

# Gendered Negotiations: Engagements with ‘Modernity’ and Identity Change amongst Chiapeneco Youth in Mexico

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## Abstract

In this paper I wish to examine how changes have occurred in the processes of gendered identity construction amongst Mexican youths through examining local experiences of global, and specifically Mexican, modernities. Based on fieldwork carried out amongst youths in the city of San Cristobal de las Casas, in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, my analysis addresses how youths plan for the future in the context of economic and political marginalisation, and how this affects the way in which they pursue different forms of romantic relationships. I also address changes that have occurred in youths’ understandings, perceptions and performances of their gendered identities in the context of a highly developed local tourist industry, the advent of mass media, and new online social worlds. My study shows how gendered identity construction amongst youths here becomes context-dependent, and how it encompasses individual agency whilst at the same time being negotiated through wider structural and social limitations. I also wish to demonstrate how changing gendered identities amongst youths are constantly constructed and renegotiated by individuals seeking to accommodate notions of modernity with perceptions of the traditional, and how these individuals balance contesting notions of gendered identities within themselves. This is, therefore, a study of local and gendered identity change amongst youths in the context of localised modernities and rapid social change.

**Keywords:** youth, gender, globalisation, modernity, Mexico.

## Introduction: Changing identities in a changing Mexico

San Cristobal de las Casas is a small, sleepy, yet vibrant city nestled in the highlands of the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico, close to the border with Guatemala. Few foreigners fail to fall in love with the city and its charming colonial character, thinking of it as an area fixed in time, a world of timeless indigenous cultures, which is simultaneously bohemian enough in its mestizo centre to give them a taste of the backpacker lifestyle whilst still enjoying the ‘real Mexico’. This closed and rather fixed picture of San Cristobal, however, obscures the actual lived experience of its inhabitants. San Cristobal is a teeming mixture of indigenous, national mestizo, and Western cultural influences. These have been blended and brought together through extensive processes of economic change, high rates of rural to urban and international migration, intense political upheaval, an ever increasing expansion of the tourist industry, religious change and the advent of mass media in the region (see Gledhill 1991, 2008, Collier, Farias Campero, Perez & White 2000, Earle & Simonelli 2005, Hernández Castillo & Nigh 1998, Stephen 2005, Vogt 2003, Evangelista et al. 2001). These processes combine to form many new subjectivities and avenues through which local and individual identities are formed and negotiated.

Amongst those in San Cristobal who feel the change brought about by these processes perhaps the most are the city’s youths. Merging regional, national and global influences, which act upon them, they negotiate their identities in specifically gendered ways. They combine their rural and

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urban selves with aspirations for, and influences from, modernity, along with their perceptions of the 'traditional'. They interpret their actions both in terms of the individual and the collective. Actively constructing their identities both within global, national and regional processes of change, they also recognise ways in which they are constrained by them. This affects how they conceptualise and plan their actions for the future in constructing their identities through the changing context of today. This paper focuses on the lives of a small group of youths living in San Cristobal, mainly a group of male and female youths aged 15-21 studying at a small *preparatoria* school in the centre of the city, from both indigenous and mestizo working class backgrounds.

The adoption of neoliberal economic policies and structural adjustment requirements in Mexico has occurred hand in hand with large reductions in state expenditure on welfare and services. This has led to increasing levels of unemployment, poverty, inequality and migration (Larrain 2000: 1999, Olivera & Furio 2006: 106, Cortez 2001). In 2008, the number of Mexicans living in poverty was 47.4%. However, this figure incorporates 53.5 % of Mexicans aged 5-17, out of whom 13.1% live in extreme poverty (Infoníñez 2011a). Chiapas is the state with the second highest rates of marginalisation within Mexico (CONAPO 2007). Whilst maternal mortality in Mexico at a whole is 57 women out of 100,000, in Chiapas that figure rises to 90.1. Chiapas also has one of the highest infant mortality rates in Mexico (21/1000) compared with the national average of 15.5. Similarly, levels of infant malnutrition are almost four times higher in the southern Mexican states than in the north and three times higher for adolescents (Infoníñez 2011b).

In this context, Gutmann argues that the working classes in Mexico have had to rely on their own efforts when government assistance programs do not live up to their expectations (1996: 96). This has led to a situation where 12.5% of the Mexican population aged 5-17 years has to work, with 69% of these being aged between 14-17 years (Infoníñez 2011c). This is a pattern increasingly seen amongst youths in San Cristobal, who are obliged to enter the labour market often at a young age and in exploitative conditions, in order to fund their studies and cover living expenses. In the case of youths who have migrated to the city from rural Mayan villages, this is combined with processes of historical and structural racism towards indigenous populations within Mexico and in Chiapas, which already limits their access to further education (Hernández Castillo & Furio 2006, Labrecque 2005, Martinez-Novo 2009, Speed & Collier 2005, Nash 2001, Stephen 2002). Indeed 9.6% of Chiapanecos aged between 8-14 years are illiterate (compared to a 3.3% national average) as is 21.4% of the population over 15 years of age. (INEGI 2011). Whilst the average number of years spent in school in Mexico has increased between 1970 (3.4 years) and 2008 (7.7 years), Chiapas is still below the national average, with an average number of only 5.7 years being spent in school. Similarly, although primary education coverage in Mexico is now almost universal in every state (104% in Chiapas), access to secondary education is much lower (only 64.4% in Chiapas). In Mexico as a whole, over 3 million children still lack access to a complete education (Infoníñez 2011d).

