

Being Mexican and American: Negotiating Ethnicity in the Practice of Market Research

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We report on an ethnographic consumer research project among Mexican Americans in which negotiation of identity between respondents and a multiethnic, multidisciplinary team structured the process literally and symbolically. This negotiation is examined in terms of research process as well as results. We focus on how knowledge of language and cultural practices (or lack thereof) contributed to interactions and how respondents' articulation of being *both* Mexican and American is itself a collaborative, social process. Refracting the discussion through personal and disciplinary lenses, we underscore tensions and dynamics arising from an anthropological analytic stance vis-à-vis culture and ethnicity versus corporations' need to simplify. We discuss the implications arising from corporate consumer segmenting practices and question the efficacy of these practices, given normative processes of identity formation. In this case, we also show how constructed authenticity, international market forces, and deterritorialized national ethnicities make it possible for authentic Mexican commodities to emerge from a virtually "non-Mexican" part of the United States.

Key words: corporate anthropology, consumer research, ethnic identity, segmentation, Mexican American

The goal of this paper is to illustrate boundary-crossing processes of identity creation that we encounter in the practice of consumer research. We underscore the inherently fluid and performative acts by which ethnicity is constructed. In so doing, we highlight the tension between a corporate tendency for simplification (and segmentation) and the lived reality of consumer complexities, a tension which we, as anthropologists and applied researchers, must negotiate effectively. We take as our example a research project commissioned by a large U.S. corporation during the spring of 2002. The company, a consumer goods manufacturer located in a semirural, almost solely English-speaking area of the United States, with a virtually nonexistent Latino population, was under pressure to target its goods to "the Hispanic market." The company set for itself the daunting task of "understanding the Hispanic consumer." A year earlier we had carried out an ethnographic cultural analysis on the general market consumer for this company and, as anthropologists, we were called upon again for this more "targeted" research, as it is put in the mildly militaristic jargon of marketing.

Conducting consumer research is an inherently collaborative endeavor. Sunderland and Denny are academically trained anthropologists working in the corporate world, applying a distinctly cultural (in contrast to the more usual

psychological) framework to consumer behavior. Our clients (as we call the individuals employed by the corporations, institutions, advertising agencies, or other companies that hire us) set the research agendas; we design and conduct the research, produce written and video reports, and present the results to our clients' sometimes wide, sometimes narrow, constituencies. Implicit and explicit negotiations abound throughout the endeavor: we and our clients must negotiate the meanings, the process, and the implications of the research. The people, the consumers with whom we engage in ethnographic interactions, the respondents in the jargon of consumer research, are also, inherently, our partners (see Denny 1999, 2002; Sunderland and Denny 2002).

Dávila (2001) argues that the practices of marketing worlds have had an important role in the social construction of Latino/Hispanic identity in the United States. Whether through familiarity with recent scholarship (Appadurai 1996; Bourdieu 1984; Costa and Bamossy 1995; Dávila 2001; Firat 1995; García Canclini 1995, 2001; Miller 1997; Tharp 2001; Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Vélex-Ibáñez and Sampaio 2002), or by virtue of being a citizen of the contemporary world, few of us can doubt that the organization of consumption in relation to international market forces has had a significant impact on the production and reproduction of contemporary notions, expectations, and lived realities of ethnic identity. This paper provides a case study of these processes and issues.

In this instance, the corporation was pulled into the force field of the ethnicity production matrix when one of the key retailers for its products decided to focus sales efforts on the U.S. Hispanic market. When the corporation

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itself reorganized so profits would be calculated jointly for its U.S. and Mexican affiliates, the case was sealed. We were pulled to the center of the force field when hired to conduct the research. We have organized our narrative to coincide with the three main temporal stages of our research process: preparation, fieldwork, and results. As will become evident, only the labels are straightforward.

Preparation

Despite a written proposal, telephone calls, and e-mail to and from the main parties responsible for the initiative within the organization, events truly began when Sunderland and Denny traveled to the corporate headquarters for a “start-up” meeting. The goals for the day were to: refine the scope and objectives of the research, including fieldwork locations; introduce researchers to the corporate stakeholders; articulate the significant questions and issues for any and all of us; and, in the end, get project support from the corporate stakeholders. As with any research project, if there are no champions within the organization, the impact of the research on the business can be negligible. For corporations, this outcome is anything but ideal.

