

NATIONAL IDENTITY: A CURRENT UNDERSTANDING AMONG LIBERAL STUDIES STUDENTS AT METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

There is a significant lack of documentation on Venezuelan national identity in contemporary research. Under the premise that identity is a dynamic construct shaped by socio-historical

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contexts, it is argued that previous characterizations have lost their validity in the face of current reality. Using a qualitative methodology with a hermeneutic-narrative approach and a social constructionist paradigm, the self-perceptions of students in their final semesters of Liberal Studies at the Metropolitan University were explored. The findings reveal a predominantly positive self-perception, where kindness and sociability serve as pillars of identity; however, weakness in work ethic emerges as the main negative trait. The analysis suggests a significant evolution in the perception of the Venezuelan self, influenced by the migration crisis and the recent sociopolitical environment, reaffirming that national identity is a complex, mutable, and situated phenomenon.

Keywords: venezuelan national identity, social psychology, qualitative studies, self-perception, social change, socio-historical context, stereotypes, Venezuela.

Sustainable Development Goal(s) (SDG) to which the research work is directed

This work explicitly aligns with three Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations' 2030 Agenda:

4. QUALITY EDUCATION

By proposing a review of national self-concept as a pedagogical tool for the formation of critical and ethical citizens.

16. PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

By suggesting that the evolution toward a positive self-perception is the necessary foundation for rebuilding the social fabric and fostering a culture of peace.

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Introduction

When addressing Venezuelan national identity, there is a significant research gap, given that the most recent studies date back just over a decade. This chronological distance compromises the validity of previous findings, since identity, both individual and social, is not an invariable entity, but is constructed and reinvented according to the socio-historical circumstances experienced by individuals and the collective. Consequently, defining identity requires consideration of dynamic factors such as social context, historical framework, and social structure (Pujal & Tirado, 2020). At the collective level,

...social identity involves an evaluative definition of self-concept in terms of the attributes of a group, and is seen as a psychological process that functions as a bridge for understanding the relationships between various social phenomena, social cognition, and individual behavior (Acosta, 2015, p. 68).

The attributes that the collective internalizes and consolidates over time, derived from its socio-historical reality, constitute the basis of national identity. However, there is still a gap in this line of research. Thirty-five years passed between the research of Salazar (1980) and Acosta (2015); likewise, more than ten years have passed since Acosta's work, a period in which unprecedented social and political transformations have taken place in the country.

Pujal and Tirado (2020) define identity as:

The set of characteristics and attributes that define a person and provide them with a sense of continuity and coherence over time. Identity is constructed from the interaction of personal, social, and cultural factors and is affected by the experiences we have and the relationships we establish with others (p. 112).

In the social environment, individuals appropriate traits that allow them to identify with and integrate into their sociocultural system. Thus, social identity is understood as “the part of identity that derives from belonging to social groups... it provides us with a sense of belonging, of connection with others, and helps us define ourselves in relation to others” (Pujal & Tirado, 2020, p. 115).

As an aspect of social identity, national identity is a complex concept in constant flux, influenced by historical, economic, and political processes. It provides a sense of belonging

that serves as an anchor for self-definition in relation to other members of the same nation-state (Acosta, 2015). For his part, Montero (1984) conceptualizes it as a network of shared meanings and ideas that allow groups with common territory, language, and traditions to recognize themselves as a cohesive community.

Multiple factors have converged in shaping Venezuelan identity. Acosta (2015) categorizes them into four areas: national history (colonial and republican periods); culture as a hybridization of inherited traits; geographical diversity and natural resources; and political dynamics, recently characterized by instability and divis. These elements give national identity a complex and diverse nature, albeit with a deeply rooted sense of belonging (Acosta, 2015). While individually assigned traits may lack statistical relevance in isolation, their generalization to the nation constitutes a “characterization.”

According to Gómez (2007), this consists of assigning qualities to a group simply because of membership in it. This process is intrinsically linked to stereotypes, defined as the “set of shared beliefs about the characteristics of a social group. These beliefs can be positive, negative, or neutral, and are often generalizations about the members of a group, based on their belonging to that group” (Gómez, 2007, p. 250).

In the case of Venezuela, Acosta (2015) identifies positive stereotypes that describe the subject as hospitable, cheerful, and sociable; in contrast, negative stereotypes point to traits of indolence, irresponsibility, anarchy, and corruption. Given the dynamic nature of this construct, it is postulated that these stereotypes have undergone a metamorphosis, attenuating negative traits and enhancing positive ones. This reconfiguration can be attributed to globalization, the role of new media in disseminating favorable narratives, and the conscious effort of citizens to distance themselves from historical stigmas (Acosta, 2015). Added to these factors are the sociopolitical processes that have impacted Venezuela since the beginning of the 21st century.

