

## *That's how Life is over there, Isn't it?* Family Life Changes among Mexican Non-Migrants who Stayed behind

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### ABSTRACT

This article studies the experiences of the non-migrating kin of Mexican undocumented emigrants to the United States. It examines the negotiations and changes in family life of those who stayed behind by looking at spouses', siblings' and parent-children's relations. First, it analyzes the perceptions and imaginaries that non-migrants hold of migrants' life abroad and introduces three possible outcomes for its conceptualization: positive overcompensation, neutral perspective and negative compensation. It also analyzes the positive changes in family dynamics for the individual self-perceptions of those who stay behind. Subsequently, it discusses the role played by the extended family in the household arrangements following emigration. Lastly, it explores the relations and adjustments taking place between return-migrants and those who stayed behind.

*Keywords:* 1. Mexico-United States migration, 2. transnational family relations, 3. compensation, 4. non-migrants staying behind, 5. extended family.

### *Así es la vida allá, ¿no?:* Cambios en la vida familiar de mexicanos no migrantes

### RESUMEN

En este trabajo se estudian las experiencias de los familiares no migrantes de mexicanos indocumentados en Estados Unidos. Considerando las relaciones de cónyuges, hermanos, padres e hijos, se pretende lograr una mejor comprensión de los cambios y negociaciones en la vida familiar de los que se quedan. En primer lugar, se analizan las percepciones e imaginarios de los no migrantes sobre la vida de sus migrantes en el extranjero y se sugieren tres conceptualizaciones al respecto: sobrecompensación positiva, perspectiva neutra y compensación negativa. Posteriormente se estudia el rol que la familia extensa y política juega en los arreglos intrafamiliares. Por último, se discuten las relaciones y reajustes que tienen lugar entre los migrantes de retorno y los que se quedan.

*Palabras clave:* 1. migración México-Estados Unidos, 2. relaciones de familias transnacionales, 3. compensación, 4. no migrantes, 5. familia política y extensa.

## *Introduction*

Migration studies have tended to focus on the economic, political and social consequences of migration on receiving countries and on the lives of migrants there. While there is also a considerable body of literature on the impact of migration on communities of origin, this has mainly focused on the economic change, poverty reduction and development that result from remittances. Much less attention, however, has been paid to the social impacts of migration on the migrant's family left behind, on those who had no wish, no opportunity or no possibility to migrate.

The literature on transnational families and family networks has acknowledged the family's role in the society of origin for the initiation and continuation of migration, as well as the use and management of remittances for the alleviation of poverty and economic development. However, social research on the impacts of migration on the family members left behind is recent and has been mainly limited to women's empowerment and raising children in the absence of one or both parents. Little attention has been devoted to the relations that bond both parties, those who left and those who stayed, and how the ideas and impressions that one side has of the other are not always accurate, fair, realistic and/or based on first-hand information. Yet it is important to acknowledge the role of those who stay behind as they are as embedded in the migration process as migrants themselves (Kothari, 2003; Pedone, 2003; López and Loaiza, 2009). "Migration is not an experience that belongs solely to those who leave their countries. The protagonists ... include those who leave, those who stay and those who come and go for generations to come" (Falicov, 2005b:400).

Those who stay behind are the focus of this paper. It studies their perceptions and imaginaries of life abroad and analyze the changes in family dynamics they undergo while their relatives are away. It is suggested that the changes in the relationships and feelings of those who stay behind can experience three general types of outcome. The first is when non-migrant family members over-

estimate the successes and sacrifices of the migrant relative. The second is when non-migrant family members see the migrants' efforts with empathy but without excessive concern. The third is when relations between migrants and non-migrants become strained to the point of rejecting the efforts made by migrant relatives, ultimately resulting in indifference and apathy.

This paper also analyzes the positive changes in family dynamics that migration causes for those who stay behind. Subsequently, it discusses the role the extended family plays for the arrangements taking place in societies of origin following emigration. Finally it explores the relations and adjustments return-migrants negotiate with those who stay behind.

### *Methods*

The following discussion emerges from the findings of over seven months of multi-sited ethnographic research with two cohorts of undocumented Mexican migrants in the United States and their family members in Mexico. These cohorts differed mainly in their demographic origin (rural/urban), social class (working-class/middle-class origins in Mexico), educational achievement (elementary/high school and more) and modes of crossing (entry without inspection/visa over-stayers).

