

## *Site under Construction: An Ethnopsychological Representation of the Mexican Self Concept*

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### Abstract

The relevance of psychological constructs can only be evaluated if the validity, reliability and cultural sensitivity of the concepts are established. Individual attributes and social behaviors stem from a life long dialectic between cultural norms and settings and each individual's bio-psychological tendencies. In this paper, the historical and cultural foundations of Mexican Identity are presented, followed by the universal conceptualization of the self, and ending with the ethnopsychological research conducted to depict and understand the components that express, and the processes responsible for, the evolution, development and consolidation of the concept of Self among Mexican people. Clearly, the Mexican self describes a highly socio-emotional being.

*Keywords:* Self-concept; ethnopsychology.

### Sitio en Construcción: Una Representación Entopsicológica del Auto-Concepto del Mexicano

#### Compendio

Referente al desarrollo de la personalidad, se puede afirmar que se deriva de una dialéctica permanente entre las premisas histórico-socio-culturales de un pueblo, el ecosistema en el que se desarrollan los individuos y sus tendencias y necesidades bio-psíquicas. Para el presente trabajo se inicia con las bases históricas y culturales de la identidad del mexicano, seguido de la conceptualización del auto concepto presentada en el centro de la corriente de la psicología universal, y terminando con la investigación entopsicológica realizada para describir y entender los componentes que expresan y los procesos responsables de la evolución, desarrollo y consolidación del concepto del yo entre mexicanos. Se debe adelantar, que el resultado es un auto concepto profundamente enraizado en aspectos sociales y emocionales.

*Palabras clave:* Autoconcepto; etnopsicología.

The concept of "self" as a human endeavor has an ancient history. In fact, many great philosophical writings cover its components and processes. Plato compares the self to the soul while Aristotle makes a systematic description of its nature; Saint Agustin gives us a first glimpse at an introspective self and Saint Thomas gives a theological interpretation of the concept; after renaissance, Francis Bacon introduces a positivist perspective and Níche offers an existential account of the self (Oñate, 1989). In fact, questions as to how we perceive ourselves, how we see ourselves through the eyes of others, if we behave different or consistent according to the characteristics of the situations, how we see ourselves with the change of age and the expectations of others, and the way in which we explain the continuity of our lives, led James (1890/1952) to consider not only the image that we have of ourselves, but the image that others have. Due to its complexity, James distinguished three components. The material "self", who worries about objects and places, the social "self", which is concerned with relationships and interactions, and the spiritual "self", that worries about speculations concerning the immediate reality. Other influential authors focused on the processes related to the development of the "self". Baldwin (1897) centered on how

"the self" emerges and is constructed by the individual, as a result of his/her interaction with others, while Cooley (1902) postulated that the "self" develops as a reflection of social interaction and the reactions of others. Later, in the 1930s, Mead's (1990) social interaction theory established the "self" as emerging from a process that uses symbols and develops with time from contact with others, in a continuous deluge of social communication.

The path of the self as the principal topic in psychology has continued throughout the twentieth century, as it influences all scopes of human behavior. According to Allport (1976) the "self" is implicated in all human conduct, and influences the confidence, judgment, memory, reference frame, aptitude for learning and all other motivational aspects of behavior. In other words, because the "self" is so important in human life, it is defined as the unifying force of all habits, characteristics, attitudes, feelings and tendencies of the human being. In summary, the self-concept is more than a simple phenomenon, and has been presented as the central construct of psychology, since it somehow rules human behavior, which is finally the primary object of study in psychology as a science. However, recognizing its importance was only a first step, the challenge became to delimit and define the concept suitably. With that need, came an endless number of definitions and theories which appeared to describe it in under the likes of "I", "consciousness", individualization, introspection, self-image, self-esteem and identity. A description of the theoretical underpinnings of the

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self concept would be incomplete without a specific mention to the impact that cultural and ecological variables have on the definition, development and processes related to the self (Triandis & Suh, 2002).

