

"MAKING IT IN AMERICA" - A PARTICIPANT  
OBSERVATION STUDY OF CUBAN REFUGEES

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In April of 1980, a massive exodus of Cuban dissidents resulted in the arrival of approximately 120,000 Cuban refugees on American soil. Large scale migrations from Cuba such as this one are not unprecedented. Ever since the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959 there have been a series of migrations made up of those who, for personal or political reasons, would prefer to live in the United States than to remain in communist Cuba. This most recent group of arrivals has differed markedly from the earlier groups: there have been more unskilled workers, they are generally less educated, and they are made up of a larger number of Blacks and mulattoes. These differences have raised the question of whether or not this last wave of migrants will "make it in America" as have those of earlier waves. In the following pages I will describe and analyze the process of adaptation as experienced by Cuban migrants that were resettled in Oakland.

In early January of 1982 I moved into a dilapidated storefront apartment in an economically depressed section of East Oakland with my wife and a roommate. We were able to work out a deal with the landlord wherein we would renovate the apartment in lieu of paying rent. It so happened that this slum dwelling was occupied by a small community of Cuban refugees who came to the United States as a part of the massive migration of 1980 from the Cuban port of Mariel.

I was immediately fascinated by the prospect of becoming acquainted with the Cubans. I had read several reports in the newspapers which characterized the Marielitos (the term used to describe this last group of Cuban immigrants) as the rejects of Cuban society. Now that I was living amongst them I had the opportunity to determine for myself just what type of people the Marielitos were. Moreover, as a student

of Sociology, I was interested in studying and observing how the Cubans would adapt to life in this society. At the time I happened to be taking a course on participant observation as a method of conducting social research, which was being taught by Professor Michael Burawoy in the Department of Sociology at U.C. Berkeley. This provided me with a reason for taking field notes, conducting interviews and observing as much as possible the lifestyles of the Cubans. The class also provided me with a forum removed from the field where I could share my observations and analysis and receive criticisms and suggestions on how to proceed.

My initial contact with the Cubans was based upon their need for someone to translate letters they received from relief agencies and the welfare department. Within a fairly short period of time I developed a friendly relationship with two of the Cubans, Jaime and Miguel, who eventually served as my primary contacts with the rest of the Cuban community. As is true in many participant observation studies, my two 'informants' were to a large degree marginal to the community. Their alienation from the group stemmed from their spartan lifestyles and somewhat eccentric behavior. Both Jaime and Miguel had been released directly from prison prior to arriving in the United States, a factor which also seemed to contribute to their alienation from the community. Nevertheless, it was my contact with Jaime and Miguel, as well as my occasional dealings with other members of the Cuban community which enabled me to get a sense of how this particular set of Cuban refugees was adapting to life in the United States. This paper is an attempt at explaining that process of adaptation.

During the course of my field work I have had to contend with the difficult task of explaining how and why the Cubans have adapted in the manner that they have. Eventually I was able to narrow my theoretical explanation of their adaptive behavior to two propositions. The first concentrated on the culture of the Cubans, particularly their lifestyles and values. The second placed emphasis upon the social position occupied by the Cubans within the socio-economic class structure of the United States. As I debated the merits of these explanations I came to the conclusion that neither is entirely sufficient, but rather both forms of explanation are inextricably linked to a complete understanding of the phenomenon.

The first proposition explains the process of the Cubans' adaptation by focusing upon the carry over of behavioral patterns (cultural traits) from Cuba to America. Simply stated, the adaptation of the Cuban refugees is based upon the interaction of their culture with the dominant culture of American

society. The outcome of that interaction determines the extent to which cultural assimilation is facilitated. In turn, the ability of the Cubans to assimilate American values and norms has a tremendous effect upon their integration into the labor market and society in general.

Support for such an approach to studying immigrant adaptation can be found throughout the sociological literature on ethnicity and social mobility. As social scientists have attempted to explain why certain ethnic groups experience varying degrees of mobility, considerable emphasis has been placed upon the processes of assimilation and acculturation (Warner and Lunt 1941; Wirth 1945). For this reason, the perpetuation of socio-economic marginality for certain groups (e.g., Black Americans) has been interpreted as being the result of their "cultural disadvantage." Conversely, the success of other groups at attaining substantial improvements in their socio-economic status has been attributed to the adoption of certain traits associated with the dominant culture (e.g., many of the values associated with the Protestant ethic). Even for contemporary immigrant groups, conformity to the norms and values of the dominant culture of American society has been seen as being crucial to the process of adaptation (Cohon 1981).

During the 1960's a number of sociologists began postulating a new explanation for ethnic group status and mobility in American society. Rather than attributing the cause of varying rates of social mobility to the ability or inability of a group to assimilate American values and norms, these social scientists focused their analysis on the ways in which the economic and political institutions of society affected group status and mobility. As a result, the social hierarchy created by a capitalist economy was seen as the cause for the low status of minority groups, and not their "cultural disadvantage." Studies such as Elliot Liebow's *Talley's Corner* and William Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race* placed emphasis on how the political and economic structure of the United States were responsible for poverty and the development of an "underclass." This type of structural explanation has more recently been used in theoretical explanations of immigrant resettlement and adaptation (Kunz 1977).

