

Gender, Sexuality, Language, and Migration¹

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MIGRATION AND GENDER ROLES

As migrants cross borders, they also cross emotional and behavioral boundaries. Becoming a member of a new society stretches the boundaries of what is possible. One's life and roles change. With them, identities change as well. Most immigrants and refugees crossing geographical borders, rarely anticipate the emotional and behavioral boundaries they will confront.

It is my contention, based on both clinical practice and research, that at each step of the migration process, women and men encounter different experiences. Women's roles and sexual behavior may be modified more dramatically and profoundly than men's (Espín, 1987). For both heterosexual and lesbian women, the crossing of borders through migration provides the space and "permission" to cross boundaries and transform their sexuality and gender roles. However, this is usually not a smooth process, even for those women who seem to have acculturated easily to the new society. Women who migrate from "traditional" societies may find that new alternatives open to them in the new country. But the new possibilities that migration opens up are not limited to women from traditional societies. Women who migrate from "modern" societies may also find that alternatives open for them in the new country because of the distance from the fa-

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miliar environment and/or their families. "New learning opportunities emerge, as host society institutional structures interact with the psychological equipment immigrants bring and create in the host society" (Rogler, 1994, p. 706).

We know that the sexual and gender role behaviors of women serve a larger social function beyond the personal. They are used by enemies and friends alike as "proof" of the morality—or decay—of social groups or nations. In most societies, women's sexual behavior and their conformity to traditional gender roles signifies that family's value system. Thus, in many societies, a daughter who does not conform to "traditional morality" can be seen as "proof" of the lax morals of the family. This is why struggles surrounding acculturation in immigrant and refugee families center frequently on the issues of daughters' sexual behaviors and women's sex roles in general. For parents and young women alike, acculturation and sexuality are closely connected with being sexually promiscuous. Policing women's bodies and sexual behavior becomes for immigrant communities the main means of asserting moral superiority over the host culture. Yet it severely limits the personal expression of immigrant women. Groups that are transforming their way of life through a vast and deep process of acculturation, focus on preserving "tradition" almost exclusively through the gender roles of women. Women's roles become the last "bastion of tradition." Women's bodies become the site for struggles concerning disorienting cultural differences. Gender becomes the site to claim the power denied to immigrant men by racism.

It is important to recognize that some of the rigidity concerning the roles of women that we observe in immigrant communities is an attempt to protect and safeguard what remains of emotional stability; so much of it is lost with migration. It is as if the immigrants' psychological sense of safety and their sense of self depended on a sharp contrast between two sets of cultural values conceived as rigidly different and unchangeable. The preservation of "old versions" of women's roles becomes central to this sharp contrast. For people who experience a deep lack of control over their daily lives, controlling women's sexuality and behavior becomes a symbolic demonstration of orderliness and continuity. It gives them the feeling that not all is lost, not all is changing. Obviously, it is easier for immigrants to maintain control over their private world than over their public lives: work schedules, types of work and schooling, housing, and the structures of daily life are controlled by the customs and demands of the new society. But in the privacy of their homes, they can seek to maintain the sense that they are still in control. This is why frequently women themselves join actively in adhering to "traditions" that, from the point of view of outsiders, appear to curtail their own freedoms and opportunities for self-fulfillment.

Moreover, self-appointed "guardians of morality and tradition" that are ever-present among immigrant communities are deeply concerned

with women's roles and sexual behavior. These people include religious or community leaders, older women and men, and even younger people who feel a need to preserve old values at all costs. Because immigrant communities are often besieged with rejection, racism, and scorn, those self-appointed "guardians" have always found fertile ground from which to control women's sexuality in the name of preserving "tradition" (Yuval-Davis, 1992).

Pressures on immigrant women's roles and sexuality also emerge from outside their own culture. The host society also imposes its own burdens and desires through prejudices and racism. Although "returning women to their 'traditional roles' continues to be defined as central to preserving national identity and cultural pride" (Narayan, 1997, p. 20) by some immigrants, those same values and behaviors are perceived by their hosts as a demonstration of immigrants' "backwardness" and need for change.

