

## A Qualitative Study on the Creation of Erotic-Affective Relationships of Migrant Couples

### Un estudio cualitativo sobre la creación de vínculos erótico-afectivos en parejas migrantes

Laura Gabriela Oliver de la Cruz<sup>1</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

The objective of the study was to understand the creation and transformation of the erotic-affective bonds of Latin American migrant couples. The research was conducted with couples who use the Spanish Red Cross migration center. The qualitative design of the study is based on Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology; in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted to collect information. The four resulting topics (migratory experience, erotic dimension, affective dimension, and strengthening affective relationships in the destination country) add to the understanding of the migratory phenomenon from a little-studied perspective, integrating sensitive experiences. It is concluded that affective expressions, along with erotic expressions, are indispensable for adaptation during the migration project. The bond builds on joint experiences during migration and is strengthened while strategies and adaptation skills are created. The number of interviews limited the representativeness of the sample, in addition to the lack of time to delve into sexuality.

*Keywords:* 1. migration, 2. erotic dimension, 3. affective dimension, 4. Spain, 5. Latin America.

#### RESUMEN

Con el objetivo de comprender la creación y transformación de los vínculos erótico-afectivos de parejas migrantes latinoamericanas, se realizó una investigación con parejas usuarias de un centro de migraciones de la Cruz Roja Española. El diseño cualitativo del estudio está basado en la fenomenología hermenéutica de Gadamer; se realizaron entrevistas a profundidad y grupos focales. Los cuatro temas resultantes (experiencia migratoria, dimensión erótica, dimensión afectiva, y fortalecimiento de lazos afectivos en el lugar de destino) abonan a la comprensión del fenómeno migratorio desde una perspectiva poco estudiada, integrando experiencias sensibles. Se concluye que las expresiones afectivas, junto con la erótica, son indispensables para la adaptación durante el proyecto migratorio. El vínculo se construye a partir de vivencias conjuntas durante la migración, además de fortalecerse mientras generan estrategias y habilidades adaptativas. La cantidad de entrevistas, limitaron la representatividad de la muestra, además de la falta de tiempo para ahondar en la sexualidad.

*Palabras clave:* 1. migración, 2. dimensión erótica, 3. dimensión afectiva, 4. España, 5. Latinoamérica.

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<sup>1</sup> Universidad de Almería, Spain, [laura.oliver141093@gmail.com](mailto:laura.oliver141093@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0374-5975>



## INTRODUCTION

The migratory phenomenon has existed throughout history, impacting geopolitics, economy, and culture. Migration has contributed to countries, companies, and communities by generating economic benefits through jobs in both highly skilled and lesser-skilled sectors. In addition, it has paid for innovation and skill accumulation in science, technology, and humanities. On the other hand, it helps increase the workforce in spaces with a shortage of workers, in addition to filling in service and assistance jobs. Migration has also made intercultural diversity possible, through the interaction between norms, beliefs, practices, and other cultural expressions. “International migration is a complex phenomenon related to multiple economic, social, and security aspects that affect daily life in an increasingly interrelated world” (International Organization for Migration, 2018, p. 1).

It is estimated that by 2050 the world total of international migrants will be 405 million, however, migration is an unstable process, fluctuating depending on various factors. In 2015 there were approximately 244 million international migrants worldwide, of whom 75 million were hosted in Europe; more than 5.5 million foreign-born inhabitants lived in Spain (IOM, 2018).

After the United States, Spain is the main destination for South American migrants, hosting approximately 1.8 million inhabitants from South America (IOM, 2018). In 2018, Spain received 19 280 asylum applications from people of Venezuelan origin in the first place, followed by Colombia, Honduras, and El Salvador (Spanish Refugee Assistance Commission [Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado], 2019).

Refugees and displaced individuals are forced to emigrate due to conflict and persecution in their countries of origin. Upon arrival in Spain, they can apply for international protection through a government process that allows them to stay in the country and access resources (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). The Spanish Red Cross, through the Reception and Integration Program for Applicants and Beneficiaries of International Protection (Programa de Acogida e Integración para Solicitantes y Beneficiarios de Protección Internacional), assists asylum seekers from Latin American countries with high migration rates, such as Venezuela and Colombia (Ministry of Labor, Migration and Social Security [Ministerio de Trabajo, Migraciones y Seguridad Social], 2018). Institutions such as the Red Cross acknowledge the importance of the psychological and social dimensions of health, which is why the Reception and Integration Program for Applicants and Beneficiaries of International Protection is focused on the migrant individual and their family group, so that they can access resources that allow them to adapt to life in the receiving country. Its first stage consists of facilitating access to health services, the regularization of their administrative situation, and the coverage of basic needs such as housing, in a temporary shelter. In a later stage, families receive monthly financial support, and the possibility of obtaining jobs and thus becoming independent in rental homes (Spanish Red Cross, 2019b).