Three months were spent with the rural-origin sample in a city in Orange County, California, called Sunville. Their relatives are from a town named Calvarito, in the State of Mexico, where the author stayed for nearly one month. The other cohort was composed of urban-origin migrants residing in the metropolitan area of Dallas, Texas, where nearly three months were spent. The non-migrant urban sample was located in a city called Palmas<sup>1</sup> in the San Luis Potosí state, where nearly one month were spent. The accounts analyzed here, however, are only of those who did not migrate and, to a lesser extent, of return migrants.

<sup>1</sup> Names of people and places have been changed in order to protect and give anonymity to the participants in this study.

The methods employed were open-ended, unstructured, quasi-life history interviewing and participant observation. Interviews typically took place in the interviewees' own homes. In the town of Calvarito, nearly 13 interviews were conducted: five with men and eight with women. None of the female participants had migrated to the United States. Three of the male participants were return migrants. In Palmas, the sample included ten women and five men. All of the male participants in this group were return migrants. Five women respondents in the urban cohort had visited their relatives in the United States on numerous occasions using tourist visas.

The experiences of women dominate the discussion that follows. Women had, for the most part, stayed behind in their roles of mothers, wives or daughters. Only in one case is the experience of a man (the son of a migrant woman) considered. In this study only adults took part. The experiences of children are of a different order and not considered here. The majority of the respondents, regardless of their socioeconomic and demographic differences, generally shared important aspects regarding their conceptualization of the migrant's everyday life and their own experiences. The main difference between them was based on how they had constructed these images.

*Perceptions in Societies of Origin over Migration and Migrants' Life*

In Mexico, the topic of emigration generates ambiguous, polarized and diverse opinions. As Pribilski (2004:315) argued, migration is a bittersweet experience that can just as easily shatter dreams as fulfill them. Stories about life in the north abound, and range from happy stories filled with contentment, success and accomplishments to miserable accounts of hardship, limitations, exploitation, isolation and even death. Those who stay behind are, of course, influenced by these accounts. They are often fearful that their migrant relative will, at some point, neglect them, forget his homeland, form a new family, engage in emotional relations or sexual adventures, consume drugs or have an immoral

lifestyle or change in that becomes unfamiliar or incompatible with the life he or she had before migrating.

Return migrants also play a fundamental role in shaping perceptions of life abroad. However, their accounts are not always accurate. As observed by Pedone (2003) with Ecuadorian migrants in Spain, return migrants often lied about the challenges they had to face or the type of jobs they performed. Within my sample, return migrants admitted that for a while they preferred not to talk about the hardships they endured as undocumented migrants in the United States. Instead, they spoke about the greatness and modernity of American cities. At the initial stage of their return, migrants tried to give an impression of success. It was unusual for return migrants to provide an image of failure as that would have implied personal defeat. Only later did they reveal the negative as well as the positive aspects of their experiences.

Some migrants live in continuous ambivalence, idealizing and rejecting both host and home societies. Their achievements and limitations make them oscillate between happiness and sadness; frustration and joy (González, 2005). These contradictory sentiments undoubtedly influence non-migrants' perceptions of their migrant relative's life abroad and their familial relations across borders. Non-migrants, especially those who are not able to visit or see their migrant relatives, construct collective and individual images of how their migrant relative lives in various ways.

In communities where migration is deeply rooted in community life, non-migrants largely base their perceptions of their relatives' life abroad on the communication between the two parties, stories of other migrants, return migrants, and on the accounts of relatives, acquaintances and other families that have been touched by migration as well as the mass media. In societies where migration is not as commonplace, non-migrants rely more on the accounts of their own migrant relatives and the media. Contrary to what happens in societies embedded in migration, less extended social networks do not facilitate the development of a uniform, collective image of life in the United States, or the rapid communication of events and gossip occurring on either side of the

border (Fussell and Massey, 2004). This does not mean that non-migrants residing in places where migration is not a widespread phenomenon are unaware of the conditions, limitations, and everyday difficulties undocumented migrants have to face.

Scholars studying Mexican migration stemming from urban areas (Arias and Woo, 2004; Flores, Hernández-León and Massey, 2004; Fussell and Massey, 2004; Hernández-León, 2008) largely agree that the use of social networks differs greatly between urban and rural settings. While urban origin migration has seen exponential growth (Durand and Massey, 2003), cities provide anonymity; hence networks for the transmission of information and mutual solidarity are not widespread.

