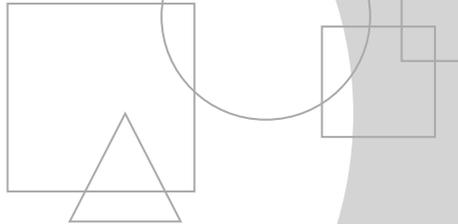


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LATINOS AND BLACKS: What Unites and Divides Us?

By Wendy Conklin

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LATINOS AND BLACKS: What Unites and Divides Us?

Wendy Conklin



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The workplace is one of the few places where people of different races, ethnicities, histories and cultures come together to achieve common goals. As the Latino / Hispanic and Black / African American¹ populations of the United States increase they continue to influence one another. Unique differences divide and unite members of these groups, affecting how they relate and adapt to their circumstances.

To explore these differences as well as the similarities, we initiated an open discussion among four Latinos and Blacks: a woman and a man from each group. Our discussion touched on many subjects, including immigration, nationality, assimilation, language, race, ethnicity, skin color and appearance. We were quick to identify what divides us and took longer to see what unites us, and some subjects were more sensitive than others.

Our time together was a learning experience. We experienced the need for Blacks and Latinos — as distinct, complex, unique and overlapping groups — to learn more about each other and bridge a gap of ignorance and misunderstanding. It was sometimes difficult to engage in deep conversation on these issues as it requires a great deal of trust and risk. This is often why many people don't engage in these conversations.

In this article, we capture the discussion that took place during our interviews and explore important issues that may stand in the way of Blacks and Latinos becoming true allies and collaborating with each other as friends, peers and bosses.

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About the Interview Participants

The participants who graciously accepted our invitation are all diversity and/or organization development consultants who bring not only their personal and professional experiences, but also a broad perspective on the workplace and diversity in general. They live in different areas of the United States and each brings their personal and professional experience as a Latina, Latino, a Black woman and a Black man. Two members of our group are Baby Boomers; one is a member of The Silent Generation and another is a Gen Xer — which allows for a varied generational perspective.

It is important to note that the participants in this interview, although members of specific groups by gender, race or other characteristic, do not speak for their respective groups as a whole. For example, both Latino voices are of Puerto Rican heritage and thus represent a

narrow slice of the greater Latino population. Of our two Black participants one is multi-racial. Instead, they speak from their own personal experience. In addition, we acknowledge that it would be impossible to eliminate bias from our participants. Instead, we work to embrace and acknowledge our biases.

Our interview participants are:

Patricia Romney, PhD, is a psychologist/consultant/professor living in Amherst, Massachusetts. She identifies herself as a Black woman who is multi-racial and deeply multicultural. Pat is knowledgeable of inter-group processes and recognizes that there is tension between these groups and a lot of room for collaboration. She wants to raise questions about our use of language.

Curt Waller, MSHRD, an organization development consultant, identifies as a Black/African American man and great grandfather living in San Diego, California. Curt is concerned about how people are lumped into these groups. He too believes that the tensions among these groups are significant. He brings an East and West coast perspective. Where he lives in San Diego, Latinos are the largest percentage of the population.

Daisy Rios, PhD, an organization development consultant and diversity practitioner, identifies as a Puerto Rican woman, mother, grandmother, who lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Daisy believes that the attention placed on Latino immigration is exacerbating the tension between Blacks and Latinos. She looks at these issues from a structural perspective and worries about how competition for resources impacts these groups ability to work collaboratively. She brings the perspective of a Puerto Rican woman who was born a U.S. citizen.

Elfi Martinez, MBA, is a diversity consultant and screenwriter who identifies as a Latino Gen Xer who lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Elfi's experience as a Latino runs the gamut from Wall Street to Hollywood. He feels that role models and mentoring are an important component in this discussion.

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The Differences that Divide Us

Some differences are obvious, such as skin color and appearance, but others are more subtle and harder to identify. The effects of each group's diverse history and cultural backgrounds, the merging of races and ethnicities, the problem of classifications, and the struggle for survival and happiness, all play roles that divide these two groups.

Below are highlights of our discussions on language, classification, identity, immigration, colorism, the U.S. system and culture, the Oppression Olympics, assimilation and playing the game.

On Language, Classification and Identity

Because Latinos and Blacks are of different ethnicities, mixes, colors and nationalities, this complexity challenges our use of language. According to Pat, all "Black folk" are members of the African diaspora and have African heritage. "We speak many languages — English, Spanish, French — and we have many different ethnicities — Haitian, Trinidadian, African American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Creole, Guyanese, Ghanaian, etc."

