

Don't 'Brown' the Hispanics

A sociologist proposes a new way for journalists to handle the confusing task of using racial and ethnic identifications in news coverage.

By Amitai Etzioni

Consider the following headline: "Reading scores of blacks and Hispanics improve: Scores of whites show little change." Like many such news reports, this one is not only misleading, but also it's wrong because it does not account for the fact that roughly half of Hispanics in the United States are white.

In the minds of millions of Americans, this kind of all-too-common wording shrinks the proportion of Americans who are white and inflates the proportion of people who aren't. Yet there is not an easy way to avoid this error, because most information available about Hispanics does not allow reporters to distinguish white

Hispanics from others. Worse, the information there often transforms Hispanics into members of a distinct race; they become "brown" Americans. Various news media have approached this challenge in different ways, but each strategy comes with some surprising sociological implications.

In typical government reports, as

well as other data-driven publications, information about racial and ethnic differences is published in two basic forms. One uses merely racial categories (such as black, white, Asian and so on). This practice makes Hispanics vanish, as they are incorporated into various racial categories, including the particularly uninformative one of “some other race.” Data are also released in ways that compare Hispanics to various racial groups, but this is like comparing apples, oranges, pears and—cars, since racial categories and ethnic groups are very different sociological creatures. As one observer puts it, “From a social science

viewpoint, this [kind of comparison] makes no sense at all; but this is the way it has been established, this is the way it is done.” Most responsible data providers do add a footnote stating that “Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race,” but this is about as helpful as saying, “Note: We just made meaningful comparisons impossible.”

Race in the United States is largely in the eyes of the beholder. People are not boxed in according to their blood or any other physiological traits (which, by the way, would blur the racial lines in a jiffy)—but according to what they claim they are. When the U.S. Census Bureau reports that a given percentage of Americans are black or white, it basically relies on what Americans themselves mark on census forms. (Fearful that some blacks might identify themselves as white, which would result in smaller government allotments to boost affirmative action and less funding targeted toward minorities, the NAACP urged people with one white parent and one black parent to check only the black category during the 2000 census.) When those who identified themselves as Hispanic were asked during that census to what race they belong, 48 percent responded white, two percent selected black, 42 percent

chose “some other race” (some analyses show that many of these wrote in Hispanic or Latino as an “other race”) and six percent checked more than one race.

Differing responses among Hispanics bedevil comparisons with various

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racial groups. When attempts are made to compare aspects of Hispanics’ life circumstances to those of whites, those who make such comparisons usually disregard the fact that about half of Hispanics are, in fact, white. And those who make such comparisons do not begin to know how to handle the race called “other.” But perhaps the biggest faux pas is that Hispanics are not a race, and this renders all such comparisons dubious from the start.

Why Words Matter

Journalists deal with this challenge in a variety of ways. Some reporters write about differences in behavior and attitudes in terms of non-Hispanic whites, Hispanics and blacks. For instance, from The Washington Post (June 2005) comes the phrase, “Hispanics are younger and poorer on average than non-Hispanic whites,” and from a February story in The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer, “Hispanics are twice as likely as non-Hispanic whites to fall prey to scams....” Such wording has the merit of reminding the reader that some Hispanics are white, but learning that merely serves to remind us that such comparisons make little sense for reasons already cited. It is also

an awkward term that most headline writers and many reporters avoid, according to a survey of such usage that I conducted in 2005.¹

It is much more common for journalists to implicitly refer to Hispanics as if they are members of a distinct race. This occurs when news stories place next to one another blacks, whites and Hispanics (or blacks, whites, Asians and Hispanics). This error seems particularly prevalent in coverage of the education achievement gap, as happened in a December 2005 article in The Hartford Courant when the following sentence appeared: “The proposal is especially relevant to the district’s goal of closing the achievement gap among white, black, Hispanic and Asian students.” Other examples include:

- In July 2005, Fox News reported that “Achievement gaps between white and black and Hispanic students remain.”
- The New York Times used such a comparison in a March 2006 story about racial differences in computer usage: “The Internet was bypassing blacks and some Hispanics as whites and Asian Americans were rapidly increasing their use of it.”
- In a story the St. Louis Post-Dispatch published in January 2006, similar inaccurate wording appeared: “The same number of African Americans, Hispanics and Asians are opposed to abortion as whites.”
- A March 2006 article in The Economist read: “The obvious correlation is with economic status: Whites and Asians are at the top of the heap while Latinos and blacks struggle at the bottom.”

This all-too-common formulation tends to make readers think they are dealing with racial comparisons, but actually references such as these involve

¹ This survey was done with the use of Google, enabling the author to look at the first 100 mentions of Hispanics in news stories to determine how they were characterized. This method was repeated and the breakdowns reported in this article were found to be essentially the same.

two or more racial groups and—an ethnic one.

When Hispanics are explicitly treated as if they are a racial group, no room for doubt in readers' minds is left, as can be seen in the following article excerpts.

- “To ease racial tensions, black prisoners had been separated from Latinos. Inmates of both races complained that they had not been allowed to shower, phone home, or put on clean clothes,” from the Los Angeles Times, February 2006.
- “Hispanic students were less likely than those from any other racial group to even take the SAT,” from The New York Times, March 2006.
- “Blacks, Hispanics and other racial minorities accounted for more than 80 percent of population growth,” from The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, March 2006.

