

**La Vida Aqui:
*Negotiating Fatherhood and
Family in Post Industry***

*by Rudy G. Hernandez
University of Michigan-Flint*

Working Paper No. 66
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La Vida Aqui:

Negotiating Fatherhood and Family in Post Industry

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La Vida Aqui: *Negotiating Fatherhood and Family in Post Industry*

This work is part of a larger qualitative study that investigate the intersection of the informal economy, fatherhood, and masculinity for young immigrant Mexican and Mexican American men living in Southwest Detroit, Michigan. It explores the following questions: *What importance do young Chicano and Mexicano men place on their fatherhood? Is there substantial variation of the decisions young men make relative to their family arrangements based on their citizenship status? Are household arrangements and family relations at all influential in how or to what extent young Chicano and Mexicano men go about doing fatherwork?*

Introduction

One way that young, urban men display gender through becoming fathers that is particularly over-represented in both the literature and popular thought is through the pursuit of cultural rewards of urban life — street cred — by fathering children without regard for responsibility (Kaplan, 1997; Anderson, 1999); the other through translating their fatherhood status into active membership in extended kinship networks that represent much traditional and cultural importance (Réyes, 1995; Mirandé, 1988). These highly dissimilar models represent extremes that in many ways bear remarkable resemblance to the cultural stereotypes ascribed to young, urban men of color. However, both models, if at all accurate, imply that fatherhood is important, albeit for different cultural reasons; although it is not clear whether both representations are mutually exclusive. In analyzing the family situations of my sample, I did not presume that one was necessarily bad and the other good; nor did I assume that they could not exist in tandem, if they existed at all. Rather, I chose to view them as strategies that young men and their families used to negotiate a difficult urban environment. However, it is evident from the literature (e.g., Stack, 1972; Kibria, 1990; Stacy 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1999) that family coping strategies are constantly adapting, therefore I considered these strategies to be dynamic, or varying manifestations of fatherhood that change with time, circumstances, or unique cultural situations.

To conceptualize fatherhood and to reconcile the fact that men perhaps constructed multiple meanings of fatherhood, I borrowed from Connell's (2000) thesis on multiple masculinities. Connell (2000: 10) states:

“It is clear from the new social research as a whole that there is no one pattern of masculinity that is found everywhere. We need to speak of ‘masculinities’ not ‘masculinity.’ Different cultures, and different periods of history, construct masculinity differently.”

In applying this concept to fatherhood, I would add that men also articulate various expressions of fatherhood depending on the social situation. For example, most men in my study simultaneously used their fatherhood status both as a way to garnish their reputation for “having game” (able to attract/dominate women) or being a *mujeriego* (womanizer) among their peers, and to gain respect from their family and community for being *un hombre completo* (a complete man) by being responsible for their children, as well as being contributing members of the extended family network.

Most studies involving fatherhood issues are limited because of their one-dimensional focus. Consequently our understanding of the related issues is very narrow: either only from a male's perspective or only from a female's perspective; seldom a synthesized view. However, history bears out that Latino families are extended and complicated systems, and that women are important architects of family relations that affect survival in harsh environments. Given that the overwhelming majority of young minority parents live with their sanguineal families (Lerman and Ooms, 1993; Wattenberg, 1998) and that children who are poor and/or are part of an immigrant family, regardless of their generational order, become important household agents who facilitate settlement (Fernandez-Kelly, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999; Gold, 2000; Zhou, 1997; Stepick, 1998), young minority fathers' obligations and relationships to their children are oftentimes at odds with those they

have to their own sanguineal families (Lerman and Ooms, 1993; Bourgois, 1995; Wattenberg, 1998; Fernandez-Kelly, 1995; Stepick, 1998; Anderson, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). For instance, it is common for these children to assume adult roles at an early age, acting as interpreters, translators, daycare providers, financial consultants — mediators between their families and the outside world (Valenzuela, 1999), which would necessarily affect the quality of and extent to which they do fatherwork.

Therefore, broadening my view to attain a better understanding of the complexities of how young men construct fatherhood necessitated integrating a larger family systems context and placing a special focus of my analysis on relationality. I approached this through a three-pronged strategy: first, I used phenomenologically-based interviews (Seidman, 1998) to analyze how young men (primary subjects) in my study constructed meaning through intersubjectivity. Second, whenever possible, I conducted semi-structured interviews, guided by issued educed from interviews with my primary subjects, with family members; and third, I used phenomenologically-based participant observation techniques to contextualize the issues related in the interviews.

Fatherhood Contested

Quidandose — Being Sure

One of the strong implications of the little research done on young, urban men who become fathers is that they are greatly affected by an urban culture that encourages rampant and irresponsible fatherhood. At the time that I interviewed the men in my study, all freely acknowledged their children and were, in varying degrees, financially and emotionally involved in their children's lives. However, there was no rush toward fatherhood for any of these men, except for one. That is, the men in my study did not embark on a conscious mission to have children, for any reason. In fact, 75% of the men initially either denied or sought confirmation of their paternity. Among the Chicanos, the reasons for this varied from “not having known the mother that long” to “I just wasn't ready to settle down.”

Although the men in this group admitted that they never actually doubted their paternity. Rather, their reluctance to concede automatically to what they perceived to be a life-altering situation was because they doubted their abilities to “measure up.”

Generally, the Chicanos who initially had difficulty accepting their fatherhood spoke of being caught between two types of pressures. On one end, they felt the pressures of accepting what they perceived to be adult responsibilities with few relatively good prospects for employment. On the other, they felt pressure from both their families and society to find ways to meet their obligations despite the absence of viable or long-term employment. As Leo, a 24-year-old Chicano who cohabits with the mother of his child, puts it:

“Yeah, sure, those *vatos* who run around bragging about how many kids they have might think that people think it's cool, but let me tell you, their ain't too much respect in that. It's usually the young *vatos* (dudes) who don't understand that sooner or later they're gonna' get caught up in the child support *chingadera* (mess). That's not a nice situation, man. You got your own people, on top of hers, up your ass to come up with something to give toward the baby. Yeah, if her moms wants to be a bitch about it, she can report that shit and you could end up usin' a roll of toilet paper for a pillow until someone bails you out. Man, I been through that shit. Ain't no one respectin' you downtown. When I went to court, the judge yelled at me... she called me 'trifling,' and told me to keep it zipped up. You know what it's like to be in front of room full of people and have someone treat you like you're less than shit? I look back on it though and now I realize that what I was doing was worth less than shit. And it was all because I didn't want to let my *ruca* control me. Shit, I was 21 years old and my *ruca*, my moms, her moms... thought they could track me down, no matter what I was doin'. You can't be doin' that to no grown-ass man. Well, maybe they was wantin' me to be a grown-ass man, but shit, I didn't

have no real job and I just couldn't see how I was gonna' do what they wanted me to do without a real job..."

