Fatherhood: A Personal Reflection on Community Expectation within the Town of San Antonio Palopò, Guatemala

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ABSTRACT

While doing field work for 3 weeks in San Antonio Palopó, Guatemala I began my research with a focus on the role fathers play within family dynamics, specifically how they are viewed by individuals as well as by how they view themselves and the role of fatherhood. What initially began as a research project however quickly evolved into a much more personal reflection on my own understanding of family, and what it means to be doing anthropological research in the field. Having been raised in a single father household, I had an interest in investigating how fathers are perceived within the community and to what extent that perception was relatable to my own personal experience. With my research I want to provide an understanding of men’s roles as fathers, specifically how societal expectations impede them from having a more emotional and involved relationship with their children. This research is a “coproduction of knowledge”, a compilation of my own personal understanding of my culture and experiences with fatherhood in relation to that of San Antonio’s (Gossen 1993:443).

METHODOLOGY

I conducted three weeks of fieldwork in San Antonio and the nearby community of Santa Catarina from February 12th to March 6th. The initial goal for my research was to gain an understanding of how individuals define the role of fathers within the household, how fathers interact with their children and family, and explore the question of how fathers fit in both traditional and nontraditional family structures. As my time in the field progressed I formulated three central questions to shape my research: What does the role of a father mean to each individual? How do they choose to express their understanding of fatherhood? And where does this understanding of fatherhood come from?
Because an important aspect of my research involved gaining perspectives on family dynamics, specifically with unbiased and tailored responses, I wanted a large part of my research to use participant observation in order for me to gather my own understanding on the individuals and family as a whole. This required me to often rely on close relationships and on some individuals to be open and reflective of their own, often very personal experiences. Other aspects of my research involved gaining information from individuals through simple conversation, daily observation, and informal interviews. Due to the topic being very relatable and at times emotional for some of the individuals I chose to speak with, I felt it often worked against me to use a formal interview environment with questions that seemed to imply I was looking for a specific response.

Due to more personal distraction however, I found my research steered toward more reflective ideas. But at the end of my research centralized the focus of my investigation on information obtained by six men in particular, due to their willingness to speak to me most freely about their lives, something I found at times restricted others from being beneficial to my investigation. These men gave me the most information and expressed their life stories in the most meaningful ways. This helped me to gain the best understanding not only of how they viewed their own role as a father, but also how they reflected on their fathers and fatherhood in general. Through the course of my research I learned the most helpful, as well as interesting aspects of my work came when I was able to simply ask an individual to tell me about his life, his childhood and his family now. Although not necessarily the most investigative of tactics, I found I was looking less for answers and more for choice of expression on how men would choose to explain the detailed or often more simple aspects of their lives.
At the end of my investigation I had obtained my findings from a total of 12 formal and informal interviews, participant observation, and casual conversations. Because the subject of fathers is a theme every individual has had an experience with it was not difficult to necessarily find people to speak. However, because of my role as a student, with no relationship to those I was speaking to, as possibly my gender, I found the biggest task was getting people to talk about personal experiences, because of the personal aspect of the information being shared. Another issue that arose was often the confusion people often seemed to have with my questions. Many individuals I spoke to frequently struggled to reflect on fatherhood. I found this to be because emotional and descriptive understanding of family is not necessarily expressed so openly, and I learned the understanding of fatherhood is represented through working and providing for the family.

The biggest struggle I faced while doing my research however, was not often related to those I was researching, but rather myself. I at times found myself distracted and incapable of fully enveloping myself in my work due to my mind often being focused on my own personal family and my distance made it even harder for me to envelope myself in my research. This distraction however made me alter my understanding of my initial research to incorporate the diversions I was facing into how I reflected on my findings.

INTRODUCTION

There is a large gap within the literature focused on family dynamics. Specifically, I found little to no literature of fathers roles within the household and their role in the raising of children. With research commonly focused on gender roles, and often more specifically the role of mothers within family relations, there is a lack of focus on what fatherhood is. This caused me to initially have a broad focus for my research, because I had very little
research to build off of. Originally, incorporating within my investigation aspects on how father roles change when the typical family dynamic shifts such as in single father households. Although I was unable to find individuals with these current family dynamics within San Antonio, I found an individual who shared some perspectives on growing up within a single father household. I did however find through some of my research, gender role differentiation within San Antonio develop into roles within family dynamics.

