May Our Past Not Be Their Future: 
Local Perspectives on Factors Contributing to Changing 
Family Size in San Jorge La Laguna

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Introduction

It was my third week living in San Jorge but the undefined feeling that roamed within my head and stomach every time someone would yell from the kitchen, “Daca, a comer!” was still very much with me. I would stop whatever I was doing, slip into my shoes and present myself in the kitchen, only to find that I was once again the first to arrive. It became clearer and clearer every day that “A comer!” really meant “A comer (en 10 minutos).” But I was never alone for long, as someone always made sure I was served immediately, and then the chicken in my plate would keep me company. Then I would be left wondering what the family dinner had in store for me that night. That particular night, the family dinner gave me enough food for thought to think about until my very last day in San Jorge. As we were eating dinner in the dimly lit kitchen, with the flame of the candle dancing to the sound of buzzing flies and falling rain, I could understand from the few Spanish words that popped out like fish in a sea of Kaqchikel that the topic of the night was to be malnutrition. I made sure to look particularly interested so that the family would make an effort to translate for me. This was another thing that fed into that undefined feeling that roamed within my head and stomach before dinners, the daily negotiation of my role and identity at the dinner table. This time I was successful in becoming a fully pledged member of the conversation and understanding that the obvious sentiment around the table is that malnutrition is a huge and continuing problem in Guatemala. The situation is reaching tragic proportions with children dying across the country every day. I asked what the situation was in San Jorge and Luisa told me that it fortunately has the least cases of malnutrition, the reason being that people here are more aware and watch what they eat. What’s more is that mothers stay at home and take care of the kids, making sure they’re well fed. In many other communities, however, the women have to leave for the day to go to work or sell at the market, and no one is there to take proper care of the children. Here in San Jorge, on the other hand, the majority of women work from home as part of a variety of networks based around ‘mostacilla’, or beadwork, and sewing.

Two days later, we would reunite in the kitchen for an evening of coffee and ‘pan dulce’ that would bring us back to the topic and Juana would tell me about her meeting in Sololá with the ‘facilitadores de salud’, doctors and organizers from around the region. The focus of the meeting was malnutrition. Juana would also tell me that the main solution proposed by one of the doctors heading the meeting was ‘planificación familiar’, or family planning. This particular doctor feels that people need to plan and think about how many children. It is feasible for one to have and take proper care of in light of the economic circumstances at both the family and national levels. People have been having and many continue to have many children without thinking about their future or their own possibilities. The meeting got heated as people brought up a number of problems and obstacles that stand in the way of such a solution and make it
a challenge to realize the various communities. Some believe contraceptives and preventative measures are bad for them. For others, the problem is that their husbands do not approve of it. Juana says this is often because men fear their wives will have affairs with other men since they don’t have to fear pregnancy. Her face scrunches up in disapproval to add emphasis to her words. “There’s a lot of this machismo. Men control women. Even if a woman learns about family planning and decides to use contraceptives, none of it really matters if her husband won’t allow it.”

According to the members at the meeting, the other obstacle is religion. Some of them reject the mere concept of family planning because the Church deems it a sin. Juana tells me that the priests and bishops prohibit such ideas to this day. She waves her hand in front of her in rejection of the idea. Shaking her head, she tells me, “While they make money and have their houses and nice things, they have never thought about helping a hungry child. It’s easy for them to tell women they can’t use contraceptives and that they should have as many children as God sends them without ever considering whether the family can afford to feed another child and keep it healthy. But when they see a hungry or malnourished child, they don’t offer them bread or water. They only tell them that they will pray for them and that it is in God’s hands. They don’t do anything but tell people what they can and cannot do.” She enthusiastically continues recounting the events of the meeting. Someone mentioned a Canadian who worked with a health organization here and said that the saddest thing about Guatemala was that there was not family planning. He said that religion was largely to be blamed for this reality and that he couldn’t really understand this because he believes that God would rather see fewer children on this earth than an abundance of children living in misery, sad, ill, hungry and malnourished.

After the exchange of opinions and ideas, a solution was proposed that all those present were to talk to the people in their communities and share the information at a local level. Each ‘vigilante de salud’ and ‘facilitador de salud’ was to dedicate his or herself to the task of going to the houses they were responsible for and talk to both women and men about the issues and encourage them to attend the workshops on family planning that would soon be organized. She tells me that the reason the ‘vigilantes de salud’ are asked to talk to the people in their communities personally is because they know their own people, their lifestyles and their needs. At this moment, I think back to the many times Juana had mentioned to me in the last three weeks that she knows her people, and their needs, worries, problems and situations. ‘Es mi gente’ she would say with conviction, placing the palm of her hand across her chest, the gentle expression of her face showing that what she genuinely feels this way. But many challenges and obstacles line the path of the community’s future (for all of the above reasons), and Juana emphasizes that everyone in the community needs to take the initiative, including the priests and the men. Even she recognizes how difficult it will be and that it won’t happen overnight. Rather, it’s going to take a lot of time and effort. But alas, it is time to prepare dinner, though I already felt heavy with food for thought.

The “Insider” Perspective

Upon arrival in San Jorge, I became interested in studying the education of women in the community. I quickly learned that a literacy class had recently been initiated for the local women and that a sewing class was already fully running and enjoying even greater popularity. The question sprang in my mind, “Why
would the sewing class be more popular among these women? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each program?” However, as is all too often the case with fieldwork, an unforeseen surprise came my way. The sewing program was terminated at the end of last year, with the last group of women having graduated and gotten their sewing machines. It didn’t take long before it occurred to me that my conversation with Juana about malnutrition had already inspired me with an interest that would soon develop into a complex research project. Furthermore, I saw it as all too related to my initial interest in the education of women because the plan proposed at the meeting of health officials, ‘vigilantes’ and ‘facilitadores’ in Sololá was to educate the local community and further promote family planning. Would this work? How might this be perceived by the community? As these questions began to take shape, I decided to explore the changes that had already been taking place in the community in regard to family size and local perspectives on family planning. The purpose of the study was 1) to identify whether there have, in fact, been changes in family size; 2) to explore local perspectives on factors contributing to change in family size; and finally 3) to explore local perspectives on family planning. By concentrating primarily on people’s stated factors contributing to changes in family size today, I hoped to gain insight into how local efforts to further promote family planning would be perceived and accepted by the local community. How people already perceive the present situation and family planning can be an indicator as to how well the solution proposed at the meeting in Sololá would play out at the local level.

The Community of San Jorge La Laguna: A Children’s Town

San Jorge la Laguna, located in the Department of Sololá in the Municipality of the same name, is one of the poorest communities in one of the poorest countries in Latin America, Guatemala. Nestled in the mountain slope overlooking Lake Atitlán, it is home to about 2550 people, and approximately 450 families. Exploring the residential sectors essentially means exploring the entirety of the town and walking through a maze of cobblestone pathways, dirt roads and stairways, and little inconspicuous dirt paths that always seem to disappear just as quickly they appear, leaving you doubting that you can ever really see it all. Officially divided into 19 sectors, the community is built around a central plaza, which serves above all as a soccer field and is practically the only area in the community not crowded with houses. However, the now serious lack of land in San Jorge may encroach onto the future of soccer in the community, unless some other solution is found. Then where will the children play?