Tightly assembled around a large conference table were engineers, designers, innovation specialists, brand and marketing managers, and the anthropologists. Among the corporate representatives were two native Spanish speakers, one originally from Peru, the other from Venezuela. Dávila (2001:40) has maintained that, “Latinos working within corporate America are seen as the Latino experts and are made responsible for the company policy toward the Latino population.” Although not from countries with the largest resident populations in the U.S., the Spanish speakers were, nonetheless, called upon to be the resident experts in this initiative. One individual, in particular, held herself responsible for making sure things were “done right.”

The first challenge to us, which she led, was being clear on the fact that “Hispanic consumer” glossed over people’s varied countries of origin, divergent cultural traditions, and different ways of speaking Spanish. What did we mean here? If as anthropological professionals we could not help but be stung by the challenge, it was not because we did not agree. While the Hispanic consumer gloss had been given to us as the term with which to write the proposal, it was clearly problematic. The general gloss may have important U.S. sociopolitical reasons to be, but the question of who were we going to talk to, and how we were going to cut through all the variety—not to mention tensions—among people was, in our eyes, exactly right (see Darder and Torres 1998). It was a question we had come prepared to raise. Undoubtedly, some of the challenger’s evident tension was generated by the fatigue of educating people who had not considered, or even thought, that things like this were questions.

Negotiations in this instance settled on Mexican American consumers. One participant had data indicating that Mexican Americans were the largest and fastest growing

consumer segment. Collaboration with the Mexican affiliate was a deciding factor. San Antonio, Southern California, and Chicago were selected for fieldwork. At this point, many around the table did not believe there was a good business case for choosing Chicago, rather it was accepted as a market for the sake of convenience of the clients who would accompany us on the in-home interviews and for researchers (Denny lives in Chicago). Some wondered if we would even find Mexican Americans in Chicago. While we knew of thriving Mexican American neighborhoods in Chicago, we did not have data in hand to prove that Chicago had the second largest “Mexican” population in the United States.

We sorted through issues of how to further define the meaning of “Mexican American” when writing the telephone questionnaire—the “screener”—which would be used by locally hired recruiters to find individuals who were willing to take part in the research and would fit our target audience criteria. To qualify, respondents needed to identify themselves as Latino or Hispanic from a group of choices including Asian, African American, and Caucasian. Respondents then needed to choose Mexican or Mexican American as opposed to Central American, Puerto Rican, Dominican, or Cuban. We stipulated that approximately equal numbers of our respondents replied affirmatively to: “I immigrated to the United States,” “One or both of my parents immigrated to the United States,” or “My ancestors were Mexican, but my parents and I were born here.” We felt this allowed for the fact that parts of the United States had once been part of Mexico and that it seemed entirely possible to self-define as Mexican without recent family history within the national territorial entity of Mexico. We also believed it would help to take into account the concerns of assimilation clients had voiced during our meeting.

Members of the corporation had been keen on including people in the study who were “really Mexican,” rather than people so assimilated to the U.S. that their cultural practices were indistinguishable from those of the general market. While the “general market” can be a gloss for an unmarked white (male) consumer (see Dávila 2001), in our own work it is often a category that encompasses more diversity and complexity. For most of the general market consumer research studies we do, clients ask us to include some combination of Asian, Latino, and African American, in addition to European American men and women. The general market study for this corporation had been no exception. In this, as in other practices of consumption, categorization organizes both inclusion and exclusion. To create specific niche markets, to target special audiences, to segment consumers also always entails processes of creating difference, “othering,” and exclusion at the same time that it can hold the promise of inclusion.¹ There are problems with these concepts and their attendant activities. The client’s concern was valid, nonetheless. Why should we be conducting this research if we were not at least potentially interested in finding out what might be *different* for this audience? We had, after all, already conducted the general market research. There was little point in repeating that.