It is important to note men’s understandings of fatherhood are instilled at a young age. When asking children for instance the difference between mothers and fathers, often times their response was men work while women stay at home. Through socialization men tend to view themselves as the economic caretaker of the family, instead of a form of emotional support. This is specifically evident within the town of San Antonio Palopò. But when roles change or shift within the household there can be an apparent change in parental dynamics. Such as Carter expresses with income or employment, a factor I often took note of during my research.

These social pressures deter men from being involved in household chores and roles often associated with women, such as domestic chores and caretaking. Men also have a harder time breaking away from gender norms because they are in a place of power (Carey 2008:116). Through the course of my work I began to see a consistent trend in how men defined fatherhood. This made me alter my research to focus on how men are viewed as the economic facet of the family, they express their care and concern for children through financial support and although often times they appear to play a detached role in the involvement of their children, this is due to expectation and forms of expression constructed by social norms.
I want to express I feel as if my fieldwork was at often times not a compilation of formal research. Due to personal distractions, miscommunication, and difficulty for individuals to express personal and often difficult ideas or thoughts, I would consider my research a personal reflection on the role of fatherhood within San Antonio. Marcus and Fischer express in their work *Anthropology as a Cultural Critique* the term *crisis of representation*, “one distinctive, alternate swing of a pendulum between periods in which paradigms lose their legitimacy and authority- when theoretical concerns shift to problems of the interpretation of the details of a reality that eludes the ability of dominant paradigms to describe it, let alone explain it” (Marcus and Fischer 1996:12). This is my own personal understanding of the individuals I have encountered during my time in San Antonio, it is my attempt to describe how I perceived the role a father plays within the community and family structure. What is mentioned within my research is what I found relevant to my experiences as well, but in no way an explanation of fatherhood, because my description is a reflection of my experience and not capable of defining the reality. This is my “interpretation” of the reality that is fatherhood in San Antonio. No form of detail or description can express to the reader what fatherhood means within San Antonio, the framework I used was instead personal reflection.

There are numerous ways in which people attempt to interpret and thus approach the field of Anthropology. Anthropological explanation is often “a clash of theoretical paradigms” it is this ‘clash’ that translates “into the writer’s problem of representation” (13). I questioned how I would represent those I had come across throughout my field research, not due to inaccuracies within my methodology, but due to my inability to perceive these moments in a way I felt would be unbiased. I could not separate my research from my own personal ideas. My choice of words within themselves portray an
understanding of fatherhood in San Antonio only I have taken part in. I often found myself reverting back to my own experiences with my family and current situations and these thoughts tended to reflect in my research.

This is my narrative ethnography of three weeks in the field (Tedlock 1991). A reflexive representation of fatherhood within San Antonio, as I observe others my findings are echoed in my own observations on my memory and experience with my father. This is coproduction of information both on San Antonio and myself, I desired to see how aspects of the research I was attempting to uncover mirrored personal observations within my life as well. The information I share here is a reflection of my own identity, how my understanding of my culture and myself causes me to base my research on reflexive narrative (Gossen 1993:445).

I have often been interested in how people understanding family dynamics. How individuals can having overlapping trends within their family structure, as well as how they can also differ greatly. How I view family, just like any other individual, may share similar overlapping trends. It is these experiences that can make one’s observations alterable. It took one informal interview to quickly realize the complexity of every aspect of fatherhood within San Antonio, a role incredibly personal but also public and reflective of social expectation. I spoke to Santos, my host father, often about his father. And he expressed to me his father was a man named Jeronimo, an American who adopted him at the age of 14. Another individual, Pantaleon, whose mother at the age of seven, considers his father to be the most important individual in his life and the pillar of all his actions. And Gabrielle, who never knew his father, because he abandoned his family when he was born, explained to me the importance of a father committing himself to his family. I witnessed an overwhelming difference in all the stories I heard, and it is apparent fathers play an
incredibly complex role in most anyone’s life. Yet I also often found trends within individual’s expressions on fatherhood, most often being how one spoke about affection, obligation, and family dynamics.

**Expression Based on Expectation**

>“Natural feelings are of great value and ought to be separated from the “factitious” or sham feelings produced by civilization” (Lutz 1983: 287).

