NERVIOS AND 'MODERN CHILDHOOD'
Migration and shifting contexts of child life in the Ecuadorian Andes

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This article addresses a culturally specific depression-like disorder (*nervios*) among children living in the southern Ecuadorian Andes. Characterized by symptoms as varied as melancholy and anger, *nervios* is said to strike when children are separated from their parents, specifically fathers, who commonly migrate to the US. *Nervios* serves as a generative site for analyzing the local meanings and practices of children and childhood within wider national and global economic processes. Specifically, it is argued that beyond explanations predicated on psychological ideas of separation and attachment, the malady reflects the limits of children's abilities to accept the terms of family life increasingly defined through transnational migration and new consumption practices. Ultimately, this article suggests that *nervios* aids children by giving voice to life changes they do not completely understand.

> As soon as their father left, the boys were struck with tremendous *dolor de corazon* [heartache]. They wouldn't sleep, eat, get out of bed, and they refused to go to school. At first, they were just sad with *pena*, then it turned to anger. This is *nervios*. (Mother of four children, early forties)

During the course of my fieldwork on transnational migration from highland Ecuador to the USA, discussions of children and family life often provided obligatory segues into other topics of my 'official' research interests. I conducted the bulk of my research alone in Ecuador without my family, and that proved to be a source of consternation for a number of my informants. Mothers expressed their worry: 'It is must be very difficult for them to be without you. It must be killing them.' Such exchanges often opened up to discussions of family separation in the communities where I was working and, in particular, the effects migration has had on the lives of children. Framing much of their preoccupation, people spoke of the pronounced rise in a cluster of new child 'disorders' manifested in extreme sadness (*pena*),[1]

explosive anger, malicious acts of violence, in addition to a general refusal to carry out day-to-day activities. Cases of *nervios* – the term most commonly used by people to gloss over the set of individual behaviors – are said to afflict children when they are separated from their parents for long periods of time, almost always in cases when a father has migrated to the US. Sharing a common symptomology with Euro-American depression, *nervios* begins with a profound sadness and despair expressed in heartache and loss, but soon transforms into open expressions of anger. If left unchecked, it leads victims to inflict bodily harm on themselves and, in the worst instances, to attempt suicide.

Although *nervios* is a commonly recognized folk illness in Ecuador, as it is throughout Latin America (Low, 1985), it has typically been understood as an affliction of adult women, and not generally associated with children (Davis and Low, 1989; Finerman, 1989; Guarnaccia, 1993). In my research, however, discussions of this new malady centered on children, most often boys, whose symptoms were attributed to being *abandonado* (abandoned) by their fathers, or more generally suffering from *negligencia familiar* (parental neglect). Both popular and professional discourses of *nervios* in Ecuador reflect the manifestation of well-worn theories of 'western' developmental psychology that place heavy emphasis on parent–child attachment. Armed with these theories, local experts link a litany of children's problems – aggressive behavior, timidness, bedwetting, stuttering, in addition to problems of gender identity – to the absence of fathers (Hurtado, n.d.; Ochoa Ordóñez, 1998; Pinos and Ochoa Ordóñez, 1999). However, such diagnoses provide only partial understandings for families grappling with a troubled child. Stories of such afflictions also suggest that purely psychological etiologies fail to capture the full meaning of *nervios* and other contemporary traumas of childhood. For example, one of the puzzling aspects of child cases of *nervios* is that in many cases it persists or even worsens after families are reunited.

In this article, I examine the increasing preoccupation with child cases of *nervios* as a generative site for understanding the local meanings and practices of children within wider national and global economic processes. On one level, anthropologists have remained well situated to document the lived experiences of what Scheper-Hughes and Sargent (1998) see as the 'small wars' of children as actors in global processes – as migrants with mixed and hybrid identities, as expendable workers in an international division of labor and as poignant symbols of failed international policies.[2] On a second level, scholars have confronted the rhetorical positioning of children within competing discourses in society and have analyzed a variety of political and ideological uses of childhood. Ideas and images central to the depiction of 'modern', 'proper' and above all 'safe' childhoods – childhoods that are cordoned off from polluting elements of adult society – circulate through the global economy through popular media, human rights discourses and

public policy. As Jenks (1996) has described, such images constitute a 'sacralization' of childhood in the West, whereby the protection of children from the world's problems has become indistinguishable from ideas of domestication, schooling and a shift from children as producers to children as consumers (Best, 1994; Field, 1995; Helleiner, 1998; Zelizer, 1985).

By bringing these two levels together in an examination of *nervios,* I join the other authors in this special issue of *Childhood* in examining some of the ways value claims related to childhood become entangled within the processes and priorities of late capitalism. I keep in mind important questions raised by Sharon Stephens in the introduction to her path-breaking volume, *Children and the Politics of Culture* (Stephens, 1995). Stephens's approach blended these two levels of analysis as she encouraged scholars to carry out critical analyses of children's rights and child welfare discourses without foregoing ethnographically thick descriptions of children's experiences under such regimes.

I address the contemporary framing of childhood in Ecuadorian communities heavily involved in transnational migration. I stress how redefinitions of children and childhood in communities undergoing rapid socioeconomic transformations are bound up in changing notions of parenting, household economy and the meanings and justifications for migration itself. Newly emerging ideas about childhood, I argue, reflect larger goals of migrant families and in particular represent engagement with certain types of a desired modernity.[3] I present three illustrative cases of child *nervios* in order to analyze the experiences and traumas of childhood within an Andean household structure increasingly bound up in the logic of maintaining a transnational existence. I argue that *nervios* is best understood as the result of role responsibility stresses placed on children by parents increasingly seeking to define their children within universal ideals of 'modern childhood'. Paradoxically, I find that *nervios* may have as much to do with the impositions of an increased child-centeredness as it does with parental absence.

