

# **Puerto Ricans: White or Non-White?**

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## **Introduction**

The question of race and racial identity among Puerto Ricans has been one of great confusion and misunderstanding. The confusion and misunderstanding exist both among Puerto Ricans and Anglo-Americans. This is a study of the paradox of race perceptions among mainland-bred and island-bred Puerto Ricans. This study was undertaken to look at several related issues: What are the racial perceptions and attitudes held by Puerto Ricans, both on the island and the continental mainland? Further, to what extent has Americanization of Puerto Ricans affected those perceptions and attitudes? Likewise, what role does class consciousness and class mobility play? How do Anglo-American racial perceptions and attitudes affect the Puerto Rican's image of self? And finally, do individual variables such as one's skin color, ethnic identity or pride, personal prejudices or family background further affect these perceptions and attitudes?

## **The Study**

Many studies have addressed the question of race and race relations among Puerto Ricans. Most notable among them are the works of Tumin and Feldman<sup>1</sup> and Eduardo Seda-Bonilla.<sup>2</sup> The literature concerning race relations among Puerto Ricans has proven to be at best, interesting, often times controversial and, even more often, inconclusive.

A further review of the literature reveals a paucity of studies concerning racial perceptions and racial attitudes held by Puerto Ricans. The question of how Puerto Ricans perceive themselves racially is a crucial question in terms of identity and self worth both on the mainland and on the island. On the mainland there is the tendency on the part of Anglo-America to relegate Puerto Ricans to a non-white category. And this has affected mainland Puerto Ricans as to where they can live and work and whether they have a sense of self worth and a positive self image, which

means achieving in school or in the labor force. The reaction of mainland Puerto Ricans, according to Seda-Bonilla is either acceptance of the non-white label as a defense mechanism or total rejection of their true identity to avoid the non-white stigma. On the island, with the overwhelming Americanization of the past thirty years and the recently emerged working middle class, the desire for a white identity is greater than ever. Tumin and Feldman showed how this was true in the labor force. Seda-Bonilla addressed the question of prejudice and discrimination in housing, education, social institutions, and even public facilities at a conference on racism in Puerto Rico held at the University of Puerto Rico in 1980. To avoid the reality of prejudice, Puerto Ricans want to be white and to move up and out; they suffer from Seda-Bonilla's charge of cryptomelanism or fear of hidden blood of color. Add to all this that Puerto Ricans, more often than not, claim that they are not prejudiced and that color does not matter, one can understand this writer's curiosity to find out what the individual racial perceptions and attitudes held by Puerto Ricans are, both on the mainland and on the island.

Puerto Ricans think of themselves as a non-racist people, where color is not an issue and yet they take great pride in saying *son la gente mas clara* or they are the lightest (whitest) people in the Caribbean islands. The factor of color does matter in many aspects of social intercourse. So, the paradox is woof in the social fabric, with its origin in the early 16th century.

Blacks appeared in Puerto Rico as early as 1510 as slaves. Unlike neighboring islands, the plantation economy never flourished in Puerto Rico, because of Spain's restrictive mercantilism which envisioned the island more as a military outpost than as another sugar producing island, competing with the more profitable outputs of Cuba and Hispaniola. As a result, slavery never gained the foothold in Puerto Rico that it did in the other islands. And with the exception of a brief period in the mid-16th century when sugar experienced a short run of prosperity, slaves never accounted for more than fourteen percent of the total population. The majority of the labor force in Puerto Rico was free and that included a significant number of free blacks and mulattos. For example, the census figures of 1846, a peak year in slave labor, show that out of a total population of 443,139 people, nearly 176,000 (175,791) were free blacks and mulattos and 51,000 were slaves. Unlike her neighboring islands, Puerto Rico's economy was never exclusively dependent on slave labor. Consequently, the post emancipation period was generally free of racial vendettas and racial tension.

