

Negotiating Ethnic Recognition Systems in the UK: the soft pan-ethnic identifications of Latin American migrants in the north of England

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ABSTRACT *Despite aiming to provide minority ethnic groups with material equality and protection from discrimination, the British ethno-cultural system of recognition has perpetuated social differentiation which is difficult to transcend. Drawing from interviews with informants and 10 in-depth case studies with Latin American and Latino-British families in the Yorkshire and Greater Manchester regions of the north of England, the paper explores the fraught relationship between these migrants and their multicultural framework of incorporation. Significant here are the contested understandings of the Latin American collective identity, combined with the diversity of migration trajectories, socioeconomic backgrounds and life-course needs of migrants and their children, which contribute to soft pan-ethnic identifications among the participant population. It is argued that, by encouraging migrants and their descendants to seek recognition through absolute ethnic differences, multicultural recognition systems can reproduce colonial categories and fail to respond to the diverse social and life-course needs of migrants.*

In this article I consider the British ethno-cultural system of minority recognition through the experience of Latin American migrants in Yorkshire and Greater Manchester, a relatively new and highly invisible immigrant group in the UK. I start by briefly exploring the post-1945 immigration flows to Britain and the incorporation models which have been adopted in order to accommodate the country's 'racially' and ethnically diverse populations. I note that, despite the current abandonment of the multicultural approach from the UK's political discourse, ethnic and cultural differentiation systems continue to dictate how migrants and minority ethnic groups can negotiate political representation and

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access social protection. After introducing the research project on which this paper is based and how it was undertaken, I proceed to consider the ways in which the contested conceptualisations of the Latin American collective identity, combined with the socioeconomic, life-course and migration trajectories which characterise this population, result in soft pan-ethnic affiliation. The case of these migrants and their children highlights how reliance on ethno-cultural differentiation can lead to the reproduction of colonial categories, and fails to respond to the social needs of those migrant groups who are not ‘officially’ recognised as ethnic minorities.

Approaches to migrant incorporation: the British case

After the Second World War most Western European countries required immigration to supply the shortage of labour that had been caused by the conflict.¹ Grillo describes how, in the case of Britain, workers came from southern European countries such as Italy, as well as from the retained exiled populations of the war, such as Poles and Ukrainians.² However, colonial and ex-colonial territories became the main source of labour and people from the West Indies and South Asia started to arrive in the country; the next few decades saw an increase in non-white immigration and a greater ethnic diversification of British society.³

Early approaches to migrant incorporation, mainly based on a US perspective, worked on the premise that migrants and their descendants would, progressively and in a linear manner, become economically, politically and culturally ‘assimilated’ (adapted and acculturated) into their host society.⁴ On this basis belonging to the national community had to be achieved by immigrants and their descendants by progressively abandoning any linguistic, religious or ethno-cultural differences, which in turn would provide them with full social membership and equality.

Castles highlights how, after 1945, assimilationist approaches were used to different degrees in the UK and other European countries, especially in the case of the way former colonial powers incorporated immigrants from countries which had been subjected to their rule.⁵ Postcolonial thinkers have emphasised the fact that, despite the process of decolonisation and the dissolution of the empire, the colonial social hierarchy was retained in the ways in which the ‘mother country’ treated its Commonwealth newcomers, for instance in commonplace assertions of the superiority of the white British.⁶ Consequently, in the 1950s, Britain started to experience the symptoms of the discriminatory treatment suffered by ‘non-white’ immigrants and which manifested in the ‘race riots’ that broke out in London and Nottingham in 1958.⁷

Within this climate several British governments passed laws to control immigration admission to the UK and to redefine British nationality from the 1960s onwards. For instance, the *Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962* and *1968* aimed to restrict the entry of colonial and ex-colonial subjects. At the same time, however, legislation such as the *Race Relations Act 1968* was also passed, in order to counteract racial discrimination.⁸ Joppke suggests that ‘the British regime for integrating immigrants presented itself from the start as a race relations regime, a regime for managing the relations between groups kept apart by

the immutable mark of skin colour'.⁹ It therefore showed an extreme example of citizenship as 'externally exclusive' by restricting new entries, and as 'internally inclusive' by adopting a Marshallian approach aimed at bestowing full citizenship equality to Commonwealth immigrants. As these immigrants already had formal British citizenship, the necessary next step was to provide them with full social rights, that is, access to welfare and material equality.¹⁰

