

**CASE STUDY****Marisol Martínez**

“I’m proud of myself and my culture, but I think I know what I should know.”

Marisol Martínez was born and raised in the United States, living first in New York City and later in Milltown, a small industrial city in the Northeast. Both of her parents were born in Puerto Rico, but they raised most of their eight children in this country. Marisol’s first language was Spanish, but because she learned English before going to school she was never in a bilingual program. She is still fluent in both languages and uses both when talking with bilingual speakers, and Spanish when addressing her parents. In language use, she is typical of many Latinos in the United States, a sizable number of whom speak both languages at least to some extent.¹

Marisol lives in a city housing project. It is a small brick townhouse, two stories high, in the middle of a row of exact replicas along the length of a city block. There is a patch of ground in front of each and a larger one in back, which some families have enclosed for a small vegetable or flower garden during spring and summer. The neighborhood is active and noisy with the sounds of children, music (both rap and salsa), and traffic. The living room of the Martínez apartment is very small, crowded with furniture and many family pictures and religious figures on tables and walls. Upstairs are three bedrooms and a bath. Marisol lives here with one brother, three sisters, and her parents. Her older siblings are married or living on their own. She is 16 years old and the fifth oldest of the children. The oldest daughter is 31.

The Martínez family is very close-knit. Marisol’s parents are older than most of her friends’ parents, and, because of medical problems, neither her mother nor her father work. Both seem to have a firm hold on their children and are involved in their lives, particularly in educational matters. All of Marisol’s older siblings have managed to graduate from high school, quite a feat in view of the dropout rate among Latinos, which has for many years fluctuated between 40 and 80 percent.² The success of Marisol and her siblings can no doubt be explained partially by the stability of the Martínez family. Research by Javier Tapia among low-income Puerto Ricans found that family stability was the most important factor influencing the academic performance of low-income students. Marisol’s parents also graduated from high school, although more than half of Latino adults in this city do not have a high school diploma.³

Over the past three decades, the demographics of the small city where Marisol and her family live have changed dramatically. Nowhere is this more evident than in the schools, where the proportion of Puerto Ricans is now greater than 70 percent. African Americans make up a small percentage of the total, and the remainder of the students are European Americans, primarily Irish and French Canadians. In the city as a whole, however, Puerto Ricans make up less than half of the population. The substantially higher percentage in the schools is due to several factors, including the larger family size in the Puerto Rican community and the considerable

“White flight” that has taken place since the schools were desegregated in the early 1980s. Almost 60 percent of all Puerto Ricans in Milltown live in poverty, four times higher than the poverty rate of Whites.

The change in demographics has also been felt in town politics. Puerto Ricans in the schools and in town in general have often been the object of discrimination and stereotypes. There have been frequent newspaper articles and editorials about the rising crime rate, drug abuse, and the subsequent disintegration of the city from an overidealized past, all with not-so-subtle implications that Puerto Ricans are responsible. Puerto Ricans are not the first group to suffer this kind of treatment. Milltown is a city of immigrants, and each new group has had to struggle with similar conditions of discrimination and rejection.

Marisol is a sophomore in the city’s public comprehensive high school. She is following an academic course of study, and her grades are all A’s and B’s. She likes all of her classes, especially biology and geometry, and she expects to go to college, although her plans are still relatively uncertain. When she was interviewed, she said she was thinking of either modeling or nursing as a career. If she does go to college, she will be the first in her family to do so.

Until fourth grade, Marisol went to school in New York City. She remembers being “very smart” in school and doing well there. However, because her family considered the neighborhood too dangerous, they moved to Milltown, where they have lived for about 10 years. This pattern of migration is not unusual for Puerto Ricans, who frequently first settle in New York and later move to other urban areas in the Northeast. Between 1940 and 1970 alone, about 835,000 Puerto Ricans moved to the United States, reflecting one of the most massive outmigrations in the century.⁴ Currently, fewer than half of all Puerto Ricans living in the United States are in New York, but this percentage has decreased considerably in the past 50 years. In fact, one of the most significant findings of the 2000 census concerning Puerto Ricans was that they were increasingly living in relatively small cities such as Milltown. Although Puerto Ricans had previously been largely concentrated in the Northeast, by 2000 only about 68 percent of the more than 3,000,000 Puerto Rican residents of the continental United States were residents in this part of the country.⁵

