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on

"Labor and the Puerto Rican Community-
Working Together for Better Social Services."

Background Paper on Puerto Rican Culture
and Organized Social Services

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Introduction

"Social Services" are the community's helping hand to a neighbor in need. It is the application of system, of organization, of trained skill to the age-old difficulties of the human family; hunger, cold, unemployment, homelessness, illness, isolation, abandonment and family disorganization. It is one of the great tributes to the generous and human spirit of Americans that its abilities at organization have gone not only into production and commerce; they have gone also into providing food for a hungry family, sharing a cloak with a neighbor who is cold, and giving shelter to the man without a home.

"Social Services" however, are a decidedly American institution. They "make sense" within the framework of American life. To people who do not share that way of life, they can be quite puzzling, bewildering. Sometimes they can be offensive. Therefore, in order to make social services effective -- "better" as your title calls them -- it is helpful to have some understanding of the background of the life from which the Puerto Ricans come. This may throw some light on the way they react to the social services that are offered to them. Knowing their background, the American may be in a better position to offer social services in such a way that the Puerto Rican will accept them with gratitude for the gift, and with respect for the giver. The following sketchy notes are provided as a modest contribution to your understanding of the way of life from which the Puerto Rican comes.

Troubles

The common troubles of the human family are as much the lot of the Puerto Rican on the Island as they are of anyone. He is familiar with them on his Island; he knows how they strike in the death of his infant son, in the illness of his wife, in his own weeks without work, in the drunkenness of the man nextdoor, in the flight from home of the girl across the way, in the family of his cousin that has just appeared at his doorstep. He has learned from folklore, from family and neighborhood gossip, from the tables of the older men how people cope with troubles with resignation and dignity. If faith lives in his heart, as it does in so many, he has learned to face trouble with a wonderful sense of God's Providence. Si Dios Quiere, "If God wills it," is as common a phrase on Puerto Rican lips as is the phrase on American lips, "somebody ought to do something about it."

In the presence of troubles the Puerto Rican is keenly conscious of one all-pervading resource: his family. The brother, the cousin, the compadre, the neighbor, the parish priest, the store-keeper are the traditional human institutions that make the difference between sorrow or joy, between pain or pleasure, between death or life. In the recurrent crises of human life, "troubles" have led the Puerto Rican to weave around himself the protecting net of human loyalties, of people he can count on, of people who will always "be there". Likewise, in the facing of troubles, in knowing what to do and on whom to count, a man enjoys prestige and respect. He is one on whom other people can depend.

To an increasing degree, the Puerto Rican is becoming conscious of another resource: the government. The District Hospital, the Health Center, the unemployment and social security check, the milk station, the school children's lunch room, the public housing project, these are becoming more familiar to people of the Island. But for the most part they are administered by people who come from the same Puerto Rican culture, who know the background of human feelings and fa-

mily life, who as often as not, know how to relate themselves to the traditions and customs of Puerto Rican people.

Poverty

Poverty is old and familiar to many of the Puerto Ricans as it is familiar to most people in the world. But poverty is a diminishing trouble on the Island. Average family income of wage earners in 1941 came to \$360 a year; in 1953 it had jumped to \$1,188 a year. The advance is remarkable. But Puerto Rico still remains poorer than the poorest of the Mainland States. Industrialization has made Puerto Rico the greatest example in the world of "the development of an under-developed area." But industrialization, while creating many new jobs of higher skill, has been eliminating many jobs of the unskilled. Staple foods are all imported and are costly. Therefore, the bananas in the yard, the mango and the bread-fruit tree, the chicken and the pig are cherished possessions. They often mean the difference between food and hunger. And the credit of the store-keeper, the loaf of bread from the friend nextdoor, the bag of vegetables from the cousin in the country are still familiar weapons in the struggle with poverty that is part of many a Puerto Rican family.

The Family

Family life has developed in Puerto Rico under three influences: that of the native Borinquen Indians; that of the Spanish Colonists; that of slavery. A fourth influence from the U.S., is increasingly felt. The predominant influence was the Spanish one. Family life on all social levels in Puerto Rico is marked decidedly by Spanish characteristics. Parents play an important part in the selection of the marriage partner of the son or daughter; the husband has a dominant role in the family; the wife's role is subordinate, oriented to home and children. Children are loved -- sometimes give the impression to Americans of being pampered -- elders are respected, and the old folks have a position of influence and respect that is common in traditional rather than modern families. The husband expects to be the provider, to make the important decisions, often without

consulting the wife; commonly he has controlled the money and has often done the shopping; he disciplines the children, and sometimes disciplines the wife.

