

## Features of a Local Culture as Viewed from the Perspective of Strangers

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**Key words:** local culture; grounded theory methodology; CAQDAS; migration; Mexico; sense of self; autoethnography

**Abstract:** This article describes a unique mixing of grounded theory methodology (GTM) and autoethnographic methods in a study of the difficulties faced by individuals (of the professional class) moving from the cosmopolitan urban areas of Mexico to a middle-sized, more traditional city, as I had done when I moved from Mexico City to Aguascalientes. The problem of suddenly finding myself to be a stranger in my own land began as a personal concern, but migrated into a professional sociological concern as I designed a GTM study that would allow me to examine the issue from a wider perspective.

For this study, I conducted 19 two-to-three hour interviews of individuals who fit the criteria of professional migrants. The transcripts were analyzed in the computer program MAXQDA. Analysis included reviewing the interview transcripts multiple times, coding them, writing memos, and sketching diagrams that would describe my emerging notions. While autoethnography was a starting point for my work, GTM was central to the research design and analysis techniques I followed.

This investigation revealed that smaller cities in Mexico, a rapidly developing nation, are experiencing a broad range of social pressures at many levels of society. These pressures result in sharp dichotomies that are experienced among insiders and outsiders. Thus, in Aguascalientes, insiders, on the one hand, present themselves to outsiders as hermetic, double-sided, mediocre, incompetent, and, on the other hand, they also present themselves as kind, open, good people, having a strong civic education. These strong contrasts in how insiders and outsiders view each other seem to be an expression of wider changes in which individuals find themselves in the modern Mexican context.

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## 1. Introduction

Stranger: That was the word that came up when I moved from Mexico City, my hometown, to Aguascalientes, a city of about 700,000 people, close to 600 kilometers north in the inland center of the country. Stranger since I saw myself as a person different from how others viewed me and thus treated me accordingly. "It is Mexico,"—I kept repeating to myself—"and people in the capital and people from Aguascalientes cannot be that different." These were my thoughts in 1992, when this city in the interior of Mexico first showed me its face. I found a society that I previously supposed to be only the country's past, and I witnessed events that surprised me to the point that my intention of gaining a sense of reality got lost in the labyrinths of nonsense. I could not grasp enough certainties to allow me to stay away from others' definitions of who I was. Thus, discussing and elaborating my arguments progressively ceased to make any sense and the world subtly turned flat, gray and simple. Parallel to my lack of understanding, I experienced a generalized incapability to take action. I was like a fly trapped in a spider's web: the more I moved the more I was paralyzed.<sup>1</sup> [1]

I tried to understand, listened to people, read about them, and even turned the city of Aguascalientes and its inhabitants into the focus of my research. I found out that the city had gone through huge changes in only about fifteen years, benchmarked by happenings such as the allocation of the governmental institute to be in charge of generating census data in the late 1980s, and the installation of transnational industries due to the successful engagement of Aguascalientes in the global market economy<sup>2</sup> (see BÉNARD, 2004). Nevertheless, this did not allow me to regain a sense of reality which aids me to position myself in relationship to others, particularly members of the in-group. It was not until I discovered grounded theory and started to apply it to the understanding of the sociocultural realm of my new hometown that I could make sense of it, and therefore, place myself within it. [2]

I used grounded theory as Anselm STRAUSS and Juliet CORBIN propose it.<sup>3</sup> The relevance of grounded theory for the clarification of my research topic was due, first of all, to two principles of that methodology. One was to put aside my own perspective and knowledge of the topic so that I could more freely listen to the people I spoke with in the format of open interviews. That way I could follow

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1 The concept of a stranger was first elaborated by Georg SIMMEL to refer to someone who is not completely alien to a social realm but has certain distance from it (see FRISBY, 1993). Alfred SCHÜTZ (1976 [1964]) on his classical essay called "The Stranger, an Essay on Social Psychology," following SIMMEL's line of thought, offers the following definition: "[T]he term 'stranger' shall mean an adult individual of our times and civilization who tries to be permanently accepted or at least tolerated by the group which he approaches" (p.91). And he argues that the outstanding example of a stranger is precisely, the immigrant.

