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Constructing the Self-concept through Culture:

A Study with Indigenous and Mestizos Students from Different Educative Settings in Chiapas (Mexico)

LA CONSTRUCTION DU CONCEPT DE SOI VIA LA CULTURE:

UNE ETUDE AVEC LES ETUDIANTS AUTOCHTONES ET METIS VENANT DE DIFFERENTES INSTITUTIONS EDUCATIVES AU CHIAPAS (MEXIQUE)

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Abstract: This study explored self-concept among 631 adolescents (410 mestizos and 221 indigenous) from the Intercultural University of Chiapas (331), the Autonomous University of Chiapas (150) and University of Altos de Chiapas (150). Our aim was to compare the results of the personal and social self-concept task (PSSC) between the students that participating in these three universities. We predicted, following the MMM approach of culture's impact on self concept, that students will have different self-concepts because they participating in different educative settings. Specifically, we expected that adolescents who are members of the Intercultural University of Chiapas will score significantly higher on social categories in self-concept task than students who are members of the private University of Altos de Chiapas and Autonomous University of Chiapas. The results supported this hypothesis. We conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA), showing significant differences in the studied groups. We suggested that proximal process is the mechanism through which culture influences individuals.
Key words: Self-Concept; Indigenous; Mestizos; Individualism Versus Collectivism; Proximal Process

Resumé: Cette étude a exploré le concept de soi chez 631 adolescents (410 métis et 221 autochtones) venant de l'Université interculturelle du Chiapas (331), l'Université autonome du Chiapas (150) et l'Université d' Altos de Chiapas (150). Notre objectif était de comparer les résultats de la tache du concept de soi personnelle et sociale (CSPC) entre les étudiants de ces trois universités. Nous avions prédit, en suivant l'approche de l'impact de la culture sur le concept de soi, que les élèves ont de différentes conceptions de soi, car ils participent à de différentes institutions éducatives. Plus précisément, nous avons espéré que les adolescents qui sont membres de l'Université interculturelle du Chiapas auraient des notes plus élevées en catégories sociales dans la tache du concept de soi que les étudiants qui sont membres de l'Université privée d' Altos de Chiapas et ceux de l'Université autonome du Chiapas. Les résultats a confirmé cette hypothèse. Nous avons effectué une analyse de variance (Andva), ce qui monte des différences significatives dans les groupes étudiés. Nous avons suggéré que le processus proximal était le mécanisme par lequel la culture influence les individus.

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Mots-clés: Concept De Soi ; Autochtones ; Metis ; Individualisme Contre Collectivisme ; Processus Proximal

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INTRODUCTION

The main question we would analyze in this article is the heart of cultural psychology: How individuals make sense and meaning of themselves and their social world? Bruner (1990) suggest that culture in mind. That is, the process of making meanings (*Acts of meaning*) is assisted, guided, through participation in local culture settings. He argues that psychology, after cognitive revolution, should return to human concerns, especially the role of culture in shaping our thoughts and the language we use to express them. In other words, the culture is the major factor in giving form to the human mind because influences cognitive content (what), cognitive process (how), and motivation (for what purpose) (Oyserman & Lee, 2008b).

Following Kurt Lewin's classic equation showing that behavior is a function of the person and the environment, Bronfenbrenner (1979) propose the "Ecology Systems Theory" which divides cultural settings into four levels: macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro-. The human development involve active participation in progressively more complex, reciprocal interactions with persons, objects, and symbols in the individual's immediate environment (microcontext) that it is influenced by other levels of context (exosystem, mesosystem and macrosystem). Through the participation in the sociocultural activities of their communities humans develops and changes their cognitive contents, cognitive processes and motivations (Rogoff, 2003). In this sense, human development and, of course, self-concept is a cultural process.

