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The construction of Chicano identity and stereotyping in the United States: postcolonial concepts and narrative review

Introduction

Data collected during the 2000 census in the United States reveal that to the open-ended question 'what is your ancestry or ethnic origin?', 14 443 629 people replied 'Mexican', 1 640 692 'Mexican American', 1 839 834 'Mexicano', 65 883 'Chicano', 73 368 'Mexican American Indigenous' and finally 320 254 replied 'Mexican state', for a total of 18 383 660 people. At the time, this made people identifying as being of Mexican or Mexican-related ancestry the third largest ethnic group of the country, after people of European and African American ancestry (United States Census Bureau, 2000). This specific question was not included in more recent censuses, however, in the 2018 American Community Survey, 36,986,661 people, or 11.3% of the total population identified as "Mexican", within the "Hispanic or Latino" ethnic category of the census. The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines "Hispanic or Latino" as "a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race".

However, Mexican Americans are not a homogenous group, as they experience a multiplicity of subjectivities. There is, for instance, the distinction between Mexican American people whose ancestors lived on the territories taken from Mexico by the United States in 1848 and those whose ancestors left Mexico during the 20th and 21st centuries. Additionally, the Chicano identity and movement is a very specific part of Mexican American identity, one that is built upon the border culture paradigm (Anzaldua 1987), as well as gender and class intersectionalities (Anzaldua 1987, Cordova 1998, Gonzales and Fernandez, 1998; Mindiola 1975). Placing the beginning of Chicano struggle with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the invasion of Mexico by the US raises an important question, as Gonzalez and Fernandez point out: 'do Chicanos constitute another immigrant group (similar to the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Germans, Jews, and others), or are they a "nationally" self-conscious, "conquered", indigenous population who were dispossessed of their land as were the Native Americans?' (1998: 90). The central claim of the Chicano movement, which started in the 1960s started with students and low-income workers (Calafell 2010: 177), is cultural self-determination (Gutiérrez 1993), and is strongly anti-assimilationist (Arce 1981: 178; Asuncion-Landé 1979: 497; Telles and Ortiz 2008: 273; Mariscal 2005: 3), which positions it as a counter-discursive, post-colonial movement.

This presentation describes the mechanisms of exclusion around stereotyping as a discursive strategy of oppression and effects on self-esteem in the context of the Mexican American population in the United States and the development of Chicano identity.

Methods

This work is based on a review of key theoretical concepts within post-colonial theory and an exploratory narrative review on Chicano history and identity in the United States from the 1960s onwards as well as existing research on stereotyping of school students of Mexican American descent.

Ethnicity and post-colonial theory

From a post-colonial point of view ethnicity is constructed, as it not based on essentialist, biological characteristics but rather on the interaction between the different groups. The term "ethnicity" is not neutral, and can bear a negative signification, if used to characterise the 'Other'. Ethnicity can negatively define "otherness", or contrast (Sollors 1986). For instance, in the US, as Sollors argues 'the English language has retained the pagan memory of 'ethnic', often secularized in the sense of ethnic as other, as nonstandard, or, in America, as not fully American' (Sollors 1986: 25). The ethnic body is thus one that is different from that of the mainstream, that is, arguably, a subaltern in the post-colonial system; the ethnic, colonial subject is constructed as other (Spivak 1988). This suggests a binary construction of identity: me and the other, us and the others, irremediably different, without the possibility of our identities to either melt together or to cohabit peacefully. Janmohamed (1985), as well as Hall (1996), mention eurocentrism more or less explicitly in the formation of ethnicity through otherisation: the subject is either European or non-European, and the non-European subject is judged from a eurocentric perspective (Janmohamed 1985).

