

Community healing among Puerto Ricans:  
Espiritismo as a therapy for the soul

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In the last three decades, indigenous healing systems from the Caribbean have been studied extensively by Western researchers in an attempt to increase our understanding of healing as a generic process (Canizares, 1993; Koss, 1992; Pérez y Mena, 1991; Sanchez, 1978). These studies suggest the need to consider the important role that culture plays in the nature of healing and disease. The study of indigenous healing systems is an important step in understanding and improving the delivery of mental health services to all populations.

**Espiritismo** (Spiritism) is one of these indigenous healing systems that is used by a significant number of Puerto Ricans as an alternative to the professional health system. An epidemiological study done in Puerto Rico found that 18% of the Puerto Rican population consult spiritist healers to resolve emotional problems. (Hohmann, Richeport, Marriot, Canino , Rubio-Stipec & Bird, 1990). Moreover, several studies on **Espiritismo** have concluded that spiritist healers are effective in the treatment of several mental health problems (Garrison, 1977a, 1977b; Comas-Díaz, 1981; Harwood, 1977; Koss, 1992, 1980; Núñez Molina, 1990; Pérez y Mena, 1991)

Espiritismo is practiced by Puerto Ricans living on the Island as well as those living in the United States. It is utilized by lower-class as well as upper-class individuals (Núñez Molina, 1987). Illiterate people as well as those with a college

education are also believers in Espiritismo. It functions as a religion for some Puerto Ricans, as a healing system used in moments of crisis for others, and as a "philosophy" and "science" for those who are academically oriented.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the therapeutic and preventive functions of Puerto Rican Espiritismo. In addition, I will describe the methodological issues that I confronted while doing research on Espiritismo. I believe that the traditional research methods are not adequate to study folk healing systems.

I will begin by describing the belief system and practice of Espiritismo as well as the development of this system in Puerto Rico. Then, I will discuss the methodology used to study this healing system. Finally I will examine the therapeutic and preventive functions of Espiritismo.

### Belief System

The foundation of the spiritist belief system is the acknowledgement of a spirit world which is constantly interacting with the "material world" (mundo material). The spirit world is believed to be inhabited by spirits who are classified according to a hierarchy of moral development (Harwood, 1977). The spirits at the lowest level of this hierarchy are identified as ignorants because they are too attached to the material world and interested in harming human beings. At the highest level, the evolved spirits or "spirits of light" (espíritus de luz) have achieved a great

degree of spiritual perfection, being able to protect people from the negative influence of the ignorant spirits.

Human beings are composed of two major dimensions: a material body and a spirit. When a person dies, his or her spirit leaves the body but continues living on another level of existence. In this other level, the spirit maintains its identity as well as its moral and spiritual development. The essence of the person is his or her spirit; the body is just an instrument.

One's spirit exists before one is born and it will survive after death. Spirits have to reincarnate several times in order to achieve moral perfection. One life is not enough to purify the spirit of its moral weaknesses. One's present problems and conflicts are deeply determined by one's actions in past lives. For example, conflictive relationships from past lives may affect one's present relationships. A spirit wife or husband from a past life can cause problems in current intimate relationships with the opposite sex if this spirit is ignorant and does not recognize that we are living another life.

Related to the belief in reincarnations is the concept of "pruebas" (trials or tests). According to espiritistas, pruebas are problems, sufferings or illnesses which have been chosen by a person before birth in order to pay a spiritual debt of a past life. If a person suffers the pruebas with resignation, he or she will purify the spirit of moral imperfection.

Communication between the spirits and human beings is an essential element of Espiritismo. Individuals capable of contacting the spirit world are called mediums: they serve as intermediaries between the spirit world and the material world. Theoretically, every person is an actual or a potential medium because mediumnity is considered a natural capacity. Yet, in order to become a medium, an individual has to be involved in a process called "desarrollo de facultades" (development of faculties). The "facultades" are the different capacities that a medium needs to communicate with the spirits in order to get help from them.

Spiritists believe that ignorant spirits can be the cause of physical as well as mental illness. These spirits can control the thoughts and actions of an individual, making him or her experience an "obsesión" . The individual who is experiencing an "obsesión" is under the influence of an ignorant spirit, subjected to that spirit's will. The influence of these ignorant spirits can also produce physical disturbances, ranging from headaches to major illness.

Since birth, every person has a guiding spirit who is in charge of protecting him or her from the influence of ignorant spirits. The guiding spirit is expected to provide assistance, guidance and spiritual support when the person is in trouble.