1. SITUATED COGNITION PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURE

Numerous studies over the last decades have shown the relationship between culture and self-concept (see Heine, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Oyserman & Lee, 2008a; Triandis, 2001, for reviews). Specifically, Markus and Kitayama (1991) have proposed that in Western cultures, particularly in the North American middle-class culture, the concept of self as independent. That is, the self is viewed as integrated whole composed of values, abilities, preferences, feeling states or personal attributes. In contrast, members of many East Asian cultures, such Japanese or Chinese, are committed to the contrasting idea of the self as interdependent. The interpersonal or societal obligations, hierarchical social order, and interpersonal adjustment are central to self-definition. Several studies comparing the self-descriptions with North American students and those with Japanese students have shown that American participants describe themselves in terms of inner psychological traits or emotional states than were those form Japanese's people (Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997).

According this line of works, the normative person in European American models would be a bundle of attributes, preferences; independent from others; expresses and affirms an independent self; actions are "freely" chosen contingent on one's own preferences, goals, intentions; and actions are diagnostic of the self and actively controls, influences others. In contrast, the normative person in East Asian models would be a node in a set of relations; maintains relations with others; affirms an interdependent self and one's social position; actions are responsive to obligations and expectations of others (preferences, goals interactions are interpersonally anchored); and actions are diagnostic of the nature of relationships and actively references, adjusts to others (Markus, 2004). The relationship between sociocultural environments (culture) and psychological structures and processes (psyche) is of the "mutual constitution". The individuals actively produce settings that reflect their understanding, feeling and then further influence their actions. Culture is not an entity; it is not eternal something. Rather culture, like psyche or personality, is a meaning-making process that convergence with material reality (social artifacts like language, mathematics or legal, media, political and educational institutions) and ideational reality (knowledge, beliefs, ideas of the cultural group) (Adams & Markus, 2004).

The Seminal works of Markus and Kitayama has studied, principally, the construction of the self in United States students versus Japanese students (for example, Kitayama et al., 1997). Other scholars have generalized this cultural differentiation (Hofstede, 1980).

According to Triandis (1996; 2001) the individualism-collectivism cultural syndrome appears to be the most significant cultural difference among cultures. People in individualist cultures, such as North and Western Europe and North America, tend to define themselves with elements of the personal self (e.g., "I am introvert"). People from collectivist cultures, such as those of Asia, Africa and South America, tend to sample elements of the collective self (e.g., "my friends thinks I am assertive person") (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988).

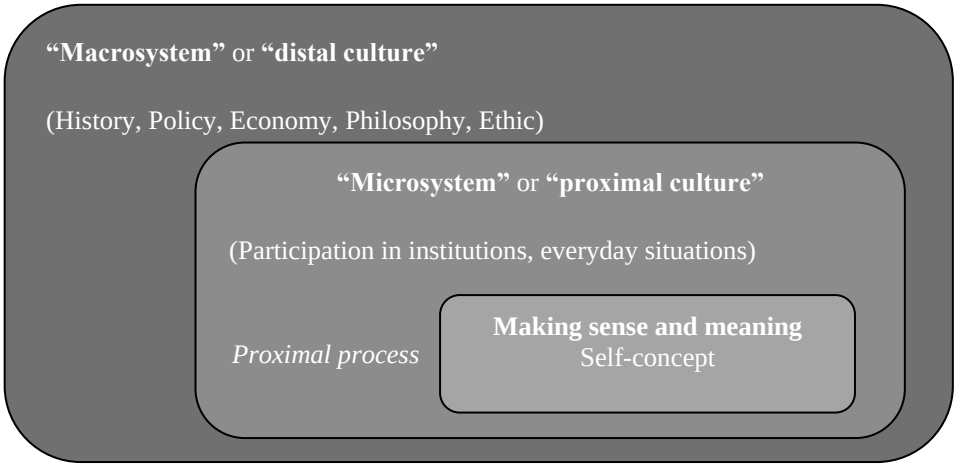
However, in recent years the individualism and collectivism or independent and interdependent constructs have been criticized (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Schwartz, 1990). It should not be assumed that everybody in collectivist cultures or