Some of the conflict experienced by these young men also had to do with the affiliations they had with local gangs. Whether they "weren't ready" to because "it was fun," or could not for fear of retribution, severe their ties with *la vida* (the life), they considered their lifestyles to be inconsistent with being good fathers. Although fatherhood was common among their associates, the few who acknowledged having children, participated in their children's lives beyond nominally and reluctantly providing financial or material support. There is an important departure here from the qualities of urban youth culture described by Anderson (1999) and Bell Kaplan (1997) — that social pressures exist to encourage the rampant siring of children without regard for the socially accepted implicit obligations. At least in the way the men in my study framed the issue, they were conflicted about what they perceived to be an inconsistency between *la vida* and what they thought was socially or culturally acceptable behavior in regard to their families. To them, *la vida* was street life. It was a culture much larger than just gang life. It was the neighborhood. Gang life was merely a component of *la vida*. When a horrible situation or a seemingly irrational event happened, it was explained as *la vida*. For instance, on one occasion I was to meet a couple of young brothers, both fathers who worked construction together, for a dinner interview. I waited at the designated restaurant for two hours before deciding they were not going to show, a situation with which I had become all too familiar. The next day their mother, a woman who I had met while doing participant observation at Madonna's SWEEP program, called me to explain the situation. As it was, the previous morning two very young police officers had been murdered in the neighborhood by a few young men, who were reported to have been driving a truck similar to her son's. Her boys had been snagged in the extremely wide net cast by the police department. They were held incommunicado for 30 hours before the real suspects were apprehended. During their detention, they were physically and psychologically coerced into signing false confessions. Their response:

"That's the neighborhood, homie... that's *la vida*... that's how it is for a young brown man in this barrio. Sometimes you serve it and sometime you gotta' eat it. And, it don't matter if you're down (in a gang) or not. To them, we're all down because we're all brown. We're just lucky we didn't have to eat the whole fucking thing this time. Some vatos don't get so lucky. How's that song go? '*La vida te da sorpresa... sorpesa te da la vida* (Life gives you surprises... surprises give you life)... It's all good.'"

Like most of the young men in my study, these young men had no formal affiliations with gangs whatsoever. Also like most of the men in my study, their strongest affiliations were with their family network. Yet they describe *la vida* as having a set of principles that demanded their full and unwavering attention, lest they be victims of its arbitrary appetite for young brown men.

A common thread that ran through my interviews with the men who described themselves as *veteranos* (ex-affiliates), current affiliates, or "just regular vatos" was to separate their actions into two categories: (1) what they had to do ("a vato's gotta' do what a vato's gotta' do"); and (2) what they wanted to do ("the rest is *mole*"). The actions associated with *la vida* fell in the first category. As such, most of every other part of their life fell in the second category, including what obligation they felt to their children. And, while their language showed little more than contempt for men who did not recognize their paternal obligations, they also used this rationale to explain their own paternal shortcomings. The important distinction here is that contemporary urban culture, at least in the ways these young men experience it, does not directly encourage young men to "hit and run." Rather, the reality of urban life, which affords young, uneducated men few luxuries, encourages men to prioritize their obligations.

Henry, a 25-year-old Chicano and *veterano*, puts it this way:

“I can tell these young fools that 90% of being a pops is just showing up. The hard part is still showing up when you got nothin’ to give. That’s where the problems come in. You got an idea about how fucking embarrassing it is not to be able to give your little man somethin’. See, when my ex told me she was pregnant, I really didn’t think [the baby] wasn’t mines. Shit, there wasn’t no fool stupid enough in this barrio to mess with what was mines... and that girl, she was mines... No, man, I was just plain scared. What did I know about being a dad? I was down pretty tight with ***** (gang)... I really didn’t join, but on that block if you ain’t in you’re pretty much dead... and living with my moms and little brother. I had a hard enough time just taking care of them. You know, my moms don’t speak English that good and she hasn’t really been able to get a good job since my old man split. So I had to hustle to make sure they was okay... and keep on my *carnalito* (little brother) so he would stay in school and keep out of trouble. The messed up thing is that I had been involved in a lot of crazy shit... you know, guns, fights, slanging... and nothin’ scared me as much as the thought of having to take care of this little man (caresses child’s head). My ex’s old man tried to talk to me, but I didn’t care... I wasn’t afraid of him. One day I came home and my ex was sitting on the sofa with my moms. My moms asked me if everything [my ex] told her was true. I didn’t even deny it. I just told my moms that I didn’t care if it was true. No one was going to force me to take care of her... the baby... My moms started crying and said that this is not what she taught me... ’es no dee Messican waaay’ ... Shit, she kicked me out of the house and took my ex in to live with her. Ain’t that a bitch? ... so one night I’m at the club with a bunch of *vatos* and someone asked me why I ain’t at home takin’ care of my shit... we ended up getting into a fight... but I started realized that night that I had turned into the same type of fool I used to

make fun of... the kind that don’t want to take care of their shit... in the end, I made sure I always had something to give, even if it was something small... even just a hug and kiss for my little man... I-TAKE-CARE-OF-MY-SHIT, *entiendes?*”

Virtually all the Mexicanos in my study were sending remittance to Mexico. However, it is important to note the transnational nature of fatherhood for the three Mexicanos who were working in Detroit to support children in addition to family they had left in Mexico. The initial reluctance to fatherhood that they spoke about was rooted in the same apprehension about their ability to provide as their Chicano cohorts. However, all three men spoke about the need to protect against the underhanded tactics that families in their *pueblito* employed to harness able-bodied young men for the U.S. employment market.

In a conversation that I had with Hermo and Jesus, both of whom had children in Mexico, they explained:

“No hay jale en aquellos pueblos. Los varones de cada otro hogar ya andan o en Detroit o en Chicago. Y las familias en que no hay varones estan rejodidas. O como en el caso mio, un dia se fue mi jefe para el norte a buscar jale y ya nunca volvio. Se deja oir por alli que tiene nueva familia en Chicago. Hay que quidarse porque la gente alli esta desesperada, las mujeres mas que todos. Te enganchan y no hay mas otra que venir a camellar en este mendigo frio. Tampoco es raro que ves a un pobre infeliz matandose aqui porque le mandaron aviso que su vieja se puso gorda antes de que viniera. Hay que estar seguro porque te enganchan...”

“There’s no work in those villages. The men from every other home are already working in Detroit or Chicago. And the families that have no men are really screwed. Or like in my case, one day my old man went up north

to look for work and he never returned. I've heard that he has a new family in Chicago. You have to protect yourself because the people there are desperate, especially the women. They'll trap you and then there's no other option than to come to work in this blasted cold. It's also common to see a poor fool killing himself because he got word that his old lady got pregnant before he came. You got to be sure of these things because you'll get trapped..."

