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# Precursors of Cross-Cultural Psychology and the Context of Culture

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# Precursors of Cross-Cultural Psychology and the Context of Culture

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I begin my remarks by making a few biographical comments on some major parts of my career orientation. My mentors at the State University of Iowa, between 1943 and 1947 (Lindquist, Bergman, Knott, Wendell Johnson, Robert Sears, Kenneth Spence and Kurt Lewin), provided me with solid theoretical, methodological and content knowledge about the science of psychology. But culture was not in the psychological vocabulary at that time, much less the



term cross-cultural psychology. In Mexico, a mestizo culture, you could hardly avoid the term. For example, an early Mexican scholar, Ezequiel Chavez (1901), wrote an essay on our national character. Upon my return from Iowa in 1948, as Head of the Department of Psychology of Mexico City College, I organized a course with the title "The Psychology of the Mexican People". The bibliography included materials from Mexican philosophers and poets as well as European and American anthropologists and sociologists.

Samuel Ramos (1938), a philosopher, felt that to understand the Mexican culture one had first to understand the Mexican mind. The Mexican mind could be best understood through Adlerian psychology: Mexicans had an inferiority complex that showed best in their Machismo, and the culture showed it particularly in its tendency to imitate other cultures. Octavio Paz (1959), our Nobel laureate poet, wrote that Mexicans were solitary, airtight, simulators, servile and "sons of the nothing". When distinguished Mexican psychoanalysts, both Freudian and Frommian, expressed their views, interesting conceptualizations developed but the view of the Mexican character was still utterly negative.

As a member of a very traditional lower middle class family immersed in Mexican proverbs, and influenced by the Kluckhohns, I decided to try to understand the psychology of the Mexican on the basis of their most important and/or generalized beliefs. For substantial theoretical reasons, these were eventually labelled "Historic-sociocultural premises". The first study with ten of these beliefs was carried out in 1949. Questions such as, "Is the mother for you the dearest person in existence", "Do you believe the place for women is the home", "Do you believe that men should wear the pants in the family", were answered affirmatively by around 90% of individuals over 18 years of age in a weighted random sample in Mexico City in 1949 (Diaz-Guerrero, 1952).

In January, 1951 Werner Wolff came to Mexico City for the World Congress of Mental Health, where he contacted Guillermo Davila, Manuel Facon, Oswaldo Robles and myself. Werner felt it was important to communicate in psychology across the Americas. An Argentinean, Eduardo Krapf, was drawn, and the InterAmerican Society of Psychology (SIP), was founded.

At the second congress of the SIP, in Mexico in 1953, Theodora Abel noted in a paper dealing with culture change that "we can achieve greater flexibility for our concepts and develop new models through comparative studies of cultures in transformation" (Abel & Metraux, 1954, p. 100). During a conversation with her, this must have been the first time I felt it might some day be possible to isolate what was truly Mexican through some

sort of multicultural studies. Soon the SIP was to permit the alliance of a Mexican group headed by Guillermo D vila and a group led by Wayne Holtzman. Wayne and I became friends and collaborating scientists. Beginning in the middle fifties, we initiated and continued cross-cultural research between Mexico and the U.S. The most notable result of these efforts was a six-year cross-cultural longitudinal and overlapping study of school children in Mexico and the U.S., with systematic use of intracultural variation and a longitudinal design. In that project we followed children with a battery of tests from the first to the sixth, from the sixth to the twelfth, and from the twelfth grade to university entrance. This work led to the simultaneous publication of a now classic book, in English in the U.S. and in Spanish in Mexico, (Holtzman, Diaz-Guerrero, & Swartz, 1975).

The InterAmerican Society of Psychology deserves further credit among the antecedents of IACCP, because its Xth Congress in April 1966 in Lima, Peru, had so many symposia and papers on cross-cultural psychology that its proceedings (Hereford & Natalicio, 1967) had the title "Aportaciones de la Psicología a la Investigación Transcultural", that is, the contributions of psychology to cross-cultural research. There was an invited address on "Cross-cultural Research", by Fred Strodbeck, who asserted that: "The most easily conceptualized form of transcultural study equates cultural experience with the laboratory treatment administered to an individual subject" (Hereford & Natalicio, 1967, p. 67).

Triandis (1997) and I (Diaz-Guerrero, 1997) appear to strongly agree that the Ibadan Conference was an unintended cornerstone leading to the birth of our Association. The main purpose of the Ibadan Conference, as indicated in its prospectus, was "to encourage and promote research on the psychological aspects of social change and development (with special emphasis on developing countries)". It was definitely not to test cross-culturally the universal validity of psychological principles and data! Actually, the intention of the Ibadan Conference was well recognized in the central theme of the 1967 XIth InterAmerican Congress of Psychology: "La Contribucion de las Ciencias Psicológicas y del Comportamiento al Desarrollo Social y Económico de los Pueblos" (Natalicio, Hereford & Natalicio, 1969), that is, "the Contribution of Psychology and the Behavioral Sciences to the Social and Economic Development of Nations". Its Proceedings were published by the National University of Mexico in two volumes, and had on its title page an original and symbolic drawing by the noted Mexican artist Jose Luis Cuevas.