The practice of Espiritismo in Puerto Rico

The most important event in the practice of "Espiritismo" is

the spiritist meeting. Most of the spiritist centers have a similar physical set-up. Usually there is a long cloth-covered table which is occupied by the group leader (**Presidente**) and the various mediums. On the table there may be a goblet of water, flowers, cigars, statues of different Catholic saints, incense and other paraphernalia. Generally, the room is adorned with pictures of Christ and the Virgin Mary along with other religious personalities.

Usually the session begins with a reading from the book El Evangelio Según el "Espiritismo" (The Gospel According to Spiritism), written by Allan Kardec. Another book that is used in almost every spiritist meeting is the Collection of Selected Prayers. This contains prayers requesting the presence of guiding spirits, the education of ignorant spirits, and support for the health of the sick.

After this first stage, the mediums prepare for the "working" of "causas" that are affecting the visitors. The "causas" are the actions and influences of the ignorant spirits upon an individual. The "working of causas" is a process which involves several tasks. First, a medium identifies the particular problem of the individual, classifying it according to two major categories, material or spiritual. When the "causa" is found to be material, this means that the individual's problem is not caused or influenced by the spirits. Usually, the mediums will refer such a person to a modern health professional. They may, however, also

offer a treatment based on their knowledge of herbal treatment. When the "causa" is identified as spiritual, the healing process is oriented toward educating or "giving light" to the spirit who is totally or partially responsible for the problem.

When the "causa" is spiritual, the role of the medium is to divine which of the symptoms that the person is experiencing are produced by the ignorant spirit. After this has been done, the medium is prepared to be possessed by the spirit in order to create the opportunity for a dialogue between the spirit, the other mediums, and the affected individual.

This healing dialogue has two major functions. First, as the spirit expresses its feelings against the person, those present can become aware of why the spirit wants to harm him or her. Usually, ignorant spirits are affecting the individual because they are seeking revenge for something that the person did to them when the spirits were alive, either in this life or a past one. The second, and more important, function of the dialogue is to educate or give light to the ignorant spirit so that it will not continue doing harm. If the ignorant spirit decides to follow the medium's advice, then it means that the "causa" has been lifted up. The healing process is not complete until the ignorant spirit repents for all the evil it has caused.

The mediums also involve the afflicted person in the working of the "causa" by asking him or her to perform a number of activities and rituals that are supposed to be effective in giving

light to the spirit. For example, a medium can prescribe such rituals as the lighting of candles and the reading of prayers. At the same time, the afflicted individual is asked to transform his\her character because ignorant spirits affect the people who do not have enough strength to resist their influence.

When the "Presidente" considers that it is time to finish the working of "causas", the meeting is closed with a prayer from the Collection of Selected Prayers that is called "At the end of the meeting".

A brief history of Espiritismo in Puerto Rico:

All the major sources on the history of Espiritismo agree that it was introduced in Puerto Rico during the second half of the nineteenth century (Cruz Monclova, 1952; Koss, 1977; Rodríguez, 1978; Yañez, 1963). At that time Puerto Rico was a colony of Spain and the official religion was Catholicism. The political environment was one of repression and complete lack of civil rights. However, there were a good number of middle class Puerto Ricans who had the opportunity to go to Europe to study. In Europe these Puerto Ricans were deeply influenced by a French educator and philosopher who wrote under the pseudonym of Allan Kardec (1804-1869).

The return of the Puerto Rican intellectuals from Europe also meant the introduction of the spiritist philosophy into the Island. These Puerto Ricans were interested in reforming the



Puerto Rican economic and political system. They found in Espiritismo a philosophy which addressed the transformation of the individual as well as the community. Espiritismo became for Puerto Rican liberals an ideal doctrine that would liberate the oppressed community from the dictatorial government of Spain.

Kardec's most significant books The Book of the Spirits (1978a), The Gospel According to Spiritism (1978b), and The Book of the Mediums (1977) gained great popularity within the Puerto Rican intellectual community. At first these books were clandestinely brought to Puerto Rico because the Spanish government was opposed to the introduction of the spiritist philosophy (Rodríguez, 1978). Despite this, by 1873 Puerto Rican bookstores were selling Kardec's books and the new movement was gaining acceptance by many Puerto Ricans.

In the beginning, spiritist groups had to be organized secretly because they were believed to be affiliated with revolutionary groups. Espiritistas were arrested and prosecuted by the government (Yañez, 1963). Different magazines and newspapers published articles in which Espiritismo was described as an "abominable social cancer" and the cause of mental illness (Cruz Monclova, 1952). In 1875 the Boletín Mercantil, a government newspaper, reported that Espiritismo was "invading the Island" (Cruz Monclova, 1952, p. 643). Similarly, the Catholic Church published many articles condemning the practice of Espiritismo. In addition, Espiritistas were denied sacraments such as baptism,

marriage, and last rites.

