

Men who Abandon their Families: Households As Border Zones In Mexico City

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In early January 1997, I was standing outside a corner *tienda* [shop], in my Mexico City neighborhood of Colonia Santo Domingo, sipping Coronas with my friends Marcelo and Marcial to celebrate the New Year. A third friend, Marcos, who lived next door to the *tienda*, stopped by. Having just been on a family vacation to Yucatán and taken a forty-eight-hour bus ride to return to Mexico City, he was tanned and exhausted, and he couldn't wait to tell us, especially Marcial who was originally from Yucatán, about the trip. Two things stood out in his mind as highlights of the journey: the archaeological ruins he had seen at Chichen Itza, and the topless beaches he had visited on Isla Mujeres.

Just as Marcos was beginning to describe the details of each encounter, a little boy walked up to him and asked for some coins to buy candy in the *tienda*. I looked at the boy, who was then about three years old, and asked him his name. He looked me in the eye and replied that it was Ruvaalcaba. Ruvaalcaba, I knew, was Marcos's last name. Marcos prompted him to give his first name. "Marco Antonio," the child responded. Marcos immediately asked, "¿Y cómo se llama tu padre? [And what's your father's name?]", to which the child answered matter-of-factly, "Abuelito [Granddad]," whereupon a huge grin appeared on Marcos's face.

Marcos' daughter had become pregnant by a gang-banging youth who had long since fled the scene. The daughter and her son continued to live with Marcos and his wife, Delia, who were the boy's biological grandparents. Marcos, Delia and another daughter of theirs were helping raise the boy, while Marcos' formal role in his grandson's upbringing was perhaps a bit more diversified given the fact that he was the only man in the household.

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Since Marcos is only forty-four years old himself, many people who see Marcos and Marco Antonio together probably assume that they are biologically father and son. In his quiet, unassuming way, Marcos was happy to go along with appearances if these served the boy's best interests. Furthermore, in addition to playing the anthropological game of polysemic kinship terms, Marcos was also striking a distinctly defiant pose in order to "shock" me by the casualness with which he alternated between the roles of father and grandfather.

Households as sites of gender conflict

Prompted in part by feminist conceptualizations of families (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982; Thorne and Yalom, 1992; Hansen and Garey, 1998), in recent decades social scientists in Mexico and the United States have increasingly emphasized the importance of households in formulating identity. In addition, the household is where unequal relations are confronted, challenged, and, occasionally, transformed in the day-to-day lives of men and women. In Mexico, several recent studies have shed light on just such conflictive processes, particularly from the woman's perspective.¹ Yet we have only begun to understand their implications for men and fathers, as these investigations focused more on women. In fact, some excellent recent work has mainly focused on men and fatherhood (see Figueroa, 1998; Lerner, 1998; and Taggart, 1992) and much valuable material may be obtained from several ethnographies of Mexico, including certain classic studies (for example, Arizpe, 1973, 1989; and Lewis, 1961, 1964). However, there is still much work to be done on men and fatherhood and their role in the Mexican household.

One contribution made by the new feminist scholarship is a critique of the now rather outdated vision of families and households as simply representing the last bastion of patriarchy, the *ne plus ultra* of institutionalized fatherhood. Teresita de Barbieri's (1992) and Steve Stern's (1995, 1998) theoretical work, for example, has called the category of patriarchy into question as over-generalized and therefore in constant need of historical contextualization. At the same time, although recent research has documented what Stern (1998:61) terms a "transition from a patriarchal regime of hierarchical complementarity to a regime of discriminatory and stigmatized competition among genders" in Mexico, there is no need to rush to the other extreme and overestimate the "feminine" qualities of the family and the household. Domestic matters should no more be neatly relegated to the "private" world of women than should "public" matters of politics and street life be tidily categorized as exclusively male realms (see Alatorre, 1999).

In short, in Mexico as elsewhere, fatherhood is in urgent need of redefinition and further study. In an earlier ethnographic monograph on changing gender relations in Colonia Santo Domingo, I argued that socioeconomic and demographic transformations, the impact of popular social movements involving women throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and the general influence of feminist ideas during this same period have caused rapid modifications in the meanings and practices associated with fathers and fatherhood in the 1990s (see Gutmann, 2000a, especially chapters Three to Five). Specifically, the fact that more women work outside the home for wages than ever before, the 50% decrease in birth rates in the last two or three decades and the equalizing of girls' and boys' education levels have resulted in men being challenged in direct and indirect ways to assume more responsibilities associated with children and housework.

