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Source: *Gender and Society*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Feb., 2006), pp. 32-59

Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27640865>

Accessed: 10-07-2017 18:32 UTC

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# ***HONOR AND VIRTUE***

## ***Mexican Parenting in the Transnational Context***

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*Recently, scholars have described the emotional consequences of transnational motherhood on families. Research, however, has neglected to address the lives of migrant fathers and how they compare to those of migrant mothers. This article fills the gap by analyzing the experiences of Mexican transnational mothers and fathers residing in New Jersey. Ethnographic data and interviews show that parents behave in similar ways when internationally separated from children. However, their migration patterns and emotional responses to separation differ. I show that these differences are tied to Mexican gender ideology in which women's maternal roles are sacralized, whereas fathers' roles are tied to financial provision. Although the contemporary Mexican transnational family structure challenges gender norms, the analysis of how parents understand their family roles when separated from their children proves gender ideals to be highly durable in the transnational context.*

**Keywords:** *family; transnational; immigration; mothering; fathering; Mexico*

**P**aula Rodriguez works at two fast food restaurants in New Jersey to support her children, ages 15 and 18, living with her cousin in Puebla, Mexico. The children do not know their father; Paula is a single mother. Paula has not seen her children for three years, although this is not the first time she has been away from them working in the United States. When her youngest was two years old, Paula migrated to Oregon for a year. She returned because she could not bear being apart from her children. This

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This and related research was funded by a Fulbright/Garcia-Robles Grant and the Carole and Morton Olshan Dissertation Fellowship at the City University of New York Graduate Center. I thank Julia Wrigley for her research guidance and also thank Nancy Foner, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, Rachel Salazar-Parreñas, two anonymous reviewers, and Christine Williams for very helpful comments on this article. Finally, I am indebted to the Mexican migrant parents who generously shared their feelings and experiences with me.*

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GENDER & SOCIETY, Vol. 20 No. 1, February 2006 32-59

DOI: 10.1177/0891243205282660

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time, Paula has adjusted better, although she grows teary remembering her children. She consoles herself by considering migration a sacrifice: By working abroad away from her children, Paula is able to finance their education.

Luis Sandoval sends much of his salary from a low-wage job at an upscale Italian restaurant, also in New Jersey, to his wife and children in the state of Oaxaca. Luis last saw his four children, ages 5 to 11, a year ago, although he first came to the United States when he was 20, to work in the fields of California. After six years, he returned to Mexico, got married, and started a family. Ten years later, Luis migrated again. While his salary working for a local government program was enough for subsistence, it was not enough to save for his family's future. Since his first trip to New Jersey in 1998, Luis has been back and forth three times. He speaks to his children almost daily and claims they have adjusted well to his seasonal migrations.

Paula and Luis live in what researchers have recently labeled transnational families, generally referring to families in which members of the nuclear unit (mother, father, and children) live in two different countries. This family type is not new; split household migration was also common a century ago for Chinese, Polish, Jewish, and Italian immigrants, among others (Foner 2000; Nakano Glenn 1983; Thomas and Znaniecki 1927). Generally, it was men who settled abroad, gradually bringing over other family members, although return migration rates were also high: Between 1900 and 1920, more than a third of immigrants to the United States returned home (Foner 2000, 172). Among Mexicans, mid-century U.S. migration policy institutionalized split-family migration patterns; the Bracero Program (1942-1964) provided men with temporary agricultural work visas with no provisions for family migration (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).

Today, scholars note that a specific type of transnational family has become more common, one in which mothers migrate and leave children behind. In 1997, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila labeled the phenomenon "transnational motherhood." The number of transnational mothers worldwide is not known. Qualitative researchers, however, have found the migration of mothers to be common among certain immigrant groups. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) reports that of 153 Latina domestic workers in Los Angeles whom she interviewed, 40 percent of 114 mothers had children in their country of origin. Salazar-Parreñas (2001) finds that in her sample of Filipina domestic migrant workers in Los Angeles and Rome, 54 percent are mothers with children at home. And looking at the relationships from a different perspective, a longitudinal study of 407 immigrant children in Boston found that 79 percent had been separated from their fathers during migration and 55 percent had been separated from their mothers. Forty-

two percent of Mexican children lived apart from their mothers prior to migration (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie 2002).

Most recent research on transnational families explores the emotional consequences for mothers who live apart from their children while working abroad, especially in domestic service where they are expected to look after other people's families (Constable 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Lan 2003; Salazar-Parreñas 2001). The story, however, neglects the migration of fathers and how their experiences are comparable to those of migrant mothers.

This article fills the gap by analyzing the experiences of Mexican transnational mothers and fathers who currently live in the United States and have children in Mexico. I draw on two types of data. First, for six years, I was immersed in the Mexican immigrant community in central New Jersey in a variety of capacities, including formal work at three social service agencies and at a volunteer English as a second language program. I am not Mexican or Latina, but through these professional affiliations, I came to know hundreds of Mexican transnational families. In addition, my three-year-old son's father is a Mexican immigrant. Raising a child with one foot in the Mexican immigrant community often paved the way for informal conversations and observations about the flexibility, and permanence, of family child care arrangements. Apart from this ethnographic data, I conducted in-depth interviews with 43 Mexican parents separated from their children due to migration. Interviews were not easy to arrange, as the topic of family separation is sensitive. However, my experiences working in the Mexican community helped me gain access to parents. I met with many parents on multiple occasions; I was often shown videotapes or photographs of their hometowns and was able to listen in on some phone conversations with children in Mexico.

I find that when mothers and fathers are separated from their children due to international migration, their parenting activities are remarkably similar. Their experiences differ, however, in two ways. First, mothers and fathers live in different types of transnational families. Second, mothers' relationships with their children in Mexico are highly dependent on demonstrating emotional intimacy from a distance, whereas fathers' relationships lie in their economic success as migrant workers. I suggest that these differences are tied to Mexican gender ideology in which women's maternal role is sacralized whereas the father's role is tied to financial provision. Although the contemporary Mexican transnational family structure challenges gender norms, parents' experiences of separation prove gender ideals surrounding parenthood to be highly durable in the transnational context.

