

"MACHISMO," DRUGS AND STREET SURVIVAL IN A US-MEXICO BORDER COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how many of the behavioral norms, values, and attitudes encapsulated in the cultural ideal of "machismo" are expressed through the interrelated activities of drug use and aggression among male Mexican heroin addicts ("tecatos") in a US-Mexico border community. Ideals of excess, risk, and outstripping others frame the onset and trajectory of drug use careers. The aggressive aspects of "machismo" provide the "tecatos" with an effective means of adapting to a social life-world fraught with a variety of personal risks. Through enacting and re-creating the ideal of "machismo" in his day-to-day interactions the "tecatos" gains social status as well as a means of self-defense and a strategy for drug use management. While recognizing the practical value of these attitudes many "tecatos" are also aware of their costs. In the context of life in the streets, aggression, along with excessive drug use, are emphasized to the exclusion of other more positive male attributes in Mexican society, including personal control and familial responsibility. On an ideal level such positive aspects of male gender expressions are recognized and culturally available but on a practical level they are rarely practiced. It is suggested that structural factors may mitigate against the expression of these more positive aspects of "machismo."

INTRODUCTION

Using an ethnographic approach this paper examines the complex interrelations between "machismo," drug use, and aggression among intravenous drug users (IDUs) in a US-Mexico border community. Underscored is the directive force and social impact of "machismo" in the day-to-day life-worlds of Mexican male heroin addicts, or "tecatos." Our goal is not only to provide a broad outline of the cultural model of "machismo" elucidated by this group of men, but also to examine how this notion of masculinity is internalized and re-created through drug use and aggression in the context of street survival. To conclude, we emphasize some of the wider issues related to representations of Mexican men, masculinity, and drug use that this study brings to light.

Known locally as "El Trampolín," Nogales, Sonora is seen as a springboard for both drugs and immigrants into the United States and attracts individuals from the interior of Mexico lured by the money to be made in the streets of this border town. As one "tecatos" from the state of Sinaloa summarized:

When I got here to Nogales I was tired of drugs. But I got here and I realized that there were more drugs and it was easier to get money. It was easier for everything and so I started on the streets of Nogales.

These and other variables, including drug use, self-defense, street survival, and structural factors influence the expression of "machismo" in this border community.

METHODS

The information presented here was

collected as part of a larger study, "El Proyecto Por Nosotros," that focuses on the development of a culturally innovative HIV risk prevention program for IDUs in the border community of Ambos Nogales made up by the cities of Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora. Ethnographic research took place from February through October of 1995 and consisted of open-ended interviews with current and former IDUs and sexual partners of IDUs. These semi-structured interviews focused on several domains including: 1) drug use histories and drug management; 2) HIV/AIDS knowledge and attitudes; 3) risk perceptions and barriers to HIV prevention; 4) attitudes and barriers toward condom use; 5) religion and spirituality; 6) family and relationships; and 7) several key cultural constructs, including "respeto," "machismo," and "confianza." Our research team conducted a total of 89 interviews and seven focus groups. Respondents included 104 men and 25 women; 102 current and 18 former IDUs; and nine sex partners of IDUs. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 54 years with a mean of 32 years of age.

"MACHISMO" AS A CULTURAL MODEL: THEORETICAL NOTES

In the social science literature "machismo" typically refers to a constellation of traits exhibited and valued by Latino men that are the result of various historical processes and cultural transformations. There are two general trends in representations of "machismo." First, researchers such as Madsen (1964) and Lewis (1961) offer stylized and often monolithic representations of "machismo" that emphasize rigidly dichotomized attitudes, behaviors, and gender roles. In line with these representations

other researchers focus on the hypermasculine aspects of Mexican male orientations by emphasizing fearlessness, control, dominance, sexual prowess, and aggression (Casas, Wagenheim, Banchero, Mendoza-Romero 1994; Goldwert 1985; Ingoldby 1991; Stevens 1973). A second more comprehensive representation of "machismo" moves away from these monolithic ideal types and psychological constructs linked to compensation and passive-aggressive syndromes by underscoring the variability of male roles, and the influence of various power relations in the construction of masculinities (Baca-Zinn 1982; Cromwell, Ruiz 1979; Gutmann 1996). This paper examines "machismo" in light of both of these traditions of representation.

