Critical Issues in Latino, American Indian, and Asian Pacific American Identity Development

"There's more than just Black and White, you know."

"I took a Chicano Studies class my freshman year and that made me very militant."

JUDITH, A CHICANA COLLEGE STUDENT

"There's a certain amount of anger that comes from the past, realizing that my family because they had to assimilate through the generations, don't really know who they are."

DON, AN AMERICAN INDIAN COLLEGE STUDENT

"Being an Asian person, a person of color growing up in this society, I was taught to hate myself. I did hate myself, and I'm trying to deal with it."

KHANH, AN ASIAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENT

Like the African American and European American students I have described, each of the young people quoted above is also engaged in a process of racial or ethnic identity development. Although conversations about race, racism, and racial identity tend to focus on Black-White relations, to do so ignores the experiences of other targeted racial or ethnic groups. When we look at the experiences of Latinos, American Indians, and Asian Pacific Americans in the United States, we can easily see that racial and cultural oppression has been a part of their past and present and that it plays a role in the identity development process for individuals in these groups as well.
Though racial identity models such as that of William Cross were developed with African Americans in mind, the basic tenets of such models can be applied to all people of color who have shared similar patterns of racial, ethnic, or cultural oppression. Psychologist Stanley Sue, an expert in crosscultural counseling, writes, "[I]n the past several decades, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians have experienced sociopolitical identity transformations so that a 'Third World consciousness' has emerged with cultural oppression as the common unifying force.'

In this multiracial context, Jean Phinney's model of adolescent ethnic identity development stands out. Grounded in both an Eriksonian understanding of adolescence and research studies with adolescents from various racial or ethnic groups, Phinney's model is made up of three stages: (1) unexamined ethnic identity, when race or ethnicity is not particularly salient for the individual; (2) ethnic identity search, when individuals are actively engaged in defining for themselves what it means to be a member of their own racial or ethnic group; and (3) achieved ethnic identity, when individuals are able to assert a clear, positive sense of their racial or ethnic identity. Phinney's model shares with both Cross's and Helms' models the ideas that an achieved identity develops 'over time in a predictable fashion and that encounter experiencesbten lead to the exploration, examination, and eventual internalization of a positive, self-defined sense of one's own racial or ethnic identity.

While Phinney's work describes the identity process for adolescents of color in general, it is important to continually keep in mind the cultural diversity and wide range of experience represented by the groups known as Latinos, Asian Pacific Americans, and American Indians. Because of this tremendous diversity, it is impossible in the space of one chapter to detail the complexities of the identity process for each group. Therein lies my dilemma. How can I make the experiences of my Latino, Asian, and Native students visible without tokenizing them? I am not sure that I can, but I have learned in teaching about racism that a sincere, though imperfect, attempt to interrupt the oppression of others is usually better than no attempt at all. In that spirit, this chapter is an attempt to interrupt the frequent silence about the impact of racism on these communities of color. It is not an attempt to provide an in-depth discussion of each group's identity development process, an attempt which would inevitably be incomplete. Rather this chapter highlights a few critical issues pertinent to the identity development of each group, particularly in schools, and points the reader to more information.

What Do We Mean When We Say "Latino"?

Latinos, also known as Hispanics, are the second largest and fastest-growing community of color in the United States. There are more than 25 million Latinos residing permanently in the United States. As a result of high birthrates and continuing immigration, the Latino population is expected to surpass the African American population in number early in the twenty-first century, thereby becoming the largest minority group in the United States. Over 60 percent of Latinos are of Mexican ancestry, a population that includes U.S.-born Mexican Americans (also known as Chicanos) whose families may have been in the Southwest for many generations as well as recent Mexican immigrants. Approximately 13 percent of Latinos are Puerto Rican, 5 percent are Cuban, and about 20 percent are considered 'other Hispanics' by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The last category includes Dominicans, newly arrived Central Americans (e.g., Nicaraguans, Guatemaltecos, and Salvadoreños), and South Americans (e.g., Chileans, Colombians, and Argentinians). Each of these groups is a distinct population with a particular historical relationship to the United States.

In the case of Chicanos, the U.S. conquest and annexation of Mexican territory in 1848 created a situation in which people of Mexican ancestry became subject to White domination. Like African Americans and Native Americans, Mexican Americans were initially incorporated into U.S. society against their will. It was the general
feeling among White settlers that Whites and Mexicans were never meant to live together. Segregated schools, segregated housing, and employment discrimination were the result. State legislation in Texas and California outlawing the use of Spanish in the schools was enacted. Though the Mexican population declined immediately after the conquest (due to forced relocations), it increased again during the early twentieth century when U.S. farmers actively encouraged the immigration of Mexicans as an inexpensive source of agricultural labor. Subsequently, political and economic conditions in Mexico have fueled a steady stream of immigrants to the United States.