After lunch, my little “brother” Lucas wanted to play some basketball and I was eager to get out and see what was going on outside. Juana was walking behind us with her head buried in the textbook she uses to teach her literacy class. Today, she’ll only be teaching from 2:30 to 4pm because the women will be getting back late from the market and because it’s Father’s Day and they need to prepare for the humble family festivities. As Lucas and I walk across the empty football field, I take a good look at San Jorge. Where are the mothers? Where are the fathers? Where are the adults that run this town? But alas, it seems that today San Jorge is a children’s town. That’s all I see. Children… A group of 2 or 3 young ladies (about 6-7 years old at most) walk their little brothers and sisters across the field, a family of little people. In front of the preschool, about 10 boys are playing with marbles, the dirt sneaking in behind their nails. The older guys are hanging around a car which they soon drive off with. It rattles off into the distance, leaving
behind a rising cloud of dust and dirt particles. The little San Jorge “women” pass by us slowly as I teach Lucas how to shoot. As the ball leaves my hands, they follow it with their gaze, and if it happens to go in, they look at me and smile. I wonder what kind of impression this will leave on their little lives and almost naively think that by seeing a girl shoot a basketball and score, it will instill a sense of “girl power” in them. They walk away still looking at me, sometimes mustering up enough courage to shyly greet me. Who is this strange girl? All the way in the distance, I see two young boys sitting by one of the soccer goals, whistling, chatting, and looking at one of the boys’ scars. They whistle to the guy standing by the water fountain flanking the basketball court and he whistles back. A young girl fills her blue and white jug with water from the fountain, observing what’s going on around her and leaning casually against the stone wall. She doesn’t talk to the boys and only goes about her business until she can be on her way again. At times, she gets distracted watching me and Lucas play as the water continues to flow into the jug. Behind her, a young guy of about 15 is sweeping the inside of the large fountain pool. Today is the first time I see it empty. By now, the soccer field is occupied by the group of guys who started out playing with marbles not so long ago. They’re only taking up one side of the court and are just running around with no apparent plan or sense of direction. Their shirts and pants are dirty and whenever the ball hits the ground and bounces up a little, a cloud of dust rises. Sports are a dirty activity here. I look down at my hands and realize that my fingers have automatically positioned themselves like “cat claws” for the last half hour. The film of dirt is thick and feels even thicker. It won’t let my fingers touch. As I write this, I can still feel a film of soap from all the scrubbing I had to do right after. And as the clouds come in, towering and gray over the little “mountain community”, there are still no adults in sight. A few walked out of the church, the women dressed in dark blue with colorful blue headbands wrapped around their heads. Another man with a backpack almost seemed to sneak out of the church. But that was it. It’s market day. It’s working day. It’s Father’s Day. Because and despite all this, today San Jorge is a children’s town. And I feel like I’m the oldest person out.

When I leave San Jorge, I will remember it above all as a children’s town. Many times that I strolled through the community or walked hurriedly to an interview or literacy class, it would seem surreal to me that there were hardly any adults in sight but that there were children everywhere: boys playing soccer or marbles, girls walking in groups in their colorful huipiles and Cortes, boys playing at the arcade, older sisters walking their younger siblings by the hand, young girls filling blue and white jugs with water at the fountain, and children dotting the Church steps flanking the central plaza. When I would finally reach the highway, they were but little dots in the distance giving life to an otherwise sleepy little town.

I knew that most of the women were in their houses, preparing lunch and one of the many daily batches of tortillas, washing clothes or dishes, taking care of their little ones, or perhaps drawing an array of colorful beads onto their needles and threads in hope of earning a little bit of extra money. But where were all the men? One day, I was determined to go out and find men to interview but my host brother Jose advised me not to even try. He told me that it would be very hard for me to find men to talk to in San Jorge during the day. It’s really very simple. They’re all working somewhere else. There is no work in San Jorge because no one has their own agricultural land or business and very few have tend, the twenty or so little, colorful grocery stores that dot the landscape. There are also very few opportunities for construction work seeing as how there is nowhere to build. The town has almost reached its capacity and there is no more space to
build a house. The result is that the men have to find work outside the town, either around the Lake Atitlán region or all the way in Guatemala City, in which case they are gone all week. They leave late Sunday evening and come back either on Friday evening or early Saturday morning to be with their families. Even those who work in the region have a six-day working week and only get home at six or seven in the evening. The reality, he says, is that there is a lack of money and very, very few job opportunities. People take whatever they can get because one can’t be too picky. He shrugs his shoulders and tells me, “Asia as la Vida en San Jorge” (That’s how life is in San Jorge).

A Poor Community in a Poor Country

According to Figueroa et al. (2006), Guatemala has one of the highest levels of social and economic inequality in Latin America and is, by far, the most populous country in Central America with an estimated population of 13.2 million inhabitants. Furthermore, they suggest that the country also stands out for its largely rural population (54% of Guatemalans compared with 31% of Central Americans overall) and its exceptionally large and diverse indigenous population (indigenous peoples make up 43% of the total population). Despite the “peace dividend” which has started to bring about gradual reductions in poverty after nearly forty years of civil conflict that ended in 1996, the majority of Guatemalans still subsist below the poverty line. “The most vulnerable segment of the population - indigenous people - is even more destitute: Three-quarters of the indigenous population live in poverty, and one-quarter in abject poverty (i.e., cannot afford food alone). Indigenous Guatemalans trail in all measures of socioeconomic development, health and education” (Figueroa et al. 2006). Yet despite all this, or perhaps because of it, Guatemala is growing at an annual rate of 2.6% and has one of the highest fertility rates in all of Latin America - 4.4 lifetime births per woman - in addition to one of the lowest rates of contraceptive use in all of Latin America (43% of women of reproductive age who are in union) (Figueroa et al. 2006). Figueroa et al. argue that poverty and high fertility are very much linked, and that early child bearing is likely to take place among poor women, creating further economic and social disadvantage. Furthermore, young mothers tend to have bigger families than those who choose to postpone starting a family, and aside from facing increasing difficulty in terms of moving out of poverty, their educational and consequent employment prospects are also severely limited, as is their ability to adopt a direct role in determining their and their children’s future. However, as was briefly mentioned, Ad sera and Menendez (2005) argue that economic instability may, in fact, bring about a decrease in fertility rates, a phenomenon that has certainly been witnessed in most, if not all, Latin American countries in the last few decades. Guatemala is no exception, though the decline in fertility rates has been slower here that in most of Latin America. Within this context then, it is important to look at how these factors play out on the local level, and whether the poverty and necessity in San Jorge la Laguna have led to higher or lower fertility rates. Depending on what the trend is, it is also important to look at both the local and more global factors driving these trends.

Methodology

My study was based on a cognitive approach and primarily concentrated on people’s stated perspectives on changing family size and factors contributing to this change. The data was collected through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. I interviewed 42 individuals, including 10 males and 32
females aged 15-49. 11 of these were unmarried and without children. Two males were not from San Jorge but own and run a local store and internet café in the community. I began my research with six in-depth interviews with local women, which generated data for my preliminary questionnaire. I then conducted a free-list/pile sort, which provided the groundwork for another questionnaire, further formal and informal interviews, and themes for a literature search. By looking at literature on trends in fertility rates and family planning, I was better able to situate my study of San Jorge within a wider national context.

