Master thesis : "Do you ever feel guilty? How Relational Emotions Affect Migration and Migration Affect Emotions and Social Roles: the Case of Latin Americans in Belgium"

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Diplôme : Master en sociologie, à finalité spécialisée en migration and ethnic studies
Année académique : 2024-2025
URI/URL : http://hdl.handle.net/2268.2/24091

Année académique 2025-2026

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Mémoire de fin d'études

Do you ever feel guilty? How Relational Emotions Affect Migration and Migration Affect Emotions and Social Roles: the Case of Latin Americans in Belgium

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1. Introduction

"The word emotion comes from Latin, emovere, referring to 'to move, to move out'. Of course, emotions are not only about movement, they are also about attachments or about what connects us to this or that. (...) What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place" (Ahmed, 2004, p.11).

As Aquino, Chanamuto, and Christou (2022, p. 201) note, "Emotions are increasingly recognised as a fundamental dimension of human mobility." Similarly, May and King (2009, p. 296) advocate for an emotional turn in migration and mobility studies, arguing that love, affection, and emotions are central to migration behaviours. Focusing on love and emotions does not aim to overlook other drivers of migration; rather, it adds depth and nuance to them. Every migratory decision is made with conscious and unconscious consideration of multiple, often intertwined, factors. As May and King (2009, p. 297) ask: how is it possible "to separate a migrant's desire to improve the economic well-being of her/his family from the feeling of love, loyalty and respect this elicits, or from existing gendered understandings of responsibility, morality and care?".

Emotions have traditionally been confined to the private sphere, despite their significant influence on public life, including migration. This division raises critical questions: which emotions are permitted in public discourse, and which are relegated to the private realm? Such distinctions often reinforce stereotypes and obscure the full emotional complexity of migratory experiences. It is essential to consider both men and women in emotional analyses of migration, to challenge gender stereotypes. Migrants have too often been dehumanized in both academic research and public discourse, portrayed as cold, calculating figures driven solely by economic or strategic motives. Reintroducing emotion into the conversation is a necessary step toward restoring migrant agency and challenging dominant assumptions about who is seen as "rational" or entitled to emotional depth.

In this research, I aim to explore the question: *to what extent does guilt, particularly in connection with other relational emotions, shape migrants' experiences and choices at different stages of the migration process?* To better answer the research question, I will include two supplementary questions in the analysis part: *How do emotions, particularly guilt, connected to imaginaries, gender, and social roles influence migration?* And *How does migration affect emotions, and perhaps challenge imaginaries, gender dynamics, and social roles?* I approach

this through the case study of Latin American migrants living in Belgium. In my research I consider guilt, as well as all the other emotions, as relational, meaning that emotions do not exist solely within a person but they are social, shaped by other people, their expectations and social roles. Guilt, in particular, is an emotion caused by perceived wrongdoing or inaction, that causes a long-lasting state of discomfort. While it is difficult, and perhaps even limiting, to study a single emotion, guilt offers a productive entry point into understanding the broader emotional dimensions of mobility. Additionally, my research tries to give space to the understanding of other emotions, their connections, similarities and differences. As Misheva (2006, p. 130) argues, “Shame and guilt, as no other emotions, are at the very heart of the emotion puzzle, which itself is the key to understanding individual, interpersonal, national and international psychologies.”

As guilt is a relational emotion, it is often intertwined with love, love (for what I often define as loved ones: friends, family, partners), and often emerge as migrants renegotiate relationships and form new attachments across borders. This research in fact also engages with broader questions about love in migration. Dominant narratives often centre romantic, heteronormative love, framed as a pursuit of individual autonomy and emotional fulfilment (May and King, 2009, p. 300). However, love exists in many relational forms, between friends, family members, and communities and can be equally influential in shaping decisions about movement or staying. People do not migrate solely for romantic love, nor should romantic love be seen as the only emotional justification for staying or leaving. While family is also very prominent in research in the part of the migration field dedicated to emotions, here many times we talk about care and obligations more frequently than love.

The rationale for this study is to begin addressing a gap in migration research by highlighting the importance of emotions within migration studies, and, conversely, the significance of migration within the study of emotions. Focusing on emotions offers deeper insight into migrant agency and decision-making. Examining the Latin American community in Belgium contributes new perspectives on a growing yet under-researched group. Furthermore, this study explores how love and relationships are both challenged and reshaped through mobility, as migrants navigate loneliness and adapt to new environments. Finally, examining emotional practices sheds light on the social norms that shape emotions, and, in turn, influence both individuals and society. Migration often disrupts these norms through the constant renegotiation of what is usually taken for granted. In doing so, it can unsettle and transform them.

My thesis is structured as follows. The first chapter presents a literature review that opens with an overview of the field of emotion studies, before focusing more closely on the concept of guilt in the social sciences and its interrelation with shame. The following section positions emotions within migration studies, illustrating their relevance through selected examples. This leads into a discussion of current research limitations and the ways in which the present study addresses these gaps. The chapter concludes with a section on gender roles, social constructions, and imaginaries, including a dedicated discussion of these dynamics within the Latin American context. This part reviews how these issues have been approached in existing research and outlines how they inform the analytical framework of the study.

The second chapter is about methodology, it begins with a section detailing the qualitative epistemology and analytical framework guiding the study. This is followed by a section on research methods, including a subsection on qualitative interviewing, and further sections addressing ethical considerations, participant selection, sampling strategy, organisation of interviews, researcher positionality, limitations, and the analytical process.

The analysis is organised into two main parts. The first addresses the question: *How do emotions, particularly guilt, connected to imaginaries, gender, and social roles influence migration?* This part adopts a diachronic approach, beginning with the past, which focuses on migration imaginaries and the decision to leave, including the search for approval. The present explores how families become transnational, how emotions influence care practices and transnational communication, and the role of distance. The future examines how emotions, together with social norms and family expectations, shape migrants' visions for their trajectories, balancing the pull to remain abroad with the desire to return. The second part reverses the perspective, asking: *How does migration affect emotions, and perhaps challenge imaginaries, gender dynamics, and social roles?* It begins with a reflection on masculinity and emotional expression, then explores three central emotional experiences: anxiety, fear and loneliness. It concludes with an examination of how migration reshapes intimate, familial, and social relationships.

The thesis concludes by synthesising the findings, discussing their theoretical and empirical contributions, and reflecting on the methodological implications of the study. It identifies avenues

for further research and argues for the centrality of emotions in migration scholarship, while also demonstrating the reciprocal value of migration studies for the sociology of emotions.

2. Mapping the Field: Theoretical Perspectives on Emotions and Migration

The literature review begins with an overview of the field of emotion studies, especially in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology and social psychology. Proceeding with a focus on shame and guilt, as key in this research. The following section is about the fruitful connection of the emotions and migration field, situating the relevance of emotions in migration research. The review also acknowledges certain limitations within the emotional turn, including its occasional lack of attention to power dynamics and structural inequalities. To address this, the final section engages with intersectional perspectives, considering how cultural and moral norms, gender expectations, imaginaries and broader social contexts shape emotional experiences in migration, and another part about social norms, in the context of Latin America in particular.

2.1 An Overview of the Emotions Study Field

The study of emotions emerged in the late twentieth century as an interdisciplinary field, bringing together the interests of multiple social and human sciences. Once marginal, it has moved to the centre of academic debates to such an extent that some scholars speak of an “emotion revolution” and an “affect revolution,” where emotions are viewed as central to understanding human behaviour (Misheva, 2006, p. 128).

However, emotions do not constitute a unified research field. Instead, they comprise diverse and often fragmented bodies of knowledge (Misheva, 2006, p. 128). This fragmentation reflects a broader challenge within the social sciences, where certain domains gain prominence without the development of shared conceptual frameworks. To overcome this, many scholars advocate for a multidisciplinary approach, one already embedded in emotion research and equally relevant to migration and mobility studies. This thesis operates at the intersection of these fields, also drawing on insights from sociology, anthropology, social psychology, philosophy and politics. Here, emotions are not treated as individual self-expressions but as social forms shaped through interactions, cultural expectations, and power relations.

Durkheim (1982, p. 52) notes that “Most of our ideas and our tendencies are not developed by ourselves but come to us from outside,” thus the only way for them to become part of us is by

imposing upon ourselves. In this sense, emotions are not only relational but also subject to cultural expectations and norms, rules about who is allowed to feel what, in which situations, and in response to which actions. This is particularly clear in self-conscious emotions such as shame, guilt, pride, and embarrassment, which are often seen as more social than others. Durkheim (1982, p. 53) stresses that, “Even when we have individually and spontaneously shared in the common emotion, the impression we have experienced is utterly different from what we would have felt if we had been alone.”

Several scholars in sociology and anthropology have emphasized the social and cultural construction of emotions, challenging views of emotions as purely psychological states. Tangney and Fischer (1995, pp. 3–4) argue that “the centrality of other people is particularly evident in emotions. All the emotions are fundamentally social, (...) the ‘self-conscious emotions’—are especially social. Emotions such as shame, guilt, pride, and embarrassment are founded in social relationships, in which people not only interact but evaluate and judge themselves and each other.” Emotions are essential to understand humans, and are strictly connected to how humans feel perceived by other humans and society. The assumption that someone, themselves or other people, is judging an action or characteristic of theirs in an unfavorable way is exactly how people end up feeling ashamed or guilty (Ibid).

Hochschild’s (1983) concept of “emotional labour” further illustrates how feelings are shaped by norms and expectations in professional and familial roles, an insight particularly relevant to transnational migrants navigating care across borders. Similarly, Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990) contend that emotions are not only felt but also regulated, represented, and politicized within specific cultural contexts.

Collins (1990, p. 27) revisits Durkheim’s question of “what holds society together?” and concludes that the mechanisms producing moral solidarity do so by producing emotions. He argues that Parsonian sociology comes to a similar conclusion by sustaining that *“*society is held together by values” (Ibid). However, he further clarifies “values, to the extent that they exist—and leaving open the issue of how far they are shared, and under what conditions—are cognitions infused with emotion” (Ibid). Collins thus calls for a dedicated sociology of emotions, positioning them at the heart of social cohesion.

From an anthropological perspective, White (1993) similarly asserts the relational nature of emotions. Williams (2001) also challenges the emotion–reason binary by drawing on the

corporeal and social nature of emotions. She argues that emotions are not irrational residues but embodied ways of engaging with the world. Williams notes how Western traditions have often sidelined emotions in mainstream theory, portraying them as volatile, and highlights the consequences of this neglect. She draws on both classical and contemporary theories, especially those concerning the body and intimacy, and critically evaluates poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches.

Kemper (1978) offers a social structural model of emotions, suggesting that they are grounded in social relations and status–power dynamics. Katz (1999), through empirical studies, examines the performance of emotions, with a focus on bodily expression and process. While Katz's attention to embodiment is valuable, Wouters (2002) critiques his work for lacking historical context and for ignoring broader social interdependencies, leading to an overly universal and static view of emotions.

If we understand feelings as relational and circulating between bodies, we can speak of the "sociality of emotions" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 8). Despite differing emphases, these scholars share a conceptual background: emotions are relational. Ahmed (2004, p. 9) proposes that emotions can be understood as coming from outside the individual and moving inward, a view shared in crowd psychology and sociology, contrasting with the "inside-out" model of traditional psychology. According to Ahmed (2004, p. 8), "Emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of 'towardness' or 'awayness' in relation to such objects." In this view, emotions are not contained within subjects or simply projected onto objects; they emerge through encounters and move between bodies (Ibid). The attribution of emotion to an object is "an effect of the encounter," involving affective reorientation (Ibid).

As Misheva (2006, p. 130) states, "Although emotions are embedded in living bodies and inseparable from them, they are also socially formed. One cannot study emotions without having knowledge of this process, which necessarily involves knowledge of the very society in which it takes place." To make sense of emotions and foster agreement in this contested field, some classifications may be useful, however, classifying emotions is challenging, as many belong to several categories (Misheva, 2006, p.131). One common approach is to distinguish between "positive" and "negative" emotions, but this division is culturally and historically contingent. For example, love in China has been considered a negative emotion, while in the US and Italy it is seen as positive. Shame in China is regarded as a basic, primary emotion, while in the US and Italy it is a secondary one, subordinate to sadness (Tangney and Fischer,

1995, pp. 12–13). Historical shifts also matter: shame has at times been considered a positive force. Many emotions, including love, guilt, and shame, contain both positive and negative dimensions simultaneously, and can be classified as both basic and non-basic, also defined as primary and secondary (Misheva, 2006, p. 131). While there is contention on the definition of basic emotions, all believe that they are emotions that can be easily recognised because of the specific reaction and feeling everyone has when experiencing them. This underscores that emotions cannot be essentialised; they must be understood within their historical and cultural contexts.

2.2 The Shifting Meanings of Shame and Guilt: Historical and Disciplinary Perspectives

The distinction between shame and guilt has evolved significantly across time and disciplines. In early philosophical and psychological thought, guilt was often prioritized over shame, particularly in Nietzsche's moral philosophy and Freud's psychoanalysis (Misheva, 2019, p. 157). Nietzsche viewed both guilt and shame as foundational emotions in the formation of morality, while Freud considered guilt as "a mature form of shame" (Misheva, 2006, p. 134). These early frameworks have been challenged and expanded. Misheva (2019, p. 159–160) notes that academic attention has fluctuated between these two emotions, sometimes overemphasizing one while neglecting the other. It was not until the late twentieth century that scholars began to reconnect guilt and shame, considering how these emotions might complement one another, revealing the limitations of examining them in isolation (Misheva, 2019, p. 161).

Historical developments in emotion theory reflect shifting definitions and priorities. In anthropology and sociology, shame gained greater prominence, likely due to its association with public norms, cultural honor, and moral codes (Baldassar, 2015, p. 81). On the other hand, guilt was largely considered a private, internal emotion (Ahmed, 2004). Theorists such as Lewis (1971) reinforced this distinction, arguing that shame affects the entire self, whereas guilt concerns specific actions. Yet the boundary between shame and guilt is not clear-cut. Some theorists (e.g., Ekman, 2003) even exclude them from basic emotions, suggesting that shame, guilt, and embarrassment often blend in lived experiences (Misheva, 2006, p. 134). Probyn (2005) argues that guilt is easier to live with than shame, as it is more amenable to repair or resolution. But Baldassar (2015) counters that guilt often persists, resurfacing unexpectedly and shaping long-term moral and emotional landscapes. Both guilt and shame involve self-blame for wrongdoing or inaction, but in distinct ways. Ahmed (2004, p. 103) writes, "to be witnessed in

one's failure is to be ashamed; to have one's shame witnessed is even more shaming." Shame is thus internalised, amplified when triggered by others, and is typically temporary, subsiding once pride and identity are restored (Ahmed, 2004, p. 109). Guilt, in contrast, often lingers, endured rather than resolved, and may carry awareness of one's power to harm others.

