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You can answer the question in many ways. I will respond in two. First, as a professor of Chicana/o Studies, I can say it's an easy question to answer. Yes! Many individuals can, with certainty and with introspective consistency, claim Latino identity. It is entirely reasonable for an individual Puerto Rican from the island, or a Nuyorican from the Bronx, a recently-arrived Dominican-American, second-generation Cuban-American, or fifth generation Chicano to claim to be Latino. In public, it's done all the time.

However, if you ask me from the point of view of a sociolinguist, I can't be so glib. You might have asked: What linguistic features makes up this so-called "Latino identity?" This question is much harder. It would set me back, to turn around and ask the interviewer: Where have you seen such a community? Show it to me. That's because I don't know of a single community - that has a zipcode number - of Latinos anywhere in the nation. Weird, no?

This apparent contradiction (many people can call themselves Latina or Latino, but there is no city, town or even a local neighborhood of Latinos) brings us to the question of identity.

What is identity?! Why do professors insist on questioning what is obvious? Aren't we just individuals, born male or female, unique selves from infancy, who grow up interacting with others but not essentially changing as we live our lives? Aren't we the very same
self who was once a child? Isn’t our unique identity a whole thing that is part of us from the beginning, that really doesn’t change across time? I know myself! (Or at least I try to get to know myself.) Isn’t my self, and hence my identity, transparent (if not to anyone else), at least to me? Am I not a self-aware person? Am I not fully conscious of myself?

The uncertainty in each of us that is generated by these questions suggests maybe there is a problem with this view. Still, this commonplace perspective on identity has a long history. The famous philosopher, Immanuel Kant, spoke about the self as being the guide for each person through life in this crazy and confusing world. In this view, which is shared by most people today, each individual has a single and unique self/identity from birth to death. From this commonplace point of view, for a Cuban-American to claim Latino identity is a problem. Doesn’t a Chicano Studies professor who says, as I often do, “I’m Latino,” suffer from some kind of schizophrenia, political capitulation, or worse, simple confusion? How could a Chicano Studies professor say that he possibly could be Latino? It’s almost as bad as saying “I’m Hispanic.” (I won’t go that far.)

Linguistic History of Labels for a Latino Community

The linguistic problem of identity complicates this picture in two ways that I will mention. First, I spoke about the issue of community: identity is usually associated with a community who have a locale, or once had a shared community. Then there is the issue of labels. All ethnic and racial terminology changes over time. If we review the history of labels for Chicanos in this country over the past 100 years, we’ll come across some of the issues.

From the turn of the 20th century well into the 1930s in urban areas, and until much later in rural areas, the common English-language term for this group of people was Mexican. Either you were American, that is to say a white Anglo-American, or you were Mexican. Since the U.S. was an apartheid state (that is to say it was legal to discriminate on the basis of nationality and mere appearance), whites did not worry whether the person in question was a recent immigrant from Mexico or was born in the U.S. Either way, the person and the term was Mexican.

Within the community of people termed Mexican or Mexican-American, the latter phrase connoted someone willing to turn their back on their heritage, their family, their home language.

In one way, the label was okay. This word innocently denotes “citizen of Mexico” or “person of Mexican-descent.” But words mean in two ways. Words also connote. That is to say, the word conjured many things in the mind of Anglo-Americans of the time: a defeated and disgraced enemy, a swarthy race of people who were half Indian, the stereotypes of the shifty-eyed thief, dangerous and macho Revolutionary, or the passive siesta-taking fellow in a sarape who is napping against a cactus.
A label's connotations tend to accumulate, and a once neutral term can become graceless and weighed down, which leads people to seek new labels. To avoid the connotations of Mexican, people used an euphemism, the term Spanish. By referring to Mexicans as Spanish, one avoided the supposed indelicacy in the U.S. of referring to a Mexican.

In the 1930s, when the first generation of children of the refugees of the Mexican Revolution came of age, the term Mexican-American came into general use. While the older terms continued to be used, by self-reference in this hyphenated way, children of Mexicans could emphasize their allegiance to U.S. nationality. Within the community of people termed Mexican or Mexican-American, the latter phrase connoted someone willing to turn their back on their heritage, their family, their home language. Meanwhile, it was very unlikely that Anglo-America saw them as "American."

In the 1960s and during the period of the Civil Rights Movement, the children of Mexican-Americans rejected the assimilationist narrative of the general society, and rehabilitated an old derivative term to embrace as their own. A coarse, even vulgar abbreviated Spanish language reference to mexicano, Chicano became the term of preference among the new generation. This term was associated with the Chicano Movement. Later, among the next generation, in a politically more conservative time, the term Chicano came to connote firebrand radicalism and a political platform that was viewed by younger members of the Chicano community, particularly women, to be nationalist and sexist.

Meanwhile the demographics of the country were changing. A new U.S. federal census designation, Hispanic, was used to refer to all Spanish-speaking communities from across Latin America. Each group, however, viewed the other as more different than similar, and rejected the term. White America ignored the disdain that most Latinos heaped on the term. Whites embraced the term. It got completely out of hand. The 1980s was even dubbed by Time magazine the "Hispanic Decade." These actions were premature. Now more than 20 years have passed, and even though there is a greater recognition of our similarities, Latinos still tend to reject the government-imposed term, Hispanic. We have taken up the current term, Latino, as a cross-ethnic designation that distinguishes us from Anglo-America.

