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UNDERSTANDING THE PUERTO RICAN AND HIS FAMILY.

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AN UNDERSTANDING OF TRADITIONAL PUERTO RICAN FAMILY CUSTOMS AND BASIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PUERTO RICAN AND OTHER LIFE STYLES SHOULD HELP PROFESSIONAL WORKERS SOLVE THE PROBLEMS CREATED BY MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES. THE CULTURE OF THE PUERTO RICAN CAN BE DESCRIBED IN RELATION TO THREE CONCEPTS--DIGNIDAD (SELF-ESTEEM OR SELF-WORTH), RESPETO (UNDERSTANDING OF THE ROLE IN THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY), AND CARINO (AFFECTION). THESE CONCEPTS SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD AS INTERRELATED AND BASIC TO PUERTO RICAN TRADITION. THE EXTENDED FAMILY, WITH ITS CONCOMITANT SECURITY FOR THE CHILD, AND THE PATRIARCHAL PATTERN OF THE CULTURE ARE DEEPLY ROOTED IN THE TRADITION. WHEN THE PUERTO RICAN MIGRATES TO THE MAINLAND, THESE VALUES BECOME STRAINED AND BREAK DOWN BECAUSE OF THE MAINLAND STRESS ON CONTRACTUAL RELATIONSHIPS AND EFFICIENT BEHAVIOR. THIS PAPER WAS DELIVERED AT THE TRAINING COURSE ON CULTURE AND CULTURE THEORY (MAY 1964). (NH)

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Ferkauf Graduate School of Education, Yeshiva University

ABSTRACTED



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A Paper Delivered At The Training Course on Culture and Culture Theory
May, 1964

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PP.

As we are going to talk about understanding Puerto Ricans, let me greet you with a word which has such tremendous power and implication among us Spanish-speaking people - "amigos".

I feel very happy to be here today and I am not unmindful of the privilege given me by Dr. Harold Yeager, Jr. in allowing me to address you at this session.

In talking today about Puerto Rican culture, I am talking about a distinctive way of life of a group of people and these people are my own, so that it is a pleasure for me to have this opportunity to present and explain to you the attitudes, values ways of acting of my people that may seem strange to you or even unknown to you.

It seems to me that if I can present to you some of our traditional family customs, pointing out to you the basic differences between our way of life and yours, you may have then a wider understanding of our people and a feeling for the "why" or "how" of our manner. This increased knowledge will, I believe, help you to work more affectively with my people and your understanding and sympathy will be a greater asset in dealing and solving the varied problems with which you are confronted.

I am not a professional social worker. My formal training has been in sociology. However, I have worked as a missionary in Puerto Rico among my people for many years, and also here in the states at three different periods over the past 25 years. At present, I am stationed in one of the high delinquency areas of the borough of Brooklyn. Through all these years, I have been part of Puerto Rican life and so I know the changes that have occurred with regard to Puerto Ricans.

Not long ago, I met an American Sister who had been in Puerto Rico for many years teaching school, now she is teaching here in a Parochial school that has many Puerto Rican students. She was complaining of how different the children here are from those she had taught on the island. She said to me: With such a beautiful island as they have, I don't see why they come up here where they lose all their gracious manner.

It seemed to me that the Sister had missed a point. While she taught in the island, she did not acquire a knowledge of the personality and culture of the Puerto Ricans and now she could not understand the struggle that these children were having in trying to grow up in an environment so alien to their own past experience and their cultural traditions. The terrible state of confusion that immigrants go through in their uprooting from one country to another is keenly felt by the children and adolescents and they reflect it in their behavior.

Now let me explain a little point. Don't expect me to give you generalizations of "one type" Puerto Rican. I cannot say to you: Puerto Ricans always act this way or that way; this is impossible. Let me put it this way. You must see pictures of Puerto Rico, the beautiful scenery, the varied hues of our vegetation; you have probably noticed the different shades of green that met your eyes. May I suggest comparing all this variety of color to the many different types, personalities and temperaments in our people? We are not just

Spanish, Indian or Negro. We are combination, and we come in many, many brands and varieties - that is hard to explain. To understand us well, we have to go deep into our historic background and there find that from our Spanish heritage and Puerto Rican traditions and environment, we have developed into a special people with many idiosyncracies and ways of acting typical to us, but variable because of the many differences found among us.

The American citizen from Puerto Rico differs from his continental fellow citizen in many ways but those key concepts for understanding the Puerto Rican are: dignidad, respeto y carino. These are separate traits, but usually are found together and they reinforce and complement each other. These cultural themes or "focal concerns" as Walter Miller might call them, are hard to describe because they are not written down in books in Puerto Rico, but are transmitted from family to family through the generation, and from friend to friend, and by other informal ways.

