

TRANSFORMING PREJUDICE INTO PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL GROWTH

A LATINO AMONG LATINOS: A DOMINICAN IN PUERTO RICO

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This is about the author's personal experience as a Dominican living and working as a social work practitioner and educator in Puerto Rico for 14 years. She was unprepared for the discrimination she encountered, and began to seriously explore her experience of living with social rejection, as well as her attitudes toward diversity.

I had lived and worked as an advocate for Puerto Ricans in New York City for eight years. As a Dominican, I was treated with respect and with the recognition that we, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, were part of the same family. Puerto Ricans always related to me with warmth, almost as a part or extension of themselves. I was a professional they could trust; my ethnic or national origin was hardly relevant.

In 1979, after the fall of President Balaguer in the Dominican Republic, I returned to participate in the newly found democracy of my country. In 1987, for personal reasons, my husband and I decided to move our family to Puerto Rico. I did not entertain any misgiving. I assumed from my previous experience with Puerto Ricans in New York, Puerto Rico would provide me with the best opportunity for professional growth. How wrong I was! Instead of being a Latino among other Latinos, I discovered that I was a Dominican among Puerto Ricans.

To be a Dominican in Puerto Rico is to be stigmatized. Dominicans are often oppressed and abused. Dominicans come to Puerto Rico looking for a better life. Some

are legal residents of the United States who choose a similar island in climate, language, and culture. Others, perhaps

the majority, are illegal aliens who see the worst part of Puerto Rico: living in the slums, the alleys, the inhuman and intolerable conditions of the streets, as house maids or taking the backbreaking jobs that most Puerto Ricans don't want. There is little mercy or compassion for "those people." Often, Dominicans are the joke of the local comedians whenever a small boat is located with hundreds dead or badly hurt from illegal and unsafe trips taken from different points of the Dominican Republic. Dominicans are killed in the streets of Puerto Rico, and perpetrators are rarely prosecuted. Judges and juries apply stiffer sentences to Dominicans than to Puerto Ricans for the same type of crimes. For 13 years I prayed to God that nothing happened to me while in Puerto Rico because I was afraid I would not get justice.

We Dominicans pride ourselves on our ability to relate to all types of people from any nationality, race, color, or religion. So I decided to explore the discrimination suffered by Dominicans in Puerto Rico.

Both countries share Spanish culture, language, and religious tradition. Both groups live on islands, which give them a sense of isolation. We both share the works of common historians, educators, and patriots. Both countries have racially mixed populations, the Dominicans being more colored than the



Puerto Ricans.

I wonder if the discrimination may have to do with a different history. The sense of nationhood instilled in the Dominican people is a factor with which most Puerto Ricans find it difficult to deal. They see pride, and often arrogance, in the destitute Dominicans who arrive to the island looking for better opportunities. The Dominican Republic became independent in 1844. It was not a negotiated or given independence; it was a conquest. Puerto Rico has never existed as an independent nation. Puerto Rico receives billions of dollars every year from the Federal Government; the Dominican Republic has to struggle on her own limited resources. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens while Dominicans are "just" poor immigrants. Dominicans consider that Puerto Ricans are not free since Puerto Rico is a "territory" of the United States, and Puerto Ricans resent this.

Or perhaps it has to do with the darker color of my skin? But Dominicans of light skin color experience the same practices in Puerto Rico, even those few who are wealthy. I know also of white Americans and Europeans being discriminated against.

The discrimination of island-based Puerto Ricans against Dominicans is not a simple act. Like other discrimination, it is an orchestrated effort of the powerful ruling society to keep down a determined group. While there is no law prohibiting giving a job to Dominicans, they and other outsiders are the last to be hired, regardless of qualifications. It has to do with power. Kivel (1992) talks about the power struggle that goes on between the groups that are in power and the ones that are not. Puerto Ricans are "the" power, and anybody else who is not Puerto Rican is under such power, is "less than" the dominant group. I encountered the discriminatory statements, behavior, and attitudes from those more powerful and in control: The Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico are the "majority."