Not all guilt is alike. Misheva (2019, p. 160) distinguishes mature guilt, arising from acceptance of responsibility and genuine remorse, from immature guilt, rooted in fear of losing love, internalized social pressures, or a rigid superego. Many other forms exist: authority guilt, relational guilt, separation guilt, survivor guilt, and these can intersect with shame, pride, and moral obligation. This underscores that emotions rarely operate in isolation and aligns with Baldassar's (2015, p. 86) observation that guilt is deeply shaped by social and relational expectations, even when the relevant family relationship is perceived as unworthy or morally complicated. Some scholars view guilt as emerging from role conflict, me as daughter, me as friend, me as migrant, shaped by tensions between competing identities (Misheva, 2006, p. 140). This perspective frames guilt as relational and contextual. In extreme cases, unresolved guilt can lead to social isolation, with Misheva (2019, p. 168) describing a form of *"*primary guilt*"* linked to profound loneliness or *"*social death*."*

2.3 Guilt, Care and Hope: Links between Emotions and Migration

While emotions have long been central to anthropology and sociology, in migration studies they remain less systematically examined. This is partly because migration research is highly multidisciplinary, often analyzing individual emotions in isolation rather than considering how emotional experiences as a whole can inform the study of mobility or how migration studies might contribute to broader theorization of emotions. As Boccagni and Baldassar (2015, p. 79) argue, focusing on emotions within migrant life trajectories not only provides insights into migrants' subjective views, identities, and senses of belonging, offering a counterpoint to overly structural accounts, but also illuminates the ways emotions are shaped by shifting material, relational, and spatial contexts. Transnational migration, they suggest, offers a unique window onto two key processes: first, the transformation of emotions across different physical and socio-cultural environments; and second, the cultivation of emotions without physical proximity (Ibid).

Baldassar (2001; 2007; 2008; 2015) has extensively explored the emotional dimensions of transnational family relationships, particularly how they are maintained across time and space.

In her work, guilt is framed as a relational emotion, one that arises within the dynamics of interpersonal relationships rather than existing solely as an internal or private psychological state. She often focuses on care, and how responsibility towards aging parents affect migrants. This tension is intensified by normative expectations around caregiving, particularly in Western contexts, where ideal family care is often associated with physical co-presence (Jamieson, 1998, cited in Baldassar, 2015, p.87). In other cultural contexts, the migration of both men and women is more readily accepted as a way of providing care, for instance, through financial support and thinking about future opportunities for children, although distance and related feelings of guilt remain significant.

Exploring transnational families through the lens of emotion and mobility, Mozetič, Lebek, and Ratzmann (2023) focus on the emotional processes rather than specific emotions in the settlement experiences of Ukrainian refugee women in Berlin. Using longitudinal interviews, they show how emotions are central to navigating integration structures such as housing, employment, and legal status. Family relationships, both local and transnational, play a crucial role: children's emotions shape mothers' decisions about staying or returning, while relatives in Ukraine can trigger guilt or pressure, highlighting how settlement is a dynamic process of anchoring and un-anchoring, deeply shaped by social ties and emotional responses.

Similarly, Kokanović and Božić-Vrbančić (2015) investigate the interplay between home, depression, and belonging, showing how experiences of emotional distress and migration can shape a woman's sense of home and subjectivity. Their analysis underscores the importance of emotions in understanding migrants' well-being and their attachment to place.

Other scholars have linked migration and emotion through specific concepts. Hage (2003) emphasizes hope as a key factor in migration, framing it as an imaginative resource that sustains migrants in uncertain circumstances. Kleist and Thorsen (2017), particularly in the African migration context, argue that hope drives migration decisions in ways that cannot be fully captured by structural or economic analyses alone. They emphasize that migration is shaped by emotional and imaginative dimensions, especially hope in the face of uncertainty, as a way of navigating uncertain futures, sustaining migrants through precarious journeys and challenging conditions. Neil (2017, p.37) explores affective responses to migration through everyday practices, such as food preparation, providing a lens into "the visceral and emotional geographies of home". By examining ordinary activities, she reveals how migrants negotiate

emotional spaces in the private sphere, highlighting the relational and embodied nature of affective experiences.

Overall, these studies demonstrate that emotions are central to understanding migration, not only as private psychological states but as relational, culturally mediated, and deeply entwined with mobility. By examining emotions such as guilt, hope, and attachment, migration scholars gain insight into the moral, social, and imaginative dimensions of migrant experiences, emphasizing that settlement, belonging, and emotional life are dynamic, contextually shaped, and deeply interconnected.

2.4 Limitations in the Field and the Need for an Intersectional Perspective

As Misheva (2019) argues, a multidisciplinary approach is essential to fully grasp the complexity of guilt, particularly when it is examined in connection with other emotions. Although this thesis focuses on guilt at the interpersonal and individual level, it is worth acknowledging that guilt also plays a crucial role in broader social contexts, such as environmental guilt, collective guilt for atrocities like genocide or war. While these collective dimensions are not the primary focus here, they can influence individual experiences and relationships. For instance, interview data reveal how the COVID-19 pandemic heightened feelings of guilt around proximity, distance, and perceived inaction across society.

The work of Baldassar (2001; 2007; 2008; 2015) has been foundational in highlighting guilt in transnational caregiving, especially in relation to women. However, several limitations remain. A key concern is the underrepresentation of male experiences. Baldassar's focus on women is understandable, given the gendered expectations surrounding caregiving and emotional responsibility. Yet by not addressing men in the same depth and not looking at how different social construct can affect people, her work risks overlooking how people may internalize, negotiate, or resist these social expectations. Questions such as what happens when a man is the sole child responsible for care, or people reject these norms, remain underexplored.

Moreover, the claim that guilt motivates "relationship-enhancing patterns of behaviour" (Baldassar, 2015, p. 84) warrants further scrutiny. While guilt may indeed prompt contact and care obligations in transnational families, its long-term emotional effects can be more ambivalent. Guilt may also strain relationships, foster resentment, or result in emotional withdrawal, especially if it is repeatedly used to enforce obligations. As Baldassar herself notes,

“Guilt may punish and hence reduce the frequency of interpersonal transgressions so that it makes people less likely to hurt, disappoint, or alienate their [transnational] kin” (Baldassar, 2015, p. 84). The assumption that guilt is inherently functional overlooks its potential to fragment relationships when it becomes excessive or manipulative. Expanding attention to other emotions alongside guilt may allow a more nuanced understanding of relational dynamics and the emotional complexities of care.

Another limitation in the existing literature is the insufficient attention to how guilt, as a relational emotion, is shaped by intersecting systems of power. When examining transnational care and family ties, emotions such as guilt do not operate in a vacuum. As May and King (2009, p. 300) argue, practices of love and care, including the obligations and expectations attached to them, are embedded in cultural, economic, and social structures. These include globalised hierarchies and the intersections of gender, class, race, and religion. Failing to meet culturally expected standards of care may generate guilt, but these standards themselves are not neutral, they are constructed through unequal power relations. For example, the way someone is “supposed” to show love or provide care may be shaped by racialised and gendered scripts, which in turn affect who is allowed to feel guilt, for what, and with what consequences.

This thesis aims to broaden the lens by offering an intersectional perspective on guilt, examining how its expression, distribution, and consequences are mediated by broader social norms and expectations. Rather than accepting guilt as inherently relationship-enhancing and equal to everyone, nonetheless gender, race, religion, migration status, class etc., I analyze it as a site of tension, negotiation, and power. While the focus remains on transnational families, this study also questions relational hierarchies and explores how guilt is experienced differently across relationships and stages of migration.

2.5 Cultural and Moral Norms: Imaginaries, Family Roles, and Emotional Expectations

To understand guilt as a relational and socially embedded emotion, it is essential to consider the cultural and moral norms that frame expectations around family roles, care, and reciprocity. These norms are often embedded in widely shared social imaginaries that shape what people believe they should do and what they imagine others expect from them.

Durkheim (1982, p. 50–52) highlights that social norms operate independently of individual consciousness: fulfilling duties as a sibling, spouse, or citizen is guided by objective standards received through education and socialization. Social constraints shape action, thought, and feeling, creating pressure to conform even when personal sentiments might differ. Worrying that we might be excluded from society and more specifically people we love, make us continue to conform (Ibid).

One dominant norm, particularly in Western and Southern European family models, is the idea of generalized reciprocity, whereby parents care for children early in life and are expected to receive care in old age (Baldassar, 2008, p. 248). While rarely articulated explicitly, this moral expectation strongly informs transnational care dynamics and the emotional burden of migration. Disruption of physical co-presence can trigger guilt for failing to fulfill expected roles or for challenging intergenerational contracts.

Carling (2008) emphasizes the role of imagination in shaping transnational relationships, highlighting how expectations, projections, and emotional assessments across borders inform migrants' decisions and obligations. Similarly, Zittoun (2020) notes that migration trajectories are often shaped by imagined futures, desires, expectations, and projections of life elsewhere that are deeply emotional, entwined with hope, fear, guilt, and disappointment. Bal and Willems (2014) explore how aspirations are particularly socioculturally embedded, illustrating how imaginaries of future mobility intersect with local sociocultural and economic transformations and global possibilities. Some theorist focus more on the sociocultural dimension of imaginaries, with a meso level perspective, others perhaps on the intersectional, with a more micro level perspective, while to have a deep understanding both things are needed.

Boccagni (2022) challenges the traditional concept of home by introducing the concept of "homing" as a relational and dynamic practice, rather than a static notion or imaginary of home. Homing captures the intimate and relational aspects of belonging, particularly relevant for migration; home becomes not only a physical space but a practice of emotional and social relations.

By focusing on imaginaries, this thesis positions guilt as a socially distributed emotion, arising through shared cultural narratives, historically specific ideals of family life, and imagined futures. These narratives produce behavior as much as they explain it, shaping how individuals evaluate

themselves and others. In this sense, guilt becomes a socially embedded emotional experience, closely tied to moral frameworks, intergenerational expectations, and imagined life trajectories.

2.6 Gendered Expectations, Family Norms, and Migration in the Latin American Context

To deepen this study's intersectional approach to guilt and relational emotions in migration, it is essential to consider how gender roles and familial expectations shape migrants' experiences, both before and after mobility. In the Latin American context, dominant imaginaries of gender, influenced by Catholic values and patriarchal traditions, influence how migration is perceived and experienced.

Pedone (2008) offers a particularly illustrative analysis of migration from Ecuador to Spain, revealing the contrasting societal perceptions of male and female migrants. Her article's title captures two prevailing stereotypes: *"varones aventureros"* (adventurous men) and *"madres que abandonan"* (mothers who abandon). Even though, by 1999, more women than men were migrating (Pedone, 2008, p. 42), public discourse continued to associate women's mobility with the breakdown of family structures and moral failure. When women, particularly mothers, leave, it is seen as an *alarma social*, a social alarm or moral panic, evoking fear and disapproval (Pedone, 2008, p. 43).

These reactions are rooted in deeply entrenched gender roles. As Pedone (2008, p. 43) summarises, the figure of the *varón* is associated with economic responsibility and participation in public life, while the *mujer* is tasked with domestic organisation, care work, and moral reproduction within the private sphere. While these roles are neither universal nor static, and are increasingly being contested, they continue to shape social expectations and, by extension, individual imaginaries and emotional responses. Migrant women, for example, may feel guilt not only for leaving their children or parents behind but also for not conforming to these enduring ideals of motherhood and care.

Importantly, some recent research challenges this binary. Studies show that in parts of Latin America, particularly among younger and more educated men, there is a growing interest in childrearing and gender equality (Barker and Aguayo, 2011; in Aguayo, Barker and Kielman, 2016, p. 98). While men's participation in domestic life is increasing, entrenched norms persist. Across the region, men still dominate the paid labour market, while women continue to perform

the bulk of unpaid care work and housework (Aguayo, Barker and Kielman, 2016, p. 98). Moreover, the expectation for men to act as providers remains strong (Aguayo, Barker and Kielman, 2016, p. 99), even as women's participation in the labour market has risen significantly. The majority of women in Latin America are employed, yet this often comes in addition to their full responsibility for unpaid domestic labour (Blofield and Martínez, 2014; in Aguayo, Barker and Kielman, 2016, p. 99).

These dual responsibilities contribute to a heightened emotional burden, particularly among women, who may experience guilt for not fully performing expected care roles, not only as mothers but also as daughters or caregivers to elderly relatives. While such pressures are not unique to Latin America, as similar gendered dynamics exist across the globe, the specific configurations and moral weight they carry within Latin American history and family imaginaries are especially important to consider.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to explore the emotional dimensions of migration among Latin American migrants in Belgium. It describes the research design, data collection methods, and analytical strategies employed, as well as the ethical considerations and positionality of the researcher. By combining semi-structured interviews with an intersectional lens, the methodology was developed to capture the complexity of relational emotions, particularly guilt, within transnational relations contexts.

3.1 Epistemology and Analytical Lens

My epistemology is subjectivist, differing from positivist assumptions that treat stories as objective (Hastrup, 2004, p.458). Ontologically, there are "multiple truths" (Mayan, 2023, p.19) and, as Lincoln and Guba argue (2016, in Mayan, 2023, p.20), knowledge is not discovered but created. Because the relationship between observer and observed is inherently shaped by personal knowledge, values, and cultural norms (Mayan, 2023, p.20). And, our view of reality is shaped by the organization of the social (Lugones, 2007).

On this basis, I will adopt intersectional feminism as my metatheory. Intersectionality examines social constructs and the diverse experiences of individuals influenced by race, gender, class,

and sexuality; enlightening the intricate and multifaceted nature of identity (Mayan, 2023, p.34). Feminism highlights how socially constructed roles shape experience, decision-making, and emotions, challenging the historical marginalisation of emotion as irrational or unscientific (Lutz, 2002). This critique is linked to the history of social sciences privileging positivism and masculine-coded rationality. Feminist theorists have re-analysed the emotional dynamics of gender, seeing emotional life as central to identity and social relations (Lutz, 2002, pp.105–107). As Ahmed (2004, p.170) notes, we must contest the assumption that rational thought is unemotional, recognising that emotions are racialised and gendered, and can reinforce societal roles.

As mentioned by Lugones (2007, p.192) “Intersectionality reveals what is not seen when categories such as gender and race are conceptualized as separate from each other”. Intersectional feminism was created by women of colour and third world women, who demonstrated the inseparability of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Lugones, 2007). For this reason intersectionality is strongly connected to feminism and feminism should always be intersectional.

This lens is crucial for understanding how emotions affect people differently, and how expectations about emotional behaviour are socially and historically situated. As Aquino, Chanamuto, and Christou (2022, p.214) observe, emotions are embedded in specific sociocultural practices. This aligns with “live sociology,” which sees knowledge as fluid, shaped by perspective and demands the researcher to constantly contest and challenge their own positionality (Aquino, Chanamuto and Christou, 2022, p.203). Ethnographic engagement, informed by the researcher’s own mobilities and emotional commitments, underscores that knowledge production is situated and relational, central to a feminist methodological approach (Aquino, Chanamuto and Christou, 2022, p.203). This will be later further developed in the positionality section.

