



What Does Blackness Mean in Puerto Rico? Opening a Dialogue to Embrace Our Heritage

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Blackness is socially constructed in Puerto Rican society in ways that can create tension for Puerto-Ricans to fully accept their African heritage. Connecting the experiences of Black Puerto Ricans’ historical/contemporary resiliencies can help address racial adversities of people from the Transatlantic African Diaspora.



Figure 1 Photo by Dhemer Gonçalves from Pexels. CCO.

Using their individual reflections as data, we were able to identify resiliency

“I saw discrimination and racism with my own eyes. I saw it here in a place I always believed was filled with no racism and in a place I consider innocent to color differences...I discovered that as Puerto-Ricans, we are so used to the fantasy of diversity that we do not see that, for some, diversity is unrealistic; especially when you can’t even acknowledge the basic rights of others.”

factors that have helped to strengthen ours and others’ racial identity. In this process, we were able to have a deeper understanding of our African ancestry and develop a more inclusive Puerto Rican identity.

Highlights

Puerto Ricans can be challenged with their African ancestry.

Researchers wrestled with memories of childhood, oral traditions of ancestry, historical evidence, and live observations towards Blackness on the island.

Narrative evidence contributes to the challenges of unlearning anti-Blackness in the lands that have thrived because of the Transatlantic slave trade.

This process included examining the ways that anti-blackness and colorism are displayed in the Puerto Rican culture and detecting areas of racial justice and resiliency throughout our community.

Methods

Our ethnography approach involved a comprehensive narrative of what we observed through dialogues and reflective experience attending an international conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico. While there, we visited communities, tourist places, and organizations in Puerto Rico that serve Black Puerto-Ricans. Using an ethnographic method, we journaled our experience and conducted “round table discussions” over the following year. We discussed the themes we observed in Puerto Rico that related to the overarching question, “What does Blackness mean in Puerto Rico?” and the impact of this meaning on the well-being of Black Puerto-Ricans.

Results

- Many Puerto Ricans describe themselves as deriving from the three race/ethnicities in this order: “White, Brown, and Black.” There is pride in being descended from the “three races”, yet it is often discussed in a romanticized fashion. We found that the romanticized rhetoric can give the appearance that all three races have equal standing and acceptance in Puerto-Rican identity and culture.
- The romanticization of *trigueña* can serve as barriers for Black Puerto-Ricans to openly talk and make meaning out of their experience of racism.
- Many Puerto Ricans connect to their African roots as expressed through art and music that is deeply embedded in the larger Puerto-Rican culture. This is seen as a possible facilitator to well-being for Black Puerto-Ricans as it speaks their truth of their experiences with anti-Blackness, describes their resiliencies, and promotes pride in their cultural identity.
- Many Afro-Puerto Ricans may feel a sense of national unity which can increase well-being. At the same time, Puerto Rican society may ignore the fact that darker skinned or black identified Puerto Ricans have different racialized experiences, which can negatively impact well-being.
- Through heightened awareness and self-reflections, we felt a sense of increased competency in navigating the racial dynamics in the United States, particularly as it pertains to Black lives and other marginalized groups.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

This action-oriented research is a form of social justice to celebrate culture, reduce oppression and respect diversity. Just as the researchers felt empowered by this work, so can many others who share similar backgrounds, experiences and/or identities.

What Does This Mean For?

Practice: Our work here exemplifies an ethnographic approach to expand the conversation about cultural identity in the greater African transatlantic diaspora. This research can inspire other groups to do action-based inquiry to lead them to dialogue toward social justice.

Social Action: We aimed to dialogue the experience and understanding of Blackness in Puerto Rico with the hopes to lead to empowerment of all persons, celebration of culture, and reform of cultural practices that maintain biases. This work suggests that embracing all racial identities can lead to greater well-being.

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