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Growing Up Puerto Rican: College Students' Reality of Staying in Puerto Rico Post-Maria

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GROWING UP PUERTO RICAN: COLLEGE STUDENTS'
REALITY OF STAYING IN PUERTO RICO POST-MARIA

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

Puerto Rico has been under influence and colonial rule by the United States since the Spanish-American War of 1898. This has led the island to have partial and limited control over the affairs inside it. The passing of Hurricane Maria on September 20th of 2017 exposed problems even further. Puerto Rico remains under the control of a Financial Oversight and Management Board since the passing of the PROMESA act (The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act) signed by President Barack Obama in 2016. This had forced Puerto Rico to make drastic cuts to its public services. One of the main services was has been its public university, The University of Puerto Rico. This study provides a critical analysis of the reality of college students staying in Puerto Rico and continuing their studies in the UPR. Ten interviews have been completed. These semi-structured qualitative interviews provided themes that can be studied to create and inspire further research and eventually influence policies that can better the quality of life of these students. The data points to mental health issues, limited opportunities in research and internships, post-hurricane experience, structural problems to the university (physical and bureaucratic), amongst others. There are also signs of resilience and community support. Analysis of the themes through the transcription and data coding have provided insight to steps that can be taken at UCF's Puerto Rico Research Hub that can extend to Central Florida and the island itself.

DEDICATIONS

I dedicate this to all Puerto Ricans who have been affected by austerity measures and unjust political processes in the island, and all over the world.

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the events of September 20th, 2017 many changes have been forced on the people of Puerto Rico. The arrival of Hurricane Maria uncovered great susceptibility in the island. An article released by El Nuevo Día on March 9th states that more than 135,000 Puerto Ricans left the island and it is predicted to increase throughout the next couple of years (Delgado Robles 2018). With an approximate \$90 billion spent in damages, more than 462,000 households received \$1.4 billion in Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) individual Assistance for repairs and disaster relief, others were relocated to hotels in 41 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico (FEMA 2018, Kishore et al. 2019). Although FEMA provided relief and reconstruction help, many people were displaced and permanently scarred from Hurricane Maria.

The displacement of Puerto Rican residents is an important factor to consider when looking at the economy and recovery measures in the island. Those who stayed, whether by choice or circumstance, live the reality of life in the Puerto Rico post-Maria. The colonial status of the island provides for a vulnerable position for further damage (Rodriguez-Diaz 2018). The debt crisis was brought to full display by the hurricane, yet it has been part of its history since the Spanish-American War of 1898 (Backiel 2015). The long history of disregard towards the debt could no longer be ignored once Maria hit, leaving Puerto Rico at the hands of an oversight board that had been appointed by President Barack Obama back in 2016 through the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (or PROMESA). The Fiscal Oversight and Management Board was delegated control Puerto Rico's budget (Rodriguez-Soto 2017).

The economic reconstruction devised to address the debt has led to cuts to social programs that used government funds. One of these programs: its public university, the University of Puerto Rico. Students enrolled in the university had outside factors that further affected their situation prior to the hurricane. On March 21st, 2017 the UPR campus in Río Piedras agreed to begin a campus wide strike to fight the fiscal plan that had been presented at the time. Most of the campuses joined in the following weeks, leading a strike that continued until June 12th. The situation had varied effects on students enrolled at the time, to many it greatly delayed students' degree timeline (Meléndez García 2017). During the Fall of 2017, students had returned to school - working harder sometimes to make up for lost time. In September, Maria made landfall and the UPR, composed of 11 campuses, was closed for 40 more days. These factors have affected the college students in Puerto Rico in varying ways, although they have not been explored through academic research. Student activism in the UPR that was observed during the Spring of 2017 is not a new trend, they have stood firm in their resistance towards the "kidnapping" of their public education in the midst of this economic crisis (Martinez & Garcia 2018, Atilés-Osoria 2013). It is pivotal to understand the experiences of these students to seek ways to help.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It can be convenient to believe that there are no issues in Puerto Rico, or if any do exist that they exist in isolation. Puerto Rico's political situation and location lends itself to deep analysis of its inner workings. In September of 2017 the island underwent, category 4, Hurricane Maria. Before diving into the consequences of this major storm, this project seeks to unravel the particularities that preceded the disastrous event.

