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Puerto Rican Phenotype

Understanding Its Historical Underpinnings and Psychological Associations

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The following is a historically informed review of Puerto Rican phenotype. Geared toward educating psychologists, this review discusses how various psychological issues associated with phenotype may have arisen as a result of historical legacies and policies associated with race and racial mixing. It discusses how these policies used various markers to demarcate an “authentic” Puerto Rican identity, and how we continue to reference these variables when defining Puerto Rican identity, despite the fact that identity is contextual and fluid. In reviewing the historical underpinnings and contextual nature of phenotype, it is hoped that the reader will gain a greater appreciation of the role of phenotype in the lives of Puerto Ricans and understand how phenotype, and, most importantly, historical trauma can be related to a host of psychological concerns.

Keywords: *Puerto Rican; phenotype; skin color; historical trauma; caste system*

Despite popular claims to the contrary, among Latinos, race can be a divisive and hegemonic tool often used to assign privilege and status. Moreover, although race can interact with other notable demographic variables,

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such as gender and class, race has its own particular role in demarcating a person's social rank and establishing hegemony (Migden Socolow, 2000). Namely, race can exert its influence not only by privileging those who are European but also by assigning advantages to those with phenotypes (i.e., skin color and facial features) that resemble the White European colonizers of colonial Latin America. From a psychological perspective, it is important to understand the historical underpinnings of phenotype because racial appearance has often served as a marker for power, and current research indicates that disempowerment, due to historical trauma, can affect psychological functioning.

With this in mind, this text presents a Latino-centric, multidisciplinary, and historical review of Puerto Rican phenotype geared toward educating psychologists about the potential psychological issues related to phenotype. This type of review is needed because previous research on Latino phenotype has typically only cited the social history of African Americans in the continental United States (e.g., Hall, 1994, 2000), and this history is distinctly different from the migratory experiences of multiracial Puerto Ricans who, at any given point, may reside either in continental United States or in Puerto Rico. The following, therefore, is a review of racial mixing and its psychological significance in Puerto Rico, beginning with one of its earliest inhabitants, the Arawak Taíno Indians, followed by a more detailed account of how subsequent contact with, and among, the other racial and ethnic groups that later arrived on the Island produced people of varying complexions. Discussion also focuses on the subsequent social hierarchy of these racial groups and how various preferences were given to those who were Spanish, or who could "pass" for Spanish, based on various demographic and contextual factors.

A few caveats are required before we begin. First, because the primary goal of this text is to underscore the psychological importance of phenotype, it relies exclusively on secondary, and not primary, historical sources. Additionally, although the historical section of this text is arranged in chronological order, this is not meant to either prioritize the contributions of one ethnic or racial group over another, or to imply that racial mixing occurred in a necessarily ordered and stepwise sequence. Instead, racial mixing was, and continues to be, an ongoing process in Puerto Rico, as in other parts of Latin America.

Phenotype and Racial Mixing Prior to Spanish Rule

Prior to the arrival of Christopher Columbus, the Taíno Indians were the last indigenous inhabitants of Puerto Rico. Historical sources have described

Táinos as having almond-shaped eyes, aquiline noses, pronounced cheekbones and front teeth, with flat foreheads, thick lips, beardless faces, straight, black hair, and copper-colored skin (Alegría, 1950; Cruz Monclova, 1979; Rouse, 1992; Thieme, 1959). Typically among Puerto Ricans, these descriptions are often touted as being “authentic” markers of Puerto Rican identity and are often coveted and considered “naturally” beautiful.

However, the archaeological evidence supporting these descriptions is limited. Specifically, only a few of these physical descriptors, such as those regarding the structural composition of the face (i.e., cheek, canine teeth, and foreheads), have been directly supported by a handful of excavations in the field of physical anthropology (e.g., Rouse, 1992; Thieme, 1959), whereas other traits, such as hair texture, have only been indirectly supported by the analysis of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) samples of modern-day Puerto Ricans (Martínez-Cruzado et al., 2001). Thus, there is currently insufficient evidence to completely validate these descriptions. In fact, when critically scrutinized, these early testimonials, which come mainly from the first male Europeans to colonize the Island (e.g., Columbus, trans. 1971), perhaps belie the colonizers’ own racist assumptions of beauty and, therefore, do not necessarily serve as the most accurate description of Taíno phenotype. Instead, these descriptions reveal much about the colonizers’ own desires and mis/conceptualizations of beauty and, therefore, have been criticized for their overly exoticizing and objectifying gaze (Duany, 2002).