This is the framework of a strong, traditional family in which stability does not depend on "togetherness" in the American sense, but on a clear understanding of roles, of expectations. By doing that which is expected of a man, a woman, a son or daughter, the Puerto Rican enjoys the satisfaction of being a good man, a good wife, a good child. He has a sense of personal dignity and pride, and enjoys the respect and esteem of his family and friends.

Tied in with these close family relations is an expanding network of compadres; Godparents at Baptism; sponsors at Confirmation, best man and bridesmaid at marriage. This network of close personal loyalties and responsibilities acts like an extended family group to befriend, to support, to help, to correct, to criticize, to sanction.

The key to the stability of the system is the virtue that Puerto Ricans call respeto. The English word "respect" doesn't catch the meaning at all. Respeto consists of an understanding of my place, of what is expected of me as husband, wife, child; the carrying out of my obligations to others in a complicated network of personal loyalties. Husband provides support and authority because he has respeto; wife is faithful and properly submissive; child is obedient and dutiful because they have respeto. When this fails, family conflict and possibly disorganization is on the way.

Typical of the Latin tradition, a double standard of sexual morality has been common in Puerto Rico. The girl is carefully protected, regularly chaperoned. The family feels deep responsibility to bring her safely to marriage as a virgin. As a wife she is expected to be close to the home, protected by husband and relatives, faithful to her husband. On her chastity, marital fidelity and devotion, the strength and security of the Latin family is firmly built.

More liberty is accorded to the boy. Sexual liberties outside of marriage are not considered a "problem" in the American sense of the word. Pre-marital relations with prostitutes or "bad" women are more openly accepted than on the Mainland, and outside interests during marriage are tolerated, often openly admitted. Illegitimate children have generally been openly and honorably acknowledged. It is a matter of law now that, if the father is known, he must "recognize" his illegitimate child, and the law vests the recognized child with certain rights of status, support and inheritance. These outside interests of the man are never considered "morally good;" they are tolerated as "humanly expected." They do not represent the "problem" that they would be in the culture of the Mainland, but they can be the occasion in Puerto Rico of frequent jealousy, conflict and personal violence.

Consensual unions

According to the 1950 Census, 25% of the unions of men and women in Puerto Rico were classified as "consensual," that is, what American law would define as a common-law marriage, a union without civil or religious ceremony. Many of these are stable unions. They have been a common feature of Puerto Rican culture for centuries. The background of consensual marriage is quite complicated; it is partly related to the experience of slaves; partly to the practice of a colonial ruling class having outside interests among poor women; partly to lack of good religious training; partly to the attitude of poor people who were much more concerned about having a companion who treated them well than they were about an official ceremony.

Consensual unions have been a socially acceptable form of life in Puerto Rico despite the constant effort of the Church to correct them. People without embarrassment frankly admit that they are not married. Their moral judgment on the union is in terms of the behavior of the man or woman: "He supports me

and my children;" "She keeps my home, prepares my meals, takes care of my clothes and is good to my children." Children of a consensual union are legally illegitimate, but are universally "recognized" and they enjoy the rights of recognized children.

The unstable unions

Finally there are the unstable unions. Divorce is relatively easy on the Island and the rate of divorce is high. Separation and abandonment may occur, and frequently in cases of distress, the women may seek support by living with another man, either consensually, or in a civil or religious marriage if the union can be regularized.

The abandoned family, the fatherless or motherless child, are as sad a human phenomenon in Puerto Rico as they are on the Mainland. But again, the network of family relationships softens the shock of human distress. The relative, the friend, the compadre become once again the reliable human resources. They regularly take in as their own, mothers and particularly children who are in need. It is not uncommon to find in Puerto Rican families a child or children, informally adopted, and being raised by parents who are not their own.

Youth, Recreation and Leisure Time

The world of a child in Puerto Rico fills the mind with images and associations quite foreign to the child of a complicated city like New York. The life of a boy is taken up with many of the small tasks of childhood: bringing water from the common fountain in converted five-gallon oil cans; bringing meals in little containers to father or brother at noon-time; hunting for crabs; shining shoes, selling papers, feeling quite useful in the manifold services he carries out for his family. Apart from that, leisure moments are filled with the simple play of childhood, along the beach if he lives near the sea; around the mountain home if he lives in the hills; seeking amusement with other children around the Plaza, along the streets, across the fields.

