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Exclusion and Cultural Diversity: A Community-Based Experience with Dominican Immigrants

Ruth Nina-Estrella PhD: Is a full Professor in the University of Puerto Rico and Coordinator of the Social-Community Psychology Program, in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico.
rvnina10@gmail.com

Carlos Rivera-Santana M.A.: Is a PhD research student in the University of Queensland in Brisbane, but also a PhD student in the University of Puerto Rico in the Social-Community Psychology Program.
unamuno1017@gmail.com

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Abstract

The following article reflects and presents an intercultural experience within the context of Puerto Rico through the *Voces con Eco* (Voices with Echoes) project. In this work we contextualize our experience within the Caribbean and Puerto Rican domain and the cultural diversity phenomena that impregnates our every day life. Then we explain how an intercultural educational intervention is relevant and we present *Voces con Eco* and our experience in Puerto Rico with the Dominican Republic immigrant community. Through this project we intended to promote the value of cultural diversity, rich coexistence and incentive a curiosity towards different cultures. Through research, developing intercultural skills, particular educational material to be used in workshops, filmed documentaries and further research across the recipient country (in this case across Puerto Rico) we think that a very rich intervention was enacted.

Keywords: cultural diversity, intercultural interventions, Dominican immigration, intercultural education, community projects.

Each day we find increasingly more complex and changing cities. A city is a space lived, felt, valued, and perceived by its inhabitants, who by way of mental and historic representations, as well as individual and collective impressions, sow, shape and establish a city's character which is able to exert influence over collective behaviors (Zarate, 1996). Cities are scenarios that show the diversity of its actors, who convoke all of its inhabitants to recognize their rights and responsibilities. They are also the contexts where recent changes in work production and relations may be evidenced.

It is in urban spaces where such diversity is concentrated and expressed. In light of the homogenization imposed by the state, most societies have constituted themselves from the multiplicity of cultural and ethnic groups (Borja & Castell, 1997). Cultural differences establish territorial forms of life that reflect diverse patterns of behavior and intercultural conflict. It is for this reason that in the present the notion of *city* provokes a rethinking of other concepts such as: diversity, solidarity, identity, pluralism, coexistence and multiculturalism. To recognize cultural diversity in our societies is to initiate a long journey that can make visible the invisible, as well as reaffirm citizen identities that are immersed in contexts of social exclusion (Eroles, 2006).

A multicultural society implies people of diverse cultures living in the same geographic space. In the Caribbean this phenomenon is due to the migrations between the islands in the region because of

economic, political and historical factors (such is the case in Cuba and the Dominican Republic). It is when we are living together among different ethnic groups that one starts to talk about the other, evidencing attitudes or behaviors that denote racial discrimination, nationality, customs, social class, educational level, and religious practices (Chrysochoou, 2004; Mahalingam, 2006). Identity construction in multicultural societies reflects either rejection or acceptance of the so-called "Other" establishing a dichotomy between "we" and the "other". This lack of understanding the other legitimizes a discourse of intolerance towards what is different or unknown.

Because of the reasons mentioned above and others, we suggest that intercultural education programs be developed, which may contribute in the processes of integration and social life of immigrant families. Why a program of intercultural education? First of all, interculturality must be emphasized because multicultural education does not comprise the "living togetherness" among cultures, but rather their coexistence, stressing more the differences (Colectivo Amani, 2002). Interculturality is different in that it considers the convergence of ties and commonalities that bind ethnic groups, as well as it considers their human rights (Paz, 2007; Valdillo, 2006).

This work presents the experience of one community's implementation of an educational program grounded on tolerance and cultural diversity in Puerto Rican society. Understanding this approach

requires contextualizing the reader on two aspects; the study of migration within social psychology, and the study of the Dominican migration in Puerto Rico.

The concept of “convivencia”

In the topic of cultural diversity, in the Spanish literature particularly, we use the concept of “*convivencia*” that translating it in a literal manner, means living together. There are referents that can imply something similar to the concept of *convivencia* such as coexistence, cohabitation, even just living together. However coexistence and cohabitation can't semantically grasp the signification of *convivencia* since it connotes a warmer, more significant and interactive form of living together. In Latin-American culture, particularly in the Caribbean, this warmth, this significance and interactiveness is constitutive to the ways and processes in which one culture may interact and live with each other. Therefore in this article we will use coexistence, living togetherness and living together as interchangeable where it can be used semantically and metonymically, but meaning ultimately the Spanish concept of *convivencia*.