In our meeting, issues of assimilation were reduced to differences in language usage. A strong voice among the clients wanted Spanish-only speakers. At its most basic, the formulation was: English speakers were assimilated to U.S. culture; Spanish speakers were not. Where to begin the counterargument? Both Denny and Sunderland had academic background and interests in language use. Each had allegiances to linguistic anthropology as a theoretical framework. This pragmatic of simplicity had to be challenged. Everything we knew about the interrelationships of language and cultural practices spoke against anything approaching such a simplistic one-to-one mapping. However, given the realities of divergent daily practices between consulting and academic worlds, it was difficult to form an easy counterargument that invoked the latest in linguistic anthropology arguments in a way our client could intuitively grasp (but see Santiago-Irizarry 2001:88-115; Urciuoli 1996; Woolard 1998). As neither Sunderland nor Denny was a specialist in the Latino consumer market, it was also difficult to detail the contemporary usage of Spanish versus English with enough specificity. We observed that ethnic differences tended to never map exactly onto language and suggested that acculturation was not a linear function of time or language per se. The world was more complicated, and it was entirely possible to identify as Mexican or Mexican American and be primarily an English speaker. At the same time, we granted that Spanish seems ever increasingly important in the United States, undoubtedly with complicated reasons having to do with both Latino and Anglo ascendancy.

We resorted to pragmatic exigencies: The research entailed 24 in-depth interviews, subsequent respondent self-directed video documentaries, followed by new product innovation sessions. Given the size of the sample, the clients' need to participate in the interviews, and the price point of the goods, we suggested a focus on English-speaking respondents. A reasonable compromise, that all could live with, was to recruit a relatively equal mixture of homes in which people would self-report that they spoke "mostly English," "mostly Spanish," and "about the same amount of English and Spanish in their homes." This solution did not indicate, define, or delimit whether the person does or does not speak the other language. We wrote the screening questionnaire in English and locally hired recruiters translated it into Spanish. We do not directly control the recruiting process and in at least some of the cities it seemed that most of the people were prescreened on this and other questions in Spanish. This exclusive use of Spanish for the telephone screening produced its own trajectory of expectations, which we will revisit below.

For the fieldwork, we organized our efforts so that a Spanish-speaking researcher would be present for each of the interviews. We constructed collaborative teams: Gigi Taylor, a former advertising agency account planner with a Ph.D. in advertising, worked together with Sunderland in San Antonio and San Diego. Mérida Rúa, a Ph.D. candidate in American studies whose dissertation centered on issues

of Puerto Rican and Mexican identity among Chicagoans, accompanied Denny in Chicago.

Neither Sunderland nor Denny had easily accessible or acceptable claims to Latina identity. Denny and Sunderland had carried out the general market research for this corporation but they were, nonetheless, fortunate to be offered this project. One of the realities of corporate, advertising, and qualitative consumer research worlds is the reductionism of research capabilities to essentialist properties of personal identity. This reality must be faced on a much too frequent basis. As women, we are not supposed to be able to understand how or why men drink beer; as light-complexioned persons, we are not supposed to understand how or why dark-complexioned persons take care of their skin. In these essentialist formulations it always seems to be forgotten that what we do is research. When we provide insight on the lives of men, pickup truck drivers, people who use *Ambi* or those who give their dogs antianxiety medications, it is not because we *are* these people, nor because we do these things in our daily lives, but because we are researchers. It is not essential sharing, but rather the ability to decode symbols and meanings that is essential. Geertz's (1973:12) message that "culture is public because meaning is" was an important one. Anthropology's tradition of studying "the other," despite its colonial and elitist problems, also revealed the revelations that can come from being an outsider.

The corporate representatives responsible for this particular project were not naive on this score, something for which we were grateful. They trusted us to do a good job. We liked and respected them, and they us. Some luck was also involved that a consumer research company specializing in the Hispanic market had not been assigned the job. There is another side in these essentialist formulations. One of the realities of these worlds is the strategic exploitation of these essentialist identities as a means of personal leverage, power, and careerist gain (see Dávila 2001). It was actually a comfort to Sunderland that she did not have to defend her credentials on the basis of shared identity. Her father, who was of Anglo parentage, had been born and raised in Cuba. While Sunderland did not claim Latina heritage she had, nonetheless, grown up with *arroz con pollo*, *café con leche*, and garbanzos. The world is complicated.