Despite all of this repression, the spiritist movement grew rapidly and spiritist centers were organized in different parts of the Island. The first one was "Luz del Progreso" (Light of Progress) founded in Mayagüez on 1888 (Yañez, 1963). During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, spiritist centers promoted changes in the areas of education, health care and social reform. Spiritist groups organized libraries and published a significant number of magazines and newspapers. At least 11 spiritist magazines were published in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Spiritist leaders considered the study of Espiritismo essential for the intellectual and moral growth of the Puerto Rican community.

In 1903, a group of Espiritistas founded the Spiritist Federation of Puerto Rico, an organization dedicated to the promulgation of Espiritismo and the cohesion of spiritist centers and societies. This organization began to hold annual conventions in which Espiritistas from many towns of Puerto Rico would meet to participate in conferences and to discuss the development of Espiritismo on the Island.

Espiritismo began to develop in Puerto Rico as a middle class movement led by intellectuals and academically-oriented Puerto Ricans (Rodríguez, 1978). They were more interested in Espiritismo as a philosophical system which provides a framework for social and moral development. Some of them were attracted to Espiritismo

because of its "scientific" orientation and emphasis on psychical research.

However, there was also another group of Puerto Ricans, generally from the lower class, who were interested in Kardec's Spiritismé not because of its "scientific" and philosophical orientation but because this system offered a framework for understanding healing and treating illness. They syncretized Espiritismo with popular Catholicism, "curanderismo", herbal medicine and other healing practices derived from their Indian and African heritage. In the process they adapted Kardec's Spiritismé to their own reality and needs, creating a unique healing system which in this article I am calling "indigenous espiritismo". I am using the term "indigenous" to describe this healing system because in a major way it is a socio-cultural creation which integrates different healing systems and religious traditions which have evolved in Puerto Rico for hundreds of years.

At the time of the introduction of Kardecian Espiritismo, there was already a rich folk healing tradition in Puerto Rico derived from the heritage of the Indians, the Afro-Americans and the Spaniards (Alegría, 1979). Folk healing practices such as "santiguos" and herbal medicine were used by poor people to resolve their everyday problems ("Santiguos" are the hand massages that are given for setting dislocated bones and curing various forms of intestinal diseases). The origin of these healing practices can be traced to the healing traditions of the Puerto

Rican Indians called **Táinos**.

Towards an experiential model for researching traditional healing systems

I consider that an experiential approach to research is fundamental for an understanding of traditional healing systems. Through an experiential approach it is possible to capture the complexity of healing systems without degrading, reducing or devaluating them. A significant number of person-centered ethnographers are recognizing the role of subjectivity and the researcher-participant relationship as a source of increased knowledge and understanding (Briggs, 1970; Crapanzano, 1980; Dwyer, 1982; Rabinow, 1985). These studies suggest the need to consider researchers as "positioned subjects" who have particular life experiences that both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight (Rosaldo, 1983). In support of the use of the researchers's experiential data in the research process, Reinharz (1984) writes:

If the experience of the research is omitted, then the discipline is limited to the study of observable behavior and responses to instruments and contrived situations such as questionnaires. Studies built on such a foundation lack both the experience of the researcher and of the subject since the information concerning the subject is experiential but an artifact of research

procedures (p. 337).

The roots of my approach to the study of Espiritismo: A personal story

Research accounts in the social sciences have emphasized the analysis of results without enough reflexive description of how the researcher's cultural and personal background are influencing the selection of the research topic, the methodological approach, relationship with participants and the research process in general (Lawless, Sullive and Zamora, 1983; Nash & Winthrob, 1972; Polkinghorne, 1983). The general orientation among social science researchers is to write about their research as if they were not present or involved in the act of interviewing, observing, participating and interacting with the people studied. Usually research publications are totally dedicated to examining the Other ("the subjects") without including a description of the Self (the researcher) and how the interaction of the Self and the Other affected the research findings (Dwyer, 1982). The researcher's personal experiences and reflection on the research process are most likely to be found in peripheral places of a work, such as prefaces, postscripts, footnotes, acknowledgements and appendices. In doing this, researchers are disregarding their personal experiences and reflective stance in order to present an "objective" analysis of their findings.

Due to my strong conviction that the researcher's personal

story is essential for understanding the research process, I will take the risk of telling mine. This personal story is composed of preconceptions and assumptions that I brought to the study, moments of vulnerability in which my world view was challenged and biographical data that influenced the research direction.

