

“Macho”: Contemporary Conceptions

Mi Noche Triste

My own *noche triste* occurred when my father returned from location on the film *Capitán de Castilla* (Captain from Castille). I remember that he had been gone for a long time, that he came back from Morelia with a lot of presents, and that at first, I was very happy to see him. Then there was a big fight; my parents argued all night, and they separated shortly thereafter. ¹ One night when my mother was very sad and depressed, she went to *el árbol de la noche triste*. As she cried by the tree she thought about how she and Hernán Cortés both had been in the same situation: depressed, weeping, and alone.

After my parents separated, my brothers and I went with my father and moved to Tacubaya to live with his mother, Anita, and her mother (my great-grandmother), Carmela (Mamá Mela). Grandmother Anita, or *Abillá*, as we called her, was a petite, energetic little woman, but Mamá Mela was tall, dark, and stately. In Tacubaya we were also surrounded by family, but now it was my father's family, Mirandé-Salazar. His family was smaller because he was an only child and because his father's two siblings, Concha (Consuelo) and Lupe (Guadalupe), never married or had children. My grandfather, Alfredo, died when I was about two years old, but I remember him.

In Tacubaya we first lived in a big, long house with a large green entrance, *El Nueve* (nine), on a street called Vicente Eguía, before moving to an apartment house, *El Trece* (thirteen), down the street. At *El Trece* we lived in the first apartment, and my great-aunts, Concha and Lupe, lived in *El Seis* (six). Concha had been an elementary school teacher and Lupe was an artist. They were retired but very active; both did a lot of embroidering and Lupe was always painting. I was very fond of *las tías*. To me *las tías* always seemed old and very religious, but I was very close to my aunts and loved them deeply. They wore black shawls and went to church early each morning. When I wasn't playing in the courtyard, I was often visiting with my aunts. They taught me catechism, and Tía Lupe was my *madrina*, or godmother, for my first communion.

I would spend hours with *las tías*, fascinated by their conversation. It seemed that every minute was filled with stories about the Mexican Revolution and about my grandfather, Alfredo. I especially liked it when they spoke about him, as I had been named Alfredo and identified with him. They said he was a great man and that they would be very proud and happy if I grew up to be like him someday. No, it was actually that I had no choice—I was destined to be like him. Because I had the good fortune of being named after Alfredo, I had to carry on his name, and, like him, I too would be a great man someday. I should add that my aunts stressed *man* when they talked about him. In other words, I had a distinct impression that my grandfather and I were linked not only because we were both named Mirandé and Alfredo, but also because we were both men. I did not realize it at the time, but my teachers (who were mostly women)—*las tías*, my *Abillá*, Mamá Mela, and my mother—were socializing me into my “sex role.” But I don't remember anyone describing Grandfather Alfredo as “macho.” Perhaps my *tías* took his being “macho” for granted, since he was obviously male.

I do not know very much about Alfredo's family, except that his father, Juan, or *Jean*, came to México from France and married a *mexicana*, María. I also learned from my mother that Alfredo was of humble origins and was, in a very real sense, a self-made man who studied and pursued a career as a civil engineer. He was committed to bringing about social justice and distributing the land held by the *hacendados* (landowners) among the Mexican *peones*. As a civilian he served under Emiliano Zapata, making cannons and munitions. According to historian John Womack (1968, 291), Alfredo Mirandé was one of Zapata's key assistants and worked as a spy in Puebla for some time under the code name “DELTA.” While he was in hiding, my *Abillá* would take in other people's clothes to mend and to launder to earn money so that the family could survive. My grandfather grew to be disillusioned, however, as the Revolution did not fulfill its promise of bringing about necessary economic and social reforms.

My *tías* had a photograph of Alfredo standing proudly in front of a new, experimental cannon that he had built. They related that a foolish and headstrong general, anxious to try out the new cannon, pressured Alfredo to fire it before it was ready. My grandfather reluctantly complied and received severe burns all over his body, almost dying as a result of the explosion. It took him months to recover from the accident.

