Everyone wants to be a Professional:

Work, Education, and Social Mobility in Santa Catarina Palopò

“Porque quiero tener un futuro mejor a que nuestros antepasados.”
-Student, Age 14

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1"Because I want to have a future better than that of our ancestors.
Abstract

The town of Santa Catarina Palopò, Guatemala is a town in economic transition. Through a series of interviews and surveys, this paper identifies what these transitions are, and how they have impacted the behaviors and decisions of youth. What was found was that unlike in the ethnographies of the past, the town seeks socioeconomic mobility, not socioeconomic continuity, due to the lost viability of their former way of life. The community sees mobility as the advancement of work, from manual labor to professional careers. With the proximity of multiple vocational high schools, the path to a new age of economic stability is perceived as continued education.

Introduction

The municipio of Santa Catarina Palopò is a Kaqchiquel speaking highland Maya town on the Eastern shore of Lake Atitlàn in Sololà, Guatemala. The town is small, with a population of only 4200 (Lonely Planet). But it is only a fifteen minute car ride from the larger town of Panajachel, a main destination for tourists visiting the lake. Pick-up trucks run between the towns every twenty minutes, and they are often filled with community members going to shop at the market or to sell artesanías to tourists, and uniformed teenagers on their daily commute to private high schools.

The town has been built into the cliffs—the shoreline is mostly lined with chalets, or large, carefully maintained estates, owned by wealthy Guatemalans or foreigners that often sit empty being maintained by hired locals. Above them, the town begins. It scales the hills until half way up, where the houses disperse, and the land is scattered with rocky barren land, steep, golden milpas, and carved onion terraces.

Most women and girls in Santa Catarina Palopò wear traje, or traditional Maya dress. The traje of a Maya town is often a way to identify members of the community, with each town having a distinct

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2 District territory. Similar to a county in the United States

3 Maya cornfields
style. In Santa Catarina this style is an intricately woven bright, turquoise-blue *huipil*, or blouse, with a woven belt, a long, straight skirt, and a velvet scarf wrapped in their hair. It is no longer common for men to wear *traje*, but a few men can be seen in long woven shorts.

The same weaving the women use to adorn themselves is also a main source of livelihood for the community. The main street of town has several small shops filled with woven textiles, and the street that runs from the center of town to the boat dock is lined daily with women and girls who have set up shop on the street selling *huipiles*, table runners, belts, and various souvenirs. As they sit awaiting boats of tourists to arrive, many women continue weaving—at-achting their back-strap looms to fence poles. To make one *huipil*, women weave for two to six months, and sell them for often less than thirty dollars.

For three weeks, I lived in this town studying the future aspirations of the youth, focusing on careers and their relation to education. After investigating through conversation, interview, and surveys, I determined that the youth in Santa Catarina Palopò and their parents are in agreement with what they want for the future. This goal is to have new careers: careers that differ from the work of their parents and relatives; careers that are usually achieved through specialized higher education, and that enable greater financial gain, making social improvements for the rising generation. As an impoverished town with little economic prospect, the community aspires change, and these changes are generally believed to be possible through education and subsequent professional careers.

**Background and Discussion**

In his article “Future Time Perspective in Sociocultural Contexts: A Discussion Paper,” Huy P. Phan discusses how Future Time Perspective (FTP), or a sense of future serving as motivation to act presently (McInerney 2004), grows in importance during periods of social and economic uncertainty (Phan 2009: 768). Phan argues that FTP is a double-edge sword in terms of educational motivation during times of socioeconomic change and uncertainty, as I will argue is the case in Santa Catarina
Palopò. He argues that socioeconomic status, whether poor or affluent, serves as a “motivational force that could help individuals strive for academic success” (Phan 2009: 771). However, he concedes that in dire situations, socioeconomic instability can lead to feelings of despair and hopelessness (Phan 2009: 770), feeling that no future exists and so planning has no purpose.

In 1970, Peter Furst and Karen Reed published the book *Stranger in Our Midst: Guided Cultural Change in Highland Guatemala*, which emphasized the importance of parental attitudes in determining the educational future of children in rural Guatemala. They cited two reasons held by Guatemalan parents for disdainful attitudes about continuing education: seeing “school as a waste of time because it teaches their children things that have no apparent relevance to their everyday life,” and “apprehension that schooling will alter the children's goals and eventually lead them to abandon the family and traditional life and move to a town or city” (Furst and Reed 1970: 492). They argued that the only education the Maya deem relevant is the education of skill necessary to maintain their lifestyle, education that teaches to “live within the confines of their environment” (Furst and Reed 1970: 488).

