

Between Technology and Distances: Emotional Remittances and Bonding Culture in Ecuadorian Transnational Families

Entre tecnología y distancias: remesas emocionales y cultura de vínculos en familias transnacionales ecuatorianas

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ABSTRACT

Analyses of economic remittances have focused on the role of migrants as providers. This study broadens the concept of locating remittances at the emotional level as a key factor in the reciprocal and conflictive relationships built between migrants and non-migrants. Through qualitative thematic analysis, the association between physical distance and virtual co-presence is explored in the experiences and perceptions of three groups of Ecuadorians: migrants, migrants' relatives, and returned migrants. The findings suggest that, thanks to ICTs, the co-responsibility for keeping the culture of bonds active means that, while it is strengthened by feelings of love and solidarity, it also reveals tensions over resentments, obligations, and guilt. Although virtual co-presence that exists is dynamic and daily, emotional gaps persist. This illustrates the need for programs that support transnational families to cope with the effects of separation.

Keywords: 1. migration, 2. ICT, 3. co-presence, 4. Ecuador, 5. Spain.

RESUMEN

Los análisis sobre las remesas económicas se han concentrado en el rol proveedor de los migrantes. Este estudio amplía el concepto para ubicar las remesas en el plano emocional como factor clave en las relaciones de reciprocidad y conflictividad construidas entre las personas migrantes y no migrantes. Mediante el análisis cualitativo temático se explora la asociación entre la distancia física y la co-presencia virtual en las experiencias y percepciones de tres grupos de ecuatorianos: migrantes, familiares de migrantes y migrantes retornados. Los hallazgos sugieren que, gracias a las TIC, la corresponsabilidad por mantener activa la cultura de vínculos implica que, mientras se fortalece con sentimientos de amor y solidaridad, también revela tensiones por resentimientos, obligaciones y culpa. Aunque la co-presencia virtual es dinámica y cotidiana, persisten vacíos emocionales. Esto ilustra la necesidad de crear programas que apoyen a las familias transnacionales para afrontar los efectos de la separación.

Palabras clave: 1. migración, 2. TIC, 3. co-presencia, 4. Ecuador, 5. España.

Date received: February 24, 2021

Date accepted: August 9, 2021

Published online: September 15, 2022

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INTRODUCTION

Previous studies have addressed the effects of economic remittances on Ecuadorian transnational families (Bertoli & Marchetta, 2014; Calero, Bedi, & Sparrow, 2009; Mata-Codesal, 2016; Vasco, 2013), and the influence of social remittances on communities of origin (Parella Rubio & Cavalcanti, 2006). This research paper analyzes the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the management of emotional remittances (Katigbak, 2015), an aspect on which no evidence has been found before. The bonding culture (Diminescu, 2008) of a group of Ecuadorian migrants residing in Spain, relatives of migrants who remain in Ecuador, and migrants who returned to Ecuador while part of their family is still in Spain is analyzed, this way comparing the experiences of the various actors.

Remittances have played a leading role in migration processes, due to their causes and effects among those who migrate and those who reside in the place of origin. Remittances are commonly understood as something that is sent and received (Real Academia Española, 2021). In the field of economics, they are limited to money as a material and tangible element that flows through formal and informal channels (International Monetary Fund, 2009). While for Levitt (1998) social remittances, are symbolically linked to cultural dissemination through ideas, behaviors, identities and practices that circulate back and forth between migrants and non-migrants.

Over time, analyzes have emerged on cultural remittances (Flores, 2005), sacred remittances (Garbin, 2019), political remittances (Krawatzek & Müller-Funk, 2020; Tabar, 2014) and professional remittances (Sun, 2016). This spectrum accounts for approaches that, from metaphorical notions, address various angles of migration processes that make it possible to understand the ins and outs of changing transnational family dynamics.

Katigbak (2015) broadened the conceptualization of remittances to locate them in the realm of emotions. To do this, he referenced the proposal of Folbre (2001) on the invisible heart, which represents the family values of love, commitment and morality. The dynamics of being and creating a family are acknowledged as requiring the production and distribution of symbolic and material resources, but also feelings. Anything that is sent and communicated between the origin and the destination is marked by the emotions shared by family members; that which is sent and communicated encompasses both material objects and socio-cultural values and emotional manifestations. Analyzing the emotional dimension makes it possible to understand the social reality of those who partake in the phenomenon of migration (López Fernández, 2020), since emotions constitute a fundamental component of family dynamics.

Oftentimes, when sending and conveying emotional remittances, those involved interpret the material and social exchanges as signs of love and care, since they are not devoid of meanings and feelings (Katigbak, 2015). In this scenario, communication processes are important since they function as indicators of the relational and affective continuity that transnational families keep, or as signs that account for their disruption (Peñaranda Cólera, 2010).

The objective of this research is to analyze the ways in which migrants and their non-migrant family members deal with physical separation through the emotional remittances that circulate

through the communication channels provided by ICTs, in order to sustain and strengthen their sense of belonging, from the commitment and the moral responsibility that bonding culture imposes on families, and how this conditions the subjectivities in which transnational family daily life takes place. Consequently, the intersections between migration, communication and emotions are analyzed.

