SOCIAL FACTORS THAT STRENGTHEN OR WEAKEN

THE AMERICAN FAMILY

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In the first place, I want to congratulate all of you and to thank you for your wonderful interest in the Puerto Rican people that has brought all of you here to the Island to seek a better insight into the way of life of these newest citizens of New York City, and of many other cities on the mainland. I know of no instance before, in the history of migrations, when the older residents went to so much effort to learn about the life and background of newcomers so that they might understand them better and receive them more warmly. You share in a great historical experiemce that will be recognized, I am sure, as a high point of the respect, and love and interest, of one group of citizens for another.

The focal point of the greatest difficulties of a people migrating from one culture to another is the family. Therefore, I think it is important that we devote a little time to a consideration of the way these difficulties may arise. I repeat here, what I have often said elsewhere, the important thing for us to do is to look first, not at the aspects of the family life of Puerto Ricans from which the migrants come, but at the aspects of the family life of the United States to which the Puerto Ricans go. This is the structure to which they must adapt themselves; this is the way of life that is quite bewildering. Therefore, a brief discussion of some of the main aspects of American family life will be important.

I would like to sketch briefly some of the things that have created weakness-

ses in our American family structure; I would like to point out the sources of strength. Then, against that background, we may be able to see more clearly how our American way of family life may cause serious difficulties for the Puerto Ricans coming into it.

The central theme of our American society leaves the family completely unsupported and exposes it to disintegrating forces which cannot be avoided. Therefore, if a marriage is to be successful, our society places on the individual married couple a burden of responsibility, maturity, self reliance, and dedication that have rarely if ever been placed on couples in any other culture. How then, can we acquaint our families with the social forces that weaken them; and how can we cultivate in them the maturity, responsiblity and dedication to common values which are the only sources of strength?

In trying to outline the structure of the American Family, I would like to touch briefly on a number of salient features which appear to create great strains for the family in the U.S. : (1) the fact that, typically, the American family is an isolated conjugal unit, generally removed from in-laws or wider kinship groups which traditionally gave the family its strongest support; (2) the anxiety and uncertainty that beset many Americans who, by intense economic effort, are struggling for higher status in the United States; and the lack of integration between this economic activity and the family. This is particularly true of the lack of integration between the family and the occupation of the father, and in a growing number of cases now, the occupation of the mother; (3) the loss of important functions which once made the family very necessary. Without these functions, the family is much less necessary. People needing it less, may neglect it more; (4) the terrible bewilderment that besets people such as the Puerto Ricans in New York as they find themselves strangers in a culture which challenges and upsets the family values which they had come to take for granted.

All of this is complicated by the confusion of spiritual values relating to family life.

It appears to us to be quite a natural thing that young men should mingle freely with young women; should choose their own partner; should then set up a separate household from that of parents and relatives. This is called the isolated conjugal unit. Far from being natural, this is very much of a social innovation. Traditionally, societies did not permit this. They judged that marriage was much to serious a matter to be left entirely to the choices of relatively immature young men and women. They judged that those most capable of telling who would make a good husband or wife were the people who had lived as husband and wife for years, namely, the parents. Consequently, most societies of the world looked upon the choice of a marriage partner as a matter for the families involved, not the couple involved. The wife of the son was chosen by his parents; the husband of a daughter was chosen by her parents, and after they were married, it was expected that they would move into a family group of their kin. This is the way most of the people in the world live today.

From the standpoint of social structure, this meant that a new family was received into a going organization, into a group that was economically, socially psychologiaally experienced in family living. Economically, the new family did not face the problem of starting out afresh.

Psychologically, the role of husband, or wife, or child, was clearly defined. Norms were consistent; firmly established, everyone knew what was expected of them. The life of a young couple was in the form of an apprenticeship lived in the midst of, and with the guidance of, and under the control of, an extended kinship group. It is like setting up a business as a subsidiary of an established and experienced corporation, rather than launching out on your own.

