

NATIVE INTELLIGENCE
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This column's focus: Hispanic, a Term Which Prevents Biomedical and Statistical Accuracy

On the University of Arizona campus a woman was assaulted and raped several times. The suspect, who was also engaged in burglary, was not found but the police did issue this description: "...a Hispanic male in his mid-20's. 5 feet 2 inches tall, weighing about 130 pounds with sharp facial features and short, dark hair.

The use of the term "Hispanic" in this description clearly impedes the apprehension of the assailant since actual "racial" character is replaced by a word which has no physical meaning. In 1977-78 the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) decreed that anyone of "Spanish origin and culture" including persons of any race should be classified as Hispanic.

In defiance of all logic (except that of politics) white Spaniards of Europe (some with blonde and red hair), Spanish Jews (Sephardic or Ladino Jews), Spanish Gypsies, Arabs and Berbers from former Spanish Morocco or Spanish Sahara, Black Africans from Spanish Equatorial Africa, Guamanians, Filipinos (the latter were colonials of Spain until 1898), and persons stemming from every former Spanish colony in the Americas (such as Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina, Mexico and Panama) should all be classified as Hispanic regardless of race.

In addition, persons born in such former Spanish colonies as Florida, Texas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Arizona and California can all call themselves Hispanic if they have even a partial connection with Spanish ancestry or a Latin American origin. Even Portuguese-origin persons might be inclined to select Hispanic since it is derived from Hispania, the Roman name for all of the Iberian Peninsula including what later became España (Spain) and Portugal.

In short, Hispanic not only refers specifically to the Iberian Peninsula of Europe but it is also meaningless as a "racial" or genetically-relevant term. It lumps together all person whose origins happen to have some connection with the old Spanish Empire or with Spain. It places persons of European, Middle Eastern-North African, Black African, Native American, Asian-Pacific, and mixed

ancestries into a group which cannot be described physically, genetically, or biomedically. It also obscures economic, social and political characteristics since groups with sharply different social histories are merged together. Hispanic cannot be used as an "affirmative action" term since it includes ineligible persons (such as white Spaniards and Argentineans).

Then how is it that police departments and other public agencies are being forced by the OMB to use a useless term, a term that makes it more difficult to identify a suspect, a victim, or a potential medical donor ?

What is surprising perhaps, is that when OMB made its decision, it failed to consult with anthropologists, sociologists, racial historians, medical scholars (such as epidemiologists), and geneticists. General discussion by concerned lay people did not occur. Only federal bureaucrats were involved, in addition to the political appointees in charge of the final determinations. Thus we have a classification system which is purely political and which has little or nothing to do with "race", genes, DNA, or even with key social and cultural indicators.

It seems clear that the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the Department of Education, and other agencies which can see the need for more accurate , biomedically and socio-culturally useful ways of classifying people, should communicate their concerns to OMB and to the Bureau of the Census.

From a First American perspective it is especially galling that American Indians from Latin America are not being counted as Native Americans but are instead being forced into a Hispanic group which benefits only a few politicians and agency bureaucrats (who end up with more "Hispanic money" or with a "Hispanic" voting district because our Native People from south of the border are being counted as Hispanics). Essential data is being lost and lives are being risked in order that one group might have federal funding and influence in excess of their actual entitlements. And many suspect that our Maya, Mixtec, Zapotec, and other American Indian relations from Mexico southwards are not being well served by agencies who receive money based on their numbers. This is because of the well-documented anti-Indian prejudice often found among Spanish-speaking elites.

The terms adopted in 1978 by the OMB, such as Hispanic (or Spanish Origin), are especially dangerous when they become the norm for birth and death certificates, health questionnaires, and national health studies.

What good does it do to ask questions about diabetes, for example, if the actual ancestry of the individuals is not known? Do Native Americans have some kind of a genetic predilection towards diabetes? That important question cannot be answered if it is assumed that all Native Americans of U.S. tribal origin are of unmixed indigenous ancestry and that all Native Americans from south of the border are so-called Hispanics (or Latinos). Numerically, the vast majority of aboriginal Americans are living in Mexico, Central America, and South America. Thus we have to know their biomedical character in order to separate genetic factors from diet and other environmental factors. Our schools, courts, and other agencies must also know how many of their clients speak American languages at home, even if they may have a Spanish surname.

No matter what some politicians might like, we need to have all Native People counted accurately . It just makes good sense. [May 31, 1996]

(For additional data on this topic see
WICAZO SA REVIEW, VI, no. 1, Spring 1990
pp.2-26, and LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES
19, no.4, Fall 1992, pp.59-78.)
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