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Jessica Trejos was born and raised in New York City. She received her Master of Science in Social Work from Columbia University, with a concentration in Advanced Generalist Practice & Programming, a specialization in Family, Youth & Children’s Services, and a minor in International Social Welfare & Services to Immigrants and Refugees. Her research interests draw greatly from her personal and professional experiences.

INSPIRATION FOR ARTICLE

I began writing this paper while writing my doctoral dissertation. I felt compelled to justify, in detail, why I choose to utilize Latine in my writing instead of “Latinx.” This led me to spend a lot of time going down a lot of research rabbit holes in search of the perfect citation, one that encompassed my full perspective on the need to use gender-inclusive – but not gender-neutral – language when referencing my pan-ethnicity. Realizing that the empirical article I was looking for didn’t exist yet, I decided to write it myself. It was important to me to publish this piece in the Columbia Social Work Review because of the connections between CSSW and the topic of my article. One thing I hope readers take away from it is a greater understanding of the term “Latinx” including how it came to be and how its usage has grown. I’m really excited to see this paper in print and share it with family, friends, colleagues, and professional partners, in the hopes that it will provide them with a well-researched basis to explain why and how they choose labels of Latinidad, without having to complete a systematic review of research like I did!

ABSTRACT

People of Latin American origin use many different terms to self-identify their ethnicity. To date, there are very few scholarly articles that have investigated the growing use (and potential outcomes) of the term "Latinx." Over the past decade, this pan-ethnic identifier has been wholly ascribed to a group of people who do not all identify with it. The dearth of empirical understanding on this topic is especially concerning given its significant implications on one's positive identity development and overall psychosocial functioning. This conceptual essay is meant to introduce readers to the role that U.S. colleges and universities played in the promulgation of the word "Latinx." It also aims to stimulate discussion amongst readers who may question how "Latinx" came to be the pan-ethnic identifier for this community as well as those who may question whether they should adopt or reject the label. To address the aforementioned inquiries, this composition includes a brief history of the most commonly used pan-ethnic terms for the Latin American diaspora. The implications of ascribing gender-inclusive vs. gender-neutral labels on positive identity development, as well as recommendations and best practices for social work researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders, are also discussed.

The first time I heard the word "Latinx" was on September 6, 2011. It was my first day of classes in pursuit of a graduate degree at the Columbia University School of Social Work. While a fellow first-year student was describing what brought them to the field of social work, I heard them say a phrase that sounded like "*Latines* in this country." I mistakenly attributed the pronunciation of this word to their regional accent, not to an intentional effort by a non-binary person to utilize a gender-inclusive form of *Latinos*.

As someone who was born and raised in New York City, I have often observed that people can pronounce the same words in different ways. However, my new colleague informed me that, although they were from Boston and spoke with a distinctive accent, they had indeed intended to say *Latines*, not *Latinos*. Moreover, even though the word was pronounced with an E, it was spelled "Latinx," with an "X." They also told me it was understandable if I had never heard the word "Latinx" before; they had only ever heard it used amongst genderqueer people.

Over time, I heard more of my social work peers utilizing the word "Latinx," but enunciating it more like "Latin Ex." This was distinct from the way I first heard my associate from Boston pronounce it as someone who was a heritage speaker of Spanish. Moreover, I did not hear anyone besides other social workers using "Latinx" until December of 2015 – when I began working at a university in the Midwest. Through my academic and vocational networks, I learned that "Latinx" was quickly being adopted at institutions of higher education across the country at that time. However, I did not observe its usage in any other contexts, and I sought to comprehend why.