Youths living in San Cristobal, however, have many aspirations with regards to further studies or temporary labour migration to the USA, which means that in younger life they often emphasise the importance of self-reliance and creating an economic basis for their future individually – before marrying and settling down with a partner. This inherently affects how they view and desire romantic relations with others.

## Gender in Mexico

Before discussing contemporary changes in the gendered identity of youths in Chiapas, these must be grounded in an understanding of how gendered identities in Mexico have been conceptualised in the past. Traditional gendered identities in Mexico have been marked by notions of a man's obligation to support his family, with female identities being tied to motherhood and suffering (Napolitano 2002:

159, Hirsch 2003: 89). According to these women, though one suffers in marriage, one has to put up with it and accept one's fate. Here, a good husband was one who provided for his family's needs and who respected his wife. If one chose a bad husband, one had to simply endure it (Hirsch 2003: 89). For women born in the 1940s and 1950s, courtship before marriage would be highly regulated by the girl's family, and the young couple would have little opportunity to see each other alone before marriage unless they met in secret. Even then, young girls often had difficulty in finding an excuse to leave the house, and so secret meetings were also difficult. Hirsch claims that older women today argue that maintaining one's respect and the reputation of one's family was most important in past generations (2003: 100). The notion of 'marianismo' in Mexico has involved women being seen as morally superior beings to men who must be protected from dishonour, hence the emphasis given to the woman's place in the home and as a mother (Chant 2003: 9). It has been noted, however, that such identifications of female identity with motherhood have also provided a means for the public and political participation of women in Latin America generally, when they have been unable to carry out their mothering 'duties' due to wider political, economic and social problems (see Chant 2003: 10). Traditionally there have also been contrasting understandings of gender in Mexico, which incorporate the figure of the 'macho' man who does not respect women, drinks alcohol, is financially irresponsible, and has violent tendencies. The mirror of this image is that of 'la chingada' - the woman who belongs 'to the street', who is free in her sexual behaviour, and who is not respected (Napolitano 2002: 160).

There are, however, shifts occurring in the way in which such aspects of gendered identities are given importance in Mexico today (Napolitano 2002: 159). In Mexico, the average age at marriage in the 1970s was 18.8 years, whilst in 1994 it was 21.2 years (Hirsch 2003: 83). The number of women using contraception has risen from 30.2% in 1976 to 72.5% in 2009 (INEGI 2011). Similarly, fertility rates in Chiapas have decreased from 4.36 in 1990 to 2.28 in 2010 (CONAPO 2011). These changes have been explored in numerous ways.

Schaefer-Grabiell (2007) argues that in Guadalajara middle and upper-class Mexican women look to escape traditional Mexican gender roles and Mexican men through establishing relationships with white North American men over the internet, whom they view as being more open to new interpretations of gendered roles in which equality for women stands out. However, in seeking personal fulfilment, these women actually reaffirm what they see to be traditional gendered roles of Mexican women in order to attract these new partners. According to Hirsch, however, young women in Mexico today prize intimacy and affective relationships with their partners, although the extent to which sexual intimacy before marriage occurs is highly negotiated, with emphasis still being placed on respect. Women today, however, are seen to be much more active in choosing their partners, and men have more responsibility to keep women happy during marriage, both emotionally and sexually (Hirsch 2003: 110).

Hirsch employs the term 'companionate marriage' to describe changes occurring in the marital relationships of young Mexican couples today. This term has its roots in the Euro-American movement beginning in the Victorian era, which sought to highlight the need for intimacy, trust, sexual closeness and friendship within a marriage (2003: 9). It is widely held that these ideological changes in the expectations and experiences of marriage led to lower fertility rates in these areas when combined with changing economic and social contexts which saw increasing life-expectancies, lower child mortality rates, an increasing feminisation of labour, and increases in the age of the first-child, along with an individualisation of society. These processes, in turn, fed the development of such companionate marriages, and the search for emotional intimacy with one's partner (2003: 11). Such changes occurring in Mexico, however, are not following a Euro-American line of progression, but are embracing such ideologies in distinctive ways and are integrally related both to wider changes occurring within the nation as a whole, and with experiences of migration to the USA (2003: 12).

Since the 1994 EZLN uprising (an indigenous movement seeking autonomy and an end to marginalisation for Mexico's indigenous peoples), challenges to traditional gender structures in Chiapas are taking place in many Mayan communities which are spearheaded by indigenous women themselves. They include assertions of women's right to choose marital partners, to live free from domestic violence, and to have equal access to social, economic, political and legal rights as do both men and the wider mestizo population of Mexico. These changes, however, have not been easily implemented and form part of an ongoing struggle for women in such communities (Speed, Hernández-Castillo & Stephen 2006: 33-54). Bargaining within relationships between men and women in Mexican marriages today is constantly being renegotiated and changed in light of changing circumstances, which are both economically and socially influenced (Hirsch 2003: 7).

