

## **Social Representations, Gender and Identity: Interactions and Practices in a Context of Vulnerability**

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From the framework of social representations, this study addresses gender and identity in a situated context of recursive vulnerability in the southeast of Mexico. The first section establishes the theoretical premises and presents the common sense relation between social representations and gender. This is followed by the second section where a discussion of the studies of identity and gender identity is elaborated, looking at the relation between perspectives focused on the individual and those oriented towards culture and the social. This gives way to the third section, a triangulated qualitative case study in three phases about gender identities in the port of Celestún in Yucatán that elaborates on two main analytical dimensions: vulnerability and emotional distress. The article closes with a brief concluding reflection. Overall, it addresses the systemic and polysemic richness of representations and gender identities in terms of both process and content at the

same time as linking research to action in a community. In addition, from a perspective of interaction, it analyses discursive practices linked to hegemonic social representations of gender identities which given their perverse logic of subjective naturalization and consensus in the structure of social behaviour constitute one of the most resistant obstacles to the configuration of liberating systems that can orient subjects towards a logic of rights and well-being, further exacerbating vulnerabilities.

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## **SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND GENDER: A COMMON SENSE RELATION**

Social Representations Theory (SRT) stems from Serge Moscovici's epistemology of common sense. It is a holistic, dynamic, systemic, multifaceted, intricate and rich theorization to understand and explain the relations between the social and the individual within culture, based on the mutual interdependence of the triangular interaction Ego-Alter-Object across time (with changes expressed graphically in the Toblerone Model; Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). SRT is a critical and coherent interdisciplinary framework that derives from social psychology, sociology and anthropology, initially drawing from the work of Piaget, Durkheim and Lévy Bruhl, and it develops as an alternative to reductionist, one-dimensional, totalitarian, dualistic and fragmentary conceptions, as well as to scientific disdain of common sense knowledge. SRT has developed with the contributions of various academics following Moscovici's seminal work since the sixties; in Latin America, the theory has boomed since the eighties (Flores-Palacios, 2011; Wagner, Hayes, & Flores-Palacios, 2011).

Social representations are a rich, complex, often ambiguous, patchy and loosely tied networks of social and psychological actions, heterogeneous and dynamic collective systems of meaning and common sense knowledge with social and symbolic dimensions and practical functions. They enable individual and collective subjects to make sense of their worlds, to guide themselves, to understand and communicate, to develop, share and transform knowledge, to justify behaviours, to construct and transform identities and relationships, to inhabit cultural

worlds and outlooks, to relate to power, and to build a common although not uniform reality (Jodelet, 2003; Marková, 2017; Moscovici; 1961/76, 1984, 1988, 2000).

It is important to stress that social representations are sociogenetic and not individual schemas; although they inhabit the minds of people, they cannot be understood as mere mental structures. Social representations are social products, derived from interaction, deeply ingrained in culture specific frameworks. “While representations are often to be located in the minds of men and women, they can just as often be found ‘in the world’, and as such examined separately” (Moscovici, 1988, p. 214). Social representations are relational, and they originate in everyday life, “they [SRs] are the equivalent, in our society, of the myths and belief systems in traditional societies” (Moscovici, 1981, p. 181, cit. in Augoustinos, Walker & Donaghue, 1995, p. 38). They are not reality but a socially elaborated and negotiated approximation to it, emerging both from common sense and also from scientific knowledge in modern societies (Serrano Oswald, 2013), they are consensual as well as originating from tension and dissensus, developing always in relation to other social representations through the basic mechanisms of anchoring and objectification. Social representations are not unique, and different representations can coexist in a given society, group or person, giving coherence to our beliefs, ideas, images and knowledge systems. This polysemic richness is crucial in order to highlight the agentic nature of individual and collective subjects when negotiating social representations through their discursive practices. This category of ‘discursive practices’ will be central to frame the analysis and results of our research in Yucatán.

Seen from the framework of SRT, gender and *engendered* identities make sense. The success of the hegemonic hetero-cis-patriarchal gender system is that it is rooted in the common sense understanding that bases individual identities, interpersonal relations and cultural norms and practices. Gender norms are familiar, their quotidian dimension make them seem natural, inevitable, even desirable; despite their exclusionary logic and structural violence. The hegemonic hetero-cis-patriarchal gender system, also called ‘patriarchy<sup>1</sup>’, ‘patriarchal order’ or

<sup>1</sup> The term patriarchy comes from the word ‘patriarch’, in Greek *patriárchees*, which is at the origin of terms such as parent, patrimony, patron, parricide, etc.; and *archee*, being the first and thus power, commanding others, such as the ruling father. Since the eleventh century it has also directly referred to a territory and to the government of the patriarch, called patriarchy. As a social system linked to kinship, patriarchy is a form of social organisation in which authority is exercised by a male head, undermining all women and most men that fall out of hegemonic power (Serrano, 2019, p. 60).

‘patriarchal ideology’ as analytical category refers to the coherent system of social representations based on the historical social construction of sexual difference that structures cosmovisions, establishes kinship systems and social modes of relations, outlines the contours of individual and group identities, and prescribes behaviours.

Given this gender system that operates through historical and geographically situated gender social representations, it is crucial to understand that gender, gender identities and sexuality are sociocultural constructions that have no existence before the social (Wittig, 1980). The ways of organising and structuring knowledge and relations is naturalised through historical, political, economic, cultural, relational, juridical, and sexual categories that make sense given the coherence of the gendered social representations stemming from lay knowledge and specialised knowledge<sup>2</sup>. From the feminist gender standpoint, it must be emphasised that “feminine and masculine are not natural or given by biology but must be constructed and should be understood therefore as cultural achievements” (Moore, 1994, p. 42). It is the explicit and implicit social norms of the gender system, operating through social representations, which enable the social organisation of people based on gender. In patriarchal societies, these norms operate as naturalised binaries, and they are harmful, destructive, oppressive, and alienating, resulting in a form of social organisation that leads to inequality, injustice and exclusion (Lagarde y de los Rios, 1990).

Given that gender identities are constructed following the characteristics through which specific cultures signify and classify sex across time and space, socially organising sexual difference and classifying people and groups in diverse genders, it becomes clear that, as Simone de Beauvoir said “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”. Contents may vary, but the “observation of the difference between the sexes underlies all thought, traditional as well as scientific” (Héritier, cit. in Fassin 2005, p. 62).

Gerard Duveen and Barbara Lloyd (1986, 1990) have researched the socialization of infants during infant development in schools and the way that gender identities are constructed based on social representations. Their research highlights the need to develop a gender identity, it

<sup>2</sup> Both lay knowledge and expert knowledge interrelate, both stem from and justify the gender system. For instance, occidental science has had important biases towards women stemming from common sense and has used its method as justification. For example, the burning of ‘witches’, healers and women with botanical knowledge; the measurements of female brains to ‘prove’ women’s inferiority given their smaller brain size without considering body-size proportion; the theories of hysteria regulating female sexuality, etcetera (Blázquez, 2011).

becomes a must if children are to become competent social actors. The interplay between the interpsychological and intrapsychological in development makes identity formation a multi-layered process of agentic positioning and negotiation of meaning and discursive practices (not of sheer reproduction in theories that understand socialization as interiorization or replication). This is the process through which individual children negotiate and gestate their identity in a world that is structured by gendered social representations and in which the metaphor of sexual reproduction provides the central image (Duveen, 1993).

Thus, it is important to further examine the mutually fertilising potential of social representations and gender. As said, gender as analytical category addresses the cultural construction built around sexual difference. Gender is also a research variable, a social category, as well as a relational research perspective (Velázquez, 2014). However, and most importantly, it is also the methodological tool of the gender perspective, which derives from feminist political thought, and thus has a standpoint and a political agenda: the emancipation of women, overcoming patriarchal malaise and substantive equality and social justice for all. It takes the gender distinction as the main identity referent through which the world has been divided throughout *history*. Gender is a “system of social regulation that orients a specific cognitive structure, constituted following biological data and making normative the notions of masculine and feminine” (Flores-Palacios, 2001, p. 7). This system, which is not natural but rather based on social representations, sets and reproduces gender conditions that imply abysmal power differences and unequal access to wellbeing (Melhuus & Stolen, 1996). This is also the most promising aspect of social representations research, from a gender feminist perspective: given that social representations are historically and geographically constructed, they are subject to change. Following from this critical and deconstructive aspect of social representations, the theory “may also from its genesis, support the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of gender meanings, going beyond the descriptive dimension and suggesting strategies to deconstruct reductionist binomials such as subject/object, society/culture, feminine/masculine” (Flores, 1996, p. 196). Thus, researching gender from a social representations’ perspective enables us to make visible, analyse, historicise, dismantle, deconstruct and transform the hetero-cis-patriarchal hegemonic gender system (Facio, 1999; Lagarde y de los Rios, 1990).

