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Developmental Roots of Productive and Unproductive Social Character Traits

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Abstract: A longitudinal study of early attachment and social character development of 14 Nahuat mother-infant dyads -since the infants were 11 months, having assessed them at 9 years of age and again in their late adolescence- show a significant improvement on the youngsters' emotional development. The study conducted by the *Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis* within a 40-year-long humanizing project in the village, called »Intercultural Participation Project,« suggests the benefit of promoting the rescue of their indigenous Nahuat culture and tradition.

Keywords: Erich Fromm, intercultural-participation, joy-of-life, passive-hopelessness, character traits, Nahuat-culture.

The *Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis* (SEM-SOAC)¹ is conducting a longitudinal study

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of early attachment and social character development of 14 Nahuat mother-infant dyads since the infants were 11 to 15 months, having assessed them at 8 to 9 years of age and again in their late adolescence at 17 to 18. Seventeen more were assessed at infancy and at age 9 but are not 17 years old yet. We plan to assess them when they reach that age. Our work has been possible thanks to the existence of a social humanizing project called the »Intercultural Participation Project« that has been taking place in the Nahuat village.

First, we will introduce the »Intercultural Participation Project.«² The project has been underway for more than 40 years and is still ongoing, using a human-centered social sciences approach that is a dynamic and self-conscious understanding of the

statistical consultation and support; Bob Duckles for his careful English editing of this paper as well as PRADE—especially Francisco Sanchez and Beatriz Acevedo—for their collaboration and work in the Nahuat Village.

² The name was given to this effort by Sánchez and Almeida in their 2005 book *Paths of Uncertainty. Intercultural Relations and Dignified Survival*, reflecting, in 2005, on the experience (Sánchez & Almeida, 2005).



way social knowledge is constructed. Sánchez and Almeida's social sciences approach sees as central to the process the researcher's role as an »involved participant.« This perspective has also been adopted in today's field of relational and interpersonal psychoanalysis, in which the analyst is considered a »participant observer.«

We will now describe and reflect on the longitudinal study of 14 boys and girls conducted by the *Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis* when they became young adults, in 2015.

The »Intercultural Participation Project«

In 1973, PRADE (*Proyecto de Animación y Desarrollo*, Activation and Development Project), a group of Mexican non-Indians, came to live and work with poor and very poor indigenous peasants of a Nahuatl village in the Northern Sierra of Puebla.

The »PRADE team« aimed to participate in a »dignified way of life« by not complying with the alienated and unjust economic system that denies the existence of human beings who live in poverty. By centering their attention on Indian culture and everyday life, PRADE members have dedicated themselves from the start to enhancing the quality of life for both the villagers and themselves. To do this, they have created and supported the establishment of production and consumer cooperatives; a vigorous human rights commission directed to create awareness on the extreme violence present in the community that is usually hidden; a health center accessible to all inhabitants; and a special project that seeks to improve the children's nutrition. The health center offers both traditional and western medicine. All these projects are centered around rescuing indigenous cul-

ture and tradition.

PRADE members have reflected on their experiences and participation through the years in a dynamic, thoughtful, and systematic way, both as individuals and collectively. This has taken them to a deep understanding of their own and of the Indians' motivations and meaning of everyday life experiences, and reconfigured their own and each other's identities. On this path, participants have encountered ways to nurture and re-configure their »dignified« senses of identity: both of the indigenous villagers and of the non-indigenous team members.

During intermittent encounters between PRADE team members and SEMSOAC members, we reflected together on this experience. We at SEMSOAC feel we have, through the years, been witnesses to the critical originality and dedication of the PRADE participants.

The longitudinal study of Nahuatl children conducted by SEMSOAC

We intended to contribute to the understanding of the ongoing process of the Intercultural Participation project, with a more complex psychological and developmentally informed perspective. Since 1999, we have been studying early attachment relations and social character formation of the Nahuatl children, and the influence of their mothers' social character traits on their development. We initiated the study with 14 Dyads in 1999, adding 17 more in 2005 (See Gojman et al. 2012, 2013, Gojman and Millán 2015 and Gojman, Millán, Sanchez, and Gonzalez 2017).

