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Hispanic Psychology: A 25-Year Retrospective Look

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Hispanic Psychology: A 25-Year Retrospective Look

Abstract

Hispanic psychology has its roots in ethnic psychology and in cross-cultural psychology. The basic premise is that it is a valuable enterprise both theoretically and empirically to study the behavior of Hispanics. Over the past 25 years, research in Hispanic psychology has given way to a new scholarship or paradigm that calls for the recognition of intragroup variation which values within-group comparisons rather than relying exclusively on between-group effects. Acculturation and biculturalism have taken on special significance in Hispanic psychology. Further, Hispanic psychology must also consider the effects of racism and oppression on people and how these affect ethnic identity, attitudes toward the dominant group, and intergroup relations.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1973 Rene Ruiz and I published a monograph entitled "Latino Mental Health: A Review of Literature" (Padilla & Ruiz, 1973). This work represented the first systematic effort to organize the psychological and mental health literature on Spanish-origin people in the United States. In a March 1971 census report the total Spanish origin population was estimated to be just under 9 million. Also at this time, "Hispanic" as an ethnic label had not yet been coined. The word was first introduced by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 1980 as a replacement term for people of Spanish origin. Further, it was not until the latter part of the1970s that it became clear how rapidly this ethnic group was growing. Today, Hispanics number approximately 30 million and will become the largest ethnic group in the United States shortly after the turn of the century.

At the time of writing "Latino Mental Health" only about 500 articles, chapters and books of a psychological nature on Latinos could be located (Padilla & Aranda, 1974). Of this literature about 25% was only tangentially related to psychology or mental health. Over the ensuing years, research on Latinos has increased substantially. A recent search of PsychInfo using the term "Hispanic" resulted in more than 3,500 citations.

What is Hispanic Psychology?

A definition of Hispanic psychology is important because it sets the stage for theoretical paradigms, research methodologies and instruments used, and the interpretations we give to our findings. Specifically, Hispanic psychology is a branch of ethnic psychology where the population of interest is of Latin American origin, and where the target population resides within the U.S. or Puerto Rico. Therefore, the study of Hispanics takes place in a context of majority-minority group relations.

It is also important to be clear about the term Hispanic and how it is used. A person who is of Latin American origin (e.g., Mexico, Cuba, Peru, Argentina, Guatemala) is designated for census purposes as Hispanic. Such a person may be an immigrant to the United States or may even be part of the 8th or 9th generation of U.S.-born citizens whose roots extend back to when the American west was part of Spain and later Mexico. However, the ethnic label that an individual uses to self-identify is very important. Many individuals prefer to identify as Latino rather than as Hispanic. Thus, in the remainder of this paper, I will use the two labels interchangeably because this practice is frequently found in the psychological literature.

More important than specific national origin or preferred ethnic label are the shared cultural values and traditions of the population and how these shared values and traditions influence behavior (Padilla, 1995). These shared values and traditions include: Spanish language usage; strong sense of familism; Catholicism; traditional male-female roles; celebrations of Latin national holidays; visual, performing and musical forms; etc. Since the majority of Hispanics are U.S. born citizens, most speak English fluently and are influenced by American values, traditions, and lifestyles. This is also true of immigrants who have resided in the U.S. for more than a few years.

Hispanic psychology also has roots in cross-cultural psychology, but is distinct in that it concentrates less on *inter*cultural group differences (e.g., cognitive differences between Japanese and American students) and more on *intra*cultural group differences. In other words, cross-cultural psychology is usually concerned with the systematic study of experience and behavior as it occurs across cultures in different nation states (e.g., Japan and the United States). Exceptions to this pattern often occur, of course, because the logic of the cross-cultural method can be used both within and across cultures

In contrast, Hispanic psychology seeks to understand the influence of culture, language, and minority-majority group status on people of Latin American origin who reside in the U. S. The *intra*cultural comparison enters because Latinos maintain aspects of their culture of origin while also acquiring American culture. Hispanic psychology then seeks to learn how differences in acculturation level also influence a wide variety of behaviors such as substance abuse, sexual attitudes and behavior, or coping responses to stressful environments.

