

IDENTITY, ADOLESCENCE AND CULTURE Secondary School Students in a Regional Context

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Abstract:

This study, through the use of qualitative techniques and a survey, documents certain aspects that configure the construction of the identity of young people enrolled in secondary school in a marginalized region of Estado de México. The research recognizes the contributions of the local and regional culture in the identity-related processes of rural and urban adolescents, as well as the specific cultural expressions and crises of their stage of life. The article emphasizes the importance of students' peer relationships in their transition from family to society, and explains the professional and employment projects young people create, based on their socioeconomic conditions and scholastic trajectory. In this process, migration is one of their main ideas for the near, possible future.

Key words: young people, secondary education, cultural factors, rural setting, urban setting, Mexico.

Introduction

Diverse responses have been given to questions about the identity of secondary students. In the best of cases, researchers have turned to psychology for elements of aid in understanding these young people. Psychology's definition is based on the stage of individual development, under a generic and homogeneous category: adolescence. And adolescence as a stage is associated with problems of diverse types: emotional (mourning and crisis), behavioral (changing states, rebelliousness) and social (isolation, violation of norms). Although such manifestations are real, they are not absolute parameters for defining all adolescents in all contexts. Adolescence is an historical concept that has acquired various connotations, depending on the time and society involved. Therefore, in this study we shall attempt to recognize young people in their specific situations, in their social and historical conditions, and in the concrete contexts where they live and learn.

Adolescence, as a theoretical category, is only a referent for thinking about young people enrolled in secondary school; these young people, however, are also students, children, friends, consumers, TV watchers, workers, country or city dwellers, male or female, and much more. All these aspects amalgamate in a particular manner in each individual's perspective of the meaning of youth. The culture that is lived and internalized in various settings¹ is synthesized in a differentiated and unique manner in each personal history and context. Individuals and groups configure their identity in a complex way within the framework of their own social, economic and historical conditions, and within the meanings that define their local culture as part of the global culture.

Another referent for defining young people has been school. In that context (especially in secondary school) young people are "naturalized" in the position of students, and from that position a series of adjectives is constructed to label them as a function of the logic of institutional norms: "undisciplined", "apathetic", "lazy", "a lost case", or "a good student", "reliable", "responsible", and "obedient". Thus students are at one of two poles, according to the parameters of school discourse: the "good" or the "bad" student. Such polarity reduces the possibility of understanding young people as whole subjects, and recognizing their heterogeneity and potential in their diversity.

This article is based on recognizing young people's bio-psychosocial need to construct their identity as a function of their intimacy and autonomy, as well as their own values and projects, in a framework

of personal crisis that marks adolescence. This crisis is understood as individual potential, in which the regional culture², social conditions, and regional, community, and family economics influence adolescents' processes and relationships in facing identity conflicts.

Our study documents diverse aspects of the lives of secondary students, including their tastes, expectations, life and career projects, values, processes of constructing intimacy, and manifestations of sexuality. All of these elements contribute to their construction of identity.

We approach identity as a complex multidimensional articulation of psychological, social, cultural and intimate/emotional elements that are specifically synthesized in each adolescent. We attempt to articulate conceptual elements from different disciplinary sources in order to make a broader, and more open reading of identity as well as adolescence. Each stage of development, according to Erikson, assumes crisis. Yet crises of development are not a "catastrophe" or a fatality, but "a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and higher potential" (Erikson, 1992:82) that combine with the social and cultural conditions of each context. Thus Erikson claims that the adolescent stage represents a period of *constitutive or normative crisis of identity* that will take on different hues depending on the society and culture in which the person lives. The crisis is explained as the young person faces the "physiological revolution" within, which de-structures his body image and his identity.³ Adolescence, as Erikson continues, is the stage of accentuation of the identity conflict, "almost a way of life between infancy and adulthood" (1992:111).

In western society, adolescence is the time when "genital puberty inundates the organism and the imagination, with all kinds of impulses; when intimacy with the opposite sex is approached and when the immediate future confronts the individual with too many possibilities and conflicting choices" (1992:114). In this process, and from the psychological plane, the normative crisis of adolescence is outstanding—a crisis that synthesizes the previous stages and becomes a turning point when the adolescent reconsiders his own personality. As such, crisis represents potential for determining the future.

During this project we interpret intimacy from a broadened perspective that includes not only connections and care for the other—as pointed out by Gilligan (1994)—but also affective relationships, and links of friendship, support, trust, communication and empathy; as a construction of spaces of interpersonal relationships mediated by affectivity and marked by the ability to give to others and think about them.

Based on psychoanalytical, sociological, anthropological and philosophical concepts, we analyze adolescents' processes of constructing identity with emphasis on sexuality, intimacy, autonomy, values and projects.

The thesis shared with Giménez (1997), Gilligan (1994) and Erikson (1992) regarding the influence of sociocultural settings in the construction of personal identity led us to consider adolescents' relations with the family, at school, and in peer groups. Emphasis is also placed on the intimate/affective dimension of identity, by documenting adolescents' relations with parents, siblings, friends, and teachers. These relations are seen as privileged spaces where adolescents obtain their education and appropriate meanings selectively.

This article expresses aspects such as manifestations of crisis, relations of courtship and friendship, adolescents' tastes and preferences, and their future projects and expectations. All in a framework of a specific cultural region that influences the configuration of their identity.