But whilst anthropologists have recently noted changes in gendered roles and identities within Latin America in the global contexts of modernity and economic and political change, they also argue that gender roles and identities in the region have never been static or essentialised but in fact undergo constant reinterpretations, and that's why they must be understood in their specific cultural and historical contexts (Hirsch 2003: 1,2, Gutmann 2003: 13, 28, Grimes 1998). Gendered identities and relationships do not become loosened through these processes but are reconceptualised and joined in new ways through negotiations of changing masculinities and femininities (Hirsch 2003: 9). In Mexico, Gutmann argues that multiple gender identities are increasingly being reflexively considered by men and women. However, there is no single 'Mexican' gender identity, as this is often crosscut by class and ethnicity and varies between places (1996: 9). Boehm further argues that processes of globalisation are subjectively experienced through gender, which leads to new conceptualisations of gendered identities. These new identities are not mere products of structural change but are actively sought and constructed by individuals within these changing social contexts (2004: 20). These theories suggest that we have to move away from gendered stereotypes in Latin America and see how gender identities are conceptualised through actual and subjective everyday practices and experiences.

I would argue that in Chiapas, independent of class, young men and women are actively articulating their own interpretations of gendered ideologies and gender roles, seeking to change those aspects of 'the traditional', which they do not like. Both males and females are changing their gendered identities rather than looking outside national borders to redefine them. Young men are looking to move away from gendered stereotypes such as 'the macho', whilst young women simultaneously seek new kinds of relationships and personal fulfilments. Here, I would like to highlight how gendered identities, as experienced by young people in San Cristobal, actually come to be expressed on a context dependent basis. Within an individual, multiple experiences of femininity and masculinity exist, some acting to create possible conflicts or 'friction' for youths when expressed at the same time. Youths then need to negotiate which aspect of their identity is most suitable to be expressed in a specific context, though this is often done subconsciously. This depends on with whom they interact and the selves they wish to portray through this interaction. Since multiple and ever-changing experiences of masculinity and femininity exist within any given individual, youths may find it difficult to emphasise one aspect of their femininity or masculinity over another, as all aspects are equally important in different ways, but may create problems when expressed together. As youths plan for the future and conceptualise the selves they wish to occupy and the kind of people they wish to be, they are able to negotiate these multiple and sometimes conflicting gendered identities by expressing them in a context-dependent manner. However, whether these ways of negotiating differing experiences of gendered identities continue into the future remains to be seen. As youths follow different life paths, make choices and move into the future, their experiences of masculinity and femininity will undoubtedly change again and be experienced in different ways – whether they choose to emphasise certain aspects of their experiences of gendered identities which they now express on a context-dependent basis remains to be seen and poses some interesting questions for the future.

## Modernity and globalisation

Processes of globalisation today act to connect the 'local' and the 'global' through cultural and economic forms and processes in an unfixd and varying process of interrelation and 'flows' (Moore: 2004: 80). Appadurai views the global as being composed of various *-scapes*, including ethnoscaples, mediascaples, financescaples, technoscaples and ideoscaples (1996), all of which, however, relate and react to one another through encounters of friction (Tsing 2005). 'Modernity' as an entity is often described as the spread of neoliberal capitalist forms of organisation along with the spread of western, enlightenment cultural forms. But 'modernity' itself is fractal, ever-changing and fluid (Bauman 2000). Despite initial predictions of global cultural homogenisation, most anthropologists today would argue that these processes of globalisation and 'modernity' are in fact manifested through a post-modern condition and are instead appropriated by local actors, contexts and interpretations. Modernity, therefore, is not a universalising process but actually leads to alternative or vernacular modernities constructed through grassroots interpretations. Thus it becomes possible for multiple and overlapping identities and subjectivities to occur within a given locality, leading in fact to an increasingly heterogeneous, though inter-connected, world (see for example Napolitano 2002: 5,12, Appadurai 1996: 4,7,17, Tsing 2005: 1, Geschiere & Meyer 2000: 602). Furthermore, as Kearney claims, globalisation entails the opening of unbounded, multi-dimensional spaces in which people interact and produce identity (1995: 550). Cultures are no longer seen as discrete, bounded entities but are understood to undergo continuous change and are situated in connection with one another (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 7).