During our conversation over coffee, a few other men with whom they lived joined in the discussion. These older men, perhaps in their late 20's to early 30's, commended my young subjects for their frugality. They considered their frugality to be a form of self-sacrifice — the epitome of loving fatherhood — so that they could maximize the amount of money sent home. They compared these young men to another transnational father who shared the house. When I expressed interest in interviewing him, they told me not to waste my time with *el pajarito gordo* (the fat bird). They explained that instead of saving his money to send to his wife and children, he lavished himself with *lujos* (luxuries); buying new clothes instead of used ones from *la segunda* (secondhand store), or spending his money on liquor and women at a neighborhood bar. But, all the while bugging the boss for more money because he had children in Mexico to support. They later explained that they call him *el pajarito gordo* because he could sing really nice but he could not fly — all talk.

Fatherhood-by-proxy

Although *el pajarito gordo* was the nickname for this particular gentleman, the men made it clear that his lifestyle was a fairly common occurrence, one they attributed to the many temptations readily available in *la vida aqui* (the life here) that can potentially lead their fellow good intentioned sojourners astray. Like their Chicano cohorts felt about their friends who rejected their paternal obligations, the Mexicanos expressed little more than contempt for their compatriots who were not disciplined enough to *hacer lo que vinieron a hacer* (do what they came to do). They compared these

men to Chicanos with whom they worked, whose reluctance to accede to the harsh conditions or tendencies to complain about low pay were interpreted as being lazy, spoiled or as having forgotten life in Mexico. Pedro (22) and Iris (21), a Mexicano couple that met at a restaurant where they both used to work and that at the time of the interview cohabited with her family, explain it best:

Iris: "Senor Rudy, es que aveces estos paisas vienen es que a jalar duro por sus creaturas... como muchos venimos. Pero se ponen a correr de aqui p' alla buscando el buyo. Y despues se les hace poco el sueldo or demasiado duro el trabajo... ya cuando eso, nadie los aguanta... se ponen flojos... como los pochos que no mas quieren que alguien los soporta... si la vida aqui aveces se pone carancho, pero fijate que al que no le tiene miedo al trabajo siempre tiene la barriga llena... no como en Mexico. No es verdad Pedro?"

Pedro: Simon. Pero los mas huevones son los que no se atreven a venir. Imaginate el buey que tiene ninos con hambre y ni con eso se anima a cruzar. Esos son los que menos me sacan el respeto. No son hombres... no encuentro palabras para decirle de la verguenza... el dolor... la humillacion... que uno pasa... que hasta los pelados sienten... en no poder darle de comer a su familia... el que se deja a soportar eso no es hombre... "

Iris: Mr. Rudy, It's that sometimes these comrades come [to the U.S.] supposedly to work hard for their children... like many of us come. But they start running back and forth looking for the action. And then they start thinking that the pay is too low or the work is too hard... and when that happens nobody can stand them... they get lazy... like the Chicanos who just want someone to support them... the life here may get hard at times... but the person who's not afraid to work won't have an empty stomach... not like in Mexico. Isn't that right, Pedro?

Pedro: Yeah. But the real lazy-asses are the ones who don't dare to come. Imagine the asshole who can't even be motivated to cross [the border] by his hungry children. Those are the ones who I respect the least. They're not men... there are no words I can use to describe the embarrassment... the pain... the humiliation... even a young kid feels... in not being able to feed your family... the person who resigns himself to that is not a man..."

Iris later confided in me that the reason for Pedro's rant was because his initial plans were to come to the U.S. with his older brother-in-law, who at the last minute lost his nerve. Despite his ties to Detroit, his family did not approve of Pedro coming because he was only 17 years old at the time. According to my informants, it is not uncommon for boys as young as 14 years old to *cruzar* (cross), especially if they are among the oldest males in the family. Pedro was, in fact, the oldest male of six siblings living with his mother. And, he was a primary provider since both his father and older brother lost their lives *cruzando* (crossing) because a *coyote* (a person who facilitates border crossings), to whom they paid their family fortune, abandoned them in the Arizona desert. One of his older sisters was married. The other sister lived with him and his family. However, it was explained to me that even the most desperate of families shy from sending women, especially young single women, to *cruzar* because of the particularly heinous treatment to which they are subjected by *coyotes*.

In addition to Pedro regularly sending money to his mother, Iris encourages him to make an effort to help his sister out by sending money and clothing. Pedro absolutely detests the fact that he is standing in for his brother-in-law. According to Iris, he not only feels betrayed by the man because *lo dejo parao* (left him standing), but he also feels like his brother-in-law *se esta aprovechando* (taking advantage). According to Iris, Pedro tells few people about the situation because instead of taking pride in providing for his sister's family, he feels embarrassed about being the brunt of his brother-in-law's *pendejada* (stupidity). His dream is one day to provide a way for his family to come to Detroit. However, according to Iris, his brother-in-

law is not included in his dream. As far as Pedro is concerned, he has another child in Mexico. Although surrogacy was not widely reported by my informants, Pedro was not alone in assuming fatherhood responsibilities for a child who he did not sire. One young Chicano who was referred to me by one of my lateral informants, I did not include in my sample for reasons that will become obvious. This young man was a frequent client of a neighborhood agency that provided support for young people. Its programs were primarily designed to offer adolescents with opportunities to complete their GED. It provided clientele with classes, tutoring and advice related to employment acquisition (e.g., interviewing skills, assistance in applications, etc.).

As a way to encourage adolescents to develop "life skills" young parents were offered incentives, usually through free coupons or other small "giveaways," to create "positive experiences" for their children. These experiences ranged from regularly bathing their child to strolling them to neighborhood parks. Young fathers were especially encouraged to take initiative in generating these experiences. A great amenity received by these fathers was that the staff "don't sweat them for small shit if they doin' they thing." After an initial interview with the young man in question, I was informed by one of his peers that he was "posing." That is, he led the staff to believe that he fathered the child of a young woman in the program so that he could exploit what little extra services that were provided. The young woman reluctantly confirmed the situation but begged me not to "rat" them because her "baby daddy don't do shit." Although it was a hoax and she saw the "poser" only when she attended the programs, she did appreciate his contributions, which ultimately allowed her also to receive extra incentives. However, she also admitted that she enjoyed the notion of having a "baby daddy" involved, "even if it's just for pretend." I did not "rat" them. In a subsequent conversation with a staff member, I learned that the staff knew about the charade all along. They tolerated it because "few things in life make these young women happy, and it's good training for him because *o tarde o temprano* (sooner or later) — probably *temprano mas que tarde* (sooner rather than later) — he's gonna' be a daddy."

