



UNDERSTANDING
OUR
DIFFERENCES

MEXICANS
AND
AMERICANS

Learning Seed

Bibliography

Condon, John C. **Good Neighbors: Communicating With the Mexicans**. 1985, Intercultural Press.

A very readable 90 pages to help both Mexicans and Americans understand each other.

de Cortes, Oralia Garza, and Louise Yarian Zwick. "Hispanic Materials and Programs: Bibliography." Chap. in **Venture into Cultures: A Resource Book of Multicultural Materials and Programs**, ed. Carla D. Hayden. Chicago: American Library Association, 1992.

The listings of both fiction and non-fiction are divided into English and Spanish titles. Appropriate grade levels are included with detailed annotations.

Rochman, Hazel. "Latinos." Chap. in **Against Borders: Promoting Books for a Multicultural World**. Chicago: American Library Association, 1993.

One section of the chapter on Ethnic U.S.A. is devoted to Latinos. Each entry includes appropriate grade level and a detailed annotation.

Schon, Isabel. **A Bicultural Heritage: Themes for the Exploration of Mexican and Mexican-American Culture in Books for Children and Adolescents**.

Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1978.

The themes of customs, lifestyles, heroes, folklore, and history are covered with each area divided into three age levels from K-12. Each grade level is further divided into outcomes, books, discussions, and evaluation & follow-up activities. The lists of books include recommended as well as not recommended titles, with the stated idea that there

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Understanding Our Differences: Mexicans and Americans is a 23 minute live action video. Catalog number 226. ISBN 0-917159-95-0.

Using this Guide

Owners of this videotape may reprint portions of this teaching guide for classroom use.

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Summary

Mexicans and Americans live, work, and go to school side-by-side in increasing numbers. This much needed video examines perceived cultural differences that often spark mutual conflict and mistrust.

The Petersons and the Garcias are neighbors but see each other through cultural glasses that tint their perceptions. The Garcias see the Petersons as somewhat cold and reserved. The Petersons view the Garcias as overly emotional and living amid a gaggle of relatives.

Understanding Our Differences explores common misconceptions about Mexican culture as well as stereotypes Mexicans have about their neighbors to the north.

- ♦ Is there a difference in the family life of Mexicans and Americans of non-Mexican descent?
- ♦ Are Americans less "emotional" than their south-of-the-border neighbors?
- ♦ Do Mexicans in the U.S. want to speak Spanish or learn English?
- ♦ How do these terms differ: Hispanic, Latino, Chicano?
- ♦ Are Mexicans all of one race?
- ♦ Do all people of Mexican descent the the U.S. work in low skilled jobs?
- ♦ Do Mexicans steal jobs from hard working Americans?

Watch a group of teens discuss these questions, see the Petersons and Garcias explore how they differ, and hear ideas to help undo common stereotypes.

ericanos often translate mañana to mean "within the next 24 hours."

To think that the difference in time-beliefs is merely that Americans are more punctual is to misunderstand that the two cultures view time differently.

FOOD

Many Americans have two misconceptions about Mexican food. First, they believe all Mexican food is very spicy. In reality, Mexican food is no more spicy than standard American food. However, a Mexican meal comes with a side dish of chili sauce or whole chili peppers so eaters can spice to taste.

The second misconception is that many "Mexican style" fast food restaurants serve the kind of food eaten by Mexicans. Most of these restaurants serve the kind of food that evolved among Mexicans living in Texas — often called "Tex-Mex." To a Mexican, a bowl of chili is a bowl of jalapeño peppers. The dish Americans call chili con carne is an American invention.

The tortilla is the basis of most dishes. Enchiladas and tacos are tortillas filled with meat or cheese and folded or rolled. Rice and beans are served with most meals.

MOTHERHOOD

Mothers in Mexico are held in high esteem. Mothers depend on their sons to care for them in old age., and it is part of *machismo* to do so and defend her honor.

North Americans are likely to judge Mexican men as overly devoted to their mothers while Mexicans are likely to judge North Americans in the opposite way.

of discrimination complaints. The use of the word "Ms." is a uniquely American way to minimize differences.

In Mexico differences in age, sex, and social status are very important and not to be ignored. A father and a son are not equals, there are *patrons* and *peons*. Mexico is a hierarchical society in family, society, religion, politics, and business.

A common mistake for North Americans is to view these distinctions as "wrong" or "old fashioned." Understanding between cultures means that each recognizes which distinctions the other values and which it downplays.

