



## EXPRESSIONS OF RACISM IN A SAMPLE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MEXICO\*

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### Abstract

Our purpose is to explore the terms that students from three intercultural universities use to refer to indigenous peoples, as a sign of racist expressions. We analyze how racism adopts new expressions in modern times, as reflected in both subtle and simulated discriminatory practices. Empirical research conducted in Spain and different Latin American countries was reviewed that revealed different forms in which racism materializes. In addition, this work documents the presence of racism in Mexico as a product of miscegenation and how the historical and cultural legacy of native peoples has been ignored due to integration policies. A word association instrument was developed for carrying out empirical research. This instrument was applied to 168 students using the semantic networks technique, under which three analytical categories were constructed for purposes of interpretation: acceptance, stigmatization and denunciation. Results showed that the term indigenous conveys high levels of acceptance and that young people used different terms to express pride for their cultural wealth and inherited millennial traditions. Nonetheless, other expressions of non-acceptance and rejection, with negative connotations, also appeared that, although not representative, must be pointed out as evidence of the persistence of racist expressions among university students.

**Keywords:** Racism, indigenous peoples, university students

### INTRODUCTION

Our purpose of this article is to explore expressions of acceptance, stigma and discrimination used by students at intercultural universities in regards to the the trigger word “indigenous”. This work begins with a theoretical approach to racism through its main exponents. We analyze how racism adopts new modern day expressions, which are reflected in subtle and simulated discriminatory practices towards ethnic minorities. We present empirical research conducted in Spain and France that explains how new, modern-day racism manifests itself not only in physical traits but also in cultural characteristics that are employed as obstacles to the integration of other social groups. In addition, investigations from countries such as Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Colombia, and Chile reveal different modes of expression of racist ideologies, which are

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present in daily life in these countries. This work exposes how the historical legacy of discrimination, characteristic of processes of colonization in Latin America, continues to permeate social interactions and is enconced in daily coexistence, in differentiating practices that conceal sentiments of exclusion and discrimination towards the poorest and most subordinated groups, who are generally indigenous and Afro-descendant. Also, we review specialized literature that documents the presence of racism in Mexico, as well as the phenomenon of miscegenation, which instilled the idea of a creole and a mixed-race nation, failing to recognize the historical and cultural legacy of native Mesoamerican peoples.

Fieldwork was conducted in three intercultural universities in the northern, central and southeastern regions of the country. Two instruments were designed, tested and applied: a survey and a word association test. This report only presents the results of the second exercise, which aimed to investigate the meanings of the trigger word "indigenous" for university students. This instrument was applied to 168 students and analyzed using the semantic networks technique. Results showed that the trigger word "indigenous" has high levels of acceptance and young people used different words to express pride for their inherited cultural wealth and ancient traditions. However, there were also expressions of rejection, through the use of terms with negative meanings and connotation that, although not representative, must be pointed out since they are proof of racist expressions among university students.

#### **THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Racism has its origins in the emergence of the notion of race that, according to Knauth (2000), is a concept associated with differentiation based on physical characteristics—skin color, facial features, type of hair, height, eye color—. This distinction is used to legitimize power relations that result in discriminatory practices. Moreover, phenomenon such as heightened identity expressed through ethnocentricity generate insecurity and mistrust in the presence of *the other*, who represents an outsider or something foreign when faced with one own's symbols of belonging and identity, that are threatened by the unknown. Situations like xenophobia, prejudice, stereotyping and dependency, on their own, do not cause racism but they do contribute to the emergence of the phenomenon. For Taguieff (2001), racism is an ideology tied to the theory of inequality among different human races that is founded in biological determination that materializes in discriminatory practices associated with prejudice and stereotyping.

Wade (2014), also reflecting about racism, investigates the chronology of the concept of race and affirms that it acquired diverse interpretations depending on the socio-historical context at the time: in the 16th century, it was used to name the lineage or stock of animals, mainly horses and cows; in the 18th century, it was associated with modernity and processes of European colonization; in the 19th century, grounded in scientific racism, it served to justify human diversity using skull and body measurements; and in the 20th century, backed by the generalized rejection of Nazism, it was replaced by the word ethnicity and used as a category to indicate social and cultural differences in a variety of academic and political spaces. For the authors, independent of multicultural and integration policies, in different contexts the concept of race acquires multiple connotations that continue to permeate the life of inhabitants in many different regions around the planet.

According to Wieviorka (2009, p. 13), it is possible to approach the definition of racism by “characterizing a human grouping using natural attributes that are also associated with intellectual and moral features that can be applied to each individual related to that grouping and, on that basis, adopt certain practices of inferiorization and exclusion.” Racism naturalizes inequality, under biological argumentation that justifies the exclusion of *the other* and favors situations of social differentiation. Some scholars on this topic, such as Wieviorka (2009, 2007, 1992), Castel (2010) and Cisneros (2004, 2001), situate the origin of racism in connection with different social and historical events. Nevertheless, Castellanos (2001) points out that processes of colonization and the development of different nation-states, together with nationalist sentiments and the rise of racist theories from the 19th century, drove manifestations of these theories in Europe and the Americas.