Fieldwork

Clients often accompany us during fieldwork, generally a positive aspect of the process. As is true for us, going to the field, being in-situ, hearing and seeing things first-hand helps clients understand and appreciate the phenomenon under study—whatever or whoever is being studied comes alive. At the same time, this accompaniment introduces additional stresses and intricacies.

Corporations pay dearly for consumer research, in terms of allocated monetary resources as well as employee time and attention. Clients can thus be quick to condemn as "a waste" any interactions with respondents who do not fit the

target profile. As we are responsible for recruiting people for a study, any perceived mishaps are assigned to us as a fault. Never mind that one learns even when not meeting the overly determined recruiting specifications because cultural meanings are discernable—often quite readily—in the midst of difference, lies, and even madness (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987). Any of our interaction missteps, instances of social gaffe, or clearly saying the wrong thing are also quickly judged as failures. Never mind Goffman's (1961, 1963, 1978) ethnomethodological insight that gaffes are precisely the means to illuminate norms of cultural practice. We feel ourselves under the lamp, and at the worst of times believe we can palpably feel the glare of the question: "Why did we hire you?"

For this project there was a changing stream of clients present at the interviews. The innovation specialists, designers, engineers, two Spanish speakers, and the brand managers all came to at least one or two. The interns were endearing—MBA students assigned to the Hispanic market case. One, a male, recently arrived from India, was gently instructed after the first interview to not disappear from respondents' sight to take pictures of items in their homes. We reminded him that, after all, we were strangers in these people's homes and that kind of action was likely to induce discomfort. To wit the illumination gaffes can offer—the general reaction he induced in respondents was parental indulgence. His healthy appetite helped. These interviews centered on food and in many households we were invited to eat. In one household he gustily ate the breakfast *chilaquiles*, guzzled juice, and jumped at the chance for second helpings. He also freely shared his view that Mexican food was, unlike usual American fare, exactly what he so intimately knew from India. Tortillas equaling *chapatis* was only the beginning. One woman demonstrably took his side when it was obvious that our glances and verbalizations were chastisements. He was a dear, and one to be indulged, not unlike other "little ones."

Another actor in the collaboration was the representative from the corporation's Mexico City affiliate. She had traveled to the U.S. for some of the Texas interviews. We drove and picked her up at the door of her hotel. As she slipped into the passenger seat, attired in a striking business suit, Taylor and Sunderland exchanged fleeting, meaning-saturated glances. With three hours to go into the homes of people one has never met before and to find out their dreams, desires and dislikes, formal business attire is not recommended. Attire aside, this woman was an astute observer and clearly excited and eager to take part in this research. She was also ready to speak English. While her English was Spanish-accented, she carried the weight of Sunderland's language inadequacies; we spoke English in the car. When respondents who seemed more comfortable with English addressed her in Spanish, she responded in English. The next day when we picked her up at the hotel, she was in jeans.

Using the most simplistic of essential identity frames, one might assume that her presence would make the Mexican American respondents particularly comfortable. After all,

Mexico City had entered the house. Warm as she was, this was not necessarily the case. In one interview, the respondent openly expressed her anxiety. She too had planned to serve us Mexican food. With someone from Mexico City there, it was equivalent, she said, to "cooking lasagna for an Italian." The pressure was on. Living in a household of mixed American and Mexican consumption practices and "bloodlines," the respondent was afraid she was not going to measure up. In the course of the interview she also told of experiencing discrimination when she was in Mexico. She was primed for making a mistake.

Regardless of individuals involved, as soon as we entered people's homes, the complex negotiated exchange and interplay of language and ethnicity began with the introductions. What were our names? What was the language that was spoken? What was the accent, regardless of the language? What were people's abilities in Spanish and English? Assessments, of course, were always mutual. In cases of doubt, questions were asked openly. Is Spanish okay? Is English? Where were we from? In Chicago, Rúa's Puerto Rican-ness was immediately recognized via speech and typically addressed. The appearance of one of the Spanish-speaking clients did not match with cultural imaginations for Peru, the country she would name as her place of origin. Most people would not immediately inquire—the difference was enough to pose a challenge. To question her may have seemed impolite. But once comfortable, most people would awkwardly inquire. The answer: Peru, but of 100 percent Chinese parentage.