## MOTHERS AS CAREGIVERS, FATHERS AS PROVIDERS

Research on mothering, ranging from studies of the social construction of motherhood to those emphasizing identity work, proves it to be an activity primarily associated with the care of children (Collins 1994; Nakano Glenn 1994; Rothman 2001). Fatherhood, in contrast, most often entails providing children with economic, educational, and/or career opportunities (Marsiglio et al. 2000; Thompson and Walker 1989). Yet scholarship also shows that mothers and fathers in different social, historical, and cultural contexts may vary the ways they care and provide. Middle-class fathers in nineteenth-century America, for example, were often involved in providing moral guidance for their children, especially in career choices (Johansen 2001). And while in the past, poor women almost always have worked, today, lower-class mothers in the United States, particularly those on welfare, may choose not to work so they can care for their children (Edin and Lein 1997; Hays 2003). On the contrary, professional mothers today may make significant contributions to family income and spend a majority of their time at their places of employment. However, they often feel caught in a "time bind" between commitments at work and children at home (Hochschild 1997). Yet despite variations in how parents enact their roles, there is a remarkable salience of the ideal of mothers as caregivers and fathers as providers.

In Mexico, like elsewhere, mothering is mostly associated with the daily care of children and fathering with the securing of economic resources for the family (Gutmann 1996; Lewis 1959). But Mexican mothers' caregiving role is especially celebrated and linked to the self-sacrificing characteristics of the Virgin of Guadalupe—likened to the Virgin Mary—who is worshipped devoutly throughout Mexico by individuals of remarkably diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Latin American scholars describe this culturally specific version of maternity as *marianismo*. According to this ideal, women should be self-negating and martyrs for their children because they are spiritually and morally superior to men (Melhuus 1996; Stevens 1973). In contrast, Mexican fathers' role in the family is linked to honor rather than morality. Like Cuauhtémoc, the last emperor of the Aztecs who was tortured when he would not reveal to the Spanish where treasures were hidden, the Mexican macho is stoic when challenged (Melhuus 1996; Paz 1981). As long as he never gives up, the Mexican man maintains power over his foes.

According to Melhuus (1996), Mexican gender ideology bears a unique double standard. While men are considered more or less masculine compared to each other, women are judged in terms of morality. "[This is] the enigma of Mexican mestizo gender imagery: a male-dominant society

which nevertheless places its highest value on the feminine, indicating a split between power and value" (Melhuus 1996, 230). As such, there is a great degree of social value placed on women's roles as mothers. Mexican children respect mothers above all else; they are the emotional heart of the family. Fathers' roles are less idealized. However, if mothers are models of morality, a father's duty is to show children how to act honorably in the face of adversity.

Recent scholarship has shown international migration to be formative for reshaping gender relations within Mexican families (Hirsch 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). If the ideals of motherhood, as some have suggested, are challenged when mothers migrate as family breadwinners (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997), it seems likely that ideals of honor and economic provision are also shaped by the labor migration of fathers. How specifically do these gender ideals operate in the context of international separation? One could hypothesize that for fathers, migration is an honorable way of ameliorating economic hardship, whereas mothers' migration risks immorality since from a distance, mothers cannot be directly involved in child care. However, little direct evidence has been available to compare parents' roles in transnational families. I now turn to my interviews and ethnographic data for insights into how migrant mothers and fathers understand their family roles when living apart from their children.

## DATA AND METHOD

This article is based on ethnographic research between 1999 and 2004 and systematic interviews in 2003 and 2004 conducted in central New Jersey. I did research in and around New Brunswick, a city where Mexican immigration has boomed since 1990. The U.S. Census Bureau (2000) estimates that in the year 2000, 12.6 percent of the total population in New Brunswick was Mexican, foreign born, up from 1.3 percent 10 years earlier. This relatively new migrant population largely comes from the Mixteca region (includes parts of Oaxaca, Puebla, and Guerrero), where migrant networks are well developed (Smith 2001). In addition, most Mexicans in the community are undocumented. Recent research suggests that current U.S. immigration policy, which has increased militarization of the U.S.-Mexican border since the late 1990s, coupled with labor opportunities in nonborder states, has resulted in the proliferation of Mexican migration throughout the United States and in more permanent migration patterns among the undocumented (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002; Zuñiga and Hernández-Leon 2005). At the local level, the effect of national immigration

policy seems clear: split-family migration is quite common among Mexican parents in central New Jersey.

I interviewed, in Spanish, a total of 21 mothers and 22 fathers who live apart from their children in Mexico. Three of the mothers had been reunited with their children in the United States at the time of the interview. In open-ended interviews, I asked parents about why they migrated to the United States, the care arrangements for their children in Mexico, how often they are in touch with their children and in what ways, how they feel about living apart, and their plans for the future. I met 13 parents on two or three occasions and another 9 parents even more frequently, some of whom I had known for years.

Fieldwork included informal conversations and observations with parents who have children in Mexico and other Latin American countries, as well as members of the Mexican community, including local leaders and participants in an English as a second language program. I conducted ethnographic work in different capacities, from teacher to social service administrator to family friend. These experiences helped me gain trust among some families; the fact that I speak fluent Spanish using Mexican colloquialisms put many parents at ease. Since I was in contact with some families for years, I was also able to track how family configurations change over time.

Despite my community connections, I found the topic of family separation to be sensitive. As a local Latina psychologist suggested, it is essentially shaking out a family's dirty laundry. Many interviews, for example, brought up issues of marital problems or personal failures, such as problems of alcohol abuse. Interviewees were reluctant to recommend me to other transnational parents; they feared reprisal for divulging family affairs to an outsider. Snowball sampling did not work in the traditional sense; I generally gained parents' confidence one by one or via referrals from individuals without children in Mexico. Ironically, once parents agreed to an interview, they seemed more comfortable disclosing their stories to an outsider, someone who did not risk their reputation in the Mexican community. For example, fathers were fairly candid in revealing marital infidelities; I suspected this was in part due to the perception that women in the United States have more liberal attitudes about sex. In contrast, mothers appeared most at ease in learning of my relationship with my son's father, as if I could understand since I too had lived with a Mexican man.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, I taped interviews with only 3 of 43 parents. In most cases, I took notes during the interview. Some parents did not want me to write while we spoke; in such cases, I recorded detailed notes after the interview. In data analysis, I reviewed notes of conversations and the taped interviews for salient themes. Next I did a more detailed, thematic

review of each interview. In some cases, I consulted parents again for clarification on a specific topic important to analysis.