As I think back, most of the stories they told me had a moral and were designed, indirectly at least, to impart certain values. What I learned from my *tías* and, indirectly, from my grandfather was that although one should stand up for principles, one should attempt to avoid war and personal conflicts, if at all possible. One should also strive to be on a higher moral plane than one's adversaries. Alfredo was intelligent, strong, and principled. But what impressed me most is that he was said to be incredibly just and judicious. Everyone who knew him said he treated people of varying educational and economic levels fairly, equally, and with dignity and respect.



Alfredo Ignacio Mirandé and Ana María Salazar de Mirandé.

I realize that Alfredo lived in a society and a historical period in which women were relegated to an inferior status. Yet I also know that he and my grandmother shared a special intimacy and mutual respect such as I have never personally encountered. By all accounts they loved and respected each other and shared an incredible life together. I have read letters that my grandfather wrote to my grandmother when they were apart, and they indicate that he held her in very high regard and treated her as an equal partner.

“Macho”: An Overview

Mexican folklorist Vicente T. Mendoza suggested that the word “macho” was not widely used in Mexican songs, *corridos* (folk ballads), or popular culture until the 1940s (Mendoza 1962, 75-86). Use of the word was said to have gained in popularity after Avila Camacho became president. The word lent itself to use in *corridos* because “macho” rhymed with “Camacho.”

While “macho” has traditionally been associated with Mexican or Latino culture, the word has recently been incorporated into American popular culture, so much so that it is now widely used to describe everything from rock stars and male sex symbols in television and film to burritos. When applied to entertainers, athletes, or other “superstars,” the implied meaning is clearly a positive one that connotes strength, virility, masculinity, and sex appeal. But when applied to Mexicans or Latinos, “macho” remains imbued with such negative attributes as male dominance, patriarchy, authoritarianism, and spousal abuse. Although both meanings connote strength and power, the Anglo macho is clearly a much more positive and appealing symbol of manhood and masculinity. In short, under current usage the Mexican macho oppresses and coerces women, whereas his Anglo counterpart appears to attract and seduce them.

This chapter focuses on variations in perceptions and conceptions of the word “macho” held by Mexican and Latino men. Despite all that has been written and said about the cult of masculinity and the fact that male dominance has been assumed to be a key feature of Mexican and Latino culture, very little research exists to support this assumption. Until recently such generalizations were based on stereotypes, impressionistic evidence, or the observations of ethnographers such as Oscar Lewis (1960, 1961),

Arthur Rubel (1966), and William Madsen (1973). These Anglo ethnographers were criticized by noted Chicano folklorist Américo Paredes (1977) for the persistent ignorance and insensitivity to Chicano language and culture that is reflected in their work. Paredes contended, for example, that although most anthropologists present themselves as politically liberal and fluent in Spanish, many are only minimally fluent and fail to grasp the nuance and complexity of Chicano language. There is, it seems, good reason to be leery of their findings and generalizations regarding not only gender roles but also all aspects of the Mexican/Latino experience.

Utilizing data obtained through qualitative open-ended questions, I look in this chapter at how Latino men themselves perceive the word “macho” and how they describe men who are considered “*muy machos*.” Although all of the respondents were living in the United States at the time of the interviews, many were foreign-born and retained close ties with Mexican/ Latino culture. Since they had been subjected to both Latino and American influences, I wondered whether they would continue to adhere to traditional Mexican definitions of “macho” or whether they had been influenced by contemporary American conceptions of the word.

Specifically, an attempt was made in the interviews to examine two polar views. The prevailing view in the social science literature of the Mexican macho is a negative one. This view holds that the origins of excessive masculine displays and the cult of masculinity in México and other Latino countries can be traced to the Spanish Conquest, as the powerless colonized man attempted to compensate for deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and inferiority by assuming a hypermasculine, aggressive, and domineering stance. There is a second and lesser-known view that is found in Mexican popular culture, particularly in film and music, one that reflects a more positive, perhaps idyllic, conception of Mexican culture and national character. Rather than focusing on violence and male dominance, this second view associates macho qualities with the evolution of a distinct code of ethics.