If one looks at the struggle for emancipation in Puerto Rico, one observes that the island gentry petitioned for abolition. The leading

Puerto Rican abolitionist, Segundo Ruiz Belvis, was the former owner of three hundred slaves who had kept his family in very comfortable circumstances. The final victory of emancipation in 1873 was anticlimatic. The struggle itself was just one more aspect of the overall struggle for freedom from Spain's oppressive colonialism. The quest for nationhood included the freedom of all and not just for the whites as was the case in this country's history, despite the exquisite rhetoric of "freedom for all," found in the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

The process of integration was natural and there never appeared the institutionalized forms of segregation that developed in the United States and which persisted in Cuba until Fidel Castro came to power. Also, a tremendous amount of transculturation occurred, leaving a very clear Afro imprint on the national culture of Puerto Rico. From this brief historical overview one can understand why Puerto Ricans claim no prejudice in their past and thus in their present. At the same time, they are quick to say they are the lightest or whitest of the islanders.

This whiteness arises from the significant immigration from Europe during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Settlers came not only from Spain but from Italy, Corsica, Sardinia, France, Ireland, and Germany. These immigrants, because of Spain's restrictive immigration policy, had Roman Catholicism in common. They made up the core of the merchant class and large scale farmers. Many settled in the interior of the island and in the large cities. The coastal plains, given exclusively to sugar cane, was owned by upper class whites and worked largely by lower class non-whites and blacks.

Clearly the matter of color was a matter of class. Traditionally the upper class was the predominantly white bourgeoisie while the lower class was predominantly non-white and racially mixed. So, class was equal to color. If a non-white or racially mixed individual should rise in class status, then that person was accorded the deference of that class and the color disappeared. These attitudes, however, changed with the emergence of a large middle class in the 1950s and 1960s. Under the old rigid class lines, everybody knew their place and thus all may have seemed harmonious and free of racial tension.

Was Puerto Rican society ever truly harmonious and free of tension? The question is even more difficult to answer in light of the extensive miscegenation that was openly practiced. It was not uncommon because of the promiscuous nature of the Latin double standard—he can, she can't. Thus, landowners had both their legitimate children and also the offspring of their many liaisons. This meant that family trees not only had many branches but also many colors. Consequently, this writer is always wary of the Latin who speaks of his grandfather who came from

Spain. What about the grandmother? One is reminded of the situation that the black American anthropologist, Zora Neal Hurston, saw in Jamaica in the 1930s. All the very light-skinned Jamaicans spoke about their British fathers and grandfathers. Hurston reported that the Jamaicans explained this by saying they were roosters who laid eggs! And so despite any historical explanation, the paradox still remains and we come back to the original question: what are the individual perceptions and racial attitudes held by Puerto Ricans? For the island Puerto Rican faced with the pressures of the new middle class syndrome and Americanization, whiteness is crucial to upward social mobility and advancement.

When a North American attempts to classify Puerto Ricans into a white or non-white category, a serious problem is created. The problem centers on the fact that after almost five centuries of miscegenation, Puerto Ricans range from all possible colors and shades. As Felipe Luciano put it, "We are the rainbow people." Of course there are those who fall into the customary fixed category of either black or white, but a great majority fall into intermediate categories, something this country does not recognize. And so in the United States someone like Lena Horne or Julian Bond is considered black despite the obvious difference in color from say Leontyne Price or Barbara Jordan. Joseph Fitzpatrick was one of the first Americans to recognize how this absence of intermediate categories created a problem for Puerto Ricans, particularly on the mainland.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally Puerto Ricans place more emphasis on hair texture (*pelo malo*—bad hair) than on skin color. Other physical attributes were cited such as lips, nose and then coloring. One is *trigueno* (literally wheat color or dark skinned), *moreno* (brown), mulatto, *jabao* (high yellow) and so forth. One should also note here, to add to the confusion, that the terms *negro* and *negra* are not racial classifications in Puerto Rico but merely terms of intimacy and endearment.

