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The Machismo Syndrome: A Residential Correlate of Its Expression in a Mexican Peasant Community

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ABSTRACT

The Michaelson-Goldschmidt hypothesis states that in peasant societies wherein male dominance is an ideal, matrilineal residence tends to encourage the expression of the machismo syndrome of behaviors. Recent ethnographic research in a Mexican peasant community supports the hypothesis by the finding that interpersonal violence (one measure of machismo) during a fiesta was perpetrated in every extreme instance by men who were residing matrilineally. The hypothesis thus effectively predicts, in this case, matrilineality as the variable most closely associated with the violent dimension of machismo.

INTRODUCTION

Machismo is a Spanish word that refers to excessively masculine behavior. Exactly which behaviors are considered to be masculine are defined partly by culture; but the word has come to have a more broadly applicable meaning, at least in American English. Michaelson and Goldschmidt (1971:346) define machismo as:

...aggressive masculinity which involves the demonstration of manhood through violence and fearlessness, but especially through feats of sexual conquest.

Because these authors apply the concept of machismo to a cross-cultural examination of peasant societies, they apparently intend it to carry a meaning that transcends cultural particularity.

I apply the concept of machismo, as Michaelson and Goldschmidt define it, to a series of incidents of aggressive masculine behavior that I observed during a fiesta in a rural south Mexican hamlet in 1973. My objective is to discover whether their hypothesis regarding the expression of machismo can explain why some men and not others participated in the violence observed.

THE HYPOTHESIS

Michaelson and Goldschmidt hypothesize that machismo occurs in those peasant societies that (1) have an ideology of male dominance over women, but (2) in which men do not have the means to actualize that ideology. In peasant societies land is the most valued property, so machismo is most likely to be manifested in societies in which there is an ideology of male dominance and a system of bilateral inheritance of land (i.e., women as well as men can inherit). Societies in which men alone can inherit land, or in which there is no ideology of male dominance, would be less likely to manifest machismo because there would be no major conflict between ideology and experience. Michaelson and Goldschmidt (1971) examined 46 peasant societies in culturally different parts of the world and found some confirmation of their hypothesis.

OBSERVATIONAL CONTEXT

Whereas the Michaelson-Goldschmidt study concerns differences among whole societies, my interest is to examine differences of behavior among individual men within a single community. Only one of the three behaviors associated with the machismo complex is examined here: aggressive masculine violence. Instances of this behavior were confined to a limited context (the fiesta) and were, with one exception, observable. The community in which the behavior occurred is composed of peasants, for whom inheritance of land is bilateral; there is a variety of residence choices based partly on access to land. Also the culture expresses an ideology of male dominance, although not of a very extreme sort.

Evidence of such an ideology includes the markedly differentiated socialization of boys and girls, which emphasizes active autonomy of boys and their protectiveness toward related females; the customary proscription against women and girls being alone, which implies that men would take sexual advantage of a lone female; and the public representation of the family by the husband, complemented by a

wife's reluctance to embarrass her husband by public disagreement. However, the domestic solidarity of husband and wife in this community is a culturally expressed ideal, and their domestic interdependence is a socioeconomic fact. The unmarried adult status — male or female — is a difficult, undesirable, and (except for the elderly) usually temporary one. The female-headed or the matrilineal household (Gonzales 1970) is rare.

It must be noted also that violent machismo behavior occurs despite a climate of disapproval. Disruptively violent behavior within the community is neither admired nor encouraged, although (short of permanent injury) no sanctions seem to be imposed after the fact. When violence occurs it even may be officially denied as having been caused by community members. Finally, women tend to be instrumental in ending fights, an indication that such behavior is distinguishably masculine.

OBSERVATIONS OF MACHISMO

During the fiesta in 1973, I learned of four incidents of male aggression involving seven men. The first incident involved Ernesto, who was well known for his belligerence when inebriated, and for his chronic inebriation. Although he was observed trying to initiate a fight, he was unable to engage anyone.

The second incident involved a community resident, Hector, and another (unidentified) man. The fighting in this case was violent enough to disrupt all activity of an otherwise amicable celebration, and drew a crowd of people. In this incident the conflict was brought to an end when an unidentified woman struck Hector a heavy blow on the shoulder with a piece of wood. I was told later by other residents that both fighters were nonresidents, which was untrue but expressed the community fiction that they are an entirely peaceful people.

The third incident was a fight that broke out between a young man, Alejandro, and an older man, Nero, his father-in-law, both of whom had been drinking heavily. Again, a crowd gathered, and most women and children fled to a safe distance. Alejandro was said to have been the instigator and, bad enough as it was to have picked a fight with his father-in-law to whom he owed respect, he later picked a fight with his own father. Other residents who did not know I had observed the fight between Alejandro and Nero told me that neither of the belligerents were residents. Most of the crowd around the fighters were men, but foremost in the fray were Nero's wife and teenage daughter, who finally were successful in pulling him away, and Nero's wife led him unwillingly toward home. Another man, Jaime, who evidently was inebriated, had attempted to enter the melee between Alejandro and Nero but was readily persuaded to desist by another woman.