After having explained what social representations are, and how they relate and are useful for feminist gender studies, the next section addresses the study of gender and identity, how it has

developed within the discipline of psychology and how it benefits from the social psychological outlook of social representations in terms of its explanatory and transformative potential. These two sections provide the theoretical foundations for the case study in Mexico presented in section 3.

## **GENDER AND IDENTITY FROM THE STANDPOINT OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS**

In psychology as discipline, the topic of identity and gender identity relates to the heteronormative social construction of the feminine and masculine, integrating regulated and normalized representations that have nourished social control, for example, by defining health and deviance. This issue is not simple, its complexity –both individual and collective– requires a deeper analysis that will help us understand the landscape where all human beings perform and root their identity and relations on a daily basis.

Studies of identity can be classified into two broad group that reflect the discipline from which they emerge: on the one hand, those that focus on the person –the individual perspective– and, on the other, those oriented towards cultures and the social. In the first group, the psychology of personality and human development together with the field of cognitive studies are important in considering identity as a descriptive, foundational process, while the second, including the perspectives of social psychology, anthropology and sociology, emphasizes the role of culture and the context of belonging in the development of identities. Some studies in this group, especially in the European tradition, have advanced from social influence and conflict (Moscovici, 1972; Moscovici & Mugny, 1991; Tajfel, 1978) by returning to the integrating, constructive vision of the subject, while also underscoring the importance of social interaction (Farr, 1996).

In classic personality studies (Erickson, 1902-1994; Freud, 1856-1939), identity was exposed as a certain type of biological determinism inculcated in the early years of a subject's life, from which normalized behaviours that owed their nature to the process of the development of individuals were generalized, gender was naturalised. This introduced the initial elements of the role played by culture in the structure of personality. In those studies, development theories

were keys to the affirmations that impacted agreed-upon explanations, especially in the field of psychological psychology.

Throughout his works, Piaget (1896-1980), one of the main authors in the constructivist view of development and important pillar in the work of Moscovici, elucidated the importance of stages of development for the cognitive structure of individuals. He wrote of schemes of meaning that are integrated into concrete thought through assimilation and accommodation; what we recognize today in SRT as anchoring and objectification.<sup>3</sup> These two processes, as is well-known, are central to understanding the relation of people to the world. Following this line of thought, Erickson (1962) added the integration of ‘Ego’ from a genetic vision in which culture is clearly introduced into people’s conceptions of the world as a source of inspiration. In his postulates, Erickson takes up Freud’s theories of psychosexual development, by revealing the importance of identification as a first step towards the constitution of the subject independent of the ‘Other’; that is, a subject that achieves separation and individuation such that it can recognize itself from its own capacity. The identity of the subject in psychoanalysis proceeds from the speculative, imaginary and symbolic ‘Other’. In this perspective, in summary, the primary identification is the principle of the social bond.

This differentiating landscape that unifies and at the same time distinguishes us, is one of the most essential mechanisms that humans possess for recognizing themselves socially in the ‘Other’, in the group, but it also functions to perpetuate a certain difference that makes us unique given our most basic personal traits, which are regulated by our characteristic narcissism from individual experience. These elements are useful to understand the processes through which people complexify their place in their world of reference, as we shall see below.

In 1962, Melanie Klein, a disciple of Freud and contemporary of Erickson, developed the concept of ‘self’ as a representation that is installed in ‘Ego’ and argued that the sentiment of personal identity depends on the differentiation and permanence of these representations. Her

<sup>3</sup> Anchoring is the process of assigning meaning, it is not the formal construction of objectification, but of insertion towards already constituted thought. It is responsible for the integrative function of cognition, interpretation and orientation of behavior.

Objectification, the mechanism through which a social representation of an object acquires ‘body’ and a relational meaning between a novel object and a pre-existing one. Links are constructed between concepts and objects and objectification naturalizes new information and incorporates it into a coherent meaning for the subject.

theory of object relations clarifies the capacity that every human being has to generate early drives with objects that will be represented with great significance in their life experience.

Recollection and recording of primary objects establish the advent of memory framed and integrated in the organization of subjectivity. This is a central aspect to which we will return in the explanation of gender identity. Briefly, from the psychodynamic perspective we can understand how “conflict is capable of deeply perturbing the functioning of Ego and, through the identification of the structuring of the psyche, opens the way to studying the deficits of Ego that have identification as their cause” (Bleichmar, 2013, p. 59).

The problem with the structure of gender from primary identification is, precisely, that parental deficits are assumed naturally in a very early stage when consciousness of the world has not yet been constructed, but only imitated and naturalized. This phase is marked by the preservation of subjective domains anchored to meanings that in the person’s later development may generate conflict or be deeply questioned by diverse circumstances that the individual’s lived experience might validate or invalidate.

When one rejects or begins to question feminine or masculine gender identities, the effect is to upset the constitutive moral order by generating a complex landscape of contradictions to which the subject is exposed. This entails an arduous labour of deconstruction and reconstruction that may be channelled in psychotherapy so that the subjective frameworks of identity, and therefore the mandates of gender, are subjected to reflection. In this way, the person will be freed from the weight of identification as destiny. In psychodynamic work, this method of deconstruction-reconstruction acquires a position that questions the difference that has constituted, to a great degree, the power device of our androcentric, patriarchal culture. From the standpoint of analyses oriented by a gender perspective, ‘deficits’ are reviewed critically in light of culture, to vindicate potentials that have been concealed for generations. Clinically, the centre of attention is the psychic conflict that the primary resonance of identification acquires and, in some cases –perhaps the majority– paralyzes and immobilizes precisely the liberating potentials of individuals. As Emilce Bleichmar (1997) observed: “The phantom of gender is a content of the preconscious/unconscious mind that comes to act through the specific actions of a more-or-less dichotomous character that shake and pull the childhood of any infant”.

In social psychology, however, when this gender identity is established as universal, and is accepted consensually by the culture as a hegemonic gender system, a structure of relations is



established between men and women that condenses the differences already assumed in the subjective domain, thus generating conflict –both interpersonal and intrapersonal– in the dynamics of everyday life. In this process, the superego works as a perfect ally of culture and the moral order. Subjectively, the penalty for infringing the mandate of gender is a state of tension that prevails for a long time, perhaps even through moments of submission that may appease those feelings of guilt but do not eliminate them. At this point one should redouble efforts to configure new structures signalling the implications of behaviour in everyday relations, within couples and family configurations, and in society itself. A culture free of these subjective ties will be able to act as catalyst of renewed subjective structures that are oriented towards gender wellbeing and equilibrium in affective relations. It is for this reason that social representations of gender provide a fertile epistemic framework that makes it possible to understand, from culture, the systems of meaning and actions that are anchored and objectified through social norms, thus clarifying the interrelation of the intra and interpersonal landscape.

It is important to recall that social representations cannot be analysed only from the social milieu, for they also have an individual content that is constructed from cognition and affectivity, including aspects that are part of the subconscious. Derived from culture and social systems, these meanings are constructed from mental processes that acquire the status of reality. They establish relations between the individual and the social through the mutually interdependent interaction Self-Other-Object/Ego-Alter-Object. In this sense, Wagner posits that “research on the individual as individual permits significant comparisons among people with the most varied cultural identities”, only then –he argues– “is it possible to affirm that mental phenomena can be considered constants of the species, and psychological processes in the strict sense” (Wagner & Hayes, 2011, p. 278). This means that an individual’s singularity derives from understanding her/his subjectivity as specific and distinct from all the rest, without obliterating the social dimension that roots it through social representations.

The category of gender is very important for it introduces an explanatory vision of subjective and social conditioning that is established during the early years of life and consolidated as the socialization process advances. Indeed, gender is one of the most significant artefacts involved in transmitting roles through education, and often, beliefs that are inculcated as absolute truths. From SRT, individual mental functions are representatives of the specific groups

to which people belong; thus, the female and male will have individual characteristics according to people's personal story, but also derived from their social belonging.