Methodological Clarifications

The article's object of study—the forms of construction of identity among adolescents in secondary school—implied an eminently interpretative qualitative analysis in the light of authors like Geertz

(1997), Rodríguez (1996) and Woods (1998). Our initial approach, however, was a survey of students' socioeconomic conditions, as well as certain aspects of their identity, projects and values. The survey fulfilled the purpose of discovering the regularities of the region, in terms of structural conditions and adolescents' values and projects. Most of the project was based on the use of qualitative techniques such as in-depth interviews, open observation, and ethnographic logs. Another technique for compiling information was the adolescents' expression of feelings and problems through the writing of anonymous letters.

The study was carried out in the municipality of Tejupilco, in the southern part of the state of Estado de México. Two systems of schools were used as a sample for the survey—secondary schools of the “general” type, and secondary schools known as *telesecundarias*. We ensured that the schools were representative of the region, through their location in different contexts: ranging from rural contexts in the Nanchitla mountains, far from the municipal seat, to nearby urban and semi-urban contexts.

The survey was used (after preparation, piloting and validation) in eighteen schools: twelve *telesecundarias* and six general secondary schools in the state's educational sub-system. Within the schools, a random sample of 623 students was taken: 64% from the *telesecundarias* and 36% from the general secondary schools. The survey participants are between ages eleven and seventeen, with an average of fourteen. In terms of gender, 48% are males and 52% females, enrolled in the three years of secondary school: 38% in the first year, 30% in the second year, and 32% in the third year.

Under the assumption that school is a privileged setting for constructing identity, the qualitative phase of the research used two schools (one general secondary and one *telesecundaria*) prestigious in the community and/or school system as “good schools”.⁴ The schools are in two different communities within the municipality of Tejupilco: Cerro del Bosque, the site of the *telesecundaria*, and San José de la Sal, where the general secondary school is located.

The qualitative study included twenty-five in-depth interviews (twenty-three with students and two with Civics and Ethics teachers). Out of the twenty-three students, eleven are enrolled in general secondary school and twelve in *telesecundaria*; thirteen boys and ten girls between ages thirteen and sixteen. In addition, we carried out classroom observations in the Civics and Ethics classes, and used the technique of anonymous letters, which the adolescents wrote according to a brief guide presented by the researcher.

The Region as a Context

The southern region of Estado de México is characteristic of areas that historically have been least favored by development policies. The problems of poverty, marginalization, illiteracy and immigration are serious in the area.

According to the indicators of the National Population Council (Consejo Nacional de Población) (Conapo, 2000), the five municipalities⁵ in the southern region of Estado de México have the worst marginalization. They are part of the 386 municipalities in the nation that have 38% of the illiterate population aged fifteen or older; where 67% of the population have not finished elementary school, 31% live in housing without a sewer or a private toilet, 28% have no electrical power, 41% have no piped water supply, 72% live in housing with dirt floors, and 74% have some degree of overcrowding.⁶

The southern part of Estado de México is also catalogued at the national level as a zone with high migratory intensity;⁷ as such, its rates of migration to the United States are comparable to areas that have been traditional sources of migrant workers since the past century. As in other regions, the phenomenon is essentially labor-oriented. Migrants are usually young men and women, often the head of the household, who are in search of better employment opportunities; their money transfers are an important source of income for the local and regional economies. According to national statistics, in

this region, “the great majority of resources received is used to satisfy basic needs, acquire nonperishable consumer goods, and to buy and improve housing, while only a small portion is destined to savings and so-called productive investment” (Conapo, 2000).

From the region’s cultural point of view, and specifically within the area of our study, we found geosymbols⁸ like the “doll” and “fat” hills, the “San Felipe River”; “anthropized” elements, as Giménez would say, like the church of San Pedro in the municipal seat, and the archaeological ruins of San José de la Sal. We also have institutions and symbolic practices that are linked to regional territory in terms of their origin and distribution, and that function as metonymic symbols of the zone: the *tierra caliente* music; popular songs like *corridos* about migrant workers, “narcos” and brave men; typical dances like the *zapateado* and the dance of the Moors and the Apaches; the traditional *huarache* sandals and big hats, still used; and habitual foods—based on the consumption of meat, tortillas, chiles and beans, and special dishes like barbecued goat.

Other cultural elements that identify the region are: language, which includes its own words, like *huache* to refer to children; religious festivities like the Christmas *posadas* or the Day of the Dead, large carnivals on the main communities’ feast days, and other religious practices such as pilgrimages to honor Our Lady of Guadalupe; agricultural products like coffee, broad beans, squash; handicrafts like *rebozo* shawls, hats and *huarache* sandals; and the traditional outdoor markets.

Transition from Childhood to Adolescence. Changes and Crisis

Throughout life, we pass through complex moments that define what we are doing and what we shall be in the future. On this journey, the drama of adolescence, which integrates, synthesizes and expresses the crises of previous stages (Erikson, 1992) is a decisive step, a vital reconstitution of our being in which we arise as new individuals on the way to being adults.

Puberty, the initial phase of adolescence, is characterized primarily by the anatomical and physiological changes that lead to sexual and genital maturity. The manifestations of this stage are seen in what has been called primary and secondary characteristics, as well as in physical growth and the psychological, social and moral revolution that describe the transformation from childhood to adolescence.

