



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Contexts and Social Determinants of Mental Health Among Psychology Students at the Autonomous University of Nayarit: An Empirical Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the social, academic, socioemotional, and economic contexts and determinants that influence the mental health of psychology students at the Autonomous University of Nayarit (UAN). The research is based on an empirical perspective and is supported by experience gathered in growth and development workshops, as well as the administration of social skills tests.

It is observed that most students come from moderately populated areas, which generates community dynamics with a loss of privacy, and that residents of the capital tend to interact more socially, although influenced by social networks that affect their authenticity. Psychology training encourages theoretical analysis and personal introspection, aimed at strengthening self-knowledge and mental health.

Among the determinants of school, group cohesion and social skills play a key role in well-being, although it is noted that the academic focus sometimes limits social interaction. On the socioemotional level, the needs for belonging, love, and affiliation are essential and can generate conflicts between individuality and adaptation to social norms.

Economically, Nayarit's productive structure is based on tourism and services, which influences students' opportunities and expectations.

The psychology academic program incorporates contemporary approaches such as third-generation therapies and positive psychology, promoting a hybrid and humanistic model that seeks personal and professional development.

The methodology used is non-experimental, based on direct observation and experience.

The growth and social skills workshops focus on developing autonomy, coping skills, and personal independence, using experiential techniques that allow students to identify and address emotional and social limitations. It is concluded that strengthening mental health in this group requires integrating attention to social skills, self-esteem, and the balance between individual and social needs, with an educational approach that transcends the academic sphere and prepares students for their professional and personal lives.

## Introduction

The Autonomous University of Nayarit, located in Tepic, the capital of Nayarit, Mexico, stands as the largest educational institution in the state, boasting an impressive enrollment of 29,717 students across 65 diverse educational programs.

Among these programs, psychology stands out with approximately 980 students distributed over eight semesters. The demographic composition reveals a majority of female students, accounting for about 60% of the population, while male students make up around 40%.

While there is little disparity in socioeconomic status among students, notable sociocultural differences exist regarding environmental development. A significant proportion of students hails from moderately populated areas, fostering strong interpersonal connections that often lead to diminished personal privacy. As a result, many students may resort to uncommunicative behaviors and social avoidance.

Conversely, students in the capital city tend to engage more actively in socialization, which can be advantageous. However, the pervasive influence of social media disrupts these interactions by prioritizing virtual connections over real-life relationships, often prompting students to adopt behaviors that do not align with their authentic selves.

The psychology curriculum rigorously examines a wide range of sources that explore the human experience from various perspectives, including personality theories, human development, growth workshops, child and adolescent psychology, the anatomy of the nervous system, adult and elder development, psychological developmental disorders, and various therapeutic approaches such as cognitive-behavioral, existential-humanistic, and systemic approaches. UAN.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout their education, students actively engage in self-discovery activities, such as growth workshops, which empower them to identify and address barriers to their personal development. These workshops foster a healthier self-image and promote overall mental well-being.

The existential humanist approach examines epistemic and philosophical themes, along with the foundational theorists of the humanist movement, also referred to as the "third force" Castanedo,<sup>2</sup> To complement this theoretical framework, objective assessments such as Goldstein's,<sup>3</sup> Social Skills Test and Shöstrom's<sup>4</sup> Personal Orientation Inventory are utilized.

These tests are designed to evaluate personal competencies that foster a healthy self-perception and identify factors that may hinder students from living fully in the present moment. Living in the "here and now" involves concentrating on the present and recognizing the qualities and strengths individuals possess to navigate their lives, without being weighed down by past events.

A key aspect of this approach is that individuals who face emotionally distressing situations often become fixated on negative experiences, leading them to develop avoidant or phobic behavior patterns. They may attempt to escape their emotional pain by avoiding situations similar to their past experiences. This avoidance can prevent them from perceiving their current circumstances fully, making it difficult to develop effective coping skills.