Puerto Rico became a colony of the United States in 1898, which helps explain some of the differences between Puerto Rican migration, or (im)migration, and other immigrations.⁶ Taken over by the United States as a result of the Spanish-American War, since 1952 Puerto Rico has officially had “commonwealth” status, although some people maintain that this is a camouflage for what is in reality a colony.⁷ After 1900, U.S. absentee landlords and later large corporations dominated the economy, displacing small farmers and creating economic and political dependence for the island. Puerto Ricans were made U.S. citizens in 1917 (some say, to coincide with the need for soldiers in the armed forces during World War I, for which Puerto Rican men were recruited en masse). Consequently, they do not need passports or special permission to migrate to the United States. In addition, “back and forth” or circulatory migration is a major characteristic of the Puerto Rican community in the United States. This kind of movement is based primarily on the economic dependence of Puerto Rico on the United States. To

explain the formidable economic subordination of the island, it is often said that “when the United States sneezes, Puerto Rico catches cold.”

The economic situation of Marisol’s family did not improve substantially after the move from New York, but the family feels safer in this small city. Nevertheless, the problems of urban living, including drug abuse and crime, are becoming more apparent here every day. There are frequent drug raids by police and signs of gang activity are increasingly apparent, but there is also a “small town” atmosphere in this city that makes it feel more comfortable than large urban areas.

Marisol was shy but eager to discuss her experiences in school and at home. She seems to be very aware of her academic success as compared with the situation of many of her friends. It is a source of both pride and pressure. Three major themes emerged from interviews with Marisol: the desire “to be someone”; a keen awareness of peer pressure and her attempts to deal with it; and a contradictory cultural identity, which ranged from pride to lack of awareness or even embarrassment.

“I Want To Be Someone”

[When I was younger] I wanted to be a good student. I wanted to be someone when I grew up. . . . I wanted to have a future. I want to be someone, you know? Have work and be someone people can look up to, not be out in the streets doing nothing.

I was [a good student] because I respected the teachers, and I did my work, and I behaved. . . . Well, I go to school to learn. If I know I’m trying and my grades are down, the point is I tried.

[What would you tell a new student in your school about what it means to be successful?] I would say not a nerd, actually. I would just say that he has to keep up with the grades and the books and things like that, but then again, watch yourself in the school because, if you’re gonna stay quiet and be behaving, they’re gonna take advantage of you, the bigger ones, you know, and the tougher ones. I would just say not take things.

I think I can make it, I think I wanna make it, I think I’m successful. . . . I’m still going to school, and I don’t plan to drop out, and I’m still keeping on with everything, not like others that will quit and that have quit. . . . I don’t think there’s anything stopping me. I don’t think there should be anything stopping me. If I know I can do it, I should just keep on trying. Of course, no one can stop me, and there’s nothing that can get in the way of me wanting to do what I want to do.

I just think of that, you know. I wouldn’t want to see myself like [my friends on the street or in prison or with babies]. So that’s what keeps me going.

[My friends who are still in school] want to make it, just the way I want to make it. They plan to make it, and they have faith in themselves. They want to go to college, the same way I want to. They don’t want to be in the streets. They want to be someone too.

[My parents] want me to be someone, I guess. . . . They talk to me, you know? They’re open with me and they tell me what’s right for me and what’s not right. I do things to please them. . . . They like school, and they encourage you to keep going. I think they’re proud of us ‘cause my sisters and brothers, they all have nice report cards; they never stood back, you know, and usually we do this for my mother. We like to see her the way she wants to be, you know, to see her happy.

I think if I believe in being something and if I believe that I want to do something, I think I should do my best in doing it. . . . I would take it on my own. I wouldn't go to teachers or counselors. I mean, I would talk to my friends about it, but I would take it on my own.

[What will it take to make you successful in the future?] I don't know . . . I guess never quit . . . and . . . have my hopes up. That's about it. I don't know . . . I mean, keep up with what I'm doing now and just keep on going.

Peer Pressure and Defenses Against It

[My family and I] talk about mainly things that are happening nowadays, such as drugs and teen pregnancy and, you know, things that are important to us. They really care about us and just tell us the rights from the wrongs. She prefers, and he prefers, us to be open to them, you know, and never keep things from them.

My parents are really beautiful people. They're peaceful, you know; they don't like problems. They like to share with other people. But one thing, if people come giving them problems, they will not stay shut, their temper will rise like this [snaps her fingers]. They're really nice people to get along with. . . . They understand us. They take time out to stay with us and talk to us, you know. Not too many parents do that. . . . I like living with these people, and I like being with them.

[Would you change anything about them?] Nope. Not a thing, absolutely nothing.

