

**NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY AND MOTHERHOOD AMONG LATIN AMERICAN  
MIGRANT WOMEN**

by

**Yolanda Hernández-Albújar**

BA Education, University of Barcelona, 1998

MA Latin American Studies, University of Florida, 2004

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This dissertation was presented

by

Yolanda Hernández-Albújar

It was defended on

April, 2012

and approved by

John Markoff, Distinguished Professor, Sociology

Lisa Brush, Associate Professor, Sociology

Douglas Harper, Professor, Sociology

Dissertation Advisor: Mohammed Bamyeh, Professor, Sociology

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# **NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY AND MOTHERHOOD AMONG LATIN AMERICAN MIGRANT WOMEN**

Yolanda Hernández-Albújar, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2012

This study analyses the experiences of 12 Latin American migrant mothers in Pittsburgh, PA. I explore the content and style of migrant women's narratives about their motherhood roles from a phenomenological perspective. In particular, I explore the ways in which participants incorporate their motherhood experiences into accounts about themselves. I first analyze constructions of personal identity in the context of migration. Second, I explore the influences of motherhood and mothering on shaping personal self-perceptions. I conducted two interviews with each participant. The first interview aimed to explore the ways in which participants articulated their sense of identity in general, and the ways in which they positioned their roles as mothers within that broad narrative. That interview was videotaped and based upon a single open question: "*Who are you?*" The participant was left alone to respond in order to limit biases linked to social desirability and research expectations. The second interview was a follow-up with open-ended questions. I used narrative analysis to explore and interpret the data. Since mothers are made, not born, I learned that as women regulate their behaviors and presentation of themselves into such dominant discourses, their identities also transform. For migrant mothers, this topic is a source of strong emotional and compassionate feelings due to the existing social demands to perform motherhood within dominant discourses on "good motherhood." Remarkably, the mothers in this research perceived such demands coming from two different sources, namely the receiving society and their own home countries. Mothering in the context of migration appears not only as a political and cultural practice, but also as a conceptual element to negotiate adjustment and

change. This document develops as a reflexion on the practices of identity and the ways in which migrant women use their roles of mothers to reposition themselves in time and space, and reconstruct a new sense of self.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>XI</b>
<b>1.0 WOMEN WHO MOTHER IN A DIFFERENT LAND: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 MIGRATION, MOTHERHOOD, AND “MESTIZAJE” .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.2 PROBLEMATIZING MOTHERHOOD .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.3 DE-CENTERING MOTHERHOOD.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>1.4 NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY: BETWEEN THE SOCIAL AND THE PERSONAL .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>1.5 THE VIDEO-GRAPHIC EYE .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>1.6 PITTSBURGH IN CONTEXT.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>1.7 CONCLUSIONS: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>2.0 METHODS .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>2.1 INTRODUCTION: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>2.2 THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>2.2.1 <i>De-Centering</i> Motherhood and the Positive Sides of Peripheral Analysis</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>2.2.2 The Video Device and the Self.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>2.2.3 The Experiment .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>2.2.4 Narrative Maps: Personal Cartographies of Form and Content.....</b>	<b>50</b>

2.2.5	Narrating the Self .....	51
2.2.6	Narrative Maps, a Visual Tool for Understanding Identity .....	54
2.3	<b>PRACTICAL ANALYSIS: DESCRIBING THE INTERVIEWS</b> .....	<b>59</b>
2.3.1	Participants' Recruitment .....	59
2.3.2	First Interview.....	62
2.3.3	Second Interview .....	63
2.4	<b>CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	<b>64</b>
3.0	<b>NARRATING IDENTITY: STRUCTURE, COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES</b> .....	<b>66</b>
3.1	<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>66</b>
3.2	<b>WHEN AND HOW DO WOMEN TALK ABOUT MOTHERHOOD?</b> .....	<b>69</b>
3.2.1	Disclosing Motherhood from a Situational Standpoint .....	69
3.2.2	Motherhood as a Way to Explain Relationships .....	73
3.3	<b>STRUCTURING THE TALE: LINEARITY VERSUS CIRCULARITY</b> .....	<b>80</b>
3.3.1	The Opening.....	80
3.3.2	Linearity versus Circularity .....	87
3.4	<b>FINAL REFLECTIONS ON NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY</b> .....	<b>99</b>
3.4.1	Unsolved Dilemmas .....	100
4.0	<b>FINDINGS</b> .....	<b>104</b>
4.1	<b>THE TRANSNATIONAL SELF: STRATEGIES OF CONTINUITY</b> .....	<b>104</b>
4.2	<b>MOTHERHOOD, IDENTITY AND SOCIETY</b> .....	<b>106</b>
4.2.1	Fitting In, Fitting Out.....	106
4.2.2	The Receiving Society: Perceptions of Otherness.....	109

4.2.3	The Sending Society: Becoming the Other at Home .....	118
4.3	HOME AND NARRATIVES IN TRANSITION.....	124
4.3.1	Between "Home" and "Feeling at Home" .....	127
4.3.2	Habitus, Identity and Home .....	131
4.3.3	Memory and the Construction of Home.....	133
4.4	CONCLUSIONS.....	139
5.0	CONCLUSIONS .....	142
5.1	TRANSNATIONAL MOTHERING AND PERSONAL IDENTITIES .....	144
5.1.1	Thematic Narrative .....	145
5.1.2	Narrative Analysis of Form .....	150
5.2	POSITIONING THE RESEARCH: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS.....	154
5.3	PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS .....	160
5.4	FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	163
APPENDIX A.....		165
APPENDIX B .....		167
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....		180





## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A person's identity as the center of inquiry .....	42
Figure 2: Motherhood as the center of inquiry .....	42
Figure 3. Ana .....	168
Figure 4. Angi .....	169
Figure 5. Benjamina.....	170
Figure 6. Carmen .....	171
Figure 7. Clara .....	172
Figure 8. Elisenda .....	173
Figure 9. Flor .....	174
Figure 10. Isabella.....	175
Figure 11. Marisol.....	176
Figure 12. Natasha .....	177
Figure 13. Serena .....	178
Figure 14. Simona.....	179

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## 1.0 WOMEN WHO MOTHER IN A DIFFERENT LAND: INTRODUCTION

This qualitative dissertation studies the experiences of 12 Latin American migrant mothers in Pittsburgh, PA. I explore the content and style of migrant women's narratives about their motherhood roles from a phenomenological perspective. In particular, I analyze how participants incorporate their motherhood experiences into accounts about themselves. I first study constructions of personal identity in the context of migration. Second, I analyze the influences of motherhood and mothering<sup>1</sup> on shaping personal self-perceptions.

From my previous experiences interviewing mothers, I realized this topic could be a source of strong feelings, especially in light of the significant social pressures stemming from prevalent discourses on "good motherhood." Since mothers are made, not born, I learned that as women regulate their behaviors and presentation of themselves into such dominant discourses, their identities also transform. In my opinion there is no such thing as a mother's identity; however, it is undeniable that all of the women who experience motherhood in its various

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<sup>1</sup> For stylistic reasons, I interchangeably use *motherhood* and *mothering*. In this document I refer to both as the practice of caring and nurturing for a child or children, following scholars like Glenn (1994), and Hochschild (2003). According to them, such relationship not only involves physical care, but also deep emotional connections.

formats face a series of personal and social challenges that will most likely reflect on the sense of themselves.

This work is divided into five main chapters. In this current introductory chapter I include the main literature relevant to the topic of motherhood and migrant women. I have also set up the significant characteristics of the site in which research and collecting data occurred (i.e., the Pittsburgh area). Although, in Chapter 1 I present a brief historical review of visual methodologies in social research, the theoretical background supporting the use of video, and the rationale behind narrative maps, will be more comprehensively elaborated in Chapter 2. In Chapter 2 I also pay special attention to the distinction of form and content in the analysis of the interviews and I give a detailed account of how the video interviews were conducted. In Chapter 3, I elaborate a narrative analysis of the form in which the mothers in this study present their stories, finding structural similarities and differences among them. Chapter 4 examines the content of the interviews and centers on two main findings: the social pressure upon immigrant women to perform as good mothers, and the tensions created between the sending and the receiving societies around what it means to be a good mother. The second part of Chapter 4 deals with the concept of home and its parallels with mothers' understandings of themselves and their relationships. Finally, in Chapter 5, I present my conclusions on the topic of transnational mothering and the ways how it shapes personal identities. I also explore the implications of transnational mothering for the receiving society, the structure of the family, and the relations in which motherhood is implicated. The chapter closes with a reflection on the main theoretical and methodological contributions of this research and its practical implications for future studies.

This research adopted a qualitative methodology. I conducted two interviews with each participant. The first interview aimed to explore the ways in which participants articulated their

sense of identity in general, and how they positioned their roles as mothers within that broad narrative. That interview was videotaped and based upon a single open question: “*Who are you?*” The participant was left alone to respond in order to limit biases linked to social desirability and research expectations. The second interview was a follow-up with open-ended questions. I used narrative analysis to explore and interpret the data collected.

The participants were Latin American migrants. Four main reasons guided the choice of this specific group. First, Latin Americans are the most numerous immigrant group in the United States, and most political and social controversies on migration focus on this population. The study of this particular group of migrants is more likely to generate a higher impact in the migration field. Second, in spite of the multiple cultural and linguistic differences existing in the Latin American region, there is also a sense of “Latinidad” as opposed to “Los Americanos” (Americans). Before moving to the United States, many Latin American migrants share such contrast, which tends to intensify after crossing the border. This Latino construction highlights the commonalities rather than the differences among people, with the result of facilitating their grouping under a single nomenclature. The third reason involved the fact that I share a common language with the participants, which was a practical and convenient aspect. Like me, most Hispanic Latin American migrants are fluent in Spanish, even if this does not mean that Spanish is our first and only language. Last, but not least, assumptions concerning shared common cultural values among participants and the participants and me (the researcher) are an important research dimension likely to facilitate the understanding and interpretation of the data. In spite of the numerous cultural differences between Spain and the Latin American region, there are also many similarities in the practices and values of motherhood. My research certainly benefits from

such parallels, since they help elaborate a phenomenological understanding of the role that motherhood plays on identity construction.