As I have attempted to understand the process of adaptation experienced by the Cuban refugees I have found that both approaches are useful, though they offer different explanations. Furthermore, unless the two approaches are combined in a manner which allows them to be used interchangeably, neither approach can explain the phenomenon adequately. To illustrate this point we need only to attempt to explain

the criminal behavior of Jaime. Ever since I have known Jaime he has sold marijuana as a means to earn a living, in addition to stealing and selling stolen merchandise. On the one hand, we could explain Jaime's criminal activity as a behavior carried over from Cuba and re-exhibited in his new environment. It could also be attributed to a failure on his part to conform to the values and norms associated with good citizenship (e.g., respect for the law, honesty, being industrious, etc.).

However, if we take into consideration the way in which the social structure of society limits and restricts Jaime's opportunities for upward mobility another conclusion may be drawn. Jaime, like most of the Cuban refugees, came to the U.S. with hopes of improving life. It is true that he engaged in criminal activities when he lived in Cuba, but it is possible that Jaime would have reformed if given the chance upon arriving in this country. However, Jaime was not given the chance to reform himself. Instead, like thousands of other refugees, he was detained in a refugee camp shortly after arriving in the U.S. Eventually, Jaime was resettled in a slum community in East Oakland. Unemployed, residing in slum housing and being unable to communicate in English, Jaime's expectations for improving his life were diminished. Disillusioned with his prospects for upward mobility, Jaime, like many of the other men in this new environment, turned to crime in order to survive.

Both attempts at explaining Jaime's criminal behavior provide us with valuable insights. For this reason I have chosen to combine them into a broad theoretical explanation of Cuban refugee adaptation, rather than to treat them as competing theses. In the following pages I will offer an explanation of the Cuban refugees' adaptation in the United States. I will begin by describing the circumstances surrounding the massive exodus of 1980. This will be followed by a discussion of the stereotypes which have been cast of the Cuban refugees, as well as an analysis of how these stereotypes have affected the Cuban's experience. The following section examines the reasons why the Cubans left Cuba and came to the U.S. so that we can analyze the expectations of the Cubans towards the prospects for their future in this country. Finally, we will look closely at the behavioral adjustment patterns of the Cubans, to determine which factors have the greatest bearing on how the Cubans adapt.

I have chosen to make an explanation of the Cuban refugees' adaptive behavior the theme of this paper for several reasons. First and least important is that it enables me to present my field work experience in what will hopefully be a coherent and meaningful manner. Secondly, because I have had such extensive access to the Cuban refugees, my explanation of their adaptive behavior can potentially help to increase

understanding of this often maligned group of people. Finally, through an analysis of this kind I also hope to add something to the current understanding of deviant behavior among low status groups. I believe that by identifying the causes of social conditions such as poverty and crime we can greatly increase the possibility of effectively addressing them.

### Background to the Refugee Crises of 1980<sup>1</sup>

It started out as a small but violent incident and mushroomed into a major international crisis. On March 28, 1980, thirty Cubans seeking political asylum hijacked a bus and crashed through the gates of the Peruvian embassy, killing a Cuban guard stationed there. A pattern had developed wherein those persons who desired to leave Cuba were compelled to use violence. People who went through official channels in applying for visas to leave the country were normally not able to obtain one unless it could be proved that they were in urgent need of political asylum. By using violence to enter a foreign embassy, a person demonstrated that s/he was politically persecuted and therefore in need of exile.

The Cuban government reacted to the incident by withdrawing its guard from the Peruvian embassy and announcing that anyone who wanted to leave Cuba would be allowed to do so. Within two days, ten thousand people gathered at the embassy with the intent of leaving Cuba. Serious difficulties soon arose due to the lack of facilities at the embassy to feed, house and care for the medical needs of those who had gathered. The Cuban government began to provide needed services to the encamped, but desired to maintain as little involvement with those seeking exile as possible.

Without the presence of official law enforcers, the situation at the embassy quickly deteriorated. Although many of the people who had gathered at the embassy were persons who had family living in the United States with whom they wished to be reunited, there were also a number of people who could best be described as "criminal elements." These persons acted as bullies on the embassy grounds. Food that was sent to the area by the Cuban government was seized by these bullies and sold to weaker persons. Conditions deteriorated to a point where space under improvised tents was being sold as shade. To ease the situation, the Cuban government began allowing those who were seeking asylum to return to their homes until measures were taken to provide for their safe passage out of Cuba.

On April 14, flights to Costa Rica and Peru began which delivered approximately one thousand Cubans to these countries. The United States offered asylum to 3,500 of those seeking refuge, but this figure was considered too low and therefore unacceptable by the Cuban government. Internationally, the incident at the Peruvian embassy was being used as a means to discredit Cuba by those who saw the massive departure as an indication of the failure of socialism in Cuba. At the same time that a solution was being sought to handle the embassy crisis, the United States government initiated major naval maneuvers which included landings at the Guantanamo naval base. The Cuban government interpreted these maneuvers to be a mock invasion of Cuba, and subsequently staged their own maneuvers which involved parts of their Army surrounding the American base at Guantanamo.