With respect to the importance of the socio-cultural context, in 1901, Ezequiel A Chavez, an influential Mexican academic, wrote the following lines:

"Character varies across ethnic groups, and thus, the most relevant human endeavor is lodged in the study of the ethnic character of people. Not considering this cardinal rule has induced many to fall victims to the absurdity of attempting the direct transplant of educational, repressive or political institutions, without even reflecting on the possible incompatibility of intellect, feelings, and will, of the people who they intend to improve, offering a beautiful, although inadequate reality. . . It is not enough for laws to satisfy intelligence in the abstract, it is indispensable that they concretely adapt to the special conditions of the people they were created for. Ideas and programs may seem very noble, however, a sad reality is lived too often in Latin American countries, when marvelous plans are traced on paper, harmonic constitutions are advanced, and like Plato's dreams, they crash against the crudeness of practice and reality." (p. 84)

This fragment offers us at least two major considerations. On the one hand, the cardinal role of culture in the construction of reality, on the other, the historic preoccupation of the Mexican people with the roots and reaches of their identity. Understanding identity and self concept in a valid, reliable and culturally sensitive form requires dwelling into the historical, geographic, cultural and psychological evolution of a group of people. This paper turns now to a brief depiction of the historical and cultural bases, and moves on to the ethno-psychological research conducted with regards to the Mexican self.

Before the Spaniards arrived in Mexico in the fifteen hundreds, Mesoamerica was a thriving and culturally diverse region. Only on the valley perched among the mountains, over one hundred thousand inhabitants populated a bustling Tenochtitlan. The Aztecs were a powerful warrior people who had many enemies. Among them, the Tlaxcaltecas contributed with over 12,000 fighters in the Spanish attack on their city. Many other cultures developed in equally distinct geographical ecosystems of the area, as is the case of the Mayans, the Olmecas and others. Each Pre-Columbian ethnic group contributed its biological and cultural heritage across three centuries of Colonial rule. Priests like Bernardo de Sahagun and Bartolome de las Casas, wrote profusely about the customs and rights during the colonial years. Extracting from their legacy, a vivid and distinct ethnic identity is conceivable for each group, and the depiction of integration of the races is full of clearly distinguishable paths. In the early eighteen hundreds, after a decade of the Independence war, a two fold army marched into Mexico City. Indigenous and half breeds (*Mestizos*) led one contingent while Spanish descendants born in America led the other contingent. Iturbide, a Spaniard general fighting for independence, arrived first at the government's palace and established himself as the monarch of the newly free Mexican Empire. As the struggle continued, questions of

ethnic identity became rampant. ¿Should Mexicans side with liberal or clerical political conceptions? ¿Where their roots akin to a European Monarchy or to a multicultural Republic led by the children of Spanish men and indigenous women? What was the role and place of the original people who had walked these lands before the Spanish ever came? In consequence, who did the Mexicans identify with? Who were they? What was their character? The nineteenth century brought many new battles, the military incursion of the United States of America into Mexican soil, a French invasion, later, a Reform movement to separate church and state, and finally, 40 years of the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz.

The emergence of the twentieth century brought a civil revolution. At stake, aside from a power struggle, were the identity of a country and the emancipation of a Mestizo movement. In its aftermath, Jose Vasconcelos, a writer, a politician, a thinker, promulgated the coming of a cosmic race; one which extracted its strength from its mixed past. The measuring stick for the ethnic identity was now indigenous. However, a few years later, in the 1930s, Samuel Ramos, a Mexican philosopher, extracted the importance given in psychological theory to the development of autonomy and independence for the growth of the self. With this theoretical framework, he observed indigenous people in an attempt at describing the self of the Mexican, consistently finding depictions which focused on the importance of the community, of family and of the cardinal place that others have in the definition of the individual self. These collective responses were taken as a sign of a lack of independence which seemed to indicate that the autonomous self of the Mexican was not fully developed. Other writers, in particular Paz (1954), set out on a self fulfilling prophecy that led him to verify an inferiority hypothesis, with little or no data. The only possibility for reassessment depended on the development of serious and systematic psychological research.