Research methods

The ethnographic data presented in this article stem from fieldwork I carried out in four villages of Ecuador's lower Cañar province in summer 1997 and over the course of a year in 1999 as part of a larger project on migration, masculinity, and fatherhood. I carried out interviews with 15 different families in the four village locations. I tried to interview at least two family members in each household (e.g. a father and a child, mother and a child, husband and wife). Open-ended questions were used to solicit information about migration, children and about *nervios* specifically. Data from children suffering from *nervios* were collected during numerous informal interviews and a focus group with students at a regional elementary school. Additional

interviews were conducted with school teachers, public health doctors and nursing staff, as well as with a psychologist who works directly with child development issues in migrant-sending communities.

Survey research supplemented interview data. A household inventory of 45 randomly chosen domestic units yielded information about general household spending and expenses, home construction, agricultural data, as well as general migration histories and explication of migrant networks. In a second survey instrument targeted to high school students ($N = 137$), respondents answered questions about their relationships with their parents abroad as well as household economics and consumption patterns. Survey results aided in the process of cross-checking information gathered in face-to-face interviews.

Fathers and families in Ecuador's transmigrant communities

The provinces of Azuay and Cañar are comprised of densely clustered villages of mixed indigenous and mestizo *campesinos* (peasants) occupying a range of mountain slopes and intermontane valleys. In the first half of the 20th century, households throughout the region practiced a combination of low-intensity agriculture and artisan production of straw 'Panama' hats supplemented by the seasonal migration of men to work in the banana and sugar plantations of Ecuador's coast (Domínguez, 1991; Hirschkind, 1980; Lentz, 1991). However, as sources for plantation jobs contracted and overseas markets for artisan goods collapsed at mid-century, families in the region have increasingly looked north, mostly to New York City and Chicago, and to jobs in the restaurant and service sector to make ends meet and maintain the vestiges of an agricultural livelihood. Since the mid-1960s, it is estimated that as many as 400,000 Ecuadorians – almost 90 percent of them from provinces of Azuay and Cañar – have immigrated to the US (Borrero and Vega, 1995; CONUEP, 1995; Jokisch, 1998). Approximately 70 percent are believed to have entered the USA illegally.

In over three decades of Ecuadorian migration, patterns of settlement and return migration have changed considerably. Early waves of migration in the 1970s and into the 1980s were characterized by a high degree of permanent settlement. Numerous migrants who entered the US at this time received amnesty under the 1986 Immigration, Reform, and Control Act (IRCA) and were granted residency (Bean et al., 1989). On their coat-tails, family members followed from Ecuador and sought residency once they had reached US soil. In total, slightly more than 180,000 Ecuadorians were conferred residency status between 1961 and 1995 (INS, 1992, 1997).

In the past decade, however, as steady economic opportunities have eroded in both the 'sending' areas of the Ecuadorian highlands and the 'receiving' areas of urban USA and US immigration policy has tightened, Ecuadorian migrants have become part of enduring social networks that link

their host and home communities (for comparative cases, consult Glick-Schiller et al., 1992; Goldring, 1996; Mahler, 1998, 1999; Rouse, 1989). Despite the distance of sending communities from the US, highland families stay well connected with loved ones abroad. Families maintain linkages through letters, audiotapes and video recordings sent by postal and delivery services, and depend on money-sending agencies to facilitate the transference of between US$150.00 and $400.00 each month into households.[4] Migrants also circumvent the obstacles of crossing borders and obtaining illegal entry into the USA by securing the costly services of *coyotes*, or migration brokers, that facilitate trips north.[5] Owing to the ubiquity of these services, many migrants make repeated trips between the US and Ecuador despite their illegal status. While migration can in no way be characterized as 'easy', it is certainly an option that few men would see as out of their range. To fully comprehend the impact of migration within these communities requires a language more accustomed to describing the commuter culture of many Americans. I have found it useful to think of these travelers not as migrants, but as commuters, who endure lengthy commutes (3000 plus miles) and long work shifts (between 2 and 6 years at a time).

The overwhelming majority of migrants are men, and migration serves as an important, socially recognized benchmark in the transition from youth to adulthood within the sending communities.[6] For men as young as 16, traveling north means fulfilling the dream of becoming an *iony*, a name derived from the expression 'I [heart] NY' used to describe returned migrants who have adopted American styles of speech, clothing and attitude. Most men who seek this dream marry first, and not infrequently conceive a child. Many new fathers first come to know their children through photographs. For migrants, leaving a wife behind anchors them in their home communities and invests women with important tasks related to funneling remittances into domestic projects – land purchases, house building and the care of children. The majority of new households in lower Cañar begin with marriage, pregnancy and migration.

Most return migrants assert that they endure the hard work of migration, the long separations and the risk to their lives in order to offer a better life for their children. Paradoxically, it is common to hear men say things like, 'I am a better father because I leave. I value my kids more.' Men often insist that going to the US for work should be *ida por vuelta* (go and return), with the intention being to earn as much as money as possible in the shortest amount of time. Yet once abroad, the notion of finding quick success working 12-hour shifts six days a week quickly dissolves as migrants learn that paying their debts and achieving their goals will require longer stays. Absence from one's home village entails both separation from family members and the loss of previous statuses within the community such as political positions that have traditionally reinforced conceptions of and defined pathways toward manhood. Abroad, migrants find few options to maintain their

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previous statuses. Work, for instance, is often found in the restaurant sector washing dishes or bussing tables, and is considered by many men to be inherently 'feminine' in contrast to the masculine agricultural work to which migrants are accustomed. In the absence of other identities, attention to fatherhood becomes a salient arena in which men can maintain connections with their communities, remain in contact with their families and exert their masculinity.