AUTHOR'S POSITIONALITY

The lens through which I examine the usage of "Latinx" is informed by my background in Social Work as a practitioner specializing in Immigrant and Refugee Issues in addition to my background in Education as both a scholar of psychosocial development and as an adolescent educator. I also carry the perspectives and biases that come as a result of over two decades of experience working with Latina/e/o/x youth in both formal and informal learning environments. I self-identify as a cis-gender, heterosexual woman whose parents migrated to the U.S. as children after forced displacement from their homeland. My own process of self-identifying as a Nicaraguan-American first, a Central American second, and a Latina third was shaped by having resided in six different cities across the U.S. (as well as in Nicaragua) and the impact that interacting with other Latinas in each of those places had on my own self-perception. In my personal and professional experiences, I have seen how my many intersectional identities frame not only how I have come to understand ethnic identity development but also how I continue to learn about labels of *Latinidad* (which I translate as "Latineity" – the quality or state of being Latina/Latine/Latino/Latinx).

UNDERSTANDING "LATINX"

Numerous studies have observed a correlation between one's ethnic or gender identity development and many aspects of well-being. Positive identity development is characterized as forming a healthy self-identity and a secure sense of self. This can be achieved at both the personal and the social level with beneficial outcomes such as high self-esteem, successfully engaging with others and developing/maintaining healthy relationships, and a positive sense of agency to accomplish goals (Brandon-Friedman, 2019). According to Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development, which describes how an individual's personality develops and how their social skills are learned, adolescents must confront the challenge of ego identity vs. role confusion. During this stage of development, the main tasks that need to be resolved

for healthy outcomes include constructing one's own unique sense of identity, finding social environments where one feels a sense of belonging, and establishing a confident sense of where one fits into society.

One way that adolescents accomplish these tasks is by developing their ethnic identity which includes adopting an ethnic-or pan-ethnic-identifier. For example, "Latinx" is a pan-ethnicity, a term that refers to the organization of ethnic subgroups perceived by outsiders to be homogenous under an umbrella category of collective interests and shared socio-political goals (Espiritu, 2019). Under this umbrella category, there are dozens of other ethnicities, such as Central American and Nuyoricano. Notably, there are very few scholarly articles that have investigated the growing use (and potential outcomes) of the term "Latinx" as an ethnic identifier. This dearth of empirical understanding is especially alarming given the significant implications for one's sense of self and ability to engage with others on identity development and overall psychosocial functioning (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2002).

Young people from across the Latin American diaspora make up the second largest racial/ethnic group enrolled in K-12 schools (KidsData, 2021) and post-secondary institutions (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022) in the U.S. today. In addition, research demonstrates that students of Latin American origin more often rely on schools than other systems as their primary provider of mental health services (Franco, 2018). This should be of particular concern to social workers who make up the country's largest group of mental health services providers according to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, n.d.).

This conceptual essay is meant to introduce readers to the influential role that U.S. colleges and universities played in the promulgation of the word "Latinx." Schools, as sites of socialization, are influential in the psychosocial development of students, including their racial identity, ethnic identity, gender identity, and sexual identity development. Subsequently, the staff and other students at one's school have the potential to support or hinder psychosocial functioning and

development outcomes (Verhoeven et al., 2019). It is therefore possible that the usage of "Latinx" may have a developmental effect that we do not yet fully understand on students of Latin American origin.

I also aim to speak to readers who may question how "Latinx" came to be the pan-ethnic identifier for this community as well as those who may question whether they should adopt or reject the label—which may be utilized by individuals or groups in different contexts and for different reasons. For example, in the past decade, I have spoken to dozens of people (whose heritage traces back to what is now called Latin America) from all walks of life about their decision to use "Latinx" or not. Although the majority of them expressed that it would be ideal to have a unanimously-accepted identifier of *Latinidad* that is non-patriarchal and inclusive of everyone in the community regardless of national origin, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and sociolinguistic background, they felt that the umbrella of *Latinidad* encompasses so much diversity that there may never be one term that is truly inclusive of all. Ultimately, whenever they decided to utilize "Latinx," it was often based on the same strategies they usually employed while code-switching—they adjusted their word choice based on what they perceived their audience would find acceptable.