Colonial Status

An accurate analysis of Puerto Rico cannot be compiled without understanding the historical context of more than 500 years of colonial rule (Backiel 2015; Torruella 2018). Under Spanish rule, beginning in 1493 Puerto Rico became a colony. In 1898 becoming a possession of the United States as a result of the Spanish American War under the terms of the Treaty of Paris. The acquisition by the United States commenced a particular relationship with Puerto Rico. Beginning with the Foraker Act of 1900 which established a U.S. appointed government. Although the law intended to provide structure to the island, Puerto Ricans had limited to influence regarding the implementation of this law and the election of the governing officials. In 1917 the Jones Act was passed, this law granted Puerto Ricans with U.S. citizenship and allowed for the retention of Resident Commissioner in the U.S. congress that did not hold voting power in issues pertaining Puerto Rico, or any issue (Torruella 2018). This same year, the development of the 48 U.S. Code for Tax Exempt Bonds established that:

“All bonds issued by the Government of Puerto Rico, or by its authority, shall be exempt from taxation by the Government of the United States, or by the Government of Puerto Rico or of any political or municipal subdivision thereof, or by any State, Territory, or possession, or by any

county, municipality, or other municipal subdivision of any State, Territory, or possession of the United States, or by the District of Columbia” (United States Code, 2006).

This would later capture the attention of future bondholders, or bonistas, that will be attracted to the triple tax exemption to purchase bonds from the Puerto Rican government to finance its debt with no guarantee of repayment. The dissatisfaction of the US-PR relationship grew as many of these efforts further isolated Puerto Rico in a state of helplessness for what the United States chose next for them. The concept of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, or “Estado Libre Asociado” (as it is known in Spanish), was introduced in 1952 as a result of the Public Law 600.

The ever-amending relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico has based itself on the economic capital. More precisely, Puerto Rico’s lack thereof. Many of the legislation previously mentioned has been reactionary measures that the United States has implemented to combat the economic crisis that Puerto Rico has confronted since its origins as a U.S. territory. As a response to this growing debt crisis the United States decided to implement one more piece of legislation to further prove presiding status over the island. In 2016 under the leadership of President Barack Obama, congress enacted the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act, also known as the PROMESA bill. This bill “addresses Puerto Rico's debt by establishing an oversight board, a process for restructuring debt, and expedited procedures for approving critical infrastructure projects,” all of this done without a democratic process to lead it (PROMESA 2016). President Obama appointed an unelected Financial Oversight and Management Control Board, whose appointments were later found unconstitutional by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit in February 2019 due to failure to follow the outlined procedure in the U.S. Constitution. Although this ruling did not

invalidate the measures that had been taken and implemented by the board since its employment. There is still no official ruling that has been made regarding the validity or future of the members of the Board (Legal Information Institute 2019).

Due to its Commonwealth, or colonial, status Puerto Rico has suffered great loss and economic turmoil. Decisions made by the Puerto Rican and US government have often failed to address their intended purposes, improve the quality of life of the people in Puerto Rico. This disregard has manifested itself in the lived experiences of Puerto Ricans. The Financial Oversight and Management Control Board has made and continue to make cuts to social services, pensions, and higher education (Meléndez and Hinojosa 2017). These services that are critical for the people but are easily dismissed when compared to the enormous debt that needs to be repaid.

University of Puerto Rico

The effects of colonialism tend to bleed into all aspects of life. There is not only a history of colonialism instilled in Puerto Rico but one of violent suppression. The University of Puerto Rico, or UPR, and its students have been subject to this since its beginning. Atilés-Osoria (2013) conducts his analysis of this issue by arguing that,

“(1) Puerto Rico has been under colonial rule for almost 520 years, the past 114 years under the United States; (2) the Puerto Rican people have experienced a high degree of polarization and politicization because of this colonial condition;² and (3) the UPR is not exempt from the country’s colonial and social conflicts. This last point becomes clear through a review of the rich history of student activism that the university has experienced in its 108 years of existence” (106).