Castles has noted that, from the 1970s onwards, many Western countries faced the 'illusion' of long-term cultural assimilation and engaged with the enduring social and cultural diversity of their immigrant populations.¹¹ In Britain the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the development of educational and municipal multicultural initiatives aimed at addressing, to some extent, the discrimination suffered by minority ethnic individuals.¹² At the same time, and inspired by the US black civil rights and liberation movements, non-white British residents organised politically to demand recognition of their rights.¹³ However, multicultural initiatives in Britain did not become fully developed national policies; instead they focused on minorities and tried to address their discriminatory treatment by introducing ethnic monitoring systems and developing special social protection provisions.¹⁴ Within this framework minorities were offered cultural tolerance and protection as long as they lived according to existing laws and civic principles; nevertheless, the core of perceived 'British values' remained untouched and multicultural principles were not implemented more widely.¹⁵

Since the end of the 1990s multiculturalism has been widely questioned from political, policy and academic angles. It has been argued that multiculturalism is built upon bounded and organically essentialised ideas of cultural or ethnic groups,¹⁶ ignoring their inherent diversity (women, young people) and the power relations within them.¹⁷ Furthermore, as Joppke and Lukes have pointed out, by protecting a 'mosaic' of cultural groups, multiculturalism has been accused of fragmenting and disuniting the national collective and fomenting segregation.¹⁸

At the beginning of the 2000s Britain saw attempts to address these criticisms. The publication of *The Parekh Report* was the culmination of the work of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain and aimed to provide policy recommendations on how to counteract racial discrimination in the country.¹⁹ Overall 'new multiculturalism' was a re-conceptualisation that tried to adopt a 'bottom-up' approach by which 'culture' was considered to be generated from society at large and not rigidly defined by the state from above.²⁰ In spite of these 'reformist' efforts, the multicultural approach has been disappearing from UK governments' agendas during the past decade. Terrorist attacks such as the ones on 11 September 2001 in New York and 7 July 2007 in London have complicated further the contemporary political climate, fuelling fears of disaffection and segregation (mainly focusing on young British Muslims). Within this climate the British state has shifted its efforts towards a more policy-regulated framework rooted in principles of 'community cohesion'. These policy developments place 'the primary responsibility for integration... with immigrants and minorities', therefore returning to assimilationist positions.²¹

Despite this gradual abandonment of the multicultural discourse, ethnic and cultural recognition principles continue to underpin British policy approaches aimed at the social protection of ethnic minorities from discrimination.²² In the

following sections I consider the fraught relationship between Latin American migrants and their descendants in the north of England and this ethnic minority recognition approach. First, however, I briefly present the research project on which this article is based.

The case of Latin American migrants and their children in the north of England

Scholars have started to document the extent to which the UK has become a popular country of settlement for Latin American migrants in the past two decades, with an estimated total population of 186 500 in 2011.²³ However, most of the studies conducted to date have been undertaken in London, where the majority of the population resides.²⁴ Consequently information is scarcer once outside the capital and there has been a general lack of research about the experiences of children and young people from this group.²⁵

The project on which this paper is based aimed to address the gap of information affecting Latin Americans (adults and young people) in the north of the country, where the population is smaller and more dispersed. The research was conducted using 14 stakeholders (from Latin American support groups and businesses, Evangelical Church and interpretation services) and other informants (young families and single migrants), as well as a case study with 10 Latin American and Latino-British families (totalling 30 participants) in the Yorkshire and Greater Manchester regions in 2009–10. It is important to emphasise that all participants resided in towns or urban settings with a low presence of fellow Latin Americans. Figures from the *Labour Force Survey* for the period October–December 2009 indicated that only 4.7% (6401 people) of the Latin American population registered by this survey resided in Yorkshire and the Humberside and North East and West regions.²⁶ In this paper I use the expression ‘north of England’ as a collective name for the two regions in which the project took place as both regions have low numbers of Latin American residents and similar socio-cultural invisibility parameters. In order to build a case study of this ‘hard-to-reach’ population, I selected as research subjects Latin American individuals and their families with whom I could explore their experiences of settlement within conditions of socio-cultural invisibility (marked by the relative absence of fellow migrants and scarcity of Latin American cultural spaces).