In this paper, I will argue that due to recent economic and environmental changes, the findings of Furst and Reed are no longer accurate. Furst and Reed’s findings stem from the argument that what is desirable for the future is socioeconomic continuity. However, I will argue using data as well as personal experiences that this way of life, a life managed by a domestic economy of subsistence (Gudeman and Rivera 1990), is no longer economically viable, and the town of Santa Catarina Palopò is in a time of economic change and instability. As a result what is desired is intergenerational social mobility. This change in aspiration corresponds with the economic transition of the community away from agriculture, away from a domestic economy of subsistence and towards a market economy (Gudeman and Rivera 1990). This is in accordance with the generally accepted sociological theory that social mobility is stronger in industrial societies. In agrarian societies, according to theory, it is much more likely that occupation is passed by generation (Ultee 2007: 3061). I will further argue using the
framework of Huy P. Pham that this change in economy and environment for the majority in the community of Santa Catarina is a source of motivation to continue education and create a new industrial economy ruled by professionals. I also will contend, as Pham, that for a limited few in the community, the economic instability is also a double-edge sword, as it has led to hopelessness for the possibility of a different future for their children or themselves.

Methods

I conducted my research in Santa Catarina Palopó, Guatemala, where I stayed with a family for three weeks from February 13 through March 4, 2012. I received most of my information through formal and informal interviews that I conducted throughout my stay. In my third week, I also gave a formal written survey. Additionally, some of my information was found through participant-observation, or my own observations from living in the community and forming relationships with its members.

I began my investigation by developing four central questions to guide my research. The questions were the following: What goals are the youth in the community setting? (Or what do the youth want to do?) What role do parents play in the setting and reaching of these goals? In regards to the previous two questions, what motivations or factors influence their answers? And, how have economic and social changes influenced changes in the types of goals being set? When I set about to talk to the community about these issues, I did not pose these exact questions. Rather I developed inquiries unique to each person and situation that guided our conversations towards answering them. I left my questions open-ended, but most of my conversations about the youth and their goals revolved around jobs, careers, and the education that was necessary for such ends.

During my stay, I conducted 29 formal and informal interviews—some of which were casual extended conversations with members of my immediate and extended host family or people in the town whom I befriended. And some of which were scheduled formal interviews with the director of the
school, teachers, members of the municipalidad\textsuperscript{4}, town elders, a director of a school in Panajachel, and other members of Santa Catarina Palopó.

The goal of my research was to discover what type of future the youth envision for themselves, how successful these dreams have been, and how the changing perspective on education ascertained by past student projects fits into my findings. In order to find this information, I interviewed a lot of youth as well as adult community members of varying ages. I also found it useful to talk to youth and adults in the same family in order to observe parental influence. I informally and formally conversed with youth between the ages of 8 and 22, but focused on youth old enough to make informed and meaningful decisions regarding their own future. Additionally, I conducted a formal written survey of 30 students in the grade of third Basicó (the last grade of public school available in the town, and the equivalent of ninth grade in the United States). I chose this demographic because they are at a crossroads in their education, where next year they must decide whether or not to continue to high school in neighboring Panajachel. I requested their sex and age and asked four open-ended questions aimed at determining what they are doing in the next year of their life and beyond. I entered a classroom with the permission of the Director and the teacher at the beginning of the school day, and the students took between five and twenty minutes to respond to the questions and return their surveys.

Due to the broad requirement for interviews for my project, I faced relatively few problems in my conversations. I did find young teenage boys to be a difficult age demographic for me to connect with, and for them to show interest in talking with me. My survey was in some ways a remedy to this, although I still felt from some of the responses that some of the boys took the survey less seriously than the girls. Additionally, as Spanish is my second language as well as the second language of almost everyone I spoke with, I faced a severe language barrier. However, most of the time, I felt that the

\textsuperscript{4} Government of the Municipio
double language barrier made conversations easier. My grammar mistakes were less obvious and my ideas more discernable to those who were also not fluent in Spanish. My most difficult conversations were with native Spanish speakers like a local Language and Communication teacher who spoke very quickly and seemed amused by my slips in grammar.