No doubt that time will bring another term, once the current term Latino becomes overloaded with connotation. My personal favorite future cover term is Americano, because it encompasses all the Americas, north and south. However, Anglo-America would have to allow its favored self-designation, American, to share the stage with Latinos. Now, this would be a really powerful political coalition!

**A Better View of Identity**

Identity is only a problem, a big deal, if we continue to think about identity in the current commonplace way that each person is just an
individual, born a unique self from infancy, who grows up but
does not really change much in his or her life. I want to question
this view.

Our uniqueness as a person is	not the same thing as our
identity. Our identity changes
across time. Our identities as
human beings are fluid, not a
fixed thing. We all have multiple
identities, rather than just one.
Consider identities to be multiple
facets on the precious gem of our
individuality. Or to use another metaphor, each of us is a
constellation, a cluster of related (or even unrelated) identities that
correspond to the wide-ranging roles through which we live our
lives, and settings in which we live our lives.

In this view, identity is still an integral part of each individual. It is
also clear that each infant’s personality seems to be a unique
flower that blooms with time and maturation, as much a
developing uniqueness, as his or her smile. But identity is also
situational, a set of roles and ways of living life that is “mediated”
or created in social interaction with other people playing roles and
living their lives.

Because the ethnic and racial designations are labels, they fail to
express this multiplicity. They label, with a fixed stamp, one of the
dynamic elements of a person’s self. Moreover, these identities
have a structure, they fit together into a recognizable constellation.
For example, one person who is (1) a “Latina” is also (2) a mother,
called Mamá, Mami, or Momma and Mom. She is also (3) a wife
or just as significantly for her identity, she is not a wife. The
person she is involved with, her partner, also creates in
interpersonal mediation a large facet of her identity. Who her
partner is (really the multiple whos) makes up a lot of her identity.
And so, too, the multiple whos that she is makes up a lot of the
partner’s identity. Moreover, this same woman is also (4) a
working person, another part of her identity, whether a high school
counselor or a state senator. The person’s living and past
backgrounds, her social class, her identification with her
community and the wider society—all these and many more aspects
of her life (5 to 15 or more) contribute to her identity.

Social philosophers call this view “the critique of the subject,”
rejecting the view that each of us has an identity that is unique, that
this identity is oriented to a single set of rules which guides the
conduct of one’s life, and that this identity is not affected by
society. Rather, we are people whose multiple identities are
inextricably integrated into society. Moreover, we are situated in
social settings and times. Lastly, our multiple identities are also
made up in interaction with others in the process of making their
lives.

Is There Such a Thing as a Latino Family?
From this vantage point, we can begin to answer the question that arose: Was the American Family episode a portrayal of a Latino family? And, is there such a thing as a Latino family? More precisely, does a family exist whose primary sense of identity is Latino, rather than an ethnicity or nationality? I have to say, no.

- I believe there are more and more Latinos. By this I mean there are individuals whose lives have added formed a new identity, an interesting new facet of their precious gem of their personhood. There is no doubt that we will see more such individuals in the first portion of this new century.

- In contrast, truly Latino families may exist in isolation, but do not comprise a community of any size.

Most Latino families are first and foremost Mexican-American or Chicano families, Cuban-American families, Nuyorican families, Dominican families, Honduran families, or Guatamaltecan or other such immigrant or ethnic families. This is because most of us grow up in the primary socializing unit of a family. Family is the first socializing unit, where we experience and absorb the first facets of our identity: culture, language and heritage. So, while outsiders may call our families Latino as a shorthand for unspecified ethnicity or nationality, for the greater majority of the millions of us, our families are ethnic families, above all else. This is even the case for so-called Latino families who have become de-ethnicized, who are far more assimilated into Anglo-American culture. Their ethnicity is Anglo-American, not Latino.

This is not to say that there might be a time in the later stages of the 21st century when the social conditions create a post-ethnic Latino community. In this scenario, the primary ethnic identification is no longer Chicano, Cuban, Dominican or Guatamaltecan, but some sort of pan-ethnic Latino identity. A community of families would raise kids who would be primarily Latino, and what we take to be national-origin heritages would be distant indistinct memories. Such a scenario currently is science fiction or rather, social science fiction-but it is certainly possible. We do not know what the future holds. One hundred and fifty years ago, we could not have predicted the character and vibrancy of today's Chicano culture, since such a distinct identity did not exist before the contact with Anglo-America in the 19th century. Who knows what this century will produce.

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Footnotes:

1.

I draw on the illuminating writings of my friend Professor Edwina Barvosa-Carter (Assistant Professor of Social and Political Theory, Department of Chicano Studies, UCSB), whose revised dissertation, Wealth of Selves: Multiple Identity and Democratic Citizenship, is being reviewed by Cornell University Press.

2.

Other American racial groups have similar linguistic labeling histories. During the 1960s, among African Americans, the once-reviled term Black was also resurrected. The catchphrase for young African Americans of this time, "Black is Beautiful," was a very public subversion of the then-general view that blackness of African America was inherently bad, vile and ugly. Before then, Negro was the socially-appropriate designation, and Black was a slur. Black was taken up with pride; later Afro-American and now African-American. Each term has its period, and then it is replaced by another.

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