The transcendence of racism lies in its use to legitimize power relations of one group in regards to other groups, placing them in situations of subordination (Knauth, 2000; Castellanos, 2001; Paris, 2002; Gall, 2004; Casaús, 2009; Guimarães, 1996). Racial distinction, which gives rise to racial discrimination, occurs associated with phenomena such as xenophobia, in which the presence of *the other*, perceived to be *the stranger* or *the outsider*, increases beliefs and prejudice about inferiority. The propagation of different racial theories during the 18th and 19th centuries, such as the theories Goebbels defended that were backed by genetic studies and theories from Spencer and Gobineau that were based in biological grounds (Gall, 2004), justified physical differences and served as scientific explanation for demonstrating racial differentiation, affirming that nature generates inequalities and thus, these distinctions *are natural*. Phenotypical traits reinforced racial differences that, in turn, justified social stratification, segregation and discrimination mainly for populations of Afro-American and indigenous descent (Castellanos, 2001; Paris, 2002).

Phenotypical traits were associated with individual potentialities and weaknesses, thus justifying the place each one occupies on the social scale. Afro-descendant and indigenous populations were placed on the last rung of the scale, being identified as clumsy, cheating, dumb slackers (Paris, 2002). In contrast, the collective imaginaries that associated white-skinned people with beauty, intelligence and professional success were disseminated. The incorporation of these stereotypes to society gave way to racial prejudice that generated discriminatory practices with heavy repercussions for segregated groups. From that perspective, differentiated groups have few possibilities for upward mobility, since once their physical features are associated with individual potentialities and abilities; these groups are generally discriminated at work, school and in the community.

For Castoriadis, racism as a universal, aggravated phenomenon is present in almost all human societies because, “It is the apparent inability to constitute oneself as oneself without excluding the other and the apparent inability to exclude the other without devaluing and ultimately hating him” (2005, p. 34). Unlike other theorists such as Wieviorka (2009), Taguieff (2001) and Gall (2004), who reject the idea that racism is a product of modernity, on the contrary, Castoriadis (2005) contends that it arose in the most ancient civilizations since even in the first writings of the Old Testament, we find manifestations of rejection of *the others*—the unbelievers—who professed different beliefs and defended them with the sword and the cross. He argues how exclusion and inferiorization of *the other* are linked

to the social imaginary that communities build, with their ways of representing the world and categorizing it.

Institutional racism is known as the set of ways and practices that organizations adopt internally that serve to reproduce discrimination, violence and segregation based on ethnic origins (Wieviorka, 2009, 2007), such as segregation of some children in a school setting for not speaking Spanish, not being hired for a job due to physical appearance, or the difference in treatment when receiving a public service. Different specialists in this field (Wieviorka, 2009; Taguieff, 2001; Gall, 2004) have documented multiple manifestations of this phenomenon and confirmed how, instead of disappearing, racism is changing. This phenomenon is called neo-racism (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991), cultural racism (Wieviorka, 2009), differentialist racism (Taguieff, 2001), and modern racism (Javaloy, 1994; Espelt and Javaloy (n.d.)), to refer to the phenomenon whereby racism not only does not disappear but as a result of processes of globalization, adopts new expressions that turn into discriminatory practices that no longer focus on physical features rather on cultural characteristics. These new forms of racism consider culture to be the main obstacle to the lack of integration of these minorities, who are rejected. Wieviorka (2009) also refers to this new reality as symbolic racism.

#### RESEARCH ON RACISM

During the final decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the current century, numerous studies have been developed on racism in Europe and Latin America (Paris, 2002). Although this is not a recent phenomenon, with some theorists maintaining that it is as ancient as early civilizations (Castoriadis, 2005), other specialists place its beginnings starting with modernity linked to the processes of colonization during the 16th and 17th centuries (Castellanos, 2001; Moreno, 1994; Wieviorka, 2009; Paris, 2002; Gall, 2004; Casaús, 2009; Wade, 2013), in which incursion to unknown territories and the opening of new trade routes opened other types of relations with different human groups. There is an abundant production of short theoretical essays that address the phenomenon of racism (Wieviorka, 2009, 2007, 1992; Taguieff, 2001; Gall, 2004; Wade, 2013, 2011; Castoriadis, 2005; Moreno, 1994; Castellanos, 2001) but less empirical research that demonstrates racist discriminatory practices in different contexts. This article is interested in documenting some pieces of research that have studied concrete, explicit manifestations of racism through individual or institutional practices that occur in environments that generally fail to recognize the presence of current racist phenomena.

In Spain, several works call attention to discrimination towards African populations that emigrate to Europe. In an article published in the *El País* newspaper, Borasteros and García (2007) document the existence of numerous articles on racial discrimination between April 2006 and May 2007. They point out the emergence of a new racial panorama in the face of the rising wave of immigrants. They call this new visage of discrimination *low intensity racism* and demonstrate its presence in the collective imaginary with several testimonies that show indirect yet latent rejection of foreigners, who are blamed for the lack of employment, housing and room in schools. In her work, Moreno also demonstrates the phenomenon of growing racism in different European contexts, which she defines as “a doctrine that represents the justification and *natural* legitimization of a modern context hierarchy that is ideologically dominated by the idea of equality (1994, p. 50). Espelt and Javaloy

(n.d.) analyzed the results of surveys used with the Spanish population as applied by the Center for Sociological Research. They document attitudes on immigration, finding strong contradictions between an attitude of tolerance and the denial of racist attitudes, accepting that the majority of Spanish people have race-related prejudice, particularly towards African migrants. Although a high percentage (95%) defend the freedom of migrants to work and live, only 26% would be willing to give them refuge, whereas 11% express rejection and 15% do not answer. The authors express concern in the face of doubtful answers because, although a large number of Spanish interviewees see themselves as not prejudiced, they indicate that the majority of Spanish citizens are prejudiced against foreigners.

