

Pan-ethnicity and Latino Communities in the U.S.

Assessing Intra-group Cohesion

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Addressing the fragility of Latino pan-ethnicity in the U.S., Marie L. Mallet presents an overview of the social interactions between Latino communities in Los Angeles, Boston and Miami, showing how these differential interactions impact on the identity formation and subsequent assimilation of Latino immigrants.

The demographic changes in American society and the rapid growth of the Latino population in the United States since the 1960s have been accompanied by an increased scholarly interest for understanding the mechanisms of Latino assimilation into American society. Despite this growing interest, few studies explore the relations between the Latino national groups (pan-ethnicity) and how these interactions impact their assimilation into American society. Latinos are still frequently considered by a large portion of the literature as a monolithic group. This methodological assumption fails to acknowledge the cultural differences between the Latino groups, although Latinos themselves recognize these dissimilarities.

In order to better comprehend how Latino immigrants assimilate to the host society, this essay analyzes the relations among the different Latino groups in Los Angeles, Boston and Miami and puts forward their importance on the assimilation of Latino immigrants into American society. The cultural differences between the Latino national groups and their resulting interactions (both positive and negative) are critical to understanding alliance formation and group cohesion. We therefore need to assess their incidence on their assimilation and, in turn, on the social, economic and political spheres of American society.

Cultural cohesion, identity formation, and assimilation into American society

Cultural cohesion, in this context, is to be understood as a set of shared cultural characteristics, an acknowledgment of similarities among the different Latino communities. I do not argue that social cohesion is a pre-requisite for social integration (as do Forrest and Kearns 2001) or its opposite (as does for example Delanty 2000) – instead, cultural cohesion among Latino groups is here analyzed in order to highlight their heterogeneity and to determine how it influences their identity formation. Cohesion among the different national Latino groups is a key element of assimilation, for it fosters socially desirable outcomes such as collective action – for instance, solidarity among immigrants may lead to the creation of labor unions (Milkman 2007) – and correlates both with social mobility and a higher socioeconomic status (Brown and Brooks 2006).

Studying the interactions between the Latino national groups is of renewed importance, because if the way Latinos interact with other ethnic groups influences their assimilation, we can hypothesise that interactions between national groups will also have an impact on

assimilation. The literature on identity formation considers ethnic identity to be an indicator of immigrant assimilation (Phinney and Ong 2007). As a result, Latino assimilation is frequently analyzed through the lens of ethnic identity (Massey and Sánchez 2010), by determining immigrants' level of adoption of the host society's culture and their degree of retention of their own ethnic culture (Phinney et al. 2001). Studies have shown that ethnic identity evolves with time (Tovar and Feliciano 2009) and in response to the political, economic and social contexts (Sabatier 2008; Tovar and Feliciano 2009). For instance, ethnic identity becomes more salient when immigrants perceive feelings of discrimination from other ethnic groups (Sanchez 2006), particularly in their interactions with non-Hispanic Whites (Weaver 2007), African-Americans (McClain et al. 2006) and Asian-Americans (Johnson 2004; Kim 1999). When minorities are the target of prejudice and perceived unfair treatment, they tend to coalesce with their own co-ethnics as a coping mechanism (Stepick and Stepick 2002) and reactivate their ethnic ties (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Latinos may experience solidarity and come together to protect their rights: for instance, in California, Latino immigrants and native-born Latinos united to fight against discrimination and unfair treatment in the workplace, to protect their rights such as access to health care, and to resist Immigration and Naturalization Service raids (Martinez 2008; Stepick and Stepick 2002).

The present study on intra-group interactions and contacts evidences both rivalries and cooperation between Latino national groups. Analyzing the latter through the lens of the different nationalities that comprise them provides a more concise understanding of assimilation that takes culture and origin into account. The aim is here to begin and fill a historiographical gap by understanding the mechanisms of intra-groups interactions of cohesion and disunion.

