Ethnoracism and the "Sandwiched" Minorities

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Using case studies from interviews and focus groups, this article reconceptualizes the meaning of race and racism by examining how members of a multiracial group, Puerto Ricans, experience racism. The authors argue that the social construction of race involves ethnic and global factors such as national origin, culture, language, the historical relationship between colonial powers and their political subjects, and race. The totality of these factors amount to a racial matrix of domination resulting in ethnoracism. Findings suggest that within the current climate of "colorblind" racism, ethnoracism is the mechanism through which the current racial order will be maintained.

**Keywords:** ethnoracism; ethnicity; race; Puerto Ricans; Latinos

Do Latinos suffer for reasons of culture and nationality, but not for their "race"? . . . If we look at social conditions, at the actual experience of Latinos in the U.S., it makes more sense to conclude that the presence of national minority oppression doesn’t signify the absence of racial oppression . . . Social conditions affirm that combination of national, cultural, and racial oppression. . . . In a land where the national identity is white, nationality and race become interchangeable. We live today with a white definition of citizenship, which generates a racist dynamic.

—Martínez (1998, pp. 474-475)

**INTRODUCTION**

Carmen is a state legislator. She was visiting one of the towns in her district, a town that is predominantly White. Other local politicians were at the event, and...
one of them was introducing Carmen to his wife. Carmen, who is phenotypically White, was standing next to her assistant, Mirella, whom Carmen describes as “trigueña” (brown). The politician’s wife thought that Mirella was the “Latina legislator:”

The woman is thinking that my assistant is the legislator and the man continues to tell her, “No, it’s not this one, it’s that one” [pointing at Carmen]. And she [says], “But it can’t be, she is white. No, it’s her” [pointing at Mirella]. . . . To the extent that the woman could not escape from her amazement and she’d say, “She’s white, she’s white, she’s white!” The woman touched my face and with her finger she did this [ran her thumb across her cheek] and she told me, “But you’re white, you’re white!”

Recent decades have seen a wave of research on the significance of racism in explaining minority outcomes. From studies that look at the micro foundations of racism (Bobo, 1999; Essed, 1991) to those that look at its systemic roots (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Feagin, 2000), racism continues to be a social fact that is part of everyday life for many American minorities. However, in U.S. society, the dominant racial discourse is often based on the dichotomy of Black versus White; as such, much of the literature has been framed within this two-tiered conceptual approach. Studies on contemporary racism explicitly draw attention to the blatant and covert ways in which racism manifests itself in everyday life, explaining why some groups continue to lag behind on socioeconomic indicators. Yet this binary racial discourse implicitly reifies the subordination of non-Black racial “others” by rendering them invisible in discussions and research on racism. This explains why someone such as Carmen would suggest that the overarching problem of Puerto Ricans such as herself is one of invisibility, “sandwiched” in between Black and White racial constructions.

This article attempts to reconceptualize the meaning of race and racism in a multiracial, multicultural context by probing how the “other Americans” experience racism. In contemporary U.S. society, the social construct of race overlaps with ethnicity (Rodríguez, 2000), yet theoretical discussions of racism often exclude ethnic dimensions. We argue that the definition of racism must be expanded to include how ethnicity, culture, national origin, and the historical relationship between minorities’ country of origin and the country of settlement (Bonilla-Silva, Silva; Grosfoguel & Georas, 2000) have been racialized. We use case studies gathered from interviews and focus groups with Puerto Ricans to illustrate how these ethnic and global factors function as mechanisms of racial formation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent decades have seen an evolution in how the concept of race has come to be understood (Hirschman, Alba, & Farley, 2000). It is widely accepted in
contemporary social science that race is a social construct that is given meaning by the historical context and social relations in which it is embedded (Oni & Winant, 1994). But there is trouble with how the concept of race is applied to Latinos. Endemic to many Latin American countries' history is a history of racial intermarriage (Amaro & Zambrana, 2000; González, 2000). Latinos are a multiracial, multiethnic group, rendering it difficult to classify them. Even though the U.S. government approaches Latinos as an ethnic rather than racial group, Latinos do not see themselves fitting into U.S. categories (Rodríguez, 2000).

For example, 42% of Latinos identified themselves as “other race” on the 2000 U.S. census form (Morales, 2001). Latinos see race as a fluid concept involving culture and context (Rodríguez, 2000). Racially, they might identify as Black, brown, mulatto, criollo, trigueño, mestizo, or White. However, their nonracial status in the eyes of the U.S. government reifies the illusion that they are not racialized as a social group; their “race” is subsumed under White or Black. But the “Latino race” is real in its consequences—their social position is “almost equivalent to that of one of the major racial categories” (Hirschman et al., 2000, p. 382).

These conceptual issues carry over into studies of racism. Although the concept of race has shifted in recent decades, the concept of racism has not. When it comes to examining racism toward “other” minority groups, one gets the distinct impression that the social construction of race comes in two forms: White or Black. Thus, the relationship regarding skin color and racism appears to be a simple one: The darker you are, the more racism you experience, almost quantifying racial oppression. This overly simplistic perspective has limited our understanding of contemporary racism and has adverse implications for the “others.”