individualist cultures has the characteristics of those cultures. A recent meta-analysis (Oyserman et al., 2002) showed that individualism and collectivism are orthogonal. That is, both exist to some extent in all societies and influence psychological processes depending on the situation. European Americans were not more individualistic than South Americans or African Americans; and not less collectivist than Japanese or Koreans. Only Chinese showed large effects, being both less individualistic and more collectivist. These scores suggested the new wave of conceptualize individualism versus collectivism or independent or interdependent. These constructs as fluid and dynamic and this expression on self-concept depends of the situation. In order to explain this position Oyserman and her colleges suggest a "situated cognition perspective on culture" (Oyserman & Lee, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Oyserman & Sorensen, 2009).

According this scholars, "societies socialize for and individuals have access to a diverse set of overlapping and contradictory process and procedures for making sense of the world and that the processes and procedures that are cued in the moment influence the values, relationality, self-concept, well-being and cognition that are salient in the moment" (Oyserman & Sorensen, 2009, p. 26). North America and Chine, for example, socialize members both individualism and collectivism. North America is not only individualist and Chine is not only collectivist. Rather, people of both societies could active descriptors of the personal self-concept (like traits of personality, e.g., "introvert") and typical components of the social self-concept (like social groups, e.g., "American"). Different studies show that depending on what is primed in the moment it is possible to elicit individualism or collectivism (see Oyserman & Lee, 2007; 2008b, for a review and a meta-analysis). However, the cross–cultural research shows significant differences between individualistic societies (like Chine) and collectivist societies (like North America). These two scores, that seem contradictory, it would be possible to explain in the light of a "situated cognition perspective on culture". Individuals making sense of oneself, others, and the world through situate components that can stimulate personal self-concept qualities (individualistic, independent) and social self-concept aspects (collectivist, interdependent). More broadly, features of the immediate situation are critical in turning on individualistic versus collectivistic cultural syndromes or independent versus interdependent self-construal because cultural characteristics can be situationally primed in the moment. The proximal situation made accessible or cued the cultural general traits like individualism and collectivism (Oyserman & Sorensen, 2009). In sum, "culture is a form of situated cognition; provides cues as to who one is, what is meaningful and desirable, and how to process information about the world" (Oyserman & Lee, 2008b, p. 260).

2. THE MMM APPROACH OF CULTURE'S IMPACT ON SELF-CONCEPT

It seems reasonable to argue that minds are structured to see both separation (need to autonomy and independence or individualistic cultural syndrome) and connection (need to belong and social connectedness or collectivistic cultural syndrome). Experimental technical to prime aspects of individualism or collectivism making, for example, social or relational-based elements of self-concept more accessible and traits or attribute-based elements of self-concept less accessible (Oyserman & Lee, 2008a). However, studies that lack experimental manipulation cannot illuminate the process by which culture impacts on self-concept. That is, the mechanism through which culture influences individual minds. The ecology validity is the problem of the laboratory studies about human mind. For this reason, we propose an ecological model (MMM) that want to show the mechanism through which "macrosystem" or "distal culture" impacts on self-concept (Graphic 1).



Graphic 1: The MMM Approach of Culture'S Impact on Self-Concept

"Macrosystem" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) or "distal culture" is attitudes or ideologies of the culture in which individuals live, for example, the Judeo-Christian beliefs, democracy politic system, economic patterns, national customs, social conditions or ethnical tradition. "Microsystem" or "proximal culture" is the setting in which an individual lives (e.g., family, peers, school, university, work, neighborhood, social clubs). In these settings the person develops roles (sister, child, mother, student and so on), interpersonal relationships (to be friend or son), and activities (learning in school or playing with friends). People change through guided participation in everyday situations, in cultural practices and circumstances of their community (Rogoff, 2003). Practicing and playing with routines, activities and roles the members of community learning the patterns of their culture and their making sense and meaning about themselves, others, and the world. In line with this argument the proximal process is the mechanism that permits to active the cultural syndromes like individualism or collectivism. The proximal process is a progressively more complex interaction between an active man or woman and the people, objects, or symbols in its immediate environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended period of time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). It seems reasonable to argue that in collectivist cultures there are many opportunities that active the social self-concept than in individualistic cultures. However, the culture is situated and local so different educative contexts could promote different self-concepts.