## **1.1 MIGRATION, MOTHERHOOD, AND “MESTIZAJE”**

My parents moved from a small village in southern Spain to Barcelona when they were very young. They were looking for jobs and new opportunities in life during a time of economic crisis and political repression. In Barcelona, with no family support and little money, they to worked very hard to be able to start a family on their own. While my father worked in a car factory, my mother took care of my four siblings and me. When money was short, she managed to combine her household chores with occasional low-paid jobs that helped ends meet. Still, my mother’s struggles were hardly recognized by anyone in the family. I never heard my mother complaining, except for the times when she wished she had her own mother with her to keep her company, and help with the house and children. Although my parents moved within the same country, in the 1960s traveling was expensive and arduous, and keeping contact with those left behind was more difficult than today. Perhaps because of the deep cultural differences between Catalonia and Extremadura, my parents always described themselves primarily as immigrants, and still see themselves as such today. While growing up, I was very aware of the impact that migration had on my mother’s way of relating to her children, and how it shaped her personal identity. Although my mother understands the Catalan language and has always supported her children’s full immersion into the Catalan culture, she had conflicting emotions regarding her cultural loyalty and sense of belonging. My mother always felt out of place. Today, I also find myself



developing my own “migrant identity,” and as a mother living in a different country, I also wish my own mother were here with me.

Due to my personal experience with family migration, I knew from the beginning that gender and migration were going to be my fields of study in graduate school. Those first years of incessant reading and tireless search developed into the realization that in the migrant mothers’ literature little was said about migrant mothers outside of their roles as mothers. For me, this is a clear sign of how women have been cataloged into particular social discourses in which gendered justifications of social differences (such as motherhood) become dominant structures that shape ideas and social constructions of womanhood. Besides the largely discussed romanticized discourse of mothers as the natural guardians of society –as procreators and as cultural carriers—mothers’ roles are, in most cases, taken for granted rather than deconstructed and analyzed. In other words, any study examining women only from the "mother" perspective cannot illustrate the complexities involved in the act of mothering. From this perspective, then, it is inaccurate to believe that research that investigate and address mothers’ needs and concerns can actually reach their goals, since an array of personal and social elements affecting these women are neglected or regarded as secondary.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her classic book, *The Second Sex*, says that “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one.” (1973: 301). Such “becoming” puzzles and inspires me to ask questions about the role that motherhood may play to help “becoming” a woman. Since we live in a gendered society in which norms, rules, and laws are made based upon supposedly clear conceptions of what it is to be a woman, and what it is to be a man<sup>2</sup> it is correct to assume that

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<sup>2</sup> Probably the clearest example of how gender becomes the main constitutive referential aspect for legal rights is the case of same-sex marriages. The center of the storm, in fact, is not whether or not two people of the

the idea of citizen is also gendered (Brush 2003, Inderpal 1996). Accordingly, women, whose main social recognition has been based for centuries upon their reproductive capacity, are immersed in hierarchical categories of dominance and subordination. Mothers --real, imagined, eager to be, and/or reluctant— find themselves tangled into webs of political power and structural inequality. With that in mind, there is a logical conclusion to consider, namely that migrant mothers have a double discursive adaptation to make: they have to adjust into a culture as migrants, and as mothers. Or -adapting Gramsci's narrative on hegemonic power - the ideal citizen entails the ideal mother within normative dominant discourses.

“Normalized” motherhood, or what Shari Thurer (1994) calls “the Good Mother,” participates in discourses of inclusion, while “other” motherhoods reveal discourses that promote social exclusion. Nonetheless, as Sara Ruddick (1989) points out, definitions of "the Good Mother" inherently feed the idea of bad motherhood as the necessary, yet banned counterpart. Thus, mothering practices that deviate from the hegemonic norm are considered bad, and many migrant mothers are, until proving the contrary, under suspicion. For some migrant women proving they are good mothers will become, then, a key aspect of their integration. However, different to what Simone de Beauvoir says on women's capacity to oppose otherness by becoming sexually, intellectually, and economically independent from men (1973), for the

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same sex have the right to engage on sexual intercourse, since this is not prosecuted under American laws, and although not willingly accepted by everybody, it is at least acknowledged by the general population. The real issue is whether or not two people of the same sex have the right to be legally married and enjoy the same legal rights and responsibilities given to heterosexual couples. In order to establish a clear-cut difference between heterosexual couples and same-sex couples, law must be able to define, identify, and recognized women from men.

general population, migrant mothers will never lose their status as migrant. Even the most imperceptible accent, or the vague mention of a different home country, will keep placing them in the outsider's category over and over.

Accordingly, we can affirm that migrant mothers embody the symbolic spaces between societies. It is because of this continuum of marginality from diverse cultures while still being irremediably connected to both of them that I include migrant mothers as part of what Gloria Anzaldúa calls the “new *mestiza*” (1987). Mothers constitute, independent from their race, the cultural/social/political strategic *mestizaje* forced to save the splits between past and present, tradition and new practices, “in a constant state of transition” (Anzaldúa 1987:24). By serving as emotional and cultural bridges between their children and their family, and their children and the new culture, migrant mothers give us an account of the world in interaction. Moreover, and borrowing again from Anzaldúa, mothers are agents who, functioning from the “borderlands,” have the potential to transform their personal experiences into legitimate knowledge. This knowledge produced at the margins gives us a better understanding of the complexities involved in the so-called global societies.

## **1.2 PROBLEMATIZING MOTHERHOOD**

The study of the experiences of migrant women from their own perspectives as mothers, and the broader structural analysis of these perspectives are relevant at many levels. To name a few examples: under the paradigms of inequality and poverty, there is no doubt that this sector of the population experiences a higher risk. To study them could provide relevant information on how

structural mechanisms perpetuate perceived gender discrimination, and the role that motherhood plays on it.

Under cultural paradigms, changes in mothers' self-perceptions before and after migration can be understood as linked to symbolic representations of womanhood and otherness that are reminiscent of imperial dominions. At the same time, these changes can also be linked to misleading conceptions of exoticism, folklore, and authenticity. Close to the cultural paradigm, for the global citizen perspective, migrant mothers represent a stimulating example of the ideological and concrete difficulties and contradictions of becoming a global citizen. The global citizen viewpoint also provides the basis for a two-sided reading of the ties between gender and development. While globalization has a particularly negative effect on women from developing countries which enter the international labor force as expendable and cheap working group, these women, many of them mothers, still represent the only source of survival for their families, as well as being a means of development. This is true since women's remittances ensure a better future to their children (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Cranford 1999, Shiva 2002, Toro-Morn 2008).

Finally, from an "identities" perspective, the one used in this dissertation, migrant mothers embody all the tensions and contradictions mentioned above. The understanding of the ways in which migrant women incorporate their roles as mothers into personal interpretations of identity, helps us understand that, in fact, motherhood is not just a role developed under certain circumstances, but on the contrary, is, as Butler says in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), another performative experience of gender. Us such, it evolves during a life course, and sees dominants discourses of motherhood as the main protagonist, and not the real act of mothering per se.

Mothering is a social enactment based on cultural views of gender that influence women's behaviors and self-perceptions. Although motherhood/mothering is one of the acts by

which society defines womanhood, through this research I argue that for many mothers the main descriptor of their identity is not the intimate relationship between mother and children. Rather, the terms and conditions through which motherhood emerges in the participants' narratives are related to external agents of social arbitration. In other words, in spite of the fact that for many women, including myself, there is no doubt that their children are an extremely important part of their lives, when it comes to self-definitions, motherhood appears as a vehicle for negotiating identities that come from the outside.

The identity of or as mother emerges as an intricate web of social constructions that are both placed on the women and internalized by them through their performance of motherhood. Identity is a label (mother), an act (to mother), and a performance for different, yet specific audiences of a woman's life: the woman herself (who internalizes, observes, and contemplates this identity), her children, parents, partner, friends, relatives, reputation, etc. Recursively, all of these meanings, sides, and practices feed each other to create “the mother identity” as a constant flux of constructions and dynamics.

My last statement may seem odd; in fact, it appears only logical that in order to study mothers we have to precisely explore the role of women as mothers and their relationships with their children. But this standpoint is based in three problematic suppositions:

First, in Western societies we are used to a convenient, separation between public and private life. The division between these two realms can be understood as a gendered one. Public life has been historically considered “masculine” (e.g., men decide over politics, economics, and legal issues), while family life has become a part of the private sphere. In the household context, power has been in the hands of men, but women have had the main responsibility for child education, household chores, and so on. Rousseau, along with other figures from the

Enlightenment, established the idea of women's "natural" functions upon which modern societies were based. The utopian gender-complementarity Rousseau advocated for between reason and feelings deepened the romantic notion of women as subjects in need of protection from worldly, everyday concerns (Lange 2002). Some scholars have referred to "women in the home" as the moral essence of family, and have consequently argued that private and public lives have marked a clear separation of spaces, and parallel social responsibilities for both sexes (Gómez-Ferrer 2002). Rousseau supported gendered social dichotomies (e.g., reason/nature, public/private) entailing the implicit message of viewing men as active social actors and women as passive recipients. The transformation of women from subjects to objects had important consequences on the social understanding of women as being mainly family nurturers. On the other hand, public discourses and regulations concerning, for instance, family laws, public policies, national/local economies, health regulations and war, have had a direct impact on women's lives and their family relations. This interplay of private and public domains has to be considered to study motherhood. In other words, to study mothers just in the family context, or in the relational context within the family, does not account for mothers as subjects in its own complexity.

Second, the public/private division existing in Western countries cannot be literally translated into other cultures. Traditional Latin American values and practices underscore the importance of the public dimension of motherhood. Although Latin American society has undergone numerous changes, the communal tradition of Latin America indigenous people has been translated into the family/social organization (Arriaga 2007, Molyneux 2000). For many indigenous and mixed women their identities as citizens cannot be separated from their identities as mothers. Therefore, when they claim gender rights, as is the case of Mapuche women in Chile,

they do so on behalf of their children and in the name of their own “pueblo” or people, which implies discourses of ethnic identity as well (Richards 2003). Similarly, most Latin American women’s movements opposing repressive governments during the 1970s and 1980s claimed the legitimacy of their requests through discourses on motherhood, such as the *CoMadres* in El Salvador, *Asociación de las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* [The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo] in Argentina, *El Comité Independiente de Chihuahua Pro Defensa de Derechos Humanos - CICH* [The Chihuahuan Independent Committee for the Defense for Human Rights] in Mexico, or the most recent case of the *Damas de Blanco* [Ladies in White] in Cuba. Moreover, although most Latin American women’s active participation in politics has been based on defending their families on one aspect or another, they have strategically adopted the human rights agenda to obtain more public visibility and international support (Stephen 2001, Yudice 1991) as in the case of Rigoberta Menchú. Therefore, the separation between public and private becomes even more problematic in the Latin American case, where any formulation of women’s roles within the family overlaps with ethnic and national identities, political resistance, unequal class structure, and social justice. Finally, although “woman” and “mother” are conceptually distinct categories, most young girls are still socialized to take into consideration this endeavor as a future, likely, and somewhat desirable, possibility (Cviková 2003). The ways in which such socialization occurs in Latin America is often not the same as in the United States. Motherhood, as well as womanhood, does not have a unique model, but rather multiple cultural and social practices that vary in time and space. Migrant mothers are exposed to different ideals of “good motherhood” that they perceive outside of their homes through their interactions with American society. The diet is different, pediatricians have different procedures, and school system demands more from parents. The social networking of aunts, sisters, and grandmothers disappears for

most migrants, and the daycare system is extremely expensive. In other words, it is not always possible to directly translate women's knowledge about motherhood into the new culture because social practices tend to differ.

