A particularly important element in our understanding of human behavior is the consideration of cultural context. The norms and mores of a society affect the growth and development of all those reared in it. For ethnic minority groups within that society, additional norms and mores contribute to behavior, values, attitudes, and worldview. Whether reared in a traditional ethnic family or in a family more nearly assimilated into the American culture, the members of ethnic minorities—to differing degrees and in different ways—necessarily experience dual cultural influences.

Social and political conditions in a society profoundly influence the ethnic minority individual. Media stereotypes, for example, may promote discrimination and prejudice toward a minority group, and the internalization of those negative messages affects the self-concept of minority group members. Low levels of educational, economic, and occupational attainment (relative to the majority group) further reduce minority individuals' sense of self-worth, and the lack of access to key resources diminishes their overall well-being. Only through recognition of these and other elements in American society that deter and devalue ethnic minority groups, and realization of the effects such elements exert, can we come to understand the psychology of minority groups in general and of their members individually.

**Hispanic Americans**

Currently the second largest minority group, Hispanic Americans are expected to be the United States' largest minority by the year 2000 (Newton & Arciniega, 1983). They have a high birth rate and high immigration rates, and both trends are predicted to continue. The 1982 current population survey by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1985) developed a national postcensus estimate of 15.4 million Hispanics, including Cubans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and others, the largest group being persons of Mexican descent (8.7 million, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980).

Although the various Hispanic subcultures have much in common (e.g., language, values, customs), each Hispanic group also has its own history and experi-
ence. Thus, we recommend that a course structure include a brief overview of all Hispanic groups and then focus on one specific group. The target group would generally be that group most widely represented in the local geographic region. For purposes of illustration, the course described here focuses on the Mexican American or Chicano population, although the overall course structure could apply to any group.

A Course on Chicano Psychology

The present course is an advanced undergraduate seminar that has been offered on a number of occasions in the Educational Psychology Department of the University of Texas at Austin. Cross-listed in the School of Social Work and in the Center for Mexican-American Studies, it has had special appeal to liberal arts and education majors wanting to learn more about the psychological literature on Chicanos, a significant ethnic group in Texas. Ideally, the student has had introductory courses in general psychology and social psychology and some additional courses in anthropology, sociology, and ethnic or Chicano studies. Classes have typically been limited to 15 students, which greatly enhances class interchange and discussions.

Although offered to undergraduates, the seminar can easily be directed toward graduate students; in fact, the core readings may be more suited to the latter. Four books have served as texts for the course: *Explorations in Chicano Psychology* (Barón, 1981), *Chicanos: Social and Psychological Perspectives* (Hernandez, Haug, & Wagner, 1976), *Chicano Psychology* (Martinez & Mendoza, 1984), and *Blaming the Victim* (Ryan, 1972).

Course requirements include a midterm and final essay exam based on the readings and a term paper on individually selected topics. Topics for the term paper have varied widely in conjunction with the students' interests; the only requirement has been that they relate in some way to the cultural issues addressed in the course and highlight appreciation of ethnic and cultural factors. They have included teenage pregnancy among Hispanics, patterns and practices of alcohol use, language orientation and mental health, ethnic dialects in sign language, ethnic factors determining the actuarial tables used by life insurance companies, and Mexican-American mythology as expressed in various art forms in the Austin–San Antonio area (presented as a slide show). Students present oral summaries of their papers to the class during the final weeks of the semester.

Course content includes the following: history and overview of Hispanic psychology, narrowing to a focus on Chicano psychology; life span development within a Chicano cultural context; Chicano personality and social psychology; issues of intelligence and learning; psychological services for Chicanos; and the future of Chicano psychology.

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1. The terms Chicano and Mexican American are used interchangeably and, for the purposes of this chapter, are defined as Americans of Mexican descent.
History and Overview of Psychology

Hispanics. The first section of the course serves as an introduction to a range of basic subjects, including a historical overview of the experiences of Hispanic Americans, current demographics, the field of Hispanic psychology (including a critical examination of existing research), and stereotyping.