I do not wish to give the impression here that I look upon this extended kinship group as an ideal family system, nor do I suggest going back to it. It undoubtedly had its own particular strains and difficulties associated with it - but they were not strains that proceeded from uncertainty nor were they strains that led to family weakness or disorganization. Indeed centuries of trial have proven the remarkable stability of these extended kinship systems. The families of China and India endured wars, famine, flood, invasion--and continued for thousands of years. Hardly a century of our system has passed and it is already beset by serious weaknesses.

Thus you will recognize that, when these social supports are missing, the family survives on the basis of the determination of the couple involved. In this system that places such a burden on the determination of husband and wife, their self-reliance, their responsibility, the marriage partner should naturally be selected with a sense of realism and clear awareness of all the risks that affect modern marriage. Yet the partners generally select each other in the glow of that experience called romantic love," which tends to emphasize qualities (illusion, superficial fascination, lack of realism) just the opposite to those that are needed. This compounds the risk, for imstead of preparing the couple carefully to face the inevitable weaknesses of an isolated family system, it can creat illusions which leave the couple dangerously exposed to the weakness when it appears.

I do not wish to appear to be-little our American system. In our system there are certain very important values involved. We are trying to give the individual every possible opportunity for his self-perfection, his self-fulfillment. The success or failure of marriage is going to be his achievement and responsibility. But we pay a price for this insecurity. Unfortunately, many of our people are not fully aware of these insecurities. One of our tasks, as counsellors to people before marriage or after it, is to alert them very definitely to the fact that, in order to achieve the benefits of a successful marriage in the United States, they

must prepare with determination to deal with the insecure position of the fami y in our American socie y.

Further complicatin this problem is the confusion in the roles of women, a problem that has been clearly recognized and widely discussed. We need not dwell upon it here. It is enough to comment that, in a system where clear determination is so necessary, where decisiveness and self-reliance are such helpful qualities, the role of women is anything but clearly defined.

II

THE FAMILY AND OCCUPATIONS

The second feature I would like to sketch is the disorganizing effect our occupational system can have on the family. Traditionally, the family was an economic unit. From the plowing of the field by the father to the tending of the garden y the mother, the care of small animals by the boys or the gathering of fruit by the girls, every member performed a set of tasks which contributed to the survival of the family and gave each person a status; they knew they were needed; they belonged. There may have been great poverty in these families, but the more intense economic activity for survival did not weaken the family, it strengthened it.

The rela ionship of family to occupation that has developed in industrial America often functions in just the opposite way. We must recognize clearly first that survival is not the primary concern of the American family. The primary concern is status--a level of living that marks one as successful to some degree of in American life; the satisfaction of having bettered oneself in the competition for social and economic advancement. This s ruggle for higher status initself is the cause of serious anxiety and insecurity--but it is all the more serious because it is related almost completely to the occupation of the father. Whatever claims women may make to equality with men; in this area the predominance of the

father*s role is still unchallenged. The family is either the family of Mr. Smith, the president of the First National Bank, or of Mr. Jones who is still an ordinary office clerk after twenty years of service, or of Mr. Shanks who drives a truck for the Department of Sanitation. I am over-simplifying this for brevity, but the general principle is correct. A number of interesting consequences develop from this.

In the first place, the wife who had been taught to consider herself the equal of the man, finds her own status and that of her family to be dependent on the occupational success of the husband. She can encourage him, prod him, perhaps badger him toward greater effort and more effective competition. The supplementary income from her own employment may help to maintain a better home, buy a better car , send the children to a better school, and all this helps. But the crucial factor will continue to be the occupational success of the husband.

The occupation of the husband, however, is separated from the home, He leaves generally early in the morning, sometimes before the very young children are out of bed. The experiences of his working day are never seen by his wife or children; and the experiences of their home life are never seen by him. Their lives proceed in two distinct worlds, often quite foreign one to the other.