We classified each mother's central character orientations using the social-clinical view proposed by Fromm (Fromm 1947a;



see also Fromm and Maccoby 1970b). Mothers' responses to the interview were then scored on six scales developed by SEMSOAC (Gojman, Millán, Sanchez, Gonzalez, and Rodarte, 2013). The interviews were conducted to understand the mothers' principal unconscious attitudes towards their lives, towards their children, and to see if and how much these influence the quality of their care-giving.

The scales we developed were: *joy of living, sensitivity towards their children's emotional needs, lovingness, as well as instrumental attention to survival in everyday life, and passive and active-violent hopelessness.*

We had filmed and coded the infant's attachments patterns with their mothers through the Ainsworth Strange Situation procedure (Ainsworth et al 1978). We had also filmed the mothers' caregiving practices in home observations (See Ainsworth et al 1978) and their adult attachment interviews. (Main, George, and Hesse 2003–2008).

When the children reached the age of 8 to 9 years (14 in 2007 and 17 in 2012), we interviewed the children with the *Social Character Interpretative Questionnaire* (SIQ), adapted for children. This included Piaget-like cognitive moral reasoning stories, family drawings, as well as a brief story about the family. We classified the central character tendencies of the children using the social-clinical view proposed by Fromm (Fromm 1947a; see also Fromm & Maccoby 1970b) and assessed them on the six character traits scales developed by SEMSOAC specially adapted for children. The children's—and later on adolescents'—character trait scales were: *joy of living, sensitivity towards their own and others' emotional needs, harmonious versus au-*

thoritarian non-supportive relations with parents, passive and active-violent hopelessness and sibling and peer rivalry. Results from these two phases of the study, when the children were 11 to 15 months and 8 to 9 years old, have been examined and published elsewhere (Gojman et al. 2012, 2013, 2017).

The productive and unproductive character traits evolution from 9 to 17 years of age in 14 Nahuat children.

In 2015, we were able to work again with the first 14 of the infants from the study. They were now late adolescents, about to become adults (17 to 18 years old). Some had started to work, and some others were initiating parenthood. We interviewed them again with the *Social Character Interpretative Questionnaire* (SIQ), asked for their House-Tree-Person drawings, and conducted Adult Attachment Interviews with them.

Thirteen of the 14 young adults or late adolescents (six boys and eight girls) had been able to register for and attend a post-secondary technical school recently established in the village. One girl was unable to do so because her assistance of her mother was crucial to the family's survival.

When we interviewed them, we found that most of them were in the second year of the technical school. When they complete these studies, they are expected to have a chance to get a better, though a still elemental, job.

The technical school reflects some progress regarding schooling in the village. Not long ago the highest possible achievement was graduating from secondary school. This made the children who achieved it, and their families, very proud and happy. The



recent progress seems not have worked equally well for girls as for boys, however. None of the boys had stopped attending, compared to three of the girls who started, but later had to drop out. Two left because they had given birth to their own babies. The other dropped out because her family was no longer able to support her school attendance financially.

So far, we have been examining the childrens' evolution from the ages of 9 to 17 using a sort of case study in which we pay attention to their global character orientation as assessed by their answers to the social character interviews, and by using the

six character traits scales. These have been showing important improvements in their character development.

Thirteen of them were studied when they were 9 years old (six boys and seven girls, one girl's family had temporarily moved away). Considering their shared, dominant character orientation, we found that three of them, 23%, showed a tendency toward a productive character orientation (either to be a productive-receptive or productive-hoarding orientation). The other 10, 77 %, were considered unproductive, with a passive-receptive orientation.

Dominant Character Orientation	Productive Character Orientation	Unproductive Character Orientation	
At 8-9 Years	(3) 23 %	(10) 77 %	Highly Unproductive
At 17-18 Years	(9) 64%	(5) 36%	Highly Productive

McNemar Test
Sig: .031*

When 14 were interviewed at age 17–18 as young adults (six boys and eight girls—the family of the girl that had been studied as an infant and had moved away came back to live again to the village), nine of them, 64%, were considered to have a global dominant character of productive (either receptive or hoarding) and five, 36 %, were considered unproductive receptive in the McNemar statistical test .031 *sig (See Table 1).

