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"The Spanish-Speaking People
in American Society,"

+type script, 1964

*Very happy to join the migrant stream to N. Calif. - apprehensive of workshops
don't know Expectations - Am. Instit. - pool our ignorance + great things will
result.*

THE SPANISH-SPEAKING PEOPLE IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

*San Jose
Feb 17, 1964*

People from distinct nations and cultures from most of the world comprise what we call American Society. No other nation in modern history has been confronted with a task of such magnitude as that of bringing together such diverse people under one governmental and societal system.

The task has not been an easy one, nor is it completed. Throughout its history American society has been influenced predominantly by the cultures of northern Europe and to a somewhat lesser extent by the cultures of central and southern Europe, although it was Spain that was one of the early explorers and colonizers of the western hemisphere.

American society has had a history of large numbers of immigrants coming to its shores, either in pursuit of freedom of one kind or another, or escaping injustices, or hoping for a better life. The usual pattern has been that these immigrants have come to the United States and over a period of some three generations they have usually become fairly well integrated into the society. One of the major factors for this relatively rapid assimilation is that for the most part the immigrants have never had a large reservoir of people who have had easy access to this country and who have constantly replaced those who have become assimilated.

The case of the Spanish-speaking has been different from that of other European immigrants in that they were conquered by Americans as were the Indians and they have always had at their back door, in the Southwest, a large reservoir of culturally similar people who continue to enter this country much like the Puerto Rican immigrations of today.

One of the most difficult problems which has faced this nation is that of accommodating all these people of different cultures into a united nation. The problem for the nation has actually been one of accepting bits and parts

of the cultures of the various groups represented and molding them and making them fit into what we may call American culture. The second problem has been one of understanding cultural differences.

Cultural differences are easy to observe and recognize. It is also easy to appreciate other cultures, but it is more difficult to really understand other cultures. This difficulty of understanding other cultures stems from the fact that most people are prone to look at another culture from their own cultural orientation, and obviously it is most difficult to understand one culture from the viewpoint of another culture.

The culture of an individual is learned - it is not something that he is born with. A culture is transmitted from generation to generation from parents to offspring, with whatever changes occur in the intervening time. The culture of an individual largely determines his behavior, that is to say, all human behavior beyond that which is purely reflexive, has a cultural component. We can also say that culture is persistent in time and that culture changes, but at the same time is highly resistant to change. Culture, of course, exists only in the minds of people and the cultural traits of an individual are not a random collection, but form rather a more or less inter-related and consistent whole although there may be inconsistencies and even contradictory elements within this interrelated whole.

Professor Williams in his book American Society has listed what he calls the major value orientations in American culture. It might be of interest to give these to you here and perhaps we can contrast these with those of the Spanish-speaking. Our value orientations according to Williams are concerned with 1. achievement and success; 2. activity and work; 3. moral orientation; 4. humanitarian mores; 5. efficiency and practicality; 6. progress;

7. material comfort; 8. equality; 9. freedom; 10. external conformity; 11. science and secular rationality; 12. nationalism including patriotism; 13. democracy; 14. individual personality and integrity; and 15. racism and related groups superiority themes.

If Williams is correct in his observation, you may well agree the unacculturated, low economic status Spanish-speaking persons with low educational achievement and a rural background probably do not share these value orientations. The Spanish-speaking people are more likely to be oriented to tradition rather than to the future. They are more likely to live in the present and for the present. Progress to them is not likely to mean what it does to us and it will probably not be considered as important. There is a strong element of fatalism among this population. This fatalism is related to their inability to do anything about their day to day life and it is related also to strong attitudes of dependency which have developed in the culture over a period of many years. Individual achievement and success is not likely to be important because their culture has never stressed this. One is rewarded by what one is more than by what one does. Activity for the sake of being active and work for the sake of work never carried much importance. Nor was there ever much interest in culture change. To be realistic, one could do little to bring about change, nor was change necessarily desirable.

Personalism was always emphasized and it is a value orientation which is related to dependency. The emphasis is on being rather than on doing. The important relationships are those that are personal rather than impersonal. The relationship of an individual to government, law, court or agencies is likely to make more sense and be considered stronger if personal rather than abstract entities are involved.

These value orientations do not exhaust the subject and are given only to indicate the contrast between the two cultures.

If these contrasts are in any way correct, it is no surprise that the Spanish-speaking people have been highly resistant to change and that American culture from their point of view has been less than appealing because it emphasizes the wrong things.

Assuming that these cultural differences are very real and that they do present obstacles to full assimilation, one needs to look at another part of the picture, namely the social class part, which tends to compound the problem of assimilation for the Spanish-speaking. ^{Poor people without power, power or full are disadvantaged people.} Poor people have many characteristics and problems in common. This observation has led Oscar Lewis to develop the concept of the culture of poverty. Many of the observations which are made of Spanish-speaking may also be true of Negroes, Southern Whites and Pennsylvania coal miners. Sometimes we confuse cultural characteristics with social class characteristics.

What I am trying to say is this - that if the Spanish-speaking were of a higher status generally, the matter of cultural differences, important as it is, would not be such a great obstacle for their eventual assimilation into American society. But since the majority of the Spanish-speaking are of a very low socio-economic status, low educational achievement, and have low status occupations, they are then doubly handicapped in their attempts at assimilation.