My hope is that writing about the research process from a personal perspective will be helpful in illuminating the methodological issues that I confronted during this process

In studying Puerto Rican Espiritismo, I became a native researcher not only because I am Puerto Rican but also because I have experienced this healing system from an insider's perspective. Native researchers have been defined as those who conduct research on the ethnic group of which they themselves are members (Fahim, 1982; Madan, 1975).

I was born in a small rural town in the mountains of Puerto Rico into an extended family and a community of strong spiritist believers. My world-view and concept of reality has been heavily influenced by being a Puerto Rican who was socialized within the subculture of Espiritismo. Having participated in the activities of spiritist centers in my community since I was young, I have had the opportunity to experience Espiritismo from an insider's perspective.

My interest in the study of Espiritismo can be traced to my first contact with a spiritist healer when I was seven years old. At that time I was suffering from a condition that did not enable

me to function normally. The doctors commented to my parents that there was a physiological basis for my condition and that I should be operated upon as soon as possible.

My parents were desperate and did not know what to do. A friend talked to them about a good spiritist healer who lived near my town. My parents decided to take me to the healer's house. I remember that the healer was a fifty-five year old man named Gumersindo. The first thing he did was to put a cup of water on a table. Then he laid his hands on my head and stomach, giving me some "pases" (spiritual cleansing). After this, he took the cup of water and said to me: " Drink it, thinking you will be cured". I drank the water as he told me, thinking it was the medicine that I needed to be cured. The last thing I remember from this experience was when my parents asked Gumersindo, "How much do we owe you?". He responded: "It is free. The healing power has come from God and the good spirits. I am not responsible for it. Your child has been cured." He was right, since that moment my health problem completely disappeared.

This healing experience motivated me to study the therapeutic dimensions of Espiritismo. It also contributed significantly to the development of my experiential approach to the study of this healing system.

In describing the experiential approach I am proposing a different paradigm for doing field work. This paradigm stresses the vulnerability of researchers which facilitates their

understanding of the participant's reality. By accepting one's own vulnerability and thereby surrendering the security of one's own world-view, one is opened to being transformed by a culture through participating in its world-view (Katz, 1993).

Experiences of vulnerability seem intrinsic to field research, and perhaps to the research enterprise in general. I experienced my own vulnerability during research on Espiritismo (Núñez-Molina, 1987). A description of one of my experiences of vulnerability at a spiritist meeting follows:

Doña Gela, a Puerto Rican spiritist healer, is known in the community for her "spiritual injections". I talked with several of Doña Gela's clients and discovered they felt as if they had been injected with a needle when she had touched a part of their bodies with only her finger. My initial reaction was to interpret the "spiritual injections" as produced by suggestion or by the use of some object. I decided to observe Doña Gela very carefully when she was working with clients in order to see if she was carrying something on her hands. She "injected" several people in front of me and I could not see anything in her hands or fingers.

One day when I was doing participant observation at Doña Gela's center I had an experience that changed my perception about the reality of the "spiritual injections". After having worked with two clients, she looked at me and said: "You are



very tired. You are working too much." She asked me to stand up in front of her, and began to massage my back and stomach. Suddenly I felt as if I had been injected in my stomach with a small needle. At that moment I tried to deny the experience, thinking that I was imagining it. However, after a few seconds I felt another injection but this time it was of stronger intensity. My mind was telling me: "You are a researcher, keep your objectivity". Then Doña Gela took one of my arms and she pressed gently with one of her fingers on the middle of it. At this moment I had to move away a little because the sensation that I felt was as if I had been injected with a bigger needle. It was kind of painful. I told Doña Gela: "These injections are too strong". Everybody in the room began to laugh and Doña Gela smiled at me, continuing her massage. When she finished I looked at my stomach and arm, and I saw three small red points at the places in my body where I was "injected".

This experience contributed directly to the development of a better relationship with Doña Gela and the other participants of my research. Through this episode I was able to experience and understand their reality. More importantly I learned to respect and value their experiences by accepting my own vulnerability and giving up the security of my own world-view.

## The reality of the spirits

Generally, researchers who have studied Espiritismo make the implicit or explicit assumption that spirits do not have objective reality and proceed from there to analyze their data. One of the spiritist healers in this study expressed that no one can undertake serious research on Espiritismo with the assumption that spirits are products of the medium's mind. He argued that it is impossible to understand the process of becoming a healer if one makes this assumption from the beginning.