Investigations of Migration from the Social Psychology Context

According to the United Nations 10% of the world populations are immigrants. The International Migration Report (ONU, 2002) concludes that the number of immigrants has doubled since the 70's and approximately 175 million persons live outside the nation they were born in. This means that one out of ten people in the developed nations are immigrants.

The immigration processes raise questions of a need for a redefinition of the nation-state and group identity (Castels & Miller, 2003; Mahalingam, 2006). This suggests a more complex situation that mere statistics can only describe and not explain.

The immigrant and immigration are prevalent topics in anthropology, demography, economy, political science and sociology; however there is a lack of research of this nature in psychology. There are many perspectives in immigration studies as a social phenomenon such as: (1) some that gives importance to expectations and motivations of individuals to explain immigrant behavior. It is known that immigrant individuals elaborate a migratory project based mainly in countries job offers and economic reasons. (2) Other more complex models try to explain the emigrating behavior based upon an array of factors in conjunction with personality variables (Boneva & Frieze, 2001).

Social psychology views the migratory phenomenon from the perspective of the subject's mechanisms of accommodation to his/her new environment (personal changes), and the subject's capacity to facilitate social change. Immigration is considered to be a transition process that involves facing such problems as a new language, different value systems, different beliefs, inadequate situations of co-existence, and rebuilding a personal support network. All of these situations could increase the vulnerability of the persons in such a way that in time specific disorders could develop, including depression and stress. Stress particularly is a response to daily social situations that the immigrant can face such as: racism, xenophobia and marginalization. The lack of social and psychological skills needed to deal with these situations is a variable that could predict the blossoming of these disorders.

On the other hand, another characteristic of immigration are the specific changes that occur within the immigrant group in the process of coexisting in the host society. This phenomenon is called acculturation, and the changes refer to their values, beliefs, lifestyles, group identities, etc. It is important to maintain clear that in this process, the host nation-state (which is the dominant group) a way forces the immigrant group to make a higher effort for change, which in turn, creates more inter-group conflicts.

Berry's model (2001) tries to explain the acculturation phenomenon, establishing that immigrants confront two vital decisions when they arrive in the host nation-society: (1) decide if their own culture is, in itself, a value to preserve in the new context; and (2) decide if they are going to establish relationships with the members of the receptor society. The combination of these elements gives the possibility of four acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. Social cohesion problems between host and immigrant population emerge when acculturation strategies used by the immigrant group, and the desired strategies of the receptor group, differ greatly. Especially in terms of religious practices, children's education, couple relationships, sense of being neighborly, etc.

Another theoretical approach to immigration processes is the intergroup relation theory, which tries to understand the conflicts between the members of the host social group and the immigrant groups in terms of attitudes, stereotyping and discriminatory conducts. Some of these studies include the works of Tajfel & Turner, (1979) on social identity, establishing that a process of social comparison

generates a conscience of belongingness in the group's perception.

In the community context, to value diversity implies that society must provide the same services and resources to all its members. Educational interventions, that address the immigration phenomenon, is important because an intercultural education for peace and co-existence - based on equality, non-prejudice and the respect for diversity - may be possible. Particularly important is that these interventions concentrate on the minority group's strengths, rather than what makes them different. Intervention programs directed toward immigrant groups with the goal of improving their social integration through multiple initiatives must have objectives, such as: 1) to identify and conceptualize aspects related with intolerance, such as racism; 2) to stimulate the development of skills, such as improving communication, respecting diversity and dealing with prejudice; 3) promoting empathy with the persons who frequently suffer racism and intolerance.