2 The institute is the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática* (INEGI), reallocated in Aguascalientes after the earthquake that devastated Mexico City in 1985. Among the most important industries that moved to the city were Nissan, Texas Instrument, and Xerox.

3 I have used mostly their second edition of "Basics of Qualitative Research" in its Spanish version published by the Universidad de Antioquia (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998), and also their third edition (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2008), and the resumed version of it as presented by CORBIN (2010) in a conference organized at the Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes in 2008 (see BÉNARD, 2010).

their narratives, and intervene only to ask questions that would let them elaborate on topics, feelings, and perceptions they themselves brought into the dialogue. I began the interviews with an open question, which consisted of asking each interviewee to tell me his or her story, to tell me how it had been for them to move to and live in the middle-sized city previously having lived in a bigger metropolitan area.<sup>4</sup> [3]

As I listened to them, I observed how issues came up: Some often repeated a certain issue; other issues were brought up in one or two interviews, but sometimes with the same intensity as they appeared in my own story. There were also topics that people brought to my attention, which I had not previously contemplated, not to mention others which I had considered as very significant. [4]

The second principle of grounded theory that I followed was to be aware of my own perceptions, feelings, and prejudices, not by pretending that I did not have any or avoiding them, as some researchers still assume it to be possible. On the contrary, I made my views explicit to myself in the many memos I wrote during the interviewing and analysis process, and I continued to work on them while I wrote. This process of confrontation and introspection helped me understand the in-group, develop a sense of empathy with some members of the out-group, and progressively regain a better sense of self. [5]

It is for certain that without grounded theory as methodology I would have not been able to make sense of my data. This was so because when facing that local culture and being treated as someone different than I saw myself, I experienced what Alfred SCHÜTZ has defined as *a crisis*. [6]

SCHÜTZ (1976 [1964], p.231) makes reference to how social groups count on a general understanding of the sociocultural realm, its institutionalized forms of social organization, its systems of status and prestige, etc. These traditional or habitual patterns of representation shared by a specific group help its members to make sense of everyday situations. Nevertheless, these become problematic when new situations arise. [7]

On an individual level, when the typifications of a certain group are imposed, they have different impact depending on whether they are viewed as positive or negative by the individual, and also according to the extent to which the typification takes place. If he or she is defined, even in broad terms, according to something considered by the typified as positive, he or she could even view it as a form of self-realization, because the typifier confirms the typified's definition of self.

"But if he is compelled to identify himself as a whole with that particular trait or characteristic which places him in terms of the imposed system of heterogeneous relevance into a social category he had never included as a relevant one in the definition of his private situation, then he feels that he is no longer treated as a human being in his own right and freedom, but is degraded to an interchangeable

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4 I also followed the insights of MAY (2006 [1994]), MORSE (2006 [1994]), and SANDELOWSKI (2006 [1994]).

specimen of the typified class. He is alienated from himself, a mere representative of the typified traits and characteristics. He is deprived of his right to the pursuit of happiness. This may even lead to a complete breakdown of his private order of domains of relevance—that is, to a crisis ..." (pp.256-257). [8]

That definition of crisis, a complete breakdown of an individual's private order of domains of relevance, very much reflects my situation when I moved to Aguascalientes. For many years, I had identified with one particular characteristic that was of great significance to me: a professional sociologist. When I moved to Aguascalientes, I was identified on the whole by the in-group as being in a social category not meaningful to me in a public way: a spouse and a housewife. And just as SCHÜTZ argues, I felt "degraded to an exchangeable specimen of the typified class" (p.256). The more I intended to negotiate my reality with the in-group whose members constituted the only available relationships I had at that time, the more I fell into the dark land of nonsense. There was little space in the receiving community for a woman like me, or like I thought I was. [9]

In my case, one of the paths out of the crisis was to stick to sociology, which was what I thought defined me more accurately, and to investigate the social world of those who imposed their typification system on me. However, the breakdown of my private order of domains of relevance did not allow me to distance myself enough from the in-group in order to make sense of my place in it as an outsider. It was grounded theory and qualitative computing that allowed me to approach the topic and make sense of it. [10]