In discussing history and demographics, instructors need to spend time defining Hispanic, which is "a generic label including all people of Spanish origin and descent" (Ruiz & Padilla, 1977, p. 401). Although Hispanics share language, values, and customs, they are not a homogeneous group: The Spaniards' arrival in the New World and their subsequent exploration and colonization resulted in an aggregate of distinct subcultures across different geographic areas (Ruiz, 1981). The earliest subculture to develop was Chicano. Students may not know that by the middle of the 16th century, the original immigrants from Spain, the native Indians from Mexico, and their mestizo or "mixed-blood" progeny had settled in all of what is known as the Southwestern United States. Ruiz (1981) described contemporary Chicano culture as the "end point" of this historical, immensely varied, genetic and cultural interaction. Puerto Rico and Cuba were also colonized by Spain in the 16th century, with Puerto Rican and Cuban subcultures developing in this country mainly in the 20th century. LeVine and Padilla (1980) have provided a succinct historical sketch of Cubans and Puerto Ricans.

Hispanic Americans tend to be urban dwellers—82.5%, compared with 76% of Blacks and 67.8% of the total population. Ruiz (1981) described the subgroup distribution as follows: 87% of the Chicanos reside in the Southwest (California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado), 76% of the Puerto Ricans reside in Connecticut, New Jersey, or New York; and most Cubans reside in Florida. These demographic patterns may continue to change with the infusion of new immigrants and refugees from Latin America.

With regard to Hispanic psychology, the course includes both Old and New World concerns about human behavior from a Hispanic perspective. The primary source for this section is a valuable synopsis of the history of psychology by Padilla (in Martinez & Mendoza, 1984). The origins of Hispanic psychology are discussed, in particular the historical interrelation between psychology and medicine in Spain and the New World. Spain's humane care of the mentally ill has long gone unrecognized, and remarkable figures such as Juan Luis Vives, called the father of modern psychology by at least one scholar, are largely unknown outside of the Spanish-speaking world (LaCroce, 1984). In our analysis of psychology in the New World prior to the Conquest, we point out the advanced system of medical care and knowledge of the medicinal value of plants and herbs that had accumulated over centuries, both of which were subsequently lost. Curanderismo, a form of folk healing still practiced in Mexico, Latin America, and the United States, appears to be one of several therapies for mental illness once used by Aztec healers. We also describe the advances in mental health and psychotherapy in Mexico in the past four centuries, highlighting contributions of key Mexican psychologists.

The first part of the history and overview ends with a critical examination of the research methodology on which early social science literature on Hispanic Americans was based. Various critiques (Casas, 1984, 1985; Hernandez, 1974; Padilla, 1981) have pointed out ways in which stereotyping and misperceptions
have shaped the literature on Hispanics' values, attitudes, and behaviors, and offer recommendations for methodological improvements in future research.

Chicanos. The second part of the overview focuses on the historical experience of Mexican Americans, from those living in the Southwest prior to U.S. acquisition of that land to recent immigrants. It includes the key experiences of Chicanos in American society and the history of Chicano psychology. Ruiz (1981) is a good source of historical information, and Hernandez et al.'s (1976) first nine chapters provide a thorough immersion in key issues related to the social experience of Mexican Americans in the United States. Chapter 4 of Hernandez et al. analyzes the unique evolution of new modes of thought and action by Mexican Americans, demonstrating clearly how Chicanos are different from Anglos in the United States and from Mexicans in Mexico. They point out that cultures are dynamic, not static, so that when groups from various backgrounds come in contact, cultural hybridization often occurs. Thus, for example, Chicano family structure may become less patriarchal than traditional Mexican family structure, yet the underlying values of family loyalty remain and are different from those of the Anglo culture. The first five chapters of Ryan (1972) provide another important perspective.

In reviewing the history of Chicano psychology, we focus on Chicano psychologists and their contributions. Martinez and Mendoza's (1984) text (Chapters 1 through 3 and 13) is a helpful resource for exploring the foundations for a Chicano psychology. Chapter 7 provides a critique of the "damaging-culture" model (that Mexican-American culture itself is the source of problems for this group) and presents an alternative account of Mexican-American culture as a positive example of sociocultural adjustment.