Being a native researcher and having a different epistemology than that of Western researchers, I find it more appropriate to examine Espiritismo from an emic perspective, remaining at the level of the medium's construction of reality, without trying to make interpretations beyond the data collected. My goal was not to examine their experiences by using a framework borrowed from Western psychological theories but to examine them based on the healer's world-views. Since it is precisely the way in which they experience reality what interests me, I do not find it helpful to analyze spirits as creations of their minds, nor to compare spiritist concepts with Western psychological concepts .

Similarly, Csordas (1985) suggested the need to include the sacred reality in the study of religious systems, presenting the question of "whether religious phenomena can legitimately be translated into psychiatric terms or whether in some cases they must be analyzed with respect to the structure of the sacred ..."

(p. 105). This dilemma is crucial for a better understanding of religious experiences. The tendency is to translate these experiences into psychological terms without considering the spiritual dimension.

The research model that I am proposing is based on the paradigm of multiple or alternative realities (Bentov, 1977; Berger, 1977; Rogers, 1980). This paradigm emphasizes that ordinary reality is just one of a number of realities and states of consciousness, as opposed to the conception that there is one reality with which everyone should be in contact in order to be considered "normal" and "mentally healthy". Mental health, within Espiritismo, is the capacity to live in a world of alternate realities and being capable of controlling the possibility of connecting with each of them at will.

The reality of the spirits is not something that can be proved or denied. We never will be able to prove if spirits are objectively real or not. However, from a psychological perspective, the spirits can be conceived as psychic truths. The fact that people have experiences with spirits is enough to consider them as phenomenologically real. For spiritist healers, the reality of a transpersonal or spiritual realm becomes a lived experience, not just a simple belief. For them spirits are not abstract concepts or symbols for explaining reality. They can see the spirits, hear their voices and experience their reality in the possession trance.

The value of subjectivity

I consider that it is necessary to redefine the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity if one is to engage in a research which has the purpose of describing and understanding people's religious experiences. In this "new paradigm research", the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity disappears, leading to a new concept of what it means to be scientific. To be objective is to let the phenomenon unfold as it is, without wanting to change, control, reduce or analyze it. To be objective is to have an open attitude towards the phenomenon, that allows it to manifest as it really is, not as the researcher wants it to. As Colaizzi wrote: "objectivity is fidelity to phenomena" (1978, p. 52).

Objectivity can not be achieved by the elimination of the investigator's personal features, but, instead, by his/her having a clear understanding of his/her influence on the research (Reinharz, 1984). As Beteille and Madan wrote:

To seek to eliminate the supposedly distorting role of the observer's subjectivity, if at all possible, would destroy the most precious of our tools-- the fieldworker himself (1975, p. 6).

As a researcher one is always present in some way, there is no such thing as an independent observer. Scientific knowledge is

gained from a particular point of view or perspective without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. As Polanyi writes: "There is personal involvement of the known in all acts of understanding but this does not make our understanding subjective ... Such knowing is indeed objective in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality ... "(1958, pp. VII-VIII).

From this perspective researchers become more scientific by recognizing their subjectivity, not by repressing or denying it. It is essential to include our subjective assumptions as part of the research because all knowledge has its roots in personal experience. In this sense, knowledge becomes a fusion of subjectivity and objectivity, eliminating the dichotomy that has been created in the social sciences.

The experiential approach has several advantages. It may help researchers achieve insights that have been overlooked by others (Maruyama, 1981). This model may offer alternatives for collecting, analyzing and understanding data in a way which is more consonant with the culture that is being studied.

Another advantage of this approach is that it helps reduce the bias against religion that exists within the field of psychology. Since Freud's conception of religious experiences as a sign of mental illness, psychologists have resisted to examine the therapeutic potential of religion (Freud, 1928; Fromm, 1967).

The degree of researchers' connectedness with and subsequent

understanding of a culture may depend to some extent on the acceptance of their own experiences of vulnerability. Moments of vulnerability can become an essential resource for decreasing the experiential and epistemological gap between a researcher and the people studied. A female Korean shaman, talking about being a healer and becoming possessed, made the following argument trying to describe this gap:

You, though you say you are trying to understand how I became a mudang (shaman) and what it's done to me, you will never understand me... You see, there cannot be any real understanding between the possessed and the non-possessed... The possessed have had experiences that the non-possessed cannot begin to comprehend no matter how they try. At best, they can only see what your possession is doing to you and to them (her family) socially. They cannot really understand your inner feelings or experiences (Harvey, 1979, p. 199).

The degree to which I was an "insider" in this study is not very clear to me. Although I am not a spiritist, I share the world-view and epistemology of my participants to a great extent.

