

Aging, Relatedness, and Social Abandonment in Highland Peru

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I recently conducted a month of preliminary ethnographic research on aging in highland Peru. During June and July of 2007, I was in the mid-sized Andean city of Ayacucho (population approximately 125,000). This research report describes the methods and some of the preliminary findings of this project.

I come to the anthropology of aging from a broader interest in kinship. In previous research in this region, I investigated "child circulation," or children's movements between caregivers, and addressed the specific social, economic, and political meanings of these movements (Leinaweaver 2007 and in press). I also considered the role of orphanages. I was interested in the circumstances under which children do not live with their families. In Andean contexts, families are extended and kinship solidarity is widely acclaimed, yet there are orphanages for children just as there are long-term care facilities for the aging, and, in both cases, the presence of abandoned children or elderly in those institutions is explained locally by a sense of family breakdown or crisis. Thus, I anticipated many similarities between the childhood research and the aging study.

I was also interested in this topic because, when studying the circulation of children, I found that occasionally children were asked to move in with and provide company to older relatives or aging community members. In one particularly poignant case, this connected closely to migration: An older widow's grown children had migrated to Europe, and she was accompanied first by her grandson, who stayed behind when his parents migrated, and later – when he rejoined his parents – by another young woman (Leinaweaver n.d. and in press). Thus, I had already found migration to be a key practice within which care for children and care for the aging might intersect, and I was curious about how increasing transnational migration might affect both elders and children in this population. Over the last decade, the numbers of Peruvians leaving to seek socioeconomic improvements abroad have increased dramatically, in response to Peru's position within the global political economy (Berg and Paerregaard 2005). If adult migrants cannot bring their children with them immediately upon leaving Peru, then child circulation allows them to meet their parenting responsibilities by ensuring their children are cared for in their absence. However, transnational migrants also rely on child circulation in order to meet important social responsibilities as grown children of aging parents, because they have brought into the household a related child who will accompany and care for the elder. This is as yet a completely understudied phenomenon; the lack of emphasis on aging has obscured the ways in which care is given and received on multiple levels.

In order to better understand the intergenerational affects of transnational migration, during this stage of research I focused on philanthropic and governmental approaches to Peru's aging population, using three linked approaches. First, I conducted a few formal interviews and several hours of participant-observation in a local, urban institution designed to assist the aging population. This institution is the *Asilo de Ancianos* (or "elderly asylum") *Padre Saturnino*, a home that houses up to 115 elderly and which is run by a congregation of nuns, the *Hermanitas de los Ancianos Desamparados* or "Sisterhood of the Unsupported Elderly." This congregation was founded in Spain in the 19th century, and they run similar institutions throughout Spain and the Americas. There are twelve of these homes throughout Peru, and the nuns at the Ayacucho home (which was founded in the 1960s) explained to me that their efforts are financed entirely through donations (pairs of nuns go out and collect money from community members once a month). Secondly, I also spoke with informants of various ages, also living in the city, who shared their understandings of what the home was for and of how aging should work in their particular cultural context. Finally, I conducted interviews with individuals representing institutions that are interested in aging (such as the government's Office of Senior Citizens, or *Dirección de Personas Adultas Mayores*).

Ayacucho is a unique setting because of the recent internal war (see, for example, Kirk 2005). From 1980 to the mid-1990s, the Shining Path insurgency and Peruvian military and police fought a war that resulted in almost 70,000 deaths and disappearances. A disproportionate number of these were from Ayacucho, the desperately poor agricultural region where the war began. I was told that many of the *ancianos* in the *asilo* have seen terrible things, like their children being killed, and many had psychological or mental difficulties as a result. Since Ayacucho is also poor in terms of

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psychiatric or gerontological specialists, the *ancianos* do not always get the care that they most need, but the nuns do the best with what they have. Trained as nurses, they are able to take care of the ill, who reside in a separate infirmary.

The institution is designed around two large open patio gardens. The residents are segregated by sex, one patio for the men and one for the women. Residents' dormitory-style rooms, a bathroom, workrooms, and a dining room surround each patio. At least one of the sisters has a green thumb, and the patios are beautiful gardens with doves, peacocks, and even a toucan providing splashes of color. According to Inocencio,¹ one of the *ancianos* with whom I spoke, the residents wake at 5:30, attend Mass in the *asilo's* chapel at 6, eat breakfast at 7:30, sit in the sun until lunch at 11:15, say the rosary at 2:45, sit out again until dinner at 4:45, then go to bed. This routine is embellished with visiting days on Thursdays and Sundays. I'd been invited to visit daily during the hour or two between lunch and dinner, and during those times I generally found the patios full of twenty or twenty-five residents, for the most part sitting quietly and still in plastic chairs. The chairs and the occasional walker have metal legs, and the patio floors are gleaming polished cement, so, the screeching of a chair being slowly pushed across the patio often drowned out conversations.