**Preliminary Interviews and Questionnaire**

The first series of in-depth interviews were open-ended and were intended to provide a general idea of the kinds of changes that have been taking place over time in terms of trends in fertility, marriage, family relations, and the factors contributing to these changes. The first questionnaire provided information on changing family trends in the community and was also included as part of more in-depth interviews. The results, representing a total of ten respondents will be summarized in the data section below.

1) Do you think family today is different from family in the past?
2) In general, at what age did women marry in the past?
3) At what age do they marry nowadays?
4) At what age did a woman generally have her first child in the past?
5) At what age does a woman have her first child nowadays?
6) Do you think women today are having more children, fewer children, or the same number of children as in the past?
7) Do you think many women are using family planning methods?
8) How many children did your mother have?
9) When was she married?
10) How many children do you have?
11) Do you plan to have more children?
12) When did you marry?
13) Age/Sex/Employment/Education/Religion

**Free list/Pile sort**

Thirteen individuals, male and female, were asked to list the factors they considered or would consider before having a child or another child, depending on their current family situation. This produced a list of factors that formed the basis of the pile sort. Twelve individuals, eight males and four females, were asked to place 41 factors [see Table 1] under any one of five categories (Very Important, Important, Not Very Important, Not Important, No Opinion). Once the pile sort was complete, I would ask each individual to pick their five most important factors and explain their choices. This would lead into an interview focused primarily on their choices, but also covering a set of themes that I wanted to address in each interview. The pile sort provided valuable data on the factors that were most commonly considered most/least important,
and generated the themes that would form the basis of this paper. The results of the pile/sort can be found in [Charts 1 and 2].

**Questionnaires #2 and #3**

The free list/pile sorts formed the basis of my second questionnaire, which I needed in order to obtain information from a wide among women and I felt it was inappropriate to approach a potential informant by asking if they are able to read or if they went to school. For this reason, questionnaire #2 was made to resemble the free list/pile sort. It was conducted with seven women attending a literacy class and ranging from the ages of 16-41. Though I decided to modify the questionnaire, since it did not seem effective enough to ask informants to decide whether a factor was important in yes/no form, the results should not be disregarded as they have much in common with the results of the third questionnaire and the pile sorts. For the third questionnaire, nine individuals, including eight females and one male from the ages of 23-41, were asked to list the factors they felt were most important to consider before having a child or another child [Table 1]. They were then be asked to rate the importance of 21 factors included in the questionnaire. Six additional questions were included in the interview to garner more information on specific issues and themes. The results of the questionnaire can be found in [Chart 3].

**Limitations**

I encountered a number of limitations throughout my research, including time constraints and language barriers. Because the direction of my research changed completely three weeks into the field school program, I was left with only four weeks to begin and complete the research. Only when the end of the program drew frighteningly near was I able to see the impact that each new day and interview had on the direction and meaning of my research. This made it all the more clear that the end was not, in fact, the end but only a beginning. This is important to consider when considering the research data and results presented here. Another barrier was language. Though I was able to communicate effectively in Spanish with many of my informants, the inability to speak Kaqchikel made it impossible to interview certain people in the community. Furthermore, the varying Spanish-speaking ability of some of my informants sometimes made it difficult to convey the intended meaning of my questions and certainly affected the depth and subtlety of the responses I was able to obtain. Furthermore, I ran into some problems with terminology that will be discussed further on in the paper.

A significant limitation throughout my research was the very reality of life in San Jorge. Many women that I approached in the streets or in front of their homes told me they were too busy to answer any questions. They said they had a lot of work to do in the house, taking care of the children, preparing lunch, and so on. Others simply refused saying they were not interested. Nonetheless, I was able to interview 32 women. The problem of finding men was significantly greater, seeing as how the great majority is gone for the day, working outside the community. They would get back at six or seven to have dinner with their families and rest. Their only free day is Sunday, which is dedicated to family, housework, or Church. Thus, I was only able to interview ten males, two of which were from Sololá.

**The Importance of Children**
Before examining why people no longer want to have many children, it is important to address the way people in the community feel about children. Despite the growing trend toward smaller families, as perceived by my informants, I did not encounter anyone who said that they didn’t want any children. The interviews, questionnaires and pile sorts all indicated that having children is very important to people. Children are valued for various reasons, such as that they are able to help in the house, they can work and contribute to the family once they finish with school, and they can be provide future help and support for their parents. However, it seems people are also becoming more aware of the reciprocal relationship between children and parents, and as one of my male informants tells me, “It depends on us whether our children will be able to help us. One has to make a plan for tomorrow and think about the future of the children, their health, studies, and resources. Later on, when they remember the love and care of their parents, only then will they be there to help.” Another very important reason for having children was that they are good company for mothers and are seen to be the happiness of the home. Another male informant tells me, “Life without children is sad. Children bring happiness into one’s life. What’s more is that, if the couple is not speaking or the two are fighting, they have problems if they don’t have children.” Several of my informants suggested the same, that children are the glue of a family, creating a stronger bond between a wife and husband.

A Decrease in Family Size

As will be seen, it is the very importance people attribute to children that also accounts for the importance of having fewer children. The responses to the questionnaires and interviews all indicated that there has, in fact, been a significant decrease in family size in San Jorge. Whereas women before generally had seven to twelve children according to my data, the average number of children in each family today is two to four, with the maximum number mentioned by the majority of my informants being four. Furthermore, when the informants aged 17-35 were asked how many children they hoped to have in total, almost all of them said two to three was enough. The change is perceived to have occurred for various reasons that will be addressed shortly. One reason that encompassed all of the other factors and the general sentiment of my informants, however, was that people today are finally thinking. When asked whether their grandparents or great-grandparents would have thought that such and such factor was important, all of my informants said No [see Spreadsheet 2]. Then the majority added that, in the past, they didn’t think about anything, as the following quotes show:

In the past they didn’t think. They had many children. My mother had 8 and when she died, I had to take care of the family. Because of that, I was only able to finish third grade of elementary school. My mother died in child birth. They didn’t think about anything before. My grandfather tells me, “And why don’t you have more children?” and I tell him that it costs, there’s nowhere to put them, and there’s no money.”

With many children, sometimes they’re not well fed and there are health problems because the parents can’t take care of them, feed them, or take them to the doctor. It’s just that before, the people were not aware of all this because of the very culture. Everyone wanted to have many children.
They didn’t worry about those things. They didn’t even think about whether they would be able to leave a piece of land for us.

They didn’t think about these things. They simply brought children into the world without realizing what would happen or thinking about what they would do after. But today it's different.