### **SIMILARITIES IN TRANSNATIONAL MOTHERING AND FATHERING**

Most surprising given Mexican gender ideology, which celebrates the mother's role in the family, I found that mothers and fathers reported similar behaviors in communicating with or growing apart from their children in Mexico. Indeed, of those interviewed, an equal number of mothers and fathers sustained regular relationships with their children in Mexico while an equal and very small number of mothers and fathers have disappeared from children's lives (see Table 1). In a number of ways, the transnational context diminishes distinctions in mothers' and fathers' parenting activities.

#### **Staying in Touch**

The most common way parents maintain contact with their children is by telephone. While almost all parents have somewhere they can call, not all have easy access to a phone in the United States. Some use cell phones and others public pay phones. Nearly all use calling cards, which offer the best rates to Mexico. Numbers, however, often ring busy during peak calling times. Despite technical difficulties, most parents interviewed, regardless of gender, reported calling home once a week and gave a generic checklist of things they discuss with their children. They ask about school, how siblings are behaving, and what things children want sent from the United States. I listened to José, a father of two teenagers, when he called home one Saturday.

José's son is the first to answer the phone. José says hello and asks how the boy is. Then he asks when the boy will have his high school entrance exam—I assume he learns the date of the exam results, for José next asks, "What do you want me to get you, a stereo or a tape player?" They discuss the benefits of each and José concludes that a stereo is better and he will send that. He asks what else his son would like as a gift before asking to speak to the boy's grandmother, his mother-in-law. (notes, 24 July 2004)

I found no notable patterns in the types of conversations mothers and fathers reported in their weekly calls home, nor in what they talked about with sons or daughters. Conversations for both focused on the economic



**TABLE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENTS INTERVIEWED**

<i>Fathers</i>									
<i>Name</i>	<i>Years in United States</i>	<i>Return Visits?</i>	<i>Occupation in United States</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Location of Mother</i>	<i>Number of Children in Mexico</i>	<i>Number of Children in United States</i>	<i>Frequency of Phone Calls</i>	
Armando	3	No	Factory worker	Divorced	United States	3	0	Daily	
Benito	4	Yes	Restaurant worker	Married	Mexico	3	0	Weekly	
Bernardo	10	Yes	Mechanic	Divorced	Mexico	4	0	Every 3 months	
Carlos	6	No	Landscaper	Divorced <sup>a</sup>	United States	1	1	None	
Daniel	3	No	Factory supervisor	Separated <sup>a</sup>	United States	3	0	Daily	
Esteban	18	Yes	Construction worker	Married	Mexico	4	0	Weekly	
German	10	Yes	Landscaper	Married	Mexico	3	1	Weekly	
Gonzalo	7	No	Waiter	Divorced	Mexico	3	0	Weekly	
Horacio	2	No	Electrician	Married	Mexico	3	0	Weekly	
Javier	5	Yes	Factory worker	Married	United States	3	1	Weekly	
Jose	3	No	Restaurant worker	Divorced <sup>a</sup>	United States	2	0	Daily	
Juan	3	No	Construction worker	Married	United States	2	1	Weekly	
Luis	10	Yes	Restaurant worker	Married	Mexico	4	0	Daily	
Nestor	4 months	No	Farm worker	Married	Mexico	4	0	Weekly	
Onesimo	50+	Yes	Farm worker	Married	Mexico	3	0	Every 3 months	
Pedro	12	Yes	Factory worker	Married	Mexico	4	0	Weekly	

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

Name	Years in United States	Return Visits?	Occupation in United States	Marital Status	Location of Father	Number of Children in Mexico	Number of Children in United States	Frequency of Phone Calls
Quirino	6	No	Construction/often laid off	Divorced <sup>a</sup>	Mexico	1	3	Every 3 months
Raul	5	Yes	Restaurant worker	Married	Mexico	3	1	Weekly
Salvador	18	Yes	Landscaper	Married	Mexico	2	0	Weekly
Sergio	10	No	Plant nursery worker	Married	Mexico	3	1	Every 3 months
Ulysis	11	No	Factory worker	Married	Mexico	4	0	Monthly
Xavier	6	Yes	Construction worker	Divorced	Mexico	1	0	Monthly
<i>Mothers</i>								
Name	Years in United States	Return Visits?	Occupation in United States	Marital Status	Location of Father	Number of Children in Mexico	Number of Children in United States	Frequency of Phone Calls
Berta	5	No	Factory worker	Married	United States	3	1	Weekly
Cristina	3	No	Laid-off factory worker	Divorced	Mexico	2	0	Weekly
Elsa	2	No	Factory worker	Separated <sup>a</sup>	United States	2	0	Every 3 months
Hilda	6	No	Laid-off factory worker	Divorced <sup>a</sup>	Mexico	2	1	Monthly
Iris	2	No	Factory worker	Married	United States	0	1	Weekly

Isabel	2	No	Factory worker	Married	United States	2	1	Bimonthly
Juana	1	No	Homemaker	Married	United States	2	1	Weekly
Laura	1	Yes	Homemaker	Married	United States	2	3	Daily
Linda	3	No	Bartender	Divorced	Mexico	0	3	None
Mariana	4	No	Factory worker	Single mom <sup>a</sup>	Unknown	1	1	Weekly
Nadia	6	No	Homemaker	Married	United States	4	2	Daily
Nancy	3	No	Part-time—cleaning company	Married	United States	0	2	Weekly
Nicandra	5	Yes	Nanny	Divorced <sup>a</sup>	Mexico	2	0	Daily
Nydia	2	No	Former waitress (on maternity leave)	Married	United States	1	1	Weekly
Ofelia	7	No	Laid-off factory worker	Married	United States	1	1	Weekly
Paula	3	No	Fast food worker	Divorced <sup>a</sup>	Mexico	2	0	Weekly
Raquel	3	No	Child care for family	Married	United States	4	2	Weekly
Sandra	5	No	Homemaker	Married	United States	1	2	Monthly
Sylvia	2	No	Part-time activist	Separated <sup>a</sup>	United States	3	0	Monthly
Teresa	5	No	Laid-off factory worker	Divorced <sup>a</sup>	Mexico	3	0	None
Wendy	2	No	Factory worker	Widow <sup>a</sup>	Not applicable	1	2	Weekly

a. New partner in United States.

aspects of the parenting relationship and future migration plans. Raquel, mother of four in Mexico, said her children “tell me they are good and they ask me when I am going back there. . . . They ask me for shoes, clothes, toys and money” (notes, 27 January 2004). Juan told me, “My son asks me when I am going back and asks me to send him money” (notes, 10 April 2004). And Mariana said her six-year-old daughter says, “Take me north. I want to go north with you” (notes, 19 April 2004).