3. DIFFERENT EDUCATIVE SETTINGS IN CHIAPAS

Chiapas is the southernmost state of Mexico, located towards the southeast of the country. Chiapas has an area of 28 653 sq mi. The 2005 census population was 4 293 459 people. About one quarter of the population is of full or predominant Maya descent (957 255). However, the predominant state's population consists of Mestizos. That is, people of mixed European and Amerindian ancestry that speak Spanish as their first language. Most people in Chiapas are poor, rural small farmers. The state suffers from the highest rate of malnutrition in Mexico, estimated to affect more than 40% of the population. In Chiapas there are eight ethno linguistic groups (Tseltal, Tsotsil, Ch'ol, Zoque, Tojol-ab'al, Kanjobal, Mame and Chuj). The tseltal indigenous group is the bigger with 362 658 people (Fábregas, 2006).

Our study has been carries out in three different Universities from Chiapas: The public Autonomous University of Chiapas (UNACH), established in 1974; the Private University of the "Altos de Chiapas" (UACH), established in 1993; and the Intercultural University of Chiapas (UNICH), which was opened on August 22, 2005. The predominant social group at UNACH and UACH is Mestizo. In this context, the Intercultural University of Chiapas was created, for, but not exclusively, indigenous groups and the curriculum incorporates the cosmovision of the indigenous peoples of Mexico, their knowledge and languages (Tsotsil, Tseltal, Tojol-ab'al, Ch'ol, Zoque). The mission at the UNICH is to serve as a center for the protection, revitalization, and promotion of Mexico's indigenous language, traditions, and cultures. By the 2007 academic year there were a total of 945 (427 mestizons and 518 indigenous). The aim is to increase the education access level for low-income youth and accept the diversity of the territory.

4. RESEARCH GOAL AND HYPOTHESIS

Previous studies suggest that Latin Americans are overall higher in collectivism but not lower in individualism (see meta-analysis of Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Our general aim is to compare the unique traits and attribute-based personal elements (own individualistic cultures) versus the presence of the social or relational-based elements (own collectivist cultures) of the self-concept in a sample with Chiapas students of the different higher educative contexts.

Following the MMM approach of culture's impact on self-concept, inspired on Situated cognition perspective on culture (Oyserman & Lee, 2007), we expected that students will have different self-concepts because they are participating in different educative settings. In other words, it would be probably that in a competitive model of higher education (private University of Altos de Chiapas and public Autonomous University of Chiapas) the self-concepts will be more personal than social. Instead, in an Intercultural educative model that foments the social aspects (language, indigenous traditions, social rules and practices) we estimated that students accent the social aspects of their self-concepts. Specifically, we expected that adolescents who are members of the Intercultural University of Chiapas will score significantly higher on social categories in self-concept task than students who are members of the private University of Altos de Chiapas and Autonomous University of Chiapas.

5. METHOD

Participants

Participants were 631 adolescents from the University of Altos de Chiapas (150 students), Autonomous University of Chiapas (150 students), and Intercultural University of Chiapas (331 students). The average age was 20.99 years (SD = 2.98; range: 17 - 40). There were more boys (51.7%%) than girls. Although most (410) of the students participants are Mestizos (Spanish speakers), 221 are indigenous mainly from Intercultural University of Chiapas (187) (Table 1). The percentage of ethnic minorities in our sample closely reflects the total University population. It was estimated that 55% of the students (518 adolescents) were indigenous at UNICH in 2007. In the other hand, the students at UACH and UNACH are predominantly mestizos.

