Juan and I were discussing our experiences driving taxis and being mugged in Mexico City and Chicago. As we shared a beer on the sidewalk in front of his house on Huehuetzin Street in the Mexico City neighborhood of Santo Domingo, Juan, a grandfather then in his late fifties, reminisced about a fare he had picked up early one evening several years before, just as the sun was going down in the Mexican capital and the street lights were coming on:

I was driving along and I saw a well-dressed young man. He had a little bag. “Where to?” I asked him. “You can take me to the Zona Rosa.” “Right away,” I responded. Well, we’d gone about four blocks when he says to me, “Hey, do you mind if I change my clothes?” “What, are you naked or something?” “No,” he says, “I just wanted to check.” So I say, “Go right ahead!” I looked at him in the mirror, though I couldn’t see very far down. By the time we got to Insurgentes Avenue I was getting a little worried. I was scared that he might try to rob me. So I kept looking back in the mirror. One of these times I turned and saw that he had on a blond woman’s wig. I say to him, “And now what?” “Hold on, just wait,” he answers. We get to Génova Street and he says, “Let me out there. How much do I owe you?” It was like four pesos. I turn around and I say to myself, “Where did this woman get in?” And it was a woman, a really cute one. He had become a woman. I sit looking at him and he gives me ten pesos. And I sit looking at him and I say to myself, “What a great body!”

The Zona Rosa is a popular gathering site in Mexico City for men who are looking for male sexual partners, although undoubtedly cross-dressing does not necessarily indicate anything about the sexual preferences or practices of the particular individual in Juan’s cab that afternoon. Of much greater interest is how others interpret this individual’s cross-dressing. The Zona Rosa is also a major tourist destination, and the city’s busiest Metro stop, Insurgentes, is in the Zona Rosa. Thus millions of people pass through the area each workday. In the evenings and on the weekends the Zona is a favorite spot among more adventurous teenagers from the colonias populares (working-class neighborhoods) like Santo Domingo.

Juan continued his account:

So another passenger got in and asks me, “Where did you pick up that girl? What a woman! Just look at her!” We don’t move; we just sit there looking until he goes away. I begin to laugh and the passenger asks me why I’m laughing and I begin to tell him. “Get out of here!” he tells me. “What makes you think...? I can’t believe.... Look at those legs! Look at that great body!” So I say to him, “But I tell you, when he got into my car he was a man, and when he got out he was a woman.” I told him all about it, but he still didn’t believe me. You see and hear a lot in a cab.
In neighborhoods like the Zona Rosa, men and women in Mexico City regularly come into contact with people of different cultural orientations, including men who engage in sexual practices with other men and men who dress as women. This kind of open cross-cultural and cross-sexual “overflowing,” to employ Joan Scott’s phrase (1988:49), is one feature of life in Mexico City that makes the capital stand out from many other parts of Mexico and Latin America.

Juan lives today in the working-class neighborhood of Santo Domingo, on the south side of the Mexican capital, where for several years I have been studying Mexican men as fathers and sons, adulterers and celibates, alcoholics and teetotalers. Drawing on his personal history in our discussion that afternoon, Juan raised a broader question that concerned how men were “made,” and, at least implicitly, he mentioned the relation both of other men and also of women to this process. Juan’s concerns were linked in turn to a more general question that recurs with great frequency in recent ethnographic fieldwork concerned with masculinity, one that is directly connected to the central theme of this article: the conceptual problem of clarifying, in a nontrivial manner, the cultural relation that women have to men, to masculinity, and to changing male identities.

women making men

Throughout this article I wish to demonstrate that the changes occurring with respect to masculinity and gender relations in the working-class neighborhoods of Mexico City encompass every aspect of social life: popular social movements, parenting, housework chores, sexual politics, and linguistic usage. Further, I intend to show that, where change is occurring and has taken place, the impetus for this change has come both from sociodemographic and economic transformations that provide women and men with new stages on which to conduct their dramas and also, in the case of gender relations, from the instigation of women in families and households as well as in the larger arenas of social struggle.

It might be argued that at least since Lévi-Strauss (1969) all this has been obvious in anthropology: applying the framework of The Raw and the Cooked, Sherry Ortner (1974) constructed her nature/culture model, which explicitly defined men in relation to women. Yet this model, too, is premised on the notion that although women may “control” male children, among adults it is men who culturally command women. To take a contemporary example, in Latin America in the last two decades anthropologists and others have convincingly documented the efforts of women in Brazil, Mexico, Bolivia, and elsewhere, as these women have spoken truth to power, to government authorities, and also to their men. Yet how men in recent years have reacted to women’s involvement in struggles for land, social services, and indigenous rights in the region has been largely neglected in the ethnographic literature.

In this article I also maintain that ethnographic investigations of men and masculinity should include research on women’s ideas about and experiences with men. My argument extends beyond the simple statistical assertion that increasing one’s sample size will sometimes increase one’s understanding of a subject. Nor should research among women on the issue of masculinity be approached as a useful but ultimately unnecessary supplement to ethnographic work with men on masculinity, although it is surely true that women often do not agree with men in their assessments of masculinity or with men’s accounts of past events and relations. These facts alone argue for women’s involvement as central and invaluable to any ethnography of men. Instead, basing my theoretical and methodological claims on fieldwork concerned with changing male identities in Mexico City, I wish to demonstrate how masculinities develop and are transformed, and to show that they have little meaning except in relation to women and female identities and practices in all their shared diversity and complexity.
This research in the working-class colonia popular of Santo Domingo in Mexico City provides numerous illustrations of the part played by women in making and changing men and masculinity. Certain other anthropological approaches to the study of gender have arrived at opposite conclusions; I also therefore present here a critical analysis of those ethnographic findings that posit enduring, ubiquitous, and, for the ethnographer, insuperable gender divisions. In this way I seek to encourage debate among ethnographers of men and masculinities regarding the possibility and appropriateness of men working with women on these issues.2

Through a focus on the politics and methods of men studying gender and sexuality we may additionally examine broader questions relating not only to women and female identities, but also to issues of identity that are of great concern today to ethnographer and layperson alike. Many feminist theorists have insisted on the mutability of gender and sexual identities, not with the intention of disallowing (or disavowing) these terms but rather in order to describe more effectively these cultural classifications as processes and not finite entities. Joan Scott, for instance, writes:

“Man” and “woman” are at once empty and overflowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transendent meaning. Overflowing because even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions. [1988:49]

In the century-old history of anthropology, “the study of man” has been the centerpiece of ethnography. The last thing we need today is renewed attention to men instead of women. Rather, an emphasis on men and masculinity, on men as engendered and engendering persons, on men-as-men, should derive from the kinds of questions being asked in studies of women regarding the relation between difference and inequality, between cultural reproduction and cultural creativity, and between such excessively dichotomous pairs as nature and culture, sex and gender, and, especially, women and men.3

the male ethnographer’s (g)ambit

What I call a debate—often tacit—regarding the scope of allowed and necessary activity of male ethnographers began for many with an article by James Gregory in 1984. This essay has become an informal reference point for later discussion on the possibility and importance of working with women on the question of masculinity—that is, on the maneuvers (gambits) employed by ethnographers in defining the scope (ambit) of their fieldwork on men and manhood. In his article Gregory writes:

Undoubtedly, there will continue to be some situations—in all types of societies—in which male ethnographers will find it virtually impossible to get information from and about women, just as there will be some situations in which female ethnographers will find it virtually impossible to get information from and about men. But it is no longer acceptable to simply ignore the woman’s world as though it were both irrelevant to an understanding of the man’s world and unimportant in itself. [1984:326]

If Gregory overestimates the dichotomy involved in gender differences—“the woman’s world,” “the man’s world”—on the whole this article correctly insists on a new approach to the study of men and masculinity. Others, however, do not agree, and some anthropologists have argued that, as men, they are severely limited in their ability to work with men. In his survey of cultural images of manhood worldwide, David Gilmore says that he writes “from a male perspective, using data collected mainly (but not exclusively) by male anthropologists simply because these are the only data we have at present” (1990:5). My own view is that there are data galore on men that have been collected by women. Elsewhere, in his article on drinking and male camaraderie in Spain, Gilmore insists that,

being a man, I was able to compile useful observation-participation data on men’s activities only. . . .