**Lake Atitlan and Santa Catarina Palopó: Changing Times**

The environment of Lake Atitlan, the ecology and economy of the lake itself and the developed and undeveloped land surrounding it, is very different than it was even ten or fifteen years ago. In an ugly conglomeration of climate change, population growth, deforestation, and the spread of free-market cash crops and synthetic fertilizers (Gutiérrez), the lake has seen a great decline in the use and viability of the two former ways of subsistence, agriculture and fishing. My host father owns two pieces of land he farms to feed his family. But today that isn’t enough. He also works for a wealthy Guatemalan man doing gardening and maintenance on a chalet. He told me it’s much harder to farm today, and much less people do it. The rainy season used to be different, he said. It used to rain a little every day, but now only once in awhile, but when it does it is very strong. It is much harder to grow things now. I asked him if people still fish. “There used to be so many fish!” he exclaimed, “Now there are no fish. I don’t know why.” (Garcia, Interview Feb 22nd 2012).

After hearing my host father’s story, I went to the Municipalidad to discuss the changing environment and economy. I was able to speak with Juan who works in the *Dirección Municipal de Planificación*, or the Office of Planning for the *municipio*. He said there have been great changes recently. Before, when kids were 14 or 15 they would go work in the fields. But there have been drastic changes in the rainfall, and as a result today such opportunities don’t really exist.

The rainfall changes have also caused changes in the lake ecology. More runoff of fertilizers and volcanic soil increased the phosphorous levels in the lake (Gutiérrez), killing many of the fish. Juan said instead of working in town with the old sources, the youth either have to leave to find work, or
they continue with school (Juan, Interview February 23, 2012). At the end of our interview, Juan emphasized that the people in Santa Catarina are poor. There is some farming, and some opportunity to sell artesanías to tourists in town and in Panajachel, but mostly there is not a lot of work. It is a poor community.

The women agreed that there have indeed been changes in the type of work in the community. Petrona, the coordinator of our homestays and a prominent business woman in the community, told me that in the past people (men) used to have one job: they were a farmer or they were a fisherman. When children were 11 or 12 they would quit school to do one of the two, which ever trade was passed to them from their parents. Now most people work in comercio⁵, selling products to tourists or in tiendas, small convenience stores that line the street. Today most people have more than one job. They work in whatever way necessary to financially support their family. The work they have is just work—no one has careers (Cumez, Interview Feb 23, 2012). It is for this reason that parents are encouraging their children to do something different. The work held by the adults is no longer a trade that can be passed along, and the work they do have is not desirable. Parents want mobility. They want their children to have a better future than the life they are living. And so, Petrona told me, the youth in the community keep an open-mind about what they want to do (Cumez, Interview Feb 23, 2012).

Even Catarina, an 86 year old community member who communicated with me through a translator, believes that children should be able do different work than their parents. What is important for her is that they have work, and are thus able to improve themselves economically. She believes this is possible through education (Interview March 1, 2012). It seems that Atitlán is changing, and that it has changed. Cultural continuity through a trade profession is no longer a viable option. Alberto Rivera Gutiérrez wrote that in order to sustain such a lifestyle, to sustain the domestic economy, “frugal and

⁵ Trade
judicious use of available resources is necessary” (Gutièrrez:12). These resources are no longer available, and so the town of Santa Catarina is in search of alternatives means. In my time there, I found that most people believe the alternative will be found through continued education.

**Seeking an Alternative Lifestyle through Education**

There are three levels of schools in Santa Catarina. All of the schools share one building near the center of town. The first level is *Preprimaria*, equivalent to Kindergarten in the United States. *Primaria* encompasses the equivalent of first through sixth grade. It is divided into two schools, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. *Bàsico* is the final level of school available in Santa Catarina. There are three grades of *Bàsico* equating to seventh, eighth, and ninth grades in the United States. There is not a *Colegio*, or high school, in town. Students who wish to continue with their education after *Bàsico* must go to private schools in Panajachel or other larger cities that are farther away.

The director of the morning *Primaria* and of *Basicó*, Jaime Matzer, believes the source of development in Santa Catarina Palopò is education:

Santa Catarina is a community that has lost is sources of work. [...] It was a community devoted to agriculture; today, no. It was a community devoted to fishing, but today, no. There are no sources of employment. Today, the alternative that parents have found is academic preparation. The students find a preparation better for having a job. [...] Our development is education (Matzer, Interview Feb 17th 2012).

