

In L. Huang (Ed.) (1993). *Career Development for Ethnic Minority Psychologists: Choices and Challenges*. Washington, D.C. American Psychological Association.

Building Bridges: The Journey of One Chicano/Latino Psychologist

Steven Regeser López, PhD
Associate Professor, University of California, Los Angeles

The metaphor of a bridge captures much of my professional journey. Throughout my career, I have been connecting regions and territories of my personal and professional life that have previously been poorly connected or not connected at all. In this paper, I discuss the bridges that have been central to my career development. These include the ties between my family history (the past) and my present life, between the community and the research enterprise, between ethnic research and mainstream research, and between Latinos residing in the U.S. and Latinos residing in other parts of the Americas. My hope in sharing my experiences is that in some small way I might influence other ethnic minority psychologists, particularly those who are just beginning their professional journey, to consider the importance of reinforcing or building bridges between psychology and our rich and diverse experiences, experiences that have frequently been misunderstood, ignored, and devalued by the very field that we have chosen to pursue.

Upbringing though College: The Bridge between the Past and Present

I was born in Tucson, Arizona, a city about 90 miles north of the United States and Mexico border. My ancestors were mostly Mexican in background (López, Encinas, Aguirre, Siqueiros, Felix), with a little German (Regeser) and Indian (Durazo and others) mixed in. Based on oral history, my family first came to Tucson around 1830, when Tucson was still part of Mexico. A soldier from the interior of Mexico reportedly was sent to

the presidio de San Augustin, the fort that guarded the Tucson community. The Lopez family was said to begin from the marriage of an Apache woman and this Mexican soldier. Two of my families' generations lived under the Mexican flag prior to the Gadsden Purchase of 1853 when Tucson and the surrounding area were sold to the United States. The predominant language of these two generations and the two that followed was Spanish. This was not the case for the fifth generation, the generation of my brothers and sisters.

English was the primary language in our home, and in most cases the only language. The exceptions were when our older relatives visited us, principally our paternal grandparents, when Mom and Dad wanted to communicate privately their intimate or angry messages, and when they played an occasional album of Mexican songs. For the most part, my brothers, sisters, and I had little need for speaking Spanish because we were raised in a largely Anglo neighborhood on Tucson's eastside. Our Spanish was limited to the variety learned in junior high and high school Spanish classes, like our renditions of Dialogo Número 1, "Olah Pahco. Kay tall? Como estahs?" and skits, such as "La Caperocita Roja" (Little Red Riding Hood), which I remember proudly reciting to "Granny and Granpa Lopez" in my heavily accented Spanish.

As children, I think we knew that we were Mexican Americans. I remember having taken notice of several indications of our ethnicity. We ate more beans and tortillas

than my friends Jimmy Buck, Tim McFarland, and Scott Lewis. My Dad and my brother Dennis are dark-skinned, and to us, at that time, "they looked like Mexicans." We had an uncle, Uncle Chato (we called him Uncle Chate), who brought his guitar to the house when we baptized Albert, my youngest brother, and together with other relatives they sang Mexican songs. Juan Charrasqueado, a Mexican corrido, was among his favorites. And as I noted earlier, my parents and older relatives spoke Spanish. So I had ample evidence that I was different from my "gringo" friends, but ethnicity and my family heritage was not something we spent much time reflecting on. Sports, school, and television series such as I Love Lucy, Andy Griffith, and Leave It to Beaver were much more prominent parts of our lives.

The significance of ethnicity for my life changed dramatically when I entered college in 1971. Claremont Men's College (now Claremont McKenna College) is located in the greater Los Angeles area. At that time civil rights and ethnic pride were salient themes. Black and Chicano Studies Centers had recently been organized and there were concerted efforts to increase the representation and support of ethnic minorities on this rather conservative, private, liberal arts college. I was thrust into this political atmosphere which forced me to consider the meaning of ethnicity in my life. I knew I had Mexican roots, but was I a Mexican American, a Chicano, or a "Tío Taco" (Uncle Tom) as it was rumored? I thought that if only I had dark skin like my brother Dennis, I wouldn't have had this problem. People would have known where I belonged.

