

From Chicano to Latinx: My search for identity finds diversity

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Thank you for inviting me to share a few stories in celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month. First I want to thank BLS for this honor and opportunity. Y’know, all of us – Latino or otherwise -- have stories that need telling so that we can better understand each other in this crazy age of societal extremism. So let me start with a little story about when I was 3 or 4 years old – and it has relevance later on. I was born and raised on the “West Side” of San Antonio, Texas, just

south of Woodlawn Lake. The first few years of my life were at home under the care of my maternal grandmother took care of us while my parents went to work at Kelly AFB – the biggest employer in the city at the time. For generations those civil service jobs were treasured by families in the barrio. Anyway, as a 3-4 year-old I was often given pretty wide leeway playing in the pretty barren backyard. At one corner, though, was an intriguing cactus garden filled with prickly pear, agaves and other native cacti. For some reason I was fascinated with that garden and specifically with the prickly pear. When my grandmother checked on me during the day I often was near that garden despite admonitions to stand clear. This picture shows what they look like, and you can see why she was strenuous with her warnings.



Well, one day I found a stick and lopped off one of the prickly pads, then dragged it over to the garage shed for some in-depth probing. While squatting above it and poking with the stick I heard the screen door slam. Looking behind me, I saw my grandmother coming out with a load of laundry to hang on the nearby line. Not wanting to get caught I quickly devised a concealment plan. I spun around, still in a squatting position and poked the ground in front of me, pretending to be interested in the dirt and expecting my body would shield the biological specimen from view. I remember being both happy and excited because the clothes started going up on the line. My plan was working. But then fate struck. Darn it if I didn't lose my balance and fall backwards – and sit – directly on that prickly pear pad. I let out a screech heard 'round the neighborhood, and my grandmother ran over. I expected to see compassion and sympathy. Instead, I bore witness to delight and howling laughter. She howled until the last *spina* – or thorn – was plucked off my baby bottom... although you never get them all because some are way too small to extract. You might think I learned my lesson that day, and I did: I was a lot more careful the next time! Prickly pears were way too interesting for me to suspend my research endeavors.

That persistence to pursue my interests – even at the cost of a little pain – is something I learned early on. And it ties into the journey I’m going to tell you about today: A search for ethnic identity that encounters terms like Hispanic, Latino, Lantinx, Mexican-American, Chicano, mestizo, Raza. It’s a journey that spans over half a century and continues to this day because such quests never really end. I’m going to tell you how I navigated my path to identity as a kid in the barrio, , as a college student, a family man, a professional statistician, a leader, and now a *viejito* – an elder – which I legitimately call myself now that I have signed up for Medicare. Throughout my identity journey, I’ve been passionate about being a Mexican-American, a Chicano. And I happen to be monolingual English speaker. My hope is that as I guide you through this journey of discovery, you’ll appreciate and value the diversity of not just Latino groups such as Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Mexicans, Central Americans and so on, but recognize and value the diversity *within* these specific groups as well. So let’s begin!

OK, you might think this odd, but my journey started with my grandparents, about half a century before I was born. Their actions determined the starting point of my journey. Here is a picture of my them, including my dad who’s atop that way cool tricycle.



Circa 1920

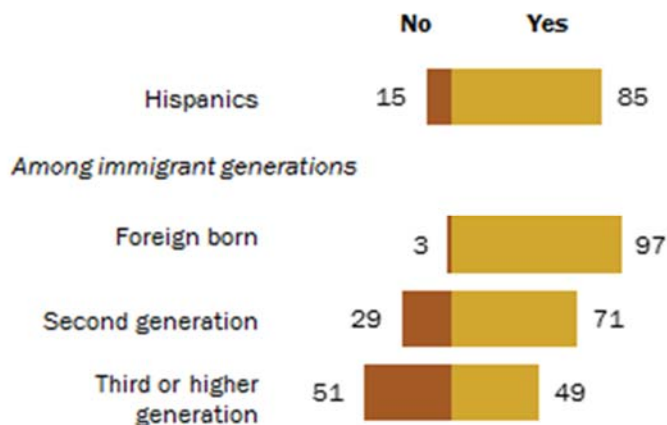
That’s how he rode. Like many in their generation including on my mom’s side, they fled Northern Mexico to avoid the violence of the Mexican revolution around 1910. They simply upped and crossed the Texas-Mexico border *sin papeles* and settled in San Antonio. One of the first jobs my grandfather had was as the greenhouse gardener of

the Brackenridge family estate – if you live in San Antonio you'll know Brackenridge Park... same family. The pic was taken in front of one of the estate's greenhouses. My parents were born in San Antonio, so they were second generation immigrants and that means I'm a third generation immigrant.