For example, in his book Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, and Unequal, Andrew Hacker (1995) explained his title by stating that “in many respects, other groups find themselves sitting as spectators, while the two prominent players try to work out how or whether they can coexist with one another” (pp. xii–xiii). He based this on the premise that “other” identities are more culturally or nationally oriented. Our current binary understanding of racism suggests that a minority who appears phenotypically White could not possibly be the object of racism. As the politician’s wife stated in the excerpt introducing this article, “But she’s white!”

Recent scholarship has debated the appropriateness of this “Black-White paradigm” by arguing that the invisibility of other groups in the dominant racial discourse discourages the perception of common interests, impedes solidarity, and diminishes the “others’” subordination (Martínez, 1998; Pérez, 1998). Others, nevertheless, argue for example that “it is a comprehensive system of exploitation and oppression originally designed by White Americans for Black Americans” (Feagin, 2000, p. 204). It is beyond the scope of this article to continue this debate, however, it does lie at its foundation. We argue that the racial
continuum that privileges Whiteness over Blackness is indeed a social fact; but also, the nature of the binary racial discourse reifies the subordinate position of “other” Americans in the same studies that attempt to unravel how race operates in the daily lives of those most affected by it. In this manner, the duality of race and the implications for White racial subjects undermines their structurally subordinate position, shaped by centuries of institutional racism.

How do we account for the experiences of racism toward multiracial minority groups in a context in which much of the dominant racial discourse is color-coded? We argue that the racialization of ethnicity has resulted in ethnoracism. Race in 20th-century America is not limited to phenotype; the social construction of race involves ethnic and global dimensions such as national origin, culture, language, religion, the historical relationship between colonial powers and their political subjects, and race. Neither of these alone explains the outcomes of ethnoracism, but their totality amount to a racial matrix of domination. Similar to the matrix of domination that involves race, class, and gender as interlocking forms of oppression (Andersen & Collins as cited by West & Fenstermaker, 1996), we argue that the social construction of race in contemporary U.S. society consists of the interlocking effects of these ethnoracial, cultural, historical, and geopolitical factors, resulting in the placement of Latinos in general and Puerto Ricans in particular at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

The case of Puerto Ricans is a good example to explore these questions. An unincorporated territory of the United States, colonization of the island in 1898 led to the influx of American capital, which eventually displaced much of the island’s agricultural labor force. As a new reserve army of labor, Puerto Ricans were contracted as migrant labor as early as 1900 (Bonilla & Colón Jordan, 1979), a trend that continued throughout the century. Today, the “rainbow people” (Rodríguez, 1991) are part of a racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva, 1997) created by U.S. occupation of the island and colonial policies toward its residents. The historical and structural nature of Puerto Ricans’ global social position as colonial racial subjects (Grosfoguel & Georas, 2000) is captured in the following excerpt from congressional hearings at the beginning of the 20th century regarding the “capacity” of Puerto Ricans to govern themselves:

If we should acquire territory populated by an intelligent, capable and law-abiding people, to whom the right to self-government could be safely conceded, we might at once, with propriety and certainly within the scope of our constitutional power, incorporate that territory and people into the Union as an integral part of the United States, and ... extend to them at once the Constitution of the United States; but if the territory should be inhabited by a people of wholly different character, illiterate, and unacquainted with our institutions, and incapable of exercising the rights and privileges guaranteed by the Constitution to the States of the Union, it would be competent for Congress to withhold from such people the operation of the Constitution and the laws of the United States, and, continuing to hold the territory as a mere possession of the United States to govern the people thereof as their situation and the necessities of the case may require. (Trías Monge, 1997, p. 41)
Since its occupation, U.S. policies have laid the foundation for colonial racism toward the island and its multiracial people that continues today (Grosfoguel & Georas, 2000). Puerto Ricans’ position in the global “coloniality of power” (Quijano as cited in Grosfoguel & Georas, 2000) interlocks with race, ethnicity, culture, and language, forming a matrix of multiple systems of domination that constitute the basis for everyday racism (Essed, 1991). This article explores the dimensions of ethnoracism by examining how a multiracial group such as Puerto Ricans experiences racism.

METHODS

The data in this article come from two sources. The first is a recent study on the emotional adaptation of Puerto Rican migrants to settlement, focusing on how emotional struggles weigh into migration decisions. Participants in this study were recruited both in the continental United States (out-migrants from Puerto Rico) and in Puerto Rico (migrants who left the island for the mainland and later returned, becoming return migrants), for a total of 41 in-depth interviews. U.S. participants resided in a large, northeastern city, and island participants resided in various parts of Puerto Rico. The targeted population in both the United States and Puerto Rico included migrants from diverse racial and gender but largely middle-class backgrounds (gauged by a combination of a participant’s education and occupational status).