I must also stress that modernity and globalisation are not entities 'out-there', separate from the social fabric of a community and experienced as external, but are inherent within everyday experience. They are expressed through varying and linked processes that connect individuals, objects and processes in many ways. Globalisation and modernity, as experienced within a given locality and appropriated by individuals and actors within these, become interwoven with other aspects of that social network to create a varying social plane on which individuals interact (see for example, Moore 2004). Following Latour, then, I do not wish to start by examining 'the social' as a single entity in which individuals are located. By examining changes youths experience in the expression of their gendered identities through their experiences of globalisation and modernity, I wish to trace the connections, processes, experiences and objects which interrelate with each other to influence youths, as well as being appropriated by them (Latour 2005). These connections join wider processes with more local experiences. However, I do have a problem with the assertion that 'modernity' and 'globalisation' in the wider social field interact with things which are inherently 'local'. The extent to which 'local' really is 'local', and the extent to which 'global' really is 'global' is somewhat limited, as the two feed off each other and influence each other by various means, at different times and to varying effect, depending on the context. Therefore, rather than the dichotomy between local/global, the two are in fact situated along the same string of processes, intimately connected to each other, making it hard to distinguish the point when something becomes inherently local, or global, since the two are in fact continuous with one another and are mutually reproduced (see Moore 2004).

Similarly, when Appadurai discusses the notion of globalisation and modernity as expressed through a variety of *-scapes* this seems to give the impression that these forces occur separately to one another and are experienced as such by individuals (1996). But real lived experiences are not divided into such 'scapes or experiences' but rather are lived through a mesh of interactions, which makes it difficult to separate them into different categories. Often new media is experienced through technology, the use and introduction of which is intimately related to patterns of consumerism and the purchasing power of an individual, which is linked to their strategies of making a living, their experiences of migration, state economic policy and the international economic processes. Similarly, the pursuit of economic strategies to be able to consume such technologies may be traced to the appropriation of ideologies of

modernity, which again may be experienced through media and technology. All these 'scapes' interact and interrelate in varied and often unseen ways, creating a mesh of interactions as opposed to neat '...scapes' of influence.

## Methodology

In an anthropological world which now calls for ethnographic multi-sitedness (Falzon 2009), my fieldwork experience took me from interacting with youths within San Cristobal de las Casas, as well as tracing their journeys through the region of Chiapas, to their home villages, along with attempting to trace the wider processes which affect their lives such as forms of mass media, technologies and economic policies. The fieldwork presented in this paper was carried out over a period of three months in the summer of 2010, although it is also supported by various insights that I have gained during my previous 13 months of residence in San Cristobal de las Casas. The insights I gained from youths are based on responses to interviews and focus groups carried out with 53 male and female students at a *preparatoria* school in the centre of San Cristobal. It is also based on extensive participant observation carried out with youths, in which I attended various social events, 'hung out' with them at their place of work, visited them at home and interacted with them at school.

There were many factors that could have affected how the youths related to me as both a friend and anthropologist. The fact that I was a young, female *extranjera* (foreigner) may have meant that youths were eager to represent themselves to me in a certain light. Extranjeras are seen by many youths in the city, both male and female, to be of a liberal-feminist kind who are also very free in their sexual behaviour (see Dewalt & Dewalt 2002: 90). Preconceptions such as these may have influenced participants to portray themselves as exhibiting a specific type of persona in my presence. However, if this was the case, the fact that they should feel the need to do this is also telling in itself and should not be dismissed. Also, the fact that I was able to interact with youths in various settings and at various times reduced the likelihood of them maintaining a certain persona at all times when in my presence, even more so as friendships developed between us.

There were other factors, however, which made it easier for participants to relate to me as a person. The youths knew that I had spent a lot of time in San Cristobal previously and that my own partner at the time was Mexican, and moreover, from Chiapas. This made me both an outsider and an insider at the same time (Mullings 1999). I was not only researching their world but was also a personal participant in it. This perhaps made it easier for youths to relate to me. This notion of shared experience and understanding was perhaps also heightened by my own knowledge of Mexican Spanish. I spoke to participants in a very colloquial, youthful form of Mexican Spanish, which I believe made it easier for me to relate to them through the use of shared language. Valentina Napolitano also noted this during her fieldwork in central Mexico, when one of her participants declared she was practically a 'Mexicana' due to her knowledge of colloquial mexicanisms (2002: 181). My knowledge of the language allowed for free-flowing conversation during interviews and a more nuanced understanding for myself of what exactly what was being said and of the double-meanings hidden within the language itself. The fact that I was close in age to the youths also meant that I was able to participate in their social worlds without seeming out of place.

I was able to discuss topics brought up during my fieldwork youths long after I had returned home through the use of MSN messenger. Here I was able to carry on conversations with youths and clarify issues brought up during data analysis with them, reflecting the fact that not only does technology today bring anthropologists closer to home whilst 'in the field' (Simpson 2009), it also allows the anthropologist to engage with participants from 'the field' whilst 'at home' – extending the realms of what counts as participant observation and indeed, 'the field' itself (Garcia, Standless, Bechhoff & Cui 2009, Amit 2000).

Although this study has ethnographic and theoretical insights to offer, it should be taken as being representative of a small segment of the population of Chiapas and of San Cristobal de las Casas. My fieldwork was conducted with a small number of youths in comparison to the population of the city, and not all of their opinions and perspectives will be representative of Chiapaneco youth as a whole. Neither is my own knowledge of Mexican youth representative of the whole population but is dependent upon my own subjective experience. Therefore, though this study can offer very useful theoretical ideas of changes in gender relations amongst youth in Chiapas, it should not, however, be taken as representative of the whole population.