Bem's (1981) "gender schema theory" provides one framework to describe this complex relationship between gender and behavior. This theory proposes that sex linked, content specific information and behavior are learned through complex cognitive processes in social interactions. The gender schema is a cognitive network of associations and organizing principles that guides individual perception. Bem notes:

A schema functions as an anticipatory structure, a readiness to search for and to assimilate incoming information in schema-relevant terms. Schematic processing is thus highly selective and enables the individual to impose structure and meaning onto the vast array of incoming stimuli. (Bem 1981)

Sex typing in information processing and responses to the environment derive from gender schema and the notions of self-identity intertwined with it. The basic premise underlying this framework is that an individual's gender is integral to how they process and react to the exigencies of the world about them. In short, as a gender ideology the cultural model of "machismo" can be seen as a "social fact," a collective representation that generally compels people to act in certain patterned ways (Gilmore 1990).

"Machismo" among the "tecatos" of Ambos Nogales is part of a comprehensive cultural model of street masculinity that includes a variety of values and social orientations relating to drug use, aggression, and survival strategies. Cultural models are shared, taken-for-granted ideas people have about their world and their place in it that are learned and

practiced in an interactive social context (Holand, Quinn 1987). Cultural models are an integral component of human motivation, social interaction, goal setting, and goal attainment since they not only provide important directive schema for engaging the world but also channel experience and memory. Cultural models are implicated in the shape and substance of a variety of human behaviors including health care seeking (Price 1987), career choices (Linde 1987), and courtship and marriage (Quinn 1987). Recent work in cultural aspects of cognition suggests cultural models are linked together into sets of schema that guide the conduct of certain activities, and in so doing, help motivate the achievement of valued goals (D'Andrade, Strauss 1992). The details of such forces and processes in the arena of masculinity, drug use, and street survival among Mexican IDUs remain largely unexplored.

"MACHISMO" IN THE WORLD OF THE "TECATO"

Within the context of the "tecatos" subculture "machismo" is linked almost exclusively to hypermasculine aspects of drug use and aggression. Thus, Bullington (1977) regards "machismo" as both an adaptive, efficacious attitude in navigating through prison experience and as an underlying variable related to the expression of criminal behavior. Likewise, Casavantes (1976), in his study of "el tecato," emphasizes the hypermasculine aspects of this model. He notes that

machismo in its exaggerated form [includes] fighting, drinking, performing daring deeds, seducing women, asserting independence from women, and...bragging about escapades. (Casavantes 1976)

Thus, these previous studies of "tecatos" recapitulate the monolithic view of "machismo" present in stylized representations of masculine behavior and identity by emphasizing excess and violence.

Similar essential aspects of masculinity are highlighted by "tecatos" in Nogales who recognize two broad types of "machismo": the "machismo" of the street and the "machismo" of the home. One "tecatos" noted:

In the street "machismo" is something that you put on over others. You're in the habit of robbing people, putting them down, beating them up.

You can get knifed or shot. The "machismo" that's used in the street is not like the "machismo" of a man over a woman. I am really macho when I am in the streets and he who is macho on the street is one of the most macho. Everywhere there are different levels of "machismo," but the most exaggerated form of "machismo" is that of the street. Street macho is when you put yourself above everybody else. It's the one you learn in the street. You don't have compassion for anybody.

Another "tecató" explained:

I think there are various factors that go into one becoming "machista." In my case, my father would beat my mother. From the time that I could understand he would hit her everyday. He was a strong character. He was tattooed, bigger and older and I learned from him how to smoke marijuana and then to take cocaine. The first thing that he told me was to take care and watch. That's an aspect of "machismo." So that's one way that it is formed and the other way is in the street, one neighborhood or another, to see who is the most macho and all that, to see who beats up who, to see who beats up his girlfriend and that's how it's formed.

The "machismo" of the streets, which has the most social utility among "tecatos," is characterized by excess, drug use, aggression, and a willingness to confront and dominate others, as well as insensitivity and a lack of refinement. For the "tecató" "machismo" is simply "being a man" — invulnerable and a social locus of power and influence. "Machismo" is more than a term used to gloss certain behaviors. It is an enculturated model that provides individuals and social groups a framework for motivations and an attitude towards life. In what follows we illustrate how "machismo" is linked to a number of areas of critical importance in the life-world of the "tecató" including drug use, social status, self-identity, self-defense, and survival in the streets.

