

LATINOS IN MISSOURI

**Occasional Paper Series
Department of Rural Sociology
University of Missouri-Columbia**



**Exploring Double Consciousness Within the Hispanic Male
Community**

***Latinos in Missouri* Occasional Paper Series, No. 3
Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri-Columbia**

**Roderick H. Thomas
Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri-Columbia**

January 2002

<http://www.ssu.missouri.edu/ruralsoc/>

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The *Latinos in Missouri* occasional paper series grew out of the writing experiences of graduate students in Rural Sociology 406: The Sociology of Globalization. Students in the class were required to write term papers on issues related to the growth of the Latino population in the state as an aspect of globalization. Typically, the papers were developed over the semester by making contact with Latino immigrants for in-depth interviews, although some papers make use of secondary data such as the U.S. Census. Each of these papers was reviewed by two of the student editors listed above. Student editors then returned the papers to the author with their suggestions. After these revisions were incorporated, I edited each paper one more time, returning it to the author with my final editorial comments. When these changes were made, the papers were posted to our website for downloading.

While these are graduate student class papers and limited in length and scope, they do represent a substantial amount of work on the part of the authors that generally goes well beyond a typical class requirement. They were written in the hope that they will be read and used by policy makers, agency personnel and service providers, teachers, community leaders, and anyone concerned with the well-being of Latino immigrants in the state, and indeed in the nation.

Many thanks to the student authors and editors who worked on these papers, and particularly to those individuals who shared generously of their time to provide the information gathered here.

Dr. Elizabeth Barham (BarhamE@missouri.edu)

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ABSTRACT Developing what W.E.B. DuBois termed “double-consciousness” was African Americans’ response to dealing with daily racial inequalities experienced in this country. In certain respects, obstacles Hispanic men are having to overcome once in America bear a resemblance to what is commonly referred to as the “plight of the black man.” For this paper I chose to do a comparative study between Hispanic and African American men to explore differences on several issues such as assimilation, perceptions of law enforcement, and socioeconomic status. Although the story of Hispanic immigration is not as violent as African American history, as a black man myself I was curious to know if there were similar circumstances in both cases that would yield similar results. I questioned whether or not Hispanic males were finding the need to develop front stage and back stage personalities, or a double consciousness, to assimilate into American society.

If demographic changes that are taking place in this country remain constant, Hispanics will be the dominant ethnic group numerically within a few years. In recent decades, the dramatic increase of Hispanic immigrants has been felt in all regions of the United States. From 1990 to 2000, the Hispanic population doubled in the state of Missouri alone. Prior to that, “Hispanics captured the bulk of the population growth in the Midwest over the 1980’s” (Aponte 1990:3). This population increase has allowed Hispanics to become one of the most visible minority groups in the state of Missouri.

Both Hispanics and African Americans suffer various socioeconomic disadvantages in relation to many other ethnic groups in the United States. The various disadvantages experienced by African American men have collectively become known as the “plight of the black man.” Considering that there is no official definition of the term, I have decided to use a section from Michael Dyson’s book, “Reflecting Black: African American Cultural Criticisms,” to illustrate its definition. In his book, Dyson (1993) states that:

For black men between the ages of 18 and 29, suicide is the leading cause of death. Between 1980 and 1985, the life expectancy for white males increased from 63 to 74.6 years, but only from 59 to 65 years for black males. Between 1973 and 1986, the real earnings of black males between the ages of 18 and 29 fell 31 percent, as the percentage of young black males in the work force plummeted 20 percent. The number of black men who dropped out of the work force altogether doubled from 13

* Roderick H. Thomas (rhtb20@mizzou.edu) is a candidate for the Professional Master’s Degree in the Department of Rural Sociology. His research interests include socio-economic aspects of minority issues.