Un hombre que es macho is not hypermasculine or aggressive, and he does not disrespect or denigrate women. Machos, according to the positive view, adhere to a code of ethics that stresses humility, honor, respect of oneself and others, and courage. What may be most significant in this second view is that being “macho” is not manifested by such outward qualities as physical strength and virility but by such inner qualities as personal integrity, commitment, loyalty, and, most importantly, strength of character. Stated simply, a man who acted like my Tío Roberto would be macho in the first sense of the word but certainly not in the second. It is not clear how this code of ethics developed, but it may be linked to nationalist sentiments and Mexican resistance to colonization and foreign invasion. Historical figures such as Cuauhtémoc, *El Pipila*, *Los Niños Héroes*, Villa, and Zapata would be macho according to this view. In music and film positive macho figures such as Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, and even Cantinflas are patriots, but mostly they are *muy hombres*, men who stand up against class and racial oppression and the exploitation of the poor by the rich.

Despite the apparent differences between the two views, both see the macho cult as integral to Mexican and Latino cultures. Although I did not formulate explicit hypotheses, I entered the field expecting that respondents would generally identify with the word “macho” and define it as a positive trait or quality in themselves and other persons. An additional informal hypothesis proposed was that men who had greater ties to Latino culture and the Spanish language would be more likely to identify and to have positive associations with the word. I expected, in other words, that respondents would be more likely to adhere to the positive view of macho.

Findings: Conceptions of Macho

Respondents were first asked the following question: “What does the word ‘macho’ mean to you?” The interviewers were instructed to ask this and all other questions in a neutral tone, as we wanted the respondents to feel that we really were interested in what they thought. We stressed in the interviews that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers to any of the questions. This first question was then followed by a series of follow-up questions that included: “Can you give me an example (or examples) of someone you think is really macho?”; “What kinds of things do people who are really macho do?”; and “Can a woman be macha?”

Each person was assigned an identification number, and the responses to the above questions were typed on a large index card. Three bilingual judges, two men and one woman, were asked to look at the answers on the cards and to classify each respondent according to whether they believed the respondent was generally “positive,” “negative,” or “neutral” toward the word “macho.” Those respondents classified as “positive” saw the term as a desirable cultural or personal trait or value, identified with it, and believed that it is generally good to be, or at least to aspire to be, macho. But those respondents classified as “negative” by the judges saw it as an undesirable or devalued cultural or personal trait, did not identify with being macho, and believed that it is generally bad or undesirable to be macho. In the third category, respondents were classified as “neutral” if they were deemed to be indifferent or ambivalent or to recognize both positive and negative components of the word “macho.” For these respondents, macho was “just a word,” or it denoted a particular male feature without imputing anything positive or negative about the feature itself.

Overall there was substantial agreement among the judges. In 86 percent of 105 cases the judges were in complete agreement in their classifications, and in another 12 percent two out of three agreed. In other words, in only two instances was there complete disagreement among the judges in which one judge ranked the respondents positive, another negative, and still another neutral.

One of the most striking findings is the extent to which the respondents were polarized in their views of macho. Most had very strong feelings; very few were neutral or indifferent toward the word. In fact, only 11 percent of the 105 respondents were classified as neutral by our judges. No less surprising is the fact that, contrary to my expectations, very few respondents viewed the word in a positive light. Only 31 percent of the men were positive in their views of macho, compared to 57 percent who were classified as negative. This means, in effect, that more than two-thirds of the respondents believed that the word “macho” had either negative or neutral connotations.

My expectation that those individuals with greater ties to Latino culture would be more likely to identify and to have positive associations with “macho” was also not supported by the data. Of the thirty-nine respondents who opted to be interviewed in Spanish, only 15 percent were seen as having a positive association with macho, whereas 74 percent were negative and 10 percent were neutral toward the term. In contrast, of the sixty-six interviewed in English, 41 percent were classified as positive, 47 percent as negative, and 12 percent as neutral toward the term.

Although negative views of the word “macho” were more prevalent than I had expected, the responses closely parallel the polar views of the word “macho” discussed earlier. Responses classified as “negative” by our judges are consistent with the “compensatory” or “deficit” model, which sees the emphasis on excessive masculinity among Mexicans and Latinos as an attempt to conceal pervasive feelings of inferiority among native men that resulted from the Conquest and the ensuing cultural, moral, and spiritual rape of the indigenous population. Those classified as “positive,” similarly, are roughly consistent with an “ethical” model, which sees macho behavior as a positive, nationalist response to colonization, foreign intervention, and class exploitation.