FAMILY, MIGRATION AND REMITTANCES

In some cases, the fact that one or several members of a family migrate is related to their desire to improve the quality of life of those who stay in their place of origin (Ivlevs, 2015). As a result, in certain circumstances, monetary remittances become indicators of intra-family relationships (Guarnizo, 2003). In this sense, a significant part of the analyzes on the subject have focused on the active role of migrants as economic support for their families (Carling, 2014).

Studies on economic remittances have shown that these do not always translate into savings, since they serve to satisfy basic needs in the communities of origin (Arroyo & Corvera, 2003), are spent as just another income (Canales & Montiel Armas, 2004), reinforce expectations and improve lifestyles (Schmalzbauer, 2004), cause transformations in gender relations (Tapia Ladino & González Torralbo, 2013), and/or finance business ventures (Martinez, Cummings, & Vaaler, 2015).

In addition to the financial support they send (Mazzucato, 2011), migrants also create circuits of affection, care and communication with their families (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Parella, 2007). Although sending money gains a moral dimension that, in the migrant imaginary, contributes to the construction of the “good” father, mother, daughter, son, sister or brother (Simoni & Voirol, 2020), feelings of love, selflessness, guilt, and sacrifice that are inherently associated with migration also partake of that category (Huenekes, 2018).

For Simoni and Voirol (2020), the sending and receiving of remittances is part of the values and priorities that characterize migrants as social beings who keep with obligations and expectations towards the people who are important to them; that is, their family. Migration is associated with the emotional labor of caring for or “having affection and concern for the other and working on the relationship between the self and the other to ensure the development of the [emotional] bond” (Lynch & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 256-257).

It is in this context that the family is usually defined by a set of interdependent relationships whose purpose is primary reproduction by means “socialization, security, affection, discipline or material subsistence”, and is organized thanks to the “management of space, time, blood and/or political kinship, power, and authority”. The concept of transnational family is common in the face of migration, due to the dichotomy between proximity and geographical distance (González Torralbo, 2016, p. 2).

A family is transnational when its members live apart for long periods of time, yet despite the physical separation they are able to keep bonds that make them feel part of a unit and perceive the shared well-being of familiarity (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). Geographical distances do not limit,

in emotional and trust terms, the subjective maintenance of close kinship relationships (Zontini, 2006).

This is possible because, from the affective dimension, transnational families keep strong ties associated with reciprocity and solidarity (Putnam, 2001). These bonds are not built independently of the feelings of belonging that identify members as a family. The relationships they interweave are mediated by the intensity of the connections maintained by migrants with their places of origin, and by the responses they obtain from their loved ones (Comas d'Argemir & Pujadas Muñoz, 1991).

Although migration entails emotional costs (Schmalzbauer, 2004) and disturbs the dynamics of family coexistence, family members act within a system of obligations and wishes based on reciprocity, which means that they have to remotely renegotiate intimate relationships (Huennekes, 2018). As stated by Alonso (cited in Parella, 2007), family relationships are not annulled or dissolved, they are reformulated, thus highlighting the flexibility and adaptive capacity of the transnational family.

Emotional Remittances

The renegotiation of intimate relationships can be understood through emotional remittances, or the positive feelings (love, solidarity or gratitude) and the negative ones (disappointment, resentment, ingratitude or guilt) that circulate among transnational families (Katigbak, 2015).

In the multiplicity of emotional relationships and correspondences that take place among these families, exchanges reconfigure the family unit while consolidating it at once (McKay, 2007), given that love does not have a fixed character: it is a renewable resource that creates more of itself same (Hochschild, 2008). As they do not share a physical space, families must find new ways to strengthen their affective connection (Pribilsky, 2004). They are also involved in tensions and conflicts that are part of the dynamics that generally define families, but that can be accentuated by the geographical distances that separate their members (Parella, 2007).

The sending and receiving of emotional remittances are encrypted by the obligations and commitments accepted in the family, which implies assessing what is conceived as morally acceptable (Gowricharn, 2004); the need to express those feelings deemed appropriate is created, and those considered inappropriate are repressed or hidden (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). In the effort to function as a family, the moral obligation to keep contact is generated (Simoni & Voirol, 2020).

Physical separation creates conditions that weaken affective bonds, yet emotional remittances allow migrants to maintain connections with their places of origin, since they function as mechanisms that minimize or eliminate the risk that their families will forget about them. Remittances also function as a symbolic reminder that prepares for future reunions or returns (Katigbak, 2015). In this scenario, communication and its various means play an important role in making these connections possible.

Communication and Bonding Culture

Means of communication should be counted among the factors that contribute to preserving family ties in spite of distance. These tools facilitate the transfer of emotional remittances in face of the fact that feelings of identity and belonging are challenged and must be constantly renegotiated, as emotions transform and evolve throughout the migration processes (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015). Communication enables or hinders the expression of these emotions.

According to Portes and DeWind (2004), in remote times, no matter how committed migrants were to their families, they could not send money, visit them or communicate regularly with them, as the transient and technological conditions did not allow for it. This caused migrants to be perceived as uprooted subjects who were forced to cut ties with their communities of origin (Sayad, 2010).

