

SURVEY BRIEF

March 2004

ASSIMILATION AND LANGUAGE

ABOUT THE 2002 NATIONAL SURVEY OF LATINOS

In the 2000 Census, some 35,306,000 people living in the United States identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino. That represented a 142% increase over the 1980 Census count, and means that Latinos now make up nearly 13% of the U.S. population overall. This rapid growth is among one of the most important demographic trends shaping the future of the United States. Recognizing this fact, the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Pew Hispanic Center joined forces to conduct a comprehensive national survey of the Hispanic population.

The Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation 2002 National Survey of Latinos explored the attitudes and experiences of Latinos on a wide variety of topics. The survey sample was designed to include enough Hispanics from various backgrounds and national origin groups so that in addition to describing Latinos overall, comparisons also could be made among segments of the Hispanic population.

The concept of assimilation has been debated extensively in the social science of migration since the early 20th Century, but it is now broadly accepted as a way to describe the ways that immigrants and their offspring change as they come in contact with their host society.¹ In its current usage the concept of assimilation does not imply any superiority in the host society's views or a particular value to the changes in attitudes and behavior among immigrants across generation. Rather, assimilation is now most useful as a means for describing a social dynamic that is characteristic of this era in U.S. history.

Immigration has been the largest source of population growth in the Hispanic population since the 1970s. The 2002 National Survey of Latinos permits a comparison of the views and attitudes of immigrants and those of native-born Latinos and non-Latinos. This is one way to assess the pace of the assimilation process by which many newcomers adopt some values, beliefs, and behaviors more similar to U.S. culture than to the culture of the country from which they or their ancestors originate. This is neither a complete nor uniform process as some individuals change more than others and attitudes in some areas are more subject to change

than others. Assimilation is similar to the concept of acculturation, which describes the changes in both the newcomers and the hosts when they come into contact with each other. Whereas assimilation describes this process on an individual level and focuses on members of one group adopting the cultural patterns of the majority or host culture, acculturation focuses on the impact that the two cultures have on each other.²

Literature has suggested that, while not perfect, language acquisition—in this case the acquisition of English—is a reasonable proxy to measure acculturation and assimilation.³ Two questions are important to consider: To what extent do differences in language among Latinos mirror differences in attitudes? And, how much does language matter in explaining those differences compared to other factors such as education or country of birth? On both points an analysis of the survey results demonstrates that language plays a central role in the assimilation process.

Language As A Measure

The survey asked an extensive battery of questions on language preferences and abilities. The results showed a range of language use—both speaking and reading—in the adult Hispanic population, with almost half (47%) indicating that they are primarily Spanish speakers, around one quarter (28%) indicating they are bilingual, and one quarter (25%) indicating they are primarily English speakers. While the survey demonstrated that there were some important similarities among Hispanics of all language groups, it also highlighted key differences on important issues. Some of the most interesting variation was found on social issues such as divorce, homosexuality, and abortion, and attitudes toward the family (see Table 1). Other differences worthy of note also exist regarding beliefs about what it takes to be successful in the United States, attitudes toward government, and fatalism. In general, the attitudes and beliefs of English-dominant Hispanics are much more similar to those held by non-Latinos than the attitudes and beliefs of Spanish-dominant Latinos.

Table 1: Topics that Highlight Differences in Attitudes Held by Spanish Dominant, Bilingual, and English-Dominant Latinos

		Latinos by primary language			Non-Latinos
		Spanish-Dominant	Bilingual	English-Dominant	
SOCIAL VALUES: For each, thinking about your own values and morals, I'd like you to tell me whether you think in general, it is acceptable or unacceptable.	Divorce				
	Acceptable	47%	63%	67%	72%
	Unacceptable	50	33	29	26
	Sex between two adults of the same sex				
	Acceptable	16	27	38	35
	Unacceptable	81	70	60	62
GENDER ROLES AND IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY: Will you tell me for each of the following whether it is something you personally agree with or disagree with?	Having a child without being married				
	Acceptable	49	60	67	55
	Unacceptable	48	38	31	43
	Abortion				
	Acceptable	10	22	36	41
	Unacceptable	88	73	59	55
	In general, the husband should have the final say in family matters				
	Agree	43	34	27	29
	Disagree	56	65	71	70
	It is better for children to live in their parents' home until they get married				
Agree	95	75	52	46	
Disagree	5	24	47	52	
Elderly parents should live with their adult children	Agree	76	71	69	56
	Disagree	23	26	28	41
	Relatives are more important than friends				
Agree	94	88	79	67	
Disagree	6	11	19	31	
FATALISM	It doesn't do any good to plan for the future because you don't have any control over it				
	Agree	59	31	24	17
ATTITUDES ABOUT THE BEHAVIOR THAT LEADS TO SUCCESS IN U.S. WORKPLACE: Now let me ask you about the kind of values and attitudes that you may have encountered in American workplaces. Do you agree or disagree that you can be more successful in American workplaces if you...	Disagree	40	68	75	82
	Are willing to work long hours at the expense of your personal life				
	Agree	17	33	45	45
	Disagree	81	66	55	54
	Get along with people of different races and cultures				
	Agree	97	97	97	97
Disagree	3	2	3	2	
Do what is best for yourself rather than what is best for others	Agree	68	55	47	33
	Disagree	29	44	50	64
ATTITUDES TOWARD GOVERNMENT: Trust in government and attitudes about the size of government	Which of the following statements do you agree with more ...				
	I'd rather pay higher taxes to support a larger government that provides more services	62	63	52	35
	I'd rather pay lower taxes and have a smaller government that provides fewer services	31	31	43	57