If a Puerto Rican was asked to define "dignidad" he would find it hard to define it in technical words. It is a quality which gives depth to a person in the feeling of being someone. It is an inner value of himself expressed in many of the circumstances of life. Because of this, "dignidad" a man will choose rather the intangible than the materialistic desires of life. This quality is complimented by "respeto" which makes a Puerto Rican understand his role and act accordingly. It does not matter whether he is rich or poor, white or black. A Puerto Rican knows what is expected of him in his relations to his friends, relatives and other people. Because of this, he acts with "dignidad" and expects "respeto" in return, the same as he will give that "respeto" to others as required by his obligations within the extensive network of his loyalties.

"Carino," our third concept, loosely means affection. It is the emotional bond between people which grows out of "dignidad" and "respeto". First comes "dignidad," then "respeto" and finally "carino." Without "dignidad," the other two do not follow - an important fact to remember in relating to Puerto Rican people.

Let me tell you little stories that may illustrate some of our traditions of "dignidad, respeto, y carino".

Raque is a young teenager in Brooklyn. His family is poor, but hardworking and both parents have tried to raise their children in the traditional Puerto Rican way and the family has tried to live with "dignidad". Raque needed shoes, but one of our Sisters knew he would never accept money from us so we asked him to wash our car and then Sister gave him an envelop with money as a "little gift". That afternoon he came back to us with a beautiful African violet plant. He had spent the money on a grateful gift to the Sisters. "Wasteful" or "foolish" some practical people may say, but to me watching Raque going down the stairs, he had expressed his "dignidad, respeto, y carino" as a true Puerto Rican would always do. This was part of his great Spanish heritage, the depth of which he could not put into words, except to feel that it was a major justification of his behavior.

Let me tell you another story. Last year when I was back in Puerto Rico

in the summer, I went to visit the little town of the Cabo Rojo where I had worked as a missionary for 9 years. As I visited some of my old friends in a "barrio" I saw this old lady waiting for me on the road. She said: "Sister, while you were with us I never was able to give you anything, but today when I saw you down the street I rejoiced because I could give you a little present" and putting her hands in her apron pocket she brought out five beautiful fresh eggs as her gift to la Hermanita (little Sister). She wanted to show her "respeto y carino," and in turn to insure her own "dignidad" by doing something for the ones that had been good to her.

These little stories represent in a way the traditional "dignidad, respeto, y carino" of the Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans react to kindness by a deep and loyal emotion of respect which we term "carino". If we, therefore, treat them with respect, win their "carino" and preserve their "dignidad," we can do much to mold and help them to acquire standards of living that will prove profitable for them in this country.

Perhaps it is not so different with "Norteamericanos" but here people do seem to put more stress on contractual relationships and rational behavior.

In making comparisons we necessarily simplify them. We are not claiming that every Puerto Rican lives up to these ideals, but these are what constitute the heart of their cultural traditions as it influences interpersonal relationships.

Someone may say that the Puerto Rican has changed recently and that his "dignidad" is something of the past. Recent surveys show the contrary. Melvin Tumin in his book Social Change and Social Class in Puerto Rico takes a random sample of 1000 Puerto Ricans heads of households in all kinds of educational background, income and occupation and finds out that this "dignidad," this sense of self-worth is very much in evidence and very strong in the Puerto Ricans personality. For when the individual was asked to rate himself in comparison with other people he almost always rated himself at "high" because to a Puerto Rican it does not matter whether he is poor or rich, of much or little education - he has a place with dignidad as a person in his society. He has self-respect and he is aware that other people in his society respect him.

Juan Monten is to me an example of the clash of values which occur when the Puerto Rican comes to New York and begins to live and work here. When Juan came to New York he had a happy family. His wife Lola and his four children respected him as the head of the family, the provider and the authority for all. Juan worked hard and kept them all happy as best he could but as time went on and the children became older he could not keep up with the rest of the society around him. His teenage girls wanted special clothes, his boys wanted to appear well-dressed, his wife wanted better furniture. Juan's job was not enough. The wife went to work to help and Juan lost part of his authority because he was no longer the sole provider. To catch up he began to gamble, hoping to make money to provide for what he could not provide by work. When the man loses his "dignidad," his sense of self-worth, he loses his sense of his obligations to others. Conflict began and poor Juan Monten's family is fast becoming a "problem"; the teenage boy is dropping out of school, the teenage girl is running wild and fighting with others, and the mother is continually arguing and fighting with the

father.