A final case concerns Martin, who went home one evening of the fiesta and beat his wife, Marina. I have only Marina's account of this, but I observed during the day the incident that led to the violence. Both Marina and her husband were attending a dance during the fiesta, and Marina was holding their two-year-old daughter. She had been looking forward to dancing at the fiesta, but Martin would not dance with her. When an older male relative of hers invited her to dance, Marina rather unceremoniously thrust the baby into her

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husband's arms and left him standing alone with an angry expression on his face. According to Marina, he was jealous of her dancing with another man, and that evening he (inebriated, by her account) kicked and hit her in the stomach (knowing her to be pregnant), and "stole" some of "their" money.

DISCUSSION

According to the Michaelson-Goldschmidt hypothesis, the custom of bilateral inheritance of land is a threat to male dominance because it permits women to have control of property that might otherwise be controlled by men, and enables women to be not wholly dependent on men, particularly their husbands. Bilateral inheritance also permits flexibility of residence choice, insofar as residence is based on ownership of land, for spouses who originate in different communities. According to information I collected, the expression of machismo is related to a wife's control of land by her inheritance of it or by gift of it from her living parents, and by the degree to which the wife's access to land is economically important to the couple. The wife's control of land varies among couples in the community, and land is most likely to have been acquired through the wife if the couple is residing matrilocally — i.e., the husband and the wife have been born in different *municipios* (roughly analogous to townships in the United States) and after marriage they reside in the municipio where the wife was born. Matrilocal marriages are especially common in cases in which the groom has little property of his own. Thus a matrilocal marriage itself implies some economic dependence on the holdings derived from the wife or her relatives. Matrilocal residence also usually means that the wife's parents and other kin live nearby and provide various kinds of cooperative assistance to the couple; the husband, if his relatives live far away, cannot fully reciprocate such aid.

Of the marriages between spouses who have been born in different *municipios* (42.86% of all complete couples in the community), more than half (57.14%) are patrilocal. Patrilocal marriages also tend to be first marriages (reflecting greater permanency), are characterized by more expensive weddings and by more formal sanctions (involving both a church and a civil ceremony), and the bride in such marriages is more probably a virgin. In short, patrilocal marriages tend to be more prestigious.

Matrilocal marriages, by contrast, are 38.10% of all intermunicipio marriages (another 4.7% are neolocal), and generally carry fewer of the various criteria of prestige. Patrilocal residence is chosen over matrilocal residence by a ratio of roughly 3 to 2. Thus, though the community as a whole cannot be characterized by either a patrilocal or matrilocal residence pattern, I conclude that the first is the preferred form.

In Table 1, I have compared the men who were involved in instances of physical aggression during the fiestas with several variables that I thought might be relevant to the frustration of an ideal of male dominance. Five of the variables are related to economic concerns, and the last two refer to other possible value conflicts with male dominance. As the table shows, all the men who actually were engaged in fighting exhibit some of the traits that the Michaelson-Goldschmidt hypothesis suggests should be associated with a failure to actualize an ideal of male dominance, and which therefore should be associated with machismo. The one variable that is manifested in every case of active belligerence is matrilocal residence. By contrast, the two men who did not effectively engage in violence exhibit none of the variables.

It is also of interest that all fighting was by men who had drunk a large amount of alcohol, and who apparently were inebriated. Though Michaelson and Goldschmidt do not include drunkenness *per se* as a manifestation of the machismo syndrome, it might be regarded as such in some cultures and contexts. One man (a modest imbibor) told me that he did not know why certain men drank and fought so much at fiestas, but when they did they were likely to throw out their chests and exclaim to the world: "*Yo soy hombre!*" ("I am a man!"); the machismo syndrome thus is recognized by this and probably other community members. Inebriation by itself, however, cannot explain belligerent behavior, because all men (and women to a lesser extent) are expected to drink at the fiesta, and the men who participated in the fighting were not the only ones who had drunk heavily.

CONCLUSION

Though my data do not enable me to expose the Michaelson-Goldschmidt hypothesis to conditions of possible disproof, they have had predictive success in identifying the variable most closely associated with the violent aspect of machismo: matrilocality. It is the bilateral inheritance (or gift) of land that makes matrilocal residence an economically advantageous choice for some men, but creates a situation that brings the husband into frequent and ongoing interaction with his wife's relatives, leading to indebtedness to them which he cannot easily discharge. Not being able to fulfill his role as husband, neither can he with impunity take out his frustration on his wife. In a culture that perceives men to be capable of violence and appropriately dominant, aggression toward other males provides alternative compensation.

Neither the Michaelson-Goldschmidt hypothesis nor my discussion of it exhausts the range of possible contributing causes of machismo, such as psychological development (Chodorow 1974) or socialization experiences (Stevens 1973), but I have explored some of the inherent features of the socioeconomic structure that make the manifestation of machismo likely. Though some authors have explored the causes of matrilocal residence (see Harris 1975:343-4 for a summary), perhaps one reason for matrilocal residence being less common than patrilocal residence in the community described is that the male role-stresses associated with the former are perceived and avoided if possible.

Table 1. Characteristics of Belligerent Males

Men Involved in Aggressive Behavior	Economic Characteristics				Other Characteristics		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Martin	X	X	X		X		X
Neró			X	X	X	X	X
Hector		X	X		X		
Alejandro					X		
Ernesto							
Jaime							

1. Corn land derives from wife or wife's relatives.
2. Coffee land derives from wife or wife's relatives.
3. Houseplot derives from wife or wife's relatives.
4. Wife earns some cash income.
5. Residence is matrilocal.
6. Husband is younger than wife.
7. Wife is unchaste, implied to be unchaste, was not virgin at marriage, or was married previously.

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