Amidst this tense atmosphere, no agreement could be made between Cuba and the United States on how to handle the crisis at the Peruvian embassy. A spontaneous solution was initiated by the Cuban community in Miami, Florida. Boats of all sizes began to arrive at the port of Mariel to pick up friends and relatives who wanted to leave Cuba. The Cuban government cooperated fully with this operation, allowing anyone who wanted to leave to do so. Between April 21st and 30th, 7,655 Cubans departed for the United States. On April 29th, U.S. Coast Guard and Navy ships that had been involved in the Caribbean maneuvers became involved in the boat lift operation. Between May 1st and 31st, another 94,143 Cubans arrived in the United States.

Meanwhile, the situation in Cuba remained tense as resentment towards those wishing to leave Cuba grew among large portions of the Cuban population. Huge demonstrations and marches involving millions of people took place in Havana in an exhibition of support for the revolution. On May 2, a group of 400 people gathered at the U.S. Interest Section in Havana requesting visas to travel to the United States. A large crowd of supporters of the Cuban revolution gathered around the center, and within a short time a riot ensued. To escape the large crowd that was encircling the building, the 400 persons seeking visas broke the glass doors of the Interest Section and took refuge in the building. Like the earlier exiles, safe departure was guaranteed for those who had barricaded themselves in the Interest Section, even though anger and resentment towards them ran high throughout Cuba.

As the refugees began pouring into Southern Florida, a major resettlement problem began to emerge. Initially President Carter announced that the Cuban refugees would be received with "open arms and open hearts." However, as the num-

ber of arrivals rose, the government's response changed substantially. At first, many of those who arrived in Florida had family and friends who took on the responsibility of finding housing for the refugees. As the number of Cubans seeking entrance increased, fewer were able to resettle through contacts in the United States, and the federal government was forced to assume responsibility for their housing.

Beginning in mid-May 1980, the U.S. government officially shifted its policy towards the Cuban refugees. On May 14, President Carter requested that the Cuban government close the port of Mariel. The Cuban government ignored this request and allowed the mass migration to continue. Carter's request for the closing of Mariel was prompted by rumors that many of the Cuban refugees were criminals - rejects of Cuban society. The Cuban government had made this claim all along, but it was only when immigration officials began reporting that a number of hardened criminals were entering the country that the rumors were taken seriously. Part of the reason why many of the exiles seemed to be criminals is that the U.S. government had made a special request for the release of "political prisoners." The Cuban and U.S. governments have had a long disagreement over what constituted a political prisoner. To avoid the dispute, the Cuban government allowed any prisoner who desired to leave the country to do so. Thus far, of the 124,779 Cubans who arrived since April 21, 1979, 1,769 have been detained in federal correctional institutions (1.4%). This number could have been much larger but certain Cuban prisoners, such as persons convicted of counterrevolutionary activity, refusal to work, refusal to join the Army, traffic violations, loitering, gambling, fighting and petty theft, were placed with the other refugees.

Fifty percent of the refugees were resettled with families or friends within the first three months after their arrival. The remaining fifty percent were distributed in refugee camps throughout the country: Fort Chaffee, Arkansas (19,060 or 15.3%), Fort McCoy, Wisconsin (14,362 or 11.5%), Elgin Air Force Base (10,025 or 8%), Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania (19,094 or 15.3%). After being processed, which involved being seen by doctors and having an F.B.I. security check administered, the refugees were gradually released to individual sponsors and relief agencies who handled resettlement. Although some Cubans were allowed to leave the camps after a few weeks, several were forced to wait several weeks due to a shortage of sponsors, and some are still being detained in the camps. Impatience caused by the drawn-out waiting period led to a number of disorders at the refugee camps as well as several escape attempts from Fort Chaffee, Arkansas.

For the Cuban refugees who had left their home in search of a better life in the United States, the prolonged waiting period in the camps was a most disheartening experience. Difficulties with resettlement developed as the news media carried reports that the refugees were criminals and rejects. It wasn't until November 1, 1981 that most of the Cuban refugees were released from the camps (92%), and the process of adjustment to life in America began.

### Stereotypes

During the time that I have known Jaime and Miguel I have found that they rarely speak about their lives in Cuba. They may make mention of how something here is different from how it is in Cuba (e.g., salsa music), but they seem quite hesitant to openly discuss how their lives were in Cuba. Moreover, Jaime and Miguel have been weary of disclosing much information concerning their experiences in the resettlement camps. I believe that much of this hesitancy to discuss their past has been caused by the stereotypes of them which have been presented, both by the Cuban government and the American media.

The Cuban government described the Cuban refugees as the "rejects of society" and "the scum of the earth." For some of the refugees, the stereotypes served only as a means to denounce their counterrevolutionary behavior. Many of those who decided to leave Cuba on the "freedom flotilla" were people who had formerly appeared committed to the Cuban revolution. As the author of an article in *Cuba Times* (Spring 1982:22) commented: "...in the general population, an attitude of great indignation was growing against those who had encamped at the embassy, particularly against those who just weeks before, had behaved as if they were true revolutionaries." However, there were also persons among those who left for whom the phrase "scum of the earth" was intended to be taken literally. These were people who refused to work, who placed an overly high value on material goods, were users of drugs and alcohol, and who had never made a full contribution to society. While people who fit this description might not be considered deviant in this society, they certainly were deviant according to Cuban standards.

