

Negotiating Latina/o Ethnicity in NYC: Social Interactions and Ethnic Self-Presentation

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Today, an increasing number of people regularly switch from ethnicity to ethnicity in normal discourse, in an attempt to maximize their economic and political interests. This paper focuses specifically on ethnic flexibility among Latina/os in New York City. Drawing on ethnographic, linguistic, and social network data we explore how Latina/os in NYC negotiate between *multiple* ethnic identities in everyday contexts. Through language and dialect switches, accents, and even calculated silence the Latinos in our research negotiated NYC's multi-level system of categorization. We hope to show that no one-to-one relationship exists between subjective feelings of ethnic belongingness and the use of ethnic markers. Ethnic markers, particularly language-related ones, are manipulated in a number of creative ways by members and non-members alike, pushing the limits of what constitutes ethnic group membership and challenging notions of ethnic authenticity.

Keywords: situational ethnicity, multiple ethnic identities, code-switching, Latina/os, New York City

Introduction

As America's ethnic diversity continues to grow, issues like resource distribution, ethnic conflict, or social and political movements cannot be understood in terms of neatly packaged identities in competition. Today, an increasing number of people regularly switch from ethnicity² to ethnicity in normal discourse, in an attempt to maximise their economic and political interests. The literature on ethnicity provides many examples of people contextually invoking (or hiding) their ethnicity to strengthen or weaken their ties to kin, community and the state and thereby to

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² Throughout this paper we use ethnicity as a construct that subsumes race, and do not make too fine a point about distinguishing between the two, except when referring to the US Census or research that uses the *race* construct. Following, Brubaker (2004) we treat race, ethnicity, and nationality as the same domain – subject to the same cognitive categorization processes of difference-making. We concur with Loveman (1999) that the distinctions between race and ethnicity are arbitrary and reflects differences 'based on a particular reading of US history, and not on any analytical foundation'. (p. 895) What is more, research has shown that Latinos tend to view their Latino/Hispanic identity as equivalent to race (Hirschman, Alba, and Farley 2000; OMB 2000), a trend that creates problems for interpreting racial and ethnic data used in the US Census - which distinguishes between the two constructs.

improve access to economic and political resources (Barth, 1969; Horowitz, 1975, 1985; Kelly & Nagel, 2002; Patterson, 1975). Yet, while ethnic identification has long been understood by anthropologists to be a contextual phenomenon, less is known about how the process of ethnic identification switching works in daily life. Little research has been done in recent years to further develop a theory of ethnic flexibility, a pattern of social interaction that emerges in highly ethnically diverse environments.

Through two case studies of ethnically flexible Latino men, we will demonstrate how situational ethnicity provides a fruitful theoretical departure for students of ethnicity. In kind, this paper focuses specifically on ethnic flexibility among Latinos in New York City. As America's fastest growing ethnic group, and certainly among the most internal diverse pan-ethnicities, Latinos are an ideal group for examining the salience and negotiation of multiple ethnic identifications. Drawing on ethnographic, linguistic and social network data we explore how Latinos in NYC negotiate between multiple ethnic identities in everyday contexts. These negotiations point to how Latinos cross back and forth between various Latino subgroup boundaries and reflect the prevailing patterns of everyday relationships and interactions among Latinos in New York.

Latina/os in New York City

In New York State, the majority of Latinos reside in the five boroughs that make up New York City (NYC). The Census shows that of the over three million Latinos state-wide, 2,281,173 reside in NYC alone; this is almost 1/3 of the total NYC population. The size of the Latino population in NYC has experienced a steady increase from 2000 to 2006. The Census data for these years show that the Latino population in NYC grew by 5.8 per cent. The most recent 2006 Census data shows that Puerto Ricans remain the largest Latino group in NYC (771, 984), making up 33.8 per cent of the total Latino population. They are followed by Dominicans (609,885), who are 25.7 per cent of total Latino population (See Table One). While Mexicans are the fastest growing Latino group (with an increase of 43.6 per cent from 2000-2006), they are the third largest Latino group making up 10.3 per cent of the total Latino population (263,811). The sharp rise in the Mexican population is attributed to the continued migration to NYC. Ecuadorians are the fourth largest Latino group with 186,469, followed by Colombians whose population decreased between 2005 and 2006 and totalled 107,712 in 2006. ³

³ Data derived from, Latino Data Project: New York City's Latino Population in 2006. Laird W. Bergard, November 2007. Data was obtained from the US Census Bureau 2000 Census and American Community Surveys 2005-2006 data. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, found at <http://usa.ipums.org/usa>. American Community Surveys were obtained from samples; Census Bureau estimates a margin of error for Puerto Ricans was +/- 6 per cent, for Dominicans +/- 8 per cent and; +/- 15 per cent for Mexicans, Ecuadorians, and Columbians.