This finding, that parents now value education more, is in accordance with the work of students in previous years. They found the research of Furst and Reed to no longer be accurate, that Maya parents do indeed value education for their children (Basu 2010). In addition to confirming this, I believe my

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6° For more information regarding the decreasing viability of agriculture and fishing as a sustainable livelihood, see the papers of Gwendolyn Jenkins and Ben Welna.
research explains that the cause of this increase in the value of education corresponds to a new goal of social mobility through alternative careers.

The school director told me that he believes 99 percent of the children in Santa Catarina currently attend Primaria (Matzer, Interview Feb 17th 2012). Additionally he told me that last year, of the 92 students who finished sixth Primeria, 7 repeated the grade, and 76 went onto to continue in Básico (Matzer, Interview Feb 27th 2012). From these numbers, approximately ten percent dropped out after Primeria. Claudia, a 19 year old mother, and worker at the only internet café in town, told me that “In reality, in Santa Catarina, all the children study. Before, no. My mom, my dad, no. They didn’t have the opportunity” (Interview Feb 28th, 2012). Catarina, the 86 year old I interviewed, agreed. She said that “before, the children didn’t study, they only farmed. And before, only men studied. They didn’t think women had that right.” In her opinion, there has been a lot of change with education, but this change is good (Interview March 1st 2012). One recent change was the addition of a satellite school farther up the hill for Preprimaria and first and second Primaria, the youngest three grades in the schools. Sandra, a teacher at the school said they opened the school only two years ago to accommodate the increasing number of children in school, and to make it easier for small children who live farther away to be allowed to start school (Interview Feb 27th 2012).

Yolanda, mother of seven and a weaver who sells her textiles on the tourist street in town, agreed that it was important to give an education to her children. She said education teaches them to speak and how to write. They need to communicate with the people, and education is a means to do that (Lopez, Interview Feb 23rd 2012). I asked Yolanda about teaching her daughters to weave. I wondered what the motivation is in learning to weave if girls intend on having other careers. (Yolanda’s eldest daughter is attending school to be a secretary.) She pondered for a moment in silence, then

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7" The final grade of Primaria
looked up and said, “I don’t know what my life is. Only God knows what it is—what will happen” (Lopez, Interview Feb 23rd 2012). The only thing that seems to be certain in the minds of the people of Santa Catarina Palopò is the uncertainty of their future. The youth have taken it upon themselves to bring the community back to a state of security and economic certainty by continuing their education.

My survey of third Básico further emphasized that the youth perceive education as a source of social mobility. Twenty-seven of thirty students surveyed plan to continue school after Básico. Six students specified it was in order to have a better future. Four students wrote that they would continue to bring their town or their country forward (Fieldnotes Feb 29th, 2012). It seems that in accordance with Huy Pham’s theory of FTP, socioeconomic uncertainty in Santa Catarina serves as a motivational factor for continuing education.

**Dreaming Big: What do the youth of Santa Catarina Palopò want to do?**

Of the thirty students in third Básico I surveyed, only three said they would not continue with school after they finished, all for financial reasons. When I inquired about career aspirations there were two secretaries, two teachers, four accountants, one chef, and four business workers, three of whom specified that they want to own their own business. In the survey I also asked what type of work their parents had in order to observe intergenerational continuities and mobility. Seven of their fathers work on chalets, as gardeners or guardians. Three fathers are day-laborers, doing manual labor. Five fathers are brick-layers. No students said their father was a farmer or a fisherman. Only two students wrote that their mother did work other than weaving or was an Ama de la Casa. There were no obvious differences between the responses of males versus females. Of the students surveyed, only two wrote that they planned to work with their parents, or do the same as them (Fieldnotes Feb 29th, 2012).
Anna, a ten year old well beyond her years, and one of the daughters of Yolanda told me that she would like to be a tour guide. She sells her family’s textiles on the street to tourists, and she really enjoys it. She likes to talk to the tourists, and she wants to teach them everything about her home—about the people and the culture of the indigenous people. She said she doesn’t know if she will be able to because it is very expensive to get started, but her parents tell her that if she goes to school she will be able to do anything the wants (Interview Feb 22\textsuperscript{nd} 2012). Anna’s eldest sister Hilda, age 15, is enrolled in a secretary program in a \textit{carrera} (vocational high school) in Panajachel. She said her parents are very supportive of her education, but it is a sacrifice. They have adapted by trading shifts selling textiles while other siblings are in school, as some go in the morning and some in the afternoon. If there is a time when all of them are in school, their mom is available to sell (Interview Feb 22\textsuperscript{nd} 2012). Due to the dedication and flexibility of her family, Hilda has been able to continue her studies in a \textit{carrera}.

