Americanization Is Tough on “Macho”

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Rose del Castillo Guilbault was born in 1952 in Sonora, Mexico, and was educated at San Jose State University in California. For the past fourteen years she has worked as director of editorial and public affairs for KGO-TV, the ABC affiliate in San Francisco. For two years, she wrote a column called “Hispanic USA,” which appeared in This World, a weekly magazine of the San Francisco Chronicle. In one of these columns, “Americanization Is Tough on ‘Macho,’” Guilbault defines American and Hispanic attitudes toward the connotations of the word macho.

AMERICANIZATION IS TOUGH ON “MACHO”

What is macho? That depends which side of the border you come from.

Although it’s not unusual for words and expressions to lose their subtlety in translation, the negative connotations of macho in this country are troublesome to Hispanics.

Take the newspaper descriptions of alleged mass murderer Ramon Salcido. That an insensitive, insanely jealous, hard-drinking, violent Latin male is referred to as macho makes Hispanics cringe.

“Es muy macho,” the women in my family nod approvingly, describing a man they respect. But in the United States, when women say, “He’s so macho,” it’s with disdain.

The Hispanic macho is manly, responsible, hardworking, a man in charge, a patriarch. A man who expresses strength through silence. What the Yiddish language would call a mensch.

The American macho is a chauvinist, a brute, uncouth, selfish, loud, abrasive, capable of inflicting pain, and sexually promiscuous.

Quintessential macho models in this country are Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Charles Bronson. In their movies, they exude toughness, independence, masculinity. But a closer look reveals their machismo is really violence masquerading as courage, sullenness disguised as silence and irresponsibility-camouflaged as independence.

If the Hispanic ideal of macho were translated to American screen roles, they might be Jimmy Stewart, Sean Connery and Laurence Olivier.

In Spanish, macho ennobles Latin males. In English it devalues them. This pattern seems consistent with the conflicts ethnic minority males experience in this country. Typically the cultural traits other societies value don’t translate as desirable characteristics in America.

I watched my own father struggle with these cultural ambiguities. He worked on a farm for twenty years. He laid down miles of irrigation pipe, carefully plowed long, neat rows in fields, hacked away at recalcitrant weeds and drove tractors through whirlpools of dust. He stoically worked twenty-hour days during harvest season, accepting the long hours as part of agricultural work. When the boss complained or upbraided him for minor mistakes, he kept quiet, even when it was obvious the boss had erred.
He handled the most menial tasks with pride. At home he was a good provider, helped out my mother’s family in Mexico without complaint, and was indulgent with me. Arguments between my mother and him generally had to do with money, or with his stubborn reluctance to share his troubles. He tried to work them out in his own silence. He didn’t want to trouble my mother—a course that backfired, because the imagined is always worse than the reality.

Americans regarded my father as decidedly un-macho. His character was interpreted as nonassertive, his loyalty non-ambition, and his quietness, ignorance. I once overheard the boss’s son blame him for plowing crooked rows in a field. My father merely smiled at the lie, knowing the boy had done it, but didn’t refute it, confident his good work was well known. But the boss instead ridiculed him for being “stupid” and letting a kid get away with a lie. Seeing my embarrassment, my father dismissed the incident, saying “They’re the dumb ones. Imagine, me fighting with a kid.”

I tried not to look at him with American eyes because sometimes the reflection hurt.

Listening to my aunts’ clucks of approval, my vision focused on the qualities America overlooked. “He’s such a hard worker. So serious, so responsible.” My aunts would secretly compliment my mother. The unspoken comparison was that he was not like some of their husbands, who drank and womanized. My uncles represented the darker side of macho.

In a patriarchal society, few challenge their roles. If men drink, it’s because it’s the manly thing to do. If they gamble, it’s because it’s how men relax. And if they fool around, well, it’s because a man simply can’t hold back so much man! My aunts didn’t exactly meekly sit back, but they put up with these transgressions because Mexican society dictated this was their lot in life.

In the United States, I believe it was the feminist movement of the early ’70s that changed macho’s meaning. Perhaps my generation of Latin women was in part responsible. I recall Chicanas complaining about the chauvinistic nature of Latin men and the notion they wanted their women barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen. The generalization that Latin men embodied chauvinistic traits led to this interesting twist of semantics. Suddenly a word that represented something positive in one culture became a negative prototype in another.

The problem with the use of macho today is that it’s become an accepted stereotype of the Latin male. And like all stereotypes, it distorts truth.

The impact of language in our society is undeniable. And the misuse of macho hints at a deeper cultural misunderstanding that extends beyond mere word definitions.