Before delving into the current activism that has distinguished the UPR, here's a brief overview of its history. The university of Puerto Rico was established in 1903 and becomes a "Land Grant College" in 1908 in order to create schools for agriculture, science and engineering (Universidad de Puerto Rico 2019). From the beginning the UPR taught its courses in English, although the primary language of the island was and is Spanish (Martinez & Garcia 2018). There has been an unbalance of colonial and native relations that bled into the everyday interactions of the students of the University of Puerto Rico.

Since the implementation of Reserve Officer's Training Corps programs on the university campuses, there have been students organizing around anti-colonial and anti-militarization movements. The great strike of 1948 was a result of forced military participation from the UPR students, hundreds of students were arrested and even more expelled. This discouraged activism of the UPR of a bit (Paralatici 2005). Due to repression of student led independence movements, in 2010 and 2011 there were a series of strikes that emerged due to these colonial relations and resistance towards austerity measures the government was imposing on the UPR due to its growing financial crisis mentioned before (Atilos-Oscoria 2013; Brusi 2011). In 2010, it had been announced that tuition waivers, ones granted to student athletes, fine art students, and honor students would no longer going to be granted if the student was eligible to receive Pell Grants. During the strike process and the back and forth between the governor, Luis Fortuño, and the students and leaders of the UPR (Brusi 2011). The results from these strikes resulted in the administrative and governmental criminalization of student protests in public places (Atilos-Oscoria 2013; Brusi 2011; Martinez & Garcia 2018)

In 2016, the signing of PROMESA and establishment of “La Junta” (The Fiscal Oversight and Management Board), were received by the students as a direct attack to their public education. On April 5, 2017 after the National Student Assembly (Asamblea Nacional de Estudiantes) called for a strike due to the most recent cut to the university’s budget of \$512 million (Melendez Garcia 2017). The system-wide student strike had been a long time coming, organizing and rallying in different campuses for different reasons, at the assembly on April 5th was when they decided to enter into a strike that would last about 60 days, the timeline fluctuates depending on the campus. Although it is important to mention that not all students participated in the processes that lead to the strike. Río Piedras, for example, it was 700 students out of the total student population made this decision. During the strike students were not attending classes due to the university itself being closed (except for some UPR units, i.e. Recinto de Ciencias Médicas) as civic disobedience towards the increasing austerity measures La Junta was imposing as a result of the economic crisis (Brusi et al. 2018).

From 2016 to 2019 there have been increase in enrollment and credit costs, reduction in budget for campuses and funding (El Nuevo Dia 2019). The University of Puerto Rico was not prioritized when developing the plan for debt restructuring by the JFC because it was deemed as, “un mero gasto público,” just public spending (Diaz Gonzalez 2017). This has penalized the students by diminishing the importance of affordable education as it states in the university’s mission statement (Universidad de Puerto Rico 2017):

“To fully develop cultural and intellectual richness [...], specially to those less favored in economic resources, can be put at the service of the Puerto Rican society.”

The JFC proposed a cut of \$450 million from the UPR's budget which led to the 2017 strike mentioned previously. Yet it does not end there, the cuts and cost increases as the announcement of the closing and consolidating of campuses is on the horizon. In 2016 the cost per undergraduate credit hour was \$56, it has increased to \$124 since July of 2019. Although, it is predicted by the JCF for the credit hour to increase to \$157 by 2023, making public education hardly accessible for current and future students (Telemundo).