In our study, we found that the boys accept physical changes and view growth as a sign of autonomy as they are treated differently by their parents. Emanuel, age fifteen and in the third year of *telesecundaria*, accepts physical changes because they indicate the passage to overcoming parental overprotection; his parents show trust by allowing him to do certain things by himself, evidencing some of the advantages of growing up:

Well, what I like is that I’ve grown. They see you and they don’t treat you like a child. “Go there on your own, you can take care of yourself.” That’s what I like most. They don’t overprotect you. “Learn how to do it and take care of yourself” [...] I’ve liked the change in my voice... The truth is that the changes you experience are good. I want to be grown up.

The voice change and physical growth—transformations that imply many other changes on the psychological and social planes—are signs that allow adolescents to recognize themselves as older. They become aware that they are transforming into people who will participate more in the adult world. In other words, “the adolescent’s awareness of these changes and this awareness as a factor of development” (Tessier, 2000:14).

The girls also accept, in general, the physical changes they undergo, although menstruation is a dramatic phenomenon. Some of the girls come to hate menstruation because of its implications in

terms of pain, uncertainty or discomfort. It is one of the manifestations of change that they most suffer and reject. Sofía, age fourteen, from Cerro del Bosque and a student at *telesecundaria*, although informed about menstruation thanks to good communication with her mother, did not know specifically what would happen when menstruation started. Thus she was overcome by fear and confusion: “The first time I was very afraid, really afraid [...] I was running and I got scared because I felt something hot. Oh! Horrible... I yelled, I yelled as loud as I could.”

Menstruation is associated with feelings of fear, anger, something that “puts you in a bad mood”. Such feelings refer to adolescents’ perception of menstruation as an event. “Menstruation, and the ability to procreate that it represents, are valued in all cultures in a different manner” (Hiriart, 1999:83). In this case, the local culture may not appreciate its importance as a sign of reproductive capacity and the value of motherhood, but may instead be associating menstruation with dislike, bother, pain, and the “shame” of being a woman.

In Aberastury’s terms, the young girl’s rejection of menstruation shows “mourning for the lost body of the child, the biological basis of adolescence, which imposes itself on the individual, who often feels the change as external, from the perspective of a powerless spectator of what is happening to her own body” (Aberastury y Knobel, 1998:11). A girl in puberty does not determine the changes that affect her body, but must become accustomed to them in spite of their rapid appearance and the psychological drama they represent.

Adolescents experience physical changes as “an uncontrollable interruption of a new body system that modifies their position with regard to the outside world and obligates them to seek new guidelines for interaction (Aberasturi y Knobel, 1998:159). This is a confusing and painful time when some adolescents suffer extreme imbalance and anxiety. They must confront the adult world without being totally prepared, while separating from their childish world and identity. This is the tension that in itself represents a crisis, and that will take on various hues depending on the case and the ways the adolescent has confronted and resolved the crises of previous stages.

Adolescents manifest this crisis in different forms, depending on the context and family dynamics. For example, some adolescents in the urban setting fact family conflicts, due to their rebelliousness; others, from the rural setting, distrust the people around them and turn inwards in an attempt to solve their problems alone; still others confess their interior debate, overflowing in self-censure and self-contempt. In his anonymous letter to an imaginary friend, a fifteen-year-old boy enrolled in the third year of *telesecundaria* described his family as “really beautiful” while denigrating himself:

I wanted to tell you who I am, but I don’t even know. The only thing I can recognize in myself is what an idiot I am in deciding and acting... I really have no problems; only inside; I feel physically horrible, with a perfectly stupid nature, a poor useless being... I would like you to give me your opinion about everything I am, and some solution to fix the destruction I feel inside.

Some authors, more oriented to a psychoanalytical posture based on the primary ideas of Freud, explain such adolescent reactions in terms of the internal struggle the young person unleashes in an attempt to repress his unconscious desires. According to this view, a young person’s self-censure would be a manifestation of the “removal” of childish desires, channeled through a “reversion-in-hate” (Kaplan, 1986:122) oriented to himself rather than his parents. In Erikson’s words, this is explained by the concepts of “loss and identity crisis” that assume the young person’s intolerance of the surrounding world, and in this case, of himself.

Other adolescents, especially those in a rural setting, experience the crisis in a reserved manner, distrusting others and trying to solve their problems alone, although everything “turns out bad”. An

example is provided by an excerpt from a letter of another fifteen-year-old boy in the third year of *telesecundaria*: “Problems, would be how my life is going at this time; everything I do turns out bad, at the moment or in the future I screw it up. Most of the time I don’t like to follow anyone’s advice. If I have a question, I almost never ask. I try to solve it by myself.”

Mateo, a third-year student in the general secondary school (located in a rural setting), smiles with mischief when the topic of sexuality is mentioned. He comments openly that he does not like to talk about the subject: “I don’t like to talk about that.” Also Rodaciano, fifteen years old and the son of peasants, says that he does not talk to anyone about his internal conflicts or questions regarding sexuality: “I have almost never liked to talk to anyone... I don’t talk to anyone around here... I don’t trust them... I fix my problems as well as I can by myself.”

According to Erikson, the problem would revolve around Rodaciano’s great need to trust himself and others, since adolescents look for “people and ideas they can have faith in”. Paradoxically, they express this demand through an “ostentatious and cynical distrust [...] avid for confirmation from classmates, teachers, and for inspiration from worthy lifestyles” (Erikson, 1992:112).