to 25 percent. By 1989, almost 32 percent of black men between 16 and 19 were unemployed, compared with 16 percent of white men. And while blacks constitute only 12 percent of the nation's population, they make up 48 percent of the prison population, with men accounting for 89 percent of the black prison population. Only 14 percent of the white males who live in large metropolitan areas have been arrested, but the percentage for black males is 51 percent. And while 3 percent of white men have served time in prison, 18 percent of black men have been behind bars. (p. 90)

Circumstances such as these have persisted for black men for decades and have collectively become known as the plight of the black man. Because of these disadvantages, government aid has proven to be critical in providing assistance for this particular minority group. Following slavery government assistance took well over a century to be incorporated into the constitutional rights of African Americans. The struggle for civil rights that took place during the 1960's has eliminated some of the obstacles that must be overcome by African Americans, as well as for Hispanics and anyone else coming to America seeking prosperity. But the fact that both Hispanics and African Americans are identified by group characteristics that are physically visible may still cause them to be the target of racial or ethnic prejudice.

One main distinction must be made between the Africans that were originally brought to America and Hispanic immigrants coming to America. African Americans' ancestors were forced from Africa to be used as human capital under the American system of slavery. Hispanics fleeing their homelands, for whatever reason, come to the United States somewhat voluntarily. To seek the American dream is still the catalyst and motivating factor that brings millions of less privileged people to this country. They come to America with hopes of becoming citizens and perhaps improving the socio-economic status of their family members in their native land by sending money back home. They may also return home themselves sometime in the future because this is a luxury afforded to them. On the other hand, Africans could not return home once they were brought to America in slavery.

The spatial mobility of Hispanics is different from that of African Americans as well. "Because blacks do not have the same spatial mobility as other ethnic groups, they are unable to take full advantage of unevenly distributed social and economic resources"(Massey 1985:104). This implies that Hispanics, as well as other minority groups, relocate for job opportunities and other desired resources while African Americans do not necessarily have that opportunity. This factor allows groups of people to leave a community once a factory or plant closes down. However, I think that being tied only to a job, as opposed to a community, eliminates the sense of stability necessary for anyone to truly assimilate.

Though many Hispanic immigrants are skilled laborers, they typically arrive in America with very few resources. Thus, they are forced to work jobs that are undesirable to the residents of a particular community as opposed to utilizing their trade to make a living. "Hispanic workers continued to be disproportionately concentrated in blue-collar employment. Approximately one-half of all Hispanic workers were employed as craftsmen, operatives, transportation workers or laborers"(Santiago 1990).

Theory

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

W.E.B. DuBois coined the term “double consciousness” in 1903 while writing his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. This is his attempt to describe the mental adjustment required to deal with the day-to-day racial inequalities experienced by African Americans living in the United States. As DuBois elaborated, double consciousness is a categorical scheme placing the individual in a position in which, “He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face”(Dubois 1989:5). I believe that African American men in this country have and continue to encounter the obstacles that many Hispanic males are encountering as they become more visible in American society. “We have just begun to understand the pitfalls that attend the path of the black male. Social theory has only recently fixed its gaze on the specific predicaments of black men in relation to the crises of American capital, positing how their lives are shaped by structural changes in the political economy, for instance, rather than viewing them as the latest examples of black cultural pathology”(Dyson, 91). Because the African American struggle has been well documented in recent American history, I have chosen to compare my findings on Hispanics with research previously done on African American males.

I feel as though double consciousness theory, like any other theory, must be considered in context. This theory was developed in 1903. African Americans had only been released from bondage a short amount of time. Segregation and Jim Crow laws wreaked havoc on the civil rights of African Americans nationally. W.E.B. DuBois' theory was developed during an era of American history in which African Americans were not able to assimilate into the dominant culture. Prior to this point in American history African Americans had been stripped culturally. While they were no longer Africans, there was little done to truly make them feel like American citizens. For African Americans, this sense of homelessness caused identity problems that persist today in the African American community. But DuBois' response to these circumstances was timeless, because his theory could be applied to other groups trying to assimilate into other societies who experienced similar difficulties.