Yet the images and perceptions that non-migrants hold of life abroad share similarities whether they originate in a town or in a city. Leyva and Caballero (2009) conducted a study on wives of migrants in both urban and rural settings. They found that the majority of wives staying behind (80 %) thought that their husbands had a bad time by being migrant workers in the United States, but were doing better than if they had stayed in Mexico (*la pasan mal, pero les va mejor*). This bad time referred to the dangers of crossing the border, harsh working conditions, discrimination, lack of health services, being away from family members and a limited sense of freedom because of their undocumented status. On the other hand, doing better meant having better economic earnings and interestingly the possibility of their husbands having several sexual partners without them finding out.

During the fieldwork, it was observed that both cohorts, regardless of their urban or rural origins, often exaggerated either the suffering, adversities and hardships or the successes and accomplishments the migrant had gone through or achieved. Pre-migration interfamilial relations played a central role in defining how non-migrants thought of and imagined the lives of their migrant relatives and the value of physical (as well as emotional) separations. The same could be said of the migrant's economic success, social relations, adaptation experiences and frequency of communication between those who left and those who stayed behind.

In general, it was observed that the remaining family members' collective imaginaries could be grouped into three types: those who believed their kin were suffering, hiding and having a bad time; those marked by ambivalence who believed life in the United States was hard even though their relatives' migration had improved their lives, and others whose relations were tense, distant and even indifferent. I have termed these three possible outcomes: positive overcompensation, neutral perspective and negative compensation (see table 1). In their study of parent-child reunification Suárez-Orozco, Todorova and Louie (2002) found similar outcomes. In the first, children had felt abandoned and responded by detaching from the parent that left and in turn became more attached to the caregiver. In the second, both parents and children reported feeling like strangers. Parents found it difficult to exert control over their children whom they saw as ungrateful while children felt ambivalent towards their parents. In the third, parental guilt resulted in the overindulgence of children, creating inconsistencies and a continuous pattern of rejection and counter-rejection. The categories suggested however, do not only refer to parent-child relations, but also aim to be more generally applicable.

Table 1. Perceptions over Migrant Kin's Life in the U.S.

<i>Positive overcompensation</i>	<i>Neutral perspective</i>	<i>Negative compensation</i>
Non-migrants exaggerate (real and imagined) hardships of migrants. Sense of guilt and compassion. Reluctance to believe in migrant's well-being.	Balance between difficulties of migration and improvements to economic situation. Migration seen as a shared responsibility. Migrants and non-migrants go through periods of adjustment.	Tense and distant relations between migrants and non-migrants. Sense of anger/abandonment against migrants for having left the family home.

Source: Author's elaboration based on fieldwork data.

*Positive Overcompensation. Having a Bad Time*

Non-migrants who thought that their migrant family members had sacrificed themselves in order to improve their lives developed a sense of guilt and compassion (Falicov, 2003, 2005a; Rumbaut, 2005). They exaggerated their relatives' hardships and believed their life was characterized by a negative environment. Migrants sacrificed themselves in order to provide a better life for those who stayed behind. The sacrifices of migrants gained greater significance and worth for the non-migrants when the former experienced difficulties. Those who stayed behind were reluctant to believe their migrant relative's life was not permanently marked by adversities.

For instance, Cristina (age 49, Calvarito) thought that Jorge (age 29, Sunville), her son, lived in sadness and fear. She thought that his life was worse in Sunville than in Calvarito. "I think that his life there is very sad, it must be the same, maybe worse than here because there he doesn't see anybody. He doesn't have his family and friends around. I think he is locked inside all the time because he must be afraid" (Cristina, Calvarito, December 2009).

Cristina also showed concern over the impression that, as Jorge has been working in the United States, in order to pay off the family debts, he "has not done anything for himself". In particular, she feared that Jorge would not find a good woman to marry.

I don't know what he thinks or what he wants. I don't know when he wants to come back...But look at his cousins, they already have families, some have bought *terrenitos* [small pieces of land] or have started to build up their savings. And what does he have? Nothing, and he is getting old and the best is pretty much chosen... (Cristina, Calvarito, December 2009).