### **1.3 DE-CENTERING MOTHERHOOD**

This research starts with the premise that mothering in a foreign land has an impact on mothers' identities. Being a mother in a foreign land has a simultaneous impact on various levels of the person's social and cultural incorporation into the new society. First, for most migrant mothers, their children are both source of stress and support. Women who take care of their children while also learning to navigate unfamiliar milieus encounter additional challenges due to the moral and physical responsibilities over their offspring's wellbeing. Simultaneously, mothers' duties toward their children might also act as a drive to overcome depression and isolation (Hernández-Albújar 2004). Second, the spaces in which mothers interact with the new culture expand significantly, exposing them to situations that call for specific survival strategies. For instance, a mother interacting with her children's teacher, doctor, or friend is pushed to learn new vocabulary, social codes, values, and behaviors that she would otherwise be less likely to learn. The third dimension I want to address is identity. While most studies on migrant mothers explore the first two "benefits" of acculturation mentioned above, much less research focuses on how these new resources and challenges shape the sphere of personal identity. To study mothers' identity without considering social roles or positions, however, would be reductionist, since a person does not develop in isolation from their relational environment. In other words, we cannot study mothers without studying the woman, or subject. I develop therefore a model of data



gathering and analysis model that takes a step away from common research. In this model, which I call “De-Centering Motherhood,” the understanding of women who mother is linked to recognizing the subject who undertakes the function of mother just as one of many other functions, and who exists beyond this role. This position informs most of the research decisions that I took during this project, and is presented in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

The *de-centering* framework becomes even more crucial when considering the specific life contexts of migrant mothers. Processes involving migration and displacement deeply intersect with those of motherhood and identity formation. To mother in a different land within a different language and culture emerges as a distinctive field of experience. In order to analyze motherhood, we have to relate to their experiences as immigrants and how migration has shaped their social and family structure, and their self-representations. At the same time, women’s experiences as migrants are highly related to their status of mothers. For instance, the time they have to attend language courses, or to socialize in the new settings, is proportional to the time they can spend outside home. The expenses they have also relate to the number of children. The psychological and emotional pressure to provide livelihoods for themselves, as well as for their family, adds to the already demanding cultural adjustment. In other words, the experience of these women does not just interplay with motherhood and migration, but also with the intersection of these two processes at different intensities and times. For this reason, ranking or separating them would be artificial.

While substantial sociological research has emerged in the field of gender and migration, studies that concentrate on the specifics of motherhood are still scarce. Furthermore, those that focus on motherhood tend to center on the mothers’ mental health (Brown and Small 1997), reproductive roles (Liamputtong Rice 1997, 1999), child caretaking (Buijs 1993, Castañeda

1998, Días 1989), parenting interventions (Zayas, Borrego, and Domenech Rodríguez 2009), and facilitation of their children's cultural assimilation/adaptation (Dion 2001, Menjivar 2002). A common aspect across these studies is that mothers are considered important, but intermediary actors, of a major goal: their children's wellbeing. Consequently, the representation of the lives of immigrant women who have children is reduced to their roles as mothers, therefore neglecting other external factors such as their professional life, socio-economic status, or their access to social services, health care, and education. These aspects affect how women perceive themselves. They also have an indirect effect on the ways women develop their roles as mothers in the new setting.

In her book, *Immigrant Mothers: Narratives of Race and Maternity, 1890-1925*, Katrina Irving takes a political stance on the subject of immigrant mothers and their role in "framing the immigration issue" (Irving 2000:109). Irving's cultural/historical analysis of the depictions of the maternal representations of immigrant women links fiction literature and photography with the dominant political discourse of immigration control of that period. Irving proposes that the idea of motherhood is scrutinized and constructed in the public arena depending on political views about immigration. Irving aptly captures the complexities of the condition of being a migrant mother, but her representation is limited to the symbols and cultural representations of the host society.

Although the studies mentioned above are of great value to understand the most basic issues that migrant mothers face, they fail to bring migrant mothers as women, with interests and needs that develop aside from their roles as child caretakers, into the picture. Most importantly, they fail to connect those external elements with women's self-perception as mothers, and the influence of such images on their daily practices of mothering. Along this line, research on

transnational Latino families examines the emotional cost that migration and separation have on mothers, and how such separation influences their adaptation into the new society (Constable 1999, Dreby 2010, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, Salazar-Parreñas 2001, Schamalzbauer 2004). In addition, recent studies in transnational families pay closer attention to the father figure, and compare male family roles to those of their female counterparts (Ávila 2008, Dreby 2006), arriving to the conclusion that parenting from afar does not change traditional gender roles within the family. Thus, even if working overseas, mothers are still expected to be nurturers and financial providers for their families. However, the belief that situates the “good mother” at home contrasts with the situation of most transnational migrant women. Frequently, such a contrast is source of emotional distress and guilty feelings in migrant mothers (Ávila 2008, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ávila 1997).

In general, it can be said that migrant women who travel with their children meet numerous obstacles related to the social constructions of their roles as cultural facilitators, while still being the main nurturers, and often providers, for their families. The presence of their children frequently persuades mothers to change their own views about mothering, precisely because the cultural adjustment is not just about cultural and gendered practices, but also about children’s education and adaptation. More specifically, for many Latino mothers, to be the main, and often the only, family provider is a major cultural change. Mothering as a migrant is not the same as being a mother in one’s home country and culture. Being forced to adapt to new gender, family, and education styles adds an extra burden on the wellbeing of these mothers. Whereas family separation represents an additional obstacle to the migrants’ successful integration into the new society, women who travel with their children also encounter social, cultural, and economic challenges. Those migrant mothers who manage to bring their children still experience

guilt and stigmatization in relation to being judged according to their children's success in the host society. Liamputtong Rice (2006) followed up on the adjustments of Asian immigrant women in Australia after becoming mothers, and on their representations of the "good mother" in the context of migration. The women in this study experienced a transformation of self through the process of becoming mothers. Because they considered taking care of their children as an ethical obligation, they performed motherhood as a moral career. According to Rice, language and economic barriers hinder the aspirations of migrant women to be good mothers as they understand it. Rice brings awareness to the cultural and social factors that affect both the idea and performance of motherhood.

Lesser attention is paid in the literature to the ways in which the experience of motherhood changes the experience of migration. On her study of migrant women, Aranda says that because "gender mediates the process of migration" (Aranda 2003: 617) men and women's experiences are quite different. Building on Aranda's statement, I argue that within the gender dynamics in the migration process, motherhood acts as a specific mediator that negotiates the meanings of gender in the context of migration, as well as in the meanings of migration itself. In fact, in previous studies I have conducted on migrant mothers in Italy and in Pittsburgh, some interviewees declared that their roles as mothers had great influence on their experience as migrants. All the participants affirmed that, compared to other migrants, their experiences were different because of their condition as mothers. Nonetheless, in their opinion, although motherhood was an added source of stress to their already complicated situation, it also represented an emotional defense against homesickness and depression (Hernández-Albújar 2004).

This brief literature review suggests that motherhood and migration studies need to consider the social, cultural, economic, political, and psychological aspects that influence the mothers' wellbeing. Similar to the ways in which motherhood extends beyond the reproductive function of giving birth, the self-perceptions of migrant women includes social functions that are indirectly linked to mothering, such as being active members of society and family. In the case of migrant women, however, their challenge to become proficient readers of unspoken cultural values, ideas, and practices frequently entails questioning their traditional views on mothering.

As mothers experience the cultural gap between interpretations of motherhood in the home and host societies, they tend to become less effective in being cultural facilitators to their children. This task is important for the wellbeing and acculturation of mothers and their families, but in order to successfully adjust to the new society, mothers need to obtain social recognition in the public and private spheres, in order to develop a positive idea of themselves as active and valuable members of their host and home societies, as well as in their family. To de-center the idea of "mother" in order to understand the contextual circumstances surrounding it, becomes an indispensable research strategy that translates into studying motherhood by paying closer attention to other variables, besides that of mother-children interaction, and mothers' roles within the family. My research brings a holistic perspective on motherhood and helps to fill some of the gaps in the literature of gender and migration.

## **1.4 NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY: BETWEEN THE SOCIAL AND THE PERSONAL**

The word “identity” is now part of the popular culture and the common vocabulary of media, politics, academics, and even regular citizenry. Because of this, rather than looking for common ground or a definition of identity, I agree with Stuart Hall’s view of identity as “an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all” (1996:2). More than defining identity, I am interested in exploring those “key questions” that need identity to be understood and answered. It becomes a methodological reflection on the practices of identity, how migrants reposition themselves and are positioned by others within political discourses of exclusion and integration.

As argued before, women engage in a process of identity negotiation to be able to deal with the tensions of mothering in the migration context. In many cases, this dialogue is not immune to conflict. For instance, what a person knows about motherhood before migration becomes irrelevant or inadequate in the new setting. But even in the rare cases in which the new and the original mothering styles adapt well to each other, it will be necessary to add a third element: identity formation and/or reconstruction. Different from the topic of immigrant mothers, identity is a well-established field of research in many disciplines (Bauman 1977). Besides its popularity, whether the focus is on individuals or groups, the concept of “identity” is conflictive and challenging. The term is vague and authors from different academic backgrounds and frameworks adopt it through conceptualizations and methodologies that are neither standard nor uniform. For instance, Giménez and Valenzuela-Arce insist that is impossible to encapsulate the notion of identity in a single definition. As they say, the problem is not the lack of literature but rather the opposite (Giménez 1997, Valenzuela-Arce, 2000), to the point that, for some

scholars, identity has become a term that has lost meaning through its excessive popular and academic consumption. Brubaker and Cooper (2000:1) affirm, it “tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity).” I agree with Brubaker and Cooper’s suspicion about the indispensability of identity. As social researchers, we have to ask whether identity is as relevant for the participants and subjects of studies as it is for those studying them. With that said, I do believe that identity, in spite of being an over-used expression, is still a referential concept that illustrates the complexities involved in society and the perception of others and the self.

