What Color Line? Discrimination and Ethnic Identity

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Bio:

Andrew Jones graduated \textit{summa cum laude} from the University of North Texas in Spring 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and Ethnic Studies. He is a member of Lambda Alpha and Phi Kappa Phi Honor Societies, and co-founded the student organization, Transcending Gender Denton. Jones presented the results of his fieldwork in Mexico on poverty and marginalization at the Anthropology Student Association Conference in Spring of 2006. He also presented “What Color Line?: Discrimination and Ethnic Identity” at the UNT Scholar’s Day Conference in Spring of 2006. His primary focus is social justice, specifically within ethnic and deaf communities. He volunteers at the Deaf Action Center of Dallas, tutoring immigrants who are deaf in American Sign Language.
Abstract:

This paper was written based on an interview with a Hispanic professor. The informant was interviewed about his life, schooling, experiences as a professor, and specifically about being a Hispanic professional in higher education. These experiences are discussed, as well as the question of how discrimination affected the professor’s preference for an ethnic label. The most important conclusion of this research is that people who do not experience a sense of feeling different based on their ethnicity are likely to accept a color-blind perspective of society. The paper briefly explores the political implications for people who support this model.
Introduction

The absence of discrimination throughout much of Dr. Galvan’s life (Galvan is a pseudonym for the informant) has resulted in his hesitation to identify ethnically, as well as in his preference for a color-blind ideology. His dissatisfaction with the ethnic labels available to him was apparent, although he chooses Hispanic as the label with which he can relate most. Even after being set apart from others, he has continued to support a color-blind model. Thus, the absence of discrimination prior to identity formation affects an individual’s identity and attitudes; for some, even after discrimination and a change in identity, these attitudes endure.

Dr. Galvan’s encounters with discrimination seem to be few and far between. He grew up in a suburb of San Diego that he describes as diverse. He said that he had a wonderful childhood, free of racism or segregation. This appears to have continued through most if not all of his entire college career. College and teaching have been very important parts of his life, along with being a husband and father. These aspects of his life were certainly more important than any ethnic label he could use for himself. Although his father is from Costa Rica and his mother is from Mexico, he said he did not realize he was Hispanic until he moved out of his home to attend college. Throughout the interview, he made clear that being Hispanic was something he did not necessarily identify with: “There’s a lot of different classifications for me and so Hispanic is just one of those, and that’s especially one that I haven’t chosen” (emphasis added).

Construction of Ethnic Identity

Dr. Galvan expressed caution and hesitation toward identifying himself with any particular label. Because “ethnic identity involves situational dynamics…and the construction or reconstruction of cultural meaning” (Gonzales, 1993, p. 158), Dr. Galvan was careful to choose an identity with which he could relate. That the identity labels he had to choose from were
inadequate was expressed in his explanation of the available labels for Latinos, their history, and the reasons they were unacceptable for his use. He expressed the most dissatisfaction with the term “Chicano” when he said, “You go…talk to the history people and they’re going to say, ‘Oh no, you guys are Chicanos,’ you know, but what is that…I don’t even want to go there.” One must take into consideration the connotations associated with the term “Chicano” to understand this sentiment. It is a term that brings one back to the Civil Rights Movement and political activism, a term used to empower people “united by culture and victimized by American imperialism and oppression” (Gonzales, 1993, p. 172). As someone who does not feel he relates to the experience of discrimination or oppression, one cannot expect that he would relate with this term. He seemed more comfortable, though not necessarily satisfied, with the term “Hispanic.”

When asked what ethnic label he preferred, Dr. Galvan responded, “If we have to label ourselves, I prefer Hispanic.” The connotations corresponding to this term coincide much more with his experiences than Chicano. The term “Hispanic” was used “in a top-down attempt to control the politics of ethnic identification by dissociating from the militancy of ‘Chicano’” (Gonzales, 1993, p. 175). Gonzales noted that in his experience “ethnic definition itself did not arise as an issue, and, in fact, was avoided if possible” (1993, p. 176), perhaps by others like him who did not feel the need to identify. Also the term “Hispanic” was taken by those Latinos with “professional qualifications” (Gonzales, 1993, p. 175), another aspect to which Dr. Galvan could relate. However, this identification as Hispanic did not arise until he experienced discrimination.