In a similar vein, many modern-day Puerto Ricans also consider the Táinos to be a culturally distinct and exotic population that represent the “true” foundations of Puerto Rican identity. However, once again archeological evidence dispels this belief and indicates that the Táinos were not a monolithic, isolated, or impermeable group. Instead, they most likely intermingled with other Indian groups, such as other Táinos in Hispaniola (i.e., the modern day Island of Haiti and The Dominican Republic), the Island-Caribs of the Lesser Antilles (i.e., the groups of Islands in the West Indies bounded by the Caribbean Sea), and the Guanahatabeys of Western Cuba (Rouse, 1992).

As psychologists, therefore, when we are confronted with a client’s desire to claim “pure” Indian ancestry (e.g., “*Soy pura India*”/“*I am pure Indian*”) or with the obsessive need to classify various body parts according to a presumed indigenous past (e.g., “*Tengo el pelo indio*”/“*I have Indian hair*”), we need to stop and consider the multiple meanings of these assertions given the paucity of empirical research on Táinos in general, and more particularly, the limited research on Taíno phenotype. For example, rather than serving as an accurate description of appearance or ancestry, these statements may voice more of a yearning to belong to the group, to be

held central, or to be considered “authentic” because among dispersed and diasporic groups, it is common to express longing for inclusion based on appearance (Lewin, 2005). Additionally, among disenfranchised and marginalized groups, it may indicate the need to be valorized and considered exotic. Most importantly, however, it may belie an unacknowledged racism among many Puerto Ricans who consider being “Indian” more beautiful, or more authentic, than being Black and, thus, often prefer to claim this over a Black identity (Cruz-Janzen, 2003). We must, therefore, question these unexamined *sine qua non* standards of beauty, authenticity, and group membership.

Phenotype and Racial Mixing under Spanish Rule

Phenotype, or more specifically race, most likely did not acquire significance in Puerto Rico until the late 15th century, when the Island was colonized by Spain. At the time, because Spain viewed Puerto Rico only as a military fort, it only encouraged the migration of single men to the Island, in order to exploit its strategic position among important trade routes (Esteva-Fabregat, 1987/1995; Migden Socolow, 2000). As a result, after a century of colonization, Puerto Rico had approximately twice as many Spanish men than Spanish women (Rogler, 1946).

Racial Mixing Between Spanish and Indians

Some scholars have stated that this disparity helped explain why racial mixing ensued between Spanish men and Indian women (Esteva-Fabregat, 1987/1995; Migden Socolow, 2000; Rogler, 1946; Rouse, 1992). However, racial mixing between Spanish men and Indian women continued to occur even after the migration of Spanish women to Puerto Rico, and so these unions must have occurred for a variety of reasons. For example, Indian women were often bartered as objects, sometimes by their own tribes, as a way to establish tribal ties with the Spanish. Equally disconcerting, however, is that these unions often occurred because Spanish men simply willed them to occur. Hence, although in some cases these unions may have been the result of simple attraction, the absence of female testimonials concerning these relations, and their documented coercive nature, suggests that many of these early instances of racial mixing occurred indiscriminately because of differences in power.

Still, in some instances lighter skin may have been a factor in sexual conquest. Specifically, historical documents note that some Spanish men

purposely chose lighter, over darker, skinned Indian women as their sexual companions (López de Gomara, 1505/1946 as cited in Esteva-Fabregat, 1987/1995). Additionally, lighter skinned women would at times resort to painting their faces black in order to appear unattractive to their captors (Morales Padrón, 1974, as cited in Esteva-Fabregat, 1987/1995). This would presumably support the notion that lighter skinned women have historically been viewed as more attractive and desirable than their darker skinned peers.