In recent decades, and in line with a number of circumstances, these assumptions have been refuted, based on what Diminescu (2008) identifies as connected migrants. The author explains that, through the appropriation of ICTs, people live their experiences from the capacity they acquire to keep “virtual” bonds. Technological connectivity creates conditions to restructure family relationships, making absence and distance relative. This has contributed to a new, previously unthinkable management of emotional remittances.

This is how bonding culture emerges, through which migrants develop networks, activities and lifestyles between their country of origin and the host country (Diminescu, 2008) in order to continue participating in family dynamics in their communities of origin, independently of the place where they live (Komito, 2011). Bonding culture, or those mechanisms implemented by transnational families to sustain affective relationships, has been latent in various migration experiences. To establish dynamics of co-presence, that is, to feel the presence of others or to have the sensory experience of perceiving and being perceived (Baldassar, 2008), migrants and their family members have resorted to the means of communication available to them.

Throughout the course of their migration project, and in the search to adapt to new contexts and mitigate absence, transnational families have deployed communication strategies to reaffirm their relational continuity and negotiate their affectivity by different means and practices. From epistolary exchange—marked by the asynchrony between transmission and reception, with the implicit knowledge of certain events at the wrong time and with out-of-date emotional reactions (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1996)—to the use of the telephone which, through simultaneous communication, provides intimacy and increases the feeling of closeness (Wilding, 2006).

As an example, Asis (2002) shows how Filipino migrants, through letters and phone calls, tried to keep a constant sense of connection with their children. Richman and Rey (2009, p. 153) found that Haitian migrants “wrote” the messages “orally” on cassettes that they sent to their families, which allowed them to recreate certain emotional states. Madianou and Miller (2011) point out that, for almost two decades, letters and cassettes were the means used by Filipino families to reproduce everyday life at origin and destination. Nedelcu (2017) points out that the parents of

Romanian migrants develop technological skills so they can interact with their children and grandchildren.

As for Ecuadorian migrants, Carrillo Espinosa (2010) shows the meanings assigned to photographs, images that reinforced their sense of family belonging, renewing their presence-absence in the lives of their families. Leifsen and Tymczuk (2012) indicate that due to the need to stay in contact with children, the frequent use of the services provided by phone centers⁴ took root in Spain, for migrants to make calls, send e-mails and keep visual contact through web cameras.

In recent years, the fast evolution of ICTs has made bonding culture more visible, boosting transnational communication and its influence on emotional expressions. These technologies help families reinforcing the ways they express, as they contribute to preserving their mental and emotional health (Benítez, 2012) and allow them to directly face the difficulties posed by migration (Bacigalupe & Cámara, 2012), as loved ones are integrated into the daily life of those who are far away (Francisco, 2015).

Despite its positive contributions, the adoption of technology in bonding culture also reveals a problematic aspect: Madianou (2012) suggests that ICTs introduce solutions for remote coexistence, but that the frequency of communication also promotes disagreements and disputes. Francisco (2015) reveals that web cameras also function as visual surveillance systems. According to Nedelcu and Wyss (2016), ICTs serve to exert pressure for any-time availability and help.

Indeed, in contexts of greater human mobility and geographical distance, the mediation of ICTs in bonding culture creates opportunities and tensions in the affectivity of transnational families.

Research Questions

The management of emotional remittances imposed by bonding culture has been reinforced and at the same time made more complex with the massive use of ICTs, influencing the affective and relational dynamics of transnational families. These issues have not been explicitly addressed in relation to Ecuadorian migrants, their families and returnee migrants. Thus, the following research questions arise:

PI1: how has the use of ICTs influenced the management of emotional remittances among members of Ecuadorian transnational families partaking of bonding culture?

PI2: What is the role of ICTs in their co-presence routines?

METHOD

From the interpretive paradigm (Crotty, 1998), which understands reality as individually constructed, it follows that there are as many realities as there are individuals (Frowe, 2001). The qualitative method was used in this research, to analyze the influence of ICTs on the bonding culture of the people who make up Ecuadorian transnational families. The participants are divided into three groups of men and women: 21 migrants from Ecuador who live in Spain, 11 relatives of

⁴ Public access phone booths known as *locutorios*.

migrants who stayed in Ecuador, and 9 migrants who have returned to Ecuador while part of their family is still in Spain.

Non-probabilistic sampling was chosen, since statistical representativeness is not sought, but rather the information provided by key individuals. Although the results are not generalized, they allow answering the research questions and observing trends on the subject analyzed (Robinson, 2014).

Participants were recruited by means of snowball sampling; initial interviewees referred researchers to other individuals (Atkinson & Flint, 2001) belonging to transnational families in Ecuador and Spain, or who had experienced long-term family separation (at least two years). No specific age criteria were established.

Participants were informed on the objective of the research, and their verbal consent was obtained to record their responses (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The interviews were carried out in person by a researcher in Spain and Ecuador, this is therefore a multi-sited study. Being framed in daily life, the interviews were carried out in different places (homes, or work, study, and association spaces), according to the convenience of the participants.

Topics related to migration experiences, family relationships, the frequency of contact, or the use of technological tools for family communication were addressed based on interview scripts. Participants answered semi-structured and complementary questions.