3.2 Research Methods

Qualitative methods are especially useful for trying to grasp nuances and meaning in experiences rather than obtaining quantification or numbers (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p.15). As suggested by Aquino, Chanamuto and Christou (2022, p.202) the empirical research of emotions employ a wide range of methodological approaches including semi-structured

interviews, multi-sited ethnography, focus group, mapping exercises, timeline tools, between others that allows “to examine experience at the intersection of social identities including, age, gender, religion, class, ethnicity and citizenship status.”

Interviews have the characteristics to be exceptionally sensitive and effective in deeply understanding the everyday experiences of subjects (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p.14). In line with Hastrup (2004, p.467), I believe that experiences cannot just be collected but should also be explained, in the explanation you gather a lot of the significance. Moreover, the role of emotions remains underexplored in migration studies, and interviews offer a valuable means of generating new insights in a field (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p.9).

3.2.1 Semi-structured Interviews

In my research, I will imply semi-structured one-on-one face-to-face interviews in Spanish; see Appendix 1 for the interview guide. Qualitative interviews are typically semi-structured, with a set of questions and a list of themes to be addressed (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p.72). This allows the interview to be “neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire” (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p.14). It’s the perfect middle ground, as it allows an informal setting, in which information can be generated, but there is also enough freedom and space for emotion and spontaneity. It is a flexible method, the questions can be asked in a different sequence and some follow-up questions can be created to sustain people telling particular stories (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p.72). Thus, semi-structured interviews help understand and put together similar experiences, feelings, and facets shared by different people to then interpret a bigger phenomenon, which is the larger narrative (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p.9). One-on-one face-to-face interviews allow us to gain insight into behaviours as well as identities, imagined realities and emotional states (Lamont and Swidler, 2014; in Mayan, 2023, p.155).

3.3 Ethicality

Ethical considerations must be addressed throughout the research process, from design to dissemination (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p.29). Following procedural ethics, participants will receive clear information on how I will use their data in this study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the possible risks and benefits of taking part (Mayan, 2023, p.209). They will be encouraged to share only what they are comfortable with, and interviews will be conducted with sensitivity.

Privacy is ensured through anonymity, so the data of the interviewee won't be used with their real name but a pseudonym chosen by them, furthermore, in some cases, anonymity can also be applied to cities they mention, other people and so on, if needed (Mayan, 2023, p.211). Although my study does not place participants in dangerous positions, it encourages people to share private and emotional experiences. These will be treated with care: participants will not be pushed to discuss distressing topics, and data will not be included if it could endanger them or they ask me to.

I acknowledge that discussions of migration often involve complex and deeply felt emotions, including guilt, loss, and vulnerability, themes that are central to this study. My intention is to explore these feelings as meaningful aspects of participants' lived experiences, to validate such emotions as shared and normalised experiences within broader migratory contexts. Interviews may involve moments of silence, emotional responses, or memories of trauma; I will remain attentive to participants' cues with empathy and openness, allowing them to share these memories, set boundaries, change topics, or pause when needed (Mayan, 2023, p.99).

In line with feminist communitarian ethics, qualitative research can foster cooperative, democratic reciprocal, and open-ended relationships between researcher and participants, which can help mitigate many ethical challenges (Lincoln, 2005, in Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p.30). Conducted with these safeguards, I believe this research poses no critical ethical risks and can be carried out safely and respectfully.

3.4 Chosen Population: Latin American in Belgium

This study focuses on Latin Americans in their 20s and 30s living in Belgium, who have resided in Europe for one to six years. This age group is particularly significant because these life stages often involve complex family dynamics and transnational relationships where guilt and other relational emotions frequently shape migrants' decisions and identities. Exploring this group allows for a nuanced understanding of how emotional ties influence migration experiences during crucial periods of personal and social change. There are several advantages and some limits to this choice.

First, distance from family and home plays a significant role in shaping relational emotions, particularly guilt, which is central to my research question. The physical separation intensifies these feelings, making this population especially relevant for exploring these dynamics.

Second, shared language and cultural familiarity further supported the choice of this population. As Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, p.44) note, familiarity cannot be obtained solely through literature but also requires knowledge of language, expressions, and habits. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, which allowed participants to express themselves with greater authenticity and emotional nuance (Welch & Piekkari, 2006, p.428). Emotional expressions often lack direct translations, as they may require more words or carry different connotations in another language (Etxebarria, 2003). Several participants explicitly expressed their appreciation for being interviewed in Spanish, and for the sense of trust created by having been referred through familiar contacts or having met me previously even just once. As Milo shares:

> *"Today I can sit comfortably and have a conversation with you, I already know you from before. But if you just wrote to me (without previously meeting or without the friend talking about me), maybe it would've been a bit more difficult to connect…*"
>
> (Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

Knowing people beforehand many times is regarded as a possible weakness because of bias, but in this case casually meeting some of them informally created more comfort and openness.

Fourth, this age group was chosen not only because these years often involve significant life changes, they are a key stage for negotiating relationships with parents and transnational family dynamics. But also because being in my 20s myself, I anticipated that age similarity could facilitate rapport, allowing participants to feel more understood and more open in sharing personal experiences.

Lastly, Latin Americans remain under-researched in the Belgian context despite being a growing community. In 2025, in Belgium there are 97.539 people with Latin American origin. Ten years ago, in 2015, there were around 62.599; ten years prior, in 2005, 33.2896 (Belgische Federale Overheidsdiensten, 2025). So, since 2005, every ten years there has been an increase of around 30.000 people with Latin American origins in Belgium. Exploring their migration experiences contributes to filling this gap and expands the geographical scope of migration research on Latin American diasporas in Europe. At the end of the interview I've asked Andrea how she felt after it and she shared:

> *"Ah, I feel good. I like that… that the Latin American community is kind of …. gaining visibility a bit here. Because… For example, my partner is Belgian. And he says that yes, the Latin American community is not that big. So, they do not take us much into account. So, the fact that is becoming more visible, for me is like… it's nice."*
>
> (Andrea, Chile 03/2025)

3.5 Sampling Strategy: Criterion-Based and Snowballing

In qualitative research, sampling is conducted purposefully to allow for in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, rather than aiming for randomisation as in quantitative designs (Mayan, 2023, p. 145). For this study, I employed criterion-based case selection, in which all cases meeting specific criteria are included (Mayan, 2023, p. 147). The criteria were:

1. Being Latin American.
2. Being between 20 and 39 years old.
3. Having lived in Europe for between one and six years.
4. Residing in Belgium at the time of the interview.

While seeking diversity in gender, migration status, and national origin, I also aimed for a balanced representation of countries from different subregions of Latin America: Central America (2 El Salvador, 1 Nicaragua), South America (2 Chile, 2 Ecuador, 2 Colombia, 1 Venezuela). In some cases, participants from the same country shared similar migration statuses; this, however, can be read as a reflection of broader socio-political and economic conditions in their countries of origin. For more details about each interviewee see Appendix 2.

Recruitment was carried out through adapted snowball sampling (Mayan, 2023, p.147), beginning with contacts provided by a friend (whom I interviewed later in the process) and expanding through participants' social networks. This approach is consistent with snowball sampling's logic, starting with a few information-rich interviews and using these connections to identify additional relevant participants, while acknowledging that my network was not entirely independent of the research population. To diversify the sample and avoid clustering, I also sought contacts from acquaintances who were not connected to my initial participants. Recruitment via adapted snowball sampling facilitated access to participants comfortable discussing sensitive emotional topics. Trust within social networks was essential to create a safe

space for revealing feelings of guilt and other relational emotions that influence migrants' choices and life trajectories.

This combined use of clear inclusion criteria and network-based recruitment enabled the construction of a sample that reflects both the diversity and the shared experiences of Latin Americans in Belgium, in line with the research focus.

3.6 Getting Things Done: Concrete Organisation of the Interviews and Realisation

My access to preliminary contacts was facilitated by personal relations. Through friends, I had previously met one of the participants; this participant then introduced me to two others, and one of those led me to another contact, a process resembling snowball sampling. While not a perfectly linear snowball, this approach is still built on existing trust networks and as mention purpose sampling. To avoid having all participants come from the same "source," I also recruited two other participants through two different friends.

Once I interviewed someone, they often mentioned knowing others who might be interested. Over time, I became acquainted with part of the Latin American community in Liège, where my knowledge of Spanish and my prior experience living in Uruguay allowed us to share language, cultural references, and common experiences. This facilitated rapport and eased initial conversations. As mentioned by Demirci (2024, p.22) "One of the most important tasks of the interviewer is creating a safe and welcoming space for participants to share their authentic experiences."

The realisation of the interview is not limited to the conversation itself but preparation is equally important (Demirci, 2024). All the interviews took place in cafes, I always asked if people preferred one place, some proposed a location, others asked me to choose. Cafes are an easy and neutral space, also to avoid being in private spaces which could create a more uncomfortable situation. Participants were not afraid to open up or be heard, probably the fact that in Belgium most people do not speak Spanish helped. It also created a shared moment, not only to talk, as all the times we shared some food, a coffee, a tea or a lemonade. In the majority of the cases people offered me the drink. Normally interviewers are pushed to pay in order to give some monetary compensation or thanks for the time offered; but it is also crucial to avoid exacerbating power dynamics (Demirci, 2024, p.22). So I appreciated when people offered

without insisting on paying myself, I was also open in splitting the bill or paying all, making this process more friendly, human and equal.

I recorded all interviews on my phone to ensure I could revisit nuances that might be missed during the conversation. Recording allows for more specific and ‘neutral’ reflections during analysis, since initial interpretations can be shaped by the emotions of the moment. Taking notes during the interview would have interrupted the flow and potentially made participants less comfortable. Interestingly, most participants seemed to forget they were being recorded, except when a notification briefly lit up the phone screen, yet even then, their attitude did not change. Informed consent was obtained at the start of each interview through a recorded verbal agreement, with participants reminded that they could stop or end the interview at any time.

Mayan (2023, p.156) outlines five steps for a good interview starting with the interviewer presenting themselves and their job and age. This step is crucial because it is a way to set boundaries and explain easily what the study will be about, its possible risks and benefits, how it will be used and if it will be recorded (Ibid). The interviewee in this stage should get enough information to conform to informed consent, so voluntarily decide to participate; this is formalised by recording their consent at the beginning of the interviews (Ibid). The second step allows the creation of a safe and trustworthy environment by asking questions that are not too profound, to ease the tension and establish a rapport (Ibid). The third stage is the most sensitive part, in which the hardest questions are asked; this is a very delicate moment in which the researcher must be careful and know when to ask a follow-up question and when to change the topic (Ibid). Lastly, it is crucial to go back to a lighter topic in the fourth stage to end the interview on a positive note (Ibid). In the fifth stage, it is fundamental to thank interviewees for their time and openness and acknowledge the importance of what they said (Ibid).

While the five-step structure offered a partially useful checklist. I found that strictly following steps two through five risked making the interaction too mechanical, positioning the interviewee as an ‘object’ rather than a co-creator of knowledge. Semi-structured interviews are meant to be flexible, and in practice, the emotional depth of the conversation rarely followed a fixed sequence: some participants opened up early on, while others only shared their most personal reflections at the very end.

This aligns with Demirci's (2024) view that interviews should be approached as a collaborative process, fostering reciprocity and allowing the interviewee to shape the direction of the exchange. In my case, reciprocity sometimes took the form of participants asking me about my own migration experiences, something I was open to share. I found it fair that if participants entrusted me with personal stories, I could respond in kind, as long as it did not shift focus away from their narrative. To do this, normally after assuring a comfortable atmosphere, we started the interview, to leave time to chat and ask questions to me after this process. At the end of the interview I've always asked participants if they felt a question was missing or what they thought more broadly about the research. They occasionally suggested questions they felt were missing and insights; where possible, I kept them in mind for subsequent interviews. This iterative approach helped keep the interview process dynamic and participant-led, ensuring it was not only a data collection tool but also a space of shared reflection.

The interviews were transcribed with the help of the software Atrain, a free, open-source and offline software (see Haberl et al., 2024). The extracts from the interviews used in the text are all translated by me, the reference is as follows: (pseudonym, country of origin, month and year of the interview).

3.7 Positionality

This topic is close to me because of my own mobility history. Although I am Italian, I have lived in Uruguay for two semesters, have close relationships with many Latin Americans, and share a cultural and linguistic familiarity with my participants. My ability to speak their language particularly, sometimes with a hint of Uruguayan accent, helped create a sense of closeness. I also share their age range. I have been mobile since 2019 and have myself experienced life as a migrant in Liège and other European cities. This combination of familiarity and difference placed me in what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) call the space between: not a full insider, but not a complete outsider either; maybe this is the only space possible as researchers. As the researcher will always have inherently more power and even if very similar, there will be some differences: for example in age, gender, migration status, country of origin, race. In fact, to present insiders and outsiders as dichotomous is dangerous, it oversimplifies these two terms, deletes nuance and forgets the big space in between (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p.60).

From a feminist perspective, the research relationship is ideally as co-equal as possible (Gubrium et al., 2012 in Mayan, 2023; Demirci, 2024). My positionality facilitated moments

where participants felt seen and understood, sometimes even recognising aspects of themselves, or a younger/older version of themselves, in me. This sometimes extended beyond the interview setting, as participants offered me advice on navigating Liège or shared personal reflections they might not have offered to a more distant researcher.

At the same time, I am aware of the complexities of occupying this “space between.” As Asselin (2003) observes, familiarity with participants or the research setting can lead to role confusion, where the researcher’s own experiences risk shaping the direction of interviews or the emphasis in analysis. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) similarly caution that while insider status can foster trust and openness, sometimes creating a shared sense of “us” versus “them”, it can also prompt participants to assume similarity and leave important aspects of their own experiences unexplained. In this case, what made me different from them helped me, also some things that might be explained as taken for granted can be easily clarified by asking simple questions such as “what do you mean by that?” or “can you elaborate?”. Things taken for granted are especially key in research about social norms and emotions.

Yet, being a narrative analysis, this research is premised on the understanding that even people with similar positionalities may have felt and experienced things in profoundly different ways. Shared characteristics do not guarantee shared emotions or shared experiences, and as Fay (1996) suggests, we can even hide aspects of our own experience from ourselves out of fear, self-protection, or guilt, sometimes. In my case, while guilt was a recurring theme for participants, it is also an emotion I have felt in the context of mobility and family relations, which meant I could recognise its weight but also needed to consciously avoid projecting my own meanings onto theirs.

Ultimately, my position as an insider–outsider shaped not only the trust and intimacy of the interviews but also the interpretative lens through which I approached them. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p.61) note, qualitative research does not allow us to retreat to a distant, neutral role; the stories we collect stay with us, influencing both our analysis and ourselves. This reflexive awareness was essential to ensuring that my engagement with participants’ narratives was both empathetic and critically grounded.