However, evidence of lighter skin as a sexual preference among Spaniards has not been found in other texts, and even cultural anthropologist Esteva-Fabregat (1987/1995) concludes that overall skin color was not an initial, or perhaps even important, variable in sexual conquest or racial mixing (Esteva-Fabregat, 1987/1995). Hence, although the sexual objectification of lighter skin is a common therapeutic theme among many racially ambiguously appearing women (Buchanan & Acevedo, 2004; Root, 1994), this issue does not appear to be sufficiently documented in earlier historical texts of this period. More to the point, it was due to the indiscriminate and widespread mixing of these groups, combined with the hardship of enslaved labor, mass killings, suicides, and the onslaught of various diseases, which led to the dramatic and rapid decrease of the Indian population by the end of the 16th century (Cook, 1993; Martí Carvajal, 2002).

Racial Mixing Between the Spanish and Africans

To compensate for such a loss of labor, the Spanish imported African slaves to Puerto Rico, which resulted in the racial mixing between the African, Spanish, and Indian populations. Although historians disagree about when Africans first arrived at Puerto Rico,¹ those who have argued that Africans came to the Americas with the Spanish believe that this initial African sample was drawn from a larger population of already enslaved people residing in Spain (Esteva-Fabregat, 1987/1995; Migden Socolow, 2000). Consequently, some historians have proposed that these Africans were presumably more familiar with the Spanish culture and language than were the Indians and that this greater familiarity explained the extensive racial mixing that ensued between the Spanish and Africans (e.g., Esteva-Fabregat, 1987/1995).

However, the majority of the imported African slaves did not come from Spain (Migden Socolow, 2000). Instead, they were captured at various times from different areas in Africa, such as the southwestern coast of Africa by the Dutch in the 17th century (Alvárez Nazario, 1974, as cited in Stark, 2002), the Upper Guinea and Congo River area (Dorsey, 1994/2000), as well as the Gold Coast, by the French and Dutch during the 18th century

(Stark, 2002). Furthermore, these enslaved groups were highly diverse and spoke languages distinct from Spanish, as well as from one another (Mintz & Price 1992), and even when linguistic similarity existed between some Africans and Spanish, racial mixing still occurred between the Spaniards and Africans who did not speak any Spanish at all. In fact, many slaveholders considered it their right to have sexual liaisons with their slaves, despite believing that slaves were heathens and comparable to animals (McD. Beckles, 1996/2000a). Therefore, race mixing with Africans, as with the Indian population, occurred mainly because of differences in power.

Similarly, some scholars have proposed that European colonizers sexually preferred lighter skinned African women over darker skinned women (McD. Beckles, 1996/2000a). Yet, the common presumption that “White women (are) for marriage, Black women (are) for work, and mulatto women (are) for sex play” has been contested (e.g., see Dorsey, 1994/2000, p. 637). However, although variations in skin color may have played only a minor role in sexual selection, the intersectionality of race and gender did dictate and limit the feasibility of certain relationships. For instance, racial mixing probably did not occur frequently between Spanish women and African men because of the severe punishments reserved for such unions. Specifically, if a Spanish woman was ever suspected of such a union she would be heavily ostracized, whereas an African male would either be castrated, dismembered, or killed by execution (McD. Beckles, 1993/2000b). These differences clearly reveal the privileges and punishments that have historically been afforded to race.

Racial Mixing Between Africans, Indians, and Others

Some scholars have also argued that racial mixing between Africans and Indians did not occur with great frequency because of the restrictions placed on both groups by the Spanish (Migden Socolow, 2000). Yet, new evidence suggests that many Africans fled to live with the Indians, in order to fight against the Spanish and subsequently intermixed (Torres & Whitten, Jr., 1998). Unfortunately, information regarding the unions of these two marginalized groups is sparse (Allaire, 1987; Stark, 2002). Therefore, it is difficult to know the precise rates of racial mixing, or, more specifically, what the role of phenotype was in these interracial unions.