Using Pettigrew and Meertens Blatant and Subtle Prejudice Scale (BSPS), Sánchez, Campillo, Illán, Llor and Ruiz explored student attitudes in the Murcia region in regards to Maghrebi immigrants. The authors affirm that due to the promotion of democratic principles in different societal spheres, “[people] have developed more concealed and refined ways to channel their prejudice, characterized by discriminatory beliefs and feelings that acquire different nuances from age-old racism” (2005, p. 2), which the authors called *subtle expressions* of racism, allowing them to establish the basis for the existence of a high percentage of racist expressions among sample subjects. Cea (2009), placing an emphasis on methodology, studies the validity of the survey to detect racism and xenophobia in the attitudes of Spanish peoples prior to the immigration phenomenon. The author concludes that many results from past measurements can be attributed to characteristics of the instruments themselves and proceeds to underscore the importance of methodological interaction in empirical research to ensure the validity of results.

In France, Castel (2010) looks further into so-called negative discrimination, pointing out the subtle ways in which society and institutions discriminate against French citizens of African descent. He documents discriminatory practices to which ethnic minorities are subject as part of the legacy of colonial racism, as society, raising the defense of Republican principles, demands they assimilate and renounce their culture of origin or remain in a situation of social, political, and cultural subordination.

In Latin America, different empirical studies show the multiple ways in which racism manifests itself in daily life. In Ecuador, Rahier (2013) documents the presence of racist representations of the *black* population in the mass media, particularly in the *Vistazo* magazine, who appear as beings with negative characteristics, as a way to justify domination exercised over *the others*. Traverso-Yépez (2005) analyzes racist discourse from linguistic practice, arguing the institutionalization of racial segregation against the *non-white* population by Ecuadorian elites. She carried out semi-structured interviews with leaders from political, economic and cultural spheres, concluding that the presence of discourses that minimize racial discrimination towards indigenous and black populations justify the pejorative image of *the other* as different, as a threat, and emphasizing that these discourses contribute to the reproduction of prejudice and conceptions in daily interactions. Placencia (2008) reflects on discriminatory practices based on ethnic-racial prejudice towards Kichwa indigenous peoples by white-*mestizo* Ecuadorians. Using observation, in-depth interviews and focus groups with indigenous residents in Quito, she studied the ways in which discriminatory practices are constructed to inferiorize indigenous peoples compared to white-*mestizo* peoples and how these mechanisms are reproduced in different arenas of daily co-existence.

In Guatemala, Casaús (2009) discerns the phenomenon of racism practiced by the State during the 1980's, which culminated in the brutal repression of the civil population and the genocide of Mayan indigenous peoples, resulting in the calculated deaths of approximately 200,000 Guatemalans. The author examines the results of some studies to demonstrate that Guatemala is a racist country, a situation that the political class and some intellectuals fail to recognize. In one piece of research, she also presents testimonies from family members and survivors of the killings perpetuated by the army, with the objective of diagnosing levels of racism within the population, in order to generate public policy to combat and eradicate racism.

In Venezuela, Ishibashi (2003) studies racist practices of the mass media, analyzing the exclusion and inclusion of black people. This study combines a quantitative study, which counts the participation of black people in different forms of media, with in-depth interviews and working groups, in order to identify practices of exclusion towards this population by the media. For the author, the most serious problem facing this country is the invisibility of minority groups and systematic denial of racist practices that are present in Venezuelan society.

In Colombia, Ojeda and González (2012) studied student stereotypes at the University of Nariño in southwestern Colombia. Using focus groups, they inquired into perceptions of their Afro-Colombian and indigenous classmates, using four categories of analysis: personality, interpersonal relations, academic performance and cultural traditions. In their results, the authors found that negative stereotypes prevail towards these communities, thus determining the types of relations established among students who do not belong to these groups with Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples.

In Brasil, work by Guimarães (1996) addresses the myth of alleged institutional anti-racism that the author categorizes as assimilationist and universalist, for seeking to conceal the racial differentiation derived from physical features of the population. This policy sought to naturalize racial differences and make social phenomena such as poverty; ignorance and unemployment appear to be natural, by justifying social hierarchies and relations of domination and exploitation towards indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants. According to the author, phenotypical characteristics of the Brazilian population have racialized and symbolically and materially established a system of social hierarchization founded in the lightness of skin color and social *whitening*.

In Chile, Pávez (2012) inquiries about experiences of discrimination and racism of Peruvian children who migrate to the city of Santiago. Pavez conducted observations in two public schools and interviews with 15 children of Peruvian families. The data was analyzed based on three categories: skin color and phenotype; personality; and nationality. In her conclusions, the author indicates that conditions such as nationality, social class and gender are used to justify discriminatory practices towards Peruvian migrant children.

As observed by the brief overview of these investigations, racist practices continue to permeate daily life in many regions of Europe and the Americas and there is a lot of work to be done to bring visibility to this issue and fight for the eradication of racism.

## **RACISM IN MEXICO**

As a multicultural and multiethnic country, the phenomenon of racial discrimination is not a new problem. The origin can be found in the processes of colonization

during the 15th and 16th centuries in territories known as New Spain (Castellanos, 2001; Paris, 2002; and Gall, 2004). The argument of racial difference grounded in biological difference has been used to perpetuate a racist legacy, emanating from the process of colonization in Latin America and particularly in the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards, to justify situations of domination and subordination of native groups. In the case of indigenous peoples in Mexico, belonging to an ethnic group makes them subject to differential treatment that magnifies their racial origin, making their differences a disadvantage: skin color, clothing, speech and customs are all motives for differential treatment that leads to mistreatment and stigmas by people of European descent and *mestizos* (mixed-raced peoples). Discrimination emphasizes differences, placing the person who practices discrimination in a position of apparent superiority and placing the target on a plane of subordination. Currently, according to figures provided by the 2010 Mexico Population and Housing Census conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, 2010), there are 15.7 million indigenous peoples in Mexico, 6.6 million of which speak an indigenous language and 9.1 million who identify themselves as indigenous peoples, even though they do not speak a native language.