Data and Method

The data for this study was collected between 2010 and 2013 and consists of 240 semi-structured qualitative interviews of Latino immigrants, of which 72 were conducted in Boston, 89 in Los Angeles and 79 in Miami. Three main reasons underlie the choice of these cities: First, they all have large concentrations of Latinos – 65% in Miami, 47.7% in Los Angeles and 19.9% in Boston; second, they are located in states that are geographically diverse and provide a great variety of implemented social policies; finally, their respective Latino populations are shaped by varied national origins and assimilation trajectories. Indeed, each city has different Latino majority groups: Miami has a very sizeable Cuban community, while in Los Angeles Mexicans constitute the majority of the Latino population; lastly, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans predominate in Boston. These large populations of diverse origin and development, each faced with diverse social policies, allow this study to comparatively explore the role of the interactions among Latino communities on the assimilation of Latino immigrants into American society. This research focuses on seven Latino groups in particular: the Mexicans, Cubans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and Colombians. There are multiple reasons for these choices. Not only are these groups the most numerous in the United States, but they are also heavily represented in at least two of the cities under study.

Cultural values as a dissociative mechanism

Previous works have showed that some members of a minority group turn against members of their own, thus aiming to distance themselves from the group, which they view as being detrimental to their social success (Ochoa 2000; Guarnizo, Sanchez, and Roach 1999; Lavariega Monforti and Sanchez 2010). As a result, Latinos sometimes seek to avoid categorization as 'minority,' which usually has negative connotations, and may refuse to be defined by membership of that group. However, very few studies actually evidenced this among the different Latino national groups.

Analysis of the interviews revealed that Latino respondents overwhelmingly experienced discrimination from other Latinos, especially from other Latino national groups. This is exemplified by Gladys, a Puerto Rican woman from Boston, who explains that Latinos are divided by national groups:

“Well, we Latinos might not be as close as we should. We unite based on nationality, not so much because of race. (...) I think that if all were united by race, as a united Hispanics community, we would have more to show. But many times the Colombians go with Colombians, the Dominican go with the Dominicans, Salvadorans with Salvadorans and so on. Everyone with their own. If we were united by race we would have more power, we would be better. So that's what happens. That's why we have such little power. We only join on the fifth of May, because we are fighting for immigration rights, but after that everyone goes right back to their own little corner. Because you are Dominican, because you Salvadoran, because you are.... You know? There is some discrimination among ourselves. (...) The culture is quite different, but that doesn't mean that we can't understand each other. The persons that seem to unite a little more are the Dominican and Puerto Ricans. I don't

know if it's because we talk loud and fast while the other cultures are quieter, more reserved; they are a little more.... what's the word? Shy?" (Interview n°24, Boston)

Although the interviews revealed that discrimination within the same national group is rarer among Latinos, especially among Colombians and Cubans, it may still come from within the same national group, both from former immigrants who settled in the U.S. a long time ago and from Latinos born in the United States. This is exemplified by Belkis, a Mexican immigrant living in Los Angeles:

Yes, Latinos, sometimes there is not a worst race but your own. I don't know why, no idea, I mean because the Mexicans never want what they have, they want what you have... right? And they want to take you down, put the foot down so that you don't get better, so that you can't get up. (...) So it is not that they just don't want to help each other but they also want to put obstacles in your way. (Interview n°16, Los Angeles)

Social Separatism?

Discrimination, either between and within the various Latino national groups, or within one national group; sets the stage for interactions based on mistrust, in which the most basic form of mutual support can rarely be found outside the immediate family. Latinos, by an overwhelming majority, appear cognizant that mutual support among their own communities is very limited.

Although increased contact between groups has been proved to help develop mutual understanding that ultimately enables the creation or strengthening of communities, this research shows that there is a lot of mistrust among the Latino communities. Some of the factors hindering solidarity between Latino groups may be due to the special treatment received by some national groups, such as the Cubans and the Puerto Ricans. Their status grants both of them some privileges which are not shared by other Latinos. It creates tensions among the Latino communities, as non-Cuban and non-Puerto Rican Latinos tend to feel resentment. During the interviews, the words 'jealous', 'feel superior/inferior', 'unfair' and 'abuse' were mentioned repeatedly to refer to the differential treatment received between the two categories. This is exemplified by Sonja, a Guatemalan immigrant in Miami:

"Here, especially the Cubans, they get everything, from the moment they arrive. They get jobs right away, while us we don't even know where to look; when they arrive, they get the whole package, they get the nationality, they get benefits, how is that fair?" Interview n°12, Miami

The different status creates a hierarchy between the national groups, which is interiorized by immigrants and leads to resentment and decreased solidarity.

