Reactions of Puerto Rican Children in New York City to Psychological Tests

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REACTIONS OF PUERTO RICAN CHILDREN IN NEW YORK CITY TO PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTS

An analysis of the investigation conducted by Messrs. Armstrong, Achilles and Sacks under the auspices of the Special Committee on Immigration and Naturalization of the New York State Chamber of Commerce

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The origin of the report Reactions of Puerto Rican Children in New York City to Psychological Tests is stated in the letter of transmittal to the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York signed by the members of the Special Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. The report was inspired by a study dealing with immigration control which contains an appendix by Dr. C. P. Armstrong, Psychologist attached to the Children’s Court of the City of New York. This appendix sets forth the results of psychological examinations of children of immigrants. The Special Committee states: “This latter study (Dr. Armstrong’s) taken in connection with an agitation now on foot to include Puerto Rico as a state in the Federal Union suggested that an investigation of the quality of immigration received from Puerto Rico would be a valuable contribution to our knowledge.”

The fallacy of the reasoning involved in this quotation is very evident. To an unprejudiced mind the investigation suggested would have appeared ineffective in throwing light on either of the two issues that originated it: it was useless as a measure of the desirability of immigration control because Puerto Ricans are American citizens and as such have free access to the country; as a measure of the merits of the agitation to include Puerto Rico as a state of the Union it is as absurd as if a psychological test of the immigrant Italian were to be taken as a measure of the ability of the Roman citizen generally. These fallacies, however, were disregarded and the investigation was conducted. The original sin thus committed pervades and invalidates all the generalized conclusions advanced on the basis of the study.

1 Reactions of Puerto Rican Children in New York City to Psychological Tests.—A Report of the Special Committee on Immigration and Naturalization of the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York, p. 1.
The fact that the illogical inferences cited above are made by the Special Committee on Immigration and Naturalization of the New York State Chamber of Commerce might perhaps be pardonable because, after all, the committee members are not scientists but just Chamber of Commerce members. However, the body of the report written by Doctors Armstrong and Achilles and by Mr. Sacks, A.M. shows that these three scientific investigators have also fallen under the spell of the delusion suffered by the Chamber of Commerce members. On page 3 of the body of the report it is stated: "... a consideration of the intelligence of Puerto Rican school children as compared with that of public school children here, may be illuminative." Such a comparison would be illuminative indeed, if properly conducted. However, the investigators ruined the illuminative possibilities of the study by assuming that the intelligence of the children of Puerto Rico could be judged by a study—through the use of tests devised for Americans—of the intelligence of 240 Puerto Rican children in P.S. 57 at 115th Street near Lexington Avenue, New York City.

In an investigation of the kind attempted by Armstrong, Achilles and Sacks, the extent to which the "sampling" selected is truly representative of the group, is the corner stone of the whole structure. On more than one count the sampling selected in this study can be indicted as non-representative. Out of the 240 pupils included, 182 were colored or had indications of negro antecedents. This represents 76 per cent of the total. These figures, however, are taken from the report of the New York study and hence we cannot warrant their authenticity. The color distribution of the inhabitants of Puerto Rico, according to the 1930 census, was 74.3 per cent white and 25.7 per cent colored. If the color classification of the 240 pupils included in the investigation is correct, the proportion of white to colored children is approximately the reverse of the proportion found in Puerto Rico. This fact is an evidence of the absolute disregard of the principle of "representativeness", that should have guided the Chamber of Commerce research workers in selecting the "sampling" for their study.

A second evidence of the disregard of the researchers who conducted the study for the tenets of correct sampling is to be found in the absence of any occupational analysis of the heads of the families from which the pupils selected came. Instead of making such an analysis, the research committee took time to investigate the inconsequential details included in the following quotation, which is the only mention of the pupils' parents found in the report.

"Slightly over two-thirds of the Puerto Ricans children were living with both parents. Most of the remainder lived with mothers alone, a very few with fathers, and a few with other relatives. A small number had step-parents."

Of the importance of the occupational analysis as a determiner of social status, and of its relation to mental rating, Dr. May Bere has the following to say:

"The correlations for the individual tests with occupational status are all positive, although they vary in size for the different groups. They are about as substantial as correlations for the same facts for children of native parentage. They indicate that there is some relation between social status and mental rating."