In Mexico, discrimination places discourses on citizenship, equality and human rights, as well as the 4th Article of the Mexican Constitution that prohibits discrimination in our country, at the center of this debate by affirming the presence of multiple racist practices in different spheres of social life. Many different studies conducted on the living conditions of indigenous peoples in Mexico (Paris, 2002; Castellanos 2001; Cisneros, 2004 and 2001; Gall, 2004; and UNDP, 2010), confirm the huge inequality and social inequity that have characterized these populations for decades. The Human Development Report 2010, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development* (UNDP, 2010) shows figures in reference to the indigenous population, indicating that these groups reach a Human Development Index that is 11.3% lower than the non-indigenous Mexican population, stressing that income levels present the highest levels of disproportion, with inequality reaching 17% in this field.

Mexico's National Survey on Discrimination indicates that 8 of every 10 Mexicans of indigenous origin interviewed manifest that *their rights have not been respected* due to reasons relating to *their customs or culture, their accent upon speaking, their skin color, for coming from another place, their education, their religion, or their way of dressing*; whereas 7 of every 10 indicated that it was because of their condition of *being a man/woman, their age, their physical appearance or not having money* (CONAPRED, 2010).

The same source documents that 44% of Mexicans consider *they do not respect indigenous peoples' rights*; 54.7% of people who speak an indigenous language speak Náhuatl, Mayan, Mixtec, Tzeltal and Zapotec. Moreover, 15.9% of the total of people who speak an indigenous language do not speak Spanish, that is to say, they are monolingual. The main problem perceived by ethnic minorities is *discrimination* (19.5%), followed by *poverty* (9.4%) and the *lack of government support* (8.8%). They also consider *language* (6.8%) to be another factor contributing to unequal treatment.

Pro-native projects in the first half of the 20th century had the aim of *integrating* ethnic groups under the principle that progress for these communities consisted of abandoning their ancient culture and traditions and of adopting a

life according to the vision of civilization proposed by dominant groups (Gall, 2004; Castellanos, 2001; and Paris 2002). Miscegenation, as a pillar of nationalist discourse on integration towards modernity and progress made *mestizo*—or mixed-race—peoples the incarnation of national identity, thus condemning cultural legacy of pre-Hispanic civilizations and failing to recognize the existence of over 10 million indigenous people spread throughout national territory. Cultural assimilation programs attempted to incorporate indigenous communities to the new national project (Paris, 2002; Gall, 2004).

However, processes of resistance and persistent defense of indigenous cultures and their traditions led to the failure of these projects. It would appear that the choice was to assimilate or to disappear (Castel, 2010). Paradoxically, after several centuries, these groups continue to subsist in defense of their cultural legacy, with actions of resistance and, in many cases, survival. Mexican society, as a historical consequence of its colonial past, inherited a history of discrimination towards native peoples and has proceeded to continue to reproduce differential forms and practices that render racist expressions and manifestations.

Other forms of exclusion towards indigenous groups occur in educational curriculum and thus, in practices that unfold in school micro-universes of the classroom, some of which are visible and others invisible due to their familiarity (Hernández and Estrada, 2012). Teachers are a sector that validate and invalidate both knowledge and actions. For Granja (2009), policy to modernize public education was designed at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century in Mexico. “Scientific” construction of the categories of schooling became indispensable. Measuring and countering children and developing categories to classify children’s physical and mental features became an essential task in order for Mexico to undertake modern education and an integrationist policy through public policy endeavors. Poor children, many of whom come from diverse ethnic groups with habits that differ from urban, middle and upper class children were classified negatively.

For Hamel (2001), a child who does not speak Spanish in school arouses discrimination from principals, teachers and students. Spanish is proclaimed as a language whereas indigenous languages are called “dialects,” the latter of which are presumed to have lesser status. Furthermore, teachers teach in Spanish regardless of whether or not the school is bilingual; the teacher gives class in Spanish to children who speak an indigenous language, with no concern that s/he master the indigenous language. In this and other educational practices, the dominant culture is overvalued and the subordinate culture is excluded.

For this same author, the school is a cultural microcosms where numerous practices are woven that respond to deeply rooted cultural representations and principles in the participating actors. Hernández and Estrada (2012) report that teachers are bearers of hegemonic representations and, in their daily activities, consider children of indigenous descent to be inferior. Teachers fail to observe, much less understand, that the child’s behavior derives from his/her contextual, socio-economic and cultural situation (place of origin; parent, sibling and family occupations; and living conditions). To the contrary, teachers and students assume that the child is different, that his/her learning problems, absenteeism and even personal hygiene are due to the fact that s/he does not speak Spanish, is a member of an indigenous group, is an immigrant, etc. All of these practices reproduced in the school micro-space are invisible to actors.

Belonging to an ethnic group, almost by historical determination, converts the person who inherits this identity in beings with generally negative attributes. As part of this investigation, it was of interest to observe the expressions of acceptance, stigmatization and denunciation that students from three intercultural universities demonstrated in regards to indigenous peoples.

