

NEW HEALTH RESEARCH PARADIGM SEEKS TO FREE LATINOS FROM DOUBLE JEOPARDY

By: *Michael Montoya, Assistant Professor, UCI Departments
Chicano/Latino Studies and Anthropology*



Biomedical research bypasses the most powerful influence on human health – the conditions under which humans live. In spite of the billions spent on biomedical research and the dedication of generations of intellectual talent, we can predict only a fraction of who will become ill and who will remain healthy. We do know that minorities and marginalized communities are at significantly greater risk for the most common illnesses. Researchers report that behavior (e.g. diet, tobacco use) and social factors (e.g. poverty, education, environmental exposure, health care) account for at least 70 percent of premature death. These factors, however, account for approximately one third of the federally funded research budget. The discrepancy between what we know accounts for premature death and those factors on which we spend our precious resources, acts as a double jeopardy for Latinos. Most disturbingly, the research disconnect between the social and biological worlds increasingly leads to the wrong headed pursuit of linkages between illness and the Latino body itself. The

quixotic pursuit of racialized genes for diseases are but one of many trends that are at best a distraction from real public health research, and have been shown to reinforce racial stereotypes.

Wading in to this conundrum, my work seeks to develop an empirically grounded, interdisciplinary, multileveled research approach that focuses on the behavioral and social factors that cause most disease. I am currently creating a research protocol for type 2 diabetes. There is a long tradition of epidemiological research into the effects of social context on health. Yet research into many of these variables suffers from fundamental identification errors that prevent the isolation of basic causes of diseases and deploy top-down rather than locally derived social constructs. Thus, by characterizing both biophysiological and social conditions of specific Latino communities, my research seeks to identify and operationalize health variables derived from locally manifested social and historical forces.

According to the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) diabetes is the seventh leading cause of death in the United States. Type 2 diabetes is a late-onset chronic disease that is associated with risk factors such as increased obesity, dietary fat intake, smoking, and low physical activity. Risk conditions such as racism, stress, and socio-economic status have also been implicated in the development of diabetes. The National Institute of Diabetes Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) reports that over 8 percent of all Latino Americans aged 20 years or older have diabetes. Mexican Americans are over twice as likely to have diabetes as non-Hispanic whites of similar age. Some predict that without intervention, half of all Latino girls will develop type 2 diabetes.

Building upon my ethnographic research into the misidentification of Mexicano ethnicity as a *de facto* cause of type 2 diabetes, I seek to develop a model for the identification of causal biocultural variables for type 2 diabetes and other chronic diseases. Biocultural variables are interlinked biological, social, and ecological phenomena. Biocultural phenomenon can only be derived by a careful attention to the ways of living of a particular set of people. Biocultural phenomena are reflections of the biological dimension of economic and sociocultural changes for human life. After all, humans are biological and social beings.

In the past year, I launched a grass roots effort to identify the assets and challenges of one Latino community. The Círculos de Acción is an experimental movement designed to spark creative participatory action and reflection on community health. It is my hope that together, we will begin to characterize the qualities of life, its distresses and joys, and begin to map these qualities onto health outcomes. Also, in 2006, Leo Chavez (Department of Anthropology) and I helped develop a survey of Orange County residents that included several questions related to adverse life conditions and health. This countywide study examined the impact of stress due to adverse life events and poverty on rates of diabetes, asthma and other health conditions. Preliminary data indicate that the median rates of adverse life events for Latinos was double that for Anglos. This study found that for Latino families three or more stressful life conditions confer a 65 percent increased likelihood for diabetes compared to Anglo families. Stressful life events increased significantly for Latino immigrants compared to U.S. born Latinos. Together, the surveys and Circulos, will form the first step in characterizing the social and behavioral conditions of one community.

Health research that presumes diseases like diabetes are caused by biological or cultural factors unique to Latinos has failed to either predict disease or reduce its disproportionate impact. As a result, researchers from many disciplines increasingly seek better ways to conceptualize disease. My research venture is admittedly ambitious and for some, rather heterodoxical. However, the findings of this emergent productively undisciplined biocultural research will provide a vastly missing empirical link between the rapidly expanding genomic inventories of communities and the lived conditions of the bodies from which genomic data is derived. Without empirically sound locally derived basic social scientific data the interactions between biology and society, and the underlying causes of variations in human health, will be impossible to understand.

STUDENT NEWS



Roberto Gonzales (left), Sociology Graduate Student, was selected by Public Policy Institute of California as their Dissertation Fellow for 2007-08. The fellowship provides 12-month support toward finishing the dissertation.

Ismael Herrera (right), received the LINC TELACU Education Foundation David C. Lizarraga Graduate Fellowship and the Southwest Airlines/Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities Dandole Alas A Tu Exito Travel Award. He was also selected as a representative to the Model U.S. House of Representatives to represent California's 34th Congressional District



Victoria Ramirez (left), 3rd year undergraduate majoring in Criminology, Law, & Society, and minoring in Chicano/Latino Studies, has been awarded the National Hispanic Business Women Association (NHBWA) Scholarship and a LINC TELACU Education Foundation Scholarship.

Rosa Zamora (right), DCLS major and 2007 graduate, is one of ten fellows accepted into the Judicial Administration Fellowship Program that is administered by the Center for California Studies at Sacramento State and co-sponsored by the California Judicial Council. The fellowship program is both academic and professional. Upon acceptance into the program, fellows are enrolled as graduate

students in Public Administration at Sacramento State, and attend regularly scheduled academic seminars. Fellows serve as full time professional staff in Judicial branch offices.