Language practices, even if not direct maps, are key indexes of ethnicity and key variables around which issues of ethnic identity, cultural capital, and political issues are fought (see Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; Urciuoli 1996). A number of respondents were primed before we walked in the door to be thinking about language. At least in the Texas portion of the research, respondents expected the interview to take place in Spanish because they had been asked the telephone screening questions in Spanish. For some this had created anxiety. Having knowledge of Spanish, but usually speaking English, a tension was created: a whole interview in Spanish? Relief ensued with the realization that the language *could* be English and all things being equal (which, of course, they never are), we would prefer the interview in English, especially when clients were there who spoke no Spanish.

Denny and Sunderland spoke no Spanish. Even if they sometimes understood, their utterances were always in English. In terms of the research process, this clearly had its advantages. Given their language abilities, obvious and sometimes acknowledged ethnicities ("New York" "East Coast" and "Anglo"), their cultural naiveté was accepted, even enjoyed—they could be taught. This was not interpreted as a personal—or for the most part a political—failing. Sunderland and Denny could ask the ridiculous, as-if-they-were-from-the-moon questions. They could talk about *telenovelas* as if they had never seen them (because they never

had). They could ask what countries made these shows. They could ask what the pleasures of them were. They could ask how the shows compared to *I Love Lucy*, one respondent's other favorite show. They could voice astonishment that these stories "ended" unlike the "strange" American soap operas that go on "forever." Sunderland and Denny also did not need to know the difference between a taco and a tamale, the point of a *comadre* or a *quinceañera* celebration, the rationale for saying Latino or Chicano or Hispanic. One could argue, justly, that it is precisely the operation of processes of interethnic power that made it the case that they were not expected to know these things. True. But the fact of the matter was, for these encounters, it also meant that Sunderland and Denny could easily ask to have these issues explicitly explained and thereby have a bright light shone on the categories of cultural meaning, the symbols that so resonated, the issues that so mattered *without* too personally being drawn into the vortex of ongoing internecine internal ethnicity struggles. By dint of personality and luck, they were also generally able to make themselves and their interests appear harmless enough to not become "political footballs."

In all of our studies we try to keep the from-the-moon vantage point. Purposefully holding this vantage point often helps us to see what is assumed about what really matters. The stance also encourages the people who participate as respondents in our research to explicitly articulate the culturally implicit, the unsaid of what they do and think. In doing so, we draw on the positive lessons from anthropology's tradition of studying "the other." While the political problems, the colonial and elitist assumptions, the absurdity of thinking that one is ever outside of the produced social realities are beyond dispute, being conceived as an outsider, being marginal to the everyday social fabric, being so clueless as to need everything explained, had its advantages. The lessons of "Shakespeare in the Bush" (Bohannon 1966) are not all without merit. Naïve outsiders have a lot to learn about what really matters. In this study, Sunderland and Denny could strategically assume this naïveté and have it work in their favor, Taylor and Rúa could not.

For Taylor and Rúa, it was virtually the opposite. Perceived lack of knowledge tended to cause cultural and political suspicions. Somewhat akin to cooking lasagna for an Italian, any lack of knowledge of language or a cultural practice put Taylor at risk of being classified a cultural incompetent if not a traitor. Biographically a child of one Mexican parent and one Anglo, raised in Colorado, with a Brooklyn born-and-bred Jewish husband waiting in Austin and an aunt, recently arrived from Mexico City and speaking no English, taking care of the baby in the hotel room while we did interviews, arguably how much more "Mexican American" could she get? Nonetheless, gaffes meant something different here. How could another Mexican American not know? Why does she not know that word in Spanish? Does she think she's just an Anglo? Who's this we've got on our hands? So, from advertising? From the university? In Chicago, Rúa became Puerto Rican spokeswoman and friendly rival. Whose rice is

better anyway—Puerto Rican or Mexican? (The consensus was Puerto Rican.) For both: are you Latina enough?