Despite what some overly sanguine ethnographers have said about the narrowing gender gap in Hispanic
societies (Gregory 1984), it is still problematic for men fieldworkers to enter the female world, especially in rural Andalusia. [1991:29, n.2, emphasis added]

In this citation certain of the implications of the formulation “the female world” are more apparent, as the division between male and female “worlds” is alleged to be all but unbridgeable. Perhaps, one could argue, the discovery by ethnographers like Gilmore of unbridgeable (gender) difference involves qualitatively different cultural contexts and sites. On the other hand, at least to a certain extent, ethnographers themselves may inadvertently facilitate the erection of such cultural barriers. Stanley Brandes, for example, working in the same “Hispanic society” of rural Andalusia, comes to a conclusion about the restrictions on male ethnographers in that region that differs considerably from Gilmore’s judgment:

Certainly structured situations within the culture itself are partly responsible; appropriate male and female roles invariably exert some influence on the fieldworker’s access to data. At the same time, however, fieldworkers may operate innocently according to erroneous assumptions about the people under investigation, or may even avoid potentially instructive situations that seem, for whatever reason, personally threatening. In these ways, male or female anthropologists might actually limit their own channels of information, while defensively attributing these research restrictions to the culture under study rather than to themselves. This fieldwork syndrome has recently been exposed in James Gregory’s forceful statement on ethnographic rationalizations, or “myths,” as he calls them (Gregory 1984). My own experiences in Andalusia bear witness to his general observations. [Brandes 1987:359]

It is surely a grave error to impute too much similarity from one cultural context to another. Yet generalizations for hundreds of millions of people (as in Gilmore’s term Hispanic societies) and direct and indirect conclusions regarding the possibility of a male ethnographer compiling any useful information about women, much less from women about men, seem to merit further attention. I offer the present article as, in part, a counterpoint to certain current notions of overarching gender divisions. Whether or not people remove themselves from the company of the opposite sex during ritual occasions, for example, women and men do regularly interact in other circumstances, and they have opinions about and profoundly affect each others’ lives, identities, and activities. We must not confuse formal roles and definitions with daily life; there is normally more to life than normative prohibitions.

Through examining material from Mexico City I also propose a distinct comparative approach to studying gender difference grounded in the understanding that, whether women are physically present or not, female identities often serve as the central point of conscious and unconscious reference for men in the development, maintenance, and transformation of their own sense of what ser hombre (to be a man) does and does not mean, and what it can and cannot mean. In particular, with respect to studying masculinity, we should strive to avoid quantitative arguments and ethnographic recipes that carry the none-too-subtle implication that “women (scholars) have had their chance, so now it’s the men’s turn.” Gender is not reducible to the formula “men + women = gender.” Further, if one valuable lesson of feminist anthropology is that we should not rely on men alone to furnish comprehensive and unbiased views of women, why should it be any different with respect to men’s views of men?

Keeping in mind the above debate on the relation of women to masculinity, we should also bear in mind the insights of Maurice Bloch and others regarding the contradictions inherent in delineating gender divisions. In a brief survey of representations of women among the Merina of Madagascar, Bloch offers a critique of theoretical [and, I would add, methodological] approaches that cannot accommodate such contradictions. The problem is rather to suggest a framework that explains the systematically contradictory nature of representations of women and that associates these contradictions with the most relevant aspects of social constructions. [1987:324–325]

Far from being embarrassed by these contradictions, Bloch adds, anthropologists should instead understand them as integral to systems of kinship and descent among the Merina.

So, too, we might extend the social constructivist assertion about contradictory representations of women to studies of masculinity and representations of men. In studying gender
identities and difference, anthropologists have rightly placed emphasis on what have traditionally been viewed as marginal ideas and practices. Yet there is also much to be gained by reexamining groups and categories previously taken for granted, or at least considered “overstudied,” such as men and manhood. And a critical comparative methodology requires that we do so.

the catalytic women of Santo Domingo

Let us therefore return to Colonia Santo Domingo, a rough-and-tumble neighborhood that lies today on the ancient lava fields in the southern outskirts of the Mexico City basin, where I lived with my family and carried out fieldwork beginning in 1992. A largely residential area of over 100,000 people in the early 1990s, Santo Domingo is one of dozens of communities in Mexico City in which popular movements for social services have had a strong impact on the cultural politics of daily life for both women and men in the last 25 years. In fact, one of the notable characteristics of these popular urban movements in Santo Domingo and elsewhere in Latin America has been the participation of women as militants, and sometimes as leaders, in raising community demands for water, electricity, schools, paved streets, and other necessities.

These social movements in Latin America were prompted by many factors, including sociodemographic dislocations as populations moved from rural to urban settings, the simultaneous collapse of modernization schemes, as well as a series of severe financial crises beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through the 1980s. Invoking a Habermasian framework, Foweraker writes that in Latin America, in the context of such major “lifeworld” shifts, “collective action responds to disaffection with both public and private (especially family) life” (1995:12).

In Colonia Santo Domingo, as elsewhere in the continent, changes in gender identities and relations in this period were immediately and intimately related to economic compulsion as well. When I asked my friend Doña Fili, a new grandmother and a longtime community leader in the colonia (neighborhood), whether the decision for her to work outside the home was hers, her husband’s, or shared, she replied politely but firmly:

“It was necessary. Look, we were paying for the land, for the lamp poles, and much more. Most women had to work, and our children basically raised themselves, as God allowed them to, right? As my comadre says, usually one has to do things out of necessity.

“And if your husbands oppose?” I inquire. “Well, you do what you have to, and if you have to, a fuercita [use a little force].”

I chose to live and work in Santo Domingo especially because women in this area had been active as leaders and organizers since the colonia was founded by land invasion in 1971. Several pioneering studies of the role of women in popular social movements in Latin America have been published in English and Spanish, but none has examined in detail the impact on men of women’s involvement in these struggles. The particular history of Colonia Santo Domingo thus provides an opportunity to understand some of the consequences for gender relations overall of women’s contributions to constructing squatter communities in Mexico City.

It also seems reasonable to expect that if there are changes occurring in male identities and practices in Mexico generally, they may be more present—or at least more apparent—in settings like Santo Domingo, where popularly conceived gender “roles,” identities, and practices have been openly challenged in the last 20 years by women’s innovative roles in creating and transforming this community.

In the specific historical juncture through which men and women in Mexico have passed in the last two decades, women have often been the first to be affected by the political, cultural, and economic challenges to gender identities and relations. Men have often been affected most immediately by the conscious and unconscious initiative of women, who, intentionally or
otherwise, have played a catalytic role in changing the population in general with respect to
gender questions and much more.

fathering and “being a man”

On one level the issue of women’s relation to the construction of masculinities has been
extensively, if still far from adequately, discussed in the literature of mother-son bonding,
Oedipal conflict, and mother-son estrangement. A further step that must be made, I think, is to
link these seemingly more psychological concerns and studies to political questions of power
and inequality, paying as much attention to women’s influence on male adults as to mothers’
influence on male children. The influence of women on men that has primarily preoccupied
scholars has been mother-son relations. The tacit assumption in many of the social sciences has
long been that women have a negligible influence on males beyond infancy and childhood.7

In the most obvious sense, women in Santo Domingo, as elsewhere, are integral to social
constructions of masculinity through childrearing—that is, through mothering.8 In Santo Dom-
ingo, it is certainly the case that women have far more responsibility for infant care. As for older
children, many men play little part in young children’s daily care, while other men are routinely
involved in most aspects of their children’s well-being.

