

The Plight of Transnational Latina Mothers: Mothering from a Distance

R. M. Sternberg

Family Health Care Nursing, University of California, San Francisco

Abstract. Economic globalization, trade agreements, and revolutionary changes in transportation and communication have fueled a steady increase in international migration. Foreign-born Latinas, driven by a strong desire to escape poverty and to improve life for their children, face difficult decisions as transnational mothers. These women emigrate from their countries of origin, leaving their children behind with relatives. After overcoming the hardships and dangers involved in a clandestine crossing of the U.S.-Mexico border, they continue to suffer the pain of separation from their children and to hope for eventual family reunification. This study focuses on the experiences of eight Latina transnational mothers and calls for reflection and solidarity by nurses and other health care professionals in order to influence the dynamics of social, economic, and political actions to relieve social suffering.

Keywords. Transnationalism, motherhood, family separation, Mexico, U.S.-Mexico border.

1 Introduction

Lupita, a young undocumented woman migrant from Mexico, became visibly anxious when the nurse asked her if she had children. “I have three little girls,” she said, “but only one is here.” Fighting back tears, Lupita told the nurse that poverty and despair had forced her to migrate from Mexico to the United States. Leaving her two youngest daughters behind, she and her 10-year-old daughter made the difficult border crossing. Though Lupita’s life is filled with hardship, she hopes eventually to reunite with the daughters she left in Mexico. She wonders whether that day will come and, if it does, whether her daughters will know her.

Lupita personifies the modern phenomenon of transnational motherhood: women migrating to other countries and mothering from afar. Latinas often migrate to escape poverty, socio-political persecution, environmental degradation, and other difficult situations (Forbes Martin 2003). For them, migration is a survival strategy; as transnational mothers, they can use wages earned abroad to support their children and extended family back home (Schmalzbauer 2004). Yet the separation from their children is “grueling, and hovers like a specter over their daily lives” (McGuire and Martin 2007, 185).

Latinas who become transnational mothers are responding to the global economic and social changes that shape international migration. As the main wage earners for themselves and their families, they are driven to migrate from developing to developed countries in search of a living wage (Castles 1999; Forbes Martin 2003). They are motivated by economic opportunities that will help them overcome poverty and reunite with their families. They confront daunting challenges

in pursuit of these goals: living in fear of deportation and experiencing feelings of guilt, loneliness, loss, and despair as a result of leaving their families and children behind (McGuire and Georges 2003).

2 Study Design

Hermeneutic phenomenology, as described by van Manen (1990), was selected as the philosophical approach for the study because of its focus on the awareness of diversity in human experiences and the variety of ontologies underlying those experiences.

To be included in the study, a participant had to be Latina, 18 years of age or older, and have immigrated without her children. Recruitment of participants used snowball sampling and connections within the community. With the approval of an institutional review board, each participant’s verbal consent was secured at the time of interview to promote a sense of comfort and trust in case, especially important for interactions with undocumented migrants. All participants were assigned fictitious names to protect their identity.

The study’s participants included eight Latina mothers, aged 21 to 39, who emigrated from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, or Mexico. All spoke Spanish as their native language, and all were monolingual. Their formal education ranged from 3 to 11 years. Although all had children living in their native country, others had given birth to children in the United States. The participants’ children ranged in age from 2 months to 24 years; one participant had grandchildren. All of the participants reported having lived in poverty in their native country and had entered the United States by walking across the U.S.-Mexico border.

I collected data by listening to the participants’ narratives. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, and the taped narratives

were then translated into English as they were transcribed. Thematic analysis was accomplished by highlighting text and identifying emerging themes.

3 Findings

Seven key themes emerged in the interviews with the eight Latina transnational mothers:

3.1 Extreme Poverty

The eight participants all reported having lived in extreme poverty in their respective countries of origin, where they could not meet basic human needs for food, potable water, sanitation, clothing, shelter, or health care. Their home communities also lacked opportunities for gainful employment and were often subject to threats of violence. Consuelo noted that after her husband stopped sending her money she simply did not have the resources to support herself and her four children. Rosario left Mexico without her baby because she could not feed her. Margarita left home because of the difficult conditions her family endured; they had no electricity and had to transport water from a nearby river by donkey. And Beatriz was driven to leave El Salvador without her children because, had she stayed, the entire family would have starved.