Sensitivity to the "Why did I hire you?" question from clients also becomes acute. When a mistake occurs in Spanish, what does the Spanish-speaking client think? Use of *usted* with a respondent when the client seems to think that *tú* would be more appropriate? Should a word be pronounced with a Spanish or English accent? Does the choice sound too pretentious? Too politically left, right, or correct? Veer into "Spanglish?" Is this too informal? Déclassé? All choices carry cultural meaning for the respondents; does the client even appreciate the difficulty, the issues? Do Sunderland and Denny even get just how many different things there are to negotiate? What do they think? If "Hispanic" ethnicity can be a useful tool for landing consumer research assignments, doing so is not without its minefields. Latino identity and ethnic authenticity are sociopolitical constructs. Nonetheless, or more precisely exactly because of this construction, among the great dangers in this arena are the potential accusations of cultural inauthenticity. These abound. Sources are respondents, clients, and oneself. Self-accusation is real. One *should* know. It speaks volumes if you do not.

Results

One of the central issues we communicated in our report to the client was the hybrid nature of Mexican American self-identity. We stressed what people had communicated to us—directly and indirectly—about living lives that straddled countries, with sentiments and self-ideals that combined, coalesced, and accommodated both. We pointed out that the issue was one of being Mexican *and* American and that *both* the Mexican and American sides of the equation were valued, lived, and creatively performed (cf. Firat 1995; Keefe and Padilla 1987; Mehta and Belk 1991; Oswald 1999; Penaloza 1994). Though not necessarily immigrants, our respondents continued to cross boundaries (Oswald 1999; Penaloza 1994). In the report and presentation we told of Isabel, a Mexican American grandmother who wore an apron emblazoned with "Texas," as she cooked scratch tortillas on her *comal* with a Norman Rockwell image of a family praying at a Thanksgiving table hung on her kitchen while *fideo* and *carne guisada* sat on her table. "Betty Crocker" was her favorite cookbook, but it was highly important to her that her children speak Spanish—speaking Spanish enhanced their employment opportunities in the U.S. was her primary argument. We discussed Jesús who had spoken candidly to us about the offense he feels when someone assumes based on his looks that he does not speak English. His English was halting, and the friend he had invited to take part in the interview spoke almost no English. Was it providential fieldworker's luck that we did not add to this offense only because Taylor, the Spanish-speaking researcher, was unable to take part in that interview? Rather than conducting the interview in Spanish, as we would undoubtedly have done if Taylor was there, Sunderland had forged ahead in English, inviting Jesús to

help her ask and understand the point of view of his friend. The Peruvian-Chinese client (another bit of luck that it was her day to attend?) assisted with context, recounting just what was happening on *Cristina*, the TV show that played from the corner during part of our interaction.

We discussed the situational nature in which ethnic identity is expressed, that educational and professional settings were generally times for “American-ness,” whereas home and family were arenas for the symbolic expression of “Mexican-ness.”²² We talked of how a respondent who had grown up in East Chicago depicted his youth as one of Mexican in the home, Motown out. We discussed the pride in the history and culture of Mexico coexistent with goals of prosperity, work, and school life oriented to the U.S. environment (cf. Keefe and Padilla 1987). We offered the argument that respondents saw the corresponding value of Spanish and English in each domain. We added that respondents esteemed bilingual abilities in Spanish and English as an aspect of economic opportunity in the United States as well as parents’ arguments that it was good for their children to speak Spanish to be a potential aid (and ally) to those who could not speak English. The client had wanted to know whether consumers wanted or needed Spanish labeling on company products. Obviously, it is a nuanced issue. Most people did not perceive the need for themselves (and Spanish labeling and brochures could even be construed as an insult), but thought it might be helpful for others. In certain contexts, Spanish could clearly be appreciated for its symbolic value. Depending on the product and target audience, perhaps make Spanish an option?