The sample (Table 1) is made up of 31 women and 10 men. The minimum age is 18 years and the maximum is 80. The average age by groups corresponding to migrants is 45.05 years; that of relatives is 47.91 years; and that of returnee migrants is 44.22 years. Migration processes to Spain were established as of 1999. The average time of family separation among migrants is 15.14 years; that of relatives is 15.64 years; and that of returnee migrants is 14.11 years, with an average time of return to Ecuador of 4.70 years.

After family reunification, most of the migrants interviewed live now with their children in Spain and, to a lesser extent, with their partners and parents, while relatives in Ecuador live with their siblings or, to a lesser extent, with their children and parents; although there are also those who stated living with the entire family. Children, siblings, nephews, uncles/aunts and cousins can be counted among the relatives who migrated to Spain. For those who returned to Ecuador, the family members who stayed in Spain are mainly siblings and, to a lesser extent, parents and offspring.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

Status	Country of residence	Pseudonym*	Age Range/Gender	Years of family separation
Migrant	Spain	Amalia	33-37/ F	14
		Mirtha	63-67/ F	5
		Melina	18-22 / F	15
		Viviana	48-52/ F	16
		Omar	48-52/M	17
		Gilda	43-47/F	16
		Josué	33-37/M	14
		Eduardo	33-37/M	16
		Yadira	38-42/F	13
		Xiomara	48-52/F	17
		Humberto	58-62/M	16
		Paola	53-57/F	16
		Antonia	48-52/F	15
		Telma	43-47/F	16
		Magdalena	38-42/F	16
		Anastacia	48-52/F	18
		Elvira	43-47/F	16
		Rosaura	53-57/F	16
		Samuel	58-62/M	13
		Ismael	48-52/M	13
Julián	48-52/M	20		
Returnee	Ecuador	Carlota	18-22/F	19
		Tatiana	18-22/F	14
		Raquel	53-57/F	15
		Catalina	58-62/F	13
		Ligia	48-52/F	15
		Fátima	38-42/F	15
		Fernando	53-57/M	2
		Doris	68-72/F	17
		Abel	18-22/M	17
		Family Member		Romina
Rodolfo	28-32/M			20
Graciela	18-22/F			17
Roberto	38-42/M			10
Elisa	28-32/F			19
Renata	58-62/F			15
Roxana	63-67/F			2
Margarita	48-52/F			17
Silvia	78-82/F			22
Valeria	48-52/F			12
Mariela	48-52/F	18		

*Names have been changed in order to protect privacy.

Source: Own elaboration.

Analysis

The data corpus included the verbatim transcripts of the interviews that had previously been audio-recorded and anonymized. Data was systematized and coded according to the parameters devised for a thematic analysis; according to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis allows one to understand and interpret the phenomenon studied, identifying, organizing and analyzing the themes from the careful review of the data. Following this procedure, common threads were searched for and recorded.

The analysis process focused on the coding and categorization of information, identifying excerpts of the text with a theme and relating them to the codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Bengtsson (2016) points out that a decision must be made between the manifest or descriptive analysis (surface structure) and the latent or interpretive analysis (deep structure). In this article, we have opted for the synchronic method, which, according to Ibáñez (1985), allows qualitative analyses to be carried out that address the surface structure until reaching the deep one.

Although it was not possible to interview members of the same families in Ecuador and Spain, thus being unable to contrast shared experiences, our findings still allow us to verify that the experiences and perceptions of the group of migrants residing in Spain are related to those of relatives of other migrants residing in Ecuador.

RESULTS

Results have been organized into four thematic blocks: perceptions emerging from the experiences of migrants; those of non-migrant family members; those of migrants who have returned to Ecuador; and the positive and negative emotions emerged from the interactions of the people who make up transnational families. Testimonials about essential situations are exemplified by means of key quotes.

Bonding Culture and Communication: Perceptions of Migrants in Spain

For those migrants who participated in this study, Ecuador is an affective reference to their roots, associated with nostalgia and sadness, particularly so if children, parents or couples from whom they had to separate stayed in Ecuador (primarily for reasons financial). “(It’s) my home (...) I feel I belong there, I don’t feel like a stranger” (Antonia, personal communication, August 16, 2016).

At the onset of these migration processes (between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s), the communication mechanisms that were established as a gravitating factor to keep ties with the family in Ecuador were voice calls, made over the Internet at phone centers, due to the fact that the use of conventional telephones was expensive and there were difficulties in accessing telephone lines, due to the migrants’ lack of papers, for one example.

[First] at the phone center and then over the cellphone. That’s how I used to call, but it was really expensive, over the cellphone is super expensive, but well, I had to do it, nostalgia hits hard when you are far from your family (Samuel, personal communication, August 18, 2016).

Phone centers became spaces where not only money remittances could be sent, but where also emotional exchanges took place, although conditioned by a lack of privacy that could generate some discomfort. This situation was overcome with the massification of cellphones or mobile phones, which allow direct and more private communications.