Supplementing these interviews are data gathered from two focus groups that were part of a pilot study on racial discrimination conducted in the mid-to-late 1990s. The targeted population consisted of Puerto Rican migrants residing in the Southeastern United States. Both focus groups consisted of 4 persons each. In all, 6 women and 2 men participated in the study.

Participants from both studies were recruited through purposeful, snowball sampling techniques. Most interviews and both focus groups were conducted in Spanish. All interviews and focus groups were audiorecording and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were combed for the conceptual themes discussed in this article. We focus on a few case studies to illustrate certain concepts, although much of our conceptualization is grounded in the data.

Although this study solely employs data on Puerto Ricans, we believe that many of the issues discussed here can be better articulated with data gathered from multiple ethnic groups to compare and contrast the dimensions of ethnoracism. However, our primary goal is to broaden the theoretical lens through which racism is interpreted. Given the multiracial character of Puerto Ricans and their status as colonial migrants, we believe they are an interesting group to examine these issues in the absence of data from diverse groups. Thus, we believe limiting our analysis to one group does not hamper our efforts to move closer to reconceptualizing racism.
FINDINGS

What it means to be Puerto Rican changes upon migration. In Puerto Rico, migrants are part of the majority group linked by a common culture, navigating in a racial landscape where the character of racism is latent, albeit palpable. However, in the United States, group affiliations force Puerto Ricans into a binary system of racial classification that is much more overt. Upon arrival to the United States, Puerto Ricans undergo a process of racial socialization in which they are placed in this racial classification system. However, their placement is not always determined by their race. As Martínez (1998) argued in the introductory quote, nationality often serves as a proxy for race. However, we argue that the matrix of domination that constitutes modern racism includes more than race and nationality. As will be discussed in subsequent sections, ethnicity, culture, and Puerto Rico’s position in the “global coloniality of power” (Grosfoguel & Georas, 2000), in addition to nationality and race, racialize Puerto Ricans in spite of whether they appear to be Black, brown, or White.

RACIAL SUBJECTS AND THEIR GLOBAL POSITION

In defending the binary racial system in the United States, Andrew Hacker (1995) argued that none of the presumptions of inferiority associated with Africa and slavery are imposed on other ethnicities. This argument ignores the history of U.S. imperialism in Latin America that renders an image of Latinos as a people to be conquered and exploited (González, 2000). It also ignores how this history has become deeply embedded in American culture. For example, Otto Santa Ana (2002) recently argued that as the “principal unit of hegemonic expression” (p. 9), metaphors in contemporary public discourse reveal a dismal portrayal of Latinos in today’s society: “Latinos are never the arms or the heart of the United States; they are burdens or diseases of the body politic. Likewise Latinos are characterized as foreigners invading their own national house” (Santa Ana, 2002, p. 10).

Hacker (1995) argued that our racial system associates Whiteness with descendants from Europe (also implying a higher level of civilization) and Black with Africa (implying the converse). We argue that the “other” minorities too have their own respective associations that are usually refracted through an ethnoracist prism that views Latinos in general as coming from uncivilized, disorganized, and primitive countries of the Third World. Eliud’s experience illustrates this.

Eliud is a medical doctor, deeply affected by the ethnoracism he encountered while living in the United States:

I had a patient from Arkansas, but he was visiting Florida because that’s where his son was from, that area. . . . Well, I had this guy, I admit him [to the hospital] . . . and was treating him, then his son calls me and the first thing he says on the phone.
because I have my accent in English, [is] that “no Third [World] country doctor” he doesn’t want treating his father.

Broaching the issue of White racism, Feagin (2000) discussed the role and function of the Black body in the minds of White Americans. According to his argument, the Black body triggers anti-Black stereotypes and other demeaning images of Black Americans in the minds of Whites. Whites then apply these stereotypes to any Black person with whom they come into contact. In the aforementioned situation, Eliud’s Spanish accent functioned in a similar manner.

Due to the exploitative fashion in which it has been presented by the mass media (Feagin, 2000; González, 2000), White Americans associate the sound of the Spanish accent with anti-Latino stereotypes. For example, accents trigger images of the vile and dangerous villains that threatened the safety of White action movie heroes south of the border or of the somewhat exotic but surely incompetent and morally depraved natives that served as their tour guides. To the patient’s son, Eliud’s accent represented a level of incompetence and miseducation that stems from the demeaning images that the Third World represents. Consequently, Eliud, in his day-to-day practice as a Latino doctor in the United States, must not only worry about winning the confidence of his patients and their families by way of his professionalism and competence but must first prove himself as even worthy of the position that he holds because Whites view his ethnicity as incompatible with the presumed healing capacity of his chosen profession:

I answered that I was no Third country doctor, that I came from a school accredited by his grand nation, that I’m an American citizen, in case you don’t know that Puerto Ricans are American citizens [he laughs], and I passed the boards from his grand nation.