Table 1: The Distribution of the Sample by Gender, University and Ethnic Group

			Ethnic group		
Gender		**University**	**Mestizos**	**Indigenous**	**Total**
Men		UNICH	65	97	162
		UACH	68	8	76
		UNACH	66	22	88
	Total		199	127	326
Women		UNICH	79	90	169
		UACH	74	0	74
		UNACH	58	4	62
	Total		211	94	305

The Instrument: Personal and Social Self-Concept Task (PSSC).

The PSSC is an instrument that aims to assess the number of personal and social categories on self-concept. The scholar has to choose the 5 adjectives or categories that more and better define him or her. There are 18 possible categories: 9 adjectives are personal (intelligent, generous, applied, romantic, aggressive, friendly, applied, accountable, restless) and 9 categories are social (religion, ethnolinguistic group, gender, Maya or Zoque, Chiapas, Mexican, indigenous or mestizo, student, community of origin). The question answered by the students was: "choose, from listed categories below, the five that you believe define you and order them being the first category the one which define you the best".

Procedure and Analyses of Data

Prior to beginning the study, the investigators obtained the collaboration and support of administrators and teaching staff members at the Universities. Adolescents received information about the aim of the research and signed an informed consent agreement. After that, one member of the research staff visited the University and administered the PSSC task with students who volunteered and, after a random drawing, participated in the study. Completion of the PSSC task took place in classrooms during school hours thirteen classes of different races and different courses. Completion took approximately 15 min on average.

To determine differences in self-concept among students from different Universities, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with responses from a sample of adolescents (n = 631). We used the version for Windows 15 (2006) of the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS).

6. RESULTS

There are significant differences between personal adjectives and social categories on self-concept in three Universities. The students of the Intercultural University of Chiapas are those who present a major number of social categories and a minor number of personal adjectives in his/her self-concepts, in comparison to the students of Autonomous University of Chiapas and the students of the University of "Altos de Chiapas", who have the major number of personal adjectives and the minor of social categories in his/her self-concepts (see Table 2).

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations and T Test for Personal Adjectives and Social Categories on Self-concept by Universities

		Personal adjectives		Social categories			
University	**N**	***M****	***SD***	***M****	***SD***	**T**	**.sig**
UNICH	331	1.81	1.407	3.22	1.311	-10.074	.000
UACH	150	3.18	1.018	1.75	1.302	9.867	.000
UNACH	150	2.87	1.121	1.98	1.110	5.018	.000

*Range: 0 - 5

However, in the Intercultural University of Chiapas sample, indigenous had higher scores in social categories than mestizos. But mestizos of the Intercultural University had higher scores in social categories than mestizos of the others Universities. In other two Universities there is no a sufficiently wide sample and, therefore, representative of indigenous (Table 3). Both tables (2 and 3) show a predominant social self-concept in Intercultural University of Chiapas sample than others Universities sample.

Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations for Personal Adjectives and Social Categories on Self-concept by Universities and Ethnic Groups

			Personal adjectives		Social categories	
University	**Ethnic Group**	**N**	***M****	***SD***	***M****	***SD***
UNICH	Mestizos	144	2.29	1.372	2.69	1.334
	Indigenous	187	1.25	1.094	3.76	1.098
UACH	Mestizos	142	3.28	1.027	1.72	1.072
	Indigenous	8	3.97	0.756	1.03	0.756
UNACH	Mestizos	124	2.98	1.089	2.02	1.089
	Indigenous	26	2.62	0.752	2.38	0.752

For comparisons of the means, we used a one-way ANOVA and statistical post hoc tests assuming unequal variance. Tamhane's test of pairwise contrasts shows that there are significant differences between the three Universities (Table 4).