So, in Puerto Rico I was considered a

"minority" person with a "minority" status. But I had never thought of myself as "a minority." Born in the Dominican Republic, I have lived in Sarasota, FL.; Wilmette, IL.; St. Louis, Mo.; New York City; the Dominican Republic; Puerto Rico; and at present Ft. Myers, FL. I have traveled around the world. I am part of an amazing international family with close relatives from the Dominican Republic, Spain, France, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Canada, Ireland, China, United States, Venezuela, and feel comfortable with differences whatever they might be: from physical handicap to differences in color, race, nationality, religion, or sexual orientation. In fact, I always thought we are all "minority" in some ways. I used to joke about being a minority and the meaning of it. I realize now that what De La Cancela, Jenkins, and Chin (1993) say about the term "minority" is true; it goes beyond the color or group of any people. It has connotations of oppression, of disempowerment and poverty that are inappropriate and offensive in the context of Latino groups (as well as other groups) that are educated, economically strong, and socio-politically organized.

Reality forced me to accept that I was "minority" in Puerto Rico. This means that I was deprived in many instances of opportunities due to me as a regular U.S. citizen: I was denied equal pay for a similar position held by a Puerto Rican, pay increases were less, caseloads were bigger. I was not able to work for any public office. I applied for vacant positions with the University of Puerto Rico; although I had a DSW, the position went to a Puerto Rican with an MSW. I made applications with the Court system, the Department of Social Services, the Public Mental Health Outpatient Clinic, and even the Puerto Rican Telephone Company. I was always turned down because I was "overqualified," or because references were required from the politicians or the party in



power. After many months First Hospital Panamericano, an American hospital, hired me.

But what happens when you get a job and the clients you are servicing discriminate against the social worker delivering the service? Often, the clients do not want to openly discuss difficult situations with someone they don't trust.

Discrimination brings out in the open the best and the worst of our personalities. It helps me think, it helps me to process my thinking, and it also helps in confronting my own values and beliefs. Anger is displaced by a sense of understanding, and some empathy emerges, which allows the change to start, continue, develop, and eventually bring to closure for both the client and me.

Journey to the Inner Self

It was not all about Puerto Ricans but also about my feelings and me. Would I be paralyzed in terms of my practice? Could I work with Puerto Ricans? Could I maintain peace within myself and serve the Puerto Ricans?

Being a social worker and doing clinical work, it occurred to me that all I had to do was to enter the road less traveled: a journey to my deepest feelings.

I had to do what Flores (2000) says about reflection on one's own identity. Flores discusses the type of questions one must ask in order to do some reflection: Who am I? How comfortable am I with myself? In other words, when doing this type of reflection you will find your real self, the reality of you. You can confess to yourself among your innermost feelings.

These questions can be intensified among Latinos because ethnicity is continually changing by marriage into a different group, accepting and assimilating many new values. I realized the extent to which my family of origin, my religion, and my social class status, together with the social environment, media,

television, and the different geographical settings have influenced me.

In traveling towards the inner me, I encountered a reality: I am a unique individual with some specific purpose in life. Also, I came to the conclusion that many people were not as aware as I was of my purpose, yet I had to fulfill it in order to experience a sense of achievement and accomplishment. There was no longer space for anger; there was only space for growth and development.

My first reaction in Puerto Rico was anger, shock, and disbelief. I was angry because I felt it was unfair and I certainly didn't deserve such treatment. When I think about it now, I must ask myself the same question: who deserves it? No one does. It was rejection. It necessitated coping, adaptation and a degree of acculturation. As I began to seriously explore my experience of living with social and verbal rejection, I also began to re-examine my attitude towards other groups of people known to be "minorities," towards those of the different ethnic groups to whom I provided mental health services. I found room for improvement and gaps to fill.