In the research for this paper, I hoped to establish whether Hispanic males between the ages of 18 and 26 years share similar attitudes about assimilation, perceptions of law enforcement and socioeconomic status as African American males in the same age group. In addition, I recognize that personal economic situations are capable of shaping individual perceptions of community, and I attempted to investigate how similar the two groups are economically. If these two groups are similar socio-economically and face similar racial prejudice from the dominant culture, their feelings about the world in which they live may also be similar. Although the struggles have

taken different paths for each group, Hispanic males are currently experiencing many of the social conditions in America that lead to the development of a double consciousness for African Americans at the turn of the century. I wanted to explore the processes Hispanic men are using to deal with these issues, and whether Hispanic men are also developing double consciousness.

Method

In addition to reviewing past studies conducted on Hispanic and African American males, the research methods that I chose to use, were participatory observation, formal interviews and informal interviews. The subjects of my observation were a group of Hispanic men 18 to 26 years old. I met with them at a local restaurant to share food, drinks, and conversation before venturing to one of the local nightclubs. I chose to meet at this restaurant because I wanted the participants to be as relaxed and comfortable as possible. This location is a regular meeting place for this group of young men. I was previously unfamiliar with this restaurant, but I have a Hispanic friend who is a member of this group and he introduced me to the group as a good friend of his. He also agreed to translate my questions and the answers from my interviews (some of the Hispanic men speak English) when necessary. In addition to translating when in the group, my friend also agreed to allow me to conduct formal interviews at his residence that he would translate.

Selecting individuals that fit the limitations of my age requirements and who were willing to participate in my research was not difficult. I selected a group of eight Hispanic men. Even though every participant immigrated to the United States, they had all been on American soil for at least two years. They all worked blue-collar jobs around town. While selecting willing participants, one criteria that I set was that I preferred interviewing men who could speak and understand English well enough to minimize the use of my interpreter. Basically, I wanted to feel assured that we could understand each other well. Nevertheless, my interpreter was present during every meeting. I met with them at the restaurant once a week for four weeks and asked several questions on issues related to assimilation, perception of the criminal justice system, and socioeconomic status. These were areas of life in which I felt that the presence of a double-consciousness could be identified. The plight of the black man is not necessarily limited to these areas, however these are all contributing factors. [The questions I asked are included in Appendix A.] The informal interviews usually lasted from two to three hours each.

In addition to meeting in the restaurant, I arranged to meet with some participants in a more controlled atmosphere. The line of questioning remained the same regardless of the location. The purpose of meeting in a more controlled atmosphere was to assure that the answers that I had received in the casual group settings of the restaurant would be consistent with those of the more controlled atmosphere. These formal interviews lasted from one to two hours each. I asked the group questions to try and gain a better understanding of how they felt about assimilation, the criminal justice system, and socioeconomic status. I then compared my findings from these conversations with what I had learned in our earlier meetings to determine if there is any phenomenon in the Hispanic male community that resembles the development or existence of a double consciousness.

Results

Assimilation

Williams states that, “Although many Americans worry that Hispanic immigrants are not learning English and therefore will fail to assimilate into the American mainstream, there is little evidence that is the case. A majority of Hispanics can only speak English by the third generation in the U.S., and are closer to other Americans on most measures of social and economic status than they are to Hispanic immigrants” (Williams 1999:154). In contrast to Hispanics, some would argue that African Americans have yet to fully assimilate into American society. Others would argue that African Americans do not want to assimilate any more than they already have for various reasons. Assimilation by Hispanics has become an issue for several reasons. First, many Hispanics do not consider America home so they may not necessarily want to assimilate into the dominant culture. Secondly, those Hispanics that do not speak English are able to function in an English speaking country. In certain states government documents are printed both in English and Spanish, which would seemingly discourage Spanish-speaking immigrants from learning the English language.