Yet a third oppressive factor comes from people eager to be "culturally sensitive." Under the guise of respect, some members of the host society may "racialize" and "exoticize" immigrant women, particularly those who come from non-European countries. Many well-intentioned people believe that the "true immigrant" has to be "different" even if she does not want to be. Tragically, they contribute to the oppression of immigrant women in the name of respecting their culture and preserving their values. Deployment of "tradition" and "culture" to justify behavior should never remain unproblematized.

Conversely, much is made about the incidence of male dominance in immigrant cultures by individuals in the host culture. However, it is important to remember that any expression of male dominance among immigrant is nothing but the specific culture's version of the myth of male superiority that exists in most cultures, including mainstream American culture.

Many immigrants of both sexes still subscribe to the traditional ideas of male superiority and its consequent forms of expression, but many reject it outright. Let us remember that there are many immigrant women who are actively involved in the feminist movement and who are unwilling to submit to the authority of male relatives. The stories of many of the heterosexual and lesbian interviewees in my studies of immigrant women illustrate this point. Indeed, the existence of lesbians and feminists among immigrant women challenges the myth of their submissiveness to old values so prevalent in mainstream American culture. In fact, research shows that the pace of acculturation tends to be slower for females than males in all aspects but one: Females of all ages acculturate faster than their male counterparts when it comes to gender roles (Ginorio, 1979). As sociologist Silvia Pedraza (1991) reported:

While men were eager to return [to the home country], women tended to postpone or avoid return because they realized it would entail their retirement from work and the loss of new-found freedoms As a result, a

struggle developed over ... return that revolved around the traditional definitions of gender and privileges which the migration itself had challenged and which many men sought to retain by returning home. (p. 310)

MIGRATION AND SEXUALITY

Although the experience of women in international migration has begun to draw attention from researchers, policymakers, and service providers (e.g. Cole, Espín, & Rothblum, 1992; Gabaccia, 1992), sexuality and other intimate experiences of women immigrants are mostly absent from these studies. "By contrast, there exists a well-developed scholarship about how immigration ... has reproduced racial, ethnic, and class distinctions" (Luibhéid, 2002, p. xi). Little is known, for example, about the experiences of immigrant women in such "private" realms as sexual identity, sexual behavior, and sexual orientation. Yet, as we know, sexuality is not private, and this explains why so many cultures and countries try to control and legislate it. Indeed, as one historian observed, "Sexual behavior (perhaps more than religion) is the most highly symbolic activity in any society. To penetrate the symbolic system implicit in any society's sexual behavior is therefore to some extent closest to the heart of its uniqueness" (Trumbach, 1977, p. 24). I believe with Luibhéid (2002) that sexuality is a central axis through which immigration to the United States has been organized. Perhaps the simplest illustration of this point is the importance placed by immigration legislation and enforcing authorities on issues of women's sexuality such as prostitution, lesbianism, and pregnancy—all of which have been used as exclusion criteria for female immigrants at one point or another. Indeed, "the immigration apparatus has been a major site for the construction and regulation of immigrant women's sexual identities and activities" (Luibhéid, 2003, p. xxvii).

Immigrant women's sexuality and gender-specific behavior are not static. The established norms for women's appropriate sexual behavior experience constant transformations in both the home and host cultures/societies. Immigrant women and girls develop their identity against the backdrop of these contradictions. I believe we need to reconceptualize how we view women immigrants by expanding our understanding of what migration entails for women in the realms of sexuality and gender roles. The stories immigrant women tell about how their migration experiences, gender roles, and sexuality have been influenced by the culture/society they came from and the culture/society in which they now live, and by the language in which the stories are told. Listening to those stories sheds light on the impact of migration on gender role and sexuality

MY STUDIES OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN'S SEXUALITY AND GENDER ROLES