The fieldwork with the families included all the household members over eight years of age and combined a range of qualitative methods, involving multiple individual and group research encounters. With the adults I conducted an in-depth interview which combined narrative and semi-structured phases and the completion of a family diagram,²⁷ and we discussed migration, settlement and transnational family experiences. In addition, I undertook three different fieldwork activities with each young participant to explore their everyday experiences, social worlds and senses of belonging (these included family, maps and weekly activities diagrams combined with semi-structured interviews).²⁸ Finally, I conducted a group semi-structured interview with a ‘biographical object’ (ornamental object, photograph, etc) chosen by all the participant members of the family with the aim of collecting collaborative accounts

regarding family stories, values and heritage.²⁹ Fieldwork with informants and stakeholders consisted of semi-structured interviews to develop a deeper understanding of the migratory and socioeconomic diversity which characterise Latin American migrants, and of any existing cultural or support initiatives in the north of England. Participants were given freedom to use English or Spanish (or both) during the fieldwork, and in the quotes used in this paper, I indicate in *italics* those passages that were originally spoken in English and in normal font those which I have translated. All names used are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

For the purpose of this article it is important to consider the diversity of life-course stages and migration situations which characterised the family case studies and additional informants in the project. In order to explore the experiences of second-generation migrants, all the families included in this study had at least one child over the age of eight and had resided in the UK for some time. The sample does not reflect the full diversity of migration histories or socioeconomic backgrounds, as a result. To obtain a better understanding of the population in the north, the sample of additional informants included young people with no family responsibilities (single or in partnership) who were more recent migrants, and couples or single parents who had very young children (up to seven years of age). Participants had arrived in the UK as asylum seekers or refugees, initially as students or as the result of marriage to a British citizen, or as economic migrants (both high- and low-skilled); periods of residence ranged from long-term (20+ years), mid-term (10+ years) to recent migrants (five years or less). All the participant families, informants and stakeholders had regular migration status, either through having acquired British or Spanish citizenship or having been given Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK. However, two young informants were potentially in an irregular situation.

For the research I followed the most popular politico-geographical definition of Latin America, which includes the '20 countries that gained their independence from Spain, Portugal (Brazil), and France (Haiti) in the nineteenth century (and at the turn of the century in the cases of Cuba and Panama)'.³⁰ The countries of origin of the final sample of participants included: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico and Peru. However, as I will discuss in the next section, 'Latin America' is a highly controversial term and, in order to counteract the colonial standpoint which it connotes, I actively recruited participants who self-identified with the idea of Latin America in some way (however contested and perceived), with the aim of foregrounding their understandings of the term and how it is resisted, negotiated and reconstructed.

Contested conceptualisations of the Latin American collective identity

The meaning and uses of the concept of Latin America are highly controversial. There are two strands of thought regarding when the term was first used. One of them considers that geographers in the 16th century started to deploy it to designate the territories colonised by Spain and Portugal.³¹ The other maintains that it was first used by French colonisers in the 1850s as an attempt to consolidate their power in the region by creating a political entity based on the Romance

(Latin) languages and cultures that the Spanish, Portuguese and French had brought to the continent.³² In fact, both perspectives are Eurocentric and colonialist and reify the 'Latin' patrimony of the imperialist nations (Spain, Portugal and France) which had invaded the region from 1492 onwards, disregarding the important African, Indigenous and subsequent immigrant cultures that are part of the heritage of the continent.³³

In addition, and as Mignolo has pointed out, after obtaining independence from Spain, white dominant classes in South American and Caribbean ex-colonies appropriated this macro-identity in order to build their political agendas and secure their power over the population of indigenous and African descent, further exacerbating the discriminatory connotations of this term.³⁴ Notwithstanding this, it is important to note that many scholars and other intellectuals concur that a sense of Latin American identity (multiply defined and contested) has continued to exist *vis-à-vis* national identities and other collective affiliations across this vast and heterogeneous region.³⁵