Negative Conceptions of “Macho”

A number of consistent themes are found among the men who were classified as viewing the word “macho” in a negative light. Though I divide them into separate themes to facilitate the presentation of the findings, there is obviously considerable overlap between them.

Negative Theme 1: Synthetic/Exaggerated Masculinity. A theme that was very prevalent in the responses is that machos are men who are insecure in themselves and need to prove their manhood. It was termed a “synthetic self-image,” “exaggerated masculinity,” “one who acts tough and is insecure in himself,” and an “exaggerated form of manliness or super manliness.” One respondent described a macho as

one who acts “bad.” One who acts tough and who is insecure of himself. I would say *batos* [dudes] who come out of the *pinta* [prison] seem to have a tendency to be insecure with themselves, and tend to put up a front. [They] talk loud, intimidate others, and disrespect the meaning of a man.

Another person described it as

being a synthetic self-image that’s devoid of content. . . . It’s a sort of facade that people use to hide the lack of strong, positive personality traits. To me, it often implies a negative set of behaviors. . . . I have a number of cousins who fit that. I have an uncle who fits it. He refuses to have himself fixed even though he was constantly producing children out of wedlock.

Negative Theme 2: Male Dominance/Authoritarianism. A second, related theme is that of male dominance, chauvinism, and the double standard for men and women. Within the family, the macho figure is viewed as authoritarian, especially relative to the wife. According to one respondent, “They insist on being the dominant one in the household. What they say is the rule. They treat women as inferior. They have a dual set of rules for women and men.” Another respondent added:

It’s someone that completely dominates. There are no two ways about it; it’s either his way or no way. My dad used to be a macho. He used to come into the house drunk, getting my mother out of bed, making her make food, making her cry.

A Spanish-speaker characterized the macho as follows:

Una persona negativa completamente. Es una persona que es irresponsable en una palabra. Que anda en las cantinas. Ese no es hombre. Si, conozco muchos de mi tierra; una docena. Toman, pelean. Llegan a la casa gritando y golpeando a la señora, gritando, cantando. Eso lo vi yo cuando era chavalillo y se me grabó. Yo nunca vi a mi papá que golpeara a mi mamá (A completely negative person. In a word, it’s a person who is irresponsible. Who is out in the taverns. That’s not a man. Yes, I know many from my homeland; a dozen. They drink, fight. They come home yelling and hitting the wife, yelling, singing. I saw this as a child and it made a lasting impression on me. I never saw my father hit my mother).

Negative Theme 3: Violence/Aggressiveness. A third, related theme is macho behavior manifested in expressions of violence, aggressiveness, and irresponsibility, both inside and outside the family. It is “someone that does not back down, especially if they fear they would lose face over the most trivial matters.” Another person saw macho as the exaggeration of perceived masculine traits and gave the example of a fictional figure like Rambo and a real figure like former president Ronald Reagan. This person added that it was “anyone who has ever been in a war,” and “it’s usually associated with dogmatism, with violence, with not showing feelings.” A Spanish-speaking man summarized it succinctly as “*el hombre que sale de su trabajo los viernes, va a la cantina, gasta el cheque, y llega a su casa gritando, pegándole a su esposa diciendo que él es el macho*” (the man who gets out of work on Friday, goes to a bar, spends his check, and comes home yelling and hitting his wife and telling her that he is the macho [i.e., man]). Still another felt that men who were macho did such things as “drinking to excess,” and that associated with the word “macho” was “the notion of physical prowess or intimidation of others. A willingness to put themselves and others at risk, particularly physically. For those that are married, the notion of having women on the side.”

One of our Spanish-speaking respondents mentioned an acquaintance who lost his family because he would not stop drinking. “*Él decía, ‘La mujer se hizo para andar en la casa y yo pa’ andar en las cantinas’*” (He used to say, “Woman was made to stay at home and I was made to stay in taverns”). This respondent also noted that men who are real machos tend not to support their families or tend to beat them, to get “dandied up,” and to go out drinking. Another said that they “drink tequila” and “have women on their side kissing them.”