Sometimes the news media go a step further and refer to a “race” rarely mentioned—brown Americans.

“Growing Up Brown in a Border Town” was the headline of a story on National Public Radio’s show “All Things Considered” in May 2006.

- “Vaca appeared at California State University, Sacramento, earlier this month to discuss black-brown tensions,” wrote The Sacramento Bee in April 2006.
- “Certainly, not all Mexicans see Memin as a goodhearted black kid whose ready wit and quick thinking get his brown and white schoolmates out of jams,” wrote The Dallas Morning News in July 2005.
- The American Editor, published by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, advised in December 2005 that reporters “must now cover the future work force that will have a majority of black and brown faces—many of whom are less educated than the white workers they will replace.”

These examples indicate that many news organizations do not appear to have explicit editorial policies concern-

ing how and when to properly use the term “Hispanic.” In my informal survey of articles, I found that the same publication, for example, used the term differently. At times, Hispanic appears as a race; sometimes it’s an ethnicity. For example, on February 10, 2005 the Los Angeles Times referred to Latino as a racial category in its description of the Michael Jackson jury: “The majority of the potential panelists were white, with about a third Latino and a half-dozen African Americans—roughly in line with the area’s racial makeup.” Yet on May 29, 2005, that newspaper ran a headline that referred to Latino as an ethnic group: “Latino Bloc Has Far to Go; For myriad reasons, L.A.’s largest ethnic group hasn’t harnessed its full political power.” When editors there were queried about their policy, they chose not to respond.

When there is a policy, it seems not to be enforced. For example, reporters with The Associated Press (AP) have not followed the dictates of the 2005 edition of “The Associated Press Stylebook” to treat Hispanics as an ethnic, not a racial, group. In February 2005, one AP national writer wrote, “Last year, telecommunications giant Verizon used a fictional interracial family—white and Hispanic—in seven commercials pushing their communications products” Another AP story in 2005 contained these words: “Among the racial groups, most gaps in reading and math scores showed some narrowing. Black and Hispanic students scored higher in reading than in the 1970’s, with 9-year-olds in both groups posting their best scores yet.” Describing a jury pool in Milwaukee, a third AP reporter wrote in April 2006, “Races of people in the pool are 70 percent white; 19 percent black; 7.5 percent Hispanic; 3 percent Asian, and 0.5 percent American Indian.”

Using Different Identities

There is good reason to sort this matter out. To characterize a group of people as a distinct race—and for them and others to start to regard themselves in this way—is to create a divide where there was once only a space. Race is

a place you cannot leave, nor your children, nor theirs. Ethnic lines are muted and apt to blur in future generations. For those identified as being nonwhite in North America, they belong to a minority with a keen sense of separateness, if not discrimination and victimization often associated with such a label. In contrast, as members of an ethnic group, typically they feel that they are as American as apple pie, even if they prefer flan. After all, every American is a member of one ethnic group or another, so to draw racial lines where none exists is to divide Americans even more, which is detrimental to societal well-being.

Moreover, viewing Hispanics as members of a distinct race tends to detract attention from what is one of the most significant sociological changes in American society—the decline in the importance of race. For many decades, American society was divided into black and white, terms reflecting a shameful era in our nation’s history. Racial conflicts and tensions have subsided in recent decades, but have far from disappeared. Like other minority groups, some Hispanics feel discriminated against, but as a group they do not share the same sense of alienation that many African Americans did and do. And as they become more socially and politically active, Hispanics are destined to soften lines that divide Americans—unless they are racially identified, unless they are browned.

There is an admittedly maverick way for journalists to deal with this identity dilemma. Drop racial categories all together and use instead the much less divisive ethnic categories based on country of origin. Terms such as European American, African American, Hispanic American (for those who come from South of the border) and Asian American (including those from Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia who are now categorized as white). One might wonder what term ought to be used to refer to Australian Americans, New Zealand Americans, and the more numerous Canadian Americans. It would be a stretch to lump them with European Americans, although this approach might suffice.

For more detailed purposes, the use of regional terms such as South-east Asian Americans, Middle Eastern Americans, and Caribbean Americans might work. If more detail is needed, follow the long-established practice of referring to Polish Americans, Irish Americans, Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, Haitian Americans, Iraqi Americans, and so on. Categorizing people in this way would recognize the empirical fact that countries of origin and ethnicity are often much more meaningful than "race." Thus the differences between Cambodian Americans and Vietnamese Americans on the one hand and Japanese Americans and Korean Americans on

the other are substantially higher than the differences between these 'yellow' Americans and some white groups. And the differences between Cuban Americans and Mexican Americans are larger on many dimensions than the differences between Cuban Americans and, for example, West Indian Americans. Thus, instead of turning an ethnic group into a race, we'd think about races as if they were nothing more than ethnic groups.

By focusing on country of origin and using terms such as Mexican American or Japanese American, journalists could play an important role in reminding all Americans that while our forebears arrived in different boats, we now sail

on the same ship. Identifications of this sort would stress that differences among us, although far from trivial, are transitional. We are not different tribes that happen to reside next to one another on one piece of land, but one people. ■

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