

La Familia

In Mexico you never feel alone – Teresa Rodriguez.

If there was one thing that you should take away from this book in order to understand Mexicans, it is the importance of family. If there is one thing that exemplifies the differences between our respective cultures, it is our concept of family and what defines a family relationship.

I want to emphasize, as I have said in various parts of this book, that when I point out a difference between our societies, it is never with a judgment of which is better or that either society's way of doing things is "good" or "bad." I wrote this book to explain things about Mexican society so that foreigners can understand the Mexican culture. Sometimes a comparison between American society (the only other society I know) and Mexican society can help to illustrate the differences. But in no way whatsoever am I saying one way is better than another.

While writing this, I read an article in the Nov/Dec 2008 AARP magazine that seemed to me to focus a major difference between American's attitudes about aging parents and Mexican's attitudes. While any generalization is suspect, I believe this one is worth noting. I'm aware that some Americans would strongly disagree with the contributor below. There are also Mexicans who feel differently about the role of the family. But overall, I think that the two cultures differ in their attitudes.

A middle-aged son had to take over his elderly parent's finances, which had become a mess. The son had to lend money to his father to stave off creditors and to try to work things out with them. Things worked out after a couple of years and the son got paid back. He said, "It was a complication I didn't need in my life."

I use this example not to be snide or judgmental about the man who said it. Until you've walked a mile in someone else's *zapatos*, it's best not to judge. I'm aware that many American sons and daughters would disagree with that statement. Hey, I've been in those *zapatos* and it's a hard mile to walk.

I did the best I could to take care of my own mother in the early stages of Alzheimer's. Her finances were also a mess. Since my financial plan for myself was to shut my eyes, cross my fingers and open up a new bank account when the old one got too confusing, straightening up her affairs was the blind leading the blind. I am sure there were days when a quote like the one above would have been one of the kinder things I might have said.

In the end, Mother went to an assisted living facility five hundred miles away and is visited daily by my sister in Plano, Texas. My sister is a jewel, while I am, at best, a diamond in the rough. My sister actually comprehends that a checkbook should balance

and that “more or less” is not an accounting term. Things are much better for Mother now. They are better not just in a financial sense, but in terms of the care she gets.

When I shared this with Mexicans, none of them judged me. They accepted that this was just one of the ways our cultures differ. Perhaps if we all could learn to accept our differences instead of trying to convince each other who’s “right,” the world would be a better place. Sorry, a little bit of my old sixties idealism leaked out.

But I do think most Mexicans would not even think such a thing, or if they did think it, would feel guilty about having thought it. In Mexico, you take care of your own. Long-term care facilities are few and mainly for the very rich or the very poor. If mama has Alzheimer’s there are always enough relatives that somebody can take care of her. If she needs a constant caregiver, some family member or combination of family members will take care of her. Most people don’t think twice. That is just what sons and daughters owe their parents.

Oops! I fell into stereotypical thinking. After I wrote this chapter, I met a family of modern Mexicans who said they fully expected their daughter to have them put into a good facility instead of spending her life taking care of them. The daughter agreed. So, like everything else presented here, there are exceptions. And I remembered a Mexican man I once worked for whose mother was in the best, or at least the most expensive, assisted living facility in Mexico.

Family Values Doesn’t Mean the Same

When we talk about “family values” here, we don’t mean the same thing as Mexicans. Here, that generally means certain political, social or religious views. In Mexico, it means that you value your family and family members over anything else in your life. Your family is more important than your job, than your convenience or any thing you might own. And Mexicans don’t just mean the nuclear family. To them, *la familia* extends to aunts, uncles, cousins, great cousins, cousins of cousins etc. As Dr. Mark Reeves said to me, *between my wife and I, our family probably numbers a thousand or so.*

No matter what the social class or economic status, *la familia* matters above all except *la patria*. Moving away from the family may be necessary for economic reasons, but new homes are bought with an extra room, both for visiting family members, or in case mother or father needs a place to live. In the United States, we think guests and family members are like fish, “They begin to stink after three days.” If they can afford it, most America family members would prefer to stay in a motel during a visit. That is just the way our culture is, these are not value judgments.

With Mexicans, these ideas are strange. When relatives come to visit, you make room for them, even if somebody has to sleep on the couch or floor. Family stays for weeks if they can. There is never a question on either side of going to a motel.

Although I traveled extensively in Mexico (with a few forays into Central and South America) starting in the 1960's and known many Mexicans of different social classes, I don't think I understood the culture very well until I lived there in the 1980's.