While most Mexican-origin Latinos are legal residents, people of Mexican descent are often stereotyped as illegal aliens. Most Mexican Americans continue to live in the Southwest in urban areas. According to the most recent census data, Mexican-origin Latinos are the youngest of all Latino subgroups—median age in 1990 was 24.1 as compared to 33.5 for non-Hispanics. Education and family income remain below the U.S. average—only 45 percent of Mexican Americans age 25 and older have completed high school, and approximately 26 percent of all Mexican-origin families live in poverty.

Like the conquered Mexicans, Puerto Ricans did not choose to become U.S. citizens. Puerto Rico became an unincorporated territory of the United States in 1898, ceded by Spain at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War. Puerto Rico, which had struggled to become independent of Spain, did not welcome subjugation by the United States. An active policy of Americanization of the island population was implemented, including attempts to replace Spanish with English as the language of instruction on the island. The attempts to displace Spanish were vigorously resisted by Puerto Rican teachers and students alike. In 1915, resistance to the imposition of English resulted in a student strike at Central High School in San Juan, part of a rising wave of nationalism and calls for independence. Rather than let the Puerto Rican people vote on whether they wanted citizenship, the U.S. Congress passed the Jones Act of 1917, imposing citizenship and the obligation to serve in the U.S. military but denying the right to vote in national elections. In 1951, Puerto Ricans were allowed to vote on whether to remain a territory or to become a commonwealth. Though there were those who urged another option, Puerto Rican independence, commonwealth status was the choice. Commonwealth status allowed Puerto Ricans greater control of their school systems, and Spanish was restored in the schools.

Economic conditions on the island have driven many Puerto Ricans to New York and other Northeastern U.S. cities. Many came in the 1940s and 1950s to work in the factories of the Northeast, but as industry left the region many Puerto Rican workers were displaced. Fluctuating employment conditions have contributed to a pattern of circular migration to and from Puerto Rico which is made easier by U.S. citizenship.

In general, Puerto Ricans have the poorest economic conditions of all Latino groups—the poverty rate is close to 60 percent. Approximately 53 percent of Puerto Rican adults over age 25 have completed high school. A multiracial population descended from European colonizers, enslaved Africans, and the indigenous Taino Indians, a significant number of Puerto Ricans are dark-skinned and may experience more racism and discrimination than lighter-skinned Latino populations.

As a group, Cuban Americans are older and more affluent than other Latinos, reflecting a different immigration history. Although Cuban communities have existed in Florida and New York since the 1870s, Cuban immigration to the United States increased dramatically following the 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro. The first wave of immigrants were upper-class, light-skinned Cubans who left in the very first days of the revolution. They were able to bring their personal fortunes with them and established businesses in the United States. The second major group left after Castro had been in power for a few months, and were largely middle-class professionals and skilled workers. Though many were unable to bring possessions with them, they received support from the U.S. government and charitable organizations. The last major group of Cuban "immigrants,
known as Marielitos, arrived in 1980, having lived most of their lives under a socialist government. Marielitos are typically much poorer, less educated, and darker-skinned than earlier refugees.

On average, Cubans have higher education levels than Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. Approximately 17 percent of Cubans over age 25 are college graduates, as compared to less than 10 percent for Chicanos or Puerto Ricans. Because the early Cuban immigrants view themselves as people in exile who might return to Cuba when Castro is no longer in power, they have worked to keep Spanish an integral part of their lives in the United States.

"Other Hispanics," as the U.S. government classifies those Latinos who do not trace their family background to Mexico, Puerto Rico, or Cuba, are an extremely heterogeneous group. They include South Americans as well as Central Americans, well-educated professionals as well as rural farmers, those who immigrated for increased economic opportunities as well as those escaping civil war. Among this category of "other Hispanics," the largest groups are from the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru, and Nicaragua.

Although non-Latinos often use Latino to refer to a racial group, it is an error to do so. The term Hispanic was used by the Bureau of the Census as an ethnic label and not to denote a race, because Hispanics are a racially mixed group, including combinations of European White, African Black, and indigenous American Indian. It is possible for an individual to identify himself or herself as ethnically Hispanic and racially Black or White at the same time. As in African American families, there can be wide color variations in the same family. Racismo within Latino communities is akin to colorism in Black American communities, advantaging lighter-skinned individuals. Although a majority of Latinos share the Roman Catholic faith and speak Spanish, not all do. Researchers Gerardo Marin and Barbara VanOss Marin argue that cultural values—not demographic characteristics—help Hispanics self-identify as members of one ethnic group.

