

The Construction of Brazilian Identity in the Context of the United States

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Abstract – This research paper examines how some Brazilians in New York see themselves in racial and ethnic terms, specially regarding the label Latino/Hispanic. Three Brazilians who live in New York City participated in this research. Through the discourse analysis of their interviews, the ways in which their identity is negotiated and constructed in the United States are revealed. The Portuguese language, which is seen as a strong mark of identity for Brazilians, and the lack of a clear definition of Latino and Hispanic, among other concerns, have a strong influence on how Brazilians define themselves ethnically. The lack of a specific ethnic category may have a negative impact on Brazilians since it reinforces their invisibility as a community in the context of the US. This research paper may be considered as a first step towards a better understanding the complexity of the construction of Brazilian identity in the United States.

Key-words: Brazilian identity in the USA, language, Latino/Hispanic.

Introduction

Although Brazilians may be included in the Hispanic/Latino group in the United States, many times they do not feel that they completely fit into this category. Through the discourse analysis of the three interviews that I did with Brazilians, many aspects of their identity construction are revealed. Some aspects may influence the way Brazilians construct their identity, such as the unclear definition of the term Latino, Brazilian history and culture, and the use of the Portuguese language in contrast to the Spanish language. The inclusion of everybody in one category, Hispanic/Latino, not only contributes to the invisibility of Brazilians but also homogeneously *racializes* all Latin Americans (MARCUS, 2003). As we will see in the analysis of the interviews, a homogeneous Hispanic/Latino race is illusory.

Language and identity

Language is perceived by many speakers, including linguists, as a way to express identity. African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which is the dialect used by many African Americans in the USA, for example, is “central to the maintenance of group identity within African American communities” (FORDHAM, 1999, p.275). Dominican Americans use the Spanish language to “define their race” (BAILEY, 2000, p.556) and resist the phenotype-racial classification as blacks. Portuguese is also a mark of identity for Brazilians. They do not think that they can appropriate the term Hispanic because they do not speak Spanish. The use of the term Latino is also problematic. The terms Hispanic and Latino (and often Spanish) have been used interchangeably in the USA by speakers, in the media, in scholarly papers, and technically. In the US Census, the term Hispanic or Latino is used as one category. This semantic confusion has had negative consequences for the Brazilian community: In the Census, “only a fraction of Brazilians were counted or, if they were counted, their nationalities were not specified” (MARGOLIS, 1999, p.105).

Latino versus Hispanic?

Although the terms Latino and Hispanic have been used interchangeably, dictionaries have shown different connotations. According to *the Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus* (1996, p.694), Hispanic is defined as “of or being a person of Latin-American or Spanish or Portuguese descent in the US” as well as “a Spanish-speaking person, esp. one of Latin-American descent, living in the US”. Latino is defined by the same dictionary as “a person of Spanish-speaking or Latin-American descent (1996, p.845). The *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (1999, p.798, 937) gives the same definition for Hispanic and for Latino, “a citizen of the United States who originally came from Latin America, or whose family originally came from Latin America”. The unclear definition of Hispanic and Latino increases Brazilians’ confusion regarding their ethnic category in the context of the USA.

Race in Brazil versus Race in the USA

Another important factor that has increased the difficulties for Brazilians in ethnically identifying themselves in the context of the USA is that, historically, race has been treated differently in Brazil and in the USA. In America, the binary white-black categories are strict. In Brazil, Brazilians identify themselves based on their skin color and physical features. The Brazilian Census currently uses five categories: white, black, brown (*pardo*), Indian, and Yellow (Asian). In 1976, after many complaints from Brazilians about these limited choices, IBGE, the government agency responsible for the Census, decided to research the problem. By asking Brazilians to identify their skin color, they came up with a list of 134 terms. Those terms were based on skin color, "hair texture, the shape of lips and noses, facial and body shape" (LEVINE; CROCITTI, 1999, p.386). The official Census, however, still maintains the five categories mentioned before. In the USA, the way one looks does not matter much, but one's ancestry does. Being black in the USA has been defined by the one-drop rule, so that if one has African ancestry, he is defined as black. In Brazil, the opposite occurs. According to Helen Marrow (2003), a person with any European ancestry is defined as essentially white or at least not black.

Setting and Methods

The fieldwork for this study took place in New York in November 2005. The data collection method used consisted of interviews recorded on cassettes. For this research paper, I interviewed three Brazilians of different backgrounds. The first Brazilian, whom I call Eduardo, is a male student at Hunter College. He is in his late thirties and has been living in New York for about seven years. The second interviewee is another male Brazilian. He is a nineteen-year-old high school student who has been living here between four and five years. I call him Leo. The third Brazilian that participated in this research is a secretary at a language school. He is in his early thirties and has been living here for four years. I call him Marcos. All interviews were recorded in English. I approached them with some questions

related to ethnicity and let the conversation flow naturally.

Data Analysis

Brazilians: the Latino Term and Race

When the participants answered the first question about ethnic self-definition, they revealed that it is not an easy question to answer. Eduardo says at first that he defined himself as a Latino, then he mentions his European ancestors. At the end of his answer, although he feels that he is not really Caucasian, he says that he is white.

Eduardo: Ethnically, I, I define myself as a Latino because I am a Latin American since I am from Brazil. And I, ah, I know that I, although I am darker, ah, yeah, I have darker skin, I mean, I don't know if I could, I never thought of myself as Caucasian, although I know all my ancestors were from Portugal. But, since, I don't know, since we have been in Brazil for, for four generations we all got darker under the tropical sun. So, as how I consider myself. It is harder for me to say Caucasian. But, I, I think I'm white, I consider myself white; but since there is a definition that, a label for Latino, Hispanic, Latin Americans, I'm a Latin American, so, I think I ()' on that restriction.

Eduardo shows in his discourse how complex the ethnicity issue is for a Brazilian. He promptly answered that he is Latino. The term has a geographical reference for him. Soon after, he mentioned his skin color, a reference to how Brazilians describe different *types* or races in Brazil. Brazilians define race differently from Americans: physical features and skin color define the different *types* of Brazilians. There are many different skin colors; for example, Brazilians can be tan, very tan, light tan, dark tan, etc. (LEVINE; CROCITTI, 1999, p.386). In the American system, the way one's parents are categorized will define their children's ethnicity. Such a straight definition, however, has become more and more complex because of the multiracial couples in the USA.

In the interview, Eduardo switches from the Brazilian perspective of race to the American view of race. He starts talking about his European ancestors. Eduardo then says that he is *white*, but he would use the label Latino because he is from Latin America. The way Eduardo constructs his ethnic identity through language is an attempt to adjust his Brazilian way of perceiving race to the American way. The use of American folk taxonomy is seen as arbitrary. Eduardo uses the term Latino as an imposed label. In his discourse, language is used freely “to highlight diverse facets of his identity;” although “language is also used to impose restrictive identities” (BAILEY, 2000, p.557).

The definition of what a Latino is is not so clear and the interviewees may appropriate the term at first and, soon after, use a different term to describe themselves ethnically. Marcos also said at first that he defined himself as Latino, although he stated that Latino would not be the best term to use to describe himself.

Q² :

So, if somebody calls you Latino, you are fine, you think it is right.

Marcos: Ah, it is fine, but, I mean, yes. The best thing would be if you had a term like Brazilians.

Although Latino may be seen as encompassing those people who come from Latin America, the practical use of the term Latino has been related to speakers of Spanish. The Spanish speakers are conscious of being “Latinos because they speak the same language” (PADILLA, 1995, p.658). Although the Spanish language is a strong mark for the Latino ethnic group, “it still cannot be used as the primary defining characteristic of the Latino ethnic group identity and consciousness” (PADILLA, 1995, p.447). This confusing semantic context of Hispanic/Latino is revealed in the participants’ discourse.

Eduardo: In the Census of 2000, I would probably use ‘others.’ But now, I would say Hispanic.

Q: And why, why would you have checked ‘others’ at that time?

Eduardo: Because I couldn’t (), it is just a matter of, ah, feeling more

comfortable now, ah, ah, because of the confusion of the language. Hispanic suggests that you speak Spanish and now, I say Hispanic because I think we have so much in common that it is close to what Brazilians are.

Although Eduardo associates the term Hispanic with Spanish speakers, he ends by saying that he would describe himself as Hispanic. The fact that in the Census 2000 he would check the box *others* and today he would check the box *Hispanic/Latino* leads us to think how Brazilians' ethnicity is negotiated and constructed through time. It is more a *continuous process* than a definitive issue.

In his interview, Leo uses the term *Latin* to describe himself; although, for him, Latin and Latino are interchangeable.

Leo: I define myself as Latin, not Latin Hispanic, just Latin.

Q: Latin, not Latino?

Leo: Latino, yeab.

Q: Latino.

Leo: Yeab, Latino. But not like Latino Hispanic, just Latin.

Leo does not embrace the term Hispanic, although he seems to feel comfortable with the label Latino, which leads us to think that Leo perceives Hispanic and Latino as having different semantic values.

Latino and its meaning in the USA

Through the years, the term Latino has come to have a powerful meaning in the USA. It has given the Latino community more of an ethnic consciousness and identity. It has also gained political meaning. Padilla argues how important it is that the social organization of Latino ethnicity “represents an attempt to alter the existing social and power arrangements between the Spanish-speaking and the larger American society” (PADILLA, 1995, p.662). Eduardo offered another positive point that the term Latino conveys.

Eduardo: And one more thing that I like about the concept of being Latino, you see, that, ah, in the city of New York, it make, ah, (...) I think it more pleasant, ah, I don't know if that is the word, but if you go to other places in the United States, you will see that ninety percent are white people and ten percent are black people. There is nothing in between. So, by having all those Latinos here, ah, the color issue (...), it gets weaker, you know. It is not that strong. It makes people more used to diversity, that what it is, diversity, that what is New York about.

For Eduardo, the fact that Latinos have all types of skin color has contributed to diversity in New York City and ultimately it has made the city a more tolerable place regarding ethnicity.

Used with pride by many, Latino is also seen as a stigmatizing term carrying “the dual stigmas of prejudice and low socio-economic status” (MARGOLIS, 1998, p.104). This view of the term Latino is also perceived in the participants’ discourse. This also may influence whether or not Brazilians would use Latino to describe themselves.

Eduardo: They may, ah, (...) connect Spanish speakers being () immigrants, illiterate, and I, I (), I think () it is most of the time. They, ah, they want to people think that they are more Europeans, you know, that they are more white. They don't want to be connected with, with the Spanish speakers. Pretentionism.⁴ This is how people are.

Leo: Racism. Because, let's say, if you are Hispanic, most people don't like Hispanic people. Because, you know, the situation where they live, stuff like that, but this is the most disadvantage, I think. Racism.

Through their discourse, Eduardo and Leo reveal a reason why Brazilians may reject the label Latino for themselves. Some people in the USA associate Latino with illegal immigrants or workers in lower positions, for example. In other words, Latino may be associated with a community which does not have the same prestige as other groups, such as the Europeans. Although Brazilians may be aware that such ideas are

discriminatory, as expressed by Leo, they may act in a way that reinforces the stigma when they reject the label.

Are Brazilians a different “ethnicity”?

Although there is a sense of solidarity between Brazilians and other Latin Americans, at the same time there is a feeling among Brazilians that their heritage is unique. Brazilians try to distinguish themselves “linguistically and culturally from other Latin American immigrant groups in New York partly because of cultural pride, what they see as the uniqueness of their *race*.” (MARGOLIS, 1998, p.103) This is revealed in the discourse of two participants in the research.

Eduardo: No. Most Brazilians feel like they are different, you know.

Marcos: Brazilian culture is very different from Spanish culture in the sense (...), the music is totally different, we don't share the same taste in music, () (...) yeah, the background, everything is different.

Portuguese Language

Speaking Portuguese is an important issue for Brazilians. It distinguishes them from other groups and it is a way to express their identity. When Brazilians are interacting with others, they assure them that their language is Portuguese, not Spanish.

Leo: Because I don't speak Spanish myself. I feel like I am from South America, so, still. But I am not Spanish. I am from South America but I don't speak Spanish. Portuguese only.

Marcos: Hispanic is related to Spanish language, people who speak Spanish as the first language and Latino includes all Latin America and then, Brazil is there and we speak Portuguese.

Assuring others that Brazilians do not speak Spanish can be seen as a way to resist and challenge the American imposition of the Hispanic/Latino label. Language is used as a tool in their negotiation of race/ethnic identity. Bailey (2000) argues how important the Spanish language is for Dominicans in order to assure their ethnicity. Brazilians also index their identity through language, differentiating themselves from Spanish speakers.

Conclusion

Although the terms Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably, Brazilians do not see them as synonymous since they feel that Hispanic is restricted to those who speak Spanish while Latino encompasses a broader semantic field. Therefore, they reject the term Hispanic. Latino may be the term that they would use, although there is a semantic confusion regarding the use of the terms Hispanic and Latino in the USA. Furthermore, Brazilians have a different way of perceiving race, which influences their construction of identity in the context of the USA. The consequences can be considerable for the Brazilian community: it is difficult to know how many Brazilians live in the USA. When filling out the Census form, many Brazilians may not check the box *Hispanic/Latino*, since they reject the label Hispanic. Margolis (1998) calls the Brazilian community *the invisible minority*. The fact that some Brazilians do not appropriate any specific ethnic category in a strong way makes the Brazilian community more invisible and less powerful in the American perspective. On the other hand, it challenges the arbitrary imposition of labels that immigrants feel they have to adjust themselves to in America.

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¹ Empty parentheses indicate material that could not be heard clearly enough.

² Questions asked by the interviewer.

³ Short pause (around 1 to 4 seconds).

⁴ I believe the interviewee wanted to say *pretentiousness* (the transcriptions of the interviews were kept as faithful as possible to what the interviewees said).

Resumo – Esta pesquisa investiga como alguns brasileiros em Nova York se vêem em termos de raça e etnia, principalmente em relação ao termo Latino/Hispânico. Três brasileiros que moram na cidade de Nova York participaram desta pesquisa. Através da análise do discurso de suas entrevistas, as formas como a sua identidade é negociada e construída nos Estados Unidos são revelados. A língua portuguesa, vista como um marco forte de identidade pelos brasileiros, e a falta de uma definição clara dos termos Latino e Hispânico, entre outras questões, têm uma influência marcante em como os brasileiros se definem etnicamente. A falta de uma categoria étnica específica pode ter um impacto negativo para os brasileiros, pois reforça a sua invisibilidade enquanto comunidade no contexto dos Estados Unidos. Esta pesquisa se propõe a ser um primeiro passo para melhor entender a complexidade da construção da identidade dos brasileiros nos Estados Unidos.

Palavras-chave: identidade brasileira nos Estados Unidos, língua, latino/hispânico.