Hurricane Maria

For those who were impacted by the student strike returned to their Fall semester expecting classes to resume as normal. Unfortunately, about a month and a half into the semester the island underwent a hurricane. September 20th, 2017 would mark the history and every part of Puerto Rico, so much so that many refer to the event as a dividing point of pre and post Maria. Winds of 150 mph left Puerto Rico in total darkness for months to come. An ever-growing population had already been migrating to the mainland since 2010 has become an exodus of Puerto Ricans leaving the island since Hurricane Maria (Pew Research Center 2014). Bringing thousands of Puerto Ricans to states like Florida, Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania (Centro 2018). This migration wave has left the island with a significant dent in its population that is estimated to lose 14% by the end of 2019 (Meléndez and Hinojosa 2017). The Puerto Rican population also suffered due to the loss of lives the hurricane brought about. Kishore et al.'s (2018) study on the mortality rate due to Maria concluded that the actual death toll was about 70 times the official estimate. The results of this study are alarming to think about the disregard to the reality of the damages evoked. The uncovering of social inequalities that resulted from hurricane Maria was important in understanding the reality of where the island

found itself in. recovery efforts allocated \$41 million by US Department of Education to aid recovery for universities impacted by the hurricane yet 20% of the funds were given to the UPR (Brusi et al. 2018). All these events occurred as direct or indirect result of the conditions that had been developing in Puerto Rico for decades. It was the passing of Hurricane Maria that uncovered the vulnerability that the island and its public university found itself in.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

George Hebert Mead is considered the father of **Symbolic Interaction Theory**, one of his students was Herbert Blumer. Blumer developed the framework a bit further by providing an analysis that (a) people act based on the meaning they have attributed to things in their lives, (b) meaning is created through social interaction, (c) meanings for things may change based on interpretive processes. Based on this, researchers, specifically in the health field, have begun to use this framework to interpret subjective concepts through individual behavior (Handberg et. al 2014). When examining the context in which students from the University of Puerto Rico are placed in, it can best analyze based on meaning making to each person's individual experience.

DATA AND METHODS

Participants

The University of Puerto Rico's enrollment makes up about 28% of the total postsecondary institutional enrollment in the island (Instituto de Estadísticas de Puerto Rico 2019). The University of Puerto Rico provides 93% of public postsecondary education in Puerto Rico. Due to the political context which directly affects public education in PR, I have chosen the UPR as my target population. Due to time constraints, I chose two of the eleven campuses: UPR-Río Piedras and UPR-Mayagüez campuses. Participants in this study included college students over the age of 18 who had been enrolled before and after Hurricane Maria in the University of Puerto Rico as an undergraduate or graduate student. Participants were recruited by contacting professors of the university by email and snowball sampling, due to limited available participants during the time of interviews. Once I was made aware of potential participants, we corresponded to confirm participation criteria. For further clarification this study relied on in-depth, respondent-driven sampling, with no attempt to make inferences about the population.

Procedure

The data was collected through face-to-face interviews to gather current information on the experience of students at the University of Puerto Rico. Ten in-depth, semistructured interviews over a two-week period in June 2019. The interviews were conducted by the author, a native-born Puerto Rican undergraduate sociology student. All interviews were guided by a pre-established questionnaire inquiring about themes surrounding the context of university life the year prior to and post Hurricane Maria. Specifically, the questionnaire was guided by the events

of the 2017 UPR Student Strike, individual experience pre and post-Maria, attitudes toward the UPR system and mental health.

Before data collection began, UCF's Institutional Review Board approved the study. The interviews were conducted in Spanish at a location most convenient to the participants (e.g. restaurants, coffee shops, participant's apartment, etc.), each lasted between 30 and 55 minutes. After consent to participate in the study was obtained, the interviews were recorded on a small digital recorder and a password protected smart device. Once all interviews were conducted, the author transcribed verbatim each interview. Resulting in approximately 53 pages of data.

Analysis

Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed by me. A professor in my major and I independently read the transcripts and identified themes that were derived from the interview script. Some themes that were not a part of the interview script were also found. Based on the interview script, and other themes, and my consensus, participant quotes (translated into English) were divided into the following themes: 2017 UPR Student Strike, experience as college student pre and post Maria, decisions to stay/leave, mental health, attitudes toward the UPR system. I identify the research participants with pseudonyms, outside of that there are no identifiable traits outside of gender.