Even if he were very poor, possibly living in a slum, his life is likely to be filled with memories of waves breaking quietly against the shore, of trade winds whistling through the trees, the sudden downpour of tropical rain followed by brilliant sunshine, the sight of cane blossoms bending in the breeze, hibiscus growing wild beside the fields, flamboyants covering the highways.

As the child pushes into the teen ages, school finishes often when he is sixteen, sometimes before he is sixteen, and the desire for a job becomes a pre-occupation for the boy. The girl generally helps around the house. Interest now begins to center in more organized sports, baseball, basketball, soccer; in the small fiestas in someone's home or the dance in a nearby hall or in social gatherings where he hopes to meet a girl who will someday be his wife.

Play and recreation are thus geared into the ordinary routines of a simple life. There are the special moments when hundreds gather in the Plaza for a patronal feast, a procession, a parade. The old, the young, the middle-aged participate in the common celebrations of a community, each one conscious that he belongs to a "pueblo," that he has an identity, that one's life is tied in with that of a family, friends and neighbors. One feels always "at home."

Housing

A house in Puerto Rico is a different thing than it is on the Mainland; it serves a different function. It is a private house, to begin with, a little wooden structure built up on stilts and consisting of two or three little rooms. The Puerto Rican lives there with his family, often with parents and grandparents; sometimes sharing it with cousin or friend. It is a kind of symbol of his individuality and independence, for, whether rented or owned, it is his and it is separated by a little or a big space from the house of the man next door. The Puerto Ricans have put these up for themselves, climbing up the hills on the outskirts of the towns, along the river banks or the sea-shore, gazing out on

the beautiful water, lining the steep mountain paths, and clinging to precipitous slopes over the green valleys. They are his house and his home. If we could allow the Puerto Ricans to put up their little houses in Central Park or along the Harlem river, they would settle their housing problem quickly. Almost all houses have electric lights, most have an electric refrigerator and a radio, and the TV aerial is appearing more frequently above the little wooden dwellings. Children fetch water from public pumps; women wash in nearby streams; and life goes on in a vigorous lively, human way in the area round the house. The Puerto Rican generally sleeps in his house, but he lives around the house. It is a shelter only from the rain, not from the cold. Life in Puerto Rico is very much under the open sky. Public housing is now quite common: large, long multiple dwellings, two and three stories high, echoing with the sounds of activity and life. Middle class homes are becoming so numerous that the outskirts of most cities are beginning to resemble Levittown. Practically all the middle-class houses are detached, concreted private dwellings, open to the wind and the air, as is so much of Puerto Rican living.

Medical and Hospital Care

The one aspect of life that brings government and family close together is the matter of health. The control of illness and disease, the cutting down of the death rate is one of the great achievements of Puerto Rico. The death rate on the Island was cut from 31 per thousand per year in 1899 to 7 per thousand per year in 1957; and life expectancy at birth was raised from 38 years in 1910 to 68 years in 1957. In this victory over illness and disease, the Puerto Rican was particularly aware of the local health center, the small hospital in his town, the large district hospital, of public health services brought into the most crowded neighborhoods of coastal cities and the most distant hamlets of the mountains.

Folks practices are still widespread, the use of herbs and potions; recourse to the woman who has special power to cure; reliance on superstitions. But the systematic efforts of the government have reached the lives of the people in every section of the Island with results in health improvement that have been remarkable.

Race and Social Class

The Puerto Rican has been aware all around him of people of every variety of color from completely white to completely negro. In his ordinary social relations, he never averted to the fact of a person's color. If a man was upper class, the Puerto Rican knew that man would be "white", although, interestingly enough, some of the "white" people in the upper class were darker than people who were not called "white". If a man were lower class, the Puerto Rican knew he might be any color. In the plaza, at social gatherings, at civic meetings, around the neighborhood, people of all different shades mingled together, took each other for granted, often intermarried and had children in their family of noticeably different color. Discrimination on the basis of color, as it prevails on the Mainland, was something an ordinary Puerto Rican would not understand.

