

Running Head: A STUDY OF RACE IN CUBA

A Study of Race in Cuba: Past, Present, and Future

Holly Achee

School of Social Work

University of Pittsburgh

### **Introduction**

After returning from the ten day Cuba Spring Program that I was fortunate to be a part of, it was extremely difficult for me to choose one specific area of focus for a research topic to reflect my studies during our trip. The itinerary that was set for our group included a range of many amazing and diverse experiences, from visiting medical clinics, community programs, and an orphanage to listening to lectures by highly acclaimed Professors of various specializations from the University of Havana. We saw the best of the country. Our group had first-hand experiences with people of different backgrounds on professional and academic levels, in addition to first-hand experiences with individuals in the community on a more casual level.

With the range of knowledge that I acquired from this program, I had many interests in mind to expand on. Being a direct practice student with a concentration in mental health, I had planned before our departure to concentrate on community healthcare in Cuba. Despite this mindset, I was continually reminded throughout the trip of the racial issues in Cuba that we discussed during our classes leading up to the visit. An American woman on my flight to Miami asked me where I was traveling to, in which I responded that my final destination would be Cuba. She then asked why I was going there, so I told her that I would be studying race with other students and faculty members. She was shocked by this response, and said that we would have a difficult time studying race because the country is not divided by color and they are “all just Cubans” (Anonymous, personal communication, 2014). I also believed this generalized assumption of Cuba before being a part of this program, but now know and understand that this is not the case. Although racial problems have made some improvements throughout Cuban history, race is still very much an issue and is something that should be discussed, but is being overlooked. Although Castro has acknowledged that race is a problem, it is still a subject that is brushed off and not openly discussed – partially because people do not think that it is a problem, and partially because people are striving to be unified in Cuba and fear this divide.

During our trip to Cuba, our studies of the existence of racial issues in Cuba were confirmed as we experienced first-hand accounts, conversations, lectures, and discussions that emphasized the existence of racial problems, but with conflicting views and acknowledgements. On the surface, Cuban nationalism and a general unity of the country are emphasized (e.g. the country being made up of Cubans, not races) and it would be considered antipatriotic to inquire about race (de la Fuente, 2001). For this reason, many individuals deny that race is an issue that needs to be discussed, or may recognize it is an issue but ignore the need for it to be discussed. On a deeper level, racial problems and discrimination does exist and can be confirmed when looking at certain issues, for example, education, housing, income, and employment. As Morales (2013) stated, it is not possible to carry out the tasks of the struggle against racism if racial consciousness does not exist, and to deny skin color is to throw away centuries of Cuban history. In relation to this, it is important to discuss the history of Cuba and how racial struggles have evolved over the years, the conflicting views and racial issues in present-day Cuba, and the hopeful visions that those who recognize the existence of racial struggles have to dissolve racism in the future.

### **Past: History of Race in Cuba**

As Morales (2014) emphasized during his lecture, Cuba has endured 400 years of slavery and just less than 60 years of Cuban Independence, so racial problems cannot be expected to be resolved in this short amount of time. This statement puts the present day issue of race in Cuba into perspective, and assists in better understanding how racial issues continue to exist in many different countries where slavery existed. Understanding the complex and interesting history of Cuba, including the country's struggles and accomplishments that have taken place over time, is important in understanding race in present day Cuba. An overview of Cuban history will lay out how far the country has come to get where they are today, and will also signify that race is still an issue that should be addressed. There are several significant periods in Cuban history, so these will be broken down into the pre-revolutionary era leading up to the uprising in the 50's, the post-revolutionary

period following the government takeover, and modern Cuban history that takes place in more recent years.

