2. Ethnic Self-Referent and the Assimilation of Mexican Americans

PHILIP E. LAMPE
San Antonio, U.S.A.

The hallmark of the sociologist has been a concern with social groups and the social consequences of membership in them. Since the early part of the twentieth century a growing concern has been shown in understanding the forces involved in the coming together of various racial or ethnic groups through the process of assimilation. In the United States this concern with assimilation has been far from merely an abstract or academic interest. This country was built on the foundation of a culturally and racially heterogeneous population and has been proud of declaring itself a democratic "melting pot." Yet after 200 years as an independent nation the United States remains composed of numerous socially, economically and politically unequal ethnic minority groups. One of the largest of these is the Mexican Americans.

Many factors have been identified as contributing to, or impeding, the assimilation process (see Lampe, 1975a). In addition, several indicators of the degree of assimilation of individuals or groups have been identified, such as frequency of use of Spanish language (Nall, 1962; Penalosa and McDonagh, 1966) and rate of intermarriage (Mittlebach and Moore, 1968). Single factor indicators may be of great utility to social scientists who, for whatever reason, are unable to use a more accurate but time-consuming measure.

Another such indicator, more readily available, may be the personally selected ethnic-identifying term of the individual members of the group. It is felt that this is related to degree of assimilation. This is because self-image is an important aspect of the assimilation process (Gordon, 1964), and an individual's self-image is reflected in his/her selection of an identifying term. As Anselm Strauss stated, "The names that are adopted voluntarily reveal even more tellingly the indissoluble tie between name and self-image (1959: 12)." He went on to explain that a person wants to have the kind of name he thinks represents him as a person, and if his self-image changes so too will his self-referent. But as Schellenberg has indicated, "we do not form a sense of personal identity in a social vacuum....Relationships with other people present the ground upon which is built a sense of identity, the soil in which a sense of self is nurtured (1970: 78)."

This means an individual's reference groups, those to which he/she belongs or aspires to belong, will influence his/her self-image and, therefore, the ethnic self-referent selected. Racial and ethnic identification begins in the preschool and early elementary school years. During this period children become increasingly aware of racial and ethnic differences as well as learn the corresponding labels and affective responses associated with various ethnic groups including their own (Allport, 1954; Proshansky, 1966). Actual membership in an ethnic minority appears to speed up this awareness (Hartley, Rosenbaum and Schwartz, 1948; Radke, Trager and Davis, 1949).

There is a relatively large body of research which deals with self-identity, and while racial or ethnic self-identification is undoubtedly closely related to selection of an ethnic self-referent, they are not the same. Unfortunately, there is not an equally large body of research in the latter area.
Although there is a dearth of research on the meanings of ethnic self-referents, especially among Mexican Americans, there is not a complete void. Several studies have noted the existence of social and psychological differences among members of this highly diversified minority group which appear to be related to preferred self-referent (Lampe, 1975b; Lampe, 1976; Gutierrez and Hirsch, 1973).

There is considerable evidence which indicates that personal or self-pride is essentially the expression of group pride (Grossack, 1956; Noel, 1964; Lewin, 1948). An equally large body of evidence supports the belief that Chicanos, in particular, exhibit pride in their group membership and ethnic heritage (El Plan, 1970; Rendon, 1973; Ortega, 1971).

This being the case, it would be expected that those who call themselves Chicanos would be unlikely to go outside their group for most of their primary relationships or to give up their ethnic identity and subculture. Furthermore, it could be expected that someone self-identifying as an American with no distinguishing qualifiers would be more assimilated than someone who selected another term or a qualified identity as an American. Based upon this reasoning, the following hypotheses were formulated.

1. Those individuals who select the ethnic self-referent, “American” are more assimilated than those selecting the terms “Latin American,” “Mexican American,” “Spanish American” or “Chicano.”

2. Those individuals who select the ethnic self-referents “Latin American,” “Mexican American” or “Spanish American” are more assimilated than those selecting the term “Chicano.”

3. Those individuals who select the ethnic self-referent “Chicano” are least assimilated.

Methodology

In order to test these hypotheses, questionnaires were anonymously answered by eighth-grade students in eighteen schools in San Antonio, Texas. The schools were equally divided between public and parochial schools. An effort was made to pair schools from the two systems on the basis of area of the city served and overall socioeconomic status of the student bodies. Within each school the questionnaires were administered to an entire class, but only those respondents who were subsequently classified as Mexican Americans were utilized in the final sample. Ethnic designations were made on the basis of parentage. Respondents were classified as Mexican American if they indicated their mother and/or father were of Mexican or Mexican American descent. However, in those cases where one parent was Black or Oriental the respondent was eliminated because in the United States such a person generally is considered as Black or Oriental.

Questionnaires were composed of a personal data sheet and a seven-part measure of assimilation. The personal data sheet requested the following information: ethnic background of parents; occupations of parents (used to determine SES based on the criteria of Hollingshead (Kohn, 1969); sex; school system; school attended; religion; a series of five items to establish degree of religiosity; and three items used to establish level of socioeconomic aspiration.

Items used on the questionnaire were selected only after an extensive two-