

Some Peculiar Educational Problems of the "Anglicized" Mexican American

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As has been pointed out repeatedly (but which apparently fails to register in the popular view), the Mexican-American population falls into a very broad continuum of enculturation-acculturation patterns. On the one extreme are those who are Americans ("United Statesians") virtually only in the political, or legal, sense of the term. They consider Mexico their homeland and Mexicans their people. English is effectively a foreign language to them, and they tend to live insulated from competing cultural influences, at least to the extent possible, in Mexican or Mexican-American enclaves. Although they may be citizens of the United States, the use of "americanos" or "norteamericanos" does not include them. On the other extreme are those Mexican Americans who are "Mexican" or "Chicano" virtually only in surname or on the basis of other descriptive criteria except for their peculiar marginal status in contemporary society. They are hardly "at home" in Mexico, among Mexicans, and probably even among most Mexican Americans. They are monolingual in English, and they probably feel estranged in almost any environment that is not "American" in terms of their own experiences in much the same way that almost any other native-born American does in similar circumstances. The vast majority of Mexican Americans, of course, fall along points between, combining ingredients of diverse Mexican, Mexican-American, and other American cultural patterns in varying degrees of success. The upshot is an extraordinary and complex cultural diversity among Mexican Americans, a heterogeneous population that complements the plural character of the American people generally.

A phenomenon which cuts across the lives of virtually every Mexican American is that he is commonly experienced in terms of an impersonal, or abstract, entity. It is not without patience and difficulty for almost any Mexican American to be experienced as an individual without perceived "Mexican-American descriptors" unfailingly and

continually intruding in his ordinary social relations with non-Mexican Americans. Mexican Americans are generally expected to appear, think, and behave along preconceived notions of what it is to be "Mexican" or "Mexican American." Exceptions are usually met with surprise, are overlooked, or even penalized. The phenomenon is particularly prevalent among Mexican Americans who are visibly mestizos; racial consciousness is deeply engrained in American life and seriously aggravates the problem of stereotypes in inter-personal relations.

With the current efforts to mobilize *la raza* as a political force, the "anglicized" Mexican American both faces and presents peculiar educational problems which warrant focal attention. A pervasive feature which many professional ethnic politicians and cultural pluralists do not like to acknowledge is the increasing number of Anglo-enculturated Mexican Americans. The Anglo-enculturated Mexican American does not follow the pattern typically treated in Mexican-American literature and popularly assumed among schoolteachers in which a second culture is appropriated, superimposed, or learned in any meaningful sense. He is not an acculturated or a bicultural Mexican American; nor has he "lost" or "rejected" his so-called "Mexican" cultural heritage in that he never had such a heritage to begin with. But stereotypes continue, and that is what he has to reckon with.

The Anglo-enculturated Mexican American is typically a product of an upwardly mobile family, a lower middle-class or middle-class home, and a highly integrated or predominantly Anglo neighborhood. He is typically under or around the age of thirty years. In many cases, he was reared outside the Southwest in communities where there were few Mexican Americans. He has had little contact with anything that might be meaningfully called a "Mexican-American community"—as a result of social or geographic distance. In some instances,

he is the son or daughter of parents who deliberately did not teach him Spanish, based upon a set of beliefs which is widely held among the generation that served in World War II: That the U.S. is and should be a "melting pot" and that Mexican Americans are slowly being assimilated; that "Americanization" (on a mid-western model) is the key to good citizenship and upward social mobility for their children; and that Spanish and "excessive" Mexican or Chicano identification is an educational and social handicap for children in modern society. Those parental beliefs and general school practices which reject pluralism or ignore diversity have resulted in a group of Mexican Americans for whom Mexican or Mexican-American living cultural ties do not exist.

