



## Attachment Patterns and Social Character in a Nahuatl Village

### Socialization processes through social character interviews and videotaped attachment current methodology

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Erich Fromm formulated a socially informed psychoanalytic perspective, one that recognizes context as a main source of unconscious processes and the development of meaning. His concept of social character is an outstanding contribution to the social sciences, and creates a frame of reference for developing psychoanalytically informed field research.

A socially rooted understanding of dynamic unconscious processes, developed through the assessment of character traits prevalent in diverse non-clinical populations, can on the other hand bring an experiential opportunity for analysts to gain critical insight on the psychoanalytic dialogue.

The concept of social character was originally postulated by Fromm (1930) as the „character matrix common to all members of the group” (1932); „the drive structure, the libidinous and largely unconscious attitude of a group”, the „character of a society”. Starting from the discovery of the dynamic concept of character- as one of Freud’s greatest contributions to the science of man - it was aimed to apply psychoanalytic categories to the study of social groups. It was conceived not only as the energy of the individual, structured in terms of Freud’s dynamic character concept, but the one that is common to most members of each group or class within a given society. These traits „do not refer to the complete, highly individualized, in fact unique character structure as it exists in

the individual, but to a character matrix, which has developed as an adaptation to the economic, social and cultural conditions common to that group” (Fromm and Maccoby 1996, 1970).

This concept explains how psychic energy in general is transformed into the specific form of psychic energy that every society needs to employ for its own function. There is no „society” in general, says Fromm, in emphasizing diversity, „only specific social structures; each society and class demands different kinds of functioning from its members”. Differing social contexts demand that its members relate differently to each other, i.e., as equals, superiors, or inferiors.

The demands of each social role becomes „second nature”, making the person want to do what he or she must do without being aware of the motivation. Society produces not only tools and machines but also the type of personality that employs energy voluntarily and unconsciously for the performance of a social role. This process, Fromm asserts, „of transforming general psychic energy into specific psycho-social energy is mediated by the social character”. Recognizing the fundamental importance of childhood experiences as Freud did, Fromm’s theoretical viewpoint concerning the essential influences in character formation is different, mainly implying a distinct viewpoint about the possibility of later change. Fromm points out that there is a certain sequence in the develop-



ment of the child with regard to the stages that were postulated, although it does not seem to be as strict as Freud assumed. Clinical and social data suggest, he says, that the child starts out with all the potential modes, some stronger, others constitutionally weaker, and experiments with various character orientations. Eventually, the ones that become dominant are those most suited for adaptation to his or her particular environment. The importance of childhood experiences (very much mediated by the child's constitution) by no means excludes later changes in character.

Fromm's understanding of social character formation - which recognizes the need for human relatedness as a fundamental key for human growth (Millán 1996, p. 329) - is impressively coherent with what comes to be supported by attachment theory through the outcomes of its most sophisticated current methodological research. Preverbal early experiences may have special significance because they are not accessible to verbal recall; „unconscious processes” are thus set in the initial phases, which are immensely important, but not absolutely determinant, to how experiences become interpreted later on. „Prior history is part of the current context, playing a role in selection, engagement, and interpretation of subsequent experience and the use of available environmental support” (Sroufe, 1999). Meaning does determine in a large part what is lived through the ways in which experiences become interpreted and through these interpretations the subjects *become* involved in different experiences that can either close or open alternative modes of relation. Hope is a matter central to development and to human experience in general, and to the clinical practice in particular (Fromm 1968). It is a consequence from being cared for in a responsive way. It becomes manifest through the child's expressions of its own needs and feelings (as if) expecting and thus propitiating-provoking the corresponding responses from others. Hope is based on consistent previous experience that promotes similar consistent future interactions.