As evidenced in this quote, Latinos’ assertion of their abilities is often accompanied by a free history lesson that seeks to debunk the racist myths and associations concerning “other” minorities that abound in the White American mind. Eliud is aware that invoking his medical credentials is not enough to debunk this Third World stereotype; he also asserts that he has been certified in the United States. But even more interesting is that Eliud feels he must also invoke his American citizenship to defend his training.

Racialized images of Latinos due to their country of origin’s position (or perceived position) in the global coloniality (Grosfoguel & Georas, 2000) also manifest themselves in ethnic-specific terms. These ethnic-specific images stem from the “primal” characterization of their countries of origin rooted in the history of European colonial expansion, revealing a global dimension to racism illustrated in the following account.

As a high school teacher who taught English to international students and Spanish to U.S. students, Marta explains,
That’s where I had my contact with American students. I noticed that they really had no interest in learning Spanish. Their attitude was one, one of mocking the language, mocking that which was Hispanic, because I am from Puerto Rico. When we spoke of Puerto Rico they would ask me questions, but the questions in a way I felt . . . were mocking too. There were so many times that I heard expressions such as “Oh, we own you.”

Clearly, Marta’s experiences reflect the view of Puerto Ricans as colonial subjects—conquered, colonized, and United States owned. This power relationship played out in Marta’s classroom. Her authority as an educator was undermined by her global social position as a colonial subject. This seemed to give her students a sense of superiority associated with the role of colonial power. Although we discuss this account for its relevance to ethnoracism, it is clearly laden with gendered overtones.

This kind of ethnoracism, packaged within a hyper-ethnonationalistic worldview and tailored to the particular circumstances of the country of origin of racial subjects, also manifested itself in a piercing ignorance of anything outside the United States. For example, Marta told of a colleague who asked her if she had ever driven on a road before, or the respondent who was asked for her passport at the supermarket, or one of the researcher’s anecdotal accounts of being asked how long the drive is from the United States to Puerto Rico (more than once). Explicitly, this ignorance suggests a manifestation of ethnocentrism that some might argue plays out in any society. But, viewed against a historical-structural backdrop of colonialism, these comments are a manifestation of Western-style ethnoracism that has damaging effects. Implicitly, the message is that colonial subjects are invisible and unimportant.

Ethnoracism has cultural manifestations; expressions of national identity through culture invoke ethnoracism. Thus, aspects of culture such as language, accent, and other cultural forms of expression racially mark ethnic minorities.

**COLORED TALK**

Cultural identities are often the basis for racism. Take Bonnie Urciuoli’s (1996) study on Puerto Ricans’ use of Spanish and English; she argued that certain cultural phenomenon, such as having an accent, use of Spanglish, or using “good” English plays into the racial formation process. In this sense, Puerto Ricans are racialized through attention to their linguistic disorder (Urciuoli, 1996). Use of language becomes a sign of race.

As discussed earlier, the American media, through its use or more precisely its misuse of the Spanish language (González, 2000), has racialized Spanish-speaking peoples by equating the language itself as well as the Spanish accent with heartless drug dealers, funny maids, and talking Chihuahuas. These images serve to demonize, poke fun at, and dehumanize entire communities of people with the overarching purpose of making them more easily detectable in the eye of the White beholder. Consequently, Spanish serves as one of the premier racial
markers when racial/ethnic differences are not readily apparent. The following experience retold by Jorge, one of the focus group participants, illustrates this linguistic bigotry:

There are 1,500 persons at the management level, and only 3 are Puerto Rican. Then, they sometimes stop me in the hallway, more than once, and they have asked me to speak Spanish. [They said] "It sounds funny." ... I say I would love to do it, but they wouldn't understand what I was saying. So ... they get two of us and ask us to talk to each other so they can hear.

Not surprisingly, many respondents' testimonies allude to incidents and occasions where their use of Spanish or their Spanish accent affected their interactions and relationships with White Americans. More important however, the retelling of these incidents denotes the often conflictive relationship that some respondents have with their accents because of the way they are perceived in the United States. A fragment of the interview conducted with Mirna clearly illustrates the toll Spanish-speaking people pay for not simply having an accent but having that accent speak for them:

M: I don't have a problem with English, the only thing is I know that I will not lose the accent. I thought that I could come to speak it and lose the accent, but I've realized ... it's been 6 years and there's no way ... [laughs] and so as soon as I talk, people tell me I have an accent ... and that obviously makes you feel like you are never from here, because as soon as you speak, because of your accent, they know you are not from here, and there's no way to avoid that. And for that same reason I feel, I always feel that I'm not from here.

E: And has anyone ever made any comments about your accent or the way you speak?
M: Well, it's not that they've made fun of the accent, no. But yes, for example on one occasion I went to pick up my son at his football practice, and I couldn't find him or I didn't know where he was at that moment and I asked, and when my son was approaching ... immediately a man told him, I mean my son was walking in my direction, but he didn't know where I was, and so the person immediately said, "Does your mom have an accent?" And he said yes. "Oh, then she's there." So as a matter of fact they immediately notice a foreign accent.

