

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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Parenting as an International PhD Student

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The experience of parents from the Global South pursuing doctoral studies in North America while raising children remains a largely unexplored topic. Related current literature, such as Christopher Dana Lynn's recent commentary in *Anthropology News* (49[6]:16), has focused on parents studying in their home countries. Of significance is the particular lack of writing about international single parents pursuing anthropology PhDs.

We started our PhD programs in anthropology in 2003 as single mothers of a four-year old from Ecuador (Viteri), and a seven-week old and a six-year old from Kenya (Lusambili). We each completed our programs at American University in Washington DC within four years. In this article, we discuss our experiences raising children and pursuing our careers in the US during this period. Confronting the perception of children as (only) barriers to completing graduate work, we illustrate how children and parents can together simultaneously deal with the challenges a migratory experience and benefit from opportunities to learn in the field and classroom.

was waiting; once in the US, family and colleagues (including my advisor William Leap) provided invaluable support.

Throughout my education in Ecuador, I did not experience a particular division of work, study and childcare, and I saw the separation of the intellectual (mind) versus the physical (body) discussed by Evans and Grant in *Mama, PhD* (2008) as rather foreign. When I conducted interviews with Colombian refugees in Imbabura, Ecuador, Simone played with their children. At the publishing company I worked at, she would suggest her favorite games be included in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language book series. As my child and I entered the US, I visualized us once again as a team. Thus, my Ecuadorian background allowed me to create alternative spaces where Simone and I could continue sharing and learning together, which other students did not always imagine as a possibility for themselves. Simone accompanied me through fieldwork, 2004–08, with Washington DC's Latino LGBT population—at points facilitating my development of social relationships in the field—and it became a learning experience for us both.

Simone is now a fully bilingual and bicultural nine-year old already thinking about her PhD and a career

came home frustrated, telling me how she corrected her teacher's assumption by stating, "Ecuadorians don't eat tortillas. We eat bread." She was already counteracting the US's homogenization of Latinos and Hispanics as one cohesive unit for which many people's only reference is Mexican culture. This experience reflects just one way in which her migratory experience through my graduate education has been both challenging and enriching.

Lusambili's Journey from Kenya

International graduate students who are also parents experience a unique set of challenges. Like many others, my experience was impacted by limited social networks, financial instability, language barriers, cultural differences and immigration issues. Simultaneously, I worked to manage the competing needs of raising children, such as paying childcare expenses and having sufficient time to schedule and attend medical appointments, organize play dates, attend parent-teacher conferences, participate in children's school activities and assist children with homework. A child's needs can compete with academic and professional needs such that finding time to attend conferences and classes, write papers, plan research and work part-time to pay rent and purchase insurance can be a challenge. One must also assist children in coping with the conflicting cultural experiences encountered in a new environment while also personally coping with those same issues.

I enrolled in graduate school at American University in spring 2003, knowing that it would be difficult. As an international student from Kenya with two children—two months and six years old—I expected tough times. I knew that there were things I would miss out on: close ties with family in Kenya, entertaining friends, and attending

academic and professional conferences. The situation became more complicated when my husband's US visa renewal was denied in 2004, implying that I had to become a single parent. My marriage added to the list of the many things that suffered in this process, and increased the time I needed to take care of the children. I considered myself different from most graduate students, and thus had to develop a unique graduate school strategy.

Although raising children as a graduate student was at points overwhelming, I refused to look at them as hardships and instead



The authors' children: Calvin, Simone and Laurie, fall 2006. Photo courtesy María Amelia Viteri

saw them as a motivating factor. I spoke to them about what I was doing and in the evening we studied together and discussed our progress in school. Three years into my PhD program, my son was nine. Although he did not understand much about graduate work, he knew my advisor (Dolores Koenig), my research topic, what days I had classes, and where I searched for books in the library. He spontaneously explained my research topic whenever people asked about it. My children looked forward to the day I would finish my PhD as they felt they were part of this process. They attended my dissertation defense and were proud when I finally received the PhD. Although I missed attending many academic conferences and put friends and extended family on the back burner, I now look back and realize that my children

COMMENTARY

Viteri's Journey from Ecuador

When I received American University's acceptance letter for my PhD in cultural anthropology with a concentration on race, gender and social justice, I pictured myself continuing what I had done in my home country: studying, working and caring for my daughter, Simone. But I was unsure how this would all play out in a foreign setting with a different language. Would my experience reflect my memories of caring for Simone as a baby, holding her with one arm while breastfeeding as I simultaneously wrote my BA thesis in linguistics? I limited my PhD applications to schools in the DC area where a secure family network

as a teacher. I value the fact that she comfortably engages in fruitful and interesting interactions with all kinds of people of different ages, nationalities and ethnicities and in a variety of settings. Growing up with reassuring images and representations of her home country, Ecuador, she has painfully realized through her migration experience that a majority of people in the US don't know (or care) much about Ecuador. This newly acquired knowledge has turned her unexpectedly into a cultural bridge. While a first grade student in Maryland, her teachers were getting ready to reenact a Mexican celebration and one asked Simone how she and I prepared tortillas at home. Simone

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