Why talk about immigrant generations? It's because it influences one's acculturation in the new country. And what do we know about generational acculturation in the U.S.?

Share of Hispanic parents who speak Spanish to their children declines across immigrant generations

*Do you speak Spanish to your children, or not?
% of parents saying ...*



Note: Although those born in Puerto Rico are U.S. citizens by birth, they are included among the foreign born in this analysis because they were born into a Spanish-dominant culture. Voluntary responses of "Don't know" and "Refused" not shown.
Source: Pew Research Center 2015 National Survey of Latinos.

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Pew research suggests what you probably already know: that the percentage of households speaking Spanish at home declines with successive generations. Their 2015 Survey of Latinos showed that virtually all first generation Latino households speak Spanish at home but it drops to about half by the third generation. And true to form, there was a bit of Spanish spoken in my second generation home when I was growing up – although there is some important nuance that I'll get to in a sec. But I can tell you that MY third generation family exclusively spoke English at home.

As for the nuance: my grandparents were monolingual Spanish speakers throughout their lives. Until I was about 5 years old my maternal grandmother lived with us and cared for her *nietos* – us grandkids -- while my parents worked and laid claim to their American dream. That means my early days were spent in a mostly Spanish speaking household. You may ask how on earth I ended up being monolingual? I sometimes ask myself that.

Well, as best as I can tell, it was good intentions gone awry. Being a good Catholic family with a national basilica and parochial school only a few blocks away, my parents scraped enough money to send us to

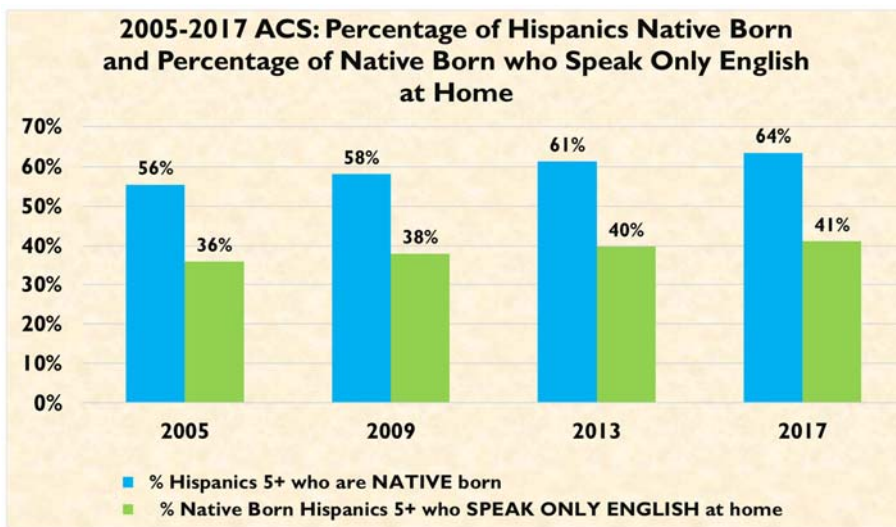
parochial school to be taught by nuns... Irish nuns. Here is a pic of my elementary school.



Bless their hearts, besides teaching us Irish folksongs, they believed that the secret to a good education in the barrio was for students *and their families* to embrace an English-only environment. Spanish was not allowed at school, and parents were asked to only speak English at home. Not all parents at that school complied, but mine did. And since my grandmother no longer lived with us, it didn't take long.

Within a few years I pretty much had lost the Spanish I had known as a young child.

It's this language loss that lead to personal conflict in my journey of identity: How could I call myself a Latino or Mexican-American if I am a monolingual English speaker? Well guess what, I wasn't alone being monolingual English speaker then, and the situation is more pronounced now.



2/3 of Hispanics are native born in 2017
Of these, about 40% speak only English at home

ACS data between 2005 and 2017 show two things – the percentage of native born Hispanics is steadily increasing over time and now make up just under two thirds of all Hispanics in the US; and these native born Hispanics – myself included -- increasingly speak only English at home, now at about 40 percent in 2017. I can pretty much guarantee it's only going higher with time.