All in the Family: Familism in Latino Communities

In particular, the cultural value of familism, the importance of the extended family as a reference group and as providers of social support, has been identified as a characteristic shared by most Hispanics independent of their national background, birthplace, dominant language, or any other sociodemographic characteristic.

In a carefully designed comparative study of four groups of adolescents—Mexicans living in Mexico, immigrant Mexicans in the United States, U.S.-born Mexican Americans, and White American adolescents—researchers Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco investigated the nature of familism among the four groups. In particular, they examined perceptions of the degree of emotional and material support provided by the family, the sense of obligation to provide support to one’s family, and the degree to which families served as one’s reference group (as opposed to peers, for example). They predicted that the three Latino groups would demonstrate more familism than white American adolescents, and that Mexican immigrants would demonstrate the highest level of familism because immigrants frequently turn to the family for support and comfort. They found that the Latino groups were indeed more family-oriented than the White American group, but that there was no significant difference between the three Latino groups. All the adolescents of Mexican ancestry had a strong family orientation that expressed itself in a variety of ways.

For example, achieving in school and at work were considered important by Latino teens because success would allow them to take care of family members. Conversely, White American teens considered education and work as a means of gaining independence from their families. The researchers concluded that "in Mexico the family seems to be a centripetal force; in the United States it is a centrifugal force." Because both immigrant and non-immigrant Latino adolescents expressed this value, the researchers also concluded that familism is related to enduring psychocultural features of the Latino
population, not only the stresses of immigration. Similarly, Fabio Sabogal and his colleagues found that Mexican Americans, Central Americans, and Cuban Americans all reported similar attitudes toward the family, this familism standing in contrast to the rugged individualism so often identified with White Anglo-American culture.\(^n\)

In her book *Affirming Diversity*, Sonia Nieto describes a very successful program for Latino youth in a large, urban high school that has recognized the importance of this cultural value and has incorporated it into the classroom structure.\(^n\) The program was infused with a sense of caring and support, and family-like relationships were fostered between the teacher and students, and between the students themselves. Through activities such as peer tutoring and mentoring, a sense of collective responsibility was reinforced. In contrast to the high dropout rates common in many Latino communities, up to 65 percent of the high school graduates of this program have gone on to college. Said one student, "The best thing I like about this class is that we all work together and we all participate and try to help each other. We're family!"

Though familism is not caused by immigration, it is reinforced by it. The ongoing influx of new Latino immigrants and the circular migration of some populations (Puerto Ricans, for example) help to keep cultural values alive in the U.S. communities. The Suarez-Orozcos write, "For many second- and third-generation Latinos the immigrant past may also be the present. . . . Among Latinos the past is not only kept alive through family narratives but unfolds in front of our very eyes as recent arrivals endure anew the cycle of deprivation, hardship, and discrimination that is characteristic of first-generation immigrant life.\(^n\)"

In this context, perhaps the most critical task facing the children of immigrants is reconciling the culture of home with the dominant American culture. Drawing on the work of social identity theorist Tajfel and others, Phinney describes four possible outcomes for coping with this cultural conflict: assimilation, withdrawal, biculturalism, and marginalization. Assimilation is the attempt to blend into the dominant culture as much as possible, distancing oneself from one's ethnic group. Individuals using this strategy may actively reject the use of Spanish. Withdrawal results in an emphasis on one's ethnic culture and an avoidance of contact with the dominant group. This strategy is seen in highly segregated communities where English is rarely spoken. A bicultural identity incorporates selected aspects of both the home culture and the dominant culture, often achieving bilingual fluency in the process. The bicultural strategy can be a very positive one, but it is not easily achieved. For some the attempt to bridge two worlds may result in alienation from both. Having rejected the "old country" ways of the family, yet unable to find full acceptance in the dominant culture, these adolescents often experience marginalization. These alienated young people, relying on their peers for a sense of community, may be at particular risk for gang membership. School programs, such as the one Nieto describes, that help bridge the gap between the culture of home and the culture of the dominant society can reduce the risks of alienation.\(^n\)

"Who Are You if You Don't Speak Spanish?" Language and Identity Among Latinos

As is suggested above, language is inextricably bound to identity. Language is not only an instrumental tool for communication, but also the carrier of cultural values and attitudes. It is through language that the affect of *mifamilia*, the emotions of family life, are expressed. Richard Rodriguez, author of *Hunger of Memory* and critic of bilingual education, describes what happened in his family when the nuns at his parochial school told his Mexican parents to stop using Spanish at home, so their children might learn English more quickly. Gradually, he and his parents stopped speaking to each other. His
family was "no longer so close; no longer bound tight by the pleasing and troubling knowledge of our public separateness.... The family's quiet was partly due to the fact that as we children learned more and more English, we shared fewer and fewer words."24 What did it mean to his understanding of familism, and other aspects of ethnic identity when he relinquished his Spanish?