In exploring and explaining the contradictory and overflowing meanings and practices of
being a man in Mexico City, however, I have also begun to see that, regardless of the degree
to which fathers participate in childcare and parenting, most men I know in Colonia Santo
Domingo partly define their own and others’ masculinity in relation to fathering activities—not
only or primarily in relation to procreation or how many male offspring they have sired. Among
those men who actively shun such responsibilities as changing diapers, playing with children,
and providing moral training, the most frequent explanation offered is that childrearing is a
woman’s affair and that as men they will not be as involved as women in such duties. An
acquaintance commented one day while we rode the Metro together, “Women, they like to be
in their house, they like to take care of the brats. In Mexico sometimes men don’t feel like
working, but they’ve got to.” A variation on this theme is that some fathers feel parental
responsibility only for sons. Another man declared to me that he felt far more responsibility
toward his sons than his daughters: “Boys, they are men’s business, while girls are women’s.”

For men who are active in fathering, these practices are also closely linked to their
understandings of, and approaches to, being men. “You know, Mateo,” my mechanic friend
Gabriel mentioned to me one day, “if I had the money, I would spend all day with my kids.” In
this revealing comment, Gabriel was not only announcing to me his desire to have more money,
but also his secret wish to live more like a woman, for it is women who more often are “allowed”
to spend all day with their children. Such sentiments about ideally differing and practically
overlapping parenting duties are echoed in the comment of a woman Behar calls Esperanza:
“All those years, I have been both man and woman to [my children], supporting them, helping
them grow up” (as cited in Behar 1993:157).

Explanations about what fatherhood means and what fathers do as fathers in Mexico are
tremendously varied today, as undoubtedly they have been historically. When families have
depended on agriculture for their livelihood, fathers have trained their sons from an early age
about plants, soils, and irrigation management (see, for example, Lewis 1963[1951]). Among
the elites in Mexico today and historically, on the other hand, not only men but often women
have typically had more contact with servants than with their own small children (see Lomnitz
and Pérez-Lizaur 1987). The regional diversity of parenting practices and beliefs in Mexico
belies simplistic and static portrayals of “Mexican fathers,” “mestizo fathers,” or generalizations
about the fathers of particular ethnic groups that share a single language like Zapotec in Oaxaca
or Náhuatl in Puebla (see Stephen 1991; Taggart 1992). Nor is it possible to reduce fatherhood
in Mexico to the quest for progeny as the proof of virility. It is not that such feelings and objectives are unknown in Mexico; rather, such characterizations conceal more than they reveal about men and masculinity and notions such as the infamous "machismo syndrome" (see Gutmann 1996, 1997a).

For another friend, Marcos, it was not his influence over his wife's behavior that concerned him when he described taking his two teenage daughters to the neighborhood of Tepito, in the old part of Mexico City where prostitutes solicit clients. Marcos told me that he felt it was important to give his girls "an education," so they could decide what they would do with their lives and to what they should be alert. Again, this account conforms to a more "traditional" relationship of men (in this case a father) telling women (in this case daughters) what they should and should not do to be "good" women. As Marcos continued, however, it became clear that he was also describing a process in which his daughters greatly influenced his own perception of what it meant to be a "good" man and father. Because of the preparation they received from their father, Marcos told me, "I hope that when they leave home other people will say to them, 'You know what? Your papa is OK. He's polite and decent. He's no womanizer.' " A practical relationship is thus suggested by Marcos regarding daughters' relationship to the multiple meanings of masculine pride for fathers.

Many men may have opinions and routines that they associate with gendered divisions of labor—for instance, about who feeds the infants, who shows affection, who punishes, and who teaches which children to do which household chores. But neither these men nor their wives always implement their ideas about the different parenting tasks of men and women. For both men who are relatively uninvolved and those who are more engaged in parenting, being a man is closely related to what it means to be a woman and to how, in any given instance, this distinction may be culturally and practically relevant to men's and women's actions and ideas. Often in my fieldwork it was the women, not the men, who would provide details of their husbands' parenting activities, whether these involved taking the night shift with colicky infants, teaching toddlers to walk, or accompanying older children to their karate and fútbol practices.9

By acknowledging the variety of meanings of fatherhood and fathers' practices in Colonia Santo Domingo, Mexico City, we can more effectively speak of the social reproduction of mores and activities associated with fathers in the colonia, as mothers and new generations of fathers simultaneously adopt and transgress the habits and feelings of past generations.

If, following Ginsburg and Rapp (1995), we understand reproduction as central to social life, as anything but static, and certainly not as a simple synonym for "replication," then we should also recognize that women's relation to men and masculinity varies significantly according to different personal and historical moments and processes, as well as with regard to the impact of different women (mothers, sisters, wives, and others) on men at particular times. The portrait I wish to paint of how men are created (and recreated) from day to day in Santo Domingo is decidedly not monochromatic.

Furthermore, unless framed within a historical context, theories of social reproduction quickly lead to naturalized conclusions about men and women. In the case of Mexico City, for example, little can be said about changing gender attitudes and behavior without mentioning the influence of grassroots feminism on millions of women and men. From women's ubiquitous involvement in the upsurge of popular social movements to the (past) wide circulation of feminist journalism in a leftist daily newspaper, and to a popular feminist television documentary series that continued to air in the mid-1990s on Saturday nights, in myriad ways the feminist movement has had a profound impact on how women and men see themselves and each other and, to a certain extent, how they relate to one another in Mexico City.

Our efforts to understand the reproduction of men and masculinity should also avoid the trap of attributing to masculinity anything and everything that men do. Even many of the best ethnographies with a focus on men and masculinity are guilty of declaring by ethnographic
fiat—on the authority of “the natives”—that when women are courageous or violent or stoic, they are thereby surely acting like men—their husbands, fathers, or brothers. This kind of analysis is especially problematic when the sources of this “native” understanding turn out to be comprised more or less exclusively of members of the male population. Is strength, for example, to be considered inherently masculine? If so, according to whom? What about being reflective? Or being affectionate? When men show tenderness with small children in Colonia Santo Domingo, is this somehow to be construed as male mimicry of women and mothers? Actually, say many women of men in the colonia, men cannot help themselves when they find themselves in the presence of youngsters, and this, and not simply the fact that women spend more time than men with young children, accounts for the fact that mothers usually have more responsibility for the physical punishment of children and that fathers often demonstrate greater leniency with their little ones.

Pat Caplan (1993:20) points out that whether ethnographers are single or married, young or old, and with or without children has a profound impact on those individuals whom they will encounter and learn from in the course of fieldwork. This point is important in considering the variety of experiences, and the quite divergent analyses based on these varied experiences, of male ethnographers working with women in their research on men.

creating new parents

Late in August of 1992 my wife and I arrived, newly parental and diffident, in a Mexican colonia popular where we intended to live. Yet, unlike others in at least partially similar situations, we found the place anything but remote or a world unto itself. And although for certain residents of the neighborhood Michelle and I were no doubt in some respects intruders, many others viewed us in a fairly familiar capacity, in part because we arrived in Santo Domingo with Liliana, our then eight-week-old daughter. Since that time—both during my stay and thereafter—as much as I have been identified by residents of the colonia as an anthropologist, I have also been treated as a new father. When I return to Santo Domingo from the United States, with or without Liliana, neighbors and friends interrogate me to make sure that Michelle and I are still raising Liliana correctly and to offer any further advice that they feel will be useful to us as she, and now her younger sister, grow up.