Now let's consider my journey as a young Latino through a different lens – the lens of media. It's illustrated nicely in this pic of my sister and me when I was about 4 years old.



Circa 1959

There are two things I want to point out. First, obviously I forgot to put on some pants. Yup, I'm out the posing in my underwear. I remember distinctly that as a kid I was so excited just to be alive. I'd bounce out of bed and run outside to play, sometimes not even grabbing a tee shirt. Now take a closer look at the tee shirt I

happened to be wearing. It's a Davy Crockett shirt! The same Davy Crockett that helped take Texas away from my Mexican ancestors. I loved that shirt so much that it didn't matter there was a huge hole in the front. I wore it until it was in tatters. But WHY? It was because of the new technology of the day -- called *television*.

As third generation immigrants in the mid-50s and 60s, we had a black and white TV, and what did we watch? Programs like Ozzie and Harriet, Lassie, Andy Griffith, the Rifleman, and yes, Davy Crockett. And I watched tons of cartoons but I'm not going there... That's another talk. These programs and pretty much all TV programming at that time communicated non-Latino lifestyles and views. When Latinos did appear as in *I love Lucy*, they were a bit stereotypical and in other programs it was much worse. We know now what we didn't then: that exposure to media can affect how we think about life. Being a latchkey kid, I got a pretty good dose of TV as a child.

By the time I graduated high school, I knew I was a Mexican-American and I labeled myself as such. But after being exposed to mainstay national television programming, it was pretty clear to me that that society did not really value Mexican-Americans, African Americans, Asians or any other racial-ethnic minority or their culture. This was

reinforced on a number of occasions growing up when I encountered blatant discrimination at stores, parks, public swimming pools and grand venues such as Hemisfair, the 1968 World's Fair. Not to mention that San Antonio was and still is segregated along racial-ethnic and income class lines.

Coming out of high school, all I knew is that I was a Mexican American, an aspiring hippie/flower child, and I desperately wanted to go to college and learn mathematics. Little did I know that my postsecondary education would be host to the next leg of my identity journey as a Latino.

After some courses at San Antonio Community college, I transferred and received a BA in Math from Trinity University. Back then, it was a predominantly White, private, and pretty solid liberal arts college. Having married at 18, I really didn't spend much time at the campus other than to take classes. During my undergrad days in the early 70s, the San Antonio Latino activism scene was blossoming. The Raza Unida party gained some popularity and I was able to meet some of the principals in the city that included poets, musicians, political scientists, activists and so on. I quickly embraced being a Chicano, a Mestizo... I was Raza! Interestingly, being monolingual English did

not seem to matter to this crowd. They were more concerned with building political power and civic engagement. But as quickly as my exposure to that scene came, it ended when I decided to attend graduate school in a land far, far away: Michigan. You see, up to that point in my life, I had never travelled north of Dallas.

The next leg of my identity journey commenced with grad school in 1976 at the Department of Statistics of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.



GO BLUE!

I was only able to attend because of a university minority fellowship, and later with a Ford Foundation fellowship for minority students. Turns out I was among the last cohorts to benefit from Affirmative Action. I somehow felt guilty receiving this support, thinking that

there were Latinos or African Americans or Native Americans much more deserving than I. It was only later at Temple University's Institute for Survey Research that I worked on the NSF National Survey of Recent College graduates and understood how very few Latinos there were in STEM graduate programs, much less statistics.

In any case, the fellowship support at Michigan further instilled in me an obligation to 'pay it forward'. That was a value I acquired through a dozen years of parochial schooling and embrace to this day. During these years, my wife and I joined with 'more veteran' Latino grad students at Michigan to form a support network for incoming Latino grad and undergrad students. We also joined Latino graduate student groups including a Ballet Folklórico and an activist group called the Association for Critical Social Studies.



**1977 Ballet Folklorico
performance at Ann
Arbor Street Fair**

Then fortune smiled and thanks to a Latino researcher named Carlos Arce I secured a Graduate Student Research Assistantship at the famed Sampling Section of SRC. I learned sampling from the great survey sampler Leslie Kish – himself a president of ASA in the 70s, and I became a sampling statistician.