Note: "Don't know" and "Refused" responses not shown.

The survey results clearly demonstrate that differences in language are correlated to differences in views on a number of topics. A more challenging question regards the extent to which language helps explain these differences. This question is difficult to answer because primary language among Hispanic adults is closely related to other factors that would also be expected to influence assimilation. These factors include whether or not an individual was born in the United States or in another country, how many years an immigrant has spent in the United States, and in the case of the native born, how many generations the individual's family has been in the United States. Table 2 illustrates one of these factors, showing how primary language varies among Latinos by generation: the first being those born outside the continental United States (including those born in Puerto Rico), second are born in the United States with at least one foreign-born parent and the third-generation and higher are those born in the United States with two U.S-born parents.

Language Compared To Other Factors

A logistic regression analysis permits an assessment of the importance of language in assimilation by controlling for other factors and statistically isolating the role of language. In effect, the analysis asks, if other factors were equal, would language stand out as a characteristic that correlates to the differences in views described above or are factors like age, education, and generation as important in explaining the differences. The results demonstrate that on almost all key

questions related to assimilation, language contributes to differences in attitudes substantially even after controlling for other factors, such as age, gender, level of education, income, place of residence (urban, suburban, rural), country of origin, political party, religion, citizenship, and generation in the United States. For example, based on the results from logistic regression, it is estimated that when all controlled values are set at their mean, 93% of Spanish-dominant Latinos agree that it is better for children to live in their parents' home until they get married. When these same calculations are done for English-dominant Latinos, fewer, 71%, are estimated to feel the same way. Furthermore, using the same analysis, it is estimated that 51% of Spanish-dominant Latinos find divorce acceptable, but when these same calculations are done for English-dominant Latinos 70% find divorce acceptable. This pattern is also observed for all of the following dependent variables: the acceptability of sex between two adults of the same sex, having a child without being married, and abortion; and agreeing that, in general, the husband should have the final say in family matters and that relatives are more important than friends (see Table 3).

Table 2: Primary Language Among Latinos, by Generation in the United States

	Generation in the United States		
	1st Generation	2nd Generation	3rd Generation and Higher
English Dominant	4%	46%	78%
Bilingual	24	47	22
Spanish Dominant	72	7	–

Table 3: Results of Logistic Regression Coefficients from Analysis

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	DEPENDENT VARIABLES						
	SOCIAL VALUES: Do you think the following behaviors are acceptable or unacceptable...				GENDER ROLES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY: Is the following statement something you agree or disagree with...		
	Divorce	Sex between two adults of the same sex	Having a child without being married	Abortion	In general, the husband should have the final say in family matters	It is better for children to live in their parents' home until they get married	Relatives are more important than friends
Spanish-Dominant vs. English-Dominant	-.798**	-1.097**	-.793**	-1.547**	.457*	1.657**	1.212**
Bilingual vs. English-Dominant	-.211	-.564**	-.411*	-.781**	0.232	.666**	.536*
Age	-.014**	-.020**	-.024**	-.002	.011**	.029**	-.003
Gender (male vs. female)	-.437**	-.342**	-.324**	-.333*	.391**	-.040	.057
Education	.147*	.230**	.109	.134	-.128*	-.185**	-.033
Household Income	.010	-.009	-.022	.080**	.024	.009	-.006
Suburban vs. Urban	-.249	-.049	-.183	-.105	-.127	-.162	-.390
Rural vs. Urban	-.133	-.783**	-.241	-.814	-.333	.100	-.212
Puerto Rican vs. Mexican	.050	.289	.146	.357	-.109	-.195	.359
Cuban vs. Mexican	.795*	.141	.191	.933**	-.188	-.149	-.558
South American vs. Mexican	.907*	.269	.739**	.842**	-.119	-.250	.376
Central American vs. Mexican	.221	.158	.066	.200	-.402*	-.361	-.591*
Dominican vs. Mexican	.689*	.056	.463**	.782**	-.201	.178	-.184
All Other Countries of Origin vs. Mexican	.027	.172	.210	-.031	-.163	-.167	-.031
Republican vs. Democrat	-.445**	-.270	-.322*	-.314	.320*	.173	.071
Independent vs. Democrat	-.286	-.419*	-.246	-.799**	.295	.235	-.273
Other Party vs. Democrat	-.119	-.118	.093	-.473*	.098	.133	-.246
Don't Know Party Affiliation vs. Democrat	-.493**	-.191	-.250	-.320	.404*	.097	.098
Evangelical vs. Catholic	-.661**	-1.207**	-.874**	-.613**	.555**	.194	-.204
Christian/Non-Evangelical vs. Catholic	-.369	-1.021**	-.922**	-.217	.666**	-.183	-.697
No religion vs. Catholic	.442*	.339	-.087	1.078	-.433*	-.091	.132
All Other Religions vs. Catholic	.276	.326	-.494	.575	.093	-.711	-.648
Citizens vs. Non-Citizens	-.051	.036	.078	-.106	-.132	-.894**	.180
Generation	.034	-.015	-.015	.034	-.076	-.193*	-.120