Just a few weeks ago I was skeptical I would ever get the chance to begin my field research in San Antonio, let alone complete it. As much as I had initially wanted to experience Anthropology in the field, there was a much bigger part of me that wanted nothing more than to be home for a compilation of reasons. Within a week of arriving to Guatemala I was faced with news from my family that my father was going to need brain surgery in order to remove a tumor. It was news my father had planned on never telling me, in hopes of preventing worry, fear, and knowing my obvious reaction would be to come home and end my time abroad. When I was able to speak to him about my returning home he insisted there was no reason for me to, trying to express how unconcerned he was and how simple of a procedure it would be. But as convincing as he tried to be, he knew the decision had already been made.

While listening to him explain how much he wanted me to stay in Guatemala there was an evident tone in his voice I have never heard, and it was overwhelmingly clear it was one of complete fear. It is important to mention that my father is likely the strongest, yet most stubborn person I know. He raised me and my three siblings on his own, and I learned at a young age how difficult this was for him, but never because of how he expressed it. Because, like so many other fathers across numerous cultures, he has expresses himself in a
way difficult to decipher. He has become incredibly successful at disguising how he often feels, as if it is what is expected from him. Although possibly not always intentionally aware of his response to situations.

The moment I heard that fear and rush of emotion in his voice is a moment I have recounted regularly while speaking to fathers in the field. I in some way felt the appearance my father was trying to portray was strangely similar to that of how men often presented themselves in San Antonio. I met an individual right at the start of my research who made a statement about men’s need to be strong, and it made me think back to that phone call. Jose owns a store on the main street of San Antonio. Like many San Antonio residents, he was born in San Antonio and has no desire to ever leave. At 75 years old, he explains, he has seen so many changes even within a short amount of time. He expresses the importance education has had in benefiting the economics of San Antonio and states, for him the most important thing you could ever do for your children is educate them. A sentiment my father has often shared with me as well.

When I came by Jose’s store, most every morning, I regularly would ask him to express to me the differences between men and women, specifically within family relations. His usual response would be that men and women are moving toward a time of equality, but men work while women raise the children. This is accurately the response I heard from most individuals I spoke with, in varying ways. Even women with their own work, would usually express this is the major trend within San Antonio. Rarely did anyone mention the fact that women do work, depending on the family, yet still remain labeled as solely the domestic factor within family structures.

Two weeks into my research he invited me to come with him to pick tomatoes on a plot of land he owns off the main street near his store. As we worked our way up the
terraces of tomatoes, he talked about family and education again. I asked him once more to explain to me what his role is as a father. His response differed however, to those I had heard before. He explained, “Men have to be hard and strong”. After asking why this is the case, he responded, because women can get help. There are people who can take them to get help, and they can go to the doctor. Men however, when they aren’t strong enough, they physically will die because no one can help them. They have to be strong and take care of the family, while also never being weak emotionally or physically.

As he said this he continued his work picking tomatoes, mentioning this information as if it was simply a fact every father recognizes. I had heard many people explain differences between mothers and fathers in terms of what is often expected of them. But this was the first time I had heard a statement alluding to men’s lack of emotional expression and the physical demand of fatherhood. This is either because others neglected to consider this aspect in understanding the divide in parental roles, or because it is a concept not often expressed outwardly. This statement suggests there really isn’t such thing as weak men because those who show signs of weakness die. Due to the societal expectation on fathers, men need to be strong because no one will reach out to help them.

Hearing this interpretation of fathers’ obligations instilled in me a sense of concern, knowing a father has to resist against making mistakes, showing signs of weakness, and expressing himself outside of the restrictions constructed for him. Jose continued to clarify being “hard” and “strong” also entails being strict and lacking the sensitivity mothers tend to have toward their children. Suggesting men must remain unemotional, and as a result detached themselves from those they love. Jose had been taught this understanding and his confidence expressed to me many others likely had the same conceptualization. He explained if a man is not hard and strong and thus incapable of fulfilling his obligations,
there is no one to take care of his family. This also puts stress on men to fulfill their obligations.