The Effects of Oppression and Racism

An additional feature of Hispanic psychology is that often the focus is on understanding how oppression and racism influence the behavior of Latinos. As members of an ethnic minority group, many Hispanics have experienced prejudice and/or discrimination. When members of an ethnic group feel that they are the targets of discrimination, there is a natural tendency to form close social networks and to look toward their own group for support. This also affects the perceptions that members of an ethnic group have toward members of the majority group and their willingness to integrate socially, especially if it means giving up their culture and identity.

How oppression and racism influence the perceptions, feelings, and behavioral expressions of Latinos is not easily dismissed in Hispanic psychology, whereas these conditions are less relevant in cross-cultural studies. The reason that themes of oppression and racism are important in Hispanic research is that these topics emerge frequently in the accounts of Hispanics as they relate their experiences with majority institutions and individuals. Also research bears out the fact that racism creates social barriers that pose serious obstacles for Hispanics and these experiences shape their construction of a social identity (Niemann, Romero, Arredondo, & Rodriguez, 1999).

An example of how oppression and racism adversely affects Hispanic youth can be gleaned from data on school completion rates. Demographic information taken from numerous sources including the U.S. Bureau of the Census shows that Hispanics have the largest school dropout rate compared to all other ethnic group. Many majority group researchers attribute the poor showing in school achievement to: (a) their belief that education is not a core Hispanic cultural value, (b) to their belief that parents don't value education because of their culture, (c) and to students who do not invest themselves in schooling because they are not rewarded by the culture for school success.

An alternative explanation and one based on a Hispanic perspective is that underachievement of Latino students has nothing to do with the culture, the family, or

students. Rather, the root causes of the underachievement of Hispanics lie with the school culture and educational practices that predispose students to failure. This is very different from the "cultural deficit or disadvantage" hypothesis. For example, Valencia (1991) calls for an examination of the discriminatory and institutionalized racist practices of schools that channel Latino students into low educational tracks from which few can exit and which establish the pattern of school failure.

Eurocentric vs. Cultural-Specific Paradigms

Another unique feature of Hispanic psychology is the recognition that universalistic principles of behavior do not always apply when societal structures of dominance and oppression exist that influence a person's experiences and interactions with majority group members and institutions. The nomothetic or universal approach has come under sharp criticism from feminist and minority researchers because of its Eurocentric perspective. The most salient feature of the Eurocentric paradigm is its focus on a monocultural, male-oriented, and comparative approach to research. This approach lends itself to a very narrow database that results in biased conclusions of substantive psychological importance that are problematic for even majority group members who differ from the normative population. Sears (1986) in a provocative article declared that research based on college students tested in academic laboratories on academic-like tasks has resulted in social theories that are incompatible with the ordinary experiences of most non-college age majority-group adults.

The problem is worse for Hispanics who frequently differ markedly from the majority group who, because of privilege and status, are defined as the normative group. Hispanic researchers have recently begun to reject aspects of this Eurocentric approach and have become more active in developing instruments that tap the unique experiences of Latinos. For example, the author with colleagues developed a measure to assess psychological stress in Hispanics that specifically included items not found in other measures of stress. This instrument, the Hispanic Stress Inventory, includes items having to do with the stress of not speaking English well, changes in family values and relationships due to acculturation, and perceptions of discrimination (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1991). A very useful and thorough discussion on the development and adaptation of psychological instruments for use with Hispanics can be found in a book by Marin and Marin (1991).

In sum, the Eurocentric approach is appropriate so long as the population being studied possesses similar characteristics to the normative group on which instruments and theories were developed. The problem arises when "biased" instruments that favor White middle-class males are used in a comparative research design to examine differences between racial or ethnic groups. As we all know the comparative research design requires a statistical test between at least two groups that have been equated on all variables known to have an influence on the behavior in question. However, if both the construct being assessed and the method or instrument used to assess the construct originate in the

same cultural context, then the comparative approach seriously increases the potential for bias.