Stereotyping and colonial narratives

Another aspect of interaction is language and representation. As Fanon showed in *Black Skins White Masks* (1952), race can be 'uttered', and one can be made aware of their difference through language (Fanon 1952). For Bhabha, the stereotype is the discursive strategy of colonialism, for it holds fixed eurocentric views and perceptions of the colonised (1994: 66). The stereotype, 'as a phobia or a fetish' (Bhabha 1994: 72-73), is a fantasy, much similar to Edward Said's "Orientalism" (1978), which contributes to negative otherisation. Moreover, it is not merely a simplification, but rather a false representation of reality, as Bhabha adds, one that is part of the Eurocentric colonial discourse (1994: 75). The stereotype permanently fixes the colonised subject in a false perception of reality that is perpetuated and, in some cases, internalised. Internalised colonialism and discrimination are a consequence of stereotyping discourses.

Helen Tiffin also underlines the importance of narratives and how derogatory representations by the dominant culture can be presented as the authoritative and objective interpretation of reality (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1995: 86; Tiffin 1987; Pandey 2000:281-282). Because of prevalent imperialist narratives, Chicanos are put in a subaltern position as opposed to an "imperialist elite", identity is constructed through difference (Spivak 1988). For this reason, but not exclusively as we will see, the use post-colonial theory to study Chicano identity and culture is appropriate.

The construction of Chicano identity and ethnicity

Hunt, Benford and Snow (2009) link processes of framing – or presenting arguments in a certain light to foster the creation of a collective identity, to mechanisms of mobilisation in new social movements. Mexican Americans have a diverse set of cultural and historical references, and thus activists had to choose which of them were to be emphasized and how (Noakes and Johnston, 2005: 8): Spanish or Native American ascendancy. This creates a collective identity, or 'an individual's cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution' (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 285): people thus became Chicano through a conscious process of identification, and developed political and cultural self- awareness (Ysidro in Arce 1981: 185), process which was initiated by a certain framing emphasizing certain aspects of history.

This "constructed" Chicano collective identity allowed the emergence of a Chicano culture around some common symbols, a common history, and common claims and grievances. However, a branch of the Chicano movement developed "el plan espiritual de Aztlán" or Aztlán's spiritual plan. This formal statement, formulated in 1969 in Denver by activist group Crusade for Justice, provided a new vision for those who identified with it (Rhea, 1997: 74). According to what is called the rhetoric of Aztlán, the part that was colonised by the US in 1848 was to be given back by those belonging to the Chicano ethnicity, or rather race, as it was then reformulated (*ibid*). Preceding this, in 1967, Chicano activist Reies Lopez Tijerina gathered a militia and besieged the courthouse of Rio Arriba County in the town of Tierra Amarilla in New Mexico, demanding that the lands were given back to the Chicano families whose ancestry had been stripped off their property in 1848 (Ulibarri 1993). The movement used the notion of mestizaje, of 'brownness', as well as a geographical and historical reference to embody a particular political vision and realise what Pérez-Torres calls the 'great Chicano nationalist dream' of forging a 'socio-political body' out of 'brown bodies situated in so many different positions of subalternity' (1998: 168). Arce analyses such phenomena in those terms: ethnic culture and cultural artifacts are being manipulated to become 'more Chicano than most Chicanos' (1981: 185) while failing to resonate with most Mexican Americans. Moreover, this vision and plan is somewhat essentialist, as the 'Chicano nationalists wanted a certain skin colour to be equated with a way of

looking at the world' and form an 'indissoluble social bound' (Rhea 1997: 77). However utopian and little representative of grass root Chicano movement, *el plan espiritual de Aztlán* points to something important. Aztlán is largely constructed on boundaries: "them", the gringos who invaded "us", the Chicanos. Moreover, it also uncovers strong underlying conflicts: Chicano identity was not solely constructed by the action of activists who framed issues and elements of cultural stock.