We tried not to simplify the issues, discussing the family in which the man immigrated to the United States from Mexico when his sister married a Native American. He had married a Japanese American woman and now had children who happily called themselves “Jap-a-Mex.” We broadly discussed the fluid nature of the identities. We foregrounded the realities of back-and-forth travel between the United States and Mexico: the vacations and summers in Mexico; the people born in the United States, but brought up in Mexico; the (pre 9/11) crossing back and forth for those who lived near the border. We noted the interplay of cultural practices: the open enchiladas layered in a pan “like lasagna.” We reiterated what respondents had pointed out to us: Mexican brands are available in the U.S. and Wal-Mart and Pizza Hut are places frequented on trips to Mexico; clear-cut distinctions between what is Mexican and what is American are not easy to make. We fought against the notion that assimilation was a function of time in the U.S. or that language use was an accurate index of acculturation, the client’s prevailing initial assumptions.

Roughly akin to Rosaldo’s (in García Canclini 1995: xv) argument that identity is inherently hybrid not because it is a case of mixture but because there is never stasis, identities are always in process, always in flux, always in the potential state of change, we discussed the way certain respondents, multi-generational inhabitants of the United States, had recreated and reconfigured their identities after marriage to someone

born and raised in Mexico. For instance, Norma, who had grown up in the U.S. barely feeling “Mexican” had married the status, class, and Mexico City heritage of her professor husband. In this Texas household, there were active efforts to resist “Tex-Mex” mingling, the reach was for the more “pure,” “authentic,” and “high” offerings from the cultural palate, for instance a bottle of Tequila Almendrado. Had we ever tasted it? We were offered to experience the pleasure of a small taste of this beverage, so good for digestion. The offering came from a supply self-imported from Mexico—in an old Johnny Walker bottle, now relabeled with black marker on masking tape. This was something truly special.

Drawing and building on ideas of power generated by the writings of Foucault, many scholars have pointed out that what is important about ethnic national identities is not a question of their authenticity or roots but the ways in which these are invoked. In whose interest are these invoked? For what ends? To serve what goals? The important questions are how intertwined networks of power organize the deployment of these socially constructed identities, not historical or cultural authenticity (see, for instance, García Canclini 2001; Santiago-Irizarry 2001; Vila 2000. See also Thompson and Tambyah 1999 on cosmopolitan identity).

Respondents did not directly speak in these terms, but as in Norma’s case, their narratives and actions indirectly highlighted the issues. Rosa’s daughter told us about how she now described herself as Chicana, after taking a university class that taught her the history of the Chicano name. Angel said she did not know what to call herself. Not that she did not know who she was—she had a clear sense of herself as a mother, a person, an individual—but should she call herself Hispanic, Mexican, or Latina? It was the overarching sociopolitical implications of ethnic identity that were in play. Sandee, who provided us with one of the liveliest interviews, plied us with expertly made margaritas as she sarcastically joked about knowing from the wagon-wheel lawn decorations whether a Mexican or Anglo lived in the home: iron wagon wheels meant Mexican, wooden wagon wheels were Anglo. Her cousin, there for the interview, was a “half-breed,” her father was an Anglo. This epithet was delivered with obvious affection, and perhaps another clink of the margarita glass. Much more serious were Sandee’s points that, in fact, one did feel more Mexican during San Antonio’s “Fiesta Week” and that, as a teacher, she did find it important that her students were aware of realities of Mexican history and interactions with the United States. Real anger accompanied the pronouncement of, “I don’t speak like this, man,” delivered in a mimicry of the stereotyped accent ascribed to lower-class Mexican workers. It was difficult to separate the threads of this anger. Was it directed at Anglos? At class inequities? At a history of personal affront? At everything simultaneously? The African American ethnicity of Sandee’s female partner was barely mentioned.

Race may be hidden, but class is the (not so) hidden dimension. Among our recommendations to the client was the suggestion to mine the commodities and processes perceived

as particularly intricate and Mexican and market them to the high-end general market. In doing so we were suggesting that the corporation act to further insert Mexican “culturally authentic,” “high-end” and “pure” aspects into the globalized elite cultural realm that circulates throughout our contemporary world. It is unlikely that the company had this outcome in mind in its dictum from the outset to focus on the “real” Mexican American market, but it was an important outcome of the research. And only in a world of constructed authenticity, international market forces, and truly deterritorialized national ethnicities could the further insertion of authentic Mexican commodities into the international cultural realm result from the efforts of a corporation located in a semirural, U.S., English-speaking, non-Hispanic part of the world.