## **2. Qualitative Computing**

I conducted 19 two-three hour interviews, which were all transcribed and first analyzed aided by color pencils and cards. In a first approach, interviews were read many times and marked according to the topics that appeared and repeated themselves and memos were written in separate cards. In a second stage of the analysis, I made use of the program MAXQDA in order to conduct a more organized and systematic analysis. The use of the program allowed me to code segments of the transcribed interviews, assign codes, define properties and dimensions of them and organize all according to the frequency in which they appeared on the interviews. Parallel to that process, I wrote many memos in order to explore the data more thoroughly, establish the relationships between the codes and elaborate the categories. Memo writing also gave me the opportunity to explore my own perceptions and biases and to confront them with those of the people I interviewed. It was through this process, that I could construct an understanding of the in-group as viewed by strangers that could stand on its own.



Illustration 1: The data in MAXQDA (enlarge this figure [here](#)) [11]

The following chart presents the pseudonyms of the interviewees and their major characteristics.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Place of birth</b>	<b>Years settled in</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Other cities, or countries, of residence</b>
Alejandro	Zacatecas	Less than one	Architect	Querétaro, Culiacan
Ana	Durango	More than twenty	Nutriologist and sociologist	Monterrey, Paris
Bertha	Campeche	More than twenty	House wife	Mexico City, Paris
Carmen	Mexico City	More than twenty	Sociologist	None
David	Acapulco	Less than one	Car salesman	None
Denise	Guerrero	Less than five	University student	Cuernavaca
Emma	Saltillo	Less than five	Architect	Mexico City, Saltillo, Guanajuato, San Cristobal de las Casas, Spain
Ignacio	Jalisco	Less than five	Catholic brother	Guadalajara, Morelia, Querétaro, Monterrey, Spain
Isabel	Jalisco	More than twenty	University professor and therapist	Guadalajara
Julia	Mexico City	More than twenty	Kinder garden teacher	Puebla
Laura	Mexico City	More than twenty	Research assistant	None

Pseudonym	Place of birth	Years settled in	Profession	Other cities, or countries, of residence
Maria	Jalisco	Less than five	Alternative medicine	None
Maria Emilia	Mexico City	Less than ten	Government functionary	USA and Europe
Norma	Mexico City	More than ten	University professor	None
Pedro	Yucatán	More than twenty	Government consultant	Mexico City, France
Rocío	Mexico City	More than twenty	English teacher	None
Rodrigo	Mexico City	Less than five	Museum director	None
Silvia	Mexico City	More than ten years	Editorial designer	None
Susana	Michoacán	More than five years	Kinder garden teacher	Mexico City

Table 1: List of the interviewees [12]

The results of my analysis, which will be presented below, appeared as mostly negative. This concerned me and caused me to question my data. Nevertheless, I found SCHÜTZ's arguments about the topic to be of invaluable help. He argues that when an in-group, the members of the incoming society, meet strangers, or the out-group (in this case the Mexican migrants from other parts of the country), they establish complex relationships in which the in-group feels that the misunderstanding of their ways of life must respond to prejudices or bad faith. This leads the in-group to develop a stronger solidarity and to resist strangers. The out-group reacts negatively to this closing of the in-group, fortifying the interpretation that the in-group is "highly detestable" (1976 [1964], p.247). This vicious circle established between natives and strangers makes perfect sense when looking at the traits of local culture as viewed by strangers. [13]

### **2.1 Results obtained by the use of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS)**

Local culture is only one of the topics present in my research topic, which is concerned with the process through which Mexican migrants from larger metropolitan areas develop a sense of belonging in the middle-sized city of Aguascalientes (see BÉNARD, 2009). The results presented here refer only to one topic that has appeared as very significant in the process through which strangers generate a sense of belonging in their new urban setting.