The experience of being in the home is a challenging one. Francisco, a resident who did double duty as the *asilo's* doorman, explained to me that the elderly become resigned, or come to accept this life, rather than getting accustomed to it. And, in fact, from my interlocutors who lived in the city, I heard more than one story of an elderly family member who briefly entered the *asilo* and then left, preferring to be alone in their towns. One of the main difficulties seems to be the sudden shift from a perceived independence to a forced dependence. I asked Ernestina if she liked living in the *asilo*, and she said no, then launched into a story that at first seemed to me to be unrelated. She told me she was from Huancavelica (a province adjacent to Ayacucho, similarly poor and agricultural), and in Huancavelica there are potatoes, barley, wheat, sheep... and her list went on. She showed me with words and hand signals how she would spin wool while tending the sheep, how she would plant seeds and later harvest the produce, and she described to me how delicious fava beans are when mixed with just a few peas and tossed into a soup at the last minute. It's not like that here in the *asilo*, she concluded – this is a house, there are no fields.² Catrien Notermans has also drawn attention to the larger importance of fields for aging women in Cameroon: "They do not willingly abandon their fields as both food and the sharing of it are vital

elements in maintaining and creating social relationships, which are crucial for having the feeling of 'being alive'" (2004:10). I took Ernestina's invocation of her fields to stand for all the activities and tastes and experiences she no longer participated in.

As I prepare to expand and continue this research in years to come, my preliminary analysis of this data has revealed a deep and textured understanding of the meaning of what Joao Biehl has called "social abandonment" (2005). As one of the nuns at the *asilo*, Madre Felicitas, informed me, the elderly that they care for are generally "abandoned." Either their families bring them to the *asilo* saying that they can no longer tend to the aging family member, or the aging person shows up asking to be cared for. The reasons for abandonment are not surprising, and they are similar to the reasons I collected for child abandonment in previous research. These include poverty (the family may be too poor to feed and clothe every family member; indeed, Madre Fortunata told me that in 1992 when then-President Fujimori's "paquetazo" or sudden sharp increase in all prices occurred, the sisterhood's homes instantly swelled to the brim with abandoned elderly), the related issue of the demands of work (an elderly person can't be left home alone, or the absence of jobs in Ayacucho require that the caretaker migrate to Lima or the jungle), and personal or social transformations (a growing intolerance for the challenges of caring for an aging person). Poverty is perhaps the most powerful trigger of social abandonment, and in Peru, poverty tends to align with indigeneity. A quick glance at the women's patio confirms this (as Marisol de la Cadena has noted, "women are more Indian" [1996], so markers of indigenous identity will likely be more visible on women's persons): all but one of the *ancianas* wore heavy *pollera* skirts that mark their indigeneity.

A second important theme is the relationship between the *ancianos*, their caregivers, and their kin. Francisco, the recently arrived *anciano* who attended the telephone and the main door in the nuns' absence, drew my attention to this relationship as he told me the story of Asunción, who brimmed with resentment and anger. Her niece had brought her to the *asilo* saying that Asunción couldn't take care of herself, and because the niece worked, she wasn't able to keep Asunción with her. Asunción often raged at Francisco, telling him that she hated him when he wouldn't let her out of the *asilo*. Francisco said tentatively that he thought perhaps the *madres* are almost complicit with the niece in this case – that perhaps they should intervene, telling the niece that her duty is to tend to Asunción, rather than agreeably carrying out the niece's instructions.

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Having heard this about Asunción, I was eager to meet her and hear her side of these events, but, when I first started to approach her, one of the other *ancianas* told me not to, because being left here by her niece had made Asunción go crazy. As one of the nuns told me, Asunción “is here against her will.” Asunción informed me that her niece comes to take her out on Sundays, but, she mourned, only to this little park right on the corner. She asked if I knew her neighborhood, named specific streets, reeled off her address. She asked the sister on duty to tell her niece to take her home, and the nun gently humored her. Later Asunción told me that she had escaped and one of the *asilo*’s workers had come to collect her in a car: she felt that they wouldn’t let her leave. At dinner that evening, one of the nuns swept in and retrieved a plastic container full of medicine from the pantry, removing a bottle of anxiety suppressants and telling me that Asunción can’t sleep without them.

Asunción’s grown niece did come on one visiting day, and I caught up with her as she took Asunción to the corner to catch a taxi to the other side of town. I asked her about Asunción and she said that Asunción had lived with them, but she and her husband can’t tend to her now because they work during the day and can’t leave Asunción alone. Asunción had accompanied her sister until she died, and, in the niece’s view, this affected Asunción so much that she became mentally ill and the *asilo* was the only option. On one of the last days I visited, one of the nuns gave Asunción a crochet hook and some wool, and it seemed to work wonders; the next day she was still doing it, and her tears had dried. Yet the nun’s small act of kindness, dozens of which I witnessed during my short research trip, cannot obscure the complexity of Asunción’s story, which highlights the tensions and ambivalences that inhere in the social relations between resident, family members, and caregivers, as well as the sometimes sharp divergences in their understandings of aging, social responsibility, and appropriate responses to political economic pressures.

As my research advances, I am particularly interested in exploring how intergenerational caregiving practices have been transformed by globalization, transnationalism, and increasing rates of out-migration. The findings from this fieldwork in Ayacucho’s *asilo* – the specter of social abandonment and the importance of relationships – remind me that the role of the state and private philanthropic organizations is central, even if only as a foil against which migrants make their caregiving decisions.

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(Endnotes)

¹ *In order to protect the confidentiality of the people with whom I worked, all interlocutors’ names are pseudonyms.*

² *While the asilo is centrally located in downtown Ayacucho, it does have*

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