Nonetheless, notable differences persist between classes, so that in the wealthier strata parenting for both men and women is less a hands-on activity than a supervisory one of overseeing servants who continue to carry out these tasks. In poorer working-class communities like Santo Domingo, there is little homogeneity in fathering in the 1990s, so that it ranges from men who have relatively little to do with their offspring, especially small children, to others in the colonia for whom fathering is at the core of male activity and identity.²

This article presents thoughts about contemporary fathering in light of the cross-generational influences of fathers who abandoned their families. It is based upon ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in the Mexico City working-class community of Santo Domingo. This largely self-built community, whose population reached well over 150,000 in 2000, was formed by land invasion in 1971, and continued to grow as squatters from throughout the capital and the provinces arrived and staked their claims. In this article I will focus on households in Santo Domingo as sites of conflict and change, using examples from my friends' and neighbors' lives that illustrate the impact male abandonment has had on their personal histories.

Paternal absenteeism may seem a strange way to approach fatherhood, yet in an eminently anthropological manner, this marginal type of fatherhood may provide clues regarding the general phenomenon of households as border zones of gender relations. Fathers known as *padres de cheque* (check fathers) are a well-established feature in Mexico today. These are men whose paternity is established and maintained primarily through their periodic remittances to households in which they have long since ceased to reside, at least for most of the year. Indeed, in Mexico fatherhood is often defined either by the man's role at the moment of procreation (a fleeting act establishing paternity) or by the man's later absence from the domestic scene. One reason to study the practices of fathering in Mexico today is to further distinguish between cultural stereotypes

about fatherhood, such as those regarding families as eminently private and female, and the day-to-day realities of fathering. Oft-repeated clichés regarding fatherhood in Mexico still seems to overshadow empirical studies of the realities of what men actually do or do not do with their children.

The constraints of abandonment: cross-generational change and transformations

If holding on to her husband at all costs is necessary to her household's survival, how can a woman do anything but struggle to get by? Under such conditions women will seldom have the opportunity to change anything about gender relations either for themselves or for society as a whole. Yet, in Santo Domingo in the mid-1990s, men of all ages were clearly affected by the widespread participation of women in the community's political affairs. Some of the rather subtle ways in which men and women revealed their feelings about such issues may be seen in the stories they tell about childhood abandonment. These stories of abandonment can help us better understand how living in a neighborhood formed by land invasion in recent decades has directly and indirectly influenced the lives of its inhabitants.

Case 1: Alfredo Pérez

If he gets to know you well enough, Alfredo Pérez might tell you about his painful childhood due to having had a wandering father. However, he will become angry if anyone else, especially his wife, ridicules his father. In Alfredo's opinion, like many poor men of his generation, his wife's father was no more accountable to his children than his own father was. Thus no one has the right to speak ill of Alfredo's father except Alfredo himself. But when I talked with him about fatherhood in the spring of 1993 as he approached his sixtieth year, his bitterness still echoed through his recollections of times long past.

My mother was from a village in the State of Mexico. She came to Mexico City because she was mistreated and because she had a child and didn't want anyone to take him away from her. She set up a stand outside the public baths, where she sold stockings, socks, diapers, and so on. That's where she met my father. They spent six years living in *unión libre* [common law marriage]. I was born, then my brother. But my father was sort of a *mujeriego* [womanizer]...

and he began going around with another woman. One day this other woman came to see my mother, and my mother told the woman that if she wanted to take my father, she was welcome to him, so that she could get on with her life.

It was during the war, in 1942, and my father was working on the tram lines. That's why he had stored gasoline in the *jacalón* [shed] where we lived. It wasn't a house like this one, but a shed with a corrugated cardboard roof.

Well, while my little brother was playing with my mother's comb, the plastic caught fire [from the flame of a lamp], and everything burned down. My mother managed to save my brother and one suitcase, but she burned her legs. I was burned, too. I cried a lot, because of the burn and because I was so alone. We were only a small family: my mother, my brothers and me.

Alfredo's father was willing to accept some financial responsibility for members of his former family, but only to a point. He paid for his son's and former wife's operations, so they did not have their legs amputated as originally planned. Alfredo showed me the scar he still had on his calf fifty years later. Alfredo still remembers dragging himself along the ground until his leg healed fully because his father would not pay for crutches.