What is more important is that the husband, in order to compete successfully in business, must cultivate a set of virtues which are directly opposite to those he must cultivate to be a good father and husband. If he is to advance in business, he must be aggressive, impatient with inefficiency, a hard driver trying to beat the other fellow to a bargain or a deal, self-reliant, sometimes ruthless. When he returns home, if he is to be a good father and husband, he must be patient, understanding, reasonably submissive to the demands of others, considerate of others failings. In this kind of a system, the possibilities of misunderstanding, criticism, disagreement are very great. By and large, our American men and women

adjust themselves to this with a fair degree of success. Problems arise when they begin blaming each other for the difficulties which the system has created for both of them. Under the prodding of the wife, the husband works late repeatedly trying to advance his position; then finds himself criticized for not being attentive enough to the home. He finds his wife singularly uninterested in the fact that he lost an important sale because of the carelessness of a secretary; but he wasn*t home when the youngster pulled all the pans down out of the closet or used the garden hose on the parlor floor.

Much of this problem is the subject of the comic cartoon, the amusing joke, but it represents a serious lack of integration between home and occupation which can tear a family apart. Every new child is an economic liability, pressing one to more intense economic activity.

The increased economic activity whether on the part of the husband seeking a second job, or on the part of the wife taking employment, far from strengthening the family, can easily aggravate the disintegrating influence of occupation on American family life. Thus, the family in a system that lacks the support of an extended kin group or extended family, finds itself further shaken by the very economic activity it depends on for status and achievement.

It is at this point that maturity and understanding become extremely important if our families can be given the ability and maturity to appraise these difficulties realistically, they should be in a better position to face them without unfortunate results. Security is not something that our society provides for the family; it is something the family must work for every minute of the day, every day

III
LOSS OF FAMILY FUNCTIONS

I can merely mention in passing the third characteristic of American family

life which leads to weakness: the loss of functions by the family. In other cultures the thing that made the family strong was that people simply could not survive without it. The child was born in the midst of the family with the assistance of relatives; one*s economic support came from the family; if he was sick, he would have perished without the aid and care of the family; recreation, religious practice, recognition, care in old age were provided by the family. Men simply had to hold on to the family and keep it strong; for, without it, they would have perished.

But in our society, practicallly every vital function, once provided by the family, has become the specialized task of professional people. The women doesn*t need the home and family now for the birth of a child; she will be well taken care of in public or even private clinics; in 1954, 94% of all births in the United States took place in hospitals with a physician in attendance. When we get sick, there is Blue Cross and Blue Shield, and all kinds of medical care available. Education has become professionalized from nursery school to Ph. D.; recreation is now provided commercially. If anything happens to the family, the wife can seek employment for a wage; even the children in late teens can do the same. When we die, we are buried professionally from a funeral parlor.

We are all quite familiar with all these phenomena. I do not wish to appear to ridicule any of this. They are part of the scientific developmemt of our lives, the specialization that seems to be part of scientific progrss. And many of the benefits consequent on this are remarkable. But, from the viewpoint of our discussion, the inevitable effect of this loss of function by the family is the fact that the family is much less necessary than it has ever been before. People can get along without it.

I do not think we reflect sufficiently on the fact that families in other cultures did not disintegrate, not because the moral determination of people kept

strong and stable; but simply because the pressing necessities of life made it impossible for people to get along without them.

Therefore, in a society like our own, families will stay together, not because social and economic forces compel people to keep them together, but because husband and wife are morally determined to keep them together, regardless of the limited function they fulfill.

I have spent almost all my time on a discussion of the weaknesses of the American Family . We should not permit thes to obscure some of the very promising aspects of it. Our American system places a high premium on maturity, on self-reliance, on personal development-- qualities which can be the seed bed for great spiritual development. In a family system where so many functions have been taken over by professionals, the attention of the couple can more easily be focused sharply on the deeply significant aspects of the relationship of husband to wife, and of parents to children. People will not be inclined to marry because they need someone to help them with a farm, or because they want security against old age. They will be inclined to marry in order to achieve a spiritual union of husband and wife, and to raise children to God.