3.8 Narrative Analysis

I will use narrative analysis as my analytical framework. This method can maximise the use of one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Through narrative analysis, the stories and different experiences are combined to develop an understanding of the 'typical' narrative (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p.129). For my study, I will be using both thematic structural analysis and thematic narrative analysis. The structural narrative analysis focuses on how stories are told (Riessman, 2008, in Mayan, 2023, p.66). The thematic narrative analysis focuses on the content divided into themes (Riessman, 2008, in Mayan, 2023, p.66). As I am focusing on an emotion in my research question, it is crucial to gather the nuances of how interviewees are telling their stories, because at times they answer in words on how they felt, but many times feelings are unconscious or displayed in their voices, expressions and silence.

In analysing the interviews conducted for this research, it is important to recognise that emotions are not always fully accessible, even to those experiencing them. Individuals may not always be able to name how they feel, or they may choose not to express certain emotions explicitly. In some cases, feelings were conveyed more clearly through tone, gestures, or silences than through words. For this reason, the interviews were not approached as a straightforward means of data extraction, but rather as relational and reflective encounters. I aimed to create an environment where participants could take time to explore and process their experiences, including their past journeys, future aspirations, and the emotional undercurrents that connected them. Often, this resulted in a shared moment of reflection. As Sofía told me at the end of our conversation:

> *"I feel like you made me think about things I didn't think about. It gave me a topic to chew on for the rest of the day."*
>
> (Sofía, Ecuador, 03/2025)

3.9 Limitations

For ethical concerns I anonymised the interview as, if even just one person prefers to remain anonymous all the other will follow, this didn't come as easy as I thought. As interviewees interestingly and rightfully started questioning about anonymity. This made me reflect on how to evolve the co-participant role of my interviewee using the real name could be a way, but for the general anonymisation I couldn't.

To add to my methodological approach I tried to access online group chat on Facebook and Whatsapp, but after time without material. I decided to avoid this ethnographic project for several reasons, one I was an external observer, my position of power was inherent. Secondly either the group were talking about things that are not relevant to relational emotions such asking for legal advice or offering services; or I was in a group about emotional support where people decided to open up about how they felt. In this case I felt like using any of this material, even if I had mentioned it to them and asked their consent obviously, would have been unethical as I don't want to ruin what some people feel like is a safe space.

Another limitation came up during sampling where I mainly focused on gender balance, different jobs, migration status, different countries and age within the age range. A big limitation was not considering sexuality, race; this was due to the people I had access to. Finally for the length of this study focusing on the categories rather than adding more helped creating a more in-depth analysis.

4. Analysis

The structure of the analysis is divided in two parts: one that follows a diachronic logic, reflecting the temporal and processual nature of mobility. Rather than viewing migration as a clear-cut movement from one country to another, I approach it as a complex, ongoing process: one that begins long before physical movement occurs, and continues to affect people long after they have settled in a new place or even returned to their country of origin. This perspective draws on the concept of the "migratory career" by Martiniello and Rea (2011), which shifts the focus away from single-level explanations (macro, meso, or micro) and instead considers migration as a dynamic trajectory shaped by the interplay of structural, relational, and individual factors (Martiniello and Rea, 2011, p.2). Like a career, migration relies on forms of social capital, the acquisition of new knowledge, the learning of languages, habits, and ways of navigating unfamiliar systems (Martiniello and Rea, 2011). Time, chance, and unexpected encounters play a role, as do prevailing ideas about the 'skills' or dispositions required to be a migrant. In this view, a migratory trajectory is never fixed once and for all: objectives may be multiple, pathways can shift, and unplanned events can create bifurcations and reorientations over time (Ibid). This section aims to answer a key question: *How do emotions, particularly guilt, connected to imaginaries, gender, and social roles influence migration?*

The second part centers on a thematic narrative analysis of emotions. It explores various emotional experiences, by focusing on particular emotions. In addition, one chapter is dedicated to masculinity and emotions, and another to the changing nature of relationships. This part tries to answer the question: *How does migration affect emotions, and perhaps challenge imaginaries, gender dynamics, and social roles?*

From this perspective, emotions, memories, and future imaginaries are not secondary to movement, but are central to the lived experience of mobility itself. Feelings of guilt, belonging, affection, and disconnection, as well as the expectations tied to family and community, play a constitutive role in shaping how mobility is imagined, enacted, and remembered. Similarly to Mavromattis (2020) I seek to disrupt a binational/bilocal view by understanding transnational lives as part of continuous yet fragmented mobility.

4.1 Past: Expectations, Imaginaries, and the Emotional Preludes to Migration

Migration is rarely a sudden or clear-cut event; it is preceded and shaped by emotions, expectations, negotiations, and internal conflicts. In many of the interviews, participants reflected not only on their reasons for moving but on the long emotional buildup that preceded the decision, an accumulation of imagined futures, family dynamics, and sociocultural scripts.

4.1.2 Imagining

For some participants, the idea of Europe was strongly associated with success and upward social mobility. As Gerardo mentioned:

"*In Latin America, it is always like living in Europe… great!*"

(Gerardo, Chile, 03/2025)

Milo had a similar view on how Europe is perceived in Latin America, which was then shaped because shortly after he moved the COVID-19 pandemic started. When asked how he felt when he was moving from Ecuador, he responded:

> *"Excited. The truth is it was the first time I had ever left Ecuador, and I left for Europe, from Ecuador. Going to Europe, to Belgium, that was different to where my uncles live, in Spain. So it seemed interesting. It was the first time I took a flight… It was exciting, until the Pandemic began, until then. I think that the pandemic really impacted what Europe meant. Because I think in Latin America, for many people coming to Europe is a dream.*

Many people want to visit Europe, many people want to know all that is the Old World. I came for work or training, not really because it was my dream coming to Europe."

(Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

Some imaginaries bring excitement and hope before moving, in fact the majority of the interviewees thought of moving for better career opportunities and, as a consequence, for social mobility. Gerardo adds:

"*Generally (moving) is looked at as something positive, in the sense that you move for searching for a better opportunity, a better life, a better job especially, you earn more money here; for example, in Chile it really matters to people, in general as a culture, the money… how to say this, they 'rank' you, I don't know how to explain this … they think you are better or worse, only based on how much money you own and which job you have. So generally (moving) is taken as something positive, like it is going to go well for you and you will earn money.*"

(Gerardo, Chile, 03/2025)

Showing how perceptions of success in Chile are entangled with financial stability and professional advancement. Gerardo described his decision to move as initially met with pride and joy by his family and friends. Migration, in these two previous cases, is framed as a courageous and promising step forward. In Gerardo's words when he accepted the Phd position (he orignially moved to Belgium short-term for a 7 months internship):

"At the beginning, clearly, when I said I was going to accept the Phd position, my mum was a bit sad, or at least it seemed to me, but I was happy myself, but clearly, it meant I was going to stay here and she was not going to see me for a long time. My dad was also happy, proud, for what they told me, I hope. For my friends it was the same, they were all happy I was moving here because they knew it was an unique opportunity to do a PhD and that they pay you well to do it."

(Gerardo, Chile, 03/2025)

However, this optimistic reception contrasts with how women's migration is often perceived, as explored in the literature by Pedone (2008). An example is Patricia's story: while her mobility was also a form of self-determination, she felt more judgment, fear and skepticism from those around her. These differing receptions echo Pedone's framing of the "varones aventureros" (adventurous men) versus the "madres que abandonan" (mothers who abandon), highlighting

gendered double standards in the imaginaries of migration. Moreover, even positive imaginaries coexist with negative or ambivalent ones. Patricia's parents, for instance, associated Europe (and the US) with danger, excessive freedom, or even decay, an image far removed from the "European dream." When I asked Patricia how her parents reacted to her decision to move she shared:

> "*Well at the beginning they were not on board with it. Firstly, because my parents think that foreigners, not just Europeans, especially Americans, are a bit crazy, because there is more access to different things. For example, in Canada or the US they have access to weapons or that marijuana is legal. In Colombia not yet. In Colombia abortion was recently legalised. So all my family is very conservative. And these kinds of things, they are like, what if you die, what if they kill you, what if…*"
>
> (Patricia, Colombia, 05/2025)

She mentions though how Colombia isn't safer. Patricia's parents, having little knowledge about Europe, are likely influenced by media and others' opinions, as Carling (2008, p.1465) notes: "non-migrants relate to life abroad through relatives, neighbours, and friends, but have limited ability to verify patchy and sometimes contradictory information." Patricia's family felt unsafe, fearful of picturing her in one of these places.

Other people instead had no idea about Belgium or Europe, for example Andrea's parents:

> *"My mum doesn't know Belgium, she doesn't understand geographically where it is situated, she doesn't understand the culture, she knows that here people speak French because I'm studying French. But much more than that, she doesn't know. She knows it is cold and that it is super grey, for what I tell her, but she doesn't have a preconceived idea of Belgium"*
>
> (Andrea, Chile, 03/2025)

All interviewees reflected on how others perceived Belgium, Europe, or abroad more broadly. These perceptions and impact of others' reactions may have influenced their own feelings about migration. For example, hearing others talk about danger can instill fear, whereas hearing pride and excitement about success may inspire confidence and reduce feelings of guilt. Likewise, having no clear image can cause insecurity and anxiety, especially among parents who cannot visualize where their children are going.

Finally, social media further shapes and influences imaginaries and expectations, Milo reflected:

> "*I think that a lot of people that see me, a bit on social media and so, see this (moving to Europe) as a dream come true. But from my perspective it is not really a dream come true, it is more something I'm trying to reach through Europe*"
>
> (Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

Seeing other people's lives on social media can emotionally impact future migrants or people that decided not to move, pushing them to believe their lives could be better and generating hope and positivity about moving, rising expectations. However, this may also lead to misconceptions and overestimations, resulting in disillusionment. Social media usually highlights only the positive moments, not the struggles. Moving is not always instantly fulfilling. While pride and admiration are pleasant to experience, Milo might be fearful of not living up to the image of the 'perfect migrant in the beautiful Old World', which could lead to feelings of shame. Additionally, he may feel that his difficulties are unseen, and he might experience guilt when expressing dissatisfaction because he is perceived as 'living the dream.'

4.1.3 Thinking about leaving and Seeking Approval

The emotional buildup to migration was not always linear or fully conscious. Some participants, like Patricia, had long considered leaving but felt constrained by emotional attachments. Her case is particularly revealing:

> "In 2016, 2016, my granny died. She had Alzheimer. So my mum, my brother and I, we were always attentive to her. Everything we did, we did at her disposal. So, we were always there… When she died it was something very hard for me. I always wanted to live other experiences, to leave the country. I wasn't thinking about going too far, I was thinking about going somewhere else in Latin America. I had an option in Paraguay, but finally I didn't accept it. So, then at that moment, I chose to move to another city, I left Bogotá and moved to Baranquilla for two years. I loved living near the sea (...) I would like to go back and be able to do it again. But when my grandma died, my life was broken in half. And then, the question started… I want to leave Colombia".
>
> (Patricia, Colombia, 05/2025)

Patricia likely felt that she had to fulfill a promise, provide care and she would feel guilt if she left or she went too far and something happened. She felt like presence was the most important thing she could give to her grandmother, which reflects Perez Murcia (2023) findings on elderly

people's experience of transnational family. Patricia's case stands out because her mobility was delayed by love, care, and potential guilt. It wasn't that she simply needed the right opportunity or timing, it was about love, grief, and the fear of absence. This emotional complexity goes beyond a guilt-based interpretation: she stayed not just because she felt she must, but because she wanted to. Still, the possibility of future guilt, say, not being present at a loved one's death or when she needed it the most, haunted her decision-making.

Across interviews, the mother–child relationship emerged as central in negotiating migration and sometimes grandparents played this role due to their caregiving during childhood (Carrillo et al., 2004, p.411). All interviewees mentioned discussing migration with their mothers, reflecting and reinforcing family hierarchies. It underscores the mother's (or grandparents') role as the 'chief' of the private sphere, the one consulted for decisions affecting the family (Ibid). This negotiation can be emotionally challenging, as migrants seek approval from their main source of emotional support and help in decision-making (Ibid). A decision that will have a huge impact on their relationship. The fact that most interviewees sought permission can be understood through Misheva's (2019, p.163) concept of authority guilt, which relies on emotional residue from childhood moral conditioning, rooted in respect and the need for approval from authority figures (mothers or grandparents in this case).

When I asked Grace about her loved ones' reaction at her decision to move to Belgium with her boyfriend at 21, she explained:

> *"To be 100% honest, well they agreed because when I took the decision I was very young. So when I decided I talked about it with my mom, I mean, it was a decision that we took together. They were sad but on board in the end because it was something we talked about."*
>
> (Grace, Nicaragua, 03/2025)

This type of maternal approval often alleviated guilt. As Baldassar (2015, p.86) notes, "guilt is greatest among those migrants who were not given license to leave by their parents, particularly women." In my case studies, participants generally received approval, which may have lessened their emotional burden.

When I asked Andrea when she decided to migrate, she answered:

> *"It was at the age of 25, 26, that I decided, … I got the idea to leave Chile (...) what I thought was, I dedicate myself to science. So science in Chile is quite difficult and not*

very well paid. I wanted more opportunities. (...) When I finished my Ph.D. studies, I knew I wanted to do postdoctoral research abroad. I knew I was going to leave. My subconscious tried to extend it, to stay a bit more. I wanted to leave but at the same time no. So I tried to stay as long as I could until I had to come because, well, I had a contract to comply with, so I had to come. But at the beginning it was… difficult"

(Andrea, Chile, 03/2025)

She was very determined to improve her career but very reluctant and insecure in leaving. When I asked her the reaction of her loved ones, she said:

"Well, my mum didn't like the idea because I was going to go super far. I mean, Chile is in the other hemisphere, in another continent, it is very far. (...) So she didn't like (the idea) so much. But she understood it was for a greater good, she understood I was searching for a better life option, being able to work and to develop as a professional in a good way. And that this, in the future, could also help me help her if she needed. So she understood it was for the future."

(Andrea, Chile, 03/2025)

The decision carried an expectation of future reciprocity, which in a way helped her justify her migration. But added possible increasing expectations. Additionally, her mother's first reaction might not have helped and was another reason for the delay of her departure.

Grandparents also mattered deeply; Carrillo et al. (2004, pp. 410–411) and Pedone (2008, p.60) underline how grandparents, as caregivers and emotional anchors, influence major life decisions. One participant recalled about his decision of moving:

"It was a difficult decision, I had my job and everything. I fought very hard for that job. I was talking with my relatives, my grandparents especially, the closest to me, and my mum. And I talked to them and told me well, I am going, here I do nothing, the work isn't working, I have no suitable salary, nothing. So I made the decision. There (in Belgium) I can have things I will never have here, like a future."