Negative Theme 4: Self-Centeredness/Egoísmo. Closely related is the final theme, which views someone who is macho as being

self-centered, selfish, and stubborn, a theme that is especially prevalent among respondents with close ties to México. Several men saw machismo as *un tipo de egoísmo* (a type of selfishness) and felt that it referred to a person who always wanted things done his way—a *la mía*. It is someone who wants to impose his will on others or wants to be right, whether he is right or not. It is viewed, for example, as

un tipo de egoísmo que nomás “lo mío” es bueno y nomás mis ideas son buenas. Como se dice, “Nomás mis chicharrones truenan.” . . . Se apegan a lo que ellos creen. Todo lo que ellos dicen está correcto. Tratan que toda la gente entre a su manera de pensar y actuar, incluyendo hijos y familia (a type of selfishness where only “mine” is good and only my ideas are worthwhile. As the saying goes, “Whatever I say goes.” . . . They cling to their own beliefs. Everything they say is right. They try to get everyone, including children and family, to think and act the way they do).

Some respondents who elaborated on the “self-centeredness” or *egoísta* theme noted that some men will hit their wives “just to prove that they are machos,” while others try to show that they “wear the pants” by not letting their wives go out. One person noted that some men believe that wives and daughters should not be permitted to cut their hair because long hair is considered “a sign of femininity,” and another made reference to a young man who actually cut off a finger in order to prove his love to his sweetheart.

Because the word “macho” literally means a “he-mule” or a “he-goat,” respondents often likened macho men to a dumb animal such as a mule, goat, or bull: “Somebody who’s like a bull, or bullish”; “The man who is strong as though he were an animal”; “It’s an ignorant person, like an animal, a donkey or mule”; and “It’s a word that is outside of that which is human.” One person described a macho as

the husband of the mule that pulls the plow. A macho is a person who is dumb and uneducated. *Hay tienes a* [There you have] Macho Camacho [the boxer]. He’s a wealthy man, but that doesn’t make a smart man. I think he’s dumb! . . . They’re aggressive, and they’re harmful, and insensitive.

Another respondent said, “Ignorant, is what it means to me, a fool. They’re fools, man. They act bully type.” Another similarly linked it to being “ignorant, dumb, stupid,” noting that they “try to take advantage of their physical superiority over women and try to use that as a way of showing that they are right.”

Given that these respondents viewed “macho” in a negative light, it is not surprising to find that most did not consider themselves macho. Only eight of the sixty men in this category reluctantly acknowledged that they were “somewhat” macho. One said, “Yes, sometimes when I drink, I get loud and stupid,” and another, “Yes, to an extent because I have to be headstrong and bullish as a teacher.”

Positive Conceptions of Macho: Courage, Honor, and Integrity

As previously noted, only about thirty percent of the respondents were classified as seeing macho as a desirable cultural or personal trait or value, and those who did so were much more apt to conduct the interview in English. Some 82 percent of the men who had positive conceptions were interviewed in English.

As was true of men who were classified as negative toward the word “macho,” several themes were discernible among those classified as positive. And as with the negative themes, they are separate but overlapping. A few respondents indicated that it meant “masculine” or “manly” (*varonil*), a type of masculinity (*una forma de masculinidad*), or male. The overriding theme, however, linked machismo to internal qualities like courage, valor, honor, sincerity, respect, pride, humility, and responsibility. Some went so far as to identify a distinct code of ethics or a set of principles that they saw as being characteristic of machismo.

Positive Theme 1: Assertiveness/Standing Up for Rights. A more specific subtheme is the association of machismo with being assertive, courageous, standing up for one’s rights, or going “against the grain” relative to other persons. The following response is representative of this view:

To me it means someone that’s assertive, someone who stands up for his or her rights when challenged. . . . Ted Kennedy because of all the hell he’s had to go through. I think I like [Senator] Feinstein. She takes the issues by the horns. . . . They paved their own destiny. They protect themselves and those that are close to them and attempt to control their environment versus the contrast.

It is interesting to note that this view of being macho can be androgynous. Several respondents mentioned women who exemplified “macho qualities” or indicated that these qualities may be found among either gender. Another man gave John Kennedy and Eleanor Roosevelt as examples and noted that people who are macho know how to make decisions because they are confident of themselves. They know their place in the world. They accept themselves for what they are and they are confident in that. They don’t worry about what others think. . . . They know what to do, the things that are essential to them and others around them.

