

Old traditions, new words: reflecting on Hispanic history and an evolving terminology

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This year marks the 33rd anniversary of Hispanic Heritage Month, the annual celebration of the contributions and influence of Hispanic Americans to this country's history, culture and achievements.

But before we can celebrate, we must first ask: What does it mean to be *Hispanic*? Is that different from being *Latino* or *Latina*? And how do we use new identifiers like *Latinx* and *Latine*? These words have a complicated history and are evolving at a remarkable speed. It can be understandably challenging to ensure that the words we use are inclusive of all.

Understanding the origins and current meanings behind the various identifiers used to describe members of the Hispanic and Latin communities is an important first step to ensuring that language is used in an inclusive manner.

However, this challenge can be overcome. Simply understanding these terms of identity — and being open to recognizing when these terms evolve — is a significant first step toward creating and maintaining a diverse and inclusive workforce. By understanding the origins and ongoing evolution of these terms, law firms, corporate legal departments, and other organizations can take their inclusion efforts to the next level because they will have established a framework for learning, curiosity and respectful conversation in the workplace.

The origins of these terms

Hispanic is arguably the oldest of the identifiers. It derives from the Latin *hispanicus*, which was used by the ancient Romans to describe people from "Hispania" (i.e., the Iberian Peninsula or modern-day Spain and Portugal). Although the term *Hispanic* has existed for centuries, it was not popularized until the 1970s, when the U.S. Census Bureau adopted it as a catch-all term to identify and count

Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, Puerto Rican Americans, and American citizens from other Spanish-speaking communities.

By contrast, the terms *Latino* and *Latina* originated much more recently. *Latino* is short for *latinoamericano*, which is Spanish for "Latin American." Although most historians agree that the term "Latin America" arose in the mid-1800s, they disagree on the origin. Some historians believe that the term was first coined in Napoleonic France to justify French intervention in areas of the Americas colonized by Romance language-speaking people (e.g., Spanish, French, and Portuguese). Other historians believe that the term actually originated from Central and South Americans protesting imperialist expansion in the region.

Either way, by the late 1850s, the term was being used in California — which had just become part of the United States — to describe people descended from Spanish and Mexican settlers in the area.

Because Spanish is a gendered language, *Latino* is generally used to identify men, while *Latina* is generally reserved for women. However, this binary fails to capture the full diversity of Latin people, most specifically non-binary or other gendered people.

In response, the term *Latinx* has developed as a gender-neutral and gender-inclusive term to describe anyone of Latin American descent. This term is not without its critics, however, who argue that the "x" does not follow traditional Spanish grammar and is difficult for native speakers to pronounce. To avoid the unintended exclusion of Spanish speakers, some have adopted the term *Latine* as both a gender-neutral and accessible alternative to *Latinx*.

An ongoing evolution

Today, the term *Hispanic* is commonly used to describe people who originated from any Spanish-speaking country, including Spain, Mexico and the Spanish-speaking parts of Central and South America and the Caribbean; and *Latino/a* is commonly used to describe any person who originated from Central or South America or the Caribbean, regardless of the language spoken.

However, because most Latin American countries are predominately Spanish-speaking, the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino/a* are commonly used interchangeably today despite their historically different meanings. In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau currently defines *Hispanic*

and *Latino* synonymously to include anyone of “Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.”

But there are still personal preferences. For some, *Latino/a* is associated with ethnic pride, evoking the part of the New World from which they originated, whereas *Hispanic* is associated with Old World conquest and colonization. Regionally, *Hispanic* is more popular in the eastern United States, whereas *Latino* is more popular in the West.

Once a baseline of shared language is established, it creates an opportunity for conversation, feedback, and reflection across the organization.

Because the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino/a* traditionally refer to a person’s ethnicity and not their race, the terms are often paired with racial identifiers to acknowledge a variety of intersectional identities. For example, *Afro-Latino* is frequently used to identify Black Latinos with African ancestry. However, while the U.S. Census Bureau maintains this distinction between race and ethnicity, many do not. Indeed, according to one recent survey, 17% of Hispanic adults identify *Hispanic* as their race.

Recent polls show that most community members do not have a preference and use *Hispanic* and *Latino/a* interchangeably. In fact, the majority of Hispanic and Latin Americans prefer not to use any catch-all identifier at all. Instead, most prefer to identify themselves based on their country (or countries) of origin. This may be influenced in part by the fact that many Hispanic and Latin Americans report that their race, ethnicity, and/or nationality is often misidentified or over-simplified by others and by the fact that most Latin Americans do not share a common history, culture or even dialect.

The momentum behind gender-neutral identifiers (like *Latinx* and *Latine*) has been much slower to build. Despite the significant media attention, a recent survey found that only 23% of U.S. adults who self-identified as *Hispanic* or *Latino* had even heard of the term *Latinx*. Of that percentage, 65% said that the term *Latinx* should not be used to describe them, with most preferring *Hispanic* or *Latino*. That said, the use of gender-neutral terms like *Latinx* continues to be widespread among the Millennial and Gen-Z population.

The co-existence of tradition and inclusion

Understanding the origins and current meanings behind the various identifiers used to describe members of the Hispanic and Latin communities is an important first step to ensuring that language is used in an inclusive manner. But this is a complex issue, and there is no one term that can be used to describe a diverse group of people who migrate or descend from all over the world and come with unique histories and cultural backgrounds.

Law firms and business organizations should consider providing learning opportunities for employees about how to use identifiers thoughtfully and how to avoid making assumptions about an individual or group. Once a baseline of shared language is established, it creates an opportunity for conversation, feedback, and reflection across the organization.

Context also matters. Practically speaking, *Hispanic* and *Latino/a* remain acceptable terms to use when referring to those communities as a whole, especially when the heritage of individuals is unknown. Of course, law firms and other organizations should be vigilant about how these terms are used, particularly in marketing materials, so as to maximize the inclusion of prospective clients and talent. However, because there is no clear consensus among the Hispanic and Latin communities as to how they should be described, these traditional identifiers will likely be welcomed until more specific identifiers and preferences are expressed.

On the other hand, law firms and other organizations should be wary about using these terms when referring to individual persons. Preferences will differ, and space must be created to listen and acknowledge how individuals choose to identify themselves. For some, that may be a traditional identifier like *Hispanic* or *Latino*. For others, that may be newer, non-gendered terms like *Latinx* or *Latine*. Some simply prefer to be identified by their country (or countries) of origin. And still, there are many who will define themselves with a blend of language that realizes their specific intersectionality. It is best not to assume someone’s preferred identifier. Instead, give that person the space and freedom to identify themselves however they feel most comfortable.

At the end of the day, different words have different meanings to different people. But these words don’t have to be divisive. By keeping an open mind and listening with genuine curiosity and interest, we can use these words to appreciate, honor, and celebrate the amazing diversity that exists *within* the Hispanic and Latin American communities — now and for many years to come.

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