[At the teen clinic], we answer questions, for instance, students have. You know, they're free to ask us because we're students like them. We put up, like, the questions they might ask with the answers. We all get together and talk about topics and make fliers and give them out. . . . We also have like a "Dear Abby" sort of thing. . . . They do write letters, and we do read them, and we keep it up because I guess they enjoy it.

There's a lot of girls out there getting pregnant and dropping out of school. I don't want one of those girls to be me, you know? I just want to stay away, you know? And I want to advise the ones that are not pregnant as to why they shouldn't get pregnant at an early age and how to prevent from doing that. . . . I would like the kids such as myself to realize what's happening out in the streets and not to put everything to waste. . . . If they're really interested in going to school and having a nice future, I think they should read things and take time to think about it and learn about it. . . . I think there are students out there that need this information and would take time to read it and know more about it.

Cultural Identity: Pride and Embarrassment

I'm proud of [being Puerto Rican]. I guess I speak Spanish whenever I can. . . . To me, it's important, you know, because I have to stand up for Puerto Ricans, to say like for the Whites probably it's more important for them too, just like the Blacks.

I used to have a lot of problems with one of my teachers 'cause she didn't want us to talk Spanish in class, and I thought that was like an insult to us, you know? Just telling us not to talk Spanish, 'cause [we] were Puerto Ricans and, you know, we're free to talk whatever we want. . . . I could never stay quiet and talk only English, 'cause sometimes, you know, words slip in Spanish. You know, I think they should understand that.

[Are there any differences between Puerto Rican students and others?] [No,] 'cause you know you can't say that Puerto Ricans act one way and the Whites act the other. . . . [But] I know that Puerto Ricans are way, way badder than the Whites. . . . You know, the way they act and they fight. . . . You know, but everybody's the same, everyone's human, and I don't know, I think they should understand everyone just the way they are.

I think [teachers] should get to know you, and whatever they don't like about Puerto Ricans, or they feel uncomfortable with, you know, just talk to you about it, and you can teach them things that probably they're confused about and they don't understand. That way we can communicate better.

I don't think [having a class in Puerto Rican history] is important. . . . I'm proud of myself and my culture, but I think I know what I should know about the culture already, so I wouldn't take the course. . . . No, 'cause [teachers] would have to know about Black and White and Irish [too]. . . . I think they should treat us all the same, you know?

[Do you admire people in your community, for example?] Admire them? No! I admire my mother, that's it.

COMMENTARY

This case study of Marisol Martínez brings up several dilemmas facing many young people from dominated cultures. One of these is wanting to be successful while also trying to maintain one's culture. This strain is evident in Marisol's determination to "be someone," also a major theme in Marcelo Suarez-Orozco's classic ethnographic study of Central American high school students.⁸ The differences between Central American and Puerto Rican communities in the United States are substantial, including both historical and cultural differences. Yet, in the case of Marisol, there is the same insistence on "making it," challenging the assumption that only "voluntary minorities" (as opposed to Puerto Ricans, who would be considered "involuntary minorities") have the drive to succeed academically.

To "be somebody," Marisol has had to be a good student. When she talks about what it takes to be a good student, her focus is not so much on grades as on behavior and attitudes. To be *educado* in the Latino sense of the word means being polite, respectful, and obedient, and it is how many Latino parents define a "good student."¹¹ This multiple definition of *educado* has a profound effect on many Latino children, who learn that to be a good student also means to be quiet and reserved, a departure from how intellectually curious children are defined in mainstream U.S. culture.

Marisol is caught in the classic struggle between what her parents and teachers want her to strive for and what her peers, including some of her close friends, have experienced. This dilemma was described poignantly by Marisol on several occasions. She virtually absolved the school of any responsibility and when she mentioned it at all, it was to say that students dropped out simply because they did not like school. Marisol did not mention how certain cultural discontinuities between students and the school might exist, or how school policies and practices might jeopardize student learning. She believes that youths must accept complete responsibility for their own success, that only their own determination will help them get

an education. Although self-reliance may define Marisol's success, it is probably not true of other students.

The role of family is evident in Marisol's determination and academic success. Her efforts to please her parents and make them happy is a primary motivating factor in her academic success, and in this Marisol is similar to other Puerto Rican youngsters.⁹ She says that her parents do not pay attention to grades as much as to their children "trying." What makes them angry is lack of effort or good behavior from their children. They have taught their children to "want to be someone," and this concern is reflected in Marisol. Her parents are involved in the children's education in ways that might not be evident to the school but may in the long run be even more meaningful in their children's academic success. When she was asked if her parents participated in school, Marisol was quick to answer that they did not because they do not visit the school or go to parent meetings or volunteer. But, their strong influence seems to be significant in their children's drive to do well in school.