A Spanish-speaking respondent added:

En respecto a nuestra cultura es un hombre que defiende sus valores, en total lo físico, lo emocional, lo psicológico. En cada mexicano hay cierto punto de macho. No es arrogante, no es egoísta excepto cuando tiene que defender sus valores. No es presumido (Relative to our culture, it’s a man that stands up for what he believes, physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Within every Mexican there is a certain sense of being macho. He is not arrogant, not egoistic, except when he has to defend his values. He is not conceited).

Positive Theme 2: Responsibility/Selflessness. A second positive macho theme is responsibility, selflessness, and meeting

obligations. In direct opposition to the negative macho who is irresponsible and selfish, the positive macho is seen as having a strong sense of responsibility and as being very concerned with the welfare and well-being of other persons. This second positive macho theme was described in a number of ways: “to meet your obligations”; “someone who shoulders responsibility”; “being responsible for your family”; “a person who fulfills the responsibility of his role . . . irrespective of the consequences”; “they make firm decisions . . . that take into consideration the well-being of others.” According to one respondent,

A macho personality for me would be a person that is understanding, that is caring, that is trustworthy. He is all of those things and practices them as well as teaches them, not only with family but overall. It encompasses his whole life.

It would be a leader with compassion. The image we have of Pancho Villa. For the Americans it would be someone like Kennedy, as a strong person, but not because he was a womanizer.

Positive Theme 3: General Code of Ethics. The third theme we identified embodies many of the same traits mentioned in the first and second themes, but it differs in that respondents appear to link machismo not just to such individual qualities as selflessness but to a general code of ethics or a set of principles. One respondent who was married to an Israeli woman offered a former defense minister of Israel as exemplifying macho qualities. He noted that

It's a man responsible for actions, a man of his word. . . . I think a macho does not have to be a statesman, just a man that's known to stand by his friends and follow through. A man of action relative to goals that benefit others, not himself.

Another said that it means living up to one's principles to the point of almost being willing to die for them. One of the most extensive explications of this code of ethics was offered by the following respondent:

To me it really refers to a code of ethics that I use to relate values in my life and to evaluate myself in terms of my family, my job, my community. My belief is that if I live up to my code of ethics, I will gain respect from my family, my job, and my community. Macho has nothing to do with how much salsa you can eat, how much beer you can drink, or how many women you fuck!

They have self-pride, they hold themselves as meaningful people. You can be macho as a farmworker or judge. It's a real mixture of pride and humility. Individualism is a part of it—self-awareness, self-consciousness, responsibility.

Positive Theme 4: Sincerity/Respect. The final positive theme overlaps somewhat with the others and is often subsumed under the code of ethics or principles. A number of respondents associated the word “macho” with such qualities as respect for oneself and others, acting with sincerity and respect, and being a man of your word. One of our interviewees said,

Macho significa una persona que cumple con su palabra y que es un hombre total. . . . Actúan con sinceridad y con respeto (Macho means a person who backs up what he says and who is a complete man. . . . They act with sincerity and respect).

Another mentioned self-control and having a sense of oneself and the situation.

Usually they are reserved. They have kind of an inner confidence, kind of like you know you're the fastest gun in town so you don't have to prove yourself. There's nothing to prove. A sense of self.

Still another emphasized that physical prowess by itself would not be sufficient to identify one as macho. Instead, “It would be activities that meet the challenge, require honor, and meet obligations.” Finally, a respondent observed:

Macho to me means that you understand your place in the world. That's not to say that you are the “he-man” as the popular conception says. It means you have respect for yourself, that you respect others.

Not surprisingly, all of the respondents who viewed machismo in a positive light either already considered themselves to have macho qualities or saw it as an ideal they hoped to attain.

Neutral Conceptions of Macho

Twelve respondents could not be clearly classified as positive or negative in their views of “macho.” This so-called neutral category is somewhat of a residual one, however, because it includes not only men who were, in fact, neutral but also those who gave mixed signals and about whom the judges could not agree. One said that “macho” was just a word that didn't mean anything; another said that it applied to someone strong like a boxer or a wrestler, but he did not know anyone who was macho, and it was not clear whether he considered it to be a positive or negative trait. Others were either ambivalent or pointed to both positive and negative components of being macho. A street-wise young man in his mid-twenties, for example, indicated that

The word macho to me means someone who won't take nothing from no one. Respects others, and expects a lot of respect from others. The person is willing to take any risk. . . . They always think they can do anything and everything. They don't take no shit from no one. They have a one-track mind. Never want to accept the fact that women can perform as well as men.