Stories of migrant life in the US contain themes that link together the meanings of work, the responsibilities of fatherhood and the changing face of children's needs. In one account of life abroad, a young migrant father described:

> I have taken some really awful jobs in the US – some downright dangerous! At times I would think, man, I could be back in the *campo* [countryside] where the air is nice, with my family and friends close by, working my land, tending to my herds. But things would never change, I could never give them [his children] anything better. So I stayed. Fathers now can provide more for their kids. Fathers now take more concern for their kids. They are not so macho. [*Ellos no son tan machistas.*] They do not father so strictly; there is more *cariño* [affection] between fathers and children.

Men commonly make explicit comparisons between their abilities to be good fathers with the experiences they remember with their own fathers. While fathers in the past are often talked about as instilling important values of respect (*respeto*) and trust (*confianza*), differences arise over the degree to which fathers actively shaped their children's childhood. Many define 'traditional fatherhood' by describing the unequal relationship between a strict and respectful father and children *que sean buenos y dóciles* (good and docile children) (McKee, 1980: 61). By contrast, returned migrant fathers often pepper discussions of their parenting practices with images of more involved and nurturing behavior. 'New fathers', these migrant fathers argue, know their children better, better anticipate their needs and strive to be caregivers and not just breadwinners. One telling example comes from Miguel, a returned migrant with three children, who sees his own fathering abilities to be a vast improvement over those of his father's:

> You should have seen it years ago here – it wasn't like this – the big houses, everyone owning a car. No, we were poor. If he [my father] had, say, an apple or pear, he would split it into fourths so that every kid could have a portion. But that was it. He was tough, he watched out for us and made sure we were provided for. The fathers today are *más modernos y progresivos* [more modern and up-to-date]. They know what their kids want. They know better how to meet their needs.

In practice, being a father who is *más moderno y progresivo* comes about in part as migrants are exposed to a wide array of images conveying 'modern' models of fatherhood in television, movies and other media both in the US and in Ecuador. In short, such images that show 'hands-on' fathers who are

in tune with the individual needs of their children, who command respect through what they can give their children rather than through strict force, have become aspirations of the successful migrant.

Consumption practices: parental identity and child obligation

Images of a desired modernity and of *iony* styles are intertwined with the presumed 'needs' of children and imagined 'modern' domestic contexts in complex ways. One way to understand this process is to look at how migrants and their families appropriate both material goods and commodified images related to childhood. In the past decade, anthropologists have looked closely at people's consumption practices and choices under the precept that patterns of consumptive behavior yield important information about how new identities are fashioned and how contradictions and tensions within society are reworked.[7] Within migrant-sending communities, where the daily rhythms of an agricultural existence have slowly given way to the necessities of long-distance migration, consumption represents one of the key arenas where normalcy of a transnational existence can be instilled. While abroad, to the extent that limited wages and time afford, consumption of goods and images (including movies and television) allows migrants to confront tensions between their lives as poor urban workers and the roles and positions they left behind in their home communities. Participating in the consumption of *iony* styles (from watching American television programs to purchasing fashionable clothing) takes otherwise alienating experiences shaped by inadequate English-language abilities, feminized work conditions and the loss of former statuses into powerful engagements with modernity.

Over the course of interviews, returned migrant men would make repeated mention of free time spent watching movies and television in the US, occasionally imitating particular characters and discussing favorite shows. Though viewing is seen in functional terms – as a way to learn English – it is also a source for conveying models of *iony* consumption and perceived images of 'modern' men. Whereas the migrant men I spoke with shared a preference with their North American male counterparts of the same age for programs that depict men in action roles, they seemed equally aware of men as husbands and fathers. American television and advertising are filled with images of what Hondageneu-Sotelo and Messner (1994: 205) describe as the 'New Man' and the 'the involved, nurturant father'. When pushed to define the contours of men who are *más modernos y progresivos*, migrant men draw on these images – images of fathers playing with their children, men presenting a specially selected gift for a child, a dad who pulls off a special party for a son or daughter.

Most migrants working over 60 hours a week in the US have very limited time to spend with their children. Ironically, however, for the first time

in their lives they have discretionary income – money to spend as they like on themselves and their families. Articulating the difference between wages earned working on Ecuador's coastal plantations and those made in the US, one returned father reflected,

> After you worked in the fields, you would be lucky if you could afford to buy a little *trago* [liquor] for yourselves and friends. The rest of the money went to taking care of the house – a new roof, seeds for planting, and things like that. . . . Over there [in the United States] I am not rich, but I can *hacer su agosto*[8] [make a lot of money]. [The remitted money] can allow my wife to buy something for herself or I can get something for my children. Then they know I care about them when I'm gone.

Clearly, migration strategies in the past afforded men the role of 'breadwinner' as money helped to reproduce the household economy. Migrating to the US, however, permits men to define their roles with greater respect to consumer choices.

Migrant spending customarily begins with purchases of electronic equipment, such as cameras, cassette tape players and recorders and video camcorders. The ability to take photographs and make recordings of aspects of their lives abroad helps migrants grapple with the temporal and spatial separations that migration creates. In their self-portraits of fathering from abroad, migrants have a tendency to view their stories as fathers as mediated by these communication technologies. As one returning father told me, '[When I am in the US] I feel like I am with my kids. When they see the pictures of me, it's like they are here.' Such exchanges, coupled with occasional international telephone calls and letters, work to create a father's presence in the home and permit migrants to share in the lives of children still in Ecuador.