During regular class sessions and human development workshops, we have encountered a range of personal experiences—some dramatic and others more mundane—related to interpersonal relationships. Topics discussed in these settings include parental abuse, infidelity, early sexual activity, divorce, loss of sexual identity, difficulties in socialization, conflicts with administrative policies or teaching methods, fear of speaking in class, reluctance to ask for help, challenges in group participation, difficulties in following instructions, struggles with making apologies, inability to persuade others with their arguments, relationship issues with classmates, and excessive attachment to opinions expressed on social media, among others.

The application of test batteries is crucial for accurately identifying situations that require the development of coping skills. For instance, the Social Skills Test consists of 50 items organized into six categories. A more detailed description of this test will be provided later in the article. For now, based on the empirical evidence collected, we can present a local overview of the context, determinants, and mental health care of psychology students at the Autonomous University of Nayarit. This will also include a human development workshop designed to cultivate coping skills in students, which will extend beyond their academic life to impact their professional and personal lives.

## Background

Time zones, like calendars, are essential tools for measuring and pinpointing the temporal location of human events. They play a crucial role in helping us position ourselves in time, serving as constant reminders of our past. Memories enable us to relive previous experiences, generating sensations that evoke a range of emotions—some enjoyable and others challenging. This ability to recall past events is not easily controlled, as present stimuli often trigger memories that resemble earlier experiences.

People often coexist without questioning the extent to which their past influences their present. Every experience, whether positive or negative, leaves a legacy or lesson that fundamentally shapes who we are.

These lessons are frequently reflected in our mindset as we confront daily challenges. Certain experiences can motivate us to maintain routine, while others can weigh us down, hindering our progress. The burden we feel is not a matter of physical weight but is instead evident in our morale, which directly impacts how we approach daily tasks. This influence manifests as either a pessimistic or optimistic attitude towards life, significantly affecting our motivation and lifestyle choices.

This article asserts that understanding reasoning and recognizing the importance of social and experiential learning are vital. This understanding originates from the family unit, where interactions with siblings, cousins, uncles, and other relatives lay the foundational groundwork for our learning experiences.

## Social Learning and Individual Development

Social skills are a crucial part of the teaching-learning process. They help us face and navigate various life challenges. It is important to understand that different teaching and learning processes are intertwined with emotions and unpredictable situations. Many social skills are acquired naturally through experience, while others are learned formally in educational settings. A significant amount of this learning takes place within the primary family unit, with additional influences coming from the broader social environment.

These diverse learning experiences prepare students to effectively manage the common situations they encounter in their daily lives. While most of these challenges can be resolved successfully, some students may struggle to achieve the same level of success, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction or frustration. Although such emotions are natural, they can become habitual, causing individuals to become desensitized to their own dissatisfaction.

This uncomfortable pattern of behavior can ultimately help students build resilience over time, contributing to character development. Character is defined as the unique set of qualities and circumstances that distinguish a person or group from others in terms of behavior and personality. Thus, character serves as a framework for individuality, facilitating improved reasoning and self-awareness. RAE. <sup>5</sup>

However, the journey toward self-identity can create a paradox. On one hand, it allows students to feel strong and secure in social settings, while on the other hand, it can trigger internal conflict. According to Albert Bandura, as cited by McClelland, <sup>6</sup> much of our social behavior is learned through imitation, meaning that many of our actions are significantly influenced by social factors. As a result, some behaviors that students adopt may not align with their true personalities.

This dynamic often leads to students feeling overwhelmed by social learning, causing them to lose touch with their authentic selves. The conflict arises from their desire to realize their true identity, which fosters a more genuine self-concept. As they move further from their innate essence in pursuit of societal acceptance, they become increasingly disconnected from their true reality.

This suggests that as long as students strive to conform to societal expectations, they will experience less harmony within themselves, resulting in dissatisfaction both personally and within their environment. In this context, students can only preserve their individuality when they are not socializing; isolation allows them to maintain their original traits.