Considering that identity is a construct shaped by historical developments, the need to update traditional categories of analysis is evident. That is why this study seeks to answer the following question: How do the self-perceptions of national identity among Liberal Studies students at UNIMET (2023) contrast with or reaffirm the classic characterizations of Venezuelan social psychology in the current socio-historical context?

General Objective

To relate the characteristics of Venezuelan national identity identified by social psychology researchers and contrast them with the reports of students in their final semesters of Liberal Studies at the Metropolitan University of Caracas (2023).

Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature, based on the paradigm of social constructionism. This position is supported by an ontological view in which reality is not assumed to be a given fact, but rather a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon, collectively constructed through social interaction and the meanings that individuals assign to their shared experiences (Gergen, 2007). From this epistemological standpoint, national identity is not conceived as an objective, static, or universal entity to be discovered, but rather as a dynamic product of social interaction and language.

As Gergen (2007) points out, social constructionism challenges traditional assumptions of objectivity and single truth, proposing instead the collective construction of knowledge and conceiving truth as a relational achievement. Consequently, this paradigm is ideal for the study of identity, as it allowed access to the subjective experiences of the participants and, through hermeneutic interpretation, generated a situated and contextualized understanding of their reality as Venezuelans.

In line with the above, qualitative methodology, as referred to by Molano et al. (2021), is the fundamental tool for understanding human experiences and cultures. By focusing on discourse and what people express, it provides a descriptive and subjective response to phenomena directly related to human beings and their sociocultural environment.

Method

The hermeneutic-narrative method was used, which prioritizes the social component and subjectivity in the construction of identity. This method seeks to “interpret linguistic experiences and aims to achieve an understanding of individuals’ experiences, which are always intersubjective, concrete, and situated spatially and temporally” (Porta & Flores, 2017, p. 696).

Therefore, this approach allowed for the understanding and interpretation of the experiences and self-perceptions of Liberal Studies students. It also facilitated the analysis of how the socio-historical context, the social fabric, and everyday life in Venezuela have shaped the meaning of national identity, making it possible to explore the psychosocial dimensions that intervene in the formation of the sense of belonging today.

Population and Sample

From a population of 230 students enrolled in the Liberal Studies degree program in 2023, a sample of eleven (11) subjects between the ages of 21 and 25 was selected. The participants were in the final semesters of their studies at the Metropolitan University of Caracas. The

selection was made through intentional or convenience sampling, based on criteria of academic relevance and proximity to graduation.

It is imperative to note that the sociopolitical context of the data collection period presents distinctive nuances with respect to the current Venezuelan scenario; likewise, the degree program's curriculum has undergone modifications since that date, factors that delimit the framework for interpreting the findings.

Selection Criteria and Information Collection

The choice of Liberal Studies students was deliberate, based on the premise that the robust historical training and program content of the Venezuelan Political and Economic Thought course provide informants with superior analytical skills. This facilitated the collection of testimonies with greater argumentative density and descriptive richness on national identity.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the information. The interview script was designed to be open-ended to allow for spontaneous narratives to emerge, structured around the following questions:

- What are Venezuelans like?
- Describe the positive characteristics of Venezuelans. Justify them.
- Describe the negative characteristics of Venezuelans. Justify them.
- Describe the physical characteristics of Venezuelans. Justify them.

Results and Analysis

After conducting the interviews, a content analysis was performed to characterize the profile of the responses obtained (see Table 1). The analysis was structured according to the dimensions explored: general opinion, positive characteristics, negative characteristics, and physical traits. Based on this categorization, the most frequently occurring attributes were identified.

Tabla 1

Características Generales	Características Positivas	Características Negativas	Características Físicas
<p>Resilientes Relajados Ambiciosos Creativos Amistosos Divertidos Amables Cálido</p>	<p>Sociables Carismáticos Ambiciosos Creativos Trabajadores Resilientes Valientes Arriesgados Amistosos Familiares</p>	<p>Distraídos Ética del Trabajo Aprovechados Conformistas Ambiciosos</p>	<p>Mestizaje Trigueño Ojos oscuros Bajos Delgados</p>

Dimensions of Self-Perception

With regard to general characteristics, there was notable heterogeneity in the attributes mentioned, among which terms such as relaxed, ambitious, creative, fun, resilient, friendly, and mischievous stood out. It is significant that all of the responses in this category had a positive connotation; no pejorative perceptions were recorded when defining the general nature of Venezuelans.