**Getting There: The Carrera**

If you stand at a major transit corner in Panajachel between 12:30pm and 2:30pm Monday through Friday, you are likely to see crews of teenagers hopping off and on pick-up trucks, wearing assorted school uniforms. These are students from the surrounding rural towns coming to and from their private \textit{carreras}. Panajachel, or Pana as it is known to most, is a hub for private high schools for the towns around it that do not have public high schools.

I visited the Colegio Instituto de Computacion Informatica (I.C.I.) and spoke with the director Carlos. The school has students from all \textit{municipios} of the lake that attend three different sections: morning, afternoon, and Saturday. There are six different programs of study, such as business administration, accounting, and secretarial training, all aimed at vocational education. There are 365 students in the school. One difficulty is that many students also work eight hours a day in addition to
going to school. This is one reason they have a Saturday school, which is attended by people who work full-time and often already have their own families (Interview Feb 28th 2012).

My host brother Eustaquio attends I.C.I. and is studying business administration. He said that people in his classes come from all over—San Andres, Sololà, Santa Cruz. Most people that attend private high schools in Panajachel don’t live there because there are public high schools available for residents. But, he stressed, if you live in Santa Catarina and want to go to high school, you must go to a private school. I asked him if there are a lot of jobs available for students graduating after studying business administration. He said yes: in hotels, restaurants, in all sorts of businesses. My host father smiled and interjected, “Or a bank.” I asked if that was what he wanted his son to do, to work in a bank. His face animated and he nodded in agreement. Previously, my host father had told me that he was teaching his son how to farm a milpa. He said it was very important for the youth to be able to farm for work. With this conversation, it became clear that my host father does not see farming as a career, but a supplement for added subsistence and security.

Jaime, the Santa Catarina school director estimates that 60 percent of students in Santa Catarina will continue on to a carrera or another type of high school (Matzer, Interview Feb 27th 2012). Martin, a Bàsico teacher of Language and Communication told me that he thinks that participation in school after Bàsico in Santa Catarina is not great, but that it is much better than other rural towns in Guatemala due to its proximity to Panajachel. In other Departamentos⁹ the education system is much worse, he said, and children must walk up to two hours to get to school. In Santa Catarina, the opportunity for education is much better. Twelve years ago, he said, no one went to Bàsico because there was not one in town. Now, almost everyone does, and due to the closeness of Panajachel, many even continue

⁹ The equivalent of a state in the United States
afterwards. As a country though, Guatemala still has a large problem with educational opportunity (Interview Feb 27th 2012).

Making Sacrifices: Financial Barriers and Steadfast Determination

In 2002, using a number of analytic methods, Ronald D. Lee and Karen L. Kramer evaluated the economic connection between child and family by finding the net asset value of a child in a rural Maya community (Lee and Kramer 2002). What that they found was that contrary to a logical assumption based on average family size, children in rural Maya communities are an economic burden on their family. Consequently, they argue that for a family to financially break even after having a child, they need the labor of the child. They found that “children become economically active at an early age and, by the age group 15-20, work about as many hours as adults. Girls contribute considerably more hours of work than do boys, particularly below age 15” (Lee and Kramer 2002: 480). Although this data is now ten years old, my observations confirm that for contemporary Maya families, sending a child to school as opposed to them working is an economic sacrifice.

In my survey of third Básico, all three students who said they would not continue with school after this year cited economic reasons. One girl wrote “I would like to study but I will not be able to. My father cannot afford it with the expenses of the family” (Fieldnotes Feb 29th, 2012). Still despite this misfortune, the vast majority of students seem to find ways to make the sacrifice.