Since the family to which the child dynamically adapts continues to represent the spirit of the society into which the child enters, the same influences which have been the main determi-

nants from the beginning continue to mold the adolescent's and adult's character structure. Institutions of schooling, work and leisure do not differ essentially from the way of life transmitted to the child in his family. This is constantly reinforced later in life, provided that the social circumstances do not change drastically. But when circumstances do change in a significant way, the child, and even later on the adult, may bring forth orientations which have been latent, and which are more suited to the new circumstances. A shared „human nature”<sup>1</sup> (Fromm 1962) allows us to know ourselves by recognizing and understanding the broad and real differences in how we humans live and construct our personally and socially biased identities.

For the last two years, a research project in Semsoac (Gojman, 2000) has been focusing on the character traits of indigenous rural women (as expressed through the Social Character Interpretative questionnaires) and how they relate to their mothering practices and their babies' patterns of attachment. The project has assessed: a) videotaped home observations of the dyads; b) videotapes on the infants' attachment strategies through Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation procedure<sup>2</sup> (Ainsworth 1978, Sroufe & Flesson

<sup>1</sup> It consists of 8 episodes each of them of three minutes. 1) The researcher brings mother and baby to a room with toys. 2) The baby is invited by the mother to engage with the toys and sits down. 3) A stranger comes in and subtly tries to engage with the baby. 4) The mother leaves the room and the baby is left in it with the stranger. 5) The mother says the baby's room opens the door and comes in and tries to comfort it and to interest it with the toys. 6) The mother leaves the baby alone in the room. 7) The stranger comes in and tries to comfort the baby. 8) The mother comes back again, says the baby's name, comes in and tries to comfort the baby and engage it again with the toys if possible. See Ainsworth (1978).

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1986); and c) the tapes and verbatim transcriptions of Mary Main's Adult Attachment Interviews with the mothers (Main, Kaplan and Cassidy 1985, Main 1993). These will ultimately be compared to an equivalent urban middle-class group of mothers in Mexico City (Barroso & Sierra) who have formed a support group to improve their child-raising skills, and who are being assessed with the same instruments.

We will here present our first impressions on two of the 14 dyads that we have gathered and on the way the different aspects we have been studying seem to be related.

We are convinced that these varied elements offer together an impressive coherent understanding of their process of socialization. We can see manifestations of the character of the mother in the way she treats her baby and we are privileged witnesses of subtle mechanisms of the transmission of emotional interchange. The evolutionary view of attachment theory explains how the infants adapt and learn from the mother's consistent responses to their messages and needs. We think this study is an outstanding opportunity to sharpen our clinical observations complementing it with the accurate social understanding of the traditions and childbearing practices as they are developed in their everyday-life conditions.

Both mothers live in an economically extremely emarginated indigenous peasant community that mainly cultivates coffee, sugar cane, black pepper and tropical fruits. Both of them speak as their original language Nahuatl, and have learned some Spanish, but one of them, Maria is fluent in it, while the other, Celonia is barely elementally capable of expressing herself in it. She responded to the interpretative social character questionnaire with the help of a Nahuatl translator. Her husband is a „jornalero“, as was her father, both of them being peasants that are employed to cultivate on the plots of land of others. She lives in an extended family household that is placed 5 Km away and to be reached walking from the last group of huts to

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which one can come by collective transportation that runs a few times a day. The land on which they have built with cane bamboo a precarious house is not their property either, but has been lent to the family. Maria on the other hand lives in the small central town, 12 Km away from an Indigenous Village that is communicated by the regional road. She has been integrated to the patriarchal extensive family household of her husband. The paternal grand-grandfather of her baby is in fact a dominant character of the town. He has become central to the transmission of the oral tradition. He participated meaningfully to the recuperation of it that was gathered in a bilingual (Nahuatl-Spanish) book.<sup>3</sup> One of his sons (the father-in-law of Maria) is an important member of the local Human rights committee. Maria's husband has taken advantage of special opportunities for educating himself. He just finished his courses having gone for years to the state capital of Puebla to study a Diplomat while working as a teacher (in a private school) to sustain himself. Maria's family of origin in which she was raised is quite different. Her father was all of his life a peasant and has only for the last few years complemented his living by preparing food (tacos) to sell.