Another theoretical perspective involves basic human needs. According to Abraham Maslow, as cited by the editors of *Historical Figures* <sup>7</sup>, humans require social connection and a sense of belonging for their development. This viewpoint underscores the importance of acceptance and social interaction as crucial for achieving self-fulfillment.

Thus, a relationship emerges between the need for individuality and the desire to engage socially within a specific environment. This relationship highlights the paradox between personal satisfaction and societal acceptance. Students often find themselves prioritizing social conformity over personal fulfillment, resulting in a blend of behaviors that do not clearly distinguish between what genuinely satisfies them and what meets societal expectations. In confronting this dilemma, students may replicate actions across different settings, failing to differentiate between behaviors that promote their individual growth and those that prioritize social acceptance.

## School Determinants

It is commonly understood that skills develop throughout an individual's life. By being part of a family, having friends, or interacting with schoolmates and coworkers, individuals acquire social interaction skills. However, defining socially skilled behavior can be quite complex. Meichenbaum, Butler, and Grudson, cited by Ochoa et al., <sup>8</sup> argue that it is impossible to establish a consistent definition of social skills because behaviors often manifest differently depending on the environment. In other words, social interactions are influenced by the people, contexts, and situations an individual encounters.

Human beings are inherently social, and the need for interaction with others grows according to personal needs. One critical factor in students' pursuit of relationships is their personal needs. Additionally, various elements linked to social skills in the academic context—including psychological, sociological, and lifestyle factors—can positively or negatively impact the student environment.

Social skills play a vital role in group interactions. Research has shown that individuals who are well-integrated socially are more motivated to engage with their peers, whereas those with low social integration tend to withdraw. Hodgetts & Altman. <sup>ix</sup> Team cooperation enhances student performance by fostering a harmonious environment among group members, not only academically but also in terms of their emotional and personal well-being, which in turn contributes to group cohesion. Carrón <sup>10</sup> defined group cohesion as a dynamic process where members of a group tend to stick together and remain united in pursuit of common goals.

Barón and Byrne, <sup>11</sup> noted that social behavior patterns are shaped by the culture and context in which individuals live. Therefore, a lack of cohesion within study groups could stem from previous experiences and social interactions. If a student has not cultivated good relationships in earlier social contexts, it can adversely

affect their academic environment by limiting interactions with peers.

Previous experiences serve as a filter for students, influencing how they relate new information to what they have learned in the past. The most relevant information tends to be stored in long-term memory and is highly resistant to change. These enduring experiences can significantly impact an individual's social perceptions, sometimes leading to feelings of threat to their safety or well-being. Factors such as a student's background, the degree they are pursuing, their semester, age, gender, interest in subjects, the personality of their professors, teaching methods, coping skills, lifestyle, and overall personality can all influence the group cohesion among students enrolled in the psychology program at the Autonomous University of Nayarit, as observed in a growth workshop.

### Socio-emotional Determinants

Abraham Maslow,<sup>7</sup> presented a theoretical framework suggesting that human beings have specific needs throughout their lives, which tend to take precedence over others. To illustrate his theory, he proposed that if a person were hungry or thirsty, they would first seek to quench their thirst before eating. He argued that while one could go without food for several days, the same could not be said for water, which a person could only do without for a couple of days. This demonstrated that, between thirst and hunger, the need to drink is more urgent. Furthermore, he noted that if a person were extremely thirsty but also had difficulty breathing, they would prioritize breathing over quenching their thirst. Based on these observations, Maslow developed the hierarchy of needs, organizing it into five major categories: physiological needs, safety and security needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs.

Maslow placed the need for love and belonging in the third tier of his hierarchy. He argued that once physiological and safety needs are met, individuals begin to experience these social needs. This category encompasses the human capacity to love, feel loved, and experience social integration. Specifically, people seek friendships, romantic partnerships, familial relationships, and a sense of community. Therefore, a lack of social belonging can lead to heightened feelings of loneliness and increased social anxiety.