Table 2: Complete code system (enlarge this table [here](#)) [14]

The following are the elements that strangers use to define local culture. They will be presented according to the relevance with which they appeared in the analysis. [15]

### 2.1.1 *Hermetic*

The most relevant negative characteristic the foreigners mentioned to refer to natives was that they are *hermetic* people. They meant that the natives interact only or primarily with relatives. Second, they mentioned that beyond family relationships, they prefer to interact with friends, and mostly those they have known for a long time. And finally, interacting with people who come from other parts of the country, particularly Mexico City, is something natives would rather avoid. [16]

Julia describes the distance strangers perceive when intending to get closer to members of the inner group:

"A friend from here is like a jewel. No, no, no, it is rare for someone from here to open up. A classmate from Aguascalientes when I was studying in Mexico City told me: 'If someone from Aguascalientes invites you to his house, you can consider yourself to be his/her super friend.' And, yes, I do think so!" [17]

Other interviewees, like Julia, accepted or acknowledged that they did have friends from Aguascalientes. Nevertheless, they described the difficulty with which they had acquired them. Pedro and Bertha mentioned that they had good and close friends among native people and made reference to two cases:

Pedro: "[Two couples] have been good friends with us. Those couples are good *Aguascalense* friends. They are the kind of friends to share with them at home."

Silvia Benard: "Could we tell, then, that they make no difference between you and people born here?"

Pedro: "In that case, no?"

Bertha: "In that case, yes! [One of the couples] lived for many years in Mexico City, thus both are more open." [18]

Besides, while natives strive to circumscribe their interactions to family and people they have known for a long time, strangers criticize them for always trying to locate people socially; from the moment they know someone, they want to find out who their relatives are and whom they know. Emma's unease when narrating an episode of the kind, tells a lot about the difference in perspective among strangers and natives regarding this issue:

"My aunt has lived here all her life. And I remember talking to her:

—A friend of mine is Juanito Pérez Pérez.

—Of the Pérez, of the uncles, the cousins of the nephews of ...

—I don't know, he is Juanito Pérez Pérez, I did not ask him either who his father was, or who are their relatives, and I don't care to know.

And then, on the next family gathering, she told me: 'Guess what? I found out, he is the son of such and such.' Oh my God! It is pointless to have all that useless information in your head. What is the use for her to know the family tree of a person from Aguascalientes?!" [19]

That, which appears to be so trivial to Emma, is important from the local perspective, it is a strategy that allows natives to identify the members of the in-group and locate them in the social hierarchy. Once the person is identified, he or she can be treated accordingly to his/her position. [20]

A very common phrase used by natives is *gente de aquí de toda la vida* [people from here for all their lives]. This serves as a kind of a social certificate of acceptance in the in-group and it is the most commonly used among people with the highest social status. That same phrase is particularly disliked by strangers, possibly due to the fact that many of them belonged to the same social status, or even a higher one in their place of origin, and now the local bourgeoisie bars their entrance to a social space they assume are entitled to. [21]

María Emilia, a woman from Mexico City who belonged to a family with a long bourgeois tradition, mentions:

"It reached the point in which, you know, I decided not to go [out with people from Aguascalientes]. They would invite me to the golf club and because of [a couple of friends] I'd go. They are nice people, but the rest, no, I'm sorry but I do not feel comfortable with them. You feel that everything you say is wrong, that if you dress the way you do, it is because you feel too much; that if you are *chilanga*,<sup>5</sup> you are

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5 This is a somehow pejorative word to refer to people from Mexico City.

crooked, and they dislike the accent you have and the way you talk. Then, yes, it is difficult. I can tell you that I was not welcomed." [22]

She is a good example of how people from Mexico City felt mistreated by people from Aguascalientes, who even though being viewed as less sophisticated, felt that they had the right to criticize big city people. [23]

### 2.1.2 Double-sided

Besides seeming closed off, natives appeared two-faced to foreigners. Nevertheless, this negative characteristic was far more difficult to decipher because although strangers can sense a great ambivalence from members of the in group, it is hard for them to apprehend what is really going on. [24]

Some strangers describe natives as *people of appearances* and to them that means people who pretend to be what they wish they were or what they think it is expected from them. For that reason, they fake, for example, having a higher social status or being a role model. Due to such behaviors, natives are constantly trying to act according to the mores and norms of the place, doing such things as visiting friends, particularly if they happen to have a problem, and going to social events such as weddings, christenings, first communions, funeral wakes, etc. [25]