After several decades of clinical work and research on immigrant and refugee women, a few years ago I completed a study that sought to increase knowledge and understanding of sexuality and gender-related issues among this population. Specifically, I wanted to explore how women's sexuality and gender roles are affected by migration to a new country. Between 1994 and 1996 I collected 35 life narratives of women who migrated over a period of 58 years to the United States from different parts of the world. The women interviewed ranged in age from early 20s to mid 70s, and they were all college educated. These women were chosen on the basis of their ability to articulate their experiences with the research topic, their fluency in English, and their knowledge of their first language.² They came from Europe, Canada, Latin America, Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Middle East. And, contrary to the stereotypical image of all immigrant women as heterosexual mothers, 30% of the women who volunteered to be interviewed were lesbians. The data consist of life story narratives elicited through the use of open-ended questions in in-depth interviews that focused on different aspects of their experience. Individual interviews (and a few focus groups) were conducted in several cities in the United States (San Diego and San Francisco, CA; Boston; Chicago; Miami; New York; and Seattle, WA). The results of this study combined with those of two previous studies appeared in my book entitled *Women Crossing Boundaries: A Psychology and Immigration and Transformations of Sexuality* (Espín, 1999). The two previous studies focused on adolescent experiences of migration and on mother–daughter separation through migration, respectively. These studies also used life narratives as their source of data. The migration narratives of the interviewees are intertwined with their telling about the development of their sexualities, their relationships, and their identities. Their stories are the product of unique personal and cultural contexts dislocated by migration. The events surrounding migration and its precipitants are central to these women's lives. Thus, their stories are both prototypes and individual tales. Together these narratives challenge common stereotypes about immigrant women. What I present here are some of the main results and conclusions from these studies. In the interviews, choice of language to discuss issues of sexuality emerged as one of the important components of the subjective ex-

²This may raise the objection that these women are not "typical" immigrants. There is a common misconception that all immigrants are poor, uneducated, and unable to communicate in English. The reality is that immigrants to the United States, particularly after 1965, come from all social classes in their countries of origin and adapt to their new environment in a variety of ways, including becoming successful and well educated.

perience. Given their responses, I found myself focusing particularly on the role of language in shaping and expressing the experiences of immigrant women concerning sexuality, gender roles, and identity.

Narratives of gender and sexuality, like all stories lived and told by people, are influenced by what is culturally acceptable. Acceptable accounts of behavior are regulated by society. Individual desire and societal possibilities both push the limits and constrain the boundaries of the lived story. When societal transformations occur, the lived story and the acceptable accounts of that story are also transformed. Immigration constitutes one of the most powerful transformative processes in a given person's life. Surely, we agree that culture and historical events are powerful forces in human development. What, then, happens to the individual life, sense of self, and life story when the cultural narrative changes abruptly as with migration? Although "the story about life is open to editing and revision" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 154), some editing and revision may require more work than others. "Re-writing one's story involves major life changes" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 182). What happens when events that are not "personal events" in the usual way "invade" the life story? Events that happen "out there" in the world are not only "social" but also "psychological." These events transform the "plots" provided by the culture and the social context, either because the culture itself is transformed, or because the individual finds herself in a new cultural context that allows a different kind of story. Some classical studies of life history have their source in these cataclysms (e.g., Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918–1920/1927).

Through the collected narratives, I explored how questions of cultural identity and sexual identity are negotiated by immigrant and refugee women. I tried to understand how the stories women immigrants tell about themselves and are both made possible and constrained by social constructions of reality and by the language in which the stories are told. I was particularly interested in the vicissitudes of gender and sexual construction as the transformations created by migration, developed in these women's lives.

Almost all of the interviewees in my studies actively attributed the transformations in their gender roles and sexuality to their migration. Not all of them were fully comfortable with their sexuality or gender roles, but then, sex is not unproblematic for most women. Sex and sexuality can be a source of fear, pain, and embarrassment, and they can also be a source of happiness, pleasure, and fulfillment. In this, the interviewees are no exception. In any case, the transformations in their gender roles and sexuality did not occur independently from other identity transformations, but rather were part of a process characterized by a move toward greater autonomy in all areas of their lives. Because the women interviewed had experienced dramatic transformations in their lives, the evidence for a social construction of sexuality and gender roles provided by their life narratives becomes even

more poignant. Listening to these women's stories, the power of this social construction manifests in: (a) their struggle to either maintain or reflect the values of the immigrant communities concerning women's sexuality—meaning both values brought from the home country and values of their identified community that developed during the migration process; (b) the internalized desires of the women themselves, which have originated both in the home and host cultures; and (c) the “uses” both the woman herself and her community make of female sexuality in the process of establishing identities different from the host society, or, conversely, to signal assimilation.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LANGUAGE

In the in the course of the interviews, it became evident that language changes were central to the transformation of identity and the expression of sexuality in the interviewees. Indeed, language—the forced learning of the new and the loss of the old linguistic community—is central to the migration experience. In fact, language change is one of the most difficult problems the immigrant faces—and I am not referring to issues of vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation.