The interior struggle that is the crisis of this stage in some adolescents, especially those from urban settings, is also manifested in rebellious behavior towards their parents, plans or threats to leave home (sometimes carried out) or the assumption of extravagant attitudes.

“A friend, but more intimate.” Courtship

Adolescence is a struggle to solve and integrate the feelings and crises of childhood. Young people look for “a new feeling of continuity and equality with themselves, which must now include sexual identity” (Erikson, 1992:110). The window is opened to amorous relations, which lead to intimacy, and the subjective and profound relation with the other, who helps the young person to configure his own identity and define the place others occupy in his life and values.

While this process occurs, adolescents experience serious problems with respect to their sexuality and relations of courtship. Our survey showed that the greatest problem for adolescents (22%) at the present time has to do with sexuality and courtship (14%). This problem, in turn, is related to self-confidence, which 12% of the sample recognize as their major problem.

In our culture, adolescence marks the first affective relations outside of the family. A notable change occurs in this stage in relations with the opposite sex based on courtship. Not unusually, young people interpret courtship as a link of friendship, “but more intimate”, as Emanuel states. In our survey, 44% answered that courtship is a form of sharing feelings, while 32% said it was having company for conversation. Emanuel, whose girlfriend is in the third year of *telesecundaria*, commented: “to have someone to talk to, to tell your feelings to, almost like a friend but more intimate, more your own...”

Thus courtship goes beyond friendship, implying a deeper level of intimacy—intimacy that Juana (a fourteen-year-old in the second year of the same school as Emanuel, and whose boyfriend attends the same school) associates courtship with communication, support and mutual knowledge: “To try to communicate with each other, to get to know each other better, to help each other...because your boyfriend tries to help you when you are messing up, in a family problem, or with your grades [...]”

Thus we see that courtship implies communication, support and respect. Erikson affirms that in adolescence, courtship and falling in love are not a “sexual matter”. Rather, they are “an attempt to define one’s own identity, projecting on the other the diffuse image of one’s self, in order to see it reflected and gradually clarified” (1992:113). Therefore, according to this author, youthful love “consists of conversation”. This seems to be corroborated in our study, since both urban and rural adolescents define courtship in terms of friendship, trust, conversation, support, getting to know each other, externalizing feelings, and even “preventing boredom”.

According to developmental theories, girls awaken to sexuality before boys. Girls more commonly date boys who are older than they are. Similar opinions are expressed by María, Isabel, Juana and several girls in their anonymous letters, especially in the rural setting. They see courtship as a relation of love and an emotional connection with the boy, and suffer if the tie is broken. A fifteen-year-old girl in the general secondary school wrote in her text: “I have been through a hard time. I liked my boyfriend a lot, and he was cheating on me. And the truth is that I still like him and that is why I feel very sad.”

The first kiss is a very meaningful experience for adolescents. It is a basis for falling in love and feeling that the sexual relation is an act of love and affective connection with the other. A fifteen-year-old girl in the general secondary school wrote: “The happiest experience I have had was when I had my first kiss with a boy I liked, a very nice kiss. And I love him and I like him a lot, but unfortunately he died.”

While the girls see courtship as a way to give and receive love, the boys, especially in early adolescence, consider kissing and sexual relations “at least partially, to be the confirmation of their masculinity” (Pollack, 1999:180) and a form of strengthening their own identity (Erikson, 1992).

In spite of the different meanings boys and girls attach to courtship, in general terms it is an important relationship for adolescents. In courtship they find and establish levels of intimacy that translate into support, trust, motivation, self-knowledge and knowledge of the other, which allow them to establish an inter-subjective, intimate/affective bridge with the other. Such a bridge builds the foundation of still precarious emotional maturity, yet leads to the construction of a sexual and emotional identify that is relatively defined in adolescence.

“He’s really my friend.” Intimacy among Peers and the Value of Friendship

The peer group represents fundamental support for adolescents, as a source of the necessary reinforcement for the changing aspects of their personality. The peer group helps adolescents to differentiate themselves from their family and reconstruct their identity. They transfer to the group a large part of the attachment previously maintained with their family and in particular, with their parents. When family links are modified, “friendship with peers acquires increased importance” (Delval, 2000:574). The peer group aids in the necessary transition to the outside world in order to attain adult individuation; by passing through the group experience, a young person can begin to separate and assume his adult identity.

For this reason, our interviewees define a friend as the person who offers them the most trust, surpassed only by their own mother. Although mothers are in first place in terms of trust, a friend’s trust surpasses that of fathers. The friend is in first place for 15% of the young people in the sample (Chart 1).

In terms of friendship and intimacy, friends and the peer group are fundamentally important for adolescents; almost all of the survey participants have a special friend or are looking for one in order to share their concerns, doubts, sadness and excitement.

In the process of defining identity, an adolescent’s relation with his peers is a necessary condition for strengthening the processes of attachment and differentiation. Listening to and supporting another person, while receiving the same support in return, represent an intimate space of friendship, attachment and trust that strengthens the individual and allows him to re-contextualize meanings. Adolescents attach great importance and value to friendship, and especially to certain friends. We turn again to Emanuel, who has a close friend he has known since elementary school: “[...] One who’s still with me in the third year of secondary school. I met him in the third year of grade school, and I’ve always gotten along with him. He’s really my friend. I talk to him, I tell him everything [...] even though

some school years we haven't been in the same group at school, we still talk to each other the same way.”