In the absence of any information regarding the occupational status of the parents of the children included in the study, it is entirely possible to suppose that the neighborhood that feeds the school selected may not have supplied a distribution of occupations typical of the Puerto Rican population of New York or of Puerto Rico in general. It is an established fact of psychology that the intelligence levels of various occupations range from very low in such occupations as laborer, miner, teamster, barber, horseshoer, etc., to very high in the professions of engineering, medicine, accountancy, etc.

Two additional data supplied by the investigators themselves furnish evidence that the "sampling" selected is not representative. It is stated in the report that over one-half of the children studied were on relief, and that forty-seven per cent were retarded. A summary of the characteristics of the group should have convinced the investigators that their a priori assumption that the 240 pupils of Public School No. 57 was a representative sampling of Puerto Ricans was not borne out by the facts. To accept—as the researchers have accepted—that a sampling which is 76 per cent colored, over 50 per cent on relief, and 47 per cent retarded is representative of Puerto Ricans is, to say the least, unbelievable. With such a "sampling", the results of psychological tests of mental ability were foredoomed to be inferior. It seems hardly necessary to offer scientific evidence to support our contention. Whatever may be the final outcome of the argument about differences in racial intelligence, which is one of the unsettled problems of psychology, Pintner points out that "all results show the negro decidedly inferior to the white on standard intelligence tests." 2 Regarding the probable correlation between intelligence and employment, this same author admits that there is an in-

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1 Bere, May.—A Comparative Study of the Mental Capacity of Children of Foreign Parents, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1924.
2 Pintner, Rudolf.—Intelligence Testings, Henry Holt & Co.—1928. P. 345.
dication that low intelligence is likely to be very common among the unemployed. And the fact that over fifty per cent of the pupils in the sampling were on relief indicates that their parents were unemployed. Retardation in school work has been generally associated with low intelligence. A proportion of forty-seven per cent of retardation is clear evidence of abnormality in intelligence.

To be sure, Puerto Ricans are not seventy-six per cent colored, over fifty per cent unemployed and forty-seven per cent retarded. On the basis of such a "sampling"—and it can be easily duplicated from among American born children in almost any state in the Union,—a researcher who is not particularly scrupulous about his task, could pronounce any American community inferior, fit for deportation and unworthy of statehood.

Casting about for evidence with which to substantiate the conclusions derived from their study, Armstrong, Achilles and Sacks cite Porteus and Babcock’s study of racial intelligence in Hawaii. These investigators, when comparing the various national groups in Hawaii, found that all of them—including the Puerto Rican group—were inferior to California children in native ability. The Porteus and Babcock study is a flimsy support for the sweeping generalizations made by the Chamber of Commerce researchers. Speaking of the Hawaiian study, Thomas R. Garth, professor of experimental psychology at the University of Denver, and one of the most distinguished students of race psychology, says the following:

"With reference to Hawaiian intelligence as it has been tested, we have I. Q.’s from an adapted Binet furnished by Porteus and Babcock. The I. Q. as thus found was 84.3 for 105 Hawaiians, which is evidently too small a group on which to base a judgment."

In Professor Garth’s opinion the Porteus and Babcock’s judgement of Hawaiian intelligence is invalidated by the smallness of the group studied. If we consider that of the several racial groups included in the Hawaiian study the Puerto Rican was "nearly the smallest group", it is logical to conclude that whatever judgements were passed regarding the intelligence of Puerto Ricans are still more unwarranted and groundless.

Garth’s judgement as to the inadequacy of a sampling of 105 children as a basis for judging the mental ability of Hawaiians in general is also an indictment of the sampling used by Armstrong, Achilles and Sacks. If 105 subjects used by Porteus and Babcock in Hawaii is too small a group, as compared with Hawaiian population or school attendance, then the 240 pupils examined at New York is an entirely inadequate number also. The Hawaii group is 0.28 per cent of the total population, and 0.12 per cent of the school attendance. The 240 Puerto Rican children represent a still smaller proportion: 0.015 per cent of total population and 0.11 per cent of the school enrollment of the island.