The Spanish-speaking have been in this country for a great number of years. Yet I think it is probably safe to say that this large ethnic group is one that has assimilated the least in American society. ^{not to say no improvement - much - but not noticeably}

The Spanish-speaking people in the United States constitute a very large, heterogeneous group numbering about six million. Some three and a half million are concentrated in the five Southwestern states. Of those who reside in the Southwest, some 82% are located in the states of California

and Texas. This population in 1940 was predominantly a rural population. In 1950 some 66% were considered to live in urban areas, and in 1960, 86% were classified as urban. It is a population that is growing rapidly due to high fertility rates, higher than the total white population and the non-white population in the respective states. A second factor for the population increase is the large migrations yearly from Mexico. California itself in the ten year period between 1950 and 1960 increased some 88%. With over 50% of the population under twenty years of age, this indicates high rates of dependency, high proportions of the population in infancy and child-youth status, and a high demand for community resources such as schools, health facilities, recreation, sanitation, etc.

The housing situation for this group, according to the 1960 census, is inferior both in quantity and quality in relation to the Anglo and the non-white population, and their housing shows extensive deterioration, overcrowding, lack of bath and toilet facilities; they pay proportionately more rent for their accommodations and get less for what they pay. As was indicated earlier, fertility is high as is the incidence of morbidity and infant mortality and as can be expected, the incidences of broken families from either divorce, separation or widowhood. Their educational achievement is notably lower than for Anglos or non-whites in all five of the states and in some states as high as 52% of the Spanish-speaking have four years or less of schooling, which would place them in the category of functionally illiterate. Their unemployment rates are considerably higher and their income is comparatively lower than for the dominant population. A large proportion of this group is represented in the migratory labor streams which means a situation which involves an inequality of opportunity for education and employment and practically everything else. It involves also much child labor and its consequences.

Besides the serious disadvantages under which they live, there are other problems which confront this group and which are equally important. Even living in a pluralistic society, the need to read, write and speak English is of paramount importance. In order to function well in this society, knowledge of the dominant language is imperative. *Language of culture gives one his view of the world* Secondly, since this population is generally speaking of one of low socio-economic status and one which seemingly presents a foreign culture in the midst of American society, the communication system between the subordinate group and the dominant has yet to be developed, nor has there developed effective leadership which can deal with problems of the two cultures and which can help the subordinate group become a more effective force in and partake of the fruits of the American society. *Imp. problem + solution not easy - don't blame accent if by too much*

The agencies which work with this population usually approach them with a middle class bias. This again means a lack of understanding of cultural differences on their part. School teachers, social workers, physicians, community organizers, public health nurses, etc., are more likely to approach these clients more from the standpoint of making them over into their own image rather than from the standpoint of understanding them.

Actually, what is so wrong about not being clean? About not being on time? About missing appointments? What is wrong with not knowing English or speaking English with an accent? Or having a large family? Or having to consult certain members of the family before making decisions?

What is so correct in always being punctual, reliable, practical, efficient and taking care of the future? Why not blow your family to steak and wine when you make a little money?

What is so wrong with the *above* about stereotypes is that they lack conformity to middle class norms. Williams is correct in suggesting that one of the value orientations in this society is conformity. Those professionals

who work with people do like to have them behave like everyone else. In a pluralistic society, I'm not convinced that this is necessarily right.

Let us look at the problem in another way. Statistically, it is easy to state that this population shows fewer successes than any other group on any index of achievement. The inference drawn from these statistics leads many to suggest that these people are unambitious, they don't care to get ahead, they are lazy, shiftless, etc. I am convinced, however, that these inferences are wrong.

If these people were not ambitious, they wouldn't be in your midst. Nor would you find them in Oregon, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota or Kansas. If they didn't care about their family, they wouldn't put their children, by the thousands, in the elementary schools. Few complete school, but perhaps the blame should not be placed on the children. A family that undertakes a jaunt from southern Texas to northern Michigan in less than first class accommodations to labor long hours under the worst of conditions, *returns as broken as they left* is not lazy and shiftless. They are as ambitious as you and I, and far more courageous. Those people who leave their place of birth and seek out a livelihood on the fringes of society in whatever part of this country certainly are hoping for some kind of success, if not for themselves, for their children.

To some extent they are different socially and culturally from the dominant society, but they do have certain hopes and aspirations which are common to us all. What the majority lack, almost categorically, is equality of opportunity. People and agencies of training and good will must provide this equality of opportunity with dignity. Old clothes and powdered milk are not enough.

An agency in the community, with well trained personnel established in such a way as to provide effective leadership and liason to the other structures

in the community such as schools, police, welfare, courts, health, religious, labor, and government might be one of the most effective ways of providing equal opportunities. The programs of such an agency must be imaginative and should differ from one community to another as the circumstances differ.

President Johnson said recently, "I wish to see an America in which no young person, whatever the circumstances, shall reach the age of twenty-one without the health, education, and skills that will give him an opportunity to be an effective citizen and a self-supporting individual".*

We have a long task ahead of us.

Moynihan, D. P., "Draft Rejectees: Nipping Trouble in the Bud",

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