The controversy of this nomenclature has been intensified by the growth of Latin American migrant populations and their descendants around the world. As Gracia highlights, the remit of the concept 'Latin American' excludes those populations who have family roots in the region but were born outside of Central and South American countries.³⁶ Increasingly Latin American migrant and minority populations in the USA are adopting pan-ethnic categories such as Hispanic or Latino to define themselves and acquire political representation.³⁷ In this context pan-ethnicity refers to the consolidation of a collective identity category incorporating a range of ethnic, 'racial' or national groups which have historically considered themselves to be distinct.³⁸ Hispanic and Latino pan-ethnic categories are subject to 'colonialist' problems similar to those affecting the concept of Latin America, but also incorporate further issues related to their core defining features, such as political boundaries or 'racial' characteristics, and to the external influences on their creation (eg policy frameworks and census groups in the USA).³⁹ All these constructed and dynamic categories are highly problematic and do not provide a straightforward basis of ethnic identification for those coming from Central and South American countries or their descendants.

An example of the extent to which people born in this region identify or mis-identify with the category 'Latin American' in England and Wales can be found in the *2001 Census*.⁴⁰ Figure 1 shows the data for people who, in this survey, chose to describe their ethnicity as 'Latin American' versus those who, instead, preferred to use the terms 'Central or South American' (information gathered through the written answers of the participants; 42 488 people provided this clarification after ticking the category 'Other'). As can be seen, in all the regions of the country a greater number of Census' participants decided to define themselves as 'Central and South American' (62% of the total) rather than as 'Latin Americans' (38%).

The problem remains that using 'Latin American' as an ethnic category does not capture the diversity of self-identifications of people born in these countries. The *Labour Force Survey October–December 2009* provides an illustration of the multiplicity of ethnic affiliations that characterise this group in the UK.⁴¹ Figure 2 shows the chosen ethnicity categories for the labour force born in Latin

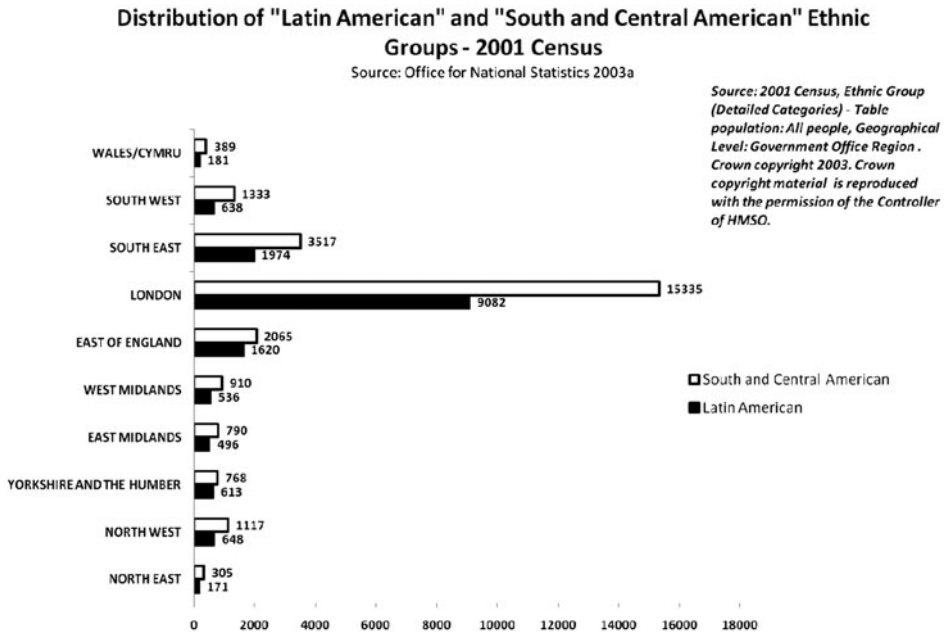


FIGURE 1. Distribution of 'Latin American' and 'South and Central American' ethnic groups (self-definitions) in the 2001 Census.