(Jesús, Venezuela, 03/2025)

Then I've asked about his loved ones' reaction:

"Well, they took it a bit difficult because I'm very attached. Well, I was very attached to them and they took it a bit hard, they cried, they told me to think it through. Because, here, practically, I'm alone. I don't have a family anymore. (his

grandparents told him from his recollection:) 'So what? You are going to be without family, without anybody there, that can help you. Well, just one person… You've to think about it very well. Anyway, your daughter. Think about it, your mum. We are old. Maybe when you come back, we won't be there anymore' Yes (the decision) hit them very hard".

(Jesús, Venezuela, 03/2025)

Their words, or at least how he recollected them, conveyed a strong sense of family duty, and while that could provoke guilt, it also underscores his resolve. Notably, Pedone (2008, p.61) discusses how women's absence is often framed as causing family disintegration, implying heavier emotional burden for women. At the beginning the focus is shifted on him and the potential challenges he might face without a family there, just after he is reminded of caring about other people as potential responsibilities, but he is determined in searching for a better life for himself. He showed toughness, it seemed that these comments were not especially guilt-inducing; because of his determination, hope in a better life and feeling of being defeated in Venezuela because of the job and the conditions.

In Alejandra's case, her parents had migrated before, for doctoral studies in Spain, and returned to Colombia. She shared about her mobility:

"Well, I think he was influenced by my parents, so everyone took it well. Of course, there's always grief in leaving family, but overall everyone received it positively. My parents had migrated before and returned. They were doing their PhDs and then came back. (...) They were happy because it was a very good studying opportunity"

(Alejandra, Colombia, 03/2025)

The positive migration experience of Alejandra's parents likely reduced worries for both her and them, enabling a supportive response, which also likely reduced guilt and perhaps, they viewed it as temporary, mitigating emotional strain. Their support is clearer when later interview I asked her how her family reacted when she went back to Colombia and then back to Belgium:

"Normally, they take it well, because already during the master was like this and generally they always support and give encouraging word, so that I will be fine"

(Alejandra, Colombia, 03/2025)

For Rafael, the decision was different. Nearly 16, his mother and stepfather needed to leave due to violence and death threats. He and his sister could either accompany them or stay with their father.

> *"My mother and stepfather made the decision for our family… but they always said we could choose… because my father is still in El Salvador. (...) My father works all the time, so… That means staying home alone all the time. My sister and I decided to come with my mother. (So I asked: Was it difficult to decide for you?) At that moment, no. Because I didn't have much affection for my father. I mean, I respected him as a father, but I didn't have the kind of affection that would make me say, yes, I'll stay with him."*
>
> (Rafael, El Salvador, 03/2025)

This hard choice reflected relationship hierarchies and the importance of emotional support and physical presence.

Many participants initially framed their migration as short-term. For instance, Gerardo, Milo, and Sofía described it as temporary for studies or internships. This framing provided emotional safety: temporary departures were less disruptive, more acceptable, and carried less guilt. Yet, this temporary often became longer-term without conscious acknowledgment in some ways.
Milo shared:

> *"One leaves saying: 'Well, I'm leaving for a certain period, nothing more, and then I'll come back.' But I think that at this point, for example, I questioned myself a lot after… I only left to do the master's, which was two years. Although I knew I wanted to do the doctorate, well, that added four more years. And at this point it's at least six, seven years that I've been outside the country. And I think I wasn't prepared for that initially, honestly. I thought I was leaving, but I didn't think it would be for so long."*
>
> (Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

Gerardo echoed this:

> *"Uff, it was difficult, because at the beginning it was only, it was only a 7-month internship, so I didn't see it as emigrating, I saw it as, of course, going for a while and coming back. And then, once being here, I was offered an opportunity to do a doctorate, which, maybe at the beginning I didn't take much into account what it meant, as it was four years here, working and living here, that is, changing country."*
>
> *(*Gerardo, Chile, 03/2025)

Sofía applied to a Master's with a scholarship and just shortly before the start of the program she was told that she was accepted. She reflected how fast things unfolded:

> *"So yes, it was kind of fast. The moment I knew I was going to get the scholarship and immediately you know all the paperwork, well, for us in Latin America all the paperwork you have to do to move around. It was two months of running around. I think my family also didn't really have time to react (...) It was a real rush but I feel like my mom at least was very happy for me, worried because well, I was going to a completely unknown place and alone and all that, worried of course, but still happy for me. And my sister, well, very sad, at that moment we lived together (...) When you asked me if I would like to stay here longer… I didn't think I wanted to stay longer… (she laughs) I mean, yes, I would like to stay longer."*
>
> (Sofía, Ecuador, 03/2025)

4.2 Present: Transnational Families, Distance, and the Emotional Work of Care

Family ties are a fundamental pillar in the lives of Latin American migrants, profoundly shaping their decisions to migrate and their ongoing emotional experiences. While guilt is often central to these transnational connections, acting as a powerful emotional glue that motivates communication, care, and sacrifice, it is by no means the only force that sustains these bonds. Love and mutual support equally play vital roles. As previously mentioned the concept of family itself is expansive in Latin American cultures, frequently including extended kinship networks beyond the nuclear family (Carrillo et al., 2004, p.410). This broad familial scope deepens the emotional stakes of migration and separation, prompting migrants to engage in continuous emotional labor to maintain these several relationships across distance. This chapter explores three interconnected dimensions of family life in the present: the role of communication as a form of emotional presence, the gendered expectations shaping care and anxiety, and the physical and emotional challenges imposed by geographical distance.

4.2.1 Staying Connected: Communication as Emotional Presence

Most interviewees shared that they had a good relationship with their relatives, and staying in contact, even across long distances, was a central part of their daily or weekly routines. Importantly, Baldassar (2015) observes that guilty feelings can act as both a motivator and a burden. Guilt often compels migrants to maintain contact with their families, which sustains

emotional ties across distance. Phone and video calls act as a “virtual co-presence” allowing migrants to remain emotionally present despite physical absence (Baldassar, 2015). At the same time, these efforts may intensify guilt by reinforcing the sense of absence or inadequacy; a phone call or video chat, after all, might not substitute for physical presence.

Sofía shares how for scheduling issue is not easy calling more than once a week, about the calls she shares:

“When we call once a week, normally yes we stay one, two, three hours chatting.”

(Sofía, Ecuador, 03/2025)

There are other very similar examples that mirror the importance of frequent communications such as Milo, at the questions on how he keep in contact to his loved ones, he answers:

“By phone, normally. I call them or write to them. Everyday I talk with my mom.”

(Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

Phone calls and video calls offer a virtual co-presence, a way for migrants to remain emotionally present even when physically absent. This helps in the case of Grace as a way to be present in the life of her sisters.Grace mentions:

“Nowadays it is much easier keeping in touch than a couple of years ago with our families. I videocall my sisters everyday. I am the oldest and I’m 27, the one after me is 17, so they are way younger than me, thus it is crucial to always stay in touch with them, that is why I call them everyday”

(Grace, Nicaragua, 03/2025)

After a while she highlights the responsibility she feels as an older sister:

“Yeah I call my sisters everyday but I feel like I need to maintain a really close relation with them, besides being the older sister, it is even more complex because you feel some responsibility (so I shared that I get her as I am also an older sister) and she asked me does it happen to you that you want to protect her? (I said yes)... exactly"

(Grace,Nicaragua, 03/2025)

Showing the importance of communication as a form of care and responsibility, which also leave a feeling of anxiety and worries, especially guilt and sadness if anything happens. But remains an important way of being present daily, creating emotional support and helping.

Interestingly, guilt was not experienced only by one who moved. As Milo mentioned in his interview, families back home sometimes hesitated to involve their loved ones abroad in important matters, fearing to disturb them or make them feel worse:

"*My family decides to call me only for big reasons. I think they don't want to worry me too much."*

(Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

This reveals how guilt flows both ways, it is not just the migrant who feels guilty for being absent, but the family who may feel guilty for needing or expecting too much, or also not sharing enough. But communication remains crucial in particularly important moments, at least to symbolically include everyone in the family. As mentioned by Carling (2008, p.1464) "Migrants and non-migrants alike can be frustrated by not knowing for certain what goes on 'on the other side'."

Drawing on this there are also some negative aspects in the possibility of constant transnational communication (Carling, 2008). Having the possibility of updating someone 24/7 can lead to lack of boundaries and a lot of expectations.

Patricia is an example:

"I have to talk to my mum everyday. More than my option, it's her option. Everyday I wake up, I write her a message. I go to bed, I write her a message. We talk on the phone or videocall, twice or three times a month. Anyway, everyday, 'hi, how are you? How did you wake up? What did you do? Well, take care.' The day I don't write to her, she writes to me: 'I can't sleep, my heart is my mouth. You don't think about me (...). With my dad I talk once or twice a week."

(Patricia, Colombia, 05/2025)

Worries come easy in this case and sometimes migrants want to avoid communication to avoid showing pain, creating guilt, worries and anxieties; this constant communication can cause guilt as people may end up omitting things (Baldassar, 2015, p.85).

As clearly seen, the emotional dynamics of communication are not always smooth. While guilt can sometimes drive a desire to stay in touch, it can also have the opposite effect (Baldassar, 2015). Several participants described moments when guilt actually disrupted communication. When feeling too sad for being far and feeling too guilty about not being present, feeling shame for not fulfilling expectations or not being able to help, migrants sometimes avoided calls, out of pain or discomfort. This can also be related to forms of masculinity and care.

4.2.2 Masculinity and Care

Remaining connected through the phone is just one of many forms of care. Care is a central dimension of migrants' emotional lives. In transnational contexts, it extends beyond physical assistance to include emotional availability, maintaining contact, and providing financial support. These practices are deeply shaped by gender norms, family expectations, and the emotional costs of distance. For some migrants, care is experienced as a moral duty, while for others it is negotiated, delegated, or even avoided as a way to protect one's emotional well-being.

The latter is Jesús case, when asked if he felt responsibility towards his family back inVenezuela, he responded:

> *"Well, it depends. With my grandparents, yes, a little, because it affects me. I spent all, let's say—my youth there… My teenage years. I spent them with them, and I was very close to them. And of course, I do feel some responsibility toward them. Sometimes it hits me, not being there with them and all that… but life is like that."*
>
> (Jesús, Venezuela, 03/2025)

This is an example of reflecting upon generalized reciprocity, whereby parents, or in this case grandparents, care for children early in life and are expected to receive care in old age (Baldassar, 2008, p. 248). So then I proceeded by asking how he keeps in contact with them, he answered:

> *"Not much. Not much. I'm not someone who calls or sends messages often. Maybe once a week or twice a month, and that's a lot for me. (...) Well, I wouldn't know exactly how to explain it, but I'd say it's because, to detach myself from the feeling, I prefer not to call. That way I don't have the burden on my conscience of thinking 'ah, I miss them and all that.' No, no, no. I'd rather not call."*
>
> (Jesús, Venezuela, 03/2025)

Showing how when care or communication might feel as too much of an emotional burden or might create a sense of inadequacy for not doing enough. Some people might feel care is not their role or obligation. When I asked Rafael and then Santiago if they kept in touch with their families and friends back in El Salvador, they answered:

> *"With almost all my family. But mostly my mother is the one who stays in contact. And when my mother talks to them, I talk to them too. But regular contact that I personally keep, well, I often contact my father and… my aunt."*
>
> (Rafael, El Salvador, 03/2025)

“Eh… it’s not like I talk to them every day, but from time to time. The problem is the time difference, it’s like a 7-hour difference. I find it hard, but… I’d say yes, I do keep in touch.”

(Santiago, El Salvador, 04/2025)

For some people, staying in touch feels less like an obligation, as in the cases of Rafael and Santiago. And if that choice triggers guilt or sadness, avoiding contact can become a form of self-preservation, as with Lex. In Rafael’s case, someone else, his mother, takes care of maintaining contact.

In Latin American cultures, care within families is not only common but often expected, especially from women (Pedone, 2008). Care is a moral and emotional obligation, one that is deeply intertwined with affection, but also with guilt, anxiety, and gender roles. This care is not only physical but also emotional labour, being emotionally present, listening, and maintaining connections (Lutz, 2002, p. 114).

In Milo’s case, he frames his responsibility more in economic terms. When I asked if he felt responsible for his loved ones, he replied:

“What kind of responsibility? (so I vaguely said: ‘I don’t know… being close to them?’) Yes, yes, yes. I think that even today, they don’t bother me for money. They try not to ask me for anything, but I know I’m not in a bad position.”

(Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

This reveals that, subconsciously, his idea of responsibility aligns with a masculine role of economic provision, rather than spending time together. Still, he takes other forms of responsibility seriously, such as trying to return to Ecuador once a year, which remains his goal. Gender clearly plays a crucial role: men often have more social permission to disengage emotionally from transnational caregiving than women. Another factor that plays a key role in transnational caregiving is distance.

4.2.3 Distance: It is not the Same on the Phone

All the interviewees agreed that in many cases the hardest thing about being far from ‘their country’ was being far from their families. While digital communication helps bridge gaps, the

physical reality of distance remains a fundamental challenge. Many migrants expressed that no phone or video call can fully replace the intimacy of in-person interaction. As Alejandra shared:

“Interaction on the phone even if it shorten distance, for example through social media, videocalls, well is not the same as a face-to-face interaction”

(Alejandra, Colombia, 03/2025)

Jesús at the question about what is the hardest thing about being far from Venezuela, he answered:

“Well, everything affects you a bit, because it is difficult being far from your family. You cannot see them, you cannot hug them, you cannot be with them. It is not the same seeing them on the phone and being with them, having a coffee, chatting, it is not the same.”

(Jesús, Venezuela, 03/2025)

Some people had the opportunity to go back to visit their loved ones, their experience interestingly portray the complexity of emotions that going back entails, for example Sofía summons up the feeling of many:

“*I have been back to visit three times. (...) it was emotional because it was two years that I had not gone back home. (...) I went to meet my nephew and all, truly emotional. Everything for the first time. And then the two other times were also exciting… but how can I say? They feel like vacations, I mean, you don’t feel like you’re going back home.*”

(Sofía, Ecuador, 03/2025)

However, not all migrants can return frequently. Financial means, age and migration status strongly shape this possibility. Santiago, for instance, views returning as a hopeful but very distant possibility:

“I would love to go, yes. But I can’t. So… It is difficult… I don’t know in how many years I could go back. But… hopefully!”

(Santiago, El Salvador, 04/2025)

Jesús expresses frustration over his inability to leave Belgium:

“*Well at this moment, I cannot go. I cannot leave Belgium. So, I cannot go back but I would like to go back, to visit… for one month, two weeks, enjoy with my family and then come back here.*”

(Jesús, Venezuela, 03/2025)

This could reflect further reasons for detaching themselves and not maintaining communication through the phone: the difficulty of waiting to see people again makes people opt to detach from people far away. But they show hope for future visits and reunions, even if they seem distant in time.