Two broad epistemological positions are the most common conceptualizations of identity. A realist approach implies the existence of identity prior to the observer’s, or the scientist’s search for it. From this perspective, identity is at least partially independent from experience. Constructionist epistemologies, instead, emphasize the multiplicity and plasticity of identity, whose existence, awareness, and development, depend on the specific social/cultural contexts and political discourses. Identity refers to one’s concept of the self, as well as the separation from “the other.” Both the individual and “the other” perform in a fundamental process of self and mutual positioning (Hall 1996). The self and the “other” are two interconnected markers that together form a sense of identity. If we assume that contexts are important for identity construction, then specific environments and experiences invite us to reassess and reflect on who we are. This is easy to see in the case of many immigrants, whose transition into a different location, language, and culture requires significant personal adjustments that test personal understandings about the world and the self. There are two main reasons for this: First, migration exposes the person to different cultural and historical experiences and to different ways of being understood and interpreted as a unique individual.

Second, re-defining one's identity in the context of migration is surely a process that calls for the balancing of multiple self-understandings at different times and places. Those aspects might break with the notion of "being" as something static, natural, and intrinsic to the person. In light of this, Gergen understands identity as an ongoing process deeply embedded in one's personal history, as well as in one's relationships (1994). However, identity is not only related to past representations. It is tied to personal and social expectations, and the possibilities of identification are more related to "becoming" than to perceived current realities of "being" (Sarup 1994: 98). Accordingly, we can see how migrants may reconsider their sense of self in different cultural traditions that shake their biographies and initiate processes of social and political recognition, as well as historical understandings of the "Other" that inevitably impact one's own sense of self. From those perspectives, identity depends on multi-leveled surroundings and dynamic horizons that constantly re-define the interaction of the person with the environment. Moreover, and although authors like Giddens, Husserl, Mead, or Schutz believe that continuity and coherence in time and space are a precondition for identity formation, it does not imply that identities are stationary. Rather, identities are relative, and do not exclude changes and re-conceptualizations of the self (Giménez 1997).

Knowledge is mediated by experience that is acquired mainly through interactions. Therefore, we have to take into account the social world in which migrant mothers operate. We position ourselves in the social world in reference to others. Similarly, we position others in relation to where we believe we are. Because of this, any matter regarding identity is also a matter of recognition. Recognition mimics a coin: even if its value is inherently found in each side, in order to be considered a valid unit, it always needs both of them to effectively inform the observer about its value. Therefore I present the social recognition of a subject by external



agents, but also how the subject captures and interprets such social recognition/rejection. Following this idea, José Manuel Valenzuela considers that identities are constructed within social processes that also generate constructs of differentiation. Consequently, identities are the product of identification and recognition practices (Valenzuela 1998). In other words, identity is as much the way how a person defines herself in relation to others, as how others define the person, constructing specific spaces of being. It is in this context of otherness and sameness in which immigrants re-think their position in the world. In their case, sameness is a difficult, if not impossible, status to obtain. Not only are migrants “the other” in the host society, but also, in the long run, they become “the other” in their own home cultures (Akhtar 1999).

Sameness versus otherness is not a motionless dichotomy, but a much more complex psychological process in which the migrant navigates in search of a place. Migrants are more likely to be exposed to these dichotomous feelings than other people, by virtue of inhabiting a space that is simultaneously theirs and non-theirs. As Kristeva points out, otherness has internal and external manifestations, since the presence of an outsider changes the group to some degree. At the same time, the perception of the outsider as different from the rest (or the rest different from him/her) changes the person to an extent: “the foreigner challenges both the identity of the group and its own” (Kristeva 1991:42). In this context, we have to elaborate new interpretations of otherness able to capture the fluctuation that is definitional of the self. Rather than focusing the discussion on whether identities are static and solid, or dynamic and constructed, I find it is more interesting to explore the social processes that participate in the creation of immigrants’ identity. To the two levels of recognition explained here, personal and social, I would like to add a third dimension which helps to recognize the mother and her agency as manifested in her ability to describe or explain herself: *testimonio* [testimony]. The validity of ones’ *testimonio*,

even in cases where it appears irrational or contradictory, becomes another category of recognition that researchers grant to their participants.

“*Who are you?*” however, is a difficult question to answer. In terms of validity, my approach does not require elements of certitude about who the participant is. Rather, just asking this question invites the subjects to be flexible and explorative about their self-constructions and, therefore, to be open to change and surprise in their narratives. For instance, in his book, *Out of Place: A Memoir*, the cultural critic Edward Said (2000) maintains that the self is never completely settled or logic. From his point of view, the self does not necessarily entails rationality or self-knowledge beyond doubt, as understood on Cartesian terms. Rather, from the phenomenological position I adopt, the person, on trying to gain consciousness of herself, needs to have the “possibility of eventual doubt whether the world is actual and the possibility of its non-being” (Husserl 1977: 17). Under this premise, the self is susceptible to contradictions and conflicts, which could also be regarded as tools of its adjustment to new conditions. This is also the main position of critical thinkers like Kristeva and Derrida, who proposed new understandings of identities that transcend narratives of the absolute. As Judith Butler’s states on her book, *Giving an Account of Oneself*:

As we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally or definitively, who he or she is, it will be important not to accept an answer that will ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. If letting the other live is part of any ethical definition of recognition, then this version of recognition will be based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of epistemic limits. (Butler 2005: 42-43)

In line with Butler's postmodern position on the self as de-centered and diversified, Gubrium and Holstein (2000), borrowing from Rosenau (1992), identify the two main positions that postmodern theorists take on the self. The first is affirmative and concerns the possibility of

a multiple self. The second is skeptical or radical, and views reality as indeterminate: hence, the impossibility of a self. Gubrium and Holstein explore an alternative to these two possible interpretations. Drawing on Foucault's genealogy method and subjectivity, Holstein and Gubrium (1995) interpret the self in its discursive formation, that is, as a discourse of subjectivities that vary across time and space, but that nonetheless inform the subject on its own being. Here then, the existence or multiplicity of the self turns out to be irrelevant, since the importance relies on how we enact the subject through discourses. The analysis and object of study becomes the discourse within its particular political, historical, and cultural context.

In addition to these dense and intriguing theoretical arguments present in the literature, the study of identities presents specific, practical challenges. For instance, it is not easy to decide how to explore identities, and with what population, especially when working with under-represented populations. In these cases, the scholar's disposition and reflexive judgment become the main drive. Keeping in mind that discourses of the self are susceptible to interpretation, the participant, the audience and the researcher become part of such an interpretive process. From the researcher perspective, I pay careful attention to Spivak's distinction between the two ways in which traditional studies represent the subordinate: *vertreten* and *darstellen* (1988), or represent and portray, respectively. As a researcher, it is not my intention to speak for the research subject (*vertreten*), nor is it to offer an artistic and/or philosophical re-presentation of them (*darstellen*). At the same time, deciding on where to draw the line separating my interpretations from those offered by the participants needs further analysis. I am aware of the pitfalls that the topic of identity represents. For instance, the subject negotiates her/his self in relation to her/his immediate space in which others participate as well. While the answer to the question "*Who are you?*" may appear an individual process, it is also a social collaboration in

which many external factors are involved, among them the research itself. It is my intention that this research to show the social dimensions of identity construction.

Although an exact definition of identity appears to be problematic, the nature of the question I propose to the participants requires a clarification of my own position on the numerous theories of the self. Even if at first sight “*Who are you?*” seems to search for definitions of the person, from a postmodern or phenomenological position, fixed, clear-cut answers become irrelevant, since the social being is shaped by the very process of making sense of oneself in relation to others at different points in time. This research aims precisely at studying the maternal role in shaping migrant women’s identities. But rather than analyzing motherhood practices, I analyze how the subjects incorporate their role as mothers into their discourse of the self.

## **1.5 THE VIDEO-GRAPHIC EYE**

As said in the introduction, an important part of my research centers on the methodology. In particular, I problematize how discourses of the self are traditionally gathered and I offer new alternatives in the study of identity in the social sciences. For this research, and due to my personal interest in visual methodologies, I collected part of the data using a video camera. In spite of the relatively limited use of visual methodologies in social research, they are not new in providing knowledge about the social world in which we live and interact. Since Nicéphore Niépce’s first permanent photograph in 1826, and Edison’s kinetoscope in 1888, projected images inform us about the world. In academic research, anthropologists such as Alfred Cort Haddon, were the first to use visual devices to support scientific knowledge during the British

expeditions to the Torres Straits Islands in 1898 (Griffiths 2002). George Bird Grinnell invited Edward Curtis to capture the Harriman Alaska Expedition in 1899 in more than five thousand photographs.

Although more intermittent, the documentary tradition of photography has also influenced the field of sociology, which in 1897 timidly incorporated visual methods for the first time through the work of Dorothea Moore and her research on the social and physical organization of Hull House. In 1899, Fairchild introduced what it could be considered an early approach to photo-elicitation. In his attempt to build up an effective visual method to reinforce ethics education at schools, Fairchild captured children's fights and quarrels with his camera. He then discussed those images with their subjects. Besides these early works using visual methodologies, starting from 1920 and for nearly four decades, the presence of this research approach progressively declined in academic journals. At that time, with the strong influence of the Chicago school, social studies aspired to the objective perception of the subject/event under study. Thus, positivist perceptions of social sciences considered visual methodologies to be "emotive and subjective" (Holliday 2007:256), lacking any scientific base (Harper 1988, Holliday 2000). In spite of this, recent re-conceptualizations of social research have had a positive impact on Sociology, which nowadays employs numerous methodologies and values epistemological complexity. Additionally, Visual sociology has established itself as a distinct field through publications, such as *Visual Studies*, *The Journal of Visual Culture*, *The Journal of Visual Studies*, and organizations such as International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA).