Even then I did not really begin to get a glimpse into the society until I courted a woman from Mexico City. I won't say that I immediately grasped the nuances of life in Mexico from that ill-fated love affair, but it opened my eyes to the importance of family in Mexican lives and how different our cultures were. Once my eyes were open, I knew where to look to understand the Mexican people better.

As any *gringo* or *gringa* who's married a Mexican will affirm, they didn't just marry a person – they married a family. That may well be one of the attractions for foreigners who marry Mexicans; not only does it fulfill romantic needs, but it fulfills our familial needs as well.

One of the attractions of music festivals and events like Burning Man are that the attendees feel like they are among their “tribe” or “family.” It's like many Americans feel the need for family, just not the one we were born into.

In trying to grasp the importance of family, it's easy to fall into the trap of idealizing the Mexican family. People are people, no matter where in the world they are born. There are good people and bad people everywhere; there are well-adapted and no-so-well-adapted people in all cultures. The dysfunctional family is not solely an American concept. There are drunken uncles, scheming aunts, delinquent children and the ne'er-to-do-well brother no one talks about (in our family's case, me) in every society, if not every family.

The difference in the Mexican family is that, because family is first, conformity is second and individuality is last, family gatherings are generally more pleasant than many of those in the United States. I am going out on a limb here, but it seems like I read (and know) of more dysfunctional than functional families in the USA. Someone said, “*If you don't think your family's dysfunctional, you haven't watched enough daytime television.*” It may be that we simply pay more attention to deviations from the norm and Mexicans have more tolerance and acceptance.

In the USA, a family gathering a year is about it, usually Thanksgiving or Christmas. If the popular press can be believed, these are more often than not stressful times. There are waves upon waves of articles in magazines and newspapers with tips on how to avoid family discord during those gatherings. We're usually happy to see the family arrive and happier yet to see them depart. If family members stay more than a few days of a holiday, we get edgy. We Americans value our space.

Mexicans (of all social/economic classes) have a different approach. In fact, our concept of the importance or lack thereof, of family bewilders them. As Luis Miguel, a tour guide in Morelia put it:

“I know a lot of people in my own family who have a lot of time for religious ceremonies. Whenever there is a birthday, we come together. Since we are twelve [brothers and sisters], you can imagine that there are lot of birthdays, because we celebrate the birthdays of the children of the brothers and sisters (the nieces and nephews) as well. We make at least fifteen fiestas a month. Then we all come together for mother’s day and the festivities of our nation, as well as the two weeks around Christmas and Easter. So time without the family is inconceivable. Our children have grown always going to family events. They go to the fiestas of the towns. The important thing is that time shared together is the most important.”

Some would argue that Americans are the way they are because our country is vast and we are more likely to live far away from our relatives. That is valid, but immaterial. Mexicans today are more likely to live in different towns than the rest of their family, but are just as likely to show up for family gatherings as before. In fact, when you tell a Mexican you are going to some distant city, their first expression is usually, “*Lo es muy lejos*” (It is very far) usually said with a sense of wonder, followed by, “*¿Tiene familia allá?* (Do you have family there?).

Travel is more likely than not (though this could be changing) to a town or city where one has family, rather than just to a destination one has never seen. If one does desire to break out of the familial orbit and go somewhere new, it’s most likely that he will invite at least some family members to share the journey. Vacations are seldom solitary searches for identity. One’s identity is wrapped up in one’s family.

When I traveled throughout Mexico alone, Mexicans invariably asked me: “*Don’t you have any family?*” and “*Isn’t it very sad to travel alone?*” A friend of mine puts together small tours of ten to fifteen people to visit different parts of Mexico. When he asks for a discount at hotels, he is usually told, “*That’s not a group, that’s a family.*”

During Christmas and Easter (both of which are at least two-week vacations), the cities empty, government and industry effectively halt and the beaches fill with families. All those crowds don’t live in Acapulco, Cancún, Puerto Vallarta etc. They come from all over the country to gather as families.

In the American culture, this sort of familial closeness would be considered stifling – in this generation. Since we are all immigrants, our feelings about family have probably evolved depending on how many generations we are removed from our original culture and what country our family left to come to America. If we are originally from a country in Europe or Asia that felt strongly about family, we can identify with the Mexicans on this issue. If we come from a country where families were smaller and less important, we find the Mexican emphasis on family hard to understand.

Regardless of our personal experiences, I think that it is important to understand things about people without trying to identify them as similar to ourselves. Yes, there are many similarities between Mexicans and Americans, but it is the differences that make us interesting.

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