Some parents communicated more with daughters and some more with sons. And among couples in which both parents are in the United States, some reported that the mother talks to the children more than the father, and others reported that the father talks to the children more than the mother. For example, Armando said he spoke most with his nine-year-old son when he called home, and his ex-wife with their five-year-old daughter. José has better communication with his 13-year-old daughter than his 16-year-old son, but Paula spends more time talking to her 18-year-old son than her 15-year-old daughter. And Nydia was calling home more than her husband when she was on maternity leave. But when she worked as a waitress, Nydia’s husband called more because when it rained he did not work at his job in landscaping.

Although phone conversations are filled with talk of gifts, parents said they preferred to send money, as it is expensive to send goods either through mail services or courier businesses. Most send gifts with friends or relatives, or take purchases on their own trips home. German, a seasonal migrant for seven years, gave me the following list of items he takes his wife and four children whenever he returns: one pair of shoes each, two to three sets of clothing for each child, toys (almost always remote control cars for the boys), and an electronic item, once a TV, another time a VCR, and most recently a video camera. The most common item sent back and forth between parents and children was videotapes, usually filmed by relatives or friends. Most tapes depicted a special party or event, like a wedding or the festival for the town’s patron saint. Both mothers and fathers shared pictures of children whether safeguarded in picture frames, albums, envelopes, or wallets.

While money is the most important item parents send to children, it was difficult to collect information on their amount of remittances. Mothers and fathers were vague or gave what seemed to be generic answers. Nevertheless, mothers and fathers reported similar frequency of remittances: once or twice a month. Other research suggests that women send less money home than men (De La Garza and Lowell 2002; Schmalzbauer 2004); I found variations in reported remittances among fathers and among mothers to be greater than those between them.

## Losing Touch

It is a common belief in the Mexican immigrant community in New Jersey that many parents who leave children in Mexico abandon them. According to Iris, a mother who was reunited with her son a year ago, "there are two types of mothers. There are those, very few, like me, who make the effort to bring their children here. Then there are those who come here and have more children, either with their husband or with another man. These women often forget about their children at home, abandoning them" (notes, 25 May 2005). Stories of fathers who do the same are also common, although fathers are rumored to maintain two families, in the United States and Mexico. German told me that many fathers abandon their children: "They get married to a new woman here. I hear these things while we are drinking; they feel guilty about leaving their children, it is not something they feel proud about" (notes, 26 April 2004).

Despite widespread rumors of abandonment, most parents I spoke with maintain fairly regular contact with their children. Those who do not are divorced or separated; estrangement from the ex-husband or ex-wife makes contact with children in Mexico difficult. Linda, for example, left home when she found out her husband was living with another woman. For three years, she had little contact with her three boys; she only occasionally spoke to the oldest when a neighbor helped arrange it. Eventually, Linda went back to Mexico for her children and now lives with them in the United States. Bernardo, a divorced father of four, became an alcoholic in his years away from his family. None of the children want anything to do with him, although he occasionally talks to his oldest daughter, who still remembers her father's good years.

The second most commonly perceived factor to affect parent-child relationships is U.S.-born children. Whether born of the same marriage or a new one, mothers and fathers considered jealousy a potential source of conflict with their children in Mexico. Juan, for example, pondered out loud whether his two children in Mexico will accept his newborn son but then decided, "They are young enough to grow attached to him" (notes, 10 April 2004). Juana joined her husband almost two years ago, leaving two daughters with her sister-in-law. As soon as she arrived, she got pregnant with a son, seven months old at the time of our conversation. Juana complained that on the phone, "the girls reproach me. They are jealous, extremely jealous, the younger one more than the older one" (notes, 19 April 2004). And while watching a home video of Hilda's 14-year-old daughter in Mexico, Hilda pointed out a 9-year-old blatantly ignoring the camera and explained that he is her brother's son. Hilda's brother has another wife and two children

in the United States, but the boy does not acknowledge his siblings. He appeared to be snubbing the video his father would surely watch.

Finally, many parents struggle to keep their memories alive over time. A surprising number of fathers (10) left pregnant wives and subsequently did not know their youngest children until they visited home. Benito said, "In fact, she didn't even tell me about the baby until I had arrived here because she didn't want me to worry" (notes, 12 May 2004). Many mothers have a similar problem because they leave infants. Sandra explained her husband is closer to their daughter than she is because he visited Mexico three years ago. He was only there for three weeks, but this was enough time for the girl to get to know him. In contrast, "She doesn't know me," says Sandra. "She doesn't remember me. She was little when I left" (notes, 1 June 2004).

In summary, mothers and fathers who maintain regular contact with their children appear to behave in comparable ways, as do those who lose touch with their children. The geographic and technical challenges of parenting from abroad, in some ways, neutralize gender distinctions in Mexican families.

### **GENDER DIFFERENCES IN MEXICAN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES**

Although parents' actions while apart from their children do not significantly differ, migration patterns for mothers and fathers are distinctly different. Since the 1880s, Mexican migration to the United States has been characterized as primarily fathers and young men migrating north as wage earners, leaving women to care for children in home communities (Massey et al. 1987). As mentioned above, the U.S. immigration policy encouraged this migration pattern between 1942 and 1964 (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Starting in the 1970s, Mexican female migration rates began to rise, which some scholars attribute to family reunification policies, like the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Massey, Goldring, and Durand 1994), and others attribute to increased job availability for women in the U.S. service sector (Chang 2000). Moreover, Kanaiaupuni (2000) finds that marital status has a profoundly different effect on migration patterns for men and women: While married men are more likely to migrate than married (or single) women, divorce significantly affects female migration and has no effect on male migration. In short, research suggests that today, three types of Mexican transnational families predominate: fathers who migrate without their wives and children

in Mexico, couples who reside abroad with minor children in Mexico, and mothers of failed unions who leave children when they migrate alone.