Mexican culture is more aware of titles and social standing. North Americans who try to win favor by treating everyone "equally" will find frequent frustration.

TIME AND MAÑANA

Time and appointments are more flexible in Mexico than in the United States. Arriving thirty minutes or more "late" for a social occasion is appropriate. In Mexico City, guests often arrive as much as two hours late.

To citizens of the U.S., time is money. To Mexicans (and many other cultures) time is NOT money. Time cannot be wasted because one is always doing something. The key is to make enough time for the people in your life. It is more important to see a friend of the family than to keep an appointment. Americans are more influenced by the clock, Mexicans by events. Author Jorge Castaneda observes about Mexico and the United States, "time divides our two countries as much as any other single factor."

When a Mexican says that something will be done *mañana*, this does not mean literally "tomorrow." The word refers to a vague date in the near future. *Norteam-*

Vocabulary

AMERICAN

North America is a continent, not a country. So both Canadians and Mexicans are Americans. But the term "American" is used throughout the world to refer to citizens of the U.S.A. No other label has garnered wider worldwide acceptance.

In Spanish, *America* may mean the Western Hemisphere, Latin America, or the United States. Citizens of the U.S. are commonly called *norteamericanos*, but this term fails to recognize that both Mexicans and Canadians are also North Americans.

The only other widely used term referring to citizens of the U.S. is "yankee," but this is often negative and can also refer to New Englanders or any northerner.

MEXICAN AMERICAN

To hyphenate or not to hyphenate? During the 1970s, many Americans whose family origins were outside the United States proudly used hyphenated names such as German-American or Mexican-American. Eventually, the hyphen came to signal a sort of marginal status: someone who is not yet completely a part of the country. Today, the hyphen is usually dropped in order to avoid the connotation of incompleteness.

More politicized and activist Mexican Americans sometimes refer to themselves as Chicano or Chicana.

CHICANO, CHICANA

A Mexican American. This term was first used in the late 1940s. It is capitalized in English, but not in Spanish. In

it's earliest usage, the word carried negative connotations. In the late 1960s, some younger and politically aware Mexican Americans reclaimed Chicano as a label of ethnic pride. Chicano came to mean a Mexican American without an Anglo self-image.

Today the term is preferred by some as a way to show ethnic nationalism and interest in Mexican heritage. Others reject it as militant or insulting. The press prefers the terms Latino or Hispanic.

HISPANIC

Hispanic is a very broad term for persons of Spanish-speaking background or those with a Spanish surname. Hispanic refers to language, not culture, country, race, or color.

The U.S. Census Bureau defines Hispanic as people who identify their origins as Mexico, Puerto Rico, Spain, or Spanish-speaking countries of the Caribbean or Central or South America.

Some opposition to the word is based on the recognition that the word is European in origin and connotes colonialism. To some, Hispanic is a holdover from a past of European invasion and enslavement.

LATINO/LATINA

A general term for anyone living in the Americas south of the United States. It is based on geography, whereas Hispanic is based on language. A Brazilian man (who speaks Portuguese) is Latino but not Hispanic.

To illustrate the problem of names, the Census Bureau uses Hispanic instead of Latino to avoid confusion with *Ladino* which can mean the language of Sephardic Jews. The *Los Angeles Times*, on the other hand, avoids Hispanic because of its connotations of past slavery.

native of the U.S. return from a trip to Mexico and report he discovered that "we Americans are logical and unfeeling."

North Americans who comment on Mexicans' being emotional usually do so with a tone of disapproval. But the quality of emotion or passion is very important to a Mexican concept of being human.

CONTACT AND CLOSENESS

Physical contact between members of the same sex is more common in Mexico than in the U.S. Men greet with a hug (*abrazo*), women may kiss. Hugs, pats on the back and physical contact are an important part of everyday communication among Mexicans.

The fact that Mexicans (along with many other cultures) engage in conversation while closer than is common in the U.S. can cause misunderstanding. A North American unfamiliar with Mexican ways might interpret this closeness as being "pushy" or overly "intense."

RACE

North Americans consider race a matter of physical characteristics. But Mexicans (and many other Latin cultures) consider race a cultural rather than biological difference.

A Mexican is usually considered as "Indio" on the basis of language, clothing, or eating habits rather than based on physical features.

SOCIAL STANDING

North Americans downplay differences in age, sex, rank, and social standing. In communication, North Americans treat each other as equals far more than what is common in most of the world. Differences in race, age, marital status and "social rank" are minimized or become the basis

Cultural Differences

DECISIONS

Rules and laws are less important in decision making than personal relations and subjective feelings. The best interests of the family or group often sway decisions. The needs and feelings of friends and family are key factors in important decisions.