In a study conducted on spatial assimilation as a socioeconomic outcome, it was shown that, “Hispanic socio-economic status is negatively related to the likelihood of living near blacks but that black socio-economic status is positively related to the probability of living near Hispanics” (Masey and Denton 1985:96). This study uses the variables of education, income, and occupational status to make direct and indirect linkages to the probability of living near white Americans, which they termed spatial assimilation. Ironically, “prior research employing aggregate data from a variety of southwestern cities have shown that blacks are much less able to achieve spatial assimilation than Hispanics” (Massey and Denton 1985:97). This speaks volumes about the perceptions of both African Americans and Hispanics by white Americans. In my research sample, this would seem to be true. All of the participants live in close proximity to white Americans. That is to say that they have more next door neighbors that are white as opposed to black. The Massey study concluded that Hispanics are generally more accepted as neighbors by whites than African Americans tend to be. If this is indeed the case, it would only seem logical that this level of acceptance would extend past spatial assimilation into other aspects of life. How far this acceptance extends remains a question.

When my informants were asked if they wanted to be American citizens, the general consensus was that it is too hard to gain citizenship here, but eventually they do want to follow through with the process. They felt that there was entirely too much paper work involved. They also had a negative impression of people in the position of granting citizenship. “Even if you do everything right, they still don’t have to let you stay,” responded one participant. He went on to elaborate on examples he knew in which people did everything “right,” only to be reported to immigration authorities. As a whole, the group felt that the chance of being deported was too great of a risk to even attempt to gain citizenship. Because of this, they tended to accept lower paying jobs that pay “under the table,” as opposed to a job that would require them to pay taxes. They tended to view paying taxes as a way for the government to track them down and they fear this more than anything.

My findings from the questions related to assimilation indicate that for the most part these men do want to be citizens and have a clear understanding of what it will take to do so. America, although it is not considered home by these men, is considered a better place to live and make a living than their native land. For this reason, most of the men whom I interviewed plan to make America their legal place of residency at some point in the future. These men felt as though they blended into society fairly well. They all admitted experiencing some forms of discrimination while in this country, yet it had not been experienced frequently enough to harm their quality of life here. In those cases in which my informants admitted being discriminated against, all were based on interactions with whites. None of my informants could ever remember being discriminated against by an African American, even in cases in which they lived near African Americans.

The criminal justice system

It is important not only to examine the relationship between African Americans and Hispanics but also the relationship between white Americans and Hispanics. “Volumes of research on the self-fulfilling prophecy suggest that others’ perceptions have important implications for self-perceptions and behavior” (Jussim1986:429).

While questioning my informants, I realized that the criminal justice system is seen as a white mainstream institution as far as they are concerned. They did not feel as though African Americans had any positions of power in law enforcement. They mentioned on several occasions that they felt that law enforcement officials treated African Americans worse than Hispanics.

This particular research theme was very informative because it provided me with firsthand information about Hispanics and the criminal justice system. Out of a group of eight Hispanic males, only three individuals had had involvement with law enforcement directly; however, all of the participants spoke of being indirectly affected by the U.S. criminal justice system. In two cases, subjects had been passengers in an automobile which had been pulled over by the police for having bad tags. They then realized that they had been profiled. “The tags on the car were good, he just wanted to pull us over or something,” the interviewee stated. In this regard, African Americans and Hispanics both suffer because of discrimination based on physical appearance. Having visible ethnic characteristics places Hispanics in a position of being discriminated against on this basis.

Socioeconomic status

The majority of the answers that I received in regard to immigration factors were related to family situations. For the most part, Hispanics are “pushed” out of their native countries by deplorable economic conditions that don’t allow growth, and “pulled” to America because of the possibilities of economic gain. All of my informants admitted that they made a lot more money in the U.S. than they did in their homeland. They did not consider themselves poor, but they did admit that they felt that they were paid low wages for the work that they did. During the 1980’s, Hispanic families in the Midwest generally experienced the sharpest increase in the proportion of families receiving public assistance. But African American families continue to have the highest percentage of families with public assistance incomes -- 24%, followed by Hispanics with 13%

(Santiago 1990:3). Ten percent of the adult Hispanic population attended college while only eight percent of African American adults in the Midwest had attended college. In 1980, 83% of Hispanic males were in the labor force compared to 73% African American males. One in five Hispanic families were below the poverty level in 1994, compared to one in three African American families. Among white families, only one in ten were living below the poverty level.