When Dr. Galvan states that “Moving here, to Texas, has actually…how can I say …it’s raised my awareness, of you know what? I AM Hispanic.” One may wonder what led him to this sort of solidification of identity. He said that it was in Texas that he first experienced a sense of
being different in ethnic terms; however, it was not the negative discrimination one might imagine. Instead he was invited to join numerous boards and offered positions simply because people were looking for diversity. One can deduce that it was not until Dr. Galvan experienced a sense of difference that he identified with being Hispanic. He remembers that early on, he did not realize he was Hispanic; his experiences growing up never made him feel that he was different from any of the other kids, nor that they were any different from him.

Politically it becomes difficult to “persuasively advocate on behalf of a group one cannot identify” (Torres-Saillant, 2003, p. 140). That many Hispanics feel reluctant to ethnically identify themselves is revealing when “it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificial, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity” (Torres-Saillant, 2002, p. 448). It is partially the need to work together for civil rights or to fight against discrimination that influences the use of a label for a (sometimes imagined) group of people. Dr. Galvan’s lack of a need for this community is illustrated by his rejection of the most politically motivated ethnic label for Latinos: Chicano. It becomes clear that the situations or needs mentioned earlier that spark a political community based on ethnicity are not of high relevance to Dr. Galvan, for whom that political community takes low priority in life. His current attitudes toward race (that it is something to look over rather than take note of) reflect his ability to ignore its importance. This has been made possible by the fact that he has not experienced the negative discrimination or denial of civil rights that would spark such a priority in one’s life. Yet even after experiencing discrimination (albeit not negative), his attitudes toward race and racial politics remain unchanged.

In the interview, Dr. Galvan revealed that he considered race something that should be and is easily looked over. He emphasized that there is more to him than simply who he is as a
Hispanic person. Stressing that “we're all human. We're from the human race,” he emphasized the need to come together and “help each other out.” These phrases, highlighting the similarities between people, illustrate his supportiveness of seeing beyond race (color-blindness). Because he considers racial identity irrelevant to his life, he is able to take on this color-blind ideology.

Sanchez shows that people supporting the color-blind model “look forward to a time in which race does not determine social condition as much as it does today…[They believe] that the dismantling of racial categorization, in and of itself, will contribute mightily to a more equitable society” (2002, p. 55). It can be reasoned that those who would be disadvantaged by ignoring race (without changing social ills such as racism) would not support the color-blind model. Because the model is “conceptualized as a goal of eradicating all indications that race is significant in the United States” (Yancey, 2003, p. 95), it tends to ignore and discount the experiences people have with racism. For those who would attest to realizing that they were seen as different, and especially those who have encountered racism as early as three years old, this model would prove difficult to accept (Tatum, 1997). Therefore, it seems that the color-blind model would actually only be available to people such as Dr. Galvan, who have not experienced discrimination early in their lives.

Dr. Galvan’s propensity to support the color-blind model is equivalent to his ability to ignore race, which Yancey describes as “one of the hallmarks of majority group status” (2003, p. 95). That color-blindness may operate as an aid to maintain privilege creates the belief that only people who do not experience discrimination based on their perceived race and/or ethnicity are likely or even able to identify with this kind of attitude toward race. Dr. Galvan’s support of color-blindness does not appear to be an isolated incidence within the Hispanic community, as Yancey’s research (2003, p. 107) indicates that “the fact that Hispanic Americans are even less
supportive of talking about race than European Americans may indicate a greater support for "color blindness" within the Hispanic community.

There is evidence that Hispanic Americans are beginning to relate not necessarily with the majority group itself, but with the attitudes majority group members hold toward race. Yancey’s research on racialized attitudes shows that Hispanic Americans “have an even greater tendency to develop a dominant group perspective” (2003, p. 110) on overtly racialized issues. This was shown by Dr. Galvan’s support of color-blindness: even as he did experience discrimination later, his attitudes toward race currently remain the same. Without any discrimination or other experiences thus far in his life that have had the ability to affect him so much as to change his racial attitudes, his support for the color-blind model has seemed unwavering.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the absence of discrimination prior to identity formation affects an individual’s identity and attitudes; for some, even after discrimination and a change in identity, these attitudes endure. The fact that Dr. Galvan grew up in a diverse neighborhood without experiences of racial discrimination or segregation has made it difficult for him to identify with other Hispanics seeking political action. It has also allowed him to take on a color-blind attitude toward race, which remained even after his experiences of discrimination.
References


