Models of Masculinity: Socialization of Young Boys in the Andean Region
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This summer, thanks to the Latin American Studies grant, I spent four weeks in a rural indigenous community in Ecuador conducting research on gender roles, particularly focusing on the socialization of young and adolescent boys. One thing that drew me to this community in particular was the fact that about 10 years ago a man and several women in the community started a tourism business whose goal was not only to help preserve indigenous culture, but also to work to end machismo and domestic violence in the community by creating more jobs for the women and providing them with a support network. I spent time there last summer for an anthropological field school and found that the women had more stable incomes than they had in the past, but that there were still a lot of issues with sexism; many women told me that it was common that their partners or husbands would leave for periods of time without saying where they were going, but then were jealous and expected the women to be at home.

I went back this summer hoping to gain an understanding of why men continued to have more freedom to wander and avoid domestic responsibilities while women were confined to the home- what kinds of expectations were communicated to young boys and girls that helped to perpetuate this pattern? To conduct the research, I tried to integrate myself into daily life as much as possible, helping out the women and children with their work, playing with the kids, teaching English classes to the older teens and along the way asking questions, recording observations, trying to get to know the families in the community in order to better understand why men and women did what they did and what kinds of models there were for boys versus girls.

What I found was that there were stricter, more segregated gender roles than I had expected, but that there were several teenage boys who were starting to break the mold, defying traditional expectations to establish their own masculine identities. In general, the community tourism business was set up so that the men served as tour guides or motor canoe drivers, going outside of the community to bring tourists in for a day or to show them around the jungle, while the women worked inside the community cooking traditional meals and performing Kichwa dances for the tourists. This meant that boys didn’t really see their dads or older brothers collaborating with the women in the community, and so they didn’t seem to feel that they had responsibilities to help out their mothers or sisters. While young girls cooked and cleaned alongside their mothers during their school vacation, the younger boys stayed at their houses to play or watch TV, only occasionally venturing out to the tourist complex area. Part of this division also seemed to be reinforced by their moms, who often communicated to the boys that they were in the way, that the kitchen and dining area weren’t places for them.

Because of this, leaving the community seemed like the most logical and appealing option for boys; working elsewhere first of all was a better economic opportunity, but it also gave the young men a chance to be independent; many of the tour guides and motor canoe drivers expressed that they loved having a very flexible schedule, and also being able to go on adventures, meeting new people and trekking through the jungle. This made me wonder too whether some of the men saw these jobs as opportunities to escape from family issues or pressures. I observed while I was there that I rarely heard the men talking seriously with each other - they were almost always joking around or were quiet. When I asked one teenage boy about it, he said he didn’t know how to talk seriously, that he just joked about everything because it was easier. He said he had too much pride to reveal his emotions or what he was thinking, and that it was only at home that he was more serious, that he got angry with his family. This sharp divide between men’s public and private selves, due to socialization that men aren’t supposed to reveal their emotions, might further encourage men to leave the community, in order to have some space, and might also lead some of them to become more aggressive and violent within the home as a way to finally express their bottled-up emotions.

I did meet a couple of boys, though, who were breaking away from these patterns. One teenage boy doesn’t drink alcohol, despite huge pressure at all social events in the community, because he says he has seen the damaging effects of alcoholism. This is a crucial mental shift, because many women talked about how alcohol contributes to violence, and I witnessed the way in which men of all ages in the community would turn to alcohol, using drinking to fill their free time and numb their emotions. Another young man works in the kitchen every day with his mother and says he wants to be a chef when he grows up. His mother, the main cook for the tourism business, said he’d always been like this, that he was always aware of how hard she was working and was looking to help her. Part of what may have influenced him is that his father, the cook’s husband, is always helping her out in the kitchen, and is there when she is sick or has other household chores to get done; this gives their children a model of a partnership, a more equal relationship in which the men and women share responsibilities, including domestic ones. These examples show that there have been some small shifts in the mentality of the new generation of young men, that there are now new models of masculinity emerging that start to challenge strictly segregated gender roles and to foster collaboration and deeper understanding between men and women.