## Analysis

### Negotiating sexuality and romantic relationships

One visible change to have occurred in the gendered practices of youth in San Cristobal is in their forms of romantic relations, which now tend to be multiple, relatively short-term and without the assumption of marriage, along with those that take the form of '*amigos con derechos*' (friends with 'rights'). Perhaps the main contrast with past forms of relationships here is the fact that multiple, short-term relationships amongst youths today are carried out in an open and obvious manner compared to the past. These desires for multiple, short-term relationships in the immediate future are inherently related to wider changes occurring in Mexican society. For many youths, marriage is the end product of immediate short-term economic independence, seen as something to work towards rather than rush into. Furthermore, most talked about wanting to enjoy their youth until they are ready to marry – they claim that youths who marry too soon “don't think about it, and they don't realise what they miss out on” (Maria, 15).

Similarly, youths in San Cristobal claim that they would not wish to have children until a later age, as well as fewer children when they do start their families, and only after they have experienced a certain amount of time of married life alone with their partner. Most youths cite economic and emotional considerations influencing this decision – they want to be in a strong economic position before having children so as to be able to provide for their material and emotional needs. As Flor (aged 17) explained, “For me, getting married is really important... but first, it's important that you get a degree and all the things your family would need – marriage comes after this”. Similarly, Anna (17) argued, “I want to enjoy being young before I get married... I don't want the responsibility”. This is also connected to Hirsch's analysis of changing ideas of roles and forms of parenthood amongst youths in the region, as they also stress the importance of emotive bonds between parents and children, and highlight the idea of 'friendship parenting' (2003). Rosa (17) argued that “it's better to have fewer children, so that you can provide for all their needs, give them the best of everything and the best start in life, rather than splitting everything between lots of children”. Jose (aged 19) similarly argued that “parenting should be shared between both of you, it has to be between both, because when you're a couple you do things together and not apart like that”. These changes in parenting practice are in no doubt due to the changing composition of Mexican households in urban areas, which has seen a reduction in the amount of extended families living together, the increased availability of contraception, the state family planning policy, economic considerations, and the pursuit of educational and career ambitions by women away from domestic life (Grimes 1998: 100, Gundelman Malin, Herr-Harthorn & Noemi Vargas 2001: 1805, Gutmann 1996: 78), although desires for new kinds of relationships also play a large part (Hirsch 2003: 245).

Part of the desire to be able to enjoy marriage by spending time alone with one's spouse before having children relates to wider trends in Mexico discussed by Hirsch, leading to an increased desire for 'companionate marriage', with relationships based more on trust (*confianza*) than respect, in

which spouses can also be best friends as well as married partners (2003: 245). Therefore, there have been changes not only in the form of romantic relations, but also in their desired content, with more importance being stressed on the emotional form relationships should take. Alfredo (18) noted that "When I do marry, I want to spend at least a year with my wife without children so we can enjoy being together, enjoy our relationship". Indeed Hirsch and Wardlow argue that modern forms of relations see a shift in marriage and relationship expectations towards those that are based on intimacy, pleasure and closeness (2006: 2). The forms these shifts take, however, are dependent upon the local context and on social and economic transformations taking place in a given locality (2006: 2). These discourses of love and intimacy are also closely related to notions of individuality and may be attempts to assert 'modern' identities and ways of thinking by actors (2006: 5, 14). Indeed, in pursuing new forms of intimate relationships, youths in San Cristobal seek to assert and make known their own 'modern' identities and attitudes. They are in no doubt influenced in this by different forms of mass media, the discourses they communicate on migration, and inter-cultural interactions in a tourism-dependent area. However, despite being influenced by these processes, youths also actively seek these avenues for expression of modern identities, acting to create those discourses themselves through their very enactment.

Many young women here are also undergoing significant changes in the expression of their sexual identities, and how they pursue sexual desire. Montgomery (2009) argues that sexuality and reproduction are important arenas of discussions around female adolescence, and Napolitano argues that these processes are undergoing considerable change globally in the context of local interpretations of 'modernity' (2002). In San Cristobal, many girls express feelings of being torn between their own sexual desires and their desire to remain *respetada* (respected) by their boyfriends through refraining from sexual relations, something that has traditionally been expected of them. However, here, bombarded with sexual imagery in the media and sex education in schools, combined with their own desires to explore their sexuality, many girls find it difficult to balance this with the traditional female persona they feel they are supposed to follow in refusing sexual encounters. Many argue that while this does not stop them from being sexually intimate with men in the end, it makes them regulate their behaviour in terms of making it harder for their boyfriends to convince them to have sex or to be intimate. In doing this, they argue they are still able to fulfil their own sexual needs without sacrificing their respect. As Laura (18) described, "You shouldn't make love with them straight away, not without being together a while first, because if you do, then, well, you lose respect - even if it does feel good to do it, you still have to wait a bit". Gabriella (aged 17) also explained, "It's like this, if you give them something straight away then they're going to think badly of you, you have to make them work for it a bit first, even if you want it too, because if not then it loses the romance, and they're going to think you're just like any other girl!". Gabriella had been seeing her boyfriend for four months, but had still refused to have sexual relations with him, though she often complained to myself and her friends on MSN messenger how frustrated she was. It was only after four months, when Gabriella came home one day to a room full of teddy bears and roses, that she did consent. When I asked her why she chose then to consent, she said, "It shows he respected me, you know. He really made an effort, and I made him wait so long, so I knew he wanted me for me and not just for sex". In this way, these moves towards openly pursuing their own sexual desire are not without internal conflicts, though young women actively manage these conflicts on their own terms in ways with which they feel most effective.