Furthermore, the personal responsibility that is necessary in family life today requires a more conscious awareness of the virtues involved in family life, and a more deliberate determination to live according to these virtues. If the marriage is successful, it will not be successful because the social organization would not permit it to desintegrate; it will be successful because the two people involved were determined with God's help to make it successful. This will be the occasion of collapse for some; but we can hope it will be an occasion for a greater family life for the many others. The remarkable effort being made by so many sincere people today to cultivate a deeply spiritual family life, based on conscious motivation, is only one by-product of the problems created for the family by American culture.

Therefore, if we can use our enthusiasm and our skills to cultivate in our people an awareness of the kind of society in which they must create a strong and stable family; if they can be made alert to the fact that they will receive no support from the overall society; if we can give them an awareness of the need for deep and common values and objectives in their family life, I think we will be giving them the one great strength the American family has. The risks are great, but, for those who have the maturity and strength to face them, the rewards are abundant.

IV

CONTRAST AND CONFLICT IN THE PUERTO RICAN FAMILY

Against this background of the American family, I can now say a few words on the main point on which our discussion is centered, the experience of the Puerto Rican family coming to the Mainland. This could well be the subject of a week of discussion rather than an hour. In discussing the Puerto Rican family, I am going to prescind from those areas of difficulty, namely, temporary unions, abandonment; lack of responsability on the part of the man. I have in mind mainly that family that that has stability and strength, and this would include not only that large number of "good" families; it would include many consensual unions in which man and woman live together faithfully without civil or religous ceremony. What I am concerned with is the organization of these families, the values and relationships that give them strength and stability in the culture of Puerto Rico.

As this Puerto Rican family leaves its own culture, and faces the problems of adjusting to the family structure of the United States, it suffers the experience that we call cultural transition. This transition is the problem that all people must face who must set aside their own way of life in order to become like us. This is the problem of the uprooting that is featured in the literature of the immigrants, a process that never has been and never

will be easy. Everybody has a culture, whether they are Negroes from Miss.-issippi, poor white folk from Arkansas, refugees from Hungary or Puerto Ricans from the Caribbean. They all have their values, their reasons for doing things, types of behavior that brin them respect and prestige. This is their culture that makes it as difficult for them to understand us as it is difficult for us to understand them.

As we deal with these people, it often seems to me that we run into difficulty not because we do not understand their culture, but because we do not understand our own. We take our attitudes and values so much for granted that we never appreciate the strange way of life that our culture presents to the Puerto Rican who is being asked to accept it.

For instance, traditionally there are deep personal and family loyalties among the Puerto Ricans. They have a strong tendency to prefer their obligations to their family ahead of personal advancement. If they live five in a room in the South Bronx, and a sister-in-law arrives with two children, then they live eight in a room. The friends and relatives are taken in without question. This is what a family does. The charity of these people to one another in some parts of Puerto Rico is almost breathtaking. Their lives are intertwined with a network of family loyalties. A man, an honorable man, is a man who has been true to his family. When this man comes to the mainland, he immediately feels the intense pressure on him, from our culture, to get ahead. But getting ahead as we understand it in the United States, strikes the Puerto Rican as the height of selfishness. To seek personal advancement without regard to other members of the family; to be willing to leave them behind in his own social and economic rise, this violates the deepest sentiments of his family background. Thus he is caught in a struggle of conscience and feeling, also sentiment as his traditions dictate loyalty to family responsibility, and his new enviroment insists that he minimize that loyalty in order to get ahead.