The social character questionnaire of Celonia shows her as a submissive, dependent, traditionally receptive woman, that defines herself by enlisting socially proscribed attributes which she considers to be absent from, as if she would be implying that she does not misbehave. Her role in society is clear and accomplished by being obedient and attentive to her husband, without noticing openly the value of her own activities, her work as she develops it or even her maternal duties. She considers physical punishment as an acceptable educational resource to which she easily recognizes to recourse when the children do not obey her, although perhaps in a little weaker form from the one that she suffered from her mother during her own upbringing. Children should for Celonia be obedient and be afraid of their parents because in the contrary they do the things they shouldn't do and are not

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<sup>3</sup> Taller de Tradicion Oral de la Sociedad Agropecuaria del CEPEC 1994 „*Les oimos Contar a Nuestrros Abuelos*“ INAH.



allowed to. She prefers from all that she does embroidering, because she „can earn some money while at the same time being aware of the children”. She has been suffering from having to stay all morning through a long period of time at the kindergarten to which her three year old boy attends, because he cries incessantly and cannot adapt to it. So much so that the teacher has advised her to stay and even will only receive him if she stays with him. Her dreams show her fears and damage that can come from society and the kind of everyday life she is in, but also her despair and completely repressed violence that flows as an undercurrent to her submissiveness. In one of them she witnesses an extremely bloody and violent scene in which a man is murdered. In another one she loses her six year old boy in the market of the nearest village and never finds him again.

The social character interview of Maria impresses as characterizing a young woman that is involved in a process of transforming her socially traditional character traits of receptive submissiveness to one of taking care of herself. An independent active attitude, which is critical of authority and purposely, oriented to seek her educational development even against her father's will. Maria did run away from home when she felt her father was mistreating her during adolescence and in spite of having counted basically on his support and comprehension during her childhood. His attitudes were contrasted with her mother's jealous and aggressive controlling attitude, which was enhanced in her adolescent years. She declares that children should not be afraid of parents and that one „should give them the opportunity to express what they feel to become self-reliant”. Her dreams fulfill her family desires: In one she sees herself when she is being married at the church, while living in a house of their own with her husband and having procreated two children. In another she sees her baby very happily walking by herself. Then she dreamt that the baby was sick, vomiting and she interpreted it as a sign that she should be more careful with it and not let herself be taken away by her dreams of good fortune.

In spite of clear differences among them, both infants seem to present organized behav-

ioral patterns of attachment. The baby of Celonia is an anxious resistant one,<sup>4</sup> while the one of Maria is a secure one.<sup>5</sup> Home observations of both confirm the ever-present relation between the way the mother treats the baby to the baby's response in this Strange Situation assessment. While Celonia feeds and baths the baby without paying attention to the signals it manifests, Maria is concentrated on the non verbal interchange, responding to the baby's signals, giving it the time it needs to swallow it, and putting words to its obvious gestures. The baby expects to be responded, signals what it wants and provokes the reactions of its responsive mother. A secure pattern of attachment as it has been observed in careful longitudinal studies (Sroufe 1989) can expect that the infant will later through childhood and puberty engage in relations with classmates, who are similar in their attachment strategies. It has also been observed that the child will persist, when things appear to be difficult to accomplish, insisting on trying and trying again. The baby's signaling what it needs and trying what it wants to do is one delicate expression of hope as Fromm used to describe it in „*The Revolution of Hope*” (Fromm 1968) as he also exemplifies in his introductory words to „*You are My Brother*” (Campbell 1975): One that is aware of its possible scope and is ready to sustain it and develop it in a everyday behavior.

The Adult Attachment Interview of Celonia is a proof, in a very limited Spanish, although in-

<sup>4</sup> One in which the infant becomes very upset by the mother's absence and cries a lot not becoming settled when she comes back, not greeting her in an open way nor manifests clearly to her what it needs. It is an ambivalent behavior that presents proximity seeking and resisting it at the same time and cannot get to an ultimate solution. The baby does, on the other hand, not manifest signs of a disorganized, conflicted or fearing its mother that could be expected from what we know of Celonia's traumatic childhood experiences.

