

The Origin of the Term “Hispanic”

Grace Flores-Hughes

Grace Flores-Hughes has been in public service for more than thirty years as both a career civil servant and political appointee. She held several high-level posts in the Reagan and Bush I Administrations. In 2004, President George W. Bush appointed Flores-Hughes to a five-year term on the Federal Service Impasses Panel of the Federal Labor Relations Authority. Flores-Hughes chairs the executive advisory board of the Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy and is currently writing her memoirs. She received a master of public administration in 1980 from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

About fifteen years ago, I attended an alumni association board meeting at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. That same weekend, I was invited to participate as an observer at a one-day conference held by Latino students from the various Harvard schools to discuss the presence of Hispanics in the student body and faculty.

The discussion quickly turned to self-identification. A heated conversation regarding the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” ensued. Some of the students preferred to be identified as “Latino,” others as “Hispanic,” while still others simply wanted to be known as “American”—not “Mexican,” “Cuban,” “Puerto Rican,” etc. There was no consensus about the most appropriate term, and the discussion left the impression that the origin of the term “Hispanic” had been misunderstood.

During the early 1970s, the Office of Education (OE), a branch of the former Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), commissioned a study to identify education issues affecting Hispanics and Native Americans. After its completion, OE officials invited the Hispanics and Native Americans who participated in the study as advisors to attend a meeting in Washington, DC, to discuss the study’s results.

As soon as the meeting commenced, several Native American and Hispanic participants denounced the report. Their complaints centered on the terms used to identify each ethnic group. Native Americans objected to being referred to as “Indians,” preferring a term more reflective of their native roots in America and one that would not confuse them with East Asian Indians who had not been independently described in the study. Hispanics were unhappy with the report’s references to “Chicano,” “Mexican American,” “Cuban” and “Borinquen/Puerto Rican” as ethnic categories. They wanted a more universal term that encompassed all Hispanic subgroups, including Central and South Americans.

The advisors refused to comment on the issues raised in the education report and their policy implications until the matter of ethnic identification was reexamined and adjusted. Thus, HEW Secretary Caspar Weinberger ordered the same OE officials who commissioned the study to form an interdepartmental ad hoc

committee to address the department's method of collecting data on racial/ethnic groups.

The Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Definitions was formed in 1975. Its mission was to develop racial/ethnic definitions for Hispanics and Native Americans as well as for Asians, Blacks and Whites that HEW and all federal agencies could use in meeting their data-gathering requirements and in more clearly identifying the underserved people that were the target of their various programs. Thus, the committee was divided into task forces consisting of Asian, White, Black, Hispanic and Native American civil servants. I was the sole Mexican American on the Hispanic task force, working with two agency colleagues of Puerto Rican and Cuban descent.

Like the Hispanic and Native American advisors before us, our Hispanic task force engaged in a highly charged emotional debate over a six-month period. We discussed use of several terms including "Spanish-speaking," "Spanish-surnamed," "Latin American," "Latino" and "Hispanic." But in the end we were deciding between the terms "Latino" and "Hispanic."

From the start, I was a fervent proponent of the term "Hispanic." It was the term that I strongly believed would begin to close the door on the kind of discrimination that I came to know firsthand while growing up in South Texas. At least in my world in Texas, a Mexican American or any other person of Spanish lineage could count on being often addressed in derogatory terms. References to us as "wet-backs," "dirty Mexicans," or "beaners" could be an everyday occurrence. The terms "Latin" or "Mexican American" were often used in public, but each was meant to focus on our differences from Anglos rather than to include us as an American ethnic group. I cannot count how many times I heard, "Why don't those Mexicans go back where they came from?" Therefore, I felt that the relatively new term "Hispanic" was more encompassing of all people of Spanish lineage, would serve to more respectfully identify a U.S. ethnic group and would facilitate a new era of inclusion for all people of Hispanic origin.

I viewed my role on the committee to be to make certain that if Hispanics were not served by HEW, it was not because of discrimination. In my opinion, the only way to ensure that outcome was to collect data on those who applied for services and identify the reasons for denial. Toward that end, identifying each American based on his or her roots was essential.