Table One

Top Five Largest Latino Groups in New York City, 2006

Nationality	2000	2005	2006	Per cent of Total Hispanic Population in 2005	Per cent of Total Hispanic Population in 2006	Per cent Change 2000-2006	Yearly Rate of Increase 2000-2006
Puerto Rican	799,558	790,609	771,984	35.0	33.8	-3.4	-0.6
Dominican	532,647	570,641	609,885	25.7	26.7	14.5	2.3
Mexican	183,792	227,842	263,811	10.3	11.6	43.5	6.2
Ecuadorian	146,200	172,791	186,469	7.8	8.2	27.5	4.1
Columbian	105,471	112,992	107,712	5.1	4.7	2.1	0.4
Total Latinos	2,156,930	2,222,641	2,281,173	100	100	5.8	.9

Latinos are bonded by a common language, similar geo-political histories, intertwined political destinies and shared neighbourhood where their lives overlap on a daily basis (Ricourt & Danta, 2003; Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2002). For example, antecedents to migration are strikingly similar across certain groups. Mexican, Puerto Rican and Dominican migrations were triggered by a shift from diversified, subsistence economies to capitalist agriculture and industrialisation. Yet the similarities between Latino groups arguably end there. Latinos run the gamut: from Mexicans who can trace ancestors here back a century or more, to Ecuadorians who just arrived; from the educated Cuban businesswoman, to the Puerto Rican factory worker; from black Dominicans to white Colombians. A number of scholars have reflected on these contrasts (see for example Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2002; Portes & Truelove, 1987; Padilla, 1984; Stepick & Stepick, 2002; Torres-Saillant, 2002). Scholars argue that the differences are too significant for Latinos to be grouped together for analysis or policy treatment (Portes & Truelove, 1987). Indeed the contrasts are significant, and as Portes and Böröcz (1989) show, immigrants to the US experience divergent modes of incorporation. In fact, this makes Latinos an ideal group for examining the salience and negotiation of multiple ethnic identities. As we will argue, linguistic flexibility is central to this process.

Linguistic Flexibility & Social Interaction

Linguistic flexibility (multi-linguists, multi-dialects, multi-sociolectism) coupled with an ethnically ambiguous physical appearance, offers speakers exceptional control over ethnic self-presentation. Given these factors, Latinos are in an especially advantageous position to manipulate ethnic and linguistic categories, expectations and assumptions. The US Latino pan-ethnicity includes at least nineteen dialects (Lipski, 2004), socio-historical roots in nearly every continent, and distinct immigration histories within the US. Besides a medium for cultural reproduction and individual actualisation, language serves as a tool for categorisation of self and others (Fishman, 1977; Giles & Johnson, 1981; Giles & Coupland, 1991). In multi-ethnic settings language may be the least ambiguous criteria used to categorise people into ethnic groups. Even among groups that speak the same language, lexical, grammatical and phonological variations are important ways to distinguish between various national or regional populations. Researchers assert that among all the criteria for membership in an ethnic group, language is potentially the strongest cue to a person's ethnic identity (Fishman, 1977; Giles & Johnson, 1981). This is because a person's accent, speech style and language choice is acquired, in contrast to inherited characteristics such as physical appearance. Language markers are used by people as a cue to the strength of a person's ethnic identification.

Code-switching (CS), or the use of two or more linguistic varieties was a common way of invoking multiple ethnic identifications for participants in this study. A switch can occur between turns, within turns and intra-sententially (Bailey, 2000). Blom and Gumperz (1972) see switching as falling into at least one of three overlapping categories: situational, metaphorical, and contextualisation switching. In situational switching, context determines which code will be used. For example, people look for a number of group membership indicators, including gender, age and status and social setting to assess the appropriateness of a code choice or code-switching itself. Becker (1997) suggests that speakers don't CS unless they know the linguistic background and social identities of interlocutors. This (and other types of switching) suggests conscious action, but it should be noted that some switches occur below the level of awareness. With metaphorical switching, the social setting remains outwardly unchanged, but the code-choice may signal a change in topic or social role. Finally, unmarked, contextualisation switches centre the act of switching itself as a conversational resource (Gumperz, 2001; Bailey, 2000; Li, 1994; Auer, 1984). Thus, 'individual switches serve instead as contextualisation, or framing, cues to mark off quotations, changes in topic, etc. from surrounding speech (Bailey, 2000: 242)'.

In terms of the identification or identity functions of CS, bilinguals can change the directionality of CS (from English to Spanish or from Spanish to English; regional dialect to a majority language). It is also common for bilinguals or multi-linguists to scatter words or phrases in a second language throughout a mostly monolingual conversation. For example, Spanish-speaking bilinguals may briefly switch to words and phrases like *bueno* (good), *lo que sea* (whatever), *y todo* (and everything), *pos* (well), *ándale pues* (¿?) (Ok then or let's go), to mark their Latino ethnicity (Jacobson, 1982; Toribio, 2002). A special case of CS is language or code-

crossing. This is characterised as the unexpected (and often viewed as ‘illegitimate’ or ‘inauthentic’) switch to an out-group code (Rampton, 2000, 1995).

The identity functions of CS are among the most widely explored areas in bilingual studies (Williams, 2006; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Greer, 2005; Gafaranga, 2001; Bailey, 2000; Cutler, 1999; Lo, 1999; Sebba & Wooton, 1998; Zentella, 1997; Rampton, 1995). The prevailing conceptual orientation is that identity is constructed or co-constructed discursively, rather than a pre-existing given of category or group membership (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Within this framework, code-choice is but one of several linguistic strategies that encode a relationship between a social identity and aspects of the social context. Our own approach is kindred to the constructivist conviction that a person can identify independently of category membership. However, we prefer to think of CS in the sense put forth by Gumperz (2001; see also Levinson, 2002): as cues that establish the context in which messages are interpreted and understood.