I understand and respect the realities articulated by the spiritist healers not only due to a scientific attitude but also because sometimes I have been able to participate to a certain degree in these realities.

To some degree I have also been involved in the process of becoming a spiritist healer. Years ago when I began to visit spiritist centers as a researcher I was not sure if I should continue participating in this way at the spiritist meetings. I was afraid that my degree of participation will be seen by other researchers as a sign of being too personally involved. I felt that they would disqualify me as a researcher arguing that I did not have enough "objectivity" to study Espiritismo.

After some time of reflection, I realized that my experiential approach to the study of Espiritismo could be one of my unique contributions as a researcher. I felt that my personal experiences as a researcher would not necessarily be an obstacle or limitation but rather an asset and a resource for understanding Espiritismo as a healing system.

Learning from spiritist healers about healing, development and spiritual growth

I decided to study Espiritismo because I wanted to know about healing, illness, development and the spiritual dimension. The healers that I met in the process shared their wisdom and helped me achieve an understanding of life as a meaningful journey. I will now discuss what I believe are the most important contributions of Espiritismo as a healing system.

First, I learned that many spiritist healers are very effective therapists. They use several techniques known by mental health professionals: reframing (Garrison, 1982); abreaction and catharsis (Harwood, 1977); confession and review of past history (Harwood, 1977); therapeutic paradoxes (Koss, 1975) ; role playing (Lubchansky et. al., 1970); hypnotic techniques and suggestion (Delgado, 1979-80); crisis intervention and rehabilitation therapy (Garrison, 1982). They know about the placebo effect and use it as a way of helping their clients (Núñez Molina, 1987).

It seems to me that the analysis of similarities between spiritist healing and modern therapeutic approaches is important to some extent because this analysis may help us understand the therapeutic implications of Espiritismo. However, this analysis may prevent us from a full understanding of Espiritismo as an indigenous healing system (Katz & Núñez Molina, 1986). One might conclude that spiritist healers are effective because they are very similar to modern psychotherapists. But comparing healing systems of different cultures involves the danger of emphasizing similarities at the psychological concepts level without considering the importance of the differences at the cultural and social dimension level. There is a tendency to "psychologize" Espiritismo without considering the unique healing elements of this system.

Second, I learned that several healers make interventions which are very different from the helping techniques of mental



health professionals:

1. Spiritist healing, unlike Western psychotherapy, is congruent with basic premises of the Puerto Rican culture. Healers are actively engaged in bringing about therapeutic results, offering direct advice (Delgado, 1977). In this sense healer and client share similar expectations because it has been found that advice and medication are the principal types of treatment expected by Puerto Rican patients (Gaviria & Wintrob, 1979). Healers like to prescribe herbs and baths which represent a kind of medication for the clients (Morales Dorta, 1976). In addition, most lower-class Puerto Ricans do not believe that they can resolve their problems through psychotherapy. They do not expect to be questioned about or to discuss their psychic conflicts (Gaviria & Wintrob, 1979). Spiritist healing fulfills this expectation by involving the client in different activities, giving little emphasis to talking as a way of achieving insight. Consequently, clients do not necessarily need verbal skills in order to get help. Purdy et. al. (1972) described spiritist healing as "exorcism by action as opposed to exorcism by thought and insight" (p. 78).

2. The sociocultural difference between spiritist healers and their clients is minimal (Singer, 1984) . Healers live in the same community as their clients, "sharing the day-to-day frustrations of ghetto living: unemployment, lack of adequate

sanitation, housing and medical care, and estrangement from the outside world" (Ruiz & Langrod, 1976a, p. 394). Usually healers provide assistance any time of the day without the need to make appointments. The services of healers are very inexpensive and most of the time the payment for services is based on an optional voluntary offering. All of this provides the spiritist healer with a better understanding of the client's problems.

3 . In spiritist healing the client's problem is not a stigmatizing phenomenon. Usually the client's problem are not seen as the manifestation of illness but as the signal that the client is developing faculties. The healers interpret the symptoms as a gift. This is very important for Puerto Rican clients because they are afraid of being labeled "locos" (mentally ill).

4. Spiritist healers attribute mental illness to external sources, relieving the client of feeling guilty (Morales Dorta, 1976). The client is considered responsible for the recuperation but not for the illness.

Throughout my years of researching, I learned that one of the most important therapeutic dimensions of Espiritismo is its function as a natural support system. Natural support systems are those groups outside the professional mental health setting to whom one turns when experiencing problems associated with one's

everyday life. The family, friends, neighbors and co-workers can be part of the natural support system of an individual.