Imagery is an important component of contemporary thought. For instance, in his description of the panopticon, Foucault tells us about power dynamics behind watching and

being watched (1975). Even more, at an international conference on qualitative research<sup>3</sup> I attended few years ago, some panelists stated that most of the information people receive comes from movies, documentaries, and other audio-visual media that are far from academic sources, and contribute to the unconscious construction of knowledge. Although it is not the purpose of this chapter to explore the power relations that might emerge from relationships mediated through visual data, it is important to note that visual media can create knowledge that may reproduce structures of power and oppression, as well as resistance (Foucault 1970). Images frequently integrate both, in a tension/dialogue that depends on personal interpretations and semiotics.

In his well-known article, "Photocontext," Clem Adelman states, "the research photograph is a method seeking discovery, rather than a technique documenting life instances and object relationships." (2000:133). This statement can be applied to other visual methods in social research. Visual sociology is not only concerned with the visual dimensions of culture, but integrates visual methods as a way to gather, analyze, and articulate data. It uses the power of images to trigger the imaginary, recall memories, and stimulate other senses (Buxó i Rey 1998). The main challenge for Visual sociology is to create a field distinctive from other disciplines such as Photojournalism or Fine Art. Becker (1974), Banks (2001), and Wagner (1979) resolve this debate by affirming that it is the theory behind a certain image or sequence that transforms it into a sociological tool and a method of study. The social scientist works from a theoretical framework that informs her/his research choices, methods, and arguably, results. Visual sociology is more than taking a picture or making a video. It implies thinking about the reasons

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<sup>3</sup> IBERACUAL 6-7 June 2008, Barcelona.

to record or select specific images, analyzing what those images tell and what they neglect. Most importantly, it contextualizes those images so the viewers could develop an informed understanding of them. For instance, Douglas Harper's research on tramps (1982) and his recent work on the interactions that Italians create around food (2009) adopt photographs as an integral element of analysis. Pictures were not only an act of illustration, but were a way to increase readers' understanding of the actors' experiences. His pictures tell us about people's lives, social structures, practices, and values established around a specific life style (in the case of tramps) or around the complicity of food tradition and table practices in Italian culture. Those photographs are sociologically constituent because of the context in which are presented, and the story that they contribute to explain.

The numerous ways in which society can be described through images mirrors the various modes in which visual methods are applied in research. Researchers tend to incorporate visual data in heterogeneous ways, including the adoption of multiple forms of imaging and representation (Banks 2001, Gold 2007). In addition to photo elicitation and documentary, the other less common but still present visual approaches are: video, which has been increasingly popularized in the form of video diary (Holliday 2007), ethnographic documentary (Pink 1999, 2007, Zarco and García de la Torre 2008), participatory video (Camas et al. 2004), and experimental video<sup>4</sup> (Hernández-Albújar 2007). Besides the theoretical considerations that

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<sup>4</sup> By "experimental video" I mean sequences of images that do not necessarily explain a coherent story. The author edits the images from traditional lineal narratives, with the goal of provoking a set of feelings and/or sensorial experience in the viewer. The understanding of the story is secondary to the emotions experienced by the viewer when she or he recalls those images. There are numerous examples of experimental video from the academic

traditional social research entails, the visual researcher needs to reflect upon other additional issues. I identify three extra steps or considerations that are deeply interconnected and that inform my choice of video as a tool for data-collection: the medium that best fits the research project and the researcher's skills, the methodological approach, and the organization of the visual data.

In this section, I have provided a general review of the literature that inform us about the increasing visual "nature" of global post-modern societies and about different visual methodologies that have contributed to social knowledge. Yet, my study needs to be positioned at the margins of most common visual research. For instance, it is possible to observe that many academic articles concerning visual methodologies discuss or adopt photo-elicitation techniques or other similar strategies in which images are dissected and analyzed in ways that become the true core of the study. Compared to these inquiries, the visual aspect of my research lacks of such centrality. Paradoxically, although filming participants is crucial for my investigation, as I discuss in Chapter 2, for this project the actual visual analysis of the images is minimal, since I used the camera as a tool for data gathering rather than as an instrument of sociological analysis and interpretation. With this said, it would be interesting to analyze the video-interviews in future projects. To sum up, in this section I sustain that visual devices are valuable tools to explore identity and contribute to sociological knowledge.

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sociological field - including Marina Abramovic and Cao Fei. Fei presented "Life on Mars" at the 55th Carnegie International Festival.



## 1.6 PITTSBURGH IN CONTEXT

Since motherhood is a socially informed construct, the context in which it is enacted is crucial to understand its meanings and dynamics. Once the producer of half of the nation's steel, Pittsburgh's social landscape dramatically changed when the mills closed in the early 1980s. At that time, more than 150,000 workers lost their jobs and the city saw a sharp population decline. In the last years, Pittsburgh was able to reinvent itself as a modern Northern city, detaching from negative stereotypes and myths of the Appalachian region. It is also home to more than 10 universities and colleges, and a world-class hospital (UPMC), which employs nearly 43,000 people. At the same time, however, Pittsburgh is one of few cities in the nation to show a decline in its population. Pittsburgh is also seeing the significant increase of its migrant population, particularly from Latin America and Asia. In the last decade, the Latino population in Southwestern Pennsylvania has grown by an estimated 44%. In 2010, the U.S. Census reported that 2.3% of the population living in Pittsburgh was of Latino origin. In fact, the increase of the Latino population in Pittsburgh is very notable since recent immigration helps mitigate population loss.

In a pilot study I conducted in the city with Latino mothers, the participants described two distinctive phases of the recent development of the Latino community in Pittsburgh. A wave of Latin American immigrants arrived at the beginning of the 1990s, whereas a second contingent arrived after 2001. With the exception of international students, the majority of Latin American immigrants came to work. However, their reasons to migrate and the selection of Pittsburgh as the final destination tend to be complex. Even if employment was, and still is, the main pull factor to the area, other factors have also influenced the choice of Pittsburgh. For instance, almost all of the interviewees referred to affordable housing and good public

transportation. Some of them were attracted by the public schooling system, and two out of the eleven interviewees who had live in a different city before settling in Pittsburgh (Los Angeles and Chicago) talked about their preference for a smaller and more provincial city in order to raise children.

Latin American migrants in Pittsburgh are mainly from Mexico, but there are also important contingents of Venezuelans and Central Americans. These immigrants tended to bring their immediate families with them. In an informal conversation, the head of the main Latino Church in town reported that, although some men came alone, the church encouraged them to bring their families so they would not “fall into temptations,” such as alcohol abuse or prostitution. From his perspective, close relatives provided emotional support and encouragement under adverse circumstances. Many Latinos/as live in Oakland because of the low rents, better bus services, and proximity to work, but the largest Latino community has settled in Beechview (Conte and Vellucci 2007), a neighborhood in the South Hills area that already has two Latino food stores. Latino locations are, however, various and scattered, limiting their capacity to create a strong sense of community. Their occupations vary widely. Men are likely to be employed as construction workers, cooks, waiters, and painters, although there some are paralegals, doctors and professors. Women are employed mostly as housekeepers, babysitters and elderly care. A smaller group works as nurses, doctors and professors. It is also important to consider that the bigger the Latino community becomes, the more businesses are likely to develop to serve its needs. For instance, some Latin Americans become small entrepreneurs and open Latino stores, restaurants, and loan services in the Pittsburgh area (American Banker 2006, Batz 2006).

The majority of Latin American migrants in Pittsburgh bring their family with them. Sometimes they arrive together. On other occasions, family members come at different stages. In any case, women are always active participants of the family reunion process. Although just few of the migrant women in Pittsburgh are alone, it would be a mistake to consider them as depending on their partners. In fact, women find work more easily and quickly than men, and this is an important survival strategy for the just-arrived family. For many of women, their quick incorporation into the job market comes at the cost of their professional status. Most women, even those who did not usually work, agree to work as housekeepers, nannies, or elderly caretakers with minimal job security and low salaries. Although some theories assert that women's incorporation into the labor force promotes their economic freedom and independence, it is also important to consider that domestic service frequently reproduces class hierarchies and patterns of male domination (Andall 2000). On the other hand, women's income may break patriarchal patterns of interaction and may foster a process of "deterritorialization of power [which] has led to the reterritorialization of identities" (England 1999:32).

## **1.7 CONCLUSIONS: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL**

### **CONTRIBUTIONS**

Ferree and Hess points out the relational and structural dimension of gender's identity (1987). The argument is based on the notion that we live in a world where a big part of the social consideration for women comes from their roles as caretakers. Thus it is not surprising that many women, even if successfully incorporated into the job market, still feel that home-life should be their priority. Even in the 21st century, many women are educated to prioritize relations with

others more than their own individualities. From this perspective, most women tend to see themselves in terms of relational agents who mediate on, and with others. In other words, self-descriptions imply describing their relationships with others, which brings new complex dimensions to the issue of gender and migration.

The importance of this study lies in the timeliness of migration concerns, which are related to the global increase of the migrant population to the point that it is now necessary to gain a more nuanced understanding of this population's components, one of which is mothers. In fact, the last two decades witnessed the raise of female migration, which now characterizes international flows to Europe and U.S. (Morokvasik 1983, Romero 2002). This change in the gender composition of the migrant population brings with it important changes in the dynamics of relational contexts that are influenced by the migration process. In this regard, because of the deep-rooted consideration of women as the main family's caretaker, mothers struggle to balance their cultural positions as caretakers, wives, and women with the customs and rules of the host society. Women have a key role in family resettlement, and they increasingly take care of tasks and responsibilities that have traditionally been within the male domain. However, even when mothers incorporate into the labor market, they are still responsible for childcare and domestic labor. Such an overlapping of responsibilities (as bread-winner, mother, and home-keeper) frequently results in adaptive stress (Schechter 1998, Liamputtong 2001).

There are unique aspects of the immigrant mother's experience that make personal redefinitions more complex and dependent on the environment. The practices of mothering and nurturing are traditionally performed by women, to the point that they have been socially and culturally reified as natural and essential features of womanhood and the female discourse (Gillespie 2000, Letherby 1999). This is even more manifest in traditional Latin America

cultures (Dreby 2006). Although the need for identity redefinitions is a somehow inevitable aspect of migration (Benmayor and Skotnes 2007), migrant mothers face the further burden of being stretched out across different and yet crucial realms, such as work, family, and social constructions of motherhood. The latter aspect reflects both personal views of her role and identity as mother and social expectations that are related to the socio-cultural practices of motherhood in both the sending and the receiving community.

