

**STUDYING  
MAYA  
ADOLESCENTS  
IN A NEW  
HIGH  
SCHOOL IN  
ZINACANTÁN,  
MEXICO**

**BY ADRIANA MANAGO**





**CSW/GRAD DIVISION IRVING & JEAN STONE DISSERTATION YEAR FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT SHARES HER RESEARCH PROJECT ON “GENDER AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN A MAYA COMMUNITY”**

# **STUDYING MAYA ADOLESCENTS IN A NEW HIGH SCHOOL IN ZINACANTÁN, MEXICO**

**BY ADRIANA MANAGO**

**C**ómo se dice “te amo”? “I love you,” I tell the high school boys crowded around me on my first day back as the English teacher at the new high school in this Maya community called Zinacantán, located in the highlands of Chiapas in southern Mexico. It’s my third year here at the school and my dissertation field site, and every year on the first day of class, the boldest of the students want to know how to profess their love in English. What I want to know is how this high school, now ten years old, brings adolescent boys and girls together socially in ways unprecedented in their community, and how, in the process, it creates new socialization pathways toward adulthood that shift this generation’s values for gender and family.

My journey to this project began with my initial interest in the ways gender stereotypes, that is, men as agentic (tough, assertive and independent) and women as communal (sensitive, nurturing and dependent), influence how we form impressions of men and women in positions of power. While completing a thesis on this topic a master’s program in experimental psychology at San Jose State, I began to wonder how we form beliefs about gender in the first place. This led me to explore the disciplines of anthropology



***To understand their perceptions of the psychological impact of urbanization and higher education, I interviewed these 4 women and 14 first-generation indigenous university students who had moved to San Cristobal for school...The interviews provided background for the development of materials used to measure value change associated with a new high school in the Maya community of Zinacantán.***

and developmental psychology as avenues for conducting fieldwork to understand how psychological beliefs and concepts are produced from socialization experiences in particular cultural environments.

It was then that I discovered Patricia Greenfield and the Culture, Brain and Development program in the Department of Psychology at UCLA. Professor Greenfield was developing her theory on social change and human development from her research spanning nearly 40 years in the Maya hamlet of Zinacantán. Her theory outlines how sociocultural change—from a rural, agrarian environment to an increasingly urban, commercial environment with higher levels of formal education and technology, a movement from a *Gemeinschaft* (community) to a *Gesellschaft* (society) social ecology (Tönnies, 1887/1957)—shifts the “deep structure” of culture in the direction of increasing individualism. Her research examined the dynamics of these changes in the ways that girls in Nabenchauk learn to weave, a central task in the socialization of girls in this culture. Greenfield’s work, linking sociocultural change to psychological change struck me as a useful way to illuminate how gender is socially constructed, because through this process, one can see the shifts in meanings for gender that are connected to particular kinds of ecological affordances. Because adolescence is a sensitive period for sexual development and preparation for adult



gender roles, I have applied Greenfield's theory to adolescent identity and gender role development to understand how, in the process of making sense of behaviors evoked from factors changing within the social ecological environment, adolescents form the values and beliefs to guide their future behaviors and transition to adulthood.

Greenfield's conceptualizations of "deep structure" culture shifts, from familism, where the needs of the family are priori-

tized over the individual, to the reverse, individualism, coheres a variety of changes in adolescent development I have observed in my fieldwork in Zinacantán. All cultures must deal with the nature of the individual's relation to the social group, and gender roles are a central part of the social structure created in determining the parameters of this issue. Anthropologists in Zinacantán in the 1960s described adolescents' transition to adulthood in terms of an assumption of prescribed gender roles

demonstrated by mothers and fathers: women raised children and made tortillas from the corn that men provided through farming (Vogt, 1969). Gender roles were conceptualized in terms of everyone's contribution to the family unit. Adolescent social life revolved around the family and adulthood was achieved through protracted marriage rituals symbolizing the alliance of families (Fishburne, 1962). Today, the new high school in Zinacantán and a new Intercultural University in the nearby

city of San Cristobal encourage some Maya adolescents to postpone marriage to attend school and prepare for individually chosen roles in a more commercial economy where men and women can potentially do the same kinds of jobs. They are also increasingly involved in social activities with peers outside the family and choosing their own romantic partners.

In developing my dissertation research project, I volunteered for a Maya community organization called Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya (FOMMA) in the colonial city of San Cristobal in Chiapas in 2007 as a first step. The group was led by 4 Maya women positioned at the forefront of social change as some of the first professional indigenous women in Chiapas immigrating to an urban center. To understand their perceptions of the psychological impact of urbanization and higher education, I interviewed these 4 women and 14 first-generation indigenous university students who had moved to San Cristobal for school (Manago & Greenfield, in press; Manago & Greenfield, under revision). The interviews provided background for the development of materials used to measure value change associated with a new high school in the Maya community of Zinacantán.