Mirna's account of such a mundane and seemingly colorless activity was problematized and lingered in her memory by the way language racially marked her when the man identified Mirna as the woman with the accent. Interestingly, this man did not single her out because of how she appeared phenotypically (Mirna identifies as trigueña) but because of how she sounded. This created in Mirna a distinct sense of incompatibility with her surroundings; she was not seen for who she was as an individual but for what she sounded like, and she did not sound White. Thus, she felt singled out.

M: I don't have a problem with the accent, but ... because I know that what's important is communication and I know I can communicate well. But in certain situations it makes me feel uncomfortable because immediately they realize that I'm not from here, and that's obvious. But it's like they immediately turn around, as if
this person . . . calls attention because of it. And for example, when I’m with my daughters I like to speak in Spanish all of the time, and sometimes in stores, in places, restaurants and the like. I feel uncomfortable, because people hear you speaking Spanish and quickly start to look, maybe because of curiosity and I [prefer]. . . . to think it’s out of curiosity and not prejudice. But it makes you feel uncomfortable that they are staring at you with so much curiosity. That’s speaking Spanish, and obviously when I speak English with an accent, well they also immediately . . . [laughs] yes, immediately you feel like they are looking at you or they are trying to listen maybe because it’s different, you draw attention let’s say, in a way that I don’t find pleasant.

F: So it’s not the accent itself that bothers you but the attention that people pay to it when they hear you?

M: What I would like is to be able to speak like I’m speaking here to you and not attract attention because of it. In Puerto Rico, you speak and you are the same as the rest, but then here quickly they notice that you are not from here.

The racialization of language reinforces Mirna’s feelings of alienation from U.S. society, reifying her status as an outsider. MiRNA’s language and accent not only mark her, but by coloring and consequently muffling her speech, they make her a mute regardless of how well she knows and expresses herself in English. Through the racialization of language, a person’s right to communicate with others and express himself or herself comfortably is stricken when the manner in which he or she naturally does it is deemed improper, inferior, and unnatural.

Ironically, for Marta, the teacher discussed earlier, her fluency in English and the fact that she had no Spanish accent revealed underlying racist assumptions. Being a Puerto Rican migrant and “sounding White” was viewed as an anomaly:

Most people were surprised by the fact that I could speak the language fluently, they would ask me if I had lived in the States or if I had gone to college in the States, and I very proudly said that I was a product of the University of Puerto Rico.

Implicitly, the surprised reaction Marta discusses is really surprise that she sounds White yet is one of the “others,” implying the palpable presence of stereotypes regarding Puerto Ricans. Furthermore, astonishment at the fact that a Puerto Rican can be mistaken for White reveals that these stereotypes are built on their juxtaposition to Whiteness:

I think that without a doubt . . . people in the States have a very poor opinion of Puerto Ricans. They judge us without even knowing us. The truth is that they are very ignorant in regards to Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. They think that we are the same people who had gone to . . . New York, in the movie the West Side Story, the Jets and the Sharks. They think that we are that kind of subculture. They think that, even in the media, in the movies, in Hollywood . . . Puerto Ricans and also Mexicans are, and of course, let’s say Hispanics in general, they are . . . usually they are portrayed as low-life people. If it’s a male he is either a drug pusher or a drug addict, he is a criminal. If it’s a woman she is either a prostitute or a maid. And I am kind of tired of seeing that image of Puerto Ricans and Hispanics in general on TV and the movies. I think that the Hispanic community in the States is in a struggle very similar to the Black people in the ‘60s. It is a struggle for respect.
validation, for recognition. And, I think that is why I had that struggle because they have such a poor opinion of Puerto Rico. They know nothing about Puerto Rico.

Even though Puerto Ricans adhere to cultural and national identities, when considering their treatment in U.S. society, it becomes clear that their position in the U.S. racial hierarchy is not that distinct from other historically racially oppressed groups. Furthermore, as seen with Marta and Carmen, majority group members' encounters with Puerto Ricans who exhibit outward manifestations of Whiteness (be it white skin or accentless English) are actually disconcerting to Whites given that the mechanisms by which the others are identified are not there.

Thus, in the case of light-skinned Puerto Ricans, Whiteness can alter their experiences with racism; at the micro level, it serves as a mechanism of privilege that allows a Puerto Rican to "pass" for White. But, their White privilege is surrendered when considering other factors such as accents and in Marta's case, a Puerto Rican identity. Thus, when a light-skinned Puerto Rican opens his or her mouth and speaks or reveals his or her Puerto Ricaness through ethnic identification or culture, at that precise moment any possible confusion that may have been enveloping that person's racial/ethnic identity in the mind of the White beholder is cleared up; the construction of racial difference is established. As Raquel, who appears phenotypically White, states, "Well, the accent, I have a brutal accent, I mean I've been here 11 years, I speak English very well, but I speak it with an accent, so when I open my mouth people know I'm not White." Although language and accents mark some, in Cuqui's case, the way in which she expresses herself functions as a racial marker.