Arguing that Chicano identity and ethnicity was entirely constructed as a movement is somewhat one-sided and misses two important elements: conflict and labelling. An interesting aspect of new social movement theorists Taylor and Whittier's notion of boundaries is interaction. The building of boundaries is part of the process of self-definition of a group, in opposition to those outside the group. But this involves taking up characteristics given by the majority group to the minority group who wishes to assert its identity and exacerbating those differences (Taylor and Whittier 1992), hence the emphasis on Native heritage, found in Chicano movement and culture as opposed to whiteness and European heritage bore by Anglo-Americans. This produces heightened awareness of one's identity, in the Chicano case, ethnic identity as opposed to belonging to the mainstream white group. Chicano discourses are thus a product of a post-colonial relationship, as they question Eurocentric paradigms and are counter-discursive. Nagel nuances purely constructionist arguments according to which ethnicity is constructed by activists and highlights the relevance of interactionist analyses of culture formation, which allow us to understand that external forces are crucial to the emergence of culture and identity. For instance, and especially for Chicanos, the enforcement of ethnic labels and stereotyping plays a central role and thus interaction with the larger society, as well as historical context, however it might be interpreted (Nagel 1994: 156-162). Chicano culture was constructed over the exacerbation of certain traditions, voluntarily or as imposed by the dominant culture, through negotiation and designation or labelling. The Chicano movement of the late 1960s is a good example of cultural construction for ethnic mobilisation through the promotion of certain cultural symbols and imagery.

Chicano identity and dissidence

As Mariscal points out, the high point of Chicano activism between 1965 and 1975 was a period of dramatic change for Mexican American communities (2005: 2). By taking by surprise those who believed that Mexican Americans were "politically apathetic" (Mariscal 2005: 3), the movement opened a space for different claims to be formulated. Ethnic self-determination (Asuncion-Landé 1979: 498) and the right to be different without being inferior were then placed at the centre of the Chicano movement. As Langegger argues, Chicanos had publicly claimed the right to express their cultural difference, by reclaiming space, or through art (2014: 188). Several scholars have highlighted

the anti-assimilationist characteristic of Chicano mobilisation (Arce 1981: 178; Asuncion-Landé 1979: 497; Telles and Ortiz 2008: 273; Mariscal 2005: 3). Chicano identity would then be characterised by its position against cultural homogenisation, and a certain degree of group consciousness. However, Chicano identity is complex.

Oscar 'Zeta' Acosta was a lawyer, writer and Chicano activist who disappeared and presumably died in the mid-1970s. His two major novels, *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1989a) and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1989b) are points of reference in Chicano literature and are useful to try and understand the paradox of Chicano identity. Literary critique Pérez-Torres analysed Acosta's work in terms of his focus on mestizaje, and on a racialised vision of Chicano identity (1998: 164-166). He picks out examples from *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* where Acosta explicitly denigrates his *Indio* heritage, and explores his non-white physical features, which he deems inadequate in American society. Acosta stresses the importance of not acting like an *Indio*, something that clashes with the rhetoric of Aztlán and the references to pre-conquista times present in Chicano activism, in which he takes part, and Chicano identity, with which he identifies. Moreover, although he was a prominent advocate of Chicano rights, Acosta described himself in very derogatory terms, 'big, brown ass' (1989a: 12) for instance. This uncovers the paradoxical nature of Chicano culture: one that embraces its heritage but at the same time identifies it as irremediably different from that of mainstream Anglo society, both physically and morally. Moreover, Aldama suggest that Acosta's *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* is a subaltern narrative, a perspective that uncovers the complexity of mestizo identity (2000: 201). On the other hand, the symbolic use of the "cockroach" is a recurrent one in Mexican popular culture since the 19th century, with for instance the revolutionary song *La Cucaracha* (The Cockroach), which is also used in Chicano rhetoric

Scholars like Barth (1969) insist on the importance of boundaries in the formation of ethnicities. Chicano identity represents the 'assertion of an explicitly non-white racial identity' (Telles and Ortiz 2008: 278), which potentially clashes with the 'normative whiteness' (Hurd 2008) of mainstream American society. As the example of Oscar 'Zeta' Acosta shows, Chicano identity is a mestizo identity. But, if we follow Pérez-Torres's analysis, it is also one that is lost in translation: being Mestizo is not being American or Mexican, or of Native American or European descent. Being Mestizo as being Chicano is enacting self-definition (1998: 169-171), in a subversive way.