Dialect switching was one form of CS commonly found among the participants in this study. Who switched to which dialect and why, suggested patterns of dialect classification and use consistent with that found by Zentella (1990). Among Latinos in New York, class, race and education affects the extent to which Spanish speaking groups assimilate each other’s dialects (*ibid.*). Zentella investigated dialectical contact at the lexical level in various New York City Spanish varieties. Her findings point to a number of social barriers to the adoption of lexical items from both Puerto Rican and Dominican Spanish. Zentella particularly found widespread rejection of the Dominican lexicon by Colombians, Cubans and Puerto Ricans. In contrast, the Dominicans were the only group that adopted from all other groups without exception. We would add that another dialect not adopted by the New Yorkers in this study is Mexican Spanish. With the exception of expression like *ándale pues* or *orale* to caricature or mock Mexicans, non-Mexican participants in this study did not switch or accommodate to this variety of Spanish.

The Study

We present here insights from a study in which the first author accompanied eleven NYC Latina/os, for one week each, in their daily routines and observed and recorded their verbal interactions. In addition to completing life history interviews and social network assessment questionnaires, these eleven participants were given digital recorders and they each independently collected another week’s worth of their verbal interactions with family members, friends, co-workers, classmates, store clerks, and other community members. In all, at least 50 hours of naturally occurring conversations and interviews were collected by each participant.

From these continuous monitoring observations, two participants, Roberto and Abel emerged as the most ethnically flexible. Both Roberto and Abel regularly switched ethnic identifications in their daily interactions, and did so by switching languages, dialects, accents, or ethnic categories. We now turn to the cases of these two men who illustrate how sociolinguistic data as well as data about their social environment reveal subtleties in ethnic identification.

Roberto

Roberto is a bilingual, Venezuelan-born Queens, NY resident who had an excellent command of multiple-dialects. In addition to the ethnic category he was born into, Venezuelan, Roberto's life experiences led him to also identify with or as Puerto Rican and American, in addition to the Latino category. Table Two presents the ethnic identifications reported or invoked by Roberto during interviews and interactions. Next to each category we include a description, along with a verbatim example of how the category was invoked in Roberto's speech.

Table Two
Roberto's Ethnic Identifications

Category	Description	Example
Venezuelan / South American	Automatic response used when must identify using an ethnic label. Otherwise, linguistically draws on other categories. This category becomes salient when discussing immigration issues or when communicating with other Venezuelans.	I'm from Venezuela. <i>Yo soy Venezolano.</i> ('I'm Venezuelan')
Spanish	Makes claim to family origins in Spain. Can be used to support claims to whiteness or being white, and conversely, can be downplayed to support claims to blackness or being black.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well, if they ask me where my origins are from because my origins are from Spain. • My father is from Spain. My father is that type of Spaniard that, he brought me up with values!

<p>Puerto Rican/ Nuyorican</p>	<p>Developed attachments to elements of Puerto Rican culture like the food, music, dancing and language. This identification strongly tied to place, either the island or Puerto Rican communities in New York City.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know a lot about Puerto Rico. I know more about Puerto Rico than about my own country. You can drive me right now to Puerto Rico and I go boom! Give me the rental, I know where I'm going, I know what to do. Do that shit in Venezuela? <i>No joda, me encuentran en una montaña, allá al la'ito 'e Colombia. Perdi'o!</i> ('No kidding, they'll find me in a mountain, over there next to Colombia. Lost!') • I don't speak New York Spanish, like I said, I can roll into whatever. Usually we talk more Puerto Rican than anything.
<p>Urban Latino</p>	<p>Often associated with African American culture, including music, language (AAVE), food, dress and kinesics. Urban Latinos are strongly linked in people's minds with socio-demographic trends among poor urban Latino and African American populations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You know what time it is with this nigger right here, son! • I like my rap, I like my Hip Hop.