This understanding of men’s roles within society, and more specifically within the family, re-instills in men the need to conceal their “natural feelings” and instead present themselves in the way societally expected of them (Lutz 1983:287). This inability to express themselves is reflected in their lack of a role as a caretaker or emotional support system within the family. For example, men within San Antonio and surrounding communities traditionally don’t accompany their children or family members to the doctor, a role designated for the mother or other women within the family. Men play as little role as possible in what is considered “weakness”, both physically and mentally, and because of this cannot turn to family to care for them.

What added to my disappointed in learning this perspective on fatherhood was my personal discomfort in watching my own father try to hide weakness, especially in a moment where support is what I would find necessary for him. It is hard to determine if fathers, such as those I met in San Antonio, portray themselves as tough intentionally or because they have been brought up culturally to understand this as expression. I question if it is a cognitive or social process, a performance. As Turner states, “Man learns himself through taking on a role in society, through performance. Or observing and as a result participating in the performance. It is a “transformation” of self, and not necessarily a disguise” (1987:13).

**Economic Obligation and Displays of Affection**

Throughout my conversations and informal interviews, when I asked individuals to tell me about their fathers the immediate response always involved his work. If I asked for
them to explain their father’s personality, I often sensed a slight confusion and pause as they would attempt to answer the question. At one point, Francisco, another individual I interviewed, continued talking about his father’s work. It wasn’t until I repeated the question, explaining further what his personality was like, did he respond he wasn’t at home often, but concluded he was a good father. It was evident Francisco, along with most every individual I spoke to, associates the success of a father to how much he works to provide for his family.

As I continuously heard similar descriptions of father’s, I began to consider how infrequently fathers are viewed as caretakers beyond the financial realm. Initially I was slightly frustrated I was unable to gain a more profound answer from most of the people I interviewed, but it did help me build a better understanding for why men are described as inattentive or distant from their children. Their obligation to their family is to be distant, not only emotionally, but physically as well. Working to support their family is how they express care. Men take on the role their father often has had before them in the only way they know how, caring for family through financial means.

I attended a union ceremony at the Municipalidad during my time in San Antonio. As the mayor read from the Civil Code he listed off numerous obligations the woman has within the union. Most involving her care within the household and tending to her and her spouse’s children. The only obligation stated during the ceremony for the man was the expectation to provide for the family. It is not just socially expected, but verbally stated at a ceremony in which a family begins.

This information caused me to attempt to answer the question I had asked so many others. How would I describe my father? After an initial description of his personality, intelligent, at times incredibly frustrating and headstrong, yet caring and protective, I would
likely continue in saying he is strong and hardworking, how most individuals reflected on their fathers in San Antonio. I related to this description, yet was confused at how there was no addition, as if there was either nothing to really say or they really did not know their fathers beyond their obligation. What I realized could also influence their responses was the societal aspect of fatherhood. When I asked these questions of them, it may have been easier to respond in a more general way, not bring their personal emotions into the conversation. Because emotions are something unassociated with men.

Memories of One’s Father

I do not intend to make it seem as if there is a lack of care or love represented in people’s understanding of fatherhood within San Antonio. Rather, their understanding of fatherhood is one hard to express. However, I did speak to a select few who did have a great amount of emotions to express when talking about their fathers. But what I notice in these individuals was they were raised in less conventional families. Pantaleon is 58 years old, with 14 children. He prides himself on how big his property is and his past position as mayor within San Antonio. And he has expressed to me, he owes all of this success to his father. Like many other men around Pantaleon’s age, his childhood involved having a father who worked incredibly hard as a farmer. At seven years old his mother died and his older sister took on a motherly role. When I had told him about my own family, and how my father also had to support us in every way, Pantaleon went into an incredibly long and articulate speech about how important his father has been to him. I felt as if he became more comfortable with me, and I with him, as we both understood in some way how similar our childhoods had been.
To Pantaleon his father shaped him in every way. As he tried to think of specific memories his eyes began to water, and explained his father as his best friend. He did not necessarily describe many personality traits, or define who he was, but expressed there was no way to fully explain really how much he meant to him. And said, his biggest regret is not getting to share his success with his father after all he did for him. This is a perspective I did not regularly experience while doing my field research, and it was one of few times I felt the relationship with one’s father stretched beyond those typically displayed throughout the community. Pantaleon, possibly due to his more untraditional upbringing, had a greater need to express how he felt about his family and how viewed his father because his role was so uniquely different yet similar in the simplest of ways.