Factors Contributing to Change in Family Size

Quantitative Data Results

Questionnaire #2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors considered important by all 7 individuals (of 16 factors)</th>
<th>No.of responses (total of 9 individuals)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where to put the children</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future education of the child</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money for clothes and food</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The prices are rising</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future of the child</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health of the mother</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children can help in the house</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children can earn money and contribute to the family</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children today need more things</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A home without a child is sad</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to family planning</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With many kids the mother does not have time to rest, have fun and go to meetings</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and ‘capacitaciones’ for women</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Lack of land’</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Least important factors

| Religion- to not have children is a sin                                     | 8                                      |
| Opinions of the community                                                  | 8                                      |

Questionnaire #3 [see Chart 3]
Least important factors
- Religion says it is a sin to ‘planificar’ (use contraceptive methods)
- Opinion of the community

Pile Sorts

Here is a list of the top nine factors most commonly considered to be the most important from the 45 factors included in the pile sort conducted among twelve individuals. For the complete results of the pile sort see [Charts 1 and 2].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Important Factor</th>
<th>Frequency of response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education of children</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future of children</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion of spouse</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health of the mother</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family planning</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of land</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleanliness and order in home and family</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of employment</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors most commonly considered ‘not important’ or ‘not very important’
- The will of God- one must have many children
- Religion- it is a sin to ‘planificar’ (use contraceptive methods)
- Opinion of the people in the community

What the People are Saying

According to the quantitative data presented above, the most important factors to consider before having a child/another child are the future and education of the child, the health of the mother, and economic factors. The least important factors to consider are the opinion of the people in the community and the fact that their religion considers it a sin to use contraceptive methods. This data will be very important to consider in light of people’s perspectives on family planning which will be explored further on. At this point in the paper, I feel it is time to let the voices of my informants speak.

Economic factors

The times have changed

In their study of fertility changes in Latin America and their contributing factors, Adsera and Menendez (2005) explore the relationship between fertility trends and economic and political factors. They note the sharp decline in fertility rates across Latin American countries in the last three decades, and analyze this change in the context of the economic and political uncertainty of some countries, characterized by evidenced by high inflation, persistent unemployment and political regime changes. They argue that these factors have likely influenced household decisions such as childbearing. Some of the variables considered in their study include unemployment rates, the variance of gross domestic product (and/or household
consumption) growth, changes in consumer prices, measures on the extent of democracy, corruption and civil war, urbanization levels, the education level or literacy of the population and female labor force participation, as well as measures of contraceptive use and infant mortality. They present information on age-specific fertility rates across Latin America, including Guatemala [see Figure 1]. Seeing as how Guatemala is one of the poorest countries in Latin America, with a high rate of unemployment and a long history of corruption and civil unrest, these factors are important to consider when looking at changing trends in family size and changing perspectives in regard to family planning.

As I moved on from interview to interview, the same responses would ring in my ears, el tiempo ha cambiado. Times have changed. Lidia tells me that in the past, there was no clothing, no shoes, and her father had to sew pages of paper together to make notebooks for them. They just didn’t sell those things back then, but though they sell them not, what is lacking today is money. The times have changed and no there are more things but there is no money to buy them with. When I ask another informant, Cordelia, what it is about life in San Jorge that has led women to have fewer children, with a shrug of the shoulders she tells me that times have changed. These are harder times. Now the parents work but they earn very little money, and don’t earn enough to maintain a family, only to cover the necessary expenses. With fewer children, she tells me, parents can take care of them, buy clothes and food and send them to school. Cordelia, too, thinks that people before had money but there was not as much to spend it on. What’s more is that they didn’t need money as much. In the case of her family, her grandfather had land, a ‘milpa’ and harvested coffee. In contrast, people in San Jorge today no longer have land, and even though there are more job opportunities, they’re earning very little.

This is a serious problem considering that many of my informants feel that children simply need more things today. Too many times I was told by my informants that they had no shoes when they were little and that they couldn’t even imagine eating the food kids eat nowadays. All they got a small plate of beans or an egg, but rarely did the two come on the same plate. One of my informants tells me that the kids today have already developed their own taste, and much of this is due to the media and the fact that San Jorge is in the middle of a tourist center. He shakes his head, crosses his arms and says, “Va cambiando el tiempo.”

I follow Frida into her kitchen, and my eyes are immediately drawn to the fruity colored table cloth covered with thread, mostacilla beads of all colors, scissors, tweezers, and an incomplete necklace made of black, white and clear beads. She offers me a seat and I relax to the sound of chirping birds and the rush of the water from the river that runs on the side of the house. The window is open and the sun lights up the room. Frida is already concentrating on her work as her fingers pick through the beads, separating the black from the colored, and drawing them onto her needle from time to time all throughout the interview. I take in the scene of the little window looking out at the bright sky blue wall across, and this little woman in her colorful traditional dress, her hair a little bit frizzy at the top, and her expression gentle as she eyes through the colors of the beads. Frida tells me that the food has changed. Kids before didn’t get eggs with beans and things like that. They only got a little bit of beans. Or a little bit of rice. But now kids don’t want to eat that. Kids today want clothes, shoes, food, bread, and to go to school, many of the things that were not available before. Before, kids didn’t have anything. They didn’t even have notebooks, and the supplies were very limited. But everything’s different today and kids need more things. El tiempo ahora que está
muy cambiado. When she was a little girl, her dad would give her one centavo, and only on Mondays. But today, not even a quetzal is enough for a child. Por eso veo que el tiempo es muy dificil. Because of that, I see that the times are very hard. Women have to work now to help their children a little bit, because kids need so many things nowadays. As the words wander out of her mouth, she continues separating the black beads from the colored ones.

Working woman

Frida is one of many women in San Jorge belonging to a network of mostacilla or bead workers. However, the working woman was not a common phenomenon in the past, and the girls who did start working at an early age because they didn’t have the opportunity to go to school would stop working once they married. Once she started her family, a woman would be obliged to stay at home and take care of the house and kids. The man was the bread-winner. But, again, times have changed and what the man earns is no longer enough for many families. A niche has been opened for the woman and she is now able, if not required, to contribute to the family income.

Before, men did not allow women to work. But today there are more opportunities for women to work. Before they mistreated and humiliated women a lot. But now there’s more freedom for us to do things and there are more opportunities. Men now give rights to women.

This increasing trend toward the working woman has also affected family size. Many of my female informants expressed the desire and need to work, and told me that a woman can only work and earn some money if she has fewer kids. Before, a woman worked and sacrificed herself just as much working in the house, cleaning, washing, and taking care of the children. Now, women have to sacrifice themselves in a way that diverts their attention from housework and childcare. The majority of my female informants work with mostacilla, which is extremely time-consuming.

A woman has to sacrifice herself a lot in order to put the bread on the table and feed her family. Before, there was no work. Women didn’t work outside the home, and there they only washed clothes, cleaned the house, made the food. They didn’t work like women work today, earning money. Before there wasn’t work like there is today. There was no mostacilla.

‘Hay una falta de empleo’

The increasing need for women to contribute to the household income goes hand in hand with the current local and national economic situation or crisis, as some call it. Pablo, 29, tells me how it is: “Considering our being indigenous, we have practically been facing a crisis for a long time because of the lack of employment. It’s because of this that many of those my age have decided not to marry or start a family yet. The minimum salary one gets is not even enough when compared to the monthly expense of a family. And then there’s the need to send kids to school.” Pablo says that the economic crisis is most strongly felt in the rural areas, and that the only real source of employment and income for those living in San Jorge are the restaurants and hotels in the tourist haven Panajachel, that is if one is talking about the formal employment sector and more stable jobs. But even there, very few are able to get jobs. Many have
to migrate to Guatemala City. As for the rest, I've already described the routine of the San Jorge man. They simply have to look elsewhere and for many the only option is construction. This is a far cry from what life used to be like in San Jorge when people had their own land to work. Today, they're relying on the market economy and are no longer able to subsist off their own land.