White New Yorker	Emphasises upbringing in New York City as a source of attitudinal and behavioural uniqueness: grittiness, street-smarts, universality and directness. Embraces the city's long history as a melting pot, while capitalising on white privilege. Associates culturally and/or linguistically with white groups having a long history in New York (e.g. Italian, Irish). Speaks the New York dialect of English (Labov 1982).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We grew up in Queens Village but I basically grew up in New York City because I would make my way all over New York. • And the whites were just, they were more like me in the sense of, you know, the whole crew likes to play handball, you know, we all like to ride our bikes, everybody worked on their bikes. • Like I could be a white boy. I['d] listen to classic rock and wear them jackets and the jeans, and you know 'hi dude, how are you doing dude' and you know.
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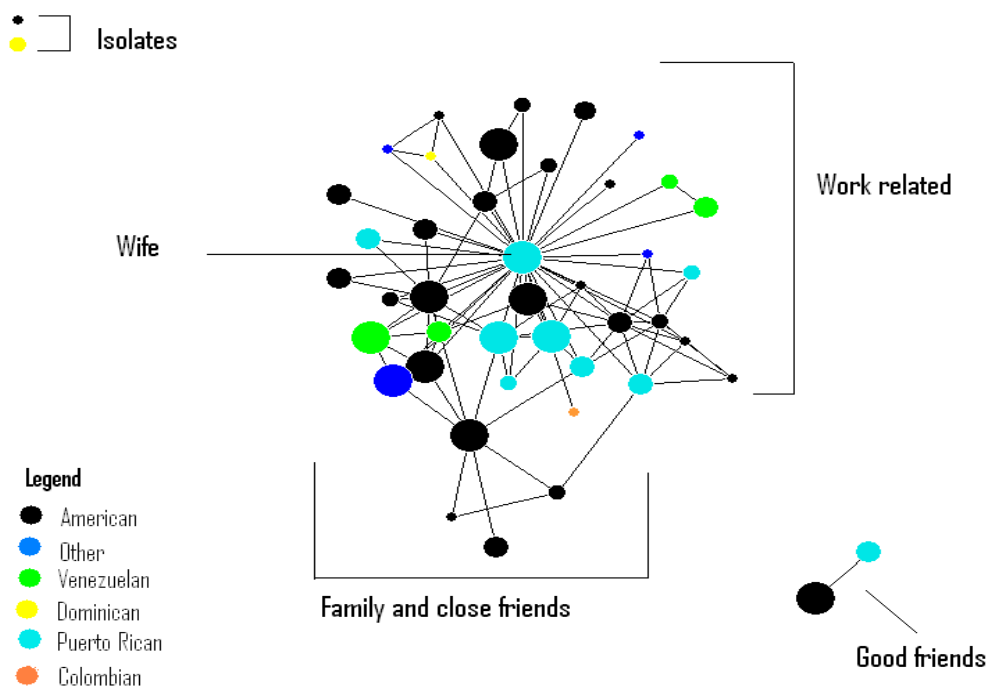
Roberto's Social Environment

Figure One suggests that Roberto's immediate social environment, as depicted by a social network graph, correlated with the diverse ethnic repertoire outlined above. Growing up in middle-class Queens Village, Roberto lived among a mix of people and languages. His close childhood friends were European-, Colombian- and Puerto Rican-American. Queens Village is close to Jamaica, an established middle-class West Indian neighbourhood and Roberto reports being one of the few white kids in a predominantly black school. Roberto affirms that he was more drawn to the 'Spanish crowd' and 'the whites'; the Spanish guys because they 'got all the pretty girls' and the white guys because he felt he had more in common with them.

In Figure One, refer to the legend for information about each network member's (alter) ethnic background. The size of the nodes represents his closeness to each of the alters: the bigger the nodes, the closer he felt to them. Roberto's network consists of four components. The largest component appears in the middle and includes work-related, family and friendship ties. Next, at the bottom right of the graph, two nodes are connected to each other and no one else. These are women who are related to each other, and have been supportive to Roberto in his life. Finally, each of the two isolates are separate components. These are distant acquaintances (Roberto was unsure about the last name of one of them), who have no relation to each other or anyone else in the network.

Figure One

Roberto's Social Network



Roberto's personal network is moderately dense. Some areas are more interconnected than others. His family and close friends more so than his work-related contacts. The people he has known in his money-making ventures have not all been from one employer or organisation. We can see that most are spread out, several of which are only linked to Annie (Roberto's main business partner). The largest component, represents 41 of the 45 alters Roberto listed. His wife, Annie, can be seen in the middle, the most central person in his network. Except for the isolates and dyad on the bottom right, Annie has contacts with all areas of Roberto's network. The ethnic diversity of his upbringing and formative years is also portrayed in the graph. Roberto described half of his network as American (black nodes). Three of these he further described as Nuyorican or of Puerto Rican descent. His American alters are mostly white, but four were described as African American or *mixed-race*. Of the nodes that appear in blue ('other'), two were categorised as Russian, one as Jamaican, and another as Haitian (his step-mother who appears as the largest of the blue nodes). A number of his alters are Puerto Rican, more so than those who are Venezuelan. Finally, Roberto had weak ties to (based, in this case on closeness) to a Dominican man and a Colombian man. Thus, we can see that the two major network influences, both in terms of numbers and degree of closeness, were American and Puerto Rican. As we discuss next, these influences are evident in his code choice and discourse.

Roberto's Sociolinguistic Behaviour

Roberto's ethnic and linguistic repertoires are quite broad. However, during

interviews he confirmed that besides English, the code he used most frequently was Puerto Rican Spanish (PRS). The ability to align himself with Puerto Rican identification through the authentic use of PRS was advantageous in cases when he wished to distance himself from the ‘whiteness’ of his phenotype and Venezuelan heritage. Roberto is white and blue-eyed. Except for when he speaks in Spanish, he is indistinguishable from other white Americans. One day Roberto travelled to a black neighbourhood to purchase drugs. Apparently this neighbourhood was known to be frequented by undercover police officers. Here Roberto describes how he appropriated Puerto Rican (*boricua*) identity to avoid being mistaken for an undercover police officer:

‘You know one thing when you are in a black neighborhood, right? You don’t want these motherfucking *molletos*⁴ to think you’re white-white! Fuck that! *Me hago Boricua* (‘I make myself Puerto Rican)...instantly! Like I remember, the last time I got high I was on my way to cop [buy] and I knew these niggas was not even gonna look at me. You know what I did? I turned the phone to vibrate so it won’t ring and I had the thing *y me pongo hablar* (‘and I start to talk’), *‘Mira que si este, que si lo otro, cla, cla, cla...’* (‘Look, this and that, blah, blah, blah’). *Hablando una conversación con el aire* (‘Having a conversation with the air’)! *Pero en español* (‘But in Spanish’). *En boricua* (‘In Puerto Rican’). *Y los tipos ahí* (‘And the dudes there’): *‘Bueno* (‘Well’), you’re not white!’