My exploration of the propagation, and by whom, of the term "Latinx" is not an argument against using it (see Scharrón-del Río & Aja, 2020; Milian, 2019; and Guidotti- Hernández, 2017 for further reading on the significance of the term). I wholeheartedly believe that gender-inclusive language is absolutely necessary not only in the field of social work but whenever the Latin American diaspora is referenced. It is not at all my intention to argue otherwise. Rather, I caution against the usage of "Latinx" without critical self-reflection, particularly in a color-blind, gender-blind, and sexuality-blind fashion. I also call on and encourage my fellow social workers in particular, in accordance with our Code of Ethics (NASW, 2021), to not only seek out a nuanced understanding of the adoption and rejection of pan-ethnic labels of *Latinidad*, but to advocate for practices that highlight our ethical obligation to

both promote social justice and respect our clients' right to self-determination. This includes enhancing each of our clients' capacities to set their own boundaries regarding which, if any, pan-ethnic term we should use when referencing their identity. With that charge in mind, the following section offers a brief history of the most commonly used terms.

BACKGROUND ON PAN-ETHNIC LABELS OF *LATINIDAD* HISPANIC

Although "Latino" and "Hispanic" are often used interchangeably in the literature, there are significant differences between the two. Grace Flores-Hughes (1996), a self-identified Mexican American who is credited with introducing the term "Hispanic" to U.S. public policy, has said herself that it is not at all synonymous with "Latino" (Flores-Hughes, 2006). The identifier "Hispanic" was set in 1976 as the government term for anyone living in the U.S. whose origins can be traced to a country or territory where Spanish is an official language (U.S. Pub. L. No. 94-311, 1976), including Spain itself. At the time, that also included the Philippines. However, a focus on Spain makes this term Eurocentric (Mora, 2014), and people who are of African (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2022), Asian (UnidosUS, 2021), and/or Native American (Parker et al., 2015) descent may not identify with "Hispanic" (Taylor et al., 2012) even if they are native Spanish speakers (Lopez et al., 2023). It is also important to note that many people do self-identify as Hispanic even if they do not speak Spanish; most adults who identify as Hispanic say it is not necessary to speak Spanish to be considered Hispanic (Mora & Lopez, 2023).

With the institutionalization of "Hispanic" as a pan-ethnic identifier, both widespread adoption and resistance to the term developed soon after. Many argued that the term represented an attachment to the Spanish legacy of colonialism and genocide in the Americas, and the utilization of the term "Latino" (short for *latinoamericano*) as a more progressive alternative quickly grew in popularity. It is important to note that people

of Latin American origin living in the U.S. had been calling themselves *Latino* since the years following the wars of independence in Spain's former colonies, and also in response to being sociopolitically ascribed an ethnic label that they did not identify with (Gutiérrez, 2016).

LATINO

The identifier "Latino" refers to any person whose origins can be traced to any country or territory in Latin America. It was later added as a government term to "Hispanic" (62 FR 58782, 1997), but the two terms have since been used interchangeably. As a result, in government directives (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), "Latino" also does not include anyone living in the U.S. with roots in countries or territories where Spanish is not an official language. Therefore, people who are from Brazil, French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Haiti, Martinique, Saint-Barthelemy, and Saint-Martin are not considered "Latino" by the U.S. government, even if people from these countries self-identify as such.

Pushback against the term "Latino" also began in the 1970s from feminist communities in the U.S. who called for a less patriarchal, more gender-inclusive term. This opposition included the emergence of various new expressions such as "Latin@" as alternatives, although widespread adoption would not take place for several decades. However, the specific origin of these alternatives are unknown. Nonetheless, scholars agree that—with the advent of replacing Spanish morphemes "o" and "a" with "e" or "x"—the initial usages of *Latine* and "Latinx" likely came soon afterward (Papadopoulos, 2022).

