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### Aging and Caregiving Among Latin@s in the U.S.

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#### Publication Information

Rodríguez-Galán, Marta B., "Aging and Caregiving Among Latin@s in the U.S." (2014). *Sociology Faculty/Staff Publications*. Paper 2.

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## **Aging and Caregiving Among Latin@s in the U.S.**

### **Disciplines**

Sociology

### **Comments**

This was presented at the XXXII International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association in Chicago, Illinois, on May 22, 2014.

# Aging and Caregiving Among Latin@s in the U.S.

Dr. Marta Rodríguez-Galán  
Sociology Department



# Objective

- To present a general overview of the literature on familismo in relation to aging and caregiving among Latin@s in the U.S.
- To use ethnographic vignettes from my research on Puerto Rican grandmothers raising grandchildren to examine the extent to which familismo is maintained in the context of Puerto Rican grandmother's surrogate mother experiences.

# Defining Familismo

- Strong identification with the family group
- Filial obligations and respect for elders
- Strong reliance on social support for family
- Socializing frequently with family members
- Satisfaction with familial relationships

(Applewhite, 1989; Cortes, 1995; Montoro Rodriguez, & Koloski, 1998)

# Familismo: An enduring Pattern

- Older Hispanics in the Boston area tend to socialize with children and relatives more often than same neighborhood non-Hispanic Whites:
  - Visiting and calling on the phone, providing care for a relative not living with them.
  - They also showed lower use of formal social activities: attending senior center, congregate meals programs, socializing with friends in the community and doing volunteer work

(Rodríguez-Galán ,& Falcón, 2010)

# Living Arrangements and Familismo

- ◉ Older Hispanics are more likely to support co-residence (Burr & Mutchler, 1999)
- ◉ Proximity allows for more frequent exchanges of services of care, such as grandmothers caring for grandchildren (Rodriguez-Galan, 2013)
- ◉ Increase in the likelihood of Independent Living for elderly Hispanic females (Burr & Mutchler, 1992)

# Grandparents in U.S. Latino Families

- The traditional family structure has included at least three generations
- Grandparents pass on culture: traditions, heritage, teaching Spanish language skills.
- Grandparents provide care and when necessary participate in family decision making
- The transition to the role of grandparent is more important for Hispanics than Anglos (Valle & Cook-Gait, 1998)

# Grandparenting (Cont.)

- Grandparents provide significant amounts of support in times of social and economic stress:
  - › emotional nurturance and protection from discrimination and racism
  - › Physical care and help with household chores
  - › Provision of *consejos* and discipline across generations
  - › Transmitting cultural and linguistic knowledge

(Applewhite, 1989)

# Grandparenting (Cont.)

- ◉ Increase in the number of Hispanic (and other) grandmothers raising grandchildren is associated with:
  - > “Crack cocaine” epidemic (Roe, et al. 1996)
  - > Changes in Foster Care policies

Thus many more grandmothers have an expanded role within the family

# Puerto Rican Grandmothers Raising grandchildren

## ● The study:

- › Ethnographic interviews with 14 Puerto Rican grandmother's raising grandchildren in Boston, MA (2009)
- › Prior fieldwork from 2005-2008 for NIH funded Boston Puerto Rican Health and Health Disparities
- › 5 interviews in Rochester, NY (2012)
- › Most interviewees live in subsidized housing

**Goal:** to offer a more comprehensive portrait of Puerto Rican grandmothers raising grandchildren: role definition, psychosocial impact, physical and social context of caregiving

# Puerto Rican Grandmothers and Familismo

- *Familismo* is commonly observed, but these women's view of it is less idealized and more nuanced version. The "traditional family" is also associated for them with machismo and physical punishment
- They feel obligated towards children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, parents, spouses; and maintain the importance of knowing one's relatives and keeping in contact with them.
- They believe that grandchildren benefit from *familismo*
- However, they also fear that some may be losing their "culture":

# Puerto Rican Grandmother (Cont.)

“Reinalda: Yes, it is important that the family [each side of grandchildren’s family] knows each other, because this is how we Latinos are, but as I was telling you, today it is not like that. Today, if you want to know the family on your father’s side you do it, and on the mother’s side the same, but if you don’t want if then you don’t

Marta: Yes, do you observe this also among Puerto Rican families?

Reinalda: Yes, I observe this also with Puerto Rican families that are loosing the culture a little bit. Uhum, the culture is being lost a little bit.”

# Grandmothers (Cont.): mothering

- Many of these grandmothers have already mothered other people's children throughout their lives: siblings, foster children and "*hijos de crianza*":

"Graciela: And I have an "*hija de crianza*" (reared daughter) that has five (children). I raised her and now she has five children and these five also have children.

Marta: So this is a granddaughter that you raised, right?

Graciela: No, she belonged to someone else and I raised her

Marta: Oh, and you raised her!

Graciela: Yes, and now her children are my grandchildren and she is my daughter, do you understand? And then I have my grandchildren [from her] too

Marta: Oh, OK. And how is it that you adopted this girl?

Engracia: Because one of my mother's cousins gave her to my mom, and then my mom gave her to me.