Discourses, narratives, images and elaborations of meanings to explain concrete realities set out from a regulatory system that integrates its components into subjective structures, going so far as to generate contradictions and malaise that are introduced into social co-existence (Flores-Palacios, 2015). For example, gendered social representations that have motherhood at the core of female identity (Serrano Oswald, 2010) and hold that women possess –almost by their very nature as females– the power to be born caregivers and mothers. At the same time, men should be successful as providers and in the public realm. The failure to perform outstandingly in these ‘naturalised’ endeavours can provoke feelings and emotions of unease that inhibit freedom of choice and negates alternatives. Hence, from the gender perspective, the goal “is to replace the naturalized habit of thinking conceptual categories as ahistorical and universal; that is, essential. What is needed is to search for bridges between subjects’ narratives, explanatory theories and political apparatuses that sustain the social fabric” (Fernández, 1996, p. 101).

In this sense, social theories of identity and of gender identity can be grand devices that reveal constitutive processes based on the dynamics of social interaction (Deschamps & Moliner, 2009; Doise & Sinclair, 1973; Festinger, 1957; Lacan, 1966; Mead, 1934; Tajfel, 1978; Turner & Oakes, 1986) explaining the impact of institutions as power apparatuses linked both to people's subjectivity and socialization –for example in the case of gender social representations– as well as to the need for social belonging that characterizes all human beings. Without doubt, social theories of identity have made significant contributions by proposing explanations of the diachronic process of representation that is configured in the relation between Ego as a singular structure and cultural ideologies. Using group and qualitative research approaches helps explain the patterns of relation formed by collective phenomena that offer a complementary vision – phenomenological, sociogenetic, and processual in nature– which help us understand how agentic subjects construct their vision of social reality in consonance with their own behaviour and identity.

Tajfel and Turner's (1985) key contribution was to include the motivational element in an inter-group perspective. This has turned out to be highly revealing for our understanding of the nature of categorization and cultural stereotypes, for example feminine and masculine stereotypes

classified in the competition among social behaviours. From a functionalist perspective, science in general and psychology as discipline, in particular, has occupied a conventional place of legitimizing biological differences by classifying the supposed normality and abnormality in the competition among social behaviours, especially those of women and men. In summary, the contribution of Social Identity Theory (SIT) is that it enables us to understand that the subject categorizes her/himself as a result of her/his belonging to a certain group, making comparisons of similarity and difference that determine a certain subjective ordering and lead to the in-group or out-group.

If subjects do not identify themselves as belonging to any of these feminine-masculine collectives because their identity is not assimilated to the functioning of a man-woman subject but, rather, has constituted other sources of identity based on their desire –not their biology– as their foundational destiny, then they face a situation of tension. This is because the social and institutional structures, at least in our Latin countries, are not yet sufficiently accepted and, without doubt, demand new social representations and practices that are on the making or need to be constructed. For example, if the gender category is taken only as a limited explanation of the feminine-masculine as a juxtaposed dichotomy, its explanatory potential will be limited by the dualistic framework. This is the direction in which we must advance, posing new challenges based on assumptions that break with determinism and overcome classic dichotomies. A functional, regulatory and hegemonic system has favoured this dyadic classification by submersing desire and free sexual choice to the norm. At this point, the contributions of gender studies have offered great support in “decentring biology and exposing the foundational [role] of culture in constructing the subject” (Flores-Palacios, 2001, p. 25). However, it is time to reach new conceptions of identity that subvert the regulatory, hegemonic feminine-masculine order. Queer theorization (1992-2008) offers one possibility for advance towards such new explanations.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transvestite, Transgender, Intersexual, Queer, Questioning, 2-Spirited and Allies (LGBTTTTIQQ2SA+) movements around the world have organized to defend their existence and gain respect for their identity in a framework of diversity on the margins of the masculine-feminine hegemony. These groups have played a key role as protagonists in vindicating their rights by seeking to consolidate new conceptions of the human.

Today, tensions between hegemonic and alternative thinking still generate strains in social and political positioning and discourses, as well as in science. Unlike the rigidity inherent in the Durkheimian conception of social facts, in SRT knowledge and practices that root identities and identity-formation processes are dynamic and subject to change.

As with gender representations, dialogic and discursive practices in situated contexts enable the formation and transformation of representations. However, there are representations and representational elements that are deeply rooted in cosmovisions and are more resistant to change. In SRT there are two classification systems of three types of representations depending on the degree to which they are shared, to their identity weight or how rooted in identity they are, as well as the degree of autonomy/freedom individuals have in relation to them: hegemonic/closed, emancipated/open and polemical/agonal-critical (Pop, 2012). According to Moscovici (1988), Ben-Asher (2003), Pop (2012), and Serrano Oswald (2019):

hegemonic/closed representations resemble collective representations, they may be uniform or coercive, with elements that are constant and analogous, they are shared to some extent by all members of a highly structured group, without having been produced by the group, signifying their societal identity, prevailing implicitly in all symbolic and affective practices, reflecting homogeneity and stability and allowing very few degrees of freedom on the individual level. Motherhood and care for others as axe of a naturalised female gendered identity is a good example of a hegemonic and closed representation;

emancipated/open representations linked to subgroups are distinctively constructed information systems by small sections of a society, which are not yet incompatible with the hegemonic representation. These representations are created when members of a society are differentially exposed to new information and consequently reflect differences between individuals or subgroups within a broad identity group; they have a certain degree of autonomy and it has to do with the circulation and negotiation of knowledge, ideas and practices that reflect differences between individuals or subgroups within a broad identity group since their elements are distributed among various categories of the population. They result from processes of integrating and exchanging novelty, from the version that each group generates and shares, or not, also

with the degree of contact between groups as interacting segments of society, and their processes of resemblance-differentiation in terms of identity that gives them coherence. An example could be representations of breastfeeding and the use of wet nurses across times, social groups and cultures;

polemical/agonal-critical social representations relate to the conflicting nature of relationships between groups. They are representations generated in the course of social conflict and social controversy whose elements are more or less the same in an entire population, but whose significance is determined by contrasting values. They are polarizing and mutually exclusive, expressing rivalry or incongruity, and society as a whole, subgroups or social authorities do not share them. They construct new action scenarios, emerging from social conflicts as means of opposition and struggle, resistance or acceptance. Same-sex marriage, marriage versus parental cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing and DINK families are recent examples.

A pertinent methodological note put forward by Höijer is that “the classification of social representations into these three categories is however, as much classification, somewhat vague, not least because ideas and social thinking is complex and often heterogeneous. As mentioned above social representations are multifaceted and may even be intrinsically contradictory” (Höijer, 2011, p. 5).

These three types and categories of representations are useful in terms of looking at the gender components in identities and relations present at different levels ranging from the micro-level of individual idiosyncrasies, couples, families, and small groups, to the meso-level of in-group and inter-group cultural dynamics articulated regionally, up to the societal macro-level of ideological information exchanges with the quotidian impact of information and communication technologies in the horizon of globalization. Besides, the types of relations and interconnections, with identities marked by multiculturalism, postcolonialism and coloniality of power mean that determinisms no longer fit. The ‘times of times’ are discordant at the individual, family and social level, as well as in rural and urban settings (Boscolo & Bertrando, 2019). Identity in late modernity (Giddens, 1991) means we are facing a complex reality of sexual and cultural changes and exchanges that are generating new forms of social relations and, therefore, new subjectivities,

affectivities and identities (Beck & Gershheim, 2002). This particular context, unprecedented in history, and the defensive way in which social representations operate may lead to deeper polarizations and antagonisms in a framework of phobia and exclusionary tolerant co-existence, but it may also lead to alternatives, generating dialogic spaces of conviviality<sup>4</sup> (*convivencia*; Arizpe, 2014) and respect as common sense, to better understand and relate to otherness through changing and novel gender social representations, and to more democratic discursive practices that account for difference without resorting to gender violence. Well, this is, at least, a main utopia of feminist thought.

### **SITUATED CONTEXT: THE PORT OF CELESTÚN**

A 'situated context' is a useful analytical category referring to the place where individual and collective histories are interwoven, where representations, in general, and gender representations, in particular, seed and translate into practices. It is also the place of lived experience, where change is coherent and becomes possible. Knowledge is always pertinent and coherent with its context, and it is progressively transformed into other knowledge, never into higher or lower forms of knowledge (Marková, 2017). Thus, by situated context we refer to the physical space in which social interactions and representations are generated from symbolic referents integrated into the experiences shared by subjects of action. A concrete situated context is "a micro-culture made up of intersubjectivities" (Flores-Palacios, 2015). A situated context is also the milieu where active minorities transform their lived experience, their everyday life and their relations.

