

Managing My Latinx Identity at Work

Edward E. Scott
Slippery Rock University

Organizational diversity and inclusion programs encourage employees to bring their authentic selves to work; however, some employees find it difficult to bring their authentic selves to work. Social identity is the value one places on membership in a certain group. This study investigated whether group (e.g., Mexican compared to Puerto Rican) differences existed among Latinx professionals, regarding their preferences for playing up or playing down their social identity when interacting with coworkers. This study found differences between groups based on preferences for playing up or playing down social identity; racial centrality; and gender.

Keywords: social identity, Latinx, racial centrality, impression management

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that the Latinx population would exceed 50 million by the year 2020 (DelCampo, Blanco, & Boudwin, 2008). By 2020, the U.S. Latinx population had increased to 61 million (Krogstad & Noe-Bustamante, 2020). Although the Latinx population has a substantial impact on the complexion and capacity of the U.S. workforce (Krogstad & Noe-Bustamante, 2020), Latinx professionals represent only 10.1% of management and business related occupations (Statistics, 2019). Similar to other underrepresented racioethnic groups, Latinx professionals experience various forms of *social identity* devaluation when interacting with non Latinx coworkers (Cruz & Blanco, 2017). Social identity is the value one places on membership in a particular group (Tajfel, 1978). In this paper, social identity is the value a Latinx professional places on membership in their racioethnic group (e.g., Peruvian, Ecuadorian, or Dominican). Social identity devaluation is the denigration and marginalization of someone or group via negative stereotypes, deliberate or unconscious biases, actual or perceived discrimination, and micro aggressions. Given the growth of Latinx professionals and the objective of diversity and inclusion programs — to encourage employees to bring their authentic selves to work — it is important to understand how Latinx professionals prefer to manage their social identity when interacting with coworkers.

Roberts (2005) conceptualized two social identity-based impression management strategies: positive distinctiveness and social recategorization. In this paper, *playing up* refers to a Latinx professional's preference to use positive distinctiveness behaviors to promote their social identity. *Playing down* refers to their preference to use social recategorization behaviors. Latinx professionals play up their social identity when they educate others about the positive attributes of their racioethnic groups (Roberts, Settles, & Jellison, 2008). Conversely, Latinx professionals play down their social identity when they distance themselves from their racioethnic groups by avoiding race related matters and conversations (Roberts et al., 2008). In this study, playing up or playing down is examined across three factors: (a) *racial centrality*, “a

measure of whether race is a core part of an individual's self-concept" (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997, p. 806); (b) the effect of a Latinx professional's racioethnic group (e.g., Mexican compared to Puerto Rican) on his or her preference to play up or play down; and (c) the effect of gender on one's preference to play up or play down.

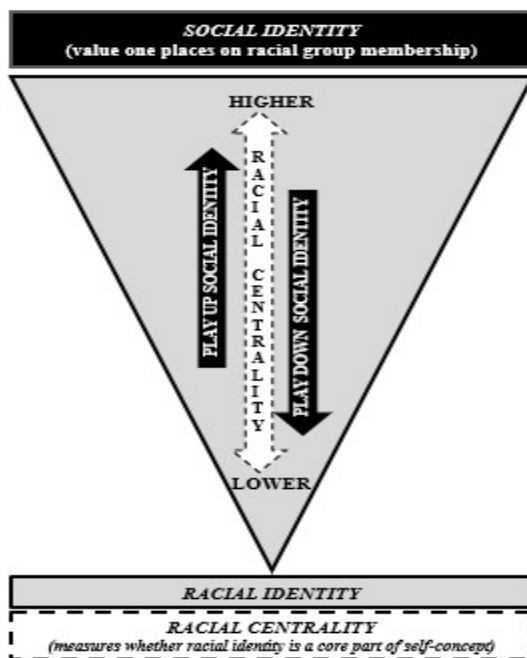
This study sought to examine if group differences in levels of racial centrality, positive distinctiveness, and social recategorization, existed between Latinx professionals who preferred to play up or play down their social identities. This study also examined if gender or racioethnic group influenced one's preference for playing up or playing down. Perhaps the findings from this study might assist organizations with enhancing diversity and inclusion programs relative to: (a) understanding factors that might affect the performance of diverse teams and dyads; and b) evaluating the depth and effectiveness of diversity and inclusion programs.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Managing Social Identity at Work