CHART 1
Person Most Trusted by Adolescents

Trusted Person	Percentage
Mother	36.3
Friend	15.4
Father	10.6
Sibling	9.6
Girlfriend or boyfriend	8.3
No one	5.2
Teacher	4.8
Counselor	4.8
No answer	3.7
Other	1.3
Total	100.0

Source: Survey completed by 623 adolescents.

In other cases, the friend is a source of advice and help for special situations, “in the good times and the bad”, in the words of Oliver, a thirteen-year-old in the second year of *telesecundaria* whose mother died two years ago. In addition to getting along with and receiving support from his cousins, Oliver spends time with close friends he has known since kindergarten. They have the same liking for cockfights and sports. Oliver believes his friends are: “Someone to trust; I talk to them and they talk to me. Then you feel different [...] I feel supported [...] They’re important [...] Almost all friends help you in the good times and the bad.”

The meaning of friendship changes in relation to the adolescent’s age. As Delval indicates, based on a study by Aldeson, “from ages fourteen to sixteen, security is the most important, and loyalty becomes a central value” (Delval, 2000:585). Or in Oliver’s words, friends help “in the good times and the bad”.

Intimacy among friends occurs in fields of interaction where the adolescent confronts his peers, puts his preferences into play, identifies with certain friends, recognizes himself and is recognized by others. “Because of his relatively unformed identity, the adolescent forms a ‘gregarious’ identity that is shared with others and also attained by identifying with public figures from music, shows, and ‘heroes’ that become models” (Delval, 2000:584).

In sum, personal identity is constructed in a relation-oriented and inter-subjective manner, in which love and intimacy with others play a decisive role. In this process, other people who are the closest to adolescents, such as parents, friends, cousins and teachers, are strong support in motivating their formation as individuals; they also represent important figures of attachment and transition, in terms of models of identification and depositaries of the love that helps adolescents construct their identity. As Kaplan affirms, “Love for others, with all its frustrations and limitations, is the safety net of human existence” (Kaplan, 1986:122).

Local culture and manifestations of culture to which adolescents have access are an important source of meanings that add a sociocultural dimension to young people's identity. During their search, young people define their likes and preferences as they identify with certain types of music, television programs, movies and pastimes. This process is highly influenced by the global culture⁹ that reaches adolescents through electronic means, principally television, as well as by the local culture and the socioeconomic and cultural conditions of the adolescents' family, community and region.

In the area of our study, spaces for young people's recreation are not abundant, and the socioeconomic conditions limit their possibilities of accessing modern technology like the Internet. Thus most watch television and listen to music for several hours each day. The sample data show that 37% of the surveyed adolescents listen to music from one to two hours each day, and 23% from two to three hours; 70% watch television from one to three hours each day. These activities are most common among young people enrolled in the general secondary schools in urban and semi-urban areas, where families enjoy better socioeconomic conditions and have more possibilities to access the outside culture that reaches these zones through commercial exchanges and the media.

Music

The young people's tastes tend toward Mexican *ranchera* and *banda* music. They identify with these types of music because of their everyday references and creation of meaning. The favorite band of 42% of the sample is "El Recodo". The gender variable, however, also describes important differences. In general, the boys are inclined to like *ranchera* and *banda* songs, while the girls prefer peaceful, romantic music.

The young people in the rural setting, whose local culture is more influenced by what has been called the "narco-culture" (drug culture) like *ranchera* music, including "corridos and narco-corridos". This is the case of Mateo, who likes "only *corridos* or *norteña* music", and of Rodaciano, who prefers *corridos* that deal with drug production and trafficking: "The *corridos* and *narco-corridos* are sung by 'Los tigres' and 'Los paisanos', and the song I like the most is *El cerro responde*". This is an aspect of the regional culture that expresses the phenomenon of drug trafficking in the zone, the basis for constructing the concept of "narco-culture", which also serves as a background for the adolescents' ideas.

The above is an expression of historically situated elements of culture and identity. Beyond the homogeneous concept of "youth culture" that is associated with urban meanings, the local constructions of meaning show the heterogeneity of the "youthful" or "young" category and the need to elaborate new identifications in response to the young people's situations. Such identifications should be differentiated by variables such as gender and class.

Television

In the context of our study, television is a medium that is very close to both the urban and rural young people; it forms an important part of their daily life. Almost all of the interviewees admit to watching a Mexican soap opera (*telenovela*), although others prefer comedies or documentaries on animals, science or fantasy. Many of the young people, both boys and girls, watch *telenovelas* that feature young actors and aspirational lifestyles. Melina, for example, finds forms of relationships and entertainment that she likes in one *telenovela*: "Well, it's the life of adolescents, older than us. But especially about what they do with their boyfriends; they go to the disco". Other adolescents identify with this type of *telenovelas* because of the problems they have in common. Ramón, a thirteen-year-old who lives in the municipal seat, believes that the *telenovela* that is most watched by adolescents shows problems that are experienced in many settings. "There you see almost all the problems we have with family, with friends... at school."

The media, model lifestyles and youthful images on television represent an influential field of constructing meanings for adolescents. The identifications that arise from their interactions with television affect the conformation of their self-image and imagined lifestyles.

