

Study shows media stereotypes shape how Latinos experience college

September 9 2015, by Mike Krings

Latinos are the largest racial/ethnic minority in the U.S., yet they are not graduating from college at the same rates as their peers. A new study from the University of Kansas shows that media representations of Latinos play a role in how those students navigate the college experience, how they believe others on campus perceive them and, perhaps most importantly, how they conduct themselves around non-Latinos.

Joseph Erba, assistant professor of journalism at KU, conducted 40 hours of in-depth interviews with 12 U.S.-born Latinos attending a large, predominantly white public university. He found that students who identify more strongly with their Latino heritage were more likely to be personally affected by [media](#) stereotypes and modify their behavior around their peers. While all were high-achieving high school students and attending a prestigious university, the students who identified less with their Latino heritage thought their non-Latino peers viewed them as "cream of the crop" students, whereas students who identified more with their heritage thought peers viewed them as having been accepted at the university because of affirmative action policies.

Many studies have explored why Latino students do not graduate from college at the same rate as their peers, looking at variables such as socioeconomic level, education of their parents, how long they have lived in the country and other factors.

"There is no consensus on why they are not graduating at the same rate," Erba said. "We thought, 'No one has taken a look at media.' Do media

messages matter? When these students are in college, how do they navigate that environment, and do media messages make a difference?"

The respondents in Erba's study all identified as Latino. Some were from rich families, others from poor families. Their families were originally from countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, Cuba, Honduras, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Erba explored the results through the lens of [stereotype threat](#), which asserts that when members belonging to racial/ethnic groups find themselves in a situation of reproducing a media stereotype, they may modify their behavior to counter that stereotype, which can also take a psychological toll.

"If anything, they felt just being on campus dispelled stereotypes of Latinos as gang members or poor students," Erba said, referring to the students who did not strongly identify with their Latino heritage.

All of the respondents were well-aware of the stereotypes commonly associated with Latinos in popular media. They reported commonly seeing Latinos portrayed as gang members, drug dealers, "Latin lovers" and unintelligent, among other negative portrayals. Only one student could think of a positive example, "The George Lopez Show," in which Latinos were portrayed in a more favorable light. Despite the uniformity in awareness, only those who highly identified with their Latino heritage said the stereotypes affected them.

"Other than that one example, they all agreed that media were portraying Latinos in negative stereotypes," Erba said. "But the high-identifying students were more sophisticated in the way they thought about these messages. They said 'these stereotypes hurt me, and I have to work to overcome that,' which is classic stereotype threat behavior."

Previous studies have shown that among Latinos, feeling a sense of belonging is important in succeeding in higher education. Facing

stereotype threat is a significant threat to belonging, Erba said, and indicates that universities need to do a better job of showing Latino students that they do in fact belong on campus and are welcome and valued members of the university community. Professors can also do a better job of relating to students of all backgrounds and considering how the materials they present in class affect all students. Colleges tend to group minorities into the same categories also, such as Latinos, without much consideration about the vast differences within a group, Erba said. The study also shows academics have largely overlooked the role of media representations in college experience research.

Erba, who presented the research in May at the Ethnicity and Race in Communications division of the International Communications Association convention in Puerto Rico, said taking steps to open dialogue with students and faculty about what it means to be Latino can go a long way in helping improve the college experience and help more [students](#) succeed in higher education.

Provided by University of Kansas

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