In order to be able to act according to what is socially expected from them and live their everyday real life, natives have probably no choice but to resort to appearances, a social resource that at the same time it is viewed as natural to them, it disconcerts and annoys strangers. [26]

Strangers mentioned three aspects that appeared particularly disturbing to them. The first was what they qualified as *hypocrisy* given that, according to their testimonies, natives talk about others when absent and, when they have to confront the people they talked about, they do not express the same disapproval. To the contrary, they even sometimes adulate the person they were criticizing behind his/her back. [27]

The second aspect, more frequently mentioned than the one above, was the *inconsistency of their interactions*, given the fact that natives change the way in which they interact with strangers according to circumstances and to their own convenience. [28]

Something often mentioned by the interviewees was how natives change their level of closeness in their encounters. They could have talked about very personal issues on one occasion with a stranger and two or three days later, meet the same person and react as if they were only acquaintances or, even worse, do not even say hello. [29]

An example of these inconsistencies, strangers cited the changes natives show when they greet them. Local people are viewed as two-faced because they kiss

when they greet if they are by themselves, but when meeting again, if they are with other members of the inner group, they may hardly say hello or pretend they do not know them. [30]

Greetings, as simple as they may appear, become an issue because they sum up several implicit conceptions worth deciphering. For many strangers, particularly those coming from Mexico City, greeting with a kiss is very common: they do it even if they just met, they do not distinguish between women and men, they do not tend to change their greeting ways whether the person is married or single, younger or older. Greeting with a kiss in Mexico City is interpreted as a genteel gesture. It is also true that this is a practice among members of the high middle class, but it is not common among people of lower classes. The members of the middle class do not use that gesture when greeting the poor. [31]

In Aguascalientes, greeting with a kiss is not so common, and it is even less common among men and women. Furthermore, for the inner group it is interpreted as a gesture that would express much more closeness given that traditionally this type of greeting is reserved for family members, particularly parents and their children. Natives do not want to treat non-relatives, particularly foreigners, as they treat their relatives. [32]

Therefore, when strangers and natives encounter, they begin a kind of dance—kissing, no kissing, greeting by hand, kissing among women but not with men, this time but not the next, alone but not in the presence of important others—, where the in- group and the out-group interpret meaning based on different codes. This results in many misunderstandings and multiplies the unease of everyday interactions. [33]

The other aspect that was frequently mentioned by strangers regarding the two-facedness of natives was their use of *double standards*, particularly in topics regarding gender issues. Foreigners feel that natives view as "natural" that men may have a "legitimate" family as at the same time, they look for casual sexual encounters; have one or more lovers, or even another spouse and kids. [34]

As Maria Emilia phrases it:

"I feel that this is a double standard society because you see men with their wives all formal at church, and then you see them by themselves and they are in a hurry to go to the table, to other places, and they are just looking around." [35]

Those double standards permeate all gendered interactions, from love relations to family and work. During the interviews, people made many references to the fact that women and men assume traditional role models, very traditional ones, such as having men going to social gatherings to "get loose" while women stay at home taking care of the kids and the household. [36]

Also, many women narrated quite striking events regarding the treatment they received at work not only from their bosses but also from their colleagues. One of

them commented, when talking about her first attempt to get a job in Aguascalientes: "They asked me if I was married or single, if I had already asked my husband for permission. They then made the decision and told me that, because I was a woman and not from Aguascalientes, I was not getting the job" (Maria Emilia). [37]

Another quite serious event regarding the treatment women receive at work refers to the refusal to hire a woman who had already been assigned by the federal government to occupy the position as the head of a Museum in Aguascalientes. When the news reached the person in charge at the state's level, he assured her that, "A woman cannot be the head of the museum. Society is not prepared for that" (Rodrigo). So she did not get the position. [38]

A second group of comments regarding double standards often referred to as *machismo* in Aguascalientes related to everyday interactions at work. Two issues came up: the first one regarding gossip about possible sexual affairs between women and their bosses as an explanation for the reason why the former had a good position. Rodrigo comments on how he had heard people saying that his wife worked where she did because she must have been her boss's lover. Similarly, they say that Rodrigo's secretary defended him from attacks on his job performance surely because they "have something going on" between them. [39]