Family values

Cultural heterogeneity between Latino national groups and differing values lead to deep divisions, which affect in turn their assimilation into US society. Indeed, immigrants are transformed by their migration experience, but they also transform the social world around them (Bedolla 2005). Since newly arrived Latino immigrants traditionally tend to first settle in immigrant neighborhoods (Damm 2006; Brown and Brooks 2006; Alba and Nee 1997; Logan, Zhang, and Alba 2002), the interactions among the different Latino communities are

of prime importance for the assimilation of these immigrants. They are an essential part of the assimilation process, as they shape social relations, the increase or lack thereof of social capital, and alliance formations. As studies have showed, the different types of capital that immigrants bring to the U.S., as well as the capital that they accumulate in the U.S., shape their incorporation into host society (Nee and Sanders 2001).

It is usually admitted that for Latinos, the interest of the family often predominates over that of the individuals, a social pattern which is referred to as ‘familism’. However, these values, which are an important feature of Latino culture, are not shared by all national groups (Mallet, 2013). Analysis of the interviews puts forth significant cultural differences among national groups, particularly between Latinos from the Caribbean and Latinos from Latin America¹. These are most salient among Puerto Rican and Dominican families when compared with Latinos from Latin America. Overall, these two national groups are generally perceived by other Latinos as less stable and more fragmented, such as single-parent families. Anibal, a thirty-year old Chilean living in Miami, summarizes the differences between national groups revealed in the interviews. He explains that the Dominicans and Puerto Ricans do not regard familial ties in the same way as Latinos from Latin America. He holds these ties to be more superficial and the moral values to be less traditionally-oriented.

“They [The Puerto Ricans and Dominicans] are very different from us; their women have kids with different men, sometimes they don’t know who the father is. This doesn’t happen among us”. (Interview n°61, Miami)

Although academic literature shows that ties among members of the same family residing in another country are generally very close for Latinos (Dreby and Adkins 2011), the interviews revealed that these ties are stronger for some Latino groups than for others. A distinction arose between Latinos from Latin America and those coming from the Caribbean; many of the Dominicans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans interviewed for this study had abandoned their families back home in order to start new ones, a trend less present among interviewees of other origins. This phenomenon was common to all three of the cities analyzed. The varying strength of family ties among Latino communities is exemplified by Cristina, a Dominican single mother who argues that Dominican men tend to abandon their families for better opportunities.

Well, the Dominican man has got one thing, while they are with you they are fine, but then if they go to another place, it is like you and the children do not exist anymore, he is married there. He works there, he does not send me money weekly, sends me from time to time, something, but there is not stability, the help he gives me is little and I do not have a lot. With his help I cannot pay for shelter for my children, or move out to give them a better place. The Dominican is like that, he is sexist, when he is with you he loves you and cares about his children but then nothing, now he is married to sort out his situation, but the pressure is on me, you know that a mother will not leave her children. But honestly, the situation is not easy. (Interview n°4, Boston)

¹ Although Latin America commonly refers to the area south of the United States border, including Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean, in this essay, I use ‘Latin America’ and its derivatives to designate the regions south of the U.S. border and South and Central America, excluding the Caribbean.

On the other hand, a majority of respondents from Latin American stated that they kept close ties with their family in their country of origin. This is exemplified by Reina, a Salvadorian woman in Los Angeles, who left her then 4-year old daughter in El Salvador in order to find better economic opportunities to help her and her family. Her undocumented status makes life difficult and she stated that she would like to go back to her country to see her family that she has not seen in over 8 years, but cannot do so:

I can't [return] because if I return to my country I would be in the same role, that there is no betterment for my daughter and worse it would be for my daughter, not for me. (...) I am thinking about my daughter and I think about her future... I would like to [bring her here], but sometimes, sometimes it is really complicated for them over here, I see my daughter so happy over there (...) I have proposed it to her various times and she says no, she is barely going to be ten years old. She already reasons, she thinks well, she feels...she feels happy over there, so then I am not going to force her, I am not going to bring her by force, it would be like kidnapping her, no, she feels good over there...I will leave her over there. Even if with me, yes I do miss her a lot and I feel that I've lost the best of her. (...) Even though we speak almost every day on Skype, just a moment ago I was speaking with her. (She starts crying)". (LA - Boston 48)

Gender plays a significant role in transnational contact, as women usually tend to keep more in touch with their relatives who stayed in their country of origin.

