

The influence of Latinx cultural values on outdoor recreation practices

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Latinx populations in outdoor recreation is an uncommon topic in dominant discourses. Through a communication lens, this report investigates the importance of family for Latinx engagement and its impact on the choice and frequency of activities. Using an ethnicity theory proposed in 1991, distinct cultural values may explain differences in participation rates between non-Latinx white populations and Latinx populations. Latinx visitors to recreational spaces are more likely to engage in group activities, they often frequent the same areas over time, and learn about recreational spaces mainly through word of mouth. Environmental privileges, such as access, disposable income, coverage of environmental issues and a welcoming space for people of color present barriers to Latinx participation in recreation. Personal experience reflects these findings from various studies about recreation in forests and parks. Emerging leaders with the objective to engage Latinx people in mainstream recreational activities present examples of the unique preferences of Latinx visitors in recreational spaces. Proposed changes in recreational spaces to attract and retain a diverse community must consider cultural values and recreational habits as a result of these values. Although Latinx is a broad term including Hispanic, it is important to acknowledge individual and intracultural experiences. Since the Pacific Northwest holds vast opportunities to recreate in the outdoors, meeting the needs of all residents is important.

Key terms: environmental privilege, environmental justice, environmental journalism, newsworthiness, cultural risk model of communication

My project aims to illuminate cultural values that predict the choice and frequency of outdoor recreation activities from Latinx populations in the United States. Throughout this report, I use “Latinx” as a gender-neutral alternative to Latina/o and I include Hispanic people. Collectivist values are demonstrated in Latinx culture through the importance of and focus on family. Outdoor recreation in this context includes biking, camping, visits to local and state parks, visits to the coast, and hiking. In Oregon, these activities are reasonably accessible to residents, even for urban populations. For example, a trip from Salem to Lincoln city, which is the nearest main city on the Pacific coast, is an hour and ten-minute drive. The drive from Salem to Silver Falls State Park is only 25 minutes. The multitude of local parks and bike lanes in the Willamette Valley makes it easy to go for walks and bike rides in our own neighborhoods. However, different groups of people recreate in different ways.

I claim that Latinx residents are more likely to engage in outdoor recreational activities as a family than individually, which shapes the choice and frequency of activity. My claim is

supported by several studies by Deborah J. Chavez, a former Forest Service employee who conducted and supported extensive research on the topic of Latinx recreation. In a synthesis report, Chavez notes that “in general, Latinos tend to use the natural resource recreation areas in larger and extended family groups, which includes nuclear family plus aunts, uncles, cousins, etc., as compared to non-Latinos...” and “large groups of Latinos may use sites for big gatherings with cultural activities”.¹ I ask the following questions: *What motivates Latinx families to participate in outdoor recreation, and how are Latinx cultural values communicated, addressed, and reflected in current recreational spaces?* In doing so, I am using the ethnicity theory explained by Carr and Williams as the idea that “under-participation is the result of subcultural differences in values and expectations related to outdoor recreation experiences.”² Using academic journals, I explore the Latinx values that motivate some families to prefer one type of activity over another and investigate factors that inhibit Latinx participation in recreation. Within academic articles, I consider the area studied to account for differences in outdoor recreational activities. In other words, going to the beach in southern California is a likely different experience than going to the Oregon coast. I am especially critical of wide generalizations that may be more harmful than informational, so I also look for acknowledgements in academic articles of diversity within Latinx populations, especially given that the majority of Latinx people in the U.S. are Mexican or Mexican-American.

¹ Chavez, Deborah J. “Serving the Needs of Latino Recreation Visitors to Urban Proximate Natural Resource Recreation Areas”. *Recreation visitor research: studies of diversity*. Edited by Patricia L. Winter et al. U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station, Albany, CA. 53-62.

² Carr, Deborah S. and Williams, Daniel R. “Understanding the Role of Ethnicity in Outdoor Recreation Experiences”. *Journal of Leisure Research* 25.1 (1993): 22-38.

It is impossible to discuss involvement of communities of color in recreation without discussing **environmental privilege**. Summarizing Park and Pellow³, environmental privilege acknowledges the fact that some groups can access safe, healthy spaces and resources due to economic, political, and cultural power that these groups enjoy. According to Pezzullo and Cox⁴, since **environmental justice** is an intersectional discipline that brings together issues of human rights, it is crucial that social privilege is included in this report. In a study Chavez, barriers to Latinx participation in outdoor recreation include education, access to the political process, and racism. Along with physical access to environmental spaces, recreation requires disposable income. Low-income and working-class Latinx families may find it hard to spend hundreds on travel, admission, personal gear and rentals, or simply take time off work to fully enjoy an excursion. In fact, a study reported that safe bicycle facilities are not built in lower-income communities at the same rate as wealthier areas and communities of color⁵. Carr and Williams explain this intersection with “low socio-economic status, lack of access to desired facilities, and discrimination”⁶ as the marginality hypothesis. Other cultural barriers to participation exist.