Gradually, migration has gained more elements of analysis. It has been analyzed from demographic, geopolitical, economic, and health perspectives. However, it is an increasingly diverse and complex phenomenon that requires considering other intersections (IOM, 2010, 2018; Rechel et al., 2013).

The most solid and representative social bonds within migrant populations are family, friends, and people from the same country of origin, in that hierarchical order. These links are particularly useful for mobility and the adaptive process. Therefore, the migrant experience is shaped by the social axis in general and the family one in particular (Flahaux et al., 2019; Herman, 2006). Some research has focused on the reconfiguration of transnational families and couples affected by migration, however, fundamental areas such as the affective and sexual dimensions remain unexplored (Birman & Bray, 2017; Flahaux et al., 2019; Martínez, 2018). In these emerging perspectives on the emotional experience, the changes and permanence of family groups and couples, the qualitative methodology has been made use of to explore the discourses on the experiences, opinions, practices, rituals, emotions, and other elements of their daily lives. The family group and the couple are reconstructed from the ideals of family and marriage. Among migrant families, being groups lacking territory and other material goods, their union is perpetuated from these collectively constructed ideals. Faced with the transformation of roles, rituals, and affective and sexual expressions, identities find themselves in constant evolution (Gil & Pedone, 2014; Parella, 2012).

The gender perspective has been crucial to study the modifications and adaptations of roles, the sexual division of labor, and the bonds and daily practices of migrants through their interaction (Muñiz, 2014; Tapia, 2010; Téllez, 2001). This includes the intersection of elements defining and materializing the cultural norms to which individuals subscribe in their socialization processes. Migrations and demographic changes reconfigure the family, relationships, and the discursive forms of sexuality, which in turn result in transformations at a social and individual level (Philo, 2005; Zamudio, 2003).

Eroticism and affectivity are aspects that partake of the complex framework that is human sexuality and experience. The erotic experience is part of the affective bond, so both concepts are inherent. This link between the erotic and the affective implies the search for well-being, that is to say, its underlying objective is the satisfaction of needs (Gómez-Zapiain, 2009). From Ricouer's perspective, sexuality encompasses eroticism and the affective. The first element has to do with instinct, need, and lack, while the affective or emotional dimension encompasses the interhuman, the bond that makes passions humane (Basombrío, 2000).

The erotic experience is a complex set of sexual behaviors, feelings, and emotions triggered by the mental representations emerging throughout life, that is, the socio-affective history of an individual; the sociocultural context also impacts this set of behaviors (Gómez-Zapiain, 2009). Affectivity is understood as the susceptibility of an individual before certain alterations that take place in the real world or his own self. It is expressed as subjective sensations in certain contexts

and is based on physiological triggers, emotional states, and feelings, also helping to guide behavior toward certain purposes (Gómez-Zapiain, 2013; Le Breton, 2013).

Migration emerges as one of the components permeating the erotic-affective bond. Eroticism in a disciplined society is ordered by the temporal and spatial dimensions, which determine the encounters, embodies performativity, and shapes the bodies, their proximity or distance, as well as their positions and uses (Philo, 2005). This perspective fits into the migratory experience since the temporal and spatial aspects simultaneously shape the ways of living and representing reality (Montero, 2013).

Emotions are “movers of people,” in other words, they are central motivators for decision-making and modulate behavior. Migration, in addition to spatial and geographic mobility, involves changes in the proximity and distance of people (Mendoza, Staniscia, & Ortiz, 2016). That is to say, new forms of subjectivity and daily practices arise, as well as affective and sexual expressions. The elements of the emotional experiences described in this article come together and result in particular modes of connection corresponding to a specific moment and space framed by the migratory experience. Emotions and feelings are the product of a specific sociocultural context and depend on the socio-affective history of the individual, also functioning as an engine that generates behaviors and develops bonds.

This article aims at exploring, describing, and understanding the emergence of erotic-affective bonds among Latin American migrant couples seeking asylum, during their reception and integration process in a migration center of the Spanish Red Cross.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

### *Design*

A qualitative method based on Gadamer’s hermeneutic phenomenology was used for the interpretation and understanding of materials. According to this author, individuals and history are not opposite terms, but rather every human being is a fact in history, so they must be within history (Gadamer, 2005). This methodological framework seeks to establish a dialogue with the participants in an attempt to dilute the interviewee and researcher asymmetry, thus resulting in a joint understanding. It starts from the interest in understanding a phenomenon, identifying the preconceptions of the researcher, and exploring the existing bibliography. With this information, a fusion of horizons is produced between the person who experiences the phenomenon and the researcher.