Interestingly, Cristina was unaware of Jorge's social and romantic relations during the time he has lived in California. Cristina learned from her daughter-in-law that Jorge had had a girlfriend in California only when he was asked about it. She had thought that Jorge had not had any relationships during his stay. However,

Lorena, Cristina's daughter-in-law, intervened to correct Cristina after she said that her son had not had a girlfriend in all the years he had been abroad. Likewise, Cristina felt more at ease after she was shown some pictures of her son and her brother-in-law in Sunville. She seemed to be glad after seeing that her son was "*bien gordo*" (nice and chubby). Still, Cristina probably continued to believe her son was suffering and making sacrifices for the sake of the family in Calvarito. It was as though she preferred to construct images of hardship and difficult times rather than ones in which her son was having a "normal" life.

Hortensia (age 68, Palmas) experienced a similar situation. During the initial period following her son's departure, she did not entirely believe he was all right. However, as opposed to Cristina, she constructed these ideas based on what she saw on the news rather than other migrants' accounts. She thought her son had to live in hiding from the immigration authorities' constant harassment of Mexicans. Her concerns were largely based upon racial prejudices. She felt more at ease after her son told her that because of his light coloring he was not detected by U.S. authorities.

Seeing [on the news] that so many bad things were happening over there, how could I not get worried? And even if I heard him on the phone and he said he was better than here, I couldn't avoid feeling worried. But then I had to learn. And he also told me that he didn't look suspicious; that the police was [*sic*] after the *morenos* (Hortensia, Palmas, February 2010).

Among the women who participated in this study, it was particularly mothers who had a positive over-compensatory approach towards their migrant children. In the cases described above, mothers made victims of their male children and were reluctant to believe in their well-being. The mothers of migrant women experienced this positive overcompensation by seeing their migrant daughters as enhanced persons, with greater capabilities and achievements. They realized that their condition of being women engaged in migration made them especially courageous, determined and brave.

For instance, *doña* Guille (age 56, Calvarito) and Clara (age 33, Calvarito) both interviewed in December 2009 were the mother and sister respectively of Reyna (age 38, Sunville). They thought of Reyna as a woman who overcame anything that got her in her way. Unlike the majority of migrant women in her hometown, Reyna did not migrate to join her husband or leave with him. Instead, Reyna migrated on her own when she was 19 years old to try her luck in the United States. They both seemed very proud that Reyna had pursued migration “just because she is very brave” and realized that emigrating as she did is “not easy at all, otherwise everybody would do it”.

Clara, living in Dallas, is another case of positive overcompensation. Her mother, Isabel (age 64, Palmas) and her sister Alondra (age 43, Palmas) saw Clara through rose-tinted spectacles. Alondra thought of her sister as the bravest of her siblings, and saw her as a “determined and audacious person who pursued her dreams”. Also, Isabel saw her daughter as superior to other women also engaged in domestic service. “She is very serious about her work. I admire her ... She is not like the girls here [in Mexico] that pretend to work, but do not really clean. She does it to perfection putting a lot of effort into everything she does” (Isabel, Palmas, February 2010).

Isabel and Alondra seemed to categorize their migrant relative differently from the images usually attributed to both undocumented migrants and domestic workers. For them, the status of Clara as a domestic worker in the United States could not be compared with the status of domestic workers in Mexico. As noted by Margolis (1994), a migrant’s social identity is not bound up with his or her job. There is a sharp distinction between the identity attached to work on the one hand, and the social identity of the immigrant on the other.

*Neutral Perspective: They Have to Put up with it*

The second category observed was one in which non-migrants did not exaggerate in either a positive or a negative way about the opportunities or adversities of life in the United States. Instead

believed that their migrant relatives had to put on a brave face and endure the hardships of life abroad, especially since their migration had been voluntary. In general, the difficulties expressed by migrants were related to the high cost of living in the United States, demanding workloads, missing their family, lack of familial care during times of illness, and risky job prospects as a result of the U.S. financial crisis.

The non-migrants who fell into this category had not undergone tense or abrupt separations. Instead, this cohort had talked with their migrant relatives about the purpose and general objectives of “going north” such as saving goals (to pay off debts or to acquire goods or land), or had defined times for return (such as the completion of children’s education). This did not necessarily imply that non-migrants in the positive overcompensation or negative compensation categories had to go through sudden or problematic separations or did not have clear objectives for their trips. Yet it was more common for families in the neutral perspective category to have a more highly defined plan of action.

In addition, these non-migrants believed that migration entailed good and bad consequences for all actors involved and not only for the migrants. They saw the migration experience as a shared responsibility, in which those who left and those who stayed had to go through periods of adjustment in order to improve conditions for the whole family. Women in this category did not think that it was only their migrant kin who was making a sacrifice for the sake of the family as they also saw themselves as “doing their part”.