COLORED CULTURE: OTHER ASPECTS OF INTERACTION

In much the same way that the Spanish accent works against Puerto Ricans by marking them as different and rendering them speechless, several other personal and cultural traits are racial markers that magnify Puerto Ricans' sense of alienation with U.S. society and ultimately, in some cases with their own selves. As Cuqui illustrates in the following excerpt, when one of a person's ethnic attributes comes into question and is viewed negatively by the people around her (i.e., Spanish accent), that person's entire self and body also come into question, making every single physical, mental, and emotional manifestation seem inadequate:

Where I live, the majority of the people are of, what they call WASPS. And, those people are, like, English ... they walk a certain way, act a certain way, and they, I think that in the United States they are the ones that put ... form the rules ... establish the norms. So ... me being the only Puerto Rican here ... of the people I know, well, I, moved a lot, I felt like I moved my hands a lot ... nobody would move their hands and arms, and their eyes were not expressive, or anything. You know, the people talk that way. And, they don't move their mouths a lot either, nor their faces,
nor, then, there are many rules, and I thought that I talked too loud, that I was too loud, and well I felt like, that I had no culture... that a civilized [emphasis added] person did not act that way.

As seen earlier, the cultural differences between Cuqui and her White neighbors, latent in the very different ways in which they talk and carry themselves, lead to Cuqui’s sense of personal inadequacy, which then leads to her perceived lack of culture. Furthermore, this uncultured feeling is a product of Cuqui not only becoming aware of the U.S. racial structure as manifested in her own community (i.e., “in the United States they are the ones that... establish the norms”) but of having internalized the implicit superiority afforded to Whiteness and expressions of Whiteness. As a consequence, she feels the need to change and better her “uncivilized,” racialized self:

So I began to [laugh] [walk] straight too, and, not laugh too loud, and, not open my mouth too much, you understand? Those are the things you feel. And I started to change, and I got to the point where I said, “No, but how can this be? I mean, why am I doing this? I’m turning into someone else!”

This situation is further complicated when Cuqui compares the ethnic manifestations of her global social position as a colonial subject vis-à-vis those of her Latino friends from independent countries. When Cuqui realized that she was becoming somebody she did not want to be and did not even need to become, that her mannerisms, her way of speech, and walk were bien también (also okay), she still found herself alone as a second-rate Latina:

To act like I act is also okay, the thing is that I don’t know anybody who acts like me. And also, our [Puerto Rican] Spanish is terrible. And so I have friends from Chile, from Guatemala, from Ecuador, from Colombia, they all, well, pronounce Spanish beautifully. And then ours is so... sloppy, creased. And, I too feel like I don’t speak well, so I personally started to, to attack myself, and the way in which I did things, as if they were wrong.

American borders do not bind the “sandwiched” position of Puerto Ricans in between the White and Black racial categories in the United States; Puerto Rico’s colonial relationship with the United States is Puerto Rico’s colonial relationship with the world. Therefore, it must be understood that Puerto Ricans, as colonial subjects, are sandwiched in between intersecting structures of domination; as in Cuqui’s case, this position makes it possible for them to be singled out and discriminated against by White Americans for their Spanish accent as well as made to feel less than other Latinos for their “Americanized” culture and “adulterated” brand of the Spanish language. Furthermore, one of the major problems is that this multiple marginalization makes solidarity between groups more difficult.

Despite this sandwiched position, if one were to adhere to more traditional perspectives on race and racism, White minorities, due to their physical
similarities with White Americans, would be expected to enjoy some of the spoils of White privilege. It is important then to examine the meaning of skin color within ethnoracist structures. How do phenotypically White Puerto Ricans fare in their daily interchanges with White Americans? How are they perceived and treated, and how do they feel about and respond to the racial labels White America places on them?

THE MEANING OF SKIN COLOR
WITHIN ETHNORACIST STRUCTURES

Traditional understandings of racism suggest that contrary to their darker skinned counterparts, White Puerto Ricans are able to pass for White and thus experience lesser amounts of racism. However, our data indicate that at the micro level of analysis, the racial markers discussed earlier (culture, language, and global position) offset the benefits of White privilege.

Carmen, the light-skinned legislator introduced at the beginning of this article, believes that one of the biggest drawbacks of U.S. society is its racism. When questioned on U.S. racism, she pondered on what place White Puerto Ricans such as herself occupy in the structure of racial stratification:

You can find a Puerto Rican to be White, trigueño, Black and he’s Puerto Rican. The only problem I’ve seen ... here is the racial problem, where the Black [person] does not accept the Puerto Rican because he’s Puerto Rican, because supposedly he’s White and ... the White [person] doesn’t accept the Puerto Rican because he’s Black. We are the ham of the sandwich. And ... the basic problem I’ve found here [United States] has been racism. That if you look a bit darker or if you have an accent, that rejection is automatically there. Now, even though people say times have changed and that it's not so much, it exists.