"MACHISMO" AND DRUG USE

Interviews revealed that "machismo" helps motivate and maintain crucial aspects of the "tecató's" life-world. In many instances drug use trajectories, including the initiation and progression of drug use careers, are intricately connected to ideas of "machismo." As one "tecató" pointedly summarized, "You gotta understand that a macho guy gets that way by

using drugs."

The details of this relation between drug use and "machismo" are varied. On one level the cultural ideal of "machismo" motivates the onset of drug use careers. "Tecatós" have many modes of situating the origins of their drug use, including feelings of curiosity and depression, but often "machismo" is implicated in the initiation of drug use careers. For young men, drug use is a means to perform macho values of risk taking, excess, and outstripping others. The "tecató" enters drug use in order to demonstrate socially valued toughness and "craziness" ("un buen loco"), or to show that they can control a vice where weaker men have failed. One "tecató" discussed the macho attitude of excess in the following way:

"Machismo" is the urge to stand out among everybody else. If you have 30 hits (of drug) then I have 40 and if you drink five beers, I'll drink 20 and it doesn't matter if you have one, I have two. And that's "machismo," coming out on top. If you steal something I'll steal something better. That's how it goes. And if you stole one, I'll steal two, you steal three and it goes on and on, I'll steal four. It's when you go around in the world of sex, or drugs, delinquency, violence, in excess.

"Machismo" values of excess and outstripping others also underlie the desire to progress rapidly through a gamut of harder and harder drugs. In this way, the attitude of excess not only influences initiation into drug use, but is also implicated in the progression of drug use, drug abuse, and addiction. The use of drugs, aside from the effects or behaviors associated with it, is seen as macho — especially when done in an atmosphere of competition. As young men, many "tecatos" began their drug use careers with alcohol and marijuana but then, motivated to out-do others, moved on to the use of pills, including barbiturates. Escalating drug use eventually led to experimentation with heroin. For many "tecatos" the beginning of injection use was a tangible signifier that they had achieved the socially valued goal of becoming real drug addicts. One "tecató" described his progression into heroin use in the following way:

When I was younger, the first thing I began using was pot and pills. It was in a neighborhood of Los Mochis, Sinaloa. But I had to move to

Culiacn. In that capital of Sinaloa I made friends and I began to get together with older people that were already strung out on heroin and cocaine, and I remember watching them. They were different than me. I was only a pill-popper. I smoked pot. But always, always, when I was younger, I wanted to be a bigger dope-fiend, experiment more, experiment all I could with drugs because that was my life as a drug addict. I wanted to be another real drug addict. So, when the opportunity came about to experiment with heroin, I said, "Yes." I said, "Of course."

Another informant expressed similar sentiments:

Like all the other "locos" I started out smoking marijuana and using pills, barbiturates, downers, as you say, then very soon, since we were very tough, very soon we experimented with heroin. First, it was by snorting it up our noses, but because you're young, each time, you want to know more and you want to have experiences. According to some maybe it's because you're Mexican, a man, right? But after that it's quick, out comes the needle.

Interrelations between drug use and "machismo" exist on other levels as well. Since the control of the production and distribution of drugs brings with it access to status and power, drug dealers are considered macho. Ultimately, those that control the drug dominate those that seek it. One "tecatos" characterized this situation in the following way:

[Tell me what it means to be macho in the world of drug addicts.]

Well, for me it's the guy "que cria."

[What do you mean by "cria," the one who sells?]

The one that has the heroin. The one with the connection. That's what counts among the drug addicts, the one with the store, the one that has the production. That's the one everyone humiliates themselves with. You give them a position of authority, a position of domination, recognition.

"Machismo" and drug use are also linked together in other ways. In some instances, "tecatos" employ certain drugs to produce distinct affects, such as "confidence" or "fearlessness," that are characteristic of the macho. These dispositions are actively sought in specific social interactions where it is

important for men to demonstrate idealized aspects of masculinity, as when relating with the opposite sex or perpetuating crimes. Drugs also provide access to money, prestige, and power on the streets, and are therefore a valuable means of gaining status and influence in male peer groups.