I was concerned that the committee would recommend the term "Latino," which I believed would convolute the data-gathering process. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines the word "Latin" as "of or relating to ancient Rome, its people or its culture." Since the term "Latino" might be confused with "Latin," it could conceivably be interpreted to include persons whose descendants are from Italy and other southern European nations. We had nothing against including such persons, but the mission of the Ad Hoc Committee was to develop a racial/ethnic definition that would allow for the accurate count of people in the United States whose descendants were from Western Hemisphere nations once colonized by Spain (and had some degree of Spanish or indigenous blood). Moreover, the term "Latino" reminded me of the negative form in which Latin was used when I was growing up Texas.

We did not want any racial/ethnic category to detract from the aim of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was intended to protect those victims historically discriminated against solely because of their skin color and/or ethnic origin. To safeguard against opportunists we again considered that the term “Hispanic” narrowed those who would be identified as having Spanish and/or indigenous roots in those Western Hemisphere countries once colonized by Spain. We also included the definition “Not of Hispanic Origin” in the Black and White categories. That policy guaranteed that all Hispanics were reported in the “Hispanic” (ethnic) category, rather than any other (racial) one, ensuring more accurate counting.

During our deliberations, we vetoed the terms “Spanish-surnamed” and “Spanish-speaking” outright. We found these two terms to be particularly troubling. During the 1970s, after the Civil Rights Act became fully implemented, awareness of minorities became the focus of hiring practices and admissions to colleges and universities. Persons with alleged roots in Spanish Latin America were being hired and touted by both the public and private sectors. However, many reaping the benefits from the protection afforded by the Civil Rights Act were not Hispanics.

Those opportunists included people who carried Spanish surnames and/or claimed to be Spanish-speaking and who were born in Spanish-speaking countries, such as Argentina and Chile, but were of non-Spanish European stock. Consequently, people whose families were the product of Spain’s colonization of the Western Hemisphere who were born and raised in the United States and had suffered discrimination were not necessarily among the first hires or the first admitted into colleges and universities.

In this context, and after six long months of debating and discussing various ethnic terms, our group settled on the term “Hispanic.” Chairman of our Ad Hoc Committee and Assistant Secretary of Education Virginia Trotter sent the final report entitled “Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Definitions of the Federal Interagency Committee on Education” to the secretary of HEW, who approved it without making changes. While working on the racial/ethnic categories, we never suspected that those we selected would end up on national forms. The chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee was a representative from the U.S. Census Bureau, the key data-gathering agency in the federal government. After the secretary’s endorsement, the Census Bureau also adopted all of our recommendations for its data-collection activities.

Initially, many federal agencies stalled, claiming implementation of the new definitions would prove “too costly” to collect data on all the Ad Hoc Committee’s identified groups. In time, the entire federal government based its data-collection activities on the racial/ethnic categories defined by the committee. Today, the foundation of those categories is used nationally by the public and private sectors.

I remain loyal to the term “Hispanic.” I am reassured that the efforts of the Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Definitions were not fruitless every time I read and hear statistics of the U.S. population. Certainly a perfect data collection world may not exist in the eyes of some, but one cannot deny that all the faces that represent our country are now easier to see and, as a result, to count.

Good people can continue to disagree about the term “Hispanic” versus the term “Latino.” But the record is now straight. For governmental purposes, the practice is to use “Hispanic.” There are many who say they do not like the term “Hispanic” because it reminds them of the Spanish empire that annihilated the Aztec civilization in Mexico. Others assert that our Ad Hoc Committee did not include a term that acknowledged our indigenous heritage. There are even some who claim that President Richard Nixon coined the term, but he was too absorbed by world and national politics that he had no idea our task force existed, much less the will to influence the report’s recommendations.

We could have met endlessly and still not have satisfied every person in the United States whose descendants are Spanish and/or indigenous. I did not see any useful purpose in belaboring the atrocities the Spanish empire committed against the Aztecs 500 years ago. After all, there are many, now identified as “Hispanics,” who carry Spanish blood, and for that we should be proud. It is useless to stereotype all Spaniards as bad and evil when that is not the case. Also, our indigenous heritage is a proud one, but because there are a multitude of tribes of origin, selecting a term that reflects all of them was not a practical option. We knew from the start that whatever term on which we decided would not please 100 percent of the targeted population. Still, we had a job to do. We did the best we could to produce a term we believed would fully describe those people in the United States historically discriminated against because of roots south of the border. It was plainly speaking, hardworking Hispanics and Native Americans who courageously challenged a federal study’s name identification, and it was Hispanic public servants who coined the term “Hispanic.”