

ACCULTURATIVE STRESS AND SELF-ESTEEM AMONG PUERTO RICAN MIGRANT CHILDREN*

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The consequences of migration from Puerto Rico to the United States and the subsequent return to Puerto Rico have been discussed in the literature from several perspectives: economic, political, sociological and psychological. In the last ten years there has been a considerable amount of discussion on the effects of migration on children. The focus of this study is to look at the role of migration and the changing self-esteem of the child as a result of acculturative stress. Reports of the study of acculturation and ensuing stress have increased considerably in the recent literature (Rogler, Cortes, and Malgady, 1991; Giordano, 1994; Gil, Vega, and Dimas, 1994; Vega, Khoury, Zimmerman, Gil and Warheit, 1995; Raviv, Keinan, Abazon and Raviv, 1990).

Rogler *et al.* (1991) report that migration is likely to disrupt attachments to supportive networks in the society of origin and to impose on the migrant the difficult task of incorporation into the primary groups of the host society. Acculturation, therefore, is a major component in migration-induced adaptations.

Stress can occur as a result of the acculturative process, and includes issues such as language problems, perceived discrimination, perceived cultur-

al incompatibilities, and commitment or lack of commitment to culturally prescribed values or behaviors (Vega, Zimmerman, Gil, Warheit and Apospori, 1993). Vega *et al.* (1993) further reports that children develop a negative self-esteem when acculturation generates a high level of stress.

Puerto Rican researchers (Agosto Delgado, 1988) have explored how self-perception of migrant students affects their academic achievement. Most of the research on self-concept and self-esteem has focused on populations composed of high school students (Colon Colon, 1982; Gonzalez Penalver, 1981).

Giordano (1994) indicates that it has become understood that ethnic values and beliefs are retained after migration. They play a significant role in the development of individual and group identities; in addition, they influence the way a person defines and solves problems and from whom the person seeks help (Giordano, 1994).

This study attempts to look at how acculturative stress affects self-esteem in a group of upper elementary school children in Puerto Rico. Migrant and non-migrant children were asked to self-report on their perceived self-esteem. This study attempts to determine what effect, if any, migration has on the self-esteem of a group of children in Puerto Rican schools.

METHOD

SAMPLE

A total of 240 children participated in the study. The subjects were divided into two groups: Puerto

Rican children who have migrated (migrant) and Puerto Rican children who have never migrated (static). The sample was comprised of children between the ages of 10 years 0 month to 11 years 4 months. There were an equal number of boys and girls in each group. The children were selected at random from 13 schools in a large school district with a return migrant population of 2,883 or 32.7 percent. All fifth and sixth graders were given a number. Subsequently the subjects were picked using a table of random numbers.

The Migrant group was composed of children born of Puerto Rican parents in the United States who had returned to Puerto Rico and who had experienced at least one academic year in the United States. The Static group was composed of children that have never migrated. The per capita home income of the two groups was \$18,077. All the children were in upper elementary grades.