In addition to being experienced on the basis of descriptive criteria, there are other automatic expectations which can diminish his chances for equal social status as an individual. For example, he is generally expected to speak or be able to speak Spanish; frequently, he has never learned, and learning a second language—even if he seriously wanted to—would be as difficult and unlikely for him as it is for most people. He is expected to have originated in a stereotyped "Mexican" or "Mexican-American" home; yet the home and life style of his family may not have been particularly different from those of other Americans of similar locale and socio-economic status. Folk sociologists and sentimental liberal educators expect him to know and care about social developments among Mexicans and Mexican Americans; frequently he does not know or understand any more of those developments than his Anglo peers, and does not necessarily care more. He is expected to be directly familiar with Mexico and her people; yet he may never have traveled in Mexico or gotten farther than a border town. He is expected to have experienced conditions of the *barrio* or of the *campo*; typically he has experienced neither of those conditions beyond vague awareness.

Among many Mexicans and Mexican Americans, he is often treated as a liar ("You really can speak Spanish; you just don't want to!") or considered an *agringado*, as if his enculturation had been designed by him during his formative years. And if he should happen to be bilingual in Spanish and English to some extent, his Spanish is commonly dis-

missed by many Mexicans, fluent bilinguals, and language instructors as *ranchero*, *pochó*, or as a substandard dialect. Any traces of Spanish vocabulary or pronunciation in his English and vice versa can result in ridicule, invite anti-Mexican or anti-American slurs, and can be regarded as symptoms of cultural deprivation or defects to be "corrected" the sooner the better.

The marginal status of the Anglicized Mexican American may be manifest in a variety of ways. He may deliberately avoid associating with other Mexican Americans; they may be strangers to him whom he fears, resents, or with whom he feels little in common. He may not want to have much in common with them and resent Mexican-American "categorical" treatment. If he or his family has attained middle-class status, he may not have readily available opportunities to associate with other middle-class Mexican Americans. Even if he wishes to establish ties with other Mexican Americans for various reasons, he may be reluctant to do so out of a fear of rejection or class bias. In any case, he does not identify or feels that he cannot identify actively with his fellow Mexican Americans.

He may actively participate in his own mis-education. He may suppress any bilingual skills he may have, for example conversational Spanish skills, understanding of spoken Spanish, pronunciations, etc. He may deliberately deny himself opportunities to visit Mexico or *raza* enclaves in the United States. He may deny himself opportunities to participate in Mexican-American social and political activities and of opportunities to learn or practice Spanish. He may even make it a point to be ignorant of Mexican-American social developments and withhold support for the development of Mexican-American studies in the public schools and the universities.

He may feel embarrassed among bilingual Mexican Americans or other bilinguals that he does not speak Spanish at all, that his Spanish is limited, or that he is not part of a Mexican-American "community." He may feel embarrassed among middle-class Anglo travelers that he has not traveled in Mexico or the Southwest and perhaps knows less about Mexicans and Mexican Americans than they might. That embarrassment often results in further withdrawal, compounding alienation and isolation.

He may respond to the ambiguity in which he

finds himself by committing himself totally to a group, an ideology, or a life style that removes or lessens that ambiguity. Such is the making of the "full-time Chicano," a True Believer, or another form of a walking abstraction.

He may reject any sense of social obligation or responsibility under some resurrected version of nineteenth-century "rugged individualism." He may deny any particular responsibility to others beyond ordinary law-abiding citizenship.

He may do nothing and be little more than a powerless victim of circumstances, ignorance, injustice, and confusion.

On a more positive side, the Anglicized Mexican American may respond to his predicament in other ways too.

He may become educated. He may know who he is and understand why he is as he is through historical, philosophical, and sociological understandings. More importantly, he is able to define himself, i.e., to become the man he wishes to be, and to resist external, superimposed definitions.

He may be or become effectively bicultural, speaking Spanish and English well, and functioning competently across cultural settings. He spares himself the agony of choosing between "success" and loss of ethnic or cultural identification by learning skills that will enable him to enjoy the amenities of American life while keeping (or making) his Mexican/Mexican-American culture alive in his life.

He may even see himself as an individual. He is who he is and a citizen of the world rather than primarily a member of an ethnic group or a nation state. He learns not only to tolerate ambiguity but to place a positive value on it in that it affords him more opportunities to make choices in his life.



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