For Jose, a young Puerto Rican man, the answer to this question is clear.

I think that the only thing that Puerto Ricans preserve in this country that is Puerto Rican is the language. If we lose that, we are lost. I think that we need to preserve it because it is the primordial basis of our culture. It is the only thing we have to identify ourselves as Puerto Rican. If you don't know your language, who are you? ... I believe that being Puerto Rican and speaking Spanish go hand in hand.25

A common coping strategy in childhood was to avoid the use of Spanish in public, a strategy akin to the "racelessness" adopted by some African American students. Said Cristina, a young woman raised in the United States, "I remember pretending I didn't know how to speak Spanish. You know, if you pretended that you were that American then maybe you would get accepted by the White kids. I remember trying not to speak Spanish or speaking it with an [English] accent."28

However, avoiding the use of Spanish does not guarantee acceptance by the dominant society. A growing awareness of this reality and the unfolding process of adolescent identity development led these students to reclaim their Spanish, a process integral to their exploration of Puerto Rican identity. Cristina, now a college student, explains:

I'm a lot more fluent with English. I struggle with Spanish and its something that I've been trying to reclaim. I've been reading a lot of literature written by Latinos lately, ... some Puerto Rican history. Before [college] I didn't even know it existed. Now I'm reading and writing more and more in Spanish and I'm using it more in conversations with other Puerto Ricans. Now I have confidence. I don't feel inferior any more. I used to in high school, I did. People don't want you to speak Spanish and before I was one of those that's very guilty of not speaking it because I didn't want to draw attention to me, but now you can't tell me not to speak Spanish because for me that's the biggest form of oppression. My kids are going to speak Spanish and they're going to speak it loud. They're not going to go with the whispering stuff. As a matter of fact, if a
White person comes by, we’re going to speak it even louder. I am going to ingrain that in them, that you need to be proud of that.\(^1\)

Zavala effectively demonstrates that while these young people are still in the process of exploring identity, the resolution of their feelings about the Spanish language is a central dimension of the identity development process. The linguicism—discrimination based on language use—to which they all had been subjected had been internalized by some, and had to be rejected in order for them to assert a positive sense of identity.

While Zavala’s study focused only on Puerto Ricans, sociologist Samuel Betances argues that for Latinos the Spanish language is a unifying theme. He writes, "in essence, the core which links Hispanics/Latinos is language, i.e., the theme of Spanish and English as vital to a healthy membership in both the larger society and in the ever growing emerging ethnic interest group."\(^\text{31}\)

Given the strong connection between language and identity it seems very important for educators to think carefully about how they respond to Latino children’s use of Spanish at school. As Nieto points out, schools often work hard to strip away the child’s native language, asking parents to speak English to their children at home, punishing children with detention for using their native language at school, or even withholding education until children have mastered English.\(^\text{32}\) While of course fluency in English is a necessary educational goal, the child’s fluency in Spanish need not be undermined in order to achieve it.

There is increasing evidence that the level of proficiency in one’s native language has a direct influence on the development of proficiency in the second language. Contrary to common belief, it makes sense to use students’ native language to reinforce their acquisition of English. While it is not possible here to review the varieties of bilingual education and the political controversies surrounding them, the positive effects of bilingual education, from lower dropout rates to increased literacy development, have been demonstrated again and again.\(^\text{33}\) Bilingual education, in which children are receiving education in content areas in their native language, as well as receiving structured instruction in English, is more effective than English as a second language (ESL) instruction alone, because the children can build on their previous literacy. Research suggests that it takes five to seven years on average to develop the level of English proficiency needed to succeed academically in school. For this reason, late-exit bilingual education programs—in which students remain until they have developed adequate English proficiency for high-level academic work—are particularly effective. Such programs have not only cognitive benefits, but social and emotional ones as well. Students who are encouraged to maintain their Spanish are able to maintain close family ties through their shared use of the language and their parents feel more comfortable with the school environment, increasing the likelihood of parental involvement at school.\(^\text{34}\) Nieto and others are quick to point out that bilingual education alone cannot completely reverse the history of school failure that Latino students have experienced. But it does challenge the alienating and emotionally disruptive idea that native language and culture need to be forgotten in order to be successful.

The attempted destruction of an oppressed people’s native language has been an issue not only for Latinos, but also for American Indians. In fact, Indian education as carried out by the U.S. government in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries served as the model for the early Americanization efforts in Puerto Rico.\(^\text{35}\) The physical and cultural dislocations visited upon Native Americans still have major implications for the identity development of Indian youth today.