These needs manifest in daily life, as individuals often desire to get married, form families, participate in communities, join churches or social clubs, or even make career choices—all of which are rooted in the need for belonging.

In the field of social psychology, Barón and Byrne,<sup>9</sup> described how initial encounters between two people—often random meetings at school, work, recreational activities, or within their neighborhoods—can significantly influence their relationships. They noted that seemingly trivial factors, such as physical proximity, can affect the likelihood of repeated interactions between individuals,

which often serve as a foundation for attraction. They also highlighted a second factor: affective state. Human beings tend to prefer interactions with those who evoke positive emotions, while they typically shy away from those associated with negative emotions.

Their research identified four key factors that contribute to attraction: physical proximity, positive emotions, favorable observable characteristics, and the need for affiliation. Together, these elements play a crucial role in the process of forming connections between individuals.

Four key factors contribute to the initial attraction between individuals: physical proximity, positive emotions, appealing observable characteristics, and the need for affiliation. These factors help individuals explore their similarities—rather than their differences—in activities, beliefs, values, interests, and abilities. As they discover these commonalities, their attraction for each other increases. The final stage of this attraction occurs when both individuals express mutual liking, whether through words or actions.

According to Celedonio Castanedo and Gabriela Munguía,<sup>12</sup> after over 40 years of research involving exceptional children, adolescents with various psychopathologies, and healthy individuals, they concluded that despite widespread social, cultural, and historical differences, all humans share the same interpersonal needs. This suggests that physical proximity, emotional states, appealing characteristics, and the need for affiliation work together to establish interpersonal relationships, which gradually evolve into essential needs for individuals.

Interpersonal relationships are often formed in groups oriented toward a common goal, such as learning. This process requires ongoing communication between classmates and teachers, who will establish the rules that govern their activities.

While group activities can present personal challenges, it is important to address these issues outside the classroom setting. This approach can help avoid negatively impacting motivation and maintain enthusiasm for collaborative work, fostering an environment conducive to teamwork and social cohesion.

Social cognition refers to how individuals interpret, analyze, remember, and utilize information about their social world. It emphasizes how people process this information to understand their environment and respond adaptively. Much of this information processing often occurs automatically. Barón and Byrne.<sup>11</sup>

By developing these attributes and skills, students can engage in two activities simultaneously: studying and socializing with their peers. While their primary focus may be academic engagement, a sense of camaraderie naturally develops, particularly because a significant portion of classroom activity involves collaborative tasks. Consequently, teamwork becomes essential, allowing students to practice social behaviors, often without even realizing it.



The unconscious socialization among psychology students leads to a lack of group cohesion, as noted by Barón and Byrne.<sup>11</sup> The cognitive abilities required for developing socialization skills are limited because students prioritize their academic activities. As a result, they engage in shared activities and interests within the same environment, focusing all their energy on academics while neglecting the prosocial behaviors that are essential for effective social interaction.

This focus contributes to a state of information overload stemming from the dynamic nature of peer interactions. Consequently, students experience increased psychological pressures, which intensify cognitive demands. They mainly address academic requirements while disregarding social ones. This imbalance ultimately hinders the development of social skills, leading to poor group cohesion.

### Economic Determinants

The population of Nayarit is 1,235,456, made up of 612,278 men (49.6% of the population) and 623,178 women (50.4%). In Tepic, the capital of Nayarit, the population totals 425,924, with 207,092 men (48.6%) and 218,832 women (51.4%) (INEGI 2020).<sup>13</sup> Notably, there is a higher proportion of women in the capital, 1% more than the overall female population in the state.

The age range of students pursuing higher education primarily falls between 18 and 24 years. In this age group, there are 138,177 individuals in Nayarit, with 69,280 being women and 68,897 being men. Fortunately, among women studying psychology, the gender participation gap is narrowing. There is growing interest in the study of human behavior from both genders, which may help address the varying challenges that students face at this stage in their lives. Many students often feel disconnected from the social groups they wish to be part of, leading to feelings of unacceptance.