My first sample at SRC was the National Chicano Survey in 1977, the first ever national area probability survey of people of Mexican descent. Through this experience I met many a Mexican American scholar including some legends like Marta Tienda, Leo Estrada and Gil Cardenas. My pride from being Hispanic soared as a grad student. But then fate reared its head. I encountered the dark side of being a

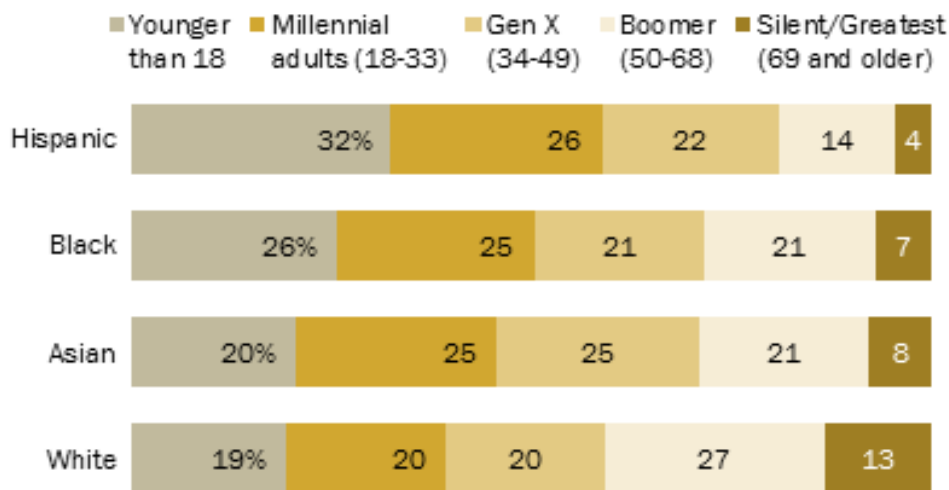
Latino monolingual English speaker. On more than one occasion during my travels with the Chicano Survey, I was clearly ‘judged’ by other Latinos – some who were prominent in their day -- as being unworthy because I was not bilingual. I was in my early 20s and I confess it hurt a lot. But just like that child who went back to the prickly pear for another pad to study, and that five year old without pants and a hole in his tee shirt, I was so excited to be a part of this pioneering study that I just moved on, learned, and had fun. I decided that I was the only person who knew my identity, and I chose to be all the above – Hispanic Latino, Mexican-American, Chicano, Mestizo, even Mexicano. And if anyone didn’t like it, then it’s just not my problem.

Fast forward thirty-something years and my thinking on identity has evolved further, thanks to the wonderful mix of policy research I’ve been honored to be a part of. My thinking now is that if we are to be a society that embraces human dignity and human rights, then we should celebrate people in the entirety of their varied cultural make up. Moreover, even within a specific group such as Hispanics, we should recognize and value diversity *within groups*. We are not monolithic in our identity. Hispanics can be Catholic or Evangelical or even Muslim, male, female or some other gender, impoverished,

middle income or wealthy, and, yes, monolingual, bilingual or multilingual. Increasingly, we are a nation of mixed race and ethnicities and I love that about us. Besides being Latino, I personally take great pride in being a parent, grandparent, spouse and friend, as well as a statistician and policy researcher a photographer and grill master. And yet, my identity journey continues.

But let's get back to Hispanic Heritage Month. I've just relayed my personal voyage of Latino identity over six decades. But there are many other voices of Latinos to be heard and appreciated.

Nearly six-in-ten Hispanics are Millennials or younger



The future of Hispanic identity will be defined by its youth

Note: Whites, blacks and Asians include only those who are single race and not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.
 Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2014 American Community Survey (IPUMS).
 "The Nation's Latino Population Is Defined by Its Youth"

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In fact, as this graph shows, the future of Latino identity will be defined by those who are under the age of 34 – Millennials and younger. They form the majority of the Latino population today.

And there is some evidence that it is already taking shape. Just as Latino young adults embraced the terms Chicano and Mestizo in the 1970s, today's Latino Millennials are drawn to the term *Latinx* which is gender neutral. And in another generation who knows what if any the new terms will help Latinos describe who they are.

So I say we celebrate the rich diversity and culture of the many Latino populations that have been bestowed upon our nation. I believe our collective diversity – Latino or otherwise – makes our nation stronger and more special. Let's all take our own journeys of identity and grow from the paths we have chosen. We'll all be better human beings for it.... Thank you.