Laura (age 55, Palmas) said that she herself had a difficult time when her husband was away and believed that if she had to struggle and overcome difficulties, her husband should also deal with his problems. She had several disagreements with her parents-in-law as to how to raise and educate her two daughters without her husband’s help. Furthermore, by being left alone, Laura started challenging the existing *statu quo* in gender relations and changed her views on how to educate her daughters.

[By being alone] I became a very strong and quite a bitter woman too. Well, I don’t know if I was strong but I gave that impression.

I started to question old-fashioned ideas. I saw that the education my parents gave me was not the only way ... I opened my own beauty salon despite my in-laws ... They said I would be spending my time working instead of taking care of my daughters ... I taught my daughters not to give a damn about what people say and not to keep their mouths shut when they are not happy with something or someone (Laura, Palmas, January 2010).

Lupe (age 29, Palmas, January 2010) thought that her husband had migrated because he had wanted to. Lupe believed that he had to put up with (*tiene que aguantarse*) the challenges and high cost of living in the United States. During the interviews, Lupe acknowledged the fact that thanks to her husband's remittances they had been able to pay off debts, buy home appliances and a van. At the same time, Lupe's perception of her own skills and capabilities was enhanced. She became aware that she could look after her family on her own. Moreover, she remarked that her husband's absence was not an impediment to her to fulfilling the role of mother and provider.

Gilda (age 23, Calvarito, December 2010) is the daughter of Melchor (age 49, Sunville) who migrated in order to provide education for his children. Gilda thought her father was making sacrifices for the benefit of the whole family, yet she did not make a victim of him. Rumbaut (2005) noted that children of immigrants, aware of being the reason for the migration of their parents, had a sense of guilt and felt obliged to achieve success for their future. Gilda experienced this obligation, but not guilt. She felt a sense of debt and a responsibility to obey her father's advice. She felt sorry for him as he was the person who was away from the family. However, she thought of herself and her siblings as hard-working students who would not let their father down.

*Negative Compensation. That's how Life is over there, Isn't it?*

The cases discussed above have involved situations in which non-migrants either see their migrating relatives through a positive

overcompensation lens or believe that their kin have to adapt to their new lives in the United States, with its pros and cons. However, transnational family relations can become strained, leading to indifference. As Foner (1999:257) argued, families are “not just a haven in a heartless world, but a place where conflict and negotiation also take place”.

The case of Esperanza (age 56, Sunville) and her children Pepe and Patricia (ages 31 and 29 respectively, Calvarito) illustrate a rather exceptional case of troublesome interfamilial relations. Their most serious problems started prior to Esperanza's migration when she remarried, after being a widow for over 20 years. These worsened because her marriage did not work. For these reasons she decided to migrate to the United States. Geographical separation and time eased their tense relations yet their problems were not entirely resolved for either side. Both of Esperanza's children were young adults when she left. However, they both complained about and rejected her attempts to provide care and support.

Owing to her very heavy workload, Esperanza had only one morning and one night per week when she could sleep over four hours a day. She had unhealthy eating and sleeping habits, which were affecting her wellbeing. She looked emaciated, had lost weight, had recurrent headaches and was constantly in a bad mood. Her housemates were worried about her and advised her to reduce her workload. They argued that Esperanza did not need to have such a heavy workload as her children were no longer economically dependent on her. Esperanza stopped remitting regularly some years ago, as both of her children had steady jobs. Only occasionally and spontaneously did she send money or goods.

Esperanza's children in Mexico were aware of her workload; however they did not consider this a matter of concern. I asked for Patricia's and Pepe's opinions on the matter in separate interviews. Both regarded their mother's workloads as normal.

Patricia believed that “that's how life is over there, isn't it? They work the whole time huh?” Her answer demonstrates how she thought that the life of a migrant should be primarily dedicated to working. Furthermore, she did not take her mother's problems

seriously. She was detached from and uninterested about Esperanza's life.

My mum likes to portray herself as a martyr, she wants us to feel pity for her ... She wants to make a soap opera out of her life. She blamed her failed marriage on us; she said that she left because of us ... Then she complains very often that she has to work a lot, she complains of her workmates, she complains that she is the only one who cleans the house, she complains of everything ... (Patricia, Calvarito, December 2009).