The stereotypes propagated by the American media changed as the policy of the federal government changed. Initially, the Cuban refugees were described as freedom fighters and haters of communism. These images went hand in hand with the government's "open door policy" towards the Cuban migration



during the early stage of the crisis. The mass exodus was portrayed as a failure of communism, and members of the State Department were predicting mass uprisings and political upheaval due to the collapse of the Cuban economy. However, as the numbers of refugees swelled, and as rumors of their criminality spread, the policies of the government shifted and so did the portrayal of the Cuban refugees presented by the media.

One news article on the Cuban refugees said that most were "gays, thieves and hoodlums" (*L.A. Times* 1980:16). This type of negative characterization was later combined with reports of violent outbreaks at refugee camps such as Fort Chaffee. Increasingly, the image of the Cuban refugees as presented by the media stressed the fact that the Cuban government had described the refugees as rejects; this commentary had not been made previously.

The existence of stereotypes such as these has made adjustment difficult for the Cuban refugees. Aside from contending with the loss of their families, culture shock, the distasteful experience of the resettlement camps, language barriers, unemployment and general hostility towards foreigners, the stereotypes which have been cast of the Cuban refugees are in many ways the greatest obstacle of all. Even though the government has made special provisions for the Cubans which enables them to work without green cards (which prove that they are legal entrants), several Cubans have experienced difficulty in obtaining work due to the stigma which has been attached to their refugee status.

The presence of these negative stereotypes not only creates obstacles for the Cubans in making their adjustments to life in this country, it also has severely limited the understanding of the American public with regard to their knowledge of the refugees. My observations of the Cubans living near and around me has exposed me to the intricacies of their value systems and therein helped me to see beyond the stereotypes. Although my two primary contacts with the Cuban refugees, Jaime and Miguel, would be regarded as deviants in Cuba and the U.S., they are not at all representative of the rest of the Cubans. On one occasion Jaime told me of his desire to one day become a pimp. He said that his father had been a pimp in Havana prior to the revolution, and that he sought to be just like him. On the other hand, Miguel informed me that he had always been a delinquent, and considering that he is now 37 years of age, it seems fair to conclude that he may remain one. Based on the lifestyles and aspirations of Jaime and Miguel it might seem as though the stereotypes cast of them were in fact accurate characterizations. However, if one examines the personal lives of these men closely, a less "hardened" side becomes evident.

For example, Miguel once came to my house with a little girl about three years old. It was about 10:00 p.m. and it seemed unusual to find a small child outside so late. Miguel informed me that the mother of the child was a heroin addict and that she was presently unable to take care of her child. He said that he had brought her to my house so that I could give her some food and let her keep warm indoors. Miguel spoke strongly against the use of heroin and said that such practices were not permitted in Cuba. He also expressed deep concern for the child's well-being and said that her mother did not deserve to have any children.

This display of compassion, coupled with his expression of disdain for heroin addiction, provided me with greater insight into the values of Miguel. Although Miguel considered himself to be a permanent delinquent, he did not view himself as a bad person. His pilfering had been the cause of his imprisonment in Cuba, and he continued to steal in his new environment. Yet, despite this criminal behavior, Miguel tried to live according to certain morals which he regarded as most important.

The stereotype which depicts Miguel and the other refugees as rejects seems to be an accurate characterization given the fact that Miguel steals. However, accepting the stereotype as the truth tells us nothing about what kind of person Miguel is, nor does it tell us anything about why he commits the crimes. If we consider the fact that most of the refugees viewed their migration to America as a chance to start life over, then we must recognize that the prevalence of negative stereotypes acts as a major obstacle in the self-transformation process.

While the stereotypes limit our understanding of refugees like Jaime and Miguel, they completely blind us from understanding other Cuban refugees such as Beto. Beto is typical of the non-criminal refugees. Like 65% of the refugees, Beto was a semi-skilled laborer. In Cuba he had a job painting automobiles. Except for his occasional use of cocaine and belief in Santeria (an African religion practiced throughout Cuba), Beto was the typical law-abiding Cuban citizen. Beto told me that he was not interested in politics while in Cuba, but is more concerned with cultural activities like drum playing and singing. Since coming to Oakland, Beto has enrolled in an English class offered by Catholic Social Services, and has also participated in a job training program designed to teach the Cubans how to behave during a job interview. Despite these efforts, Beto has experienced great difficulty in finding a job. He tells me that once an employer discovers that he is a Cuban refugee his chances for getting the job are ruined. He recently got a job working at a ship-

yard in Oakland harbor, but he informed me that he told his boss he was a Puerto Rican.

The stereotypes of the Cubans have made their adjustment to life difficult and has greatly lowered their expectations. In an interview with the director of Catholic Social Services in Oakland, I was informed that the stigma attached to being a Cuban refugee was breeding a defeatist attitude among many Cubans. He said that several Cubans have given up trying to find work after having been fired, or after being turned away from so many jobs. According to the director, most of the Cubans want to work and secure a promising future for themselves in this country, but given the many obstacles they face and the negative stereotypes which are completely out of their control, many are giving up hope.