A social worker once told me, "as one becomes acquainted with the Puerto Rican people and as they talk freely of their life "back home", one realizes the staggering list of things they must accept and become accustomed to in adapting to city life." So let us look now at some aspects of the structure of Puerto Rican society which will help you to understand them better in their assimilation into their new way of life.

- The Puerto Rican family is the integral unit of Puerto Rican society and differs in many ways from the typical American family, chiefly because the culture stresses different values - values that have developed from the strong Spanish influence and three centuries of colonization. To a Puerto Rican, his family is his stronghold. His innate joy of living, born of his hospitality and generosity, it prevails over interests in material things. The Puerto Rican family is an extended one. Someone has called this extended family "the Puerto Rican social security plan." Everyone knows his neighbors and depends upon family and friends for support in situations of crisis. The extended family does not only comprise the members of the nuclear family, but also included the many relatives, such as aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and especially the "padrino y compadres" godparents and co-parents of the baptism ceremony. With these latter there is a special network of relationship which is very sacred to the Puerto Rican. A Puerto Rican child is brought up to feel that he is never alone, but that around him there is a network of relationships that will ever sustain him and help him. Therefore, if a child is deprived of his parents because of sickness, death or some other cause, the relatives usually take over the child and without any legal procedure adopt the child. There is great security for the child in the environment of the Puerto Rican culture.

I remember when I was working in Cabo Rojo the mother of 10 children died when her 11th baby was born. I felt so bad for the father and worried about the children, and who would take care of them. The day after the funeral I visited them. All was in perfect order. The oldest girl, 14 years old, had taken over the care of her father and two of the children, the baby and the rest were already happily adjusting, each one to a new family that had adopted them immediately after the mother died.

The Puerto Rican child accepts the responsibility of belonging to this extended family as an integral part of himself and in his role. He knows he cannot fail them if he wants to win "dignidad-respeto-carino" as he grows older.

To the Puerto Rican, his extended family "con razon o sin ella" (right or wrong) is the training he gets from the very beginning of his life and so he learns that whether in business or in feasting you always have to defer to your own relatives first. Here you can see one of the great stresses the Puerto Rican child in the states has where his extended family is not around him to give him support and security and when he sees his own family losing face under the stress of the many problems that confront the stranger in a big city. It is no wonder that the "dignidad, respeto, y carino" of the Puerto Rican lose the brightness of their meaning to the child here; and this does happen as those familiar with the Puerto Rican in New York readily knows.

Talking about the extended family, let me tell you a story. Last summer one of the young teachers that went to the C.U. of Ponce told me how he was driving in a "publico" (a taxi) and he asked the chauffer if he had a big family. "Very grande, Mister" (very big, teacher) was the reply so the teacher thought, 10 or 12 children, so he asked, "how old is the oldest child?" The chauffer answered, "Oh, I have no children, but a big family, 4 uncles, 5 aunts, 10 cousins, etc."

Let me illustrate another characteristic of the Puerto Rican family. Some-time ago I met in NY a Public Health nurse and she was quite perturbed because of the conduct of Mrs. Ramos, a young Puerto Rican mother. It seemed that Mrs. Ramos had brought her child to the clinic and the nurse had told her that the child had to be vaccinated for diptheria. Mrs. Ramos refused because she said she had to ask her husband. The nurse was very upset and thought Mrs. Ramos was avoiding or neglecting her duty to her child. Great was her surprise when Mrs. Ramos returned to the clinic the next day all smiles, her husband said "yes".

You see, the family structure in Puerto Rico is a patriarchal unit and is under the complete domination of the husband or father. Man is the Head of the House and his authority is unquestioned. He is expected to be the provider, to do the family shopping, to make the important decisions, to discipline the children. This is so much a part of our life that it seems to us strange to expect any other attitude in our family relations. And so, in the above story the woman could not make a decision unless her husband consented.

All this is hard to understand unless you are aware how the Puerto Rican woman has been brought up in the idea of the respeto a woman is expected to show to her husband. This is not simply something that men demand. It is something that the whole community believes in and requires of a "good woman".

The woman's role is one of submission and dependency; she is expected to obey her husband and ask his permission to go visiting or do anything outside her established duties. She is not allowed to dance or talk to any man unless her husband gives her permission; and in all things she defers to her husband. The man is very jealous. She serves and cares for her husband and children. She does not sit until all is done. This is why some women come late for meetings run by social workers in the early evening.

Do you think the Puerto Rican woman considers herself a slave to the man. Oh no, she willingly will serve and protect him and will show with pride-"respeto"- to her man as an expression of her "carino". In return, the man protects the woman in a way which reminds us of the old-time Spanish chivalry. There are variations and we see these even in Puerto Ricans.