Falta de Terreno

The lack of land in San Jorge has not only had economic consequences. The problem has been recognized by all my informants as one of the determining factors for the changes that have been taking place in family size. There's simply no more land to build houses, a reality that concerns all those who are planning on starting a family or having more children. Frida tells me that the number one factor people are thinking about is where to put their children and where to build another house. Another one of my informants puts it very plainly: there's no more room for children in San Jorge. However, there is another problem. There's also no land for the parents to leave their children some kind of inheritance and assure them a place to live. Lisa tells me 'One has to think about what to do with their children and how to leave them one day. One has to leave something for their children.’ I asked my informants what they thought would happen in ten years. None of them knew the answer. The coping strategies so far have been either building up vertically and adding more rooms on top of the house or going into debt and buying land elsewhere in order to assure some kind of future for the family. The other coping strategy adopted by an increasing number of people has simply been having fewer children.

One of my male informants offered his own unique perception of the roots of the family planning revolution in San Jorge la Laguna as a phenomenon directly linked to the land problem. Pablo is twenty-nine years old and is one of the younger leaders in the community. At the time of the land conflict in San Jorge in 1992, he was still a young boy, but he thinks this is when it all began. From that moment on, people gradually became aware of the bigger picture. The conflict of 1992 deserves its own study but briefly summarized, the conflict took place between the community and a foreigner who took ownership of a large amount of land situated along the lake shore below San Jorge. Once the people of San Jorge became aware that the land had in fact belonged to them before the water level of the lake rose, leaving it forgotten, they rose up in protest. They wanted to recuperate the land they had lost and divide it into two parts. One portion of the land would be divided among the families, where they would be able to build and cultivate. The other portion would be destined for a special project.

Pablo points to the picture of the project design hanging on the wall behind him, neatly divided into a hotel, parking lots and other tourist-related activities, surrounded by greenery. The design hangs on the wall of this little room, and looks like a forgotten old memory collecting dust, representing a future that once seemed possible. But it's still not forgotten and the scars from 15 years ago have still not completely healed. Nor has the social impact of the conflict disappeared or turned into dust because, as Pablo will soon explain, people became aware of the roots behind the lack of land, employment and income in the community. The problem was family size. Because so many were having large families, there was no more land, the income was not enough to maintain the family, and too many were competing for employment opportunities. The land that the community hoped to regain was a way to guarantee both land and employment for the future.
generation. The employment would be generated from the tourism project. But in the end, Pablo says in a
disappointed voice, because of the authorities, only 3 'manzanas' or blocks were left to the people. Since
there was not nearly enough land for it to be distributed among the whole community, a later conflict that
took place in the year 2000 caused a rift in the community that has left scars still waiting to heal. Pablo
thinks that this was the moment that family planning was truly considered. People suddenly became aware
of a serious social problem.

**Health**

The issue of land ownership has carried other consequences, namely the change from traditional modes
of subsistence to an immersion in the capitalist way of life. This change has been accompanied by what may
be regarded as the chemical revolution. Some of my informants tell me that their mothers, mothers-in-law
and grandparents have told them that their children before hardly ever got sick; and when they did, they
would quickly be cured using natural medicines such as herbs and teas. Juana, a local vigilante de salud, or
lay health worker, tells me,

> "But today there's much more illness because everything is made of chemicals. There are chemicals in everything we eat as well as the medicine. There are even chemicals in the herbs, which are now grown together with onions and tomatoes which are grown with fertilizers. There are no herbs anymore that are natural. And with all these chemicals and pills, people are getting sicker and sicker. Before it wasn't like that. People before were healthier."

For some, this change is an important factor to consider before thinking about having more children.
For others, it makes no difference because it all depends on how well they take care of their children.
However, in the case of both groups, this new reality has garnered a greater appetite for knowledge. These
women want to learn how to deal with these new problems and how to take proper care of their children. A
salient characteristic of my female informants is an understanding of the importance of education. Great
strides have been made in the direction of educating local women about the importance of their own health,
as well as that of their children. By learning about the consequences of having many children on the
mother’s own health and the measures that need to be taken to prevent these, women have been taking
more control over their own bodies.

**The Importance of Education**

Only one of my female informants has gone past the sixth grade of elementary school. She is my 19-
year-old “sister” who is currently working and attending University. Those who did go to school reached
various levels of elementary school, and 10 of 32 did not go to school at all. The general reasons are that
there was not enough money and that it was not important for girls to go to school because they would
marry anyway and would not be able to work. There was simply no point. Lisa tells me that she didn’t go to
school because her mother grew up believing that women are only meant to marry and getting an education
was not valid for them. As for the men, the six informants aged 21-29 have all gone past elementary school,
while the two oldest informants aged 41-43 did not have the opportunity to study due to economic reasons.
Today, however, girls and boys have the same right to an education, and my informants tell me that the
majority of the kids in San Jorge go to school. One woman tells me that this is because mothers have received ‘capacitaciones’ and have been taught that men and women have the same rights. Whatever the reason, education is playing an extremely important role in the changes that have been taking place in family size in two ways.

The Education of Children

The two most important factors that emerged out of the quantitative data have consistently been the education of the children and the future of the children. All of my informants agree that people did not think about these in the past. However, according to them, times have changed, and the education of children is increasingly perceived to be necessary. For one, it paves the way to job opportunities. One of my informants puts it this way

Without education, there is now work. In contrast, they didn’t need education before. There was still agriculture, the work of the past. No more than a tiny few in San Jorge work in agriculture. Today, those without an education work in construction. But today there are better opportunities. The only thing is that one needs an education.

Everyone agrees that an education will lead to a better life. Education also keeps the kids off the street, which seems to be even more important among my informants. Many of the women and men tell me that they want their children to learn how to think and how to live. Above all, they don’t want their children to follow the wrong path and lead a life plagued with theft, drugs and alcohol. Jorge, 41, told me that though the civil war in Guatemala has passed, there is a new war has been waged. Today’s is the war of the young, and it is a war filled with violence, vice, drugs and alcohol.

Sin estudio, estan en las calles, se arruinan, no piensan en nada. En cambio, si van a la escuela, piensan, Algun dia voy a ser un maestro o un doctor.

Uno sin estudio es como una persona ciega, no puede ver como es.

Aquí en San Jorge unos ninos se ven vagando por las calles. No tienen estudio y mucho menos pueden comer bien. Unos tienen padres agresivos que les dicen palabras vulgares. Para unos padres, no les importa como se sienten los hijos. Y así no pueden los hijos autocorregirse porque no tienen educacion. Ya empiezan a vivir con el caracter del papa, o tienen que salir a trabajar temprano. Muchos entran en la delincuencia y roban para poder sostenerse.

Mas que todo, la educacion es importante para que no se fallan.