RESULTS

Participants

The sample consisted of 10 students from the University of Puerto Rico over the age of 18. Three of the participants were from the UPR-Río Piedras and the rest were students from the UPR-Mayagüez; 6 men and 4 women. All interviews were in Spanish. The average age was 21 (ranging from 20 to 24). All the respondents were born in Puerto Rico; many grew up in Ponce, PR. All except two participants were current students, the ones who were not were recent graduates. All the participants have never been married and currently reside in the island.

2017 UPR Student Strike

All students addressed how they 2017 UPR Student Strike affected their college experience. The answers varied from moderate involvement to none. The strike was something that took effect in all UPR campuses, keeping students from the scheduled academic semester. Many of the interviewed students had just entered the UPR system (2016) while others were closer to graduating.

For students who had begun their first year of college in the University of Puerto Rico expressed conflicted feelings about their participation, or lack thereof. For example, Hiram, a natural science student in the Rio Piedras campus, commented:

“I entered the UPR during one of the university's most turbulent phases, at least in recent years. I wasn't necessarily pro-strike, but I supported the reasoning behind it. I was for the students, just because I understand your point of view does not mean that I need to support it. So, my

participation was from afar; I feel like a hypocrite saying that but the reality is that its all difficult.”

Another student Gil, a chemistry major who started at the UPR in the Ponce campus which is located in the southern part of Puerto Rico, the city of Ponce, and later transferred to Río Piedras, commented on his minor involvement and what he observed from friends.

"I participated in one of the protests in Ponce. The choir performed once, and that was my involvement really. [...]Although I was not affected by this academically; I know friends that transferred to other private colleges, or even the United States, because they could not handle the academic pressure.

Some students decided to enjoy their time off, rather than protest. Wilberto, molecular cell biology student in the Rio Piedras campus, shared his experience as being a time to just have fun. He stated,

"My first thought was that the strike and protests were necessary. Two weeks go by, okay, a month, cool but then suddenly 'boom' indefinite strike.

That was my best time in college, the strike. I was not involved at all; I took my time to mess around. Went to the beach, went out, I just enjoyed my college experience. Although coming back it was all rushed and a huge headache to finish the semester in June."

The reaction from other students that had been in the UPR for longer had a better grasp on the context of what was happening, and some were being directly affected by what the students were protesting. One of these students was Carolina, an operations management major in the Mayaguez campus. She discussed:

"I participated in the assemblies and the votes. We were protesting the proposed tuition increases, which are now happening. They did not pay attention to us at all about the cuts to athletic tuition waivers which is something I've had since day one here. [...] I'm going to be completely affected, my entire college career was possible because of that tuition waiver."

Experience as college student pre and post Maria

Following the semester of the student strike, UPR students and all Puerto Ricans faced a great challenge. On September 20th of 2017 hurricane Maria made landfall. This natural disaster marked the lives of many, participants shared how it was like to be a student of the public university post-disaster. One of the areas where students were impacted immediately was personal damages or loss. Ana, a recent social sciences graduate from the Mayagüez campus, shared what she went through:

"After Maria a we lost everything in my apartment. I lost shoes, clothes, everything, the roof flew off and everything got wet. It was my last year and I didn't know what to do, I went from house to house, whoever let me stay with them. My car was also on its last leg, I would have to spend entire days on campus because there was no other option."

Other students saw their academics suffer due to damages to campus resources. Ariana, an agricultural science student in Mayagüez, reports how people in her major were affected:

"The farm where I study was greatly affected, the crops in Puerto Rico for my major requirements were affected as well. We didn't have the opportunity to visit the farms to do observations and conduct our practicum. I would say that everything was affected even in a minimal way, it all contributed to making things more difficult."

Wilberto, commented on the immediate and long-term effects. He tells:

“You can’t concentrate, you can’t write, you’re thinking of the heat, of wanting to drink water. It was all a series of events on top of each other; from strike to hurricane and all that shit. Classes had to be shifted, we literally had class December 23rd and had to be back to school by December 26th. That summer I had an internship that began in May, yet classes wouldn’t end until mid-June; I had to take an incomplete in all my classes and make it up once I was back. It was all particularly hard as well because after the hurricane all of my friends parted ways, some went to Ponce, some to Florida-- all of the sudden they were all far.”