Racial centrality, positive distinctiveness, and social recategorization, are variables that describe the psychological and behavioral processes that members of underrepresented groups use to manage their social identity (Figure 1). Roberts (2005) conceptualized how positive distinctiveness and social recategorization behaviors are operationalized by members of underrepresented groups. These behaviors are used to protect themselves from threats to their social identity and to present reputable professional and personal images of themselves; moreover, congruence between these images is important for their wellbeing. Research studies reported that Black medical students, women scientists, and Asian journalists (Roberts, Cha, & Kim, 2014; Roberts et al., 2008) managed their social identity by playing up (being positive distinctive) or playing down (using social recategorization); however, the rationale for why Latinx professionals prefer to play up or play down is currently unknown. Therefore, it is important to investigate why Latinx professionals prefer to play up or play down because these behaviors might affect their relationships with coworkers and their wellbeing (D. M. Blancero, Mouriño-Ruiz, & Padilla, 2018).

FIGURE 1
SOCIAL IDENTITY



Racial Centrality and Social Identity

Racial centrality measures “whether racial identity is a core part of an individual's self-concept” (Sellers et al., 1997, p. 806). However, because one is Latinx, one cannot infer that each Latinx person places the same value on their racial group membership (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002) compared to other in-group members. For individual Latinx professionals, divergent levels of racial centrality might affect their preference for playing up or playing down their social identity differently. This study has a threefold purpose for using *racial centrality* (Sellers et al., 1997) to investigate why Latinx professionals prefer to play up or play down their social identity. First, this study aims to examine if differing levels of racial identity might influence one’s preference to play up or play down social identity. Second, the racial centrality scale (Sellers et al., 1997) has been adapted to study the relationship between ethnicity-related stressors and Latinx wellbeing (French & Chavez, 2010). Third, research (Roberts et al., 2014) has described how varying degrees of individual racial centrality influenced Asian journalists’ choices to play up or play down their social identity.

Similar to African American medical students and women scientists (Roberts et al., 2008), and Asian journalists (Roberts et al., 2014), Latinx professionals experience social identity devaluation when interacting with coworkers (D. Blanco, Olivas-Luján, Stone, Guerrero, & Posthuma, 2014; Tsoukatos et al., 2011; Volpone, Avery, & McKay, 2012). Cruz and Blanco (2017) conceptualized how Latinx professionals *uphold* a bicultural identity “which implies the ability to function in a manner that is congruent with the values, beliefs, customs, behaviors, and language of both the ethnic and host culture” (Cruz & Blanco, 2017, p. 491). This study reasons that upholding the Latinx part of a bicultural identity is important to many Latinx professionals and might also be influenced by one’s level of racial centrality; thus, it is proposed that racial centrality will be higher for Latinx professionals who prefer to play up their social identity, compared to Latinx professionals who prefer to play down their social identity.

Hypothesis 1: *Racial centrality is higher for Latinx professionals who prefer to play up their social identity compared to Latinx professionals who prefer to play down.*