The "New Scholarship" in Hispanic Psychology

In recent years, we have witnessed a paradigm shift in Hispanic scholarship, which is evident in much of the current psychological research conducted with Hispanics. This "new scholarship" is marked by conceptual models that incorporate Latino cultural and linguistic information, the development of new assessment measures and methods of data collection that are culturally sensitive to the target population. The outcome is better quality information and culturally appropriate interpretations of findings based on the sociocultural and ecological context in which Hispanics live (e.g., Garcia and Zea, 1997).

In a particularly insightful paper, Rogler (1989) asserts that research is made culturally sensitive only after meshing the process of inquiry with the cultural characteristics of the group being studied. This occurs when research from planning of the study, to the instrumentation of measures including translation if necessary, to the collection of data, and to the analysis and interpretation of the data is informed by the culture of the group being studied. Thus, Rogler (1989) calls for a paradigm shift, in which the study of Hispanics is valued for the knowledge that it creates and the incessant need to compare Hispanics to another social group is not always of value or of interest (Marin & Marin, 1991). This approach is a reaction against the general acceptance of comparing Hispanics to members of other ethnic groups to determine whether group differences emerge on some dependent variable (e.g., intelligence, cooperative behavior, etc).

The "new scholarship" in Hispanic Psychology has to do with the importance given to the within group variation that had frequently gone unnoticed in conventional research. Hispanic psychologists have pushed for the realization that an understanding of the heterogeneity is important in unraveling the processes of how an ethnic group in America adapts and ultimately becomes incorporated into the fabric of the mainstream society (Marin & Marin, 1991). This approach emerged in the 1970s and has become more prominent in the writing of Latino researchers in this decade.

The cross-cultural approach has produced a great deal of important knowledge about members of many different cultural groups, including Hispanics. However, from a Hispanic perspective there are limitations in this approach when studying Latinos. For example, Hispanic culture promotes a strong sense of familism which means a preference for intrafamilial relationships and a cultural script known as *simpatia* which calls for positive interpersonal relationships. The researcher who does not possess an insider perspective on Latino culture could misconstrue familism and *simpatia* as evidence that Latinos are overly dependent and socially compliant. If I can draw an analogy from the Chomskian view of language, we might think about the workings of culture from a deep structure and a surface structure perspective. In other words, culture is not always what it seems on the surface. The "outsider" is likely to make assumptions about the culture and its influence on members of the social group that the insider knows are inaccurate. On the other hand, the

insider has deep cultural knowledge and is able to use this knowledge to draw a more accurate understanding of the interplay of culture and behavior.

Another limitation comes about in assuming that all members of a cultural group share equally in the values, beliefs, customs, and knowledge of the culture that they affiliate with. This assumption does not apply to Hispanics. There is no single monolithic Hispanic culture in the U.S. today. Hispanic culture can be thought of as existing on a continuum ranging from very traditional to a cultural orientation that meshes nearly completely with U.S. culture. Thus, the full spectrum of cultural heterogeneity is critical in understanding Hispanics.

In short, Hispanic psychology is rooted in the cross-cultural approach with its numerous strengths and limitations. In the new scholarship of Hispanic psychology, researchers have evolved theoretical and methodological interests that specifically move away from comparisons of Hispanics with non-Hispanics and that concentrate on understanding the heterogeneity that underlies the different subgroups of Hispanics.