Consumption practices also reflect and further smooth the edges of the complex realities that migrants and their families must negotiate. In recent years, remittances sent to Ecuador have created household discretionary budgets whereby migrant families can afford to make trips to the nearest city of Cuenca to purchase goods that only a short time ago would have been out of their spending limits. In addition, migration networks and their related infrastructures insure a conduit for the acquisition of inexpensive goods from the US. Evidence of this new level of consumption is in the nearby city of Cuenca, where one sees *campesinos* in traditional dress standing in long bank queues to deposit international checks and making large purchases with American dollars in department stores. Further, survey data indicate that perhaps as much as 30 percent of remittances are used to make household purchases beyond basic necessities, *coyote* debt and agricultural inputs. The most commonly purchased goods are *electro-domésticos* (household appliances) such as new stoves, ovens and refrigerators that adorn otherwise spartan rural houses. During a rainy Mother's Day I witnessed a special delivery of a new range (large cooker) to a migrant household. The house was old

and the new range appeared awkward situated next to a small, natural gas stove and cylinder and an open fire pit. The event, as I recorded it in my field notes, unfolded as follows:

> Three women – a woman in her late thirties and her two sisters – came quickly out of the doorway and swarmed around a delivery truck that had just made the difficult trip up the badly washed out steep dirt road. From the back of the truck, a deliveryman from Cuenca slowly unloaded the brand new range, complete with self-cleaning features and a selection of special racks. A handful of children stopped their playing outside and hurriedly crowded around to watch the overjoyed expression on their mother's face as the deliveryman showed her various uses for the oven, including a special rotisserie feature that he noted would 'perfectly prepare *cuy*[9] [guinea pig]'. I was handed a glass tumbler full of alcohol so I might join the three women and the deliveryman in a toast to Mother's Day, and then to the migrant husband in New York who had purchased the range. The children pointed to pictures on the wall of their father, explaining that he lived in New York, but would return soon. Afterwards, the deliveryman told how the husband had placed the order in a Queens, New York branch of a Cuenca department store. On that Mother's Day, he delivered three more *electro-domésticos* to migrants' wives.

Children too have become central to the consumption practices of migrant households. One of the most striking examples can be found in the dramatic escalation of the amount of money, time and energy devoted to children's celebrations. In the context of migration, Catholic celebrations such as first communions and confirmations are important events in which migrants demonstrate that they have devoted the product of their labor to children. Families of migrant workers can spend close to US$ 1000 on special clothing, food and disk jockeys for large children's fiestas that last all night. Hundreds of dollars can be spent on the purchase of specially printed invitations and personalized party decorations alone. Such events become a competition between families, where outdoing one's neighbors is an index of success among migrants.

Special events and other forms of consumption bind children in transformed relationships with their parents, both in the sending communities and abroad. The goods children receive at special fiestas or on other occasions come to them not merely as commodities, but as 'gifts' (Hood-Williams, 1990). For a young girl, a piece of jewelry or a lovely dress to be worn for a first communion are items purchased especially for her, and thus are tokens of a relationship between a specific giver and receiver, a father and his child. However, the act of receiving a gift, as Marcel Mauss (1990 [1954]) first articulated for anthropology, entails responding in kind. Special gifts from parents implicate children in the obligations of reciprocity and command a certain level of obedience. However, as I elaborate in the next section, traditional outlets for reciprocating to parents through household labor have become harder to achieve for children who spend much of their time outside the community and their productive roles in the household. In the absence of this form of reciprocity, children's own obedience and conformity to the

intricacies of maintaining a transnational existence become their reciproca-
tion for the goods they receive. *Nervios*, then, where children can no longer
maintain this obedience, demonstrates the limits of this relationship.

The decentering of children's labor in migrant households

The impact migration and new consumption patterns have on the lives of
children reflects larger changes occurring within Azuayo–Cañari house-
holds. However, the ethos of child-centeredness does not constitute a new
emphasis on children. In fact, past studies of children and childhood in high-
land Ecuador overwhelmingly demonstrate the central position of children in
rural Andean domestic life (McKee, 1980; Miles, 1994; Weismantel, 1988).
Mary Weismantel (1988: 170) writes that in the Zumbagua household of the
northern highlands, 'children are loved and enjoyed as one of the greatest
reasons that life is worth living'. She adds that while 'no one wants to live in
a household without children in it', children are 'pragmatically necessary to
the running of the household . . . drawing water, fetching piles of [firewood]
from the patio to the hearth . . . watching infants, [and] delivering little pots
of food to the homes of nearby kin'. Ann Miles, from research conducted in
Azuay province, more explicitly draws out the importance of children's
work and its close connection with ways children are socialized to learn the
ethos of reciprocity. She writes:

> Children's contributions to household labor not only serve the instrumental pur-
> pose of freeing their mothers to pursue knitting or weaving, but also helping out
> at home is considered an intrinsic moral good. . . . doing housework solidifies
> family relationships by emphasizing cooperation and reciprocity. A child who
> performs any household chore eases the burden of his or her parents and, thus,
> reinforces family unity. (Miles, 1994: 142)

What distinguishes migrant households in Azuay and Cañar from these
examples, beyond the emphasis placed on child-centeredness and new forms
and types of consumption, are the ways these processes are accompanied by
the decenteredness of children within the household economy. Principally, as
an increased reliance on remittances within migrant households has trig-
gered a move away from agricultural production, children have been
relieved of their obligations to the family farm economy. Whereas in the past
children's labor was essential to all phases of agricultural work, today much
of this work is carried out by hired hands or otherwise becomes an increased
burden for a wife left behind. This relegation of children to unproductive
roles in Andean society comprises part of a subtle shift occurring within
migrant household dynamics.

One signal of this shift has been an increased emphasis placed on
schooling. Rather than waking early to haul firewood or to help with the har-
vest, children rush to catch buses to school, spending much of their day
away from the household. Rural schools in lower Cañar have been active

since the early 1900s, though both access and interest by parents have not always been universal. Despite the fact that elementary education is compulsory, high matriculation fees and a family's need for children's labor have historically hampered attendance. Only in recent years have students in the area begun to flood into schools.[10] Not only does the new emphasis on education take children out of the household, it frequently takes children out of the community to attend school in the city. Rural schools are judged of poorer quality (and perhaps now only suitable for children of non-migrants), while schools in the nearby city of Cuenca can offer students more, including, most importantly, English-language classes. Fathers, in particular, take a keen interest in their children, especially males, learning English.[11] As one returned migrant father, who pestered me to privately tutor his child, described the importance of learning English: 'What my son learns in the school won't get him a job anywhere; learning English will help once he goes north.'