Undertaking research in social representations in situated contexts relates to the research approach favoured by Moscovici in his pioneering study on French psychoanalysis as well as Jodelet's study of madness in a French rural community, as it looks as single case studies. Researching situated contexts favours depth of research rather than generalization through statistical replicability. As Marková argues, this type of research is validated through the contributions that it posits for advancing the theory, furthermore it enables methodological

<sup>4</sup> *Convivencia* as defined by Arizpe (2014, p. 3, footnote) in the work on Intangible Cultural Heritage as: "*Convivencia* in Spanish means not only the conviviality of sharing an agreeable feast as in English or in French. *Vivencia* in Spanish means a life experience so that *convivencia* means not only sharing together but actually living the experience together."

triangulation, the integration of synchronic and diachronic research, as well as the development of methods suitable for cultural research. Angela Arruda (2003) insists that the challenge for researchers studying social representations is to develop methods suitable for cultural research. In a similar way, Valsiner (2014) argues that cultural psychologists should conceive “the centrality of culture within the human *psyche*” as a clear axiomatic stand. “Considering the Alter, whether culture or institutions, as vital in the study of social representations, clearly separates social representations from attitudes or opinions” (Marková, 2017, p. 371). Besides, in-depth case studies enable to give pre-eminence both to ethnographic data and results *per se* which remain valid across time despite changing theorizations as well as to make generalizations derived from the case study that are useful to further the discipline in terms of their epistemological, theoretical, methodological aspects, not only based on their results.

It is in this sense that we now proceed to present the results of a research project conducted in the coastal area of Yucatán, Mexico, during four continuous years, which gave rise to some of the theorizations outlined in the previous pages, integrating them. First, we will outline a description of the context of study and research methods.

Celestún is a port on the coast of Yucatán, Mexico, at a distance of 90 km from the state capital of Mérida. Its economy is based on fishing and tourism that –like all situated contexts– have their own dynamics that endow them with a certain identity founded on social representations that are woven to form their performance in the community’s everyday life. According to official figures from Mexico’s National Evaluation Council (*Consejo Nacional de Evaluación*, CONEVAL, 2014), there are 2,066 dwellings in the port with an average of 3.8 occupants per household. Only 38.6% of those dwellings have potable water, although 98.6% have electricity. Most people are registered in the country’s Popular Health Insurance program (*Seguro Popular*), but the only Health Centre in the community lacks even the minimum inputs and infrastructure required to offer adequate medical care. The total population is 7,836 inhabitants (50.9% men, 49.1% women), for a ratio of 103 men to 100 women.



Figure 1. Location of Celestún (source: Puc Vásquez, 2018)

In this community, 99% of inhabitants aged 15-24 years are literate, though for the over-25 group this percentage falls to 89.9%. Also, 73.8% of the population over-15 studied only basic education, 14% attended high school, although only 4.1% reached university (INEGI, 2015). One central aspect considered in the discussion of our results –but which we anticipate here– is that the lack of access to education is one of the severest problems of vulnerability in the context we studied.

In terms of the gendered distribution of work, the main source of income for men involves fishing and snorkelling for various species, activities that are fraught with different kinds of risks, due to the activity itself, to the distances they travel and the depths to which they have to dive to obtain the desired products. Other men work in the tourist industry, in salt extraction, as employees, as moto-taxi drivers,<sup>5</sup> or in other types of private business. The main work for women is cleaning fish for sale and diverse sorts of small-scale commerce, such as selling clothes or shoes, or preparing and selling foods and services, etcetera.

<sup>5</sup> A type of motorized transport used in the community to go from one relatively close site to another in the same geographic zone.



In terms of research stages, a diagnostic study of the community was conducted in 2014 by applying a questionnaire designed with the objective of exploring the situated context through the following dimensions: space and territory, education, sexual and reproductive health, socioeconomic participation, and violence (Flores-Palacios, Lambarri, Puc, Rojano & Trejo, 2017). This phase allowed us to obtain a general panorama of those aspects, which largely constitute a map of the imaginary and social representations of the men and women of Celestún, and how they are expressed in their practices and actions.

In the second phase, we employed the ethnographic method to explore the situational dynamics through both non-participant observation and direct immersion in the community for intermittent periods. This approach allowed us to capture not only the practices and actions of daily life in distinct contexts of interaction, but also to perceive those moments, spaces and situations of greater vulnerability and risk with which the people struggle constantly, and that are often potentiated unconsciously in the face of the conditions of adversity that surround them.

One example is consuming drugs before going out to fish as a way to calm the fear which arises from the fact that, although they are fishermen, many men cannot swim, while others do not have adequate gear. Also, there is the always latent risk that they may not get back to land. These conditions represent an emotional challenge and a direct threat to their hegemonic masculinity that has risk taking at the root, which they confront by consuming substances –some natural, others chemical– that help them “to take courage”, as they say.

Among our observations during our study periods in the port, we observed practices of negotiation and traditional barter, which is a millenary tradition and remains an important aspect of everyday life in many contexts of vulnerability in Mexico (Pérez Flores, 2018), involving both marine products and the aforementioned substances that local people consume. They include illegal markets where the only requirement for negotiating and exchanging products is being a member of the community. In this coastal paradise, adversity is configured through various schemes that cannot be adequately visualized unless one stays for enough time to observe certain practices of residents that tend to be concealed. Barter has reciprocity at the centre, and it is an important axis basing social exchanges across time, also a resource in contexts that face adversity (Arizpe, 2014).

In Celestún, men are the protagonists of such practices by negotiating pacts that involve themselves, their friends, family members, and workmates, etc. In this setting marked by

adversity, their pacts are not just implicit agreements, for they often entail health risks, failure at school and, above all, consecrating young people as men and future heads of family. At a very young age they make commitments to marry and support a spouse and, soon, a family, since early pregnancy is common in the community. Both marriage and pregnancy are important sources of positive esteem, despite the risks they entail and cycles that further vulnerability. Of course, this situation carries with it a whole series of psychosocial consequences. The identity of young men in Celestún, and their masculinity (*hombría*), is solidified and legitimized mainly through marriage, parenthood and by belonging to the group that dominates space and the maritime territory.

In the third stage, we held in-depth interviews with residents of Celestún from different contexts. Some were key informants due to their position in the port, like those who live along the frontier of the studied territory. Key informants include women who occupy strategic commercial spaces in the port where fishers and traders come to eat and drink. These women are deeply familiar with the dynamics of the transactions that take place there, especially the purchase, sale and consumption of the products traded there. They are potential informants to whom we invariably turned, since “understanding how narratives must be structured within culture is going beyond the wrappings of identity: it also means determining the forms that need to be observed in order to acquire credibility as a narrator of truth” (Gergen, 1994, p. 236).

We interviewed some local authorities who provided information from the official and institutional point of view that we could then compare to the discourses of both key informants and other community members that we interviewed, including three male seasonal fishermen and moto-taxi drivers, four women homemakers, and a mixed focal group composed of nine individuals: four male fishermen and traders and five women whose main activity was cleaning marine products and selling food. Most of those people were not born in Celestún but settled there over twenty years ago. They arrived in search of better living conditions, people mostly from the Yucatan peninsula sharing the same Maya culture, whose life trajectories are characterized by poverty and vulnerability, who face a degree of structural violence that entails a survival dilemma<sup>6</sup> and in that sense were expelled from their contexts of origin.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of survival dilemma developed by Brauch (2008) refers to the dilemma faced by highly vulnerable people as a result of social, environmental factors and poverty, with a variety of alternatives that imply important opportunity costs that make them unsatisfactory. The root causes of insecurity cannot be solved and people have no

The dynamic of the interviews was marked by an abundance, or saturation, of information. Most were held in settings favourable to explore and expose critical aspects of their life, encouraging receptivity and the depth of the dialogue made it often necessary to generate processes of emotional contention and support. For the future, the plan is to continue working in the community for however long it may take for us to be recognized as an intervention group. Then we may develop an important methodological reflection of the process that goes from research linked to action and becomes a project of participatory action research (PAR) from the standpoint of social representations. All the patterns entailed are based on the premise of reclaiming people's thinking as a dialogical process (Billig, 1987).

All study data from each stage were analysed thoroughly by combining two support tools: the *SPSS Statistics* Program for the diagnostic questionnaire, and *ATLAS TI V.5* for the interviews. Descriptive and qualitative categories were obtained that allowed us to focus information on correlations of variables in both directions and include new sub-categories of analysis. Our grouping of the information was delimited by the objectives pursued at each research stage. This included building conceptual and relational maps to facilitate reading the state of vulnerability in which social actors continuously move, and that form part of their social imaginary. We also reconstructed and constructed social representations anchored to that context of adversity from which they are signified, following the logic of research oriented towards inquiring into dimensions of social exclusion (Jovchelovitch, 2007).