Significantly, the judges were divided in classifying this respondent; one classified him as negative, another as positive, and the third as neutral. The fact is that rather than being neutral, this young man identifies both positive (“respects others and self”) and negative (“never want to accept the fact that women can perform as well as men”) qualities with being macho.

Another person observed that there were at least two meanings of the word—one, a brave person who is willing to defend his ideals and himself, and the other, a man who exaggerates his masculinity—but noted that “macho” was not a term that he used.

Another respondent provided a complex answer that distinguished the denotative (i.e., macho) and connotative (i.e., machismo) meanings of the term. He used the word in both ways, differentiating between being macho or male, which is denotative, and machismo, which connotes male chauvinism. He considered himself to be macho but certainly not *machista*.

Ser macho es ser valiente o no tener miedo. La connotación que tiene mal sentido es poner los intereses del hombre adelante de los de la mujer o del resto de la familia. Representa egoísmo. . . . Macho significa varón, hombre, pero el machismo es una manera de pensar, y es negativo (To be macho is to be brave or to not be afraid. The connotation that is negative is to put the interests of the man ahead of those of the woman or the rest of the family. It represents selfishness. . . . Macho means male, man, but machismo is a way of thinking, and it is negative).

Another person similarly distinguished between being macho and being *machista*.

Pues, en el sentido personal, significa el sexo masculino y lo difiere del sexo femenino. La palabra machismo existe solamente de bajo nivel cultural y significa un hombre valiente, borracho y pendenciero (Well, in a personal sense, it means the masculine gender and it distinguishes it from the feminine. The word machismo exists only at a low cultural level and it means a brave man, a drunkard, and a hell-raiser).

Six of the twelve respondents who were classified as neutral considered themselves to be at least somewhat macho.

Regional and Socioeconomic Differences in Conceptions of Macho

Conceptions of the word “macho” do not vary significantly by region, but there are significant differences according to socioeconomic status. Men with more education, with a higher income, and in professional occupations were more likely to have a positive conception of the word. This is not to suggest that they are necessarily more *machista*, or chauvinistic, but that they simply see the word in a more positive light. Almost half (42 percent) of the respondents who were professionals associated the word “macho” with being principled or standing up for one’s rights, whereas only 23 percent of nonprofessionals had a positive conception of the word.²

Place of birth and language were also significantly associated with attitudes toward machismo, but, ironically, those respondents who were born in the United States and those who were interviewed in English were generally more positive toward the word “macho.” Forty-two percent of those born in the United States gave positive responses, compared with only 10 percent of those who were foreign-born.

An English-speaking respondent said that “macho equals to me chivalry associated with the Knights of the Round Table, where a man gives his word, defends his beliefs, etc.” Another noted that machos were people who “stand up for what they believe, try things other people are afraid to do, and defend the rights of others.” But one Mexican man saw it as the opposite—“*Mexicanos que aceptan que la mujer ‘lleve los pantalones,’ irresponsables, les dan mas atención a sus aspectos sociales que a sus responsabilidades*” (Mexicans who accept that the woman ‘wear the pants,’ they are irresponsible, these men pay more attention to their social lives than to their responsibilities).

Regional and Socioeconomic Differences in “How Machos Act”

After defining the word “macho,” respondents were asked to give an example of how people who are macho act or behave. The answers ranged from drinking to excess, acting “bad” or “tough,” being insecure in themselves, to having a “synthetic self-image,” a code of ethics, and being sincere and responsible. Because responses typically were either negative or positive rather than neutral or indifferent, they were grouped into two broad categories.

Regional differences were not statistically significant, although southern Californians were more likely than Texans or northern Californians to see macho behavior as aggressive or negative and to associate it with acting tough, drinking, or being selfish.

The general pattern that was observed with regard to occupation, education, and income was that professionals, those with more education, and those with higher incomes were less likely to associate the word “macho” with negative behaviors such as drinking and trying to prove one’s masculinity.³

Place of birth and the language in which the interview was conducted were also related to the type of behavior that was associated with the word “macho.” Men born in the United States and those who opted to conduct the interview in English were significantly more likely to associate such positive behaviors as being responsible, honorable, or respectful of others with people they considered to be macho.