Although Marisol has a dogged determination not to drop out and succumb to the many negative pressures around her, she is unclear about how to plan for her future. The experiences of some of her friends (one is in prison, others are home with babies, some are on drugs, some live on welfare) have clearly made an impact on her determination. Their lives, as she puts it, are "down the drain," yet she neither seeks nor receives help from teachers or counselors. Her parents are unable to give her the level of support and information she needs for choosing a college or even for the kinds of classes she should be taking to prepare for college. She has no idea how to go about fulfilling her dream of becoming a model. Moreover, the choice of modeling as a possible profession indicates how she has internalized the limited role of women within society. Nursing, definitely a far second in her life choices, is only a backup if modeling fails. Although she does well in school, particularly in the sciences, she has apparently not even considered a career as a physician.

The school needs to play a role in opening the horizons of students such as Marisol. The kind of assistance teachers and schools provide for middle-class students in other settings is missing in her case, including nonsexist and nonracist career counseling, college admissions information, and advice on financial aid. Marisol has learned to rely on herself and does not expect help, but the incongruence between wanting success and the vague notion of how to achieve it is quite striking. Her desire to make it on her own is a powerful indication of her determination to succeed. Unfortunately, it is seldom enough.

Still, Marisol's strength and resoluteness to continue in school and to do well seem shatterproof. She has convinced herself, with the support of her close-knit family, that she can succeed and that she is worthy of success. Although the role models she has around her, especially her peers, are not always positive, she has developed strategies for confronting tough situations and temptations. Like other young people her age, Marisol is faced with the pressures of conforming to values and behaviors of other teenagers. In an urban setting, especially in a poor economic environment, these pressures are compounded.

The rate of teenage pregnancy in Milltown is one of the highest in the state. In explaining why she has been so concerned about this issue, Marisol seems to imply that she sees her work at the clinic almost as a vaccine against pregnancy. She is not

involved in any other school activities. She does not participate in sports and is not interested in the few clubs that are available. Fortunately, one outlet for her is the teen clinic. Her work there supports and affirms her desire to be a good student and to persist in her education.

Marisol is fighting a constant battle to “make it” in this society while maintaining her heritage, yet she also obviously has picked up the message that she needs to abandon her heritage to be successful. These contradictory sentiments are evident in many of Marisol’s beliefs. Negative messages about cultural and linguistic differences and how they are devalued in society are evident not just in school but also in the media and in the everyday life of the community.

The attitudes young people develop about their culture and heritage cannot be separated from the sociopolitical context in which they live. In this particular city, for example, there was actually a proposal to limit the number of Puerto Ricans coming into town, based on the argument that they are a drain on the welfare rolls. Given the unemployment rate of 22 percent in the Puerto Rican community, the proposal was positively received by some segments of the non-Puerto Rican population. In addition, the “English only” furor found its way here about 15 years ago when municipal workers were told they could not speak Spanish on the job (this order was later revoked). Several years ago, a number of Puerto Rican residents mentioned seeing signs reading “No Puerto Ricans” on apartments for rent. That these incidents might profoundly affect young people is not surprising; what is surprising is that young people retain any pride at all in their culture.

Because she cannot resolve the challenge posed by the pluralism of her school and society, Marisol repeats what she has learned throughout her education: that *equal means the same*, that treating everyone the same is the fairest way. This is why she does not believe that a course in Puerto Rican history is necessary or even desirable. It was clear from her interview that she knew practically nothing of Puerto Rican history, but she was reluctant to want a course in it because somehow that would seem to be “special treatment.” That European American students are accorded this special treatment every day probably has not occurred to her. It happens in the curriculum through courses on “world” (primarily European) history and American (primarily White) history.

Marisol is uncertain about the distinction between cultural and individual differences, and she seems uncomfortable talking about these things in anything but a superficial way. This is no doubt related to how these issues are treated in school. For example, Marisol has never learned anything in her classes about being Puerto Rican. In social studies classes, she remembers studying about Spain, “but not to the point of studying about Puerto Ricans.” One of her homeroom teachers in junior high school, Mr. Pérez, a Puerto Rican teacher of bilingual classes, stands out as the only one who ever bothered teaching his students anything about Puerto Rican history and culture. Marisol remembers seeing reports that students in his classes had done on the bulletin boards, along with books and other exhibits that were available in his classroom. She was interested in many of the things he taught, and, although he was never her classroom teacher, she says she learned a lot from him simply by looking through the materials he kept in the room. She used to feel, she says, “quite proud of myself” when she saw these things.