For migrant families, the stress placed on education reveals contradictions between dreams of permanently living in the US and the reality of preparing students for limited opportunities in the Ecuadorian economy. Sending children to school, though, carries considerable symbolic weight as a class marker, distinguishing migrating from non-migrating households. Within the sphere of intra-community relations, sending children off to school demonstrates the waning emphasis on maintaining an agricultural livelihood and the growing stress placed upon building children's capacities as migrant laborers. Under the auspices of the federal Instituto del Niño y la Familia (Institute of the Children and Families; INNFA), the Ecuadorian government sponsors myriad television, billboard mural and print advertisement campaigns to extol the benefits of schooling and condemn the costs of child labor. On city streets in Cuenca and in regional towns, billboard murals contrast images of children in tattered and patched clothing with disheveled hair pushing wheelbarrows heavily loaded down with bricks and rock with those of fashionably dressed, smiling children reading books. Next to the images, bold statements proclaim 'Childhood: A Time for Studying, Playing, and Growing – Not for Working' and 'Children and Adolescents Gain More Studying Than Working'.

For their part, children themselves identify their schooling outside the community with leading more 'modern' lifestyles. Still, they frequently comment on the difficulty of shuttling back and forth, and express feeling tired and lonely. As with the gifts children receive from the fathers abroad, going to school puts children into relationships of feeling indebted to parents who pay the matriculation fees, send extra money to relatives in the city that house children and forgo their children's labor in the household economy. Children's abilities to reciprocate to their parents are at best delayed, as schooling represents a long-term investment with no guaranteed payoff.

The increased emphasis upon schooling children has also caused

tension between migrating and non-migrating households, placing children's actions (or non-actions) in the middle of disputes. While children's labor has diminished within individual household economies, children remain necessary hands to assist with reciprocal labor projects (*mingas)* that can take place two or three times per month in rural villages. *Minga* projects, such as replacing a church's tile roof or repairing roads after the rainy season, are significant community-wide events that often serve as litmus tests for a family's commitment to the larger community. When a family fails to participate, they can expect to be treated with shame and can quickly find themselves ostracized from community events and outside circles of information.[12] The out-migration of men has long disrupted the success of the *minga* system, prompting an increase in the number of women participants. Children, though, have been traditional mainstays in village labor projects, often times serving as proxies when their parents are unable to participate. With more families seeking to send children to school outside the community, the absence of children in village *mingas* is apparent. During numerous village meetings I attended where future *mingas* were discussed and planned, residents frequently berated the fact that children were becoming increasingly absent in village work parties, a move seen by non-migrating families or those who otherwise did not choose schooling for their children as developing individual households at the expense of community concerns and needs. Children who were schooled outside the community and made weekend trips back were aware of these arguments and often made deliberate efforts to stay out of sight from village leaders.

A second important area where change can be detected is in new domestic architectural styles and preferences. Once a family in lower Cañar has substantially paid off their *coyote* debts, a significant percentage of remittances is commonly put towards the construction of a new home. Building what are typically large and ostentatious homes designed to US conventions sends out a strong message, simultaneously signaling success abroad and continued commitment to a home community (Fletcher, 1999). Homes in lower Cañar reflect a myriad of architectural styles common to houses in the US, including large, front-facing patios and decks, formal living rooms and dining rooms and a preference for rooms to be connected to another within the main body of the house.

Ellen Pader (1993) has written about transformations within Mexican migrant households, examining how changing housing styles both reflect and reinforce different approaches to family dynamics. She notes, 'Physical negotiations of domestic space, in which rooms are organized to reveal or hide certain behaviors, are actively implicated in the dynamics of changing meanings and attitudes about appropriate behavior' (Pader, 1993: 117). With respect to the Ecuadorian case, new homes are said to furnish children with 'their own space' by giving them separate bedrooms. Within traditional housing, there are no special places provided for each child, and often there

are no separate bedrooms at all. Rather, children will customarily bed down in multipurpose rooms that double as storerooms and *salas* (living rooms) or join parents in the one designated bedroom.

Pader notes that in traditional Mexican housing, 'the lack of personal rooms and the copossession of space enculturate a sense of continual physical connection among household members' (Pader, 1993: 126). By contrast, the addition of separate bedrooms in new migrant family homes structures a decreasing family emphasis on group interrelatedness, as activities such as cosleeping with parents and siblings diminish. Children spoke of their new rooms in contrasting ways. Some children gravitated to the idea of having their 'own space' with privacy and places to display the things that they acquired from their father who labored abroad. For a number of children, a separate bedroom remains a space that does not conform to their day-to-day activities. Some children mentioned how being alone made them scared. Often, I saw children's bedrooms in new homes go unused while children continued to sleep in the *sala* or with a parent.

Children's experiences in rapidly transforming sending communities are impacted in significant and complex ways by changing domestic arrangements, family dynamics and new expectations for schooling and labor. For some, these experiences are articulated through the affliction of *nervios*.

Nervios: interpretations of child traumas

In the midst of the changing economy of the southern Ecuadorian Andes and the markers of migrant prosperity and affluence – evidenced in the construction of large homes, increases in consumption and generally higher standards of livings for highland *campesinos* – the stories of children suffering prompted me to ask several questions: What are the causes of *nervios*? Who is particularly at risk? What are the symptoms? When does *nervios* present itself? How does *nervios* compare to well-documented psychological disorders of children? How do parents interpret *nervios* and what do they take to be its cure? These questions served as the base of my investigation of *nervios* and guided me as I talked to parents of sufferers, afflicted children and other sending community residents.