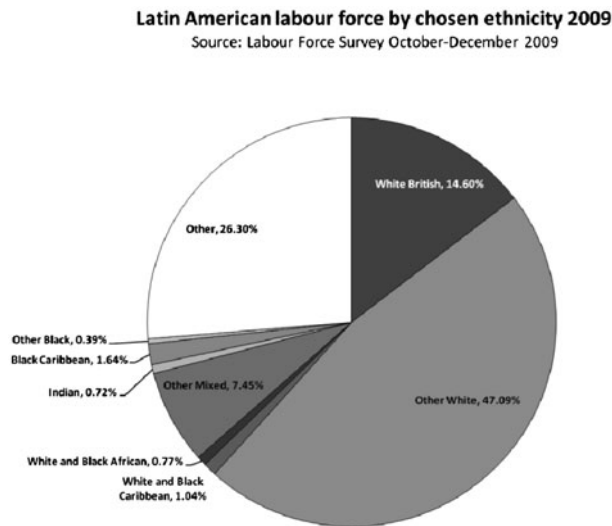


FIGURE 2. Latin American labour force by chosen ethnicity, 2009.

American countries, providing an idea of the high percentage of people who define themselves as ‘other white’, ‘other mixed’ groups and generic ‘other’.

These multiple ethnic and ‘racial’ identifications need to be understood in relation to how the idea of ‘race’ has been constructed and utilised in Latin America. Since colonial times complex ‘racial’ hierarchies have operated in the region, based on a continuum with white/Europeans at one end and indigenous and black at the other, a gradual categorisation approach based on ideas of *mestizaje* (‘racial mixing’).⁴² This continuum, in turn, is further complicated by class hierarchies, through which financial status and education can alter ‘racial or ethnic perceptions’.⁴³ These understandings may play a role in how Latin Americans self-identify when encountering the more dual ‘racial’ and ethnic constructs which dominate the British ethnic categories system.

In the UK the collection of ‘racial’ or ethnic origin information in the census did not start until 1991. Until then proxy questions had been used to assess the size and characteristics of the non-white population, ie country of origin.⁴⁴ Arguments in favour of compiling this type of data have relied on policy requirements such as responding to population needs, ensuring equity and supporting anti-discrimination legislation. In contrast, arguments in opposition have feared that these data could be used against minority groups, that the collection of such data does not in itself promote political or social change and that the standard categories used result in the creation of identities to ‘fit’ the definitions devised by the state.⁴⁵ However, developing classifications of ethnic categories which could capture the fluid and multiple identifications of individuals has proved difficult and controversial. In the UK, for example, ‘the group names listed in the census are a curious mixture of race (colour) categories and national origin categories’,⁴⁶ which does not provide clarity of meaning or respond effectively to people’s self-definitions.

In fact, among the participants in the project, the category ‘Latin American’ was often perceived as not describing an ethnicity but as a geographical origin group sharing certain cultural commonalities which embraces a multiplicity of ethnic affiliations. Despite agreeing that there was some common ground shared by all Latin Americans (geographical closeness, entangled histories and common cultural referents), this broad definition was undermined by what many of the participants considered the intrinsic diversity which characterises their home region. This lack of consensus was related to the contested origin of the term ‘Latin America/n’, to the sense that it was an identity imposed by the West and to the political divisions that have characterised the history of the region. These divisions also need to be understood in terms of the trajectories of each nation after independence and the common features (geographical location or social factors) which unite some countries more than others.⁴⁷

For instance, Marta (40s, Chilean—household 7, professional, over 10 years’ residence) had the view that Latin American identity did not really exist, that it was a construct which had been imposed on them from ‘outside’ and which was also fraught with historical rivalries and conflicts amongst the different countries in the region.

MARTA: Unfortunately in Latin America, the problem we have is that each one of us is like an island, and we always fight amongst ourselves, and we do not have a defined identity. The identity has been given to us from outside. Here they call us Latin American, but as Latin Americans, we know perfectly when it is a Colombian talking, when it is an Ecuadorian, a Peruvian, a Bolivian, an Argentinean, a Chilean [...] Then that Latin American identity I don't think it exists.

However, the geographical and culturally loose understanding of this macro-identity was also contested by the fact that some of the participants used the term 'Latin American' and the pan-ethnic expression 'Latino' interchangeably, providing a combined conception of a collective identity with its cultural origins in the centre and south of the American continent. During the group interview with his family, Ernesto (50s, Chilean—household 5, political refugee, semi-skilled job, over 20 years' residence) provided a clear example of this conceptual fusion.