## **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

### *Sample*

For the purposes of fieldwork, three universities were selected in different regions of the country: southeast, Gulf of Mexico and central. The southeastern institution is characterized by its proximity to a international tourist zone; its educational model contemplates five areas of knowledge and the university offers six different undergraduate degrees related to social and cultural environments. The university in the Gulf of Mexico region has three different campuses and the campus observed has three undergraduate degrees; the university's mission highlights a central focus on the conservation and dissemination of its cultural heritage. The university in central Mexico has the mission of training professionals committed to the economic, social and cultural development of their communities and their country; there are six undergraduate degrees at this institution that are associated with the agricultural and productive sector in the region. At all three of these universities, educational purposes are focused on regional issues and issues of indigenous peoples. Therefore, all three institutions have a significant population of indigenous students.

Students at the three selected intercultural universities were the universe of this research project. To be more precise, we refer to what Sánchez (2007) calls "finite population" since the selection was delimited to students enrolled in specific school year. A sample was selected from this "finite population," understood as a randomly selected subset of individuals (Sánchez, 2007; López, 1998). We did not opt for a representative sample of the population since this investigation did not seek to generalize its findings to the rest of the population (López, 1998). On the contrary, the authors sought only to develop an exploration, that is to say an initial approach to the meanings in regards to indigenous peoples expressed by a random sample of students from these three institutions. The results are valid for this segment of young people and not for the general population.

In order to comply with *random sampling*, the "simple sample" technique was employed (García, 1972), which considers that each subject has the same probability of being selected. This implied that the instrument (word association) not be applied to students who are classmates because that would have biased the selection towards certain subjects and left others out of the selection. Hence, student selection was carried out in open spaces, such as campus patios and cafeterias. Students from different semesters are found in these spaces, as well as students from the different areas of concentration/degrees offered at each campus. The *random sample* was composed of 168 students from three intercultural universities located in three different regions of the country; 57% of the sample subjects were women and 43% men, aged 17 to 22 years old.

### *Instrument*

The instrument selected for this research was a word association exercise, which is part of what Abric (2001) calls associative methods. For the author, this type

of method allows the interviewee to associate a trigger term with words or images, because the person interviewed expresses him/herself spontaneously, with less control from the interviewer and greater authenticity. Using a trigger term, participants are asked to write down three words they associate with the trigger term "indigenous". This technique allows us to approach the attitudes, images or representations that a specific sector has in regards to something or someone.

#### PROCEDURE

For the purposes of applying the instrument, each student was provided with a text that includes the trigger term "indigenous" and then was asked to write down three words associated with it and then, to prioritize and rank them in order of importance. Number 1 was for the most important words and number 3 for the least relevant. Lastly, students were asked to write down a phrase indicating why they wrote down each word. Each instrument was reviewed to ensure that the exercise was complete, including the justification of the words and guaranteeing that the writing was legible; if it was not, the person applying the exercise would write down the word or phrase so that it could later be recorded without complications. To systematize the information, we followed the proposal of Valdés (1998) and Reyes (1993) on natural semantic networks, that has been strengthened by other researchers (De la Cruz and Abreu, 2012; Murillo and Becerram, 2009; Hinojosa, 2008; Vera, Bautista and Batista, 2005). The information was interpreted based on the semantic weight of the words, which allowed for understanding the internal structure of their meaning. Excel statistics software was used to process and analyze the quantitative data. As an initial step, all the vocabulary was registered in three columns. On the left hand side, all the most important words (1) were captured, and in the next column all the important words (2) were registered, with the least important words (3) in the third column. All the words were registered for the initial analysis and the frequency was calculated for each word, based on its percentage, in order to numerically classify the different written words. One problem that arose was that some students at two different universities wrote down the words in their own language, which represented a problem of translation. These words were not considered for the analysis.

#### RESULTS OF THE WORD ASSOCIATION

Once the frequencies were obtained, we proceeded to incorporate the semantic weight of each term (Reyes, 1993; Valdés, 1998), as well as its corresponding percentage. Words were organized according to their semantic weight, from most important to least important, as seen in Table 1. The semantic weight of the total number of words was 962, with the first 10 words concentrating 50.8% of the total semantic weight and the remaining 113 terms concentrating the other 50%. This concentration corresponds to the fact that an important number of words had low semantic weight; however, in this first exercise, we decided to conserve the total number of words from the network regardless of their weight, because it was important to know the total number of expressions from the students. This last case includes terms like *crazy*, *grubby*, *wild*, *dirty*, and *dumb*, which call attention due to their strong symbolic weight against indigenous peoples, within a population where the majority of young students belong to these groups.