The Role of Acculturation and Biculturalism in Hispanic Research

Acculturation has emerged as the key variable in understanding Latino social behavior. Questions pertaining to how Latinos acquire and adapt to the majority group culture have been a central concern for the past 25 years in Hispanic psychology and figure prominently in many research studies. Numerous papers have been published which present measurement instruments for determining the acculturation level of a respondent (e.g., Cuellar, Arnold, and Maldonado, 1995; Padilla, 1980; Marin and Gamba, 1996). In addition, the process of immigration and acculturation has been conceptualized as stressful because of the intrapsychic conflict created by the necessity of incorporating new cultural knowledge and ways of comportment into a person's existing orientation (Cervantes et al., 1991). In the traditional view of acculturation, incorporation of a new culture on the part of immigrants was seen through the lenses of a replacement model where the new culture came to dominate and replace the home culture. This view has given way to the conception of biculturalism (Berry, Kin, Power, Young, and Bujaki, 1989). According to this view, members of an ethnic group can maintain two cultural orientations (i.e., that of the dominant group and that of the ethnic group) and use either depending on what the social context calls for. Thus, the bicultural individual is behaviorally competent in the two cultures.

Research also indicates that biculturalism has distinct psychological advantages for ethnic minority populations (LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton, 1993; Padilla, 1995). For example, individuals who are bicultural experience less psychological dysfunction, are less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, and generally do better in school than less acculturated individuals or more acculturated Hispanics who lack the knowledge (e.g., Spanish fluency) and behavioral skills of the culture of origin.

We still have much to learn about intergroup contact and the processes associated with acculturation and how to measure this construct. We need to recognize the significance of biculturalism and its protective role (LaFromboise et al., 1993) in a society

that demands adaptation and adjustment to mainstream behaviors, but which permits discriminatory practices against Hispanics forcing many to seek the comfort and safety of their home culture (Padilla, 1995). This conflicting message does more to motivate bicultural development than any other experiences.

Current Issues in Hispanic Psychology

In order to assess current research being carried out with Hispanics, I ran a search of PsychoInfo using the descriptor term Hispanic. The search resulted in approximately 3,500 hits and nearly two-thirds of the titles (approximately 2,200) appeared between1990 and 1998. Thus, research with Hispanics has shown a remarkable increase in the 1990s. Perusal of the titles indicated a wide range of topics and publication outlets.

Interesting patterns emerged from this bibliographic look at the current psychological literature. I first wanted to know what percent of the 2,200 articles appeared in American Psychological Association publications. My tally showed that only about 3% of the articles appeared in APA journals. The most frequently observed journals were the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, and *Developmental Psychology*. I also looked to see what percent of the materials had been published in the *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* (HJBS). The HJBS is an interdisciplinary journal and publishes materials in anthropology, economics, education, linguistics, political science, psychology, psychiatry, public health and sociology. Thus, it was not a surprise to see that only 5% of the published papers appeared in the *HJBS*.

A content analysis of the materials publications between 1990 and 1998 showed that 75% of the published articles were in one of five major categories. Nineteen percent of the articles were related to education, academic achievement, testing, special interventions, or special education. Eighteen percent of the articles were in the area of social psychology, intergroup relations, prejudice, or social deviance. Another 15% dealt with clinical or counseling interventions, psychological assessment, support group and/or indigenous helping system. Eleven percent focused on substance abuse interventions primarily with adolescents, while 10% addressed issues of physical health status, utilization of health services, positive health practices, intervention and indigenous helping system. The remaining articles covered such topics as family dynamics, child rearing, aging and care of the elderly including Alzheimer's disease, gender studies, and mental health services and utilization practices.

Importantly, many of the papers reported the use of an instrument to assess the acculturation level of the respondents or implications drawn about the negative consequences of oppression on Hispanic informants. The content analysis also showed that important shifts have taken place over the past 25 years. First, there was the small number of papers on mental health treatment and utilization of services in the 1990s. This topic was the major theme in Hispanic research during the 1970s. Another surprise was the growing interest in the Hispanic elderly and Alzheimers Disease. Not surprising was the large number of papers with adolescents around topics of school achievement, substance abuse or prevention and social grouping (e.g., gangs). Notable in this research

was the continued focus on problematic behaviors, rather than on success or hope. In sum, the study of Hispanic psychology has grown over the past 25 years and the field is marked by research questions that indicate the importance of studying an ethnic group that is growing in importance in the United States.

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