In another surrogate situation, fatherhood takes on the form of familistic obligation. Robert is a 24-year-old Chicano who, at the time of the interviews, cohabited with his on-again/off-again girlfriend, Suzi, who is 23 years old. Together, they have a 5-year-old son. Robert works as a framer and has so for the past few years. However, work is not always steady, so he supplements his income by doing odd jobs, or what he called “*machetero* carpentry.” “You know, like when people need stuff done — doors, windows, porches — without a permit. It’s not my gig but as long as people ain’t too picky, I can get paid.” He works very hard to provide “a decent life” for his son. He is fiercely protective of his son and demands that Suzi keep him well-groomed and that she not take him to certain places in the neighborhood that he considers “skanky.” Despite the costs and his tenuous work schedule, Robert plans on enrolling his boy in a neighborhood Catholic school because he does not want him around “the neighborhood *chusma*” (riffraff). In Robert’s words:

“Listen, I love Bobby [son]... well he’s not really my son... no, fuck it, he’s my son... I mean, he’s really my nephew, but I’m being his dad. He knows me as his dad. I know this may sound screwed up to you but... A little while ago my *carnalote* (older brother) got twisted up with some stupid shit and went inside [prison]. Things went bad for him... a *vato* ended up dying and he wasn’t ever gonna’ see daylight again. Man, I tried to talk to him [chokes up]... visit him when I could. But back then I was still tryin’ to get straight myself, *sabes* (you know)? He just couldn’t handle it... things just got too much for him. They say he killed himself, but I don’t believe it. He would have told me something was up. I mean, he was always telling me to take care of Bobby, but we were tight, like *carnales* (brothers) should be... He told me that there was some *torcidos* (bad guys) inside that knew the *vato* that died... he killed... Listen, my *carnal* wasn’t no *torcido*. He wasn’t no killer. That shit that went down was because it was him or the other guy. That’s the neighborhood. That’s how we do it down here. What was he suppose to do? Let the

other *vato* do him? He had too much to live for, man. He was all about taking care of his baby boy... I know folks don’t have much respect for *vatos* that end up like my *carnal* [brother] but, shit, he died tryin’. No fucking way *que se mato* (killed himself)... he died tryin’... that’s what I’m gonna’ tell Bobby about his *jefe* (father)... he died doin’ what he had to do... he was a warrior...”

In a subsequent interview with Suzi, she explained how she and Robert got close and ended up being a couple. Although their relationship had been marked with frequent breakups, most recently they decided to move in together and raise Bobby as a couple. They plan to marry if they can make things work out.

“When [he] was in prison, me and Robert got real close because he would try to take me over there to see him... and he would try to bring things over for Bobby... help me out with groceries and pampers... sometimes even watch Bobby when I had to go to the lawyer’s or do other things... [but] would never take Bobby so I could go out with friends. After [he] died, Robert sold his car to help pay for the funeral... he paid for most of it... and then he really started spending time with us. I think Bobby reminds him of his brother... they really loved each other... he still hurts so bad because I think he blames himself. I used to tell him all the time that [he] was his older brother and that he never wanted that sort of junk for him [Robert]. He would just get mad and take off... I’ve learned not to mess with him when he’s in one of his moods... it’s better just to let him be... get past it by himself... sooner or later he comes back to Bobby, usually with some kind of present. I think it’s his way of apologizing to Bobby... maybe even his brother... for being weak. ... I know this don’t look right. My *abuela* (grandmother) says it’s a sin... ‘*Hay que barbaridad. Es pecao, nina. No seas sinverguenza. Te hemos enseñado major. Eso es cosa de malcriados...*’ (What barbarism. It’s a sin, child. Don’t be shameless. That’s a thing of poorly raised

people...'). That I'm going to have to answer to God for sleeping with my son's uncle. But you know what? It really wasn't that deep between me and [his brother]. I mean, shit, Robert thinks his brother was some kind of great father... a saint... but he never did half the shit that Robert does for me and Bobby. Really, all he did was get me pregnant... he was too wrapped up with his friends... la vida... to pay much attention to us. Half the time when he came around, he was drunk and just wanted to get laid... would slap me around because I didn't want him to wake up the baby and then leave. ... I love Robert because he's everything that his brother wasn't. I could never tell him that though because it would piss him off. You know, when Robert gets in one of his moods sometimes he gets obsessed with finding out who killed his brother. ... It doesn't matter to me whether he killed himself or someone killed him... it was still his own stupid ass shit that put him in that situation to begin with. Shit, after getting pregnant by him, how many other stupid ass things do you think I was able to do get away with doing because I ended up being a mom and a dad to his kid? ... I love Bobby... he's my life. And I love Robert, too, because he's a real man... but probably the best thing that ever happened to me and Bobby is that his father was killed..."

Suzi's perspective offers a seldom heard voice in literature focused on issues related to young fatherhood. As was most often the case, corresponding young mothers' accounts of parental or spousal relations turned into opportunities to "set the record straight." For the most part their testimony offered a valuable tool with which to translate the meaning or rationale for what young fathers do. For instance, Toño, a 19-year-old married Chicano, attributed the reason for his constantly leaving his wife to her bickering about his refusal to quit partying at night with his friends. According to him, she had "mental problems that

run in her family" that led her to make occasional suicide attempts. However, Chela, his 18-year-old wife was quick to point out that she felt a bit overwhelmed by the fact that her parents returned to Mexico and had access few resources outside of Toño's family network. Although they treated her well, they refused to acknowledge Toño's abusive treatment toward her that at times degenerated to physical violence. "*Que mas podia hacer? Me corte y llame a la suegra. Haci me tuvieron que escuchar...* (What more could I do? I cut myself and called my mother-in-law. That way they had to listen)."

Fools Don't Rush In

A strong implication presented by research on young parenting is that urban culture encourages rampant and irresponsible fatherhood. Another common assertion is that, at least for Latinos, fatherhood encourages young men to move away from the criminality inherent in street life (see Bourgois, 1995; Moore, 1991; Vigil, 1988; Sanchez Jankowski, 1991). However, the case of Toño represents an important departure from established information on young men heavily involved in gang activity. Toño was born and raised in Detroit to immigrant parents. However, his parents own a restaurant, own low-income rental properties, and run a construction team. Most, if not all, of their employees and tenants were recent immigrants. Consequently, Toño's social networks were comprised primarily of recent immigrants. Also as a consequence, Toño rarely spoke English and preferred the company of Mexicanos. At an early age, he became deeply embedded in a neighborhood gang of Mexicano youth. According to his father, and later his mother, he came seriously close to losing his life on several occasions. After several failed attempts at intervention (for instance, sending him to live with relatives in another state) and their house being shot up by his associates, they thought it best to banish him from the household for fear of harm coming to other family members.