Several of the participants commented on the lack of health care at home. Ana's 25-year-old sister in Guatemala had recently died of a treatable chronic illness, and Consuelo described how her 5-year-old severely developmentally disabled granddaughter in Mexico lacks access to basic health care.

Five of the eight women reported living in extreme poverty as children. They recalled dropping out of school at an early age to help support their families. By age 7, Beatriz was selling peanuts and candy alongside her sister and mother. Each participant stated that poverty was their primary reason for becoming a transnational mother. Three participants reported that they emigrated to escape life-threatening personal relationships.

Five participants experienced violent personal assault in their country of origin. Dolores and Patricia reported patterns of severe physical abuse as children. Consuelo, Dolores, Margarita, and Maria disclosed personal histories rife with spousal physical abuse. Margarita's five brothers were murdered in Mexico. Patricia and Margarita insinuated that their husbands were murdered because of involvement in Honduran and Mexican gangs, respectively. In Dolores's words, "We are very poor and we have nothing.... I came here because it is the only way."

3.2 Having Hope

Hope was a common thread in the participants' narratives. As transnational mothers, they believe they can improve their children's standard of living. All of the women expressed the hope that the sacrifice they made in leaving their country and their children and coming to work in the United States will provide their children with a better life than theirs. As Patricia declared, "We believe that this is the country of opportunities, and we come here ... so that we don't remain the same."

The participants said that hope was the catalyst that prompted them to become transnational mothers. Beatriz related how she and her husband decided that they could provide a better life for their children by leaving them with grandparents and coming to the United States. Once settled, they hoped to bring their children north to join them. Unlike the other participants, Dolores and Rosario doubted that their children would ever join them in the United States. Ana, Beatriz, Consuelo, and Margarita hold out hope that changes in U.S. immigration policies will allow their children to be reunited with them. In Ana's words, "I would like people to know how incredibly difficult it is for us to leave our children. We do it so they can have opportunities and hope for a better life."

3.3 Walking Away from Extreme Poverty

Consuelo observed that "poverty makes us walk to this country.... There is no choice when there is so much need.... Being poor makes us look in this direction ... makes us be strong and keep walking." Walking away from poverty, the mothers explained, is a process; it begins by identifying a relative or friend already in the United States. Next one needs to secure funds to pay a coyote, a people smuggler, to guide her across the border. Throughout this process, would-be immigrants must continually negotiate with relatives, neighbors, and trusted friends to ensure basic care and supervision for their children.

Although five participants came to the United States with spouses or other family members, Ana, Consuelo, and Dolores made the journey on their own. When describing their leave taking of their home country without their children, they used adjectives such as "difficult," "distressing," "heartbreaking," and "agonizing." Beatriz remembered the voice of her daughter begging her to stay and the image of her son waving goodbye. Margarita recalled the devastating realization that she could only bring one of her four children. Consuelo could only afford to bring two of her children, leaving her 14-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son, the youngest, to fend for themselves. After the father of Maria's children threatened her life, she decided to leave her three children, including her 6-month-old son, with her mother. "I left without saying goodbye to them," said Maria. "I didn't have the courage."

Ana, Consuelo, and Dolores emigrated out of financial desperation. Dolores left her four children with her mother in conditions of extreme poverty. Ana still dreams of the infant she left in Mexico; he is now 11 years old. And Maria noted, "I knew that it was going to be hard and I was going to suffer. I knew that it was not going to be easy to bring them here to join me. You know it's not going to happen soon. You know when you make that decision [to migrate without your children] that you will suffer."