Pat points out that in our discussion we are using an ethnic descriptor when talking about Latinos and a racial descriptor when talking about Blacks. "My point is," she explains, "our language fails us and it is important to be as precise as possible. People care about their identity and want to be respected for who they are."

"Classifying Hispanics as a racial group, for example, is inappropriate," says Daisy. "Latinos are comprised of different races and come from different countries. The U.S. insistence on lumping Latinos into a racial category called 'Hispanic' is ridiculous to me. Latinos have many similarities with respect to language and culture, however, we are not a homogeneous group with similar experiences."

Another issue is the use of and reactions to the Spanish-English languages and bilingualism. For Blacks, language in general can be a big divide and this is not always well understood.

"For African Americans, as a whole, our African languages have been stolen and we speak English instead," explains Pat. "When people start speaking in another language, it can be scary. Sometimes African Americans wonder if they are being talked about. On the other hand, in the workplace someone with a strong Latino accent may be perceived as a 'foreigner' and be thought of as less competent."

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"In my experience non-Spanish speakers feel uncomfortable when Spanish speakers use their native language," says Daisy. "However, the Spanish language keeps me connected to my roots. Knowledge of the Spanish language varies considerably within the Latino community. Some of us were encouraged to practice it, or learn it if we were born in the States; others were encouraged to forget it and at times were even punished for using it. Within the Latino community there is often ridicule if a Latino does not speak Spanish or speaks what is considered a lesser form of the language — Spanglish."

Elfi — a Latino who was born in the U.S. — doesn't speak Spanish. Because of this, he's uncomfortable when he goes back to Puerto Rico. "I feel uncomfortable because I feel like a fraud. I take myself to a place of not being 'Latino' enough. I feel like I'm being judged as not remembering where I came from because I lack a fundamental piece of shared culture and identity — language. I ask myself — where's my accent — where's my proof?" Elfi considers Spanish to be the "social glue" among Latinos. "Although we have different cultures we are all united by language. Language functions as a way for Latinos to connect and bond."

"If a Latino speaks Spanish in the work environment they are often told to speak in English," says Daisy, "unless of course it is a part of their job and then they are often not compensated for the skill. I am stunned by how a skill that can be utilized to benefit all is seen as a negative. Only the U.S. has such attachment to monolingualism."

On Immigration

There are differences in how Latinos and Blacks see immigration. Both groups arrived in the U.S. under different circumstances, which defines their culture here. Daisy and Pat both agree that it's important to look at the reasons why people immigrated or migrated to the U.S. For example, there is a distinction between those of African American heritage whose ancestors were enslaved and brought to the U.S. and other people, some of whom are Black (Trinidadians, Jamaicans, Haitians), that came "voluntarily." Then there are those who were already here. Latinos have been in this country for 500 years and before the founding of the

U.S.² The recent media focus on Latino immigration issues ignores this historical context.

"When we treat our Mexican brothers and sisters with disdain, we are forgetting this fact. When we talk about being an 'American' we forget that the Americas is larger than the U.S.," explains Daisy.

African Americans, according to Pat, have a discourse around voluntary and involuntary immigration. "For African Americans the sense is that Blacks were brought here involuntarily in chains and had no choice. Others, like my family who emigrated from the former British West Indies, have chosen to be here. Not all Blacks are descendants of U.S. slavery. It is complicated."

For Curt the concept of involuntary immigration creates a dilemma for Blacks in accepting Latinos and the oppression of other people of color. "Blacks tend to look at voluntary immigration as 'you chose to come here.' It's a lack of knowledge by African Americans of Latino history, many of whom have been here for a very long time."

"For Curt the concept of involuntary immigration creates a dilemma for Blacks in accepting Latinos and the oppression of other people of color. 'Blacks tend to look at voluntary immigration as 'you chose to come here.' It's a lack of knowledge by African Americans of Latino history...'"

Also important is the political and economic immigration of Latinos from Central and South America that is viewed as voluntary, when it is in fact caused by dictatorships and their death squads. Pat reminds us that many folks who came here arrived as refugees fleeing political and economic oppression, such as Haitians and Dominicans, even Bosnians and Russians. So the concept of "voluntary immigration" is highly nuanced and problematic.