ERNESTO: *What we refer to as Latinoamérica [Latin America] is being from the continent of Latinoamérica [...] I mean I come up with all the stuff like, oh 'cos I'm Latino, you know and in certain ways, in certain ways I make a difference between Latinos and Europeans, the way we feel, the way we are.*

In general young participants in their late teens were more likely to embrace the pan-ethnic category 'Latino', especially if they had had the experience of residing in London or large cities in Spain with significant Latin American populations before settling with their families in the north of England. For instance, Jaime (19, Honduran—household 3, full-time student, less than two years' residence), who had lived in Spain for over three years before moving to the UK, provided an illustration of the ease of appealing to this shared identity among his peers.

JAIME: Yes, yes, only with the fact of saying that you are Latino, that's enough, it doesn't matter from which exact country you are, if you are Latino it's like...ok!

In the group interview with household 3 Jaime and his family made generational distinctions regarding the bonding potential of the Latino macro-identity. They all agreed that, in their view, it was easier for the younger generations to find common ground in this pan-ethnicity, as they were not so set in their own national histories and traditions, and were more flexible when establishing social bonds. This generational preference is in line with McIlwaine *et al*'s survey findings in London, in which almost half their 52 second-generation participants (average age 21) identified as British Latino.⁴⁸

Scholars researching Latino/a and Hispanic pan-ethnicities in the USA have long struggled to ascertain whether these identities have developed to capture a meaningful sense of shared culture and political activism among migrants from Latin America and their descendants or, instead, have been a by-product of how statistical and policy tools in the USA have classified them.⁴⁹ It does seem that the answer probably lies between these two possibilities and their interactions. The fluidity that characterises these collective identities finds its dynamism in

how migrants and their descendants come to terms with the circumstances they face once outside their countries of origin, where they encounter the Latin American, Latino/a, and/or Hispanic constructs directly, and through which they have to negotiate their positionality in their host societies.

In the UK wider negotiation of pan-ethnic identification are taking place as the population and second generations grow in number, acquire more visibility and start to organise politically. This trend can already be seen in London, where, in recent years, there have been initiatives aimed at mobilising around the macro-identities Latin Americans/Latinos and Iberian American.⁵⁰ At present the most active of these initiatives is led by the Latin American Recognition Campaign, with the aim of achieving recognition of Latin Americans as an ethnic minority in the UK. For this group official recognition is seen as the route to securing access to public services and resources, and as a tool to facilitate the identification of specific social needs and guarantee protection from discrimination and social exclusion, problems which affect important sectors of the population.⁵¹

On the basis of the Latin American case, however, I would argue that, by leading migrants to define themselves in terms of absolute ethnic differences, systems of cultural recognition do not easily accommodate the diversity of identifications, migration trajectories and protection needs of migrants. I turn to these issues next.

Local manifestations of the Latin American identity

Participants in the north explained that, at the grassroots level, migrants or anyone trying to organise communal activities or cultural groups must engage with the contested definitions of Latin America/n shown in the previous section, and negotiate inclusive standpoints which can accommodate the diversity of perspectives that different people from the region may have. For example, Martina (50s, Hispano-Colombian—household 2, professional, over 20 years of residence) who for more than 10 years was involved in a Latin American group in the northern region, summarised the variety of interpretations that members of this group displayed regarding the meaning of Latin America.

MARTINA: There were a diversity of meanings because for some it meant people with indigenous roots...then Latin America was primarily of indigenous root; for me being Colombian, the indigenous part was not important, other things were important, culture, history, politics, even religion but not, let's say, the 'racial' part. And for other people the concept of Latin America was even wider and for example, they didn't mind to get into the stereotype of how the North Americans see Latin Americans...and then...there were people who strongly rejected the Latino stereotype which exists...in the United States.