U.S. citizens are likely to value a blunt directness in making decisions, but this is not a virtue in Mexico. Courtesy and tact are valued more than blunt honesty. It is polite to tell someone what they want to hear, even if it is not literally true. Flattery is common and bargaining is favored over arguing. Avoiding the loss of face during negotiations is considered important.

EMOTIONS

Are Mexicans really more emotional than their neighbors to the north or is this just another stereotype? Even casual observers notice that Mexicans talk to friends while standing closer together, gesture more with hands, greet friends and relatives more warmly, and give great weight to feelings in making decisions.

Many Mexicans consider Norteamericanos to be lacking in feeling and overly concerned about reason and logic.

This doesn't mean there are no coolly objective Mexicans or "hot blooded" Americans. No generalities about a culture should be applied to an individual.

Also realize that any comment about a "foreign" culture is often a comment about oneself in disguise. A Mexican would not return from a first visit to the U.S. and report "we Mexicans are very emotional." Nor would a

About Mexico

HISTORY

Mexico is the largest Spanish-speaking country and the second-largest Roman Catholic nation in the world. The name is taken from the Mexica, one of seven Nahuatl tribes that inhabit the central highland.

Ancient Native American civilizations—including those of the Maya, Olmec, Zapotec, Mixtec, Toltec, and Aztec—flourished there for centuries before the Spanish conquest in the 16th century. Their empires were destroyed both by Spanish military actions and European diseases. Mexico came under colonial rule for over 300 years and gained independence in 1824.

Political strife, anarchy, and war marked the next half century. War with the United States in 1846 caused the loss of what is now Texas, followed in 1848 by lands in what is today Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, and California.

Mexico today is a federal republic headed by a president elected to a non-repeatable six-year term.

LANGUAGE

In the 1990 census over 91% of Mexicans listed Spanish as their primary language. In addition, over a hundred Indian languages are spoken. In 1990 over six million Mexicans spoke one of the dialects of these languages. Millions still speak Nahuatl, the language spoken in the capital prior to the arrival of the Spaniards.

English is widely understood by educated citizens and in large cities.

FAMILY LIFE

The extended family is the foundation of social life. The network of relatives and friends provides mutual support in times of need. The way to understand a person in Mexico is to know the family.

RELIGION

Almost 90% of Mexicans are Roman Catholic, about 5% are Protestant.

Many Mexicans include belief in the miracle of the Virgin of Guadalupe as part of their faith. The Virgin Mary appeared three times to a humble Aztec, Juan Diego in 1513. She told him to build a church on the site where the Aztec goddess Tonatin was worshipped. Today the basilica there is visited by over a million pilgrims each year. Images of the Virgin of Guadalupe are found throughout Mexico and provide some linkage between the Aztec and Spanish cultures of the Mexican people.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The Mexican government has not officially recorded racial data since 1921; so precise data about ethnic composition is not available. About 55 percent of the Mexican people are Mestizos—a mixture of Indian and European. Roughly 30 percent are Native Americans, 15 percent Caucasians, and 1 percent others.

Mexico has a very young population; over half of the people are under 20 years of age.

Mexico City is the nation's capital and largest city. Today its population is well over 20 million, making it one of the world's largest cities. Its population is equal to that of all of Central America.

The second most populous city in Mexico is Guadalajara, but Los Angeles is the city with the second largest number of Mexicans.

EDUCATION

Mexico's literacy rate is 87 percent. Most young people between 6 and 14 years old attend a six-year, compulsory elementary-school program. About eight million students are enrolled in secondary schools and colleges.

LABOR

Mexico has traditionally been a land of agricultural laborers. But since the 1950s, the country has moved from a rural, farm based economy to an urban, industrialized and service-oriented one. In 1950 farm workers account for 62% of laborers; in 1980 they were 37%, and today less than 20% of the workforce.

This dramatic shift in work strains politics, social life, and public services.

Only after the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 did the government take steps toward social equality. World War II deprived Mexico of imports on which it had depended, thus spurring industrial growth.

Tourism is a major source of income for Mexicans and 80% of the tourism comes from the United States. The fifteen hundred mile border between the U.S. and Mexico is crossed in both direction by more people than any other international boundary in the world.

CROSS BORDER UNDERSTANDING

For many in the U.S., the image of the Mexican has been that of the migrant worker, or a cartoon bandido. Surprisingly few North Americans have had contact with Mexican