Nayarit's economy is largely shaped by its unique characteristics, with key sectors including tourism, agriculture, livestock, fishing, and, to a lesser extent, industry. These sectors form the foundational pillars of the state's economy. Due to its geographic location, which borders the state of Jalisco, Nayarit has potential for increased commerce, although this area is currently underutilized.

The tertiary sector, which includes tourism and related services, serves as the primary driver of Nayarit's economy. This sector contributes significantly to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), accounting for 60%. It's important to note the rapid growth in the Bahía de Banderas region and the branding of Nuevo Nayarit as a flagship area, characterized by extensive hotel infrastructure and its proximity to Puerto Vallarta in the neighboring state of Jalisco.

### Academic Program

The draft resolution updating the curriculum for the Bachelor's Degree in Psychology at the Autonomous

University of Nayarit, issued by the Academic Coordinating Council on June 15, 2012, emphasizes the significance of psychology within Mexico's professional landscape. It highlights various sectors for development, including labor, social services, health, education, industry, community, and media. Initially, the focus was on traditional media such as television, print, radio, and marketing. However, the rapid growth of social media has compelled its inclusion in the realm of mental health, given that sensory and emotional overload can distort perceptions of reality and contribute to abnormal behaviors.

Moreover, human evolution has introduced new perspectives in the study and practice of psychology. Today, cognitive psychology has advanced to include third-generation therapies that prioritize acceptance, commitment, and mindfulness. These therapies include:

- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
- Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy
- Dialectical Behavior Therapy
- Behavioral Activation Therapy
- Companion-Focused Therapy

Additionally, positive psychology has been integrated into psychological care, focusing on concepts such as happiness, mindful experiences, optimism, positive energy, character strengths and virtues, hope, positive thinking, and personal motivation.

This ongoing evolution of knowledge is reflected in the curriculum map of the psychology program at the Autonomous University of Nayarit, which incorporates these concepts throughout the educational process. This structured approach ensures that students not only achieve academic success but also experience significant personal growth. In summary, the program maintains a hybrid, constructivist, and humanistic educational model. UAN.<sup>1</sup>

### Method

This research employs a non-experimental approach based on empirical methods, which prioritize knowledge acquisition through experience and tangible evidence. Data is collected through observations and measurements to analyze patterns, establish correlations, and draw conclusions supported by concrete data.

Therefore, considering the *post hoc* fallacy, everyday factors provide the foundations necessary for this work.

### GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT, AND SOCIAL SKILLS WORKSHOP

All students in the Psychology academic program participate in the Growth and Development workshops, which are designed to enhance sensitivity to human development through Gestalt techniques. These workshops aim to strengthen the connection between physical and mental health by focusing on the "ground and form" criterion.

The relationship between physical and mental health becomes evident when the absence of disease leads to physical balance. This balance, in turn, promotes a

positive emotional state, contributing to a deeper sense of being and doing. Individuals who experience this balance typically display a receptive and optimistic attitude toward life's experiences, which is reflected in their willingness to engage in actions that enhance their well-being. By integrating cognitive, emotional, and physical factors, people can observe themselves with optimism and find meaningful reasons to exist.

The implementation of these workshops supports the findings from the social skills test, which operates on the understanding that social skills are primarily developed within family, early school settings, and social interactions. These skills are crucial competencies that enable effective and satisfying interpersonal relationships, as well as competence within the community. A lack of social competence is linked to various negative outcomes, including low acceptance, social isolation, academic challenges, youth maladjustment, poor performance, school dropouts, juvenile delinquency, personal problems, low self-esteem, psychological disorders, depression, feelings of helplessness, mental health issues, alcoholism, suicide, and addiction.