“Cholos”, “spiked hair” and “bad words”. Adolescents’ Fashion and Language

The influence of the media and the differences in cultural contexts are expressed in the ways adolescents act, talk and dress. Those who are closer to urban lifestyles adopt the fashions and language promoted by some young urban groups as part of the “youthful culture” or “counterculture” associated with transgressing social norms.

The young people who live in an urban context, especially the boys, dress in an obviously different way from the rural young people. The urban adolescents state that they like to dress “in style” (meaning loose trousers in a style they call *cholo*, which was generated by Latino youth in the United States and consists of long, baggy shirts with stamped designs on the front and/or back, and tennis shoes). Emanuel, who works in the municipal seat, describes his form of dressing: “I always use pants that are two sizes larger, and a large shirt, tucked in only some of the time”. This is also the case of Franco, who lives in the municipal seat: “one dresses... well like, like the style right now... *cholo* pants... long shirts...”. Like many, Franco wears a cap, although he is sanctioned at the *telesecundaria* for doing so.

Style also includes “punk” hair, or in Roberta’s words, “spiked”, which Emanuel considers practical and attractive: “Well I fix my hair like that [upward] because it is more practical and simple. In the morning, I get some of the stuff I put on my hair, I get it damp, and I push it back, and I don’t use a comb or anything...and besides, it looks good. A lot of people tell me, ‘Your hair looks good.’”

These adolescents defend their ways of dressing and acting contrary to the hegemonic styles and norms that impose not only types of garments, but also limits in language and conduct. Such young people generally appropriate space in the streets, and meet in public areas like parks and videogame stores, where they configure a series of meanings that describe language and culture counter to the adult world.

Their daily language, especially that used by the boys in the municipal seat, contains “bad words”. At a school meeting of “problem” students enrolled in the second year of *telesecundaria*, and their parents, one of the teacher’s most serious complaints concerned the students’ “offensive” language. She repeated the words they use: “They have barbaric language. They insist on *no mames* (‘cocksucker’), *no chingues* (‘fuck off’), *güey* (‘dumb-ass’) and *cabrón* (‘prick’)...and double entendres... all the time...!”¹⁰

Such language is an example of the conflictive encounter between the socially legitimate school culture, translated into disciplinary norms that describe “correct” behavior, and the adolescents’ culture, which although largely imitative of other young groups, opposes and transgresses social and school orderliness.

By using the “bad words” from popular and risqué language in opposition to power,¹¹ the young people are attempting not only to transgress social norms by being different, but also to give words meanings other than those assigned by the hegemonic culture.¹² The obscene meaning is no longer fundamental, and is replaced by other meanings that often acquire a positive connotation.¹³ The generalized use of such words has also been influenced by the media and the morality promoted by certain television programs. An example is the word, *güey*, which seems to have been made acceptable by the *Big Brother* program, and is now used in all programs and *telenovelas* that contain a youthful element.

Many adolescents in rural contexts, however, like the students from San José de la Sal, adhere more to the parameters of traditional culture and do not share all of the tastes and fashions of the moment. Osvaldo, from San José de la Sal, is an example: “I dress normally. I don’t like the *cholos* much [...] Not

much at all. I have dressed like that but I feel strange... It doesn't go with me... I don't know, but they just started dressing like that recently; and their hair like that... spiked. No! [And an earring?] No way!"

In addition to the clothing, the young people's hairstyles and language are a distinguishing symbol of their own "youthful culture", and their tastes express their activities outside of school. Some students, like Oliver and Franco, reveal a synthesis of elements from "modern" and local culture: they dress like *cholos*, use a cap and ride a motorcycle, but also breed roosters for cockfights and compete with them at regional fairs. Oliver is just beginning to participate in this activity: "When I am not at the soccer fields, I take care of my roosters and have them fight [...] I have eight. I have fought two of them and I have won." Franco is a breeder and is used to competing and betting heavily: "I like the roosters [...] since I breed them now [...] I take care of them to raise more [...] I like to make heavy bets [...] At the fair sometimes I make two thousand [peso] bets at night."

Cockfighting is an example of the region's typical activities. Many young and adult men are dedicated to breeding roosters in order to enter them in the fights held at regional fairs. As children they begin to learn how to breed, care for and fight the roosters, with an eye on earning through the betting. This internalized element of regional culture contributes to their identity.

"I'm going to go to college" versus "I'm going to the United States". Professional and Employment Projects

In a regional context of socioeconomic conditions of marginalization and widespread migration to the United States, the conditions become the meaningful frameworks in which secondary school students build their projects. They base their plans on their resources and/or the meaning of school and professional preparation for them and their families. The symbolic structure, along with the socioeconomic conditions, affect the definition of the young people's goals, projects and aspirations. The survey results show that 17% of the participants have immediate plans to go to the United States after finishing secondary school, while 54% plan to stay in school, and 15% hope to work either by helping their parents or finding employment outside of the home.

CHART 2
Adolescents' Plans upon Completing Secondary School

Project	Percentage
Stay in school	
Go to the United States	
Other	
Work with father on family farm	
Work in the region	
No answer	
Total	

Source: Survey answered by 623 adolescents.

