

The Racial Identification of Puerto Ricans in the U.S.

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This paper investigates whether and how the racial identification of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. is affected by their increasing spatial dispersion across the U.S. Though it is well known that the system of racial identity in Puerto Rico is more flexible than that of the U.S., it is not known whether and how living in different racial contexts in the U.S. affects how Puerto Ricans choose to identify themselves racially. In the 2000 Census, 49% of Puerto Ricans identified their race as white, 8.2% as black, and 42.8% as “other race.” At the same time, the population of Puerto Ricans increased everywhere between 1980 and 2000, so that by 2000 there were at least 500 Puerto Ricans in every state. Given the dramatically different racial contexts of each state, we hypothesize that Puerto Rican racial identification will differ, depending on both the presence of their own group, as well as the greater or lesser presence of other racially distinct groups. Since racial identity is extremely important at an individual level as well as for measuring discrimination (Omi and Winant, 1994), and since other immigrant groups also come from countries with different racial systems, studying the contextual nature of racial identity is important and timely. Earlier work by Harris (1995) provides a model for looking at the determinants of racial identity.

Ignoring the “other Hispanic” group which combines people from a variety of countries, the Puerto Rican population is the second largest Hispanic group in the U.S. after Mexicans. It is a growing population, but the growth is very uneven: Puerto Ricans increased by only 6.4% in New York, a traditional destination for them, but their population increased by a factor of two in Pennsylvania, three in Texas, over four in North Carolina and almost five in Florida. Among Hispanic groups there is considerable racial diversity, and continued immigration to the U.S. is bringing other groups, such as Dominicans, whose conception of race is more similar to that of Puerto Ricans than the racial definitions common in the U.S. We choose Puerto Ricans as the first group to examine because they have been in the U.S. longer, and thus are more likely to be affected by the differences between their own ideas of race and those prevalent in the U.S.

Earlier work (Denton and Massey, 1989) has shown that the race of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. has implications for their segregation, a finding that was replicated by researchers at the Lewis Mumford Center (2002, 2003). This work showed association between racial identity of Puerto Ricans and the overall racial composition of the metropolitan area and speculated as to possible causes but did not investigate them in any detail. To our knowledge there have been no investigations that control for multiple factors of the individual, household and the metropolitan area simultaneously. Context could affect racial identification in several ways: first, because other Hispanic groups already in the area report their race differently from Puerto Ricans; second, if Puerto Ricans are the first Hispanic minority group in the area, racial identity may be more on

the black-white model; and third, because some of the areas to which Puerto Ricans have moved in the last 20 years have no experience with racial diversity at all. In addition, it is possible that certain Puerto Ricans may be more influenced by the context than others.

Research has shown that Puerto Ricans are well aware of how their conception of race is different from that of the U.S., and they are able to answer questions about their own racial identity, as well as the racial identity that others ascribe to them (Rodriguez, 1989, 2000; Rodriguez and Cordero-Guzman, 1992). It is not uncommon for members of the same family to be of different races, and for socioeconomic status to influence race, a process known as “whitening.” (Duany, 2002a, 2002b; Flores, 2000). However, there is also a tendency for race to be identified as Puerto Rican in some contexts (Landale and Oropesa, 2002). Among another Hispanic group, Dominicans, research has shown that language is used to distinguish them from others who are phenotypically black (Bailey, 2000), something that may be equally true of Puerto Ricans. The 2000 Census provides the opportunity to see how both personal and family characteristics, as well as locational characteristics, affect which racial category is chosen by Puerto Ricans. As Bashi (1998) has pointed out, the study of these categories and how they are used is important because they link to the racial hierarchy.

To investigate these issues we create from the Census 2000 PUMS a data file of the contextual characteristics for states and metropolitan/rural areas in the U.S. In addition to racial composition, which would be the most important contextual variable, other metropolitan characteristics related to socioeconomic status of immigrants are included to see if migrant selectivity is affecting racial identity. We then match the contextual file to an extract of the 2000 PUMS containing only Puerto Ricans or those who live in households with at least one Puerto Rican member. This file also contains information on family context and racial identity of other family members to be used as controls in the analysis. We first present descriptive tables showing the process of Puerto Rican dispersion, the contexts to which they have moved, and the heterogeneity of racial responses in different places, and then estimate multi-level regression models predicting choice of race on the census as a function of personal, family, and metropolitan/state location.

Since people can choose white, black, or “other” for their race (hardly any Puerto Ricans chose Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Native American), the dependent variable has three levels so we estimate a multinomial logit model. First, we model race as a function of characteristics of the individual: educational attainment, income, industry; second, we add characteristics of the person’s family/household: racial composition of other family members, spouse’s education, children, homeownership status. Since Puerto Ricans are native-born, we cannot control for the length of time in the U.S. but we do control for island vs mainland birth, as well as residence 5 years ago to begin to tap this dimension. Last we add characteristics of the metropolitan (or rural) area where the person lives. At this stage, racial composition characteristics are entered first, followed by other characteristics of the metropolitan area such as size, region, immigration, population growth, and industrial structure.

Preliminary results suggest that Puerto Ricans' choice of race is indeed affected by the proportion of Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics in the area, as well as the overall racial diversity of the population. It is also, however, affected by the absolute size of the population: in areas where there are relatively few Puerto Ricans, they tend to answer the race question using the U.S. binary system of white and black. In terms of personal characteristics, the most important is socioeconomic status: higher income Puerto Ricans are more likely to list their race as "white," which could reflect a process similar to the process of whitening, known as *blanqueamiento* on the island (Torres, 1998) or it could reflect the results of racial discrimination in the U.S. Longer experience with the U.S. racial system, to the limited extent we are able to measure it, is also important.

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