### **Pre-Revolutionary Cuba**

As Dean Davis (2014) reiterated during a class discussion, every country where slavery is part of the history, racial problems and struggles still exist. This statement does not exclude Cuba, which was colonized by Spain and slaves were brought to the country from Africa to work in the sugar plantations (de la Fuente, 2001). In 1886, slavery was abolished which was related to the political struggle for the island's independence from Spain and the need for a multiracial society for Cuba to have the power needed to gain its independence. José Martí emerged as a national leader at this time and emphasized Cuba's unity and togetherness for the sake of independence (de la Fuente, 2001). Martí insisted on Cuba being a society without race. Reiterating the two-sided opinion on race that seems to have emerged significantly with Cuba's independence, it could be argued on one side that deeming Cuba a country without racial divide was to create a unified and stronger republic that reinforces the thought of a racial democracy. On the other side, it could be argued that the emphasis on unity was meant to keep race from being discussed, and instead "whitening" was the focused ideology so there would be no threat of a black uprising against the white elite (Sawyer, 2006). The idea of the existence of racial democracy was identified and the hesitance to openly discuss race in Cuba is still emphasized today, so it seems to be this mindset that has lingered over time and has contributed to delaying real progress on the issue of race.

During the Republic Period and the United States occupation of the island, the issue of race in Cuba could again be viewed one way on the surface with the actual issues being found at a deeper level. It would seem on the surface that due to the rights of blacks at this time, such as voting and access to education, that Cuba was a racially inclusive society. However, viewing these issues on a deeper level, the right to vote and push for support by the black and mestizo population in politics ended up leaving this group with promises made but not kept after elections, and the blacks and

mestizos who took advantage of the access to education were then unable to find decent employment (Morales, 2013). The black and mestizo people who did find employment, however, ended up segregating from their former communities and strived to join the elite class of the society. What was thought by some as efforts to bring all races together seemed to further divide the country racially. The blacks and mestizos continued to stay the poorest on the island, and despite efforts to make the country appear to be unified on the outside, Cuba remained divided racially during this period and these similar racial problems still remain today (Morales, 2013).

Although there is not an overwhelming amount of research on the specific issue of race before the revolution, it may appear to some that Cuba was working towards a more racially equal society early on through the country's history and that this was further emphasized after the revolution. On the other hand, it could be argued that the black and mestizo population remained exploited before the revolution, and that although some progress was made on the surface, race remained and still remains a deeper issue today (de la Fuente, 2001).

### **Post-Revolutionary Cuba**

In 1959, the success of the Cuban Revolution under the leadership of Fidel Castro meant emphasizing a united Cuba, which reinforced creating an equal society and eliminating racial issues. Fidel declared that “adequate measures in education and legislation to put an end to every vestige of discrimination for reasons of race or sex, which regrettably still exists in our social and economic life” (Sawyer, 2006, pp. 52). This declaration assisted in eventually showing progress in racial problems in the country in some respects, but there were also underlying issues from ideologies formed many years before that still existed (Sawyer, 2006). The hesitance to discuss race openly and failure to acknowledge that different skin colors exist did not seem to be the solution to the problem. This added to the pressure to support Cuban nationalism and the threats that people saw in discussing race because it could divide Cuba, a country that puts so much emphasis on being a unified state. After the revolution, many countries (such as the United States, for example) looked to Cuba for

guidance in solving issues related to race since Fidel had declared that racism was eradicated. Again, on the surface, racial issues seemed to be diffused due to his declaration and the progress that was made related to race, but the issue of race still existed.

In the years following the revolution, Cuba demonstrated various areas of progress related to reducing racial issues. These were more structural changes that took place rather than addressing the race problem in society. For example, access to education was available and highly encouraged for all Cubans, housing reform created more integrated neighborhoods, health and welfare meant that Afro-Cubans were healthier, access to resources increased, and there were more employment opportunities than ever before for black Cubans (Sawyer, 2006). These advancements took some time, but during the 1980s, there appeared to be little to no divide in race when it came to certain reports on this issue. Once again, this emphasizes that on the surface there seemed to be no racial issues in Cuba at this time, but if you would ask blacks in the country they would be less likely to agree that a lot of progress has been made (Sawyer, 2006).