The emotional remittances that used to circulate through the initial contacts over the telephone evidenced a colorful scenario: from the sadness of separation and the anxious eagerness to communicate that they were fine (experienced by migrants), the concern of their relatives who wanted to know how was their new life going, passing through the joy of migrants when communicating that they had found a job, to the disappointment of some of them due to the demands of their relatives when it came to money remittances. This last situation sometimes becomes the axis around which communication revolves, mainly so when those who have stayed in Ecuador are children or parents.

With family members, the first conversations are to ask if the migrant has arrived safely, then, to find out if they found a job, and once the migrant has found a job, conversations are to say “we need money” (Julián, personal communication, June 14, 2019).

An ambivalent attitude towards economic remittances persists among migrants. Remittances are a form of care that causes satisfaction due to the solidarity implied in them, to the tranquility derived from being able to fulfill the responsibility of contributing to the material well-being of the family (which can provide meaning to family separation). Yet on the other hand, money becomes an issue that creates discord when the migrant is unable to verify the use that is given to it, thus tensioning affective ties. It is under these latter circumstances that emotional remittances acquire negative connotations, as they become associated with ungratefulness by making clear the lack of empathy of the relatives who stayed in Ecuador.

[When I talk] with my parents I feel very happy (...) The truth is, I'm somewhat nostalgic for not being with them, but sometimes I'm also very happy to be here and to be able to help them in any way I can (...) Because, although you work and have helped your parents all your life, helped your siblings to study and get ahead, economic matters always come up. I, mistakenly, might think that they are always in need (Josué, personal communication, August 19, 2016).

I send money all the time, but sending money is not the same as being there. They receive an amount that I think will be enough, and in reality it is not, because living there is one thing and sending money is another (Magdalena, personal communication, August 17, 2016).

From yet another perspective, with the acceleration of ICT development in recent years by means of devices and applications, and due to the decrease in the cost of Internet services, phone centers have lost relevance among migrants; they are still, however, visited to keep in contact with older adults who still cannot master smartphone applications, and so phone centers continue to be referential for the transit of emotional remittances.

One of the tools that has contributed to reshaping relational dynamics is videoconferencing, which, from its first applications (Skype) to the most current ones (WhatsApp), allow spontaneous, individual or group meetings, in which the feeling of closeness prevails. This tool has become a

channel of co-presence that, however, generates contradictory emotions, as it opens the possibility of feeling that the same space is shared, while stressing the lack of physical presence.

Skype was magical, (...) if you put on image and voice it would collapse and you couldn't see well. So, people watched for a little while just to get excited and introduce their children, or it was even interesting to see the families. To communicate was such an event (...) the greatest happiness (Julián, personal communication, June 14, 2019).

Some migrants state that, despite living in Spain for years now, they have not been able to fully adapt to the way of life there, as cultural codes prevent them from interacting socially with the expressiveness they were used when living in Ecuador. However, they acknowledge that ICTs have allowed them to give free rein to that expressiveness. Videoconferences are now part of everyday life, but also of celebrations so that the family, although living in apart, can simultaneously enjoy the same experiences.

to show the gifts we received in Christmas. It's a more direct approach, to see each other face to face, or to be able to talk and see the reactions of that person when you say something, because just hearing a voice is not the same (Telma, personal communication, August 18, 2016).

To the extent that some migrants, after going through regrouping processes, live with their children, partners or siblings in Spain, they have understood that staying in that country gives them work, safety, and access to health and education systems. Although they feel nostalgic and sad for not living in Ecuador, they discard the idea of returning. This is also seen among migrants whose offspring stayed in Ecuador, among whom the desire for reunification prevails, but wish to make it happen in Spain. In the meanwhile, they keep constant virtual regrouping through ICTs, which makes separation more bearable even when it cannot replace physical contact. As parents or as children, they feel the obligation to keep in contact, and so they establish communication flows more frequently, this way showing their concern and care.

My father is a very old person, so he's not into any technology, videoconferencing, or the Internet, or anything like that. So, I feel obliged, twice a week, to call him, to know how is he doing, [to ask] what he needs (Elvira, personal communication, August 17, 2016).

Bonding Culture and Communication: Perceptions of Non-Migrant Family Members in Ecuador

For those who stay in Ecuador, Spain means family, pain and distance: "it steals our children away" (Valeria, personal communication, July 17, 2019). Likewise, it translates into freedom, opportunities and work, therefore, into economic well-being for those who migrate, but also for their families.

As for communication, the perception of non-migrant relatives is that a long time used to pass between calls at the beginning of migration processes. Those calls were short interactions that had to be coordinated due to time differences, as otherwise they would take place at odd hours and generate anxiety. Some families had to wait for the migrant relative to initiate communication,

which caused concern and uncertainty. Relatives could not do so from Ecuador because migrants did not have conventional telephones; in addition, calls to cellphones in Spain were very expensive. Thus, the moral responsibility for initiating contact fell on migrants. Other families, through phone booths, call plans or prepaid cards, called landlines or cellphones, and so responsibility was shared.

Before [1999] you had to wait to get the call. Generally, the call was from over there [Spain] to here [Ecuador] because it was very expensive here. Then with the Internet you could talk via Skype, but that was gradually discarded and now, you basically do it through WhatsApp, a video call, it practically is cost-free (Roberto, personal communication, June 10, 2019).

