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Introduction to Sociology
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YEYA'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

I am a middle-aged, 4th generation Japanese-American Sociology professor, invited to a birthday party by the single mother of 17 year-old girl, Yeya, 2nd or 3rd generation Mexican-American. I know the mother from a distant chain of friendships with her in-law family. Having been to some of this family's events before, I had an idea of what it would be like.

From info I have gleaned in the past from various family members, most men engage in blue-collar work; women as housewives or service work. Many of the mothers there had bfs. The sons of the mother have had gang involvement, according to other in-laws.

ARRIVAL

I arrived Sat. Jan 14, approx. 8:30pm, after some difficulty in navigating unfamiliar neighborhood. While 75217 (Pleasant Grove) was known for crime and gangs, this lower-income neighborhood seemed fairly well-kept, with single-family housing and many cars in the street. It was hard to see address numbers. The mother responded to my text as to the house description and I went in.

I entered the living room where about 8 men were watching football on a big screen tv, however they didn't look at me or acknowledge my presence. Little talking occurred—what little was mostly in English and a little Spanglish. Perhaps this extended family has been in frequent contact, precluding the need for much talk. I saw around the same number of women in the dining room/kitchen, also preoccupied. Activities seemed very gender-divided.

My greetings were quietly acknowledged, but very few talked to me. I am not sure if my outsider status was because of being non-family, unknown, being Asian, not being Mexican, dress (all black), or something else. The mother called outside for Yeya to greet me, and she did so 15min. later.

A few times most would go outside for something, perhaps smoking or drinking. There was no beer in the house—perhaps because of young kids' presence or that it was only a 17-year old birthday party? I didn't see anyone I recognized for a while. After 10 min. the mother who I knew from before appeared and greeted me. Mexican food was served—basically people ate individually or as parent/child groups. Coca-cola was prevalent.

The modes of the ages was approx. teens and 30s. Nearly all were family. Non-family members appeared to be teen friends of the b-day girl. The men looked similar: nearly shaven heads, tattoos, overweight, teens dressed in “hoodies” or sports attire. Women also: long hair, tattoos, overweight, the teens dressed in revealing outfits.

I was not sure of the reason I was invited to these family events. It may be cynical to think that it was other than “friendship” however I do offer my photography services, and I am of a different class in terms of money, education, ethnicity, etc. I have tried to keep in touch with them, through other family events and Facebook. I was uncomfortable hanging out there with unfamiliar people, especially when they didn't talk to me.

My “original” friend, Janie, 20, arrived with her bf (son of the mother) and 2 out of her 3 kids. She talked to me frequently through the night. I have known her since she was born and have been at many family events with her.

REST OF THE NIGHT

I did become a little more comfortable, perhaps as the others got used to me, and that I could occupy myself with photography. The little kids (3-7) were excited about photos. Yeya and her pals accommodated my photo taking. There was no birthday cake or presents, however this date was not her exact birthday and those artifacts could have been at another time. In Mexican fashion, Yeya had currency pinned to her dress, .

The teens hung out most of the night out front where mostly pickups were parked on the lawn. Some cars had “rims” (expensive wheels). One Ford pickup had a subwoofer booming

Latino rap. A car alarm kept sounding. I wondered how the neighbors tolerated the sound.

Bottles were strewn on the lawn.

Yeya was intoxicated, as her unperturbed mother tended to the party. Yeya did give me a Corona beer to drink (hers). While most of the teens I think were related, some were not. There was some gender division, however there a type of display, almost by gender groups to each other. Approx. 10p I left. I said bye to the mother and Janie. When I got home I processed photos and posted them to Facebook.

CONCLUSION (EXTENDED FAMILY, DEVIANCE)

I certainly experienced an uncomfortable duration of time in a purely social setting (not work, shopping, being forced to be there). This may have been due to the lack of common cultural devices to communicate and provide ways to accommodate each other. When I did find individuals comfortable to be with (mother, Janie) that might have been from a mutual history or loyalty.

Would I have been more comfortable in a different type of party? Most likely. Perhaps social class, ethnicity, education, being non-family were obstacles. I may also present a shy or aloof attitude. I might not be visibly supportive with their norms, values, and beliefs.

These obstacles may have been more about class than ethnicity. Second and third-generation Mexican-Americans may be fairly assimilated, however the gap in class measures (education, income, discrimination) may be greater.

Events with this family appear to contain mostly family members, seemingly more so than with dominant majority Whites. Perhaps this event was mainly for family members, and another event was not. The extended family seems to have a strong loyalty/bond. It's possible that an event with these relationships may alter party behavior related to prestige, gender-bonding, and opposite-sex pursuits. A presence of more non-family members may necessitate different

behavior. However, the teens outside appear to have more non-family members, and the binge-drinking, poses, and dress may reflect this.

The deviance of teen binge-drinking, allowed by her mother, might be class-related than cultural. But I wouldn't rule out any cultural norms regarding roles and rites-of-passage. In addition, perhaps this acceptable deviance at this event may prevent more extreme acts, such as drug use, drunk driving, and closed-door activities. Further research may look at contextual differences (family v. non-family) in social behavior and the tolerance of minor deviance to prevent major deviance.

APPENDIX

(Photos are optional but any supporting evidence is helpful)



Figure 1: Eating scenario



Figure 2: A few of the mothers present



Figure 3: Teens mingling outside the house