Education of Women and Men

The education of children begins in the home. It is, thus, significant that some women in San Jorge are gradually taking an increased interest in their own education. All nine individuals surveyed in the third questionnaire felt that education and ‘capacitaciones’ for women were either very important or important. Furthermore, many of my female interviewees expressed their enthusiasm for attending capacitaciones when the opportunity presents itself. They are also talking amongst themselves and sharing information.
Twenty-one-year-old Jose tells me that women’s education has played an important role in changing family size. According to him, women receiving capacitaciones and advice are having fewer children. However, the opposite is also true. There are still many who have had no schooling and so they get married young and start having kids from at a very early age. Even though they may have two or three now that they are in their twenties, this does not mean that they won't keep having more. Education is, thus, an important factor contributing to a decrease in family size. The increased interest in education among the older women in San Jorge is bound to have an impact as well. Though most of my informants over the age of 35 have had four or more children and don’t plan to have any more, they all expressed a desire to be better educated, whether by attending the recently initiated literacy classes, going to capacitaciones or simply talking to the women in the community, oftentimes at the local health center, El Centro de Convergencia. In addition, in the interviews following the pile sort, all of the women answered that capacitaciones, the health center, and the doctor are the main sources of information on family planning. Here, women learn about their health, the health of their children, and contraceptive methods. The only problem is what happens when they take that information home.

‘Men need Capacitaciones, Too’

Jorge is standing over the bed, his hands cupping an orange cup full of coffee. He asks what we’re doing and I explain the pile sort exercise to him. I ask him if it would be possible to do the exercise with him too, and joke about how important it is for me to get the opinions of men, seeing as how all the focus and attention is on women nowadays. But he takes this seriously and says that it’s actually true. ‘No one is asking the men anything. No one is telling them anything. Everything is geared toward women and then they’re surprised when they come home and then men don’t understand. What about capacitaciones for men? Men need capacitaciones too.’ He says that while women are learning about family planning, men are left in the dark. And then the woman comes home and finds she’s talking to a wall. What’s the point of teaching the woman if the man is ignorant and rejects what she tells him? Even with all that knowledge, the woman doesn’t have much in that case. Both women and men need to be educated about these things. There should be a separate capacitaciones for both sexes so they don’t come into conflict, but they need to be done so that there are not problems at home when making decisions. The only way to go forward is to focus on both men and women.

On another occasion, I ask Jorge to tell me more about this. He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms. His eyes twinkle and his face grows a little sad. ‘No one talks to the men.’ And poor women. I understand it now. They meet, they go to capacitaciones, and when they return to their homes, they just throw away their books as if nothing had happened. Women are starting not to care for two reasons. The first reason, ‘he raises his index finger’, the first reason is that everything she learned is left forgotten in the house. The men simply say that these things are useless. ‘Son pajas de la gente.’ The second reason is that it would be better to give capacitaciones to the men. ‘El machismo,’ he says with a disgusted look, ‘makes them mock the poor woman. Capacitaciones for men are important so they stop abusing poor women.’
Besides machismo, another reason that came up among my male informants was that men simply don’t have time to go to capacitaciones. They’re at work all day, which is when capacitaciones are usually offered, and when they come home, they want to rest. Perhaps these are just excuses. Whatever the case may be, machismo is a direct impingement upon the rights of a woman, as well as the rights of a child. However, while most efforts at promoting gender equality are directed at women and their self-empowerment, the source of the problem is left untouched. If things are to move forward, men and women need to work together toward this end. Otherwise, there will continue to be cases such as this one.

Thirty-five-year-old Cecilia has six children. And she’s pregnant again! She looks at me with her tired but gentle eyes and quietly tells me, ‘I’m going to have another child. The thing is that my husband wants more children but I don’t want any more. I can’t go out. I can’t go to the market. It’s tough. I’m sorry. No muy hablar muy español.’ Cecilia wants to get an injection, but she hasn’t talked to her husband yet. And things are so expensive now, but she can’t work. All she does is take care of the children. And only three of them are able to go to school. ‘There’s not enough money to send the others. They can’t study.’ Cecilia never had the opportunity to study either, but she is regularly attending the literacy class twice a week.

Most of my informants have had more success with their husbands than Cecilia. The problem is that I cannot tell how representative their cases are of the wider community. More than 90% of my informants told me that the majority of women in San Jorge are using some kind of family planning. At the same time, the third most commonly designated ‘Most important factor’ in the pile sort was the opinion of the spouse. This factor was considered by all to be important, very important or the most important. Ideally, this would mean that if the majority of women in San Jorge are using some form of family planning, the majority of men in the community are agreeing with their decisions. Of course, this is only speculation. What has come out the pile sort is that, of the eight men interviewed, four felt that family planning was the most important factor. Three considered it to be either important or very important, and only one said it was not very important. However, this may have to do more with the fact that his twenty-three-year-old wife already had an operation for health reasons, preventing her from having more than three children. She was the only informant that told me that it was a sin to use contraceptive methods, and equated it with the murder of a child. She, however, doesn’t have to worry about having too many children anyway. What is important to note is that of the ten males included in my study, nine feel that family planning is important, though some may see an important difference between natural and artificial contraceptive methods, an issue to be addressed later.

Perspectives on Family Planning

Family planning in Guatemala

Latin America has made remarkable strides regarding contraceptive use and fertility decline in the past three decades. Thirty years ago, the total fertility rate for the region was around 6.0 lifetime births per woman; by 1999, it had dropped to 2.9. This same dramatic decline has not occurred in Guatemala, where the total fertility rate remains at 5.1, the highest in Central America (Bertrand et al. 2001).
In their study of contraceptive dynamics in Guatemala from 1978-1998, Bertrand et al. explore the factors influencing contraceptive use among ladinos and Mayans, in particular. Their study is based on data obtained from four national-level surveys which were able to show the extent to which various factors, particularly ethnicity and access, were influential in relation to contraceptive dynamics. The results of the study were the following:

1) Between 1978 and 1998, the proportion of women using any contraceptive rose from 28% to 50% among Ladinos, but only from 4% to 13% among Mayans. Little progress has been made in rural areas, where only 6% of Mayan women, married or in union, used contraceptives as of 1998, and even fewer (5%) used a modern contraceptive.

2) Female sterilization, the pill and rhythm have been the most widely used methods, although as of 1998, the injectable replaced the pill as the third most popular method among Mayans.

3) Dramatic changes in socioeconomic conditions among both Ladinos and Mayans over these 20 years have been key determinants of contraceptive use; access to services is also a significant correlate of use among Mayans, once socioeconomic factors are controlled for.

The study concluded that Mayans are a “hard-to-reach” population, but that they are becoming more open to adopting family planning when services are accessible and provided in a culturally acceptable manner.

**Family Planning in San Jorge: Informant Perspectives**

Mikael, 28, is married and has two children. He thinks that the majority of couples are using some kind of contraceptive method and that the message already exists. There is a lot of talk about it and many institutions are organizing capacitaciones de planificacion familiar. The message is also being sent through the media, including television and the radio. He attributes much of this to the location of San Jorge. “It’s because of where we are. Since the area in which we’re in is a tourist area, we are already able to get the information. According to Mikael then, San Jorge is not a “hard-to-reach” population, both in terms of location and local acceptance of family planning. However, though my data suggests that the majority of women in San Jorge are using some method of family planning, it is important to consider two factors that may or may not play an important role in the decision to use contraceptive methods.