What began with polite inspections of Liliana’s body and clothing in the street shortly after our arrival in Santo Domingo in August 1992 soon developed into invitations to dinners at neighbors with her, trips to the butcher for specially ground beef for her, and visits with other parents in the colonia to clinics and hospitals for the too-frequent illnesses of our infants. By way of thanks to our friends and neighbors, to mark Liliana’s first birthday as well as our departure from Santo Domingo we invited 150 guests to a party in July 1993. One hundred people, young and old, showed up for the clown show and to celebrate with 600 tamales, several trays of Jell-O, and many buckets of atole made from corn flour. Michelle and I became parents in Colonia Santo Domingo, an accomplishment for which several women and men in the colonia take—and deserve—much credit.

The expectations of women neighbors and friends in Santo Domingo with regard to how men should act, think, and feel as fathers became, in this fashion, an integral part of my learning about men and masculinity in the colonia and about being a new father. Women as well as men were constantly informing me about what men, women, and just plain “parents” should do and be with children. In addition, the diversity of opinions about what it meant to be a good (or bad) father or mother became manifest when I carried Liliana during my year-long stay in the colonia, and as residents of the area constantly challenged my tidy contrasts between being a father and being a mother. Often, when I went looking for difference, I was able to encounter it; but, just as frequently, I was gently persuaded by my friends that I should not exaggerate...
difference. It was often as “el papá de la gordita peloncita” (the papa of the chubby, bald, baby girl), for instance, that women and men friends on Huehuetzin Street introduced me to visiting family members or other outsiders. Typically it was only later that my gringo origins, my anthropological purposes, or sometimes my past personal history as a community organizer in the United States were explained to those who did not already know me.

Strathern’s critique (1988) of anthropological presentations of men’s and women’s views in Melanesia is relevant to the point I am making here: as she observes, we must get better at avoiding simplistic contrasts between manliness and womanliness. In particular, we should refrain from overreliance on men’s representations of themselves or of women. Strathern advances these points when she writes:

In seeing men’s creations as likely to represent a “man’s view of the world,” the analyst assumes that what men ponder upon is themselves, so that the artifacts that visually express “ideals relating to masculinity” represent an idealized expression “of what it is to be a man” (as distinct from a woman) in this or that society. The flaw lies in not making explicit the underlying theory of representation, here a naive correspondence between the sexed individual and the autonomy of ‘male’ and ‘female’ viewpoints. [1988:64; in part citing Bowden 1984:447–448]

Determining when, if ever, “male” and “female” viewpoints may be mutually autonomous is only possible when men and women are both involved in ethnographic research on gender and when both are interrogated with respect to their own age, class, parental status, ethnicity, and so on—factors that certainly affect their gendered experiences and interpretations. Further, such determinations will only prove reliable when the social reproduction of gender identities is understood as historically based and culturally mutable, and when categories like “masculinity” are viewed, not as primordial artifacts prior to culture, but rather as overflowing and constantly contested and in flux. As Connell reminds us in reviewing some of the recent literature on men and manhood in anthropology, one of the real problems in the discipline to date has been “those ethnographic discussions of masculinity which describe the pattern of men’s lives in a given culture and, whatever it is, call the pattern masculinity” (1995:69; see also Connell 1987:75).

Male ethnographers working exclusively with male informants on questions of masculinity primarily constitute a methodological manifestation of a conceptual error. Conkey and Gero write that the project of engendering archaeology must entail more than determining whether indeed men or women carried out a particular activity in the past: “Engendering the past becomes much more than ‘finding’ men and women. It is trying to understand how gender ‘works’ in all of its dimensions. . . . Before gender attribution is a methodological or procedural issue, it is a conceptual issue” (1991:14). So, too, with respect to understanding men as fathers and fathers as men, it is vital that masculinity and fatherhood be understood as intrinsically and practically characterized by their relation to femininity and motherhood, regardless of whether femininity and motherhood are themselves attributed to women or to other men.

**household debates and machismo**

Angela, whose husband Juan had earlier told me about his taxi-driving experiences, was explaining to me one afternoon what Juan had been like as a father when their four children were small. “When Juan was a papa it was very different.” Then papas had nothing to do with babies.” Juan interjected that now he loves to play with children and that he roughhouses all the time with his grandchildren. Angela allowed that this was true. Later in our conversation, and apparently apropos of nothing in particular, Angela launched into a disparaging indictment of certain husbands. She began her rebuke by singling out men who do no housework and who do not let their wives out of the house without their permission. “No les permiten salir ni a la misa” [They will not let them out even to go to mass], she reported to me, slowly shaking her
head in mock disbelief. She was even more disparaging when discussing women who tolerated men who restricted them in this way.

In the middle of our conversation around the kitchen table, a woman friend of Angela’s dropped by for a visit. Juan brought Isabel a cup of coffee. Angela smiled and casually remarked that such service on Juan’s part was also something new in the last few years. Isabel agreed, and, to tease Juan, added, “Where did you find him, Angelita?” When they were first married and living with her mother-in-law, Angela confided, Juan’s mother had told Juan not to let Angela go out without his permission. She had never accepted such a relation, she told Isabel and me, clearly proud of this accomplishment and the part she had played in changing the way in which Juan treated her and other women.12

Just then Angela’s lifelong bachelor brother Héctor walked in the kitchen area, coming for the chicken necks with which he feeds his cats twice a day. “Now Héctor is another story altogether. Men like him,” Angela waved her hand in her brother’s direction, “can be really macho.” Héctor objected, insisting that although he had never married he goes shopping all the time (and therefore could not be a true macho).13 Juan offered his opinion: “In the past women would not let men do this [go shopping] for fear that they’d be called....” Angela interrupted, “Maricón!” [Faggot!]. As odd as it might seem, persuading men to talk in their homes in the presence of women was often difficult in Colonia Santo Domingo, and not because the men were reluctant to divulge manly secrets to women. Rather, these men were often self-consciously “muted” by their wives and other women in the home. Rather than confront their wives and their wives’ friends, men would sometimes wait until we found ourselves outside on the street, away from the women, to explain to me “the true reasons” why men did or did not go shopping, cook, or wash the clothes.14

The ways in which people in Santo Domingo use and understand the term macho (as well as maricón and other expressions related to masculine identities) are clearly related to the frequently reported—though seldom analyzed—phenomenon of “machismo.”15 In Mexico City generally, regardless of the multiple uses and meanings of machismo, not only are some women known as marimachas (or marimachos) but men’s quality of being macho is generally and closely connected to their relations with women. (The term marimacha, not coincidentally, also refers to women who have sex with other women.) For older men and women, the term macho often connotes a positive quality indicating a man who consistently provides for the economic well-being of his family. Younger men are far more reluctant to accept this label for themselves, although they will freely apply it to friends, and the fact that “to be macho” is used insultingly by men in their thirties and forties is also closely connected to the recent history of relations between men and women in Mexico.

As to the expressions macho and machismo themselves, a few words of clarification are in order. As an equivalent for sexist, for example, macho has a remarkably short word history, appearing in Mexico for the first time in the late 1930s and in the United States about a decade later. In Mexico today, the word machismo still has a social science and journalistic ring for most people, and it is far less commonly employed in everyday speech than is the case north of the border, despite the fact that many people in the United States assume that machismo has a uniform and long sociolinguistic lineage in Mexico. On the contrary, within Mexico the terms macho and machismo have far more divergent meanings for different people than is the case in the United States (see Gutmann 1996).