Research about the Dominican community in Puerto Rico

The 15 independent Caribbean nations have one of the highest emigration rates in the world. The largest four sources of migrants to the USA are: Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti and Jamaica; comprising about 75 percent of the 36 million Caribbean residents. Some 765,000 Dominicans have immigrated legally, most since 1985 and most settling in New York City. Dominican migration began in 1960, particularly the 1965 U.S. invasion of this country. The Dominican Republic has about 8 million residents, and the U.S. consulate in Dominican Republic receives an average of 500 requests for immigrant and tourist visas daily, placing it in third position among visa requests for the U.S., after Philippines and Mexico. According to a 1997 poll, half of Dominicans residents have relatives in the USA and two thirds would have moved there if they could.

The biggest and fastest growing group of immigrants in Puerto Rico comes from the Dominican Republic. The exact number of Dominicans living in the island is unknown, because many of them do not have legal residence status. According to Duany, Hernández and Rey (1995), in the 90's there were about 60,000 Dominican immigrants and the Puerto Rican government recognized conservatively, more than 200,000.

The 2010 census shows that the total population of Puerto Rico is 3,725,789, of which 68,036 are

Dominican with an average age of 37 years old and 33,860 living in the metropolitan area of San Juan. This population group is composed of 719 persons less than five years old, 48,924 are less than 18 years, and 3,463 are 65 years or older. 18,536 have high school or a higher degree.

It is known that most of the Dominican community live in the country's poorest areas (Burgos, 2002), therefore the host population does not really know about the Dominican culture and as a result of this, they stereotype them. In Puerto Rico the negative image of the Dominicans is typically exposed in ethnic jokes. The ethnic joke is among the first symptoms of hostile co-existence, prejudice and rejection of those whom cross the borders to share a same territory or space (Martínez-San Miguel, 1998). Moreover, Duany (2001) presents that immigrants appear as targets of ridicule and rejection, in stories, jokes and sayings, all of these focusing on their accent, physical appearance, cultural ideologies and legal conditions. Xenophobic and racist situations can also be observed which can end in conflictive events.

The first instance of a migratory movement of the people of Dominican Republic to the United States occurred in the 70's as a result of the reform of emigration bills that former president Trujillo's government had (Burgos, 2002). If anything can be noted in the Dominican migration to Puerto Rico, it is the marked contrast between both migratory waves: (1) in the 70's, it was essentially from the medium to high social class sectors, mainly doctors. (2) In the last few years, it became illegal and from the poor social classes. The local rejection comes from the excess of workers in the local market and Dominicans are blamed constantly for taking the jobs in this country. They are also blamed for many social problems.

Duany (1990) proposes that recent migratory wave consisted of illegal persons that arrived to Puerto Rico in a clandestine manner (in a "yola" or small improvised boat is one of the ways of arriving) and often then moving to New York. In Puerto Rico the Dominican community is mainly concentrated in the metropolitan area, particularly in the poor sectors of Santurce and Río Piedras.

Research on the Dominican emigration in the United States and Puerto Rico, is found in the works of Candelario & López (1995), Fernández-Kelly (1985), Grasmuck & Pessar (1991), Hernández & Rivera-Batiz (1997) Hernández Angueira (1990), Pessar (1995). A wide range of topics are covered, such as work-force and the informal sector, sexuality and family, the use of public assistance, values and roles associated to family.

Also, one can mention studies of social and ethnic relations between the Dominican group and the Puerto Ricans, done by Ramos Pérez & Santiago Rivera (1997), Duany, Hernández & Rey (1995). Ramos Pérez & Santiago Rivera (1997). These studies generally conclude that in the community of Capetillo in Río Piedras, unequal relations prevail between ethnic groups. Also that Puerto Ricans whom live there assume a xenophobic position, and that Dominicans establish support networks with their own ethnic group in order to facilitate their adaptation in the host society-nation. Duany, Hernández and Rey (1995) found that group interaction between Puerto Ricans and Dominicans are filled with social prejudice and stereotypes, and that there are no support networks between them as well. Dominicans here also lack a formal social organization to help them face discrimination in their workplaces, in living facilities and in health clinics. Research findings also conclude that illegal immigration and the “underground economy” helps explain the difficulty in accounting precisely for the total numbers of immigrants, and for the deplorable working conditions that include poor- paying and less prestigious jobs.

Duany (2001) concludes that the media is partly responsible for xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants because they promote myths about immigrants that motivate intolerance. These myths are based on the impression that a high proportion of Dominicans are in an illegal status, are black or “mulatto” (of mixed race), are from the blue collar workforce class, from the peasant social stratum and primarily women.