The amateurish attempts to draw conclusions about racial inferiority on the basis of studies such as the one conducted under the auspices of the New York State Chamber of Commerce have drawn severe condemnation from serious students of race psychology. Two quotations will be given in evidence. Garth, to whom reference has been made before, says:

"Be that as it may, disregarding the I. Q.'s of the immigrant groups, which we do not believe are measures of the average of the groups in their lands..."

Rudolf Pintner, the world famous psychologist of Columbia University, makes the following definite pronouncement:

"It is only by testing adequate samplings of national groups within their own countries that we may approximate some knowledge of racial or national differences in intelligence."

The weight of scientific evidence and eminent opinion is so clearly against the conclusions formulated by Armstrong, Achilles and Sacks that it is hard to refrain from the suspicion that this is a case of rationalization.

"Any disposition on our part," says Garth, speaking of pseudo racial differences—"to withhold from these or similar races, because we deem them inferior, the right to a free and full development to which they are entitled, must be taken as an indication of rationalization on account of race prejudice; and such an attitude is inexcusable in an intelligent populace."

On the last page of the report, the authors feel the pangs of a stricken conscience and insert the following paragraph:

"Questions naturally arise. Is this New York group of Puerto Ricans representative of children in Puerto Rico? Can a guess be hazarded from what is known of the origin of many Puerto Rican children? Does Puerto Rico export to New York mostly her lowest strata and worst mental levels? This at least, is hardly probable. These questions cannot be answered categorically unless psychologists conduct in Puerto Rico a program of mental measurements similar to that described."

We have tried to answer the first question in the preceding paragraph. The authors admit that this and the other questions pro-

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1Garth, Thomas R.—Race Psychology. p. 81.
pounded "cannot be answered categorically unless psychologists conduct in Puerto Rico a program of mental measurements similar to that described." A thorough program of mental measurements of school children has been conducted in Puerto Rico by competent psychologists, and the authors of the report know it because the title of the published report—A Survey of the Public Educational System of Puerto Rico, directed by Paul Monroe of the International Institute of Teachers College, Columbia University—is included in the bibliography of the report published by the New York State Chamber of Commerce. It is reasonable to expect that this survey should fulfill the requirements set up by Armstrong, Achilles and Sacks for a proper answer to their questions. In a few details, however, the Monroe investigation in Puerto Rico is not similar to the one conducted under the auspices of the New York State Chamber of Commerce. Instead of three researchers as in the New York Study, the Columbia Survey Commission included such names as Monroe, Capen, Lindsley, Meredith, Rugg, Ryan, Schwartz, Wilson, Works, and Jenkins: 70,000 pupils in all the grades from the second to the eighth were tested rather than the meager 210 tested in the New York study; and all the geographical sections of the island and all the occupational levels are represented.

Three short quotations from the Monroe Survey conducted by competent psychologists in Puerto Rico—the method admitted by Dr. Armstrong and her colleagues as the only legitimate one to determine the mental ability of the Puerto Rican children—should suffice:

"The third by-product of the Commission's testing program is the contribution to the problem of the psychology of races. Those in charge of the measurement work believe that the results of the tests governing the findings of the Philippine Survey concerning problems of equality or inequality of the intellects of races confirm the evidence that the Puerto Rican people revealed as much intellectual ability as do the people who now make up that great urban mass of humanity in the towns and cities of continental United States. Hence, there is no reservation in our minds concerning the capacity of the Puerto Ricans to acquire and make profitable use of the type of intellectual education that the more progressive school systems of the modern world are developing."1

On page 106 the Columbia Survey Commission reports:

"Children develop a very high degree of skill in arithmetical computation, in arithmetical reasoning and in spelling. Errors on the tests which were conducted in English the standing of Puerto Rican children in these fields is higher than that of children in American schools.2"

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2 Ibid. p. 106.