According to Carmen, Puerto Ricans are "sandwiched" in between the White and Black racial categories, unable to garner acceptance from either of the two groups, each shunning them for being too much like the other. In essence, her discourse suggests that the particular shade of skin color does not really matter; the overarching problem is of invisibility, of a severe lack of recognition. Although according to her Puerto Ricans come in all shades of color, not one of those shades seems to fit within the U.S. racial structure. It seems as if the U.S. obsession with an imagined sense of racial purity, where the presence of Blackness automatically eliminates the possibility of Whiteness, posits the Puerto Rican against his or her own cultural myths and traditions, which are based on the much too often romanticized fusion of the Black, White, and taino (Native Indian) races (Díaz-Quínones, 1993). In a clear example of this problem, Carmen tells of her reaction to the White American woman who simply refused to believe that Carmen was Puerto Rican because of her light skin:
I had to laugh and tell her, “Look, the blond hair is dyed, so yes.” And I said, “But the eyes are mine and the color is mine, deary, that won’t go away.” I had to tell her because I thought it was interesting, I took it as an act of ignorance on her behalf. And she also said, “You are whiter than I am, how can that be?” That is an act of ignorance. I responded, “Well, in reality, it is unpredictable what color Puerto Ricans are going to be because of the rich mixture that we have, thank God. That’s why the same Puerto Rican can be in the same family white, black, and yellow and still be Puerto Rican and brother, you here are the ones with the problem.”

In Carmen’s view, “the problem” is a U.S. problem. She perceives the White woman as being “ignorant” for not understanding the mixed racial character of Puerto Ricans. Taking into account the negative light in which Latinos in general and Puerto Ricans in particular are portrayed in the United States, the White woman’s refusal to accept Carmen as Puerto Rican, though inexcusable, can only be expected. By dichotomizing and depicting the behaviors and values of minority groups as opposite to “mainstream” behaviors and values, the image of the other that results is one that is different from the “normative” group’s (White Americans). Viewed from this angle, the White woman’s behavior makes sense because she cannot believe that one of the “others” looks like someone in the “normative” group—someone like her. In fact, she cannot digest the fact that Carmen is whiter than she is. Her racism is not only rational to her (Bonilla-Silva, 1997), it simply isn’t racism at all.

As the demography of American society is changing, evidence indicates that racial inequality persists. The foreshadowing of Whites as the emerging minority group in the 21st century is unlikely to shift the ethnoracial balance of power in the United States. Thus, although someone like Carmen can be considered a “white Puerto Rican,” and at the micro level her skin color will afford her certain advantages, her position in the ethnoracial order in American society suggests that being part of the White majority and being Puerto Rican must be by definition mutually exclusive. Through an ethnoracial perspective (in which one’s position in the racial hierarchy is determined by more than skin color, including culture, national origin, etc.), these two social categories contradict each other given that Whiteness as an ethnoracial construct represents advantages and power that Puerto Ricans, at the institutional level, simply do not have.

On a social–psychological level, Carmen’s decision to contest ethnoracism by means of a candid description of Puerto Rico’s rich and varied ethnic heritage was in fact a way of subverting the U.S. racial structure. Carmen’s skin color did afford her options; Whiteness does allow one to renounce one’s identity as a Puerto Rican for the sake of color, what we know as exercising the privileges of Whiteness. However, like Carmen, many Puerto Ricans in this study refused to do this, thus, their national and cultural identities acted as proxies for race, offsetting their White privilege.

White racial subjects, though, cannot fully surrender the privileges that white skin affords. Despite her encounters with prejudice and discrimination,
Carmen’s experiences suggest that in some ways, her white skin has insulated her from a type of racism that visible markers such as skin color expose you to—forms of discrimination that Blacks and other dark-skinned racial people face, whether they be Puerto Rican, African American, or Dominican. For example, Carmen tells of the time when she was shopping with a Black Dominican friend and they were being followed by security around the store. Carmen’s White privilege vis-à-vis her Black Dominican friend’s lack thereof is evident. However, the fact that they were speaking Spanish to each other as they were being followed relegated both of them to the status of outsider.

Because ethnorracism is not limited to skin color, it must be understood that although the perceived Whiteness of light-skinned Puerto Ricans works for them in that they are less likely than their darker counterparts to be labeled and discriminated against, other factors, such as those already discussed, are also at play and serve to detect and identify them as non-White people. At the institutional level however, the history of colonial racism toward Puerto Ricans makes it so that there is no such thing as a White Puerto Rican. In effect, the ethnorracial matrix of domination has racial consequences for all Puerto Ricans.