Intolerance towards Dominicans in Puerto Rico grows every day, especially with the increase of illegal persons coming to the island by “yolas” or in other means of transport (Iturrondo, 2001). The criminal stigma over the Dominicans is very notable in the way some people come to associate their illegal immigration status with illegal behavior, crime and urban community decadence (Martinez-San Miguel, 1998).

Strategies of intervention in the context of cultural diversity

When families emigrate they are exposed to tensions that may be considered to be an ecological transition (Laluzza & Crespo, 2005), which implies reorganizing in order to insert into a new society. They must also face the difficulties of cultural change (new rules, loss of support networks, role changes and generational conflicts) and as consequence of migration, reconstructing the sense of belongingness and integrating into the social environment.

Intervention with immigrants can be done with diverse theoretical frameworks, presupposing integration processes. This limits the understandings of the realities in which these cultural groups are immersed. For this reason is so important to formulate proposals from a cultural diversity ethics in order to develop strategies that promote integration and better coexistence (Sánchez & Sánchez, 2009).

Puerto Rico lacks public policies that promotes cultural integration, as do all other countries in the Caribbean region, which make inexistent any plans or strategies for cultural integration. If one adds to this the increase in unemployment, the increase in illegal immigration (the Dominican Republic - Puerto Rico corridor, by sea), and the intercultural tensions, one can see how these factors contribute to the immigrant families’ marginalization and isolation.

Considering the above-mentioned needs in Puerto Rico we designed an educational intervention program, in which an intercultural education for peace is established, based on tolerance and respect for diversity. The program has the function of sensibilizing people over the topic and to promote social coexistence.

***Voces con Eco* educational project**

Voces con Eco is an educational program that promotes cultural diversity and tolerance that emerges as an initiative that addresses the report presented at the Ciudad Universitaria Project under the name *Nuestra Visión* (Our Vision) regarding the needs of the city of Río Piedras. In that report a diversity of needs was identified, particularly the problems of citizens living together in the diverse cultural groups that inhabit Río Piedras.

The city of Río Piedras is an example of multiculturalism in Puerto Rican society because great cultural diversity may be observed as a result of historical, political and economical factors. A mosaic of nationalities lives jointly in an urban scenario where they live together. Amidst this diversity the Dominican community predominates in the central part of the city, as a result of the latest wave of immigrants into the country. The Dominican community that transits this urban space is defined by the following characteristics: of black race, illiterate, with illegal immigration status, blue-collar workers or service employees who live daily in an environment marked by xenophobia and intolerance. To address this problem the *Voces con Eco* project is created with the purpose of developing creative forms of teaching to promote a culture of solidarity, tolerance and social integration in the city of Río Piedras (Nina, 2006).

Learning how to live together implies recognizing social and cultural diversity in the community of Río Piedras. This situation poses great challenges to education when one desires to promote values that address the problem of coexistence and social integration. Among the values that it promotes are: tolerance, respecting the different, valuing diversity, conceiving unity within diversity, cooperation and solidarity.

Among these values tolerance is especially significant mainly because it refers to accepting and respecting the diversity of cultures, races, sexual preferences, religious beliefs and political ideologies. Tolerance is conceived along three premises: accepting diversity, inclusion of pluralism and negotiation of interests. It is for this reason that tolerance has to be taught as an attitude that promotes pluralism.

Considering what we have said the educational program proposes the utilization of creative forms of teaching (such as the use of video and photographs) that reflect the social reality of the inhabitants of Río Piedras. *Voces con Eco* (Voices with Echoes) is a program that has the following objectives:

- Develop an educational experience that promotes a culture of solidarity, tolerance and social integration.
- Promote the knowledge and valorization of diverse cultures.
- Cultivate attitudes of respect towards cultural diversity.
- Help facilitate the improvement of the quality of life of the inhabitants of the city of Río Piedras.