Caste System

As a result of the racial mixing between the indigenous population, the Spanish, and imported African slaves, a legal and enforceable caste system,

called the *sociedad/régimen* or *sistema de castas*, was created in the Spanish-speaking territories of Latin America. This system codified the rights of Whites over non-Whites, or lower *castas*, and delineated what racially mixed people could own, their choice of profession, and even what they could wear (Bost, 2003; Diggs, 1953; Kinsbruner, 1996; Migden Socolow, 2000). Although in practice it became difficult to implement these caste laws (Diggs, 1953), and although the rules governing this caste system varied from place to place, the unifying principle behind this system was that privilege was based on White racial heritage (Bost, 2003; Cope, 1994; Diggs, 1953; Kinsbruner, 1996). Thus, these laws set the stage for future discrimination based on phenotype because they stipulated various classifications, or *calidades*, that were in part based on race and sometimes presumed racial appearance.

At the top of this caste were the *blancos*, or Whites, who had greater privileges if they were *penisulares*, or Whites born in Spain, followed by *criollos*, who were Whites born in the colonies (e.g., Puerto Rico). This White category could also include people of mixed racial descent who, with sufficient documentation, could claim to be legally White (Kinsbruner, 1996). Following this category, depending on which historian is cited, were either the *castas*, or racially mixed people (Cope, 1994), or the *indios* (Kinsbruner, 1996). These groups typically could not claim to be White although instances of “passing” could at times occur. For example, some historians have noted instances of “racial drift,” whereby one person could appear in different documents with various *calidades* assigned to them (see Castleman, 2001).

Additionally, within the *castas* there was a broad hierarchical order that preferred *mestizos*, who were Spanish and Indian, over *mulattos*, and those who were Spanish and African over *zambos*, who were Indian and African (Esteva-Fabregat, 1987/1995). These groups were followed by the free people of color, or *gente de color*, who were typically lighter skinned than slaves (Kinsbruner, 1996). Finally, there were the African slaves, who were commonly referred to as *negros*, who occupied the lowest rank of the caste system (Kinsbruner, 1996).

Rates and Geographic Differences in Racial Groups

Across different Latin American countries there were higher concentrations of particular racial groups over others because of differences in the timing and rate of racial mixing (Torres & Whitten, Jr., 1998). Subsequently, Latin American countries such as Bolivia, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Peru had very high concentrations of *mestizos*, whereas in the Caribbean, such as in Puerto Rico, there was a higher concentration of *mulattos* because

virtually no Indians survived the Spanish conquest in Puerto Rico (Kinsbruner, 1996).

Within various countries, there were also geographic differences in the rate of racial mixing (Lancaster, 1991). For instance, some scholars have maintained that in Puerto Rico the greatest rates of racial mixing occurred in the coastal towns and in the lowland valleys because this is where the sugar plantations, or *haciendas*, were located (Santiago-Valles, 1995; Scarano, 1991). In support of this, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, the percentages of Puerto Ricans in the Island who reported their race as either Black or African American were greatest in the eastern coastal regions (e.g., Loíza, Maunabo, and Arroyo), whereas the interior regions (e.g., Lares, Adjuntas, and Utuado) had the highest percentages of Puerto Ricans who self-reported their race as White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). However, recent anthropological evidence has not found significant differences in the African mtDNA frequencies between coastal and noncoastal residents but instead has noted a higher presence of AmeriIndian (most likely Taíno) mtDNA frequencies among residents living on the western side of the Island (Martínez-Cruzado et al., 2005). Taken together, these findings indicate that although racial mixing occurred throughout the Island, there are areas in Puerto Rico that have higher concentrations of particular racial groups.

Historically, this most likely occurred because marginalized groups, such as non-Whites and Blacks, were typically relegated to the periphery. For instance, Blacks were banned from particular areas and consigned to the outside of the fortified capital city walls of San Juan (Matos Rodríguez, 1999) or the outskirts of the Island (Duany, 2002; Godreau, 2000, 2002). The relegation of these groups to peripheral areas, such as outside the city's armored walls, ratified the belief that they were not worthy of refuge and protection and presaged the sentiment that Blacks were not a central part of Puerto Rican identity. In fact, as a number of postmodern scholars have noted, it was the *jibaros*, or the White rural peasants living in the interior region or "the heart" of the Island, who were considered "authentic" Puerto Ricans (Duany, 2002; Torres-Robles, 1999).