The negative stereotypes that have been cast of the Cuban refugees are creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. By accepting the stereotypes of the Cubans, employers, policemen, politicians and the general public severely limit the Cuban's opportunities for mobility within this society. Deprived of the chance to earn an honest living and thereby become integrated into the mainstream of society, the refugees turn to crime and confirm the stereotype. Even though some of the Cubans were criminals in Cuba, many were not, and may not have turned to crime if other opportunities were available to them. Even those who were criminals in Cuba came to America with the hope of starting their lives over, and perhaps turning a new leaf. Though such a transformation may not have been likely in any case, the possibility of any sort of reform is extinguished by the lack of opportunity.

It must also be noted that the discrimination which the Cuban refugees encounter as they attempt to acquire housing, employment and other basic needs are not entirely caused by the negative stereotypes which have been generated by the media. These stereotypes certainly have added to the discrimination they experience, but the hardships they experience are also directly related to the existence of racism in the U.S. Racial discrimination and the notion of white supremacy are aspects of the dominant culture in the United States which have penetrated the social structure of the society. As non-white, Spanish speaking people, the Cuban refugees encounter discrimination in the same way as black Americans, Mexicans, Filipinos and other racial minorities. The negative stereotypes have added to the extent of the discrimination they experience, but the primary source of the Cuban refugees degradation may be found in the dominant value system of American society.

### Expectations and Reasons for leaving Cuba

If asked, nearly all of the Cuban refugees would say that they came to the United States to escape communism. The director of Catholic Social Services felt that the Cubans must have decided during their stay in the resettlement camps that they should claim to be political exiles so that passage out of the camps and into American communities would come easier. The director claimed with great confidence that the vast majority of Cuban refugees were not people who had been politically persecuted. Rather, he felt that the Cubans came to the United States in order to better their lives socially and economically. His assertion was supported by the author of an article which appeared in the May 1981 issue of *In These Times* (May 1981:16) magazine. The author claimed that the overwhelming majority of Cuban refugees had left their country for economic rather than political reasons. Further support for this view is provided by an interview conducted by reporters from *Cuba Times* with refugees as they arrived in Florida. With the exception of homosexuals who claim to have left in order to escape what they regarded as persecution, nearly all of the respondents cited a desire to obtain material possessions and financial well-being as the primary reason for their departure.

Why did the Cubans express political reasons for leaving Cuba rather than economic ones? In order to qualify as a "Cuban entrant," the special status designated by the federal government for the refugees, one had to claim that they were seeking political asylum. The Haitian refugees who began making their way to the United States at approximately the same time as the Cubans were denied admittance and then placed indefinitely into resettlement camps (many of which were in fact prisons) precisely because they were seen as economic and not political refugees. Furthermore, the Cuban refugees might have felt it wise to claim political motivations for their departure so as to avoid possible hostilities which may have been directed towards them for being communists. In all the conversations that I have had with the Cuban refugees, denials of adherence to communist beliefs have consistently been expressed. Even though none of the Cubans in my study have displayed any interest whatsoever towards politics, all claim to have left Cuba for political reasons.

However, in conversing at greater length with the Cubans, they spoke of more economic reasons for leaving their homeland. Aside from the desire to obtain material possessions, several of the Cubans cited the prospect of upward mobility as a primary motivation for coming to this country. Mario, the most financially successful of all the Cubans in my study, told me that he knew he could better his life by coming to

this country. He said that he had worked in a plastic factory in Cuba, and that his chances for promotion and an upgrade in salary were unlikely. Since arriving in this country, he had obtained a stable job at a clothing factory in West Oakland, and with the English classes that he was now taking, he felt certain that his chances for success in the near future were quite good.

This industrious attitude displayed by Mario was not at all typical of the other Cubans in my study. Most of the Cubans wanted to achieve financial success, but their ideals were not based upon a pragmatic strategy such as Mario's. Rather, most of the Cubans seemed to have unrealistic visions of one day striking it rich. For example, Jaime told me that he wanted to become a pimp and make a lot of money. Another Cuban named Carlos told me that he too wanted to become rich, but he also told me that he didn't like to work. Cubans such as Jaime and Carlos were undoubtedly motivated to come here because they felt that this was a country abundant in wealth, a land where the dream of making it from rags to riches could be fulfilled. These hopes were based largely upon unrealistic expectations and not upon the type of ambition demonstrated by Cubans like Mario.

Interestingly, the Cubans' illusions of succeeding in this country are very similar to those expressed by black Americans of lower class backgrounds. In a study conducted on the career goals of black schoolchildren, John Ogbu (1980:84) found that black children often expressed desires to become professionals, highly paid athletes, politicians and businessmen. What is striking about such goals is that it is highly unlikely that the majority of poor black schoolchildren will ever succeed in achieving them given their social class within the U.S. The desire is therefore more of a dream than a realistic goal, for the children have no conception of how such goals can actually be attained.

