

GUEST EDITORIAL

Latíné, Latinx, Latina, Latino, or Hispanic: Problematizing terms often used in engineering education

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this guest editorial, we problematize the terms Latiné, Latinx, Latina, Latino, and Hispanic used to describe people with Latin American ancestry in the United States to better inform engineering education scholarship and practice. As members of communities that have been classified as Latiné/x/a/o or Hispanic, we are always challenged with the questions: What term should be used in our research, and why? As scholars who are also members of these communities, we bridge the contradictions emerging from our lived experiences and imposed realities while seeking to engage in a critical conversation emerging from our “theory in the flesh” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). While we situate the terms historically in this guest editorial, as an act of resistance, our title places the most recent term (Latiné) first to continue to challenge historical terminologies that demoralize and oppress our communities (Revelo et al., 2022). At the same time, we recognize that for some cultures, choosing to identify by one term over another has real-life implications and consequences, such as being the targets of discrimination and oppression and being seen as transgressors (Mejia et al., 2022), or being perceived as insiders or outsiders.

2 | OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEMATIC TERM “HISPANIC”

Soon after the 1924 Immigration Act (The Johnson-Reed Act; U.S. Department of State, n.d.), people of Latin American descent who migrated to the United States were allowed to do so on the condition that they could contribute to the expansion of the economy while providing cheap labor (Molina, 2010). In 1930, the U.S. Census Bureau changed its policy to re-classify “Mexicans” from “non-White” to “White” (Molina, 2010). By the 1950s and 1960s, Latin American immigrants in the United States were primarily composed of Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican groups. Many of them were labeled by the US government as “Whites” or via the catchall classification of “Mexican” (Bravo, n.d.). The latter classification catalyzed actions from different governmental offices, including the decision of the Immigration and Naturalization Services to dictate that a person of “Mexican” descent was required to use a form, card, or equivalent document to identify their race as “White” (Molina, 2010). This led to discrimination in communities where, for example, “Mexicans” classified as Whites were segregated *de facto* in schools supported by *de jure* policies. While these policies were aimed at those classified as “Whites” and legally supported the integration of most from Latin America, in practice, these same immigrants were socially recognized as “Brown” (Donato & Hanson, 2012).

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, leaders of Mexican-American voluntary advocacy groups (e.g., National Council of La Raza; Gómez, 1992) began to call for more nuanced statistical reporting of Latin American communities in the United States, as they claimed that in addition to classifying Latin American communities as “White,” existing census procedures also clustered “Spanish surnames” (Bravo, n.d.; Choldin, 1986; Gómez, 1992). Their argument was that Spanish surnames can come from non-Spanish communities and that to better understand the needs of Latin Americans, contextualized statistics must be collected in order to “take advantage of opportunities resulting from the new federal administration” (Choldin, 1986, p. 406). The advocacy groups requested the U.S. Census Bureau to create a more unifying term that could accurately represent Latin American origins, cultures, and ethnicities in the country (Choldin, 1986; Delgado et al., 2012; Vargas & Bishop, 2015). As a result, in 1975, an ad hoc committee on racial and ethnic definitions was created, primarily composed of federal employees and social scientists. This committee was tasked to create definitions and categories that could simplify the data-gathering processes of underserved communities needing support from federal programs (Flores-Hughes, 2006) while considering an influx of new Latin American immigrants, including Central and South Americans (Flores-Hughes, 2006).

According to Choldin (1986),

Census officials have long avoided the use of subjective questions (Lowry, 1980). As they see it, their job is to collect data and publish them. They favor questions that elicit concrete answers. While they had no objection to asking a person's country of birth and his or her parents' country of birth, they were reluctant to ask individuals how they identified themselves. (p. 406)

The question about how individuals identified themselves represented a problem for the ad hoc committee, as issues of ethnicity and self-identification were viewed by the U.S. Census Bureau as subjective, invalid measures compared to previous census instruments (Choldin, 1986). Ultimately, a close-call decision (approved by two votes) was made to use the term “Hispanic,” which the committee at the time defined as “Puerto Rican, Cuban-American, Mexican-American, and persons elsewhere in Central and South America” (Choldin, 1986, p. 406).