3.4 The Trip to and across the Border

After reaching the agonizing decision to leave their family, the participants reported, they embarked on a trial of hardship, undertaking journeys to the border that lasted between 9 and 25 days. All eight women recounted experiencing thirst and

hunger on the trek through the desert, climbing mountains, enduring the smuggler's harsh treatment, weathering the inhospitable environment, and all the while fearing apprehension.

Ana, Beatriz, Consuelo, Margarita, and Patricia all suffered such dehydration that they resorted to drinking sandy, stagnant water along the way. Most participants reported walking all day and all night, without food. Margarita described a particular hardship: "I was breastfeeding him [her 2-month-old son] ... but we didn't have food or water, so I was always on the verge of fainting." Beatriz and Consuelo described their panicked encounters with snakes and scorpions.

All of the participants reported paying their coyotes a substantial sum to be smuggled into the United States. Maria's smuggler charged her \$7,000 for the crossing; she was able to pay him \$3,000 after her mother managed to get a loan in Mexico, and she paid off the balance after she found work in the United States cleaning houses. Beatriz described how she injured her foot early in her crossing. She was unable to keep pace with the others in the group, and her coyote threatened to leave her behind. The three women participants who had been apprehended en route described how grateful they were for the water and food they received from the U.S. Border Patrol agents.

But the crossing held even more dangers than those described above. Beatriz, Patricia, and Rosario reported how women border crossers risk physical abuse, especially rape. Beatriz and Margarita described acts of brutality on the crossing. Margarita witnessed an execution of a man along the route, and Rosario is still haunted by the screams she heard of another man being tortured. Dolores, who traveled across Mexico in a freight train with her brother, described how their apprehension at the border put a merciful end to the rough treatment, sexual abuse, and other unbearable conditions they had endured.

Despite her experiences on her first border crossing, Consuelo returned to Mexico 11 months later and then reentered the United States, this time with all of her children. "We take those risks to give our children a better future," said Patricia. Although all of the participants knew that the trip north would be difficult and dangerous, they still believed that migration to the United States, even though illegal, was the only way to provide their children with the chance for a better life. In Beatriz's words, "When I was injured and in pain, crying, my friend would say, 'Beatriz, don't cry, think of your children; you are fighting for your children.' So every time I looked up those mountains, I thought, 'MY CHILDREN! MY CHILDREN!'"

3.5 Mothering from Afar

The participants in this study reported that they had been separated from their children for between 1 and 13 years. Each claimed that this was the most difficult aspect of life as a transnational mother. Maintaining regular contact with their children and other family members in the home country eases the sadness the women feel during their separation. The participants reported using cell phones and calling cards to speak with their children on a regular basis. Ana, Beatriz, and Margarita readily showed photographs of their children. The

participants' effort to maintain contact with their children also eased the parenting burden on the relatives or friends charged with their care. The participants strived to recontextualize their motherhood by taking every opportunity to communicate their love and devotion to their children. Modern technology has enabled these women to participate in such everyday occurrences as behavioral issues, homework, family events, financial needs, family crises, and mutual hopes for the future.

Through steady connections with their children, these transnational mothers have asserted their motherhood from afar. Ana is proud that her 11-year-old son still calls her *mamá*. Patricia noted that she can still express her unwavering support and commitment to her daughter, even if only by telephone. In daily contact with her three children in El Salvador, Beatriz reinforces why she left them behind, and she is very proud that her children can attend a good school thanks to her efforts. The participants who left infants or toddlers behind worry that their children will not view them as "mother." Margarita is concerned that her children will not remember her, and Rosario fears that her daughter will reject her because she left her behind.

The transnational Latina mothers were also troubled by their families' lack of resources and the surging violence in their home countries. Ana, Consuelo, and Patricia expressed concern about educational and health care options in Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras, respectively. Ana, Dolores, Margarita, and Maria fear that their sons will be drawn into their countries' rapidly expanding gang culture. Six participants expressed a continual fear of deportation by U.S. immigration authorities, a fear that negates their ability to meet new people and integrate into the community. According to Patricia, "We try to be invisible." Dolores, Margarita, Patricia, and Rosario articulated how being "illegal" often places them in situations where they experience exclusion, discrimination, and humiliation.