Language loss and its concomitant sense of identity loss and transformation are one of the most powerful components of the immigrant experience. In her autobiographical account of migration, *Lost in Translation*, writer Eva Hoffman (1989) vividly described the intensity of this experience for immigrants:

Linguistic dispossession is ... close to the dispossession of one's self [There is feeling that] this language is beginning to invent another me [And] there is, of course, the constraint and the self-consciousness of an accent that I hear but cannot control. (p. 121)

Beyond allowing the immigrants to function in the new context, a new language has profound impact on their sense of self and identity, as Hoffman's statements illustrate. The immigrant learns “to live in two languages”; similarly, she learns to live in two social worlds. Learning to “live” in a new language is not merely an instrumental process. It is not a neutral act. It implies becoming immersed in the power relations of the specific culture that speaks the specific language. Paradoxically, learning the language of the host society implies learning one's place in the structures of social inequality. To speak with a foreign accent places one in a less privileged position within those power relations.

Even supposing that the immigrant is in a country where his [sic] own language is spoken (although it can never be the exact same language), his speech act will take place at a particular moment of time and in a distinctive set of circumstances different from those he has known. (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1984, p. 100)

“One of the primary places where issues of national culture and family coherence come together is the question of language” (Bammer, 1994, p. 96). This issue becomes further complicated when different generations within a family have different levels of proficiency in the different languages spoken. While the first language or mother tongue may be taken to mean the native language of the mother, in the case of immigrants or refugees, children may be more fluent in the language of the host culture, which is really their first language, rather than the language their mothers speak best (Bammer, 1994). In other words:

Language can play a complex role, both binding and dividing family members. For not only do parents and children often end up with different native languages, their different relationships to these languages can have notable social consequences. (Bammer, 1994, p. 100)

Every language is linked to a culture. Every language depends on the concrete context that provides it with its meaning and its boundaries. “Language determines one’s knowledge of the world, of others, and of oneself. It provides a basis of support for one’s identity” (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1984, p. 109). To some extent, our language and our way of life are one and the same. When parents and children are fluent in different languages, they may, in fact, be guided by different cultural codes.

Language—the parents’ lack of fluency in the new language and the children’s lack of fluency in the “mother-tongue”—subverts authority in the family. The power of children is increased because they become “cultural brokers,” whereas the power of parents is decreased because they depend on their children’s assistance to survive in the new world. The inordinate amount of power children may acquire because of their language proficiency can be at the source of conflicts over authority issues. It also magnifies children’s conscious or unconscious fears that their parents are now unable to protect them as they used to.

An immigrant’s resistance to language learning may be an expression of a desire for self-preservation. Entering the world of a new language may pose a threat for the individual’s sense of identity. Individuals who learn the new language at a fast pace may have less of a stake in preserving another identity. This may be why the young learn faster.

Conversely, learning a new language provides the immigrant with the opportunity to “create a new self.” This facilitates working through early intrapsychic conflicts, and finding new ways of self-expression that may not have been available in the world of the first language.

People who learn to use two languages have two symbols for every object. Thus, from an early age they become emancipated from linguistic symbols—from the concreteness, arbitrariness, and “tyranny” of words—developing analytic abilities ... to think in a terms more ... independent of the actual word By contrast, monolingual may be at a disadvantage. (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, pp. 200–201)

LANGUAGE AND SEXUALITY IN THE INTERVIEWS

The interviewees' descriptions of their relation to their languages and to English illustrate some of the twists and complications created by the multilingual experience. The first language often remains the language of emotions, even among immigrants who may be fluent in English. The topic of sexuality is an emotional one for most of us. For women, particularly immigrant women, the subject is additionally charged with the many contextual layers within which it develops. Because most of what we know about people's inner feelings comes to us through language, the language chosen to discuss important emotional issues such as sexuality and relationships may determine the accessibility and awareness of emotional content.

Most of the women interviewed resorted to English when describing their sexuality—both during the interview and in other contexts where the topic was discussed. This pattern was present equally for women coming from “traditional” and “modern” societies. However, some respondents preferred their first language in their sexual interactions. They found words in their first language more sexually arousing. As one of them stated, it seemed difficult, if not impossible, to “make love in English.”

