

"DESARROLLO DEL MÉDIUM":
THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A
HEALER IN PUERTO RICAN "ESPIRITISMO"

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ABSTRACT

Espiritismo (Spiritism) is a community healing system that has been considered a very important mental health resource for Puerto Ricans. Research on **Espiritismo** has centered on explaining and evaluating the success of **Espiritismo**, especially by comparing it with Western psychotherapy. As a result our knowledge of the individuals who are practitioners within this healing system is limited and based on impressions. In order to fill this gap this study examined the process of becoming a spiritist healer (medium) in Puerto Rico using a life-story approach. Becoming a medium was analyzed as an educational process which involves several learning experiences.

Two major methods were used for collecting data about the process of becoming a medium: the qualitative interview and participant observation. Sixteen mediums were interviewed about how they became mediums, evolution of their healing practices and their conception of the ideal medium. In addition, through participant observation in several spiritist centers on the Island, data was gathered on how mediums are educated at the centers.

It was found that the participants of this study

referred to the process of becoming a medium as **desarrollo del médium** (development of the medium). **Desarrollo** involves an initial period called the "opening of the brain" (**abrir el cerebro**) in which the medium begins to communicate with the spirit world. For some mediums this period was distressing to the degree that they experienced an emotional crisis. However for others the "opening of the brain" did not involve any emotional crisis. The data suggests that those participants who have been socialized within **Espiritismo** since they were children had less propensity to suffer the crisis associated with the "opening of the brain".

The process of **desarrollo** also involves the development of faculties (**facultades**), a period in which the medium learns to have control over the mediumistic trance and to identify his/her spirit guides. Both periods, the opening of the brain and the development of **facultades**, were described in details with examples from the field work and the interviews.

The study also indicates that the medium's social class and academic education may influence his/her healing practices and conception of the ideal medium.

It was found that the education of the spiritist medium has principles which are similar to a model of healer

education developed by Katz (1981) called "education as transformation". Like education as transformation, the education of the spiritist healer emphasizes experiences of transformation, the development of the healer's character, transitioning, the service orientation of the healing work, and the centrality of the spiritual dimension. The implication of these findings were examined in relation to the education of Western mental health professionals.

INTRODUCTION

Every culture develops specific ways for dealing with issues of healing and illness within a socio-cultural context. Western psychotherapy is only one of many different healing systems around the world (Frank, 1961; Kiev, 1964; Torrey, 1986). In the last years increasing number of authors have recognized that psychotherapy may not be the most appropriate and effective method for helping individuals from non-Western cultural backgrounds. There has been an emphasis on the exploration and understanding of indigenous healing systems in order to improve the delivery of mental health services for minority groups such as American Indians (Bergman, 1973), Black Americans (Griffith, 1982) and Hispanics (Harwood, 1977; Sandoval, 1979; Trotter & Chavira, 1981).

Within the Hispanic communities, an indigenous healing system called **Espiritismo** ("Spiritism") has been extensively studied in an attempt to evaluate and understand its success in helping Hispanics and especially Puerto Ricans (Delgado, 1979a, 1979b, 1979c; Garrison, 1977a; Gaviria & Wintrob, 1979; Harwood, 1977; Koss, 1975; Morales Dorta, 1976; Salgado, 1974). It has been documented that a significant

number of Puerto Ricans are using **Espiritismo** as an alternative to the professional health system (Garrison, 1977b; Rogler & Hollingshead, 1965). Based in the belief of a spirit world that has the capacity to intervene in human affairs, **Espiritismo** is practiced by Puerto Ricans living in the Island as well as those living in the United States. In a study done by Wakefield (1957) about the Puerto Ricans in Harlem, New York, one of his informants described the popularity of **Espiritismo** among Puerto Ricans as follows:

If you ever talk to a Puerto Rican who says he doesn't believe in the spirits, you know what that means? It means you haven't talked to him long enough (p. 59).

Until now, research on **Espiritismo** has emphasized the description and the explanation of spiritist healing, primarily using the analytic framework of Western psychotherapy. As a result, very little is known about the life and development of the individuals who provide the services within this healing system. We do not know, for example, how spiritist healers develop their abilities, what they experience, or what factors may promote their development. One of the best ways to study any kind of healing system is to examine the development of those who are practitioners within the system (Katz, 1981). This thesis initiates the complex task of examining the development of

spiritist healers using a life-story approach.

Spiritist healers are known as "mediums" within the Puerto Rican community because they consider themselves to be instruments of the spirit world. Most of them are general practitioners who do not specialize in treating specific problems. In contrast to mental health professionals, mediums do not receive any formal schooling in order to develop healing skills.