However, as classes began to shift, as a middle-class began to form and to be prominent (and it has been forming for a long time), as education, industrial development and government services began to break open many channels to higher status, the question of color became a troublesome source of anxiety to many Puerto Ricans. The influence of the Mainland has only contributed to the difficulty. When color no longer means that a man is lower class, what is it going to mean in Puerto Rico? And with this question, the Puerto Rican, especially the one who is moving up, is struggling in his mind and heart: whether they will slip into the injustice and inhumanity of an American pattern of discrimination, or whether they will make explicit the human values implicit

in their tradition, of accepting a man on the basis of his personal worth and not on the basis of his color.

Religion

Puerto Rico as a Spanish colony was "Catholic" in its culture. As a man was born into the white or colored race, as he was born into an upper or lower class family, he likewise was born into the Catholic faith. This was the way a Spanish person thought about religion and its relation to society. It was part of the cultural environment. The Church dominated the plaza at the center of his town, for God had to be present in every community. Periodically, in great festivals or processions, the community worshipped God, and the Puerto Rican ordinarily is deeply conscious that he belongs to a community where God is present in the Catholic Church, and in which God is worshipped in great public demonstrations. The blessed Virgin, the Saints are almost like compadres, part of the network of personal relations on which the Puerto Rican depends for help, protection, support. He will tell you, therefore, when you ask him, that he is muy catolico, "very Catholic" and there is a great deal of meaning to what he says.

In many cases, he will be as devout and faithful a practicing Catholic as one can find. In many other cases, he will have no formal knowledge of his faith at all. Despite its constant effort to provide sufficient priests, the Catholic Church has never come near the point where it would effectively reach with religious instruction and spiritual care the large numbers of Puerto Ricans who need these. In dealing with Puerto Rican people, therefore, one cannot presume that they will understand their faith or base their behavior on a conscious knowledge of Catholic principles.

Protestantism has been active on the Island since the time of its accession to the United States, and in more recent decades, the Evangelical and Pentacostal sects have been very much in evidence. Estimates of the percentage

of Puerto Ricans who are Protestant or belong to the Sects range from 10% to 20%. Almost every town has a Protestant church, and the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches or meeting places are scattered far and wide. The Puerto Rican, therefore, has generally become familiar with Protestantism before he leaves the Island.

Spiritualism is widely practiced, by wealthy and poor, by Protestant and Catholic, despite the efforts of the Church to correct it.

This sketchy outline gives some idea of the way of life from which the Puerto Rican comes. It is presented as a "point of reference" against which Americans may try to judge how they should interest Puerto Ricans in social services that are available. With an appreciation of this background, it is hoped that the American may be given a bit more guidance in his noble and generous effort to make available to the Puerto Rican the benefits and services which the American wants so sincerely to give to any person who is in need.

SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Facts and Figures, 1959. Published by the Office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, 322 West 45 Street, N. Y. 36.
Published every year, this little booklet keeps one up to date on the present state of the migrants, the extent of migration, population trends on the Island, education and economic development. Available on request.
2. Steward, Julian H. and others. People of Puerto Rico.
Champaign, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1957.
This is the only extensive anthropological study of the Puerto Rican people available. Actually, it studies only five different segments of Puerto Rican life. But it does provide some excellent insights into the ordinary life of people in a number of sections of the Island.
3. Roberts, Lydia and Rose Stefani. Patterns of Living in Puerto Rican Families.
Rio Piedras, Univ. of Puerto Rico Press, 1949.
An indispensable book for an intimate knowledge of the practices of Puerto Rican families. Provides wonderful insights into home conditions, food, budgets, care of health, etc. Somewhat out of date by this time, but still a very valuable book.
4. Padilla, Elena. Up From Puerto Rico., N.Y.: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958.
An anthropological study of Puerto Ricans in a very poor neighborhood in New York City. Helpful for insights into the reaction of Puerto Ricans on this level to New York Life. The chapter on the Family has some rather good detail about types of families. The Section on the problem of "color" is excellent.
5. Wakefield, Dan. Island in the City. Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton-Mifflin, 1959.
Few books give, as this one does, the "feel" of bewilderment of the Puerto Rican trying to cope with the complicated organization of a large city. It makes one very much aware of the very human Puerto Rican person trying to make sense out of the way New Yorkers do things.
6. Berle, Beatrice. 80 Puerto Rican Families. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958.
Case studies of 80 Puerto Rican families and their response to medical care. Invaluable for the insights it provides for anyone who intends to provide services for Puerto Rican people.
7. Handlin, Oscar. The Newcomers. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959.
The latest word on the present state of the migration together with an evaluation of the impact of the migration on New York life. Written by one of the great authorities on the History of migrations to the United States.