My research corroborates these findings, although I found Mexican transnational families to be complicated by marital breakup. I interviewed 16 fathers, 4 of whom are divorced, who left children and wives in Mexico; 19 mothers and fathers who migrated as couples, of which 6 have since divorced; and 8 women who migrated as single mothers. The basic demographics of transnational family formation structure the relationships that parents have with their children in Mexico.

### **Migrant Fathers with Wives and Children in Mexico**

The most common Mexican transnational family form is that in which fathers leave wives and children in Mexico (Gupta 2002). The primary source of employment for these fathers is in the United States. Many make regular trips to see their children in Mexico; of those I interviewed, 10 of the 11 fathers who had made return visits had done so more than twice. Many fathers said their goal was to return to Mexico every winter, when work in the United States is slow. However, since all but 1 father I interviewed do not have legal status in the United States, return trips varied according to their economic situation. Some waited until they had saved enough to take money home and to finance the return trip. Salvador said, "I like to go home with a lot of money to enjoy there" (notes, 8 March 2004). Others returned after bouts of loneliness. German said he last decided to make a return trip when he called home one weekend and his son answered the phone and asked him to come home. German told the boy he could not because he had not saved up enough money yet. Then his daughter got on the line. "She said, 'Dad, so it's true the money matters to you more than we do?'" German said he was eaten up about it after that day and could not decide what to do. "I went on a four day drinking binge and finally I said, fuck it, and I bought the plane ticket home" (notes, 26 April 2004).

Seasonal migrants see their children more often than do other parents, although their family separation tends to be the most long running. One father I interviewed has been migrating for more than 50 years and sees his three children once a year. Many spoke of migration as a routine part of their lives. In addition, fathers often left home without saying good-bye to their children, generally because they did not want to upset the children. Benito told me, "This time I had to hide in order to leave. I left really early when the kids were sleeping because my oldest girl didn't want me to leave" (notes 12 May 2004). And Bernardo never told his children he was leaving. The first

time he called from the United States, five months after leaving, his daughter still did not know he was abroad. "She said, 'Where are you?' I answered, 'Working really far away.' She asked, 'When will you be back.' I said, 'I am far away, I don't know.' " That day, Bernardo did not tell his daughter where he was, but the next time he called, she was clued in (notes, 22 February 2004). Fathers may simply want to avoid a confrontation with their children, but their negligence in discussing the matter also shows that fathers view their migration as entirely acceptable, not warranting an explanation.

Often, fathers said the experience of migration is what helped them recognize how important children are to them. As Gonzalo claimed, "The problem is that for many of us fathers, we value them more when we aren't there. When you are there, you put less importance on them" (notes, 10 May 2004). From a distance, however, fathers' ability to establish a relationship with children often rests on the quality of their marital relationship. Some admitted to having had marital problems prior to leaving; migration provided an escape hatch that kept the marriage intact. Other fathers had marital problems postmigration. Rumors of infidelity fly in both directions, causing strains on marriages. For example, Ulysis, a father of four children between the ages of four and nine, said, "What hurt most about it [his wife's infidelity] was that I was the last in the family to know of it" (notes, 4 June 2004).

When fathers' relationships with wives deteriorated, so did their relationships with their children. Some said their wives talk badly about them to the children; the most common complaint fathers reported was that they have not sent enough money home. According to Armando, "my wife didn't do it to be spiteful, but she would tell the children I was irresponsible" (transcript, 28 July 2004). Others said their wives are convinced they live with another woman and tell the children about these suspicions. German told me his wife suspected he had another wife in the United States. When he last went home, "my two older boys came to me together and they said, 'Dad, if you have another wife, we don't want you here. You can leave'" (notes 26 April 2004). While relationships with children are especially difficult for divorced or separated fathers, estrangement is also common for fathers in intact families, like in German's case. When fathers leave, children form closer ties with mothers.

### **Married Couples Abroad**

Many fathers start out alone in the United States but then send for their wives, leaving just children behind. Most mothers who joined husbands



told me they came to help the men work. It is important to note, however, that the majority of mothers in my sample were instrumental in arranging their own migration. For example, when Nancy grew severely depressed after her husband migrated and she was left with their one-year-old child and a full-time job, she gave him an ultimatum. He had to either return to Mexico or bring her to the United States; otherwise, he could forget the marriage. The husband complied, and Nancy migrated. Many mothers explained their migration as did Nadia, who said, "I wanted to know what it was like" (notes, 9 November 2003). In fact, even husbands described their wives as being the ones who decided to migrate. Javier, who lives with his wife and U.S.-born daughter and has two children in Mexico, told me, "It was her. She told me she wanted to come and see what it was like here" (notes, 9 July 2004). And Juan, who also lives with his wife and newborn son, told me, "I didn't want her to come, but she insisted" (notes, 10 April 2004).

In all cases, the decision to leave children was a practical one: All but two parents in my sample do not have legal status, and border crossing for children is dangerous and expensive. Yet all parents considered the pros and cons of bringing their children north despite the legal difficulties, and some eventually did so. Mothers often cited the danger in the crossing. Wendy said, "I wouldn't risk taking them via the mountain" (notes, 11 June 2004), and Nadia explained, "I didn't know what the crossing would be like. For me, I knew I could do it, but not for them" (notes, 9 November 2003). Mothers also worried about child care once in the United States. Wendy, for example, added, "You also have to have a place to put them" (notes, 11 June 2004). Fathers generally objected to bringing children abroad because they believe life is fundamentally better in Mexico. German answered my question of whether he thought of bringing his children here by saying, "Definitely not because here is not a family life" (notes, 26 April 2004), and Juan did not want his kids being raised in the United States because "here the kids forget they are Mexican" (notes, 10 April 2004). These parents are determined to work hard for a few years, save money, and return home to their children.

When couples leave children in Mexico, regardless of marital status postmigration, most stay with grandparents, almost exclusively the maternal grandmother. This pattern is also common among Mexican and Central American domestic workers in California (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Ninety percent of children of migrating couples in my study live with their grandparents; two-thirds reside with maternal grandparents. Illustrating the preference for maternal grandmothers as substitute caregivers, Nadia explained, "We left them with my husband's mother just

because my mother has already passed away" (notes, 9 November 2003). And Isabel told me, "I felt okay leaving them because I knew they would be with my own mother" (notes, 15 October 2003).