Macho attitudes of aggression are a vital component to drug use management strategies for "tecatos" in the streets. Violence provides access to limited resources that are crucial in securing drugs. The physical dependence engendered by drug use and the associated desire to avoid the pangs of withdrawal, or "malilla," motivate many "tecatos" to resort to violent crime as a means to manage their addiction. One "tecatos" described the totality of his fall into heroin addiction, and its relation to the violent acts he committed, in the following way:

Look, this drug is very miserable. It destroys you. It brings you up and lets you down. It is a drug that destroys you, physically, morally, and materially. It is so opposed to your life, it's like living in the night. You're always walking around in confusion, at night, not seeing. It's your wife, your husband, your brothers, and your mother and father, your God. This drug takes you and wastes you. A lot of times I hit people. I used guns. I was never violent until I began drugs. It made me very violent. I was able to kill people without feeling anything. The people that I hurt, I put them in the hospital. It's a drug that is, it is tremendous. I think that of all drugs it is the heaviest.

Another "tecatos" related how he would regularly assault people in order to secure funds for his heroin use:

It was almost always when I was hanging out with my buddies in order to make a deal. I wouldn't wear shorts. I would dress in another way. Normal. I'd comb my hair to one side like this. And I would always bring one of the biggest types of screwdrivers with a point. Then I'd pass by the side of a guy and when I was by him, shoulder to shoulder, I'd grab him around the neck. Then I would put the screwdriver in his neck and the guy that was walking with me would then take everything and I would say to the guy, "Give it to us," and take everything and I would stab him a few times and the guy would go down. I would stab him and I'd do it so that he wouldn't follow us. I would let the guy fall. A lot of times they would fight back and I'd

have to leave them there all knifed up.

Aggressive aspects of "machismo" have a special utility in these situations where drug use motivates violence. These attitudes are compounded through the embodied effects of drugs ("fearlessness," lack of compassion, "malilla") to produce a disposition where violence is both normative and necessary.

"MACHISMO," SOCIAL STATUS, AND SELF-DEFENSE

"Machismo" frames a nexus between self-identity, social standing, and self-defense. Cultural models of masculinity motivate many to demonstrate and maintain boundaries of status and personal self-identity in the streets. When these boundaries are transgressed violence often results. One "tecato," whose drug use patterns gained him notoriety in the streets, discussed these aspects of "machismo":

They called me "Pingo" 'cause if someone screwed with me, I let them have it. In other words, there are some people that get nicknames and they like them, so they have to protect them, like their reputation, same as a doctor or an engineer.

[What do you mean? No one else can use your nickname?]

No, you'd have to protect it. For example, if your nickname is "Chango" and someone comes along and says "Chango is worthless," well the guy has to get pissed off. Just like with me, if someone comes along and says "Pingo is worthless." I'd get ready to fight, even if they beat me. Every time they saw me, they'd know me. I can go to the shooting galleries and they don't do anything to me.

At times this status, identity, and integrity extend well beyond the individual to include entire families, gangs, or "barrios." In Nogales and other areas of Northern Mexico the drug underground has a long history that connects generations of smugglers and dealers engaged in the production and distribution of narcotics (Astorga 1995). Given this context it should come as no surprise that notions of inter-generational familial pride and self identity are linked to the drug trade. One focus group participant shared his family history:

I come from a family that moves drugs around. We had hidden laboratories and we were proud that we stood out among the others in the sense

that we would stand out on the street looking as if we needed nothing and we could get anybody. But in the same street, the same neighborhood there was competition to see who was the toughest, who was bad. A pride grew up in us, a false satisfaction, that since I was really "macho" I could move and shake the whole neighborhood, and that's how we spent a lot of years. My father was the one that taught me to be tough. He himself got me involved with my first gang and my grandfather was the one that gave me my first fix. In my family, unfortunately, it was a pride that we had... standing out above everybody else.