In struggling with this question of identity, I decided to learn more about my heritage. I planned for an independent studies program for the first semester of my junior year. I made arrangements with professors for classes in Mexican history, Mexican literature, and anthropology, the latter focusing specifically on my family. The summer before going to Mexico, I spent considerable time at the Arizona Historical Society Museum in Tucson reviewing archival documents to trace

my family genealogy and history. My most treasured find was the microfilmed copy of the 1834 baptismal record of my great-great grandmother, Maria Sotelo. I also conducted interviews with family members, particularly older members of the family, to document the family's oral history. I was putting together the Mexican American version of Roots, or more appropriately titled Raices, before Alex Haley published his version.

Having done historical research into my family heritage prepared me for my trip to Mexico. But right before going, I lived a few days with mis tíos abuelos (my great uncle and aunt), Alberto y María Aguirre, with the goal of improving my Spanish. Although they were helpful in correcting my many errors in Spanish, my stay with them was especially important because it symbolized my connecting with my past. They recounted many stories of my grandparents, of themselves, of other pioneer families, and of life in Tucson years ago. They shared with me their pride in being both Mexican and American. After many hours in the archives and many hours talking with several relatives, my stay with mis tíos served to integrate what I had learned about the family. Through the lived experiences of "Uncle Bert and Aunt Mary" I had connected in a personal way with my past, with my family heritage.

I was off to Mexico. I certainly worked on my Spanish. I recall the loneliness in not being able to communicate all that well during my first few weeks. I lived with Mexican families who knew little English. I remember walking alone the streets of Zacatecas, Guadalajara, Mexico City, San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato and others, repeating difficult Spanish words, "ferrocarril, ferrocarril, ferrocarril." As anyone who has taken Spanish language classes knows, the double r's require considerable practice. In all, I learned to speak Spanish pretty well. When I returned, I could now converse comfortably in Spanish with mis tíos, mí abuela, y otros parientes (my uncles and aunts, my grandmother, and other relatives). I am certainly not a native speaker and still have trouble with the subjunctive and idiomatic expressions, but I am proud of what

I have learned. My ability to speak Spanish provides in part a spiritual tie with my ancestors, thus ensuring that I remain connected with my past.

Upon my return to college, I don't remember having changed all that much. I still pretty much did the same things as before, studied, played baseball, and spent time with friends. The major difference was that I was able to put my ethnic identity into perspective. It is true that I frequently did not fit other people's conceptions of a Mexican American or a Chicano. (This is still the case.) However, I now knew my heritage. I now knew where I fit. Like *mís tíos abuelos*, I too was proud to be both Mexican and American. Although not looked upon favorably by my family, I now identified as Chicano. For me this label captures a sense of ethnic pride and a resolve to improve the status of people of Mexican descent. This was a new perspective indeed. Perhaps learning about *mís raíces* (my roots), improving my Spanish, and traveling in Mexico did after all contribute to a significant personal change.

At the same time that I was connecting with my past, I was also deciding on my major. One important reason for choosing psychology was that I saw an opportunity to study culture and ethnicity, particularly with regard to Chicanos, even though there were few models of research at that time. In reflecting back on this decision, I think I was looking to psychology to shed further light on the meaning of culture and ethnicity for me. Having established a solid connection with my past, I believe that I was in a good position to move forward professionally, particularly given my developing interest in culture.

After College and Before Graduate School: The Community-Research Bridge

I graduated in 1975 with my bachelor's degree and decided to pursue some type of career in psychology, particularly as it applied to Chicanos. I returned to my hometown and worked as a community worker at La Frontera Center, the outpatient clinic of a community mental health center largely serving a Mexican

American community and some American Indian communities in Southwest Tucson, the opposite side of town where I grew up. La Frontera, which means border in Spanish, was known for its culturally responsive services and its wide acceptance by the community. Due to the hard work of many people, notably two of the center's original staff, Nelba Chávez and Graciela Burruel, the clinic was well used by the community, which at that time was atypical for most mental health facilities serving Mexican Americans and other Latino groups.

The work experience was invaluable because it brought to life many of the issues raised in the research literature concerning the provision of mental health services to Chicanos. The experience also demonstrated to me that community innovators could be well ahead of the research literature. Researchers at that time were trying to figure out why Chicanos underuse mental health facilities. At La Frontera underutilization was not an issue; instead, we were concerned about enhancing the quality of care for our very full caseloads. Working at La Frontera suggested a second important bridge for me, that is, the connection between what takes place in the community and what takes place in research. I learned that the community has much to offer researchers.