<sup>5</sup> One that is clearly aware of the mother's absences, more upseted in the second one. It tries to signal that it needs her and openly greets her when she comes back. The baby becomes completely settled after having received the closeness of its mother it needed. The infant can then concentrate again on the toys.



terestingly enriched by Nahuatl expressions (of which one of us, Sonia, learned the first of a few words), of the extremely abuse experiences in which she was forged during her childhood. She is scored in the extreme of the scales of role reversing and trauma through abuse, especially on the one of pressured to achieve (the tasks of the household), as early as when being between three and five years old. Celonia was forced as well to accomplish fieldwork, harvesting coffee, carrying water and firewood, to feed the chickens and the pigs and more so to attend solicitously to her parents' thirst and hunger, even on the occasions in which she intended to resist herself. These intentions always ended up in battering, experiences of trauma that may seem to qualify as non-resolved disorganizing and that would, hypothetically affect the baby's attachment pattern to become manifest in the Mary Ainsworth Strange Situation assessment of the dyad. Unfortunately we cannot yet be certain about it because her Spanish capability is too limited. Her slippery expressions as they are recorded and would count on disorganization could also be a consequence of her so limited language ability.

The Adult Attachment Interview of Maria appears as an autonomous one that is coherent and free flowing in spite of not having lived through an especially favorable childhood development. Her father seems to have had a loving behavior towards her (4.5 almost at the average level of 5 as it was founded in non-risk samples in Baltimore. We are yet to see in the future how common or uncommon it may be so in this group of women). It is contrasting to Maria's mother inferred behavior to her that seems to have given her a little less attention than would be considered instrumental, non-loving but organized elemental caring responses (2.5). Her mother's inferred behavior appears in fact aggressive and elevated in the involving role reversing scale that seems to have become much stronger, but not new, when she started having male friends, and even more perhaps when she was going around with a boyfriend in adolescence. Then<sup>6</sup>, even her father ended up losing

the emotional comprehensive contact with her and with which she had counted on previously. Outstanding are some signs in her transcript of metacognitive processes. A monitoring of her process of thinking and recalling, which takes part while the interview, is in progress. These are usually only present in Autonomous transcripts and seem to manifest a free flowing flexibility, a continuing awareness of possibly logical contradictions, of the possibly erroneous personal biases, of the fallibility of personal memory, as well as suggesting that she may be aware of aspects of the appearance-reality distinction. Some disorientation is present with respect to two losses but both seem to be contained and refer to the repeatedly confusion or contradiction of the time, when the death of her paternal grandfather and of her grand-aunt, who she considered and says she called her grandmother, took place. We are not sure if she speaks thus also of different uncles, who playing the role of grandfathers are confusing for the interviewer more used to the nuclear family concepts than to the extended one so common in this group.

We are now still only starting to analyze the results. We are presenting them here to share it with you in these initial preliminary phases. Cultural practices, traditions on children upbringing, external conditions, language expressions etc. have yet to be carefully studied, and thereafter possibly to be widened so as to complete a wider sample. We would like to follow possible relations between childhood experiences that can in such highly risky samples and so difficult life experiences allow organized patterns of attachment, as the ones we are here reviewing, as well as what permits hope to be developed, the even autonomous states of mind we can see; and also the caring practices with their siblings that, as we have mentioned, show secure patterns of attachment. The relations of these and the social character interpretative questionnaire with its more clinical psychoanalytically oriented view, seem to us to start confirming the complementary perspectives that can be very enriching on both ways of approaching human devel-

<sup>6</sup> Maybe it was more so since the Village faced some conflicts with modernization when it had accom-

plished to establish a Televised High School to which adolescents attended and a few girls got pregnant.



opment and the possibilities of resilience: From the sophisticated methodological Attachment instruments to the social character dynamics and vice versa, from its clinically oriented view to the widening of our understanding and orienting the subtle assessments of the instruments.

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