This program requires a participative methodology where the challenge is to involve the community in the process that starts from a reflection on cohabitation, within the context of cultural diversity, continues with the program's implementation and ends with the consolidation of these diversity concepts. At this moment the project features four components:

The first axis is the educational program, *Vivir es convivir* in which the goal is to develop skills that promote living together in the same urban space and developing favorable attitudes for respect and tolerance towards the different forms of understanding life. The program is composed of four educational modules based on a workshop methodology proposed by Ander- Egg (1988), which consists on the pedagogical premise of learning while doing, being also a participative methodology that implies group work. The themes of the workshops

were four in total: Community identity, cultural diversity, tolerance and social life. The implementation of the *Vivir es Convivir* program has worked primarily with the community leaders in the different cultural groups that inhabit the area, including Dominicans, Arabs and Puerto Ricans. Assistance to the workshops was planned with the participants in terms of their availability of days, schedules and places that the workshop could be held. The workshop was structured to start with the *Voces con Eco* visual presentation, in order to motivate a discussion among participants on their seldom discussed topics of cultural diversity and their experiences with it. The workshop then proceeded in sequential fashion. The module was implemented with small groups, with a maximum of twenty people. Once this was finalized, a copy of the *Voces con Eco* video and educational material was provided so that the community members could further develop this program in their community. The experience as a whole has been successful and was evaluated by the participants as a significant and positive experience. The following is a summary of some of the information obtained from the evaluations of the workshop:

- *“Río Piedras is a cosmopolitan sector, where people of many nationalities live together daily, but we must forget about race, religion and nationality”.*
- In terms of peaceful coexistence, it was established that there is little sense of belonging in the community as well as a great amount of intolerance, discrimination and racial stereotypes.
- Other problems that affect the community are: drug abuse, stagnant/smelly waters, alcohol abuse, closed-off streets, abandoned buildings, street violence, excessive noise, and excessive garbage.
- The majority of participants suggested that many people have left the city and for this reason there are many abandoned homes and immigrants moving in to occupy them.
- There are a great number of illegal immigrants living here.
- It is a multicultural city, but with a lot of misinformation. Very little is known about the cultures and ethnic groups that inhabit it.
- The history of the city should be known and documented. The events could be documented in order to emphasize positive tendencies, as well as to identify the common bonds that unify and characterize the population.

- It is important to work towards integration, taking into account that there are differences in terms of religion, educational level and upbringing.
- That living peacefully within diversity is possible and that Puerto Ricans (the locals) are always considered as good and always willing to receive persons of other cultures.
- In terms of racism and discrimination participants remarked racial and nationality stereotypes and concluded that “one must know the person before speaking negatively about him/her.
- In terms of solutions to the conflicts of living together they stressed on the following categories: communication, dialogue, education and sharing.

The second point of the educational program is the development of educational materials such as posters and an exercise manual to be used as a complement or support material for the workshops. The manual is composed of complementary literature for each one of the themes in the module, individual and group exercises, an evaluation sheet for every workshop, the declaration of human rights, and a letter of commitment with tolerance and annotated references for those interested in the subject. Each session entails two hours of work.

The third point comprises the production of filmed documentaries. The documentaries are meant to reflect the daily life of the inhabitants of downtown Río Piedras, including filmed interviews of people from different cultural backgrounds. There have been a total of three educational videos produced in this fashion: (1) *Voces con Eco*, ciudad habitada (2005) (30 min.) This documentary consists on images of the daily life of the multicultural residents and merchants of central Río Piedras who converse on the cultural diversity of the city and the conflicts that they face within this social context; (2) *[Mi] Río Piedras* (2005) (4 min): Comprised of a virtual gallery depicting the construction of the city and of the public and private spaces of its citizens; (3) *Capetillo núm. 12* (2006) (30 min.): Presents how the Dominican community lives in a sector called Capetillo. Among its images are community members sharing a dialogue on their needs, problems and identity with the city of Río Piedras.

The fourth point is the investigation component, which at the present time is being undertaken by a study called: *Travesías: Inmigración, Interculturalidad y Convivencia Social*, where intercultural conflicts are analyzed with regard to the Dominican community, evident in the recent

intolerant attitudes which show an increasing trend by way of racist, discriminatory and xenophobic behavior. The study will comprise four phases: (1) interviews with key informants; (2) focus groups; (3) photographic documentation; and (4) production of a documentary. The communities of Río Piedras and Santurce will be the sectors where the study will be conducted, as they are where the Dominican community predominates. Upon completion of the study, a publication, a documentary and a photographic exhibit will be presented.