When assessed through the six scales developed for the character traits we also found an improving tendency: The first three scales point to what we think favors a significant human emotional development, and therefore enable them to overcome or contend with adversity. We found an important improvement of their scores

over time as a group on the *joy of living scale* (Wilcoxon statistical test .041 *sig), the *sensitivity towards their own or others' emotional needs scale* (Wilcoxon test .001 **), and the *harmonious versus authoritarian relations with parents scale* (Wilcoxon test .038 *sig, See Table 2)

The remaining three scales point to what we believe indicate character orientations likely to hinder their emotional development. They suggest an affective or traumatic experience and internalized attitude that does not tend to facilitate the capacity to overcome adversity. When we considered responses on the three scales of *passive-hopelessness scale* (Wilcoxon test .033 * sig), *rivalry towards siblings or peers* (Wilcoxon test .065 not sig), and *active-violent hopelessness* (Wilcoxon test



Character Scales	At 8-9 Years High Scores	At 17-18 Years High Scores	At 8-9 Years Medium Scores	At 17-18 Years Medium Scores	At 8-9 Years Low Scores	At 17-18 Years Low Scores
Joy of Life Wilcoxon, sig:0.041*	(2) 15%	(5) 35% ++	(3) 23%	(6) 42% ++	(8) 61%	(3) 21% --
Sensitivity to self & others feelings Wilcoxon, sig: 0.001**	(1) 8%	(5) 36% ++	(2) 15%	(5) 36% ++	(10) 77%	(4) 28% --
Harmonious Relations with Parents Wilcoxon, Sig:0.038*	(2) 15%	(6) 43% ++	(3) 23%	(4) 28% ++	(8) 62%	(4) 28% --

.564 not sig), we found a decrease in these negative scores considered as a group. Generally, we found few expressions of

violent-active hopelessness in the group among them in general (See Table 3).

Character Scales	At 8-9 Years High Scores	At 17-18 Years High Scores	At 8-9 Years Medium Scores	At 17-18 Years Medium Scores	At 8-9 Years Low Scores	At 17-18 Years Low Scores
Passive Hopelessness Wilcoxon, Sig: 0.033 *	(5) 34%	(3) 15% --	(4) 30%	(5) 36% ++	(4) 30%	(6) 43% ++
Active Violent Hopelessness Wilcoxon Sig: 0.564	(0) 0%	(0) 0% =	(1) 8%	(1) 7% --	(12) 92%	(13) 93% ++
Siblings Rivalry Wilcoxon, Sig: 0.065	(4) 31%	(2) 14% --	(1) 8%	(0) 0% --	(8) 62%	(12) 86% ++

Looking at each of the adolescents, we detect that the evolution of the character traits of the children from ages 9 to 17 have individually improved in 77% of this group. Some improved minimally but pal-

pably (six cases, or 46%). Others show a really important improvement (4 cases, or 31%), notably increasing their scores on »joy of life« and/or »sensitivity to their own and others' feelings« as well as decreasing



their »*passive hopelessness*« and/or »*rivalry with peers or siblings*.« Even the »*harmonious relationship with parents, as opposed to authoritarianism and submission*« scale, seemed to show important improvement compared to when they were 9 years old. The scores of one girl from one of the very few medium low-income families in the village were high or very high as indicators of productive or developmental tendencies. It was therefore almost impossible for them to be any better.

In only two of the 13 cases (15%) did we notice no improvement. One of them, who we will call Mario, really seemed to have

started on a road to authoritarianism with an extreme need for and admiration of power and control, only very slightly countered by some *joy of life*, since he was 9 years old. This trend was confirmed at age 17. He reached very high scores on *passive hopelessness* at 9 and 17 years and even increased his high score on *rivalry with siblings and peers* at age 17. It was evident at both ages that he was not receiving any emotional support from his authoritarian family. He was a son of a single mother in an extended family household, and he spent a lot of time on the Internet.