Overall, Cuba's stability in many areas lasted until the fall of the Soviet Union and the negative economic effects of the Special Period, as it is called, which Cuba is still feeling some of the effects from today (Prieto, 2014). This was a time of great economic decline and the people of Cuba were hit very hard by this period. As Prieto (2014) discussed, the Special Period was thought of as being similar to the Depression in the United States, but it was so much worse because all of Cuba felt the economic effects and were struggling at this time. Although this may be true, Serrano (2014) countered this statement by saying that while the Special Period was viewed as being difficult for all Cubans, this period was overwhelmingly felt more by blacks in Cuba. It was during the Special Period that Cuba had to adjust its economy for survival, so the dual currency system emerged due to the greater emphasis on tourism for the economy, the black market became a necessity, remittances were sent from family abroad, and access to the dollar was the key to economic growth (Sawyer, 2006). These economic changes greatly impacted the blacks in Cuba as whites were getting the jobs

in the growing tourism market and they also had white families abroad sending remittances. By the mid to late 90s, Cuba relied mainly on tourism and remittances – the two markets that were difficult for black Cubans to tap in to – and for this reason, social and racial inequality became more prevalent but were not to be discussed (Sawyer, 2006).

### **Recent History – 21<sup>st</sup> Century Progress**

Following the Special Period, there arose more of an emphasis by individuals in the black community of Cuba to speak up about the struggles of racial inequality that still existed, especially given the circumstances of the economy and inequality that surfaced again at that time. Although Cuba has held on to and continues to hold on to a long history of Cubans being Cuban, and the discussion of racial problems and equality among the whites, black, and mulatto populations still has a long way to go, some progress has been made in recent years.

A notable speech made by Fidel in 2003 included his acknowledgement of the racial problems that still exist in Cuba, and that there is work still to be done. This was a breakthrough event in terms of race discussions in the country that allowed the invisible race issues to be more visible, not to mention more acceptable, to be talked about. Fidel stated in his speech that the emphasis to eradicate differences in social and economic statuses of black people in Cuba had not been achieved, and that although progress had been made through socialism in the country, there needed to be a leap forward to make a real difference (Morales, 2013). This created an opening for progress in the area of race discussions to take place in Cuba, but it is evident that something still needs to be done to make race an openly recognized and discussed topic for real progress to be made.

Other recent advancements in the area of race recognition in Cuba in more recent years include various publications and groups that have emerged following Fidel's recognition of the still existent race issue in Cuba. For example, in 2004, the Afro-Cuban Alliance (ACA) was formed to educate Afro-Cubans still in Cuba (and living in other places as well) about civil rights, African history and slavery, and racial discrimination in Cuba (ISLAS, 2010). Within Cuba, Esteban Morales

has emerged as a known advocate on race and published the first book on modern day racial issues in the country in over 45 years (Morales, 2013). Also, Afro-Cuban culture began to emerge as a result of the Special Period, and is more visible in today's Cuba. As the tourism industry grew during that time, an emphasis on Cuban music, culture, and creative expression emerged to draw attention to the island from abroad. This led to more open expressions of practicing Afro-Cuban traditions and also the religion, Santeria, to be permitted openly in Cuba (de la Fuente, 2001).

Although these examples of progression in the area of race in Cuba are milestones that have been met, the recurring trend continues to be that progress seems to have been made in some ways, but there is still much progress needed. Acknowledgement by Fidel on the existence of racial issues was impactful, in addition to progress in the areas of Afro-Cuban culture, publications on race, and more visibility of Afro-Cuban culture, but for the most part there are still deeper present day race problems that exist and need to be addressed.

### **Present: First-Hand Accounts of Current Racial Issues in Cuba**

During our visit to Cuba, one of the most beneficial aspects of the trip was to be able to learn from the people that we met and through the places that we visited. It was interesting to see how our readings and discussions before the trip tied into our experiences, and specifically, how the conflicting views on race were evident through our interactions and discussions. I expected there to be less visibility of the racial divide in present day Cuba, but surprisingly found that there were very distinct racial problems that we identified and did not have to dig deep to encounter these.

