

Hispanic Ethnicity in Psychology: A Cuban-American Perspective

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During the early 1980s I participated in a symposium at the Southeastern Psychological Association in Atlanta, Georgia. The well-attended symposium topic was on ethnic-minorities in psychology. However, I felt very much out of place since the other speakers were African-American and only one other Hispanic was in the audience. In many respects, this symposium has represented not only my own personal feelings about being an ethnic-minority in psychology but how psychology and North American society has viewed ethnicity as well. There appears to have been a misunderstanding or a limited definition of what ethnicity is. In general, ethnicity has been defined primarily, if not exclusively, and historically using race and, in many instances, the focus has been African-Americans. Obviously, this approach is biased and not representative of the population which psychology seeks to understand and serve.

Using the latest US Census Bureau data (2001), Hispanics now comprise the largest and fastest growing ethnic-minority segment in the United States. African-Americans now comprise 12.3% of the population, Hispanics comprise 12.5% of the US residents (and that figure is probably conservative due the limited counting of illegal aliens). If current census projections turn out to be correct, sometime during this century, Hispanics will actually comprise the largest single group in the United States. Conceivably, then, Hispanics could represent the majority group culture, at least in terms of population.

Is psychology ready for this paradigm shift? The answer is unequivocally no. The answer as to why the field is not ready for this demographic change lies in the history

of psychology. The total number of Hispanics to have received PhDs in psychology not only represent a very small portion of psychology, but represent a relative small portion of ethnic-minorities. According to the 1999-2000 figures available from the American Psychological Association, Hispanics comprise approximately 5% of both doctoral and masters level graduate students. And, those that do gain admittance into doctorate programs often do not obtain the necessary training to compete adequately in either the academic or clinical spheres of psychology (Vazquez, 1991). Furthermore, the total number of faculty members of Hispanic origin is similarly be low. Indeed, the total percentage of ethnic-minority faculty in the Untied States is about 10%.

If one were to examine the governance of APA, the numbers are disproportionately even smaller. For example, I do not believe an Hispanic has ever served on its Board of Directors. Only two ethnic-minorities have been president of APA in its 110 year history; Richard Suinn (2000) and Kenneth Clark (1971). Even in the only APA division journal focusing on ethnicity, *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, only 20% of the entire editorial board (approximately 100) have Spanish-surnames.

This situation is further mirrored in how we have chronicled the history of psychology. For example, in *The American Psychological Association: A Historical Perspective* (Evans, Sexton, & Cadwallader, 1992), no mention is made of Hispanics in any section of the book. Even in my own book *Teaching Psychology in America: A History* (Puente, Mathews & Brewer 1992), little reference is made to Hispanics. In other scholarly books as well as textbooks in the history of psychology, including Boring, Brennan, Hilgard, Leahey, Schultz and Schultz, and Wertheimer no mention is found in the Table of Contents or the Indices of contributions by Hispanics to psychology.

The assumption held by many is that the major, if not the only difference, between mainstream society and Hispanics is that of language. But language is only one aspect of Hispanic culture, there is heterogeneity of Hispanics. A Cuban is quite different even from a Puerto Rican who is quite different from a Mexican. Each subgroup has distinct cultural characteristics, heritage, and behavioral patterns. As a consequence, an Hispanics needs to be understood within their specific cultural context (Shorris, 1992). Other issues also play a role. These include the importance of family (especially of extended family), religion, social context and rules (including the limited trust placed on those outside the family or a circle of friends), the appreciation of time (rather than conquering it), the value of living (rather than just working), and a greater emphasis on cooperation (rather than competition).

History of Hispanic Psychology

In 1980 Padilla wrote about psychologists that have contributed to Latin American psychology. In the early part of this century, Hispanic psychology drew its roots and orientation from psychology in Spain. However, the civil war in Spain set back psychology (Carpintero, 1987). Indeed it was not until relatively recently that psychology in Spain has experienced a resurgence of the field. The Civil War in Spain depleted both available resources and confidence in higher education. Psychology was broadly considered a politically volatile discipline and, as such, was isolated from the academic institution geographically.

During the re-building years of Spanish psychology, Latin American psychology turned more to the United States for its focus. Initially, the focus in some countries, such as Argentina, was psychodynamic. Later, as in the case of Mexico, the focus shifted

towards behaviorism. Such areas as cognitive and neuropsychology have made relatively little impact within psychology. Using neuropsychology as an example, the Latin American Neuropsychological Society has been comprised not only of psychologists but of physicians, speech and language pathologists, as well as occupational therapists. Psychology has comprised a relatively small proportion of personnel within Latin American neuropsychology while the opposite is true in North America.

Padilla (1999) has recently argued that within group comparisons need to be considered. Hispanics are often considered uni-dimensional and cohesive. In reality, there are many Hispanic sub-groups ranging from Mexicans, Central Americans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and South Americans. Padilla has also argued that oppression, eurocentricity, acculturation, and biculturalism is often misunderstood by psychologists in the majority group culture. American psychology has understood Hispanics from the reference of American conceptualization. What may be particularly ironic is that by the end of this century, Americans may be the minority group, at least in terms of numbers.