Melvin Delgado, speaking on this problem of intermediate categories, stated that traditionally Puerto Ricans were judged according to attributes rather than skin pigmentation.<sup>5</sup> They were not forced to choose between being black or white in order to survive in society. White America, on the other hand, is color blind to the point where they can only differentiate between whiteness and blackness. Consequently, those who fall in the middle spectrum must choose either of the two, if the choice is left to them.

To find out what those choices or perceptions are among Puerto Ricans a simple questionnaire was designed to elicit responses concerning one's identity and, in turn, one's perceptions towards others—whites and non-whites. The questionnaire, in English and Spanish, focused on issues

such as dating, marriage, schools, job market, socializing, public accommodations, place of residence, and familial and personal racial identification using yes-no responses.

The sample population consisted of one hundred mainland Puerto Ricans, those born and raised here, and one hundred island Puerto Ricans, those born and raised on the island and all now residing in New York City. The mainlanders were given the questionnaire in English, the islanders in Spanish. Male and female breakdown was considered.

The profile for the mainland group follows: The group was fifty females and fifty males. Eighty percent of the females identified themselves as Catholic and twenty percent as Protestant. The fifty males identified themselves as Catholic. Two thirds of the males and females identified themselves as middle class while the remaining one third said they were working class. Formal education for the group averages twelve years of schooling. Sixty-four percent of the males and eighty-eight percent of the females identified themselves as white while thirty six percent of the males and twelve percent of the females opted for the intermediate category of *trigueno* for identification. No one identified themselves as black, mulatto or other.

For island born Puerto Ricans, the profile reads: The group was fifty males and fifty females. Sixty percent of the females identified themselves as Catholic and forty percent as Protestant. For the island males the percentage of Catholic was forty-eight percent and fifty-two percent as Protestant. The males showed the same percentage breakdown for middle class (forty-eight percent) and working class (fifty-two percent) identification while fifty-two percent of the females said they were middle class as opposed to forty-eight percent who said they were working class. The median amount of formal education was also twelve years of schooling for the group. Sixty-four percent of the males and forty-eight percent of the females in this group identified themselves as white while thirty-six percent of the males and fifty two percent of the females identified themselves as *trigueno*. No one opted for black, non-white, mulatto or other.

## Findings

Eighty percent of the island males felt it was more desirable to marry a Puerto Rican than a white American, while sixty percent indicated a preference for black Americans rather than white Americans. Their female counterparts showed a greater preference for white Americans. Sixty percent favored such a marriage while the remaining forty percent were split over their preference for Puerto Ricans and black Americans.

Mainland Puerto Ricans thought differently. Seventy six percent of

the males and eighty-eight percent of the females preferred to marry only Puerto Ricans and the remainder of males and females voiced a preference for non-white mates as opposed to white Americans. As for dating, both groups, islanders and mainlanders, indicated the same preferences as they did for marriage with one notable exception among the mainland females. Although they almost overwhelmingly preferred to marry Puerto Ricans and non-whites, almost half (forty-eight percent) favored dating white men.

Responses to questions concerning education and schools demonstrate more clearly the racial paradox among Puerto Ricans. Although ninety percent of the island born group felt private schools are better than public schools, eighty-six percent felt that blacks and Hispanics are better off in public schools. Among the mainlanders, ninety-two percent of the males agreed to the first statement and seventy-six percent the second. Mainland females answered affirmatively to the first statement (eighty-four percent) and disagreed with the second—only four percent agreeing that blacks and Hispanics were better off in public schools.

Concerning the question “The majority of Puerto Rican families have some family member with black (African) features,” both groups answered affirmatively. That is, eighty-six percent of the mainlanders and seventy-six percent of the islanders agreed. A follow up question “But my family is an exception” showed a slight discrepancy among the mainlanders with seventy-eight responding “No.” Among the islanders, however, fifty-eight percent acknowledged having family members with African traits.

As for socializing, with the exception of the island females, there was a consensus of opinion (one hundred percent) that it was more comfortable to dance in an all Puerto Rican or racially mixed club as opposed to an all-white club. The island born females expressed a forty percent preference for an all white American club and sixty percent preference for a racially mixed group as opposed to forty percent preference for an all-Puerto Rican disco.