The second issue mentioned when strangers referred to unease at work was being mistreated. Emma narrates a conflict with a colleague at work as follows: "I don't know how you treat women from here, from Aguascalientes, but I'm not from here, therefore, this is the first time that you clap on the desk and the last, and this is the first time that you shout at me and the last." [40]

Finally, regarding gender issues, there are two comments that are particularly relevant because they refer to the issue in a broad manner. One of them is Bertha's, who is around sixty years old, and says:

"I feel that people my age here in Aguascalientes are people who live in the last or before the last century. For example, if you get married, you stay at home, obey your husband and you are the suffering woman. And you can do nothing if your husband doesn't supervise and consents to it. These women are incapable of thinking on their own." [41]

The other person was Silvia, who showed concern for the lack of gender equity in the locality when comparing it to that shown on the film *Revolutionary Road*<sup>6</sup>: "It reflected the social context of the United States before the sexual revolution ... and suddenly you tell yourself ... damn, Aguascalientes now is not very far from that." [42]

The comments about gender issues very clearly reflect that local culture shows traits of inequality in terms of women's rights and people who have had the

6 This is the 2009 movie directed by Sam MENDEZ, acted by Kate WINSLET and Leonard DI CAPRIO.

experience of living in more open societies, feel uncomfortable and unfairly treated. [43]

### *2.1.3 Mediocre and incompetent*

A topic that commonly struck strangers about local culture was what they perceived as a lack of seriousness in the way natives performed their professional duties. This came up as a constant that ran through employees in public as well as in private organizations, public functionaries at high and medium levels, and even university professors. [44]

Members of the out-group generally think that members of the in-group do not do their job in the best way possible. According to many strangers interviewed, many natives seek ways to make the least effort possible. They do not care if things are not done well. They are the least willing to go beyond what is demanded from them. [45]

To be more specific, two of the interviewees showed great frustration regarding the almost null disposition of people to work. Rodrigo, director of a museum, comments on how he argued with unionized employees:

"—By law and those in unions too, know each day they have to come to work.

—Well, but we always had, hmmm, done this: We came to work, we did not get money for extra time, but then we didn't come to work for the following three days.

And also, suddenly, all the people working at the workplace were having breakfast at the museum! Okay, but they finish breakfast and then they start lunch!" [46]

Laura narrates her experiences with hiring sales employees for a furniture store her and her husband own:

"People from here, employees, have no enthusiasm, they lack interest. They leave the job very easily. The strangest thing is that when we interview them, they beg for the job because they need it. I'm more and more surprised. A person comes and begs for the job in the afternoon, you hire her to start next morning and she doesn't show up. There are also those who quit in the middle of the week and don't even come to collect the money they had already earned." [47]

Complaints about the quality of their work, extends to those in the highest positions. Rodrigo, when relating his frustration for not being able to successfully develop certain of his projects because people did not respond positively, affirmed that it was not only because employees were in a union. He mentions, "It is amazing, also with high functionaries, the director himself, and he told me once that it was because I was not from here that I didn't understand." [48]

In the same manner, often strangers made remarks that people in the locality lacked the professional and technical resources to develop their professional skills properly. That is why they called them incompetent. When making

reference to that characteristic, foreigners mentioned events such as the fact that natives did not know how to apply norms dictated by the federal government and that local administrations did not enforce the law. Similarly, Emma narrates her experience when she contacted people at the university to publish a manuscript written by her colleague, and how professors showed their lack of editorial skills:

"We came with [the person in charge of the editorial department] with the intention of having the book published. She saw the book and said: "It is fabulous." She then gave it to a group of professors in the architecture department to review and they mutilated the book. They did something like an edition of the book and came up, first, saying that the book was about architecture but the author did not know how to write. Then, they argued that the word was not architect in feminine but architect in masculine. And, therefore, she had to correct it.