LATINE

Álvaro García Meseguer (1976) argued that Spanish—as a gendered language that defaulted to the usage of masculine terms even when referring to mixed-gender groups—was sexist, and there was a need for greater gender-inclusive usage. García Meseguer further posited that, since "e" morphemes in Spanish are already gender-inclusive, people should replace "o" and "a" morphemes with "e"s when referring to

mixed groups as well as those who do not want their gender identified. Morpheme replacements in words that refer to people (e.g. *los niños/ las niñas* > *les niñes*; see Lemus Sandoval, 2001 and Lamas, 2005 as scholarly examples from El Salvador and Mexico, respectively) have remained in use throughout Latin America since the 1980s as well as the use of gender-inclusive ethnic identifiers such as *Latines* (Politi, 2020; Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018). However, there is no definitive explanation for why, in the U.S., "Latinx" was propagated instead.

LATINX

The origins of the usage of "Latinx" are undetermined. It was first seen in a published work by Elizabeth Horan (2004) where she used the identifier as an alternative to "Latin@" without explaining why. Although the intended audience of this publication were feminist scholars of Hispanic and Latin American Studies, Horan has stated (Rivas, 2017) that the term's usage began in online forums sometime in the 1990s (Milian, 2017). The renowned queer scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) has herself noted that the voices of women of color are often silenced in academia, and their perspectives are frequently disqualified and excluded from academic discourse. One can only presume that there may be a connection between the origins of replacing the "o" in "Latino" with "x," and the origins of replacing the "a" in "woman" with "x," a practice first seen in 1971 at the University of California, Davis in an effort to be inclusive of trans women and women of color (Salinas & Lozano, 2021). It is also unclear what the connection is between the emergence of "Latinx" in the U.S. and the emergence of replacing "a" and "o" endings with "x" amongst Spanish-speaking feminist circles in Europe (see Sau, 1998 for the earliest traced example), if there is any connection at all. Nonetheless, scholars have found that when "x" morphemes were utilized, they were still pronounced as "e" since it is more easily pronounceable when replacing vowels in Spanish (Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018). In addition, throughout Latin America, utilizing "e" morphemes was more common than using "x," particularly because plural words with "x" endings are unreadable in Spanish (Alexgaias, 2014).

"Latinx" was first seen in a scholarly article by Macarena Gómez-Barris and Licia Fiol-Matta (2014) who argued for its usage "to signal a route out of gender binaries and normativities" (p. 504) and further posited that the use of "x" endings challenged the dichotomy of gender representations. In 2014, Columbia University became the first known institution in the U.S. to formally utilize "Latinx" when student members of the planning committee for their Latino Heritage Month celebrations changed the name to Latinx Heritage Month (Salinas, 2020). Student groups at other colleges and universities across the country swiftly followed suit, citing the need to use terminology that is inclusive of all gender identities (Logue, 2015).

According to a Pew Research Center analysis (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020) of Google Trends data, broader interest in the word "Latinx" began increasing in June of 2016, which coincides with a variety of media reporting a mass shooting during a Latin Night event at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida (Schneider, 2016). During interviews, many survivors used "Latinx" to describe themselves. Soon after, mainstream media (Finkel, 2017) began utilizing "Latinx" as well, and it was also added to the Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary. With wider usage of "Latinx" came an increase in documented reactions (de Onís, 2017) to the word adoption, especially on college campuses (Mora et al., 2022). By this point, the usage of "Latinx" had become so common among students and faculty at academic institutions that education research articles and professional conference presentations usually utilized the term without defining it; it was implicit that anyone hearing or reading "Latinx" would already know what the word meant (Salinas & Lozano, 2019). However, Google Trends (n.d.) data also shows that the most common search query related to "Latinx" is still on the meaning of the term.

It is therefore safe to assume that there are more people in the U.S. and across the world who are unsure of what "Latinx" means than there are people who do know (Salinas & Lozano, 2019). Lozano and colleagues (2023) have posited that the hasty adaptation of "Latinx" can seem

performative given the lack of a full examination and understanding of the term and greater input from the Latina/e/o/x community. I agree with Lozano and colleagues (2023) that it is consequently imperative to ask: How inclusive, and of whom, is the term "Latinx?"