Discussion

The group of Hispanic men that I observed and questioned had trouble identifying with the theory of double consciousness. This was a surprise because prior to conducting this research I expected opposite results. Many of them had trouble trying to identify with American culture as a whole. Their coping mechanism seems to be their close family ties as opposed to the development of a double consciousness. For most of them, considering themselves as anything other than a native of their country of birth is unrealistic. They admitted that they do not truly feel comfortable in America unless they are surrounded by people whom they know. They openly admitted their general distrust of white Americans upon any initial meeting. When asked why they did not trust white people, the general answer that I received was, “We just don’t trust them until we know em.” All of the men that I interviewed stated that they had followed a family member to America. This fact illustrates the close bond that Hispanic families have. From my understanding, not many Hispanic men are coming to America with individualistic goals even though America is viewed as an individualistic society. They are coming to help their families, whether the families live with them in America or in their native land.

Prior to conducting this research project I must admit that I felt as though there would be a presence of double consciousness within the Hispanic community that I would be able to identify by applying the research methods that I utilized. Once I had a chance to question a group of males and analyze my findings, I realized that my assumptions were not supported. This is not to say that double consciousness is not present in any part of the Hispanic community, but it was not present in the particular group of men that I interviewed. I have formed several opinions of my own to explain why double consciousness does not exist in this situation. It seemed as though because these men are able to retain their cultural identity once they migrate to the United States, the need to develop two identities is not considered necessary. While racial prejudice remains the greatest obstacle for African Americans to overcome in this country, the language barrier seems to be the most pressing issue facing Hispanics once they migrate to the United States.

Suggestions for Future Research

After conducting this research, I realized that there are several areas that could be explored in greater depth. Personally, I think that conducting similar research with African American men today to determine whether or not there is a presence of double consciousness could help legitimize the theory to an entirely new generation. Considering that the theory was developed a century ago, and that there have been so many actions taken on the part of the United States government to level the playing field for all minority groups, I may have been searching for something that no longer exists. I would be interested to see research done to explore double consciousness within the African American community as a whole. I also think that by expanding this design to encompass a larger group of participants over a longer period of time

and under different circumstances may yield different but helpful information for either group of men. Statistical data, graphs, and charts used to support assumptions and findings definitely would have made my research more concrete. For those reasons, I would recommend that they be considered in future research done in this area.

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Appendix A

To gain a better understanding of how these particular immigrants felt about the issue of assimilation I compiled a list of questions to ask them. These questions were as follows:

1. Do you want to be an American citizen?
2. Why do/don't you want to be an American citizen?
3. How do you achieve citizenship status?
4. Do you feel as though you fit in here?
5. What could America do as a country, to make you feel more welcomed?
6. Do you feel as though you are better received by any other ethnic group once you arrived in Columbia?

In conversation I asked my informants to respond to the following questions about the criminal justice system:

1. Have you ever been incarcerated in the United States?
2. Do you feel as though you have been profiled, or harassed because you are Hispanic?
3. Do you feel as though the police mistreat Hispanics in traffic stops?
4. Have you ever had to appear before a judge in the United States?
5. Do you think that you were treated fairly by the criminal justice system from the time of your initial meeting with the police to the fine or sentencing that you received?
6. How do you know if you are treated unfairly by law enforcement?
7. Who do you turn to for help if you think that law enforcement officials treated you unfairly?

To gauge socioeconomic status I asked the following open-ended questions:

1. Do you have trouble paying all of your bills each month?
2. Do you live alone? If not, whom do you live with?
3. Do you consider yourself poor?
4. If you have financial trouble whom do you turn to?
5. When you have extra money what do you do with it?
6. Do you think your job pays enough money for the amount of work that you do?
7. Are any Hispanics in high positions at your workplace?