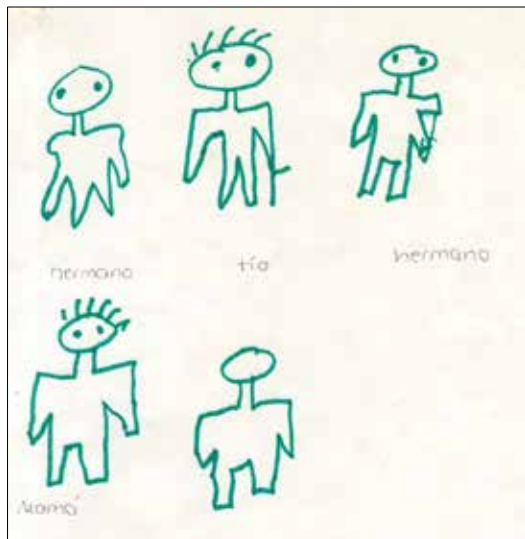
His AAI revealed that he was on the same trend as a strong Derogatory Speaker (Ds2) indicating a tough prognosis, especially regarding possible cruel attitudes towards persons or even towards animals.

The other boy, Genaro, who did not improve from age 9 to 17, shared with Mario, perhaps coincidentally, the experience of not being able to rely on his father, since his father had passed away before he was one year old. Mario and Genaro both deeply longed for their fathers' presence all through childhood. When assessing Genaro's interpretative questionnaire as a

whole at 8-9 years of age we found that he was passive-receptive in general, but looking at the scales developed by the SEM-SOAC he did not rate high on any of the specific scales: neither on the productive ones (joy of living, sensitive or harmonious relations with parents) nor on the unproductive ones (passive or active-aggressive hopelessness or rivalry with siblings). We noted the primitive strokes in his family drawing at age 9, and especially that his portrait did not include a face (see Drawing #2). His AAI was also non-autonomous, showing an Unresolved by loss, Dismissing, and fearfully preoccupied by traumatic



events state of mind (U/Ds3/E3).



Both Genaro and Mario attended the post-secondary technical school, not having started to perform work outside their family. Genaro had occasionally contributed to the family income since he was very young, and occasionally receives an income when he participates in paving or building bridges in the village's projects. They both day-dreamed about leaving the village to make huge financial progress. Both had a negative prognosis when they were infants. Both were insecure on the SSP, and their mothers provided them low sensitivity or cooperation in the filmed home observations. They both showed highly unproductive character orientations. We wonder how much weight to attribute to the absence of the father during childhood. These two are the only ones in the study who did not improve and who did not have the presence of their father while growing up.

We will now present a vignette of two of the children who improved significantly: One boy, Gilberto, and one girl, Jacinta, who overcame fearful, traumatic experiences and frightful fantasies, and having realistically been afraid for their own and

their family members' physical safety when they were 9 years old. They improved especially in their social character interviews. We had considered them to be tending toward a passive-receptive orientation at age 9. At 17, they both showed a clear productive orientation. They showed important increases in their *joy of life* and *harmonious relations with parents* scales and decreases in *rivalry with siblings or peers*. Both also came from very poor peasant families. They were insecurely attached to their mothers when they were infants, but they were not disorganized. This did not offer a positive prognosis although not the most negative prognosis either. Their mothers were illiterate, as some native Nahuat people in the village are since their native language is not Spanish, but Nahuat. Both mothers were non-autonomous speakers on the AAI but showed at least medium sensitivity to or collaboration with their infants during the filmed home observations. These mothers had also shown very high scores on *passive hopelessness* and null or very slight *joy of life* and *sensitivity towards her children's emotional needs*.

These youngsters had started to work and receive an income of their own. Gilberto worked as a Tourist Guide, and Jacinta embroidered shirts together with her siblings. Both Jacinta and Gilberto were proud to be able to contribute to their families' finances.

Jacinta initially registered and attended the post-secondary technical school, but had to drop out because the family could not support her financially while still sending their youngest daughter to the elementary school. Jacinta certainly regrets not having been able to continue her studies, but for the moment, this has not had as negative



an effect as we might have expected. In her comments throughout the interview, we noted how much she enjoys embroidering and participating in the dancing in the yearly ceremonies of the feast of the patron saint. Being selected to dance is a special privilege in the village. These activities seem to support her vivacious interest in what she does and her *joy of life*.