Authenticity was, therefore, in part, contingent on place. For example, if we invoke the concept of the "empty center," as discussed by anthropologist Theresa DeLeane O'Neil (1996), claims to authentic identities can be understood as a series of concentric circles, wherein complete "realness" or "authenticity" resides at the center of the smallest of circles. However, because this center is by definition empty (because identity is ever-evolving and fleeting), claims to authenticity can be perpetually negated by others by using markers, such as place of birth or residency, in order to distance one

from full inclusion or ethnic group membership. This may help explain why, for example, mainland Puerto Ricans are not always fully accepted as authentic Puerto Rican because they were born in continental United States and not in Puerto Rico.

However, as the *jibaro* example demonstrates, authenticity was also contingent on race. In particular, racial classifications would sometimes be judged by presumed racial heritage or by its proxy, skin color, although placement in these broad racial categories was not a simple process. That is, although slaves probably had little recourse in reclassifying their social status, those who were the result of numerous racial combinations, or who had their racial heritage judged by certain aspects of their phenotype, could be placed in various, at times, contradictory tiers. This is because racial classifications were at times dependent on the context and motives of the people seeking and doing the classifications (Castleman, 2001; Twinam, 1999). In this manner, some racial classifications could be changed. For example, in Puerto Rico, poor Whites who either married or lived free with persons of color were at times counted as colored by Spanish Census takers (Kinsbruner, 1996).

Limpiezas de sangre

A further example that underscored the malleability of racial classifications was *limpiezas de sangre*. *Limpiezas de sangre* referred to the symbolic process of “blood cleansing,” wherein wealthy individuals could petition the Spanish crown to purchase *cedulas de gracias al sacar*, or “thank you for removing” certificates, which certified that their blood was *sangre pura* or “pure blood” (Kinsbruner, 1996). Although the majority of these certificates were bought to redress the dishonor associated with illegitimate births, and not race or skin color per se, there is some evidence that *mulattos* also purchased these certificates to sanction their Whiteness, in order to secure greater privilege and status (Kinsbruner, 1996; Lipschultz, 1967, & Forbes, 1966, as cited in Bost, 2003; Twinam, 1999).

The premise behind these types of legitimizations was that greater privileges could be obtained, if blood was not “tainted” with either Indian or African blood. Although the purchase of these certificates were rare (Twinam, 1999), in part, because they required petitioners to establish proof of their racial heritage for at least two or sometimes four generations (and, thus, in effect could only be purchased by those who were already acknowledged as White), the disproportionate number of petitions that came from the Caribbean region suggests that proving blood purity was an especially important issue in this part of the world (Kinsbruner, 1996; Twinam, 1999).

Furthermore, Caribbean women were more likely to apply for these petitions than other Latin American women, indicating that the importance attributed to blood purity was indexed by gender (Twinam, 1999).

For White women, it usually guaranteed their entrance into a convent, which could provide them a safe haven and economic refuge. Additionally, blood purity guaranteed that their marriages would be officially sanctioned by the Church (Migden Socolow, 2000; Sereno, 1947). This was important because marriage, like the convent, was an institution that guaranteed White women a number of economic and social benefits because it bestowed inheritance, lineage, and legitimacy, which were variables typically associated with racial purity (Hall, 1994). Thus, having insufficient proof of racial purity could potentially affect their status, and although both men and women had to demonstrate *sangre pura*, the task of proving Whiteness was often made more difficult for women than men (Kinsbruner, 1996).

For non-White women, lacking blood purity could also have a number of consequences. In particular, with the rare exception of the occasional convents that were set aside for *mestizas*, lacking blood purity meant that these women could serve only as servants or slaves in convents. As a result, they were unable to acquire the full benefits and protections associated with these institutions and were, therefore, more likely to face greater economic difficulties than their White (and presumably lighter skinned) peers (Migden Socolow, 2000).