Spiritist centers are one of those natural support systems which provide community members an alternative to professional mental health services. Spiritist groups offer support, guidance and specific information to individuals so that they can improve the handling of a situation. They also may refer individuals to professionals when it is needed.

The spiritist center functions as a voluntary organization, as a primary group outside the family for many spiritists. Before and after each spiritist meeting, spiritists have the opportunity to talk to each other, sharing concerns and problems. As one spiritist participant commented: "Usually I do not go out but every Sunday I need to come to the spiritist meeting. I enjoy talking with other members and knowing what they have done in the week". The center provides a setting for the creation of intimate relationships within a safe environment.

Spiritist centers also offer recreational opportunities for participants such as the celebration of special holidays, social gatherings and birthdays parties. Moreover, the spiritist meeting itself can be considered a "recreational" activity. Usually spiritist mediums like to tell jokes and interesting stories at the meetings. They have a great capacity for entertaining people and making them laugh. In addition, the good spirits who communicate through the mediums enjoy talking about funny

situations and singing happy songs. The sense of mystery and suspense, which is always part of the spiritist meeting, also contributes to its being a very special entertainment event.

It is my experience that spiritist centers may be preventing emotional problems by offering support to those participants who are suffering due to the death of their relatives. At the spiritist meetings, participants have the opportunity to communicate with their dead relatives, which offer them a chance to express feelings of guilt, to work out unresolved conflicts, or to deal with the process of grieving more effectively . An example from my work illustrates the point that I am trying to make:

A woman visited a spiritist center because she was feeling depressed after the death of her young daughter in a car accident. She felt responsible for her daughter's death because she "shouldn't have given her permission to go out so late". In the meeting, the spirit of the daughter communicated through a medium, emphasizing the idea that she was happy and that the mother should not feel guilty because there was nothing anyone could do to avoid her death. The mother cried intensely, telling her daughter how much she missed her. The experience was a very powerful one and the group shared the mother's pain by crying with her.

At the end of the meeting I talked with the mother. She was very grateful for having the opportunity to talk

with her daughter and knowing she was not suffering. The experience was very helpful for her.

Espiritismo: A source of empowerment or alienation?

Do spiritist practices really empower people or do they only promote dependency and an illusory sense of empowerment? De La Cancela and Zavala have argued that the belief system of Espiritismo and other folk healing systems may promote passivity, alienation from the sociopolitical sources of problems and dependency on spiritist healers. They stated that the ideology of Espiritismo may help to maintain the oppressive social conditions in the Puerto Rican community:

Folk healing... may function to placate the action potential of angry and frustrated individuals by offering mystical and magical explanations and solutions to what are longstanding consequences of structural inequities within our society (1983, p. 267).

The weakness of De La Cancela and Zavala's argument is that they did not present any case to support their argument, nor did they mention having done any formal research on Espiritismo.

Although I agree that the ideology of traditional healing systems may contain oppressive elements, it is essential to investigate how this ideology actually guides people's actions in their daily life. It is from this kind of data that one may begin to understand the issue in all of its complexity.

To my knowledge the only research on how the ideology of Espiritismo promotes or discourages social change was done by Figueroa (1981). Figueroa's goal was to determine the role that Espiritismo plays in enhancing or diminishing both national self awareness and working class consciousness. His data came from participant observation in a spiritist group, analysis of case studies and a description of a collective action by a spiritist group.

Although Figueroa recognized that spiritist participants see their problems as caused by spiritual forces rather than social forces, his analysis of four case studies show spiritist meetings contributing to resistance more than to accommodation. He argued that spiritists believe in a dialectical relationship between the material world and spiritual world: the spiritual world can affect and shape the material world as much as the material world can affect and shape the spiritual world.

Figueroa described in detail how a group of tenants used Espiritismo in order to act collectively against a landlord who refused to provide heat for their apartments and maintainance for the building. During one of their spiritist meetings they

organized a rent strike and prepared for a demonstration in front of the landlord's home. Spiritist rituals were also used in order to ask for the help of good spirits. A "limpieza" (spiritual clean up) was given to the building and a "trabajo" (spell) was put on the landlord. The tenants' actions pressured the landlord to agree to their demands, and the day after the demonstration their apartments were warm.

The case study presented by Figueroa shows how Espiritismo can be used to promote social change and class consciousness. This dimension should be a matter of concern in future studies on Espiritismo. Without further research it is impossible to know the real effects of this ideology in the lives of espiritistas.

