Parent Seeking PhD

The Practicality and Pitfalls of Staying Local

Christopher Dana Lynn
SUNY Albany

Spouses and children of far flung anthropologists-in-training are largely invisible in the literature, promoting the popular belief that an anthropology education is only for the intrepid—and childless—traveler. The classic liminal sojourn abroad to train in this discipline is hard on family, historically leading many, it seems, to wait until this threshold has been crossed and university positions secured before breeding. Yet anthropology has matured and its requirements are no longer so narrow, if they ever really were. This has enabled people like me to enter the field with family in tow by conducting research at home. However, it also presents a number of novel problems for which there seem to be few resources. For instance, what if one’s family and research participants occupy completely different social worlds within the same geographic area? How does that affect how one defines or works within a field site?

For anyone considering local fieldwork to accommodate family obligations, or anyone fearing that parenting while in graduate school might be a folly, I offer my experience on this path. The punch line is that I am the father of 5-year-old triplet boys. How I manage comes down to having four things: (1) a long-suffering spouse, (2) a sympathetic department, (3) an inflexible schedule, and (4) a local field site.

Someone to Hold Down the Fort

The importance of the first item is obvious, but since said spouse rarely gets explicit credit I will state in print that without my wife to nurture our kids on a daily basis (and her family nearby to give her support) I could not have made it this far toward completing a doctoral degree, period.

Departmental Support

For students with children it is critical to have a supportive graduate program, whether or not the program is one’s first academic choice. I tried two other programs before and during my wife’s pregnancy until I found the right fit: a program that offers uninterrupted funding combined with sympathetic faculty and nearby family help. There is currently no one on my committee who is an expert in my chosen sub-specialty, but this has actually not caused me to detour from my interests. On the contrary, it has forced me to consult a larger number of people than I might have otherwise and to design a dissertation project that is by necessity more holistic.

Keeping the Goal in Sight

Funding is certainly a linchpin in pursuing a PhD, but with a trio of asthmatics to tend it has been less the meager stipend included as part of my assistantship than the health insurance that has been essential. Financial insecurity and the threat of losing that insurance when my assistantship was due to run out have propelled and humbled me enough to beg opportunities from anyone who might have a connection. This exercise in actively seeking diverse funding opportunities enabled faculty to better know and overlap family functions. “I needed it and because I was fulfilling all program requirements on schedule. I am not uniquely decisive or efficient, but with four other people at home eying me hungrily, I am in a hurry and don’t have the luxury of changing my topic or getting bogged down with the perfectionism that plagues other students.

Pros and Cons of Local Fieldwork

Completing fieldwork locally is, in my situation, a matter of necessity. My field sites—two churches—are within half an hour of my home. I can go to services or meet with participants any day or night of the week, and if there is an emergency at home I am but a cell phone call away. I don’t miss any of my children’s milestones and I sleep in my own bed every night.

Yet there is a downside to this. Balancing family and local research is difficult. There is no homework-bound plane signifying the end of fieldwork and return to family life. On one occasion I was talking to an informant when my cell phone started vibrating in my pocket, which had become a familiar phenomenon as Sunday services typically run past scheduled time and overlap family functions. “I think it’s time for you to go home. Your wife is pulling your leash,” he quipped, causing me to grinace.

Also, some of the more unique ethnographic opportunities in my research with local parishioner communities are holiday celebrations, but these are important family times too. This past July 4th, for example, I was expected to attend two church picnics, two relatives’ and one friend’s Independence Day parties, one playmate birthday party and a fireworks outing with my kids. Why don’t I involve my family in the research to minimize such conflict? Churches are family institutions and encourage me to bring my children, but the lines between my work and family would blur to an uncomfortable degree. What my wife and I want for our children, and indeed what the churches promote, is the consistency of one spiritual community, not toggling back and forth depending on their father’s research interests and travels.

Despite the convenience of locality, total immersion in my field site remains impossible. As expressed by Houston (in Hayland, Gordon and Vianco’s Talking About People 2006) in exploring the changing culture of same-sex civil unions in his own community, it is difficult to learn what one doesn’t already know about seemingly ordinary lives where one already lives. Church members consider my life to be much like theirs, and what they see as different is the spiritual practice they feel I can best learn by going to church. I have joked at inviting myself over to dinner but instead have been invited to suppers at the church. I recently phoned one participant a block away from his house, hoping he would invite me in. Instead, he opened a window and handed out the material I had stopped to pick up.

A few have opened their doors. On one such occasion I had my kids with me, which instead of improving relations actually made things more awkward. Our hosts ran a day care out of their home and my children couldn’t bear to leave the toys. The family tried to bribe them to go by giving them a stuffed animal they coveted, which they then proceeded to brawl over. One of my advisors has said that being a married person, a parent and a homeowner have all served as entree in opening informants up to trust and talk to him; but actually having your family there to intervene in that negotiation seems to be another thing entirely.

At the End of the Day

The populations that we study can speak the same language, send their kids to the same school and shop at the same grocery store as we do, yet still be difficult to access. I hope the issues I discuss here do more than just illustrate the balancing act involved in pursuing a PhD as a parent and doing local research. In my view, doing anthropology “at home” should not be a limitation to students of anthropology, but should be an opportunity. There are as many unexplored avenues of human interest as there are ways of navigating them.

Christopher Dana Lynn is a doctoral candidate in biocultural anthropology at State University of New York, Albany. His research focuses on the influences of speaking in tongues on biological stress response among Apostolic Pentecostals in New York’s Hudson Valley and is supported by the National Science Foundation, SUNY Benevolent Society, SUNY Albany Graduate Studies and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.