In some instances, the use of English, rather than the mother tongue, may act as a barrier or resistance in dealing with certain components of the psyche. Conversely, the second language can act to facilitate the emergence and discussion of certain topics. These topics may be taboo in the native language. González-Reigosa (1976) demonstrated that taboo words in the language of origin elicit maximum anxiety. They cause more angst than either taboo words in the second language or indifferent words in the first language. Words that relate to sexuality easily qualify as emotionally charged taboo words. Thus, speaking in a second language may “distance” the immigrant woman from important parts of herself. Yet a second language may provide a vehicle to express the inexpressible in the first language—either because the first language does not have the vocabulary, or because the person censors herself from saying certain taboo things in the first language.

Turkish-Danish scholar Mehmet Nedef (1994) contended that the issue is one of clashes in values more than language. If the words learned to discuss sexuality in the first language are “dirty” words, then the native speaker of that language may be at a loss to describe positive experiences. Sometimes a society/culture lacks the language to describe an experience. It may have not developed the vocabulary that would validate that experience. The second language, then, may become helpful as it provides an acceptable vocabulary to talk about these issues. In short, when a good experience has no name in one language, the bilingual person has the option of resorting to the other language. These two issues may be intertwined because—although this is

not a linear relationship—the absence and/or presence of terms in any language is often suggestive of cultural values. Cultures that have fairly conservative views of female sexuality and agency frequently make it difficult to speak about these issues (Espín, 1984, 1987; Necef, 1994). If one comes from such a culture, English provides a vehicle for discussing sexual issues that may be too difficult or embarrassing to discuss with either nonexistent or forbidden words in one's first language. Interestingly, some of the interviewees, who came from cultures they defined as "more liberal" than mainstream American culture, still preferred to use English in discussion of sexuality. For example, Marguerite, Hilde, and Ursula, immigrants from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, respectively, after the completion of interviews conducted in English, stated that although they believed most Americans were very "puritanical" about sexuality and although they had a larger vocabulary in their first language, it was easier for them to talk about these topics in English. Feelings of shame, they reported, would have prevented them from addressing these topics in depth had they used their first language.

Clearly, the interviews revealed how the access to more than one language pushes at the boundaries of what is "sayable" or "tellable." Interviewees stated repeatedly that the second language facilitates ease of communication when the topic discussed is sexuality. Some participants said that they did not know or were unfamiliar with vocabulary about sexuality in their native language. These women had migrated at an earlier age, usually before or during early adolescence. They had developed their knowledge of sex while immersed in English. They used English more consistently in other spheres of life as well and felt more comfortable with it. Therefore, they found it inconceivable to use their first language to talk about adult interactions, including sex and sexuality.

In my therapeutic practice, I observed that the preference for English was particularly significant for bilingual lesbians. They described their life situation and choices most frequently in English. They tended to avoid equivalent words in their native tongue. The description of her relationship to her first language provided by Lorena (one of the interviewees) vividly illustrates this point.

Lorena is a Puerto Rican-born nurse who immigrated to the U.S. mainland at age 30, and has been out as a lesbian for almost 20 years. When Lorena was growing up, she had to confront the realities of women's lives and the idea of marriage. She found it hard to imagine herself a married woman, but had not imagined the possibility of lesbianism. During her college years, Lorena had male friends but never imagined herself as a wife or a mother. Her sex fantasies then, however, were all about men.

A general sense of dissatisfaction with her everyday life in Puerto Rico prompted her emigration to the mainland. Like all Puerto Ricans, she was an American citizen; no major legal preparations were re-

quired. She hoped that a change in the environment and autonomy from her family would energize her life. Little did she know what this change would entail. Shortly after her arrival in the United States mainland, Lorena met a long-time lesbian and fell in love with her. A quick transformation occurred. In her words, "It was as if the pieces of the puzzle had now all suddenly fit in place." She has never returned to Puerto Rico since then except for brief visits.

She speaks with some degree of comfort about her sexual orientation, *in the United States and in English*. She is far less comfortable speaking of it in Spanish or in Puerto Rico. She attributes this to the plethora of "dirty words" in Spanish that describe lesbians and also to her family's presence in Puerto Rico.