Each transnational mother indicated that her main objective in migrating was to secure employment so she could provide money to her family back home. Consuelo reported that she was at work harvesting pumpkins within an hour of arriving in Virginia. Dolores found work in a restaurant and was able to send a portion of her earnings to her mother and children in Mexico. All of the participants described the delicate balancing act of supporting themselves and family members back home. Beatriz explained that, though she and her husband both work, the \$800 they send to family in El Salvador each month leaves them little cash for themselves. Margarita confessed that when she treats her children to dinner at a restaurant, she cannot afford to buy a meal for herself and must be content just to watch them eat. Maria reported that she often borrows money to send to her children in El Salvador.

Beatriz, Margarita, Maria, and Rosario reported that they work two or three jobs to support themselves and their family members in the home community. Ana also reported trying to help the less fortunate in southern Florida and Guatemala. The women agreed that it is their ability to provide for their children and family that anchors them in the United States and mitigates the pain of separation to some degree. In Beatriz's words, "I can go back any time ... but I know that if I go back, no one eats."

3.6 Valuing Family

Each participant affirmed the importance of family. Once they decided to become transnational mothers, the women negotiated changes in family roles that eased the separation and made it possible for them to mother from afar. Although the complexities of family dynamics constantly challenge transnational mothers, most participants expressed their gratitude for their family's love and support.

3.7 Changing Personally

The participants were asked to describe how they have changed since living in the United States. Each acknowledged that she has become more independent, stronger, and more assertive, emboldened by the realization that, as women in America, their voices are heard.

Each participant has had to adopt new cultural traditions while maintaining the customs and traditions of her native country. Each transnational mother affirmed that living in the United States has changed her life for the better. Despite the suffering, sacrifice, and hardship they endure, these women are resolute in their role as mothers from a distance, driven by the hope of one day reuniting with their children and providing them with the opportunity for a better life.

4 Discussion

The transnational Latina mothers in this study expressed the agonies of poverty and family separation. They described an actual physical ache for their children's touch. As Dolores put it, "I can't see them, touch them, smell them ... my heart is in pieces."

These transnational mothers' suffering is a social experience shaped by modern political realities. Social suffering, although present in all socioeconomic groups, is found most often among the poor, the powerless (Georges 2004). The power dimensions of gender, ethnicity, and class cause affliction and social suffering far beyond the notion of health disparities. This study attempted to answer the call of scholars like Georges (2004), who proclaim the need for nurses and other health care providers to eliminate the "psychological distance" that bolsters the perception that social suffering is "natural" for the poor and disadvantaged (p. 256). Distancing oneself from those who suffer social pain can perpetuate oppressive suffering by omission or by the unwillingness to recognize the invisible forces of power that cause suffering.

The experiences of transnational Latina mothers as described in this study demand that society reflect on their human condition and account for their needs in health care practice, education, research, and policy development. Their plight can be alleviated by giving voice to their silence and advocating to reduce the inequalities that afflict them.

References:

- Castles, S. (1999), "International Migration and the Global Agenda: Reflections on the 1998 UN Technical Symposium," *International Migration*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 5-19.
- Forbes Martin, S. (2003), "Women and Migration. Consultative Meeting on Migration and Mobility and How This Movement Affects Women," United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Malmo, Sweden, December 2-4.
- Georges, J. M. (2004), "The Politics of Suffering," *Advances in Nursing Science*, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 250-256.
- McGuire, S. S. and J. Georges (2003), "Undocumentedness and Laminality as Health Variables," *Advances in Nursing Science*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 185-195.
- McGuire, S. and K. Martin (2007), "Fractured Migrant Families: Paradoxes of Hope and Devastation," *Family and Community Health*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 178-188.
- Schmalzbauer, L. (2004), "Searching for Wages and Mothering from Afar: The Case of Honduran Transnational Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 66, pp. 1217-1331.
- Van Manen, M. (1990), *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, State University of New York Press, New York.