



Challenging Raceless Latinidad & Embracing the Term Latinx in Social Work Practice

by Jesselly De La Cruz, DSW, MSW, LCSW

“Embracing the term Latinx can empower youth that are disproportionately and deeply affected by discrimination, racism, and oppression based on their ethnic and sexual identities.”

The racial diversity that is the cornerstone of the Latina/o/x experience is often made invisible. And dialogue associated with the racial origins of the identity terms Hispanic and/or Latina/o/x is inevitably controversial in today’s polarized society. How much is being Latino/a/x still embedded in Indigenous and Afro roots? How much is adopted from European Conquest? How do we grapple with the real-life juxtaposition associated with what we call being Latina/o/x and/or Hispanic? The American government has also struggled to categorize those of Mexican, Caribbean, or Central & South American descent. The U.S. Census has flipped back and forth between labeling Latinos as their own race or inappropriately labeling us as White, with limited exceptions as to the historical evidence of Latinos having White privilege.

1930 began the first attempts by the U.S. Census to delineate the racial category of those of mixed-race, including an attempt to acknowledge the racial identity of Mexicans in the U.S. Later, in 1980, the U.S. Census introduced the ethnic, yet a-racial, political category of Hispanic as an identifier for Spanish-speaking communities residing in the states. And, while this was a technical landmark in recognizing the growing political power of this subgroup of Americans, decades later we continue to grapple with the terms Hispanic, Latino/a, and, most recently, Latinx or Latine.

Latinx is a term that was first used among student activists and in academia in 2004 as an effort to challenge the gender binary paradigm of the Spanish language. It is a term that some, mostly youth, use to have their intersectional identities—being Latino and being LGBT—acknowledged. While the term is gaining mainstream traction, few relate personally to it as evidenced by community polls and surveys. Personally, I also experienced resistance to embracing the term initially. However, I believe that broader societal resistance to the term is mostly fueled by continued widespread homophobia and transphobia and has little to do with homage to the Spanish language imposed by colonization. Latin American countries are well-known for their historical acts of resistance. My personal and professional position is that we should embrace the term Latinx as a way of resisting reductionist narratives of what it means to be someone of Latin American or Caribbean descent in the United States.

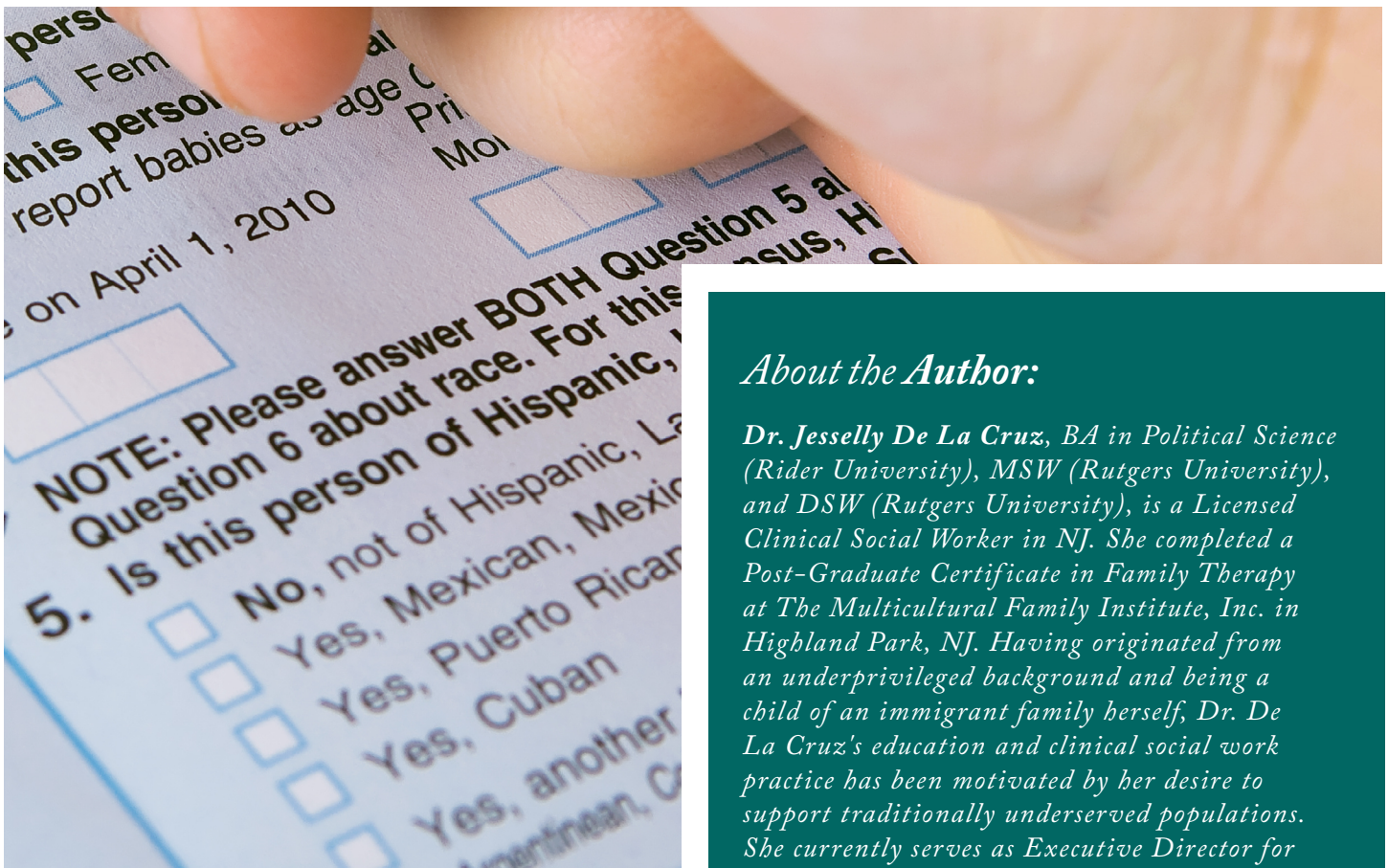
According to the Trevor Project, Latinx youth who identify as LGBT are four times more likely to report suicide attempts than their straight, cis-gendered Latino/a peers. Embracing the term Latinx can empower youth that are disproportionately and deeply affected by discrimination, racism, and oppression based on their ethnic and sexual identities. However, the truth is that all these terms are poorly defined