### *Participants and Settings*

The participants were selected through a convenience sample conducted at the Almería Red Cross Migration Center (Centro de Migraciones de Cruz Roja Almería), under the following inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria were being a woman or a man, of Venezuelan, Honduran, or Salvadoran nationality, married or living together, and being a user of the Red Cross International Protection Program (Programa de Protección Internacional de Cruz Roja). The exclusion criteria were being a minor at the time of the study and refusing to participate in it.

A meeting was held with the institution’s key informants —the director and psychologists— before the individual interviews and the convening of the focus groups. These informants helped select participants, locating the spaces to carry out the study and introducing the main researcher before the migrants; 14 participants constituted the final sample, with an average age of 40 years. The sociodemographic characteristics of the participants are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N=14)

Participant	Sex	Age	Country of origin	Years with partner	Children (ages)
FGW1	Woman	44	Venezuela	14	2 (11, 13)
FGW2	Woman	26	El Salvador	1	0
FGW3	Woman	33	Venezuela	9	1 (4)
FGW4	Woman	46	Venezuela	10	2 (4, 15)*
FGW5	Woman	32	Venezuela	14	2 (4, 7)
FGM1	Man	47	Venezuela	14	5 (11, 13, 23, 26, 28)*
FGM2	Man	33	El Salvador	1	0
FGM3	Man	35	Venezuela	9	1 (4)
FGM4	Man	58	Venezuela	10	2 (4)
FGM5	Man	39	Venezuela	14	2 (4, 7)
IIW1	Woman	44	Venezuela	14	2 (11, 13)
IIW2	Woman	38	Venezuela	14	2 (1, 8)
IIM1	Man	47	Venezuela	14	5 (11, 13, 23, 26, 28)*
IIM2	Man	40	Honduras	13	3 (3, 6, 9)

FGW: Focus group women; FGM: Focus group men; IIW: Individual interview women; IIM: Individual interview men.

\* Children from different fathers

Source: Own elaboration based on socio-demographic information collected at the migration-center of the Spanish Red Cross, 2020.

### *Data collection*

The study was carried out in the volunteer room of the Almería Red Cross Migration Center located in the municipality of Roquetas de Mar. Two focus groups and four in-depth interviews were conducted between January and February 2020. The focus groups (FG) were made up of a migrant population from the first stage of the International Protection Program, originally from Venezuela and El Salvador. The first focus group was made up of five women and the second of their male partners, this in order to know the experiences taking place between male and female migrants.

Each focus group had an average duration of 67 minutes. An open question script was used. Subsequently, to delve into the emerging topics, four in-depth interviews (II) were conducted with a Venezuelan couple from the first stage, a man from Honduras and a woman from Venezuela, the latter two from the second stage. Interviews were conducted with the users of the first and second stages, each lasting an average of 49 minutes, in order to contrast experiences. The questions focused on experiences related to their sexuality after migration. All sessions were conducted by the main researcher (LOD), who received training and rehearsed the protocol. Previous to the actual interview, the informants were explained the protocol, they were guaranteed confidentiality, and their informed consent was obtained. All the answers of the participants were recorded, transcribed, and incorporated into a hermeneutic unit analyzed by means of the ATLAS.ti 8 software. Data collection ended upon reaching data saturation (Green & Thorogood, 2018).

### *Data Analysis*

All the field notes, together with the transcripts of the focus groups and in-depth interviews, were incorporated into a hermeneutic unit and subsequently analyzed with the ATLAS.ti 8 software. The transcripts were made following the modified steps of the methodological theoretical framework of Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology, which focuses on how different understandings of a phenomenon develop. For this, the five steps described by Fleming were followed (Fleming, Gaidys & Robb, 2003; Fleming & Robb, 2019). As a first step, the choice of the research question was assessed: can the experiences of Latin American migrants regarding their sexuality and affective experiences be studied from hermeneutic phenomenology? In the second step, the researcher reflected on her own understanding of the phenomenon, derived from her experience in and attention given to other studies on Latin American couples. In the third step, seeking to broaden the phenomenon's horizons of understanding, the participants were asked: how does the shared domestic space influence your sexual activity? The fourth step aims at understanding the phenomenon through the analysis of the text; this fourth step consists of four parts: after reading the transcripts, the experiences of the participants were re-examined together with the researcher's theoretical material so as to generate new questions: how has your current ability to sleep affected the reemergence of erotic dreams? After analyzing the transcripts that aid in understanding the phenomenon, data coding was performed. The topics, subtopics, and units of meaning for this study were extracted inductively (Table 2). A rereading of the transcripts was performed to redo the coding. The most representative quotes were used for the study. In the fifth step, the reliability and rigor of the qualitative data were determined. To increase reliability, the two coding results were analyzed so as to contrast and track possible topics, subtopics, and units of meaning between both iterations of coding, in order to confirm their recurrence or to integrate new elements for analysis. The reliability of the results was guaranteed by the recording, the faithful transcription, and the analysis of the data.