IDENTIFICATION VS. ASCRIPTION, AND THE EXCLUSIVITY OF INCLUSIVITY

A number of scholars have observed that in spite of its initial intentions to be gender-inclusive (i.e., affirming of all gender identities), "Latinx" has come to be utilized more often as a gender-neutral (i.e. neutralizing or disassociating any reference to gender) term. This can perpetuate overlooking or even invalidating gender identity-based oppressions (Contreras, 2017). For example, trans women—such as Latina transgender rights activist Silvia Rivera—are women, and calling them "Latinx" solely because they are transgender potentially ignores and denies their sociopolitical struggles and right to self-determination. When "Latinx" is ascribed in such a way that neutralizes all gender identities and expressions, it may serve to further obscure the very people that "Latinx" originally sought to give greater visibility and recognition (del Río-González, 2021; Lozano et al., 2023).

Scholars posit that this shift in intentionality is a consequence of how "Latinx" has been increasingly adopted over the past decade to categorize all peoples who identify with *Latinidad* but without a thorough analysis of how "Latinx" has been defined, used, or perceived and by whom (del Río-González, 2021; Lozano et al., 2023). Trujillo-Pagán (2018) found that many people were utilizing "Latinx" merely because they heard others doing so or because it is what "other universities do" (p. 400), and that her colleagues at other institutions felt obliged to utilize "Latinx." In addition, Trujillo-Pagán (2018) found multiple instances where the label had been applied to the scholarly work of others who had not employed the term, such as a book review that utilized "Latinx" but the book's authors did not, as well as other book advertisements that utilized "Latinx" even though the authors themselves had not.

Trujillo-Pagán (2018) argues that crossing out self-chosen gendered identifiers serves to perpetuate patriarchy at the expense of cis- and trans women of color in particular; much like color-blind ideologies can operate to obscure systemic racism, gender-blind ideologies can operate to obscure structural sexism.

Even those who view “Latinx” as a gender-inclusive term may still perceive it as excluding other social identities that are salient to them. In his study on how Latina/e/o/x undergraduate students understand, relate to, and identify with the word “Latinx,” Salinas (2020) found that most participants used “Latinx” within their school environment but not at all within their home communities. Participants felt that since the word originated in academic and activist spaces of privilege, it might seem like they were imposing an agenda on family and friends who did not have the same access to those spaces or privileges. Some participants also stated that they utilized “Latinx” at their institutions because they felt compelled or pressured to do so (Salinas, 2020). Others may find “Latinx” to be a term that excludes their racial or sociolinguistic identity. For example, the letter “x” does not exist in the Quechua language, spoken by Indigenous people of South America, nor in the Garífuna language, spoken by Afro-Indigenous people of Central America (Salinas & Lozano, 2021).

Furthermore, “Latinx” has been utilized to be inclusive of queer identities but in a way that synonymizes gender with sexuality (Contreras, 2017). This has the potential to lead to misunderstandings about gender nonconformity and sexual orientation, including the misguided assumption that all genderqueer people are inherently non-heterosexual (Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018). Interchanging gender with sexuality could result in further marginalization of people with gender identities and sexual identities that have been minoritized and oppressed. Studies have shown that the more often an individual’s membership in the gender and sexuality group with which they identify is invalidated, the higher their risk of experiencing negative outcomes such as low self-esteem, anxiety and stress, and impacted health (Howansky et al., 2022).

