

Culture's influence on identity

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By Marina Pisano

David Ramirez hasn't lived in San Antonio since 1971, but the psychologist will be back in his hometown Wednesday to present the fifth Annual Frank Paredes Lecture, in conjunction with the American Psychological Association's Expert Summit on Immigration on Thursday. His subject: "A Cultural Inheritance: The 'Mojado' Immigrant Roots of My Psychoanalytic Identity."

A 1969 graduate of Edison High School, Ramirez attended San Antonio College before completing his undergraduate and graduate doctoral studies at the [University of Texas at Austin](#). He is director of psychological services at Swarthmore College, a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, where he lives with his wife of 24 years and a son, 11, and daughter, 14. As national president of the association's Division of Psychoanalysis, he works to promote awareness of cultural issues in the field, and in a recent phone conversation he talked about that and how culture shapes and informs his work.

You mentioned your parents are deceased, and you don't have family here now, so do you get back very often?

No, not very often. This will be kind of a homecoming for me, and I'm pretty excited about coming to San Antonio as a place and about giving this talk. I miss San Antonio and Austin, the food, the culture. And I miss the attitude toward living, which is a little ratcheted down from the experience on the East Coast.

What is your life like out there?

I've been at Swarthmore (near Philadelphia) for about 15 years, and it's an incredibly special place, a small, elite college. As director of psychological services (for students), I don't teach, but I train and supervise doctoral students who come here as interns. The campus is just mind-boggling. It's maintained like an arboretum, so it's a physically striking place. It's a very satisfying life

professionally. I yearn for my roots, but I'm pretty content (at Swarthmore) also. To live and raise a family here is compelling.

How have those cultural roots shaped you?

I grew up with the sense of being both different from the majority culture but also very facile with it. I was an assimilated kid and grew up speaking English. I knew how the majority culture worked, and I've always been able to move around in it. So part of the cultural inheritance has been to allow me both to experience being a part of something and apart from it. To be able to feel what it's like to be outside something — that's actually pretty big. I characterize it as an outsider-insider status.

Does culture affect psychological issues?

I think life issues are the same for everyone. Existential issues are the same. But culture matters. The psychology of cultural background varies depending on context, on where you are. That matters a lot. It changes your subjective experience of yourself. Your idea about how other people see you can also change. Being Mexican American in Philadelphia is almost irrelevant because there's no real context. The Mexican American culture almost disappears in Philadelphia, whereas in San Antonio, it's a defining element. I think people here are more interested in me because I'm from Texas. I'm almost exotic.

You're a leader in psychoanalysis, which was founded by Freud and comes out of a 19th century, white patriarchal society. It's associated with years of expensive treatment and affluent, educated people. Is it relevant for diverse cultures today, for the poor or for the immigrant experience being discussed at this summit?

It's one of those funny ironies in my career that my graduate program had a very dim view of psychoanalysis,

and I came East to study with all the weirdos in psychoanalysis. But psychoanalytic thinking, the theory just pervades psychology even in places where people don't think of it. For example, the idea that the human mind has unconscious cognitive experiences that happen outside our awareness but nevertheless affect the way we think and feel — the idea of the dynamic unconscious. Those psychoanalytic concepts are there in psychology.

The old stereotype is alive, but psychoanalysis is not just for the socially and economically elite. There are many, many practitioners who are trained psychoanalytically and are working in community mental health centers, clinics and hospitals. Our division Web site (www.division39.org) summarizes outreach efforts by members to help people who need it. The division program at this summit is about one of our members with an Asian-Indian background who has started a clinic at Massachusetts General Hospital specifically designed to meet the needs of the Asian population. A lot of them are immigrants.

But does psychoanalysis fit in with managed care and the shift from lengthy sessions of talk therapy to medications?

Plenty of studies show that combining medication with psychotherapy is more effective treatment and more long lasting treatment than medication alone. There's room for both.

You've gone far since Edison. Will you drop by your old high school while you're here?

No, but I will get some good Mexican food. In a way, this trip makes me a little nervous. You go back to your hometown and you feel like a kid again. Things you forgot come flooding back to you. It's like ancient history. But that's another idea from psychoanalysis. Your history stays with you even if it's not particularly active. It's always there