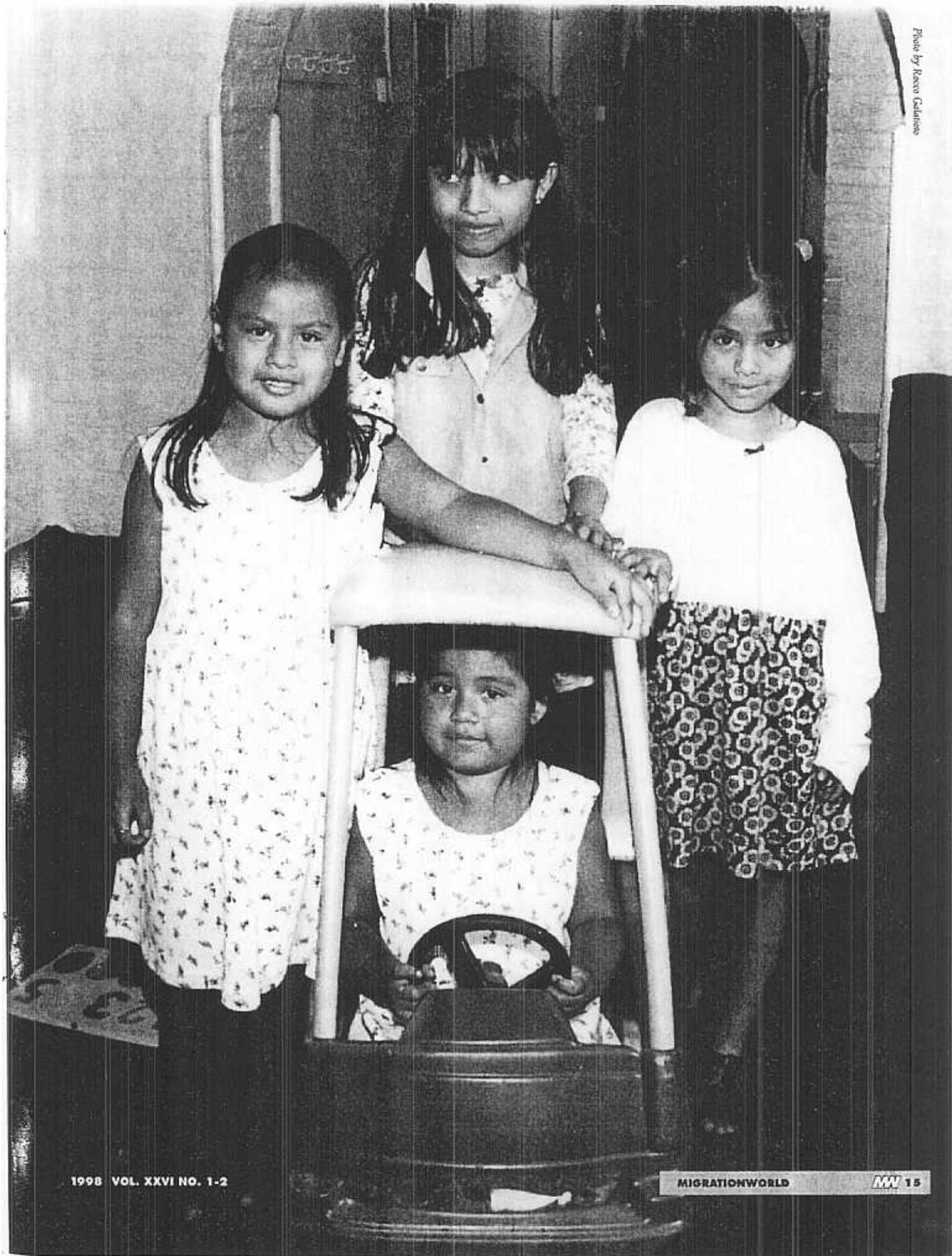
INSTRUMENTS

All subjects were administered the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale (Piers-Harris, 1969) and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI) (Coopersmith, 1967).

The Piers Harris Children's Self Concept Scale (Spanish) is a quickly administered self-report instrument. The instrument requires a reading level of third grade, and consists of 80 declarative statements about the self to which the subject responds "yes" or

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References available upon request.



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"no." The range of scores is from 0 to 80, the higher the score the higher the self-concept (Piers, 1969). The Piers Harris Children's Self Concept Scale (Spanish) contains five cluster scales labeled: 1) Intellectual and School Status, 2) Physical Appearance and Attributes, 3) Anxiety, 4) Popularity, and 5) Happiness and Satisfaction. The Children's Self Concept Scale has been translated into Spanish obtaining an Alpha coefficient of reliability of .87 (Colon Colon, 1982).

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory is a self-report, which consist of 58 declarative items. The inventory includes a subject's perception in four areas: 1) General Self, 2) Social/peers, 3) Home/parents, and 4) School/academic. The instrument was translated into Spanish (Prewitt Diaz, 1984) and obtained an Alpha coefficient of reliability of .89 in estimating the personal judgment of Puerto Rican students living on the Island.

Parental permission was sought and the instruments were administered in two testing sessions of approximately 90 minutes each. Each instrument was administered to the total population participating in the study. Both of the testing sessions took place during the first three academic periods in the morning to control for heat.

RESULTS

The results suggest a group difference in self-concept [$F(1,240) = 17.16, p < .001$] and group differences in self-esteem [$F(1,240) = 9.70, p < .05$]. The Static subjects in the group scored higher than those in the migrant group in both measures. The

scores of children in the top 3% were compared to determine if better academic performers differed significantly. Academic performers from both groups did not show a discrepancy in scores on self-concept and self-esteem. In general, migrant children in the group had lower academic achievement than children in the Static group.

DISCUSSION

The data suggest that children who come to the school system as migrants are disadvantaged initially because they are placed in programs to foster their second language learning and which holds them back in the content areas (*i.e.*, mathematics, social studies and sciences). This practice affects the development of self-concept and self-esteem of children. Only those children with the highest academic abilities are spared from emotional consequences.

A look at demographic data suggests that large number of children in the Migrant group live in single parent households (63.33%) as compared with the Static group (37.5%). The subjects in the Migrant groups reported concerns with family matters, parental expectations, and demands from the school and other adults in the community. These results are congruent with the literature (Vega *et al.*, 1995) in that cultural conflicts have a distinct effect on the self-concept and self-esteem of migrant children.

Language conflicts, perceived discrimination, and perception of a closed society have been associated to the migrant subject's self-esteem. The data obtained in this study suggest that the Migrant group subjects have lower self-esteem than do those in the Static group. Factors such as gender, grade, or family structure did not affect the self-perception of the subjects of this study.

Overall, children in the Migrant group perceived that their performance in school and learning were much lower than children in the Static



group. Children in the Migrant group lacked trust in themselves on intellectual matters, and classroom functioning. Children in the migrant group that scored in the lower 3% showed a lack of interest in classroom tasks, anxiety and perceived themselves as exhibiting inappropriate behaviors. Children in the migrant group felt angry because they felt that they are different from children in the host society. Most children in the Migrant group reported that acculturation has lead to social maladaptation.

The results reported herein are congruent with acculturative stress. Szapocznik and Kurtines (1993) propose that acculturative stress can occur as a result of the acculturation process, and includes perceived cultural incompatibilities, commitment or lack of commitment to culturally prescribed protective values/behaviors, and self blame for exhibit of perceived inappropriate behaviors.

The results of this study suggest at least two major changes in order to accommodate the emotional and educational needs of migrant children: 1) a curriculum should be developed to address values in the host society that are necessary to assure the survival and subsequent adjustment of the migrant children, 2) The Department of Education should prepare in-service training to assist teachers, counselors and school psychologists so that they can assist migrant children to integrate their worldview in ways that enhance their self-esteem. ■