Studies about the development of spiritist mediums are necessary for several reasons. First, by examining the development of mediums one may be able to achieve a better understanding of **Espiritismo** as a healing system. Second, the life of mediums may contain important lessons and general principles about healer's development and education which can be useful to Western psychotherapists. Third, research about the development of mediums may contribute profoundly to increasing our understanding of them. When one does not know enough about a group of people the tendency is to base our knowledge of them on stereotypes. Increasing our knowledge about the medium's development may help us to move away from a unidimensional and stereotypical image of the medium.

Fourth, by knowing the medium as a person, one may be able to achieve better ways of collaborating with him/her. Any formal collaboration between mediums and Western

psychotherapists or doctors has to be based on sufficient knowledge of the medium's life-history.

Based on this rationale, the major purpose of this study is to describe the process of becoming a medium using a phenomenological approach. I am interested in examining the kind of knowledge and skills that an individual needs to acquire in order to become a medium. From this perspective, the goal of this study can be seen as describing the process of becoming a medium in order to discover the major dimensions of the spiritist model for educating healers. An analysis of the process of becoming a medium would be incomplete without a discussion of how **Espiritismo** is practiced in present day Puerto Rico. Thus another goal of this study is to examine the presence of different spiritist movements in Puerto Rico and how they are influencing the development of mediums.

More than 20 years ago Rogler and Hollingshead (1965) conducted an epidemiological study of schizophrenia in Puerto Rico, finding that spiritist healers have a very important function in the prevention and treatment of mental disorders. It appears that the situation has not changed very much since that time. In 1980 the Department of Health of Puerto Rico published a report which suggested that mental health professionals were not the major source of help for a great

number of Puerto Ricans confronting emotional problems. It was estimated that more than 500,000 Puerto Ricans needed mental health services but only 103,555 of them received services from mental health centers. At that time in Puerto Rico there were 210 psychiatrists and 46 psychologists offering services to a population of three and a half million Puerto Ricans. Moreover, most of these mental health professionals were working in the Metropolitan Area (San Juan, Río Piedras, Santurce, Bayamón, Carolina, Guaynabo, Trujillo Alto). In addition, the 12 mental health centers in Puerto Rico do not have enough trained personnel to offer psychotherapy, 95% of the clients receive pharmacotherapy (Rivera, 1984).

These data may help us to appreciate the significant role that **Espiritismo**, as a healing system, may be playing within the Puerto Rican community. In Puerto Rico, spiritist healers are not usually in competition with mental health professionals; instead they are offering services that the community cannot receive from the professional mental health system.

As a community healing system, **Espiritismo** in Puerto Rico is practiced by lower class as well as upper class individuals (Saavedra de Roca, 1969). In addition, illiterate people as well as those with college education are

also believers in **Espiritismo** (Seda Bonilla, 1973). **Espiritismo** 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 academically oriented individuals.

Usually the practice of **Espiritismo** takes place in spiritist centers (**centros espiritistas**) where a group of people meet in order to communicate with the spirits of the dead. The purpose of these meetings is to help those people who are suffering due to the negative influence of the spirit world. At the spiritist meeting individuals with problems learn to have control over the spirit world by using the healing resources of good spirits and educating those spirits who are causing harm.

In order to set the background for future discussion, I will present a description of the belief system of **Espiritismo**.

Belief System

The foundation of the spiritist belief system is the view of a spirit world which is constantly interacting with the "material world" (**mundo material**). The spirit world is seen 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 or "little evolved" 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 plane of existence. In this other plane, the spirit maintains its identity as well as its moral and spiritual development. Spirits are considered to be "disincarnated beings" (**seres desencarnados**) while human beings are "incarnated beings" (**seres encarnados**); the essential difference between the two is that a human being has a "material body". 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" (**purificar**) 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 reincarnation 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 imperfections.

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. Mediums are the instruments that spirits use to manifest themselves and to communicate with the material world. In theory every person is an actual or a potential medium because being a medium is considered to be 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 to get help from them.

The spiritual development of human beings is intrinsically connected to the spiritual development of spirits. A reciprocal helping process is required for the spiritual evolution of incarnated and disincarnated beings. Good and ignorant spirits need the help of human beings to transcend their limitations. In the same way, human beings cannot progress towards higher levels of spiritual development without the help of spirits.

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

Espiritistas 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 suffering an **obsesión** is under the influence of the ignorant spirit, subjected to that spirit's will. The influence of these ignorant spirits can also produce physical disturbances, ranging from headaches to major illnesses.

In the sections of the thesis which follow, I will begin

presenting a review of the literature on **Espiritismo**. Second, I will describe the methodological issues involved in doing this thesis in chapters three and four. Third, I will discuss five different spiritist movements that are practiced in Puerto Rico today followed by the presentation of the participants' life-stories. Fourth, I will explain the criteria utilized to classify mediums emphasizing how the mediums' values are affecting their healing practices. Five, I will analyze the process of becoming a medium, emphasizing the medium's education. Finally, the implications of this thesis will be discussed followed by suggestions for future research.