This type of unrealistic expectation about the future is similar to that of the Cubans, but there are some important differences. The Cubans' expectations were shaped in Cuba through exposure to American propaganda which portrays the U.S. as the land of milk and honey. This type of propaganda has largely made its way into Cuba through the visits of former Cuban citizens who now reside in the United States. These expatriates returned to Cuba displaying the latest modern fashions in clothing, pocket radios, digital watches and other material items that are impossible to purchase legally in Cuba. Many Cubans have been led to believe that such items could be easily obtained in the United States. This certainly was true of Jaime who once told me that he didn't like Cuba because each person only received two pairs of pants per year. Showing

me his new pair of Jordache jeans, he explained that such clothing could not be bought in Cuba.

Hence, part of the difference between the expectations of Cuban refugees and lower class black schoolchildren is that the Cubans' expectations were shaped in Cuba, while those of the black children developed here. Even though the Cubans have been living in this country for nearly two years, they continue to express unrealistic expectations of achieving success in the future. Although Jaime and Carlos are unemployed, both men expect to make substantial improvements in their financial status within the near future. Neither man possesses concrete career goals, but rather both maintain the belief that one day they will "make it." Despite the fact that Jaime and Carlos have recently been fired from their jobs, and despite the fact that they live in slum housing, their commitment to a successful future remains firm. This may be due to their ages (Jaime is 21 and Carlos is 27), because Miguel, who is older, seems to have resigned himself to life as a poor thief. However, the other Cubans, many of whom are in their thirties, also possess bright outlooks on the future, even though their expectations are not as high as those of Jaime and Carlos.

In order to understand the reason why many of the Cuban refugees cling to the belief of success, we must view their expectations within the context of the dominant value system of this society. The fact that elements of the Cuban population possessed such non-socialist values indicates a failure in the socialization of the revolution's ideals. But while such values were inappropriate in Cuba, they are well-suited for American society. Success, as measured by financial and material well-being, is a value that permeates American culture. The dream of success comes through advertisements and commercials on television and radio, and is heavily stressed in much of American literature. Even though the Cubans find themselves at the bottom of the class hierarchy, the dream that they may one day rise to the top and "make it" reaffirms their belief in success as a goal that is within reach. They, like many poor people in this society, continue to cling to the belief in the American Dream, for without it, their hopes would wither and leave them in utter pessimism.

President Reagan recently signed a bill which cut off the aid the refugees had been receiving, even though the Carter administration had guaranteed it for another eighteen months. These funds had provided for housing, health care and food stamps until the refugees were able to find jobs. Considering the difficulties the Cubans are experiencing in finding employment, it seems as though there will be hard times ahead for many of them. Perhaps such hardships will lead to the

erosion of their belief in the American Dream.

### Patterns of Adjustment

The Cubans' adjustment to life in the United States has been primarily affected by two factors: (1) the presence of a small but significant Cuban community, and (2) their resettlement into an economically depressed community that is largely made up of minority residents. Factor (1) enables the Cubans to retain certain aspects of their culture and acts as a support system. Factor (2) determines the Cubans' class position in this society and affects their patterns of assimilation. By analyzing these two factors in the next few pages, we will see more clearly to what extent the adjustment patterns of the Cuban refugees are affected by cultural values and norms carried over from Cuba, and by the class position they occupy within this society.

The existence of a small Cuban community for the refugees in my study has greatly benefited the individual members in adjusting to life in this country. With approximately 10-15 Cubans living in my apartment building, and another 15-20 living in a building one block away, the Cubans have been able to develop their own niche within this section of East Oakland. This small community has functioned as an effective support system through which aspects of Cuban culture are retained. It is interesting that none of the Cubans in this sub-community knew each other before coming to America. Many of them come from Havana, but were unacquainted with the people they now regard as friends. The aggregation of this group has come about as a result of the resettlement process, wherein the Catholic Relief Agency made an effort to locate the refugees into communities as groups rather than individually.

Despite the newness of their acquaintance, the Cubans appear to have become a fairly cohesive group within a relatively short period of time. Cuban men can often be seen associating together on streetcorners in the neighborhood, and the women often visit each other but stay indoors. Even Jaime and Miguel, who are the most alienated from the small Cuban community, are regarded as members. Jaime and Miguel's marginality is caused by the fact that the others view Miguel's behavior as eccentric (he is often referred to as *loco*), and their lack of trust for Jaime, who is generally regarded as a devious youth. In spite of this social distance, Jaime and Miguel are seen as an integral part of the Cuban community. This became most evident to me when a Cuban woman's dog was hit by a car and killed. This minor tragedy drew most of the

Cubans in the area to come outside and console her. Even Miguel, who was down at the other end of the block waiting for a bus, came back to the site to show his concern.

This small crisis was an occasion when the cohesiveness of the Cuban community manifested itself outrightly. Most often, however, the closeness of the Cuban community is demonstrated through socializing. Occasionally, Cuban men get together to play drums and sing Afro-Cuban songs. This activity is regarded as a very pleasant occasion because it allows the men to reminisce together about Cuba. More regularly, Cuban men can be seen gathered together drinking beer and smoking marijuana in an informal session of light discussion and humor. This form of group activity, like the drum playing, corresponds to social norms that were carried over from Cuba. Both activities are regarded as pleasant and relaxing occasions, and could only occur with the existence of a small Cuban community.