I.C.I., the carrera I visited, is a private school, and the tuition costs Q20010 each month (Interview Feb 28th 2012). However, tuition is only one of the costs of attending school. Since almost all students are not from Panajachel, they have to pay for transportation. To travel to Panajachel from Santa Catarina, which is one of the closest towns, it costs Q3 each way to take a pickup, or Q6 each day. I asked the director Carlos if there are scholarships for the students. He said that currently there are

10" The national minimum wage is approximately Q50 each day, or less than $8.
no scholarships provided by the school, but that many students receive scholarships through programs and foundations in their town or from foreign assistance (Interview Feb 28th 2012).

The first day I was in Santa Catarina, I stumbled upon a small store of artesanías next to the entrance of the school. The sign said in English “Club Queztal.” There was another sign saying it was a cooperative to raise money for the school, and for scholarships for the students. I wandered in to look around. There were several signs on the walls in English requesting that customers do not bargain. Within a few seconds of entering, an American tourist asked the women at the cash register for a lower price. With out hesitation she snapped, “No es para los niños.” No it’s for the children.

Jaime Matzer, the director of the morning Primaria and Básico also happens to be the director of the cooperative. He explained that the scholarships provided by the store are direct scholarships for school. 60 percent of the profits go to the Administration of Education to reduce costs. 20 percent is contributed to the Municipalidad for the same reason. And the final 20 percent is contributed to the parents who are involved in the cooperative (about 25 families). He explained then, that the majority of the profits go towards funding the school to reduce costs for all students. Today there is a Q20 fee for each student at the beginning of the school year, but according to Jaime, that is much less than what it could be, thanks to the cooperative.

Three years ago, Club Quetzal was much more than just a store. Maria, a 22 year old girl from the town who is also enrolled in University, told me the story of the program during our interview. Fifteen years ago, she said, a French man visited Santa Catarina and fell in love with the town and the people. She said when he first came, things were very different. Hardly anyone went to school, and they didn’t have nice houses, ones made only of adobe, not cinder-blocks. He started Club Quetzal which paired children in the community with people in France who sponsored their education by paying the school fee and buying school supplies. Maria and another boy Alex were paired with a
French couple, or their padrinos\textsuperscript{11}. The couple came to visit the town, and they were able to meet them. Their padrinos paid for them to finish school through high school, and when they completed school they were given the opportunity to go live with them in France. Maria went for two months and studied French. With the support of her padrinos, Maria has also been able to enroll in a university in Quetzaltenango. She is studying political science. Through another town connection, Maria also had the opportunity to visit and stay in the United States. When she was growing up, her grandmother hosted international students who visited Santa Catarina to learn Kaqchiquel. She met their professor who invited her to go to his college in Albany, New York and teach him Kaqchiquel (Interview Feb 27\textsuperscript{th} 2012).

The other student Alex who was invited to France, stayed much longer. He is currently living in France with his padrinos, studying to be a chef. I went to visit his father, Santos, who lives in a small house with his only other child, a fourteen year old daughter. He told me his son did have luck, but his opportunity is also the gift of God. The truth is, he said, if you make friends, if you make connections, you can do anything (Martin, Interview Feb 28\textsuperscript{th} 2012).

Maria explained to me that three years ago, Club Quetzal saw that Santa Catarina had changed. Now all the children go to school. Their help was no longer needed. And so the organization left the community, opening the Cooperative in its place (Interview Feb 27\textsuperscript{th} 2012).

Although not every student child in Santa Catarina Palopò has experienced the same luck and opportunity as Maria and Alex, there still seems to be an overwhelming sense of determination in the community for the success of the children. One indicator of this is the large number of students who are in school, but much older than the other students in their grade. One boy I met while was watching children play soccer on a Sunday afternoon was 18 and in first Bàsico, or 7th grade. His friend was 15

\textsuperscript{11} The direct translation is Godparents, but in this case it means sponsor. Maria translated it to “Padres de amistad.” Or directly, friendship parents.
Lamberty

and in third *Primeria*, or 3rd grade. I asked my 10 year old host cousin Nicolas, who is in fourth
*Primeria*, if it was normal to have older students in younger grades. He said yes, that there is a 15 year
old in his class who is “como un hombre” like a man. Both the boys wish to continue with school after
*Básico*, and the 18 year old wants to be a teacher (Fieldnotes Feb 25th 2012). To me, the consistent
presence of older students despite years of repeated grades and set backs show the determination of so
many to stay in school and get a career.