One of the few middle-aged men I know in the colonia who seems comfortable with the title “macho” is my neighbor Luciano. While we sat watching the tortillería across the street start up for business early one morning, Luciano, a periodically employed welder in Santo Domingo told me, “Machismo is like when you say, ‘I’m a man: my woman doesn’t hit me.’” Machos, Luciano advised me, do not let their wives beat them. In subsequent discussions with him, when Luciano explicitly defended men who beat their wives, it became clear that for him a man who
is truly macho does hit women. In gauging the degree to which a man may be considered macho, a man's relation to women is an important component, if not the defining feature, of his masculinity.16

power and performance

In his tightly reasoned analysis of machismo and engendered power struggles in Managua, Nicaragua, Roger Lancaster holds that in the 1980s machismo was “grounded” primarily in male-male sexual relations (1992:237). Despite Lancaster's theoretical attention to more exclusively male relations, his ethnography is exemplary both for its detailed examination of the lives of women in the neighborhood where he carried out his fieldwork and for its consistent engagement with feminist theories of difference and inequality. Even in households headed by women who had been abandoned by their husbands—like many of the women Lancaster knew in the Nicaraguan capital—relations between women and men were the stuff of daily life.

At the same time, Lancaster is asking somewhat different questions about machismo than I am here. Among his chief concerns is to improve our understanding of relations among men in Nicaragua; this is one reason he formulates machismo as primarily a means of structuring power between men (1992:236). Nonetheless, although one may speak analytically of “men's worlds” and “women's worlds” in Managua and in Colonia Santo Domingo, it is far more problematic to distinguish neatly compartmentalized spheres of knowledge, experience, and activity in everyday practice. For this reason I find it more helpful to couch knowledge and practice associated with machismo in terms of both men and women in a variety of situations.17

Residents of Santo Domingo make such distinctions themselves: cultural typologizing is not the prerogative of anthropologists alone. In fact, daily quarrels (and agreements) concerning household chores and responsibilities are often couched in the language of “men's” versus “women's” tasks, while some of the practical activities of men and women may overlap. It is not only the representations of women and men that are often contradictory, but their actions as well.18 Some of these contradictions show up intergenerationally, as with the notable (and often noted) differences in how much more young (adolescent) men contribute to housework in Santo Domingo in contrast to their own fathers and grandfathers (see de Barbieri 1984; Gutmann 1996).19

Arguments abound within households in the colonia about who does and should do which chores. Similarly, who earns money in the household and who decides how this money will be spent are sources of ongoing discussion and debate as often as they are settled questions. Many issues are raised, and some are temporarily resolved, in the negotiation of such matters between women and men, including the practical decisions to be made and the definition and transformation of gender identities themselves.

I arrived at Juanita's house one afternoon and found her talking with my wife. Michelle and I were running late for an appointment and my impatience to leave must have been evident. Juanita smirked as she counseled me, “If you want Michelle and me to quit talking, get angry and tell us to stop comadreando.” Meaning literally “godmothering,” comadreando is commonly used to refer to women's incessant chatter or simply to female gossip in general.20 Juanita's husband Felipe, who was standing nearby, also smiled and informed me that sometimes, when he became angry, he told Juanita and some visitor to quit comadreando. It was a clear example of using the language of gender difference to make a more contradictory point. In my case, Juanita was suggesting that I use the term comadrear, knowing full well that she and Michelle would laugh at me and dismiss the “order” if and when I tried to issue it.

Attempts by men to act differently than is expected of them in terms of their performances of masculinity do not just require them to confront other men. Not infrequently, men must defy women's expectations of male behavior as well. As he packed the bearings on a Volkswagen
jintney, Gabriel complained about his wife's hypocrisy and confided some of his feelings about being intimate with another person.

Sometimes I feel like talking with her but I can't, because we are so different. We see life from different points of view. She falls more for the commercial, goes along with the system more than I do. And this is often hard for me to accept. The worst of it is that when it comes to intimate matters between her and me—like kisses, like touching each other—for me these things are very important and they should only be done at just the right moment, when someone feels them, and not with hypocrisy or phony love. But sometimes she wants us to walk down the street hugging, as if we were still boyfriend and girlfriend, holding hands.

Gabriel went on to describe hypocrites who act in one way in public although they fight bitterly in private; but his real anger seemed reserved for his wife, who insisted that Gabi present himself in public as a man who wanted to touch her. In a sense Gabriel's confession provides a particular counterpoint to the stereotypical image of the man who seeks to project a very public image of his wife as devoted, physically and in every other way, to her husband.

Multiple images can lead to confusion and confusion makes some analysts uncomfortable. A quantitatively trained colleague once complained to me that gender studies paid too much attention to marginal identities and practices. “If they’d just pull down their pants,” she promised, “I could settle the mystery about who’s a man and who’s a woman.” Her frustration stemmed in particular, it seemed, from what she viewed as an unnecessary conflation of issues relating to sexuality and other intimate gender matters. Yet multiple meanings of genitalia and bodies in general are central to the lives and representations of others.21

It is not only ethnographers who find themselves confused with respect to gender and sexuality. For instance, among youth in various colonias populares in Mexico City, bisexuality is seen by some as a mode of expressing sexual ambiguity and as an experimental stage through which some may pass. Asexuality is similarly a real issue for some men, as shown when a male friend in Santo Domingo confided, after we had come to know each other well, “I'll tell you honestly, sex has just never been as important to me as it seems to be for a lot of other guys.” To him as a man this was apparently a source of embarrassment.

Such seemingly simple dialogues as these occur daily in households throughout Mexico City. They exhibit elements of the complex psychosocial efforts of women to challenge and change what men are and do.22

domestic violence

Before I began my fieldwork on masculinity in Colonia Santo Domingo, I decided that examining domestic violence should be an important focus of my attention.23 Early in my research, however, I received some disturbing advice from a woman who worked in a center for battered women: “Do not expect women to open up to you about these matters,” she warned, “because they are quite reluctant to discuss such things even with close women friends.” With a man, and especially a man from the United States, women would not be forthcoming about domestic violence.

Despite these words of warning, I found that women were far more eager to discuss their histories of being abused than I expected. Even women I hardly knew discussed their experiences of domestic violence more readily than did all but a few of the men who became my best friends in the colonia. Owing to the reticence of most men to discuss what they knew personally about wife beating and other forms of domestic violence, I resigned myself at an early stage to the conclusion that access to information on this subject from men would probably be severely limited. It was hardly surprising that men might have had something to hide, that men lied about domestic violence, and that women responded far more often to my expressed interest in learning about physical and psychological abuse with angry tales of husbands, fathers, and
other male relatives who had beaten them or their mothers. And it bears repeating that the issue
is not simply one of adding women's experiences to those of men, especially when men remain
mute about wife beating, but rather of the crucial roles that women play in the construction of
male identities and in the gendered practices of men, including domestic violence. For both
these reasons, it frequently took little more than my evident and expressed desire to discuss
these questions with women for them to decide to make their stories public through me.

This last point is critical. Perhaps as a result of the particularities of Colonia Santo Domingo,
where women have long been political and community leaders and activists, and perhaps also
because of grassroots feminist efforts occurring more broadly in Mexico City to expose and
challenge domestic violence in the colonias populares, many women voiced their hopes that,
by relating these experiences to me, they would contribute to the process of helping men
confront domestic violence more than they had of late because I would later write and teach
about these incidents. Talking one afternoon with a young woman in the outdoor kitchen of a
neighbor's house, I mentioned that my wife and I had recently received a letter from a friend in
Berkeley, in which we learned that our friend had been beaten by her husband and was therefore
seeking a divorce. The young woman nodded knowingly. Then she told me that her own father
beat her mother and that this had continued for many years.