After the fire until shortly before his death many years later, Alfredo's father more or less disappeared from his life. His mother eventually remarried, but Alfredo had already moved out by then, so no other adult male played a significant role in Alfredo's upbringing. When he became a father, Alfredo tried not to repeat the mistakes his father had made with him, and he told me that on the whole he thought he had been pretty successful. He saw similarities in his father's actions and those of other men of that generation, yet his anger was against his father, not against his father's contemporaries. If Alfredo was different from his father, however, this was not simply a personal lesson he had learned from his own experience and from what his mother had taught him. Alfredo also believed it was generally better for men not to desert their families, and he partly reached this conclusion because he had lived through a period in which the issue of men abandoning women and children was being widely discussed and debated in the *colonias populares* of Mexico City.

According to my acquaintances in Colonia Santo Domingo, men like Alfredo Pérez have changed compared to their fathers, however the women married to the men of Alfredo's generation have changed even more. While a woman's

most important role is still motherhood, “being a mother” does not necessarily mean the same today as it did twenty or thirty years ago.

Of course none of these concerns can be addressed without taking into account countless historical and economic factors, which constantly influence the consciousness and actions of women and men in Santo Domingo. To reconcile themselves to bitter memories from the past, for example, many women simply conclude that it was all a matter of economic necessity, as if little else needs to be said. Poverty, they say, keeps some wives tied to their husbands far longer than would be true if they had freedom of choice. In addition, a family’s separation from its men often obliges boys and girls to begin working and supporting their family from a young age.

In a recent historical paper on paternity in Mexico City, Katherine Bliss (1999) documents the politicization of fatherhood in the period from 1910-1940. She quotes social workers, legislators, and legal reformers who charged at that time that through abandonment, physical abuse, and the corruption of morals, fathers in Mexican society were destroying their families, civil society, and the country as a whole. In addition to presenting vivid examples of the official vilification of working class men in the capital in the early part of the twentieth century, Bliss painstakingly links these portrayals to the historical events of the period, especially the Mexican revolution. In national deliberations over general social questions pertaining to progress and social reform that followed the tumultuous decade from 1910 to 1920, Mexican fathers were increasingly challenged in legal proceedings and other public venues as failed providers, partners, and protectors.

It has become clear to me from many years of acquaintance with Mexico City fathers such as Alfredo Pérez that official, scholarly, and vernacular notions about men and paternity are always intimately, although subtly, shaded by contemporary mores and social relations. These are generally linked with gender relations and other sources of difference and inequality. Digging beneath the surface truisms and assumptions about what Mexican fathers (or mothers, for that matter) do, and not just what men and women might claim that men do, is an ever-present task. This is made all the more difficult by the complexities of teasing out commonplaces that are as prevalent in scholarly tomes as they are in casual conversations in homes and sidewalks about the salient features of paternity, fatherhood, and fathering.

Transforming men and fathers in households

Households are not only the sites of gender conflict; through disputes, quarrels, and confrontations, households can also supply the proving ground for challenges to preexisting identities and patterns of fatherhood and motherhood. For example, when changes have occurred in the lives of many neighbors and acquaintances in Colonia Santo Domingo associated with “being a father” (from feeding the children and helping them with their homework to providing them with moral instruction), both men and women have attributed these changes to two factors. The first is *necesidad* [necessity], when, for example, mothers begin to be wage earners outside the home and men begin to “help” more with domestic chores, including child care. The second is when women are directly responsible for change as a result of wheedling, coaxing and threatening men to participate in household activities for which they are ill prepared and initially often less than favorably inclined. Thus, the woman of the household has taken a major role in redefining and redirecting the meaning of fatherhood for many men in recent decades in Mexico’s capital city.

Case 2: Susana’s Childhood Trauma

The complicated nexus of gender and economic constraints on the one hand and individual and collective agency on the other was evident in my neighbor Susana’s account of what happened when her father abandoned his family.

When I became conscious of the world, my life was very sad because I never knew my father. My mother was left alone in the world with seven children. It was very hard for her to support the family in the little village where we lived in Michoacán, near Guerrero. When I was about ten, I helped my mother wash the laundry in the river. We went to the fields to grow our own food. My life was very hard from an early age because I worked in the fields helping my mother, doing heavy work like a man. I liked to work with her and help her. In a way, my childhood was happy because I had her. It was a happy childhood, those few years I was with her. I suffered because I worked hard, but I was happy.

Later my older brother had an accident. He was hemorrhaging from the nose and they took him to Mexico City. I had a very rich uncle in Michoacán. My mother went to ask him for money and

he agreed, but told her that she had to leave one of her daughters with him to work in order to pay back the money.