An example of economic hardship is the migration of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. during Operation Bootstrap in the late 1940s and beyond, which gave way to the necessary exportation of labor to the East Coast. "U.S. policy resulted in U.S. companies benefiting from incredibly lucrative incentives on the island. The U.S. also benefited from cheap labor in the Northeast corridor. My parents, among many others, migrated during that time to work in service-related areas," adds Daisy.

Daisy also points out that Puerto Ricans are citizens of the U.S. at birth. "This is by virtue of Puerto Rico's relationship as a territory of the U.S. Curt acknowledges that growing up in Central Pennsylvania he thought Puerto Ricans were not U.S. citizens. It wasn't until much later in life that he realized this.

"The larger issue is ignorance," says Pat, "that people just don't know these things. Our immigration conversation is shaped by the media."

"I believe that immigration is the single most divisive issue currently between Blacks and Latinos. If we don't talk and reach some common ground on this issue, I believe that relations between the two groups will further deteriorate. Again — we both lose," concludes Elfi.

On Colorism and Appearance

The group agrees that skin color and appearance divide us. "In my family," says Elfi, "skin color runs from dark to light. Those with lighter skin seem to have more opportunity, be more affluent, own bigger houses. We also talked about who had the best hair — Anglo-looking hair that looked like a Pantene commercial," remembers Elfi.

Daisy has noticed that in the corporate sector the higher level positions held by Blacks and Latinos are generally held by those who are lighter in skin color. There is a very narrow band of acceptable behavior in the workplace in terms of dress, language and demeanor. Working to get rid of an accent or straightening hair is not unusual in order to fit in. Hiding passion or assertiveness out of fear of being negatively judged is also not unusual.

Curt sees this phenomenon in Southern California and within the Mexican community. "I track how things play out by race and how colorism divides us. It is also an intra-group phenomenon that divides our own families and communities. For example, we Blacks often kid each other about how light or dark we are. And not just skin color but also features like hair or phenotype." In his view, this mentality — on skin tone, hair texture, etc. — has significant impact on social interactions within the Black community.

Another observation is that some ethnicities and races come together across color and appearance while others don't. "In Puerto Rico, for example, there's a feeling of family regardless of your skin color," relates Pat, whose children are Black Puerto Ricans. "This is also true in many ways for Jamaicans and other Caribbean islanders whether they speak English, Spanish, French or Dutch. The same is true of African Americans. We still feel a family connection to one another"

"While I agree with Pat, it is important to note that colorism still plays out in Puerto Rico and I believe throughout the world," adds Daisy. "The lighter the color of your skin is the more access to power and privilege."

The entire group agrees, "In the U.S., people gain opportunities, resources and access based on skin color."

Then there are the complications of skin color and racial category. "Regardless of color I am still not White," says Elfi. "In the workplace, it can be difficult to invest yourself fully in an organization when the people at the top uniformly don't look like you," says Elfi. "You wonder why other people of color don't stick around. Mentors often want to guide people who remind them of themselves. Because of unfamiliarity, people of color have a harder time attracting champions who can assign them to high visibility stretch assignments or invite them to after-work gatherings where they can see and be seen and learn the unofficial rules of the organization — how things 'really work around here.'"

There's an old saying in my community," says Curt, "If you're White you're right, if you're Yellow you're mellow, if you're Brown stick around, if you're Black get back." What made this significant for Curt is he heard this comment only within the Black (at the time, the Negro) community. "It is a form of internalized oppression," he adds.

On the U.S. System and Culture

Another dividing factor is caused by the way the U.S. system works, which divides and classifies people by race when they arrive here. "For example, all Latinos are reclassified as people of color — a term which has no meaning in Latin America. Black Latinos are reclassified as just Black and sometimes as African American," explains Pat. "What we then see in the workplace is Black Latinos edged to the boundaries of the Latino community by virtue of being reclassified."

"Then there are the complications of skin color and racial category. 'Regardless of color I am still not White,' says Elfi. 'In the workplace, it can be difficult to invest yourself fully in an organization when the people at the top uniformly don't look like you.'"

This aspect of the system causes confusion for the people who arrive and those who are already here. "A good example of that is a Panamanian Afro Latino man I recently met who is unsure how to identify himself," adds Daisy. "He's been here for two years and is told that in this country he needs to identify as Black." This discounts his Latino, and more specifically, his Panamanian identity.

"In the greater U.S. culture," adds Pat, "race is a dominant variable and folks may feel more marginalized based on race as opposed to ethnicity. Or it can happen with language. This then translates to the great divide between Whites and Non-Whites.