At 16 years of age, Toño announced to his father that his fellow gang members would let him retire from the gang without incident, if, and only if, he were marry and have a child. In his father's words:

“Pues que mas hubo que hacer? No me callo el idea de ser abuelo... y menos le callo a mi vieja. Pero el pelado se iba casar anyways... algun dia. Why not now, no? Y le digo como andaba aquel cabron, se iba encontrar al diablo. O yo mismo lo iba a matar... Dice que quiere ser policia o meterse a la infantaria... y realmente se me hace buen idea... Ojala lo haga, at least si lo matan alli le daran benefits a mi nieto... aqui si lo matan, nel...”

“Well what else was there to do? I didn't like the idea of becoming a grandfather... and my wife liked the idea less. But the kid was going to get married eventually, anyway. Why not now, no? And I'll tell you that that idiot was on his way finding the devil. Or I was going to kill him myself... He wants to be cop or join the infantry, and really, I think it's a good idea...I hope he does it... if he killed over there, at least my grandson will receive benefits... if he gets killed in the neighborhood, he'll get nothing...”

When interviewed Toño, he had already been married for almost two years and his son was almost three years old. Despite his associates' promise to leave him alone, he was still struggling to “stay away.” When I asked him what fatherhood has meant to him, his response was:

“For me? I never really thought about it. I guess it just is. At first, I was having problems being on my own when my old man *me tiro* (tossed me from my home). *Chingaos*, it's a lot harder out there than you think. He just put me out... no *garras* (clothes)... no *feria* (money)... no *refin* (food)... Shit I wasn't afraid of those *pendejos* (assholes), *a mi me tenian miedo* (they were afraid of me). They shot at my house... I shot at theirs. That's the way we

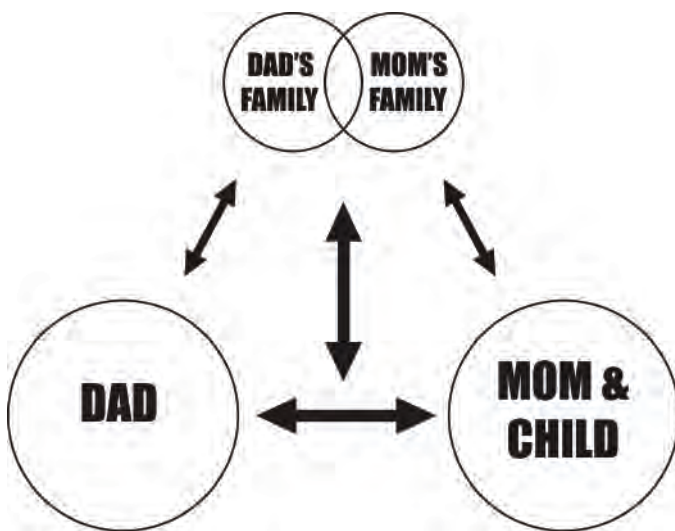
do it here... *Chale* (no), I was used to eating my mom's guiso (stew). When those *vatos* gave me *salida* (an out), I didn't think nothin' of it. What's the big deal? Chela already thought she was pregnant, *comoquiera* (anyway). Actually, the whole thing *me encabrono* (got me mad). You know, here these *pinche rancheros* (fucking farm boys) come here and think they want to be down... run with the *locos* (gangs) and then they come up with this kind of stupid shit. Don't get me wrong. I love my son... Chela's another story...I don't want to deal with that right now. *Me entiendes* (do you understand) though? That's why these *vatos* (guys) can't get no *pinche* respect from the other *clicas* (gangs)... because of stupid shit like this. After that I didn't want to run with those pussies anyways — I got some new *camaradas*. I tell you what, though, my old man's not on my ass too much anymore. As long as I keep it up, I got a place to stay... in my old man's apartment. I bring home the *maza* (dough) and Chela takes care of the kid... not bad, it's just boring as hell... I want excitement in my life... That's why I'm working on my GED, so I can become a cop and shoot some *vatos*... if that don't work out, me *voy a dar de alto* (enlist)... I wanna' shoot some fuckers... be my own muthafucka.”

Several months after this interview, Toño's father called me to let me know that he would be in my area to do a construction job and wondered if it would be all right to swing by my house drop off some tamales his wife had prepared for my family. Instead, I went to his construction site with cold water and fruit for his workers. During our visit, he informed me that both Toño and Chela did, indeed, complete the GED's that they were working on when I interviewed them. He was also fairly proud to announce that Toño had subsequently joined the army and was finishing up his infantry training in Georgia in anticipation to being deployed to Iraq. And, Chela and the baby were living with him and his wife. “*Por fin me nacio macho*... (finally a son/man/male was born to me...)”

Women's Work: Fatherhood by Committee

Dispersal and Clustering

History bears out that a common strategy for resisting structural oppression is family dispersal, whereby families extend resources as well as responsibilities to multiple households. Because of the large presence of single, female-headed families in inner-cities, mothers are necessarily vital agents in determining family relations and coping strategies. Dispersal was a common tactic among the Chicano families in my sample, however the arrangements varied from case to case. In all cases, however, it remains important to consider the complexities of multiple family relations in order to understand the multiple meanings that young men attach to fatherhood, for they are intertwined with and dependent on their family relations.

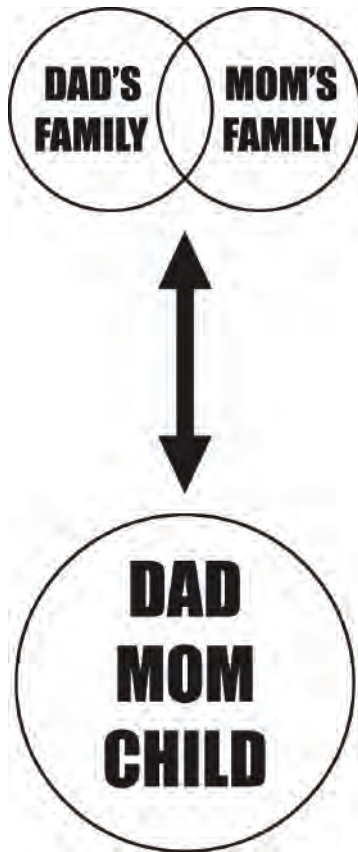


The above diagram represents a general family arrangement for the young men in my sample. Each sphere represents a component of a kin system whose collaborative efforts contribute to the sustained financial support and participation that young fathers provide for their children. The arrows represent the directional flow of resources and responsibilities as different components of the family. For instance, dads provided resources for their sanguineal families as well as their child, and in most cases their child's mother. The moms, in addition to doing what dads did, also were expected to provide direct resources to the child, as well as to mediate relationships that dads had with their children regardless of their living arrangements. It

was the resources found in the intersection of both sanguineal families what under girded stability for these aspirant young parents. More often than not, grandmothers created pacts to encourage situations that facilitated relationships between moms, dads and children.