Each question in the Social Skills test evaluates the degree to which a participant demonstrates a specific skill, allowing for the identification of strengths and weaknesses. This enables targeted training until participants: a) recognize the skill, and b) use it consistently. The test consists of 50 items and is divided into six categories. Ochoa et al.<sup>14</sup>

## Discussion

As stated in the introduction and background of this essay, all students in the psychology program participate in growth and development workshops as part of their curriculum. These workshops aim to help students emotionally ground themselves in the present moment. As previously explained, students undergo a series of experiential filters. Regardless of the nuances of their experiences, these filters involve quality. Therefore, it is essential for them to care for and respect what they have become, continuously reflecting on the circumstances of their journey.

The primary objective of these workshops is to instill the understanding that life, much like the human body, is constantly changing; that is, the individual is always dynamic and evolving. Students must learn to navigate the ups and downs of life, including moments of bitterness and joy. Above all, they must accept that human beings are never finished products.

However, what should remain constant is self-appreciation, as this appreciation allows individuals to manage the burdens and disappointments that come with intense experiences. The more we recognize the importance of self-appreciation, the better we can accept our circumstances, no matter how unpleasant they may be.

In these workshops, we have identified situations in some students that hinder their mental health, as evidenced by the results of the social skills test. These students often

exhibit an orientation toward the past and a reactivity to other people, situations, and contexts. Essentially, their process of self-actualization is anchored in emotionally uncomfortable life experiences, which leads to a persistent sense of dissatisfaction—not only with themselves but also in terms of their perceived lack of resources and skills, ultimately contributing to poor mental health. Consequently, the growth and development workshops foster a more current awareness and offer students the opportunity to achieve a harmonious connection with the skills they possess, promoting a healthier self-perspective.

In addition to these workshops, the social skills workshop focuses on helping students consolidate their independence. This involves encouraging them to embrace their unique personalities, thoughts, feelings, and desires. This independence allows them not to rely on others for validation, accept themselves as they are, and feel confident in their ability to support themselves throughout life.

Autonomy serves as the foundation for lifelong learning. It is strengthened as individuals grow, make commitments, and become aware of their responsibilities concerning their actions and decisions. Growing with freedom and commitment fosters maturity, enabling them to face life while maintaining physical and emotional well-being. Being independent does not equate to being alone; on the contrary, social support networks, such as family, peers, friends, and neighbors, are essential for developing coping skills for adult life.

The technique used in these workshops is called guided modeling therapy. This method involves students acting out roles assigned through random drawing.<sup>15</sup> During the four-hour session, each student stands in front of a group of thirty peers to perform various activities. These tasks include exploring others' academic interests, sharing family anecdotes, expressing complaints related to school or administration, recounting amusing personal experiences in a school setting, presenting topics they feel competent in, critiquing school policies, discussing displeasing situations with teachers, describing personal strengths, and sharing perspectives on negative school rumors.

As demonstrated, the goal is to encourage students to articulate their environment, regardless of how intimidating it may seem, and to release their pent-up emotions healthily. This process reinforces the idea that independence is a viable path to achieving mental health.

## Conclusions

The analysis of the contexts and determinants of mental health among psychology students at the Autonomous University of Nayarit reveals that their well-being is significantly influenced by environmental factors. Specifically, two key variables are the students' place of origin, alongside four determinants: social, academic, socio-emotional, and economic factors.

Academic training, previous experiences, geographic origin, and living conditions all play a role in shaping

group cohesion and the development of social skills, which are essential for achieving a balanced academic and personal life.

The results from workshops and assessments indicate that some students exhibit patterns of being stuck in the past, reacting negatively to their environment, and struggling to recognize and utilize their personal resources. This limitation affects their ability to achieve self-actualization and negatively impacts their mental health. However, these conditions can be improved through training

strategies that foster autonomy, self-esteem, and healthy coping mechanisms.

Workshops focused on growth and social skills, which are incorporated into the curriculum, are crucial for reinforcing personal independence. They promote a balance between the individual and social aspects of life while developing skills that extend beyond the academic realm. The combination of life experiences, reflection, and practice enables students to cultivate a healthier self-perception and enhances their resilience in both professional and personal situations.

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