I can be out in English but not in Spanish. When the plane lands in Puerto Rico it is as if I "shut down" and do not become lesbian again until I come back to the U.S. It took me forever to say certain words in English. It is still impossible for me to say those words in Spanish. I can now find pride in saying some words in English, but I still feel only shame saying those words in Spanish. I would only use those words when absolutely necessary to talk to Latina lesbians, not on my own It is not that I think that English is "liberating" or that people are so "free" in this country. It is just that English is much less charged for me, not only about sexuality but about practically anything emotional.

When I asked about the language she preferred while making love, she said she uses both languages but that English "comes easier" because she discovered her "lesbian self" in English. She is fluently bilingual but believes that some parts of her emotional self are more "in English" while others are more "in Spanish."

She equates her lesbianism to another form of biculturalism: "You are always on the margins. Being gay or lesbian is living in a different subculture. Being a Latina immigrant is like that too." Despite her sense of marginality, she believes her coming out was eased by being in the United States mainland.

Another interesting perspective was provided by Ayla, an immigrant from Turkey. Ayla found that in the United States, "It is imperative to talk about sex and sexuality if you want to make friends." Although Ayla matured sexually in Turkey and could speak in Turkish about sex, she prefers to talk about it in English. Even with her Turkish women friends, it is easier to speak in English about sexuality. Perhaps this is because "one has more practice and less prohibitive talking about this in English."

To summarize, many intriguing questions are raised by these data on the uses of language. First, is the immigrant woman's preference for English when discussing sexuality motivated by characteristics of English as a language (i.e., do characteristics of a specific second language offer a vehicle for expression that is unavailable in the first language)? Or does a second language (no matter which one) offer the

degree of emotional distance needed to express taboo subjects? If the later were true, then people whose second language is not English would find it easier to discuss sexuality in their second language. Because English was the second or third language for all interviewees (with only one exception), it was impossible to assess the possibility. Second, does the new cultural context—where English is spoken—allow more expression of the women's feelings? To many immigrants, American society seems more sexually permissive behaviorally and verbally than their society of origin. Perhaps the presumed permissiveness of American society encourages and facilitates the expression of these topics in English. This may be true for women who immigrated from traditional societies. Yet it does not explain the preference for English among those women who migrated from more "progressive" societies. A third possibility may be particularly relevant for those who migrated as children or adolescents. Because they "came of age sexually" in English, its expression may become inextricably associated with the language. This scenario would make their preference for English dependent on their learning context, rather than on emotional factors, cultural background, or the characteristics of either language.

LANGUAGE AND INTERCULTURAL MARRIAGES

Many of the women interviewed were in interracial or intercultural relationships or marriages. If, as it appears to be true from the results of my study, people who speak more than one language are able to defend from and withhold the expression of deep emotion by switching between languages, what happens for women in intimate relationships with individuals who do not speak their first languages? Do these women become truly intimate in these relationships? Are these relationships a manifestation of healthy personal transformations or are they a form of escaping intimacy and vulnerability? Is it possible that a deep and significant relationship may develop despite these barriers? Regardless of the deep desires to connect with their partners they may have, are they able to do so? Or are the splits in identity created by language differences an impediment to the success of these relationships? Perhaps, particularly concerning sexuality, nonverbal communication creates the bridge to overcome the language divide. But, in any case, this is an unanswered question in my study.

MIGRATION: LOSS AND GAIN

The loss involved in migration was addressed repeatedly by most of the women interviewed. Simultaneously, they countered forcefully the perception of losses with the argument that the experience of migration had enriched them, given them choices, options, and fluency in a repertoire of languages, modes of thought, and social networks.

The opportunities in work, education, and routines of life provided by the migration had a special significance for these women. Regardless of differences in their countries of birth concerning the roles of women, they all benefited from the liberating effect of being “outsiders” in the host culture of the United States. A quote from Marguerite illustrates this point:

I'm not sure if being in America or just being a distance from my country but I feel I am being affected by this atmosphere that gives me the freedom to experience myself. But I definitely feel that something is changing; the change is in general but also about sexuality. And it is very important for me that it is about sexuality because I felt so oppressed there.