Marta: Aha, yeah

Engracia: When she was four years old

# Grandmothers (Cont.):

Grandmothers see themselves as the guarantors of their children's and grandchildren's well being. "Bad grandmothers" are described as selfish and espousing a more nuclear version of the family, and if they care for grandchildren they demand a "fee" for their services :

"Marta: Yes, I was interested to know whether or not the role of grandmothers, eh, in the Puerto Rican culture has been maintained

Paula: No, I don't think so. I don't think so because as I told you I have heard things from grandmothers from my own village in Puerto Rico, from my own homeland, and they have said "no, this is my time, this is my life, and this is my time, and I am sorry but if you give birth, you give care [mimicking a deep callous voice]." And they have turned their backs on those girls. I would say the same thing they say but with one difference "if you give birth, you give care, but I will be watching" [*si tu pares, tu crias, pero vigilando*]... (Paula, age 73)

# La casa vs. La calle

- Grandmothers often allude to a distinction of social life that is physically (and metaphorically) split between the home and the streets
- They often describe themselves as more familistic than others and enjoying “la casa”
- Typically men and women who acquire *vicios* (vices) are drawn to the streets. As young mothers they struggled with keeping their children off the streets and they hope also protect their grandchildren from the streets’ male dominated and destructive influence

# La casa vs. La calle (Cont.)

- Marta: Do you see yourself as a traditional grandmother or do you think that this role has changed in this generation?
- Amarylis: Well, in comparison with my grandparents... I did not get the chance to meet them... Uh, I got to know my *abuelito* only on my mother's side, but that's it, but it is more... how is it? How do I explain this? The behavior that I have with my grandson is not old fashioned [smiles] it is more moderate, because of course things change, uh..., yes I am a bit strict with him, in the sense that I tell him clearly about [my disapproval of] vices, uh, I teach him that smoking is not a good thing. Because I went through that with my daughters, I do not want to have the same problems that I had with my daughter, and the bad times I had with her to be transferred on to him. **Because he is a male, men are almost always in the streets, they look for the streets and ...** they must have the same responsibilities that women have, because if one day he gets married and has a family, well then I would like him to keep a good home and family. I always talk very straight to him **and I tell him that you should not hit a woman, because one cannot hit a mother and I explain to him that a mother gave birth to him and that you must respect women.** (Amarylis, age 44)

# Grandmothers: Teaching *Respeto*

- Although grandmothers identify first as mothers, they also feel that they are not always recognized for this function (neither by their families nor the state) and are not afforded the *respeto* they deserve
- They attempt to instill in their grandchildren the importance of *respeto* both for their biological mother, their grandmother and other older family members (e.g. teaching all their grandchildren to ask for “*bendición*,” empathizing and caring for the mother who is “sick”)

# Teaching Respeto (Cont.)

In the following quote, Maria (age) explains how she teaches her grandson to respect his biological mother who is an alcoholic and lost her children due to abuse and neglect:

“Maria: The child is now 12, he is going to be 13 soon, and I send him to check on her [her daughter and the mother of the children], and I tell him “if you see that something is wrong, because she drinks (otherwise she is fine), if she starts drinking, then you come back here, if you see anything that seems wrong, because otherwise you would not be able to see her again, and whatever has happened [with your mom] this is just her own ignorance, but she is your mother. You two [siblings] must respect her and care for her, and you should not feel hate towards her, because she was not herself when she did that” and he goes...”

# Teaching *Respeto* (Cont.)

- Teaching respeto can be very challenging, especially with adolescent grandchildren
- They wish to emulate the consumerism, individualism and freedom they observe among peers, and which their grandmother cannot give them
- Several grandmothers were themselves raised by either abuelos, step parents or padrinos but say they respected them
- Grandmothers sometimes feel overruled by the grandchild's biological mother who may be a negative influence that can "derail" them

# Teaching Respeto: Disciplining

- ◉ Respeto implies submitting to the higher authority of elders in the family
- ◉ Many grandmothers admit to being *fuertes* and to even having used physical punishment with their own children. Several women have regrets, and try to apply other methods of disciplining them and also to talk more with them.
- ◉ Some still use this method of discipline occasionally with grandchildren. But grandchildren are more likely to assert their “rights” and threaten grandmothers with calling child protective services
- ◉ Many grandmothers were themselves victims of domestic violence. It is likely that their children witnessed it.

# Grandmothers Role Conflict: Caring for grandchildren, parents and spouses

Grandmothers feel they have obligations to parents, grandchildren, as well as other family members and sacrifice their own goals to provide care for them.

"Marta: So you made a sacrifice for...

Oliva: For her

Marta: For them? For your family...

Oliva: For them (...) I had already gotten used to since I brought my mother [from Puerto Rico] who was ill [with Alzheimer's], because she needed me, so I said "well, anyway I have to take care of my mother" so I completely forgot about... what it means to have a normal life. And I was forty years old, which is a good age for a person, my daughters were grown, I had already reared them, I could do other things, different things... So, for a while there was a period when I thought to myself "Guau, my life is over!" But it is all good, I have no regrets. They have taken advantage of it. And my personality too, because I do not like going out to dance, or anything, so I did not have a social life, because I did not like it, so, no, I do not regret it." (Oliva, age 53)

# Familismo and meaning

- In spite of the sacrifice, the challenges and lost opportunities, and their worries about the future, the care giver role is central to these women's own identity and it continues to offer psychological rewards, purpose and meaning to their lives in the context of *familismo*.
- “I feel satisfaction and pride that The Lord has allowed me to see my grandchildren and he has allowed me to raise grandchildren and great-grandchildren.” (Rafaela, age 67)

# Conclusion

- ◉ Familismo is quite prevalent among Puerto Ricans and it may be one of the ideological forces responsible for the ultimate decision to personally take care of grandchildren, great-grandchildren and aging family members
- ◉ These women's gender role construction makes them more likely to be providers of care for family members and even non-kin
- ◉ However, they are also consciously softening the rough edges of familismo: male domination and justification of physical punishment
- ◉ Not all Puerto Rican grandmothers extend family obligations towards grandchildren and the continuation of this cultural pattern in third and subsequent generations remains an open question