Similarly, Pepe believed that his mother "is a very strong woman and she can deal with any challenge that occurs in her life". Pepe's apparent optimism about his mother's capabilities showed a lack of involvement with Esperanza's situation. Conversely, Pepe explained that before his mother left, she did not attend to her everyday household duties or his and his sister's personal issues and needs, such as what they ate or how they were doing at school and work. But now, after years of separation, his mother wanted to act as a "mother hen". Yet Esperanza's efforts made Pepe and Patricia dubious about and reject their mother's extreme concerns.

When we talk she says to me that she would like to be here to cook my food, wash my clothes, and take care of me. I have said to her "Don't give me that bullshit, mum. Don't be stupid. We both know you are not like that" ... I think she has a strong need for affection (Pepe, Calvarito, December 2009).

To a lesser extent, *doña* Teresa (age 60, Calvarito, December 2009), felt estranged from her sons Justino and Melchor (ages 40 and 44 respectively, Sunville). When asked for an interview she initially refused and explained that she did not know anything about her sons' lives. Later, she said she rarely received money or phone calls from them. Most importantly, *doña* Teresa felt that she occupied a less important place for her son Justino than *doña* Guille (Justino's mother-in-law). *Doña* Guille received remittances

regularly, was more frequently in touch and had better relations with the family members in California. Doña Teresa was mostly concerned and upset about the fact that this state of affairs was popular knowledge. When Justino started to send money from Sunville to build a house in the town, he and his wife Reyna entrusted *doña* Guille to supervise the construction. *Doña* Teresa and her family were not taken into account to help in this enterprise. The latter however, was largely due to the fact that Reyna preferred her mother (rather than her mother-in-law) to take the responsibility for such an enterprise.

### *Positive Changes after Migration*

In the previous section, relations between migrants and non-migrants based on the imaginaries of everyday life in the United States were discussed. This section explores non-migrants' perceptions and reconfigurations of themselves and their migrants as individual beings. For instance, women staying behind believed that their migrant relatives had a greater appreciation of family union. Likewise, they believed that male migrants in particular had grown more responsible, independent and had learned to appreciate the effort involved in domestic work while they were in the United States. Besides the tangible economic benefits from remittances, there were also sociocultural changes in transnational family dynamics and roles.

Pribilsky (2004) observed how in the absence of their migrant husbands, women felt relieved of their husbands' jealousy or controlling behavior. Likewise, women would adopt leadership roles in the community ranging from catechism classes to popularly elected posts. Also, Mancillas and Rodríguez (2009) noted that after migration women "allow" themselves to be more sociable and feel more able to participate in decision-making for both conjugal and familial relations.

The observations from field research are consistent with this. Lupe saw herself as more capable of bringing up her children alone. Hortensia believed that it had not been worthwhile in terms

of economic gains for her son Sergio to go to Texas. Nevertheless, she thought her son had learned to love life. Gilda thought her father had become less chauvinistic and cared less about what other people said. She was delighted that after her father had migrated, he had become more flexible towards female employment. She was especially glad because her mother had been able to engage in paid employment. She had never worked while Melchor lived in Calvarito.

Those who stayed behind also went through changes in their own self-perceptions and their relations with their relatives. Angélica (age 63, Palmas, January 2010) was very closely attached to her two daughters and grandchildren. After they left for Dallas she went through a period she described as “being depressed and not wanting to live”. However, she felt better after she learned that her daughters were doing well economically and that they had become more like sisters by helping each other out. Angélica mentioned she had learned to live her life independently from the life of her daughters and grandchildren and that now she had more of a life of her own.

Laura explained how before her husband left she felt insecure about his fidelity as her husband was very outgoing and flirtatious with other people and very serious with her. Laura grew confident of her husband’s love and commitment to her during his absence. “I believe he had his adventures, but I am sure I am the one he loves and that he loves me a lot” (Laura, age 55, Palmas, January 2010).

Return migrants also experienced a reconfiguration of self-perceptions and capabilities. Susana (age 44, Palmas, February 2010) a return migrant, commented that she became lazy whilst she lived in the United States because there “everything is so easy”. She nevertheless argued that she was not lazy any more now that she lives in Mexico. Susana was particularly critical of women in the United States. She argued that “*las americanas*” (American women) leave their children to be educated by the television, do not cook and only warm up microwave food and do not scrub their clothes and only spray chemicals on them to remove stains.

Nicolás (age 33, Palmas), a return migrant, believed that there were more important things in life than making money. Moreover, he cherished the fact that in Mexico he was free and did not need to be hiding.