A Cuban-American Perspective

Since the Communist Revolution in Cuba, Cubans have migrated in large numbers to the United States, primarily Miami, Florida. They now comprise a vibrant portion of ethnic-minorities and an important subgroup within the Hispanic culture in the United States especially in Miami and New York. And, Cubans still residing in Cuba also remain a vibrant aspect of Latin American and the world.

The history of Cuban psychology is almost as old as American psychology starting with philosophers and educators towards the end of the 19th century. The best example of a pioneer in Cuban psychology was a Enrique Varona, a politician, educator,

philosopher, and psychologist (Puente and Puente, 2000). His first book *Conferencias Filosóficas* in 1880 marked the beginning of a strong and independent intellectual climate in Cuba. He migrated towards psychology because of its focus on pedagogy as well as its scientific underpinnings. As a consequence, he went on to most likely become the first psychologist at the Universidad de la Habana. In 1921 he wrote the first textbook in psychology in Cuba, *Curso de Psicología* (Varona, 1921).

Psychology grew, much like related disciplines, in Cuba primarily at the Universidad de la Habana. While other important universities went on to have faculty in psychology, the central focus has been and continues to be the main university in the capital. The focus on Cuban psychology remained on pedagogical applications and strong philosophical underpinnings. Vernon (1944) examined the state of psychology at the time and indicated that educational psychology was clearly the most important area within psychology.

By 1960, both Cuban psychology and society had begun to change. The revolution shifted the role of psychology and two major areas initially emerged. First, health care became a critical concern for the government and, within that focus, mental health took on an important position in health care. Although psychopathology may have been viewed in a largely social context, increasing efforts were being made to develop an experimental psychopathology (Grau, 1984). The other issues involved the application of psychology to larger social contexts. This included, for example, the use of psychology in sports, something that has eventually occurred in the United States. In all cases, however, the importance of Soviet psychology played a major role. By 1964, the focus had shifted to educational, industrial, social, and clinical psychology. As Soviet psychology became

more prevalent, other areas also took on greater importance. One example of this is clinical neuropsychology; several psychologists including Eduardo Cairo went to Moscow, some to study with Alexander Luria known by some as the father of clinical neuropsychology.

Currently, Cuban psychology remains a strong and integral part of the Universidad de la Habana. Scientific psychology, rather than psychodynamic and humanism, are the central focus of psychology today. Also, while there have been significant impediments to the integration of Cuban psychology into the mainstream American psychology (e.g., no Cuban journal is abstracted by APA's *PsychLit*), Cubans have made an effort to bring their brand of thinking and health care to other parts of the world (e.g., Gongora & Barrios-Santos, 1987).

In the United States, Cuban-Americans have comprised a very small and relatively silent group within psychology. Outside of isolated instances (e.g., Szapocznik (1995) in Miami), few Cubans have made an impact on academic or research psychology. Most Cubans that do obtain their doctorates (perhaps reflective of psychology as a whole) pursue applied and clinical aspects of the discipline rather than research or academic careers. Furthermore, those that do have an impact in academic and research circles, tend to focus their work on ethnic-minority issues.

Cuban-Americans often do not identify themselves with other Hispanics. The number of Cuban-Americans who are part of such mainstream Hispanic groups such as La Raza are rather small. As Hall and Maramba (2001) have discovered there is highly limited overlap between cross-cultural and ethnic-minority literature. They go on to report that authors of cross-cultural studies tend to be white men of European ancestry

whereas ethnic-minority research tends to be authored by ethnic-minority men and women. Further, all ethnic-minorities with a Spanish surname in their review are of Latino and not of Cuban descent.

Personal Perspective

So, how does one integrate equally successfully into both cultures, the mainstream majority culture (Anglo-Saxon) and the “mainstream” minority culture (“ethnic-minority”)? It has always been my intent to have an impact in the field of psychology as a neuropsychologist who was Cuban. For the first 15 years of my career, I published exclusively on non-cultural issues, primarily biopsychosocial variables in neuropsychological assessment.

My service to the profession consisted of membership on a variety of boards and committees ranging from being President of the North Carolina Psychological Association, North Carolina Psychological Foundation and the National Academy of Neuropsychology (NAN) to serving on the Health Care Finance Administration’s Medicare Coverage Advisory Committee and the American Medical Association’s Current Procedural Terminology Panel. However, during the last 10 years I have become much more interested in cultural, though not necessarily ethnic-minority issues. For example, I presented the first workshop at a national neuropsychology convention on cultural issues in 1993.

All the while I have held positions in APA governance (e.g., two terms on Council of Representatives) and have been mentored by Richard Suinn, past-president of APA. In these positions, I have both self-identified and been identified as an ethnic-minority. Though I value this work, I often see myself as an outsider both within these ethnic-

minority groups as well as with “majority” groups whose interests have little, if anything, to do with ethnic-minority concerns.

Perhaps both groups, majority and minority, can consider their mission the development of a psychology of variance (Puente, 1992) rather than a psychology of central tendencies. I believe that would make a more interesting, and truer representation of the history of psychology.

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