Table 1. Semantic weight and percentage of total number of words

Words	SW	% SW	Words	SW	% SW	Words	SW	% SW
Culture	117	12.2	Happy	3	0.3	Few people	2	0.2
Native tongue	75	7.8	Antisocial	3	0.3	Poet	2	0.2
Discrimination	68	7.1	Artisan	3	0.3	Uneducated	2	0.2
Poor	49	5.1	Low-income	3	0.3	Underestimated	2	0.2
Traditions	42	4.4	Hardworking	3	0.3	Taboos	2	0.2
Poverty	35	3.6	Creation	3	0.3	Term	2	0.2
Knowledge	32	3.3	Belief	3	0.3	Work	2	0.2
Person	26	2.7	Creole	3	0.3	Vulnerability	2	0.2
Humility	25	2.6	Contempt	3	0.3	Antiquity	1	0.1
Traditional attire <sup>1</sup>	20	2.1	Economy	3	0.3	Taken advantage of	1	0.1
Illiterate	19	2.0	Existence	3	0.3	Astronomer	1	0.1
Indian	19	2.0	Experience	3	0.3	Help	1	0.1
Origin	19	2.0	Tool	3	0.3	Mocked	1	0.1
Speaker	16	1.7	History	3	0.3	Common	1	0.1
Marginalization	16	1.7	Men	3	0.3	Freeloader	1	0.1
Pride	15	1.6	Humiliated	3	0.3	Spanish	1	0.1
Wisdom	14	1.5	Ignorance	3	0.3	Ethnic group	1	0.1
Identity	13	1.4	Individual	3	0.3	Strong	1	0.1
Customs	12	1.2	Intelligence	3	0.3	Equality	1	0.1
Rights	12	1.2	Interculturality	3	0.3	Laws	1	0.1
People	12	1.2	Less valued	3	0.3	Crazy	1	0.1
Respect	12	1.2	Brown-skinned	3	0.3	Place	1	0.1
Maya <sup>2</sup>	11	1.1	Worthless	3	0.3	Migration	1	0.1
Wealth	11	1.1	Pity	3	0.3	Grubby	1	0.1
Racism	10	1.0	Recognition	3	0.3	Multicolor	1	0.1
Campesino (Peasant) <sup>3</sup>	9	0.9	I'm me	3	0.3	World	1	0.1
Community	9	0.9	Support	2	0.2	Needy	1	0.1
Worker	9	0.9	Bilingual	2	0.2	Black	1	0.1
Chiapita <sup>4</sup>	8	0.8	Charitable	2	0.2	Noble	1	0.1

Education	7	0.7	Chamula <sup>5</sup>	2	0.2	Organiza- tion	1	0.1
Language	7	0.7	Chinto <sup>6</sup>	2	0.2	Population	1	0.1
Native	7	0.7	Unkempt	2	0.2	Rejection	1	0.1
World view	6	0.6	Different	2	0.2	Regiona- lisms	1	0.1
People	6	0.6	Speak	2	0.2	Vindica- tion	1	0.1
Be human	6	0.6	Honest	2	0.2	Repression	1	0.1
Country- side	5	0.5	Human	2	0.2	Rescue	1	0.1
Ignorant	5	0.5	Freedom	2	0.2	Wild	1	0.1
Forgotten	5	0.5	Mazahua <sup>7</sup>	2	0.2	Separation	1	0.1
Cho'l <sup>8</sup>	4	0.4	Mexican	2	0.2	Dirty	1	0.1
Inequality	4	0.4	Don't know	2	0.2	Dumb	1	0.1
Shame	4	0.4	Skin	2	0.2			
Farmer	3	0.3	Nothing special	2	0.2	Total	962	100.0

Source: Developed by the authors based on data obtained during fieldwork.

Now we can look at the 17 words with the greatest semantic weight, which constitute the main core of the network, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Defining words in the main core of the network

Word	SW	%	Word	SW	%
Culture	117	19.3	Traditional attire	20	3.3
Native tongue	75	12.4	Illiterate	19	3.1
Discrimination	68	11.2	Indian	19	3.1
Poor	49	8.1	Origin	19	3.1
Traditions	42	6.9	Speaker	16	2.6
Poverty	35	5.8	Marginalization	16	2.6
Knowledge	32	5.3	Pride	15	2.5
Person	26	4.3	Wisdom	14	2.3
Humility	25	4.1	Total	607	100

Source: Developed by the authors.

As observed in Table 2, 17 terms concentrate the greatest semantic weight, defining them as the Main Core of the Network, that is to say the terms that contain the core meaning of a concept (Valdés, 1998), in this case, in reference to the term *indigenous*. Defining words such as *culture* with a semantic weight of 117 (19.3%); *native tongue* with 75 (12.4%); *discrimination* with 68 (11.2%); *poor* with 49 (8.1%); *traditions* with 42 (6.9%); *poverty* with 35 (5.8%) and *knowledge* with

32 (5.3%). If the cumulative percentage for these first seven words is observed, the result is 69% of the total. It is relevant to point out that 10 of the words in the main core of the network, which constitute 62.8% of the overall percentage, have positive meanings, thus redeeming the value of indigenous traditions and pride for their cultural heritage; 14.3% represent stigma and 22.9% were words that denounce what these groups experience. The percentage of the semantic weight of these last words was not high compared to the level of acceptance; nevertheless, it is striking that students from these universities express words of stigmatization towards this social sector. Figure 1 shows these results.

Figure 1. Percentage of semantic categories of the main core of the network



Source: Developed by the authors.

#### ANALYSIS OF MEANING

On a second level, words were analyzed for their connotation. Three semantic categories were constructed (Reyes, 1993; Valdés, 1998) based on the relations of synonymy of some words. The analytical categories were as follows: acceptance, with *positive* words that denote feelings of approval and pride towards indigenous groups; stigmatization, with *negative* words that express rejection, mockery, non-acceptance; and denunciation, using words that indicate situations of *marginalization* and *structural discrimination* that have characterized these communities for centuries. Following, we provide a review of the terms grouped in each of these categories.

#### ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is voluntarily receiving what is offered, what one person grants to another who receives it freely, without any objection or consideration. In the case of social interactions, acceptance is relating freely and voluntarily with others, without regard for their physical or social characteristics, ways of thinking, ideologies, customs, political preferences or sexual orientation. In the case of students in the sample, acceptance means respect for the lifestyles, traditions and cultures of indigenous groups. It is openly declaring recognition for the cultural legacy and knowledge that these communities contribute to the configuration of Mexican society. See Table 3.

Table 3. Acceptance Category

Acceptance	SW	%
Culture	117	19.3
Native tongue	75	12.4
Traditions	42	6.9
Knowledge	32	5.3
Person	26	4.3
Humility	25	4.1
Origin	19	3.1
Speaker	16	2.6
Pride	15	2.5
Wisdom	14	2.3
Partial total	381	62.8

Source: Developed by the authors.