The young people who aim at staying in school and obtaining a college degree, center their projects on the classical professions: 23% want to be teachers, 22% physicians, and 13% lawyers (Chart 3). In general terms, the professional projects of adolescents in the region have to do with the socioeconomic condition of the family and community, as well as the meanings they have constructed, based on their backgrounds and relationship with their surroundings. Many of the young people have developed a

certain sensitivity to family and community problems and shortages, which are expressed in professional projects mediated by the intent to help others.

CHART 3
Adolescents' Professional Plans

Expectation	Percentage
Teacher	22.8
Physician	21.5
Lawyer	13.0
Engineer	11.1
Other	11.1
Architect	7.1
Nurse	5.4
Administrator	4.8
No answer	2.4
Journalist	0.8
Total	100.0

Source: Survey answered by 623 adolescents.

Among the group of young people who have already decided to interrupt their studies and migrate to the United States, the principle of offering help is also a constant. They construct their expectations in terms of finding well-paid work that will allow them to send money back to their families in Mexico. Mateo, aged fourteen, is one of the many adolescents who hope to improve his family's condition by migrating to the United States. He is waiting only to finish secondary school before going, and already has the trip "arranged": "I'm going to go with an uncle to the United States [...] to work [...] I'm going to help my father so that he doesn't have to work so hard anymore [...] First my family and then other things."

Rodaciano is not known as a dedicated student. He has decided to go to the United States when he finishes secondary school. His brothers live in Texas, and his father, a bricklayer, works on "making highways" in New York. Rodaciano comments that lived in the United States as an infant and did not return to Mexico until he was five years old. Since then, he has made three more trips, while his brothers have stayed in the United States:

I'm going on July 10... On July 7, school is out. Or if school isn't out until the 10th, I think I'll go earlier [...] I was going to go on March 10, but my mother told me, "It's better if you wait. You have only a few months left [to finish secondary school]. And yes, lots of kids my age are going to go. Except a lot are going to stay in school. They went to grade school with me. The ones I used to play with, a guy and his father are going to go, but they're going all the way to Virginia. My mother told me to go over there with them, because I think you can earn a little bit more than in Texas [...]

These adolescents, like many who leave for the United States, interrupt their professional preparation to search for work and income to help their family.

In these cases, school functions only as a temporary container that provides them with the minimum certification of having completed their basic studies. The baggage of contents that school offers and imposes has little meaning for such young people. The lack of meaning explains the apathetic attitude that many students show towards their school work. Another contributing factor is the dull strategies that predominate in general secondary school, along with the disciplinary and controlling logic.

Support for Staying in School. The Parents' Role

Many of the adolescents have the firm objective to stay in school until finishing college. Yet the socioeconomic conditions of their families and the region in general are a powerful limiting factor; 61% of the study participants recognize that the most important resource for attaining their goals is their parents' moral support, and only 8% mention family properties; 18% affirm receiving benefits from their parents' work or the economic support of their siblings; and others refer only to their own abilities and determination (9%) (Chart 4). Thus many adolescents, although without sufficient economic resources, know that their parents will make an effort to support them if they stay in school.

In general terms, we can state that within the local and regional culture, history, tradition and social and economic dynamics have interlaced the heterogeneity of meanings and the socioeconomic differentiation of the groups and communities in the region. In the smaller and more distant towns, economic deficiencies and levels of schooling mark serious differences, historically constructed, in the benefits of development. In unequal conditions, young people use different ways to construct their forms of being, thinking and acting, along with their projects and expectations.

CHART 4

Most Important Resource for Students to Achieve their Goals

Resource	Percentage
Moral support from parents	61.2
Parents' work	9.2
Own ability and determination	9.1
Economic support from siblings	9.0
Family properties	8.3
No answer	1.9
Other	1.3
Total	100.0

Source: Survey answered by 623 adolescents.

Conclusions

Adolescence represents a fundamental stage of life. It is a crucial moment for individuals to reformulate their identity, self-image, and relations with those around them as they occupy a different place in the world and their own development. All of these elements are constructed in a unique manner according to the individual's social, economic, cultural and gender conditions:

- In general, adolescents experience tension because of the changes they undergo. Such changes have social implications of their being older, more autonomous, and more responsible, as well as feelings of nostalgia for childhood and its permissiveness. Growing and adopting the physical

characteristics of adults assumes psychologically that the adolescent will occupy a place in the adult world. The young person walks away from many aspects and attitudes of the child he was, and assumes and strengthens values and projects that will orient his future.

- Girls and boys differ in their experiences of emotional and sexual changes during adolescence. For both sexes, however, the relation with the opposite sex has a strong influence on the construction of their identity: for the boys, in affirming their masculinity, and for the girls, in terms of the connection and affectivity that lead them to value themselves and also suffer. Thus the identity crisis of adolescence contains conflicts of intimacy and profound impulses that make the crisis a source of potential and creativity, a foundation of the adult personality.
- In relations of intimacy, even in the case of inexpressive young people, the mother plays a fundamental role. She is the person adolescents seek out, trust, and most admire and love. In a context of a predominant “male code” characterized by the father’s distant and uncommunicative attitudes, the mother assumes greater importance as the figure of support, affection and trust.
- Interaction and friendship with peers is of vital importance for adolescents. Friendship and the support received from friends represent a force that motivates and accompanies adolescents (“whoever has friends goes far, whoever does not have friends, goes nowhere”); and this force is a fundamental aspect in the value judgments of many adolescents. Peers seem to fill the vacuum left by parents or siblings. In general, an adolescent’s group of friends is a necessary space for constructing his identity. Peers offer possibilities for displacing the need for empathy with parents, as well as the security of undertaking joint projects that strengthen the adolescent’s self-value, autonomy, and as a result, identity.