Nevertheless, migration also carries with it the possibility of limiting women's private spheres of influence and their moral authority within traditional cultural contexts. Traditional patriarchal contexts have always provided the opportunity to carve separate—if inferior—spaces for women. The cultural transformations brought about by migration upset these spaces without yet giving women full access to equal power in the public sphere. For immigrant daughters, it may become difficult to invest their mothers with positive images and characteristics when migration has limited the mothers' sphere of influence even further.

MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE

Another significant factor present in the experience of the interviewees was the life stage/age at the time of migration. This connection between age and the impact of a life event is almost self-evident. It confirms psychologist Abigail Stewart's (1994) assumption that “one important factor in the attachment of individual meaning to social events is an individual's age, because of the connection between age and stage of psychological development” (p. 231). The women who had migrated as children seemed to have adapted more rapidly and easily. However, children whose lives have been affected by major social historical events may be affected in their broad values and expectations about the world at a deeper psychological level. “Children's experiences of social historical events is, of course, filtered through their experiences in their own families” (Stewart, 1994, p. 232). Because the migration altered the course of their psychological and material lives early in life, interviewees who had migrated at a very early age were less able to image who and what they could have been without the impact of migration.

Most conflicts about gender roles and sexuality were manifested—either presently or in the past—by those who migrated during adolescence. Negotiating gender roles, sexual behavior, and sexual identity in both the home and host cultures becomes one of the major

developmental tasks for immigrant adolescents. Thus young women or adolescent girls confront the question of how to “become American” without completely losing their cultural heritage. Conflicts over parental authority often are played out around issues of appropriate sexual behavior: Dating and other behaviors related to sexuality become the focus of conflict between parents and daughters. This is understandable because of the multiple tasks required of young women immigrants. As a young immigrant woman constructs her cultural identity in a new country, she simultaneously develops a sexual identity. The inherent connection between discourses on sexuality and sources of power in a new and different cultural context may result in split identities for young women immigrants. Religious and cultural injunctions may further limit the young woman’s decision making.

Young women from “racialized” groups may confront additional conflicts concerning their sexuality and body image. They have to find a balance between the imposed hypersexualization of immigrant women as “exotic” and the “hyperpurity” expected of them by their families and communities. Nevertheless, many young immigrant women successfully negotiate a place for themselves despite these injunctions and limitations and struggle to find their own sexual expression.

Those who migrated after adolescence appear to be less conflicted about their identity. This is due in part to their already somewhat solid identities before undergoing the extra tasks involved in the migration. This is clearly true for lesbian interviewees. Even when “coming out,” with its attendant identity changes, had occurred after the migration, the process seemed to have been less disrupting for those who migrated at a later age.

LESBIANS AND MIGRATION

Although lesbians and gay men obviously exist among immigrants, many immigrant communities prefer to believe otherwise. Some posit that homosexuality is just an evil acquired by contagion or through the bad influence of American society. They prefer to believe either that homosexuality is nonexistent in their communities or that it could be eradicated were it not for the bad influence of the host society. Ironically, the propensity to attribute sexual vice to immigrants has a long history in American society and, in fact, Americans frequently blame one or another ethnic group for their supposed propensity to homosexuality. Some of the congressional commissions created to deal with immigration in the past have blamed immigrants for the introduction of homosexual practices into the United States (Luibhéid, 2002).

Difficulties prevail in obtaining adequate statistics on lesbian populations among immigrants—a hardly surprising fact considering that until very recently the mere appearance of homosexual inclinations was considered grounds for exclusion and denial of entry into the

country. Most likely, several million lesbians and gay men are among the immigrant population in the United States.

From this and other studies we can surmise that lesbian immigrants face specific emotional and practical difficulties. Disclosure of sexual orientation affects them as individuals and it affects the community. "Coming out" as a lesbian may jeopardize not only family ties but also their much needed contributions to their community. Because most lesbian immigrants are self-supporting and take advantage of employment and educational opportunities in the United States (Espín, 1984), they are frequently involved in services and advocacy for their communities. The fear of being "discovered" and rejected may constitute a serious concern for them. These fears are compounded by the difficulties created by prevalent stereotyped conceptions of womanhood and sexuality in both the home and host cultures, familial and societal rejection of their sexual identities, and legal restrictions on their immigration. Still, the new environment may open possibilities hitherto unavailable in the country of birth, as illustrated by the example of Lorena.