Mestizaje suggests hybridity, but not in a 'mixed' or 'melting pot' way, rather in a third, challenging way: it represents Bhabha's Third Space. Belgrad raises the question of the inclusive or exclusive character of Chicano identity, arguing that Chicano identity has been one that has functioned as a limit to 'incursions by the dominant culture' (2004: 250); it has truly been challenging it by refusing

assimilation and placing boundaries, and yet claiming the right not to be discriminated. As Arce points out, this upholding of cultural differences is a possible factor of exclusion as it is viewed as 'too racially different' by the mainstream Anglo society (1981: 177).

The formation Chicano culture and identity is a continuous conflict between dispossession and empowerment, between the stereotypes imposed by the dominant culture and what is made of them by the dominated. In-group prejudice as well as internalised colonialism is a sign of such struggle. However, the struggle is also external, as Chicano identity is subversive, because it challenges the cultural mainstream in US society. As it demands ethnic self-determination, it challenges the assimilation paradigm characteristic of US society and past and current policies (Asuncion-Landé 1979:498). For instance, it resisted the decision to stop all bilingual education programs, which were beneficial to recent migrants, but were deemed a danger for American culture by the public opinion and policymakers (Elenes 2002: 247; Pizarro 2005; Cohen 2004). Arango-Keeth explicitly characterises the Chicano movement and culture as transgressive, both in its artistic manifestation and socio-historical practices and provides an explanation for the counter-hegemonic character of "lo Chicano" based on hegemon/dominated relations:

> 'The answer of subordinated groups on which a cultural coercion or marginalisation has been imposed has been transgressing and subverting the ideological values of the hegemonic culture.'

> (Translated from Spanish, Arango-Keeth 1993: 107)

We can now start to get a grasp of the position of Chicano culture and identity within American society, and the challenges it faces as well as the challenges it sets for the dominant mainstream culture. As a culture in perpetual self-definition against the dominant culture Chicano ethnicity is the counter-discursive result of post-colonial relations. It has, to a certain extent, been constructed and partially turned into a nationalist ideal in the 1960s, with the exacerbation of certain traits to build collective identity, however, some of its characteristics have also been in part imposed by the 'other', the Anglo-Americans through labelling and stereotyping as colonial discursive strategies (Bhabha 1994).

Patterns of stereotyping described in the existing literature on academic achievement

In post-colonial theory, stereotyping, objectification and otherisation are colonial discourses aimed at maintaining the colonial hierarchical order. Chicano identity, as a post-colonial, subversive identity, has sought to be counter-discursive and disturb that order by being subversive and attempting to deconstruct Eurocentric paradigms. However, the exacerbation of difference that was an aspect of

the movement and persists in Chicano identity has given a justification for the perpetuation of those colonial discourses in stereotype patterns.

Fairchild & Cozens found evidence of such phenomenon when asking university undergraduates to associate characteristics with names. They found that while Hispanics and Mexican Americans were mostly perceived as 'tradition-loving, faithful and talkative', Chicanos were mostly perceived as 'ignorant and cruel', which supports the hypothesis that labels affect stereotyping and possibly discrimination (1981: 193-194). Furthermore, Niemann outlines the negative stereotyping that Chicanos suffer, and argues that it defines their place in society in opposition to the dominant Anglo White group (2001: 62). Labelling a group situates it on the ethnic scale and participates to the perpetuation of stereotypes and prejudice, even more so with names that suggest difference. Fairchild and Cozens suggest that Chicano is an ethnic label that is contrastive, whereas Mexican American situates the group closer to being American (1981: 195). In the same way, we can hypothesise that "Hispanic", "Latino", or "Spanish", while marking difference, are in a way more neutral than "Chicano". This supports the argument that American society is Eurocentric and would explain negative prejudice against Chicanos. Moreover, Chicano identity might partially be shaped by external prejudice. Niemann has indeed found that people who shift from self-identifying as Mexican to Chicano have an increasingly negative view of their own group (2001: 65).