When describing herself at age 9, she said that she »likes the trees because little birds are born in the nest, and they keep the tree from falling even when a strong wind blows.« She spontaneously included a tree as if it were another member of the family in her drawing. She painted a remarkable lively family drawing although she did not use the colors that were available for her on the table (See Drawing # 3). This aspect of her interview made us aware of the central attention the indigenous culture gives to nature.



Gilberto also amply described taking joy in nature, as Jacinta did, while showing tour-

ists—»people from other places«— the natural caves and lush nature of the area. He clearly showed pride in being able to help his mother economically and in now being able to avoid the frequent, violent scenes his alcoholic father inflicted on his mother when he was a child, which he was unable to do anything about.

Not all the children we have been able to follow who have shown a meaningful improvement in the productive character traits have started to have a steady income as Jacinta and Gilberto have, but the two of them have shown the highest improvement when coming from traditional Indigenous families. In the interviews, they also mentioned aspects of their culture with pride and respect. When he was 9 years old, Gilberto mentioned a PRADE member, who tells them traditional stories in their own language, as someone who he admires and would like to be when he becomes an adult when he was 9 years old. In the moral reasoning stories and in other contexts, Jacinta and Gilberto both spontaneously mentioned the importance of helping people when they are in trouble. We think these statements are significant when combined with their opportunities to actively contribute to the betterment of their family's everyday material lives, doing so engaging in activities that are consistent with, not contradicting or disrupting their tradition and cultural values.

As a way of Conclusion

In its 40 years of existence, the Intercultural Participation Project of PRADE may have helped to improve the everyday lives of villagers through the establishment of the human rights commission, the producing of consumer cooperatives, as well as the bi-cultural health center, and the nutritional improvements for the children. The village



has also struggled through these years to install a water distribution system, now available to most households. All these have reduced some of the hardships of their everyday lives. While we find these critical, we also find the evolving relationships between the the people of the PRADE members and the Nahuat villagers should also be given significant weight. It has indeed expanded the capacity of the members of each group to know themselves better by coming to know the »other.« This has shaped the identity of both groups and the emotional lives of all of them. They have, through the years, faced transcendental experiences together, and shared everyday life experiences with those who are clearly from a very different culture. These experiences vividly demonstrate how being in touch with the »other,« »the stranger,« gives us insight on finding ourselves, and leading us to discover the deep meaning of the phrase, *Nothing human is alien to me*.

PRADE members have learned to make sense of the indigenous culture's main value: their fierce resistance to adapting to today's western world. The core of their purpose involves »a passion to survive to celebrate for its own sake« (Sánchez & Almeida 2005).

We see the indigenous resistance to the larger economic system that revolves around material values and their accumulation. Indigenous villagers resist, and defend themselves against an alienated system that only takes into account people who can achieve earnings and material success, a system where transcendental human values are lost. Indigenous people are not only not considered important; they are not even seen. They do not even exist. There is hope in finding ways to live a dignified,

meaningful life, and the courage to fight for this life, while living in a larger culture in which these values are almost non-existent.

The *Seminario de Sociopsicoanálisis* has focused on the children's development through these years. We are offering PRADE an understanding of the importance of attachment relationships and their social character development. We have benefited from reflecting with them on the evolution of the community. We have also benefited from witnessing their hopeful and permanent efforts: the cooperatives, the human rights commission, and the health system. Our intermittent visits to study the children have probably called the attention of villagers—mothers and others—to the children's development, as well as to the recognition on their own educational roles.

We are encouraged by the improvements we have seen in the children between ages 9 to 17, but have yet to see if these continue into adulthood. We also do not know if these trends are unique to these children or represent a more general human development.

The experience and recognition of diametrically opposed human perspectives on life can certainly nurture the participants' ability to experience empathy and compassion for each other. This is a significant emotional development that might encourage a hopeful feeling of solidarity, and a productive, sensitive joy of life.

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