Table 4: Comparisons of the Means by Universities (Tamhane's Post Hoc Test)

	University (I)	**University (J)**	**Comparisons of the Means (I-J)**	**Sig.**
Personal Adjectives	UNICH	UACH	-1.556	.000
		UNACH	-1.198	.000
	UACH	UNICH	1.576	.000
		UNACH	0.504	.003
	UNACH	UNICH	1.198	.000
		UACH	-0.387	.003
Social Categories	UNICH	UACH	1.556	.000
		UNACH	1.198	.000
	UACH	UNICH	-1.576	.000
		UNACH	-0.504	.003
	UNACH	UNICH	-1.198	.000
		UACH	-0.387	.003

7. DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrate that content of self-concept could be cue in situated ecologic context like university. Whereas the Intercultural University of Chiapas promotes social self-concepts (collectivism), the others Universities from same region, one public and the other private, but without an intercultural model, foment personal self-concepts (individualism). We suggest that individualism and collectivism are not general cultural syndromes of States or Nations (like Mexico), both could exist in all societies and influence psychological processes depending on the situation. For example, in a private university one mestizo could show personal adjectives in his or her self-concept, but in an intercultural university could show social categories in his or her self-concept. According "situated cognition perspective on culture" the expression of individualism or collectivism on self-concepts depends on the situation (Oyserman & Lee, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Oyserman & Sorensen, 2009). Depending on what is primed or cued in the moment it is possible to elicit individualism (personal self-concept) or collectivism (social self-concept).

Individuals make sense of oneself, others, and the world through situated components can stimulate personal self-concept qualities or social self-concept aspects. We propose the MMM approach of culture's impact on self-concept that postulate the proximal process (everyday situations and participation in institutions like family, school, university, work, and so on) provokes the impact of macrosystem or distal culture (attitudes or ideologies of the culture in which individuals live) on making sense and meaning. Human personality develops through processes of progressively more complex interaction between an active individual and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment or Microsystems or proximal culture. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Self-concept changes through guided participation in everyday situations that a community transmits its cultural practices, values, beliefs and norms. So individual or personal self (thought about private

traits, states, or behaviors) and collective or social self (cognitions about the way the collective relates to the individual) can take on different relations, depending on context. For example, in an institution where a person is exposed to intercultural educative model, the student could develop collective modus of defining themselves. According to this idea, culture emphasizes or deemphasizes individualism or collectivism through microsystems (participation in school, university, family, friends and so on). Culture, conceptualized as a shared meaning system, provides a variety of conceptions that people can use as symbolic resources to construct their own self-conceptions. The interaction in everyday situations with cultural artifacts (books, films, and computers), semiotic entities (language, narratives, and stories) and other social agents (friends, family or teachers) is the mechanism through which culture influences individuals. That is, culture's impact on self-concept via microsystem or proximal culture like Intercultural University of Chiapas or Autonomous University of Chiapas.

If the MMM approach of culture's impact on self-concept agrees, future studies could show how different mycrosistems or proximal cultures (for example, participation in different educative settings) promote different self-concepts. For us, we need croos-cultural evidence that demonstrates different self-concepts correlation with different local settings.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we essay the possible answer to the Bruner (1990) question: How individuals make sense and meaning of themselves and their social world? According to the MMM approach of culture's impact on self-concept, human identity develops through processes of progressively more complex interaction between an active individual and the people, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment or proximal culture. The proximal process (everyday situations and participation in institutions like family, school, university, work, and so on) provokes the impact of macrosystem or distal culture (attitudes or ideologies of the culture in which individuals live) on making sense and meaning. Our scores suggest that adolescents that participating in different educative context (private University, public University and Intercultural University) develop different self-concepts. While the Intercultural University students are more social than personal in theirs self-concepts, the private University students are more personal than social in theirs self-concepts. We think that it is necessary to revise the dimensional concept of culture developed by Triandis (1996, 2001). Culture should not be seen as a syndrome, static, monolithic entity (like East Asian and European American contexts). Instead, it should be understood as shared meanings and practices that it are produced, distributed, and reproduced among a collection of interconnected individuals in specific institutional practices. Culture interacts with the psychological in a situational context (i.e.: school or university) because culture impacts judgments and behaviors when it is activated in specific environment.

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