When he's drunk he fights with half the world, and, when he's sober, he wonders why so-and-so won't
talk to him. He doesn't remember. That's the problem. He's very aggressive. He fights a lot, with whomever
he runs into, even with children. I don't know what his problem is. In the house, on the street, everywhere.
[Then asked if her father had had problems with the police.] No, not with them, but with neighbors. It's
just that we don't trust the police around here, so no one calls them when there is trouble. My mother
and I try to calm him down, but often it's counterproductive.

The importance of understanding the relationship between domestic violence and women is
not primarily in order to portray women as the recipients, the victims, of such abuse and thereby
simply to append women's histories to the general ethnography on masculinity. Instead, these
female voices can better allow us to see women as instigators of change in gender relationships
that are based on unequal control and power.

Angela once recounted to me the occasion on which her friend Susana's husband came home
drunk early one afternoon and beat her badly. Susana arrived at Angela's house with a very
bloody towel covering her face. Susana's husband had broken her nose at the arch, and there
were large bruises around her eyes. (I had seen the scars on Susana's face, and now knew how
she got them.) They talked and cried together, Angela told me solemnly. Angela asked Susana
what she wanted to do, and Susana replied that she wanted to go back home to clean up the
house before her children got home from school and saw blood all over the floor and furniture.

I interrupted Angela's story and told her that this seemed crazy to me, as surely Susana needed
immediate medical attention and her children were going to see her badly bruised face in any
case. Angela told me that, on the contrary, what Susana proposed made perfect sense. They
cleaned up Susana's house and only then went to a medical clinic. Later that night Susana went
to the police to file charges against her husband. He was hauled off to jail but was then released,
Angela told me, for a substantial bribe.

Certainly women are a constant point of reference in men's discussions and actions regarding
domestic violence, as was evident when those rare men who would talk about their violent
histories spoke of their jealous rages as a particular spark to subsequent violent outbursts against
their wives and children. In meetings that were sponsored by the Mexico City municipal
government for men who have battered their wives and children, and that I was allowed to
attend, participants frequently described themselves as incapable of the injustices of which they
were accused. Some of these men articulated a sentiment that they felt like instrumentos (tools)
whose sole purpose was to provide their families with steady sources of income. These men
complained that they were "slighted" and "humiliated" by their wives and mothers. As one man
put it, "When I'm angry I feel especially vulnerable, almost naked."
Another theme of discussion among these men was that the “macho culture” into which they were born was the primary reason for their violence. Ideas y valores machistas (macho ideas and values) and condicionamiento machista (macho conditioning) were to blame, they declared. One middle-aged man, however, admitted, “El hombre llega hasta donde la mujer lo diga” [Men get away with as much as women let them]. Precisely because so many men complain that “women want más libertad [more freedom],” and because such demands for greater independence by women may be correlated with increases in assaults on women, women’s involvement in activities ranging from social movements to paid work has a great deal to do with changing male identities and behavior in Mexico.

I was able to learn from such conversations with men. Yet my work on ser hombre, being a man, would have been quite deficient had my encounters been limited exclusively to what men said about domestic violence. As Herzfeld states clearly in his study of the poetics of manhood in Crete,

I have chosen to focus on the poetics of manhood because I had far fuller access to male than to female society during my fieldwork. Nevertheless, the women’s view of male actions does not always harmonize with that of the men, and provides a necessary counterpart to the androcentric discourse with which this study is primarily concerned. [1985:48]

My friend Bernardino, who has been a community organizer in the area around Santo Domingo since the early 1980s, talked about his battered aunt and tried to put her suffering in some historical perspective for me:

There are experiences that make you think there might be cracks. I have an aunt who just got divorced four months ago. But she suffered a martyrdom for 16 or 20 years. He hit her, he kept her confined, it was terrible. Years and years, maybe more than 20, since she has children who are older than I am. She suffered a lot. It’s a contradictory case, because the children were the ones who told their mama, “Hey, how long are you going to wait till you get away from him? Do it now! What’s the point of staying with him any longer? We’re grown now!” They didn’t think that the situation had suddenly become unbearable. It had always been unbearable.

Another woman, Dolores, told me that even after more than 15 years of enduring beatings at the hands of her husband, she had never been able to leave him. “Now,” she said, “he doesn’t dare beat me because my children will stop him if he tries.” Dolores was proud of the fact that “my married son is not like his father, and neither is the single one.”

With his deep-seated realism, Bernardino has often expressed to me his belief that change will take a long time. But he is not a cynic. “In the popular groups, in the organized groups, and as part of society, there is a change.” He explained:

Women today are on a different level than they were 20 years ago. People no longer look down on the woman who works [outside the home], who takes positions of leadership. To call a woman “Boss” is a more everyday thing; it’s more common. And this isn’t just because of popular organizations, but it is a change, a transformation that is taking place in Mexican society.

So it was that I came to understand discrepancies in two conversations I had with another friend, César, about domestic violence in his family. The first time we talked we barely knew each other. In response to a general query about whether he knew any husbands who beat their wives César told me that frankly he did not. He added that in his personal case his wife might have hit the girls a little when they were young, but that he himself was a pacifista. Silences on topics like domestic violence can be just as revealing as commentary. Luz María, César’s wife, was not silent on the question of violence in their home. She talked of repeated physical confrontations between them throughout their marriage, until, six years before I met her, she had finally said to him, “Hit me, and I’ll hit you.” Why did she finally reach her breaking point? She simply did, she told me, even though her mother—who had a remarkably similar, “combustible character”—could never bring herself to give her husband, Luz María’s father, the same kind of ultimatum.
Several months after I had first talked to César about domestic violence, he and I had another informal conversation that started out about gang fights and eventually led to other forms of violence. At this time César revealed that he had indeed beaten his wife on numerous occasions in the past, and that only when his wife had issued an ultimatum to him—to stop or she would leave him with their girls—did César cease his furious eruptions. “What has been hardest for me is to accept that the person who has to change is me,” he finally concluded. César continued, “The time came when my wife got tired of it all. ‘Either you stop, or we’re leaving the house,’ she told me. It was a big blow for me. It made me understand. After this I began to look after my family better.”

**creativity and change**

A neighbor and father of three grown children, Daniel García, spoke to me about the conflicts that he faced as a result of getting laid off from his factory job after working there for more than ten years. Daniel had always identified being a man with “being economically self-sufficient” and “giving spending money to my wife.” He was depressed, he confessed, because he was no longer able to do this and was increasingly prone to lash out at his wife. “Now,” he said, “I can’t ask my wife for things as I did before.” He feared that his children had also lost respect for him since he was no longer holding up his end of the family bargain. Like millions of other women in Mexico City, in the last ten years Daniel García’s wife began working outside the home for money.

As if to make matters worse for him, his wife has become an active member of the Christian Base Community in the neighborhood. As an *animadora* (activist-organizer) promoting the radical ideas of liberation theology and the practices of changing life in the here-and-now, Amalia López is also one of those women in the Base Community who have learned how to talk publicly before crowds of people. Such activities are emphasized for the women *animadoras* in an effort designed to help them avoid being mere foot soldiers following male leaders in the liberation church or more generally in society at large.24

One of the most thoughtful women I know in the colonia, Doña Fili, organized a group of her women neighbors one afternoon to tell me about their experiences with domestic violence. To provide some of the context for this discussion Fili wished to impress on me that she and other women had built a street that was especially needed to connect their homes to the public wash sinks:

That street was very necessary, because we were using the public wash sinks all the time. And some of the caciques [local bosses] wanted to close it on us. But we, the women, wouldn’t let them do it. We took papers to the Delegación [municipal district authorities]. Papers and more papers. But they never responded. They were always evasive. So we continued filling in the holes in the street, with the hope that by our doing this the street would not be closed. It was a form of pressure. This was the only way to get them to let us pass by; and that’s how we spent whole days. Then we began stopping the dump trucks that passed by carrying dirt, in order to level the street. We told the drivers, “Bring us a load of dirt. Come on, it’s not far!” We women leveled the whole street ourselves. The government never did a thing.