For other students, like Gil, it made them realize the type of place that they live and study in. Gil exposes the reality for many students in the public university. He states:

“The hurricane made me realize that are many structural problems here, there are needs-based problems that are not being equitably addressed, they tended to get ignored before the hurricane but after its passing they have become too prevalent to ignore.”

Decisions to stay/leave

A natural disaster like a category five hurricane may take everything away from some and lead them make a choice between leaving or staying in the island. Students shared with me why they decided to remain in Puerto Rico. Many stated that they did not even consider leaving the island. Students like Ariana and Wilberto shared that sentiment since they were sure the university would open their doors again. Other students like Andrea, a social science graduate from the Mayagüez campus, although decided to stay shared her thoughts during that time. She shared:

“In the moment I was desperate, I would’ve rather gotten on a plane, but at the same time I knew that I had to face other things and I also had to complete my degree.”

Carolina had very real option to move outside of Puerto Rico and in a way, it was going to be decided for her. She said:

“One of my grandma’s nieces is a doctor and they offered her flight tickets so she could bring her family from Puerto Rico. My mom had told me that if by December classes don’t start up again, she was going to ask for tickets for my grandma and I.”

Other participants that did comment on why they stayed, described their logic of why they chose not to leave. Geraldo, an engineering student at Mayagüez, shared his thought process. He describes:

“First of all, my parents stayed, and I didn’t really want to leave halfway, to go live alone. Over there things are more expensive, it’s not an easy thing to do. Now, you see how everything is reestablishing itself although it doesn’t look the same as before I didn’t have a reason to leave.”

Mental health

Although some students had already shared about their mental processes during the aftermath of the hurricane, the interviews went a bit deeper to learn about how they dealt with/handled it all. Participants expressed of range of different experiences and coping mechanisms regarding their mental health. Students like Andrea and Carolina expressed deep difficulty dealing with their mental health. Andrea shared:

“I would be so frenzied, I couldn’t sleep. There were so many hours with not much to do that I would feel desperate to then sleep without power, no fan, nothing [...] I would also get panic and

anxiety attacks and I would cry and repeat “I want to leave, I want to leave” but those eventually pass.”

Other participants confided in me that they had to seek professional help during those times. Tito and Hiram both shared this, although they had differing feelings when first sharing about it. Tito started his statement with a disclaimer:

“Im gonna come clean, I went to a psychologist after the hurricane. [...] I think many, even me are a bit brainwashed in that way [referring to stigmatization of professional help]. But I said, ‘fuck it’ and I went.”

Hiram also sought out professional counseling but did not provide a disclaimer instead he describes that others do. He shared:

“I think about things a lot [...this] would lead me to ridiculous anxiety. I’d never seen myself in that situation, I didn’t know how to deal with it; I stopped eating, I stopped feeling hungry. Obviously, my sleep schedule was a shitshow, I felt horrible. It felt like I had a knot in my chest, and it wouldn’t go away, and I cried a lot. It would be 5 pm and boom ‘Damn, I can’t. I don’t want this anymore; I don’t want this anymore.’ I’ve never been a person to believe in the stigma that mental health isn’t important, that’s bullshit, I definitely recognize the importance of it. I went to a psychologist for the first time and it helped.”

There are also students, like Ana, that expressed a different sentiment. She felt proud that she was able to come out stronger in the end regardless of the circumstance. She said:

“I’m very sentimental, I’m a Pisces. But I’ve always been a persevering person. I lived some very difficult moments [...] but I have always said that I would go through them again simple because they would make me stronger.

Attitudes toward the UPR system

The sum of each student’s experience is different, although there were similar outlooks on how the participants view the UPR system as a whole. Every participant that answered this question had both positive and negative things to say. Jeremy, an industrial microbiology student in Mayaguez, had recently taken a more active role regarding university politics. He shared a bit about his experience:

“The UPR system definitely has a lot of work to do. Especially considering the huge shortage of funds due to budget cuts effected under an imposed economic improvement plan per the Oversight and Management Board.”

