ABSTRACT. This paper is about naming illnesses—about who determines what categories are used and the implications of these determinations. The central concerns of medical/psychiatric anthropology have been to understand popular categories of and systems for classification of illness, to examine the relationship of illness categories to cultural understandings of the body, and to interpret the role of categories of illness in mediating between the personal and social spheres. At the same time, the paper also discusses the interplay of popular categories and psychiatric diagnoses. This paper examines the multiple experiences of nervios among Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and New York City. Our contention is that nervios is more than a diffuse idiom of distress, and that there are different categories and experiences of nervios which provide insights into how distress is experienced and expressed by Puerto Ricans and point to different social sources of suffering. The data in this paper come from the responses to a series of open-ended questions which tapped into people’s general conceptions of nervios and ataques de nervios. These questions were incorporated into follow-up interviews to an epidemiological study of the mental health of adults in Puerto Rico. The results suggest ways to incorporate these different categories of nervios into future research and clinical work with different Latino groups in the United States and in their home countries.

KEY WORDS: ataques de nervios, culture and diagnosis, nervios, Puerto Ricans, social sources of suffering

All men have the stars, . . . but they are not the same things for different people. For some, who are travelers, the stars are guides. For others, they are no more than little lights in the sky. For others, who are scholars, they are problems. For my businessman they were wealth. But all these stars are silent.

_The Little Prince_, Antoine de Saint Exupéry, 1971 (104).

This paper is about naming illnesses—about who determines what categories are used and the implications of these determinations. The central concerns of medical/psychiatric anthropology have been to understand popular categories of and systems for classification of illness, to examine the relationship of illness categories to cultural understandings of the body, and to interpret the role of categories of illness in mediating between the personal and social spheres (Schepa-Hughes and Lock 1987; Good 1994). Medical anthropologists have examined the relationship between popular categories of illness and biomedical categories of disease, both in terms of the different understandings of experience incorporated in these different
kinds of category systems and in terms of the different social consequences of understanding distress and suffering through these different schemata (Kleinman 1988; Rubel et al. 1984).

In this paper, we examine the multiple experiences of nervios among Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and New York City. Although we are concerned about delineating the specificity of these experiences of nervios, we also contend that our approach is applicable across syndromes and cultural groups. Our contention is that nervios is more than a diffuse idiom of distress; that there are different categories and experiences of nervios which provide insights into how distress is experienced and expressed by Puerto Ricans and point to different social sources of suffering (Kleinman et al. 1997). We propose that these different ways of talking about nervios are systematized, not into discrete Linnaean classification schemata, but rather into “fuzzy sets” (White 1982:74–75). We propose calling this schema a “popular nosology of suffering,” for we contend that this kind of schema is not just important for analytic purposes, but may also provide the basis for alternative praxis in mental health and other social arenas to alleviate the distress of those who experience nervios in its varied forms.

We also want to clarify that the experiences of nervios we discuss are not uniquely Puerto Rican, but are shared among many Latin American cultures. At the same time, there may be particular inflections to nervios among Puerto Ricans and other Latinos from the Caribbean, which distinguish them from the experiences of nervios among Mexicans and Central and South Americans (Guarnaccia and Farías 1988). However, as we illustrate with our discussion of the emergence of the term “Puerto Rican Syndrome” in the psychiatric literature of the 1960s, not all attempts to identify cultural issues in mental health are benign. Our purpose in this paper is to propose a popular nosology based on our research among Puerto Ricans which could serve as a model for cross-cultural mental health research and practice.

The study of how cultural groups categorize illness has long been a central concern in anthropology (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Frake 1961). There is a widespread human tendency to use classification systems as a way to both understand and act in the world. Our work was influenced by Geertz’s argument that a major goal of anthropology is to describe experience from “the native’s point of view” (Geertz 1983). We see our research as contributing to the development of a Puerto Rican ethnopsychiatry. We draw methodological support from Gaines’ (1992) cultural constructivist approach to studying folk/popular and professional psychiatries which argues that all these systems are equally cultural and should be considered equivalent “ethnopsychiatries.” Given that no system has an inherent claim to greater ontological reality, Gaines argues that the focus of analysis should be on experience-near realities in experience-near terms such as suffering. In addition, each ethnopsychiatry is understood to express its respective culture. In