This is also inherently related to new forms of social interaction and mass media available to young women in San Cristobal. As Appadurai argues, mass media provides new means and resources through which subjective individuals can imagine new forms of self and new worlds, which may then lead to new interpretations of identity and new forms of social interaction (1996: 3). Indeed the globalisation of communications through electronic media has had huge impacts on subjective experiences of social interaction through creating imaginary (and real) links between anonymous



(and known) individuals (Larrain 2000: 40, Carter 2004, 2005, Garcia et al. 2009, Kendall 2002, Koufaris 2001). Internet programs, such as MSN messenger, metroflog, and facebook are essential to the maintenance of social relations between youths in San Cristobal. These programs allow youths to speak and interact with each other in settings away from the home and provide means for expressing that which they might feel uncomfortable discussing in person. Indeed, this is one of the main ways in which young women here often express their experiences, fears and worries as well as giving advice about men, relationships and sexual encounters. One girl (aged 18) often spoke to me on MSN messenger about problems with her boyfriend, even asking for sexual health advice. But whenever we met face to face, she was extremely shy about discussing such subjects openly, in fact, never bringing them up until she could speak to me online. These young women can discuss things such as sexual experiences and worries and ask for romantic advice from friends without feeling as uncomfortable as they might do in a face-to-face situation. Online communities also provide new ways for pursuing romantic relations and flirtations with young men and expressing their sexual desires, away from a face-to-face context. Thus, through the use of cyber-space, new possibilities for social and romantic interaction amongst youths arise. Here then the internet allows both young men and women to expand their social networks and the content of expression between friends by creating a relatively unregulated space in which social interactions can occur, and where they are not obliged to maintain certain kinds of behaviour. However, the fact that this occurs in an anonymous space away from face-to-face interaction creates the potential for the expression of intimacy and for close interaction that is perhaps not possible in everyday situations.

### Negotiating economic (in)dependency

Young women in San Cristobal are experiencing changes in the expression of their femininity in various ways, perhaps most significantly, like in other Latin American contexts, in the increasing importance they place on expressing their support of vernacular feminisms when discussing their gendered plans for the future (Anzaldua 1990, Bacigalupo 2003, Eber 1999, Kempen 2001, Moser 2004, Richards 2004). For many young women, this is a way of separating themselves from the discourses of older generations around 'proper' gender roles, and they view this as a way of asserting their own modern identities. Many make it clear that their main ambition for the future is to be 'independent', emphasising how important it is for them to be seen as equal to men and to be able to live their lives in ways which are fulfilling to them. In the words of Lisa (15), "The main thing is, I don't want to fall under the rule of any man. I want to be an independent woman, I want to have my degree, my job, and be independent". However, in asserting these identities they also make it clear that more traditional female roles still have an important place in their conceptions of the future, represented by their strong desire for marriage and children. Lisa also argued that "Getting married and having children is also really important for me, one of the most important things for me as woman". Thus, along with ambitions for independence and self-sufficiency, marriage and children are an integral part of the future as envisioned by young women. Girls here wish to be recognised as individuals and women by their own independent achievements now and in the future, but they also do not wish to separate themselves from men, marriage and family. Therefore, motherhood is still a very important part of female identity. They are able to combine ambitions for family in the long run with individual ambitions for independence by expressing them on a context-dependent basis. Rosa (aged 17) was always very vocal in school and amongst her friends in talking about her plans for the future. She would often say, "I want to be a lawyer, that's the most important thing for me right now, it's what I need to focus on after school, I want to look like I'm an important woman when I leave the house". However, when she invited me to dinner at home with her parents one evening, she told her mother to sit and relax while she cooked dinner and in the meantime cleaned the house. When I asked her

if she always cooked and cleaned at home, she said, "Of course, if I'm going to have a husband one day and my own family, I need to know how to look after them. I don't want anyone saying that I'm a bad mother". When I asked if she thought she would have to choose between having a family and her career ambitions in the future, she said, "I don't know. I hope not. When I'm at school, I feel I know what I want – I want to carry on studying and things like that. But then when I'm home, and I'm helping my mum, I see how important that is too... and that's just how things are. But, well, if I marry a man who helps me too, maybe I won't have to decide...". This represents a shift in gendered ideology but also represents a form of continuity with 'traditional' cultural ideas regarding the family. Most girls balance these views on context-dependent bases, depending on with whom they interact when expressing these identities, and the persona they wish to portray when doing so. Notions of femininity here then become context-dependent.