This was also one of the first times I felt as if I was hearing thoughts I could often relate to. As he spoke he looked out the window, and slowly began to realize how much he had shared. I could tell he became slightly uncomfortable and stopped midway through explaining how he had learned so much from his father. In that moment I attempted to articulate how I owe my father for all of my success as well, and without question he is a crucial part of who I am. And I have felt the pain of regret when it comes to not being there for him. After I expressed this, we both sat in silence as if we had reached a sort of understanding.

CONCLUSION

With little experience and understanding of Anthropology I began my study abroad experience in Guatemala hoping to find something I had a hard time expressing. What I have found is I was searching for an understanding of what Gossen expresses as a homeland. Not a physical place where I feel a sense of belonging, but rather a place enveloped in the people, people “who gain strength from the spirit of place- those who
positively want to be who and where they are” (Gossen 1993:451). A place San Antonio unquestionably represents. It is evident the simplest of conversations with Jose as he speaks about how far San Antonio has come from, the overwhelming majority of individuals who express no desire to ever leave, or even the simple sound of tortillas being made as you walk down a street.

Through my conversations and simple interactions, it took little time to see a sense of routine and tradition within families and social groups. But with like any other place, there is a continual shift toward change, as individuals would often tell me familial roles are slowly changing. Looking back on my field research I had expected to investigate fatherhood to see how it differed from what I have experienced, as well as those around me. But in my attempt to find this unique place, I instead found the familiarity in my own life. Like most individuals explained in San Antonio, my own father often acts in a way that seems to lack expression. He takes on a role expected of fathers within San Antonio as well financially he has supported me, most notably through education, and remains to strength that holds my family together.

I had felt a need to see a different place and with evident tradition and patterns in which I could understand their trends. But these trends are evident in my own home. A part of my desire to do research within San Antonio and investigate a crucial role within families was not only because of my own family dynamics, but because of my experience dealing with such a large family crisis while abroad. It made me reflect on how important my father is to me, and where this importance comes from. My father has been in so many ways an complex part of my life and my interest lies in how that role differs for others.

Anyone you ask has a thought on what their father or even the idea of a father means to them. Whether a thought of their own father, themselves as a father, or the
possible absence of one. This brought me to question how others reflect on this role. I had a preconceived understanding of how my research would develop, and sensed man would likely be considered distant and the economic facet of the family. And in some ways these aspects of fatherhood seem accurate, but I also wanted to investigate where this reality comes from and in what ways it is false. And what I concluded was fathers have social pressures that cause them to be perceived in these ways and thus they take on these roles. I often asked simple questions about fatherhood, and would usually receive fairly common and simple responses. Frequently people appeared confused by my questions, as if never asked to express an opinion about their father or their role as a father. I formulated an understanding of how many often seem to view their fathers within San Antonio, as a hard working individual and the economic support within their family.

As Marcus and Fischer explain, “cultural constructions of reality affect social action” (1996). The cultural construction of fatherhood, affects individual expression of fatherhood. Individuals who had family dynamics that strayed from the conventional cultural construction of family tended to have although overlapping views on fatherhood, an understanding of their fathers that evidently differed. A reflection I felt relevant to my own personal experiences. The lack of expression often associated with men, what can often be mistaken as lack of concern and of involvement, is a reflection of a social standard pushed onto men by tradition and other expectation. It is this pressure that deters men from involving themselves in roles so strongly associated with women (Carey 2008:116).

What I had longed for desperately at the beginning of time in San Antonio was familiarity, specifically the familiarity that comes with being home. Beyond the initial thought of shock and panic, I was hit with a feeling I had never experienced, and I cannot struggle completely define. It was a feeling of discomfort, combined with the fear and worry my dad had tried to prevent. I have
never felt so distant from something so close to home, and the only desire I had at the time, was to be surrounded by the familiar. But through my research I learned to instead see that familiarity of family I longed for at home is something evident in the lives of everyone I spoke to. The lack of expression often associated with men, what can often be mistaken as lack of concern and of involvement, is a reflection of a social standard pushed onto men by tradition and other expectation. It is this pressure that deters men from involving themselves in roles so strongly associated with women (Carey 2008:116).