The co-responsibility of sustaining their bonds has been extended to more families, as the cost of Internet services has become more affordable. Also, both migrants and family members have cellphones now, which allows for direct and spontaneous communication to be established instead of having to wait for some remarkable event to occur, and this has contributed to a decrease in uncertainty.

Everyday situations are shared through applications that allow sending photos, voice notes, and written messages, and having videoconferences in real time. Responses can be immediate or delayed. Unlike before, when only what the other wanted to express over the phone was known, current tools allow adding a face to the voice, thus enabling a more accurate reading of moods. This makes communication feel more fluid, bringing about the consequent reciprocal participation in the daily life of others.

First it was over the phone, by e-mail too, it was like 2000 or so, but it wasn't so often as it's now. It's impressive nowadays, my cousin got married recently and she livestreamed the wedding for all of us. So, seeing it all live was quite impressive (...) the excitement of experiencing the entire event (Elisa, personal communication, June 10, 2019).

However, distance prevails. Although ICTs help keeping frequent or even daily communication in some cases, the impossibility of physical contact results in sadness and emotional emptiness.

It's hard for me, I miss them being close to me and being able to hug them, you see? Because you give and receive love when you hug someone, with words too but it's not the same, it's not the same for me (Roxana, personal communication, June 17, 2019).

Due to the inability or difficulty to handle ICTs, mobile devices and applications can represent a kind of "digital loneliness" for older adults, especially when not having someone to help them establish a connection with those who migrated. Consequently, having to use conventional means of communication limits their levels of interaction with absent family members.

I don't have that system [WhatsApp], I can't use it. When I want to communicate with him [her son in Spain] through that system, I call any of my children [in Ecuador] to come see me. I tell them to ask him how is he doing (Silvia, personal communication, July 17, 2019).

For those who have returned permanently to Ecuador, Spain is associated with safety, well-being, organization, and family: “it is the homeland of my children” (Fernando, personal communication, July 5, 2019). On the other hand, “Ecuador is a nice country. The best thing is being with my grandson and my children” (Ligia, personal communication, June 18, 2019). Ecuador translates into family, food and social life, because, despite how relevant technology has become, sharing space is not something that can be easily replaced.

This [returning] has been essential in my case, because I recovered my family life. I almost didn't have one anymore. I get along very well with my sisters [who live in Spain] but we barely saw each other anymore because of our jobs; but here [Ecuador] I work Monday to Friday, and try to see my mom and my sister all the time. So yes, I recovered my family life (Doris, personal communication, June 28, 2019).

Returning entails emotional readjustments. Due to the state of things in the country, even when migrants longed returning to Ecuador, disappointment arises when they compare their lifestyle there with the one they had in Spain; this disappointment is compensated by the new family cohabitation, which implies re-learning, given that circumstances have changed for all members of the family.

I think I missed very important things with my son and that is why all these things are happening (...). Because while I was here [Ecuador] he counted on me for everything (...) when I came back I tried to cover all those spaces, these gaps, but it has not been easy for me either (Fátima, personal communication, May 15, 2019).

Returning has meant going through new separation processes, because part of their loved ones lives in Spain. The difference they perceive with respect to when they first migrated is that communication with them is uninterrupted. This makes it possible for them not to feel emotionally disconnected from the daily life of their family in Spain.

[We send each other] voice notes, photographs, everything my children are doing [in Spain], where they go, who they are with (...) I do the same, [I share them] my activities [in Ecuador], I send them photos (...) We are always in contact (Fernando, personal communication, July 5, 2019).

Another way, besides communication, in which migrants sustain the bonds with their families in Ecuador (and now the opposite, with the one still in Spain), has been and continue to be gifts, which account for the constant connection they keep with their loved ones. Gifts become reward mechanisms to compensate for absences; gifts are an expression of joy expressing that for those who migrate, the family is always present. “When you are there, buying gifts for the family is so exciting [due to] nostalgia, not being with them on special dates (...) it is so exciting” (Ligia, personal communication, June 18, 2019).

For the youngest, having returned means realizing that the family is “larger” (Abel, personal communication, June 6, 2019), which implies developing a different type of intimacy, as in Spain the family nucleus was smaller. In addition, they have been able to verify the benefits of their

parents' emotional remittances from Spain, as they now feel welcomed and supported by the family in Ecuador.

Exchange of Positive and Negative Emotional Remittances

In relation to bonding culture as mediated by ICTs, emotional ambiguity can be identified among the members of transnational families given that both positive and negative remittances are produced: positive as they enable virtual reunification, and negative because the impossibility of overcoming physical distance is evidenced. "There are mixed feelings [when communicating] because I might as well feel joy, sometimes impotence, anger (...) because I would like to be there [Ecuador]. But all the same I am happy that I can hear his voice [his father's] and when I make a video call, just seeing him makes me happy" (Paola, personal communication, August 18, 2016).