Violence is a means of self-defense in the streets where many seek to take advantage of others for their own personal gain. This is particularly true in the "picadero" — locations in open areas, arroyos, abandoned buildings, and cemeteries — where many "tecatos" go to inject drugs. Characterized by desperation and danger "picaderos" require the "tecato" to be aware and invulnerable at all times. One "tecato" provided the following description of the "picadero":

It's a place of vice, a place where you're always talking about drugs, always using the drugs they sell there. And what happens there is that there's lots of fights. They want to rob you. There's always someone there who's rotting, crying, for a few drops, for you to give them a few drops. That's what's always going on in a "picadero."

Another "tecato" noted some of the possible consequences of not projecting a macho image in the "picadero":

You can't let down your defenses. There are guys that are cowards, wimps, like we say around here. In other words, you can grab his cure ["cura," fix] just by saying "Hey, is it gonna be a fight?" So a dope-fiend has to be more "macho" than the others because if he doesn't stand out then he loses. He's gotta take care or when he least expects it, there's a fight.

Thus, "machismo" provides a special utility in the streets where attitudes of dominance, pride, and aggression are critical to the establishment and maintenance of street identities and defenses. Toughness and a willingness to confront threats and fight challengers are an effective posture when negotiating a life-world

where others constantly seek to exploit vulnerability for personal advantage. At times not only individual honor, but the pride of the family, gang, or "barrio," may be at stake. The physical settings where the "tecató" resides, including the streets, abandoned buildings, and open areas where drug use takes place, are occupied by desperate and violent actors. In this context there is a marked efficacy in developing and maintaining the reputation as someone who will stand their ground and fight.

DISCUSSION

The calculus of "machismo" among "tecatos" is ostensibly a simple matter. Those who control the supply of drugs, who use drugs to excess, and who engage in violence and intimidate others are more macho than those who do not. The "machismo" of the streets, a set of values, goals, and attitudes involving excess, drug use, and violence, has an exceptional social efficacy for the "tecató" and for this reason remains a viable model for performance and behavior.

But such a simplistic representation of "machismo" belies the plurality of this ideal conspicuous not only among "tecatos" but on more collective levels of Mexican consciousness as well. The masculine identities revealed in our interviews emerge from a larger context of national and cultural identities that are constantly reshaped in response to social dynamics and historical transformations. Mexican men present a manifold character absent in most representations of "machismo." Ideals of masculinity consist of competing and often contradictory values and propositions, and reflect transformations taking place in wider arenas of cultural force and social action (Guttman 1996).

Commentaries indexing this complex character of masculinity arose within the context of a focus group session where the topic of "machismo" generated a great deal of reflection and discussion. Several participants indicated the pervasiveness of this cultural ideal. One "tecató" noted:

I think "machismo" is something that starts in infancy. It's the strongest, the most natural thing. It's someone wanting to be a superman. He keeps up the idea that he is one, that he's going to become one, in the streets. He feels like he is a warrior.

Another focus group participant revealed a

similar opinion:

I believe that a lot of "machismo" is socialized. It is at the base of our society, our culture, as Mexicans. Because from childhood you begin to see film heroes, the macho man who has three, four women, children everywhere, so you start to have a certain propensity or leaning towards certain idols that you carry with you through life. I have seen examples of macho men, the guy who hits his wife, who doesn't give a damn about his wife, who doesn't have any love for his kids, no compassion for his children, but he's just projecting a false image of a macho guy because on the inside there is just a void because they can't really love themselves or understand themselves.

The last sentiment expressed is noteworthy since it points to a general ambivalence towards an ideal image of "machismo." Men in Mexico are reflecting on the representations and components of the macho man and they are finding them problematic. Whatever positive rewards the maintenance of a macho image provides in the social world of the "tecató," it is clear that some men also recognize its emotional toll. In the context of drug use, violence, and street survival these costs are especially poignant. While the cultural model of "machismo" may provide a means to attain status, self-identity, and promote survival in the streets it has drawbacks as well. Positive aspects of cultural models of masculinity, such as care for the family or responsibility as provider, remain undeveloped. It was in this vein that another focus group participant noted:

What I think has happened to me with my family is that I have become a completely irresponsible person, especially with my wife, as a man and as a provider in my home. Why? Because the drugs won me over. You become irresponsible with regard to your family, you neglect them completely. All the money goes. My house is gone, all my furniture and everything that I had. It's all gone because of drugs and I am not important to my family. Dignity, respect, responsibility, the sense of family, it's all lost. That sense of the man being the provider, of the responsible man, it is completely lost among drug addicts.