Effect of Culture on Development Over the Life Span

In this section, the focus is on major topics in developmental psychology as they apply to Chicanos. One topic is bilingualism: the process of bilingual language development, the consequences of being familiar with two language systems, and the politicizing of educational interventions for children from non-English-speaking homes. The research in bilingualism is extensive, and resources include Hernandez et al.'s (1976) Chapter 15 and Martinez and Mendoza's (1984) Chapters 17-through 19.

A second topic is the family (Barón, 1981, Chapter 1). Students learn the importance of la familia as the central focus for Chicano life, the high value traditional Hispanics place on affiliation, and their need for warm, mutually supportive relationships; thus, students come to see that the family and community are generally much more highly valued in Chicano culture than in American culture (LeVine & Padilla, 1980). In discussions of marriage and family dynamics, we attempt to correct erroneous assumptions such as the notion that Hispanic culture is homogeneous. Regarding sex roles within the family, we point out that many writings in this area suggest that Hispanic sex roles are rigidly defined (LeVine & Padilla, 1980), resulting in unflattering and unrealistic notions. As Ruiz (1981) explained, the word macho
translates from Spanish as "male" and is used among Hispanics as a flattering term to denote masculinity. It connotes physical strength, sexual attractiveness, virtue, and potency. At a more subtle level of analysis, "real" masculinity among Hispanics involves dignity in personal conduct, respect for others, love for the family, and affection for children. When applied by non-Hispanics to Hispanic males, however, "macho" is often defined in terms of physical aggression, sexual promiscuity, dominance of women, and excessive use of alcohol. In reaction to this abuse, Hispanic women are assumed to be submissive, nurturant, and virtuous thereby maintaining the unity of the Hispanic family despite all this disruption from their fathers, husbands, and sons. (pp. 191–192)

Other topics addressed in this section are children’s social development, including the tendency to show more cooperative responding at younger ages (Hernandez et al., 1976, Chapter 10; Martinez & Mendoza, 1984, Chapter 15); gender role development and differences; social support networks; and the effects of poverty. Although little research has been done on the topic, we examine the life span variations of Chicano men and women compared with Anglo men and women, from adolescence to middle age. Finally, using Chapter 2 in Barón’s (1981) text and Chapter 11 in the Martinez and Mendoza (1984) text, we address the needs and life-styles of the Chicano elderly.

**Personality and Social Psychology**

The third section of the course focuses on specific social–psychological concepts of Chicanos. Although related issues appear throughout the course, it is important to address such salient topics as pluralism, gender issues, acculturation, and oppression from the perspective of social psychology. Pluralism is a recognition and appreciation of ethnic and cultural differences; a pluralistic society values and recognizes the unique contributions diverse groups bring to its cultural milieu. Hernandez et al. (1976; Chapters 11 through 14 and 18), Ryan (1972; last five chapters), and Martinez and Mendoza (1984; Chapters 6, 13, and 16) are useful in providing an understanding of this concept.

Gender issues, with special focus on the double minority status of Mexican-American women, are addressed using Barón’s Chapter 3 and Martinez and Mendoza’s Chapter 14 as primary resources. Specific topics include women’s relative lack of power and status in the educational, occupational, economic, and political arenas; the unique conflicts and stresses of employed Mexican-American women, given the culture’s strong family values; single motherhood; and the high incidence of depression among Chicanas. Melville’s (1980) *Twice a Minority: Mexican-American Women* is a unique compilation of articles presenting a range of perspectives about the Chicana that can serve as an additional resource.

Acculturation is the process of incorporating the beliefs and customs of an alternate culture. We address such issues as the consequences of cultural transition and change, the importance of maintaining one’s ethnic identity, and ways of measuring the degree of acculturation (Barón, Chapter 4; Martinez & Mendoza,
Chapters 5 and 7). Examples of acculturation are discussed in the areas of food, language, dress, and customs.