I worked for my uncle for a year. I was eleven. I worked very hard. They made me work from three in the morning till twelve at night and they always beat me. I wished they had treated me like the girl I was. They beat me a lot. My aunt kept me completely naked, without shoes. Later when my mother came to see me, my aunt bought me a new dress and shoes and sat me down. She told me to tell my mother that they had treated me well. My mother arrived crying that my brother had died, and she didn't even ask how I was or anything about me. She left and my aunt tore up my dress and burned it and said that I would have to pay for it. So I escaped. I walked for five hours in the canyons, in the hills, until I reached my sister's house. I was bloody all over when I arrived. My feet were all cut up.

Susana's sister wrote her mother in Mexico City and her mother sent Susana the fare to go home.

I was twelve and I didn't know how to read because they had never sent me to school. When I got to Mexico City, my mother put me to work in a restaurant washing dishes from six in the morning until six at night.

Susana's difficulty in escaping her situation was linked not only to gender and class constraints, but to her status as a minor as well. Yet the rage with which she talks about her childhood today shows that, although she may view her childhood traumas with a certain resignation, even back then she demonstrated a desire to change as much as she could within her limited possibilities. In our 1993 conversation, Susana said the oppressive conditions of her early life, which were clearly connected in her mind with having been born a female, had not deterred her from trying to change things for the better. She continues to do so today in her own family as one of Santo Domingo's most courageous mothers. In Susana's case, this has meant coping with crises provoked by her present husband's repeated infidelities and less frequent violent episodes, her daughter's pregnancy and flight to Los Angeles with the child's father, and her son's slow slide into adolescent alcoholism. Susana is the first to admit in retrospect that she has not always handled matters as well as she could have, nonetheless her

fiery temperament that has enabled her to cope and, to some degree, succeed in holding her own with the men in her life.

The question as to whether men “naturally” act in a certain way in their capacity as fathers is a controversial one in Santo Domingo. Connected in part to a certain fusing of distinct periods of fatherhood – procreation, child rearing, and the fathering of adult children – the issue of male irresponsibility is linked in the minds of many of my friends to men’s reproductive role and sexual profligacy. In Spanish as in English, “fathering” and “mothering” have rather different meanings, the former having the connotation of procreation and the latter implying the ongoing activities associated with child rearing. Whether men have some sort of biological proclivity towards parental negligence is a question that is hotly disputed in Santo Domingo as a reflection of more general social debates regarding sexual and gender identities, relations and roles in Mexican society.

Case 3: Gabriel’s Challenge to his Father

Gabriel’s memories of childhood may include painful episodes, but in his case these are mixed with a thinly disguised nostalgia for the way he wishes things might have been. Gabriel, today a car mechanic whose “*taller* [workshop]” is a patch of sidewalk on Huehuetzin Street in the colonia, describes family instability in his childhood genially but sardonically. After all, he says, “childhood is the only time when humans are really happy”.

My mother washed clothes for others, meaning she hired herself out as a laundress who also ironed people’s clothes. My father was a plumber. He had a lot of work and was very handy with practical matters and worked well with his hands. Unfortunately, there were times when he earned a lot but spent it all on drink. Maybe I inherited the tendency to sometimes drink too much from him, but my family lives better today than we did then. When my parents were upset and annoyed, they mistreated us; they beat us. When my father was angry, he punished us and beat us and my mother defended us. When my mother beat us, my father defended us.

“Did your parents get along well with each other?” I asked.

They fought a lot. My family lived together for a year, apart for a year. Sometimes at night we went looking for some place to sleep because my father had come home drunk and given us a hard

time [*nos hacía un desmadre*], if you'll excuse the expression. Finally it got to the point where I threw him out because I couldn't stand it anymore. I was twelve or thirteen years old. I threw him out because he was mistreating my mother. And he said, 'Well, then, I'm off. And you know what? I should have left a long time ago.' And I said, 'Well, I don't know what you're doing here with us anyway.' So he left and went to his mother's to tell her I had thrown him out.

We were left then with practically nothing to eat because my parents wouldn't talk to one another for fifteen or twenty days. Later they would meet and made peace. But he was living with his mother and we were with my mother. And we had to go see my father every week so he'd give us money to eat. I enjoyed this. You know why? Because we never went anywhere, so it was a chance to go out for the day. We went to the little village where they always met one another. I liked it because after the reconciliation everything was good and they both treated us well. Later everything went back to normal.