Finally, concerning the question “Blacks and Puerto Ricans excel more in the arts than whites,” responses were overwhelmingly positive with one hundred percent of the islanders and seventy-six percent of the mainlanders believing this to be the case.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In reviewing the responses of both groups, one initially sees some overall consensus between them. However, one also notes that some responses were inconsistent with previous responses given to related statements (dating and marriage, schools and education). This may result from

some methodological weakness in the construction of the questionnaire or an example of the previously mentioned paradox of racial perceptions among Puerto Ricans. Nevertheless, some tentative conclusions can be made about both groups and their race perceptions. First, a stronger social identification between mainland Puerto Ricans and American blacks exists than island Puerto Ricans and blacks. Any number of socio-economic factors (housing, employment, poverty, education) on the mainland can account for this.

Both groups, however, believe that whites are economically superior to non-whites. Each believes that whites make more money and that they live in better neighborhoods. For Puerto Ricans in general, whites are seen as the most affluent group, thus confirming the notion that the gap between white and non-white continues. The groups are in agreement about blacks and Puerto Ricans excelling in the arts to a greater degree than whites. The islanders were much more affirmative (one hundred percent) about this than the mainlanders (seventy-six percent). Again, socioeconomic realities may very well account for this discrepancy, including the homogeneity of Puerto Rican society for island Puerto Ricans.

All the respondents classified themselves as either white or *triguero*, avoiding the classifications of black, mulatto or other. Perhaps the intermediate racial category is still significant among Puerto Ricans and the particular use of only this one, signifying merely darkness of skin reduces the possibility of racial stigmatizing since mulatto, *jabao*, and *moreno*, definitely indicate black blood. Thus, the conclusions of Renzo Sereno and Seda-Bonilla that Puerto Ricans suffer from cryptomelanism might hold true. The term cryptomelanism signals the racial insecurity of Puerto Ricans about general identity in their social relations with North Americans. Sereno specifically states, "Cryptomelanism seems to be an upper middle class and lower middle class phenomenon," and that "lower income people suffer from it only to a limited degree."<sup>6</sup> The respondents in both groups studied here identified themselves as primarily middle class and working middle class.

Further inconsistencies appear regarding group perception of Puerto Rican families, particularly among island Puerto Ricans. Although eighty-six percent of the mainlanders agreed that most Puerto Rican families have some members with African blood and seventy-eight percent agreed it was true in their own families, seventy-six percent of the islanders claimed it was true in general, but only fifty-eight percent said it was true of their own families. Perhaps the closer social identification among blacks and mainland Puerto Ricans accounts for this. Or as Tumin and Feldman noted, the emerging middle class phenomenon

resulting from Puerto Rico's rapid urban and industrial modernization is more imitative of the white, American middle class and might account for the greater personal denial among island Puerto Ricans.<sup>7</sup> The same factor would account for why island females are more prone to socialize with white Americans than their male and mainland counterparts in the survey.

Similar discrepancies can be seen in the responses to schools and education. Both groups overwhelmingly agreed that private schools are better than public schools. Yet both groups, to a lesser degree, felt that blacks and Hispanics are better off in public schools. Since mainland Puerto Ricans have come to believe that public education has failed them and their children, one can understand their preference for private schools. On the other hand their belief that public schools would treat blacks and Hispanics better than private schools might indicate a hidden fear of prejudice in schools they perceive as predominantly white. This would hold true for the island Puerto Ricans, as well, who believe also that blacks and Puerto Ricans are better off in public schools. Their preference for private schools, however, would stem from what Tumin and Feldman saw as a desire to socially escalate.<sup>8</sup> In this context one can clearly understand the rapid proliferation of private schools in Puerto Rico since the early 1960s.

The social mobility factor might account for why island females greatly favored marrying white Americans as opposed to everyone else favoring non-whites and Puerto Ricans. Joseph Fitzpatrick noted that white Puerto Rican females had the highest rate of outgroup marriage with white, American ethnics, which always means marrying up and out.<sup>9</sup> Considering how eighty-eight percent of the island females in this sample identified themselves as white easily explains their strong preference for white, American males.