By enabling the Cubans to socialize together, the sub-community eases some of the difficulties caused by social disjunction and cultural shock. None of the Cubans in the group can speak English fluently, which limits the extent to which they can establish friendships with non-Spanish speakers. With the exception of myself and my household, the Cubans have very little contact with Americans. Jaime has become close friends with a Chicano named Manny, but this was made possible by the fact that Manny spoke Spanish. Without a Cuban community, it is very likely that the refugees would not make many friends. As foreigners who are unfamiliar with American customs and norms, adjustment to this society is made much easier by being integrated into a group of people who are in the same situation. Together they can share the unsettling experience of adapting to a new culture.

The cohesiveness of the group is based partly on the fact that all within the group are Cuban. The fact that the Cubans are in a common plight of near destitution serves as a basis for group solidarity. Their shared misfortune acts as an important bond and serves as a reason to extend various forms of support to one another. For example, the Cubans generally look out for each other's apartment when the resident is not at home. This service was also extended to me as a result of the relationship I had developed with the Cubans. However, Mario, the ambitious Cuban mentioned earlier, became alienated from the other Cubans as he began to achieve some financial success. Mario's apartment was burglarized by another Cuban while he was out at work. When he returned and asked the others if they had seen anyone suspicious around his place, the other Cubans responded with smug indifference and offered



no help even though all knew who the perpetrator had been. Jaime added to Mario's loss by stealing his clothing, small pieces of furniture and silverware while Mario was in the process of moving out of his apartment. Although Mario had once been regarded as a friend and a part of the group, his drive for financial success and his close association with white Americans had deprived him of the group's support. Even though he too was a Cuban refugee, he was outcast by the group because of his desire to become economically and socially integrated into the larger society.

Hence, the small Cuban community has an effect upon how individual Cubans adjust to life in their new environment. By providing certain forms of support, and by acting as a basis for cultural retention, the sub-community reduces the degree of culture shock that the refugees experience. In an article in *Cuba Times*, the director of a Cuban resettlement center in New York City noted that Cubans who are isolated from other refugees generally experience the most alienation and therefore have the greatest difficulty in adjusting (Spring 1981). Isolated refugees have a higher chance of turning to crime and ending up in prison. Being part of a sub-community of Cubans may not keep the refugees out of trouble or out of jail, but it will at least make life a bit easier to deal with.

The second factor which influences the adjustment of the Cuban refugees is the type of community into which they have been resettled. The vast majority of Cuban refugees arrived in this country penniless and completely dependent upon the federal government to provide for their welfare. In such a state, the Cubans joined the ranks of America's underclass: the unemployed, underemployed, the lumpen proletariat who subsist on crime and vice, and the thousands of Americans whose existence is dependent upon receiving social security, welfare, food stamps, and other forms of government assistance. Funneled into America's inner cities with the rest of this underclass, the Cubans become marginal in relation to the economic and political structure of this society. It is within this marginal status that the Cubans' adaptation to American culture takes place.

To illustrate the circumstances into which the Cubans have been accommodated, I will briefly describe the community into which they have been placed. The section of East Oakland where the Cuban refugees and I now reside is probably one of the poorest areas in the city, and maybe even the entire Bay Area. The neighborhood encompasses four city blocks and is conveniently sectioned off by railroad tracks on the east, a main road on the west, a large supermarket to the south, and

some warehouses to the north. The only businesses in the area are two liquor stores, seven bars, a drug store and a small grocery store. I was told by a repair man from Pacific Gas and Electric that the neighborhood was once a thriving commercial district. The presence of an abandoned Bank of America building two lots away from our building makes me believe that the man from P.G. and E. was accurate. The building where the Cubans and I now reside was formerly a record store and a television repair shop. It is terribly run down and would probably be condemned as a fire hazard if it were ever inspected.

The inhabitants of the community are from a diverse array of backgrounds. The majority of the people are black Americans, but there is also a sizeable number of Mexicans, Southeast Asians, American Indians and even a few white people. All of the people in the neighborhood are poor, and it seems from the presence of several adults out on the streets during day time working hours that many of them are unemployed. There is a methadone clinic in the area which caters to a large group of heroin addicts who can be seen on the streetcorners late at night searching to satisfy their demand for drugs. There are also a number of prostitutes in the area who operate out of the bars and can also be seen on the streetcorners arguing with the addicts late at night. Most of the bars open early in the morning and close late at night, and cater to what seems to be a substantial number of heavy drinkers in the neighborhood.

This is the neighborhood where the Cuban refugees have been placed. Within such an environment the Cubans will assimilate some of the norms and values of those around them. To an outsider, it might seem as though the Cubans fit in well with their environment. They are not the only inhabitants who do not speak English, and certainly are not the only ones who are unemployed. Seeing Jaime and Miguel selling marijuana out on the corner late at night, one might think that they had been part of this community for some time. They wear the same type of clothing as many of the black Americans, and listen to the same kind of music on the same type of large radios. Watching Carlos bee-bop down the street, one could easily mistake him for a black American (he too is black) because of his style of walking. Yet, to the other people who live there, the Cubans are a distinct group.