Other students without having to get involved too much in the formal university politics, shared how important the UPR system is to Puerto Rico and how their experience has informed their outlook towards it. Gil is very vocal about what he thinks needs to be done. He shares:

“Being a student in the UPR, opens your eyes to Puerto Rico’s social problems. It’s something that is discussed openly, its part of the academic training of a UPR student. [...] I will say that something which needs to be improved upon is all of the bureaucracy. Specially because politics is so embedded into our administration. To conduct any type of transfer you have to visit 7,500 different offices. There is a lack of education and a lack of communication.”

Geraldo expresses his feelings toward his academic career. He said:

“What I like the most about Mayagüez are the opportunities that one has regarding job experience, internships and professional development. Although there are times that you will get a professor who has all of the knowledge but do not know how to express it. The university needs people that are able to teach and express themselves.”

DISCUSSION

I analyzed 10 qualitative interviews to explore the experience of students from the University of Puerto Rico (UPR), specifically the UPR-Río Piedras and UPR-Mayagüez campuses, post disaster. The narratives revealed that students experience varied depending on the meaning they attributed to their situation. Participants discussed life as a university student prior to and after the hurricane, many talked about situations that were out of their control and led to conversations about mental health and structural issues within the university. I discuss these meanings and implications below.

Utilizing the symbolic interaction as my theoretical framework (Blumer 1969; Handberg et. al 2014) allows for the experiences narrated by participants to be understood taking context into consideration. The themes that were found through the interviews are a direct result of trying to connect context with experience. This is important because it allows for the colonial status of Puerto Rico to be discussed in how it relates to the consequence of lived experience in the island. Each meaning that a participant attributes is fully determined by their surrounding context and may change through interpretive processes.

For example, narratives regarding the 2017 UPR student strike vary greatly. For students like Wilberto, having time off school due to its system-wide closure meant finally having time to enjoy their college experience. Other students participated in some of the university politics like Carolina and Jeremy. What all narratives have in common is the unanimous support of the reason for protest. Participants cared deeply about the future of their public education and vocalized that the austerity measures taking place are unacceptable. Whether students actively participated in the protests during the strike or completely disappeared from their campuses to spend time with

family and friends, did not affect their support for the student body. The strike was one of the layers that brings about better understanding to their experience (Handberg et. al 2014). Some of the students including Hiram and Gil discussed the effects that the Oversight and Management Board (OMB) had on their college experience, even before the hurricane referring to the proposed and enacted budget cuts to the university system. United States and Puerto Rican political relationships play a role in the way the public education system functions, and the OMB is one of those measures.

Once participants begin to share about how the UPR was like before and after Maria, some don't make a distinction because of what was already happening due to austerity measures. In 2017 the university had proposed and began making budget cuts, once the hurricane makes landfall students had already been in survival mode. Participants discussed how coming back to school a couple of months after a category five hurricane was difficult. Students had to take classes in dark classrooms sometimes due to the instability of electricity during those times. Some students, like Ana, had severe personal loss and had to rely on others to provide aid. No participants mentioned receiving or seeking out help from the university or government to assist during these processes. This could be due to having attributed a specific meaning to these two institutions; not being able to help.

The layers of context build upon each other leading to one of the themes that many participants discussed at length. This theme was mental health. Discussing mental health revealed the different meanings that each participant had given and how to deal with issues regarding mental health. Some, specifically male, participants provided disclaimers prior to disclosing having

sought out professional help. This is telling of the type of emphasis, or lack thereof, there is regarding the treating of mental health in Puerto Rico.