And again,

"the results of the Commission's measurements furnished convincing evidence that Puerto Rican children have sufficient mental ability to take on the kind of education which the modern world is developing." (p. 107)

One of the New York State Chamber of Commerce researchers, Mr. Mervin J. Sacks, makes a belated apology in a letter addressed to the Editor of the New York Times, dated February 15, 1936, where he affirms that he was never the intention of the researchers to condemn an entire race on the basis of the findings. The fact remains that the wording of the report is such as to convey the impression that Puerto Rico is being judged by the findings of the New York study. The first sentence in the section entitled "Conclusions" in the following:

"Puerto Ricans are adding greatly to the already tremendous problem of intellectual subnormal school reductates of alien parentage, whence are recruited most delinquents and criminals."3

And a few lines below:

"Does Puerto Rico export to New York mostly her lowest strata and worst mental levels? This at least, is hardly probable."4

This means in plain English that the researchers believe that the entire population of Puerto Rico can be judged by the erroneous findings of their limited study of 240 subjects in New York City.

In this same letter Mr. Sacks attacks the validity of the conclusions of the Columbia Survey Commission by pointing to the fact that since 84 per cent of school children in Puerto Rico leave school by the end of the third grade, the remaining 16 per cent constitute a highly selected group, and no general conclusions for the whole island can be based on their performances. Again Mr. Sacks misses the mark: this time because of his ignorance of the reasons for the short school life of Puerto Rican children, and because of his unscientific tendency to draw hasty conclusions. If the 84 per cent pupil mortality after the third grade (a mortality which has been reduced to 73 per cent) were due to inability of the pupils to pursue higher studies, his contention that the remaining 16 per cent are a selected group would be tenable. The truth is that the pupils who drop school after the third grade do so because there are no higher grades available in the community. Those who continue in school do so because they happen to reside in communities that offer school instruction beyond the fourth grade. The factor that decides whether the child will stay after the third grade or no:
is therefore absolutely unrelated to the mental ability of the child concerned, and hence can not render the remaining children a selected group.

The language factor entering into the results of the New York study has been hastily dismissed by Armstrong, Xerlie and Sacks on the assumption that the use of the short scale of the Army Individual Performance Test eliminates the language handicap. However, the instructions for the test were given in English. In this connection, the New York State Chamber of Commerce researchers would have profited by reading Pintner’s advice:

“Any attempt to make direct comparisons between different racial groups must be done without language. It is perfectly absurd to imagine that any real comparisons can be obtained by translating tests from one language into another. The tests must not merely be non-verbal in the sense that no words are used in the test proper; they must be non-language in the sense that no language must be required either in giving the directions or in taking the test itself. Non-verbal tests with verbal directions are not adequate. We cannot be sure that translated verbal directions are equally hard or equally easy. Directions translated into French may tell more or less than the original directions in English. All of this is so very obvious that it is surprising that no actual testing in foreign countries with non-language tests has been attempted. Instead of this we have been content to draw dubious inferences about racial differences in mental make-up from the results of the Army Tests or from the comparisons of children of different nationalities resident in this country.”

That the language handicap, even in the case of the so-called non-language tests is significant has been ascertained experimentally by Walters and is reported as follows:

“As a means of determining the influence of foreign language usage on the scores made on the tests (165 tests given to the same number of children in one of the New York schools) the test booklet was divided into two groups on the basis of the language predominantly spoken in the home. The general plan of procedure was the comparison of scores made on what might be termed non-language tests of the Binet with scores made on tests presupposing average ability in English usage. The conclusion reached by the study is that there is a language handicap of from six to eight months of mental age in the test for children 13 years old coming from foreign-language-speaking homes!”

And further, “when children with a language handicap are associated in school with children from English-speaking homes, the forces of selection are likely to operate more rigorously against the children with the language handicap than would be the case were the children not so associated.”

Mr. Sacks is willing to admit that the conclusions of the New York study are applicable only to the Puerto Rican colony there.

Our analysis of the tests used, the procedure followed, and the sampling selected shows that the “findings” are not only inapplicable to the Puerto Rican colony in New York but neither are they applicable to the 240 pupils who were the subjects of the study!

It is regrettable that the efforts and expense of the New York State Chamber of Commerce should have been wasted on a piece of research that is unreliable because of its unscientific method and productive of ill-feeling among the American citizens of Puerto Rican birth or extraction residing in the United States and in Puerto Rico. When research stoops to such a task, the lovers of truth cannot help but feel very profoundly disturbed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY