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# Latino and anglo political portraits: lessons from intercultural field research

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## Abstract

Authors report sharply contrasting portraits of Anglo and Latino political values and behaviors, urging careful consideration of these differences in plans to include Latinos in civic life in the US. Reported data were collected during two and one half years of ethnographic field research which accompanied a domestic diversity program.<sup>1</sup> Developed in the Washington, DC metro area, the Hispanic Leadership Project set out to prepare leaders from a recently arrived Latino immigrant population — primarily from El Salvador — to advocate and form political alliances on behalf of their people. With joint local government and private foundation support, project designers sought alternatives to the marginalization and misrepresentation which are common experiences of Latino peoples recently settled in the US. Intentionally inclusive, but accidentally ethnocentric, the Hispanic Leadership Program could not realize most of its ambitious goals for social change, but proved to be a very heuristically powerful approach to set certain Anglo and Latino cultural patterns in bold relief, particularly those related to political self-expression and world view. Despite the specific features of its context and participants, the project offers broader lessons to guide future research and practice; noted are guidelines for quantitative follow-up study and for subsequent efforts to foster Latino participation in politics. The Hispanic Leadership Project and companion research are offered as a demonstration of learning to be extracted

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from putative program failures and from use of qualitative methods in intercultural research.  
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## 1. Introduction

This report grows from unexpected events unfolding when one community outside Washington, DC tried to integrate a new Latino population through teaching its informal leaders to be an effective presence in local politics. The Hispanic Leadership Project, an “experiment in knowledge and power sharing”, veered off its intended course. Giving up attempts to conform events to plans, authors persisted for two and one half years in improvisatory program activities and in ethnographic documentation used for the development of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994). As a result, an experimental diversity program, which, by some traditions, would be granted a quiet burial, now yields fine grained, vividly contrasting portraits of Latino and Anglo political world views and provisional theory to guide future research and practice (Weigl, 1999; Weigl & Reyes, 1997, 1998). The progress of this diversity program, the Hispanic Leadership Project, demonstrates how forces of “primary level” culture (Hall, 1976) and the dynamics of acculturation (Ward, 1997) may powerfully override official governmental “good intentions” in managing diversity and how study of the *interaction* between two cultures, paradoxically, may provide the optimal strategy to uncover core *emic* features of each, contributing to cultural psychology (Schweder, 1991) as well as intercultural theory and practice.

The authors believe project findings might inform public activities and policy to include Latinos in civic life in a way that sharply deviates from American assimilationist traditions. Detailed portrayal of Latino and Anglo cultural differences critical to this process of inclusion are presented in this report. The project concentrated on the political interface between the grass roots leadership of a recently immigrated, poor Latino population and middle to upper middle class Anglos of a liberal and activist bent in the most political of all US contexts — the nation’s capitol. The reader might validly point out that the project design was bound to optimize the discovery of cultural contrasts and was the product of very unique, specific circumstances. In the process of sharing findings reported here (Weigl, 1995, 1999; Weigl & Reyes, 1997, 1998) authors have been surprised at the extent to which others active in applied and academic work find in study reports concise statement of cultural realities long known, but often not stated explicitly. Also, we had not anticipated that study findings would duplicate, and sometimes significantly enlarge on reports coming from even well *established* Latino communities in cities such as Boston (Hardy-Fanta, 1992), San Antonio (Flores, 1997), San Jose (Rosaldo & Flores, 1997), and Los Angeles (Regalado, 1997; Rocco, 1997). Nonetheless, critical thinking and caution should precede exporting findings reported below to other contexts as “proven Anglo–Latino differences”. Sensitivity

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