In our research, we analysed people's discourses, narratives and practices as communicative acts that configure public space on a day-to-day basis, highlighting the importance of the relational Ego in the distinct psychosocial states that residents experience permanently and that construct and permeate that representation, individual and collective identity. Clearly, the methodological framework in terms of the referents and particularities of the way in which knowledge is constructed (Delgado Ballesteros, 2010), such as the epistemological bases, operationalization and evaluation criteria are congruent with the sociogenetic tradition of social representations. Thus, the research outlook is transversally relational. Like the classical case-studies of Moscovici and Jodelet, it considers that "the fundamental theoretical contribution

basic security. Facing important and complex emergencies that translate into the lack of livelihood, with a weak or indifferent State, people must opt for migrating and abandoning their places of origin and often their traditional ways of life in the search of livelihood conditions or remain there and perish.

of these studies was the treatment of participants and their socio-cultural contexts as interdependent” (Marková, 2017, p. 371).

## RESULTS

The first phase of diagnostic exploration involved a process in order to identify dimension of tensions. Later, this derived in the main dimensions of analysis (vulnerability and emotional distress) that were observed during the ethnographic phase based on non-participant observation.

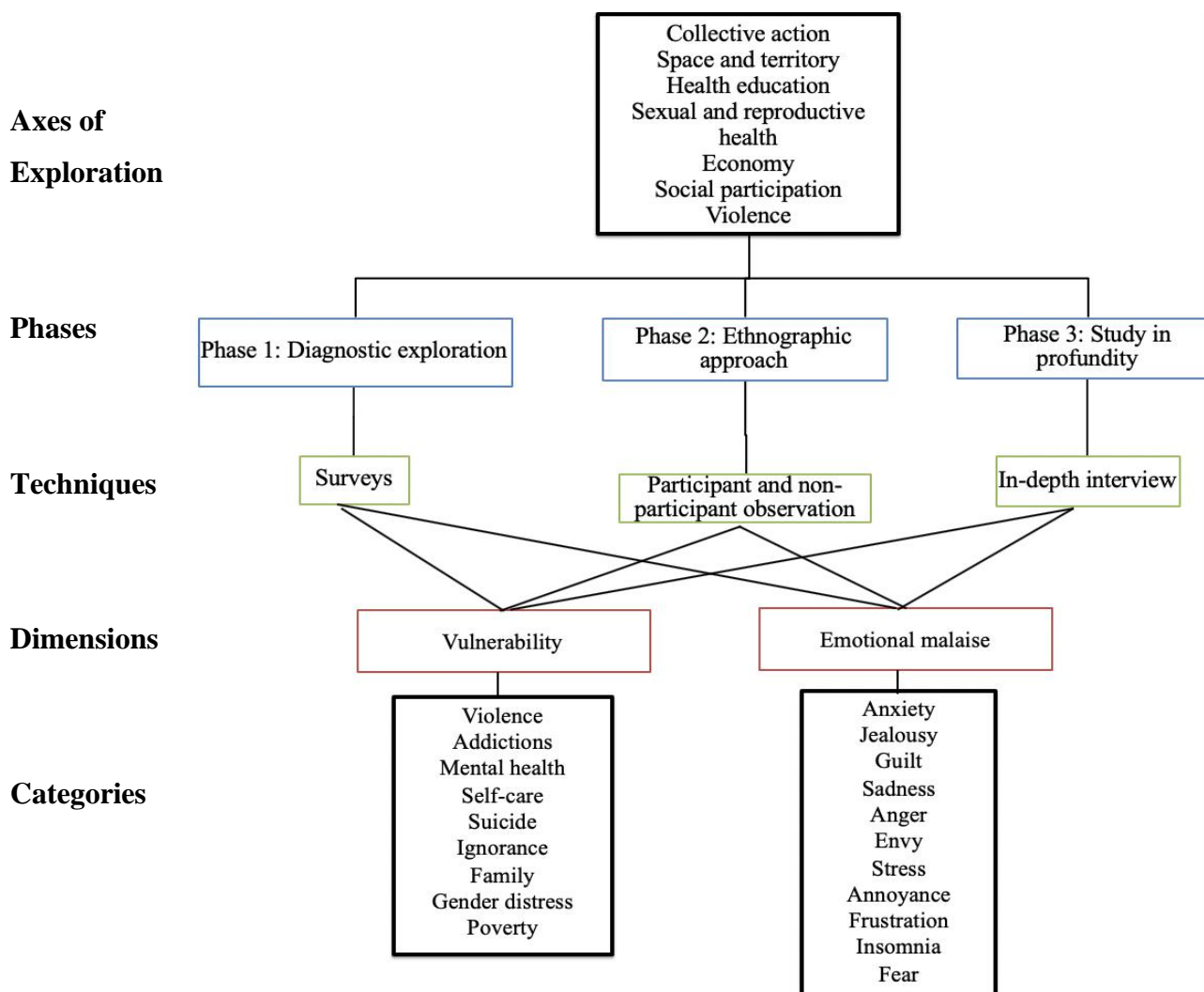


Figure 2. Study Design

In the third stage, we focused on the narratives and discourses that explain the domain of lived experience in Celestún, from which the categories that pertain to each dimension emerged.

Altogether, the study design involved the conjunction of the 7 *axes of exploration* (collective action; space and territory; health education; sexual and reproductive health; economy; social participation; violence), the three *phases of research* (the diagnostic exploration, the ethnographic approach and the study in profundity), the *triangulation of research techniques* (surveys, participant and non-participant observation and individual and collective in-depth interviews). This led to identifying the main two *dimensions* of vulnerability and the associated emotional malaise. Following the qualitative analysis of research data, the *categories* pertaining to each one of the two main dimensions were established. As shall be further elaborated in the following section presenting the results, the 9 interlinked categories for vulnerability are: violence, addictions, mental health, self-care, suicide, ignorance, family, gender distress, and poverty. They are directly related to the 11 categories of emotional malaise: anxiety, jealousy, guilt, sadness, anger, envy, stress, annoyance, frustration, insomnia, and fear. All these elements are graphically presented in summary form in Figure 2 ‘Study Design’ and give an idea of the complexity and systemic outlook of researching social representations both as relational content and as process.

The axes of exploration provide important contextual information of the area of exploration in general and of the characteristics of gender configurations and identities in particular. Although the results are presented in Table 1, some aspects to highlight are that overall social participation is scant unless there are disputes, and women are more integrated into activities such as religion, local politics and day to day conflict resolution. For example, Celestún currently has a female municipal president (Yulma García Casanova). This is relevant since women have had formal political leadership positions since 2010 when there have been 3 women municipal presidents and only 1 mayor. Before, in the period between 1962 and 2010 there were 14 male municipal presidents, and no women<sup>7</sup>. In terms of space and territory there are no important gender elements, but local identities for both women and men are rooted in the symbolised space

<sup>7</sup> It is especially noteworthy that women participate in politics as part of everyday life in Celestún. Despite the implementation of quotas that have led to a nearly equal rate of participation in parliament of women and men at federal level (48.7%), at local level the challenge prevails. In 2016 only 14% of municipal presidents were women (PNUD/ONU Mujeres/Idea, 2017).

of belonging, people are happy and proud inhabitants of Celestún. In terms of health education, women manifest affective afflictions and distress more openly, and they self-medicate, whereas men resort to illegal substance use more frequently to give them courage in the face of risks posed by fishing activities. Celestún is one of the municipalities with the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Yucatán, and there is a poor culture of contraceptive use. Extended family units care for new-borns in a transgenerational manner, with grandparents –especially grandmothers– raising grandchildren. Incest and economic family prostitution are traditional common practices that locals do not know that are criminal offences<sup>8</sup>. Economic activities include seasonal fishing, salt-production, tourism and services, transportation and services. Men are in charge of fishing and women are housemakers, small traders and are thus in charge of commerce and household income. Violence and abuse are a quotidian trait of interpersonal relations, with shouting and beatings that affect both sexes, although physical violence affects women most commonly and it is usually perpetrated by men<sup>9</sup>. Violence is another ever-present indicator that must be addressed, for it has also become naturalized in relations between men and women.