Similar to the ways medical anthropologists have described the phenomenon of 'nerves' throughout other areas of Latin America and among Latino populations in the US, residents in Azuay and Cañar locate the cause of the illness in the onset of stress and suffering (*sufrimiento*) brought about by the loss of physical and emotional well-being (Davis and Guarnaccia, 1989; Finerman, 1989; Guarnaccia, 1993; Low, 1985). When asked to identify the incidents most associated with the illness, informants reported that *nervios* could be caused by the death of a loved one, great financial loss and, most importantly, when social relations between kin and between non-kin

had been disrupted. Like other folk and popular illnesses that Ecuadorian *campesinos* categorize as *desmandos* (lapses), attacks of *nervios* are often perceived as resulting from the breach of reciprocity agreements (Hess, 1994; Muñoz-Bernard, 1985; Tousignant and Maldanado, 1989). Describing the link between depressive-like disorders and reciprocity in Andean Ecuador, Tousignant and Maldanado (1989: 901) write that:

> Social encounters, even of a business-like nature, are expected to lead to a cer-
> tain feeling of reciprocity. . . . there has to be some sort of empathy, something
> significant going on. If not, there will be frustration and a sense of failure over
> the capacity to achieve a personal exchange. In a situation where an individual
> is prevented from reciprocating his emotions, he will experience the feeling of a
> significant loss, and a state of [depression] will follow.

Children generally, especially very young children, run a higher risk for dis-eases categorized as *desmandos* than adults do. Many believe that at a young age, the souls of children – a common entry point for sickness in Andean conceptions of the body – remain undeveloped and thus vulnerable to ill-ness, most commonly to *espanto* (fright sickness) and *mal ojo* (evil eye).[13] When a child is born, parents customarily tie a piece of red cloth around the neck or wrist of the infant to protect the soul from spirit intrusion. *Nervios*, however, is usually discussed as a reflection of particularly adult problems and worries (usually adult women) and has not been commonly associated with children. When child cases do appear in the ethnographic record, they are usually explained as the result of parental mistreatment. Describing *nervios* among the Saraguro of southern Ecuador, Ruthbeth Finerman (1989: 147) quoted an informant as saying:

> The *nervios* affects us all; it catches children, even when they are in the womb –
> before they are even born. They suffer if their parents treat them badly at home.
> They get fright, they cry and scream. But that is only the children who have bad
> parents.

Most of my informants explained their alarm that children were coming down with *nervios* this way:

> Children have so little to worry about that they never get sick like the parents.
> Women especially get sick. Children, they don't know there are problems in the
> world. They don't have enough relationships to fail, to bring them down, to be
> let down. (Female, forties)

Another remarked:

> I don't remember anything like this as a kid. Children today have it much
> harder. I mean I worked hard as a kid. I went to the coast, harvested sugar cane,
> and went months without seeing my mother and [other family]. This here is dif-
> ferent. Children shouldn't be getting sick this way. Their lives should be *tran-
> quilo* [calm]. (Male in mid-sixties)

In a climate of ambiguity where people reluctantly come to label the un-explained maladies of children with an adult diagnosis like *nervios*, the influence of doctors, school teachers and other traditional sources of expert

knowledge are important components in the local constructions of the disorder's etiology. Psychologists and other doctors from Cuenca have conducted a handful of small studies addressing behavioral problems with school children in migrant sending communities, including poor scholastic aptitude, use and abuse of inhalants, violence and attempted suicide (Ochoa Ordóñez, 1998; Pinos and Ochoa Ordóñez, 1999; Hurtado, n.d.). Results of these studies enjoy wide coverage in local newspapers and frequently inform the themes of the informative meetings (*charlas*) public health workers and local officials in the Catholic church hold for sending community residents. Much of what is discussed and written about child traumas, both in articles specifically about the child *nervios* phenomenon and more generally in popular magazines that villagers read such as the newly inaugurated Ecuadorian magazine for new parents, *Crecer Feliz* (Growing Up Happy), draws from now classical theories in developmental psychology (e.g. Bowlby, 1969) that focus almost exclusively on bonding and attachment.[14] Exemplary of this brand of expert knowledge was an article written by a Cuencan psychologist that appeared in a widely read Azuay daily. Critical of migration, the author points to the effects of abandonment on young children:

> When the parents, usually the fathers, abandon the household, the children lose their loving relations and are often left in the guardianship of grandparents and aunts and uncles. Children – especially between the ages of 7 and 12 – are timid, not very sociable, and act out aggressive behavior. They do poorly in school, have trouble adapting to new settings, and generally carry on poor relations with the adult world. Over time, even their relationships with their parents abroad become nothing but economic. (*El Tiempo*, 1999)

Equipped with this knowledge, mothers invariably locate their child's *nervios* in an extremely emotional *mal del corazon*, or heartache, caused when fathers migrate. When *nervios* continues to persist even after fathers and children are reunited, mothers frequently noted that it was a lingering trauma that keeps children in perpetual fear that at any moment their fathers may migrate again. Such fears are common among people in the community for whom migration is often fraught with ambiguity. Once migrants establish themselves in the US, communication between family members increases. However, the first months after a migrant's departure can be troubling and stressful for families. Rumors of migrants murdered during robberies or dying in work-related accidents circulate often through sending communities. Even when both parents are at home, children are said to be particularly vulnerable to the chilling effects of these stories and should therefore be protected from them. Despite a mother's attempt to minimize the pain of a father's absence for a son or daughter or to shield young ears from fearful stories of migrant tragedy, parents claim that there is little they can do to prevent or stop a child's affliction. When *nervios* hits, people say a child is *botado a la cama* (literally 'thrown into bed'). As they describe the illness, it begins when an organ near the opening of the stomach generally identified

as a *pulsario* begins to vibrate. During this period there can be a loss of control, aggressive and violent behavior, manifested in shouting matches, fist fighting and torturing of animals. Sometime this phase is not cause for great alarm by parents and is accepted as natural aspects of a child's *desarollo,* or development.