Given the attention the self has engaged, it seems fair to ask before continuing, if the self is a simple artifact of Western Psychology, or if it can be rescued as a human phenomena, if socio-cultural and eco-systemic effects are factored into the formula. The answer may lie in a synthesis of the social psychological perspective of the self and the evident preoccupation with identity in the history of the dwellers of the Mexican territory. Adding these two theses, it seems clear that the phenomenon extends to this cultural group. Therefore, by paying close attention to Chavez's postulates and James's proclivity, it seems inevitable to study all personality traits, including the selves, from a socio-cultural perspective (Triandis & Suh, 2002). True to this cross-cultural initiative, Diaz-Guerrero (e.g. 1971, 1982, 1994) has repeatedly shown that the interplay between biology (psychological structure) and culture (society) determine the development of personality. He further contends that each socio-culture offers a system of interrelated premises that norm the feelings, ideas and hierarchy of interpersonal relationships. In other words, the

socio-culture offers a system of interrelated premises that are internalized by individuals in such way that they norm the feelings, ideas and behaviors by stipulating the types of social roles, the interaction of the individual in those roles, and the where, when, and with whom and how to play them. As a result, the self of the Mexican is embedded in a social developmental process that depends on socialization and enculturation practices. Based on this line of research, Diaz-Guerrero (1979) proposed a typology of the Mexican prototype, in which 8 personality structures emerged. Given the strength an inclination of the socio-cultural premises in the development of personality, 4 of these types describe over 90% of the population. True to the emphasis destined in the Mexican socio-culture to collective, social, and relational activities, the most widely spread character, over 75% of the population, was an affiliative obedient type who acted affectionately, dependently, and agreeably, as well as controlled and showed high need of social approval and support. A smaller percentage of the population would rebel against the dictates and norms of the society, producing an actively self-affirming orientation, which would translate into autonomous, independent, impulsive, dominant, rebellious and intelligent characteristics, very similar to the typical profile found in instrumental hierarchical individualistic cultures (Triandis, 1994). From the combination of the traditional premises and a moderate self actualizing tendency, another small portion of the population would develop an active internal control which would be shown by affectionate, thoughtful, rational, flexible and capability traits. Finally, constructing from the negative emotional component of every bio-system and the traditional socio-emotive norms, a passive external control type would appear, engulfed in authoritarian, aggressive, corrupt, impulsive, pessimist, uncontrolled and servile orientations.

The psycho-socio-cultural tracing of the Mexican Self was initiated with the research conducted by Diaz-Guerrero (1982) using Osgood's Semantic Differential technique with Mexican adolescents in the nineteen sixties. In a comparison of the evaluative, power and dynamism scores of the self, Mexican teenagers consistently scored lower in evaluation and power than their cohorts from 16 other cultures. The activity scores set them at the median in relation to the other youths. In addition, when the scores for evaluation for the self were compared with other social and family stimuli, such as father, mother, sister, brother, grand parents, friends and even strangers, the adolescents scored their self as less positive. These sets of data endorse the possibility of an inferiority complex. However, another possibility is the deeply social character of the Mexican who downplays the self to make homage to others by using a passive coping strategy (Díaz-Guerrero & Peck, 1967). In fact, in closer scrutiny of the data, the evaluation and power means for the Mexican adolescents are above 1 (scale goes from -3 to +3), indicating an absolute positive score, although relatively lower than the adolescents from other cultures and lower than

father, mother and friends within the Mexican sample (Diaz-Guerrero, 1982). Construing the Mexican self in a different light has definitely had an impact on the identity built for the group. A reanalysis of the events shows that when Mexican philosophers have conceptualized the self relative to European norms, the picture was dim; on the other hand, when diversity is exalted, or the social core of the self is brought up, a collective, dependent, social, yet positive construal of the self is proper.

