

## Mexico - History Of The Mexican Family

The pre-Hispanic families in Mexico were Aztec. Aztec families were typically monogamous in character, except in the noble caste, where polygamy was permitted. Marriage for the Aztecs was considered a family affair. Individuals did not have any say in the selection process, and the parents would normally consult a fortuneteller, who could, based on birth dates, predict the future of the marriage. Normally, a pair of older women, called *cihuatlanque*, would negotiate between the families. The tradition called then for a meeting of the girl's family to assess the proposal and obtain permission of all the family members.

After this, the marriage ritual would be celebrated next to the home, with the bride and groom sitting next to each other while they received gifts. The old women would tie a knot in the shirt of the groom and the blouse of the bride. From that moment on, they were married, and their first activity would be to share a plate of *tamales* (corn-based food). Later, singing and dancing expressed the happiness of the moment, after which the couple would spend four days of prayer in the nuptial room. On the fifth day they would take a bath together in a *temazcal* (traditional bathroom), and a priest would shower them with holy water. A man would follow this ritual only with his first wife, although he could take other wives. Tradition also stressed that a woman should always worry about her appearance and that the male should be the undisputed head of the family (González Gamio 1997).

Clearly, during this period, Aztecs of high caste used polygamy to ensure a steady and growing reproductive rate. However, after the conquest, the Spanish imposed monogamy. By the middle of the eighteenth century, one-fourth of the population was *mestizo* (offspring of one Spanish and one indigenous parent).

The structure of the family in New Spain followed the Spanish tradition of an extended family, which assigned uncles and cousins on both sides of the family

the same degree of closeness as parents and siblings. In fact, family identity prescribed, more than any other factor, the position of an individual within a social group, and family loyalty was held as the highest value of that society.

Marriage and family life were governed by the Catholic Church, which allowed individuals to choose their spouses, but required that the couple live together till death. According to the Christian faith, marriage sanctified the family, whose principal objective was to have children and care for them both morally and economically. Within the scheme that prevailed, the father had the divine right and obligation to guide his children toward Catholicism. The mother helped with this task by inculcating the values of love, honesty, and loyalty to the family. Children were expected to honor, love, obey, and respect their parents (González Gamio 1997).

Although the values, norms, and ways of the indigenous groups were never fully destroyed and have always permeated the country's culture, three centuries of Spanish colonization and the political and religious acculturation process imposed during this period carved deeply into the structure and *The contemporary Mexican family represents a mix of indigenous, pre-Hispanic ways of life and Spanish expectations and norms. Values that Mexicans ascribe to the family include unity, love, well-being, and tenderness.* MACDUFF EVERTON/CORBIS character of the Hispanic-indigenous family (Ramos 1951).

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## Mexico - The Contemporary Family

After five centuries of Spanish colonization, the Mexican contemporary family emerged with a distinct culturally hybrid character, which on the surface seemed to incorporate the institutionalization of the Judeo-Christian influence. However, this institution still holds within it an unfinished dialectic between the feelings of indigenous peoples (represented by the traditional feminine subculture), and Spanish expectations and norms (reflected in the masculine *machista* orientation). Thus, the Mexican family continues to live in the center of a national acculturation dialectic (González Pineda 1970), which is evidenced by the way Mexicans construe their interpersonal relationships (Díaz Guerrero 1994), their consciousness, attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors towards interaction with other members of their society.

Although most Mexican families have characteristics in common, the Mexican family is not represented by one unique type; a variety of indigenous groups live in Mexico. By 1982, Luis Leñero, a Mexican sociologist, was able to identify more than twenty categories and at least fifty-four types of families by taking into account social context and heritage and its composition and structure, which creates very diverse family interactions and dynamics.

It is estimated that 74.2 percent of contemporary Mexican families fall into a nuclear marriage pattern, while the rest correspond to extended families types (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática 2000). Although the relations and structure appear to be nuclear, in practice, they continue to be extended (Sabau García and Jovane 1994). In fact, families are more like clans who give emotional and instrumental support and guidance at all times.

Marriage is so popular that by the time Mexicans are fifty years old, more than 95 percent of them have been married at least once (Salles and Tuirán 1997). The union of these couples is increasingly sanctioned by both church and state (80.5%). Some couples cohabit without marrying (INEGI 2000). In the early twenty-first century, the average age for marriage was twenty-three for females and twenty-six for males (INEGI 2000). Until the 1980s, men used to wed women who liked to stay home and were feminine, hard working, honest, and simple; since then, attributes like submissiveness have declined in popularity. At the same time, there is a growing tendency to look for women who are faithful, understanding, responsible, and intelligent. The pattern reflects a new conceptualization of women and their role in couple relationships. At the same time, females have maintained their traditional search paradigm and are still looking for hard-working, faithful, good, understanding, and intelligent men (Consejo Nacional de Población 1995).

The profound changes in the attributes that males and females look for in a mate have had a major impact on the family life, which in turn has led to a reestablishment of the Mexican family. Mexicans are marrying older, are starting to forgo religious marriage in favor of legal or free unions, and perceive and interpret relationships in a more egalitarian form. In essence, there is a movement away from some of the traditions and rituals towards more individually based unions. In this world of transition, the families' everyday lives, dynamics, functioning, and organizations have been profoundly altered, creating new forms of conflict and crisis. Families increasingly see the lack of communication, financial difficulties, absence of respect for elders and parents, addictions, lack of closeness, and struggles with the upbringing of children and domestic chores as insurmountable problems (Espinosa Gómez 2000).

