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Haciendo de Tripas el Corazón/Plucking Up Courage: Migration, Family Internal Conflict, and Gender in Veronica's Story

Hilary Parsons Dick ¹

Abstract

This article considers how migrants conceptualize and negotiate the emotional conflicts that accompany decisions to migrate. Such conflicts are a regular feature of migrants' experience, informing how they understand the act of and reasons for migrating. The article focuses on the life of one migrant: a woman I call "Veronica," whom I met during research on migration between Uriangato, Guanajuato, Mexico and Chester County, Pennsylvania. I argue that the analysis of discourse offers a particularly illuminating window into how migrants conceptualize and negotiate emotional conflicts. I place this discussion in dialogue with the literature on family internal conflict and gender in migration.

Keywords: Mexico-US migration, discourse analysis, emotion, family internal conflict, gender.

INTRODUCTION

¡Aye, tenemos que hacer de tripas el corazón! / Aye, we have to pluck up [our] courage!

This is how one of my research participants, a Mexican migrant woman whom I call "Veronica,"² described the situation she and her mother faced on the eve of Veronica's departure for the US. As a mother with a daughter in the US herself, Veronica knew the pain of being left without the companionship of one's female child. This quotation be-

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² All of the names of I use to refer to my research respondents are pseudonyms, employed to protect their identities.

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speaks a driving conflict that shapes Veronica's experience of migration: she is divided between her desire to be with her son and mother in Mexico and her desire to be with her husband and two other children in the US. Veronica balances these desires by seasonally migrating between her Mexican and US homes every six to nine months. Yet, this is an imperfect balance, for no matter where she resides, Veronica feels guilt over and longing for the family members from whom she has departed.

Veronica's story is not exceptional. In my research on migration from Uriangato, Guanajuato, Mexico (Veronica's city of origin) to Chester County, Pennsylvania (Veronica's US destination), I encountered countless families separated by migration.³ And with such separation invariably come conflicting desires. How do migrants conceptualize and negotiate such emotional conflicts? This question is significant because this process informs how people understand the act of and reasons for migrating. Furthermore, as I suggest in the conclusion, its exploration is also revealing of common patterns in how people conceptualize family and gender in the context of migration. Through a discussion of Veronica's story, I propose that one way researchers can approach this question is through the analysis of discourse.

Some scholars have theorized conflicts such as Veronica's as a process of crossing borders between distinct "identities" (Basch *et al.* 1994, Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992, Vélez-Ibáñez *et al.* 2002). In this, borders are envisioned as both physical and emotional. Because emotional borders are carried inside of oneself, they are continually traversed, and that traversing shapes one's experience of and action in the world (Behar 1993). Veronica's story illustrates what the literature on family internal conflict in migration (Goodson-Lawes 1993, Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, Rouse 1989, 1992) suggests: the traversing of emotional borders is profoundly marked by the

³ The Mexican migrant community in Chester County is roughly 30 years old. Many of the migrants in Chester County come from Uriangato and its neighboring municipalities to work in the local mushroom farm industry.

tensions created by the prospect of leaving family members. Moreover, it shows that emotional borders, while traversed internally, are constructed socially, and thus are meaningfully observed in social interaction.

To speak of emotional border-crossing as one between “identities” is problematic, however. The act of possessing an identity—understood as a recognizable continuity of the self or a collectivity across time and space—is a culturally-specific practice (Feld & Schieffelin 1996, Rosaldo 1980, Rouse 1995), one essential to US social life. Given the cultural-specificity of this practice, transnational migrants to the US must learn it (Rouse 1995). Therefore, treating “identity” as an straightforward starting point of analysis is problematic because it can occlude potential differences between migrants’ understanding of “identity” and that possessed by researchers (cf. to the discussion of ethnicity in Glick Schiller 2005).

A less problematic approach to the study of migrants’ conceptualization and negotiation of emotional conflicts is the analysis of discourse. My data show that migrants conceptualize such conflicts in discourse: as people struggle over conflicting desires related to migration, they verbalize that conflict in talk. In this talk, speakers produce images of the actors involved in the conflict; I call such images *social personae* (Agha in press, Goffman 1974, 1981). The social personae a speaker constructs and—most importantly—the positions, or *role alignments*, he takes to them are revealing of how he conceptualizes and negotiates that conflict. In the following, I offer a summary of the personae Veronica constructs and the role alignments she takes to them in two interviews, one I conducted with her on the eve of her migration and one following that migration.

VERONICA’S EMOTIONAL CONFLICT IN DISCOURSE

Across my interviews with Veronica, she constructs images of herself as a “good wife, mother, and daughter.” These images are *self-referential* personae that represent her as a woman who is close with her family and who under-

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stands and supports the decisions some of her family members have taken to migrate to the US. Within this overarching self-representation, there is a key conflict. For her to maintain her image as a good wife and mother means migrating to the US in order to live with the members of her family who have relocated there. However, it also means leaving behind her eldest son and mother, an act that violates her image of herself as a good mother and daughter. Consider the following excerpt from the Uriangato interview,⁴ taken from roughly 45 minutes into the interview; we were discussing Veronica's impending migration:

	Spanish Original	English Translation⁵
1	A mi, se me hace bien difícil, pero no quiero que se me pierdan mis papeles.	It is very hard for me [to leave her son and mother], but I don't want to lose my papers.
2	Porque fue mucho trabajo que me los arreglara..	Because it was a lot of work for him [her husband] to arrange them for me.
3	Y digo, "No – ¿si duro mucho en ir a poco me los quitan?"	And I say, "No [I can't wait here] – what if I wait a long time to go and they take my papers away from me?"
4	Y pues, tambien quiero ir a ver a mis muchachos de allá – que están allá.	And well, I also want to see my children from there – [my children] that are there.
5	Sí – despues de tanto	Yes – after so much

⁴ From this exchange, I have deleted four lines of discourse containing an aside about the difficulties of learning English.