Although demands may focus on money, the monetary remittances is not the only thing creating tensions. Between migrants and non-migrant family members there are also demands to stay in regular contact. If communication is not frequent enough, ungratefulness is perceived as having taken ahold; this favors the circulation of misunderstandings or reproaches, which in some cases relate to economic remittances, this translating into the "I pay, you call" agreement: "mostly, it is he [her son] who calls me. I don't call him as much as he calls me, I mean, I call him out when he takes too long to call me" (Valeria, personal communication, July 17, 2018).

Tensions also build up regarding matters associated with health and care. When a loved one gets sick, the desire not to raise any concern prevails, as distance makes care difficult; thus, hiding or not giving any importance to health issues becomes an option.

I think it's in our culture that we Ecuadorians don't like to tell others when things are not fine. So it's always "everything is fine". That hasn't changed with the means of communication. People still try to portray things as going all fine, "look at the party, look at what we're doing..." (Roberto, personal communication, June 10, 2019).

In some families, as nuclear reunification takes place in Spain and the deaths of parents in Ecuador, interaction patterns change. Although migrants keep more or less frequent contact with other relatives, distance conditions the familiarity between them. Technological gaps grow smaller, yet affective fissures still occur. "My sister [in Ecuador] is the one who pays the most attention to them [uncles and cousins in Spain] (...) I get news on my uncles from my sister, because she's constantly talking to them on WhatsApp" (Rodolfo, personal communication, June 5, 2019).

This situation contrasts with that of families in which the use of ICTs has allowed them to enrich affective exchanges, thanks to the fact that they have learned to relate through technological tools and are not afraid to show their joy, but neither do they hide their vulnerabilities.

I believe communication has always been essential for migrants. Just imagine, in the past people exchanged letters and these letters were magical, it was such an event when the mailman arrived, for one to receive a letter with sometimes already old news. Today, it is easier to receive these

forms of communication, where all feelings surface. You can see tears, joy, sadness, pain, fighting, distancing, anger, jealousy (Julián, personal communication, June 14, 2019).

Despite several years of physical separation having elapsed, some family members speak more regularly with migrants in Spain than with relatives in Ecuador, which shows that ICTs have made it possible to manage virtual meeting spaces wherein emotional intimacy and closeness are shared. “When you have a strong bond with your family, new technologies help you sustain it and make sure that the network you had at some point does not fade away” (Elisa, personal communication, June 10, 2019).

A number of migrants regret leaving because, although they contribute to the economic well-being of offspring and parents, they feel guilt and remorse for not being around while the children are growing up or for not providing physical care for the parents.

I feel quite hurt, I wish I was a bird so I could fly there. Things are different when you are away. It is true that I send her [her mother] a monthly amount [of money] according to possibilities, but that doesn't solve the fact that she, for example, depends on someone else [to take care of her] (Viviana, personal communication, August 29, 2016).

Relatives in Ecuador have resignedly accepted physical separation. They understand that in Spain migrants have more job opportunities and a better quality of life. While ICTs allow them to reinforce ties on a daily basis, they feel that, although these distances have metaphorically shortened, they do not replace physical contact. “[With videoconferences] I think we feel closer to each other, that is, really there, I am a little sentimental, [I need] to hug him with my eyes, to be with him in those moments [Christmas], which in reality are sad for him [her son] and for me” (Valeria, personal communication, July 17, 2019).

DISCUSSION

In this analysis, an approach has been made to the mediation of ICTs in the affective relationships kept by the individuals who make up transnational families by means of exchanging emotional remittances (Katigbak, 2015). Our reflections are framed within the culture of bonds (Diminescu, 2008), which is understood as the development of networks, activities and lifestyles that these families maintain between Ecuador as country of origin, and Spain as destination. This research focused on three groups: Ecuadorian migrants living in Spain, relatives of migrants living in Ecuador, and Ecuadorians who returned to their country of origin.

Monetary remittances are conceptualized as part of the income sent by migrants to their communities of origin. This accounts for a type of interaction that may be one of the main factors shaping migration processes, yet not the only one. By focusing the debates only on the remittance and receipt of money between transnational families, a complex intrafamily and social network would be made invisible, a network that although converging in economic matters is not limited to them.

The conceptual expansion of remittances as reaching outside the economic field can be understood if migrants are seen not only as providers, and family members not solely as recipients;

this understanding leads to the assumption that the relationships that are interwoven are not exclusively unidirectional and asymmetric (Mazzucato, 2011). Taken unto the realm of emotions, remittances are conceived as something both sent and received back and forth between parties, reciprocally. This element is key in family dynamics where feelings such as love, solidarity and gratitude circulate, as well as disappointment, resentment, ungratefulness and guilt.

Migrants and the non-migrant members of their family act from the alternation of the conditions of providers and receivers, who emit and receive both positive and negative emotions and affections. This bidirectionality makes more sense when communication and its tools burst onto the stage, tools that are channels enabling equitable interrelationships.

The opportunities and inconveniences that arise inside the family when managing the dynamics caused by spatial separation and the transformation of daily life make it so that emotional remittances contribute to creating a sense of belonging, able to connect the lives of people in the place of origin and in the destination. This is because “intimacy is made through emotional labour—the work of connecting, sharing, telling stories, listening, responding—” which does not “necessarily preclude long-distance and technologically mediated forms of closeness” (McKay, 2007, p. 179).

