts.

INTRODUCTION

This essay reviews the issues and current literature on how “race,” skin color, and/or phenotype operate as stratifying agents among Latinos in the United States in terms of health, housing and segregation, and socioeconomic status (SES) including education and criminal justice. The recent release of the Census Bureau’s 2010 Alternative Questionnaire Experiment (AQE) study (on how to best ask the race question) has brought the issue to the fore again. It also underscores the difficulty that both the US Census and Latinos have had in accommodating to the two-dimensional (Black and White) US color line. The Census’s conclusions suggest that they would advocate eliminating the separate question in the census that asks whether a person is Hispanic

or Latino, and adding a Hispanic/Latino category to the race question. This would alter the current census view of Latinos as an “ethnic group” that is comprised of many races to a “race” group. Proponents of this change argue that such a move would eliminate the tendency to view race as separate from ethnicity and recognize that Latinos are a racial-ethnic group that experiences discrimination. Others argue that conflating race with ethnicity would also make it difficult to assess the relative importance of “race,” color, or phenotype as a stratifying variable among Latinos. Moreover, they conclude that there is value added in maintaining an analytical distinction between race and ethnicity among Latinos. A third perspective maintains that adding Latinos as a race would legitimize the Census’s current racial structure (which many scholars and geneticists have rejected) and racialize Latinos. A fourth view argues that we should eliminate the concept of “race” in the census altogether and replace it with another concept, such as national origin or ancestry. In this essay, we focus our review of the literature on the trends and emerging issues on racial stratification among Latinos in the United States with regard to SES attainments, health and housing.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

In the early studies in this area, it was generally assumed that among Latinos, “race” influenced their life chances and social position in society, that is, how much income they might make, and what types of jobs, education, and housing they could attain. Some of the early literature focused on Puerto Ricans and many authors predicted (or in some cases, concluded) that, given the racial discrimination existent in the United States, those who were seen to be white would have greater opportunities and outcomes than those who were seen as Black. Those who could not pass for white and who did not assimilate into the Black/African American community, would have intermediate outcomes, that is, between white and black Latinos.

The introduction in the 1980 decennial census of the Hispanic identifier, that is, a question asking whether the person was Hispanic or not, (along with the question asking everyone to report their “race”) enabled researchers to examine more precisely how Latinos reported themselves in terms of race. In the 2010 census, the large proportion (over 37%) of Latinos who chose the (formerly small) some other race (SOR) category was in stark contrast to the less than 2% of non-Hispanics who chose this category. It was also in contrast to what had been a tendency to view Latinos either as predominantly white—as had been done in earlier census studies—or, as either Black or White. In fact, over 37% of Latinos also chose the SOR category in the 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses.

The existence of this Hispanic identifier also spawned a great deal of research examining the question of whether a Latino's self-reported "race" influenced the SES. This research has found a complex picture. A number of authors found support for the argument that those Latinos who reported their race as white had higher SES attainments than those who reported they were Black and/or SOR. Other researchers examined the relationship between Latinos' phenotypes and/or their skin color and found, as Roth notes, that lighter and more European-looking Latinos were also generally doing better than their darker counterparts. The SES areas examined included education, employment, occupation, earnings, household income, hourly wage, poverty, housing, self-esteem, and mental health.

However, some studies found that higher SES in the Latino community was not so clearly correlated with Latinos reporting their race as "white." Part of the reason for these mixed findings may have to do with how "race" was measured in the studies, that is, whether it was based on how others identified Latinos or how Latinos reported themselves on race questions. Differences in how Latinos self-reported their race and how their race was recorded by others have been found in numerous studies. In addition, for some time, census re-interview studies and other descriptive studies have also found that some Latino respondents change their racial self-classification over time and that their response is sometimes dependent on question context. This, of course, influences how we approach and answer the question of whether Latinos' race is a significant stratifying variable in the United States, for some Latinos will place themselves differently on the color line than they would be placed by others.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