The prevalence of leaving children with maternal grandparents seems curious given that anthropologists have documented the predominance of patrilocal residential patterns in the region of Mesoamerica from which the majority of Mexican parents I met migrate. Typically when a couple marries in southern Mexico, they will live with the husband's parents for a number of years until the couple can move out on their own (Robichaux 1997). Since conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are common, when husbands migrate, wives often prefer to return to their own parents' homes (D'Aubeterre 2002; Fagetti 2002; Mummert 1988). And when mothers leave children, we can see that maternal kin in Mexico is the most acceptable replacement for unpaid labor in the family.

Migration produces its own stresses on marital relationships. The reasons for marital breakup varied among the six couples I met who separated after they both had migrated. However, a surprising pattern is that in all but one case, the fathers subsequently took over primary responsibility for the children from abroad, even when children lived with maternal kin. As will be discussed further, fathers send money home regularly and call home more often than before, while mothers grow distant and communicate less frequently with their children. Yet even after marital separation, fathers rarely questioned the ability of mothers-in-law to care for children. Daniel, whose three children lived with his ex-wife's mother, said he does not care how she spends the \$150 he sends weekly; "what matters to me is that they recognize that I am helping out and later they don't say I haven't" (notes, 26 June 2004).

Couples residing together in the United States described stable home lives for their children in Mexico. They reported amicable relationships with substitute caregivers and did not express serious concerns about their children's care. Parents did worry that children lack parental guidance, but their greatest concern was that grandparents spoil children. Berta, a mother of three children in Mexico, explained, "It isn't the same that they are with their grandparents. The grandparents feed them, but they don't insist; if they don't want to eat they don't eat. In contrast with the mother, she insists and you know that they eat well" (notes, 9 July 2004). However, Ofelia, who left her nine-year-old son when he was two to move to the United States with her husband, summarized the more prevalent attitude: "I know my son is missing the love of a mother, but I also know my son doesn't suffer terribly without me, he has food, material things, and love from my own mother. It is more that I am the one who suffers without him" (notes, 3 November 2003).

## Single-Mother Migrants

I interviewed eight women who migrated as single mothers. One came to the United States after an unplanned pregnancy as a teenager, and one mother left when her husband died. Six mothers got divorced or separated and migrated because they could not make ends meet with jobs in Mexico. Migration places these women in the position of family breadwinners. Unlike fathers and women who migrate with husbands, single mothers often left unstable families behind.

Although single mothers also preferred to leave children with maternal grandmothers, only two of eight were able to do so. In three cases, children live with an ex-husband; in one case, they live with the mother's sister; and in another, with her cousin. Finally, one mother left her children with her mother, who subsequently died. The teenagers now live alone. Single mothers seemed to face the most family pressure around their child care arrangements. Nicandra, the mother in the last scenario, explained, "They [her siblings] didn't agree [with leaving the children with her mother] because they said they were my responsibility. They said my mother was too old to watch them. My siblings' criticisms were very difficult" (notes, 21 July 2004).

In cases where children live with ex-husbands, communication with children is problematic. Teresa, for example, cannot talk to her two children who live with her ex-husband, now remarried, and he will not accept the gifts she sends. She was infuriated when she recently learned that the children now sell candy. "When I was there we were poor, but at least they weren't out on the streets" (notes, 28 November 2003). Hilda, mother to a 14-year-old living with her ex-husband, was at first excited that I would be going to Mexico; I could take a ring for her daughter's 15th birthday. A month later, I went to arrange the visit, but Hilda scowled when I mentioned her daughter. "I am not going to send her anything," she told me. "She doesn't deserve it. She is rebelling." When I asked what she meant by rebelling, Hilda explained, "She won't talk to me when I call. She is too close to her father, a real father's girl. When she gets on the phone she says she has to go because her father doesn't like her talking to me" (notes, 7 August 2004).

Mothers, single or not, rarely left children without preparing them for the migration, unlike the fathers I interviewed. A number of mothers described how they introduced the idea of migration to children in advance and talked about how children supported their migration. When Nicandra returned home after her mother died, she included her children in the decision to return to the United States. "I said, okay, now what do we do? They said it was okay [to go back] because we needed the money" (notes, 21 July 2004). And Isabel said, "I told them a few months ahead of time that I was going to

the U.S. to work with their father. The youngest boy said, 'It's okay mommy, go and work so that when you come back you can bring us a pizza' " (notes, 15 November 2003).

In summary, mothers and fathers migrate under different circumstances, which frame their relationships with their children in Mexico. For fathers who leave children with their wives, migration is a means to provide for their families honorably; it does not require a complex explanation to their children. Since many fathers participate in seasonal migrations, they are often able to visit their children fairly regularly. However, they must contend with the stress of a long-distance marriage, which can negatively affect their relationships with their children. Couples who migrate together recognize that leaving children means they will be raised without the love and attention of either parent. Mothers almost always rationalize their departures in terms of supporting husbands' work abroad. These couples feel secure in knowing that their children have a stable family life in Mexico, generally with the maternal grandparents. Finally, single mothers reported the most volatile child care arrangements. Some single-mother migrants are forced to abandon children to confrontational ex-husbands. They also face difficulties supporting children on low-wage salaries once abroad. In fact, only two single mothers I interviewed provided for children on their own, one of whom lives with a sister who helps support her. The others, including hard-working Paula whose vignette introduces this article, cut costs by living with a new partner in the United States.

### EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO SEPARATION

Taken at face value, mothers' and fathers' parenting activities from a distance seem quite similar. However, my data show that mothers' and fathers' reasons for staying in touch, or losing touch, with children in Mexico are distinct. Like their migration patterns, mothers' and fathers' emotional responses to international separation differ.

When fathers grow distant from their children, it is generally because they believe they are unable to fulfill their role as family provider. Basically, they cannot send money home. Quirino, for example, said, "I only call when I have a number to give them [for the money order]" (notes, 30 November 2003). If not, he will not call. A father may not send money because of lack of employment or because he drinks away his paycheck. However, what is important here is not the act of drinking or not working but the act of sending money.