Table 3 highlights favorable terms towards indigenous peoples that received great semantic weight: *culture* (117), *native tongue* (75), *traditions* (42) and *knowledge* (32). These words contain the meaning of what the word indigenous means to them, associated with situations of pride and recognition for their ancient traditions and cultural legacy. If these young students refer to native groups using these terms, it is because they value the cultural legacy that these groups have contributed to the conformation of Mexican culture and they express it in words.

### STIGMATIZATION

Stigma is a classification of rejection towards a person or group because s/he/they bear an attribute that the dominant group considers to be negative. In colloquial language, pejorative and offensive terms are used to refer to people who, for some particular characteristic, are different from the general public, thus causing rejection and estrangement. To bear this particular difference makes the virtues invisible and places these people in a situation of disadvantage and inferiority compared to others, creating an effect of social disrepute compared to others (Goffman, 2008). In the case of indigenous peoples, the lack of information and certain stereotypes embedded in the social collective imaginary leads them to be stigmatized for physical traits such as their height, facial features or skin color, or for cultural characteristics like their customs, native tongue or clothing. The stigmatizing terms used to refer to indigenous peoples indicate that some university students in the sample, although they belong to these very groups, continue to reject them. In the following table, the stigmatizing terms with greater semantic weight are shown.

Table 4. Stigmatization Category

Stigmatization	SW	%
Poor	49	8.1
Illiterate	19	3.1
Indian	19	3.1
Partial total	87	14.3

Source: Developed by the authors.

Terms with high semantic weight, such as *poor* (49), *illiterate* (19) and *Indian* (19), stand out. In regards to this last term, although we recognize it as an anthropological category used to refer to native groups in Mesoamerica, in this case it is considered a stigmatizing term due to the reasons indicated by students to defend this choice of words. Upon analysis of the reasons that young people offered to explain the stigmatizing terms they used to define indigenous peoples, we observe that they are related to situations of precariousness and personal insufficiencies such as being ignored due to a lack of education or living in distant, hard to access locations. In addition, in the words written by the students, we observed that these situations seemed to depend more on a question of personal will rather than structural living conditions that are difficult to overcome. It is concerning that young people who come from these communities use stigmatizing words to refer to their own ancestors and blood relatives, which shows that racism as a differentiating phenomenon continues to be present, even within these very communities. Even though there are very few terms with representative semantic weight, the attitudes of exclusion and discrimination they represent are still present through these kinds of terms.

## DENUNCIATION

University students have been a sector sensitive to social injustices. Indigenous groups in Mexico have been exploited and marginalized from social benefits (Castellanos, 2010, 2003; Gall, 2004; Paris, 2002; Saldaña, 2013) because the State and its representatives have failed to resolve the structural problems that enshroud this population (Castellanos, 2010, 2001; Paris, 2001; Gall, 2001). Social marginalization provokes vulnerability in determined social sectors; in the case of indigenous peoples, systematic anti-indigenous racism has been denied under the argument of miscegenation; however, different voices have produced multiple statements about the presence of a “clear phenomenon of great weight” (Gall, 2004: 221) and regarding the different forms racism adopts in the daily practices of Mexican society. In this category of denunciation, terms that indicate situations of inequality, exclusion, inequity and structural discrimination that have characterized these communities for centuries are included. At the core of the network, four terms stand out that were used to indicate situations of inequality, injustice, exclusion and discrimination that students expressed in reference to ethnic groups, as presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Denunciation Category

Denunciation	SW	%
Discrimination	68	11.2
Poverty	35	5.8
Traditional attire	20	3.3
Marginalization	16	2.6
Partial total	139	22.9

Source: Developed by the authors.

Words with great semantic weight such as *discrimination* (68), *poverty* (35), *traditional attire* (20) and *marginalization* (16) were mentioned and upon analysis of the reasons why they were written, research subjects denounced issues of social injustice, inequality and being forgotten by different governments that have held the responsibility of correcting these situations but have failed to carry out actions to reduce this delay. The young students denounced discrimination; they are conscious of the inequality and marginalization that ethnic groups experience and they refer to how the authorities have forgotten about these populations and the way their rights are affected based on their native tongue, dress and cultural traditions. Student testimonies also denounce how, in a country like Mexico, with its multicultural and multiethnic characteristics, ethnic minorities are not only treated differently, but also in the majority of cases, they are situated in a status of inferiority in regards to other social groups.

## CONCLUSIONS

A review of the international and national bibliography indicates that racism persists as a differentiating, exclusionary phenomenon. This social problem is rooted in multicultural societies. This is not a new occurrence, rather it dates back to the history of each society, in such a way that dominant groups have negatively classified, and thus discriminated against, all those who are different due to one or several biological or cultural characteristics. In the case of Mexico, the conquest and colonization of New Spain were scarred by a history of injustice and abuses by the Spaniards and creole peoples against indigenous peoples.

These manifestations were later adopted by mixed-race, *mestizo* peoples, spreading a sense of superiority over other ethnic groups. A social differentiation arose based on skin pigmentation. Indigenist acculturation projects during the first decades of the 20th century were aimed to strengthen nationalism based on miscegenation, seeking for these communities to forget their ancient cultural traditions and to integrate to the lifestyles of urban regions, spreading the idea that being indigenous and speaking an indigenous language were shameful. As a result, many indigenous peoples had to forget their cultural roots, their native language and clothing to become part of modern life, which developed feelings of disindigenization (assimilation) among the indigenous population and of animadversion and rejection by mixed-race people towards native communities.