The Oppression Olympics

"For African Americans," says Pat, "there's a real hope that Latinos understand that they're not White and that they will stay connected to African Americans. The fear is they will not, and that lighter-skinned people will more easily pass through to the board rooms and leave behind the people who are darker. Black folks hear Latinos say 'We get it, and we're also discriminated against.' African Americans have a hard time accepting that Latinos face any kind of discrimination that is similar to or as extreme as what they experience."

"It can come down to what Pat calls 'The Oppression Olympics' — a competition to determine whose pain is the worst."

According to Curt, this is an example of how Blacks have a difficult time accepting the reality of the oppression of voluntary immigrants. It can come down to what Pat calls "The Oppression Olympics" — a competition to determine whose pain is the worst. "People who are trying to come together are engaged in conflicting feelings," she says. "There's lots of uncertainty about how to be as well as uncertainty about who's 'on your side.'"

According to Daisy, often both groups have difficulty opening up and fully hearing what the other experiences in their day-to-day lives. "There are ways in which Latinos do not fully understand and appreciate the experiences of African Americans. The same can be said about African Americans' understanding of Latinos. In addition, both groups have internalized many of the stereotypes that exist in the larger culture about themselves and the other group, and in many ways operate without knowledge of the historical and systemic issues that oppress both groups."

"In the screenwriting world of big-budget features," adds Elfi, "studios often get nervous about all-minority leads. In cases where the male lead is Black they will bring in another leading character that is White or, as a compromise, Latina, in order to broaden the film's appeal.

In addition, says Daisy, many Latinos fear that the Blacks who have ascended to positions of power in corporations and non-profits will serve as gatekeepers and only advocate for Blacks instead of recruiting and promoting other people of color.

"We often forget our brothers and sisters," adds Pat.

Assimilation and Playing the Game

After much discussion, our group identified two mental frameworks or strategies for getting ahead in this country. Many Latinos have worked hard to "assimilate" and others are working hard to hold on to their culture and values. Many Blacks have learned how to "play the game" while also maintaining their own cultures and values.

In Daisy's experience growing up in the 50s and 60s, assimilation was seen as an avenue to "success." "I received clear messages about acceptable language when my accent was

ridiculed or when I was told to speak in English. I also received clear messages when friends who had light skin changed their names from Carlos to Charlie. We thought that the quicker we learned English and got rid of our accents the better off we would be. It is important to note that assimilation was not the route for all of us. Some of us could not or would not assimilate," she adds.

"In Chicago, where I grew up," relates Elfi, "I was invited into my school's gifted program with mostly Whites. I was accepted because I was born here and grew up speaking English. I'd often hear them say, 'You're nothing like what I thought you would be.' This is an example of an assimilation pattern that many Latinos experience." According to Elfi, many Latinos don't consider themselves people of color — they blanch at that. Many consider themselves Whites.

As an African American who was born here, assimilation was not Curt's model. "It was clear that we couldn't do that. Instead, a premium was placed on learning how to 'play the game' or imitate the dominant culture. I'd hang out with the White people and they would say, 'Boy, you really are articulate.' I'd then go back to my community and they would say 'Don't forget where you come from' and I would be like them. It was about playing the game to gain access to resources. I've learned to be good at playing the game."

"You risk being ostracized from your own community," says Curt. "You're damned if you do and damned if you don't. You live in two worlds. I experience myself as being bicultural."

Daisy also points out that assimilation and playing the game are just two of many strategies that people of color have utilized as a means of "fitting-in," of making themselves more acceptable to the dominant group — Whites.

The Similarities that Unite Us

Latinos and Blacks are a racially / ethnically / culturally diverse mix of people who all grapple with the issues our country faces. Both groups have their own identities regardless of how well their identities are or aren't accepted by society, and they struggle for their socio-cultural values and styles to be valued and accepted.

"Our cultures and values are not 'Anglo,'" says Pat, who cherishes the relational values that both Latinos and Blacks have in common.

Curt struggles to identify what we share and what unites us. "I don't know many African Americans who have crossed over the Latino boundary, so it is hard to see inside both cultures. In my experience, family values are very similar and so is spirituality, through whatever religion is chosen. Also there's a similarity by virtue of being part of a group. For me it was more important to be a member of my African American group rather than 'make it' in corporate America. The importance of extended family and community is vital to both Blacks and Latinos. For example, my third cousin is just as important as my first. We believe, like Latinos, that we must take care of any child that comes to us, no matter the circumstances or the relationship."

