

Cuba From Both Sides
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Feminist family therapy perspectives preoccupied me during a recent trip to Cuba. I thought about stories, about whose story gets told and by whom. I thought about power, how it is distributed, used and abused and I thought about women. I was aware most of all of how my own history shaped my experience of Cuba.

My Story: The Personal and The Political. I travelled to Havana with seven feminist scholars. We returned with at least seven different stories. My story is not the true story. It is only mine. I can not speak objectively about Cuba. I am not Cuban, but I speak Cuba's language. I was not born there, but it is a part of me. It was only my second visit to Cuba, but when our plane descended into Jose Marti Airport, I began to weep. Many others on the plane were also crying, but they were very likely Cubans returning home for what may have been the first time. I was not. Yet...

My relationship with Cuba is long lived. I am of British West Indian heritage and I grew up with "the islands" as part of my mental landscape. My father taught me rudimentary Spanish as soon as I could speak.

When I was ten years old (five years before the Cuban revolution) my uncle married a Black Cuban woman who was in my eyes the epitome of strength and self assurance. I watched her and listened to her speak Spanish to the three sisters whom one by one she brought over to the United States. I particularly remember her stories about racism. During the years of Batista, there were segregated parks for blacks and whites. When my aunt went to the store to buy rice, she had to wait outside the door until all whites had been waited on and had left the store, before she could enter. The rice she purchased was lesser quality stock kept underneath the counter for Black customers. As she and I grew closer, I loved the language and the culture more and more and eventually majored in Spanish in college.

I married a Puerto Rican. I listen, learned and spoke more Spanish. The liberation struggles of Cuba and Puerto Rico seemed, until recent history, as close as their almost identical flags. The only difference between the two flags is the blue and red color reversal which now speaks to me of the antithesis between the two islands, the opposites of colonialism and socialism.

My first trip to Cuba was in 1971. A young, idealist, socialist I went to Cuba as a member of the New York delegation of the Venceremos Brigade. I will never forget the first words the pilot spoke as we flew into Cuban territory. "Welcome to Cuba, the first free territory in the Americas." My companeros cheered. We looked forward to being a part of a society in which the "isms" had been vanquished. We saw in Cuba an end of imperialism, racism, classism and sexism and the birth of freedom and equality.

During two months of back breaking work in support of the revolution, cutting endless row after endless row of sugar cane in scorched and scorching fields I personally (and not always joyfully) labored for the revolution and the Cuban people. The fourth Venceremos Brigade contributed to Cuba's determination to stabilize its economy through sugar. Our sacrifices seemed completely worthwhile. We saw former mansions turned into schools. The revolution's literacy campaign resulted in Cuba having the highest literacy rate in Latin America. Free education, free medical treatment. An absence of drug abuse and other kinds of crime. We heard about the suppression of democratic freedoms and of religious perspectives, but we believed this was temporary and we were persuaded by the hope and vision that pervaded Cuban society. So when it comes to Cuba, I am not impartial. I named my son after Antonio Maceo one of Cuba's most celebrated heroes, the leader of the Mambices and the Cuban slave revolts. I am in no way neutral.

In 1980 I was reintroduced to Cuba. This time on U.S. soil, as I conducted psychological interviews with Cubans from the Mariel boatlift. I met these Cubans, then detained at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, as a member of a team of bilingual psychologists sent by the National Institute of Mental Health to determine the mental status of the detainees. For their part, The U.S. military through constant "shows of force" sought to make sure that the Cubans knew where they were and who was in charge.

I could not miss seeing the ironies. Those who had been emptied out of Castro's jails were marginal people. Too many of them were Black, gay or mentally retarded. Too many of them told stories of political repression. The gay man who was reported by the block committee because of his sexual orientation and was sent to prison. The husband, who trying to secure a fan on the black market for his asthmatic wife, was caught and sent to jail. The numerous young men who were in jail for crimes they had committed,

although their I.Q.s were in the mentally retarded range. Through these interviews, I saw the underside of the revolution.

A sense of duty led me to return to Cuba with my colleagues in March of 1993. I had heard too many stories of the hardships and shortages to look unambivalently forward to the trip. But, again, I wanted to support Cuba. I recalled the distinction between government and people, a distinction I had first learned in Cuba. In 1971 when the Cuban government and the Cuban people criticized the U.S. government they were always careful to make the point that it was the government not the people they opposed. They spoke lovingly of the people of the United States and still do. I went back to support the Cuban people. I was unsure about the revolution.

Women and Women's Studies in Cuba. A group of feminist faculty from Hampshire College, The University of Massachusetts, and the University of Toronto travelled to Cuba for a conference with faculty members from the recently formed Women's Studies Program at the University of Havana. Unlike many women's studies programs in the United States, the University of Havana's women's studies program is open to both men and women, although women are in the vast majority and hold the central leadership positions. Women from beyond the University, researchers from the National Academy of Sciences and women from major community organizations, such as Casa Latina, are invited to participate.

The interests of the Cuban women's studies faculty parallel our own. They are interested in women's literature and women's personalities, in families, violence against women, women and work, inequality in the domestic sphere, and in finding useful methodologies for studying women. They are also very much involved in developing international partnerships with other feminist scholars.

Both the dire economic situation and changing political views are contributing to a move away from the mechanistic, Marxist approach to the study of women and families. They are beginning to talk about life histories, and about qualitative research.

In some important dimensions more development is needed. In most of their work, they have not yet included race as an important variable to be studied. They seem not yet to have challenged the male canons of the various disciplines and while they are interested in life stories they do not appear to

have begun to ask questions which challenge positivism and inquire about whose stories get told and how they are constructed.

