

## Search Continues for Evolving Hispanic Identity

By Alisse Waterston  
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Just one month ago, an Associated Press headline announced, "Hispanics Pass Blacks as Largest U.S. Minority Group."

The news made the front page of many local and national newspapers. The word from the U.S. Census Bureau: the nation is now home to some 37 million Hispanics — 800,000 more than the number of African-Americans.

This news adds more punch to the already growing enthusiasm about the up-and-coming Hispanic market in the U.S.

As an ethnic marketing researcher, I welcome this enthusiasm. Yet I'm also troubled by the tendency among some advertisers, marketers and programmers to lapse into a myopic vision of the opportunities before them. From my perspective, the big news to come out of the Census Bureau press release is this: 31 percent of Americans are either Hispanic, African-American, Asian-American or a member of some other minority group.

At this very moment, we are first-hand observers of what is being called "America's Great Transition." We are right now experiencing intense demographic change. And, as I've been reporting for some time now, this new multicultural and multicolored face *defines* the general market in America for the 21st century.

The news headlines suggest an antagonistic dynamic that pits Latinos against blacks in a numbers race to the top. I argue against such a positioning because it boxes people into too-rigid either/or categories, leads to essentialism and can ultimately steer marketers toward making profound errors of judgment. How can this be so?

First, let us revisit the numbers. The Census Bureau reports there are now 37 million Hispanics of any race, 36.2 million non-Hispanic blacks, and 37.7 people who — by race alone or in combination with another race — are African-American living in the U.S. This means there are now just about the same number of Latinos as African-Americans.

Blacks, according to the census, are constituted as a race; Hispanics, on the

other hand, are an ethnic group, composed of persons from any race.

The census is a guidepost for assessing demographic shifts.

Myopia comes as people mistake Census categories for reality, imagining that society is composed of discrete groups, frozen in some mythic time and place.

### **No room for stereotypes**

"They think they know everything there is to know, just by looking at me. That's how stereotypes work," wrote Harriet McBryde Johnson, a disability-rights activist.

These words can be applied to the way many think about U.S. ethnic groups. Champions of ethnic marketing, for example, emphasize what is racially, ethnically and culturally unique about the particular group to be reached. There is danger in this practice, however, that even the best of the ethnic marketers tend to ignore.

That danger is essentialism — the practice of falsely assuming there is something particular and peculiar to each group that makes "them" different from any other. From such an assumption, it is too easy to lapse into myth and stereotype.

Aside from the ethical issues implied by this dilemma, we need to address the problem pragmatically. As a practical matter, when advertisers, marketers or programmers produce images and cultural symbols of a group that are based on myth, the efforts simply backfire by alienating the very audience they hope to reach.

The first step in overcoming this dilemma is acknowledging that it happens at all. The practice of essentializing difference is particularly dangerous when people *believe* differences are natural, inherent and not socially constructed.

Many years ago, I attended a conference on ethnic marketing in which some of these issues were discussed. In recalling a personal experience, one presenter captured what I believe to be at the core of the issue:

"In France," the speaker noted, "when I walk into a room, I am seen as first, a woman, second, as an American, and third, as black. In the U.S., when I walk into a room, I am seen first as black, second as a woman, and third as an American."

The lesson here is that no trait has meaning in and of itself. Instead, it is the social context that both creates and gives meaning to the category.

## **Ethnicity matters**

It is not that ethnicity does not matter. It does, because it is a social category around which so much of American history, culture and society has and continues to revolve.

When it comes to television, ethnicity matters for programming, for advertising and for reaching audiences. Given the prominence of ethnicity in social and political life, networks organized around these markets are very important to those viewers and potential viewers who identify with the network as an ethnic channel; who see some aspect of themselves reflected on the TV screen.

We now have a cadre of networks organized around ethnic and racial identity, from Black Entertainment Television to mun2, from MBC to Telemundo, Expresin and STV.

In reality, people's identities are more complex and blurred than our limited set of ethnic categories allow. Marketers often assume that members of each of the three main ethnic groups — Hispanic/Latino, black/African American, Asian — share the same cultural cues and ethnic values.

As it happens, there is dissension on issues of group composition, on what constitutes heritage and on the proper symbols of ethnicity.

Cultural cues do help consumers connect with a product, but using the wrong symbols may offend the very consumers being targeted.

When it comes to ethnic and racial identity, many lapse into static thinking, ignoring history. It is erroneous to assume that ethnic identity simply emerges from a monolithic cultural, national heritage or "authentic" tradition.

How many of us have heard said that Latinos cherish family, or Asians cherish education? As these are values and experiences shared by most, it is absurd to suggest these are particular cultural traits.

The questions about ethnicity require an understanding of the ways in which people create identities and express values – some of which are "traditional" and some of which are newly acquired.

## **Identity matters**

Identity is formed in the interplay of many factors, including gender, age, race and ethnicity, as well as income, education, and marital, family and household status.

At the level of the individual, the category to which one person or another

might be attached can vary according to the social environment in which they find themselves. Do "wealthy" and "poor" African-Americans share a natural affinity? No. However, they may share a collective American experience of race.

As members of the same gender, do two women automatically share the same worldview? No. But as females socialized according to prescribed gender roles, they may share in a collective experience of gender.

Or, as two immigration specialists have recently asked, "What does an English-speaking third-generation upper-status white Cuban-American in Florida have in common with a Maya-speaking recent immigrant from Guatemala?" In the American context, both *become* Latinos.

Ethnicity and culture are continually being remade and reproduced. Media content is filtered through the cultural lens. In turn, media shapes culture, ethnicity and identity.

Nowadays, people of all backgrounds are living in a new America, sharing cultural experiences that include media programming and services. Yet we would be mistaken to believe too fully in assimilation, for consumers will also continue to create differentiating cultural identities.

Identity is an ever-changing process of becoming. The challenge for advertisers, marketers and programmers is to replace assumption with information, myth with fact and superficiality with a true and deep understanding.

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