### *The Extended Family*

The extended family and in-laws (hereafter extended family) can play an important role in the daily life of non-migrant relatives who stay behind. The extended family can provide emotional support during the period of adjustment following departure and for the duration of the migration experience (Reyes, 2008). Since migration in both urban and rural areas has been predominantly male, women left behind respond in various ways to the absence of their spouses. Some wives engage employment, and therefore rely on the extended family to take care of children. In some cases the woman moves to her parents' or in-laws' house (Aysa and Massey, 2004). In general, a family's post-migration arrangements might include closer or more frequent contact with and reliance on the extended family.

However, the extended family can also be a source of conflict. Foner (2009:8) noted that in immigrant families there is a mixture of cooperation and caring. Their relations are "filled with inconsistencies and contradictions and shift in different contexts and over time". Ruiz (2008) noted the tensions that in-laws go through in their power struggles, especially in relation to decision-making. López and Loaiza (2009) analyzed how grandparents in their role as caretakers of children left behind often had ambivalent feelings. On the one hand they were grateful for the economic benefits resulting from migration. But on the other, they considered that the social costs of migration, such as parental absence or estrangement between parents and children, were very high. At the same time, grandparents largely shaped their grandchildren's opinions and what they could expect from their own parents. Their opinions were not always welcomed by the migrant parents themselves. Also, as noted by Pribilsky (2004) with

Ecuadorian families, tensions between extended family members were caused because parents and in-laws monitored the wives left behind and often assumed supervisory roles to safeguard the honor of the family. Wives left behind disliked being under surveillance and strove to achieve autonomy.

During fieldwork it was observed that conflict across in-law and extended families arose mainly from resentment due to the economic improvement of certain family members. It was common for the respondents to complain about their extended family members' jealousy about their greater solvency and their purchase of material goods. Sometimes the extended family took advantage of the latter and created tense situations.

Laura experienced a great deal of tension with her siblings after Jesús, her husband, left for Texas. Before her husband's emigration Laura and her siblings had agreed to contribute to their parents' subsistence in equal amounts. As Laura and her daughters moved to her parents' house after Jesús left, she started to make larger contributions to the parental household. However as Laura's siblings saw that she had more money because of the remittances she received, they asked her to contribute more. She was then paying 50 percent of the expenses and the other four siblings shared the other 50 percent between them. Nevertheless at a later stage, two of Laura's siblings complained of financial difficulties. For a while, they stopped giving money to the parents, placing all the responsibility on Laura.

Lupe (age 29, Palmas) also mentioned how her mother-in-law blackmailed Lupe's husband, asking him for money to buy medicines. Lupe believed her mother-in-law was not ill and that she used the money for other things. Furthermore, when her mother-in-law talked over the phone with her son (Lupe's husband) she implied that Lupe was irresponsible with money. Likewise, Lupe resented the fact that her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law were critical of the way she spent money. Her extended family would gossip about her if she bought clothes or other items for herself or her children.

Interestingly, these women rarely confronted their extended family in order to express their dissatisfaction. Nor did they tell

their migrant kin how they felt and instead resigned themselves to these situations.

### *Relations with Return Migrants*

The social implications surrounding return migration are vast and complex, yet in this section the aim is to focus briefly on the relations between return migrants and those who stayed behind. The institution of the family has been idealized to such an extent that family conflicts have been neglected and family reunification after migration has been assumed to be harmonious (Fresneda, 2001). Yet, when return migrants revert to day-to-day interaction with their societies of origin, they experience what Gmelch (1980) termed “reverse culture shock”. Return migrants and those who stayed often (but provisionally) feel estranged in relation to each other (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie, 2002).

The changes brought about by the return of a long-absent person range from joy to dissatisfaction and need for adjustment. After the period of excitement that results from the encounter of a member of the family not seen for a long period, a sensation of boredom or even annoyance can take place for those who were accustomed to living with the migrant’s absence. Parents and children and spouses have to go through periods of re-acquaintance and rediscovery. Often children see the person who took care of them in the absence of the migrant parent as the authority figure and take a while to recognize the return migrant as an authority figure (Dreby, 2009). The caretaker is usually a woman; the migrant’s wife or the children’s aunt, grandmother or godmother. Return migrants therefore feel jealous of the caretakers and feel their children do not appreciate the sacrifice that was made for their sake (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie, 2002; Reyes, 2008).