In New York City close associations are often made between blacks and Puerto Ricans. Part of this has to do with the historical neighbourhood coexistence of both groups, as well as the African heritage of many Puerto Rican. This link made it possible for Roberto to minimise the impact of his appearance and achieve some level of acceptance. As this example illustrates some Latino immigrants have used American racial categories and associations to their advantage, thus affecting patterns of ethnic identity invocation. Immigrants who can pass as white (or would otherwise be classified as white) find that emphasising a white racial identity allows them greater social and economic mobility (e.g. Cubans and Colombians). In contrast, given that the American racial binary stigmatises blacks, dark-skinned Latinos are at a disadvantage. Therefore, dark-skinned Dominicans and Puerto Ricans may choose to lessen the impact of black skin by emphasising their Latino background (Patterson, 1975).

Roberto’s comfort with Puerto Rican dialect and culture also benefited his interactions with Puerto Ricans. In one conversation with a Puerto Rican store manager with access to promising business contacts, Roberto was initially uncertain

4 A derogatory word for a dark-skinned person.

about the ethnicity of his interlocutor. Not wanting to preclude common identifications that would connect him to his peer, Roberto used his multi-dialects and knowledge of multiple frames of ethnic reference, but especially Puerto Rican ones, to keep interactional possibilities open. In other words, he invoked multiple ethnic categories in his conversation according to what he believed were the moment-by-moment interactional needs. However, in his conversations with Venezuelans he used an exaggerated form of Venezuelan Spanish (VS)⁵, one that seemed to overcompensate for his tenuous connections to Venezuela and Venezuelan identification. Thus, Roberto is quite flexible in his use of ethnicity for achieving a number of interactive and material goals. He especially aligned himself to Puerto Rican categorisation. As seen in his network, Roberto had little contact with Venezuelans and Venezuelan culture. Puerto Rican influences were more present in his life. Major sources of Puerto Rican cultural knowledge came from his current wife and past wife who both identify as Puerto Rican. Additionally, influential neighbourhood relationships during his adolescence were with Puerto Ricans. Finally, Roberto confirmed that he was much more familiar with the island of Puerto Rico than with his birth country.

These experiences have played important roles in shaping Roberto's ethnic self-understandings. Roberto occupies a gray zone, vacillating between the fact of his kin and birth ties to Venezuela and his experiential and interactional ties to Puerto Rican identification. His discourse suggests this. If he has no choice but to identify himself by a label, he will choose Venezuelan. But if he has room to manage his ethnic self-presentation he draws readily upon his knowledge of Puerto Rican culture and behaviour and Puerto Rican linguistic norms.

Roberto's case further suggests that ethnic and national labels can be misleading. Labels in social scientific research draw boundaries around populations assumed to share attributes and outcomes. But Roberto's daily practice reveals just how arbitrary these boundaries can be. US Census conventions would categorise him as a white, Hispanic from South America. Yet his linguistic preferences, social environment and cultural knowledge align him well with New York Puerto Ricans. Scientists have called attention to the inadequacy of using *race* and *ethnicity* as explanatory variables, when what they actually capture is socio-economic variation (Rivara & Finberg 2001; Collins 2001; Schwartz 2001). Promising alternatives or supplements to ethnic categories can be found in social network measures (e.g. distribution of ethnicities among network members) and in questions about language use.

5 By exaggerated we mean that his speech was heavily intonated and distinctly VS lexical items were frequently repeated throughout his speech.

Abel

The other focal participant is Abel, an Ecuadorian-born Queens resident. Like Roberto, Abel is bilingual but dominant in Spanish. Abel's case becomes especially instructive as we consider the relationship between subjective feelings of ethnic group membership and the everyday use of ethnic categories. Linguistically, Abel adopted elements of other Spanish dialects besides his native Ecuadorian, namely Colombian and Rioplatense Spanish, and to some extent, Caribbean Spanish. He used these dialects with Colombians, Uruguayans, Argentineans, and Puerto Ricans, as a way to lessen communicative or cultural distance. Often he used his linguistic flexibility to distance himself from Ecuadorian identification: this was impression management to lessen the impact of his Ecuadorian indio features and to command respect from others. To this effect, he occasionally altered his accent to feign ethnic identification, particularly to make others believe he was Colombian. Table Three shows the ethnic identifications most often adopted by Abel in his routine interactions.