As previously discussed, racial problems are present in Cuba but there are various views on this issue. It seems that many Cubans agree that race is a social or individual problem and not an institutional problem (Serrano, 2014). With that being said, the personal accounts with professors that we met were interesting since there were various views on the subject of race, and how they believe race is viewed throughout the country versus how race is viewed from an individual perspective. As Prieto (2014) stated in his lecture, the people of the country are Cubans only, or a

mix of white, black, and mulattos that do not need to be distinguished, and race is a non-issue because people marry one another and live amongst each other despite the color of skin. He also discussed that Cuba has established a system where education and healthcare is free for their people, and everyone has access to the same things (Prieto, 2014). This view supports the surface idea of race not being an issue in Cuba due to the idea that institutional racism does not exist and instead people create racial issues by bringing them up. This was not a surprising view coming from a white Cuban who whole-heartedly supports the revolution.

Alternatively, Serrano (2014) acknowledged in her lecture the deeper, less discussed perspectives on race issues in Cuba and how this has impacted the country. She spoke of the impact that the history of slavery has had on the country including multiracial issues that have been passed down over generations. Also, she emphasized that Fidel recognized the issue of race in Cuba as being one of the most difficult issues of the country, and that race is predominantly a social problem and some people do not care to recognize the issue (Serrano, 2014). As Morales (2013) emphasized, races are not equally represented publically and in the media in present day Cuba, which was also touched on by Serrano. Being a black Cuban woman, Serrano's view on race differed from Prieto's, but she recognized that although Cuba is a unified country, there are disparities that exist (on a deeper level) and that people want more equality in gender, race, and economic conditions (Serrano, 2014).

It was also very interesting to see Dr. García's presentation on social developments in Cuba, and view how things presently stand in terms of successes that have taken place in addition to what problematic areas still exist in Cuba and need to be addressed. García's (2014) presentation emphasized the social development successes of Cuba to include education and health care, which are both areas where Cuba has excelled in providing these services for the people and have made a priority to maintain. The problematic areas that were addressed were related to improving the following: education and the health care system; helping the elderly population; reducing inequalities

in society based on income, gender, and territorials; address economic functions of wages; and improve living conditions related to food, housing, and transportation (García, 2014). While this presentation was very interesting and contained helpful information, I could not help but notice that race was not mentioned at all in the presentation, not even in the section related to reducing inequalities. While it is not completely surprising because of the mindset of many to not discuss race based on reflecting the unity through the revolution, it reiterated the points that Morales (2013) makes in regard to race and statistics. He states that many statistics in Cuba do not include race, which then dismisses race as a separate issue that should be discussed. In addition, excluding race from statistics also does not recognize the advancements that have been made in terms of race through the revolution (Morales, 2013).

In relation to some of the above points that were made in Dr. García's presentation, Morales (2013) expanded on a few specifics of these areas in his book, *Race in Cuba*, where he emphasized that although institutional racism does not exist, the present day social aspects of prejudices and discrimination in Cuba contribute to the difficulty of overcoming current racial issues. Although progress has been made in terms of race issues in Cuba, there are still many racial inequalities that seem to continue to surface as they have over the years. In terms of education, all races have access to this but blacks do not obtain positions that correspond with their education level and are underrepresented in director and managerial positions. In terms of income, blacks are underrepresented in the desirable tourist industry and receive significantly less remittances than their white counterparts, which in turn makes paying for food to make up for what they do not receive in rations more difficult. In terms of housing, blacks are living in the most impoverished areas and poorest conditions (Morales, 2013). These points are interesting to observe in relation to the statistics that we discussed, and how the black population of Cuba is actually portrayed in relation to these various social aspects.