Migrant mothers navigate different cultures, whether by physically traveling back and forth, or emotionally, through their intimate relationships with people in different countries. They mother from their own memories as daughters, and combine their practice with the way people in the receiving country expect them to be, and behave as a mother. Considering this, I have chosen to present the participants of this study as subjects-in-time-and-space rather than only as subjects-to-be-known. This phenomenological emphasis on the experience of the participants helps analyze the cultural temporalities in which their personal narratives and self-interpretations are embedded. Mothers represent probably the most unsuspected interactive social agent. One of the premises of this research is its plan to offer an inclusive/participatory understanding of women who mother. This purpose implies understanding these women as complex agents of social change and social reproduction as well. For them, social constructions of their identity inevitably affect their personal views of themselves. My goal is to understand how migration forces subjects to re-think themselves and to develop new positions in an unfamiliar social world. In this manuscript, I use “identity” and “self” interchangeably, with the understanding that the “self” is not conceptualized here as an ontological entity. I propose to unpack a more multi-dimensional understanding of the roles of mothers using women’s own perspectives about preconceived ideas and expectations of motherhood. I identify how

immigrants elaborate narratives about themselves and, in this process, conform to and/or resist stereotyping, discriminatory, and assimilative pressures.

The classical interaction of personal and structural variables in the study of migration has been enriched by recent considerations of gender, race, class, and identity formation. Nonetheless, there are still significant gaps in the study of migrant women's specific role as mothers. This research focuses on the personal experiences of 12 migrant women as way to better understand how they incorporate their experiences as mothers into their narratives of self. Knowledge on this aspect will enrich the field of gender and migrations bringing a more intimate perspective on the re-negotiations women have to undertake in order to make sense of their roles of mothers abroad.

## 2.0 METHODS

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

As described in the introduction, this dissertation has two main goals. The first is to contribute to gender and migration literature by covering existing gaps regarding the topics of motherhood and identity. The second is to explore new research approaches in the Social Sciences, namely the use of video and narrative maps. I used these two visual methods at different phases of the research. First, videos were used to gather data. Second, the information obtained from the video interview was used to create a narrative map for each participant.

This dissertation's data was collected through two interviews with the participants. The first interview was based entirely on one question: "*Who are you?*" and was videotaped. Although video-recorded interviews are by no means new in Sociology, innovation came when participants were left alone with the camera to respond to the question in any way they considered appropriate. This methodological choice will be discussed later on in this chapter. The first interview was analyzed according to Riessman's approach to narrative analysis (1993, 2007), in which narratives are considered personal representations of experiences and events that individuals assemble in particular ways.

Twelve narrative maps were developed based on this information, one for each of the initial interviews (included in the appendix). The maps show the main themes conveyed by the

participants, and allow the reader to follow the actual order in which the participant presented them. The narrative maps originally emerged as a personal tool to keep track of the basic content of each interview, and help elaborate appropriate questions for the second interview. The methodological innovation of narrative maps first allowed for the identification of the parts in which the participants talked about their families and, second, helped see the ways in which the participants structured the narrative flow that preceded the topic of family.

The follow-up interview had a more traditional approach. After listening to the first participants' account in front of the camera, a series of questions and comments were prepared with the intention of further exploring some of the participants' stories and insights. The second interview was tailored for each participant in direct reference to the main topics emerged during the first interview. This time, the interview was face-to-face and tape-recorded. I carried it out as a participative, informal, yet question-based, conversation.

In the following pages, I will present the uses, reasons, and decisions regarding the use of video and the introduction of narrative maps. This chapter presents the research core. It is the basis of later discussions and conclusions. As will be explained below, the findings and data interpretation are deeply connected to how the information was gathered. In fact, despite occurring at different times, videos and maps walked hand in hand throughout the entire research. Both are reflective and interactive strategies that helped gather information and construct knowledge simultaneously. For an easier reading of this chapter, it has been divided into two sections: The first part presents the theoretical framework that sustains the methodological strategies applied here - video and narrative maps. The second one describes the practical aspects of the interviews, which entailed non-traditional interaction with participants.



## 2.2 THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

### 2.2.1 *De-Centering* Motherhood and the Positive Sides of Peripheral Analysis

In order to study motherhood and avoid external influences or social expectations as much as possible, including the participants' own expectations, the topic of motherhood had to be de-centered. For this research I define *de-centering* as the study of how the participants, when asked about who they are, with no specific reference to maternity per se, incorporate their roles as mothers into their narratives. This approach allows for unusual, yet interesting, nuances on identity and motherhood. Since participants were not asked about their children, or their roles as mothers, they talked about these topics at the moment, and in ways, that were best adapted to the flow of their accounts, therefore providing better narrative data. Rather than answering to the researcher's agenda, these topics emerged naturally from the participants' telling. It is from this peripheral viewpoint that mothers' identities have been explored, since approaching motherhood in a direct way could have fostered standardized responses.

As already suggested in the first chapter, my rationale for choosing a de-centered approach to the study of motherhood was mostly based on the idea of avoiding social desirability on notions of motherhood. When women are asked about their roles as mothers, they tend to give normative or predictable answers that in turn keep reinforcing traditional ideas of motherhood. Bourdieu's insights on social reproduction highlight how the internalization and appropriation of socially constructed ideas establishes imperceptible regulatory mechanisms of social control. Bourdieu point out that these ideas become "natural," or intrinsic to the person. Bourdieu considers that *habitus* is the main mechanism by which the pre-established social order is maintained by all of the members of a society. Since society –including women and mothers--

reproduce ideas of “good mother,” Bourdieu can be seen as acknowledging the potential of the social researcher to become an instrument of social reproduction as well. In reference to Bourdieu’s ideas on social reproduction, it can be said that, since researchers participate in the construction of knowledge and discourses, social research has the intrinsic risk of being skewed towards the personal positions of the researcher or his/her expectations (Parker 1992, Smith and Sparkes 2008). This is true not only for the research question, but also for the methodology the investigator adopts.

In terms of data collection, access to the field is one of the most important technical aspects to consider in qualitative research. Where and how data is gathered may significantly affect the results of a study. As Geertz affirms:

To discover who people think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it, it is necessary to gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which they enact their lives. This does not involve feeling anyone else’s feelings, or thinking anyone else’s thoughts, simply impossibilities. Nor does it involve going native, an impractical idea, inevitably bogus. It involves learning how, as a being from elsewhere with a world of one’s own, to live with them. (Geertz 2000:16)

By the time I started my research, I had been working with the Latino community in Pittsburgh for 3 years. I participated in various programs aimed at improving the wellbeing of Latin American immigrants, and became vice-president of a group called “9 Lunas...” (“9 Moons”), which provided emotional and strategic support to Latino mothers and families in the area. I was in contact with many community leaders and knew enough people that could help me gaining access to possible participants. As a part of the community I was studying, I believed I had what Geertz, in his famous essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" (1973) - classified as the privileged position of “being there.” In other words, I share some of the same parameters of cultural understanding and interpretation with the participants.

Although this was often the case, my double position as researcher and community member also entailed a methodological dilemma. As a member of my committee pointed out, being part of the study group could imply significant disadvantages for the researcher. John Markoff challenged my confidence on my research design and data collection with a very simple question: “How do you know that your participants are not going to answer what you just want to hear?” This was utterly true. I had access to people who knew about my research on migrant mothers, especially since I had already conducted a pilot study in Pittsburgh on the same topic two years before. Additionally, as John Markoff also pointed out, being involved in a group dedicated to Latin American immigrant mothers displayed a particular image of me as researcher. So even those who did not know the specifics of my research, were likely to know about my involvement with “9 Lunas...” This knowledge could influence their responses.

I addressed this particular issue by not including any person who knew, or could possibly know, about my dissertation topic, into my research. To ensure that participants’ answers were not moved by social desirability, I also obtained IRB approval to describe my research to the participants as a study about Latino women in Pittsburgh, avoiding any reference to motherhood. Although I had to “come out,” and explain the real purpose of my research during my second encounter with the interviewees, eluding the topic of motherhood during the initial exchange gave me the option to counter the social desirability bias. However, this was not enough because, even when I prevented the participation of those who knew me, or knew about my research, I still had to face the dilemma of how to pose the questions.

Kvale (1996) says that as researchers we always have to take into consideration whether we are asking the right questions, or only those questions that generate particular responses. Through my previous experience with research on migrant mothers in Italy, I realized that asking

about motherhood directly made mothers feel disempowered. They felt exposed and judged on their role as mother, and their contribution to society. Although it could seem overstated at first sight, there is an invisible, yet real, pressure over women in general, and mothers in particular, to portray themselves as “good mothers,” hiding the ambivalences and conflicts of mothering in our society (Maushart 1999). The general belief for adult women is that they must embrace and openly express their desire to have children at some point of their life. Moreover, according to Sharon Hays’ theory of “ideology of intensive mothering” (1996), it is only when mothers dutifully put their children’s wellbeing over their own interests that they successively gain the label of “good mothers.” As a mother, I understand that the participants in my research in Italy were fully aware of the unwritten and unspoken social expectations. Therefore, after reviewing the transcripts of that first study and the pilot I conducted later in Pittsburgh, I reflexively questioned the effectiveness of the data collection method.

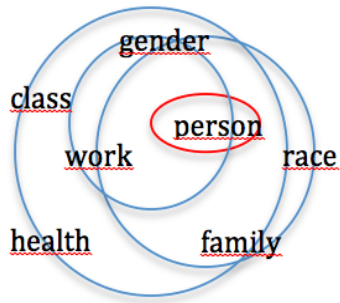
During my first explorations on the topic of motherhood, I was surprised to find consensus among many of the respondents. I interpreted the unity of their statements as evidence of social patterns on certain mothering practices in the context of migration. I did not consider that it could have also meant that the way in which I was introducing myself as a researcher, and the questions I was posing during the interviews, triggered specific answers. This could have contributed to the similarities among the answers.