These family loyalties are formalized in a rather close-knit kinship system. The presence of grandparents is a rather common feature of the Puerto Rican family. In some cases, I have known where one son has vied with another to have the elderly parents live with him. There is a practice of informal adoption through which a family may take in the children of realitves or friends for short or long periods. Americans frequently are amazed by what sometimes appears to them as a practice of passing children around from one relative or friend to another. This practice becomes most important at moments of serious need when it is common for Puerto Rican mother to take in the children of parents who have died and raise them as her own. She consults no agencies; gets no grants from the welfare department; she just does it because that is a thing for a good mother to do. These important relationships are extended further by a practice of ritual kinship calle compadrazgo. The godparents at baptism or confirmation enter into a very serious relationship with the godchild. This sometimes involves responsabilities more serious than those of the natural kin group. It is evident, therefore, that a Puerto Rican is conscious of large numbers of relatives and friends to whom he is obligated and who are obligated to him and who form a web of strength and support on which he can generally depend. It is quite clear that a person coming from this kind of culture would find our family system a bewildering thing, indeed might even consider it inhuman. When we ask him to "become American" we are asking him to do something which he may easily judge to involve loneliness, great insecurity and disregard for deeply human obligations.

With regard to the children, in strong families, there is a continued effort to protect the young girl, She is generally never permitted in the company of boys or men without a chaperone, or outside of a situation that would be defined as safe.

Our first reaction, when we meet a Puerto Rican family on the Mainland, is to advise them to let up on this, to give the girl more friends, to permit her to do what American girls do since she is in America.

Perhaps we do not sufficiently consider that the Puerto Rican father acts the way he does, not because he wants to persecute his daughter, or dominate her; but because he has been taught by his tradition that this is his moral responsibility as a father. His prestige in his family, the respect of his community will depend on his being able to say: "I have been a good father, I have fulfilled my moral duty, I have protected my daughters". To ask the father to accept American ways is to ask him to do soemthing that he considers to be immoral.

In many of the small towns and cities of Puerto Rico, I was particularly impressed by the situation of the teen-age boy. He often does not go to school after thirteen; he cannot get full-time work until sixteen; he is not called to the army until seventeen. The result is that hundreds of them seem to hang around, rather idle, doing little family chores as they are needed. In New York, this situation would almost certainly lead to serious delinquency. In Puerto Rico, there is surprisingly little delinquency. When I inquired of the older folks and community leaders why this was so, they all spontaneously replied : Respeto. They know their place and what is expected of them, and they respect this. To lack respeto is to be barbaro, uncivilized. But what happens to the boy when he finds himself in New York? Norms are no longer consistent; there are few Puerto Rican old people around to be the symbols of tradition. Patterns of behavior are no longer clearly defined; certainties have begun to fade; an action that brought praise in Puerto Rico brings ridicule in New York; what was forbidden in Puerto Rico is honored in New York; family roles have become confused, bewilderment sets in. They suffer the distress of the uprooted. This has troubled thousands of families in the

past; it will trouble thousands in the future, and whether it is a transition from a foreign culture to New York, or from a rural area to an urban one; from the south to the north; or even from a crowded lower class neighborhood to a middle class suburb, the problem of uprooting is one to be reckoned with by anyone concerned with family weakness or stability.

It is inevitable that these family practices of the Puerto Ricans will yield to our American ways. Our task is to try to make this difficult transition as easy as possible. Briefly, I conclude, with a few points of counsel that may help us in this task.

First, we must be aware of the deep and serious values which underline the Puerto Rican family, how much these mean to the members of these families. These values we must respect and honor, and effectively communicate to the Puerto Ricans that we do respect them.

Secondly, we must realize the way our American family presents itself to a Puerto Rican as something quite cold, often inhuman, and in some cases, what he would call immoral.

This will prompt us to be prudent and cautious about urging the Puerto Rican to become an American too quickly.

Thirdly, by impressing him with the fact that we respect his family life, and by pointing out to him the great values in our American system we may gradually help him to see that, in the transition, he not only loses some of his traditional values; he can gain some of the great values available in our American life.

Shall you be successful in this? Recalling what I said when I began, never have so many people from a receiving culture gone to such lengths as you have gone to understand the culture of the migrants who come as strangers to your midst. This gives great promise that they will not be strangers very long,

and that, through your efforts and understanding, the process of becoming " "one of us" will be easier for the Puerto Ricans than it has been for any group that ever came before them .

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