Grassroots perspectives, therefore, included a wide range of understandings, from the perception that the term discriminated against indigenous and African American peoples to the view that it was actually exclusively related to those with indigenous roots. Nonetheless, and as the previous paragraph exemplifies, there

was a great deal of reference to the negative stereotypes about ‘Latinos or Hispanos’ which have arisen in the USA and Spain, and which loomed large in many participants’ reluctance to embrace the term.⁵² For instance Juanjo (40s, skilled manual job) and Julia (40s, family carer/unemployed with low command of English) from household 3, the Honduran family who had undertaken onward migration from Spain, highlighted how the term could be used with racist and pejorative connotations.

JULIA: It depends on how it is used, if it’s used as...Latin American to locate you geographically that’s what we are, but if it’s used offensively as...

JUANJO: ‘Third world’...‘Latino’... [in a pejorative sense of ‘backward’, ‘under-developed’]

JULIA: They call you ‘third world’ or ‘*sudaca*’ [sic—from South America, racist term used in Spain]...but if they call you Latin American because that’s the case, I don’t see it as a bad thing.

At the everyday level this diversity of understandings becomes entangled with the heterogeneity of socio-demographic and migratory factors which characterise this population in the north of England. There is a multiplicity of life situations based on migration routes, settlement circumstances, legal status, nationality, educational and social background, and life-course stage, among others, and any Latin American organised group must negotiate this reality if it aims to be inclusive. Martina (whom we encountered above) explained that in practice this diversity meant that Latin American migrants could be united in terms of language, traditions and social activities but not on the basis of their needs, which were too diverse. At a certain point she felt that proper resources were necessary to respond to the multiplicity of support requirements (Spanish-speaking counsellor, social worker, work and legal advisers, etc) identified within and through her group; therefore, she tried to lead the association towards asking the local council to recognise Latin Americans as an ethnic minority. However, as she explains in the next extract, there was not the collective willingness to do so.

MARTINA: There reached a point when I wanted the Council to recognise the Latin Americans as a minority, and I believe that to be recognised as a minority, the only thing they had to do was to say that they were a minority and they never did...I think that...we did not consider ourselves a minority...then really we were a support network but we did not feel like a minority because each of us was a minority within a minority, then...I believe that we functioned well as...well, we called ourselves Latin American community and functioned as such but not as a minority, I don’t think we saw ourselves as such...[and] maybe we didn’t feel as such either.

As Fortier has noted in relation to the accounts of the British Italian women who participated in her research, “being defined as “minority” [can be seen as] equivalent to being marked as a cultural and economic “outsider””.⁵³ Some of the participants in this project, normally longer-term residents in stable socioeconomic

situations, were also trying to avoid this type of ‘outsiderness’ in their settlement society. They considered that being classified as an ‘ethnic minority’ could bring the wrong type of social visibility to the population, which, on the one hand, would threaten their status *vis-à-vis* the perceived mainstream and, on the other, would make them a potential object of stereotyping. For instance, Juan (30s, Bolivian—household 9, semi-skilled job in the hospitality sector, 10 years of residence) considered that the northern population preferred to keep their presence ‘quiet’ and rely instead on the solidarity of the group to respond to any socio-economic needs of fellow migrants.

JUAN: I think they try to keep it quieter, they prefer to have families settling, or students but not, not people who do not know how to work. I think that’s the reason why they try to keep it quieter...And there is more support then, the needs are not seen, other people’s needs. Why? Because if someone says, I need to work, then the others, you know the others can help you a bit.

There are several factors which help to explain the lack of significant collective initiatives in the regions studied by the project, but the main ones rely on the migratory diversity (in terms of routes and type of settlement) and on the life course stages of migrants and their families. Some participants alluded to a lack of identification with fellow Latin Americans on the basis of political attitudes and types of migration. For instance, Ernesto (50s, Chilean—household 5) emphasised the leftist political homogeneity that had united Chileans and other Latin American refugees from the 1970s to the early 1990s, but which had declined when migratory flows diversified, as having an important effect on the sense of shared experience amongst Latin Americans.

ERNESTO: ... but now, for example, refugees, Latino refugees? There are very few, arriving now I mean, arriving now, during, I don’t know, ten years ago they were still arriving from...Bolivia, Uruguay...Now you have tourists, or economic refugees...others have come because they got married to English people, then there are different...circumstances among Latinos, see?