One Saturday morning, I found myself in the most strange of experiences: translating between a
Santa Catarina family and an Australian couple over Skype. Of all the families I met during my stay,
this was the poorest and most desperate I encountered. They had been receiving financial support from
this Australian couple for the past six years because the father can no longer work, feeding a family of
thirteen with 700 dollars a year. The father stated to me that the most important thing in his life was to
give his children an education. Five of the children are currently in school, and he uses what he can of
the gifted money to buy school supplies and pay fees (Nimacachi, Interview Feb 24th 2012). Even in the
most indigent conditions, I saw resolution for change, for improvement through education.

The Double-Edge Sword

When I began my stay in Santa Catarina Palopò, the first story I heard contradicted everything
else I would learn, and I spent the next three weeks proving my initial impression of the community
wrong. My host cousin Florentina, who would become one of my best friends, dropped out of school in
third *Primeria*; and her older sister Lucia in sixth. Their father made them quit because he could not
afford to buy the supplies, even though Florentina had *Padrinos* from Club Queztal who were
sponsoring her education. There was just too much work in the house (Martin, Interview Feb 15 2012).
Today Florentina is 16, and for the past six years she has worked in her home--cooking, cleaning, and
sometimes weaving. She consistently told me how much she loved these things. “I don’t know why,”
she would say. “I just really love to make tortillas.” Sometimes when we were alone, though, she’d tell
me how much she wishes she could still study. She would tell me how much she loves to read, grab her brother’s fourth grade literature book, and slowly sound out the words to “Peter Pan.”

Huy P. Phan called this parental behavior the “double-edge sword” (Phan 2009: 770), noting that sometimes socioeconomic instability can cause hopelessness for the future, losing motivation to make what we’ve seen is truly a sacrifice by allowing your children to continue school. After three weeks of life in Santa Catarina, I can comfortably say with joy that this behavior is not the norm of the community. But I cannot deny its existence, nor, without speaking to every member of the community, substantiate that it is not more common than my impression.

**Conclusion: What will come of it all? A need for further inquiry**

After three weeks, it is difficult to call my research complete. What I found was that the town of Santa Catarina Palopó has gone through great economic changes in the past few decades. As a result of the consequential socioeconomic instability, the community has transformed from one that valued socioeconomic continuity to one that values social mobility. The community seems to equate mobility with career advancement, which, as a result of the plethora of vocational carreras, is equated with continued education. Due to the recentness of this change, I do not feel confident asserting that it is a permanent change without further research. I wonder about the availability of jobs in the sectors the youth are aiming for. How many secretary positions are going to be available each year in comparison to how many people are studying to be secretaries? And so my first point of further inquiry will require research in the future: what will come of all of these newly trained professionals? Santa Catarina is in a time of economic transition, but without forward vision, it is impossible to know what it will transition to be.

My second point of further inquiry is to examine the influence of Westernization on the increased value of education. Of the 29 people I spoke with, only one mentioned Western influence as a cause of change in the community. Additionally, I feel I must acknowledge the relation between
cultural continuity. To what extent does a move from valuing socioeconomic continuity correspond with a move away from cultural continuity? As more people are educated in order to better themselves economically, more people lose their native language and change their way of dress, key components of their essentialized cultural identity. However, I would argue that socioeconomic status and culture are not intrinsically linked, and my findings about changing aspirations do not necessarily represent a discontinuation of culture, but could also represent a movement within the culture to lift itself from poverty and defend its relative autonomy. A further conversation about the implications of my research on culture and identity is imperative.\(^\text{12}\)

No matter the future of the community, it is for certain that today is different from the recent past. When Furst and Reed published *Stranger in Our Midst* in 1970, they had studied a people of generational cohesion. They studied a people with faith in their way of life—farming, fishing, and working in the home—and saw fit to do only what was necessary to continue it. Today that is not the case. For better or for worse, subsistence life is no longer viable for survival. Markets and capital have penetrated their economy, and they have found themselves desperate, unstable, and needing to compete. The work they have is no longer a way of living. It is only a way of surviving. They want a better life for their children than the one they currently live. They want social mobility.

**Works Cited**

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\(^{12}\) For more ideas about this conversation, see the papers of Sarah Ferrari, Dillon Titcomb, Meghan Keane, and Daria Kieffer.

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