As noted earlier, the AQE study raises the question of whether Latinos are to be seen as a race or as an ethnic group, composed of different races. The Human Genome Project and several leading scholarly associations, including the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, the American Anthropological Association, the American Sociological Association and the American Psychological Association have all produced statements clarifying that race and ethnicity are both social constructions that have no biological or genetic basis. Some argue that race is very similar to ethnicity and that having two separate questions reinforces a biological view of race. Others maintain that because race and ethnicity are so similar, Latinos should have a category in the census' race question. However, a growing number of researchers have examined the importance of maintaining a conceptual distinction between race and ethnicity. Leading this effort are

scholars of health and medicine. Using the “Reactions to “Race” Module of the 2004 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System,” scholars have found that one measure, that is., “socially defined race,” was more important than self-identified “race” in terms of predicting health status, even after controlling for socioeconomic variables such as income and educational attainment.

In other words, Hispanics who indicated that others usually classified them as “White” had health outcomes that were closer to *non*-Hispanic whites. It is important to note that non-Hispanic whites had the best self-reported health status of any of the racial and or ethnic groups. Given these results, some researchers, such as Gravlee and his colleagues argue that, whenever possible, researchers should include measures of socially defined race as a key dimension of social stratification and that this is of particular relevance for health outcomes. In studies of the health disparities between Black and White Hispanics, LaVeist-Ramos and his colleagues also found that the Black Hispanic experiences within the health care industry mirrored that of other Blacks in the United States. This is theoretically important as we cannot assume that Latinos/Hispanics from even the same ethnic origin, ancestry, nationality or even family share the same racial status or what López refers to as “lived race-gender.”

The AQE study suggests that one possible approach to a combined question in the 2020 census would be to have respondents be able to choose more than one race category. Latinos could then choose the Latino category and also another race category, that is, White, Black, Asian, or Native American Indian. However, some scholars such as Hernandez argue that given the “depreciation” of nonwhite races throughout Latin America, this would result in a larger white count, as those Latinos who chose more than one race would most likely choose white and not any of the other races.

In education, qualitative and quantitative studies also point to the persistence of the color line and the importance of examining the intersection of race *and* gender in shaping the interactions of second generation Caribbean youth. Focusing on Dominicans, West Indians, and Haitians in urban educational settings, López finds that girls of color were succeeding at higher rates than their male counterparts. This was due in large part to the similarity in the racialization experiences of men who, regardless of their ethnic background, had very similar experiences with discrimination and with being racialized as potential criminals. Women, on the other hand, spoke about multiple experiences with racial stigma that was related to their sexuality. This research points to the need to examine the “gendered color line” for understanding inequalities in education and other dimensions of SES.

KEY ISSUES: LOCAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXTS MATTER

As noted earlier, there has been a consistently high proportion of Latinos who choose the SOR category in the census. This, despite census attempts to discourage this SOR response. How, why, and where Latinos report their race influences the data that is collected and analyzed by researchers. Much research has gone into examining more closely the determinants of Latino race reporting. At stake here is how particular variables and local and national contexts affect (individually or in combination) the SES of Latinos in the United States. In addition to the SES variables noted earlier that researchers have historically investigated, others have recently been added. These have included a person's national origin and skin color, their level of acculturation, and their generational status. Not surprisingly, and in keeping with previous research, lighter skin increases the likelihood of a "white" identification and decreases the odds of reporting as "black" or "other." In addition, contextual social variables, such as whether or not they have experienced (or they perceive) racial discrimination and whether they identify with others who have experienced actual discrimination, have also been examined. Moreover, location, that is, where they live or go to school, has been found to be related to how Latinos report their race. In addition, migration, that is, whether they bring or hold alternative "racial schemas," has been found to influence race reporting. Acculturation and how long Latinos have lived in the United States have also been investigated with mixed results. Lastly, a great deal of research has focused on how the way a question is asked influences Latino race reporting.