In our empirical inquiry, our aim was to know what students express at three intercultural universities whose mission includes a direct offering to students from

different regions of the country, especially to students of indigenous origin. Word association, as well as further interpretation with semantic networks, was used as a tool that allows people to express the meaning of something or someone in a spontaneous and “authentic” fashion (Abric, 2001), in this case the meaning of the word “indigenous.” From the moment of testing the tool and particularly during its application at the three universities, it was interesting to observe how students would immediately write down what came to mind, thus achieving a rapid association with the trigger or guide word. In the results, we found that students wrote down a number of terms that have different connotations. As expected, the most numerous words were the ones with a positive meaning towards indigenous peoples. However, it is striking that close to one fifth of the words mentioned hold a negative connotation and express stigma. These two poles indicate that six of every ten students hold a favorable vision of indigenous peoples, whereas two of every ten reject them. This is not a majority but it does indicate that racism is also present at these educational institutions.

In the network's core, composed of words with greater semantic weight, the situation changed, although pejorative words did not disappear. Stigmatization diminished but continued, indicating that due to their semantic relevance, stigmatizing terms have lesser importance. It is interesting to emphasize the results of the Stigmatization category. It strikes our attention that intercultural universities enroll a sector of youth coming from different indigenous groups and that these young people proceed to express themselves pejoratively about this group, as if it were a different sector than their own.

The three words that appear at the center of the network received negative ratings, that is to say, stigma or symbolic branding of a person that is not considered to be human. These words could be read this way: “The indigenous person is related to a *poor, illiterate Indian person*.” It is noteworthy that this sector of students exercised different expressions of exclusion and violence towards other youth who are also Spanish-speaking students. Nicknames also demonstrate this (Hamel, 2001; Hernández and Estrada, 2012). In our sample, a young person from the Higher Education Institute that opens its doors to students from indigenous groups is, paradoxically, the one to stigmatize indigenous people. Independently of whether or not the percentage registered at the core of the network is low compared to the categories of acceptance and denunciation, racism is detected deep down in Mexican society, to the extent that even excluded groups have integrated it.

In this first inquiry into expressions of racism towards indigenous peoples by students at three intercultural universities, each university and each institution were seen to be a micro-universe where numerous practices derived from dominant representations and cultural principles were displayed. On the one hand, students reproduce what exists outside the school walls, but also actors add their own style and seal to these practices. Exclusion of the other simply for being different is also present in these institutions, regardless of being a university that houses a percentage of students belonging to an indigenous group.

The answers provided by young students at intercultural universities show that racism as an exclusionary expression continues to exist today and is present on a daily basis in different spheres of social life, including a university setting. A differentiating phenomenon triggers discrimination that mainly targets minority groups; it is inevitable to inquire about its multiple and diverse expressions and

document these findings in order to act against its harmful effects. Given this extensive disdain, young people prefer to assume they are mixed-race or *mestizo*, rather than indigenous, to avoid being subject to marginalization. Although not justified in the young people's attitudes, it is necessary to reflect upon these situations in order to try to understand their written expressions and to open debate on civic education at educational institutions.

To consider indigenous people to be poor and illiterate assumes that their situation depends more on their personal will than on their historical and social circumstances. The context does not observe and does not recognize that the situation of indigenous peoples is immersed in a social context that reproduces injustice and discrimination, simply condemning the person for being *illiterate* and *ignorant*. These stigmas manifest both rejection of and contempt for indigenous peoples.

This stigma and discrimination are similar to what other researchers who have studied school settings in Mexico have also found. In their investigations, they have found that school principals and teachers negatively classify immigrant students, those who do not speak Spanish rather an indigenous language, and they are treated differentially.

Mexico is a multi-ethnic and multicultural country: to recognize that fact implies unrestricted respect for cultural differences, where different groups are mutually enriched in a climate of respect for the legal foundations of the State and the will and understanding of its inhabitants. Cultural pluralism that defends peaceful co-existence among multiple cultural communities is the result of political and social citizenry, but that must be built. Moreover, it is necessary to promote recognition for cultural diversity as an essential characteristic of a nation, with equal treatment for all, including ethnic minorities with their specificities, as long as they do not threaten the instruments of Rule of Law and human rights that should govern social life in a country that pretends to walk down the path of democracy.

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## (Footnotes)

1 Translator's Note: The word "vestimenta" refers here to the traditional dress, apparel or clothing of indigenous peoples, although the word "vestimenta" can also be used in reference to clothing used by people of the clergy or other groups with traditional apparel.

2 TN: Maya is the name of an indigenous people native to southeast México, Guatemala and Belize.

3 TN: Campesino is a term in Spanish to refer to people who live and work in rural areas, and their way of life, who are normally smallholder farmers.

4 TN: Chiapita is a pejorative way to refer to an indigenous person from the state of Chiapas.

5 TN: Chamula is a term sometimes used generically to refer to different Mayan ethnic *groups*—Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Mame, Tojolabal and Chol—that inhabit the mountain areas of the state of Chiapas, or to residents of the municipality of San Juan Chamula.

6 TN: Chinto is a word used in Mexico to refer pejoratively to someone with seemingly indigenous traits or attitudes "Parece chinto" ("He looks indigenous") or "No chintees" ("Don't behave like an Indian").

7 TN: Mazahua is the name of an indigenous people, and their language, native to certain regions of central Mexico, including certain areas of the states of Mexico and Michoacan, among others.

8 TN: Ch'ol is a Mayan indigenous language spoken by the Chol people who live in the northern region of the state of Chiapas.