The various folk explanations people use to explain child *nervios* shed light on the fact that, like parental cases of *nervios*, children's afflictions represent *desmandos* (lapses) from what is considered normal emotional behavior. Parents, though, invariably blame this lapse on the absence of fathers. In what follows, I present three brief case examples of child *nervios* in order to better illustrate how the illness is rooted in specific events related to children's lives in the context of migration.

Examples of *nervios* in children's contexts

Example A: Arturo

Arturo was a bright 11-year-old boy who would come to visit me only on weekends, since during the week he lived in Cuenca with his aunt and uncle who cared for him while he went to school. Arturo's father has lived in the US since he was 2, although he has made two visits back to the community despite not holding US residency. Arturo would complain to me that he hated going to school in the city, didn't fit in with the other boys, and generally missed life in the countryside. He would get anxious about his school work, often wasting time at night meaning to study but rather fretting over his inability to perform well on tests. It was usually after long nights of worrying that he would feel sick – often feeling heaviness in his chest and fatigue. Repeatedly he would miss school, refuse to get out of bed and complained of muscle pains. His mother, who Arturo lived with on weekends in the village, worried why Arturo didn't 'fit in' with friends and why he would rather not be in the city.

Example B: Carlos

Carlos's case was so severe that his father returned from the US to rejoin his family after receiving repeated phone calls of distress from Carlos's mother. As Carlos described the situation to me,

> I started back at school the same year my father left for the US the second time and that is when I got the *nervios*. My mother said when my father left I was *casi iba a morir* [at the point of death]. I would stay in my room and cry and want to be with my mother. I would become afraid to be alone and I could feel my heart pound fast, get heavy, and then I just couldn't move. I didn't know what to tell people though. I couldn't tell my mom that I didn't want to sleep in my room alone. She would think I was a *maricón* [sissy]. . . . When I was very sick and couldn't move though, she would be very good to me and we would play and laugh. When my dad came back, I got better, but I would still get the *nervios*. And when my father would ask, why I was sick, why I wasn't happy, my heart would pound harder and would have to stay in bed.

Example C: Rómulo

Rómulo's *nervios* affliction made national headlines after he took his life by ingesting insecticide-laced cookies in 1999. Two years earlier, his father had left for the US. His mother followed shortly thereafter when the couple realized they would both need to work abroad to reach their goals back in Ecuador. At 12 years of age, Rómulo and his older brother were left in the care of their grandmother, who was busy overseeing the construction of the parents' new home in the village. Soon after his mother left, Romulo's behavior changed drastically and he began to have trouble in school. In addition to falling marks, his teachers reported that Rómulo would become easily agitated and was prone to violent outbursts against his instructors and other students. His parents tried desperately to help their son from abroad through repeated phone calls and by sending him packages of gifts from New York. His grandmother reported that his suicide was precipitated by news from his parents that they soon would be sending for his brother to come to live in the US. He didn't want to lose his only brother, but was also scared that he too would have to leave to work in the US, a future he dreaded.

Discussion

The details of these selected examples, and a majority of others like them, demonstrate that the search for causes of child *nervios* must extend beyond claims of psychological explanations of family separation and abandonment to include sociocultural analyses of the wider changes taking place in children's lives. Additionally, a more thoroughgoing analysis of *nervios* would necessitate that greater attention be paid to an examination of physical causes, some of which Ecuadorian psychologists have briefly noted. For example, in the case of Arturo, it is likely that his *nervios* affliction was triggered in part by physical exhaustion, as well as malnutrition or the presence of an already existing illness. It also seems probable that in some cases where *nervios* symptoms and duration of illness correspond to the period of time directly after a father has migrated, the relationship may have as much to do with overexertion as with feelings of anxiety caused by family separation. In addition to maintaining their schooling, children may be initially needed to do the work of their absent father when he migrates until someone can be hired or the burden of his absence is dispersed among other extended family members, what Nieuwenhuys (1996) refers to as a 'double day' phenomenon.

Numerous medical anthropologists have described *nervios* as a coping mechanism and a way to express feelings that otherwise may bring condemnation and ridicule to the sufferer.[15] In the adult world, *nervios* is a socially sanctioned condition that demonstrates the proof of one's suffering, and stresses the need for rest and recuperation. For child sufferers – and most especially the boys who account for a disproportionate number of *nervios*

cases – the affliction may spare them from the chastisement their behavior would bring in other circumstances. For migrant families, who pour a great deal of resources into children, *nervios* can bring a reaction of sympathy rather than the condemnation of a spoiled child.

Beyond these specific causes, *nervios* in the sending communities of the Ecuadorian Andes represents a way in which children make sense of their changing world and bring a voice to transformations that they, for the most part, do not completely understand. Indeed, children may be only dimly aware of the value that is being placed upon them in the context of transnational migration. Likewise, when parents speak of their children, their words are filled with ambiguity about what the future holds. It is unclear if children will be able to garner better lives for themselves through education or if they too will have to turn to migration at some point.

When they are sick, children are used to hearing the witty play on words *dolor de dólares* (literally 'the pain of dollars') when people try to make them feel better, though the real truth of the saying is likely lost on both the speaker and the listener. The influence of dollars in the sending communities has reoriented priorities in the socialization of children. For parents, maintenance of a transnational existence entails great hardships and separations, but the rewards are often seen as too great not to pursue the option. One of the rewards is clearly a family's ability to improve the lives of their children. Because of this, consumption practices related to children have become important symbolic markers by which people judge the relative successes of migrant households. The new images and practices of childhood, played out in part through consumer practices, drive home the point that 'parents do not merely raise their children; they define them' (Calvert, 1998: 76).