⁵ All translations were done by the author.

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	trabajo, y es de, tanto esfuerzo – trabajo de el.	work, and um, so much effort – work of his [her husband’s].
6	Digo yo que es mucho esfuerzo, y dinero, tiempo, y todo para decir, “No. Pues no, que allá se quedan.”	I say that it is a lot of effort, and money, time, and everything to say, “No. Well no, you stay there [I’m not coming].”
7	¿No mas así, y ya?. no.	Just like that, and that’s that?, no.

The conflict inherent to Veronica’s experience of migration is made explicit in the line 1. She contrasts the difficulty of leaving her son and mother to her desire to not lose her “papers,” by which she means her US legal permanent residency. This statement constructs two representations of Veronica: one who would remain in Uriangato and one who would migrate to Chester County. To each of these personae, Veronica adds predicates characterizing them:

Veronica who remains in Uriangato	Veronica who migrates to Chester County
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not want to leave mother and son (Line 1) • Can say to her family in the US: you stay there, I am not coming (Line 6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not want to lose papers (Line 1) • Understands that her husband worked hard for her to get papers (Lines 2, 5, 6) • Cannot say she will not migrate due to her husband’s hard work (Line 7) • Wants to see her children in Chester County (Line 4)

The conflict between these personae is dramatically portrayed in lines 6-7. In line 6, the portion of her statement in quotation marks contains a representation of Veronica as a wife who, faced with the knowledge of her husband’s hard

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work, could say that she will stay in Uriangato as it pleases her. This hypothetical Veronica is self-focused, determining her migratory behavior on the basis of her will alone. She constructs this persona in contrast to the persona of Veronica as wife who understands the hard work of her husband and as a mother who wants to see her children in Chester County. As line 7 makes plain, Veronica negatively aligns herself to the self-focused persona. By voicing and then rejecting this other Veronica, Veronica—the speaker—deepens the positive role alignment that she takes to the Veronica who would migrate.

As an instance of reported speech, line 6 implies dialogues that exist outside the unfolding one between Veronica and me. One of these is the imagined dialogue between her family in Chester County and the self-centered Veronica represented explicitly in line 6. The other dialogue is one Veronica is carrying on—in this interview and outside it—with herself about the possibility of her own migration. In these dialogues, she tries on different life possibilities, imagining if she could migrate. The conclusion of this “trying on” is that her alignment with the Veronica who migrates wins out. This fact is observable in three aspects of her discourse. The most obvious is Veronica’s explicit rejection of the persona who would not migrate in line 7. Additionally, she devotes more “air time” to the persona who will migrate: only lines 1 and 6 refer to the persona who would not migrate. Finally, Veronica consistently maintains positive role alignments to the migrating persona—this persona is regularly portrayed as an accurate representation of Veronica. By contrast, her only positively role alignment to the persona who would not migrate is in line 1.

These discourse patterns are not isolated to the discourse explicated above, but are replicated by Veronica *across both interviews*. Significantly, these patterns are unlikely to have been consciously manipulated by Veronica. It would take an act of herculean self-awareness for her to know in the moment that she was constructing a particular set of personae and aligning herself to them in patterned ways. And it would be yet more challenging for her to remember her dis-

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course patterns from the Uriangato interview in March 2002 and then replicate them in the Chester County interview in September 2003. I submit, rather, that such discourse patterns exist beyond the “limits of awareness” of speakers (Silverstein 1981). As such, they are illuminating of more than what Veronica intentionally wanted me to hear. They also offer a window into a key emotion tension that is salient to her regardless of our interaction.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Veronica’s discourse offers a window into how Veronica conceptualizes the emotional conflict presented to her by the prospect of her migrating. This conflict is primarily represented as one that grounds her in webs of family relation, in which her maintenance of relationships with the members of her family in both Uriangato and Chester County is central. In her discourse, she crosses the border created by this emotional conflict, at different moments representing herself as a person who would remain in Uriangato and depart for Chester County. She negotiates this conflict by favoring the image of herself as a migrant, but a migrant who is at the same moment still connected to Uriangato. Interestingly, this pattern precedes and ultimately parallels her actual migration behavior, for not only does she migrate, but she also returns regularly to Uriangato, resolving her desire to be in two places at once by seasonally migrating. The parallels between Veronica’s discursive and migration practice suggest that how people talk about migration can be predictive of how they will migrate.

Finally, Veronica’s conceptualization and negotiation of her emotional conflict are interesting because of their gendered nature. The scholarship on family internal conflict in migration—such as that discussed above—has shown that gender relations play a central role in shaping migration patterns. This research focuses on interaction across gendered lines, examining how conflict between husbands and wives, for example, affects men’s and women’s migration. Veronica’s story illustrates that how speakers construct themselves as gendered figures—as wives, mothers, daugh-

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ters, etc.—is central to how they envision their migration. It shows that such self-constructions are not necessarily unified, but are often marked by contestation. As such, the study of family internal conflict in migration is not just the study of conflict between people, but inside of individual actors. While this conflict is internally-carried, it is constructed and negotiated in social interaction, such as discursive interaction. How people regularly construct and negotiate the emotional conflicts wrought by migration in discourse can, thus, be revealing not only of individual struggles, but of common patterns in how people conceptualize family and gender in the context of that migration.

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