"And that was not all! The author talked about a feminist revolution in architecture, about how women had to take a stance. She was one of the first women architects semi dressed like a man; she was among women who cut their hair, who wanted to use jeans, and to do what it took to be at the same level as men. And these professors told her that, well, she should get rid of that part in the book!" [49]

These comments show not only her frustration in terms of the editorial process, but also that the university professors could not understand the main purpose of the book, which was to show how gendered that profession had been. [50]

There was another group of comments regarding what strangers viewed as lack of proficiency, which can be attributed more to the context of a middle-sized city in contemporary Mexico with its level of development and its lack of social and institutional diversity. These comments made reference both to the difficulty faced when intending to develop new projects and to the limited education opportunities available, particularly at the university level. [51]

Many people moved into this city seeking to initiate new enterprises. Some of them were invited and others came on their own. In any case, the perception of people during the interviews was that projects became smaller, almost insignificant, or failed. Julia, with the clarity that characterizes her, tells us:

"Look, for example, a couple and another woman came to open the Rehabilitation Center at DIF [a government agency]. When they came, this was a huge project, a megaproject. But in Aguascalientes, megaprojects turn smaller, and smaller, and smaller. That is what happened: they cut the budget and then it was no longer what had been planned. Then the couple moved to the United States because the project became something other than what they had expected to achieve here, and in the US they had a better opportunity. And the other woman later left because of the same reason, but also because her kids were growing and she felt they did not have many educational opportunities here." [52]

If we consider all that foreigners have said about this topic, we can understand why so many of them showed such frustration, disenchantment and even rage regarding the possibility of meeting their job expectations. [53]

#### 2.1.4 *Kind*

From here on, reference is made to those characteristics of local culture foreigners found to be positive. Among those, the most significant was what they referred to as *kind*. Many interviewees said that in one moment or another, people from Aguascalientes had been nice to them. In most of the cases that gentleness was expressed in face-to-face interactions in public spaces such as, for example, the street. Strangers recalled happenings such as being told "bless you" after they sneezed, getting good instructions on how to find a place they were looking for, or getting recommendations about where to buy something. In other places, such as in restaurants and the supermarket, strangers were pleased with reactions such as being received with a smile or listening to an employee greeting customers. Similarly, Carmen comments on how nice it was for her to witness the way local people treated each other on the street:

"It got my attention that men on their bikes were riding, and then, if they saw someone they knew, they stopped, hugged each other, talked. And I said to myself, meeting someone else to me is totally different. I liked that, I like people having more contact with others on the streets, noticing each other, saying hello." [54]

The same kindness shown by natives in public spaces was also witnessed by other strangers when they are in places such as a golf club or even a boarding home. Rocío comments with emotion that when her husband first arrived, "He lived in a boarding home with adorable old ladies, he really liked the people in Aguascalientes." [55]

Natives' kindness extended, in one case, to the fact that just through references of others from Mexico City, Laura and her husband contacted a person from Aguascalientes who, besides receiving them kindly, referred her to someone else who, as she herself said "hired me with his eyes closed." [56]

In short, we can assess that foreigners view natives as *kind* people. Short comments here and there during the interviews confirm this: "People have treated me very well" (Denisse), "very genteel, all people" (Laura), "very, very cordial" (Laura), "people (are) very warm" (Rocío). Susana compared people from Aguascalientes with people from other parts of Mexico where she had lived before and commented: "People are, well, yes, warmer. They receive you with more familiarity." [57]

#### 2.1.5 *Open*

This was the second most commonly mentioned characteristic referenced when speaking about the positives of natives. This, at first sight, appears as contradictory if we remember that the most mentioned characteristic of natives

was that they were closed. Nevertheless, if analyzed in detail, it becomes clear that strangers called natives open when making reference, in general, to different traits as those mentioned when they complained about natives being closed. [58]

Categories that can be grouped as opened to professional recognition refer comments that made reference to events in which natives put aside the fact that strangers were not from the locality and gave them credit for their professional qualities. María, who does alternative medicine, gave the example that patients have trusted her without her having to show them titles or documents that credit her as a professional. In Pedro's case, that openness consisted of his winning a literary contest; of acceptance that he was president of a professional college; and of allowing him to be a member of a citizenship council in a municipal government office. This was the case despite the fact that he was not born in Aguascalientes. [59]