There is a long history of Chicano struggle in terms of education, from the introduction of segregated school at the end of the 19th century (Valencia, Menchaca and Donato 2002) to the debate around bilingual education versus English immersion in education (Elenes 2002 ; Gershberg, Danenberg, and Sanchez 2006). Although officially segregated schools do not exist anymore, racialization at school and discrimination is still a reality (Elenes 2002; Telles and Ortiz 2008; Valencia 2002; Valencia, Menchaca and Donato 2002). The effects of racism, discrimination and stereotyping at school on young Mexican Americans will be further explored and analysed

In addition to constant stereotyping processes, a common stereotyped explanation for Chicano academic underachievement is lack of interest (Pizarro 2005: 16). Moreover, Massey and Fischer reminds us that there is a belief that Latinos are less intelligent, as they quote the 1996 Multi-City Survey of Urban Inequality in which 'a representative sample of White respondents in Los Angeles rated Blacks as 37% less intelligent than Whites and Latinos as 45% less intelligent' (2005 : 45). Valenzuela has identified patterns of undermining of Mexican-related identities in Seguin High School in Houston, Texas, as well as a continuous dismissing of non-Anglo features, such as Spanish proficiency, which is constantly depreciated (Valenzuela 1999). The perpetuation of stereotyping at school and in the portraying of Mexican Americans in society has produced internalised inferiority in

Chicano subjects and has had an impact on their self-esteem and academic achievement. This argument rests on Fanon's work to 'depict the effect of colonisation and imperialism on the psyche of the person of colour' (Treacher 2005: 50).

In addition to Valenzuela, Pizarro conducted extensive research in schools in East Los Angeles, California and Acoma, Washington State, where there is a high attendance of Mexican American students. The interviews he conducted, which are compiled and analysed in his book *Chicanas and Chicanos in School - Racial Profiling, Identity Battles, and Empowerment* (2005), offer an excellent insight of the Chicano experience at school. As I was not able to conduct this qualitative research myself for practical reasons, I am going to rely on Pizarro's work to carry on my analysis. Students in Los Angeles identified race as encompassing a lot of their experiences, and some recognised that they had been made to understand that as ethnic subjects, they were inferior, and identified it as a major factor for self-identification (2005: 50-51). One student, for instance, explained that in a class he attended, whenever students were acting up, non-white students such as himself were told by the professor to 'go back where (they) came from', or 'go back to Mexico' (2005: 52). Another student, Susana, was told that although she was not quite good enough to go to university, she might still be able to get in because she was a 'minority' and would benefit from affirmative action (2005: 53). Although these are anecdotes, they testify of the bias, discrimination, or blatant racism high school attendants of Mexican descent experience. By being constantly reminded that they were different, these students are otherised, racialised, and put in a subaltern position. This had an impact on their self-identification, as the first student Ernesto, reported not feeling comfortable with being in a group of predominantly white friends, as they constantly reminded him of his non-white features which reinforced racial boundaries (2005: 54). Moreover, he admitted that he 'always thought that (he) wasn't as smart as white kids, like that was just natural.' (2005: 69). We can now begin to understand the extent to which racialization at school is a phenomenon which is determinant in self-identification, and academic success or failure. In Acoma, a rural area very different from East Los Angeles, Pizarro explains that these patterns of racialization go even beyond school, as segregation is visible everywhere in the town, and many of the interviewees again identify race as a major factor for identification (2005: 116-125).

While Pizarro's and Valenzuela's work arguably assessed stereotyping as a discriminatory practice, Hurd, on the other hand, assessed stereotyping as practices of 'normative whiteness' in a suburban Californian high school (2008). He observed a Cinco de Mayo celebration organised at the school, a (stereo-)"typical" Mexican holiday commemorating the battle of Puebla, and the conflicts that arose from it. He argued that the way the celebration was approached was reinforcing normative whiteness and Americanness, and concluded that it led to the otherisation, marginalisation and politicisation of

the high school students of Mexican descent (Hurd 2008). The celebrations of Cinco de Mayo further establish the colonial order, or are, perhaps at best, a manifestation of latent "Orientalism".