However, among men, we can still observe more attachment on the part of Latinos from Latin American in comparison with those from the Caribbean. This is all the more interesting as Puerto Ricans are able to move freely between the continental U.S. and their island, and do not face the same constraints imposed on other Latinos. Despite this privileged status, the departure of one family member, particularly in the case of couples, very often signals the end of the relationship. Cuban nationals also show less transnational contact, but this can be partly explained by the political situation between Cuba and the U.S. Overall, where Latin American Latinos generally see their migration as a sacrifice for the good of the family², Caribbean Latinos rather tend to view immigration as an individual quest for a better quality of life.

Although Latino immigrants share an array of cultural values and a common language (Mallet, 2013), the interviews conducted therefore revealed significant cultural differences between Latinos from the Caribbean, who have less in common culturally with Latinos from Latin America (North, Central and South).

² On this subject, see the book by Robert Smith - (2006) Smith describes the life of Mexican migrants who continually move between New York and the village of their birth. He speaks of the 'immigrant bargain' to describe the reason impelling Mexicans to immigrate; according to Smith, they do it above all for the good of those who remain in the home country.

Moral traits: moral flaws v. resourcefulness

Because of these differing cultural values among Latinos, stereotypes and prejudice have developed within Latino communities with a negative impact on group cohesion, and represent a hindering factor for their subsequent assimilation. Once again, the interviews show significant differences between Latinos from Latin America and the Caribbean. The former try to dissociate themselves from the latter, as they consider them overall to be individuals with lower moral values, who tend to abuse the safety net put in place in American society. This is exemplified by Orlando, a Colombian immigrant residing in Boston, who explains that Latinos from Latin American do not want to associate with Caribbean Latinos because of these cultural differences.

“For example, some of us Colombians will do it, but most of us won’t, but the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans...listen, when I got here, I saw a pregnant woman and another woman who was saying to her “You’re pregnant again”? “ Yes, to get welfare, it’s what keeps us alive; I have three others, that one will make it four.” You see the difference in mentality? We are not like that, I’m not saying all Colombians, but we are not like that, there’s a big difference (...) we are bit more reserved and respectful, not like the Dominicans and Puerto Ricans (...). The Salvadorans are also like us, quieter, but, like I told you, today we can’t say that all Salvadorans and Colombians live that way, but we mostly hang out together.”(Interview n°10, Boston)

These perceived cultural differences create a ‘moral hierarchy’, further distancing the members of the Latino communities. It deepens divisions between Caribbean Latinos and Latinos from Latin America, as the former usually tend to dissociate with Caribbean Latinos. This is further attested to by Maria, a Peruvian immigrant who lives in Miami:

“I think that Cubans in particular, now that I know them, misuse it [government benefits] a lot, because there are some who I know work on the side, they say, and they tell me: ‘No, but why do you pay so much tax?’ but that’s what I have to do, it’s the right thing, I owe it [to the government] and so I can’t keep it. I don’t like that mentality”. (Interview n°4, Miami)

When asked about these stereotypes and their validity, Caribbean Latinos respondents argued that they were simply more resourceful. This is exemplified by Yolanda, a Dominican immigrant from Miami:

It's like Dominicans come to the U.S. and fight to get their green card; one way or another, they get their green card. However someone from another culture may come and live here illegally for twenty-thirty years and never try to become a legal resident. You know, those are things that... I say that because I work here and that is something that we noticed. We see that many members have been here twenty to thirty years but they are still illegal. We Dominicans may come here illegally, but one way or another, we always try to legalize our situation. So this is a form barrier between us. They may say "oh no, let's not go there because Dominicans are there" you know.

