

**Kellogg-Kroc Undergraduate Research Grant
Project Report**

Barren Beliefs: The Female Sterilization Campaign in the Peruvian Sierra

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My initial motivations to perform research abroad one year ago were rooted in examining the overarching effects of globalization, particularly in the areas of health and medicine. While surveying some of the perceived successes of projects integrating modern and indigenous practices in Peruvian healthcare, I encountered some chilling reports of the Peruvian Ministry of Health's practices to control maternal mortality and population growth, namely a sterilization campaign on hundreds of thousands of people in the Sierra region of Peru. For many, the sterilization was against their will and has had a serious impact on their lives. Moreover, the general unawareness and my personal ignorance to these events in a country for which I had felt such nostalgia and admiration drove me to seek out explanations, ramifications, and subsequently, the state of family planning there today.

I entered into the project aware of the probable low tone of the research and tried to brace myself for the details which I could potentially expose. The often difficult results from day-to-day and interview-to-interview would sometimes stop me in my tracks and force me to question why I was there and what I wished to accomplish. While I uncovered the lack of freedoms for many in the Sierra, I discovered the greatness and power of my own liberties as a woman in the United States. The first few weeks were filled with conflicting emotions ranging from the desire to throw up my arms in confusion and frustration and wanting to reach out my arms and share my surplus of

liberties in my life. But no one leaves Notre Dame an idle pessimist or an impractical dreamer; rather, we come out of our education agents of positive and pragmatic action. My task was to reveal the story of what happened, and subsequently what is happening in Peru as told by the people themselves laced with their sentiments, their passions, praises and provocations. I could not serve as an arbitrator nor an educator, but I could function as a recorder of their voices.

What to do after I collected hours of taped conversations and pages of observations? No other research pursuit had left me with such a preoccupation. Previous scientific laboratory research led to an objective and unbiased understanding of cellular function. An anthropological investigation of emotional coping with breast cancer led to a book publication and two interviewees now working as emotional-coping liaisons between patients and medical doctors. Essentially, those research endeavors lent themselves to concrete, substantial results. I could not and cannot undo what has passed in Peru ten years ago, but how could I reasonably and effectively provide an understanding for the events? Could I, as a novice anthropologist, realistically expect strangers to discuss these issues with me? Furthermore, I grappled with how I could resolve the fact that many barriers to family planning are cultural factors that have been ingrained in that society for hundreds of years. I began to place the data into larger frameworks to try to explain the state of family planning.

I had the good fortune to experience some sudden and influential moments during the research which forced me to reach another level of realization about the topic at hand. Although all informants offered invaluable information, it was during an impromptu interview with a street vendor which compelled me to evaluate my mission and face the

next day filled with renewed fervor and concern for the matter. Prior to the interview, I was striving to view the research in the grand-scale via political, economic, religious, and cultural systems. As my files filled with data, I shuffled quotes and statistics into their respective categories. And yet as I was walking and observing on that particularly cold night, I purchased some gifts and then began a conversation with an eighteen year old who had a young baby wrapped on her back. She and her baby wore meager protection against the biting cold. That evening, she was to return home alone to a small apartment in an unsafe neighborhood because her partner left her for another woman. With her parents deceased and no siblings in the area, she also had no family. Barely a teen when she gave birth to her daughter, she was forced to stop attending school, therefore leaving her without the education necessary to obtain a decent job. At that moment I realized that I had found it too easy to place the research into larger concepts and lose sight of the people and their daily struggles. It filled me with a newfound appreciation and sensitivity for the research and set the tone for the remainder of my time in Peru. The research was much more individual and I had to consider each life story rather than deduce outcomes from larger systematic paradigms.

Contrary to many social stereotypes, the topic at hand was not at all taboo for the Cusqueña culture. Furthermore, many people were zealous about sharing their sentiments which became yet another reason for me to be enthusiastic and eager to obtain data and results. Family planning and child rearing conversations filled countless casual conversations at the lunch hour, in the marketplace, in the taxi cabs, and on the streets. Each moment of the day felt productive as I constantly noted the open conversations

shared around me. Fortunately due to the ease of rapport-building and the openness of the informants in Peru, data collection went smoothly.

I was forewarned by many anthropologists that research projects can sometimes change drastically once in the field, but I found that the wealth of information available caused me to focus in on more specific factors such as the decision-making process to use or not use modern contraceptives and, overall, how sexual decisions are formed.

Expecting to find my research within the realm of social and cultural systems, I was surprised to find that many answers were rooted in the materialist sense. Thus, many factors of family planning and the use of modern contraception are based in what is best economically for an individual and/or his or her family. I questioned how economics works into family planning from the start of the research, though I was expecting much more of a concentration on sociocultural and heritage roles. However, the prevalence of economic situations seemed to govern over many family planning decisions, which aided me in developing a personalized cost-benefit analysis weighing both material and cultural factors.

This research falls into the realm of critical medical anthropology; therefore, the analysis of this research must be centered on an evaluation of the current state of family planning, and I will offer suggestions on how Peru can see an accretion in informed and healthy contraceptive decisions. The sterilization campaign, though not in its past force, persists today in various forms. It would be futile to try to reverse the crimes against humanity that have passed but what I plan and hope for this research is that it reaches health care practitioners, human rights groups, and politicians interested in bettering health care in Peru. Part of this will be facilitated by my presentation of the research

findings at the 2007 American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting where I hope to interest fellow medical anthropologists to further the understanding and awareness of the state of family planning in Peru. I have also already been in contact with human rights groups based in Lima, Peru investigating the sterilization campaign and its effects. Together, I hope we can expose the events to ensure that the people of Peru can retain their rights to their own family planning decisions.

Above all, the ability every day to forge connections has been one of the most rewarding of my life. That constant human connection made the world feel infinitely small. As cliché as that may sound, when I paused to consider the deep connections and trust that was built in light of the vast differences between my life and the lives of those I interviewed, I saw the tenderness and impact of realizing that human connection. Although some people were pleased and even thanked me for studying the state of family planning in the Sierra of Peru, I am forever indebted to them for trusting me with emotional accounts and for always making me feel like kin.

The Kellogg research grant not only facilitated an enriching summer abroad, but also more significantly developed my passion and skill in my desired profession. I am about to spend months deep in analysis, presentation, and personal contemplation of the research. But this work will not be over as this upcoming year ends. I cannot turn away from what I have learned. Rather, this has become a part of my life and my experience this summer and has helped me prove to myself that this line of work is what I believe in and what I have found to be the most fulfilling. Thank you!