While I was at La Frontera, I was rewriting my senior thesis for publication as a chapter in the first edition of Chicano psychology. I was thrilled to have my first study, which concerned clinical stereotypes of Mexican Americans, part of the first collection of Chicano research in psychology. I bring this up for two reasons. First, it shows that undergraduate research can make contributions to the literature. I encourage all undergraduate psychology majors to get involved in research, even if they do not think they will be doing research as part of their careers. For those who conduct original research, I encourage them to strive to publish their work. It is hard to do so, but it can be done, particularly if you have psychologists to guide you, as I did in John Snortum, my advisor at Claremont, and Joe Martinez, the

editor of the book.

The second reason I mention my first publication is that it served as the means by which I obtained a research job at UCLA's Spanish Speaking Mental Health Research Center (SSMHRC). When I met with Joe Martinez, who was then at the University of California at Irvine, he arranged for me to meet the director of the SSMHRC, Amado Padilla. At the end of my visit with Amado, he offered me and my wife positions at the Center. He had recently taken over the directorship of this National Institute of Mental Health funded center. I could not have been in a better place. I had a year of community/clinical experience under my belt. Now I was going to immerse myself in research, in the area that mattered most to me, Latino mental health.

There were many positive aspects in working at the Center. We had a sense of community among the staff and graduate students. In fact, Hortensia Amaro, a contributor to this panel, was one of the graduate students at that time. We all shared a common mission to produce quality research on issues pertaining to Latinos. We believed that what we were doing could make a difference in the community. Another positive feature was that our paths crossed with many accomplished professionals dedicated to Latino mental health. Among them were Esteban Olmedo, René "Art" Ruiz, Eligio Padilla, Manuel Casas, Manuel Miranda, Martha Bernal, Juan Ramos, Cervando Martinez, all of whom who have made important contributions.

Another advantage of working at the SSMHRC was that opportunities were given to many of us, even if we had little experience with the task at hand. For example, in conjunction with Manuel Casas and Esteban Olmedo, I helped organize two small conferences, one regarding Community Mental Health Centers serving Latinos, and another concerning the representation of Latinos among the mental health professions, which later resulted in a Center monograph that I co-edited with Esteban Olmedo.

I learned many things during my work at the SSMHRC. One important lesson was that research can help the community. Helping to organize conferences and assisting with ongoing research projects all represented efforts to improve the community. Thus, I became aware of how research can have an impact on practitioners, on public policy, and, in turn, on the social status of Latinos.

In sum, my experiences at La Frontera and at the Spanish Speaking Mental Health Research Center demonstrated to me the importance of establishing a bridge between what takes place in the community and what takes place in the academic setting. There are times when the community is ahead of that which is being studied and being reported in the literature, as was the case of La Frontera's providing mental health services to Mexican Americans. On the other hand, there are times when research efforts can indeed set the pace for community endeavors. For example, documenting the severe underrepresentation of Latinos within the mental health professions served to support policy initiatives to increase representations of Latinos within graduate programs. Whatever the circumstance, I learned that a bridge between the community and the academic community is critical. The better the connection between both sides, the better the overall contribution.

Graduate School: The Bridge between Mainstream and Ethnic Research

I entered graduate school at UCLA in 1977, two years after I had graduated from college. I felt that I was very prepared for my doctoral studies in clinical psychology having had one year each of community and research experience. I was quickly humbled by my peers, all of whom were very talented, and by my instructors, who provided me with critical feedback. I learned that I was not as prepared as I had thought. Nevertheless, my performance was satisfactory, not great, but I had no significant problems, except for the usual anxiety that accompanies graduate school.

My interest in ethnic research

continued. I conducted my first research project on somatic complaints among Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans. La Frontera, in fact, was the site of my research. I wrote a review article on Mexican American's usage of mental health facilities that challenged the widely accepted notion of underutilization. I was also involved in other projects. If I was to characterize my research at that time it was to advance our understanding of Mexican Americans, pretty much in a descriptive fashion. Do they present more somatic complaints than do Anglo Americans?; Do they underutilize mental health services compared to their representation in the community?; and Do they prefer ethnically similar therapists? These were among the questions that interested me. At that time I believed that psychological theory and mainstream research had little to offer me because they were not based on research with Mexican Americans.

My ethnic and theoretical perspective were jostled when I took a personality course from Bernie Weiner, a social/personality faculty member. I was impressed by his focus on theory and psychological processes, particularly with regard to research on attribution theory. I joined his research group and did some preliminary work on applying attribution theory to the study of prejudice and racism. Bernie then suggested that I consider applying my ideas to a clinical context, which I did for my dissertation, a study of ethnic bias in clinical judgment.