Returning to Chiapas in 2008 and 2009, I continued as an English teacher at the high school. Living with a Maya family, I conducted ethnographic research, focusing particularly the peer culture in the new

high school. Out of my ethnography and from previous interviews, I created 8 moral dilemmas capturing the tensions in social change that I observed. These dilemmas, expressed in the Tzotzil language, are part of an interview instrument that also assesses contact with Gesellschaft factors and present two points of view regarding issues of family and gender. One actor represents a Gemeinschaft-adapted perspective; the other represents a Gesellschaft-adapted perspective. I presented these dilemmas to 18 female adolescents, their mothers, and grandmothers, to 42 high-school students, and to 40 adolescents who discontinued their schooling after primary school. Participants select the actor with which they agree and give reasons for their decision. Overall, data analysis shows that high-school adolescents provided the most individualistic/Gesellschaft-adapted responses, followed by non-high-school adolescents and mothers, and then grandmothers, who provided the most familistic/Gemeinschaft-adapted responses.

Patterns of responses across generations demonstrate how adolescents who are experiencing new social norms at the high school reformulate cultural meanings that depart from meanings constructed in previous generations. This example presents a grandmother, mother, and daughter in high school responding to a dilemma about new social interactions occurring between adolescent boys and girls in Zinacantán:

**Grandmother:** *It's bad they walk and talk together.... Now we can't say anything because it is already like this, people have changed, already it's better that there are friends, it seems ok to me, but now it's up to them [youth] to decide if they think it [the relationship] is something more.*

**Mother:** *Who knows, it's good and bad, before you couldn't talk to him.... Now it doesn't matter, they walk together, it would seem that he is her boyfriend/fiancé but she says that he is her friend, it's already like this now; so, we can't say anything.*

**Daughter:** *It's good because we are all people, it's the same if I were talking to a girl or a relative....before they scolded girls, I don't like that... after, they realized that there are girls talking to boy; so, now they don't say anything to me.*

The mother and grandmother make meaning out of changing norms surrounding male-female relations focusing on the loss of their role as elders in the family to provide moral guidance to youth (“now we can’t say anything”). Their responses (for example, “now it’s up to them to decide”) also suggest that the older generations are concerned about new responsibilities placed on youth to negotiate these delicate gender relations on their own, without help from their families. On the other hand, the daughter utilizes a framework that emphasizes the individual as she makes sense of the changing norms in gender relations

that she is experiencing firsthand during adolescent development, a sensitive period for identity and gender role construction. When she says, “we are all people”, she emphasizes, not the role of the individual to contribute to the goals of the family, but rather, the agency of individuals to interact with whomever they please.

Because psychologists tend to ignore perspectives from cultures outside the United States (Henrich, et al., 2010) and anthropologists tend to ignore children and development processes (Hirschfeld, 2002), my dissertation can contribute important insights to both fields by showing how adolescents acquire, shape and transform cultural meanings as they accomplish developmental tasks during the transition to adulthood. In doing so, I hope to continue in the venerable footsteps of Margaret Mead (1928/1978) who led the way in envisioning the critical role adolescents play in cultural evolution.

**Adriana Manago is a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology. She received a 2010-2011 CSW Irving & Jean Stone Dissertation Year Fellowship. Her project is titled “Gender and Identity Development in the Context of Social Change in a Maya Community.”**

## Works Cited

- Fishburne, J. (1962). Courtship and Marriage in Zinacantán. Senior Thesis, Radcliff College, Cambridge.
- Greenfield, P.M. (2009). Linking Social Change and Developmental Change: Shifting Pathways of Human Development. *Developmental Psychology*, 45 (2), 401-408.
- Henrich, J., Heine, S.J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). Most people are not WEIRD. *Nature*, 466, 29.
- Hirschfeld, L.A. (2002). Why don't anthropologists like children? *American Anthropologist*, 104 (2), 611-627.
- Manago, A.M. & Greenfield, P.M. (in press). The construction of independent values among Maya women at the forefront of social change: Four case studies. *Ethos*.
- Manago, A.M. & Greenfield, P.M. (under revision). The new emerging adult in Chiapas, Mexico: Perceptions of traditional values, gender roles and value change among first generation Maya university students.
- Tonnies, F. (1957). *Community and Society*. (C. P. Loomis, Ed. and Trans.). East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press. (Original work published in German in 1887; later English edition published in 1988 by Transaction Books, New Brunswick, NJ).
- Vogt, E. Z. (1969). *Zinacantán: A Maya Community in the Highlands of Chiapas*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