The impact of abandoning fathers

Why might many women and children actually be better off after being abandoned by men? Gabriel and Susana's accounts clearly indicate that some women were better able to make decisions for themselves when they were the heads of households than when they lived with husbands-fathers. Contrary to most developmental research, some researchers indicate that economic conditions actually improve for some households when men are not around. Spending power may be greater in a certain proportion of women-headed households since, although husband-fathers do not contribute their earnings, their presence in the home could also constitute a drain on pooled household resources. (See the collection of articles edited by González de la Rocha, 1999). The impact on the children of families and households abandoned by men obviously varies. A better understanding of how and when particular gender relations are reproduced from one generation to another, including fathering practices, may only be obtained by investigations that are historically grounded. Little may be learned about fathering, abandonment, and children in an abstract, timeless vacuum. Such relations are always dependent on factors such as the participation of women in

remunerative work, the existence and influence of popular social movements in which women play a significant role at a particular historical juncture and changing religious, sociological or psychological doctrines regarding parenting.

Like the stories told by so many Santo Domingo residents, Gabriel's portrayal of family conflicts is full of hatred towards his father for treating him badly in childhood and more than a little ambivalence regarding his mother. This renders the difference between residents' descriptions of families in the colonia in the past and in the present all the more remarkable. Accounts by Gabriel, Susana, Alfredo and others are repeatedly punctuated by commentaries like "but men couldn't get away with that anymore, because women nowadays won't put up with such behavior." In addition to historical accuracy, the *perception* of dramatic changes among women who coerce men to transform themselves, including the issue of family desertion, is also significant. The scene repeatedly portrayed in Santo Domingo is one of a community-wide dialogue and debate over such questions, usually at the insistence of women.

It is impossible to say with certainty how many households in Mexico City are headed by women.³ Some mothers claim to be *madres solteras* [single mothers] at the Family Services Agency (DIF) in Santo Domingo in order to get their children into the day-care program there. According to the rising number of applications each year for the DIF day-care center, it would appear that men are deserting their families in growing numbers. No doubt the increase in applications is also a result of Mexico's deepening economic crisis, which has usually impoverished women and children to a far greater degree than it has men.

Especially during the early period of my ethnographic research in Colonia Santo Domingo, I spent far more time talking with men and women about men who lived with their families most of the time than about men who had abandoned them. Nonetheless, *madres solteras* are certainly common in the colonia. The only woman who openly flirted with me during the year was the single mother of two children, someone whom my friends said was looking for a male companion (even a married one) who would offer her more stability than her sometime boyfriend Lupe. Not far from our apartment were two households in which sisters lived with their numerous children, as well as with nieces, nephews, and unmarried brothers, but without spouses. Neighbors would sometimes talk disparagingly about these single mothers, who were unwitting and deeply troubled participants in a series of exploitative relations with men. However, the comments revolved more around their poor choices in lovers who later ran off than about the fact that these young women had given birth to children out of wedlock. However, this still constituted a social problem due to the large numbers of single-mother households. Individual cases of single motherhood were more easily explained as a result of personal mistakes and misfortune.

What has changed in Santo Domingo and in others parts of Mexico in recent decades, then, is not so much that men have ceased to desert their families temporarily or permanently or even that men are criticized for this today whereas in the past such actions were more acceptable. Rather, there is a change in the attitude towards fathers who abandon their children and wives, that is, today such behavior is no longer necessarily considered “typical male conduct,” as it was in earlier periods. Furthermore, among my friends and neighbors in Santo Domingo today, abandonment is only one element in more general discussions and debates revolving around redefined and reconfigured ideas about fatherhood and fathering. Men still desert their families, and there is still an apparent air of resignation surrounding the accounts of abandonment shared by women on the way to the market or to drop the children off at school. Yet, instead of simply acquiescing to male proclivities, women and men in Colonia Santo Domingo may feel a glimmer of hope that such behavior just might be challenged and changed in the cross-generational struggles taking place between men and women in the border zone households of Mexico City.

NOTES

1. See García and Oliveira, 1994; González and Tuñón, 1997; González de la Rocha, 1994; Massolo, 1992; and Oliveira, 1989. For the most important anthropologically sensitive studies of urban households in Mexico written in English, see especially Vélez-Ibáñez, 1983; Selby, Murphy, and Lorenzen, 1990; and Chant, 1991.
2. For a description and analysis of debates in households in Santo Domingo regarding the naturalization of mothering and mother-child bonding, see also Gutmann, 2000b.
3. For a recent report on single mothers, see Pieza Martínez and de Dios Puente, 1992.

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