**Health**

My research suggests that the health of the mother comes before religion today. While religion played an important part in family decisions in the past, the traditional belief that a woman must have as many children as God gives her is not present among any of my informants. On the other hand, the health of the mother is consistently one of the most important factors. This has become even more obvious in my interviews with women regarding family planning. According to my informants, some women don’t use artificial contraceptives because they believe they will get sick. For example, some believe that birth
control pills produce cancer or that the pills stay in the uterus. One informant tells me that some say it can be harmful to future children. If a woman decides to have another child later, it can harm the baby. In the cases of other women, their husbands don’t allow it. What I was consistently told was that men are especially worried about the harmful effects of contraceptive methods and the risk posed to the health of the mother. Another informant tells me that many of women in San Jorge no longer like having many kids or they don’t want to keep having more, but some don’t use contraceptives because they’re scared they’ll get sick, or get stomach cancer or die. That’s what people say but she doesn’t know if it’s true. But because times have changed and everything is different now, she thinks it’s better to plan.

But not all women in the community feel this way. Lisa is very involved in the community and tells me that it’s not easy to talk to the people and tell them to use a method. Sometimes, the people just don’t want to listen. She knows a woman who is renting a house, which is very expensive to do, and has 6 children. Lisa told her that it’s enough. They don’t even have a house. But the woman said to her, ‘Until God gives me all my children, I will have more.’ People like her, Lisa tells me, are the ones that think it is a grave sin to use contraceptive methods. For some, this also has to do with issues of fidelity. Lisa mentions that she has heard women say that a woman who uses contraceptives will look for another man. This has sometimes come up in my own interviews, but more so in discussing the perspectives of men. Several of my female informants either said or agreed that some men think their wives would have an affair if they no longer have to worry about pregnancy. Despite all this, Lisa says, ‘Few are the women now who have children one after another.’ Most agree that women today are thinking more about the future and are beginning to understand what family planning is.

Religion and family planning

‘Church Leaders to Fight Guatemalan Family Planning Law’

In 2006, an article was published in the Catholic News Service, titled “Church leaders to fight Guatemalan family planning law”. It talks about the law that was recently pushed forth by the Guatemalan Congress making it a requirement for birth control methods to be available and for sex education to be a part of the school curriculum. However, this was met with opposition from Guatemalan church leaders and the president, who said they would fight the law in court on the basis of its violation of the constitutional right to life. The Guatemalan bishop’s conference added that the law contradicted parents’ right to educate their children. After the law’s passage, Cardinal Rodolfo Quezada Toruño of Guatemala City told local media in a press conference that the new law would “open the doors to abortive practices.” He then held up a box of birth control pills in one hand and a bullet in another, saying that both were killers. However, women’s rights groups in Guatemala approved of the law, and Evelyn Morales of the women’s organization Tierra Viva said she should it would actually help decrease the number abortions and the number of women who die during childbirth by giving them more opportunities to plan for or prevent pregnancies. Furthermore, it could help decrease poverty. This is especially important, seeing as how according to the World Health Organization, Guatemala has the highest fertility rate in Latin America, as well as a poverty rate that exceeds 55 percent of the population. The article gives additional statistical figures.

1) Women in Guatemala have about 4 children on average.
2) Guatemala has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in Latin America: 240 out of every 100,000 women die during birth, according to the WHO.
3) Only 43 percent of women and men in Guatemala use contraceptives, according to a 2002 government survey.

Stance of the People of San Jorge

For many of my informants, poverty and necessity override the need to obey the cry of religion. The greater sin is bringing a child into the world knowing they will suffer. Here are some of the voices that rang through the pages of my notebook. Cordelia has heard that there is more than one cardinal here in Guatemala who is against family planning and who is saying that a woman has to have kids when God sends them. ‘A woman must have as many children as God sends her’. But she says that already many don't think this way and are looking to contraceptive methods. But, yes, there are some women still who would agree with the cardinal. Frida says that the Church claims it is a sin for a woman not to have children. But Frida says that women no longer respect religion, and it's no longer as important to them as not having more children. Laura says, “Today, they don’t respect religion. Today they're interested in health and sickness. Yes, religion is important, but not very because it is important for one to see what they can and cannot do.” Lisa tells me, “In many churches they say it is a sin to plan, that it is murder.” But having many children means not having clothes, having little food, and risking the health of the mother and child. A couple has to decide how much they can and cannot do. I have to think about what I have in this life. Abortion is a grave sin but when one hasn’t seen anything, it is not a sin. There are children who start committing vices, smoking and drinking when they’re only little. Could it be that God makes them this way? Or that the parents can’t take care of them or mistreat them. It’s the children that pay the consequences. “It is better to plan than to abandon your children.” Felipe says, ‘It is not a sin to plan because the objective is for no one to be harmed. We’re already falling into extreme poverty.’ Ana waves her hand in front of her. “God is not blind to what is happening in the families. He does not want the children to suffer.” Silvia shakes her head lightly, her fingers fidgeting on top of her apron and, with her head bowed down, she says, “Maybe one day God will forgive us and maybe He won’t.”

From this passage, one can hear a cacophony of voices, each adding its own unique perspective. Perhaps it is not so much that people no longer care about religion. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they are reinterpreting aspect of that religion. No longer is the belief that a child is a gift of God that one must accept under all circumstances predominant. What seems to be even more important is the belief that God would not want a child to be brought into the world to suffer. That would be the greatest sin of all.

Choosing Between Natural and Artificial Methods: To Sin or Not to Sin

An important difference to consider is that between natural and artificial methods. Had I realized the importance of distinguishing between the two throughout my research, I probably would have gotten a much more accurate idea of local attitudes toward family planning. This is especially important considering that all the informants I asked told me that the Church today does not consider natural methods as sinful.
three year-old Alex is a local church leader and his perspective clarified the importance of distinguishing between different forms of family planning. He says:

*The Church does not prohibit family planning. God does tell us to multiply but it also depends on the ability of each couple to maintain and educate their children. That is what I have understood. But I do not agree with artificial contraceptive methods, only natural ones and the control of the woman and her period, because that does not harm her life or mine. There are many who have chosen artificial methods but over the course of time, the consequences are to be seen. And many will have to face the consequences, maybe not now but in the future, yes.*

Jorge furthers this point, but the consequences he talks about are taking place on a social level. He tells me that abstinence, long-term or during the fertile period of a woman’s menstrual cycle, is not a sin according to the Church because it is not freedom. Rather, it is a sacrifice. The use of artificial methods, on the other hand, is a sin because it leads to infidelity. It’s for pure fun. “Artificial methods are one step closer to the freedom of both and because of this it is a sin.” It is important to note that Jorge's own perspective is a little more complex. He feels that if artificial methods are used responsibly, within a marriage based on trust and faithfulness, it is not a sin.

**Family Planning: A double-edged Sword**

According to Jorge, while the men and women may tell me that people are using contraceptive methods because they are finally starting to think, in many cases, it's precisely the contraceptives that cloud their vision. They suddenly feel they have the liberty to do as they please without having to worry as much about the consequences of their actions. Contraceptive methods mean freedom for the young and unmarried. They don't have to think. It means having sex without having to fear the repercussions. This is what is sinful to Jorge. Up until now I have been happy to hear my informants tell me that the majority are using contraceptive methods, only too late have my eyes been opened to the layers of this phenomenon. And it's not like I was surprised. I knew this. I just didn't think of it in the context of San Jorge. People were telling me why they were having fewer children, and the only possible way to do that by choice was to use some form of family planning. However, the full consequences still remain to be seen on both the cultural and social level as the youth run around turning their back on tradition. When I hear an informant tell me ‘Ya se va cambiando la comunidad’ (The community is already changing), it is hard to say what it means.