Table 1.  
*Diagnosis. Characterisation of the community of Celestún*

Axes of exploration	
Collective action and social participation	We found that community members are interested in participating in activities such as sports, religion and politics, though the common denominators in reality are that: 1) participation is scant; and 2) women are more integrated into those activities. The type of activity that attracts people to participate involves social denunciations or protest, problems at the municipal level, and conflict resolution. The interests of the population studied centre mostly on the need to resolve immediate problems related to territory and family survival, not on building a true community based on equality and respect.

<sup>8</sup> The practice of exchanging sexual services by the wife of the family head in exchange for resources of diverse type is a common traditional practice that is widespread and it is not considered as prostitution locally. There is also a significant tradition in the community of incest.

<sup>9</sup> According to the National Survey on Household Relationship Dynamics (ENDIREH, 2016), 66.1% of Mexican women over 15 years of age recognize having experienced some form of violence (49% emotional violence; 29% economic violence; 34% physical violence and 41.3% sexual violence). Also, 44.8% of them report having experienced at least one violent incident over the past 12 months. Children learn and reproduce violence and gender malaise. Currently, Mexico ranks highest worldwide in terms of sexual abuse and homicide in infants and adolescents of less than 14 years of age, with 4.5 million children suffering sexual abuse (CEAMEG, 2014).

Space and territory	The perception of the space that residents inhabit is charged with affectivity, as the majority of people manifest that they are happy to live in Celestún. The most important places for residents are Ría, the beach and other tourist spaces, which concur with those offered at the state and national levels as referents for tourism. One element to emphasize is the historical dispute over territory with neighbours in other areas of the region (with the state of Campeche) due, especially, to dividing lines that are often trespassed in both directions.
Health education	There is a tendency for women to suffer feelings of affliction or distress; indeed, ailments of the affective type are the most common ones in this population. They are accentuated by concern over children, family problems and education. Other aspects related to health that could increase the severity of these problems are poor perceptions of the local health centre, the tendency to self-medicate, and high drug consumption.
Sexual and reproductive health	This community is in one of the municipalities of Yucatán with the highest rate of teenage pregnancy, which increases the probability that new mothers will drop out of school, while obliging them to take on new responsibilities, though the grandparents may step in and assume them. This point is important because it seems that these practices have become naturalized, for babies are often left in the care of grandparents. Besides, parenthood is socially valued, whereas education does not guarantee social mobility. Other significant findings are the non- or inadequate use of birth control methods during sexual activity.
Economy	The community bases its economic activity on fishing, but because this is seasonal, locals combine that income with other occupations: such as driving moto-taxis, salt production, and tourism, among others. Income from these activities is usually managed by women, who utilize the resources to purchase food, personal items and medicines, to pay for cell phone service and basic services, or to pay off debts.
Violence	Violence and abuse have become naturalized as forms of interpersonal relations, with shouting and beatings being the most common acts. These acts are not differentiated by age or sex, though women suffer more violence and physical violence than men. This was confirmed by local people who observed that it is common to find women, regardless of age, who have been beaten, usually by a man. This reveals a gender disparity.

It is clear that the eight categories which emerged from our diagnosis are interrelated through the tissue of the relational dynamics between the public and private sphere as interconnected. The economy has significant repercussions on the health status of both women

and men, not only physical but also psychological. Task diversification is delimited but also relational, as women participate actively in the life of the port, so their psychosocial afflictions – like those that affect men– are largely a product of tensions between the family and the economy. According to the Occupation and Employment Survey (INEGI, 2017), 57.4% of women in Mexico are in the informal sector of the economy and there are between 15 and 20% of women working without payment compared to 9% of men. However, the greatest challenge of *machismo* in culture is equality in household chores. Women have massively inserted into the labour market, although the democratization of the domestic sphere is far from complete. According to Mercedes Pedrero (2017, personal communication) the difference in total workload (paid and domestic work) between women and men in Mexico is an average of 19.7 hours extra for women per week.

The relation between early pregnancy and the place that men occupy in the family setting also determines certain practices that potentiate new vulnerabilities for adolescents, both female and male. This is because they tend to follow certain patterns of behaviour which lead them to repeat the practices of their parents, such as consuming alcohol and certain kinds of drugs, though this only increases their degree of vulnerability. The level of education in Celestún, as mentioned above, is very low because schooling is not seen as a ‘way out’ and people have no illusion that it will generate improvements in people’s subsistence levels. This is consistent with national findings, where social mobility is scant. Overall, in Mexico 74% of people born in poverty will never overcome this condition. However, in the poorest households in the southern states of Mexico, the proportion is of 86 out of each 100 people that remain in poverty (CEEY, 2019). In Mexico, among young people, 4 out of 5 jobs are precarious, with earnings below two minimum wages (less than US \$10 per day). In gender terms, women face a great risk. According to the OECD (2018), among youngsters between 18 and 24 years of age, 36% of women had no employment and no education in 2017 compared to 8% of men. Not surprisingly, young people in Celestún consume alcohol and drugs from a very young age. Not only is this permitted, but it seems that it has been naturalized in the community as an aspect of local patterns of interaction. An important aspect required to understand the dynamics of belonging and territorial identity is the conflict generated between ‘us’ and ‘the others’. In reality, the edges of identity belonging mirror disputes over maritime territory, which people assume as a source of both work and



belonging. In fact, the port has witnessed outbreaks of collective violence, such as burning boats to mark frontiers and territorial limits.

Based on this diagnosis, and after a long process of reflection, focal group discussions, interviews and non-participant observation in the community, we identified two broad categories that constitute the imaginary from which the relations of interaction in the community are generated. One of these is vulnerability and how it is expressed by residents, but we also identified gender differences that allude to conventional roles that intersect with a reality that presents new challenges by generating contradictions for subsistence in the here-and-now from which these people invoke their daily reality.

### **1. Vulnerability**

The following scheme assumes that the indicators of vulnerability are interrelated. Thus, they blur the panorama that classic studies of vulnerability present from social and objective institutionality, because they fail to take into account the subjective aspects that, in the present case, are constructed from an adverse reality that has consequences at the individual level by configuring human relations based on deficits that need to be alleviated day-by-day. These deficits accumulate in lived experience until they attain a subjective resonance that constitutes its own resistance and strength to cope with the adversity out of which they are constructed. In summary, this is what we denominate “*recursive vulnerability*” as analytical category (Flores-Palacios, 2015, p.76).

The context of vulnerability is linked to diverse subjective dimensions that begin with the life histories of our interviewees, individuals born and raised amidst structural adversity and poverty (Figure 3). We found that they often repeat parental patterns and roles that emerge from hegemonic social representations of what it means to be a man or woman. They occupy a specific place in the family setting with almost no possibility to reconstruct new relational models, because these, quite simply, do not exist in their codes and perceptions of reality. Violence, addictions and alcoholism have been naturalized to such a degree that people live day-to-day in scenarios that affect their mental health, including gender tensions, anxiety and depression from causes related to each individual’s experience; conditions that can propitiate practices that even threaten their life.

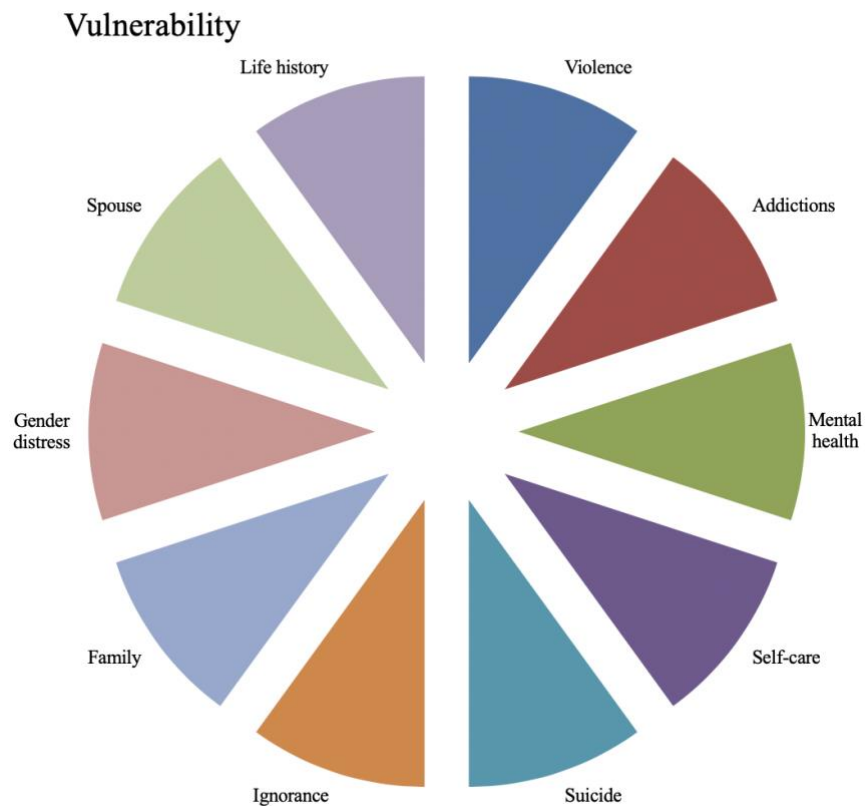


Figure 3. Indicators of vulnerability in Celestún

It was in this context that we dimensioned the importance of generating a process to deconstruct representations and then reconstruct new ones in daily life by showing that it is possible to build a world that is free of violence, permits inclusion and pushes addictions to the side-lines. But this demands a greater commitment to social and assistentialist policies by all sides<sup>10</sup>, together with recognition of the value and potential implied in recursive vulnerability, which can increase their capacity to propose new schemes of action and co-existence in their everyday interaction.