We consider that this project has been recognized by the community as helpful towards dealing with the situation of intolerance (above all in the Dominican community), a topic rarely discussed in Puerto Rico. In this process the participants have been able to identify: Problems of coexistence or cohabitation, the need to receive support in order to improve their coexistence and also the psychological effects of migration particularly in the fragilities in the single-mother headed a homes case, which predominates in the community.

Finally, due to the conflicts of coexistence that the inhabitants of Río Piedras face, it is necessary to continue the educational effort so that the community's citizens may learn to respect one another and tolerate different forms of understanding life as a result of the cultural diversity. The intervention with Dominican immigrants within a cultural diversity framework establishes an effective way of achieving social integration, where a dialogue between “them” and “us” may be made possible and working towards a common goal: To improve coexistence between all people that live in this city.

Praxis: The Community Experience

Voces con Eco already has specific experiences that mix the action and the experience of community intervention that we refer as praxis. Although the project is far from over we take the time to reflect about the processes occurring revolving around the aforementioned axis of *Voces con Eco*. In this part of the article we succinctly present some concrete ongoing work from an intercultural and coexistence perspective.

In terms of a specific impression of intercultural relations we found that in general there is “subtle” discrimination from the Puerto Rican community towards non-Puerto Rican communities, particularly towards the Dominican community. From focal groups and key informant interviews we find an array of stories of discrimination and prejudice. Focal groups with youngsters and adults told a plethora of stories of discrimination manifested in discriminatory

jokes, discrimination in quotidian social practices such as in the work sphere and even stories of police brutality. Interviews with key informants, in this case Puerto Rican community leaders they do recognize that discrimination and prejudice exists however they feel they do not participate in these discriminatory practices and therefore they feel “distant” (*ajeno*) from this phenomena. With the collaboration of members of the community there is a latent conclusion that the conditions in which cohabitation or coexistence happens is in the context of these discriminatory practices in which exclusion and conflictive relations constitute the everyday lives of intercultural relationships. To solve this problem the community members agreed that intercultural education and community participation established in collaborative intercultural activities.

The educational axis of the project was initiated with photographic workshops for youngsters between the ages of 12-15. This was decided in collaboration with key community members in which Puerto Rican and Dominican community leaders were included. These workshops discussed, additional to discussing photographic techniques and providing materials such as cameras, the topics of cultural diversity, racism and discrimination, social cohabitation or coexistence, citizenship and human rights and intercultural dialogue (*diálogo intercultural*). After three complete photographic workshops these had as an outcome three photographic expositions called; *El Lente Juvenil* (The Young Lens, 2010), *Diversidad(es): Del Concepto a la Imagen* (Diversit(ies): From the Word to the Image, 2011) and *Miradas desde Capetillo* (Gazes from Capetillo, 2012). These photographic expositions were all presented in the heart of the community (usually in a community center during some day activity) and the young community members actively participated in the expositions.

Lastly in 2012 an educational tool was produced called *Ojos que no Ven* (Eyes that can't See). This is a documentary that addressed the problem of discrimination from the Dominican Community's perspective informed by the experiences of people from the Academia. This documentary was designed to be used as a tailored tool to reflect on the discriminatory practices that the Dominican community in Puerto Rico face. As said before the project's praxis is still ongoing and we expect to have more community informed actions to contribute to a better intercultural coexistence.

With these community actions we also intend to stimulate that the communities that inhabit the city of Río Piedras take the protagonist role and they can

become the catalyst of transformation to better their conditions of wellbeing. The recognition of Dominican communities and all multicultural communities can only happen in the heart of the collectivism of individuals. The community can generate a space of security and of linkages in the fertile ground of the intercultural projects. In the praxis of intercultural projects there is a dialectic relationship in the many elements that constitutes a community that constantly transforms itself while transforming the spaces of them as well. Our bet is that community intervention with multicultural groups from an intercultural perspective can achieve a social integrity in which a dialogue between “them” and “us” can happen with at least the common goal to better the cohabitation or coexistence of all of the individual that live in a multicultural city.

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