Positive Distinctiveness and Social Recategorization

Roberts, Settles, Jellison (2008), examined two social identity-based impression management strategies that members of underrepresented groups used to manage their social identity. *Positive distinctiveness* was used when one wanted to advocate for their social identity. *Social recategorization* was used when one wanted to associate with a different identity (e.g., professional identity) or when one chose to disassociate from their social identity by avoiding any matters pertaining to race. In this study, when asked which social identity-based impression management strategies they prefer to use, 57% percent of Latinx professionals reported that they prefer to play up their social identity and 43% reported that they prefer to play down their social identity. The difference between those who prefer to play up or play down indicates that Latinx professionals are not monolithic with regard to how they desire to manage their social identity. Many Latinx professionals might be concerned about how their racioethnic group membership affects their coworkers’ impressions of them; however, the degree of one’s concern might be influenced by their level of racial centrality. For Latinx professionals whose self-concept has a strong association with racioethnic group membership (i.e., higher levels of racial centrality), positive distinctiveness (playing up) might be the preferred strategy for managing their social identity. For Latinx business professionals whose self-concept is less dependent on racioethnic group membership (i.e., lower levels of racial centrality), social recategorization (playing down) might be preferred.

Hypothesis 2: *Positive distinctiveness is higher for Latinx professionals who prefer to play up their social identity compared to Latinx professionals who prefer to play down.*

Hypothesis 3: *Social recategorization is higher for Latinx professionals who prefer to play down their social identity compared to Latinx professionals who prefer to play up.*

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Procedures

Data was collected from 305 Latinx professionals attending a national conference hosted by a U.S. based Latinx professional development and advocacy organization. The data was compiled from responses to online and hardcopy surveys. The demographic profile of the respondents was 55% female and the mean age was 39.46 ($SD = 10.61$). Twelve different groups of Latinx professionals were represented in the study (see Table 6). Institutional Review Board approval was obtained before conducting the study.

Measures

Preference for Playing Up or Playing Down social identity was determined by providing study participants with descriptions (Roberts et al., 2014) of behaviors that represented playing up or playing down social identity. Playing up was described as, “attempting to create more positive social meanings around one’s racioethnic group through education, advocacy, or selective confirmation of stereotypes.” An example of playing down was, “attempting to avoid categorization in a racial group by minimizing race-related communication.” Study participants were asked if they used these strategies and which strategies they used the most. One hundred forty-two respondents reported they preferred to play up and one hundred six respondents preferred to play down.

Racial Centrality was measured using the 8-item racial centrality subscale developed by Sellers et al. (1997). Examples of the racial centrality items included: “overall, being Latinx has very little to do with how I feel about myself (reverse coded);” and, “being Latinx is an important reflection of who I am.” All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Participant responses were averaged into a composite score with higher scores indicating a more central Latinx identity ($\alpha = .78$).

Positive Distinctiveness was measured using a 5-item scale (Roberts, 2005). Examples of positive distinctiveness items included: “I try to share aspects of Latino culture with my non-Latino colleagues;” and, “I try to educate non-Latinos about the strengths and achievements of members of my racial/ethnic group.” All items were measured on a 6-point Likert-type scale (0 = not at all to 5 = always). Participant responses were averaged into a composite score with higher numbers reflecting a greater propensity to play up the value they placed on their racial group membership ($\alpha = .83$).

Social Recategorization was measured using a 5-item scale (Roberts, 2005). Examples of social recategorization items included: “I try to emphasize the experiences and beliefs I have in common with my non-Latino colleagues;” and, “I try to avoid conducting myself in ways that are considered typical of a Latino.” All items were measured on a 6-point Likert-type scale (0 = not at all; 5 = always). Participant responses were averaged into a composite score with higher numbers reflecting a greater propensity to avoid identification with one’s racial group in favor of other social identities (e.g., professional identity) ($\alpha = .62$).

Results

SPSS version 26 was used for all analyses. All tests were conducted as two-sided independent sample *t*-tests. All available data and pairwise deletions were used for each test, which resulted in variations in sample sizes on a test-by-test basis. Cohen’s *d* effect-sizes were calculated to understand the potential magnitude of differences between groups. Descriptive statistics and correlations are reported in Table 1. See Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 for results of *t*-tests and Cohen’s *d* effect size calculations. See Table 6 for racioethnic group demographic information and preferences for playing up or playing down.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) predicted that Latinx professionals who preferred to play up their racial group membership would have higher levels of racial centrality compared to Latinx professionals who play down. H1 was supported and the effect size indicated a small to medium (Durlak, 2009; Ferguson, 2009) level of difference between the groups (see Table 2). Hypothesis 2 (H2) predicted that Latinx professionals who preferred to play up their racial group membership would have higher levels of positive distinctiveness compared to Latinx professionals who play down. H2 was supported and the effect size indicated a medium