<sup>10</sup> All stakeholders need to take part and understand the coherence of everyday life dynamics based on existing social representations in order for interventions to be successful. For example, according to Rubio Herrera (2017), out of the 185 social programmes in the state of Yucatán (all with an assistentialist classical development logic), 182 are implemented in Celestún. The problem is that government officials that administer the programs do not even know the local setting and its logic, making program implementation deficient and programs a failure.

The affective states of Ego in this community have been damaged by the context of belonging and because community identity regresses to an image from which, seemingly, it potentiates the value of people as such, but only through the defence of territory and the rejection of otherness. This rejection arises from the fear that all strange situations generate, intensified by the fact that they cannot visualize schemes or models of wellbeing that could contribute to mitigating their state of desperation. In the times of time, living in the here-and-now means palliating the dimension of the future, denying the possibility of creating and constructing a project that might dignify their existence, and this produces tension in people's identities, both individual and collective.

The following discourses exemplify residents' relations to the economic resources that allow them to subsist. The homemaker expresses the desperation of poverty that their context of everyday existence imposes, while the fisherman assumes the typical role of the male as provider, or breadwinner:

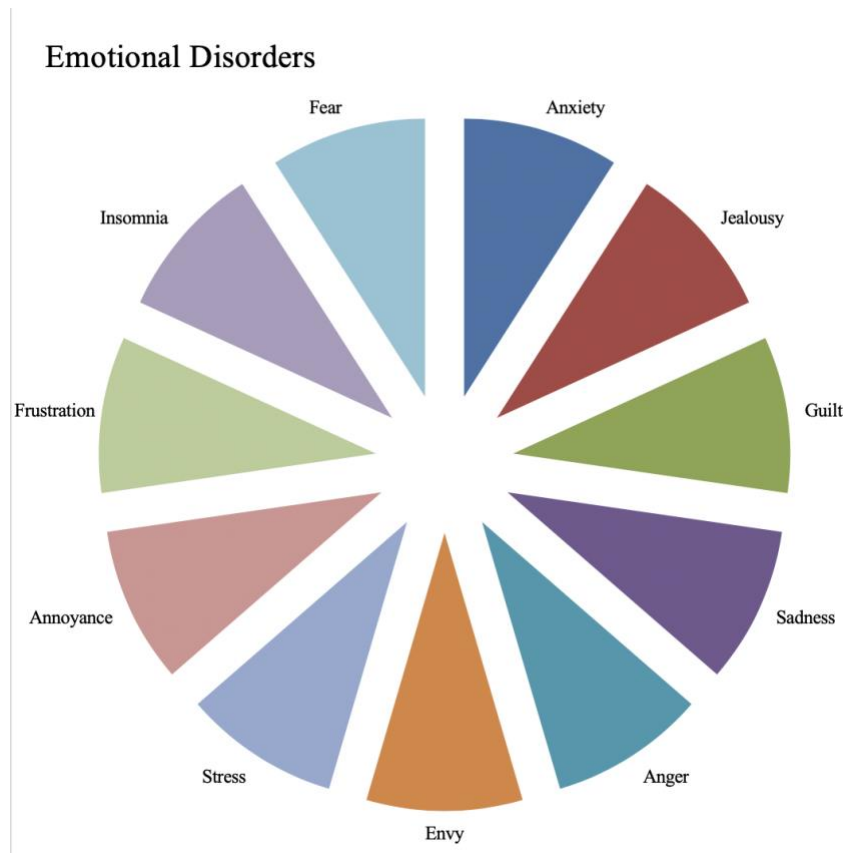
“...sometimes I feel like running away, crying, just not having anything more to do with myself, just to lose myself” (a 35-year-old homemaker)

“...as a man, you focus on the family's happiness, but you can lose sight a bit of your own happiness ...” (a 37-year-old fisherman)

The family is another key indicator that nucleates relations among people as the base that stabilizes relations, both in the in-group and the out-group. Belonging to a certain family clan establishes one's identity in the community as people know each other by reputation. Here, the married couple as a unit is still a central element of family organization though it is also often a site of violent episodes directed, primarily, by men towards women. Hegemonic *macho* thought endures in Celestún and is so deeply-integrated into relational dynamics that it continues to reproduce practices of discrimination, abuse and exclusion. The fact that men start fishing at puberty and often leave their house of origin to form new families at very young ages (11-12 years of age onwards), means they have very limited personal, emotional, and relational resources in order to question representations, do things differently and advance towards wellbeing.

## 2. Emotional Disorders

Emotional disorders were the other broad dimension identified on the basis of the construction of our interviewees' discourses, for their experiences are directly related to the indicators of vulnerability at two levels: the social context, and their own psycho-affective interactions. The principle emotional states mentioned are indicated in Figure 4.



*Figure 4.* Indicators of emotional disorders

As Figure 4 shows, the indicators of emotional disorders identified in our individual and group interviews are negatively-charged; indeed, they constitute, to a great extent, people's everyday malaise. Each one of these subjective elements is felt through the intensity with which people confront their reality. For example, frustration because of one's inability to succeed,

generates a deep sadness that can lead to anger and annoyance in everyday life. Interviewees are subject to the stress associated with the struggle for survival, the fear of failing and, especially, of being exposed as incompetent in the face of their group of belonging. Insecurity is another element, one often manifested in jealous behaviours towards the spouse that can easily result in violent incidents that generate guilt and insomnia, which congruent with hegemonic religious representations of fear and guilt, people may consider 'divine punishment' for their behaviour:

“And another thing, if I was wearing a blouse and was going to breastfeed my baby, he'd say: “cover yourself up, your breasts make me sick, they turn my stomach”. [But] when I was going to have sexual relations with him, if he took off my skirt or tore off what I was wearing, I had to grab a sheet that I had on one side and cover myself, because he'd tell me: “cover yourself up”... he only used me, he was never someone to give a hug or anything. I knew that was what my life was going to be like... that's what I understood, so I'd cover myself. Sometimes when he went away, I stayed in bed and just cried. I always, always cried. Because I did not understand why did he do those things to me (37-year-old homemaker).

We found that magic thought is another factor to be considered in Celestún. It is related to hegemonic representations and to religious beliefs that 1) determine forms of social behaviour; and 2) functions as means of social control at the individual level and in the public and political spheres of the community. Our time in this situated context allowed us to identify practices that were concealed by the discourse of social participation, but in which the exercise of power was a constant of territorial dominion and of the positioning of leaderships.

The women who participated in this process turned to self-medication, taking anxiolytics and antidepressants. Solidarity in the form of sorority took a vicious cycle as women shared their medication with other women, thus naturalizing their use as a way to palliate their maladies. This is a recurrent aspect seen in other studies framed in contexts of adversity (Flores-Palacios & Wagner, 2010).

“I feel down because I'm not happy. I've taken pills because I feel depressed and really sad at times” (32-year-old fisherman's wife).

Uncertainty regarding the future, and the fact that they see almost no possibility of emerging from their context, subject these women to a depressive dynamic that isolates them and can lead them to reproduce risky behaviours.

“I’m scared for my daughters, because of the risks in the community, the drugs that they’ll be invited to try... that they’ll be pressured to try alcoholic drinks... I think that’s what makes me hesitant to let them go out. They don’t have permission to go out at night [and] I think that makes them feel bad...” (39-year-old single mother of two daughters).