In recent years, due to the evolution of ICTs through applications that enable asynchronous and synchronous exchanges (by means of instant messaging, and audio and video streaming), emotional manifestations unfold in dynamic and changing communication environments that allow the construction of shared stories.

The migration periods analyzed in this article began between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, a time in which this group of Ecuadorian migrants, in their eagerness to stay in contact with their families in Ecuador, made very frequent use of the services provided by phone centers. These results relate to those obtained by Leifsen and Tymczuk (2012).

Phone centers were used to send money, but they also became communication nodes that functioned as emotional link points. As McKay (2007) stated, remittances are a way of caring and showing affection for the family. Thus, migrants have established long-distance financial and affective support circuits with their loved ones (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997).

The lack of access to direct telephone calls or other forms of communication created the conditions for the moral responsibility for establishing bonding culture to befall largely on migrants. The findings obtained from our research show that under current conditions of technological and human mobility, the members of the transnational families that participated in this study have access to the communication tools required for frequent contact, which, in bonding culture translates into shared responsibility between those who migrated to Spain and those who stayed in Ecuador.

The need to show and feel affection, as well as the ability to acknowledge and respond to one’s own emotions and those of others (McKay, 2007) is not something that involves only migrants but also family members who stay in the place of origin. Hence the importance of the circulation of feelings such as love or solidarity; this however does not prevent disappointments and resentments from emerging among families, especially due to issues related to money; these results were also identified by Simoni and Voirol (2020).

The access and appropriation of ICTs in Spain and Ecuador create scenarios that allow the preservation of these bonds; however, physical presence in daily coexistence cannot be easily replaced, this fact being a cause of guilt and emotional deficiencies. In the meantime, scenarios emerge wherein virtual regrouping is possible. By means of communication, the everyday life of these families is framed in the paradoxes of absence in presence and presence in absence (Sayad, 2010).

This culture of bonds, which was in some cases triggered by migrants, currently finds an echo in the proactive actions of the families that sustain a relationship with those who migrated and co-participate in the migrants' day-to-day life in Spain, in the same way that migrants keep ties with Ecuador. These results match those obtained by Nedelcu and Wyss (2016) from studying Romanian families also present in Switzerland.

If smartphones have transformed the forms of communication of the general population, for the Ecuadorian transnational families that participated in this analysis they represent connection channels through which texts, images, audios and videos containing expressions of love, hope, solidarity and gratitude circulate, but also disappointment, resentment, ungratefulness and guilt, circulate. All of these feelings are condensed in the emotional remittances that, framed within the culture of bonds, connect origin (Ecuador) and destination (Spain).

Mobile devices and applications enable the creation of spaces in which exchanges of joy, sorrow and disappointment take place that reinforce and condition the sense of family belonging, thus broadening the meanings that, through monetary remittances, were initially given to migrants for being the main managers and providers of care actions. These forms of communication have made the synergies between migrants and non-migrants as members of transnational families more visible; still, for older adults these new means of communication represent difficulties and dependency, which contradicts the findings by Nedelcu (2017).

CLOSING REMARKS

In contemporary migration, the mediation of ICTs in the culture of bonds enables a permanent regeneration of the paradoxical presence-absence of migrants in the daily life of their family members, and simultaneously of the lives these family members in the life of those who migrated. It is not the technologies themselves that allow them to function as a family, but is rather their wish to remain as such what makes it possible, aided by these technologies through which positive and negative emotions are sent and received.

ICTs have contributed to the creation of virtual spaces shared between origin and destination, in which different ways of everyday living have been established, with both joys and setbacks; ICTs have become the umbilical cord connecting two realities. However, the quality of the relationships still cannot match face-to-face and physical ones.

Although the frequency of contacts increased with the emergence of new technologies, virtual co-presence does not replace the experiencing of a common culture in the same physical space; this is why emotional remittances can also be understood as investment mechanisms to build family vitality upon: just like monetary remittances, emotional remittances become expressions of care.

However, the regular flows of communication cannot prevent emotional deficiencies from occurring, as families must face the effects of separation that, in long-term processes, can cause affective exchanges to adapt and strengthen, but also to fracture.

Emotional remittances call for a deeper analysis of the interactions in transnational families. Although they are linked to new forms of expression mediated by ICTs, they are constructions that result in a different way of expressing feelings, at the same time leading to the understanding of different configurations of intra-family relationships. Like monetary remittances, emotional remittances also represent forms of power linked to encounters, disagreements, and the search for affective solutions to face new realities that, inevitably, develop problematic exchanges that affect the processes of upbringing, parental care, and filial affections; all of this should be taken into account by States as situations of conflict at the psychosocial and individual levels.

If migration largely instills in migrants the moral obligation to send monetary remittances to cover the family's material needs, the culture of bonds also causes this moral obligation to extend to the constant maintenance of communication as an indicator of family emotional health. For this reason, it is necessary to promote support spaces for those partaking in migration processes both in the countries of origin and in those of destination. Although these people vehemently cling to doing family, this fact alone cannot circumvent the effects of living in two interconnected realities in which the dichotomy between affective proximity and physical distance is stressed.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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