There are also other studies which do not support the notion that spiritist healers promote dependency on their clients (Garrison, 1982; Salgado, 1974). For instance, Salgado (1974) described the relationship between a spiritist healer and her client as follows:

The process was accomplished by a definite plan of action that required commitment and effort on the part of the client with the support and encouragement of the spiritist. In helping families she taught them how to work with their problems rather than working out solutions for them (p. 203).

Related to the issue of dependency is the argument that spiritist healers encourage the attitude that clients are not

responsible for their problems because they are caused by ignorant spirits (Comas-Díaz, 1981; Harwood, 1977). It has been mentioned that this is therapeutic because it relieves the clients from their guilt. However, this treatment approach can reinforce the idea that an individual does not have any control over his/her life or the power to change his/her behavior. Harwood (1977), trying to reconcile this apparent contradiction, distinguished between responsibility for the problem and responsibility for the cure. He wrote that the spiritist healer denies the client's responsibility for the problem but encourages responsibility for its resolution. Spiritist healers usually make an effort to involve the client in the healing process through activities such as rituals, baths and prayers, transmitting the attitude that the client is responsible for the treatment outcomes (Garrison, 1977b; Singer, 1984).

A deeper analysis demonstrates that sometimes clients are also seen as responsible for their problems in Espiritismo. The cause of a problem does not have to be perceived as internal in order for one to be held responsible for it. Usually the wish of an ignorant spirit to harm a client is explained as being caused by the client's bad actions against this spirit in a past life. In this sense, the client is responsible for the problem because it was a consequence of his or her actions.

One can argue that to depend on spirits to resolve problems is against the process of empowerment. However, spiritist mediums



believe that besides asking help to the spirits, a client has to take active involvement in treatment. The help from the spirit world is seen as complementary to the efforts of clients to resolve their problems. Data from my work suggest that several spiritist mediums emphasize the need for the clients to take responsibility for helping themselves. For example, one of the mediums said: "People cannot become dependent on you because then you are not really helping them".

Spiritist mediums consider it is their responsibility to educate community members so that they can achieve a better control of their lives. One of the mediums declared: "The major purpose of Espiritismo is not to cure people or to communicate with the spirits but to teach people how to develop their own spiritual powers in order to become better human beings".

At spiritist centers there is a strong emphasis on developing the participants' strengths. Usually individuals who come to a meeting asking for help are guided to develop their own healing power through mediumship development. Thus, in Espiritismo those who are suffering have the opportunity to become healers. In this sense, spiritist healing is based on the empowerment of clients so that they can develop the power to heal themselves and then be involved in the process of helping others.

Beyond psychology: the need to consider transpersonal and spiritual dimensions

Spiritist healers do not use psycho-social explanations in order to explain their effectiveness. Their position is that their success depends on the connection that they have with the spiritual world. It is from this spiritual world that they get the resources to help other people. Healing is produced by transpersonal factors such as faith, the disposition of good spirits and God's will. Spiritist healers see themselves as channels of God's energy.

The idea that there is an energy in the universe which can be used to heal people is found in many cultures around the world. Research done by Bernard Grad (1979) and Dolores Krieger (1979, 1993) suggest that there is in fact a spiritual energy which is used by healers in their work.

The essential role that the spiritual dimension has within Espiritismo can be seen as sources of empowerment for the community. Transformations of consciousness enhanced by spirit possession are experienced by participants at spiritist meetings. Through spirit possession, community members experience a sense of transcendence in their lives in order to find healing resources beyond their own selves. Through these rituals of transformation, one's individuality is subordinate to the service of community goals with the result that one's sense of community is enhanced (Katz, 1981).

Spiritists also feel empowered by the idea that they have a

spirit guide who can provide support and orientation in times of crisis. They refer to spirit guides as spiritual teachers who are inspiring and motivating them to develop their potential. As one healer said: "I feel more secure and strong knowing that my guide is involved in my life".

#### Conclusion:

Espiritismo is a healing system created by and for the community. It is a system developed by the community to deal with its problems using its own resources and strengths. At spiritist centers, the community is healing itself without depending on professional "experts". Community members are in control of their own resources, increasing their sense of empowerment. The spiritist meeting is a community oriented ritual that enhances the individuals' sense of community and belonging.

As a preventive and therapeutic system, Espiritismo is based on the particular strengths and cultural realities of the Puerto Rican community. From indigenous healing systems such as Espiritismo, we may learn how to offer better preventive human services to culturally diverse communities. Instead of imposing therapeutic and preventive models without considering the resources of the community, we need to support and collaborate with those healing systems that are already functioning in the community. This kind of approach will prepare us to value and

respect different alternatives to Western preventive human services.

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