Note: Table entries present coefficients from logistic regression results. Analysis was conducted controlling for age, gender, education, income, residence (urban, suburban or rural), county of origin, political party, religion, citizenship, and generation in the United States.

*P<.05; **P<.01

Conclusion

As a result of immigration, the number of Spanish speaking Latinos is greater than those who are currently bilingual and English dominant in the adult Latino population. English, however, is quickly making ground among immigrants, and as shown in Table 2, becomes more dominant than Spanish in the second generation. Across a range of attitudes and beliefs we saw a pattern related to language hold, and language is one of the key forces behind the process of assimilation of Latinos in the United States.

The 2000 National Survey of Latinos also showed that some distinctly Latino attitudes are evident across the Spanish dominant, English dominant and bilingual groups. For example, while some attitudes about family vary by primary language, Latinos of all language preferences still seemed to place more emphasis on family in some cases than non-Hispanic whites. For example, when asked whether they agree that elderly parents should live with their adult children, large majorities of Spanish-dominant (76%), bilingual (71%), and English-dominant (69%) Latinos agreed that they should, in comparison to fewer (53%) non-Hispanic white Americans. This suggests perhaps that assimilation is not necessarily an across-the-board phenomenon, and that perhaps some selective assimilation is taking place.

Footnotes

¹ Richard Alba and Victor Nee. (1997) "Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration," *International Migration Review*, 31(4) 826-874.

² Clark, L. & Hofsess, L. (1998) "Acculturation." *In Handbook of Immigrant Health*, edited by Sana Loue. New York: Plenum Press.

³ Cuellar, I., Nyberg, B., Maldonado, R. E. & Roberts, R. E. (1997) "Ethnic Identity and Acculturation in a Young Adult Mexican-origin Population." *Journal of Community Psychology*, 25(6), 535-549.

Methodology

The Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation 2002 National Survey of Latinos was conducted by telephone between April 4 and June 11, 2002 among a nationally representative sample of 4,213 adults, 18 years and older, who were selected at random. Representatives of the Pew Hispanic Center and the Kaiser Family Foundation worked together to develop the survey questionnaire and analyze the results. International Communications Research of Media, PA conducted the fieldwork in either English or Spanish, based on the respondent's preference.

The sample design employed a highly stratified disproportionate RDD sample of the 48 contiguous states, including oversamples for Salvadorans, Dominicans, Colombians, and Cubans. The results are weighted to represent the actual distribution of adults throughout the United States. The Latino sample in particular was weighted to reflect the actual distribution among Latino adults of country of origin, age, sex, and region.

Of those who were interviewed, 2,929 identified themselves as being of Hispanic or Latin origin or descent (based on the question "Are you, yourself of Hispanic or Latin origin or descent, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Central or South American, Caribbean or some other Latin background?"). Throughout this report, they will be referred to interchangeably as either "Latinos" or "Hispanics." In addition, interviews were conducted with 1,008 non-Hispanic whites and 171 non-Hispanic African Americans. The margin of sampling error is +/- 2.41 percentage points for Latinos overall. The sample sizes and margins of error for the different language groups are shown in the table below. The report also highlights results for other subgroups of Latinos. Please see the introduction of the report for definitions, sample sizes, and margins of sampling error of these key groups.

Unweighted Number of Respondents and Margin of Sampling Error for Latino Subgroups

	Unweighted Number of Respondents (n)	Margin of Sampling Error
Total Latinos	2929	+/-2.41 percentage points
Primary Language		
English Dominant	687	4.82
Bilingual	933	4.40
Spanish Dominant	1309	3.59

Note that sampling error may be larger for other subgroups and that sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error in this or any other public opinion poll.

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