Despite the data consistency in my previous studies, I did not address or even consider the social pressures mothers experience. From this perspective, then, mothers tend to portray themselves through pre-existing narratives that confirm them as “good mothers.” It is reasonable to ponder that, in the study of Latino mothers in Italy, my underestimation of cultural and social forces might have limited the variation among the responses I collected. For instance, one of the

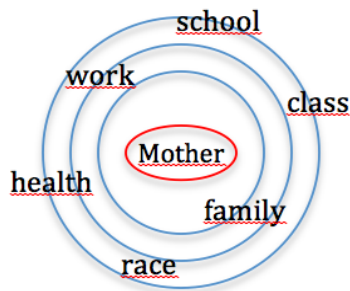
first questions I had for participants concerned the reasons why they left their countries. The main response to this question was that they wanted to offer a better future to their children. None of them ever mentioned personal reasons separate from their children's needs. On the contrary, mothers justified most decisions by highlighting that it was always done for the sake of their children and not their own. This contradicted what some mothers later expressed regarding the negative consequences that immigration had for their children. Again, the paradoxical arguments within the mothers' accounts could be explained from Hays' perspective (1996). That is, that those mothers, in order to gain social acceptance, will reproduce the expected social roles by fulfilling the required quality of self-sacrifice.

In my current research on migrant mothers in Pittsburgh, *de-centering* motherhood from the first interview allowed for the observation of the participants' own perspectives and interpretations on themselves as mothers, in a less socially constricted manner. Nonetheless, even with the lack of explicit information about the object of the interview, the participants may still wish to present themselves in a positive light to whatever audience they may envision. Yet, studying motherhood from the periphery (i.e., when motherhood is not directly at the center of the inquiry) gives useful insights on the ways women interpret their own roles and experiences as mothers. In addition, as is analyzed in the findings chapter, it helps to see motherhood from a prism in which women are complex agents that enact motherhood among many other responsibilities (Figure one), instead of analyzing motherhood as the only or main characteristic of women (Figure 2), which, in the end, consolidates a particular view of women as mothers "above all."

**Figure 1: A person's identity as the center of inquiry**



**Figure 2: Motherhood as the center of inquiry**



### **2.2.2. The Video Device and the Self**

The choice to video-record the first interview was both a methodological response to the obstacles found in previous research on the same topic, and a deliberate attempt to find new avenues to study identity. In recent years, visual methods have held a particular interest for me, especially video. As mentioned in the introduction, visual methods have the capacity to convey knowledge in a way that better mimics personal feelings, emotions, and experiences (Pink 2006, 2007). In light of this, I used the camera to create an intimate, yet accessible, context where

participants could answer the question, “*Who are you?*” Although this technique is not commonly used among social scientists, it is becoming increasingly popular (Gibson 2008). There have been other studies in the past that explored identity using video devices. Holiday (2001) elaborated video-diaries in which the participants gave an account of their identities. His study proves that video has the potential to enact reflexive accounts on the self. At the group level, Mitchell and Lange’s project on community-based participatory video in South Africa (2011), also gave testimony that collaborative visual arts have the capacity to strengthen the sense of community, regain group identity, and build new paths for social action.

Working from a phenomenological perspective, the research goal is to provide a close-up on the ways how participants construct their narratives about themselves, and how they incorporate motherhood into their narratives. This is particularly challenging since participants are both the perceivers and the objects of perception. The double-role of the participants has implications in terms of the factors that shape identity or the idea of the self, since the idea of the self influences and is influenced by the way we perceive our position in the world. This supports the perspective that identity is an ongoing process, rather than a well-defined, already-finished, product. It is from this particular framework that I have explored identity. Thus, it becomes even more important to consider the interplay between mothers’ identity and social discourses on ways of mothering, which are very present in our society.

With the above reflections in mind, the principal challenge encountered during the process of collecting data was to minimize external and internal desirability within realistic limits. As Ribbens points out in her research on the dynamics established between interviewer and interviewee, “the balance of power within the interview has all sorts of implications, including the effect of questions asked, and the involvement of the participants” (1989:581). To

main considerations were taken with regards to the research: First, the kind of questions to formulate to the participants and, second, the type of interaction to undertake with the women who took part to the study and the amount of feedback to give them. The following paragraphs explain each concern in detail. In order to better clarify the methodological decisions, I will also discuss the pilot project and the lessons derived from it.

For the first interview of the pilot, the question “*Who are you?*” was open enough to give a space for participants' personal reflection about the role that motherhood plays on their identity. At the same time, it has no direct allusion to the specific topic of inquiry. Since not asking directly about motherhood entailed the risk that some women could omit the topic, I planned a second interview in which I could discuss with the participants their rationales for avoiding or missing information about their mothering experience. Nevertheless, it needs to be said that all participants talked in major or minor degree about their children, and the implications of mothering in the context of migration.

The question, “*Who are you?*” became the underlying backdrop for participants to elaborate their narratives. Understandably, a question like this is open to various personal interpretations and possible responses. The question sought personal insights and reflections that would elucidate the impact that mothering had on women's self-perceptions within the migration context. “*Who are you?*” surely had the potential to diversify participants' answers and avoid standardized responses. At a more practical level, however, I understood that the openness of the question could be intimidating for most participants and could thus jeopardize the success of the interview. This could be especially the case if we think that such a broad, yet intimate, question positions the interviewer and the interviewee in an awkward situation at first, given that the interviewee may feel puzzled and may ask for numerous clarifications. Participants' vacillations



on how to respond might drive the researcher to offer explanations that could potentially move the conversation in a particular direction. This is true if we consider that, from a qualitative standpoint, social researchers are an intrinsic part of the research itself. They are actors with personal opinions and biases that contribute to the knowledge process and meaning construction (Gemignani 2011).

### **2.2.3 The Experiment**

In light of the challenges posed by the question, I believed my presence in the room during the first interview could potentially influence the participants' responses. Accordingly, I decided not to be present during the interview. In this way participants had to interpret and respond to the question, "*Who are you?*" using their own inference and parameters. Yet again, such methodological choice presented additional concerns that needed to be addressed. Consequently, I conducted an experimental test on myself: I tried to answer the question alone using a digital tape-recorder. At the end of my personal "reflections" --that did not last more than 20 minutes-- I felt unsettled. This feeling was linked not to the question itself, but rather to the fact that I was speaking to no one. I found myself talking softly and extremely close to the recorder --almost touching it with my face. I still cannot offer a valid explanation to my reaction to get closer to the recorder, but it felt silly because I was having sort of a confession/monologue with a small digital device. In general, I can say that the tape recorder did not have a significant presence in the room, and I had the constant impression of being alone. Unpredictably, I wanted to quit almost immediately. With no apparent audience and no clear purpose, I perceived that to interact with, and for, myself was unproductive. The outcomes of this first experience made me realize that the interviewer's absence embodied an added challenge for the interviewee who had to face

the difficulties of an atypical setting, in addition to the complexities of the question itself. Therefore, I decided to do a second test, this time using a video device.

I recruited a Latin American mother who agreed to be interviewed for a pilot study. As pre-arranged, I videotaped the interview based on the question, “*Who are you?*” At the end of her 40-minute talk, I asked the participant to describe her impressions about the camera. She replied that she got used to it very quickly. Contrary to what I experienced with the tape-recorder, the participant affirmed that she was aware of the camera enough to not make her feel alone. A little after the interview began, she felt comfortable and affirmed not to be particularly concerned by the presence of the camera. She claimed to imagine me behind the camera at times as a strategy to avoid that sense of monologue or, as she said, “talking to the wall.” Although video-recording participants in this way varies substantially from Potter’s idea of “natural discourses” (2002), it maintains the main principles of non-intervention to avoid pre-established meta-narratives.

Perceiving the video camera as a familiar observer is part of what Gibson calls the “presence of the ‘absent’ researcher” (2005). This explains people’s supposed spontaneity when the video gaze is on, which is due to the collective familiarity with technological recording devices and their incorporation into our daily lives. From Žižek’s perspective (2002), such incorporation involves the interchangeable dynamics of the immediate perception of captured images as a reality that is more real than its reproduced object. In other words, virtual reality may be perceived and experienced as reality itself. The practical aspect of 21<sup>st</sup>-century digital imaging adds to Žižek and Gibson’s complex theoretical background on reality/invention and media. People’s ease in front of the camera is a consequence of the popular familiarity with numerous techniques of digital recording. Or along a similar line of thought, the more people participate in

image capture, the more they become actors/protagonists of such recordings. In Western societies, an increasing percentage of the population is familiar with videotaping and being videotaped, for instance in domestic videos of our family, children, or friends. In addition, in numerous instances we are videotaped in public and private spaces by invisible observers that follow little fragments of our daily life, often with our acknowledgement, but without our direct consent. Such observers are anonymous technological devices themselves, usually computers and video cameras. This is the new “visionic” era in which Paul Virilio reflects on the power of capturing images separated from its interpretation (1994). The surveillance video cameras at the Mexican-American border are a good example. No person is behind the camera. Instead, sophisticated computer programs that are able to discern objects based on their movements, size, and direction control the device. With that information, the computer “decides” whether to alert the patrols in the area. There are also less dramatic instances in which the images of ordinary people are captured by electronic devices: getting into banks, government buildings, guarded parking lots, high-tech home alarms, even the Weather Channel. It is not a surprise, therefore, that most people feel comfortable with a camera pointing at them. They become improvised actors of unscripted social stories.

Scholars like Norman Denzin also affirm that we live in an era dominated by the visual or "cinematic" society (Denzin 1995, 2001) in which life imitates art rather than the opposite (Denzin 1991). Similarly, Nicholas Mirzoeff states that the postmodern era is inherently visual, and centers on, and around, new sensorial dimensions of life (1998). Still, talking about visual culture does not mean that all aspects of the Western society are visual or, mainly, image-based. For instance, Sarah Pink states that the pervasive belief that Western countries have visual cultures is misguided because it assumes the primacy of vision over other senses. Second, it

suggests that the amount of interactions between subjects and images is more significant than the quality of those interactions. In other words, visual culture is not based upon passive reception of images, but rather upon “visual practices,” and the extent in which “image and technology are implicated in the production of culture” (Pink 2006:142). What makes a culture visual is the way in which people deal with visual information and incorporate it into their life and practices. Under Pink’s premises, and considering the common use of visual devices, living in a visual era does not mean “to see better.” In fact, Paul Virilio warns that the visual has the potential to distort personal representations by promoting a “paradoxical blindness due to overexposure of the visible” (Virilio 1997:91). The extensive use of the camera, and its incorporation into our daily life, makes us stop “seeing” that we are actually being seen.