From a deeply indigenous perspective, La Rosa and Diaz-Loving (1991) set out to explore the idiosyncratic make up of the self concept of Mexicans. Starting with exploratory qualitative methodologies, they were able to discover social, emotional, ethical, physical and instrumental dimensions of the self concept. Brain storming and focus groups later led to free association sessions in the hunt for the precise attributes to describe each dimension. In a following step, adjective check lists and open ended questions introduced the appropriate antonyms for each attribute. The resulting pairs of adjectives were set on a semantic differential with the stimulus "self" at its head. Exploratory factor analyses of the responses of over 3000 young Mexican males and females yielded conceptually clear, culturally congruent and statistically robust dimensions. Without a doubt, the socio-emotional depiction of the self in Mexicans is accurate. The population describes itself as amiable and courteous in its social relationships, happy and optimistic in its outlook on life, expressive and communicative with close ones, romantic and sentimental with loved ones and calm, conciliatory and tranquil in all situations. As expected, the instrumental, individual, autonomous and independent self, so prevalent in Western Psychological depictions of the self, appeared as a sixth factor, and even then imbedded in a socio-emotional current, as it stressed social responsibility together with the more traditional industrious capabilities. In relation to the ethical dimension, attributes as loyal and honest showed again the very social-emotional milieu of the Mexican self. These data are a close fit to the construction of the Mexican self described by Diaz-Guerrero and Szalay (1993) who using free association techniques encounter a collective identity that is dependent on strict social rules, stresses reciprocity, mutual help, understanding, cohesion, and group and family as the centerpiece of any individual.

Concomitant attempts at describing the indigenous Mexican self have been carried out by Valdez (1994) and Lagunes (1999). Using semantic networks as a methodological tool and role depictions of the self, they asked subjects to give words that best defined their selves as friends and in different family member's positions. Their sampling included young, middle aged and older subjects. Based on the results of the first phase, they constructed a psychophysical scale for each attribute and used self as the stimuli. Their results replicated

those reported by La Rosa and Diaz-Loving (1991). However, they report separate positive and negative evaluation factors, which is not the case in the previous studies. One possible explanation for the differential pattern is that in the studies conducted with the semantic differential technique, the factors were bi-polar and included both the positive and negative poles. Using bi-polar scales rather than independent scales seems to have masked some of the negative aspects of the self that can develop in the culture.

### Method

#### Participants

Aware of the ecosystem constraints of research conducted in Mexico City (the urban area has over 22 million inhabitants), in attempting to generalize to the Mexican population (90 million in 2000); we set out to test an indigenous measurement instrument in four distinct Mexican Samples. Included were Mexico City and Toluca as representative of large and medium urban populations in the central mountains of the country, Hermosillo in the Northwestern coast, and Merida in the Southeastern Peninsula of Yucatan. Each of these sections boasts a unique group identity and evolved from distinct indigenous populations. Mexico City is a cosmopolitan melting pot, Toluca is a medium industrial city with an Aztec ancestry and a mestizo overtone, Hermosillo is Yaqui country combined with an individualistic outlook, which is congruent with its closeness to the United States of America, and Yucatan is deeply entrenched in its traditional Mayan heritage (Diaz-Loving, Reyes-Lagunes, & Rivera Aragon, 2002). To insure a representative sample of these four populations, 2270 subjects were selected to equally represent males and females of four age groups (17-21, 22-27, 30-35, 40-45), in total 1078 were males and 1192 females, with an age range between 16-44 years and a mean of 28.33 years. Thus, the measures were distributed to subjects in each ecosystem, insuring equal size samples of males and females who were divided by age. One fourth was between 16 and 21 and represented the youth who are confronting the socio-culture in the development of their selves. A second group was between 22 and 26 and was cementing their newly acquired selves; a next group was between 27 and 35 and had young children who they were socializing into the socio-culture, and finally, a fourth group was between 36 and 44 and had adolescent offspring at home questioning them about the strengths and weaknesses of the socio culture (Diaz-Loving, Reyes-Lagunes, & Rivera Aragon, 2002).

#### Self Concept Inventory

For the measuring instrument, an attempt was made to capture the strengths and avoid the weaknesses of the previous research enterprises. Attributes were selected to include all

unique items from the instruments developed by La Rosa and Diaz-Loving (1991) and by Valdes (1994). A total of 104 items were included and set on seven point pictorial likert type scale. Subjects were to select the square size that best indicate the amount that each attribute described them.