A key issue here is the role—or the weight—that each these variables will have as the United States becomes more racially and ethnically heterogeneous; and, as intermarriage and multiracial identities grow. Another key issue is whether discrimination (perceived or actual) will influence how Latinos report their race. This has implications for the question of whether Latinos' reported "race" is related to their SES attainments. For example, if a Latino (with high SES attainments who reports himself or herself as White) experiences discrimination because of being a Latino, he or she may reevaluate how they see their view of their race. Likewise, even if they have not experienced actual discrimination, the fact that they perceive other Latinos (or nonwhites) to face a glass or concrete ceiling may also cause the Latina/o to change their view of himself or herself as "white" and choose "SOR" or "black." Thus, greater experience (or acculturation) in the United States may lead some Latinos—who arrived with high SES attainments and who saw themselves as white within their country of origin's racial schemas—to see themselves as nonwhite in the United States.

A related key issue is whether growing up in predominantly minority schools or geographic areas influences who they identify with in society; and, whether this changes over time. Implicit in this discussion is the question of whether acculturation and increased time in the United States leads to a continuance of the assimilation experience undergone by earlier (mainly European) immigrant groups or to a racialized assimilation. Or, if this will vary depending on the “acculturated” person’s phenotype and clues/cues to his/her Latino ancestry.

Another important issue has to do with researchers’ awareness of the role of “context” on Latino race reporting. Although this has been noted and studied in the literature, researchers need to be cognizant of its role in their research. In other words, whether a person is being asked for their race on a scholarship application or on a mortgage application may influence how they report their race. Whether they are asked to check off their membership in a group that lists many other racial and cultural/national origin groups or to simply state their “race” may also influence how Latinos report their race. And, finally residence, that is, what part of the country they live in, what neighborhood, and their school context may also shape how Latinos identify. Accordingly, this will influence analyses that are done examining Latino racial/ethnic stratification. Researchers must always be attentive to how situational, local, and national contexts matter for racialization and reporting of racial identity among Latinos, as well as other groups. This is theoretically important as we cannot assume that Latinos/Hispanics from even the same ethnic origin, ancestry, nationality or even family share the same racial status or what López refers to as “street race-gender” or “lived race-gender” (López, 2013a; 2013b; 2014).

Finally, demographic changes and regional dispersion of the Latino population during the past 20 years requires that researchers take into consideration how race influences Latino ethnic groups’ SES attainments, residential segregation, and mobility patterns and outcomes. It is also imperative that differences in national origin, nativity status, SES, acculturation, family/household, generational status, and homeownership (including the metropolitan area characteristics of where Latinos reside) be taken into account. For these may produce or reflect variations in residential segregation and mobility outcomes among Latinos, by socially defined race. For example, studies examining residential segregation and housing outcomes reveal that race interacts with nativity status, ethnicity, and acculturation status to produce variations in the neighborhoods where Latinos reside, relative to other racial/ethnic groups. Insofar as traditional models of residential mobility have successfully captured the locational outcomes for the majority of white European ethnic groups, nonwhite Latino residential patterns might not follow the same linear outcomes. Furthermore, we need

to investigate how race influences Latino locational outcomes in the *new* destinations they are moving into, such as traditional and nontraditional suburban neighborhoods, especially in the South.

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FURTHER READING

Note: This essay reviews issues and trends in a very broad area that has recently been the site of much innovative research, that is, Latinos and the color line, so there are a lot of references that could be recommended. We decided that what might be best is to list both those that address the issue more generally and those that address specific areas, such as health, housing and segregation, socioeconomic attainments and crime.

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current work focuses on the creation of meaningful conceptualizations of “race” in as a dynamic multidimensional and multilevel social construction.

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Dr. Grigoris Argeros is Assistant Professor of Sociology, and affiliate faculty with the African-American Studies Program, at Mississippi State University. Dr. Argeros earned a PhD in Sociology from Fordham University and an MA in Applied Social Research from Queens College of the City University of New York. His scholarly interests are in the areas of race and ethnicity, immigration, urban sociology, and social demography. Dr. Argeros’s work focuses on the correlates and consequences of (i) patterns of racial/ethnic neighborhood change and (ii) changes in levels of residential segregation.

RELATED ESSAYS

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