(Durlak, 2009; Ferguson, 2009) level of difference between the groups (see Table 3). Hypothesis 3 (H3) predicted that Latinx professionals who preferred to play down their racial group membership would have higher levels of social recategorization compared to Latinx professionals who play up. H3 was supported and the effect size indicated a medium (Durlak, 2009; Ferguson, 2009) level of difference between the groups (see Table 4). This study exploratively investigated racioethnic group differences and gender group differences for preferences to play up or play down social identity. There was a statistically significant difference between females and males for racial centrality (see Table 5); however, the *t*-tests for differences between racioethnic groups were not statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated group differences between Latinx professionals who preferred to play up ($n = 142$, 54% female) or play down ($n = 106$, 52% female) their social identity when interacting with co-workers. The hypotheses that levels of racial centrality (H1); positive distinctiveness (H2); and social recategorization (H3); would be different between groups were supported. This study also found group differences based on gender. Latinas reported statistically significant higher levels of racial centrality compared to Latinos. For both groups (Latinas and Latinos who preferred to play up compared to Latinas and Latinos who preferred to play down), the percentage of females who preferred to play up was 54% and the percentage who preferred to play down was 52%.

Limitations and Future Studies

One limitation was low sample sizes for many of the racioethnic groups (see Table 6). Based on the findings in this study, four questions are important for future studies. First, does the difference for playing up or playing down social identity pose a day-to-day supervisory challenge for managers of diverse teams or dyads, particularly in organizations with a substantial or increasing numbers of Latinx professionals? Second, is the preference for social recategorization indicative of ineffective diversity and inclusion programs that do not realize the climate of inclusivity they seek — because if they did — the percentage of Latinx professionals who prefer to play down might be less? Third, as the population of Latinx business professionals continues to grow — and perhaps reaches critical mass in some organizations — how should organizations respond to potentially negative effects of intergroup competition between Latinx professionals and non Latinx co-workers? Finally, for within group differences based on gender, future research might investigate why Latinas appear to have higher levels of racial centrality than Latinos and how this difference might affect the nature of Latinas interactions with coworkers compared to Latinos.

CONCLUSION

This study found group differences for variables that might influence Latinx professionals' preferences to play up or play down their social identity at work. Organizational leaders should consider how Latinx professionals desire to manage their social identity in the workplace, because playing up or playing down might affect relationships between diverse team members and dyads — which in-turn — might affect important organizational outcomes related to team performance, retention of Latinx professionals, and reaping the benefits of inclusive work environments.