The life course asynchronisations of migrants, both in terms of personal lives and of migration trajectories, play an important role in their willingness and need to participate in community or support initiatives (for example, those in irregular situations are reluctant to get involved in group activities). According to the stakeholders interviewed for this project, the diversity of situations and backgrounds of Latin American migrants in the north of England seems to have increased in recent years with the arrival of small numbers of asylum seekers and their families who have been dispersed to the region by the National Asylum Support Service, but also because of the growth of the population of young migrants who have arrived as students or have settled in larger cities to work in low-skilled and low-paid jobs.⁵⁴ These recent migrants are more likely to face ‘first arrival’ problems (language barriers, access to housing and jobs) which are sometimes met by informal and religious networks but are otherwise left unaddressed, increasing the sense of isolation and risk of social exclusion of many recent migrants.

In addition, the different life-course stages of the migrants often imply different social needs. For instance, those with young families do not participate in the night scene of the single and young Latin Americans and look for activities which are inclusive for their children. Many adult participants commented that the lack of socio-cultural groups in their places of residence jeopardised any efforts to pass on their language and heritage to their children and to re-create collective cultural experiences. Karla (30s, Mexican—household 8, employed part-time for a family business and main family carer, over 10 years residence) illustrated this situation:

KARLA: ... when you have family...I feel that if there was...like the Irish...they have the Irish Centre, and of course there are classes there, they can go and have a drink there, that is, there is a place, a physical place to meet, a place where there are posters announcing what people are doing, this is one help, this is another.

Geographers have foregrounded the ways in which ‘identity construction is intricately linked to the social production of place(s)’; as such, communal spaces ‘foster both expressions of identities and reinforce them’.⁵⁵ In the case of these Latin American participants, soft senses of collective identification have so far undermined the creation of such shared places and, in turn, the lack of spaces weakens possibilities for nurturing stronger senses of commonality. Ultimately the resulting socio-cultural invisibility and lack of local support and cultural groups have more significant consequences for migrants who find themselves in more precarious situations, either socioeconomically or because they have arrived in the country as asylum seekers.

Conclusion

In this article I have considered the ethnic recognition system which underpins British approaches to migrant incorporation and social protection through the experiences of Latin Americans in the north of England, a minority migrant population characterised by significant social diversity and a high level of socio-cultural invisibility. I have shown that, in the case of these migrants, processes to pursue recognition through ethnic identification are jeopardised by the controversial colonial character of collective terms such as Latin American/Latinos and the diversity of life-course stages, migration trajectories and socioeconomic situations of Latin Americans in the north of the country. Furthermore, concerns that being identified as an ethnic minority may imply exclusion and subordination from mainstream status and lead to the ‘wrong’ type of visibility (othering and stereotyping as Latin Americans) underlined the reluctance of some participants to engage in processes of (ethnic) recognition.⁵⁶

Nonetheless, there are migrant groups in London trying to use the Latin American collective identity strategically and in order to be recognised politically. The Latin American Recognition Campaign and supporters of the ‘ethnic category’ ‘Latin American’ are attempting to articulate this term as a wide and inclusive macro-identity, which can accommodate the range of self-identifications and needs of this culturally, ethnically and socially diverse group.⁵⁷ However, as long

as there is no wider grassroots support to organise politically and obtain recognition through a collective macro-identity, many sectors of the Latin American population (both in the capital and in the north) continue to face the challenges of being socio-culturally invisible and not having their needs identified and addressed.⁵⁸

Ultimately, ‘who is seen and how they are seen’ by the state gaze affects how migrant and ethnic minority groups can negotiate their place in Britain and the resources they are able to access. As Spencer has emphasised, the ‘multicultural’ recognition model was initially designed to address discrimination faced by migrant populations with historical links to the UK but it has been slow to adapt to the increased diversity and greater geographical mobility of more recent migrants.⁵⁹ Future provision for the social protection of migrants and their descendants would benefit from the avoidance of excessive reliance on ethnic categories, which are fraught with problems arising from complex (post) colonial histories and the fluid lived experiences of ethnic identity and life-course trajectories.

Notes

I would like to thank all the adults and young people who took part in the present project and the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK for supporting this research [grant number PTA-033-2006-00068]. I greatly appreciate the extremely helpful comments received from the editors of this sub-theme and from two anonymous reviewers.

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