Salvador, a husband and father of two teenagers who visits his family in Oaxaca every year and calls home weekly, illustrates the point. Salvador first migrated to New York City when his oldest son, now 19, was 1 year old. On his second trip to New York, he got involved with a Puerto Rican woman and moved in with her but never told his family in Mexico about it. The relationship ended after six months when Salvador hit her and ended up in jail for three months. "While in jail, he had a friend send money home in his place—\$200 a month lying to his family saying that there wasn't much work at that time of the year. Salvador laughs as he recounts how his friend would call home for him, saying he couldn't call personally because he was working somewhere in the mountains where there wasn't a phone line. To this day, Salvador's family doesn't know about his incarceration or the Puerto Rican woman behind it" (notes, 8 March 2004). As long as Salvador and others like him are able to provide financially for family in Mexico, they consider themselves good fathers. In fact, 8 of the 12 fathers I interviewed who were married with wives and children in Mexico reported (or I confirmed via other means) that they had extramarital affairs while in the United States. These affairs did not make the men I interviewed feel like bad fathers. Sergio continued to call his wife and four children twice a month after 10 years of binge drinking in the United States and an alleged affair (which he denies) with his wife's sister. Remarkably, Sergio still considers himself the household head. Clearly, fathers' relationships with families are often troubled. But according to migrant fathers, when they send money home, their symbolic position as father remains intact.

Mothers' contact with children is not dependent on financial support; rather, it is the emotional care work they are able to perform from a distance that matters. Cristina, for example, said she talks weekly to her two children who live with her sister. Every time she calls, her eight-year-old daughter says, "Mommy, when are you coming back to be with us? I want you to be here with me already." Cristina does not, however, send money home regularly and explained the financial relationship she has with her sister as follows: "I trust her because we help each other out. I send money when I can, but sometimes when I don't work for two or three weeks, I don't send any and she feeds the children. And, sometimes if she doesn't have any money and needs it she will call me and ask, and I try to send something" (notes, 24 October 2003). Whether Cristina sends money home or not does not affect how she relates to her children. In fact, 10 mothers were not working when I interviewed them, some because of new child care responsibilities and others because they could not find work. All remained in touch with their children and did not consider lack of employment an impediment to the relationship.

If financial support is not essential to mothers, emotional intimacy is. Transnational mothers expect that they, and other mothers in their situation, will call home regularly and suffer greatly without their children. While fathers minimized the costs of family separation despite evidence of substance abuse and depression, 14 mothers detailed how they cried for months on arrival to the United States, lacked appetite, and became physically ill or grew severely depressed. For example, Isabel said, "I cried for like two months when I first got to the U.S. . . . I was nervous all the time, and made lots of mistakes when I first started to work" (notes, 15 October 2003). And Iris complained that before her husband went back for her son, "I didn't work well. I didn't sleep well. I didn't eat well" (notes, 25 May 2004).

Mothers who do not suffer without their children are accused of abandoning them. According to Sandra, other Mexican women criticize her for forgetting her daughter in Mexico now that she has two children in the United States with her husband. I asked if she missed the girl. "I am not going to lie. . . . I don't really miss her that much. I used to, but with time not anymore." Sandra does not even like calling home because her daughter does not want to talk to her. But she explained she was not always like this. When she first came to the United States six years ago, she suffered greatly. Sandra, who is a heavy woman, said she was unnaturally skinny: "It got to the point that my husband's friends would say if your wife keeps losing weight, you aren't going to have a wife anymore. My husband would tell me, Sandra, you have to eat, if you don't you will die. I got better once my son was born" (notes, 1 June 2004). If transnational fathers fail when they do not send money, transnational mothers fail when their emotional attentions are diverted elsewhere.

Consequently, mothers often expressed guilt over leaving children, whereas fathers rarely did. Horacio, a father of three who calls and sends money weekly to his children living in three different households, one with his ex-wife, one with his mother, and one with his current spouse, explained when I asked if he feels guilty for not living with his children, "No, it is not guilt. I think I would feel bad if I knew the children were suffering, and that they wouldn't suffer if I was there with them. But they aren't, so I don't" (notes, 3 August 2004). Compare Horacio's comment to that of Nicandra, whose two boys ages 15 and 18 live in the same neighborhood as her ex-husband: "I often feel guilty. When things aren't going well I feel guilty. When my son wasn't doing well, it was like I wasn't on top of things. I mean, one feels guilty for not giving them the attention they need" (notes, 21 July 2004). Nicandra takes on the responsibility of her children's emotional well-being, even though their father lives nearby. Horacio, on the

other hand, considers economic well-being definitive. The children suffer less, economically, because he works abroad making his sacrifice guilt free.

Most transnational mothers and fathers continue to consider their family roles in terms of female caregiving and male providing even at a distance. However, a subset of parents, those who divorce postmigration, appear to contest Mexican gender ideals. In all but one case, I found that when parents divorced after living together in the United States, fathers described more extensive efforts to cultivate relationships with their children. Josè, for example, calls his two teenagers two or three times a week since his wife left and talks to them about topics as intimate as birth control. His ex-wife now calls the children only every other month, even though they live with her mother. And Armando, a father of three young children, migrated a year before bringing his wife to New Jersey with him. Within three months of their reunification, his wife left him for another man. Armando explained why his relationship with his children changed. "When I came first, it was like they didn't miss me that much. I felt this, anyway. I think because their mother was there and they felt secure with their mother. They didn't need anything. But when she recently came, I saw that they got closer to me, it was as if, as if—like they were very stuck to their mother. When she was there, they were attached to her. She was like their idol" (transcript, 28 July 2004). Armando's relationship with his children actually improved after his wife migrated and subsequently left him. Since Armando continued to provide for the family economically, his role as father remained intact. In contrast, Armando's ex-wife violated the standard of care expected of mothers. When mothers deviate from the model of self-sacrifice for their children, and demonstrate self-interest by leaving their husbands postmigration, fathers feel more entitled to further nurture relationships with their children in Mexico.

### WHEN GENDER STICKS

In some ways, separation is a gender equalizer in transnational families. International migration limits the type of contact mothers and fathers can have with their children, for mothers cannot be directly involved in routine care work, and both parents rely on the same means of communication from a distance. In addition, the most important factor in determining how well both mothers and fathers relate to their children during international separation is the nature of the marital relationship. This finding corroborates research in the United States, which shows mothers to mediate children's relationships with nonresidential fathers (Edin and Lein 1997; Furstenberg

and Cherlin 1994). It appears that international separation magnifies the influence of the marital relationship on parent-child relationships.