Table Three

Abel's Ethnic and Regional Identifications

Category	Description	Examples
Ecuadorian	<p>Makes claim to origins in Ecuador. Regionalism was an accepted theme among Ecuadorians NYC. Personal anecdotes revealed that Ecuador was divided right in half between los costeños ('the coast people') and los serranos ('the mountain people' or 'indios'). According to the prevalent categorisations in Ecuador, costeños are at once fun-loving, superficial, untrustworthy, open-minded, machistas. Serranos on the other hand are characterised as conservative, hard-working, ignorant, humble and (also) untrustworthy. The alleged differences are so deep that a costeño gets along better with other Latinos than with serranos.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Soy ecuatoriano</i> ('I'm Ecuadorian') • <i>Aquí somos todos ecuatorianos</i> ('Here we are all Ecuadorian')

<p>Guayaquileño / Costeño</p>	<p>Makes claim to origin in the coastal city of Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city. A preferred identification when de-emphasising Ecuadorian category. Pride in being Guayaquileño thrived on the sentiment that to be from Guayaquil was to be street-smart, confident, and ready. To be from Guayaquil was also a way to disassociate from the negative associations made of indios or serranos.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Yo soy de Guayaquil</i> ('I'm from Guayaquil') • <i>100 per cent guayaquileño!</i>
<p>Indio</p>	<p>Identification with a group of people regionally linked to the Sierras of Ecuador or the countryside. Identification as indio is inextricably connected to specific phenotypic characteristics; chiefly, brown skin, short stature, and Asiatic facial features.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Mi mamá es indiecita como ella.</i> ('My mother is a little indian like her') • <i>Venimos de descendencia india.</i> ('We are descended from Indians') • <i>Yo soy cholo</i>⁶. ('I am Indian')
<p>Latino/Hispano</p>	<p>Identification with the broader pan-ethnic collectivity of people having roots in the Spanish-speaking countries of North and South America and the Caribbean.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Siempre yo soy Latino.</i> ('I'm always Latino')

⁶ In Ecuador, this derogatory term for people having indigenous heritage connotes backwardness, low educational attainment, and poor social graces. Abel referred to himself in this way to an acquaintance, as a way of jokingly explaining his difficulty with opening a particularly tricky car door.

Colombian, et al	Makes claim to origin in Colombia and other Latino categories which could not be claimed on the basis of birth origin. Colombian identification associated with favorable traits like whiteness, economic success, and well-mannaredness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • O sea a mi me daba vergüenza. ('In other words, I was ashamed.') 'Where are you from?' 'Ah, from Colombia! From Venezuela! From Brazil!'
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Abel's Social Environment

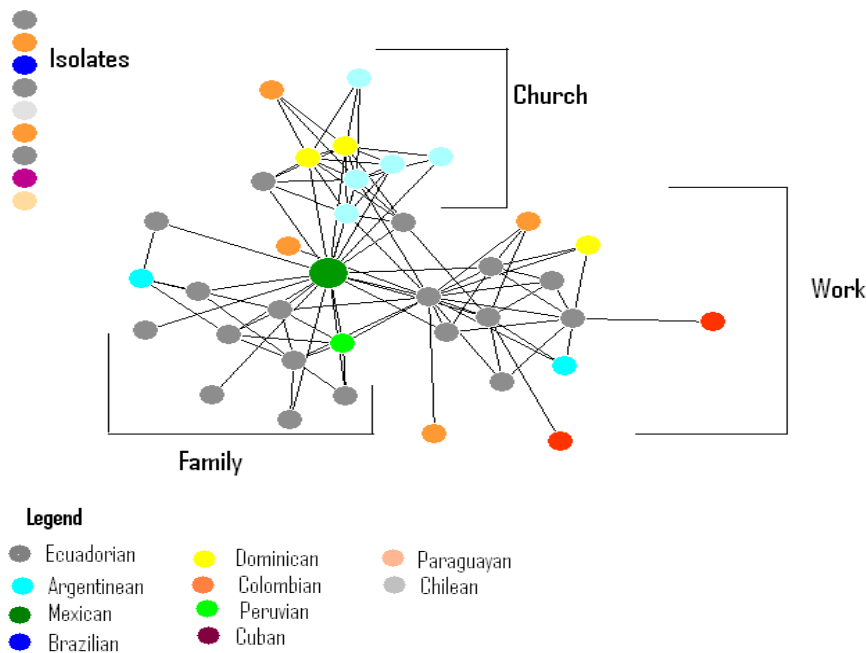
Abel's personal network suggests a Latino-dominant social environment, as reflected by the ethnic identifications he was most apt to use. His network comprises ten components, but nine of these are isolates. The main network depicted in the centre of the graph includes his work contacts, fellow church members (including pastors) and his family. Similar to Roberto, for Abel the most central person is his wife, Monica.

The main network component is moderately dense, although more dense than Roberto's. Notice for example, more clustering than shown in Figure One. Each of the sub-areas of his network is quite interconnected. Abel's network also spans international boundaries. Several of his family members live abroad; in either Ecuador or Spain. You may recall that Roberto's network was varied in the degree of closeness that he felt towards members of his network. Abel's standard for determining closeness was different, however. He used only two categories to describe his relationship with alters: 'very close' or 'close'. Thus, he reported not feeling 'extremely close' to anyone (one of the category options) but 'close' to many; his wife Monica being his closest relationship.

Abel spent most of his waking hours at work. But this work tended to be an independent endeavour. His close friend and colleague Marco was the only other person who regularly accompanied Abel during his day. They often worked together to sell satellite TV subscriptions, and had developed a system of sharing profits. Although his church was an important facet of his life, he spent very little time in church activities.

It is evident from the list of nationalities that Abel interacted with a diverse range of people. Although many of his alters were Ecuadorian, if we take out the family component it becomes clear that his actual interactions in the US were quite mixed. What is also clear is that he had few close contacts that were American. While diverse, Abel's personal network was entirely composed of Latinos. This fact was evident in the week of close monitoring observations of his daily routine. The non-Latinos he encountered on a daily basis were potential clients in his sales forays.