The role of children in these emerging practices reflect changing relationships between parents and their children expressed most concretely in new forms of reciprocity. *Nervios*, consistent with other depression-like syndromes in the Andes (Finerman, 1989; Tousignant, 1984; Tousingnant and Maldanado, 1989), strikes when people fall outside expected relations of reciprocity or in situations where they are prevented from reciprocating. Young children who increasingly find themselves socialized outside the household lack the same opportunities of reciprocity that children once enjoyed with parents. Within the school setting, children are removed from their productive roles, however small, and at best perform a type of delayed reciprocity for their parents when they have completed their studies. Additionally, as 'meeting the needs' of children becomes an increasingly salient symbol of the success and justification of migration, children's abilities to meet their parents' expectations diminish. At best, children's obedience to their parents and the difficulties of conforming to the intricacies of maintaining a transnational existence becomes its own form of limited reciprocity. *Nervios* then, as the breakdown of this reciprocity,

demonstrates the limits of the new kinds of relationships that are being forged between children and parents as households extend transnationally.

While my argument about the maintenance of transnational households and the importance of ideas of 'modern' childhood relate most specifically to the experiences of Ecuadorian migrant families, it carries broader implications for the study of transnationalism. In particular, examining the vulnerabilities of children serves to counter what a growing number of critics have cited as the overly celebratory nature of much of the transnational migration literature (Hondageneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Mahler, 1998). While transmigration may 'deterritorialize' social relations, it cannot dissolve the realities of borders and the costs they exact for those who cross them and their families. Furthermore, in assessing the impact of the global discourse of childhood within Andean communities, it would be a mistake to see this as a characteristic adoption of an 'ethnoscape' of modern childhood and yet one more example of the increased homogenization of the world's peoples (Appadurai, 1992). Ideas about 'proper' childhood and 'modern' parenting styles that circulate through the global economy are not neatly grafted onto the local situation, but rather the fit is incomplete. The imported ideas of 'proper' childhood provide an example of what Richard Wilk (1995) has called a 'common structure of global difference'. Global structures of childhood provide a common set of formats and channels for the forms of childhood in Ecuador, but it is the local mediation of these forms by family and community that dictate the experience. It is perhaps the mismatched placement of childhood roles and responsibilities that is the greatest source of trauma for children in the rapidly changing communities of the Ecuadorian highlands.

Notes

1.   Miles (1997: 66–7) explores the concept of *pena* and sadness as experienced by women in Cuenca whose husbands have migrated to the US.
2.   The foundation of this shift within anthropology is well explored in two important edited volumes: Scheper-Hughes (1987) and Stephens (1995). In sociology, a similar approach

has been carved out by Janes and Prout (1997). See also Nieuwenhuys (1996) and Scheper-Hughes and Sargent (1998).

3.   My understanding of modernity follows closely with that of Mills's use of the concept to describe the Thai migration context. She notes that modernity 'refers not to an objective reality but to a powerful field of popular discourse and cultural production' (Mills, 1997: 42). Ideas about modernity generally are framed around imagery of progress, development and sophistication which can be powerful yardsticks to judge the success or failure of participation in migration.

4.   Migrant families remain extremely guarded concerning the amount of remittances received each month, owing to both an acknowledgment of illegal activities and the fear of theft. These numbers are estimates from my own data as well as the findings of other migration researchers (see Jokisch, 1998; CONUEP, 1995).

5.   In 1999, costs for *coyote* services were rising rapidly due to the increased difficulty of illegal trafficking though Central America and Mexico. The cost ranged from between US$7000 and US$10,000 per person. The majority of families must obtain high-interest loans from informal economy loan sharks known as *chulqueros* to pay for these services. Each month, a portion of remittances are spent to repay loans.

6.   Studies of Ecuadorian transnational migration conclude that while typically women have not migrated to the USA, the numbers are increasing (Borrero and Vega, 1995; Jokisch, 1998; Kyle, 1996). My interview data suggest that women who migrate typically do so when they have legal status. Most often, a married woman will migrate once her husband has already established residency.

7.   The literature on social and cultural aspects of consumption has grown substantially in the past years, and cannot be adequately summarized here. Important introductory works include: Douglas and Isherwood (1978), Miller (1995), Howes (1996) and Friedman (1997). See Glickman (1993) and Igra (1996) for historical studies that link together masculinity and consumption.

8.   The use of the colloquialism *hacer su agosto* (literally, 'to make August') by rural peoples of Azuay and Cañar refers to harvest time in the month of August when families can hope to make the most income.

9.   Roasted guinea pig (*cuy*) is a delicacy in the Andes served at ritual and fiesta occasions.

10.   Quantifying school enrollment increases of children whose families are involved in migration is extremely difficult. Rural schools carry out a system akin to bussing in the US, where children from regions without schools may be brought into areas where facilities exist. Consequently, attendance numbers vary from year to year depending on bussing services. Anecdotally, teachers in the county-wide school where this research was conducted believe that between 30 and 40 percent of student increases are the result of families' increased participation in migration and increased family income.

11.   In discussions with teachers in the rural elementary schools, pressure to offer English-language classes was the most commonly cited request addressed in the *padres de las familias* (parent–teacher organizations).

12.   In some villages where cash is more readily used, local leaders have imposed fines for families who fail to reciprocate.

13.   A comprehensive overview of ethnomedical beliefs surrounding child illness in the Ecuadorian Andes can be found in McKee (1987). Greenway (1998) presents an engaging analysis of soul loss among chiildren in highland Peru. Muñoz-Bernand (1985) and Hess (1994) provide detailed explanations of *desmandos* and illness classifications.

14.   Similarly, Matthew Gutmann (1998) has written about how theories of development and psychology are filtered down and disseminated within lower-class Mexico City neighborhoods.

15.   There is another sense in which *nervios* serves as a coping mechanism. In some cases where migrant fathers had found life in the US difficult and unappealing and they wished to

return to their village, claims to needing to return to a child sick with *nervios* would be taken seriously and with respect by others and not seen as a migrant's failure.

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