I am now going to review the different mechanisms that link discrimination and stereotyping with poor self-esteem and low academic achievement. A study conducted by Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) has proven that teachers react differently to repeatedly undisciplined white students than they do with black students acting exactly the same way. With two experiments, they have found that racial stereotyping and the psychological perception of patterns of misbehaviour explain this difference. Other research has found that the racial stereotyping of African Americans has an impact on their self-esteem, well-being and mental health (Clark et al 1999; Williams and Williams-Morris 2000). In the case of Mexican Americans, several studies also link stereotyping, ethnic identity and self-esteem, as well as how it affects school results.

Bernal et al argue that cognitive ethnic identification for Mexican American children start developing from five years old (1990:4). Children start identifying with an ethnic group early on and throughout childhood, when most of their time is spent at school. The group in which they are placed, as well as the behaviours associated to that group is thus very important for identification. Mexican Americans seem to be negatively perceived at school, and treated in consequence, which can have an impact on how they view their group and themselves. Phinney, Cantu and Kurtz (1997) show that there is a link between ethnic identity and self-esteem, but point out that there is no empirical evidence that Mexican Americans see themselves negatively because of their ethnic identity *per se*. Gong (2007) also studied the effect of 'ethnic identity' versus 'national identity' (or being part of the dominant group) and did not find a negative link between ethnic identification and self-esteem. However, Phinney, Cantu, and Kurtz explain that there can be a negative link with self-esteem when assessing ethnic identity in comparison to white identity (1997: 179), and Gong (2007) chose Americanness as an object of identification. We can thus hypothesise that self-identifying as Mexican American or Chicano is not the issue. The issue is that by being identified as such, it implies that they are less "American", because they are implicitly identified as non-white. Thus, the pervasive maintaining of a Eurocentric hierarchy as the product of a colonial relationship seems to indeed have an impact on the in-group perception of Mexican Americans. Moreover, Umaña-Taylor found that 'contact with outside groups was related to heightened ethnic awareness' (2004: 144). This supports is consistent with post-colonial notions of otherisation.

However, despite Phinney, Cantu, and Kurtz's (1997) and Gong's (2007) conclusions, the idea that stereotyping is a colonial discourse that can negatively affect the dominated group is not to be dismissed yet. The theory of stereotype threat is useful in explaining academic underachievement

(Massey and Fischer 2005; Owens and Lynch 2012). The theory of stereotype threat rests on the idea that stereotyped subjects fear living up to their stereotype and thus disengage with what leads to the stereotyping (Massey and Fischer 2005: 47). Owens and Lynch (2012: 303) as well as Steele, Spencer and Aronson (2002) directly link the theory of stereotype threat with a reduced academic effort and negative performance in 'domestic Hispanics', or US-born people of Mexican and Latin American descent. The theory of stereotype threat allows for high self-esteem, and can thus accommodate with Phinney, Cantu and Kurtz's argument. We can also consider that the evidence presented in Pizarro's interviews (2005) suggests that stereotyping has a negative effect on self-esteem, and that Phinney, Cantu and Kurtz's (1997) argument simply rests on the lack of empirical evidence at the time their article was published.

Conclusions

By positioning itself against Eurocentric, colonial paradigms, Chicano identity and movement have sought to disrupt the order by opening a Third Space of interpretation. However, this provoked defensive reactions from the "dominant" Anglo American group, and ethnic identity has been twisted to signify difference, disempowerment, and otherisation rather than hybridity as self-determination and empowerment. A manifestation of this is stereotyping, which fixes identities and boundaries, rather than allowing them to be evolutional and fluid.

Although it is difficult to find a causal link between stereotyping and low self-esteem, the theory of stereotype threat provides a good account of the effects of stereotyping on educational achievements. Ultimately, I intended to show that colonial discourses such as stereotyping have an impact on self-image and on the assessment of one's capabilities, which can lead to a lack of socioeconomic integration. Chicano identity has been interpreted as a threat to colonial assimilationist paradigms, which has reinforced boundaries and further reinforced stereotyping as a means to maintain the Eurocentric order. Although the conclusion of this dissertation is rather pessimistic, it calls for a reassessment of assimilation as the dominant means for integration, and the establishment of a more comprehensive integration model, to accommodate with differences rather than otherise them and suppress them.

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