The immigrant lesbian acculturates to the new society as an immigrant as well as to the particular lesbian culture in which she is situated. Thus, immigrant lesbians share experiences with heterosexual women from their particular immigrant community as well as with lesbians in the host culture. They also share some experiences with gay males who are immigrants or refugees. Their political, religious, and social affiliations vary greatly. In different degrees, both the immigrant community and the lesbian community provide them with a sense of identification in the host country.

The typical immigrant's ruminations about "what could have been" are magnified for lesbians by questioning whether they would have the opportunity or the desire to live a lesbian life had they not emigrated. For those who were aware of their sexual orientation before migration, the questions may have to do with what a lesbian life would have been like in their country of birth.

ENDING THOUGHTS

Many of the interviewees described their early sexual experiences and desires—both heterosexual and lesbian—as troubling and fraught with secrecy and ignorance. Many managed to find their own ways and happiness despite their confusion and the struggles and opposition of families.

I have tried in this chapter to convey something of what the process of immigration into another country means for women. My intention was not to create a sense of grand narrative but rather to present a window into the individual life narratives developed by women who have been immersed in the transformations brought about by migration.

My focus has been on psychological aspects of their experience, with a particular emphasis on sexuality and gender roles.

I have spent my professional life working in therapy with immigrant women, doing research or teaching about issues of concern to them. Because I have shared similar life experiences with these women, I have been both glad to serve as their mouthpiece and wary about the dangers of representing them. No matter how similar those experiences, the researcher and the researched (or therapist and client) may have very different ideas about "who we are." And no matter how strong the similarities, vast differences in experience were also present. Differences originate in the dissimilar countries of birth, ages of migration, historical period when the migration took place, circumstances surrounding it, and the ultimate consequences of the process for each individual life. Each one of these women carried into the interview the history of all these events intertwined with her personal history. I also carried my own, which was an important motivation for my studies. Despite the differences among them, several behavioral patterns became clear through the interviews. Most of the women revised their social and gender role expectations as a consequence of their migration. They worked hard at renegotiating gender roles with both the traditions of their home country and the expectations of the host culture. Their experiences illustrate the simultaneous process of acculturation and identity formation. In general, their adaptations appear to be successful despite differences in individual histories and personalities and in their choice of individual paths.

In the studies I have undertaken throughout my career and in these pages I have tried to respond not only to my own interests but also to some important issues raised by the United Nations concerning women immigrants and refugees. The United Nations (UN International Research and Training Institute, 1994; UN Expert Group Meeting, 1995) unequivocally stated in recent documents that

improving the status of women is increasingly recognized as fundamental to improving the basic human rights of over half the population of the world and also contributing to social economic progress Women's migration, both internally within developing countries and internationally across borders ... to developed countries, is inextricably linked to the status of women in society. (1994, p. 1)

This assertion is followed by questions yet unanswered:

But what do we know about women's migration? ... For example, does migration lead to improvements in the status of women, breaking down patriarchal structures and enhancing women's autonomy or does it lead to perpetuate dependency? (1994, p. 1)

Ultimately, the questions faced by these studies is, who "owns" women's sexuality and women's lives? "Modern" ideas about women's

rights and free choices concerning their lives have not entirely replaced more “traditional” ideas about gender obligations and differences in rights. These questions are alive in all societies. Yet they become more poignant and dramatic in the context of traditional groups trying to acculturate in a new context which is itself in transition concerning the role of women. Perhaps participation in these studies and the transformational tales created in these interviews allowed participants to get in touch with their own sexuality and their own erotic power. Hopefully, these studies contributed to awareness and integration of experiences for the participants as they contributed to others’ increased understanding of women’s experiences of crossing geographical and emotional boundaries.

I have the experience of leaving Cuba, crossing a language and culture to make a new home in a new place. As a lesbian who celebrates her identity, I have the experience of a woman challenged to live a marginalized existence, but I have created a loving community among women and men who share and/or celebrate her experiences. My willingness to disclose personal challenges and joys has made my teaching and scholarly work vibrant. I have always invited psychologists to ask questions that were not considered by most. I would not accept that psychological theory was accurate when it was based only a small percentage of the population. As such, my early work demanded that we understand human development in relation to the experiences of women and particularly the experiences of women of color.

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