Our discussion of oppression reviews important theoretical and philosophical viewpoints, with special reference to the major issues of bias and stereotyping, as directed toward Chicanos and other minorities. The animated film, *A Tale of O*, which illustrates some of the experiences of being a minority “O” in a majority “X” group setting, is helpful in making students aware of the dynamics that can occur when someone “different” enters a group. We have also found it effective to intersperse our presentation with group experiences designed to raise consciousness about oppression and second-class citizenship. Often presentations on such topics elicit a wide range of affect, including anger and depression on the part of ethnic group members and anger, guilt, and defensive reactions from nonminority students. We have found it helpful to establish norms of openness to promote self-awareness early in the course. Equally important is helping students become aware that we have all internalized racist, sexist, and classist attitudes, by virtue of growing up in American society. The cross-cultural simulation activity, BAFA-BAFA (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983; Shirts, 1973), is designed to provide an experiential understanding of discriminatory dynamics. Other films which may be helpful on this topic include *El Norte, La Bamba!, Salt of the Earth, Soy Chicano*, and *Zoot Suit*.

Intelligence and Learning: Assessment and Prediction

The section on issues of intelligence and learning begins with a critique of the nature–nurture controversy as it relates to Mexican Americans. Next, we try to help students develop an understanding of issues in educational attainment important for Chicanos, specifically, the measurement of intelligence, academic performance, and achievement. Hernandez et al. (1976) provided unique strategies for assessing and diagnosing intellectual patterns of minority children. As an example, the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessments by Mercer (1977), although controversial, is discussed as an alternative strategy. Chapter 4 in the Martinez and Mendoza (1984) text provided an overview of the issues involved in aptitude testing for Hispanic individuals. Barón (1981; Chapters 5 and 6) dealt with aptitude testing and admissions issues. Duran (1983) provided an overview of the appropriate and inappropriate uses of predictors of college achievement for Hispanics and of research indicating that traditional indices (standardized tests, grade point average) do not predict well for Hispanics. Moderating variables, such as social commitment and involvement, motivation levels, overall language proficiency, concern about families’ well-being, and parental interest in educational goals, are key factors influencing prediction. As the condition of Hispanic education continues to worsen, an understanding of the complexities of educational attainment, preparation for college, and aptitude assessment acquires greater significance.

Psychological Services: Models, Methods, and Issues

The final section of the course considers mental health services provided to Chicanos. Students learn that, in general, ethnic minorities do not fare well in the
mental health system. Special emphasis is given to epidemiological research on psychological disorders, unique stresses on Chicanos, utilization rates of mental health services, and the importance of cultural knowledge and culture-specific techniques for assessment and treatment of Chicanos. Visiting a mental health center especially designed to service a Chicano population, if one exists in the area, can be a very worthwhile experience, with adequate opportunity for follow-up discussion. Goals for such a visit would include the opportunity to observe services that are culturally sensitive, to note community needs, and to meet minority professionals.

The study of unique stresses among Chicanos can provide insights helpful to effective mental health care. Various theories of stress, including those that view psychological distress as stemming from social–environmental factors such as poverty and discrimination, are addressed by Barón (1981; Chapters 7 and 10) and Martinez and Mendoza (1981; Chapter 12). Martinez and Mendoza (Chapter 8) summarized the available research on symptomatology and syndromes unique to Chicanos, including high degrees of depression, culturally influenced hallucinations, somatization of stress, high incidence of alcoholism and drug abuse. Amaro and Russo (1987) offered contemporary research and treatment on Hispanic women. Barón (Chapter 8) reviewed studies of Mexican American usage of mental health facilities. Finally, various issues and special models relevant to providing appropriate mental health services are addressed by Barón (Chapter 9), Hernandez et al. (1976; Chapters 19 through 28), and Martinez and Mendoza (Chapters 9 and 10), and LeVine and Padilla (1980) described counseling approaches geared to the culture, language, and socioeconomic position of Hispanic individuals. Again, we emphasize the wide variation among Chicanos such as in level of acculturation and linguistic skill and the difficulty and dangers in generalizing from the few studies in these areas to all Mexican Americans.

**Summary**

After student presentations, the course ends with a discussion of directions for future research and the development of Chicano psychology. The instructor may wish to outline and review major themes and issues that have emerged during the course of the semester.

The seminar is designed to sensitize students to ways in which psychological research has both helped and hindered understanding of Chicanos. Although larger classes are possible, the small class size allows for both a lively intellectual exchange and the sharing of personal experience, which we believe is more conducive to our major goal—a working knowledge and a deepened understanding of Chicanos and Chicano psychology.

**Resources**

*Films*

Additional Readings


References