Students overall showed strong support and love for their university. For them their public university meant access and academic and social knowledge. Being a student in the University of Puerto Rico connects students from all backgrounds and is a place where Puerto Ricans can work towards a better livelihood. Being educated means the possibility of a better future.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study are of significance in providing qualitative context to what is happening in Puerto Rico. Providing a platform for students who are working so hard to receive a degree is pivotal in capturing the essence of all types of livelihoods in the island. Moving forward, it is important to expand the scope to all eleven campuses. Interviews revealed other realities for students from other campuses and how there is a possibility of a system-wide analysis. The stories told by participants in this study is not representative of the entire UPR student population and should not be interpreted as such. The interviews from this study provide a step into what these experiences are a bigger sample is necessary to make inferences about the population. Once there is a better understanding of how all types of students in the University of Puerto Rico experience it, there is potential for a quantitative aspect. Partnering with researchers and academics from the UPR system would allow for the development of a survey that could gather empirical data derived from the themes found in interviews. Some limitations included limited time frame and sample scope. This study, and studies like these, have the potential of using research as a way of bridging social inequities. Taking time to understand the position that Puerto Rico is in and how Puerto Ricans truly live, is a step closer to creating polities and curriculum that brings about change. It is important to mention that many events have transpired since my interviews with participants. The summer of 2019 was accompanied by mass protests by Puerto Ricans leading to the resignation of the governor, Ricardo Rosselló. Toward the end of 2019 there were a series of earthquakes which varied in intensity (the strongest one of 6.4 magnitude, disproportionately affecting the southern part of Puerto Rico) but have been occurring successively into 2020. As I am finalizing my writing, we are undergoing a global

pandemic which is greatly affecting people all over the world, but Puerto Ricans are in a particular position politically. Investing time and research into issues that affect Puerto Ricans to create better policy and establish processes that positively affect all, specially students from the University of Puerto Rico and those who find themselves in vulnerable positions.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Institutional Review Board

FWA00000351
IRB00001138
Office of Research
12201 Research Parkway
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

April 16, 2019

Dear Bianca Pizarro Vazquez:

On 4/16/2019, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Study, Category
Title:	Growing up Puerto Rican: College Students' Reality of Staying in Puerto Rico Post-Maria
Investigator:	Bianca Pizarro Vazquez
IRB ID:	STUDY00000309
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Gillian Morien
Designated Reviewer

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Background Info

How old are you?

Where were you born and raised?

What do you do for fun?

When did you begin studying at the University of Puerto Rico?

What has been your favorite memory so far?

Do you commute to campus or live close to campus?

Do you live with family, alone or roommates?

Why did you choose to come to this campus?

Have you studied at a different campus prior to this one?

What is your class standing?

What is your major?

Why did you choose that major?

Do you enjoy the classes in your major offered at the university?

Are you a part of any organizations on campus?

2017 Strike

Were you involved in the 2017 strike? How involved were you in the 2017 strike?

Could you provide some background as to why the strike happened?

How long did it last in your campus/major?

Were you in favor or opposed to the strike?

How did the strike affect your academic timeline?

Maria Impact

Tell me your how about your experience as a college student before and after Maria.

Between the end of the strike and hurricane Maria much time passed?

Where were you during hurricane Maria?

How did hurricane Maria impact your academic timeline?

How did the hurricane have the most impact on your life? On your academics?

Did you consider moving outside the island due to the hurricane? Are you considering it? Did anyone you are close with (family member or close friend) move away? If so, where?

Why did you stay?

Did you have a strong support system in your community/family?

Who helped you the most to cope with the effects of the hurricane?

Were you concerned with the effect it would have on your studies?

Effects of Maria

Educational

How long after the hurricane did you resume classes?

What was the hardest thing to deal with coming back to school?

Did you feel you had missed out on time due to the strikes or Maria? Or both?

Did you or anyone you know stop going to school because of the strikes and/or hurricane?

Did you consider dropping out of school temporarily or permanently?

Financial

Was there a financial strain that occurred to you personally and/or your family after the hurricane?

Were there any major changes to your housing or lifestyle that had to happen in response to a new financial situation?

Did you have to get a job after the hurricane?

If you had a job prior to it, did you find yourself working more hours?

Did you take steps away from volunteer or extracurricular activities to be able to work or focus on school?

Mental Health

Did the hurricane have any effects on your mental health?

Has there been any help offered to students to deal with any mental health issues that could have developed from the hurricane?

Is there any stigma around mental health in your university/community?

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