Adelantando la raza

In order to ameliorate this situation, some have remarked that marriage to a lighter skinned person was often advocated because it increased a person's social status (Rogler, 1946). This process of "marrying up," or intermixing with someone of a lighter skin color, has been termed *adelantando o mejorando la raza*, or "whitening or improving the race" and for a while was the official immigration policy for a number of Latin American countries (Matos Rodríguez, 1999). For instance, during the 19th century, Spain encouraged the immigration of White immigrants, who were fleeing the independence wars of various South American countries, to come to and seek refuge in Puerto Rico (Matos Rodríguez, 1999). The expectation was that this type of immigration would "whiten up" the population and subsequently lead to the disappearance of the Black race in Latin America (Sarduy & Stubbs, 1995; Wade, 1997). This type of selective racial immigration was, therefore, heavily financed, whereas very little support was given to integrate former slaves into the larger society (Sidanius, Peña, &

Sawyer, 2001). As an example, one of Puerto Rico's early Spanish governors, Norzagaray, went so far as to ban recently emancipated people of color from Curacao, Venezuela, from entering Puerto Rico because he feared they would intermix and thus darken the Puerto Rican population (Matos Rodríguez, 1999).

As with the caste system, and *limpiezas de sangre*, the policy of *adelantando la raza* was instituted primarily to protect the rights of Whites. The dictum that urged marriage to Whites affected mostly the marriage choices of other Whites, with White men preferring to marry White women, followed by "Europeanized mestiza(s) of noble lineage" (Migden Socolow, 2000, p. 37). Marriage, in fact, was very uncommon between White men and non-White women (Kinsbruner, 1996; Migden Socolow, 2000; Stavig, 1995). Instead, interracial unions were more common.

However, for enslaved women, interracial relations were often fraught with complications because, although some women may have obtained their eventual manumission, many other women were either resold, or physically mistreated, by their owner and/or the owner's wife (Migden Socolow, 2000). The fate of their enslaved offspring was also uncertain because, although Spanish fathers could, in theory, purchase the freedom of their children (Diggs, 1953; Klein, 1986), in practice, legal recognition of paternity was not common (Migden Socolow, 2000). Additionally, there was nothing preventing these fathers from later reselling their children back into slavery. Far from "improving the race," racially mixing with a White male could place an enslaved woman's life, and her children's, at risk. In short, various laws constrained racial mixing, and the social consequences of these unions differed by race and, sometimes, gender.

Contextual Factors and Racial Classification

Although with time *la sistema de castas*, *limpiezas de sangre*, and *adelantando la raza* were eventually abandoned, these policies continued to inform race relations in Latin America. For example, racial classifications continued to become more contextual and dependent on a number of factors, such as socioeconomic status (SES) and acculturation, as indexed by adherence to cultural customs, language spoken, place of birth, and residency. These variables could alter perceptions of racial designations so that people could be declared to be Spanish/White if they lived according to Spanish customs, spoke Spanish, converted to Catholicism, or acquired great wealth, even if they had dark skin and more Africanized/indigenous features (Esteva-Fabregat, 1987/1995). Thus, in the absence of any specific

policies, among many modern-day Puerto Ricans, a higher SES can “whiten” phenotype (Comas-Díaz, 1994b; Kurlansky, 1992; Rodriguez, 1974; Rogler, 1940), whereas a lower SES can make light skinned Latinos darker (Montalvo, 1987).

Theory of Racial Democracy

Because of the importance of contextual factors, many early scholars have argued that, in Latin America, SES superseded race as a classifying variable and that the effects attributed to phenotype were secondary consequences of class-based hierarchies (Blanco, 1942; Bonilla-Silva, 1996; Rogler, 1940). According to the theory of racial democracy, or Iberian exceptionalism, race relations in Latin America were more benign than in the United States, in part, because of differences in the social and economic climate of both regions (see Sidanius et al., 2001, & Yelvington, 2001, for a critical review). In Puerto Rico, for example, race relations were assumed to be different because the sugar economy occurred on a much smaller scale than in other Caribbean nations (i.e., Cuba) and lasted for a shorter period of time than in other regions (Blanco, 1942). The slave population in Puerto Rico was also smaller than in other Latin American countries, and this supposedly resulted in reduced racial hostility compared to other parts of the world (Gordon, 1949; Mathews, 1974). The same argument contended that following the abolition of slavery in 1873, people of color in Puerto Rico allegedly experienced less discrimination than those in continental United States.