### *Ethical Aspects*

Approval was obtained from the Ethics and Research Committee of the Spanish Red Cross (Comité de Ética e Investigación de Cruz Roja Española), with protocol number CR\_20\_01. The bioethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki were respected at all times. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and invited by the psychologist of the Red Cross Migration Center to participate voluntarily. Participants were asked for their permission to record the interviews, and they signed an informed consent form guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality.

### *Rigor*

Rigor was guaranteed by the selection of the participants. A consensus was reached to prepare the script of questions, based on the objective set between the researcher, the tutors, the director, and the psychologists of the migration-center. As for the data triangulation, various methods were used, such as focus groups, in-depth interviews, in addition to the participant observation of the researcher.

## RESULTS

Four main topics and eight subtopics emerged from the analysis of the data, which made it possible to understand the sexual and affective experiences of asylum-seeking couples during their stay at the Almería Red Cross Migration Center (Table 2).

Table 2. Topics, Subtopics, and Units of Meaning

Topics	Subtopics	Units of meaning
Migratory experience	Migratory grief	Stress, angst, nervousness, fear, anxiety, restlessness, breaking with previous ways, separation from family and friends, sexual division of labor, feeling useful.
	Arising of new opportunities	Rest, tranquility, health, quality of life, dreaming again, new job opportunities.
Affective dimension	Everyday displays of affection	Union, subtle details, better couple communication, enjoying leisure time.
	The emergence of a bond	Strength of the couple, hiding feelings, shared experiences, emotional support.
Erotic dimension	The transformation of the erotic experience	To be desired, body grooming, erotic dreams, fantasies, religion, engine of eroticism.
	Barriers preventing sexual enjoyment	Sexological architecture, housing density, strategies to achieve sexual intercourse, difference between genders.
Strengthening affective bonds in the place of destination	Patriotic bond	Compatriots, cultural ties, social relations, belonging, identity.
	Strengthening of the migrant couple	Family union, shared experiences as a couple, adaptation/resilience skills, changes in the family.

Source: Own elaboration based on socio-demographic information collected at the migration-center of the Spanish Red Cross, 2020.

### Topic 1. Migratory Experience

The migratory experience generates a series of challenges in the process of insertion into a new environment. Each person perceives their own specific emotions and experiences, which frame daily actions, the development of bonds, and the ways of signifying their experiences. Participants expressed key elements that are part of the migration process, such as the difficulties and the advantages of this experience.



### *Subtopic 1. Migratory Grief*

Leaving their country, family, loved ones, culture, social status, private property, and those actions that were part of their daily lives, leads interviewees to experience feelings of stress, anguish, nervousness, and fear. The following testimonies from participants of Venezuelan origin show that despite the impact on their daily lives and their social relationships, fleeing their country was inevitable:

We had a problem with crime, we looked for police support, we were given none, extortion began and stuff, and in 30 days we decided to leave because we feared for our lives and here, we are now (FGM1, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

We had a fixed custom on Sundays to visit a friend, the family. Sharing food, on a Saturday or Sunday, and we need that, we miss it (FGM3, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

The change in their professional activities, which constituted for them an identity element, makes them uneasy and impacts on the decisions related to their life plan, as explained by one of the youngest informants: “There is an ambiguity and at least it makes me very anxious (...) you become anxious at some point, desperate, ‘I’m going this way,’ but if this doesn’t work out, you change your plan again” (FGM5, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

In this context, the uncertainty of obtaining a job and the sexual division of labor, understood as the difference between work activities according to sex, as well as their economic remuneration, are other stressors that influence the emotional experiences of the informants. The following quotes express the feelings and desires of several participants to be able to opt for paid work: “For us it would be great to work, to be independent. Providing that part that corresponds to us, right? Supporting the family and everything, having our own resources and our own...” (FGM1, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

The perception of the possibilities of men and women to obtain paid work, in addition to salary differences, is expressed in the following statement: “It is easier for women to find work. Maybe that is because they demand less pay, or maybe woman can settle for 600 euros” (FGM1, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

Despite the fact that obtaining a job is a concern of the focus group of men, some women informants also expressed their wish to obtain a job and the difficulties in achieving so, due to being responsible for too many activities, both paid and at home. The following informant was employed in her country of origin, however, due to the distribution of activities with her partner, she has abandoned her professional career and takes care of the children now: “I was actually working, but I had to quit because the schedule would not allow me to be with the children” (IIW2, personal communication, February 11, 2020).