What Pedro narrates as evidence of the natives' openness shows with more strength that people's place of origin still plays a significant role regarding how people are treated within the local culture in Aguascalientes, this being a trait characteristic of traditional societies. [60]

#### 2.1.6 *Bona gens* [Good people]

Before making reference to this characteristic, it is important to mention that this is a key word for natives. People from Aguascalientes frequently describe themselves as being the *bona gens*, and this in fact is written in their coat of arms. [61]

But while for natives, the definition of them as being good people is so relevant, strangers do not mention this very much in their narratives; to them the term good people was less charged with meaning than it was for natives. Nevertheless, there were two cases in which strangers did talk about this. Susana, for example, says, "in general I like Aguascalientes, I find it to be a beautiful city and a city of *bona gens*." Rocío, emotive, comments: "I think that people in Aguascalientes have a big heart, what is said in their coat of arms, 'clear sky, clear water, and *bona gens*,' is perfectly right, they are very good people." [62]

Finally, there were comments on the human quality of people from Aguascalientes. Isabel mentions:

"I have found people of exceptional human quality, and I'm very thankful for that. I appreciate that they have included me as part of their friends group. It is a fortune, a treasure, as the gospel says, the one who finds a friend, finds a treasure. And I have." [63]

This comment reflects an affinity between Isabel and the in-group, which was not common among most members of the out-group I interviewed. [64]

### 2.1.7 Having civic education

The last often mentioned positive characteristic was that they have what they called *civic education*. This refers to the fact that they show respect for pedestrians, and in general, circulation regulations in the city. This is a characteristic often mentioned as very positive when people informally talk about the city of Aguascalientes. Either natives or strangers recognize that the traffic rules are respectfully followed and that that makes the city a very civilized one.

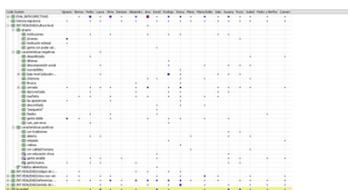


Illustration 2: Code matrix browser (on local culture) (enlarge this figure [here](#)) [65]

## 3. Conclusion

It has been argued that the grounded theory and qualitative computing were key components of the analysis of the cultural traits of an in-group, members of a middle-sized city in Mexico, as viewed by strangers, migrants from other larger metropolitan areas of the country who settled there. Without the aid of this methodological and technical tool, the analysis would have been impossible due to the fact that the researcher herself was submerged in the same situation as her research participants, and was herself in a crisis. [66]

A third factor that came to interact with qualitative computing and the researcher herself as a subject positioned in a similar situation to that of those interviewed, was the theoretical approaches used to understand the data, particularly that of Alfred SCHÜTZ (1976 [1964]). [67]

The topic I have discussed in this paper appears as no longer very relevant in most contemporary sociological inquiry. At the present the issues have more to do with, to say it in one word, multiculturalism as it is lived in "developed countries." Authors like Alain TOURAINE (2003 [1997]), Anthony GIDDENS (1991), and Ulrich and Elisabeth BECK (2002) are focusing their attention on topics that could be seen as opposite to what I am trying to understand. That is why the research topic of this paper relates more to literature written long ago by authors such as Alfred SCHÜTZ (1976 [1964]), or even Robert LYND and Helen LYND (1937). I cannot imagine Alain TOURAINE, for example, talking about the middletown-spirit, or arguing like SCHÜTZ that typifications can be so clear cut and valid to a whole group and so well institutionalized. [68]

That has been part of the challenge I have faced as a researcher and also as a foreigner in such a homogeneous society: to come from a place where nothing is for sure any more and to encounter a society where members' certainties make up such a large portion of their interactions. While more open societies tend to

accept more differences, more traditional ones, tend to look at those who are different from them as lesser and perhaps as deviant people. [69]

The difficulty faced by strangers in a place like the one where I live and I am trying to understand, refers to a traditional culture that finds its own strength in its cohesion partly due to its lack of exposure to different ways of being. It has been, up through the eighties, a quite homogeneous society in terms of ethnic background, religion, and social stratification. That has facilitated the in-group to impose its ways of being, thinking and doing to newcomers, and also the hegemonic patterns of middle and high middle classes to the rest of the population. [70]

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