Everyone echoed the fact that both groups have similar cultural values that are very uplifting, including the joy of food, dance, music, family and spirituality / religion. They also share an

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incredible resilience in the face of difficult circumstances.

Daisy highlights that both groups have made incredibly rich contributions in their countries of origin and the U.S. in the arts, business, entertainment, science and education. "And often these contributions have been unrecognized by the larger society," she adds.

A key uniting factor for Pat is "our marginalization and the reality of discrimination. Both groups are considered 'minorities' and share a similar social location in relation to the dominant White culture. Both groups have been historically treated unequally. And both groups struggle to make the best of a situation where opportunity exists but none of it comes easily."

"The structural inequality embedded in our nation has resulted in negative experiences for both groups in key areas of life: employment, access to health care, education and more," adds Daisy.

For dominant White society these two groups are all "people of color." According to Elfi, an important uniting factor is "We're not White." "We're all 'out of the club' and we need to recognize that we face similar obstacles and stereotypes. If Blacks and Latinos join forces and push for common economic and social advancement, we'd be in a much more powerful position to demand change. From a political perspective, our combined demographics could 'swing' the swing states. It's such a waste for us to beat each other up for scraps. At the group level, we all lose."

"Everyone echoed the fact that both groups have similar cultural values that are very uplifting, including the joy of food, dance, music, family and spirituality/religion. They also share an incredible resilience in the face of difficult circumstances."

This is happening more and more in organizations. Both groups share a strong work ethic and are learning from each other about strategies to succeed and support other minority employees. Both groups sometimes collaborate to bring about organizational change that benefits everyone.

In Conclusion

"I know that we could peel the onion a few more layers to the pain, the mistrust, the envy, as well as the appreciation, the admiration and love that we may have toward the other group," explains Daisy. "For me, it is about staying engaged. Sometimes we will confront each other and at other times support and advocate for each other. I just hope that we can keep our eyes on the real issues that affect both groups. For me, these issues are systemic in nature and we need to have the courage to confront them in every sphere of our lives. We often feel that we are vying for the same economic and political piece of the pie and that the only way to get ahead is to block the other group. This type of competition and fundamental lack of trust prevents us from building strong alliances."

For Elfi, the next step is a summit to build common ground between Latinos and Blacks on the subject of immigration. "Until immigration is addressed, relations between these two groups will be strained. Thereafter, I would say we need to coalesce around common economic and social concerns, and create a united front to increase collective power. None of us is as strong as all of us."

According to Curt, the dynamics [of racism] are much more subtle today than when he was growing up. If Blacks and Latinos can begin to share their experiences in this country, he believes both groups will begin to realize they have more commonalities than differences. One of the ways he is crossing the Latino boundary is by learning how to speak Spanish. "The reasons for our experiences may differ, but the experiences and outcomes are very similar."

Members of our group also shared examples where Blacks and Latinos are working together. In some companies, for example, the Latino and African American employee groups are beginning to talk. At one major financial institution the women of color (Latinas, Blacks and Asians) formed an employee resource group to focus on the disparities between women of color and white women. In working through their differences the African American women thought the Latinas were not doing enough and the Latinas felt judged. By examining their cultural differences and what each group viewed as appropriate actions they began to understand and stop judging each other. Reaching this understanding would have been impossible if both groups focused only on their own racial or ethnic groups' experiences.

Elfi notes that ABC and Disney Studios have created fellowship programs that unite under-represented minorities in the TV arena. "They have successfully placed Latinos and Blacks on TV shows. These programs draw many applications every year and have become the gold standard in that industry to get folks in the door."

Pat mentioned the Women's Color Research Center (www.coloredgirls.org) she works with — a coalition of women of color (Black, Latino and Asian). Their focus is on social justice and the empowerment of women. Pat also spoke about collaborations in the workplace around diversity. She believes that inter-group dialogues are essential — a place where people can have these kinds of conversations.

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In many ways, it is impossible to conclude this conversation. The issues of intra- and inter-group relationships are complex, emotional in nature and require ongoing commitment to dialogue and education.

Endnotes

1. It is always challenging to "label" populations. Members of the Latino/Hispanic community, whose heritage varies widely, usually have a preference for either "Latino" or "Hispanic." Members of the Black/African American community, whose heritage also varies, prefer "Black," "African American" or both. For the purpose of this article we will refer to Latinos and Blacks, with the understanding that this includes members of these populations from all heritages.
2. Mexican land was taken by the U.S. leaving Mexicans without any option but to become U.S. citizens and the same with Puerto Rico.



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