These are a few excerpts from the interviews and initial reflections that cover the main emotional disorders in Celestún. The idea for the future, as the layers of research deepen, is to develop an entire theoretical reflection linking more traditional analytical categories in sociogenetic SRT research with emotions and affective dimensions. This is because in-group conflicts in highly structured groups and the most intimate aspects of everyday life dynamics are only unveiled after many years of fieldwork and rapport. Nevertheless, these longitudinal in-depth studies are necessary and even urgent in the field of SRT. So, this section is a general introduction, it seeks to highlight the importance of going in this direction, although four years of fieldwork have been an opening that has enabled us to glance at these emotional disorders. It is across the years that polemical and emancipated representations of gender and their emotional dimensions become apparent, in a process of affective archaeology that is currently underway.

In this natural paradise, the dynamics of interaction combined with the adversity of everyday existence are lived behind closed doors in this community setting. We realized that no researcher can come to conclusions about community interaction without observing, listening and following the discourses and resources that people construct from their lived experience. Introducing ourselves into worlds that are configured through the tensions of survival is no easy task, for we must recognize that we are ignorant of local people’s subjectivities and forms of signifying the here-and-now. Also, processes of this nature tend to be minimized in research because they fail to fulfil the rigorous conditions of the scientific method. However, experiencing and recovering discourse, common sense knowledge, and the everyday practices and experiences of people and how they are cut across by gender are elements that allow us to introduce new

categories of analysis that need to be presented and argued until they achieve an epistemic consequence in light of our theories.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In terms of theoretical reflections, the perspective of social representations is a holistic, dynamic, systemic, multifaceted, intricate and rich theorization to understand and explain the relations between the social and the individual within culture. Social representations are social products, derived from interaction, deeply ingrained in culture specific frameworks. Seen from the framework of SRT, gender and *engendered* identities make sense. They are a coherent system based on the historical social construction of sexual difference that structures cosmovisions, establishes kinship systems and social modes of relations, outlines the contours of individual and group identities, and prescribes behaviours. The success of the hegemonic hetero-cis-patriarchal gender system is that it is rooted in the common sense understanding that bases individual identities, interpersonal relations and cultural norms and practices. Gender norms are familiar, their quotidian dimension make them seem natural, inevitable, even desirable; despite their exclusionary logic and structural violence. However, given that social representations are historically and geographically constructed, they are subject to change. This is also the most promising aspect of social representations research, its critical formative and transformative-deconstructive aspect. From a gender feminist perspective, conflict, tension, polemics and polysemy highlight the agentic nature of individual and collective subjects when negotiating social representations through their discursive practices.

In terms of the case study in Celestún, although hegemonic gender representations predominate to the detriment of life quality of both women and men, implying differentiated risks and vulnerabilities, it is important to remain optimistic as alternatives are in the making, even if change is very gradual. Despite the fact that Celestún as community acts as a “collective, homogenous, and ‘total’ knowledge structure”, social life and social representations by virtue of their dialogic, relational and dynamic nature imply difference and diversity where emancipated/open and polemical/agonal-critical representations are seeding. As Gillespie (2008, p. 8) states, “if the context were completely shared it would be questionable whether anything either needed to be said or indeed could be said”.

Recursive vulnerability implies lack of resources and limited self-care, ignorance, poor educational level and school desertion, precarisation of youths, self-prescribed drugs and use of illegal substances, addictions, risk-taking linked to hegemonic masculinity, illegal markets, health risks, early conjugal unions, adolescent pregnancy, unequal workloads, gender violence of diverse types such as physical and sexual violence including incest and economic family prostitution, intergroup tension with neighbouring territories, anomia and political apathy up to suicidal risk and violent conjugal, family and societal relations. Life histories of recursive vulnerability have transversal gender malaise and lead to important states of emotional distress including anxiety, jealousy, guilt, sadness, anger, envy, stress, annoyance, frustration, insomnia, and fear. Furthermore, in this coastal paradise adversity is configured through various schemes that cannot be adequately visualized unless one stays for enough time to observe certain practices of residents that tend to be concealed and entail cycles that further recursive vulnerability.

Without doubt, the violence of recursive vulnerability makes it even harder to transform and deconstruct hegemonic gender representations and explore alternative identities and modes of relation. Nevertheless, as Arruda (2010) accurately highlights, it is important to recognise the possibility of multiple rationalities in contemporary multifaceted societies and social groups, where the possibility of diverse rationalities translate into diverse forms of knowledge and action. Social representations operate as meaning complexes that interrelate Ego-text and context. In the case of gender identities and configurations in Celestún, vulnerability comes hand in hand with resilience. Women already occupy strategic commercial spaces, they have knowledge of the public and private dynamics in the community and are recognised socially, they are active in political life and have gained formal leadership positions, and they are also protected by female sorority-solidarity, community exclusive identity and social defence mechanisms including barter exchanges, reciprocity and *convivencia*.

If from the relational and sociogenetic model we understand the importance of elaborating a model of being human in which the self- and hetero-definition of oneself is significant as a dynamic and changing process that includes formal elements and diverse motivations that result from the interaction between the characteristics of the environment and the subject's set of resources, then we will be closer to an ethics of respect for, and freedom of, choice. This is the aim of research projects that restore and recognize the lived world and experience in the distinct



situated contexts in which we find ourselves. From our perspective, research linked to action sets out from this principle of recognizing experience and the common sense knowledge of the collectives that form part of the grand capital we need to explore, reflect on, and assimilate, if we are to become capable of deepening our analyses and, from those discourses, configure categories of analysis that reflect the lived experience and common sense knowledge with its transformational potential. This comes hand in hand with working with local and regional stakeholders and with locally sensitive public policy programs. In Celestún this will be particularly important in the near future, as the federal megaproject of the Maya Train will deeply impact the area transforming the local and regional setting in the near future.

In conclusion, research is not neutral. We can mention that doing research linked to action requires a deep, prior analysis that ensures the implementation of an action plan that is logical, validated and defined by the community. This requires great sensitivity in order to understand and respect the historical processes of signification that have become, through lived experience, a system of representation and, therefore, of behaviour. The collective identity plays an important role here because it promotes social belonging or, alternatively exclusion, not only in lived reality, but also at the subjective and inter-subjective levels. “Heterogeneous interactions between groups and their specific contexts produce a variety of styles of thinking and communicating, some based on consensus, others on dissensus and contradiction” (Marková, 2017, p. 362). The process of deconstruction developed in our research perspective and the process of intervention generates alternatives and looks at individual and collective subjects from a holistic perspective, including emotional and affective dimensions. It allows us to affirm that we objectified and anchored new social representations based on schemes of greater equity and equality during the research process; not only as research team, between men and women, but also inside the community. Thus, we were able to identify potential schemes of action for, and liberation from, the existing existential and inter-subjective bonds overcoming recursive vulnerability, patriarchal malaise and substantive equality and social justice for all.

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# Papers on Social Representations

## Peer Reviewed Online Journal

We ask you to review the article evaluating the criteria below. If you consider it necessary, please expand your answers by commenting under the corresponding criterion.

### 1. Conformity to the journal's scope:

a) Does this paper engage with the literature on Social Representations (in ways that exemplify, expand or critique aspects of the theory)?

Yes (X) No ( )

But the use of the theory, although announced, is not clearly illustrated by the study. The theory of social representation is not discussed in its relation to the gender issue.

b) Will the paper be of interest to the Social Representations readership and stimulate interest and discussion?

Yes ( ) No (X)

To the extent that the relationship between gender and SR is not further developed, the importance of the proposed perspective can't be highlighted.

### 2. Originality and scholarly contribution:

a) Does the paper make an original contribution (at the level of theory, methodology or empirical focus)?

Yes ( ) No (X)

It could be that it would help to narrow the categories analysed, this would give greater clarity to what it proposes to show.

In the conclusions, the findings of the study are not developed in a enough and clear way, nor is the nature and character of the analysed categories observed. For example, it does not refer to the role of violence as an element of identity and social representation.

b) Does the paper develop new insights into existing conceptual debates, methodological conventions or a field of study?

Yes ( ) No (X)

### 3. Clarity and style of writing:

a) Is the paper well-structured and is it easy to follow the argument?

Yes ( ) No (X)

b) Is it well-written and accessible to an international range of readers?

Yes (X) No ( )

### 4. Methodology and analysis (if an empirical paper):

a) Is the design and method of analysis explained clearly?

Yes ( ) No (X)

The methodology used for the analysis of the proposed categories is not clearly specified.

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