Through my meetings with Bernie and his research group, I learned the value of incorporating psychological theory into research problems. Thus, my study on whether clinicians are biased in their initial evaluations of Mexican American patients incorporated an attributional perspective. By doing so, not only was I able to assess if clinicians were biased (description), but I was also able to assess why they might be biased (theory). To incorporate theory in a meaningful fashion is perhaps the most valuable lesson I learned in graduate school although it may not always be noticeable in my research.

Integrating theory adds a fresh

perspective to ethnic research. Such research then is capable of making a contribution at two levels, one with regard to the ethnic group under study, and the other with regard to theory. For example, with my dissertation research, I found that there was little evidence of ethnic bias. But I also found that clinicians' attributions about the causes of presenting problems are related to clinical judgments in meaningful ways. For instance, clinicians' perceptions that the presenting problem is due to stable factors is related to their ratings of the patient's prognosis. Thus, my theory-based research was able to make a contribution to both ethnic and mainstream research.

For the most part I believe that ethnic research and mainstream research are segregated; there is little dialogue between these two bodies of research. Authors in each camp believe that the work in the other camp has little to offer their research. From the ethnic perspective, mainstream research is thought to be based on limited samples, typically Caucasian college students, therefore the theories drawn from such research are thought to be largely irrelevant. In fact, I was told by an ethnic researcher that attribution theory has little significance in understanding phenomena related to Chicanos because the theory was based on White students. From the mainstream perspective, ethnic research is thought to be limited because it is viewed as largely atheoretical, and thus is not viewed as advancing our understanding of basic psychological processes.

I disagree with both positions. In fact, I believe that to enhance both mainstream and ethnic research, it is critical that more connections be developed between these lines of study. Given my longstanding interest in ethnic issues, and given my training under Bernie Weiner, I learned the value of building a bridge between these two general lines of research. It is my belief that the more each type of research draws from the other, the greater the likelihood that significant advances in our understanding of human behavior will be made. In other words, if psychology is going to advance our understanding of human behavior, not the behavior of specific groups,

then mainstream research needs ethnic research and ethnic research needs mainstream research. Without this bridge, psychological research will continue to be segregated.

From my First Academic Position to my Sabbatical: The Bridge Connecting the United States and Latin America

I took my first academic position at the University of Southern California in 1982, one year prior to completing my dissertation. I developed my research on cultural issues in the clinical domain. The first three years were difficult as I was preparing for classes and getting my research off the ground. At the time of my third year review I had few publications. In summarizing the review committee's evaluation, Jerry Davison, the department chair, said that the review committee liked my work, however I had a limited number of publications. He stated, "Make it easy for us to give you tenure." I interpreted this as a very supportive statement. He would have been justified in saying, "Tenure is unlikely unless you prove to be more productive." But he didn't. His support and the support of my colleagues helped me to be more productive. I was awarded tenure in 1989.

During my 9 1/2 years at USC, I received two fellowships that helped me considerably. The first was from the Ford Foundation that enabled me to have one year without teaching so I could work solely on my research. That year was most productive. I encourage all young minority faculty to apply for the Ford Foundation post-doctoral fellowship and other sources of support to free up time to devote towards writing manuscripts and conducting research. I have been on the Ford Foundation review panel for some time and each year I am amazed that there are relatively few applicants.

The second fellowship, a Fulbright Scholar award, coincided with my sabbatical during the fall semester of 1990. I took my wife and four daughters to live in Guadalajara, Mexico for six months. ITESO, a private

Jesuit college, and Juan Ortiz, a professor at ITESO, graciously sponsored my visit. During this time, I attended a couple of conferences, met with key psychologists in Mexico, and conducted research on psychiatry residents' consideration of culture in their initial evaluations of actual patients. One important lesson that I learned was that Mexican and other Latin American psychologists are addressing some of the very same issues that have interested many ethnic minority mental health professionals: How to adapt European and American psychological theory and methods to their specific population.