### Results and Discussion

Separate psychometric analysis by site, sex and age yielded generally congruent and similar factor structures. Analysis of the total set of participants, 800 in each location, is consistent with previous findings and adds theoretical and empirical robustness to ethnopsychological research. Congruent with the expectation of a social-emotional self, out of the 7 highly significant factors which explain 48.37% of the total test variance (Eigen values above three and factor weights over .40 for each item) six are clearly rooted in social interaction. This orientation closely resembles the findings of Markus and Kitayama (1991) that saw the interdependent self as part of a social fabric, where belonging, fitting in, harmony, being empathic and promoting others' well-being became important values and cherished personal goals for collectivistic cultures. On the socially desirable end of the spectrum, a first factor of normative affiliation grows out of the tendency to be accommodating, amiable, polite, courteous, decent, educated, honest, honorable, loyal, clean, straight, respectful, simple and sincere. The Cronbach alpha for this scale is .97 and the scale mean is 5.5 on the seven point continuum. The normative affiliation prototype is reminiscent of the Hispanic cultural script of *simpatía* advanced by Triandis, Marin, and Betancourt (1984), which bestows a general tendency that emphasizes positive and agreeable behaviors and the avoidance of interpersonal conflict. These authors indicate that *simpatía* is needed to behave with politeness and respect which discourages criticism, confrontation and assertiveness. In addition to the "simpatía" script, the normative affiliation orientation resembles the self modifying coping style and characteristic of people in the Mexican culture described by Diaz-Guerrero (1994) and the affable interaction style described by Diaz-Loving and Draguns (1999). In fact, when confronted, the traditional Mexican will actively change to accommodate the needs and wishes of others. This abnegation behavior is so prevalent that it is considered a cardinal trait of the culture (Avendaño-Sandoval, Díaz-Guerrero, & Reyes-Lagunes, 1997; Díaz-Guerrero, 1993). Further inspection of the normative affiliation factor clearly indicates that being courteous and polite is a moral imperative, given the normative ascendance that this factor has when it incorporates loyalty, honesty and sincerity as part of the profile. However, it is not enough to have the good intention of being polite and loyal to become a truly abnegated member of this cultural group. The dwellers of the territory must also be patient in order to endure the strife of interpersonal relationships. This strength

is extracted from the internalized emotional intelligence factor which covers the virtues of being calm, stable, obedient, peaceful, relaxed, serene, tolerant and tranquil. A traditional Mexican saying asks, *Why are you jumping so much if the ground is so flat*. The appearance of this dimension shows the impact of socio-cultural premises built around enduring social interaction in a pleasant and constructive manner, in the practice of interpersonal relationships. In fact, the strength of emotional self control training, derived from the ever present affiliative obedience parenting strategies, prevalent in the socialization of norms, which indicate that children should always respect and obey their parents, who in turn should always love and protect their children, replicates the findings of an array of research into the psychology of the Mexican (Vigano La Rosa & Díaz-Loving, 1990).

The next two socially desirable socio emotional factors to appear, stress the importance of good and happy interpersonal relationships with friends, family and lovers. The first one, denominated social affection, explodes on the core of intimacy and closeness and is composed by items like affectionate, loving, caring, tender, romantic, generous, sentimental, noble, kindhearted and considerate. The internal consistency for the scale is Alpha .94 and the mean for all subjects is 5.3. The second dimension, coined Mexican style sociability and extroversion, is composed of items like being a joker, jovial, sociable, friendly, talkative, fun, animated, pleasant, merry, and of course, *simpatico*. The internal consistency is .95 and the mean for all subjects is 5.2. These two factors replicate two of the factors reported by La Rosa and Diaz-Loving (1991), and fill in the need for healthy and constructive social relationship as well as open communication and closeness. It is clear that the *simpatico* schema is not only about courteousness and a conciliatory demeanor; the self must also be happy and transmit this joy into its relationships. Furthermore, when these relationships enter the realm of romance, they are intrinsically devoured by tenderness, flirting sentimentalism and generosity, which equal data reported by Diaz-Loving and Sanchez-Aragon (2002) for intimate relationships among Mexican couples. It is thus that Self modification and the pursuit of the well being of others encompasses acquaintances, friends, family and intimate partners.