Similarly, Gutmann notes how men in Mexico City now often categorise themselves as "ni macho, ni mandilon" (neither macho nor controlled by women) (1996: 222). He argues that in Mexico today, there are actually multiple masculinities that do not conform to typical macho stereotypes (1996: 12). A similar situation exists in Chiapas, where there has also been a shift in the ideas of masculinity expressed by young men in San Cristobal, who are very emphatic in negating macho stereotypes of Mexican men. Young men like Gerardo, (aged 16) were keen to impress that "I'm not macho" or, in the words of Isaias (aged 19), "It's not good to be a macho". When asked to define their ideas of 'macho', they talk about men who beat their wives and who drink a lot. Instead, they emphasise that a real man should be *caballeroso* (gentlemanly) and should treat women as their equal. Similarly, Hirsch found in Jalisco that Mexican men who today claim they do not wish to be machista, wish to share obligations and power with their wives in relationships of emotional closeness and intimacy (2003: 146). However, this is also a point of conflict for many young men in San Cristobal who, whilst stressing the fact that they believe women should contribute to household income in marriage and responsibilities should be shared equally, also stress that the final responsibility for providing for a family still rests with men. As Gerardo (15) describes, "Well, it's important that the woman contributes too, you have to share things between you. But also, for me as a man, I'm responsible for looking after my family and making sure that they have everything they need". So they experience conflicts between what are viewed as traditional masculine responsibilities and their own perceived modern roles, and they are having to actively negotiate these conflicts on their own terms.

Young men are also perhaps more willing to share in domestic tasks with women due to their own experiences of living alone in the city. Young people (both men and women) from rural Mayan villages are often obliged to move to larger urban areas, such as San Cristobal de las Casas, in order to complete their education from age 14 upwards. This may be because higher education is not available in their locality after secondary school or because the schools in San Cristobal are seen to be of a higher quality than those in rural areas. It may also be because youths actively choose to move to the city as an opportunity to move away from home and experience urban life for themselves, a desire often increased when they have older siblings who have already moved to San Cristobal. However, when youths move to the city to complete their education, it takes them away from home and their parents. They may find themselves alone in the city, and for the first time they have to depend on their own abilities to survive financially. This is when siblings or friends may group together to rent a house/room communally, whilst most are obliged to combine work with school in order to survive. This means that young men need to learn how to cook, clean, and maintain a household, rather than rely on their nearest female relative to do it for them. A conversation that took place in the home village of a young male participant illustrates this. Dolores had recently sent her eldest 2 sons to San Cristobal to carry on studying, but when her sister (Gladiis) and nephew (Jorge) (who had come home from San Cristobal on a visit) came by visiting one afternoon, they told Dolores:

**Jorge to Dolores:** *You know Aunty, Matteo and Jose's room is really bad... they don't clean it at all, it smells of damp and it looks like there are rats there too... they hardly eat anything either. All they eat are tortillas and nothing else... they don't even know how to cook. I tell them to come and eat at my place because of that.*

**Gladis to Dolores:** *Didn't you teach them how to cook before they left? I showed all my boys how to cook rice, eggs chicken and stew before they went to San Cris – I told them, no one's going to look after you there, I won't be there, you have to learn to live alone. And they did, and well, now they're ok*

**Dolores:** *Oh well I didn't think of that... at least they could eat out, right... buy it from a street stall... But Jorge, when you go back tell them they have to clean their room, ok? Show them how, I'll send you with some soaps as well... they can't live there like pigs.*

In addition, like many young men brought into close contact with foreign women in the contexts of a popular local tourist industry (see Loizos & Papataxiarchis, 1991), young men in San Cristobal are also experiencing conflicts in how they conduct relationships with Mexican women in contrast to foreign tourists to the city. Many male youths who work in the service industry often talk about the differences between these women. They view foreign women in the area (mostly European and American) as being 'easy' in terms of sexual relations. Some had short-term romances with foreign women but in the end, they said, the women always leave. In contrast with Mexican women, many young men talk about how they have to work hard to 'seduce' them, and how it is much more of a commitment to move on to having sexual relations with Mexican girls. Arturo, (aged 19) argued that "With a foreigner, after a few days you're already intimate, but with Mexican women you have to wait weeks for that". Arturo also contrasted the two in terms of the economic investment involved, "The thing is, with Mexican girls you have to pay for everything, but with foreigners each pays their own part, so the relationship is more equal". This in some ways relates to the pressures young men on low wages feel on having to pay for Mexican women to live up to a *caballeroso* image, and following the tradition of the provider, despite the fact they also quote economic equality in their perceptions of their own relationships. Similarly, although many of the Mexican women interviewed stressed their desires for economic independence away from men, they also expect boyfriends to pay and be *caballeroso* – thus, again stressing conflicts inherent in the changing the gendered perceptions of relationships. Therefore, like many young women in San Cristobal, young men are also experiencing shifts in their gendered identities and in their conceptions of masculinities, and they are having to balance the conflicts inherent in these, deciding for themselves which aspect of their identities they wish to express, and the context in which they wish to do so.