Stepick (1998: 22) describes children as “social cement” that holds families together and aid in settlement. He was primarily describing how children facilitated relationships for transnational Haitian families in that children were sent to and from Haiti to strengthen or maintain family bonds. Here, children were more like catalysts for family bonds in that they provided a common source of what young men and their families considered obligations: what they had to do. In many cases, the children motivated families that absolutely detested one another for varying reasons, most of which had to do with pressure associated with either young parenting, conflicting values, or scarce resources, to work together to create strategies that allowed children to have access to multiple sources of material or emotional support. The exchange was that, indirectly, children provided a much needed source of accomplishment for their fathers. They provided them with a way to construct a meaningful, respectable and individual position within a family system whose collaborative had tendencies to subordinate any one individual's accomplishments. In effect, it was the women's willingness to mask their own maternal strategies for creating situations, circumstances, and at times episodes through children in order to allow young men to do what they thought they had to do.

The next diagram represents an extremely elusive family sub-configuration of the above-mentioned schema. However, all the men in my sample aspired to that type of independence. Despite the ephemeral quality of just about everything in these young men's live, including the relationships they had with their children's mothers, at the time of the interviews four of the men (three Chicanos, one Mexicano) in my sample considered themselves lucky enough to be “measuring up” to what they believed to be an ultimate perfunctory of fatherhood: independence.

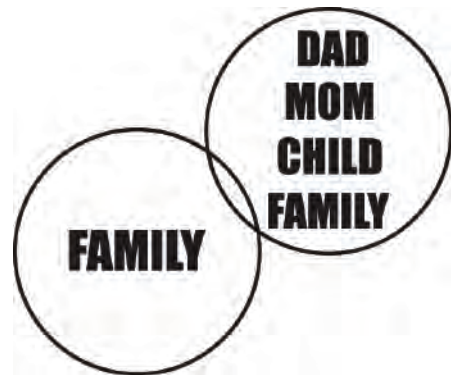


An expedient explanation would be that the older Chicanos had much more established networks from which to draw resources, or that the relationships they had with their children's mothers were much more stable. This certainly may have been the case, although of the four couples, only one (Chicano) was married and they happened to be the youngest of the four independently cohabiting couples. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the independence that these young couples enjoyed was mostly propped up by their sanguineal family contributions. For example, one couple lived in an apartment owned by a family member, and consequently did not pay rent. Another couple lived in the upstairs flat of the maternal grandmother in exchange for maintenance, and received free childcare. Another couple both were employed by the paternal grandparents, lived in an apartment owned by the paternal grandparents, and received free childcare. And the last couple occupied a flat above a restaurant where they both worked and was owned by a relative, who also provided childcare.

These families, though apparently independent, were more like outposts for larger systems whose decisions and activities affected their day-to-day family dynamic. It was common for these men to

struggle with having their family decisions upended by the need to consider their benefactors' contributions. The language these men used to articulate what they felt fatherhood meant was tenuously, at times sarcastically or ironically, steeped with referrals to independence. However, when probed, they acknowledged the importance of extended family to their abilities to provide stability for their children, something they felt they did not have themselves as children. Stability for these men was tantamount in importance to what the transnational fathers considered self-sacrifice.

The following diagram represents another sub-configuration of extended family network system. Six of my sample couples (one Chicano) lived in the following household/family configuration. While it is acknowledged that families and households are two different concepts, the overwhelming majority of my sample considerably blurred those boundaries. In a broad sense, the Mexicano families in this group could have been considered dispersed across national boundaries, however, their strategies would be better described as family clustering. It is not unusual, especially for Latinos, for multiple generations to reside within the same household.



A typical arrangement is for an elderly grandparent or single, elderly aunt/uncle to be residing with a family; just as common in inner cities is for people to be raising grandchildren. The Chicano couple and their children shared a house with the paternal grandmother. The grandmother was barely 39 years old, or at least so she claimed (I only say it this way because I have two sisters and one comadre who have been 39 years old for the past 12 years.) She was hardly an elderly parent being supported by a younger family. In fact, she

took great pride in being able to help her son be the “provider that he is.” She made it clear in her statement that she would “be damned if [she] was going to lose [her] son to another family.” Although she contributed much in the way of day-to-day expenses, she “was no goddam babysitter” and expected him to contribute to household expenses and to do maintenance on the house. She also expected the child’s mother to contribute financially; as well as to “pick up” (clean) the house, cook, and do laundry. The young mother dropped her children off at her own mother’s house, daily, while she was at work.

Although their family configurations were superficially similar to the above situation, the Mexicanos in this group resided with several family members who were at times distant relatives, *compadres* (co-parents), *padrinos* (godparents), or even non-related recent arrivals from their hometowns. Their households operated as units in that resources as well as responsibilities were shared. For instance, Miguel and Sandra, married and both 24 years old, and their three children, resided in a house with Miguel’s younger brother, his girlfriend and her child from a previous relationship; as well as a male cousin who anticipated the arrival of his wife. There appeared to be a hierarchy of order based on status. Miguel, although younger than his male cousin, made, according to him, all major decisions that affected the organization in the household. Miguel had been in Detroit almost five years and had facilitated the arrival of all others in the house, save for his two younger children who were born in Detroit. He considered himself *el que manda* (the one who orders — the boss). He explains:

“Aqui el unico que manda soy yo... no me importa lo que digan los de mas. Esta es mi casa. Yo pago la renta... aveces aunque los demas no tengan... Cuando recién llegado mi hermano el plan era mitas-mitas y no le daba lata si aveces andaba pelao porque andaba solano...bastante nos ayudaba con los niños. Ahora que anda con la Meche y su caramba esquinque... si, tiene que a fuercitas ‘pay up, man.’ Y al primo, pues, no le gusta mucho porque alli en Mexico se

daba como el gran chingon... pero aqui en Detroy el que chinga es el que tiene papiras... no soporto que se pongan pedos o que vengan sus amigos vagos... ni hombre vago ni hombre soltero... no quiero esa pendejada para mis familia... y al que no le cae, que se larga...”

“The only boss here is me... I don’t care what anyone else says. This is my house. I pay the rent... sometimes even when no one else can help... When my brother first arrived from Mexico, the deal was to split everything down the middle and I wouldn’t bother him when he was broke because he was alone... he was a great help with the kids. Now that he’s with Meche and her brat... yes, now he has no choice but to pay up, man. And my cousin doesn’t like it too much because he thought he was the big shot in Mexico... but here in Detroit, the only big boss is the one who has papers... I don’t allow for them to get drunk or for their lazy bum friends to come around... not lazy bums not single men... I don’t want that nonsense for my family... and if they don’t like, it they can take off...”