as either racial categories, cultural descriptors, or reflections of gender and sexual identity representation for those of Mexican, Caribbean, or Central & South American descent living and contributing to the cultural fabric and economy of American society. The efforts to reduce Latina/o/x identity to a singular experience by choosing a universal term such as Latinx to describe our diversity is in of itself an act of oppression.

Recently in the 2020 Census, Latina/o/x and Hispanic youth have reaffirmed their diverse racial history and self-identified as multi-racial, identifying on the census with two or more races. As a feminist, I tend to lean into my privilege as a cis-gendered, light-skinned Latina and the use of Latina/o/x for myself, which happens to be alphabetical (preference to my personal gender identity, but inclusive of my queer identity) in its sequence. Most often in professional practice, I use all the terms—Hispanic, Latino/a, and Latinx—interchangeably. But, as a practitioner scholar, I realize the journey to connecting with the diversity

of experiences is not so much the terms, but the genuine, empathic understanding of the complex phenomenology of what it means to be Latina/o/x and/or Hispanic in the U.S., wherever we may be across this great North American Continent.

As social workers, we are often aware of our position of power in practice but struggle as to how to authentically balance that in therapeutic relationships. White clinicians often shy away from conversations about race, power, and privilege due to its discomfort. But, when it comes to issues of race, ethnicity, and sexual identity issues, I believe social workers have an ethical responsibility to ask the questions directly as part of initial and ongoing assessment with clients. Racial, cultural, and sexual identities are not static and, just like the politics of terms continues to change, how one identifies can also evolve over time. Social work practice benefits from the therapeutic flexibility to embrace these changing dynamics of race, gender, & sexuality issues when working with Latina/o/x and/or Hispanic clients.



About the Author:

Dr. Jesselly De La Cruz, BA in Political Science (Rider University), MSW (Rutgers University), and DSW (Rutgers University), is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in NJ. She completed a Post-Graduate Certificate in Family Therapy at The Multicultural Family Institute, Inc. in Highland Park, NJ. Having originated from an underprivileged background and being a child of an immigrant family herself, Dr. De La Cruz's education and clinical social work practice has been motivated by her desire to support traditionally underserved populations. She currently serves as Executive Director for the Latino Action Network Foundation.