I looked into the mirror and I saw myself a "majority" in the Dominican Republic discriminating against Haitians, much as the Puerto Rican "majority" behaves in Puerto Rico. Many of the Haitians who come to the Dominican Republic are poor, even poorer than the Dominicans, they get the lowest paid jobs, and they sometimes work for food alone. Dominicans exploit them and look down at their culture.

Again, discrimination seems related to power. Dominicans in the Dominican Republic are the "majority," and as such push around those in less powerful positions, the Haitians. There are many reasons for this: Haitians have different history, different language, different culture, and darker skin. Dominicans dislike Haitians perhaps as much as Puerto Ricans dislike Dominicans. I realized for the first time



in my life that Haitians in the Dominican Republic must feel the same way I felt while in Puerto Rico: unwanted, foreign, alien.

16 Being "majority" and "minority" in different stages of my life has awakened my conscience to a better understanding of both ends of discrimination.

20 The learning that has taken place because of this experience in Puerto Rico is rich in terms of feelings aroused and, as a result, there has been much growth and peace. The growth includes a deepening empathy for all who experience oppression and discrimination, and a clear vision of my need as a professional to continue searching in order to serve others and to maintain the needed peace within the self.

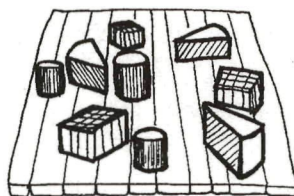
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27 **Journey to the Puerto Ricans**

30 I realized in practice what some authors discuss at length, that when one holds an ethnocentric perspective it really is only one dimension of the entire situation in which the individual is developing and working. The ethnocentric perspective prevents understanding and recognizing of cultural differences.

34 In working with Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico there were some very specific tasks that I had to do if I was to be a successful practitioner: it was imperative that I compare the two cultures, and instead of taking for granted that we were the same, I had to look at both cultures and find both similarities and differences. I made a point of discussing those differences and similarities with my clients and with friends, family, and colleagues.

37 Doing so forced me to identify and value differences as well as to identify and avoid stereotypes. The literature on diversity suggests that a significant component of multicultural practice is the need to learn from and about other cultures (Murphy & Dillon, 1998). Such knowledge is very helpful in recognizing the differences and being supportive of them. Differences are not good



nor bad; they are just differences. As a clinician, I have found it very helpful to acknowledge differences. The recognition of differences goes beyond the obvious and also gives a sense of acceptance to the client. The fact that the clinician knows about the client's particular culture can be an icebreaking technique in a multicultural situation. The sense of openness, the idea of being immediately accepted and the clinician's willingness to discuss problems make it easier for the clients to disclose the situations that brought them to the consultation.

I was challenged by and adapted to the circumstances, dedicating myself to learn more about the complexity and richness of Puerto Rican culture, literature, history, economic resources, and political status. I wanted to be proud of my knowledge of Puerto Rico and its people. And I am.

End of the Journey

Now I look back with joy to those 14 years in Puerto Rico; I am grateful for my stay there. My work was appreciated "in spite of being Dominican." It made me a better person, a better clinician, and a better teacher.

I learned about Puerto Rico and the Puerto Ricans, but most interesting, I managed to learn about myself and discovered many dark places as well as some brilliant spots. I learned about my values, my beliefs, my thoughts, my talents, my language, my heritage, and my family. I was happy as I discovered what I was about.

By living in different cultures and hearing different languages, one learns to adapt to new surroundings and to new people. In so doing, one learns about the culture and the language

of the host country. It is inevitable that some adaptation takes place, as well as some giving up or reviewing of those beliefs and values held for so long.

The healthiest way to deal with such situations and not to allow them to overpower you is through a process of positive identity formation in which the stigma is seen for what it is, society's view, and therefore robbed of its poison (Lee 2001). One of the dimensions this adds to the helper is the skill to guide such a process and to promote group work as a natural means of helping, mutual support, and empowerment.