Discussion

Segmentation is a fundamental marketing tool that first used demographics and later added lifestyle, psychographic, and, more recently, value mindsets as variables to identify and target potentially profitable segments of the population. In practice, implicit or explicit segmentation is operative in virtually all of the work we do. A financial service company requests that we examine small owners of construction, information technology, or retail businesses, as well as requests information on the special issues and “needs” of female business owners. For a cleaning products study, we are instructed to interview only home owners, not renters. For many clients, we recruit respondents based on the clients’ preexisting attitude and behavior segmentation schemas (e.g., “beginners,” vs. “experts,” “admirers” vs. “disdainers”). As in other realms, segmentation schemas are deployed by marketers to make the messiness of everyday life manageable and to achieve actionable goals (in most cases for marketers, selling goods and making profit).

Segmentation has pragmatic benefits. It is a way to carve up the world and make it manageable—in the same way that marketing channels are separated into mass or grocery or that brands are separate fiefdoms within an organization. At the same time, catering to segments in fact gives credence to and creates the categories themselves, in ways that invariably invoke a sense of homogeneity, and often assume that the created differences are based on essential qualities of individuals in the group. In today’s world in which the market is increasingly a key metaphor of, and prism for, all experience (Firat 1995) corporations (and other agencies) hold the power to define and segment markets on their own terms, regardless of the realities or nuanced similarities or differences of individuals within their targeted segment.

Marketers’ current interests in segmenting their customers in terms of ethnicity, especially Hispanic ethnicity, are no doubt a response to larger societal dynamics—the huge growth of Spanish-language media in the last decade, projected population figures for individuals of Caribbean, Mexican, Central and South American descent in the U.S., the importance of Latino identity in and as politics. As Dávila

(2001) points out, these consumer segmentations and targeting also help create Latino/Hispanic identity. Nonetheless, such schemas hide the inherent processual nature of identity construction and belie the power of consumption practices to contextualize ethnicity—to presuppose, recreate, or to forge anew. If our current world is witnessing the globalization of fragmentation (Firat 1995), then it is precisely these acts of consumption in which ethnicity (and identity in general) is productively created that deserve the attention of marketers and arguably government agencies, policy groups, charities (see also, Fennell and Saeger 2004). As practiced, segmentation schemas can lead to presumptions of homogeneity and the static existence and privileged nature of these “traits,” even when consumers (and academic analyses) demonstrate that the countercurrents of heterogeneity, situational and strategic ethnicity, and hybridity are normative practices. The devil is in the details. Negotiating this tension is a prerequisite in applied anthropological work and, we would suggest, for actionable marketing recommendations.

In the analysis we presented to the client, we tried to make clear that ethnicity was neither essential nor one dimensional, that it was an ongoing social construction (not a static independent variable), that issues of language use were not easy keys to assimilation or acculturation, that assimilation and acculturation were themselves problematic concepts, and implicitly and importantly that Mexican American did not equal “underclass.” These views were further emphasized through product ideation sessions, each of which was grounded by an ethnographic finding we felt most relevant to the client’s business. In so doing, we were trying to dispel myths (cf. Snuggs 1992) and bring a more nuanced, contemporary, anthropological view of ethnicity to bear. Given corporate needs for efficiency, simplification, and adherence to intuitive or known models, we wonder how far this understanding will go, but in so doing we were trying to bring culture as a theoretical construct—not as a variable of ethnicity—into the practice of market research.

Notes

¹ Note Santiago-Irizarry’s (2001:4) explication of these processes in relation to psychiatric treatment programs for Latino patients in New York City. Here, as she points out, the situation also simultaneously manifests as one of “culture as illness, culture as cure.”

² Compare Dávila’s (2001) argument. We included issues of family and making do, but did not reproduce a simple story of family, religion, and docility.

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