Latinx families with a recent history of immigration are less likely to be aware of the beaches, forests, camping sites, mountains, and parks that are nearby. Latinx families may also find it hard to learn about or join recreational organizations because of language barriers. Due to work, families may also be physically removed from these areas and too exhausted to spend any time outside of the home. Additionally, Latinx community members who work in the same areas

³ Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David Pellow. “The Slums of Aspen: Immigrants vs. the Environment in America’s Eden”. New York: New York University Press, 2011.

⁴ Cox, Robert and Pezzullo, Phaedra C. “Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere”. LA (2015). 45.

⁵ Lusk, Anne C. et al. “Biking practices and preferences in a lower income, primarily minority neighborhood: Learning what residents want”. *Preventive Medicine Reports* (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2017.01.006>.

⁶ Carr and Williams. “Understanding the Role of Ethnicity in Outdoor Recreation Experiences”. 22-23

that others play in affects their relationship with recreation environments. For example, a family with a farmworker background may experience nature differently from a non-farmworker family. Another example are Mexican reforestation workers who face harsh working conditions and nativist attacks by white reforestation workers, as examined by Sifuentez in his book Of Forests and Fields.⁷ Lastly, measures of safety are extremely important for Latinx families. Lusk cites an observation that Hispanic bicyclists are less likely to agree that bicycle theft would not occur compared to white bicyclists. Also, the Community Cycling Center in Portland, OR reported a testimony from a Latino man stating fear of deportation as a barrier to bicycling.⁸ There are inconsistencies in environmental communities as well.

Another contributor to disproportionate participation in recreational activities is the wavering nature of **environmental journalism**⁹ in the public sphere, as defined by Pezzullo and Cox. A small but important example is the lack of news stations that cover local stories in Spanish in the Pacific Northwest. A family that predominantly speaks Spanish at home are less likely to find coverage of current environmental issues that are happening in their own community, even if it is affecting them. One factor that contributes to the lack of representation is the **newsworthiness**¹⁰ of a story as specific as an environmental issue in the Latinx community. Unless an extreme event occurs, coverage of such a story is unlikely. Thus, Latinx families are less likely to take action and hold people in power accountable for their actions regarding the environment. Another example is the underrepresentation of Latinx people in local

⁷ Sifuentez, Mario Jimenez. "Of Forests and Fields". Rutgers University Press (2016).

⁸ Community Cycling Center. "Understanding Barriers to Bicycling Project: Final Report". Portland, OR (2012). www.CommunityCyclingCenter.org.

⁹ Cox, Robert and Pezzullo, Phaedra C. "Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere". 92.

¹⁰ Ibid., 97

and state governments, which implies a lack of Latinx voices in legislation and policy. Currently, district representatives such as Teresa Alonso-Leon and Diego Hernandez are paving the way for opportunities for Latinx and working-class families. Alonso-Leon and Hernandez are two local examples of the unique needs that Latinx working-class families have. Their backgrounds are reflected in their government work and their experiences continue to prove to be valuable through the support they receive from the Latinx communities they represent.

My personal experiences are reflected in various studies. My family and I enjoy going to the Oregon coast, local swimming holes, and parks. We tend to go to Riverfront park or Bush park more than other parks. Chavez found “evidence of repeat use of sites over time and plans to return to natural resource recreation areas multiple times per year by Latinos”¹¹. According to Vinod Sasidharan, people of Hispanic ethnicity are more likely to visit parks with at least one other person as opposed to going alone and are more likely to participate in food-related activities.¹² Visiting the coast with extended family for a barbeque is a common experience in my Latinx community and this experience is also reflected in research.

In a study done at Mecca Hills in California, Chavez confirms that the strongest preference for Hispanic visitors is a place to recreate with families, as opposed to a strong preference to recreate in clean and beautiful area by Anglo visitors. In the same study, Chavez also found that “Hispanics are more oriented towards group sports and picnicking, and Anglos are more oriented towards hiking, walking, and riding motorcycles”.¹³ This is consistent with

¹¹ Chavez, Deborah J. “Connecting Latinos with Nature”. *Recreation visitor research: studies of diversity*. 157-162.

¹² Sasidharan, Vinod. “Ethnicity and urban park use: A cross-cultural examination of recreation characteristics among six population subgroups”. *Abstracts of the Fourth Social Aspects and Recreation Research Symposium*, San Francisco, CA (2004). Albany, CA: Pacific Southwest Research Station, U.S. Forest Service.

