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Baldelomar to Examine Children's Understanding of Ethnic Categories

Summary: Oscar Baldelomar received a University of Minnesota IDEA Multicultural Research Award for work regarding children’s understanding of ethnic categories.

(March 5, 2013)-Oscar Baldelomar, assistant professor of psychology, received a University of Minnesota Institute for Diversity, Equity, and Advocacy (IDEA) 2013 Multicultural Research Award for his project entitled “Children’s Understanding of Their Ethnic Categories.” His research will focus on the ways in which first-generation Latino children come to understand ethnic categories and cultural identity.

Baldelomar will examine differences in how Latino and European American children come to understand that their ethnic categories are included in the more inclusive “American” category, forming a mental hierarchical system of categories. Given the complexity of the process, it often takes children several years to develop an understanding of how categories are nested within the hierarchy. To move down a hierarchy (e.g. “American” includes both white and non-white people), children must use logical discrimination, which is not developed until six years of age or later.

According to Baldelomar, this process of classification has significant ramifications on children’s understanding of their own ethnic identities. His research shows that, because children can move up the hierarchy much earlier than they can move down, it takes longer for them to understand that people can be both Latino and American simultaneously.

“To say, ‘I’m American,’ a Mexican American child needs to understand that not all Americans are white, which is a huge step,” says Baldelomar. “There is a lag of two years for Latino kids moving down the hierarchy. Because of the lag, Latino children take longer to see their relationship to ‘American.’ Hopefully, my research will have implications on how we design multicultural curriculum to help minority children see themselves as members of the larger American group and to help European American children see minority children as American, too.”

Baldelomar is also interested in the labels children create to identify themselves. Focusing on concrete features like skin color and language, children adopt hyphenated labels both like and unlike those used by adults. Baldelomar believes these labels are an important expression of the self, one that he hopes to better understand as a result of the project.

“I’m very happy and privileged to be doing this research. We are undergoing change here in Minnesota, and growth in the Hispanic community will be significant in the coming years. I want to contribute to the community in terms of how we improve our multicultural teaching so all students can feel included. We need to be effective, and that has to do with inclusion.”

The study will compare ways in which first-generation Latino children and European American children in grades 1-9 identify the ethnicity of people represented in various photographs. Baldelomar will start collecting data in west central Minnesota this fall.

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