### *Subtopics 2. Arising New Opportunities*

Participants reported advantages of migration through experiencing positive emotions. They expressed having felt peace and security in the host country due to improvements in their quality

of life and having access to healthcare. Additionally, they realized that in this new context they can rest again, as their sleep hours had suffered alterations in the country of origin given the constant angst due to insecurity. In addition to resting better, the migratory experience made it possible for new dreams to arise:

I didn't rest at all. I was waking up all the time and stressed all the time, the thing was, what if they rob me, stressed if the phone rang, what if, what if. Now that I got here, I dream a lot about my family. I didn't dream anymore over there (IIM1, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

The older informants communicated to us the different professions in which they had developed and how adaptation in the receiving country has not been a source of discomfort in terms of the new work activities to be carried out. As exemplified in previous quotes, the experiences that migration entails are diverse. In particular, men experience some discomfort because being the economic providers is an imposed duty, while women experience migration as an opportunity to relax, especially during the first stage of the Red Cross reception program: "In the first stage everything is beautiful, everything is spectacular, it's a fairy tale. You know what I mean? On the other hand, in the second stage you have to hit the streets, work, facing day to day experiences" (IIW2, personal communication, February 11, 2020).

## **Topic 2. Affective Dimension**

It pertains the elements that constitute the experiencing of emotions, sentiments, and affections. This dimension is one of the two main components in developing a bond as a couple. It manifests itself through daily actions that may seem subtle, such as acts of care, sharing moments of emotional intimacy, eating out together, acknowledging the emotions and needs of the other, mutual support, communication, among others.

### *Subtopic 1. Everyday Displays of Affection*

It refers to the significant and subtle activities of care, gestures, and attention given within the couple, which are part of everyday life and build or strengthen the bond, generating feelings of security and trust. Our informants communicated that the migratory experience has improved their relationship as a couple, as free time has been used to enjoy and experience the small pleasures of daily life; one of the women told us:

On Sunday we go to the beach, we just talk, that's something we didn't do over there. There it was 'let's go this place, they are selling flour there'. Those were our conversations (...) but not so here, here we realize that you can just sit down and watch television (FGW3, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

From the free time and the space in which they are located, daily acts of affection are carried out that contribute to couple unity. These acts, although subtle, come together with emotions and sensations, as expressed by one interviewee: "I have noticed things for the better, there is more

communication, we spend more time together. That is why I tell you, here we spend more time together, we share more, we talk more, we have more time” (FGM1, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

### *Subtopic 2. The Emergence of a Bond*

It represents the relational framework created from sharing experiences, ideals, perceptions, and expectations, from acts of intimacy, the feeling of trust, the rules of coexistence, and the practices of daily interaction. It is a continuous process determined by both the couple and external influences, as well as by the experiences and their social group. The emotions and feelings experienced with the partner during the migratory project, feeling supported in this new process, facing their new experiences and daily life together, all of this reconfigures the couple's relationship and, as the following informant stated, strengthens their union:

You go through processes that make you value marriage as such, the couple as such, because I think that either alone or in other circumstances, your strength would leave you or you would just catch a plane and fly back to Venezuela. I think that always gives you the strength, your partner, the relationship you may have (FGW3, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

However, some of the participants realized that men have their own certain ways of expressing or silencing feelings, communicating, and expressing themselves, in contrast to those of women:

You should be able to tell your partner ‘Look, I feel bad about this, about this, about that’ and sometimes as a man you just say ‘no, I rather don’t say anything because I’m going to make her feel bad, we’re going to feel both bad’ (FGM3, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

## **Topic 3. Erotic Dimension**

It is made up of the elements of the sexual experience. This dimension is one of the two central and inseparable components of the couple's relationship; it tends toward the satisfaction of sexual needs and is determined by the space that makes sexual intercourse possible.

### *Subtopic 1. The Transformation of the Erotic Experience*

Among the elements that constitute and reconfigure eroticism are fantasies, erotic dreams, religion, and the desire to be desired, materialized by body grooming. The following quote shows the importance of desire in the couple, in this case, the desire to be desired, where the informant shared with us the erotic expression that seems to her most relevant in her relationship:

To be desired... he likes me and that gives me a reason to dress up, move on, have my purposes. But not desire for the physical only, also for my aptitudes; desire is merely sexual for many people and not the more intellectual side, the more emotional side (IIW1, personal communication, February 11, 2020).

The next informant shares a room with her partner and her sister. Despite this, she admits that having migrated with her partner has allowed her to express her eroticism through body grooming, while in the country of origin, due to living with her family and religion, she felt unable to express her eroticism freely: “There we didn’t live together and then religion... my dad used to say that I shouldn’t wear makeup or paint my nails or cut my hair, and here I feel freer” (FGW2, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

In-depth interviews provided room for informants to express elements that are part of the couple’s sensuality, such as erotic fantasies and dreams. Although fantasies are concealed to an extent, they accompany informants on a daily basis. Erotic dreams have reemerged thanks to the possibility of sleeping and dreaming again: “Sometimes I’ve had dreams with other women, right? With her too, and she has told me that she’s had erotic dreams with me too” (IIM1, personal communication, February 11, 2020).