Listening to the Cuban demographers, sociologists, historians and psychologists and talking with my academic colleagues, about the "situation in Cuba " made clear once again how multiple and differing are the stories we construct, how necessary it is to try to grasp and hold on to multiple truths and how essential it is to reveal them. I am still puzzling over many questions. Were these women speaking as "feminists" or only as scholars of "women"? Could they study women's role in the family, women's role in the work force, and not be, or at least become, feminists? Can the concept of race (in particular, the language of race categorization) as we understand it in the United States be imported and applied to the Cuban situation?

Power and Violence: The Cuban Family. For many years Cuban women have challenged the "doble jornada" or double shift. Women in the work force, return home to almost total responsibility for the domestic sphere. Cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children is still largely their domain. This is still a topic of considerable preoccupation. There was evidence (similar to that in the United States) that more educated men were making important contributions to parenting. Men also contribute to domestic life by standing in the impossibly long lines to pick up food rations.

The women's studies faculty were studying subtle and psychological violence, which according to the women they interviewed took the form of having their authority undermined, being talked to in demanding and authoritarian ways, and having their honesty and faithfulness challenged. There were constant references to the Cuban men as relentlessly "machista." I, personally, noted how some Cuban men still commented in an entitled, proprietary way on women's appearance and weight.

Family difficulties and hardships for women are compounded by economic deprivation -- lack of housing, lack of water, paper, space, soap, food, entertainment. Some buildings have water for only one half a day. Medicines are difficult to come by. In homes gas and electricity go off without notice, the need for gas to cook with, light to eat by or bathe by, the wish to relax in front of the television not withstanding.

The topic of violence in the family was of great concern to the Cubans whom I met, both in the conference and in a class of students training to be psychologists. Although I was not able to uncover much data on the extent of

physical violence in families, I was told by the one clinician I met that it does exist. I surmise from Cuban interest in the topic and the questions that were asked that family violence is a significant problem. As family therapists know economic hardship, crowding, and stress exacerbate and intensify family violence.

Cuban families, who have struggled for almost thirty five years, are up against the most difficult time in that period. The so-called, "special period," on which Cuba embarked when the Soviet Union collapsed places incredible stress on Cuban families. Food of all kinds is in short supply. Poultry and meat are almost nonexistent. Milk is limited to those under six years of age. Hours and hours of time are spent on lines waiting for rations.

Power and Violence: The International Level. As family therapists we are trained to look for context, to include an understanding of the larger social system in our analyses. Considering the parallels between power dynamics and domestic violence in the Cuban family and the question of power dynamics and international violence in the relationship between Cuba and the United States was unavoidable.

The United States boycott against Cuba is over thirty years old. Certainly there have been escalations on both sides in the relationship between the United States and Cuba: The clash of competing economic systems and national philosophies. U.S. dominance. Cuban nationalization. Cuba's threat of nuclear armament. The Bay of Pigs.

The demise of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of European Socialism have left Cuba limping, if not crippled. In Cuba, many of socialism's goals have stalled and even died. The economy never really flourished. The dialectical materialist stance which sought to confine human sights to this earthly plane undoubtedly underestimated the yearnings of the human spirit. The people have resisted the attempt to deny them democratic freedoms including the right to spiritual life and development. The basic socialist maxim, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need" may have overrated the generosity of the human spirit. Human beings may need the incentive of personal and family gain in order to produce efficiently and at their highest levels. All of this contributed to Cuba's current crisis.

Yet, it is important for family therapists to remember that power exists. What ultimately threatens to destroy the Cuban people is not the limits or errors of socialism. It is the U.S. boycott which holds Cuba in an economic

stranglehold. What I see, as a student of power dynamics, is the complete inequity between the United States and Cuba. The United States is larger, wealthier, has greater status and greater visibility. In the complementary relationship between the United States and Cuba, the most compelling image that comes to mind is one of battering. The boycott represents the United States' attempting to batter Cuba into submission.

Although the United States can allocate \$1.6 billion dollars to Russia, and additional billions of dollars of investment is promised from Japan and the International Monetary Fund, Cuba is being starved out by the boycott. With regard to the small island of Cuba and the survival of its people, this dominance defines the narrative as hegemonic and drowns out the voice of the Cuban people.

I am interested in meaning, both emotional and intellectual, and in how our life stories, our disciplines and our politics, our visions and our dreams impose themselves on external realities and lead each of us to fabricate a story that is unique and personal and often at odds with the stories of those closest to us.

I think of these things when I think about Cuba and when I remember the haunting, hungry eyes. There is still much to celebrate in Cuba. The existence of a medical system which has been called "the Mecca of Europe and Latin America," hospitals which provide free open heart surgery and free medical treatment and rest home facilities for the children of Chernobyl. The achievements of women in the workforce, particularly in public health, can be celebrated by feminists worldwide. The ongoing work of our feminists counterparts at the University of Havana. The indominability of the human spirit. The computer room which is up and running at the department of psychology. The fortitude of the people. The Mass at the cathedral.

My aunt has family there and through our family I see many different stories, stories of racism, and hunger, of spiritual strivings, success, crowding, resourcefulness, extended family, and the absence of children. I also witness the quintessential Latino values of "respeto" and "dignidad" (respect and dignity). I see generosity and love.

My goal is to make the Cuban people visible. To call their names, to tell their stories and to refuse their assassination. I am hopeful that my colleagues in family therapy will find ways to support the Cuban people. Through visiting Cuba, attending conferences there, inviting speakers to the United

States and opposing the boycott we accomplish several goals at once. We continue to expand our boundaries beyond the U.S. and the western world. We draw more people of color into our networks. We oppose violence and the destructive exercise of power both in families and in the world.