Theory of Racial Democracy Refuted

However, recent scholarship has categorically refuted and debunked the theory of racial democracy (Godreau, 2002; Santiago-Valles, 1995; Torres & Whitten, Jr., 1998; Wade, 1997). Although slavery may have occurred on a smaller scale in Puerto Rico than in other parts of Latin America or continental United States, slavery was not a minor concern in the Caribbean because “the Caribbean region received approximately one-half of all Africans brought to the Americas during the nearly 350 year span of the organized trans-Atlantic slave trade” (Knight, 2000, p. 162). In addition, differences in scale did not negate the fact that slave uprisings did occur in Puerto Rico (Torres & Whitten, Jr., 1998) and that slaves were mistreated, mutilated, and raped (Cuchi Coll, 1972; Gordon, 1950; Ramos-Mattei, 1986), with some slaves even forced to eat human excrement as punishment (Díaz Soler, 1965).

Furthermore, the type of slave trade that occurred in Puerto Rico, which focused heavily on sugar plantation, was so dangerous that Spanish life insurance companies often limited the amount of coverage assigned to this type of labor (Kiple & Kiple, 1980/2000). In short, Puerto Rico was not a racial paradise. Lamentably, conditions were so bad that one of the worst diseases that afflicted slaves on Puerto Rican plantations was *mal de estómago*, or pica, which was an iron deficiency disease that resulted in dirt eating. What is most revealing about this illness is that, although it may have been the result of a poor and limited diet, some historians have remarked that it may also have been an attempt at suicide on the part of slaves (Kiple & Kiple, 1980/2000).

Phenotype Under American Rule

The legacies associated with phenotype and race did not disappear once slavery was abolished. Instead, as a result of the War of 1898, when Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States, as mandated by the Treaty of Paris, some scholars argued that the United States became another colonial power that used race to assign rights and privileges. For example, according to Article IX, of the Treaty of Paris, only Puerto Ricans who were native to Spain could retain their Spanish citizenship following the American incursion. Thus, from the very beginning, those with a White racial heritage, or more specifically those who could document their place of birth, had more political options than the non-White population (Perea, 2001).

Other scholars have also argued that the suspected racial background of Puerto Ricans, in part, explained why Puerto Ricans were initially denied full American citizenship once colonized (Nieto-Phillips, 1999; Perea, 2001; Rivera Ramos, 2001). Aware of this perception, some Puerto Rican leaders purposely championed the myth of White racial supremacy, in order to justify granting American citizenship to the inhabitants of Puerto Rico (Perea, 2001). Additionally, some Republican senators, guided by the doctrine of manifest destiny, declared Puerto Rico “the whitest of the Antilles,” in order to incorporate it into the Union (White, 1898, as cited by Duany, 2002). However, despite these assertions, the overwhelming popular perception was that Puerto Ricans were of “mixed blood” and therefore ineligible for American citizenship (Morales Carrión, 1983; Perea, 2001). Hence, even though citizenship had been extended to African Americans in 1868, at the time Blackness was an identity that was highly undesirable for future American citizens (Nieto-Phillips, 1999).

Although Puerto Ricans eventually became American citizens, as a result of the Jones Act in 1917, some of the laws of the Constitution did not (and still do not) apply to Puerto Ricans living on the Island. For example, although Puerto Ricans residing on the Island were not racially segregated by law, once they migrated to continental United States, they were subjected to many of the restrictions faced by people of color. For example, once in the Army, Puerto Ricans were racially segregated into White or Negro troops, depending on how their phenotype was evaluated (Betances, 1973; Duany, 2002; Gordon, 1950; Kinsbruner, 1996; Mathews, 1974; Sereno, 1947).

Yet, as in colonial Spain, racial designation in the United States could at times be contradictory. For instance, it was not unusual for some Puerto Ricans, who were classified as White on their Puerto Rican birth certificates, to be later racially recategorized as Blacks once they arrived in the United States. Furthermore, anecdotal stories exist of Puerto Ricans from the same family being racially segregated from one another when riding public transportation in the South (E. Rivera-Mosquera, personal communication, March 20, 2004) or of some parents being asked by local authorities in the United States to provide identification to prove that they are the parents of their lighter skinned children (L. Lopez, personal communication, May 1, 2004). American authorities also made futile and contradictory attempts to segregate Puerto Rican schoolchildren based on skin color (Longres, Jr., 1974).