The women of Santo Domingo have built the colonia literally from the ground up, regularly fighting the city authorities and often fighting their own spouses. By carping, cajoling, and sometimes coercing the men in their lives, these women have played the role of catalysts in changing the consciousness and practices associated with masculinity, such as those surrounding domestic violence.

**questioning women and difference**

It nonetheless remains a commonplace among ethnographers of masculinity that women are at best unapproachable and at worst unreliable. And it remains common for male ethnographers
to talk rather exclusively with male informants about manhood—and about womanhood, for that matter. As Gilbert Herdt recently acknowledged with regard to his influential studies of what he now calls “boy-inseminating practices” in New Guinea: “I did little work with women in my first fieldwork (1974–1976), and my writings to date have been based mainly on men’s views of everything, including women” (Herdt and Stoller 1990:152; see, for example, Herdt 1981 and 1987). One rationale for ignoring women in fieldwork is linked by Michael Young (1983), working on Goodenough Island, to what he calls the question of “mutedness” (see also Ardener 1975). More specifically, Young believes that “the inarticulateness of women in traditional societies has become something of a dogma and even a self-fulfilling prophecy” in anthropological circles (1983:478).

Instead of approaching methodological problems such as the problem of being men who work with women on the question of masculinity as unfortunate obstacles, we might do better to understand these key indicators of the broader concerns and systemic contradictions of those about whom we presume to learn as, instead, openings and guideposts for further research. Such a conceptual reorientation will better enable ethnographers to study men in relation to women and women in relation to masculinity.25

Nor can we simplistically equate “the gender of the anthropologist and the gender of ideas” (Scheper-Hughes 1983:110), any more than we should automatically associate the gender of informants with the gender of ideas, because gender is not reducible to the experiences of individual bodies. Problems that women have with male ethnographers are seldom a result of their relations with other male ethnographers, but reveal problems in their broader relations with fathers, brothers, husbands, and other men. Obstacles and hazards do exist for many male ethnographers wishing to learn about men and masculinity by discussing these topics with women. But we will do better if we follow Brandes (1987) and seek ways to work through such limitations, especially if they are even partially self-imposed, than if we concede the futility of even trying. What is of great theoretical consequence, moreover, is that no ethnographer can work exclusively with men or women.

The anthropological attempt to distinguish between two neatly dimorphized “men’s” and “women’s” worlds in order to gain a greater understanding of such “natural” separations is guilty of predetermining what such studies are supposed to ascertain. This is the primary reason for which studies of this kind may have a “naturalizing effect” on gender determinations and categories. Giddens writes perceptively that “theories and findings in the social sciences are likely to have practical (and political) consequences regardless of whether or not the sociological observer or policy-maker decides that they can be ‘applied’ to a given practical issue” (1984:xxxv). By overinterpreting, ethnographers can sometimes bring enhanced gender and other divisions into being. There is nothing wrong with bringing to light previously hidden aspects of cultural life. Ethnographers do err, however, when their findings originate more from their own preconceptions than from the cultures they study.

Both approaches—one in which women are central to investigations of masculinity and one in which women are for some reason or other “necessarily” excluded from these studies—are based on the premise that the voices and experiences of many women are distinct from those of many of the men. It is not social scientists alone who resort to all manner of dichotomizing approaches to gender, and men and women in Colonia Santo Domingo do speak of others as, for example, “typical Mexican machos.” But it is also clear that for these same men and women there is much common ground between them, ground that also defines and shapes their lives as engendered and engendering persons.

This is not an especially new methodological insight. Margaret Mead, for example, often remarked in her childrearing studies that it was easier for women to conduct this research than men: “Although there are distinguished male workers in the field . . . it is probably not an accident that all of them have worked closely with women teachers or collaborators” (1955:4).
If men are not "comfortable" studying infants and young children, writes Mead (1955:5), this is neither surprising nor a reason for them not to learn (from women and from their own childhood feelings and experiences) how to do so.

Difference, whether engendered or not, does not itself require resignation to the impossibility of mutual intelligibility, nor the presumed corollary that difference is necessarily accompanied by the inability to say something comprehensible and meaningful about oneself to someone quite different (see Tambiah 1990). Common, dichotomized commentary regarding the "worlds" of difference between men and women should be analyzed more acutely: such talk reflects the currency in which many trade, and not necessarily the value of their coin. Treating women and men as absolutely separable from each other both culturally and physically can too easily lead to denying that gender relations are themselves systemic and inseparable from the whole of social relations.

Implicit in the judgment that the male ethnographer may legitimately study only men is the related argument that women may similarly study only women. Intentionally or not, such a position echoes a more general approach to cultural difference as a quest for "radical alterity." Much celebrated by some interpretive modes of anthropology, such concepts, as Roger Keesing has (1990) justly observed, are incapable of describing the interpenetration of cultural differences involving class, gender, ethnicity, hierarchy, and more. This critique is analogous to Joan Scott's (1990) emphasis on the mutual interdependence of difference and equality in gender relations.

Marilyn Strathern writes that the "sex-role model" has been too widely adopted in anthropological analyses of initiation rituals and male-female antagonisms in the Highlands of Melanesia (1988:64). Her assessment has wider relevance in understanding the ambiguities inherent in culturally constructed identities, attributes, and boundaries related to gender, ethnicity, age, class, and other major social divisions. Although I argue for specific ethnographies of men and masculinity because life is too complex to capture in facile generalizations about men or anything else, the fact that life and men are not so simple does not mean that we must abandon our ethnographies of gender to the nihilist position that truth (and oppression) are all relative and really exist only in language and text. Together with di Leonardo, we must insist on "the existence of a real material world, of living beings, of humans living in varying social formations, of political struggle in history over the contours of power" (1991:27). In other words, we must guard against nuancing the politics right out of our nuanced studies.

The best ethnographies of men and manhood today do not shy away from theorizing, but, by providing fine-grained documentation and analysis of particular historical contexts in lieu of sweeping generalizations, they highlight ambiguity as a central theme of the engendered aspects of men's and women's lives rather than as historically peripheral and analytically annoying.26

epilogue: acting like men

Through an examination of conceptual and methodological approaches to the study of men and masculinity in anthropology, and through ethnographic illustrations from Mexico City, I have here offered a more general criticism of exotic alterity in the discipline. In gender studies and beyond, constructions and stereotypes of fixed cultural categories have been central components in the study of "difference." By rejecting the ongoing fashion for exotic alterity, however, and instead employing a historically grounded comparative approach, we avoid such essentializing and reified conclusions about the necessary actions of thoughts of any gender, ethnic, age, class, or other social group. As Keesing writes, "letting women, or men, speak for themselves is by no means a magical solution to the epistemological and theoretical difficulties of interpreting gender. . . . [W]e must situate ourselves critically within an experienced world as revealed in self-accounts and outside it" (1987:33).
In Colonia Santo Domingo, a man explained to me one evening, “We Mexican men are violent, on the [futbol] field and in our marriages.” Another friend disagreed: “Well, they say that’s what we’re like, but really we’re cariñosos [tender, affectionate].” “They” are the experts, journalists and commentators, politicians and anthropologists. Experts in and of Mexico regularly make stereotyped connections between violence and manliness in Mexico. Experts told me that, because I was a man and a gringo, women would not speak to me about their experiences with domestic violence.