Another aspect of racism in present-day Cuba that was addressed by Morales (2013) included that crime and racial profiling continues to take place regularly. The black and mestizo populations tend to be targeted for crime and make up a majority of the prisoners in the country. Young black males are especially targeted, and are thought of as being socially dangerous or associated with negative social or cultural features (de la Fuente, 2013). We experienced this in a few different situations during our time in Cuba. During an evening walk with a few students from the University of Havana, who all happened to be black, we were stopped by the police for no apparent reason. It is known that it is looked down upon for Cubans to interact to a certain degree with tourists, but these students informed us that because they were black, they were stopped, questioned, and then fined for interacting with white tourists. This is an example of the black youth being targeted as criminals, which they acknowledged was the norm. On another occasion we experienced racial profiling where “blackness is associated with negative social and cultural features” (de la Fuente, 2013) when a black male from our group was treated badly at a restaurant because he was a black man sitting with two white women, and was mistaken for a male prostitute. This exemplifies not only that blacks are targeted, but also that there is still an existence of black market business in Cuba that regularly takes place for this kind of mistake to be made.

### **Future: Race in Cuba in Years to Come**

As reiterated through this paper, there is a trend towards the idea of race not being a problem or worth addressing in Cuba on the surface, but then after a closer look, there is a large amount of evidence that reveals that race is still very much an issue in the country and that something needs to be done to change this. Although progress has been made over time and with policies implemented following the revolution in 1959, there is still much progress that needs to be made in order for race issues to be dissolved in the future.

As Morales (2013) states, there are different measures that could be taken to improve race issues in Cuba and assist in creating a true egalitarian society of Cubans, which the country has

strived to achieve for many years. The main recommendations for the future to make an impact would include the following: develop racial consciousness and educational programs focused on race; encourage public discussions on race and a battle against racism; recognize the history of race and existence of disadvantaged groups; include racial diversity in the media and on a national level; include race in national statistics; support higher education and research programs; work with existing national commissions on fighting racism and create new commissions to support dissolving racial discrimination (Morales, 2013, pp. 97-98). With these aspects in mind and addressing the deeper issues on race, Cuba may be on its way to becoming a true integrated culture rather than the idealistic but not representational unified country where race is not considered to be problem

As Serrano (2014) stated, she is optimistic that race problems can be eliminated but there is still much progress to be made. In addressing the history of race in Cuba, it assists in better understanding how far issues have come but that there are still many ideologies that exist that have resurfaced over time. A stronger focus on the history, culture, and roots of all Cubans could create more open discussion and knowledge on the issue of race. Through our visit to Cuba, it seems that other countries, including the United States, have and still could learn a lot from Cuba in terms of progress made on the issues of racial equality in the country. As José Martí stated, his dream is for Cuba to be a “racially egalitarian republic, a nation with all and for all” (de la Fuente, 2001, pp. 1). In light of the past, present, and future happening in Cuba, this island may be on its way to fulfilling this dream.

## References

- Antonio Alvarado, J. (2010). *ISLAS* 6(17), 1.
- Davis, L. (2014). Class discussion on race. In R. Bangs (Professor), *Cuban Social Policy Issues*. University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA.
- De la Fuente, A. (2001). *A nation for all: Race, inequality, and politics in twentieth-century Cuba*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- De la Fuente, A. (2013). A lesson from Cuba on race. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/17/a-lesson-from-cuba-on-race/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/17/a-lesson-from-cuba-on-race/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0)
- García, A. & Anaya, B. (2014). *Approach to social development in Cuba* [PowerPoint slides].
- Morales, E. (2013). *Race in Cuba: Essays on the revolution and racial inequality*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
- Morales, E. (2014). Race in Cuba conference. In R. Bangs (Professor), *Cuban Social Policy Issues*. University of Havana, Havana, Cuba.
- Prieto, A. (2014). Conference. In R. Bangs (Professor), *Cuban Social Policy Issues*. University of Havana, Havana, Cuba.
- Sawyer, M. Q. (2006). *Racial politics in post-revolutionary Cuba*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Serrano, L. (2014). Gender and race in Cuba conference. In R. Bangs (Professor), *Cuban Social Policy Issues*. University of Havana, Havana, Cuba.