Conclusion

These data provide empirical support for two very different and conflicting models of masculinity. The compensatory model sees the cult of virility and the Mexican male’s obsession with power and domination as futile attempts to mask feelings of inferiority,

powerlessness, and failure, whereas the second perspective associates being macho with a code of ethics that organizes and gives meaning to behavior. The first model stresses external attributes such as strength, sexual prowess, and power; the second stresses internal qualities like honor, responsibility, respect, and courage.

Although the findings are not conclusive, they have important implications. First, and most importantly, the so-called Mexican/Latino masculine cult appears to be a more complex and diverse phenomenon than is commonly assumed. But the assumption that being macho is an important Mexican cultural value is seriously called into question by the findings. Most respondents did not define macho as a positive cultural or personal trait or see themselves as being macho. Only about one-third of the men in the sample viewed the word “macho” positively. If there is a cultural value placed on being macho, one would expect that those respondents with closer ties to Latino culture and the Spanish language would be more apt to identify and to have positive associations with macho, but the opposite tendency was found to be true. Respondents who preferred to be interviewed in English were much more likely to see macho positively and to identify with it, whereas the vast majority of those who elected to be interviewed in Spanish viewed it negatively.

A major flaw of previous conceptualizations has been their tendency to treat machismo as a unitary phenomenon. The findings presented here suggest that although Latino men tend to hold polar conceptions of macho, these conceptions may not be unrelated. In describing the term, one respondent observed that there was almost a continuum between a person who is responsible and one who is chauvinistic. If one looks more closely at the two models, moreover, it is clear that virtually every trait associated with a negative macho trait has its counterpart in a positive one. Some of the principal characteristics of the negative macho and the positive counterparts are highlighted in [Table 3.1](#).

The close parallel between negative and positive macho traits is reminiscent of Vicente T. Mendoza’s distinction between genuine and false macho. According to Mendoza, the behavior of a genuine machismo is characterized by true bravery or valor, courage, generosity, stoicism, heroism, and ferocity; the negative macho simply uses the appearance or semblance of these traits to mask cowardliness and fear (Mendoza 1962, 75-86).

TABLE 3.1 Negative and Positive Macho Traits

<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>
Bravado	Brave
Cowardly	Courageous
Violent	Self-Defensive
Irresponsible	Responsible
Disrespectful	Respectful
Selfish	Altruistic
Pretentious	Humble
Loud	Soft-Spoken
Boastful	Self-Effacing
Abusive	Protective
Headstrong/Bullish	Intransigent
Conformist	Individualistic
Chauvinistic	Androgynous
Dishonorable	Honorable
External Qualities	Internal Qualities

From this perspective much of what social scientists have termed “macho” behavior is not macho at all, but its antithesis. Rather than attempting to isolate a modal Mexican personality type or determining whether macho is a positive or a negative cultural trait, social scientists would be well served to see Mexican and Latino culture as revolving around certain focal concerns or key issues such as honor, pride, dignity, courage, responsibility, integrity, and strength of character. Individuals, in turn, are evaluated positively or negatively according to how well they are perceived to respond to these focal concerns. But because being macho is ultimately an internal quality, those who seek to demonstrate outwardly that they are macho are caught in a double bind. A person who goes around holding his genitals, boasting about his manliness, or trying to prove how macho he is would not be considered macho by this definition. In the final analysis it is up to others to determine the extent to which a person lives up to these expectations and ideals.

It is also important to note that to a great extent, the positive internal qualities associated with the positive macho are not the exclusive domain of men but extend to either gender. One can use the same criteria in evaluating the behavior of women and employ parallel terminology such as *la hembra* (the female) and *hembrismo* (femaleness). *Una mujer que es una hembra* (a woman who is a real “female”) is neither passive and submissive nor physically strong and assertive, for these are external qualities. Rather, *una hembra* is a person of strong character who has principles and is willing to defend them in the face of adversity. Thus, whereas the popular conception of the word “macho” refers to external male characteristics such as exaggerated masculinity or the cult of virility, the positive conception isolated here sees being macho as an internal, androgynous quality.