Self-concept, and consequently self-expression, can change over time and through experience. It is understandable that the terms one uses to self-identify can change over time as well. For instance, U.S. public policy and institutionalized definitions of ethnic and racial identifiers, in addition to mainstream media usage, can impact the acceptance or rejection of identifier terms, which in turn affect the ethnic and gender identity development of individuals. Pew Research Center analysis (Lopez et al., 2023) shows that significant changes can be seen in demographic data from one Census count to the next, depending on how respondents’ understanding of the terms on the survey have changed within that particular decade. It is possible that even generational identity may play a role in how, for instance, members of the Gen Z cohort choose to self-identify racially-ethnically, compared with members of the Gen X population—who were born and/or came of age during the rise of LGBT+ activism. Similarly, scholars have shown that first-generation Americans are more likely to self-identify with their national origin compared with their second-generation children who are more likely to self-identify with racial and pan-ethnic terms that have been institutionalized in the U.S. given their greater experience navigating U.S. institutions such as public schools (Santos, 2017).

Very few studies have explored the intersection of social identities, and fewer have studied the intersectionality of racial identity development, ethnic identity development, gender identity development, and sexual identity development. The limited scholarship available demonstrates that, in alignment with intersectionality theory, our social identities work in concert with each other—we see our experiences of one social identity through the combined lenses of our other social identities (Cerezo et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2015; Veenstra, 2011). The very definition of the term “inclusive language” is that it does not exclude identities, and intentional efforts need to be made by practitioners, researchers, and affiliates of academic institutions from all fields to ensure that if and when “Latinx” is utilized, it is done so in a way that clearly defines its usage as a gender-inclusive term, as well as its meaning and significance, with input from the Latin a/e/o/x population and community.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

None of these terms—Hispanic, Latino, Latinx, Latine—should be considered the (in)correct pan-ethnic identifier. Instead, consideration should be taken to explicitly learn which term each individual prefers to utilize. Social workers cannot assume that their understanding of the meaning of “Latinx” is the same as that of their clients, and we cannot ascribe the term to any individual without knowing if they want to be referred to as such.

Adolescence is a critical period for identity development and is a phase when our self-concepts are flexible and impressionable. Therefore, adolescence is also a critical period where caretakers, peers, educators, and practitioners can impact our perceptions and understandings of our intersectional social identities. Research has already shown that positive identity development can lead to improved outcomes in physiological and psychological well-being which, in turn, can also lead to higher self-esteem. For ethnically minoritized groups in particular, healthy psychosocial functioning can strengthen one’s sense of agency in the face of adverse experiences such as discrimination. More research is needed to better understand the implications of ascribing an ethnic identifier to over 60 million people living in the U.S. and in such a way that potentially excludes the intersectionality of their multiple identities.

It is imperative not only for social workers, but all stakeholders of all fields to understand why—and how—pan-ethnic identifiers of *Latinidad* are used and promoted. A critical self-examination of the utilization of these terms is necessary to ensure that they are being used intentionally and not simply as a performative act. In other words, “Latinx” should not be the only term you use to refer to people of the Latin American diaspora, every time you reference them; Latina(s), Latino(s), Latine(s), and other identifiers of *Latinidad* can be the more accurate and appropriate term to utilize depending on the person/people being referenced. Accordingly, I invite you to take some time to reflect on your responses to the following questions:

- Why have/do I use the word “Latinx?” Is it because I felt compelled to do so simply for the sake of political correctness?
- How am I using the word “Latinx?” Am I using it to reference all Latines or only the ones whose gender I don’t know?
- When and where am I using the word “Latinx?” Am I using it in all social contexts or only in my academic/professional spaces?
- Most importantly—have I asked my Latina/e/o/x clients how they would prefer to be called?

Utilizing gender-inclusive language is not only the ethical thing to do, but is necessary—and doing so appropriately requires that we each grapple with our own intersectional and privileged identities, our roles in dismantling social injustice, and gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities of pan-ethnic identifiers for a community with immense intra-group diversity. In sum, simply using “Latinx” does not confront and eradicate the institutionalized oppressions that genderqueer people confront daily. What are you doing to challenge and address cisnormativity in your teaching, research, and/or practice?

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