The children are very important in a Puerto Rican family. Zealously they are protected and cared for - and sometimes the parents go the limits to satisfy their wishes. At times, their attitude to the children seems as if they were spoiling them and yet they expect them to be respectful and submissive. Again let me remind you of "carino" which is the deep love of the Puerto Rican for his children, but with insistance on "dignidad" to the person and "respeto" to

authority. At times, the children are punished severely; but in spite of this, they do not call the police against their father.

Children are expected to obey implicitly the man who is the head of the house. They are given responsibility early in their lives and sometimes beyond their immediate capacities. Older children are assigned the task of caring for their younger brothers and sisters, and it is taken for granted that the oldest son is next in authority with almost the same rights as his parents to enforce the family discipline, and he often does. You may frequently meet an oldest son playing this role here in N.Y. Be careful not to misinterpret what you see.

The social education given to boys, contrasted with that given girls, gives the male in Puerto Rican society a different outlook about sex conduct; thus, boys have more freedom while the girls are well protected. Girls have little freedom to associate with boys in Puerto Rican culture.

Although the boy is given a great amount of freedom, the girl is often overprotected and once she becomes a teenager she is scarcely allowed out of her parents' sight, especially at night. Here we see a source of conflict for the adolescent girl in New York neighborhoods where other girls are given much more freedom than our Puerto Rican parents can accept as possible to give their own daughter.

Let me recount to you a story of a family in Brooklyn that may illustrate my point. The T. family lives in a housing project, the neighborhood is mixed - Negroes, Puerto Ricans and a few others. The family originally came from a country town and lived in the Puerto Rican traditional way. The man came to work in New York. Later he saved money enough to bring his family. They have been here ten years. The father has always insisted on "respeto" and has seen to it that the children obey and respect. His three eldest boys have grown up in New York and gone through the dangerous adolescent age without any trouble. But, with the girls it has been a different story. The oldest one at 16 years old ran away with a boy and another one at 13 ran away from home for three days. I asked the father what he thought of it. He said to me - "Sister, the trouble in this country is that the government caters to delinquents. In Puerto Rico the father is the law and the children obey, and if he does not obey, the father will punish the child until he learns the right ways to act, but here, if you punish one of your children, he can bring you into court. That is what happened to me. I have had no trouble with the boys. They know, but once when my wife was in the hospital and I was taking care of the house I had to punish Peggy. I hit her with a strap. Next day in school, the teacher saw the mark on Peggy's arm and I was called down to court. The Judge shamed me in front of my daughter. Since then, she did as she pleased for she knew I had lost my authority."

I asked the second girl, whom I know, why she had ran away. She gave me her story: Father too strict - not allowed out - she ran away.

The dating pattern is also very different among our people. When a boy likes a girl he asks permission of her father or guardian to visit her and at all times there is someone with them and they are never permitted to go out alone. The girl knows that this way she is protected, not from her boyfriend who she trusts but from people talking about her (reputation). A boy that goes

courting "the right way" protects his girl as he knows there is already a definite understanding with her family, and family loyalty is very strong. Here in New York, although somewhat changed, the custom continues and couples are protected by the family's watchful care and interest.

There are exceptions, of course, and one also finds girls not protected. These girls may come from broken homes, or where both parents are working and more interested in their material welfare, or where the reputation of the parents is so low that no care is taken about the sanctions of society, but whatever the reason may be every Puerto Rican knows that a girl alone is courting trouble.

There is a complicated pattern of sexual behavior that involves far more than dating. The double standard of sex morality has been part of the structure of Puerto Rican social life for many generations and has influenced greatly the family patterns and values. The wives recognize the double standard and sometimes accept the children of extramarital union in their own homes. Although they are not emotionally reconciled to the infidelities of their husbands, they accept with forbearance this traditional practice. Illegitimate children have generally been openly acknowledged; and since 1942 a law was passed in Puerto Rico that if the father is known, he must recognize his illegitimate child, and the law gives that recognized child certain rights of status, support, and inheritance.

Let us not forget the spiritual values of the Puerto Rican. Many are Protestants, but most are Catholics. The Puerto Ricans are deeply religious even if they do not attend church regularly.

To conclude, I have tried to give you in a general way some of the basic characteristics of my people. In presenting some aspects of our traditional way to you I may not have given you the solution to the so-called Puerto Rican problem, but I have tried to present to you the values that are so important to every Puerto Rican: "Dignidad, respeto y carino."

Be aware of these and let them guide you as you work with Puerto Rican newcomers. Understand something of the Puerto Rican family system as you attempt to help and motivate my people. Remember, too, that a people with the traits just described make good allies.

/mf
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