Nonetheless, the transformation of erotic fantasies according to their life cycle was expressed, in addition to its implementation in sexual practices.

Of course, fantasies change because ten years ago I thought about something and now I think about other things, just imagine the things I was doing twenty years ago over there, drinking alcohol and hanging out with girlfriends and everything else, but time goes by and you reflect, and changes make one mature, you take things more seriously (...) There are things I’ve experienced, I have proposed buying a porn movie and we watched porn, things like that, and positions, those things are spontaneous (IIM1, personal communication, February 11, 2020).

Some informants expressed the importance of religion in their life, it even emerged as an immediate answer to the questions on the sexual dimension during interviews, in which said dimension is relegated to the background:

We are evangelicals, so there is another aspect in our lives that we fulfill that is more important. First, there is God, you have to pray, then as long as one has that aspect, that tranquility... then the rest comes little by little, and also, he is not the type of man who thinks about that all the time (IIW2, personal communication, February 11, 2020).

### *Subtopic 2. Barriers Preventing Sexual Enjoyment*

The migration center has provided them with a new home that has meant a change of scenery in their migration experience, all this modifying their possibility of achieving sexual intercourse. Some of the main barriers to achieving sexual intercourse is the architecture of houses, the distribution of rooms, and having to share rooms with other members of the family in addition to their partner, such as siblings or children. The family group of each informant lives in an apartment with two bedrooms, and as expressed by several participants, they look for ways to achieve intercourse with their partner. The following quote exemplifies the intrinsic consequences of the spatial distribution of space:

It has decreased because we don't have any privacy, because we don't have the time, or well, I would say it's more about privacy because we are not going to make love with the boys in the room next door (...) we try to look for the opportunity that the boys leave us alone, go play soccer, that J go for a walk and leave just the two of us, and then we manage to get intimate unconcerned (IIM1, personal communication, February 11, 2020).

In addition to finding strategies to achieve sexual intercourse, the possibility of achieving it also depends on the couple's relationship. Each couple has particular stories, which intervene in the development of the emotional and erotic bond. The following quote exemplifies how resources are made used to avoid sexual intercourse, especially when there are problems in the relationship.

She wants to sleep alone in her bed, a big bed, that nobody bothers her, and that for me is selfishness, a form of rejection. Last night by chance I slept with her in bed, my three children had already fallen asleep in my bed, so I left them there, and then I went to bed with her. When we have sexual intercourse, we just manage to get all three kids in one place and that's it (IIM2, personal communication, February 11, 2020).

However, despite the difficulties faced to carry out the sexual act due to migration, informants acknowledged the importance of sexuality for the couple: "it helps empathizing more and letting go too. I don't think I'm just that, but it does change your mood, it definitely changes everything" (FGW1, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

In addition to potential problems in their relationship, informants pointed out different ways of experiencing sexuality between men and women, in terms of expectations and motivations to carry out intercourse:

I came to understand as a man that women want to satisfy the emotional part through sexual satisfaction, men want to satisfy the physical part, find pleasure (...) men also need the emotional part and only women can give that to him, and women also need to know that beyond emotions, there are other physical things (IIM2, personal communication, February 11, 2020).

#### **Topic 4. Strengthening Affective Bonds in the Place of Destination**

This topic refers to the multiplicity of elements involved in the development of bonds. Both the social relations between nationals or other immigrants, as well as the couple relationship, are included, given that the group is useful in enabling identification, a sense of belonging, and adaptation to the new context, while the couple enables a space of intimacy and emotional support to face the challenges of the experience.

##### *Subtopic 1. Patriotic Bond*

Identifying with another compatriot, sharing national origin, the same culture, rituals, and experiences related to the migratory journey, all of this constitutes fundamental identity elements for the formation of social relationships between migrants. Feelings of belonging are central to bonding with other immigrants from the same country of origin, as well as being a key aspect in

the process of adaptation or resilience in the receiving country. The following testimonies reflect how migrants seek to celebrate and share moments, as part of the emotional processes during their interactions:

We spent Christmas together and on New Year's Eve we had a gift swap, we were all Venezuelans, and we had a wonderful time (FGW5, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

The advantage is that we are close and I, for example, with J, who is the one with whom I get along, we have a little meal over there, have a little meal over here, right? And that makes one feel like 'well, I'm not alone.' Because emotionally it is difficult (FGM4, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

### *Subtopic 2. Strengthening of the Migrant Couple*

The family is transformed by the migratory experience, their daily actions, forms of relating to each other, leisure time, and the use of time for bonding are all modified. Family union emerges as a strategy of adaptation to the migratory experience, especially when the transnational couple as a family nucleus goes through changes and challenges to which they must adapt. These adaptive movements are made possible by the union of the migrant couple.