In light of these personal costs it is important to critically examine why it is that

certain facets of masculinity are re-created in specific settings. While the social utility of aggression and violence in the context of street survival are clear, what is less apparent are the factors that help create the arenas of social action where these particular aspects of "machismo" have the currency they do.

Why are certain masculine traits more pronounced than others in particular environments? In monolithic representations of "machismo" the enactment of hypermasculine traits is typically attributed to some type of psychological predisposition related to the culture of the "Mexican." There are, however, a host of structural issues warranting consideration. On the US-Mexico border a combination of social and political factors systematically marginalize substantial groups of people from broad economic developments. Immigration, devaluation of the peso, the North American Free Trade Agreement, political insurgence, and the rise of "maquiladoras," are all tangible components of the macro-systemic forces at work throughout Mexico; forces which have compelled many "tecatos" from the interior of Mexico to move to Ambos Nogales and undertake a life in the shadowlands of the underground border economy.

Without more critical consideration of this wider context, drug use and aggression may be attributed to the culture of men, adolescents, or even Mexicans, thereby ignoring the overall structural factors — including institutionalized racism, economic exploitation, and the violence of poverty and deprivation — that make some aspects of "machismo" a necessary means of engaging in certain social life-worlds. By deferring to a definition of "machismo" that links specific behaviors, including drug use and aggression, to innate aspects of culture and personality, a host of political-economic factors that make these aspects of "machismo" expedient are ignored (Erlanger 1979; Glick 1990; Messerschmidt 1986, 1993). Recourse to the culture of "machismo" to explain drug use and violence allows a structural problem of social stratification to be framed as a cultural problem of ideological retrogression. This, it should be noted, takes place in a broader context where violence and aggression are emphasized as inherent, demonized male traits (Mariani 1995); aspects of masculinity are increasingly medicalized (Tiefer 1986), particularly among minority men (Delgado, Stefancic 1995); and Latino portrayals in the mass media have an overwhelmingly negative

bent (Tobenkin 1995; Torres 1996).

Consideration of this set of issues has important theoretical implications. Cultural model theories often emphasize the shared and accessible character of cognitive frameworks. What remains less stressed is the fact that some groups have differential access not only to material resources but to ideological resources and the interactional possibilities they frame. By glossing attitudes and behaviors under the generalized label of "machismo" we are in danger of desensitizing ourselves to these underlying concerns. Too often in the past the social sciences have been complicit in representing the Mexican male as atavistic, hyperaggressive, and misogynist without critically examining the underlying dynamics within larger power structures that may channel these expressions.

An assessment of cultural models of masculinity among "tecatos" also raises important practical issues that have a bearing on drug abuse treatment (Casas, Wagenheim, Bancho, Mendoza-Romero 1994). Many "tecatos" eventually leave the street life behind them and age out into more controlled patterns of use and assume an active role in household responsibilities. How do cultural models of positive male roles motivate attempts at personal change, including cessation of drug use? Do men articulate masculine identities by not using drugs? Clearly there is a need to understand the relationship between cultural aspects of masculinity and the "retirement phase" of drug use careers noted among Mexican and Mexican-American heroin users (Castro, Sharp, Barrington, Walton, Rawson 1991; Jorquez 1983). By adopting such a perspective we may gain deeper insight into the complex interrelations between drug use patterns, stages in life cycle, and models of masculinity.

CONCLUSION

"Machismo," a socially valued ideal that emphasizes aggression, control, and venerable dominance, has wide currency in the "tecato" world of drugs and life on the streets and is distinguished from the "machismo" of the home. As a cultural model for male behavior "machismo" provides important standards and motivations for the attainment of social goals. The cultural model of "machismo" is embedded in other meanings revolving around the use of violence to gain social status and respect, achieving a degree of protection and

self-defense, and promoting drug use and abuse. These aspects of Mexican masculinity are performed and emphasized to the detriment of other, more positive, cultural models of "machismo" and manhood. While cultural and psychological constructs are typically used to explain the hypermasculine aggressive aspects of Mexican males, we argue for the importance of considering structural factors, including economic marginality, in explaining these phenomena.

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