According to the survey findings, one may tentatively conclude that any clear, concrete perceptions of racial identity among Puerto Ricans are lacking. The discrepancies in both groups clearly indicate that Puerto Ricans say one thing and mean another: to avoid or deny their reality. Any number of social, psychological, and economic factors either resulting from the Americanization of Puerto Ricans through the migratory experience or the vast Anglo-American influence in the island, coupled with a confusion resulting from the Hispanic heritage, can be called upon to explain it all.

Certainly the role of middle class values and aspirations among Puerto Ricans, as seen in this study and previously shown in the works of Tumin and Feldman and Eduardo Seda-Bonilla account or help explain this confusion. Those in the lowest and highest social strata have far less



confusion about racial identity, especially in light of the traditional Hispanic class-race perception. For the working middle class, the concern with upward mobility is coupled with the anxiety of whiteness and non-whiteness among individuals.

Further research focusing on more specific variables is needed to answer many questions still unanswered. As long as the discrepancies and confusions remain among Puerto Ricans, their ability to be cohesive as an ethnic group is severely limited. They will remain powerless by the divisions and denials.

Denying or confusing racial identity will not solve the inherent problems of racism. Neither will it do much for the subsequent generations who will only be hurt more by the continued lack of a positive self-image. This positive self-image can only come when individuals truly know who and what they are. Samuel Betances summed it up thus:

... the problem of color is serious enough in Puerto Rican life to complicate further the second generation's search for ethnicity on the mainland. As the second generation looks toward the island and toward their homes, they don't find a people who have solved the problem of black and white. Instead they find further reasons for added anxiety, confusion, and feelings of uncertainty. Pointing out that Puerto Rico does not have race riots does not solve the problem of a youngster who must not only deal with the world outside his home which is unsympathetic and at times cruel, but he also must confront his family and Puerto Rican neighbors who for reasons all their own seem to be making efforts toward concealment of color.<sup>10</sup>

These reasons for knowing are crucial enough to warrant more direct and extensive research on this topic. As Oscar Lewis stated, "*No se puede tapar el cielo con la mano,*" or "You can't cover up the sky with your hand."<sup>11</sup> Neither can we persist to cover up or ignore the many controversies concerning the question of racial identity among Puerto Ricans.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>M. Tumin and A. Feldman. *Social Class and Social Changes in Puerto Rico*. (Princeton, New Jersey: University Press, 1961).

<sup>2</sup>Eduardo Seda-Bonilla. "Social Structure and Race Relations." *Social Forces*. Vol. 40 (December, 1961) 189-200.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>J. Fitzpatrick and D. Guark. *Hispanic Inter-marriage in New York City: 1975*. (New York: Hispanic Research Center, Fordham University, Monograph No. 2, 1975).

<sup>5</sup>Melvin Delgado. "Mental Health and the Puerto Rican: Psychotherapeutic Obstacles in the Delivery of Services." (New York: Unpublished paper presented at Columbia University's School of Social Work, May 29, 1972).

<sup>6</sup>Renzo Sereno. "Cryptomelanism: A Study of Color Relations and Personal Insecurity in Puerto Rico." *Psychiatry* Vol. X (August, 1947) 260-272.

<sup>7</sup>M. Tumin and A. Feldman, 237.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, 237.

<sup>9</sup>J. Fitzpatrick and D. Guark, 85

<sup>10</sup>Samuel Betances. "Race and the Search for Identity." *The Rican* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Fall, 1971) 4-13.

<sup>11</sup>Oscar Lewis. *La Vida* (New York: Random House, 1965) xiii.