Marisol's tastes are typical of many young people. Her favorite foods are seafood and pizza, she likes to cook lasagna, and her favorite music is hip hop and rap. She never mentioned Puerto Rican food, music, holidays, or famous people. She says that her parents listen to "old-fashioned" music, referring to Puerto Rican music, which she is very clear about not liking ("Nope, I want them to hear me: NO.") There seems to be nothing, at least in her stated tastes, that would identify her as Puerto Rican.

Yet Marisol is obviously Puerto Rican in intangible but fundamentally more important ways: her deep feelings for her family, respect for parents, and desire to uphold important traditions such as being with family rather than going out with friends on important holidays. She is also respectful, *humilde* (humble), and soft-spoken, but also strong. The last quality is evident, for example, in her uncompromising determination to maintain her native language. At home, she is spontaneously affectionate, rushing over to her mother to hug her tightly and kiss her. She also bears a larger share of family obligations than a great many young people from other cultural backgrounds. This is what is referred to in Hispanic culture as *capacidad*, or a combination of maturity, sense of responsibility, and capability. It is a trait that is very valued in the culture and that parents work hard to inculcate, particularly in their daughters.


Marisol is very much a product of both Puerto Rican and U.S. culture (especially youth culture). Marisol, and many young people like her of various immigrant backgrounds, have created a new culture, one that has elements of the native culture, but is also different from it. It is a good example of the hybridity and synchronization that occur when multiple cultures interact. Far from what used to be called a "melting pot," in modern parlance, we can think of it as mixed media art, where different colors, textures, and media combine and collide.

Both the peer culture and the demands of living in a community where her ethnic group is disparaged rather than admired have an effect on Marisol. But, her strong family network has helped Marisol counteract some of these negative effects by providing role models, at least within the family, that Marisol admires deeply. This admiration, unfortunately, has not spread to others in the community. When asked whom she admired, she answered "all them cute actresses," but was quick to say she did not admire people in her own community except her mother.

On one hand, Marisol has learned the lessons of an assimilationist society very well. On the other, she is hard at work at holding onto what is clearly meaningful for her: a culture and language that the people whom she most loves speak and maintain. The dilemma is a genuine one for this bright young woman who "wants to be someone."

TO THINK ABOUT

1. What do you think is responsible for Marisol's success in school?
2. How can teachers and schools take advantage of Marisol's (and other students') desire to "be someone"?

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3. Why do you think Marisol says that “Puerto Ricans are way, way badder than Whites”?
 4. Think of some students of various backgrounds whom you know. Do they struggle with a similar conflict of pride and embarrassment about their culture, and, if so, how? Give some examples.
 5. Marisol is divided about wanting to be a model or a nurse. What do you think has influenced this decision? If you were her school counselor, what would you say to her?

CASE STUDY

James Karam

“I’d like to be considered Lebanese.”

James Karam is 16 years old and a junior in high school. His dark eyes are serious but animated when he speaks. He thinks he has a big nose and jokes that it is one of the characteristics of being Lebanese. Poised between childhood and adulthood, James is that pleasing combination of practical, responsible, wise adult and refreshing, spirited, eager kid. His maturity is due in no small part to his role as the “responsible” male in the household. His mother and father are separated, and he is the oldest of three children, a position he generally enjoys, although he admits it can be trying at times.

James is Lebanese Christian, or Maronite. His father, whose heritage is Arab, was born and raised in the United States. He met James’s mother while visiting Lebanon, and he brought her back here as his bride. She has been in this country for almost 20 years and is now fluent in English. Although James’s parents are separated, both are close to their children and continue to take an active part in their upbringing and education.

According to the Census Bureau, Arab Americans are people who can trace their heritage to more than 20 countries in North Africa and the Middle East. The 2000 census counted approximately 1.2 million Arab Americans, a sizable increase since the 1990 census number of 870,000.² The Lebanese community, part of the larger Arab population in the United States, is little known to the general population. It is, in this sense, an “invisible minority,” about which more will be said later. There are scattered communities of Lebanese throughout the United States, with large concentrations in several cities, including Springfield, Massachusetts, where James lives. In a participant observer study of the Arab community in this city three decades ago, it was reported that the first Arab settlers arrived in the 1890s from Lebanon. Most were laborers and worked in the city’s factories, on the railroad, or in peddling businesses. They were both Christian and Muslim Lebanese, and there generally was little animosity between them.