Our relationship has become much stronger, you know? Because when you're surrounded by relatives, there's always that 'your mom tells you,' 'she tells me that,' 'I got upset and left,' but not here. Here it is he and I, nothing more. So, we have more of that union, I think everything has been to our favor, really, because we are doing good. I have not had... the only thing is the sexual part because, with children, it is logical that you distance yourself more, but look when there is communication and the couple understands each other, that goes to the background (IIW1, personal communication, February 11, 2020).

## DISCUSSION

Studies on migration from an epidemiological perspective, based on figures, statistics, health interventions, and public policies, are not unusual (Rechel et al., 2013). However, research focused on the emotional experiences of migrants, such as family reconfigurations, has been less studied (Caarls & De Valk, 2017; Flahaux et al., 2019). Even less frequent are the investigations around sexuality and migration (Gil & Pedone, 2014; Martínez, 2018; Parella & Cavalcanti, 2010).

In addition to the economic, social, and cultural repercussions, migration also has effects at the family, individual and couple levels, which will affect depending on the strengths of each person, their decision-making capacity, consistency, adaptation, and their resilience to circumstances (Lamarque & Moro, 2020), as mentioned by some informants. In this regard, institutions such as the Red Cross, acknowledging the multidimensional nature of health, provide psychological care to people to help them develop skills that foster autonomy and the creation or improvement of social relationships, especially through the Reception and Integration Program, designed to keep together and enhance the development of the family group. The workshops of said program have

generated reflection processes among informants on gender roles, masculinity, ways of relating to each other, among other issues that frame the interactions of migrant families and couples. Although it is true that a series of daily activities, roles, and particular ways of understanding, representing, and appropriating their experiences have remained, the incorporation of the gender perspective has contributed to relational and identity changes expressed in the new context (Official College of Psychologists of Madrid [Colegio Oficial de Psicólogos de Madrid], 2016; Spanish Red Cross, 2019a).

Hermeneutic phenomenology addresses how informants interpret their own experiences, to build an understanding from a fusion of horizons together with the bibliography on the topic. For this, their emotional experiences were delved into, as well as their motivations to undertake the migration journey. As expressed by them, deciding to migrate arose from the need to improve their safety, their health, and their quality of life, however, they have gone through migratory grief by having to abandon their customs, their property, and their loved ones. Similarly, this adaptation process has been accompanied by feelings of concern at not finding a job and uncertainty about the future of their status in the host country. In order to cope with this, they have made use of emotional and social resources, thus developing resilience skills, and realizing that their social relationships are an invaluable resource (Lamarque & Moro, 2020; Sánchez & Robles, 2015).

Parella and Cavalcanti (2010) point out that physical and geographical distance reconfigures the bond, the emotional dimension, and the forms of communication of couples who emigrate. However, being too close to other family members and having to share spaces such as rooms, make intimate time between couples difficult (Martínez, 2018), as expressed by the informants, who have had to develop strategies to carry out sexual intercourse.

Space is a fundamental element that modifies daily practices and, in this context, conditions erotic-affective encounters (Parella & Cavalcanti, 2010). On the other hand, as Hirsch (2003) pointed out, the new space in the host country can protect the sexual intimacy of migrants because the sense of surveillance is left behind. Space, in addition to transforming the erotic, impacts the emotions experienced, building and reconfiguring relationships (Colanazi, 2018). However, there is a dual reality in relation to the lack of some family members: in the first case, said lack makes it possible for the couple to be left alone and strengthen the erotic-affective bond; while in the opposite case, the lack of certain members of the family translates into lack of support for the care of the children, which makes sexual intercourse impossible.

To nurture the erotic dimension within the migratory framework, couples carry out body grooming rituals for seduction, develop strategies to carry out the sexual encounter, explore and incorporate sexual fantasies, share daily responsibilities within the family space, and seek time of leisure as a couple (Colanazi, 2018; Sanz, 2013).

The affective and erotic dimensions are interrelated and codependent. While the former is transformed by the interaction between individuals, the space, and other subjective elements, the erotic dimension also undergoes changes. Through migration policies, what is permitted and what

is prohibited derived from them, an ordering of the bodies and their sexual dispositions is produced (Lube, González, & Stefoni, 2018).

Emotions are inseparable from migration, as they are central motivators when making decisions and in behavior. Both the erotic-affective bonds studied hereby and those of friendship with fellow nationals evidence the transformation of intimacy and closeness (Mendoza et al., 2016).