Therefore, whilst there are undoubtedly new forms of gendered identities and relationships occurring amongst Mexican youths in San Cristobal, there are also conflicts inherent within these. These conflicts occur in a negotiation of perceived 'modern' and 'traditional' gendered identities and relationships, and are worked by youths to be able to co-exist within an individual, expressed on a context-dependent basis. These changes in the forms of romantic relationships between youths and in their interpretations of their gendered identities, roles and perspectives are inherently related to wider changes occurring in various aspects of Mexican society. The social world of youths in San Cristobal is changing in comparison to that of older generations, as youths adapt to this and indeed generate it, the process leads to new pathways on which youths negotiate their identities.

## Conclusion

Adolescence is a time when the social roles experienced by children begin to change, and when moves from the dependency and asexuality of childhood often occur. Youths today undergoing this transition do so in the context of extensive global, cultural, social, economic and political change, and they

have to negotiate their changing identities in the context of these processes (Montgomery 2009: 201, 211). Anthropologists have also begun to note the importance and impact of youths' interpretations of modernity in effecting cultural change (see Herdt & Leavitt 1998, Honwana & De Boeck 2005, Montgomery Burr & Woodhead 2003, Qvortrup 2005). In their study of 'street youth' in Puebla, Mexico, Herrera, Jones & Thomas de Benítez (2009) argue that youth identity is highly fluid and extends beyond essentialised categories and is tied to other processes such as "consumption, national identity and 'being in the city'" (2009: 67). Thus, in the context of social change it becomes difficult to articulate a singular identity and, therefore, youths take on multiple selves. In addition, Cole and Durham argue that it has become apparent that youth create discourses that are inherently linked to local processes of social change in the context of globalisation (2008). They do so as active agents who continuously negotiate new cultural forms. As Flanagan (in Cole & Durham 2008) argues, youths provide a valuable lens through which to view the future given that this is influenced by the negotiations and possibilities imagined by youth today. However, though some valuable work has been done on how youths engage with processes of modernity and globalisation and on the role youths play in forms of social change, anthropological engagement with the subject is still relatively low. Given the agency, creativity and discursiveness of youths in their interactions with these processes of modernity and globalisation (Ugor 2009), much more anthropological engagement with the subject is needed.

In San Cristobal de las Casas, changing forms of identity construction amongst youths are negotiated through wider structural processes and are contrasted and accommodated within traditional gendered perceptions. Youths form their identity in the context of social change, but their interpretations of identity and life also act to create social change in themselves. They are subject to many different processes (migration, tourism, media, technologies), both local and global, which influence their conceptions and performances of their gendered identities. But at the same time, youths actively negotiate and dispute their identities in relation to these issues. This is leading to discussion, negotiation and performance of changing identities and 'youth culture' in the region. This places youths at the forefront of localised social and cultural change in the context of globalisation and global modernities. In San Cristobal, these processes combine to create new forms of romantic relations amongst youths, along with the constant renegotiation of the ideas of masculinity and femininity. Therefore, gendered identities are both actively constructed in the pursuit of individual perceptions of modernity and influenced by processes of social change. However, they are also still heavily influenced by traditional perceptions of gendered roles, meaning individuals often balance and accommodate a number of conflicting gendered identities within themselves, often expressing them on a context-dependent basis.

Therefore, I would argue that these gendered identities are actively negotiated and constructed by individuals themselves as they attempt to accommodate changes in the social order, and the conflicts this creates within their own perceptions of those identities. Through this, notions of gendered roles and identities become fluid, constructed, and subject to negotiation by active individuals in a context-dependent way. They are dependent upon the individual interpretations of these changing social worlds and the place of the individual within these.

Many theorists describe how processes of globalisation lead to stronger pronouncements of local identities and ethnicities, with accompanying demands of autonomy and the redefinitions of boundaries (see Burawoy 2000, Geschiere & Meyer 2000: 602). I argue that the local economic, political and social changes brought about by globalisation and modernity greatly affect how notions of gendered identities are negotiated by individuals. However, in the case of youths in Chiapas, personal and communal identities do not in fact become bounded but are linked to processual and constant negotiations within a wider global context and, therefore, constantly reflect and are negotiated within social change. We must, therefore, look also at the other side of globalisation and at how people interact and interpret 'new horizons' which it opens up.

This is especially true in the case of youth interpretations of localised modernities. At the threshold of entering the adult world, youths interpret the forms and situations of changing economies in highly individualised ways, judging for themselves the best strategies to follow in planning for the future. At the same time, they take in, interpret and negotiate ideologies of modernity that are aided by mass media, new technologies and new forms of wider social interaction, which occur through globalisation and so often interpret new forms of gendered identifications. In this way, youths plan for the future in the context of highly changing social worlds but at the same time further this change themselves by constructing their gendered identities in newly formed ways. This is in no way an uncontested and unvaried process, but it places youths at the forefront of localised social and cultural change in the context of globalisation and global modernities.

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