Translating Images: Photographs (and Video) of Young Mothers in Cusco, Peru

Natasha Soto, 2015

This summer I worked with Professor Van Vleet on her research on reproductive politics in Peru. I learned about how culture, religious institutions, government policies, and the media affect the lives of young women in South America. I worked on several projects aimed at organizing the large amount of information Professor Van Vleet has gathered during her trips to a home for teenage mothers in Peru. Through these projects, I was able to gain a nuanced view of this particular NGO’s efforts support young women and their children. I was also able to see how the NGO, the girls themselves, and even the Catholic Church work to shape the social category of a “teen mom.” I was able to do my own analysis of the representation of young mothers by comparing photographs taken by the young mothers themselves with those taken by volunteers and other staff members.

The bulk of my summer was spent uploading and cataloguing photos of the girls in the home using Portfolio. I compared these photos, which were taken by the girls in the home and by Krista Van Vleet, to photos I found online. There are countless websites about this home on the internet. These websites belong to NGOs, volunteer sites, and volunteers, all chose different images to represent the girls. The photos on Portfolio painted an intimate picture of the girls. They laughed together, posed for the camera, studied, and went on trips. The photos made me realize just how young the girls really were. At the same time, there were photos that emphasized their role as mothers. For example, during the baptism of their babies, mothers posed in mother-child units. To me, these photos emphasized the “mother” aspect of being a teenage mother. Several websites seemed to stress this idea that these girls were defined by both roles, showcasing photos of the girls in the classroom (teens), as well as photos of the girls with their children (mothers). Since the social category of the “teenage mother” is less familiar in Peru than it is in the United States, it has been interesting to see how the girls are represented through
photos. Through these images they seem to be a special category, focused not only on the need to advance their children’s lives, but their own futures as well.

In addition I worked on several other aspects of this research project and gained skills using ExpressScribe, Excel, and Google Earth. For instance, I transcribed and translated several the entry files for the home. These files contained the girl’s stories as well as demographic data about them. I compiled the data into an Excel spreadsheet. I plugged the girl’s hometowns into Google Earth file to better visualize where they all came from. Finally, I translated interviews conducted by professor Van Vleet. I had initial training on nVivo where many of these data files will be compiled in order to better code and analyze the information in a comprehensive way.

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