Migrants generally return to a *statu quo* within their families that is different from what it was when they left. This might have changed for a number of reasons. For instance, new members of the family might have been born, or those who stayed may have formed new friendships. Children have grown up, gone to school and formed a character and personality that may be alien to the

returned migrant. Family members can be strangers as they have been absent from each others' lives and relations between them had been largely based on the sending of money and goods or maintained by telephone calls and other media.

In the case of spousal relations, non-migrants grow accustomed to autonomy, independence and the responsibilities of only taking care of those who stayed (Aysa and Massey, 2004). The arrival of return migrants can sometimes upset a familial system. All members therefore have to go through a period of adjustment and negotiations. Within my sample, women sometimes complained that their husbands compared the way things were done in the United States and Mexico. Women often thought their husbands were "muy desperdiciadores" (very wasteful) of food, money and items they still considered to be in good condition, such as clothing and household goods.

Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) has widely discussed gender changes that result from migration, in which migrant men play an increasingly active role in household duties alongside their non-migrating spouses. Eva (age 41, Calvarito), Melchor's wife, felt uncomfortable when, after recently returning from the United States the husband began to accompany her to do the grocery shopping. She disliked the fact that Melchor encouraged her to buy more food for the family, arguing that everything in Mexico was very cheap.

Eva had got used to what D'Aubeterre (2001) has named "long-distance conjugality" (*conyugalidad a distancia*). Eva was especially uncomfortable with Melchor's entry into a field that she considered hers and in which she was usually only joined by other women. Yet she never mentioned her discomfort to him and instead waited until "he got over it" (*a que se le pasara*).

Despite the initial complications, in most cases the disruptions and destabilizations taking place after family reunification return to normal over time (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie, 2002). Return migrants and those who stayed behind eventually learn to live side by side and to understand and adapt (or readapt) to their own and others' roles and responsibilities (Pribilsky, 2004).

### *Conclusions*

International migration has become a process with profound implications for family life. Migration has sociocultural implications for the lives of both migrants and those who stay. These implications do not stop at national borders and instead form part of a single transnational experience. In this paper, the priority was the analysis of one side of this transnational event and the experiences of the family members who stayed in the country of origin.

As noted earlier, the perceptions of migrants' lives abroad, the relations that are maintained between those who leave and those who stay and the cultural consequences of having lived abroad are complex, ambivalent and at times contradictory. Transnational individual and social lives and their effects are "inconsistent, patchy in one place or another, good for some, bad for others, short-term or long-term" (Vertovec, 2009:53).

On the one hand, migration achieved economic improvement and positive social changes, particularly for women who challenged traditional paradigms. Yet at the same time, migration created tense situations between family members. These situations existed between migrants and non-migrants, who were left alone with new responsibilities and were concerned about the migrant's well-being. Tensions also existed among those who stayed, especially in their relations with the extended family. They were often jealous of the others' economic improvement and critical of the use given to remittances. Furthermore, the tensions existed among return migrants who had upset a familial state of affairs.

The socioeconomic and demographic differences that existed between the participants of this study did not make a noticeable difference to these processes. Urban and rural participants shared patterns for constructing their imaginaries of life abroad and had commonalities regarding the involvement of the extended family and similar experiences with return migrants. Both urban and rural cohorts were concerned with the risks associated with living and working as undocumented aliens in the United States. Both

cohorts rationalized and tried to make sense of their concerns following the categories of compensation I have suggested here. Both urban and rural non-migrants often exaggerated either the suffering, adversities and hardships or the accomplishments and successes the migrant had achieved.

When migrants and the remaining kin maintained sporadic communication between them, those who stayed behind had unclear ideas about the everyday lives and experiences of their relatives in the United States. In addition, they were more likely to have a “positive overcompensation” or a “negative compensation” approach. Yet the ways spouses and parents and children responded to migration were diverse and depended not only on gender or age, but rather on the relations that they had cultivated between them.

Immigrant family relations are fundamental in shaping the whole migratory process. Family members can transform the migration experience and delay or hasten the migrant’s return. Nevertheless, the changes in family dynamics that resulted from migration do not end when the migrant returns to the society of origin. A period of readjustment between all the family members involved will inevitably follow and create a new *statu quo*. The contradictions of migration will also surface at this stage when both migrants and non-migrants balance the positive and negative consequences of the migration experience. Migrants and non-migrants have to learn to readjust, to become re-acquainted and to negotiate their roles and positions within the familial system.

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