In the present investigation, the contrasts between the emotional experiences of men and women in the face of the migratory experience were analyzed. While the women reported experiencing feelings of calm and relaxation, the men expressed having experienced stress and concern about the lack of a paid job that would make them feel “useful” (Méndez, Rojas, & Montero, 2016; Tapia, 2010). In addition to this contrast of sensations, positions also emerged from what it is to “be a man” or “to be a woman,” justifying in a certain way their emotional and sexual experiences or needs. These last two dimensions were transfigured from their dialectical relationship. The fact of enunciating themselves as “man” arises spontaneously in men when inquiring about the expression of their emotions in their role within the family group. From a gender perspective, the results indicate that men reproduce gender stereotypes because they feel an overloaded responsibility with respect to the family group and the couple by assuming the obligation of being the economic providers, which affects them emotionally, coming to feel stress, angst, and personal and situational dissatisfaction (Gil & Pedone, 2014; Merleau-Ponty, 1975; Tapia, 2010).

During the interviews, men seemed to omit data on their living conditions during the period of time in which they did not have a paid job. Specifically, they referred to the times in which they were economically and professionally productive (Sørensen & Vammen, 2014). Especially in the case of the youngest, whose identity was at stake as they were used to exercising their profession. On the other hand, this aspect did not affect older males, since they had adaptive skills developed by having performed in a variety of labor positions throughout their lives (Alzoubi, Al-Smadi, & Gougazeh, 2019; Téllez, 2001).

According to other studies, migrants from the same country of origin show forms of bonding that improve their adaptation to the new country, because they feel they belong to a group with which they share ideologies, culture, and beliefs, which allows them to sustain a collective identity (Goldstein, 2002). Such is the case of several informants who reported having bonded by holding celebrations together and coexisting daily, thus strengthening their families.

### *Limitations of this Study*

The methodological technique of focus groups had the function of facilitating the understanding of and describing the experiences of the informants on general aspects. However, a limitation to this was the number of in-depth interviews that would allow knowing and inquiring more abundantly in more specific experiences, especially in terms of the sexuality of the informants. In addition, the exploration of a group of migrants of specific origin prevented delving into the diverse or common experiences of other migrants of Latin American origin. Despite having conducted the



same number of in-depth interviews and focus groups with women and men, in order to center the results, it would have been convenient to conduct the study focusing on the experiences of a single gender.

### CLOSING REMARKS

The hermeneutic phenomenology employed allowed us to broaden our understanding from a fusion of horizons. The methodological approach made it possible to dilute asymmetries between the researcher and the person interviewed, in addition to the fact that this process allowed for a more human approach to the analytical concepts, the people interviewed, and their experiences.

Exploring the elements that intervene in the erotic-affective bonding of Latin American migrant couples is complex and involves a multiplicity of interrelated determinants in the migratory process, such as the reasons for which the decision to migrate was made, the emotional support and shared experiences as a couple, daily acts of affection and the use of free time as a couple, among others. That is why the emotional and affective expressions of migrant couples are indispensable resources in adapting to the migratory project. There is no unique way of bonding determined by the migratory experience and said experience does not guarantee a stronger or better bond either. There is a fusion of elements that come together to build the relationship, such as insecurities and pre-existing problems that persist during the development of said relationship.

Although the erotic dimension is transformed by aspects such as the layout of the space, the architecture of the home, and having to share the space with other family members, it remains one of the key elements that articulate the couple's relationship.

Migrant women appear to be suspended in time, whereas for men the future is more unattainable and uncertain, in the face of a bet or promise of professional development in which, in turn, their identity is at stake. Therefore, strategies must be developed individually and as a couple to adjust to their new context.

Although our informants indeed face a variety of vicissitudes piercing through their experiences, the ways they deal with them hold an individual component, and so it will depend on their mentality and previous experiences that they are able to manage new situations in various ways.

Finally, it should be noted that the human being is a social being that experiences transformations in their roles, rituals, and affective and sexual expressions, in such a way that identities are under constant evolution. Therefore, humans need to create emotional bonds that help them overcome the difficult circumstances that made them emigrate and adapt to a new destination. These relationships are built from experiencing migration together and are strengthened by generating a series of adaptation strategies and skills through the couple relationship project. However, the history of each couple before migration is decisive in their migratory experience and in their forms of bonding.

### *Future Lines of Research*

This paper invites future inquiries on the migratory phenomenon interested in delving into the elements that are part of the transformation of the sexuality and dynamics of the couple, as well as in exploring its development and subsequent adaptation in the receiving country, with the modification of the affective relationships among migrants. Some questions would be: how do they incorporate new affections in the receiving country? how do they integrate into the receiving society? how do they sustain/develop bonds with fellow nationals and members of their family? what new practices and beliefs constitute their subjectivity around sexuality? what are their attitudes about sexuality? and do these attitudes change?

In addition to continuing with the methodological approach of hermeneutic phenomenology, a longitudinal study would allow researchers to further delve into the adaptive process and the development of migrant couples.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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