Eventually, after my first job in First Hospital Panamericano, I became Preceptor in the U.S Navy, and a consultant in the AIDS Program of the University of Puerto Rico. I taught in the Catholic University of Puerto Rico, I gave a large number of seminars and conferences, and I established my own private practice. Except for the U.S. Navy, the other institutions hired me out of necessity. They could not find Puerto Ricans with the preparation and experience required because of accreditation and legal or academic requirements. And, of course, they gave me a lower salary and a heavier work load.

Cultural Sensitivity

There are differences among people in gender, language, age, color, class, race, and sexual orientation. The major differences are not even visible, but they are there. Differences can separate only if the person allows it. The separation is manifested by use of power. Some people, by virtue of being part of a group, exert a lot of power. They have access to jobs and job security, to housing, education, representation in government, and participation in civic life.

To have power in a society can be a good thing. The problem is when the power is obtained at the expense of others. The power is often translated into discriminatory practices. Kivel (1992) says that it is crucial

for one's survival to know where one stands on the scale of power. It is crucial simply because if one has less power, one is vulnerable to harassment, verbal abuse, poor health care, job discrimination, police abuse, and many other types of discrimination and even violence. I learned that discrimination goes way beyond not liking you or liking you but not your group. People, in general, are not aware of the damage discrimination can do to a person, to a group of people, and to society itself.

Social workers are expected to change and to educate themselves to meet the needs of their "majority" and "minority" clients. However, they must be clear about themselves and their own feelings on these issues. Models of culturally sensitive practice stress cultural awareness of the social worker. Lum (1999) discusses the culturally competent practice model, focusing on four areas: cultural awareness, knowledge acquisition, skill development, and inductive learning. I encourage social workers to think also about the distinct cultural aspects of the client, to do more reflecting on their own experiences with different clients from different cultures.

Schön (1987) advocated that professionals be reflective practitioners so they can grow and develop expertise. The reflection puts one in contact with the subject of reflection as well as with the inner feelings of the professional. Knowledge and information, once acquired is put into perspective, and the existing gap that appears to exist between valuable information that is being published and the application of that knowledge (Sotomayor, 1991) can be bridged by this type of exercise.

Puerto Ricans and Dominicans share the same Latino ethnic and cultural background. However, there are many issues related to poverty, political status, immigration, and history that distinguish these two groups. Being in the position of the service provider as a Dominican, I had only one choice: to

work out my feelings. I knew I could not blame or target the Puerto Ricans or to return the discrimination. I left Puerto Rico as a foreigner, which is what I was, and have been able to continue my involvement with Puerto Ricans in the island as well as in the States. Since then, I have reviewed my feelings about the Haitians and other groups that experience discrimination, and concluded that one's nationality or color of skin is a mere accident. We must learn to accept one another the way the Creator formed us.

As an educator and service provider, I found my experience in Puerto Rico to be a training on sensitivity and diversity. In most schools of social work, students are requested to take a diversity class. They look at their past and present experiences as related to the diversity in their geographic areas. It is not easy to develop a program for educating social workers to be effective in today's society. The development of a culturally sensitive and competent professional requires specific knowledge and skills, as well as community experience. Students prepared this way can be of service mainly to members of oppressed and marginalized groups. If, as a teacher, I manage to encourage awareness and valuing of all individuals, groups, and cultures, and if I am willing to make changes to my own attitudes, I will be teaching and learning at the same time. The students and I will be engaged in taking the journey towards the roads less traveled: the inner self. (Asamoah, 1996)

Culturally competent attitudes evolve out

of having an open mind and heart and a willingness to increase awareness about one's own cultural identity and to truly learn the cultures of others. Cultural competence is a dynamic attribute that as a helping professional, I strive for. In reflecting on my own experiences of discrimination and in meeting the challenge to develop knowledge of myself and other groups, I have deepened my knowledge and skill. Now I can teach and practice what I have learned.

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