Women in these households formed cooperative relationships in which they shared housekeeping duties, childcare and freely nurtured one another’s children. Their relationships with other household women were a lot less hierarchical and seemed to assign tasks and duties based on skills and circumstances. For instance, Sandra was much more accepting of the union between Meche and her brother-in-law, and considered Meche to be a welcomed addition to the household. However, Sandra’s lengthier experience with living in Detroit provided an opportunity to seek better employment than Meche. Consequently, Meche did childcare, maintained the household and, more often than not, cooked meals. Although Sandra relished her time in the workforce and enjoyed the fact that she could hide money for personal luxuries, she also had misgivings about how close her children, and perhaps spouse, were getting with Meche. She explains:

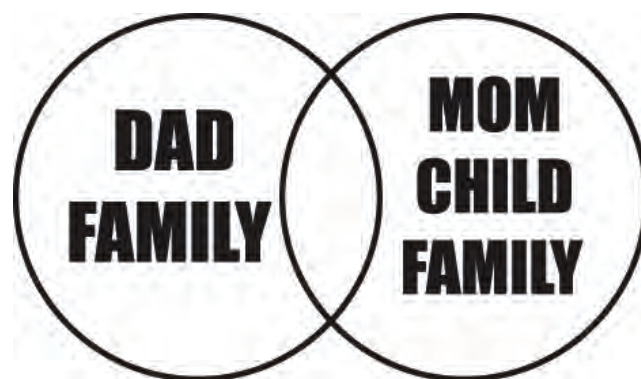
“Imagine, yo sola detras de los ninos y tambien sirvendoles a tres hombres. Hay, cuando por fin vino la Meche, me di luego al restauran del tio. No queria que me ganara aquella la chanza. Chihuahuas, que suerte. Al principio, mi viejo no queria que se quedaran mi cunado y la Meche con nosotros... dicia que buscabamos problemas con tantas mujeres en casa... y ademas no le callo bien el idea de que su hermanito se encostalara con nino de otro... o que se fuera ella o que se fueran los tres... casi los hecha a los tres... que pecado... Pero yo le fui diciendo que era su deber como hombre cuidar a su hermanito. Y ademas, ya que habia otra mujer en casa, yo podia buscar jale con el tio... entre yo y el cune poco a poco lo aflojamos. Ahora, a vez en cuando le doy a La Meche unas moneditas para que se compre sus tiliches... asi no le da para maltrata a mis hijos ni a onteojan a mi esposa... la estoy wachando... no me cae nada come se chifla aveces con lo mio... pero tampoco me cae estar encerrada en la casa...”

“Imagine taking care of the children and three men, too. Sheesh, when Meche finally came, I went right away to the uncle’s restaurant to find work... I didn’t want her to beat me to it. What luck. In the beginning, my husband didn’t want my brother-in-law and Meche to stay with us... he said that we were just looking for problems with having so many women in the house... and he also didn’t like the idea of my brother-in-law being saddled with someone else’s child... he almost kicked all three of them out... what a sin... but I started putting in his head that it was his obligation as a man to take care of his little brother... also, another woman in the house would free me up to work for the uncle... between me and the bro-in-law, we loosened him up. Now, every once in a while I Meche some money to buy her things... that way she won’t be inclined to mistreat my kids or eyeball my husband... I’m watching her... I

don’t like the way she sometimes gets coquettish with what’s mine... but I also don’t like being locked up in the house...”

A major feature of fatherhood for these men was driven by their need to keep order, not perhaps by their desire to give orders. Their parental obligations were pooled and at times subordinated to the needs of a collective household. It was common for younger fathers, or those with less status, to defer many parental decisions to more powerful men in the group. As is apparent from the above testimony, women were critical components in not only creating situations that allowed men to achieve a sense of household stasis, their work was also an important part of maintaining ties to family members outside the household who provided resources. Perhaps most important to this analysis is that it represents a scenario of men and women working together to thwart a gender regime that subordinates less powerful men and women.

The diagram below represents a very common family configuration, perhaps the way in which most young men experience fatherhood. Eight men in my sample resided in family households that did not include their children. Of the eight men, five were Chicano and three were Mexicano. Six of these men were among the youngest of my sample; all 20 years old or younger. One Chicano was the oldest (25), and one Mexicano was 22 years old. Aside from the two older men, the Chicanos in this group lived in very typical family arrangements.



These men, at the time of the interviews, lived with their parents and visited their child, who lived with its mother and her family. Although all of them financially contributed to their child in

varying degrees, they relied heavily on their own parents to facilitate the relationships with the child's mother's family. In all four cases, the families lived in close proximity of one another and had known each other for several years. Two of these men did not consider themselves to be romantically involved with their child's mother; the other two were "having problems." Most of the problems were related to "gettin' sweated" by their child's mother for either money or time. As Raul, a 20-year-old Chicano who is simultaneously in the process of moving in with his cousins and experiencing relationship difficulties with girlfriend, Jessica, who is also 20 years old:

"Dude, I just want out. All Jessica wants from me is money. I don't know what else to do. My parents take care of the baby a lot. But I gotta' work, man. I want to go to college, too. She ain't the only one who got plans. If it ain't enough that she's always up my ass for one thing or another, or wants to drop the baby off on the weekends because she wants to go out... My parents ain't got a problem with watching the baby if it's for a good reason... on the weekends, though, they make me stay home with her. It's okay sometimes, but I gotta' have fun, too. My parents told me that if I didn't start taking better care... I was going to have to leave. So, I'm leaving. I thought for sure they'd back off because I told them I wouldn't bring the baby by anymore. Riiiiight. Jessica's parents are *compadres*... Actually, they're my padrinos... When Jessica got pregnant, I didn't have the nerve to tell my parents... and I was really afraid of her dad... the *vato*'s scary... Jessica told me that her dad hit the roof when she told him... said he wanted to kill me... her mom calmed him down and then they came to talk to my parents. My ma and my *nina* (godmother) cried... my dad got drunk with Jessica's dad. Afterwards they offered me a beer. I was really surprised because my old man is really strict... beat my ass when I got drunk at Jessica's *quinceanera*... they said that

between the two of them, they'd make an honest man out of me. I thought for sure they were talking about me getting married... I ready to run then... I've known Jessica all my... heck, we were more like brother and sister than... since then, my padrinos treat me more like a son. They're the ones who are always looking out for me. They're the ones who will back Jessica off... heck, sometimes they even back my parents off. They ask me about life... tell me I'm a good father because I go over there to spend time with the baby... tell me to give Jessica a chance... Things ain't been the same with my parents, though. All they can see is my faults... I don't know how many times I can listen to my dad tell me I'm not a man, anymore... that's why I'm leaving. Heck, sometimes I think me and Jessica should just switch houses... I love my child but I don't gotta' love Jessica... how come they can't see that?"