REFERENCES

- Blancero, D., Olivas-Luján, M.R., Stone, D.L., Guerrero, L., & Posthuma, R.A. (2014). Perceptions and behaviors of Hispanic workers: A review. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 29(6), 616-643.
- Blancero, D.M., Mouriño-Ruiz, E., & Padilla, A.M. (2018). Latino millennials—the new diverse workforce: Challenges and opportunities. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 40(1), 3-21.
- Cruz, J.L., & Blancero, D.M. (2017). Latina/o professionals' career success: Bridging the corporate American divide. *Journal of Career Development*, 44(6), 485-501.
- DelCampo, R.G., Blancero, D.M., & Boudwin, K.M. (2008). Hispanic professionals after 11th September: A move toward “American” identification. *Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal*, 15(1), 20-29.
- Durlak, J.A. (2009). How to select, calculate, and interpret effect sizes. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 34(9), 917-928.
- Ellemers, N., Spears, R., & Doosje, B. (2002). Self and social identity. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53(1), 161-186.
- Ferguson, C.J. (2009). An effect size primer: A guide for clinicians and researchers. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 40(5), 532.
- French, S.E., & Chavez, N.R. (2010). The relationship of ethnicity-related stressors and Latino ethnic identity to well-being. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 32(3), 410-428.
- Krogstad, J.M., & Noe-Bustamante, L. (2020). *Key facts about U.S. Latinos for national Hispanic heritage month*. FactTank News In The Numbers. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/10/key-facts-about-u-s-latinos-for-national-hispanic-heritage-month/>
- Roberts, L.M. (2005). Changing faces: Professional image construction in diverse organizational settings. *Academy of Management Review*, 30(4), 685-711.
- Roberts, L.M., Cha, S.E., & Kim, S.S. (2014). Strategies for managing impressions of racial identity in the workplace. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 20(4), 529.
- Roberts, L.M., Settles, I.H., & Jellison, W.A. (2008). Predicting the strategic identity management of gender and race. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 8(4), 269-306.
- Sellers, R.M., Rowley, S.A., Chavous, T.M., Shelton, J.N., & Smith, M.A. (1997). Multidimensional inventory of Black identity: A preliminary investigation of reliability and construct validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(4), 805-815.
- Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor. (2019). *Employed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.pdf>
- Tajfel, H.E. (1978). *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations*. London, UK: Academic Press.
- Tsoukatos, E., Rodrigues-Santos, C., DelCampo, R.G., Jacobson, K.J., Van Buren, H.J., & Blancero, D.M. (2011). Comparing immigrant and US born Hispanic business professionals. *Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal*, 18(3), 327-350.
- Volpone, S.D., Avery, D.R., & McKay, P.F. (2012). Linkages between racioethnicity, appraisal reactions, and employee engagement. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 42(1), 252-270.

APPENDIX

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONS

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2
1. Racial Centrality	4.87	1.08	-	
2. Positive Distinctiveness	3.65	1.13	.33**	-
3. Social Recategorization	2.33	0.95	-.18**	.09

Note. $N = 305$. * $p < .05$., ** $p < .01$

TABLE 2
RACIAL CENTRALITY: *t*-TEST RESULTS AND EFFECT SIZE

Latinx professionals who prefer to...	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
play up social identity	142	5.17	3.01	.00**	.38
play down social identity	106	4.72			

Note. $N = 248$. * $p < .05$., ** $p < .01$

TABLE 3
POSITIVE DISTINCTIVENESS: *t*-TEST RESULTS AND EFFECT SIZE

Latinx professional who prefer to...	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
play up social identity	142	4.00	4.18	.00**	.53
play down social identity	106	3.45			

Note. $N = 248$. * $p < .05$., ** $p < .01$

TABLE 4
SOCIAL RECATEGORIZATION: *t*-TEST RESULTS AND EFFECT SIZE

Latinx professionals who prefer to...	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
play up social identity	142	2.17	-3.28	.00**	-.42
play down social identity	106	2.55			

Note. $N = 248$. * $p < .05$., ** $p < .01$

TABLE 5
RACIAL CENTRALITY: *t*-TEST RESULTS AND EFFECT SIZES

Latinx Professionals	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Women	160	4.71	-2.17	.03*	-.26
Men	129	4.99			

Note. *N* = 289. **p* < .05., ***p* < .01

TABLE 6
PREFERRED SOCIAL IDENTITY MANAGEMENT BEHAVIOR

Racial Origin or Descent	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage that prefers to...</i>	
		Play Up	Play Down
Brazilian	3	67	33
Colombian	15	67	33
Cuban	4	0	100
Dominican	18	50	50
Ecuadorian	11	45	55
Guatemalan	4	100	0
Mexican	75	45	55
Panamanian	3	67	33
Peruvian	9	44	56
Puerto Rican	31	68	32
Salvadorian	8	88	12
Venezuelan	6	17	83

Note: Due to sample size limitations, data should be interpreted with caution when comparing percentages across groups.