In Mexico, some people uncritically adopt established models, giving little attention to the unique cultural context of their people. The psychiatric residents and their instructors, for example, were overall strong adherents to DSM-III-R and biological psychiatry with little consideration of cultural factors. This was particularly the case during initial clinical interviews when psychiatric residents were interested in symptom identification for purposes of diagnoses with limited interest in understanding the meaning that the patients and their family members ascribe to the presenting problems. On the other hand, other Mexican professionals were modifying existing technology so that it better fit their population. A group of gestalt therapists, for instance, have given careful thought to how gestalt therapy must be adapted for their population, as they say "al estilo mexicano" (Mexican style). For example, therapeutic exercises that can be directive and confrontational in nature are more likely conducted in a collaborative fashion. A third perspective was offered by a Guatemalan colleague when he asked me, "When are we going to develop theories and therapies for our people instead of adapting theories and interventions developed for others?" My point is that the experience of our colleagues down south could prove to be most enlightening regarding how to adapt existing Euro-American psychological theory and methods or how to develop new culture specific theories and methods. As well, those of us from the United States may be able offer them some guidance on these and related issues. For example, the work of how to adopt clinical

interventions for ethnic groups in the United States and for patients from foreign countries, such as China, could assist Mexican mental health professionals to better integrate cultural perspectives in their clinical work.

Although I have only made a few connections with our Latin American colleagues thus far, I look forward to reinforcing these ties toward the goal of building a bridge. I envision more shared symposia at international conferences, arrangements for exchanges between Latin American and U.S. faculty and students, and perhaps even joint research projects. With my recent travels to Latin American (Mexico for my sabbatical and Costa Rica for a conference), I affirmed my ties with *nuestros hermanos en America Latina* (our brothers and sisters in Latin America). We share the same challenge, to improve the status of *nuestra gente* (our people).

Supports and Environmental Hazards

Bridges do not exist by themselves. They need supports to withstand the environmental hazards. Similarly, my professional journey has been characterized by many supports and some environmental hazards. With regard to supports, the people whom I have mentioned thus far are some of the professionals who have lent me a hand at one time or another. Without the guidance of Bernie Weiner and John Snortum, and without the opportunities with which Amado Padilla and Nelba Chávez provided me, I would not have had the success that I have been fortunate to experience. Supports in my personal life have been essential to my professional path. My parents, Carlomagno Encinas López and Emma Jean (Regeser) López, my wife of sixteen years, Leticia Cuecuecha-López, and my faith in God have provided me the necessary foundation for my career to grow.

Although I have had much support, like any of us, I still encounter my share of environmental hazards. Perhaps the difficulty I experience most is the tendency to overextend myself. In my efforts to bridge different

professional areas, I open myself to the criticism that I do many things, but not one thing well. I encourage young professionals to keep in mind their goals and their directions. As key decisions arise, it is important to keep in mind one's charted course.

Another risk in getting involved in too many activities is that one can tend to forget about what really matters in life. Fortunately, I have my four daughters (ages 4 to 15 years) and my wife to help me keep my priorities straight. Although it is not always clear, my family is my top priority. My greatest contribution to society will not be my professional accomplishments, they will be the four adults whom Leticia and I have educated, nurtured, and guided.

One significant environmental hazard that we as ethnic minority professionals encounter is that of prejudice and discrimination. It comes in many forms. I recall two instances when a friendly colleague of mine referred to me as "Super Taco." On the first occasion, he greeted me in the hallway in this fashion, and a Latina student overheard him. I remember feeling anxious, not knowing how to respond. I said nothing. I think I lost some of the student's respect for not confronting him.

Later, this same colleague introduced me to a large gathering of undergraduate psychology majors as the department's "Super Taco." Again I felt anxious, but this time I was prepared. After he introduced me, I made a brief presentation to the group, and then he showed a movie. I took him aside and told him in a straightforward manner that I did not like him to refer to me in that way. I remember saying, "I have not heard you call our Italian American professor 'Super spaghetti ball' or our Jewish professors 'Super Matzoh balls'." He got the message; he never called me that again. Further, we continued to maintain amicable relations.

In living in a racist society, it is inevitable that we are going to experience the ethnic slurs, innuendos, and other forms of discrimination. It is important that we be

prepared to address them in a firm, but mature fashion. I think the manner in which we respond can be most educational to those of our colleagues or students who express their racial prejudice. In the specific case that I mentioned, I don't know if my colleague's attitudes about Chicanos have necessarily changed, however I do feel that he respects me more because of the manner in which I approached him.

Conclusion

Each person's professional journey is unique. Mine certainly has had its own peculiar path. The ties I have chosen to make in my career may not be the ties others would choose to make. In relating my personal story, I hope to encourage others, particularly budding ethnic minority professionals, to reflect on the bridges they can establish between their personal experiences and psychology. I am convinced that these connections will serve to broaden and enrich psychology as a science and as a profession.