**Conclusion**

The way my informants imagine the lives and futures of their children always seems to stand in contrast with their own past and present. They don’t accept the past as the way things have to be today. For whatever reason, a multitude to be sure, people today seem to want to break the cycle of poverty, too many children, and a lack of education and opportunities, all of which characterize the lives of many of my older informants who described a life without shoes, pencils, notebooks, clothes and food. What they hope for is a different life for their children. Though no one has explicitly said that a factor for not having many children is their own past, I feel it is precisely this past that may be the most powerful force guiding the future of the children living in San Jorge la Laguna today. All the things that are at least perceived to have been absent in
the past are important factors now: the health of the mother and child, education, and family planning. A
conscious look at the past, which has arisen out of a rising awareness and eagerness to learn and to
understand, are leading some to think about the future, and more than anything, about the future of their
children. One statement that still echoes in my mind, a statement that I have heard said more than once,
seems to capture the significance of what my informants have been telling me over the last few weeks:

*Es importante que los hijos salgan mejor que uno.*

**Education as Hope and Transformation**

Though I was initially interested in women’s education and literacy, I came to understand that the
literacy class in San Jorge is just one small aspect of the rising interest and enthusiasm for education in the
community today. It is precisely education, as it is locally understood, that has been the determining factor
for changing family size in San Jorge la Laguna. Education was simply not an option for many in the past,
and is still far from being an option for all. Nonetheless, education in the form of formal schooling,
capacitaciones and platicas rising out of national and local initiatives has been one of the ways people have
been able to better assess their past and the present. The interest in education is on the rise among children
as well as men and women. Awareness is rising and so is people’s openness to new ways and ideas. Family
planning has already enjoyed a gradually increasing acceptance over the last decade in San Jorge. However,
new ways and ideas can also pose a threat to basic cultural and social values. Now that family planning is
much more accessible and people know about it, it’s very easy for the young to go around having sex without
worrying about the repercussions. Now it’s easier to have fun because contraceptives make it easy. The
cultural and social changes brought about by family planning cannot be underestimated and need to be
considered by anyone proposing the promotion of family planning as a solution to the national problem of
malnutrition. Importantly, however, my research suggests that the people of San Jorge la Laguna are not a
“hard-to-reach” population, and that local initiatives to educate community members about family planning
would be welcomed by many. In addition, based on my informants’ responses as to the factors contributing
to smaller family size, I would suggest that the most effective way to educate people about family planning
would be to make it relevant to their realities. It is not simply a matter of telling them that things are
expensive and that there is little land, but rather how expensive things are and where they plan for their
children to live in twenty years. Local leaders are more aware of the everyday realities of the people in
their communities, and I would argue that the proposal to have local leaders educate the people is a wise
one.

**Thoughts for Future Research**

Only in the last moments of my research did I hear something that cast doubt on some of my findings.
My host sister told me that that while many in San Jorge are now going to school and moving on from
primaria to básica, there are still many girls who did not go further with their education and who already
have two or three children at the age of nineteen. Luisa tells me that all of girls that finished the sixth grade
with her were now married and had children. I held my breath for a moment. What does this mean for my
research? Fortunately, she tells me that things are now changing. She says most of the youth now are going
to school of their own will, not that of their parents. There is more interest now and she thinks that that will
be very influential in how the community develops. By going to school and trying to build a career, girls will no longer be getting married so soon and starting families. Marriage will no longer be their only option. Things are changing and people are beginning to understand. But those who don’t go to school are going to be the ones getting married young and having children because, without school and a job, they will need someone to maintain them. These issues might be considered in future research that has a greater focus on 15-20-year-olds than my study did. As part of this, it would be important to explore whether an increasing trend toward girls continuing their education past the elementary level is in fact taking place and what effect this is having on family size as well as marriage patterns. From here on, studies of the future generations will be significant in determining the role that education and changing living conditions will play in household decisions regarding family size.

Further research might also concentrate on the problem of land and how the community may be changing as a result, in terms of migration, family and community interaction, and organization. Considering the fact that none of my informants could answer the question of what San Jorge would be like in ten years, this question is an important one to answer in the future. What everyone seems to agree on is that it will be very different.

*Los tiempos se están cambiando.*
References

Adsera, Alicia and Alicia Menendez
2005 Fertility Changes in Latin America in the Context of Economic and Political Uncertainty.

Bertrand, Jane T., Eric Seiber and Gabriela Escudero

Figueroa, Werner, Felipe Lopez, Lisa Remez, Elena Prada, and Joanna Drescher

Replogle, Jill
APPENDIX

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of 45 Factors for Pile Sort</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01 Kids need more things and more time to have fun and play</td>
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<tr>
<td>02 When there are many kids, the older ones have to take care of them- there’s no time for fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03 It is not easy to find time to take care of the kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04 The older kids can take care of the other kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05 How much the husband earns</td>
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<tr>
<td>06 Having access to contraceptive methods</td>
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<tr>
<td>07 With fewer children, a woman can have fun and rest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08 ‘Capacitaciones’- workshops</td>
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<tr>
<td>09 The times are hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Where to build another house</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 It costs a lot to have a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 With fewer children a woman can work and earn money</td>
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<tr>
<td>13 Cleanliness and order in the house and family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 There is more illness today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Women with many kids can’t go out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 You would like to complete your studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Lack of employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 What one earns is no longer enough to manage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 The will of God- one must have more children</td>
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<tr>
<td>20 With many children, a woman can’t have fun or go for a walk</td>
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<tr>
<td>21 Children can help their fathers in the future</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 Children (sons/daughters) can earn money to contribute to the family</td>
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<tr>
<td>23 Talks about family planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Children can help in the house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Children are good company for mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Life is better with fewer children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Religion says it is a sin to use family planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 A home without children is sad</td>
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<tr>
<td>29 Education of your children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Children today get sick a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 How much space there is in the house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 Opinion of the people in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 Everything is very expensive today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 A good diet for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 Children today need more things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 With many children a woman cannot work and earn money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37 The mother’s health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38 Lack of land</td>
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<tr>
<td>39 Money for clothes</td>
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<tr>
<td>40 Money for children’s studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>41 Family planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 Opinion of the spouse</td>
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<tr>
<td>43 How to maintain your children</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Chart 1a. Frequency of factors considered ‘most important’ and ‘very important’ to consider before having a/another child

Chart 1b. Frequency of ‘not very important’ and ‘not important’ factors to consider before having a/another child
Table 2

Factors included in Questionnaire

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Lack of land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>Where to put the children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>Lack of employment today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>Future education of your children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>Money for good clothes</td>
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<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>Money for good food</td>
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<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>The prices are rising</td>
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<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>If what you earn is enough</td>
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<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>The future of the child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>There is more illness today</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Having access to family planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The health of the mother</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Children are good company for the mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>With many children, a mother does not have much time to have fun, rest and go to meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>A home without children is sad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The children can help in the house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>The children can earn money to contribute to the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Children today need more things than in the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>The opinion of the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>That religion says it is a sin to use family planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Education and workshops for the woman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chart 2. Frequency of responses rating the importance of 21 factors to consider before having a/another child

Figure 1. Adsera and Menendez (2005)