Social and emotional components of the self are not always positive. There is also a dark ugly side to the emotional social interaction which occurs in a collective setting. There are those who saddle others with their emotional weakness; and there are those who impose their ways through their uncontrolled selfish and powerful ways. The emotional vulnerability comes forth in the negative passive emotional external control depicted by attributes like corrupt, false, frustrated, undesirable, inept, pessimist, submissive, sad, lazy, slow, unreliable, and inflexible. This factor had an alpha of .86 and a scale mean of 3.1. The negative emotional power is apparent in the external negative instrumental factor guided by aggressive, authoritarian,

conflicting, hypercritical, dominant, egotistical, peevish, impulsive, stubborn, rebellious, rancorous and temperamental tendencies. This factor had an internal consistency of .85 and a scale mean of 4.2. These two negative aspects of the social emotional self closely mirror the classic negative feminine expressive and masculine expressive-instrumental attributes disclosed in the gender literature (e.g. Diaz-Loving, Diaz Guerrero, Helmreich, & Spence, 1981). From another angle, these characteristics have also been described in the realm of the psychopathology of the Mexican (1982). Imbedded in a constant expressive, social and emotional milieu, most children learn to control the negative edge of self indulged sentiments and graduate to the light side of socio emotional selves. However, the possibility is present to falling victim to biopsychological personal needs and succumbing to the use of force or pertained weakness to influence others according to one's whims.

There is also a time to produce and show agency and instrumental qualities. The Mexican self also contains a constructive inclination towards power, a positive instrumental internal control factor attests to this. Being active, intent, capable, efficient, studious, intelligent, zealous, laborious, punctual, orderly and successful is also a part of the Mexican self (Reyes Lagunes, 1996). The internal consistency .94 and the scale mean of 5.3, also show that it is coherent and quite common to identify with these characteristics. It is interesting to note that for this culture, this is the only instrumental agentic dimension. It is definitely note absent, but it is only a fragment of a very differentiated and socio emotional laden self. And even here, where the individuals and their productions reign, they do it in harmony with their ecosystem, they do it through a humble persistence which is laborious and punctual, which is efficient and active. It is true the outer spheres reach all the way to intelligent and successful, but never come near the adventurous individual willing to stake all against the needs of the group. As it becomes clear and congruent with the rest of the socio-emotional self of the Mexican, even production and action appear within the context of a common good.

From a universal perspective, the straight line form conceptualization to measurement and conclusions some times leads to over generalization. The etic-emic dilemma has been present in the cross-cultural arena for several decades (Diaz-Loving, 1998). That is to ask what characteristics are specific or idiosyncratic to a given socio-culture or eco-system and which are generalizable to the human race. After carefully describing the self of the Mexican, an obvious question is its relationship to some universal trait constructs such as the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1997). In a series of studies described in Díaz-Guerrero, Díaz-Loving and Rodríguez de Díaz (2001), the correlations between several ethno-psychological measures like the self-concept instrument of La Rosa and Díaz-Loving (1991), an the abnegation scale developed by Avendaño-Sandoval, Díaz-Guerrero and Reyes-Lagunes (1997), and the

Big Five Inventory, show consistently low but congruent correlations between agreeableness (good natured cooperative) and extraversion (talkative and sociable) with abnegation and the social emotional scales of the self concept. Other big five items did not merge or form understandable factors, such as urgency, conscientiousness and openness, and even as independent items did not show significant correlations with the Mexican measures. This leads of to affirm that the ethno-psychological approach is also deeply rooted in methodology, theory and empiricism; however, it is much better equipped to tangle with external validity issues. It is true that this line of reasoning is less rooted in the straight lines of internal validity, but it derives robustness from its ecological perspective and its multi method approach. There is a goal, part of it is the development of idiosyncratic theory and concepts, part is the pledge of allegiance to the consideration of cultural and ecosystem variables, part is the construction of a more vivid and mundane psychology (Díaz-Guerrero & Díaz Loving, 1996). The first steps have been taken; results show a consistent pattern of idiosyncratic and universal attributes. To follow the trend now requires further research which can complete the picture, indicating the antecedents, correlates and consequences of these selves.

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Received 23/12/2004  
Accepted 02/04/2005