## APPENDIX: ENGLISH AND SPANISH QUESTIONNAIRE

NONWHITE = BLACK AND HISPANIC

RELIGION \_\_\_\_\_ SEX \_\_\_\_\_

CLASS \_\_\_\_\_ YEARS OF  
MAINLAND BRED FORMAL  
PUERTO RICAN \_\_\_\_\_ EDUCATION \_\_\_\_\_

- |  | YES | NO  |
|--|-----|-----|
| (1) Private schools are better than public schools.  | ( ) | ( ) |
| (2) It is more preferable to date a nonwhite than a white person.  | ( ) | ( ) |
| (3) It is more preferable to marry a white person than a nonwhite.   | ( ) | ( ) |
| (4) It is more preferable to study with a white person than a nonwhite.  | ( ) | ( ) |
| (5) The atmosphere in the workplace is more comfortable if there are more white people than nonwhite.            | ( ) | ( ) |
| (6) It is more preferable to live in a Puerto Rican neighborhood than in a white neighborhood.                   | ( ) | ( ) |
| (7) It is more preferable to live in a racially mixed neighborhood than in a white neighborhood.                 | ( ) | ( ) |
| (8) Dancing is more comfortable in an all white club.  | ( ) | ( ) |
| (9) Dancing is more comfortable in a racially mixed club.  | ( ) | ( ) |
| (10) Dancing is more comfortable in a Puerto Rican club.   | ( ) | ( ) |
| (11) Nonwhites are better off in public schools.   | ( ) | ( ) |
| (12) White people make more money than nonwhites.  | ( ) | ( ) |
| (13) Nonwhites live in better neighborhoods than whites.   | ( ) | ( ) |
| (14) Nonwhites live in neighborhoods similar to those that white people live in.                                 | ( ) | ( ) |
| (15) The majority of Puerto Rican families have some family members with black (African) features.               | ( ) | ( ) |
| (16) But my family is an exception.  | ( ) | ( ) |
| (17) How would you classify yourself? (A) WHITE<br>(B) BLACK (C) MULATTO (A)<br>(D) TRIGUENO (A) (E) OTHER _____ |     |     |
| (18) Nonwhites tend to excel more in the arts than whites.   | ( ) | ( ) |

Que se considera usted? (A) BLANCO(a) (B) NEGRO(a) (C) MULATO(a)  
 (D) TRIGUENO(a) (E) OTRO \_\_\_\_\_

RELIGION \_\_\_\_\_

SEXO \_\_\_\_\_

CLASE \_\_\_\_\_

ANOS DE EDUCACION ESCOLAR \_\_\_\_\_

	<b>SI</b>	<b>NO</b>
(1) Las escuelas privadas son mejores que las escuelas publicas.	( )	( )
(2) Es preferible casarse con un norteamericano(a) que con un(a) Puertorriqueno (a).	( )	( )
(3) Es preferible casarse con un(a) norteamericano(a) que con un(a) Negro(a) americano(a).	( )	( )
(4) El ambiente del trabajo es mas comodo cuando hay mas Puertorriquenos y Negros americanos que norteamericanos.	( )	( )
(5) Es mas preferible vivir en un vecindario norteamericano que un vecindario Puertorriqueno.	( )	( )
(6) Es mas comodo bailar en un club racialmente integrado.	( )	( )
(7) Es mas comodo bailar en un club norteamericano.	( )	( )
(8) Es mas comodo bailar en un club Puertorriqueno.	( )	( )
(9) Los hispanos y negros americanos estan mejor en las escuelas publicas.	( )	( )
(10) Los hispanos y negros americanos ganan mas dinero que los norteamericanos.	( )	( )
(11) Los norteamericanos viven en vecindarios mejores que los hispanos y negros americanos.	( )	( )
(12) Los hispanos y negros americanos viven en vecindarios semejantes a los vecindarios norteamericanos.	( )	( )
(13) Los hispanos y negros americanos se superan mas en los deportes que los norteamericanos.	( )	( )
(14) Los hispanos y negros americanos se superan mas en las bellas artes (bailar, pintar) que los norteamericanos.	( )	( )
(15) La mayoría de las familias Puertorriquenas tienen familiares con raza africana.	( )	( )
(16) Pero mi familia es una excepcion.	( )	( )