DISCUSSION: ETHNIC ORIGINS, RACIAL CONSEQUENCES

Through interviews and focus groups this research has shown that although the type of racism multiracial minority groups experience in the United States may be of a different kind or manifested in subtler ways, it is by no means more infrequent or of a lesser intensity or propensity for harm and anguish. This conflicts with traditional understandings of racism in which darker skin is associated with a higher intensity of racism.

Based on the premise that racial ascriptions are imposed externally, White racial subjects are believed to have the advantage of passing. Although ethnicity has a sociocultural foundation, claiming an ethnic or national identity leads to an external imposition of racial ascription based on these sociocultural differences. As this article has shown, ethnicity, national origin, culture, language, the country of origin’s “position in the global coloniality of power,” and race all interlock to form what we have been referring to as race for decades; they amount to a matrix of domination that results in racialization. Thus, culturally oriented identities do indeed have a place in the racial structure; they act as a proxy for race, marking racial subjects even if they are white.

For Puerto Rican migrants who are sandwiched in between binary concepts of race, marginalization and discrimination are not articulated in the traditional discourse of racism but are expressed within the context of migration and settlement. For example, Diana stated,

   I have not been a victim of discrimination here [United States], but this is not my home, and, well, you feel like you’re a stranger. Obviously I speak differently, I
speak with an accent and I look different. Wherever I go, I know that people are
going to look at me, when they see me they'll know that I'm not from here and well
sometimes I really miss that, to be in a place where I look how everyone else looks
and that's my home. This will never be my home, it doesn't matter how long I'm
here, and it hasn't been bad and I haven't been treated badly, but this is not my
home. And it will never be my home.

The subjective interpretations of marginality have racial overtones: Many
Puerto Ricans feel like they do not belong and have no place in mainland society.
Although Diana does not interpret this as racism, clearly this quote illustrates
the presence and perception of a color line. There should be no mistaking her
discourse as an indication of a privileged racial position; Diana in fact has been
subject to racism. When she bought a house, she was steered away from the
neighborhoods in which she wanted to live. As a lawyer in the courtroom, she
feels like she constantly has to prove herself, having an accent that marks her.
She has indeed experienced racism, yet her discourse contradicts this.

This suggests that our binary notions of race affect the way “the others”
themselves interpret racism. If not considered a racial group, how do “the oth-
ers” make sense of their racial experiences? One of the outcomes is that Puerto
Ricans have trouble identifying racism as such and making sense of their
marginalized, contradictory positions as colonial racial subjects but not a racial
group and as U.S. citizens with second-class membership status. In short,
Puerto Ricans are sandwiched in between the intersecting points of multiple
matrices of domination, rendering it difficult to assign meaning to their experi-
ences, especially within the context of binary racial understandings.

Furthermore, in the case of light-skinned Puerto Ricans, whitening colonial
racial subjects denies how the U.S. imperial position in the world system has
imprinted even its white “citizens” with racial otherness, further impeding inter-
and intraracial alliances. We argue that this is a manifestation of “new racism”
(Bonilla-Silva, 1997).

More conventional views on race and racism that subsume “new groups”
(which in fact are not new) in the U.S. binary racial hierarchy contribute to the
invisibility of Latinos and other groups by discounting the systemic “isms” of
culture and national origin. Although we do not believe those who adhere to this
model intend to not see other groups, the effects reproduce the racial structure
that subjuggates the “other” Americans.

Moreover, if Whites in this country are bent on maintaining what they see as
their inherent social, cultural, and racial rights vis-à-vis racial “others” (Bonilla-
Silva, 2000), it could be argued that multiracial minority groups present an
alarming threat to Whites’ interests, for their detection and identification as non-
Whites is made complicated by their physical appearance. White Americans
perhaps may view them as more capable of contesting structures of racial hege-
mony. This gives more weight to ethnoracism as the mechanism through which
the current racial order will be maintained.
In the opening quote, Martínez (1998) argued that there is a White definition of citizenship. We argue that Latinos do not fit this definition even if they are white. Their ethnicities and varied global positions racialize them. Furthermore, the multiracial character of U.S. society will make it more difficult to identify the other. When racial markers such as skin color, hair texture, and eye shape are not enough to identify the other, ethnoracial markers such as language, accent, culture, and national origin serve as proxies.

Discrimination based on ethnic markers, and in their absence, one's own cultural identification, is not just a social-psychological phenomenon. It is rooted in global, systemic ethnoracism. Further research is needed to examine the effects of ethnoracism as well as how multiracial minority groups negotiate their sandwiched positions as the buffers within the tiers of the racial hierarchies of the United States and other countries.

Future research is also needed on the class dimensions of ethnoracism; the data in this article solely reflect how economically privileged participants have been racialized, insulating them from the piercing effects of class disadvantage. Also, ethnoracism has gendered dimensions. Although not developed in this article, both gender and class are powerful mediators of ethnoracism, just as ethnoracism influences both sexism and classism. Future research should address how other structural sources of inequality can transform the effects of ethnoracism as well as how women and men from different class backgrounds contest ethnoracial structures of domination.

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