But the two most pragmatic recommendations of the Ibadan conference, a directory and a newsletter, fell on fertile ground: John Berry was then editing a directory of Cross-Cultural Psychologists and the assembly recommended sending the names of the Ibadan members to him; and Harry Triandis volunteered to start a newsletter and with the title Cross-Cultural Social Psychology Newsletter. As most members know, this eventually lead to the quarterly Cross-Cultural Psychology Bulletin. Thus, the Ibadan Conference was, in retrospect, central in the birth of our Association. Two years after the Ibadan conference, Walter Lonner joined the faculty of Western Washington University (then Western Washington State College) and became centrally involved in starting the Center for Cross-Cultural Research and also became founding editor of the Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, which was inaugurated in 1970. These various efforts were consolidated by

John Dawson, leading to the founding of IACCP in 1972. At that time JCCP became associated with IACCP as one of its official publications.

Now to an anecdote and a happening. Triandis (1997) refers to Fredi Stambouli, the Tunisian member at Ibadan whose eloquence convinced him and the entire assembly of the evils of intellectual colonialism. Stambouli possessed a volcanic voice. Sometimes he used it to break into a discussion, often at the end of a discussion and nearly always to express disagreement. In one of my interventions I put my foot in my mouth; I tried to summarize the statements of the speakers, but then I exclaimed, to the loud amusement of the assembly, "Stromboli erupted again!" (Fortunately Stambouli and I had developed a friendly relationship.) But there was also fun in Ibadan; I asked a Danish participant to go to a dance where we entered a competition. I had never danced the local rhythm High Life, but with the guidance of my graceful lady companion we won the competition, receiving as a prize an ice box, which remained in Ibadan!

I have been persistently fascinated by Ruth Benedict's statement that a culture is a gestalt and not a series of isolated characteristics. For many years I hoped to approximate this gestalt through the factor analysis of the Historic Sociocultural Premises or HSCPs (Diaz-Guerrero, 1972, 1986a). A number of studies found these Factors of HSCPs significantly and meaningfully correlated (Diaz-Guerrero, 1977, 1979, 1982) to many cognitive, personality and social variables. These findings led to a school of psychology termed ethnopsychology (Diaz-Guerrero, 1986b, 1993, 1995, Diaz-Guerrero & Pacheco, 1994) among Mexican social and cross-cultural psychologists.

As an example of the predictive value of the HSCPs, let us take the most generalized belief in Mexican students: "the mother is the dearest person in existence". This belief was held by over 90% of respondents in several studies in Mexico. The extreme contrary of this belief (the insult to the mother) was studied using a pancultural semantic differential (SD) among 200 high school students equally divided by sex and socioeconomic level. Respondents also responded to 20 other SD formats featuring clinical concepts such as suicide, drunkenness, crime, divorce, sickness, craze, fear, aggression, etc. as well as to Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Scale. The results showed that the greater the insult to the mother the more highly rated are crime (.57), suicide (.55), drunkenness (.50), aggression (.43), craze (.41), the less positively I evaluate myself (.26), and the higher the anxiety state (.21). That is, to behave brutally against the most cherished belief of the culture appeared to be related to most psychopathology (Diaz-Guerrero, Lichtszajn, & Reyes-Lagunes, 1979).

But studies of Mexican ethnopsychology has gone beyond these cultural beliefs: a number of colleagues have shown idiosyncratically descriptive social dimensions and personality traits (i.e., La Rosa & Diaz-Loving, 1986). A recent and possibly critical discovery indicates that all interpretations in intra- and cross-cultural studies of values are at least incomplete (Diaz-Guerrero, Moreno-Cedillos, & Diaz-Loving, 1995). It appeared that value scores were dependent on the satisfaction of the needs connected to the values. After recognizing the dynamic complexity involved in the process of need satisfaction and its impact on the connected value, a quasi experimental cross-cultural design is being carried out in Canada by John Adair, in the US by Harmon Hosch and

Roque Mendez and in Mexico by Rolando Diaz-Loving and this author. Results, in the three cultures, indicate that value scores are importantly dependent on interesting aspects of the dynamics of need satisfaction. Coincidentally, the local ethnopsychology has been upgraded, from cultural beliefs, social dimensions and personality traits, to apparently idiosyncratic levels of satisfaction of needs, the difficulty encountered in their satisfaction, the pleasure derived in their satisfaction and the importance ascribed to the associated values.

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### **About the Author**

Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero passed away in November, 2005. The story of his life and career can be found in the 2005 issue of the [Cross-Cultural Psychology Bulletin](#).