As mentioned it is not always is possible to go back, especially being there for a while, and this is becomes particularly harsh in specific moments, as with aging relatives in need of care and when they die:

> *"Last year my grandmother passed away, and I didn't go to my country because at the moment she died, my mom came here, and we didn't know what was going to happen and there wasn't an immediate flight, so she went and I stayed here. And I felt very guilty, because… it doesn't matter if you're fine, you're stable, you feel good in a place… sometimes you feel guilty because you don't have physical contact with the person, you know? For example, my grandmother is sick, and even if I don't know, I send her a gift or I call her every day, or I invite her to go to a restaurant, if I'm not in the country, the physical contact is lost, you know? And there's nothing like the human warmth you can give to another person. So, at that point, yes, I felt… I thought a lot about that situation. Of course, because I think that in those kinds of situations you realize that migrating is hard."*
>
> (Grace, Nicaragua, 03/2025)

This is a clear example of the difficulty of distance and the importance of physical co-presence in care, especially with aging people (Perez Murcia, 2023). These moments are harsh because together with guilt, sadness, there is a feeling of being stuck and lack of agency. Acknowledging that the only possible choice is far removed from the one the person would like to take. A clear example of how love can sharpen the feelings of guilt and how guilt unfortunately can remain strong through time.

4.3 Future: Envisioning what Comes next

Migrants' imaginaries of the future are often shaped by an interplay of hope, obligation, and the enduring pull of transnational family ties. While some envision returning home "one day," they tend to postpone such plans, balancing aspirations against economic and professional realities in both host and origin countries. Others face more immediate emotional pressures from loved ones, especially aging parents, whose concerns about their health and spending time with their

children can intensify with time (Pérez Murcia, 2023). These intergenerational exchanges often weave guilt into migrants' decision-making, not as the sole determinant, but as a thread that interacts with love, responsibility, and practical constraints. The two subsections that follow explore these dynamics: the first examines delayed-return narratives, where return remains a cherished yet deferred goal; the second looks at the emotional pleas and subtle pressures from family members urging migrants to "come back," and how these influence both imagined and actual futures.

4.3.1 I Will Return… But Later On

Some migrants, moved by feelings of hope and love for their home countries and the loved ones who remain there, imagine themselves returning one day, but often postpone this choice to a more distant future.

Grace explains:

> *"I am a person who strongly defends Latin American education, and I believe we have very good education. But rather, in terms of stability, I think for the moment I will stay here. But yes, of course I see the possibility of going to my country, but not in 2 years nor in 3, but more like in a sum of 8 years, 7 years… who knows. I still don't even know if I want to have children, and for example, if I were to have children, I would like them to be born here so they also get to know another culture, you know?*
>
> (Grace, Nicaragua, 03/2025)

Similarly, Jesús share:

> *"Well, yes, I would go back, yes, yes, of course. I would very much like to go back, but right now it's not possible. Because if I go back it's the same, I will be in the same, with nothing. So, it's not something I would do. (...) In the future I would love to go back to my country, my friends, my people."*
>
> (Jesús, Venezuela, 03/2025)

For some, like Sofía, there is a desire to return later and a bit of anxiety in being able to stay:

> "In the near future, let's say in the medium term, I still see myself spending a bit more time here in Belgium, if I could, because I am in my last year of my doctorate and here in Belgium the situation for migrants is a little strict. It's like you finish what you are doing here and you have to leave immediately. I understand that you don't get time to look for a job or that kind of thing. So yes, I would like to find a job and be able to stay a little

longer, but not for my whole life. I feel like I still have a little bit more time here, but then yes, I do plan to return to my country."

(Sofía, Ecuador, 03/2025)

Alejandra speaks in particular, about responsibilities back in Colombia, she sees them out of love toward her family and her country. When asked why she thinks about returning, she answered:

"Well, first because my family is there, but also I think that the fact of studying, of training, there are many things to do there, so I would like to contribute to my country. (...) (In the near future) I will finish my doctorate, maybe I will stay in Europe because the research that is done here is not done the same way in my country. But after some time I think that yes I will go back to my country."

(Alejandra, Colombia, 04/2025)

These narratives reveal that "return" is often imagined through a mixture of longing, practicality, and selective idealisation. Migrants weigh structural constraints in their home countries (economic instability, limited professional opportunities) against deeply felt attachments to place, culture, and kin. The decision to postpone return is not an absence of desire but rather an adaptive strategy, keeping the possibility alive without committing to a timeline. Loved ones might play a role in further convincing them to maintain return as a possibility, as explored in the next chapter.

4.3.2 Please, come back!

For some migrants, parents' longing for their children occasionally takes the form of subtle, or not-so-subtle, guilt-tripping, urging them to return. These emotional appeals can reinforce feelings of responsibility and amplify the ambivalence migrants already feel about living far from loved ones.

Milo's reflection show the uncertainty of going back and the impact of his mom wanting him there, so he tries to picture himself before in the best scenario and then in the worst possible one:

"I mean, I have nothing, I have no ties, my family is the only thing. Friends, they have all moved on, nobody really misses me. I do have friends but apart from that, nothing. So I really have no reasons apart from my family to go back. Although in the social aspect, in

feeling that there I could feel integrated, that yes, and with a doctorate degree I could also rise very quickly, I think, like get a good job, if there is one. And I think that could be… I mean, for that reason too it's not a bad option at all to go back. Even though my family is the first reason, there are also a couple of reasons that push you to say, 'Well, I might as well go back, it's an option.' But right now, the situation is super complicated to risk it. When I have this conversation with my mom, my mom wants me to go back, but she knows that if I go there, I'm going to be there with the degree, that I could get a lot out of it (somewhere else), and I'm going to be standing there, like, not doing anything. I think she also understands that having me there, or me having her there, implies a huge sacrifice for me to be stuck, not doing anything."

(Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

Milo's situation shows how forcing people to return could lead to resentment, guilt and shame from both parties, when he pictures him and his mum standing there in the house doing nothing. Patricia has a similar reflections:

"I see my mom is aging 'Patricia, let's see if you come back' and I'm like, but what do I do? I mean, do I live my life, or do I stay there with my parents? So that is also something very hard, when you are far away, like not being able to be there when they are so fragile."

(Patricia, Colombia, 05/2025)

Patricia reflects on her aging parents and how they need care, more than just presence, this as mentioned can be seen as a woman's responsibility and can create a feeling of guilt for not fulfilling this responsibility. She recalls another moment, when she shared one of the hardest moment in her migration journey, after time, to her parents:

"When I told them, this year, directly, my dad started sending me job offers in Colombia, and I was like… he said, 'Look, look, you don't have to do anything, just come here, here, no, look, this opportunity, look, this is your profile, and besides, they pay well.' And I was like, 'No, dad, no, thank you, but no, I'm going to wait here a bit longer.' My mom too, like, 'But if I come in May, is it okay for you if I visit you?' And I'm like, 'No, I just moved.'"

(Patricia, Colombia, 05/2025)

Guilt, anxiety, and fear are interwoven here. For parents, accepting that a son or daughter lives far away can be a rollercoaster, especially when something bad happens. And paradoxically, Patricia recalls being told something very different by her father on another occasion:

> *"I was at the airport, my dad called and said to me, 'Well, I'll tell you just one thing: if something happens to me, you don't worry about me. You keep living your life. You don't have to come to Colombia. (...) You keep living your life, because anyway, someone dead doesn't do anything.' And I'm like, 'How can you tell me that? Damn!' And I start crying, but like sobbing, 'Why are you telling me this?' 'Because I know you. Because I know that if something happens to me, you are going to come running, and for what?' (...) So yes, I do feel responsible for being far away."*
>
> (Patricia, Colombia, 05/2025)

These testimonies illustrate the double-bind of transnational family life: while parents' love is a source of comfort and belonging, it can also manifest as pressure, magnifying migrants' internal conflicts about where they should be. The tension between personal aspirations and familial expectations, often sharpened by the awareness of parents' aging, makes decisions about staying or returning deeply charged and emotionally complex. This can create guilt in remaining.

4.4 Sentimientos Encontrados: Emotional Complexity in the Migration Experience

Emotions run across time, they do not begin or end with a single moment. Rather, they intertwine, linger, and resurface, influencing how places, people, and events are remembered. Migration has a profound impact on emotions as it is a challenging experience that involves a lot of big changes in life, relationships and routine, but also in social roles, sometimes challenging and even questioning them.

As Aquino, Chanamuto, and Christou (2022, p.205) write, "the act of migration is a highly emotional experience, in turn redefining the meaning of home, belonging, borders, and citizenship." These emotional layers are not easily separable. Instead, they often coexist in contradiction: joy and guilt, pride and nostalgia, love and resentment. These *sentimientos encontrados* (mixed or conflicting feelings) emerged repeatedly in the interviews. Gerardo, when asked how he felt when he decided to move and before leaving, said:

> *"But in the end it's like, it's like mixed feelings, because you know it's for the better, but it still makes you feel guilty and sorry to leave your family… your friends. I think for them it*

was the same: 'oh great that you are leaving, but ah sad that I won't see you, I'll miss you'"

(Gerardo, Chile, 03/2025)

Alejandra describes how she felt when she went back to visit and then back to Belgium:

"Eh, it was very good personally, (...) I think it helped me to reconnect with my family. Besides, that Christmas and New Year period is a very special time to spend with family, for me. So yes, it was very good. (When I came back to Belgium…) Mixed feelings, on one hand I was happy to resume my activities, but on the other, sad to leave my family again and facing the cold, so yes."

(Alejandra, Colombia, 03/2025)

On the other hand, other participants did not always articulate this phrase directly, their stories reflected this emotional tension. As Grace put it:

"Later I'll share with you a bit about the rollercoaster of living here. ha ha To be very honest, I think it's an experience that really no one expects to live, because to make a decision like this you really have to have something telling you: I don't feel good anymore in the place where I was born. Buuut, if I could describe the experience in one word, it's that it's madness (she laughs a little) it's very… it changes your whole environment, especially when you migrate to a country that is far from your culture."

(Grace, Nicaragua, 03/2025)

She describes migration as a rollercoaster and a *locura*, a madness, something that shakes your emotional, physical, and social ground. The change of environment, routines, and relationships is accompanied and shaped by different emotions and it is a hard choice.

Some people feel a similar sense of being incomplete, which can lead to sadness, pain, and guilt. Guilt in the sense of feeling bad about not being completely grateful of the great opportunity they got or happy about the choice they know they want. But at the same time, an acceptance that it is an unpredictable emotion and difficult to understand unless lived.

Andrea very openly and vulnerably shares:

"I feel that I'm fortunate, but there is always… like you feel incomplete living abroad. What happens is that you are here, but you don't have all your loved ones. I mean, you have a part of your life that stayed in another country. So yes… it's a bit difficult."

(Andrea, Chile, 03/2025)

Similarly Milo, when I asked if he add something to add told me at the end of the interview:

“Even though you are convinced, it’s like a very weird decision because you are convinced that you want to be here, you are convinced you miss your family. But in the middle of it, obviously, your inside is almost destroying you… emotionally. Even if you know you want to be here, sometimes you just feel bad because you feel incomplete in some way. Here is what I want, but my family is there, there is who I want to be with. So in terms of social, romantic, and family relationships, it’s a total break, and it destroys you personally because you can’t plan ahead. (...) You need to start socialising, meet someone, probably … and it doesn’t always happen… Not getting understood by someone is a weird barrier which can cause emotional problems. Maybe here you are working, doing a PhD or whatever… but this (the social, meaningful relations) is an important part of your life. Like it’s Friday and what, just going out with friends. Sometimes you want to be with your family, your partner… I think emotionally (moving) really breaks you."

(Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

What different people described as feeling incomplete (incompleto), the feeling of “being in-between,” of never fully settling emotionally in one place, was recurrent. This is closely connected with Sayad’s (1999) concept of double absence, which implies that migrants when they return to their home country they realise that they do not fully belong there, nor in the country where they tried to create their new life. This can involve more than two countries; the key is that the migrant’s sense of belonging becomes fragmented and dislocated. While this perspective is valuable, it is also a rather hopeless and sad one. In the last part of this chapter, I will try to explore, not a solution, but a different approach to improve this very difficult feeling, looking at friendship and community.

Another important consideration is how culture, and language, shape the meaning and significance of emotion. It is often difficult to find a direct translation for a feeling; sometimes multiple words are needed, or the emotion is perceived differently across languages (see Etxebarria, 2003). This is why, in this chapter, I have tried to keep some emotions in Spanish, while also translating them into English, to preserve both authenticity and nuance.

4.4.1 Masculinity and Emotion

These mixed emotions do not emerge in isolation; they are deeply shaped by social expectations, cultural norms, and gender roles. As Ahmed (2004) notes, emotions are not just

internal states but cultural practices, how we feel is shaped by what we are told we are allowed to feel. Masculinity, in particular, shapes how responsibility, attachment, and vulnerability are negotiated in transnational contexts. Socially and culturally, masculinity has often been constructed in opposition to emotional openness. The stereotypical notion that "real men" are rational, controlled, and unemotional still has powerful echoes. This dichotomy, emotional women versus rational men, not only restricts how men are allowed to feel but also how they are allowed to express those feelings.

Men's willingness to speak about their emotions can depend on how they are at ease or they perceive their masculinity. For some, emotions are seen as a weakness or potential danger, making it harder to be vulnerable or open. Gerardo provides a clear example. When speaking about his own or others' emotions, he often followed such statements with a joke or a comparison. When I asked him it was difficult for him to leave them, he answered:

> *"Not so much, because I'm a shitty person (he laughs), because at the beginning, since I was coming for seven months, it was like, 'I'm going for a while and then I'll come back.' And later, when I made the decision, after I started to realize what it meant to be here. Yes, that's when it was a bit harder for me, like the fact of being far away. Sometimes, sometimes, sometimes you miss family, friends, but… but deep down, it wasn't that hard for me. (he laughs again) I think I'm not that attached to people."*
>
> (Gerardo, Chile, 03/2025)

The humor here works as a shield, signalling strength and detachment. At one point in the interview he refers to his brother as "more emotional, more gay" explicitly associating emotional expression with femininity and queerness, suggesting that showing feelings threatens a certain image of masculinity. Yet Gerardo also admits later on in the interview:

> *"Because, anyway I am emotional, but I try not to show. I am Latino, it's part of me"*
>
> (Gerardo, Chile, 03/2025)

Here, there is an implicit recognition that feeling is human, but displaying it is socially policed and culture, in this case, is used as a way to feel more authorised to be emotional. This repression is not without cost. Gerardo speaks about not calling his family during periods of high stress, not because he does not care, but precisely because he does not want to be seen as vulnerable:

> *"When I am very stressed I do not like talking with them because I don't like them seeing me stressed (…). In my family I was always the one that was happy, the strong one, the*

one you'd go to ask advice even. Because of that they cannot see me feeling bad. And … living far is a big emotional burden. The PhD is also an emotional burden. So, like, uff I don't know, besides, I miss them. So, I end up feeling like crying and I'd rather not call them. I think it is for that."