Such differences in treatment led a number of early scholars to conclude that racism occurred only after the American occupation of Puerto Rico (Blanco, 1942; Longres, Jr., 1974). However, as already reviewed, racism did occur in Puerto Rico, and so it is more accurate to state that migration to the United States served to aggravate preexisting racism among Puerto Ricans. Thus, although it may not be precise to say that Puerto Ricans were not aware of racial differences before their arrival in the United States, once Puerto Ricans arrived in continental United States, they were confronted with a system that seemed unable to acknowledge them as a single, but racially diverse, ethnic group.

This process was further complicated by a prevailing Puerto Rican national identity that exalted a culturally Spanish and racially White heritage over all other existing ethnicities or racial identities (Duany, 2002). Unbeknownst to many Americans, many Puerto Ricans preferred to be considered White over Indian, and Indian over African (Duany, 2002), or to claim a cultural identification over a racial identity (Rodriguez, 1974, 1992) so that by exalting a mixed heritage (*metizaje*) they negated any African

past (Torres, 1998). As psychologists, it is therefore not unusual to hear from Puerto Rican clients that others perceived them in radically different ways from how they perceived themselves. Additionally, Puerto Ricans report that Americans do not understand how there can be variations of skin color and features within a single Puerto Rican family, thus further creating a sense of difference and alienation (Domínguez, 1978; Montalvo, 1987; Rodríguez, 1974; Thomas, 1967).

Conclusions

From a psychological perspective, it is important to know such detailed historical information regarding racial classifications, and the laws that dictated and qualified entrance into these tiers, because it lets us know the status that was historically accorded to each group and how this legacy, as a result of the historical traumas associated with colonization and slavery, continues to affect the lives of modern-day Puerto Ricans. For example, since the time of the American settlement, much has been written about phenotype. Current accounts by Puerto Ricans, both light and dark skinned, mainland and Island, attest to the sometimes painful role that phenotype has played in their lives (Alvarado, 1977; Comas-Díaz, 1994b; Jorge, 1979; Ramos, 1986). These writings attribute importance not only to skin color but also to other physical features, such as hair, which is divided into *pelo bueno* (good hair) and *pelo malo* (bad hair), the shape of noses, which are classified as either *aperfilado* (aquiline) or *aplastado* (flattened), and the shape of lips, which are judged for thickness, and derisively called *bembes* (thick-lipped) if they are very broad (López, 2006).

There is also an increasing literature on phenotype modification among Latinos, such as the use of bleaching creams, hair dyes, or colored eye contacts (Hall, 1994; Ruiz, 1998). Latinos themselves write of the thrill, guilt, and ambivalence of being able to “pass” racially as White (Alvarado, 1977; Comas-Díaz, 1994a)—not only as a means to distance themselves from their African heritage but also to separate themselves from their Spanish background, which is now considered a lower status (Parrilla de Kokal, 1999). Conversely, Puerto Ricans may also express the need to claim a Spanish identity, instead of a Puerto Rican identity, so that they too may be associated with a higher status group (López, 2006). Hence, in keeping with earlier historical patterns, depending on the situation, and the desired effect, Latinos may use various and contradictory techniques to cope with phenotypic/racial or ethnic discrimination.

In sum, this historical review has shown how phenotype was a powerful classifying tool in Latin America. Given the historical importance of race, phenotype is an important variable that must be considered when understanding the mental health of Puerto Ricans. In particular, psychologists must be aware of the past historical legacies associated with race and how historical traumas related to race have left an indelible mark on the present lives of Puerto Ricans. To understand Puerto Rican identity, it is essential to understand the past in order to see how embedded Puerto Ricans are in their community (López, in press).

Note

1. Some historians believe that the first Africans arrived in Puerto Rico with either Columbus in 1493 or Ponce de Leon in 1513, the first governor of Puerto Rico, whereas others argue that slavery had already been in practice between West African traders and indigenous groups in the Americas prior to Columbus (see Palmer, 1991, for further discussion).

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