

# Racial identity is changing among Latinos

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A recent study conducted by Amon Emeka and Jody Agius Vallejo, assistant professors of sociology in USC Dornsife, explores why many people with Latin American ancestry do not choose a Latino ethnic identification on U.S. Census surveys. The paper was published in the November 2011 issue of *Social Science Research*. Photos courtesy of Amon Emeka and Jody Agius Vallejo.

(PhysOrg.com) -- In a paper published in *Social Science Research*, USC Dornsife's Amon Emeka and Jody Agius Vallejo look at why many people with Latin American ancestry are not identifying themselves as Hispanic on U.S. Census surveys.

Some first, second, and later generation Latinos in the United States are not identifying ethnically as Latino as they integrate into the fabric of American society, a recent USC Dornsife study found. On the American Community Survey (ACS), which is administered by the U.S. Census Bureau, many people with Latin American ancestry do not identify ethnically as Hispanic.

The study led by Amon Emeka and Jody Agius Vallejo, assistant professors of sociology in USC Dornsife, examines why Latinos often do not choose a Latino ethnic identification on U.S. Census surveys. Emeka and Agius Vallejo's paper was published in the November 2011 issue of Social Science Research.

Emeka and Agius Vallejo analyzed figures from the U.S. Census' 2006 American Community Survey and investigated why Latinos are identifying as non-Hispanic. The survey is administered each year to gather information on the social and economic needs of communities and to provide scholars data on Latin American groups.

Currently, the federal government defines "Latino" not as a racial group but as an ethnicity, and Latinos can be of any race. Respondents are asked on U.S. Census and ACS forms "Is this person Hispanic, Spanish, or Latino?" which is followed by the question, "What is this person's race." Researchers typically rely on the first question, the Hispanic ethnicity question to determine the number of Hispanic respondents and the size of the Hispanic population. However as Emeka and Agius Vallejo point out, analysts do not consider the way the question, "What is your ancestry?" is answered.

As Emeka and Agius Vallejo demonstrate, of approximately 44.1 million U.S. residents who declared Hispanic or Latin American ancestry in the survey that year, 2.5 million — or 6 percent — did not check the Hispanic box and thus do not ethnically identify as Spanish/Hispanic/Latino. As a result of some Latinos' propensity to not check the Hispanic race box on the census, a correct analysis of Hispanic achievement and mobility in America is undermined. Data from U.S. Census Bureau surveys are used to make population projections and track the minority groups with the largest and fastest educational growths, and 2.5 million people with Latin American ancestry are left out of these analyses.

“When you are trying to predict the size of a population, those projections depend on how that population sees itself and how they answer the ethnicity and race questions on the U.S. Census,” Emeka said.

In addition, respondents’ confusion with the terms ethnicity, ancestry and race often result in inconsistent answers on the U.S. Census surveys, the study found. Oftentimes the lines among these categories are blurred. And as immigrants assimilate, their identities shift.

Their findings suggest that some Latin Americans see themselves as non-Hispanic because a racial identity has become more salient in their daily lives. So they are checking the “white,” “black” or “Asian” boxes.

Daily interpersonal interactions, being born in the U.S. and traditional processes of assimilation, such as language assimilation, socioeconomic advancement, and interracial marriage may also lead some people with Latin American ancestry to drop their Latino ethnicity in favor of a singular racial identity, Agius Vallejo said.

A prominent example is President Barack Obama’s decision to not identify his multiracial ancestry on the 2010 Census Survey. Half white, Obama selected the “black” box option.

“There’s still this tendency to only pick one race, especially among African Americans, when you can claim more than one on U.S. Census surveys,” Agius Vallejo said. “This power of race or this reinforcement of identity depends not only on how you identify yourself but also depends on the ways in which people identify you.”

For example, the USC Dornsife scholars added that the pressure multiracial college students can feel to get involved in campus organizations geared toward single races, ethnicities, or ancestries such

as African American, Latino, or Pacific Islander groups often complicates the [racial identity](#) issue.

“It’s tough to walk the fence between racial and ethnic identities for lots of people,” Emeka said. “Some are masters at negotiating multiple ethnic or racial spheres, but most are not.”

Non-Hispanic identification was most common among U.S.-born Latin Americans, respondents with mixed ancestries, those who speak only English, and those who identify on the race question as Black or Asian the study found.

The findings suggest that a significant number of Latino immigrants and their offspring may be thoroughly integrating into American society, but their close identification with other racial groups distorts the data. Emeka and Agius Vallejo recommend that researchers who typically use data from such surveys should consider answers from the ancestry question in their analyses.

It is a mistake for researchers investigating Hispanic issues not to consider ancestry data when making decisions about who to count as Latino, Emeka said.

“It is time that we rethink our definition of the Hispanic population in social science research. You essentially lose many people when you do not take the ancestry question into account,” he said. “That throws us off track when we are trying to figure out how much progress is being made among Latin American immigrants and their U.S. born descendants.”

The USC Dornsife researchers said that their study is also intended to spark debate.

“Scholars and politicians question whether and to what extent Latinos are

assimilating. Some Latinos are not identifying as Latino and disappearing into the population,” Agius Vallejo said. “People with Latin American ancestry who do not identify as Hispanic may be a harbinger of future patterns of assimilation but because these people are left out we might be underestimating the extent to which [Latinos](#) are assimilating into America’s core social structures.”

Provided by USC College

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