(Gerardo, Chile, 2025).

This excerpt reveals a performance of emotional strength expected of him within his family structure, a form of relational masculinity where care means shielding others from your own pain. It is not only a question of gender roles, but also of the shame that comes from not living up to an image of resilience, and the guilt of needing emotional support rather than providing it. As he describes, avoiding contact is a way to prevent shame and sadness (crying), guilt (for possibly making his family cry), and the sadness of confronting the distance. This can be explained by looking at Hage (2004, p.118) where he explores the concept of toughness; he describes two types of toughness that he defines feminine and masculine toughness. The first implies keeping emotions tightly under control and showing no signs of vulnerability, it is a defensive stance that treats others as potential threats who might exploit any perceived weakness (Ibid). The second implies feeling so secure and unthreatened that one can openly acknowledge and share one's vulnerabilities without fear (Ibid). Hage (2004, p.118) labels these as masculine and feminine toughness, reflecting conventional gender roles. While useful to explain how people navigate emotions, such definitions risk reinforcing the very gender stereotypes they describe. In Gerardo's case, both forms appear: an initial 'masculine' toughness in avoiding displays of vulnerability, and later, moments of 'feminine' toughness in admitting his emotions. This movement between toughness types is strategic, a way to manage the emotional burden of distance without compromising one's self-image.

4.4.2 Miedo y Ansiedad (Fear and Anxiety)

Migration is often an emotional journey as much as a geographical one. The decision to leave, the journey itself, and the first months of adaptation are frequently marked by emotions that oscillate between hope and apprehension. Among these, fear and anxiety stand out not only as reactions to external threats, but as ongoing states that shape how migrants experience distance, belonging, and responsibility. In participants' accounts, fear was often tied to concrete dangers, political instability, violence, precarious travel conditions; while anxiety tended to linger, connected to moral obligations, family ties, and the uncertainty of whether one is "doing enough" from afar.

People who arrived as refugees or asylum seekers often had very different experiences at the beginning of their mobility, or during the mobility itself:

When asked which was the hardest moment of his mobility Jesús answered:

> *"The trip. The trip was horrible. In Venezuela they checked me five times. Because they thought I was carrying drugs. But me, if I'm going to leave, I haven't left yet. Search me in Spain or in another country, but not here. No, I'm not carrying anything. Of course, I was only coming with a backpack, with two pairs of pants, clothes, some things, and that's it. Only that. So they thought I was carrying drugs in my stomach. They scanned me like five times. And then I arrived in the Dominican Republic. One day I slept on the airport floor. Because the next day my flight left. And they charged us thirty euros for a hamburger. Yes. And there was nothing else to do. We had to pay for it. Because if not, we weren't going to eat. So thirty euros for a hamburger. A McDonald's. What costs three euros here. So thirty. And well, that's what we ate. Half the plane. Because half the plane were Venezuelans going to Spain. I was also going to Spain. And after that, we arrived in Spain. In Spain they didn't make it difficult for me. They gave me an entry stamp and let me through. And from Spain to here. But it was…getting on a plane. And even more so alone. I didn't have a phone… For me, the journey was the hardest part. But after I got here, everything was fine."*
>
> (Jesús, Venezuela, 03/2025)

Even after arrival, the initial months can carry heavy emotional costs. Rafael recalled his hardest moment:

> *"At the beginning, the first months, because of the stress of leaving my family and my studies… Everything. In my country, I got a disease caused by stress. There were some months that I spent, forgive the word, like shit. I didn't find myself here, in this country. My mum and I talk about this and now it makes me laugh, but back then what I said the most was 'I want to go back.' When I was in El Salvador, I was the one who said that I wanted to be here the most. So it was too strong of a shock… I expected a lot from Belgium, which at the beginning I didn't find. (...) I think that my expectations made me feel a bit bad."*
>
> (Rafael, El Salvador, 03/2025)

Here, the emotional strain of unmet expectations intersects with the physical consequences of stress, underscoring the embodied dimensions of migration.

Fear often propels migration but also limits it. It can manifest as the anticipation of pain, injury, or loss, in this perspective is very tied with anxiety. Anxiety is often a precursor to guilt, or sometimes the lingering state that follows it. It is the nagging emotional atmosphere in which decisions are made and later second-guessed. Unlike fear, which is a reaction to a concrete object or threat, anxiety is a "mode of attachment to objects" (Ahmed, 2004, p.66), it sticks to things, rather than passing by which fear does. Anxiety becomes an approach to objects while fear is a reaction to objects' approach or possible loss (Ahmed, 2004, p.66). Ahmed (2004, p.81) links anxiety to care: being *careful* is already an anxious act. This was particularly salient in discussions of caregiving, which led people to ask themselves: *Am I doing enough? Have I failed by leaving?* As Ahmed (2004, p.80) notes, the word *careful* (in Spanish, *¡cuidado!*) inherently carries anxious connotations: "Being careful is an anxious feeling... we are hyperaware of all that can go wrong."

The COVID-19 pandemic was, for many, a moment of heightened anxiety and fear. In my interviews, when I asked about the most challenging moments of migration, both Milo and Sofía shared the same experience. At that time, they had just moved and were living together with another Ecuadorian:

> "The problem with the pandemic was that, well, at the beginning we did not know anything and everything we knew came from the news. The three of us every day connected to watch the news from Ecuador, to see what was happening. And it was a bit distressing because there the pandemic was also very harsh, especially in the city where I live. There were many deaths. And so, I think that more than living the pandemic worried about us here, we lived worried about our family there (…) And at the beginning, I don't know if you remember that there was a lot of this boom that, if older people got infected then they would die. And our parents are already older, so we were thinking about that, and that you're not there because for example, if I had been at my house, I would have gone out to do the shopping, I would have gone out to stock my house. But since I'm not there, my parents had to do it themselves. So it was an anxiety like they go out to buy they can get infected and, my parents are older. Yes, it was distressing."
>
> (Sofía, Ecuador, 03/2025)

> “Definitely COVID was one that made you classify everything as ‘Is what I’m doing worth it?’, and indeed it’s something that got out of hand. And suddenly, I think it was serious enough for you to ask yourself if it was worth it to leave your parents, to move away from your country, if God forbid something happens to them and you are here, you can’t leave, you can’t do anything, even if something happens to them, you can’t move. Which was, personally, well you know that we are very family-oriented, so it was the only moment in which I did get very scared because I didn’t know what was going to happen and after that well there have always been moments of stress that take you to a limit, a peak limit. I think we’ve all gone through a kind of burnout but I think it’s very much of the period we’re living in, doing the PhD, (...) In the end you’re alone, that has never changed but I think you can be alone doing something calmer or be alone doing something complicated, and when you go down that road I feel that it’s very difficult but after COVID I think nothing has affected me like that from being so far away.”
>
> (Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

This recollection reveals how love, fear, and guilt are deeply entangled. The anticipated loss becomes both feared and guilt-inducing: *If something happens and I’m not there, then I will be guilty.* Fear, in this way, becomes an emotional prelude to guilt: the lack of presence to provide care and help translates into guilt for having endangered one’s parents. These emotions clearly and seamlessly lead into one another.

4.4.3 Soledad (Loneliness)

Loneliness, especially in the context of transnational life, can be at times relational rather than individual. As Ahmed (2004) notes, people become aware of their bodies in moments of discomfort, perhaps the same holds for emotional distance. Loneliness often emerges when long-standing relationships are interrupted or transformed into long-distance connections, when routines of care are disrupted, or when one feels no longer understood by those back home. In this sense, loneliness dictated by distance reveals emotional patterns more clearly, highlighting the sources and dynamics of support.

For some migrants, moving with others can mitigate these experiences. Milo and Sofía relocated to Liège shortly before the pandemic, and the presence of friends helped soften isolation. Sofía reflected:

> “We were three Ecuadorians traveling together and the three of us, without obviously knowing that a pandemic was coming, decided to live together at that time. So, even though we couldn’t go out, we could still do activities inside the house — cooking, listening to music, you know, spending time together — inside the house, even if we couldn’t interact with the outside world. So it wasn’t that terrible.”
> (Sofía, Ecuador, 03/2025)

Milo similarly emphasized the importance of companionship during those early months:

> “Of course. Because during the pandemic I lived with them. When we arrived in Europe, since the three of us were new to Europe, to Belgium, to everything, we rented a place together. So it was three Ecuadorians renting a house. The social impact was quite mild. It didn’t matter: I was living with friends, you understand each other, and all that. Food, music, relaxation time, all of that you share a lot with them.”
> (Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

By contrast, those who moved alone faced a very different reality. Jesus warned prospective migrants:

> *“You will be alone. You won’t have anyone if you move alone.”*
>
> *(Jesús, Venezuela, 03/2025)*

Gerardo mentioned how profoundly difficult is loneliness, when I asked him what is the hardest thing of being far from Chile, he mentioned:

> “Being far from your parents, above all. Because, deep down, yes, I am a person who always goes out, maybe I didn’t spend so much time with them. But here I have realized that they were like a fundamental pillar in my life. If I had a bad day or whatever, I would go to them, I don’t know, I had had a bad week at university. I would go on the weekend and just be with them for a little while, it was like my safe place. Like, there everything is going to be fine, everything will be fine. And now one doesn’t have that, like that support, that backing. So, I think that’s the most difficult thing, that sometimes when, especially when I arrived and didn’t know anyone, alone. I mean, if I was sad, if I was happy, I was alone. I mean, I went through it alone. And I think that was the most difficult thing, the

most difficult thing to overcome at the beginning. The loneliness. And you always feel alone."

(Gerardo, Chile, 03/2025)

Gerardo's testimony highlights how migration can make one realize the crucial role of emotional support in everyday life, and how its absence intensifies feelings of isolation.
Loneliness is also intertwined with guilt, particularly when migrants feel they are missing important family moments: birthdays, weddings, or simple everyday interactions. The inability to be present can evoke a sense of loneliness, sadness and regret.

When I asked Sofía, Patricia and Grace what was the hardest of being far from Ecuador, Colombia and Nicaragua, they respectively answered:

"Wow, that question is very difficult. I think that the most difficult thing is feeling that you miss out on moments; I think so. I mean, like that on the side of feelings. On the side of non-feelings, the difficult thing is … being far from your culture, the food, the normal life for us, for me. And on the side of feelings it's feeling that you miss out on the moments with your family. I missed a lot of things. While I was here, my sister had a child, my nephew is growing up. My parents have also gone through illnesses, through difficulties. They are already older, so time passes. I think that is very difficult, like feeling that you miss all of that. You are not there for them."

(Sofía, Ecuador, 03/2025)

Patricia similarly reflected on missing her family's evolution:

"Ok, without a doubt the family, the fact of being far from my family, the family parties. For example, my cousin, one of my cousins with whom I, in all the family parties, we always stayed awake until 3, 4 in the morning. I mean, we were super close. He got married, I couldn't be at his wedding. (...) Another of my cousins also got married, we always studied in the same school. Like that, when it happens, it's like I, ah, ok, they send me the virtual invitation. Yes, of course. And it's like, ah, ok, he/she is going to get married, right. I mean, it's because there's always like, oh, we met the new girlfriend or the new boyfriend of so-and-so. And the fact of seeing how my family's life goes on and I am not there, that affects me a lot. It's more like the family, the fact that we all evolve and

I'm not there to see that evolution, to say so. Besides, the other day talking also with my mom, she says to me, no, about Sofía, a cousin. She's already going to be a mom or something like that. And I, what? When did you—? I mean, she has a boyfriend, she's already of legal age. Sofía, she's 24 years old. I'm like, no. It's like that, like time passes very fast. I don't realize at what moment five, six years went by, in which I'm no longer there, in which… Yes, it's complicated."

(Patricia, 05/2025)

Grace emphasized how distance affects everyday sibling relationships:

"I think interpersonal relations with your family, in my case I have three younger sisters, thus it is difficult maintaining the sisterhood connection that is not lost but it is difficult to feel present when really you are not there. So I think it is crucial and for me very difficult because even if you feel good and you are feeling well in this country, you always miss being able to eat with your family, share time with your family and so on…"
(Grace, Nicaragua, 03/2025)

As Baldassar (2015) notes, being present during crises is crucial, yet participants also expressed sorrow for missing joyful or meaningful everyday moments: birthdays, weddings, and family lunches. The accumulation of these missed moments compounds loneliness, showing how deeply emotional and relational these experiences are.
Loneliness can also be intensified upon returning to Belgium after visiting home. Sofía recounted:

" The first two times I felt sad, yes, but, no. Like, it makes you sad to leave your family, but then you arrive here, go back to the routine and that's it… But the last time when I came back, I don't know why, but it hit me very hard. Very, very hard. I felt a lot of sadness for many weeks after returning. Like, I felt so alone. That hadn't happened to me before. Because being there, ehm… the last time I went, which was now in September, I went only to spend time with my parents. On this occasion I only visited a couple of friends and so, but 90% of the time I spent at home with my parents, with my grandmother, because my grandmother is very old, every year she says it's her last year, so I dedicated myself to spending a lot of time with them and I don't know, even though it was only three weeks, in those three weeks I got very used to that company, getting up, having breakfast, my mom would make me breakfast, of course, and we would have

breakfast and then after breakfast we would stay talking until it was already lunchtime, and we would go to lunch, finish lunch and we would go to my grandmother's where we would start doing knitting and the word games, all those things, and this became like a routine already. And coming back here, you get up, no one makes you breakfast, (laugh), you can't really talk to anyone, I live alone, there's none of that company you feel when those people are at home. It was hard."

(Sofía, Ecuador, 03/2025)

This testimony highlights how routines and emotional support act as stabilizing forces and how their absence upon return underscores the relational nature of loneliness. When one sees what has been missed, the emotional impact can be intense, evoking both sadness and fear of loss.

4.4.4 Evolution of Social Network: Friendship and Homing

While family often remains central in migrants' lives, migration can shape relationships. Distance, loneliness, and emotional strain sometimes push people to renegotiate their priorities, or to need new support; with friendships gaining unexpected importance. In this context, guilt interacts with shifting relational dynamics, influencing who one turns to for support and how "home" is redefined. This recalls the idea of "relationship anarchy," first used by Angie Nordgren (2006), which rejects fixed, socially prescribed categories for relationships and encourages defining bonds based on individual needs rather than convention, stating that "love is abundant". Though developed in the context of queer and feminist communities (Weston, 1991), the concept resonates in migration, where physical presence, shared experiences, and trust often matter more than pre-established roles.

Applied here, it shows how migrants often turn to friends when guilt, judgment, or communication barriers make it harder to confide in family. Friendships can offer emotional safety, mutual understanding, and companionship in a way that counters isolation and the Sayad's (1999) "double absence":

"My friends and I, most of the times we get together, especially with my closest group, we talk about the same things: things we miss from home or how each of us lived, and we share. Because after all, even among Latinos there are differences, small ones, but they exist. Even family relationships vary. I think that especially when one feels sad is when they want to share their experiences the most. We've shared many moments like that with the guys, sharing feelings."

(Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

Friendships often carry less emotional pressure than family ties. In family contexts, guilt may be compounded by authority guilt, felt for a guardian and separation guilt, felt when leaving. Among friends, expectations are generally lower and forgiveness comes more easily, making them emotionally safer for some migrants. On top of that there is physical presence, a shared feeling of being incomplete. ‘Sharing feelings with the guys’ also shows a portrayal of what Hage (2004) defines as ‘feminine’ toughness, this challenges gender roles.

Furthermore, when family ties are strained by guilt, friends often step in:

"I kept a lot of things to myself; I never told my mom, dad, or brother what was happening. I didn’t have anyone but my best friend, the only one who listened to me. That’s why it was important, because I couldn’t handle it alone anymore."

(Patricia, Colombia, 05/2025)

Both because of physical presence and being understood when feeling incomplete, groups of friends with similar backgrounds often help. When asked if she now feels like she has friends and is comfortable here, Sofía responds:

"Yes, yes. I’m not very friendly by nature; making friends doesn’t come easily to me. But here, I found a Latino community. I don’t know if it happens to you too, but in Latin America, wherever you find a Latino outside Latin America, they’re your friend immediately laughs. Here we’ve formed a community, small but close. Making friends outside of that is harder for me, first because of the language, and second because I don’t have the drive to go out and do things."

(Sofía, Ecuador, 03/2025)

Similarly Milo and Santiago share:

"Now I feel like I have quite a strong network; like, I know who I have to call if I need money, or if I need support, or if something happened to me. I easily have friends who can help me, but yes, they are all Latinos."

(Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

"It was hard for me and everything. But… when I first came to Liège… I met people… very good people. Then I met many friends. And they have given me a hand a lot. I mean… I would say thank God. It's been hard. But not as much as for other people. I've had that blessing."

(Santiago, El Salvador, 04/2025)

Building these ties is not always easy, this could be due to cultural and language differences. Grace noted:

"At first, it's difficult to find people and receive support. People are kind but very reserved initially; you have to make an effort to receive friendship or professional support. (...) That was a big cultural shock for me because we're people who give a lot of affection, even if you don't know someone. But over time, I feel I've integrated well."

(Grace, Nicaragua, 03/2025)

Milo highlights the legal and social dimension of acceptance:

"There are clear legal boundaries. Socially, it can be pleasant to talk to someone (...) But to feel fully accepted, it's important to have equal legal opportunities."

(Milo, Ecuador, 03/2025)

For some, friends become the new home. As Boccagni (2022) notes, "homing" is a process, not a fixed location, and migration disrupts the notion of home as somewhere one returns to unchanged. For other migrants seeking stability it is a place "to be reached, entered and hopefully inhabited" (Boccagni, 2022, p.598):

Some link home to stability:

"I think mainly it's about having a roof over your head. Uh… a stable place you can maintain. I mean, a job. And… well… that's mostly it. Some people also think of it in terms of family, right? But I'm on my own. And for me… my house is my home."

(Santiago, El Salvador, 04/2025)

“It depends. Alone or with company. If it’s alone, then I’m at home, at ease. If it’s with my family, then economic stability and no problems."

(Jesús, Venezuela, 03/2025)

Others to belonging:

“So, for me, home… For example, I’d say Liège is my new home. Why? Because I feel accepted. I feel… so to speak, like I’m part of this place. And… I found very good friends. So, in the end, it’s people who make places. So, in the end, home, in my view… For example, I could be doing great, have lots of money and everything. But if I didn’t have my friends, it wouldn’t be a home. I wouldn’t feel at home. So, in the end, what makes it… ah, that helps me. In the end, friendship, the relationships with people, are what make you feel like you’re part of a place and make you feel it’s your home. Of course, in the end, it’s the people. I mean, friends."

(Gerardo, Chile, 03/2025)

Grace emphasized empathy, her ties in Belgium helped her to create another home:

"It’s not just about the people, but the relationships you create with them. To create a home, it’s important to be around people you empathize with and feel good with. Nicaragua is my first home, but here I’ve also created a home thanks to my friends and the life I’ve built."

(Grace, Nicaragua, 03/2025)

On the other hand, Sofía concluded:

"I always thought my home was wherever my mom was. When I came for the master’s program, I thought I would stay for two years and then return home. But continuing with the PhD and spending more time here made me realize that home is where you are. Mentally, you construct your home, because you can’t be with all the people you want, so you force yourself to create it. It’s the place where you feel comfortable, at ease, where you can do what you want. At this point, you have to make your own home."

(Sofía, Ecuador, 03/2025)

Showing the difficulty of living far from the place you think you belong the most and creating new ties.

In navigating migration, loneliness, and the “double absence,” friendships can help manage guilt by offering spaces of acceptance, shared experience, and mutual care. They not only cushion the emotional weight of separation but also become active sites where “home” is recreated.

4.5 Conclusion of the Analysis: Main Findings

Being a migrant is an experience saturated with emotions, shaped by transnational ties. Emotions influence decisions before and during migration, in the search for justification, the hope of returning “one day,” or the obligation to call and stay in touch frequently. Social expectations shape how mobility is received, sometimes celebrating it, sometimes questioning it, and often creating additional pressure.

Separation generates separation guilt, making distance heavier and relationships more complex. Not being physically present is a burden shared by both sides, and while phone calls and visits can alleviate this, time zones, work schedules, and life demands often limit these moments. Relationships are constantly renegotiated: before departure, across distance, and in imagined futures. In societies where family is central, the inability to provide care or reciprocity can create a feeling of debt, even when this debt is rooted in love and appreciation rather than obligation.

Guilt acts as a way of making sense of other emotions: fear, anxiety, loneliness, and sadness. Migrants experience these emotions when missing important family events, being unable to act when loved ones suffer, or realizing they no longer fully belong either at home or in the host country. As Patricia reflects, balancing fear and guilt becomes a daily task:

> “Guilt and fear are always present in my daily life. You have to manage them and try not to think too much about them, finding a balance between your past (Colombia) and the present (Belgium).”
>
> (Patricia, Colombia, 05/2025)

Migration forces people to confront emotions, rethink family and social roles, and reshape relational links. In this process, love, care, and friendship become essential sources of support and belonging, even as the pull of transnational ties continues to shape their lives.

5. Conclusion

Relational emotions are a powerful lens for understanding migration. Among them, guilt emerges not only as a central experience for many migrants but also as a framework through which other emotions, such as fear, loneliness, and anxiety, are interpreted and managed. Emotions reveal the deeply human and social nature of migration: they shape decisions, justify choices, influence the frequency and manner of communication, and sustain (or strain) transnational bonds over time.

In the Latin American context, where family plays a central role in everyday life, emotional support, and care, migration often amplifies both the value and the fragility of these ties. While guilt is especially visible in transnational families, it is not unique to them; rather, it reflects dynamics present in many families but made more explicit through physical distance. Communication rarely replaces physical presence, and while regular contact can maintain closeness, it can also deepen guilt or feelings of isolation.

Migration also reshapes notions of belonging and home. Feelings of being “in between” places, the shifting meaning of homing, and the constant negotiation of care responsibilities highlight the complexity of migrants’ emotional worlds. Everyday fears and anxieties, about one’s own future, the well-being of loved ones, or the stability of life abroad, are often intensified by distance and the inability to be physically present. But hopefully new connections, friendship and community can alleviate difficulties.

Ultimately, this research shows how guilt and other relational emotions can illuminate not only the lived realities of migration but also broader questions about social roles, care, and belonging. Migration disrupts socially constructed narratives, prompting migrants to renegotiate them, and by living through these layered emotional landscapes, migrants make visible the central role of emotions in shaping life trajectories.

Limitations and avenues for future research

As guilt is a relational feeling, a clear limitation of this study is that it focuses only on migrants’ perspectives, without including interviews with loved ones who are in the country of origin. Including these voices would likely provide a more nuanced understanding of guilt, communication patterns, and mutual perceptions.

Guilt and other emotions also change over time; following the same participants after six months or a year could reveal how experiences and feelings evolve, whether people grow more certain about their future plans, whether loneliness reemerges, and how community ties hold up over time.

While this study applied an intersectional approach, its focus was primarily on gender and migration status. Future research could expand on this by incorporating, or dedicating specific attention to, race and sexuality, to explore how these aspects of identity intersect with and shape emotional experiences.

Finally, concepts such as homing by Boccagni (2022) could be further developed alongside analyses of emotions and loneliness, to better understand how migrants navigate the challenges of living in a new place. Similarly, further work could explore how migration impacts relationships by balancing pre-existing ties with the creation of new ones.

There remains a broad and rich field of inquiry at the intersection of migration and emotions, one that holds great potential for deepening our understanding of human mobility and more broadly human connection.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Interview Guide (translated in English)

share how you are feeling

Thank you for taking the time to be here. Before starting the interview, I've a couple of technical questions: can I record you? Could you consent about the recording on record. The interview will be anonymised and you can stop the interview at any point and I can delete everything at any point of the interview. For any questions, please feel free to ask.

0) How are you? How do you feel starting this interview?

1) Which is the country you were born in and where you grew up? How much time did you live there?
2) When did you decide to emigrate? (the first you were thinking to emigrate mentally, and then more practically by looking at requirements, applying for jobs etc., looking for places to go)
3) Were you the first person to migrate among your loved ones? (If another person first, did they inspire you?)
4) How would you describe leaving/migrating? How did you feel?
5) How did your loved ones react to your decision to move? What do they think about Belgium?
6) Is this the first country you have moved to? When did you move here?
7) What is the hardest thing about being far from ____?
8) Do you stay in touch with your loved ones? How?
9) Have you gone back to ___ since you've moved? (Yes: how did it go? No: are you thinking of doing it, is it a possibility?)
10) Anyone else from your loved ones decided to move after you?
11) Would you consider living in ____ again?
12) Which is your definition of home (hogar)? (maybe people, places…)
13) Where do you see yourself in the future?
14) Is there something in the city that reminds you of ____ ?
15) Which were the most challenging moments of your migrant experience?
16) Which advice would you give to someone from ___ that is thinking of migrating?

17) Is there something you would like to add, something that you think could be useful or something that you think is important to share?
18) How do you feel now?
19) I don't have any more questions, if you have suggestions I'm open to hear them, I want my thesis to be a collaboration.

if needed ask if they know more people for the interview, ask if they have question for you
In the blank space goes the country of origin of the person interviewed.

Interview Guide (Spanish version)

comparte como tu te sientes
Gracias por tomarte el tiempo de estar aquí. Antes de iniciar tengo una pregunta más técnica, ¿te puedo grabar? Podrías consentir a la grabación mientras te estoy grabando. La entrevista va a estar anonimizada y puedes parar la entrevista cuando quieras y yo puedo borrar todo. Y cualquier pregunta pide.

0) ¿Cómo estás? ¿Cómo te sientes al iniciar esta entrevista?
1) ¿Cual es el país donde naciste y creciste y cuanto tiempo viviste allí?
2) ¿Cuándo decidiste emigrar? (la primera vez en que pensaste en emigrar mentalmente, y luego de manera más práctica, buscando lugares etc.)
3) ¿Fuiste el primero/la primera entre tus seres queridos en emigrar? (Si otra persona: esa persona te inspiró?)
4) ¿Cómo describirías irte/emigrar? ¿Cómo te sentiste?
5) ¿Cómo reaccionaron tus seres queridos a tu decisión de emigrar? ¿Qué opinan de Bélgica?
6) ¿Este es el primer país a donde te mudaste? ¿Cuánto tiempo llevas aquí?
7) ¿Qué es lo más difícil de estar lejos de _____ ?
8) ¿Mantienes contacto con tus seres queridos? Como?
9) ¿Has vuelto en _____ desde que te mudaste? (SI: ¿cómo fue? NO: lo estás pensando? Lo puedes hacer?)
10) Alguien más entre tus seres queridos o conocidos eligió mudarse después de ti?
11) ¿Consideras vivir de vuelta en ____ ?
12) Cual es tu definición de hogar? (puede ser personas, lugares etc.)
13) ¿Dónde te ves en el futuro?
14) ¿Hay algo en esta ciudad que te acuerda a ___ ?
15) ¿Cuáles han sido los momentos más desafiantes de tu experiencia migratoria?

16) ¿Qué consejos le darías a alguien de _____ que está pensando en emigrar?
17) ¿Hay algo que te gustaría añadir, algo que piensas que pueda ser útil o algo que piensas que sea importante compartir?
18) ¿Cómo te sientes ahora?
19) Yo ya no tengo preguntas, si tienes sugerencias estoy abierta a escucharlas, quiero que mi tesis sea una colaboración.

pregunta por contacto de otras personas interesadas, si necesario, pregunta tienen preguntas

In the blank space goes the country of origin of the person interviewed.

Appendix 2: Participants Table

Name (pseudonym)	Age (at the time of the interview)	Country of Origin	Mobility	Employment (at the time of the interview)	Interview Date	Gender
Grace	27	Nicaragua	6 years in Belgium (Tongeren, Hasselt; moved with her boyfriend)	Working in a leadership position	03/03/2025	F
Andrea	33	Chile	2 years in Belgium, Liège (previous mobility in 2019 for an internship for 6 months in Belgium)	Working in research (doing a Postdoc)	14/03/2025	F
Sofía	34	Ecuador	5 years in Europe (Started with a Double Master: 1 year in Liège, Belgium; 6 months in Madrid, Spain; 6 months in Nantes, France. Then moved back to Liège)	Working in research (PhD student)	15/03/2025	F
Milo	32	Ecuador	5 years in Europe (Started with a Double Master, now in Liège)	Working in research (PhD student)	17/03/2025	M

Rafael	20	El Salvador	5 years in Belgium (moved to Belgium when he was nearly 16, with his mom, stepdad and sister to a reception centre, now Liège)	Working in a bar	18/03/2025	M
Jesús	22	Venezuela	4 years in Belgium (lived in a reception centre in for 9 months and then asked to be moved closer to Liège)	Working in a clinic	22/03/2025	M
Gerardo	28	Chile	3 years in Belgium, Liège (moved for a 7 months internship and then prolonged)	Working in research (PhD student)	23/03/2025	M
Alejandra	26	Colombia	3 years in Europe (moved for an Erasmus Master, lived 1 year in France, 6 months in England and 6 in Spain and 1 year in Belgium, now in Liège)	Working in research (PhD student)	26/03/2025	F
Santiago	24	El Salvador	1 year in Belgium (moved with two cousins, 2 months and a half in Spain, lived in two reception centres in Belgium, now in Liège)	Working in a restaurant	14/04/2025	M
Patricia	35	Colombia	5 years in Europe (1 year in France in 2019 for a working holiday, then back to Colombia, then Belgium, Liège for nearly 4 years)	Working in export	09/05/2025	F