¹³ Baas, John M. et al. “Influence of Ethnicity on Recreation and Natural Environment Use Patterns: Managing Recreation Sites for Ethnic and Racial Diversity”. *Environmental Management* (1993).

other studies of Latinx people in recreation, including a bicycling study where 81% of Hispanic people “thought they would bicycle more if they could bicycle with their family and friends” compared to 40% of whites¹⁴. Sasidharan mentions several steps to ensure that enough space and facilities exist to accommodate large groups of people, which would attract Latinx people to recreation areas, including game fields/courts, larger play areas, and roofed areas.¹⁵ In addition to accommodating Latinx families physically, means of communication should be adapted.

Chavez suggested changing means of communication with Latinx populations. For example, Chavez found that Hispanic visitors mainly use word of mouth to learn about a recreational area¹⁶. Thus, hiring staff who speak Spanish and are familiar with Hispanic culture would help with delivering information to Latinx visitors and relieve anxiety about asking for information¹⁷. Other suggestions, such as properly translating warnings and information to Spanish, are an example of Chavez and others employing a **cultural model of risk communication**¹⁸. In a cultural model, the goal is a democratic dialogue between the public and people we would consider experts, as opposed to a technical model, which is more of a one-way transmission of information from the experts to the public. A cultural model considers local knowledge and emphasizes the involvement of people who are affected by environmental risks. Some of the studies referenced were done for the benefit of state and national parks to improve management and these suggestions consider cultural values that go beyond technical definitions. Chavez is effectively proposing a model of communication that seeks to understand how Latinx

¹⁴ Lusk et al. “Biking practices and preferences in a lower income, primarily minority neighborhood”. 235.

¹⁵ Sasidharan, Vinod. “Ethnicity and Urban Park Use”. 15.

¹⁶ Bass, John M. et al. “Influence of Ethnicity on Recreation and Natural Environment Use Patterns”. 528.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cox, Robert and Pezzullo, Phaedra C. “Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere”. 161.

people recreate. Other effective methods include translating websites to Spanish, creating an ad or doing a segment for a popular radio or television show in Spanish. There may be other effective methods as well. Thus, it is crucial that leaders wishing to increase racial and ethnic diversity in recreation spaces seek out these kinds of opportunities, since I cannot speak for every person in the Latinx community.

There are several potential limitations to my project and the studies that I referenced. I only read open-source online articles in English for my research. Access to a paid journal, a journal in another language, or by authors other than the ones mentioned may lead to more insight on this topic. Additionally, several of the studies used survey methods. Although surveys are a personal, convenient method to obtain information, surveys may not be as reliable or as representative as we would hope. These studies were also mostly done in the 90s and 2000s, so more ongoing recent studies are needed. Also, most of the research was focused on park usage and visits. However, it would be reasonable to think that similar findings occur in other types of recreational spaces and activities. Lastly, I would like to further explore how Latinx families define and experience nature. In fact, Edwin Gomez recognizes the role of language in leisure as a gap in studying recreational activities.¹⁹ Gomez considers questions such as the role of heritage language on how, where, and why non-English speakers recreate. Such studies would incorporate other leisure gaps that Gomez identifies, such as dominant ideologies, cultural values apart from family, and location, including rural versus urban areas. These are some of the patterns that Gomez mentions in the synthesis of studies that surveyed Hispanic/Latinos.

¹⁹ Gomez, Edwin. "Race, Ethnicity, Recreation, and Leisure: An Assessment of Research Gaps". *Recreation Visitor Research: Studies of Diversity*. 75-84.

It is worth mentioning again that not all Latinx people have the same experiences. Chavez acknowledges that the data “treat all Latinos as one group,”²⁰ and that the aim of these studies is to find patterns within Latinx-identifying people. Differences within the Latinx community could further influence recreational habits.²¹ Studies of recreation in general are primarily based on majority-white populations,²² implying a need for culturally-specific studies.

A family-focused culture is reflected in the tendencies of Latinx people to recreate in larger groups with nuclear family, more frequently in the same areas that are learned about orally. My findings both within the studies referenced and my personal experience are valuable for organizations with a goal of diversifying recreational spaces. The current rate of participation from Latinx populations is being addressed by culturally-specific, emerging campaigns from organizations whose objective is to increase the involvement of Latinx families in outdoor recreational activities. As demonstrated by the emergence of organizations such as Latino Outdoors, HECHO (Hispanics Enjoying Camping, Hunting, and the Outdoors), Vive Northwest in Portland and ¡Naturaleza Ahora! in Salem, there is a need for culturally-specific spaces that address some of the barriers mentioned previously. Studies by Deborah J. Chavez and others have started the research necessary to begin the process of finding out what Latinx people prefer, but newer research should be supported, especially locally.

²⁰ Chavez, Deborah J. and Olson, David D. “Research Article: Opinions of Latino Outdoor Recreation Visitors at Four Urban National Forests”. *Environmental Practice* 11:4 (2009). 263-269.

²¹ Sasiharan, Vinod. “Ethnicity and Urban Park Use”. 15.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

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