



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2009

### H16 Hispanic: History and Use of a Generic Term

Ashley E. Shidner, BA\*, and Heidi S. Davis, BA, BS, University of West Florida, Department of Anthropology, 11000 University Parkway, Pensacola, FL 32514

The learning objective of this presentation is to discuss the basic definitions of social race and ethnicity as they relate to the term Hispanic.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by discussing the history of the term Hispanic and its common use as a social race and ethnic category.

Using the basic definitions of social race and ethnicity as they relate to the term Hispanic, this presentation will demonstrate that the term Hispanic does not fit into either category, further perpetuating confusion regarding use of the term.

Hispanic is a term that was adopted and poorly defined by the United States government in order to address a minority population comprised of various national origin groups. The term Hispanic is thought to be a derivation of the Latin word *Hispania*, used to refer to region of modern day Spain or the Iberian Peninsula by the Romans (Marín and Marín 1991). When Spanish settlers arrived in New Mexico they were referred to as Hispanos. This term was later rejected in the southwest after Mexico won independence from Spain in lieu of the term Latino, because it rejected the Spain of the conquistadors (Melville 1988). In 1968 congress authorized President Johnson to declare the week including September 15 and 16 as National Hispanic Heritage Week. It was after this declaration the term Hispanic became more widespread.

Based on a 1977-1978 government order, Hispanic was defined as “a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central, South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (Forbes 1999:62). This definition distinguished Hispanic as an ethnicity, attempting to suggest a common cultural or language origin, rather than a racial category. According to Melville (1988), the most common practice for an individual is to refer to themselves as based on their national origin. However, in official government reporting, the U.S. Census Bureau considers Hispanic as an ethnicity to be selected in conjunction with a racial category of Black or White. Thus, while many individuals from Spanish-speaking countries would *not* refer to themselves as Hispanic in their native country, they are forced to do so in the United States.

Despite governmental mandates and personal choice, Hispanics are continually referred to as both a racial and an ethnic group. Further, these terms are often used interchangeably despite significant differences between their meanings. Social race in the United States is based on skin pigmentation and other phenotypic characteristics that are believed to reflect ones ancestral genealogy. However, these phenotypical characteristics continually fail to “identify” Hispanic individuals. For example, in Puerto Rico, many individuals would be racially classified as White or Black in the United States, or even a third racial category within their own country (Rodríguez 2000).

Race and ethnicity can be differentiated on the idea that ethnicity is strictly based on the idea that the group of individuals share some cultural ancestry or heritage. Brazilians, who speak Portuguese, and Guatemala Mayans, who speak unique Mayan dialects, are often referred to as Hispanic in the United States. The discordance of language and the unique population histories of these groups reject the U.S. government's designation of Hispanic of belonging to a shared Spanish culture or origin. Due to confusing and misguided terminology, it is not surprising that anthropologists are not able to define this term accurately due to the conflicting differences between self-identification and governmental identification. This presentation concludes that when conducting forensic anthropological research using Hispanic individuals, anthropologists must clearly define their population groups, using national origins, language, and self-described identity. Defining population groups will enable a better understanding of the unique population groups that are often referred to as Hispanic.

#### Hispanic, Race, Ethnicity