Yet what actually transpired was, as I have noted, quite different. As a man and as a gringo I found that the meanings and implications of cultural differences and divisions were not determined in advance. When friends called me, grinning, “El Pinche Gringo” (The Goddamned Gringo), I do not believe that this was so much a distancing maneuver as it was a way of expressing familiarity and acceptance. Only “one of the boys” could get ribbed in this manner.  

So, too, the exoticization of “woman the other” is not an accurate reflection of the beliefs or activities of men in Santo Domingo. The point is not to show that “women act like men” or that there is no such thing as engendered difference, much less inequality. The issue is that acknowledgment of difference should not exhaust the discussion of gender. Nor is “difference” necessarily a clearer concept than “similarity.” “They are just like us”: this stance is rightly criticized as naive today. But the opposite of such “lumping” declarations is no more easily established. It, too, is laden with implicit and prior assumptions. Accepting the accepted wisdoms on the difficulty (or even impossibility) of being a male anthropologist who hoped to work with women in Latin America would have crippled any attempt to learn about how masculinity is created and recreated in daily life in Mexico City’s colonias populares.

Important strides have been made in the past 20 years in studying women in a variety of cultural contexts. Corresponding studies of male identities and practices still lag far behind. This does not mean that ethnographies of men should be viewed, understood, or utilized primarily as a complement to women’s studies. Rather, they must be developed and nurtured as integral to understanding the ambiguous relationship between multigendered differences and similarities, and between equalities and inequalities.

notes

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A la memoria de Angela Jiménez, 1937–1996

1. In Mexico, for example, similar opportunities nevertheless regularly present themselves for residents of areas like Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Guadalajara.
2. For surveys of the anthropology of masculinity see Gilmore 1990 and Gutmann 1997b.
3. Sexuality, for instance, has rather recently emerged (or reemerged) as an extrapolibical fact, in the process mightily contributing to the expanding focus of studies on gender and sexual marginality (third,

4. Precisely in order to avoid continuing misuse of culture-bound terms like *homosexuality* to characterize seemingly similar bodily practices in different cultural contexts, Herdt, one of the pioneers in contemporary anthropological studies of sexuality, has recently changed his characterization of certain beliefs, passions, and practices among the Sambia of New Guinea: "It is no longer useful to think of the Sambia as engaging in ‘homosexuality,’ because of the confusing meanings of this concept and their intellectual bias in the Western history of sexuality" (1994:xiii-xiv). Herdt now argues that they should be viewed as belonging to a larger genus of same-sex practices that might be called “Boy-Inseminating Practices.” These are typically found in association with stratification by age, with emphasis upon the intergenerational qualities of power, knowledge, manliness, prowess in war, honor, and virtue being transmitted from older to younger male. [Herdt 1994:xiv]

On problems with the formulation “ritualized homosexuality” see also Elliston 1995.

5. Intellectuals who, quite apart from their scholarly endeavors, enjoy substantial cultural ties with countries other than the United States have been in the forefront of redefining cultural boundaries in anthropology. “Diasporic postcolonials” such as Abu-Lughod (1991), Narayan (1993), and Ong (1995) insist that anthropologists must radically rethink how we are to understand cultural identity and citizenship.


7. Could this be linked to the common inference that psychology and psychological anthropology are more “feminine” and political science and political anthropology are more “manly”?


9. In some households, obviously, children and wives have been abandoned by the men.

10. I am of course manipulating Geertz’s famous opening line in his famous essay (1973) on the Balinese cockfight to highlight differences among our respective fieldwork experiences and our analyses of cultural difference.

11. Angela’s use of the term papa to refer to Juan’s activities and identity in the past implies that he, she, and their children no longer see him as a papa in the same way.

12. Juan was nonetheless able to prevent Angela from obtaining outside work.

13. It could also be argued that, as was true for other men of Héctor’s generation, because he had never married, he shopped often.

14. That this “muting” was experienced by some, though by no means all, men is a complicated matter. It seems related to several factors, among them the question of social space—the home, the street, and divergent notions of public and private; interpersonal relations and familial manifestations of privilege, ridicule, and stigma; and possibly the historical emergence of certain cultural challenges on the part of women against men in the home. This is an important area for future research.

15. For some of the burgeoning literature on machismo, see Brusco 1995; Carrier 1995; de Barbieri 1990; Gutmann 1996; Lancaster 1992; Leiner 1994; Limón 1994; Lumsden 1996; Murray 1995; and Ramírez 1993.

16. In this light we can also understand why a policeman in the city of Zamora in western Mexico insisted to Arizpe, “I’m no macho. I am just an average guy” (1989:211–212). He tried to explain not only why he shunned the title of macho, but also, and more important, what he saw as the consequences of this decision for his marriage opportunities:

In Zamora men are very macho and jealous about their women. Many of the women are really fallen women. They like you to treat them horribly. As soon as you don’t treat them badly they get upset. I came to Zamora with a different upbringing. I treated women sensitively, and they didn’t like it. That’s why I have not married. [1989:211–212]

17. See Lancaster’s *The Queer Body* (in press), in which he addresses the issue of machismo anew and tackles, among other topics, “the ambiguity of gender ambiguity.” In a related manner, Lila Abu-Lughod, in a book about “women’s worlds,” writes of her “discomfort with the notion of a specifically female voice in writing. Any attempt to isolate what was specific to women writers eventually foundered on false essentialism and culture blindness” (1993:3).

18. Herzfeld points out in his discussion of “disemia,” the contest between official discourse and everyday usage, that usage is often “serendipitously subversive of accepted meanings” (1987:146). Furthermore, it should be clear that in calling representations and actions contradictory here and elsewhere in this article, I am invoking both my own interpretation and the views of my friends in the colonia about themselves, their spouses, their neighbors, and others.

19. It is no doubt a mistake to reduce any large issue like housework to a single social relation like age or gender. In 1993 a popular video available for rental through the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City was called “House Cleaning: How to Instruct Your Spanish-Speaking Housekeeper (with English subtitles).” The fact that the video was offered to embassy personnel requires little comment; more noteworthy is the fact that the video is in Spanish and is thus targeted at a certain class of women in Mexico City.
20. This is not exactly equivalent to “girl talk” because the conversation does not necessarily involve “female-only” issues; the implication of the term comadrear is nonetheless that the topics under discussion are similarly unimportant to men.
21. See Limón’s discussion of south Texas barbecues, “a world from which women are excluded,” and his conclusion that in such settings, despite the physical absence of women, “a ritually enhanced sense of dominant masculinity” is reproduced (1994:126, 140).
22. Garber’s essay (1993[1989]) on “the overdetermination of the penis” deals with similar issues among transsexuals in the United States.
23. Commentaries on manhood in Mexico have often made violence virtually synonymous with being a man. Further, in my previous experiences in working-class neighborhoods of Mexico City, the relationship between men and violence continued to capture the attentions of many people who live there.
24. On engendered conflicts generally within the popular urban movements in Mexico and Latin America, see Massolo 1992; Massolo and Schteingart 1987; Mongrovejo 1992; Sánchez Mejorada and Torres Mora 1992; and Stephen 1997.
25. For a recent description and analysis of women’s integral entailment in cultural definitions and constructions of masculinity in a postcolonial setting, see Luhmann 1996:132-135.
26. In addition, as Sedgwick points out (1990), cultural delineations are problematic not only between groups of people, but also within the groups however identified. She writes: it is not only identifications across definitional lines that can evoke or support or even require complex and particular narrative explanation; rather, the same is equally true of any person’s identification with her or his “own” gender, class, race, sexuality, nation. [1990:60-61]
27. My customary retort was to say, “No, soy chilango de Nueva York” [No, I’m a chilango (native of Mexico City) from New York City].

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