Figure Two
Abel's Personal Network



Abel's Sociolinguistic Behaviour

Abel adopted elements of other Spanish dialects, namely Colombian and Rioplatense Spanish, and to some extent, Caribbean Spanish. He used these dialects with Colombians, Uruguayans, Argentineans, and Puerto Ricans, as a way to lessen any communicative or cultural distance. Social Identity Theory asserts that group membership leads to self-categorisation in ways that favour the in-group at the expense of the out-group. Tajfel and Turner (1986) showed that just categorising themselves as group members led people to display in-group favouritism. Thus, individuals seek to achieve positive self-esteem by positively differentiating their in-group from others. However, in Abel's case, this was not always true. Often, Abel sought positive differentiation from his putative in-group. Basing his actions and interpretations on the negative stereotypes about *serranos* or *indios*, he preferred a regional category (*guayaquileño*). In some cases, he identified with the Colombian category. And he did so in a way that did not over-commit him to Colombian identification: by keeping silent, for example.

Abel differed from Roberto in that he did not have ambiguous physical features that might have allowed him greater control over his ethnic self-presentation. Abel valued this sort of control, at the very least, because it smoothed sales transactions. He quite explicitly admitted the instrumental / material interests he had in ethnic identification. To compensate for this he frequently accommodated or adequated (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), to non-Ecuadorians. Abel used whatever linguistic resources were available to him. But again, unlike Roberto, he lacked the

proficiency in English that might have afforded him more flexibility. Furthermore, his phenotypic features further eliminated certain ethnic options (see Waters, 1990). Because of the negative stereotypes shared in Ecuador (and throughout Latin American) about indios, his options to use this identification as an instrumental tool are considerably limited.

Abel's case highlights key points about ethnic identification. While Abel expressed some symbolic attachment (e.g. music, Ecuador's weather) to his Ecuadorian heritage, these were most salient in his interactions with other Ecuadorians. Although his identification as Ecuadorian likely helped him land the job as a DirectTV salesman, most prominent was a tendency to dissociate from the Ecuadorian category. But to say that he dissociated from the Ecuadorian category should not be taken to mean that he rejected his heritage or possessed some dysfunctional psychological complex. He was firm in his insistence to control how others treated him as best he could. But he also portrayed earnest moments of ethnic pride. Abel's example undergirds a central argument of this research: that ethnic identification (instrumental) often works independently of ethnic self-understanding (non-instrumental).

Discussion

This research documents what may become a prevailing trend in America: using multiple ethnic identifications. The 2000 US Census testifies that multiple race and ethnicity reporting is common among the youngest members of the American population. Increases in reporting multiple race/ ethnic categories reflect a general trend over the past 30 years towards ethnic and racial diversity in the US (Morning, 2003). This trend has been spurred by immigration, inter-ethnic relationships and global communication. Undoubtedly, government structuring of economic and political opportunities along ethnic and racial lines has also encouraged the adoption and use of multiple categories of identification. Responding to the unique problems of counting a diverse population, in 1993 the White House Office of Management and Budget changed federal regulation to allow multiple race / ethnicity reporting in the US Census. Our work substantiates that in people's daily interactions, as in socio-demographic questionnaires, multiple categories are necessary and used to navigate a complex and diverse ethnic landscape. Some, like Abel and Roberto, have quite broad ethnic identification repertoires.

From conversations with hundreds of Latinos in New York, and in-depth work with a select few, among New York Latinos multiple ethnic identifications are common and for the most part, uncontroversial. All of the original eleven participants interviewed or observed, including Roberto and Abel, reported using more than one label to identify themselves to others. Most common is the use of 'Latino' along with a specific national label. These two ethnic options comprise the standard toolkit for ethnic identification among New York Latinos. Both the national and pan-ethnic labels are expressed situationally, but Latino identification functions as a base or a canvas onto which further detail is added as need be. For example, in Roberto's

interaction with the Puerto Rican store manager, shared Latino ethnicity was assumed early on. Uncertain about each others' ethnicity, both adopted a strategy that opened up interactional possibilities. Abel, for his part, identified strongly with other Latinos, having roomed and worked with men from several Latin American countries. Furthermore, his wife, Monica, is Mexican. In general, both Roberto and Abel employed Latino identification when encountering other Latinos whose national origins were unknown. Compared to the nationality-based ethnic categories, inclusion in the Latino label is somewhat lax and characteristically inclusive. Often, ascription of Latino identification by person A onto person B is based on surface assessments of person B's appearance or stereotyped interpretations of behaviour. A person's selection of Latino identification for himself is encouraged by frequent interaction with Latinos from throughout Latin America, as was the case with Abel.

In contexts where Latino identification is in some way obvious or implicit, and specificity required, national labels like 'Venezuelan' and 'Ecuadorian' are used. The use of these labels represents a commitment to one or few categories. Therefore, those wishing ethnic flexibility will tend to avoid using a specific label. Roberto's case illustrates this. Banking on the ambiguity of his physical appearance, he rarely uses Venezuelan identification with non-Venezuelans unless asked directly. Venezuelan identification and cognate behaviours are employed in his interactions with other Venezuelans⁷. Similarly, Abel used *ecuatoriano* with other Ecuadorians, or when interacting with others on a long-term basis. In fleeting encounters, he admitted to using whichever identification was most advantageous, especially *colombiano*.