In terms of positive characteristics, kindness emerged as the most frequently used adjective. Secondly, traits such as sociability, charisma, resilience, and industriousness were identified. These attributes reinforce a perception of Venezuelans as hospitable, family-oriented, and socially-minded individuals.

In terms of negative characteristics, poor work ethic was the predominant trait among those interviewed. Other adjectives grouped under this category included rebellious, opportunistic, conformist, and unpunctual. Noteworthy is the perception that, in pursuit of personal goals, some individuals may exploit social ties, such as friendship or kindness, through false camaraderie or interest.

Physical Characterization and Identification Processes

Regarding physical characteristics, there was consensus that mixed race was the predominant attribute. Informants used terms such as trigueño and moreno, describing specific facial features such as prominent cheekbones and brown eyes, accompanied by slim builds and wavy hair.

It is important to highlight a phenomenon observed during the construction of the narratives: when describing physical traits, the subjects tended to project characteristics of

their own gender and to use the first person plural (we are). This linguistic use evidences a process of self-recognition, where the interviewee not only describes an external other, but also positions themselves as an integral part of the identity construct they are developing.

The self-perception of the sample is articulated around kindness and sociability as positive pillars, contrasted with ethical weakness at work as a negative axis. Physically, identity is anchored in the historical origin of colonial miscegenation (indigenous and Spanish), which defines current pigmentation and phenotypic traits.

Below is a comparative table of self-defining attributes. It contrasts the current findings with the classic research of Salazar and Marín (1977), Banchs (1982), Montero (1984), and Acosta (2014) to observe the evolution of national identity:

Tabla 2. Comparación de Resultados

Salazar y Marín (1977)	Banchs (1982)	Montero (1984)	Acosta (2015)	Unimet (2023)
Alegres	Simpáticos	Pasividad e incompetencia	Alegres	Resilientes
Hospitalarios	Amables	Fatalistas o Pesimistas	Amistosos	Mestizos
Simpáticos	Misquosos	Emotividad	Flojos	Amables
Flojos	Irresponsables	Violencia	Trabajadores	Amistosos
Irresponsables	Perezosos	Carencia de sentido Histórico	Bellos	Bajos y Delgados
	Desorganizados	Generosidad, coraje e igualitarismo	Humildes	Trabajadores
	Agresivos		Políticos	Sociales

Discussion and Conclusions

This research identified traits of national identity that have persisted over time, highlighting kindness and joy as pillars of Venezuelan idiosyncrasy. However, significant shifts were evident in categories previously linked to violence or aggression, suggesting a reconfiguration of citizens' self-perception.

The findings highlight mestizaje (racial mixing) as the most representative phenotypic characteristic, while the attitudinal dimension reflects a remarkable capacity for adaptability, ease

of social bonding, and appreciation of cultural diversity. In contrast, the negative perceptions identified around work ethic point to a critical area where dishonest or instrumental behaviors, historically associated with Creole cunning, could emerge.

When contrasting these results with previous literature, profound transformations can be observed. While Montero's study (1984) reported a transition toward negative attributes influenced by the economic crisis, social instability, and repression of the time, the present study, in agreement with Acosta (2015), finds a recovery of positive valence in self-perception. The students of the Metropolitan University participating in this study (2023) reaffirm an image of Venezuelans once again centered on charisma and cordiality.

In short, Venezuelan national identity is a complex and dynamic construct, whose nature contradicts the fixity suggested in classical research. Self-perception has evolved since Acosta's work, returning to stereotypes such as sociability and mischief, but modifying severe self-criticism: traditional pejorative categories such as laziness or lack of industriousness have been omitted or attenuated.

The latter phenomenon finds a plausible explanation in the contemporary migration crisis. Contact with new cultures and the need to enter foreign labor markets have forced Venezuelans to reformulate their identity in the mirror of the other, strengthening their resilience and reframing their relationship with work and productivity.

Although the political and social violence of recent years has threatened to instill a pessimistic view of the nation, the ability to maintain a positive attitude and the need for adaptability in the face of the migration phenomenon have shielded the national identity. The changes observed in recent decades are not fortuitous, but rather respond to a constant transformation of the sociopolitical context, reaffirming that being Venezuelan is a process in permanent reconstruction.

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