Changes of modern life have altered some families for the worse. Physical violence, emotional harassment, and sexual abuse have become more common in the home. Most agencies and researchers postulate that these problems are the product of a challenged machismo, the increase in power struggles within the family, and disputes related to women's double work days. In one in four

households in the Mexico City region, both partners are employed (INEGI 1999). As a result of the growing participation of women in economic activities, new forms of family relationships, based on asymmetries and negotiations that were nonexistent in the traditional family structure, have become common. Unfortunately, males have not started to contribute to family chores and childrearing activities as fast as women have moved into the work force, placing a special burden on women. This load has had a negative effect on women's physical and mental health, as well as on the smooth organization, solidarity, and functioning of the family.

The problems of the modern Mexican family do have solutions. A national values survey (Beltrán et al. 1994) showed the emergence of positive beliefs and attitudes toward the gender work revolution. When asked who should take care of household chores, people with higher incomes and education indicated that both males and females should share in the activities. In addition, males with an androgynous personality—a personality that includes at the same time instrumental (intelligent, capable, active) and expressive (courteous, romantic, tender) positive traits—placed a higher value on egalitarian relations and are more willing to share family household responsibilities. With all the changes and the emphasis on individual well-being and personal growth, more nuclear families are separating from their extended families, and second and third marriages are becoming more common.

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## **Mexico - Stereotypes And Myths About The Mexican Family**

The Mexican family has been subject to popular stereotypes, including an extreme machismo and a submissive and powerless woman. This vision is real in some families but is not the norm. In many cases, the moral and psychological strength of women withstands the initial pledge for power of their mates, and women end up with control and authority in all family matters. In a growing number of families, the men do the housework, and the women earn part of the family income (Leñero 1982).

Other stereotypes center on the role of religion in the family, giving it a sacred and ideal tone. This is reflected in proverbs such as, "what God has united cannot be separated by man," or "you must have as many children as God sends you." These statements have affected the behavior of Mexicans for ages, but are more strongly held in the rural areas, towns, and small cities. However, in spite of the official religious character of the Mexican family, there is a large disparity between religious fervor and the practice of religious values in everyday life. Many do not practice the religion they profess (Bermúdez 1955; Lafarga 1975).

Along with stereotypes there are myths about the Mexican family. These tend to be deeply rooted in the collective memory and are expressed in the form of feelings of cognitive structures that guide the interpretation of events or traditions that confirm group identity. Thus, myths are the vehicles for the creation of beliefs and behavioral patterns of family life. Their origin is in the culture and they influence the values, feelings, and perception of how one should conduct oneself in everyday family activities. Among the most popular and widespread myth systems are:

- Families in the past were more stable and harmonious.
- The only place to satisfy the vital needs of love and protection is the family.
- Family agreement and consensus is natural.
- Virginity should be kept until marriage.
- He who is married wants a house.
- Until death do us part.
- Fidelity exists in marriage.
- Men always say the last word. (Salles and Tuirán 1997)

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## Mexico - Mexican Family Historic Sociocultural Premises

The norms that regulate the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors within the Mexican culture, as well as the formation of national character, have been deeply researched and described by Rogelio Díaz Guerrero (1986). His analyses suggest

that inter-personal behavior is directed and determined, in part, by the extent to which each subject addresses and believes the cultural dictates. To assess the adherence to the Mexican sociocultural norms, Díaz Guerrero (1982) extracted the historic-sociocultural premises from sayings, proverbs, and other forms of popular communication. Content analysis showed that these proverbs depicted the central position that family plays within this culture. Two basic propositions describe the Mexican family: (a) the power and supremacy of the father, and (b) the love and absolute and necessary sacrifice of the mother. More than 80 percent of those surveyed indicated that these premises were correct and guided their life. Analyses of the responses to the statements yielded a central traditionalism factor called *affiliative obedience versus active self-affirmation*, stressing that "children and people in general should always obey their parents," and that "everyone should love their mother and respect their father," which means children should never disobey parents and should show respect in exchange for security and love from them. From this point of view, Mexico is built on a strict hierarchical structure, where respect for a person reflects the power offered to people with higher social status. In contrast, in the United States, respect was found to be what a person who is on equal terms deserves (Díaz Guerrero and Peck 1963).

The changes related to gender in contemporary Mexican families and the sense of traditionalism are both evident in the *machismo versus virginity-abnegation* factor, which refers to the degree of agreement with statements such as "men are more intelligent than women," "docile women are better," "the father should always be the head of the home," and "women should remain virgins until marriage." This attitude of abnegation reflected that both men and women believed that it was important to first satisfy the needs of others and then of themselves. That is, self-modification is preferred over self-affirmation as a coping style in relationships.

Finally, the importance of *family status quo* and *cultural rigidity* in relation to the roles played by men and women in the family appears in such proverbs as "women always have to be faithful to their husbands," "most girls would prefer to



be like their mothers," "women should always be protected," "married women should be faithful to the relationship," "young women should not be out alone at night," and "when parents are strict, children grow up correctly."

Factors that form the sociocultural premises of the Mexican family include not only the rules and norms that specify the relationship patterns, but also the expectations and stereotypes formed by people outside the group. Premises and stereotypes are tendencies in particular groups; they give a general idea of the character of a group, but there are also individual differences. Not all Mexicans defend and live by the sociocultural premises; some rebel against the traditional culture. Mexican students expressed countercultural beliefs when they called for liberty and equality in a culture based on interdependence and respect.

*See also:* [ETHNIC VARIATION/ETHNICITY](#); [GODPARENTS](#); [HISPANIC-AMERICAN FAMILIES](#); [LATIN AMERICA](#); [SPAIN](#); [UNITED STATES](#)

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### ***Other Resources***

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