Further ethnic specificity, as with Abel's *guayaquileño*, serves at least two purposes. One is to package information about socio-economic background, cultural preferences, disposition, and/or status, for presentation to compatriots. This information could serve to positively differentiate oneself from others, or as a basis for further interactions and mutual support. Another function of a specific ethnic or regional label is to dissociate from a more inclusive, negatively evaluated category. It's the 'yes, but' move in ethnic self-presentation: 'Yes, I'm Ecuadorian, but from Guayaquil'. This was evinced by Abel. Wishing to distance himself from negative associations made of Ecuadorians and *indios*, he used *guayaquileño* as a way to draw attention from negative generalisations, taking more control over how others viewed and categorised him.

An important distinction in the matter of context and ethnic identification is whether the context entails a long-term or short-term encounter. Short-term encounters, ones in which actors are unlikely to come in contact again, allow more possibilities for ethnic self-presentation. Indeed, risky ventures like passing, as Abel did when claiming to be Colombian, are most effective in contexts where exposure or challenges are improbable.

Ethnic identification in long-term encounters or relationships tended to conform to the normative influences of relationship histories, habit and group

⁷ In at least one case not analyzed here, Roberto used a more Venezuelan presentation (dialectally) when talking to a South American (non-Venezuelan) man. This led to the only instance recorded in which someone correctly identified him as Venezuelan.

dynamics. Roberto was consistent in his language use and expressions of his ethnicity when with his wife. In fact, ethnicity was not an explicit factor driving their interactions. That being said, their initial relationship was enhanced by Roberto's knowledge of Puerto Rican culture and language, and his attraction to Puerto Rican women. Abel worked daily with a group of Ecuadorian salesmen and women. Thus, he was free to use Ecuadorian dialect and often engaged in banter steeped in references to Ecuadorian politics, people and places. In Abel's case, it was during time spent with other Ecuadorians that he expressed a positive evaluation of and connection to Ecuadorian identification.

Besides the linguistic feats described above, Roberto's and Abel's discursive work also lent support to their switching. As mentioned above, in some cases, Roberto and Abel straightforwardly used ethnic labels to identify themselves to others. Often, switching was achieved through references that signalled their (in-group) knowledge of categories like Puerto Rican, Colombian or African American (c.f. Plotnicov and Silverman, 1978) on ethnic signalling). Making references to in-group knowledge was a subtle means of negotiating multiple ethnicities. It was a way to imply affiliation without necessarily committing to an identification. In this way, ethnically flexible people like Abel and Roberto declare 'I am like _____' rather than 'I am _____'.

Conclusion

This research has shown that one cannot assume a one-to-one relationship between biographical ethnicity and the use of ethnic markers. Often, flexible identification spans multiple levels of inclusiveness (e.g. Latino, *Ecuadorian*, *serrano*, *Quechua*). Intriguingly, these repertoires also cross seemingly distinct boundaries (e.g. American, Ecuadorian, Colombian). Ethnic markers, particularly language-related ones, are manipulated in a number of creative ways by members and non-members alike, pushing the limits of what constitutes ethnic group membership and challenging notions of ethnic authenticity. People tended to switch ethnic identifications by changing to or emphasising a certain language or dialect (including accents), or simply by keeping quiet and letting others' assumptions take the lead. The reasons for switching ranged from the relatively minor (getting free drinks), to the quotidian (connecting with friends or landing better dates), to the vital (avoiding problems with immigration, making a sale, or in a job interview). When unpacked, these subtle and routine acts of flexibility reveal a number of compelling features about ethnicity. Ethnicity cannot be said to be who a person is, but rather a way of seeing (Brubaker, 2004) and doing.

By elaborating ethnographically how people choose among multiple ethnic identities in day-to-day contexts, the research informs how and why people decide what to say when they are confronted by questions about ethnicity in the US Census. Understanding what is captured by these categories is important given the reliance on these categories for prioritising needs and distributing resources. Using Roberto's and

Abel's cases, we have shown that specific nationality-based labels are misleading. Therefore, we argue that social scientist would be better served by relinquishing their reliance on self-reported accounts of ethnic identification. Abel's case illustrates how conflicting these self-reported internal states can be. Having developed negative associations of his indio heritage, he altered his behaviour during interactions to dissociate from this identity. To be sure, there are strong emotional and psycho-social attachments to identifying with a group. Yet in everyday lived experience, people like Abel and Roberto behave according to what is most advantageous for them. The sum of these actions translates to predictable patterns of behaviour that may not correlate with emotional or symbolic attachments.

Finally, this research dovetails with work on selective acculturation and segmented assimilation. Both of these critiques to the conventional, linear assimilation theory have pointed out that paths to assimilation are not the same for all immigrants and can depend on a number of immigrant incorporation factors (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Along these lines, our research has shown that the ability to oscillate between ethnic identifications according to situational requirements can lead people to have more than one fixed ethnic preference group (c.f. Nagata, 1974). The diversity of an immigrants' social environment, as reflected in their social networks, can include both mainstream American and home country influences. An immigrant need not choose between one or the other to secure their socio-economic advancement. New York City's bountiful ethnic landscape provides exceptional opportunities for Latino immigrants to develop alternative assimilation paths.

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