These differing cultural values are translated into various outcomes that have a direct impact on the immigrants' experiences and their daily lives. Analysis of the interviews consistently highlighted the division between Caribbean Latinos and Latin American Latinos. The former are more numerous to feel entitled to government benefits, and even seem less reserved about resorting to fraudulent ways to obtain residency in the U.S. The most current arrangement apparently consists in marrying U.S. citizens in exchange for money (from the interviews, prices seemed to vary between \$10,000 and \$17,000). For the Caribbean Latinos surveyed, particularly the Dominicans, the end justifies the means. For example, during an interview with Freddy, a 32-year old Dominican in Boston, he admitted that he married primarily to obtain permanent resident status. The way Freddy saw it, he would get deported if he did not get married, so he took the chance, even though he might get caught and subsequently deported.

Interviewer: Did you marry to get papers?

Interviewee: Yes and no. (...) No, it's just that's how it goes, here it's almost normal, no, all the time, like I say; look, out of eight people I know who are in the same situation as me, five have problems, awful problems, with lawyers and who knows what else, this and that". (Interview n°45, Boston)

However, for Latinos from Latin America, even though living in an illegal status brings many constraints, the interviews conducted revealed that they seem more reluctant to use sham marriages to stay in the United States. They are uncomfortable talking about it and find fault with those who use these arrangements. For a majority of them, marriage is a sacred bond that should not be perverted, even to legalize one's status. This is exemplified by Aaron, a formerly undocumented Mexican-American from Los Angeles. Like most of the Latinos from Latin America interviewed, he stated that he would not marry for papers.

Interviewer: "How did you become a citizen?"

Interviewee: My wife is American (...). We got divorced unfortunately but I became legal thanks to her, and for that, I will always be grateful (...). We have three children and soon a grandchild.

Interviewer: So you did not marry for papers?

Interviewee: Never, I would never do that! I loved my wife but sometimes things don't go how you want them to go (...)" (Interview n°9 Los Angeles)

Thus, the lack of cultural homogeneity between the different Latino communities have led prejudices to develop and thus weaken the ties among members of the group by stressing their differences. Most salient differences exist between Latinos from the Caribbean and non-Caribbean. As a consequence, Latino communities experience life and assimilation to the U.S. differently, as they have a direct impact on their life in the U.S.: Latinos from Latin America and from the Caribbean form separate social networks that do not connect as much. The networks of Caribbean Latinos seemed designed to circumvent the limitations of some immigrants' status, while Latin America's Latinos tend to play more by the rules and keep a low profile.

Conclusion

The findings suggest limited cultural cohesion between Latinos, especially between Latinos from the Caribbean and Latinos from Latin America. Solidarity among the different Latino groups is the product of three different features: cultural factors such as traditions, particularly the ones inherited from their home countries; contextual factors, such as public policies or the existence of structures that foster solidarity; and finally, structural factors, such as the level of education or general socioeconomic status. It is reinforced by the existence of social networks and the desire to guard a common heritage.

Despite this apparent unity, cohesion within the Latino communities remains limited by numerous factors. Beyond socio-economic and demographic diversity, Latinos exhibit significant cultural differences, notably regarding the importance of the family. The different behaviors associated with certain national groups have also reinforced stereotypical images, which hinder social cohesion. Latinos also display a form of social separatism, which expresses itself in a grouping by class in the three cities and that is based on physical criteria, notably skin color, but also on migratory status and the time spent living in American society. The refusal to associate with recent immigrants often translates into discriminatory acts even more notorious than the ones whose perpetrators do not belong to the Latino community.

Thus, Latino pan-ethnicity is fragile due to differences among the national groups which tend to override the elements held in common. The most marked division can be observed between Latinos from Latin America and Caribbean Latinos, who display the most notable cultural divergences. When national and class divisions are more acute than the elements held in common, intra-communitarian relations can therefore act as a brake on unity. This essay recommends that future studies on Latinos be more attentive to this diversity and try to disaggregate the groups more systematically, as the tension between mutual support and rivalry among Latinos can be understood better by studying the social cohesion of Latinos, including the cultural values of the different Latino groups.

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