The fact that the Cubans have adapted as they have might lead one to think that the Cubans possessed a disposition which inclined them to behave in manners similar to lower class Americans. However, much of the Cubans' behavior is the result of the assimilation of social norms. The similarities that the Cubans have with the other residents of the community such

as clothing styles, criminal activity and music, represent adaptations that the Cubans have made. The clothing styles and music were known to the Cubans while they were in Cuba, but they were out of reach. The criminal behavior such as drug selling, stealing and selling goods, gambling, etc., were practiced in Cuba, though not as openly, and have had to be re-learned in order to be applied successfully in this environment. For example, Jaime learned how and where to sell stolen goods from his American friend Manny. Adopting these behaviors has been part of the Cubans adjustment to this society.

As unemployed, poorly educated, impoverished people, the Cubans share some important characteristics with the other community residents. They find themselves at the bottom of America's class structure, and like their American counterparts, they are without the power to alter their situation. Many of the male refugees have run into trouble with the law and have spent time in prison. Being unemployed most of the time, they find themselves spending a great deal of time socializing on the streetcorners just like the other men in the community. It is as though their adjustment is completely out of their own control, and they are simply becoming like those around them. Of course some of them acted in similar ways prior to coming to this country, but the circumstances were different. In Cuba they alienated themselves by refusing to work or by not participating in political activities. In this country, they desire to become a part of the mainstream of society, but are systematically denied the opportunity to be integrated. Though they are Cuban refugees and therefore different in many ways from the people who live near them, they are now a part of the same social class, and consequently have a great deal in common with their neighbors.

The adjustment of the Cuban refugees has been affected in different ways by the factors mentioned at the outset, namely (1) the presence of a sub-community of Cubans; and (2) the type of community in which they have been resettled. Both factors influence how the Cubans adjust, yet they operate differently. Which factor plays a greater role in determining how they adjust? I would have to say the second one, for it is much easier for Cubans to re-orient themselves to U.S. culture and thereby gain acceptance, than it is for them to challenge the social forces and actual structure of society which limits their range of growth and development.

### Conclusion

Proposing an explanation for the adjustment of the Cuban

refugees is complicated by the fact that the two dependent variables - culture and structure - interact, and therefore must be considered in relation to each other. Yet despite the complexity involved, arriving at an appropriate theoretical explanation for the Cuban refugees' adjustment is a worthwhile and important endeavor, in that by so doing, we further our understanding of refugee resettlement and adaptation. America is a nation of immigrants, and has historically acted as a magnet in drawing people to it from all part of the earth. Each immigrant group has had a different experience in adjusting to life in this country, partly because of changes in structural conditions which have taken place over time, and partly because of how their cultures have interacted with the dominant culture of this society. Other factors could be considered in explaining how groups have adapted, but the two dealt with in this paper - culture and structure - are the most essential.

The information in this paper has been presented in a way that enables culture and structure to be considered separately. In the first section on stereotypes, we examined how negative stereotypes of the Cuban refugees created by the American media and the Cuban government have limited their opportunities for social and economic advancement. These stereotypes, coupled with the prevalence of racist values in the dominant culture of this society, act as a super-structural constraint upon the Cubans. The negative attitudes towards the Cubans limit their chances for mobility because these attitudes are so firmly rooted in the dominant culture of the U.S. and are manifested in institutionalized forms.

In the section which followed on why the Cubans left their country, we examined the expectations of the refugees towards life in the United States. Through such an analysis, we were able to identify some of the attitudes and values developed in Cuba and carried over to this country. The fact that many of the Cuban refugees came here with the desire to acquire material possessions and achieve financial success provides us with an indication of what their values were in Cuba. These values shaped the Cubans' disposition towards life in the United States, and thereby influenced their behavior.

Finally, in the last section, we analyzed the observations of how the Cubans adjusted, distinguishing between two factors which contributed most heavily to their adaptation. The first to be considered was the presence of a sub-community of Cuban refugees. This sub-community acted as a system of support for the refugees and helped in easing the trauma of resettlement and culture shock. The sub-community also helped the Cubans to retain certain aspects of their culture by providing

them with an outlet for various forms of cultural expression. The second factor cited as influencing the adjustment of the Cubans was the type of community into which they were resettled. The community played an important role in determining what types of values and norms the Cubans assimilated. The fact that the community was economically depressed leads the Cubans to become integrated into the lowest socio-economic class in this society.

In the next few years, we will undoubtedly continue to hear reports about problems and disturbances created by the Cuban refugees. The American media will probably continue to malign the Cubans, calling them criminals, rejects and other names of degradation, and perhaps few Americans will ever come to understand the Cuban refugees. Hence, they may blend into America's underclass, becoming part of that mass of people who are alienated and marginal to middle class America. However, it is unlikely that the Cubans and the rest of that class will accept their marginality, no matter how many prisons are built or how much welfare is cut. It will only be when we come to realize why and how people become trapped at the bottom of this society that we can begin to formulate workable solutions to these kinds of problems.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The statistics used throughout the following section are derived from the *Report of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force* 1981.

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