On the other hand, the socioeconomic and cultural conditions of the context, and the meanings constructed there, have a strong impact on the conformation of young people’s ideas and forms of being, thinking and acting. Internalized culture, permeated by historical conditions and processes, influences the adolescent’s construction of identity and expectations:

- The urban youth in the sample (to a greater degree than the rural adolescents) are the children of professionals, have daily contact with almost all of the media, enjoy better socioeconomic conditions, and adopt many traits of modern culture, such as clothing, hairstyles, and language; yet they also incorporate elements from the regional culture into their preferences, such as breeding roosters and betting at the regional fairs.
- The urban young people construct their projects as a function of the possibility of attaining a professional degree. This project and the conviction to continue their studies have to do with their success at school, the need to “be someone in life”, and the intention to help others, primarily the family.
- The young people from the rural setting, children of peasants and/or bricklayers, or migrants in the United States, do not see school and professionalization as a feasible and desirable way to build their future. Their expectations and life projects are focused on attaining better economic conditions through migration. Farming and an attachment to the land are things of the past; their parents and siblings who have migrated have marked another path and future.
- In general, the projects of adolescents in our study aim in two relatively opposite directions: studying for a professional degree in Mexico or migrating to the United States. Although more young people wish to continue their studies, few will be able to attain their goals given the conditions of their families, communities, and the region in general. The real limits and the ideas

that have spread through the regional culture, in which migration represents a relatively rapid form of improving living conditions, are strong conditioners in building dreams and hopes away from the homeland.

Notes

¹ In this sense, we incorporate the socio-anthropological viewpoint of Giménez, and the symbolic conception of culture of Geertz, which we attempt to use to explain the series of symbols the adolescent internalizes selectively—symbols that constitute the sociocultural dimension of identity. From this perspective, a close and reciprocal relation exists between culture and identity. Identity, states Giménez, is the subjective side of culture, an element of culture internalized in the form of *habitus* or social representations; identity is in turn selective of the cultural elements the individual represents. In this framework, identity according to Giménez is “the set of cultural repertoires (representations, values, symbols...) through which social actors (individuals and collectives) mark their borders and distinguish themselves from other actors in a given situation, all within a space that is historically specific and socially structured” (Giménez, 1997:3-4). In sum, identity, in its sociocultural dimension, implies a sense of belonging that is constructed according to the symbolic field in which social interactions occur, based on the selected and hierarchical appropriation of culture as “webs of meaning” (Geertz, 1997)—a symbolic cultural complex that acquires particular meanings according to the group, school or family where young people are formed and transformed.

² We understand regional culture, according to Giménez, as “the set of that vast, symbolic, regional culture revealed in large celebrations and regional festivities, in the discourse of the lyrical, in narrative and in regionalist history, in local journalism and in political discourse” (Giménez, 1999:35). In relation to adolescents, regional culture constitutes a setting of belonging that represents affective links; the region is perhaps felt as “the native soil” or “the motherland”, evoking a series of symbols with which young people identify.

³ Erikson sustains that the study of identity has become as important as the study of sexuality in Freud’s time.

⁴ The criteria that define “good schools” have been socially constructed and circulate among the parents, authorities, and teachers in the system, in terms of appreciations or valuations, such as: “It always wins the contests.” “The teachers do a good job there.” “Those who graduate there do well in high school.” “The teachers are almost never absent.” “It has had the best grade point averages in the system.”

⁵ The municipalities of Temascaltepec, San Simón de Guerrero, Tejupilco, Amatepec and Tlatlaya.

⁶ Conapo, report based on the Twelfth General Census of Population and Housing, 2000.

⁷ According to data from Conapo, “the municipalities of southern Estado de México and Morelos, northern Guerrero, southeast Puebla and the Mixteca zone (Oaxaca, Guerrero and Puebla) present a migratory intensity as high as the traditional region” (Conapo, Twelfth General Census of Population and Housing, 2000).

⁸ The term, geosymbol, is defined by cultural geography as “a place, an itinerary, an extension or a geographical accident that in the eyes of certain peoples or social groups, due to political, religious or cultural reasons, has a symbolic dimension that nourishes or comforts their identity” (Bonnemaison, 1981:256, quoted by Giménez, 1999:33).

⁹ According to Touraine, the global confronts the local in the “splitting of the individual” who, without losing his own local identity, must incorporate elements of the global culture.

¹⁰ The teacher is referring specifically to the boys in her group, mostly residents in the municipal seat. She called them and their parents to a meeting to analyze their problems in complying with school discipline and achievement requirements.

¹¹ To review more details on the origin, uses and meanings of bad words, see the essay (and its sources) by Hernández (2000:249-261).

¹² We contrast hegemonic culture, understood as the series of socially legitimate meanings that are imposed on new generations, with the youthful culture that generally rebels against the hegemonic culture and produces its own symbols and meanings.

¹³ This happens, for example, with the word, *cabrón* (traditionally “male goat” and then “cuckold”) which in the young people’s language refers to the difficulty to accomplish something, as well as to a person with extraordinary ability.

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