The relationship that Raul's and Jessica's families have built around the well-being of their children as well their grandchildren is exceptional only in its commonality. In this case, the kin network preceded the birth of the child and the strength of its establishment carried both young parents through difficult situations. In other cases, the birth of a child precipitated family situations that encouraged otherwise separate kin networks to overlap to create a substantial support system for young parents. In fact, in the case Adan, a 22-year-old Mexicano who lived in Detroit with cousins and whose 22-year-old wife and two children lived in Mexico, his choice in partners was actually strategic. As he explains:

"Yo no tenia familia en Detroy hasta que no me case con Amalia. Mi ama me pucho que me casara con ella en vez de otra... no hay pedo... los primos me consiguieron trabajo y me enseñaron como es la chingadera de mandar fondos... aunque se molesta un poco que estoy tan lejos... aqui ando jalando con los primos..."

“I didn’t have family in Detroit until I married Amalia. My mom pushed me into marrying her instead of another... no big deal... the cousins found me a job and showed me the business of sending money... even though it bothers her a bit that I’m so far away... I’m here working with my cousins...”

Despite not residing with their children, both of these types of family relations allow for young men to construct their sense of fatherhood through different components of their family network’s validation. These partnerships create a situation that simultaneously pushes these young men toward incorporating obligation for children within the rubric of their sense of fatherhood while also strengthening their sense of belonging to a larger family network. For these young men, their own parents had a lot to do with how they did fatherwork and what they perceived it to mean.

Henry, a 25-year-old Chicano who resided with his new girlfriend, Nica, and her child from another relationship, also experienced a similar family configuration. The major difference in this case is that Henry’s ex-girlfriend and child live with his own mother. Per Henry, it was supposed to be a temporary situation but they have been living off and on for the past four years. He has mixed feelings, but talks about the major advantages for everyone involved:

“It’s all good, I guess. I mean, Nica don’t like it... but she’s just got to deal with it. My *jefita* (mom) knew [my ex’s] mom for a long time... since back in the day... the good thing is that since my baby bro went away [to school] my moms ain’t alone. She takes care good of my little man, because I can’t be there all the time... before, [my ex’s mom] used to take care him and it was kind of hard to get her to let me come around when I wanted to see him. Her mom still watches him during the day, but I can see him in the evenings when my *jefita* takes over... she [my mom] won’t let her [my ex] bring other dudes around, either...”

sometimes I just want to take him away from [ex-girlfriend]... you know, have him with me all the time... especially now that I settled down with Nica... Nica’s always on me to do that, but it’s good for my moms and it gives me an excuse go see her... things just weren’t good between us because of all the dumb shit I used to do... now they’re getting’ better... but she still takes [my ex’s] side when she’s sweatin’ me for support... she [mom] don’t want hear shit, man... she just wants to see me pay... show *me da feria* (money), homes... My moms still don’t like Nica too much... but every now and then I take baby girl [Nica’s daughter] over there and *la jefita* (mom) unloosens a little because of she not ever having any girls... still don’t dare to take Nica there... but one day...”

Henry’s mother created a situation that not only provided resources for her grandchild and his mother, she also encouraged her son to be financially responsible and enabled him to do fatherwork with minimal interruption from a hostile ex-girlfriend. As a consequence of this family configuration and relations, Henry’s sense of fatherhood was, in many ways, a balance struck between his desire to be involved with his son and the need he felt to take care of his mother. For him, the ultimate fatherhood prize will be when he can incorporate his new family into his extended network.

Conclusion

This work has visited the many ways families organize themselves to maximize their capacities for surviving on limited resources — family coping strategies — whether through a failed attempt to *enganchar* (hook) a potential source of remittance or through creating family relations via strategically placed grandchildren. Also witnessed were young men utilizing the same systems upon which to build their visions of fatherhood. For most of these young men, however elusive, stability and independence, figure strongly into that vision. And,

despite the remarkably different experiences they have with constructing fatherhood, what remained constant were two key elements: (1) their contributions as fathers, though at times tenuous, were as dependent on, as they were important to, the inventiveness of their family networks; and (2) the quality and quantity of fatherwork they did was largely dependent on the amount they were able to or willing to subordinate themselves to the collective good of their family system. In other words, self-sacrifice, whether through denying themselves what one would consider modest staples in order to maximize remittances or through supporting a sibling's child or perhaps even by trading the excitement offered by *la vida* for an infantry unit and a steady paycheck, was the tool with which they fashioned their triumph over the often brutal circumstances that accompanied their journey toward fatherhood.

Through the course of this analysis, it became obvious to me that the two groups of men in my sample expressed a fair amount of disdain for one another. Mexicanos characterized Chicanos as weak for their inability to ignore *la vida* and stay focused on family. They felt they were lazy and unable to or unwilling to sacrifice what they considered to be extraneous pleasures in order to look after their families. The Chicanos could not reconcile what they perceived to be the Mexicanos' weakness: letting themselves be mistreated or exploited — prostituting their labor, perhaps even their manhood. For one group, the strength of their fatherhood lies in their humility; the other, in their bravado. What they have in common is their capacity to face the beast — “*la vida aqui*” — “*la vida*” — without flinching.

What does fatherhood mean for these men? To some it is a strategy or a compromise; to others, an escape, a ticket in, even sometimes a ticket out. Perhaps Henry explains it best: “... it just is, man.” Henry's sage advice that “90% of being a pops is just showing up. The hard part is still showing up when you got nothin' to give,” also tells us what all these men fear the most: the pain and humiliation

of not being able to provide; the data tell us that a fair portion of that 90% could be attributed to women either enabling or forcing them to show up. If nothing else, these data — no, these men — tell us that fatherhood is a concept and a process, both of which are quite capable of allowing men to create multiple meanings that validate their fatherhood expressions. The decisions men made — the ones they had to and the ones they wanted to — in relation to their concept of fatherhood, make absolutely no sense when considered outside the context of their broader family dynamic, regardless of their age, citizenship status or living arrangements. Their stories represent to us a fatherhood process, dynamic and flexible, that is both shaped by and helps to shape their experiences of trying to avoid “showing up with nothing with nothin' to give.”

Much of my analysis is guided by the generative fathering approach. Hawkins and Dollahite (1997: xiv) describe it as an analytic lens that “recognizes fathers' current contributions to the development of the next generation, the constraints under which most fathers labor, the good desires men have to be generative fathers, and their efforts to improve.” The words “generative fathering” and “fatherwork” are interchangeable terms used to describe the work most men do to meet the needs of their children and next generation. When applied to Latinos, or at least the men in this study, perhaps “familywork” would be much more accurate term.

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