Upon the announcement of the term “Hispanic,” rising tensions took place among Mexican advocacy groups and the U.S. Census. To minimize the tensions surrounding the term “Hispanic,” major communications media outlets were recruited to initiate a set of advertisements through Univision, Sesame Street, and the Public Broadcasting System for the upcoming 1980 U.S. Census (Vargas & Bishop, 2015). The goal of the ads was to introduce the term “Hispanic” as a definer for Latin American communities and to emphasize the importance of selecting this option in the census. The argument was that the more Latin Americans living in the United States embraced the term “Hispanic,” the more access to important resources (e.g., healthcare and education) they would have. Some advertisements even promised that the U.S. Census Bureau could better ensure “their (group) interest ... be counted and that ... census-takers ... [will] not divulge their secrets” (Choldin, 1986, p. 411).

Since then, the term “Hispanic” continues to be problematic because of ongoing disputes between advocacy groups and governmental entities and the implications that this term carries when identifying a large and diverse group of people of Latin American descent in the United States. Some disputes center around the argument that the term “Hispanic” does not accurately capture the non-monolithic identities of Latin American individuals who intersect with different racial, ethnic, and generational demographics (e.g., Alcoff, 2005). Others argue that when selecting “Hispanic” as a race in the census, it does not accurately reflect brown people, leaving many groups, such as Latiné and Middle Eastern people, wondering what option to select (Bayoumi, 2019). Furthermore, the use of the term “Hispanic” as an identifier of an academic institution type (i.e., Hispanic Serving Institution) or a funding agency (Alcoff, 2005; Oboler, 1995) restricts how sub-cultural and regional needs of students, faculty, and staff are situated and attended to.

Finally, not everyone acknowledges the term “Hispanic” in the census (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). According to the Pew Research Center (Lopez et al., 2017), a 2015 survey revealed that 11% of American adults with Latin American ancestry still do not identify as “Hispanic”; these percentages are rising (Lopez et al., 2021). The primary reason for the latter is that many Latin American communities within and outside the United States renounce the term's ties to the systems of imperialism and colonialism, slavery, genocide, and dehumanizing forms of oppression by which Spain acquired and subjugated many Latin American countries. Scholars in Latina/o studies (e.g., Aparicio, 1999; Oboler, 1995) have argued about and extensively studied the use of this term and have pointed to its significance in (mis)representing a non-monolithic cultural identity for such a large, diverse, and culturally rich group of people.

3 | THE EMERGENCE OF THE TERMS LATINO, LATINA, LATINX, LATINÉ

The most common way to refer to individuals of Latin American roots who reside in the United States has been “Latino.” The term “Latino” has been adopted by the U.S. government to include people from the Caribbean and those countries that are not Spanish-speaking (e.g., Brazil) (Murillo et al., 2021). Although the term “Latino” is a Spanish *masculine* demonym (meaning of racial or geographic origin) used to describe a population as an aggregated group or culture, Latino may be used not only to describe males but is also considered a gender-neutral term according to the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy (Real Academia Española, n.d.). The Royal Spanish Academy is Spain's authorizing institution whose mission is to audit and adapt the entire Spanish language (Real Academia Española, n.d.) across all Spanish-speaking countries.

Yet, the term “Latino” is also problematic because it inadvertently erases the existence of other gendered possibilities, including but not limited to “Latinas” (Spanish *feminine* demonym) (Rodríguez, 2014). In contrast to the term “Latinos,” “Latinas” is never used as a gender-neutral term by the Royal Spanish Academy. Given that Spanish is a

binarized and gender-based language (i.e., all nouns and pronouns have a gender), feminine and masculine representations or descriptors are the norms, thus excluding the presence of nonbinary or other gendered identities.