However, my research also shows that the experiences of migrating mothers and fathers are quite different. They tend to live in different types of transnational families. Most significantly, fathers often leave children with their wives; mothers only migrate when single or if together with their husbands. Half of the fathers I interviewed have been back to see their children in Mexico, while mothers rarely make regular return trips to Mexico. Moreover, the average length of separation for mothers I interviewed was 3.4 years compared to 9.2 years for fathers. Clearly, immigration policy and job opportunities in the United States also shape Mexican transnational family formation. Border crossing is dangerous for women, more so than for men (Amnesty International 1998), and this helps explain why mothers do not return to see their children. However, it does not account for why women, as compared to men, appear to minimize the time apart from their children, either by returning to Mexico for good or bringing children to the United States despite the even greater danger in crossing for minors. Nor can it explain why I looked for but could not find any cases of married mothers who left children with husbands in Mexico, which is a recorded migration pattern in the Philippines, even though Filipina mothers in this situation almost always rely on female extended kin as coguardians (Salazar-Parreñas 2005).

I suggest that gender expectations in Mexico are crucial to understanding split-family migration patterns. Fathers believe that an honorable way to provide for their families is to migrate to the United States where they earn more for their labor. Mexican mothers' morality is tied to how well they care for their children. For single mothers, migration is a moral way of fulfilling familial duties: In the absence of an economic provider, a good mother should sacrifice herself for her children via migration. For married mothers, regardless of their personal interests in moving abroad, migration is acceptable only when couched in the economic language of supporting husbands and, not insignificantly, when the substitute caregiver is a maternal grandmother. In either case, the cultural message is that moral mothers should reduce time away from children, whereas good fathers should prolong it if migration proves to be a lucrative economic venture.

Interviews with parents also show that Mexican gender ideology helps explain why some mothers and fathers lose touch with their children in Mexico. Fathers feel they have abandoned their children when they have trouble providing for them financially. Work conditions for Mexican migrants in the United States are often difficult. None of the fathers I interviewed earn more than \$15 per hour. Many work two jobs or average 60 to



70 hours a week. Mexican fathers face significant pressures in supporting their families in Mexico and constantly compare their achievements to other migrant men's. Fathers expect to build a house, start a new business, and/or increase the family's standard of living through remittances. The emphasis on economic provision reinforces the male role as honorable family provider when separated from children. Ironically, fathers expressed an increase in interest in their children's lives postmigration. Moreover, it is only when mothers distanced themselves from children in Mexico after a marital breakup in the United States that fathers felt entitled to further develop their relationships with children in Mexico. Regardless, the economic relationship is paramount, for fathers only communicate with children in Mexico as long as they are sending money home to them.

While mothers also migrate to work, they do not expect to perform economic miracles with their remittances. Instead, they hope either to put food on the table or to assist their husbands in his goals. Mothers expect to be able to maintain significant emotional bonds with their children despite the distance. When mothers have competing demands for their affections or lose touch with family emotional life in Mexico, they feel their relationships with children suffer. One mother I met, for example, never sent money home regularly but spoke with her two boys in Mexico often, even after she divorced their father. However, once she remarried and started a new family, her regular phone calls stopped. And Sandra and her husband, cited earlier, have not reduced economic support for their eight-year-old daughter over the six years they have lived together in the United States. Sandra's phone calls and intimacy with her daughter (but not her husband's contact) waned only when Sandra's U.S.-born children began to occupy her time.

It is important to note that mothers do use material objects as expressions of care, an act akin to fathers' economic provision of goods. Mothers, like fathers, send children gifts through friends and talk on the phone about what children want or need. However, when mothers do not send money or gifts, they do not necessarily feel they have damaged their relationships with their children. What matters is the expression of care, rather than actual material goods. For fathers, in contrast, it is what is sent home that counts.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article attempts to pinpoint gender distinctions in parent-child relationships among families living in the unique circumstances of international separation. I have shown that mothers and fathers act in surprisingly similar ways when living apart from their children. Both mothers and

fathers use regular phone contact with their children as the primary means for managing relationships with their children from abroad, and both send gifts and financially support their children through remittances. Both mothers and fathers view the maternal grandmother to be the best substitute for parental care. Both mothers and fathers struggle to incorporate children living in Mexico to changes in their lives once in the United States.

I show that gender distinctions in transnational parenting, notable in mothers' and fathers' distinct migration patterns and emotional responses to separation, are tied to Mexican gender ideology. While the conditions of migration may change Mexican gender expectations within marital relationships (Hirsch 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994), like Salazar-Parreñas (2005), I find gender expectations in parenting to be durable in the transnational context. Migration does not appear to significantly transform notions of Mexican motherhood and fatherhood even though it does change parenting activities. Fathers' relationships with their children are directly related to their ability to honorably fulfill the role of economic provider for the family. When fathers are successful economically as migrants, they tend to maintain stable and regular relationships with children in Mexico regardless of marital status. In contrast, even though Mexican mothers migrate to work like fathers, their relationships with children once abroad depend on their ability to demonstrate emotional intimacy from a distance.

Significantly, some mothers do jeopardize their symbolic position of self-sacrificing mother postmigration, most often when they act in self-interest and leave husbands once in the United States. It is in these cases that migrant fathers feel entitled to expand their roles in their children's lives, albeit at a distance. The caveats, however, are that fathers continue to provide economically for their children through remittances and that a female caregiver in Mexico, often the maternal grandmother, continues to do the daily care work involved in raising the children. And these "deviant" mothers do not truly transform the definitions of Mexican motherhood, for they are criticized for having left their children.

It is crucial to note that this article discusses migrant mothers' and fathers' descriptions of their relationships with their children, not children's assessments of these relationships. Literature suggests, for example, that fathers' economic role is less important to families in Mexico, as they have been accused of being "padres de cheque no mas" (fathers only by check) (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 67). And my preliminary research suggests that children do value the economic remittances of mothers and are resentful of fathers who consider only monetary aspects of their relationship important. Without consideration of the children's perspective, it is not possible to evaluate the quality of parent-child relationships in transnational families or

the factors that lead to their success or failures. A critical area for further research is children's perceptions of their parents' migration.

Nevertheless, mothers' and fathers' activities and behaviors are not inconsequential. On the contrary, the comparison of transnational motherhood and fatherhood sheds light on the ways gender expectations permeate contemporary Mexican parenting, even when family structures and gender relations within families are disrupted by international migration.

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