Other gendered possibilities that have emerged and gained some acceptance among LGBTQIA+ communities and scholars in the United States include the Spanish *gender-neutral* demonyms “Latinx” and “Latiné.” Latinx represents a gender-inclusive term that describes people in the United States who are of Latin American descent (Scharrón-del Río & Aja, 2020). The “x” replaces the “a” and “o” signifiers of masculine and feminine forms, to reject imposed gendered versions, and allow for a third identifier that is more “inclusive perspective of gender” (Murillo et al., 2021, p. 260). The second term, Latiné (pronounced as “Latin-eh”), is a more recent term that has gained some traction among Spanish-speaking individuals and scholars. This term acknowledges those problematic epistemologies that have been historically connected to the forces of colonialism and imperialism and used to categorize a group of people. Additionally, the term Latiné has been used as a form of resistance to the “x” in Latinx since it is perceived by some as yet another form of imposition by the United States (Murillo et al., 2021). Latiné is also easier to pronounce in Spanish since it is phonologically attuned and fluid. The accent mark in the “e” represents an act of resistance against colonial-, imperial-, and gendered-derived terminologies within the Spanish language (Galvez, 2022). While Latinx has mostly been embraced in the United States by LGBTQIA+, ally communities, and several scholars, Spanish-speaking Latin American countries have adopted Latiné as their gender-inclusive term (Limlingan et al., 2022). It is important to mention that neither term is included in the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy. Therefore, this institution *does not officially* recognize Latinx or Latiné terms as opposed to Latino and Latina, which further elucidates how oppression is present in language, both in written and spoken forms.

4 | IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We wrote this piece to provide insight to the engineering education scholarship and practice community on the implications of the use and agglomeration of Latiné/x/a/o or Hispanic groups in scholarship and practice. While U.S. federal government agencies must comply with established standards, these policies reflect outdated social constructs for how race and ethnicity are still recognized nationwide (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Socially constructed concepts are not an objective reality; they are created through social interactions in a particular space and time, are fluid, and keep evolving (Murphy, 1991).

Within engineering education, we must understand the role and meaning that individuals create and interpret from these social processes and how they are part of the larger social structures in which we live. For example, engineering students who identify as Latiné/x/a/o or Hispanic may be of any race, may be born in the United States, or may be immigrants. Their families could be from different countries; experience their closeness to whiteness or blackness differently; have different ethnic customs; speak Spanish and/or other languages, or only speak English; and have unique experiences across varied factors, such as social and economic status, generation in the United States, deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA) documentation (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.), and more. Using only one category (e.g., Hispanic) in research studies and publications does not allow for a nuanced understanding of unique experiences across varied factors. Assuming a monolithic identity, as we posed, is problematic and will continue to demoralize, misrepresent, and oppress Latiné/x/a/o or Hispanic communities if not properly attended to in research and practice.

By defining these terms and capturing some of the tensions around classifying the Latiné/x/a/o or Hispanic group identity, we call out to the engineering education research and practice community to consider the implications of selecting one classification over another, the decision to do so inadvertently or consciously, and the impact it may have on how research is understood, how narratives are created, and the aftereffects for the population itself. If the researcher is unsure of what term to use, at a minimum, acknowledge the complexity of the terms in future publications.

Consider asking participants to choose how they prefer to identify. You may be surprised that some will not opt to use Latiné/x/a/o or Hispanic terms. Rather, you may find they will elevate their ethnic and cultural contexts instead (e.g., I am Ecuadorian, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Chicano), or they might choose to highlight their racial identities (e.g., Black, Indigenous). Before you select a term to identify the complex and still oppressive realities of Latiné/x/a/o or Hispanic groups consider the implications of its use and widespread dissemination.

Acknowledge and reject the remnants of coloniality and imperialism that are still present, partly in the form of gendered language that dictates how individuals must identify. For quantitative-focused research involving large datasets,

we encourage researchers to ask more nuanced demographic questions in surveys to accurately capture the complex realities of the intended study populations. Regardless of the approach or term used, we recommend that scholars and practitioners do their part to respect and honor the lived realities of Latiné/x/a/o or Hispanic individuals in engineering and society at large.

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