For this research, I used Virilio's warning - the unchallenged visual exposure of society - to my advantage. Due to the general familiarity with the camera, the participants who agreed to be part of this research felt less intimidated by this device. Moreover, as many interviewees told me during the second interview, the “eye” of the camera had that symbolic power to recall the presence of an audience. Thus, whereas some participants pictured me behind the camera at some moments of the interview, others developed a different strategy. For this last group of participants, the presence of the camera was important only to the extent in which they could think about the final product, instead of the recording process. In other words, although the presence of a person behind the camera was not essential, the imaginary audience before the image seemed to be. For the first group (those picturing me behind the camera) the camera was a subject, whereas for the second group (those imagining a broader audience) the camera was the medium to get to the subject. In any case, both approaches helped to lower their sense of being in a nonsensical loud monologue, while helping maintain the interview context (i.e., face-to face

interaction with another person). With this said, it is important to notice that, in considering the self, it is impossible to completely ignore the external world since we bring it, and reenact it, by reflecting on what others expect from, or about us. With this premise, we can better appreciate the significant influence that the imaginary audience plays over the participants' narratives. Since the interview question made no reference to motherhood, I was able to lessen the intensity of social expectations and constructions about this specific topic.

In summary, although social desirability was to some degree present during the interviewee/camera encounter, the open question with no specific reference to motherhood was an important neutralizer of social desirability. This strategy was even more effective thanks to the absence of direct interaction between the interviewee and the researcher. When I asked the participant of my pilot study to share her thoughts and impressions about the interview, she pointed to the difficulty of the question, rather than to any sense of estrangement due to the video presence, or my absence. As expected, the participant declared that she felt puzzled by the question because she was not sure how to respond to it. She affirmed she would have preferred a more structured set of questions, or at least a better explanation of what I meant by "*Who are you?*"

The participant's remarks were not an isolated case. In social research it is common for interviewees to seek approval and guidance during the interview. Also, it is common for interviewers to participate in the interview beyond the mere role of question-asker. The interviewee-interviewer interaction has a clear influence on the outcome of the interview, since it becomes a mutual exchange of ideas. As Kvale affirms: "The qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge. An interview is literally an *inter view*, an inter change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest" (1996: 2).

Although I understand the many positive aspects that this strategy of co-construction of knowledge might represent for qualitative research, in my case it embodied a component I wanted to set aside for the first interview. Substituting the researcher with the camera prevented possible involuntary leadings on my part, which could have created expectations about right, or desirable, answers. Therefore, it can be said that the video camera was key in creating a safe and familiar setting in which the participants could develop reflexive discourses on their identities.

#### **2.2.4 Narrative Maps: Personal Cartographies of Form and Content**

As part of the method analysis I elaborated a tool I designated as “narrative maps.” I elaborated a narrative map for each of the first interviews conducted on the twelve participants of this project. This process of “cartography” was a fundamental part of the research analysis. In general, the maps embody two-dimensional visual diagrams of the participants’ narratives. The two-dimensional trait comes first from the interview’s basic content, which I designated as “content-reading,” and second from the maps’ ability to offer a clear view of how participants unfold their personal stories, or “form-reading.”

At the content-reading level, the maps act like snapshots of the general interview substance. Far from being simply clustered topics, these kept faithful track of the spatial-temporal order in which participants presented their story. The maps evolved from the research question “*Who are you?*” Each participant is the main and only actor, since there was no feedback or interruptions from the interviewer during that first encounter. Through the maps, the reader can follow the participants’ first interview, and identify the topics that emerged, the order of appearance, the number of times in which participants repeated particular topics, the themes that triggered a particular concept of motherhood, and the deliberations that followed. At the

form reading, the narrative maps are a visual unpacking of participants' ways of presenting their stories. This ultimately embodies how they see themselves. The form-reading element of each map allows observers to become insiders, looking at the world from the participants' perspective, while still maintaining enough distance to reflect on the specifics of a narrative organization. Since the interpretation of form remains personal to each observer, and could even vary from time to time for the same person, maps become polysemic tools that depict and inquire on the relations within narratives.

The participant's voice, in dialogue with participant observers is found at the core of each narrative map. Participant observers can travel from one interview to another to construct, de-construct, and re-construct the participants' phenomenological experience. Additionally, it is important to point out that maps expose the basic components of each interview from which observers can choose their own points of interest and analysis. In my case, although my focus was on identity and motherhood, the "*Who are you?*" question could take different roads for analysis such as immigration, family, or nostalgia. In the following paragraphs, I will first discuss the main narrative frameworks, positioning mine under the umbrella of Riessman's conceptualizations of narrative inquiry. Following this, the theoretical backdrop for mapping in the Social Sciences will be discussed.

### **2.2.5 Narrating the Self**

Narrative analysis is based on the assumption that people tell their stories and experiences in a narrative form (Smith and Saparkes 2008). A meaningful story is constructed by choosing the order in which we present the events and the connections among them. Telling implies the sharing of perceived experiences, as well as their understanding (Edvardsson, Rasmussen, and

Riessman 2003). In a narrative a distinction can be made between the story (what it is been said) and the discourse (how it is said) (Denzin 1997, Gubrium and Holstein 2000). Although this distinction has created some tensions in the field of narrative inquiry (Smith and Sparkes 2006), there is a general agreement when considering that narration is more than a communication tool. It is in fact, a process of interpretive representations of personal experiences. As Riessman says, “Narrativization tells not only about past actions but about how individuals understand those actions, that is, meaning” (1993:19). Therefore, narratives are not a part, but rather, the center of the research. Researchers and observers need to consider both what, and how, something is said (Holstein and Gubrium 1998).

Narrators use different styles or arrangements for their stories. For instance, some prefer to organize their telling using traditional time and space organization. This usually begins with some past event from which the rest of the tale unfolds. Although chronological sequencing is one of the most popular arrangements in Western cultures, it is not the only possible one for storytelling. Instead of basing the structure of stories on time, some people may prefer to center on the relevance of the experience. Others may opt to group their plot thematically (Riessman 1993, Smith and Sparkes 2006). In addition to the thematic types of narrative analysis, Riessman distinguishes three other perspectives: structural, dialogic-performative, and visual narrative (2008b). All of them, however, pay special attention to the tale’s progression and its general structure. The order in which the story is arranged is a fundamental factor in understanding narrative analysis, but it does not mean that all of the tales have to follow identical sequences. The possibilities for story telling are endless.

Another fundamental aspect of narrative analysis is the attention paid to the social context in which the plot emerges. As a matter of fact, the story always has a personal, political,



and cultural background in which the teller positions herself as well as is positioned by others. In the same line, Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett also affirm that personal narratives always imply social understandings (2008). Because of this, narrative analysis requires approaching participants' stories as plots embedded in social relationships that shape and influence personal accounts and vice versa.

Narrative style is an excellent tool for conveying and decoding the meaning behind particular events to those who did not experience them in the same way. Another aspect that needs the researcher's attention is the understanding of whether this genre of communication is able to "reveal"<sup>5</sup> or describe identities in a way that tell us about the person, as well as about her relationships with others. To answer this question, I mainly draw upon the work by Ochs and Capps. In their article "Narrating the Self" (1996), they conceptualize identities and narrative as part of the same inseparable process of personal awareness. Following the phenomenological tradition, the authors affirm that identities (which are understood as the interpretive and bodily awareness of who we are) rest on the interpretation of experiences through personal narratives. Narratives are the medium we use to give meaning to past and future events, which in turn shape the sense of who we are, and our position in the world in relation to others. This "identity-in-the-making" (Ochs and Capps 1996:22) is what transforms the correlation between identities and narratives into mutual dependency of existence.

Because narrations are filled with episodes that have two or more actors in them, personal narratives are complex tales that tell about the person and, at the same time, the social environment in which that person lives. Consequently, we tend to think we are particular

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<sup>5</sup> I am using quotation marks since the word "reveal" implies something secret or hidden that is made public by a person who knows of it in advance. From the perspective of narrative and phenomenological theories, this is not necessarily the case for identity, since the process of telling the story allows for its construction as well.

individuals because of the way we relate with others in specific historical contexts (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008). On these grounds, Riessman and Quinney affirm that, “A central area of narrative is human interaction in relationships- the daily stuff of social work” (2005:392). Narrative analysis, therefore, goes beyond the summary of events to highlight those aspects of the narrative that speak about the person. From this perspective, stories are as important as the different ways in which we articulate and share them with others. The story creation itself provides the social researcher with vital information about the narrator and her experiences (Riessman 2004, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Smith and Spaskes 2006; Squire and Tamboukou 2007). Accordingly, the thematic content shares the spotlight with the form and shape of the story from which personal identities emerge. Therefore, by deconstructing how participants assemble their personal stories, we can also analyze who they are, since the ways in which participants tell about themselves offer an additional understanding of the person itself. In Smith and Spaskes’ own words, “Stories shape identity, guide action, and constitute our mode of being” (2006:170).

## **2.2.6 Narrative Maps, a Visual Tool for Understanding Identity**

It is important to start this section noting that I do not conceive the narrative maps presented in this study as static objects of representation, but rather as dynamic spaces of negotiation. In his book, *The Sovereign Map*, Christian Jacob writes that, “As a social mediation, the map generates dialogue and speech, from pedagogical commentary to the free association of information and knowledge” (2006:31). Jacob elaborates a genealogy of maps taking into consideration the producer and the receiver of such objects. Although Jacob centers on geographical maps, his work parallels my approach to narrative maps. From a phenomenological and historical perspective, Jacob questions visual culture, agency, legitimacy and the production of knowledge.

In a similar manner to narrative analysis, for him, the map and its content are as important as its making. Besides the subject of study, the main difference between Jacob's approach and mine is that, while he carefully elaborates a deconstructive exploration of the role that history and culture have in establishing already existing maps as objects of truth and knowledge to understand the world, I go the opposite direction. I actually construct maps that inform about the position a person thinks she/he occupies in the world. Paradoxically, the dichotomy construction/deconstruction is closer in meaning than it seems at first sight, since for post-structuralists, like Derrida, construction is an intrinsic part of deconstruction. By deconstructing, we do not destroy but rather create new meanings (Derrida 1997).

Maps have existed since Prehistoric times. The Bedolina petroglyph map in Northern Italy dating from 2500-1500 B.C., and the wall painting at Çatal Hüyük in Turkey dating from 6200 B.C., are amongst the oldest examples of maps. Maps have had very important roles in the history of civilization, the emergence of societies, and the survival of cultures. Early maps were peculiar combinations of science, art, mythology, and religion. Merchants, warriors and crusaders mostly used them. From the imaginary naval cartography of medieval times, on which fantastic animals were represented, to the more realistic strategic military drawings; from the constellation sky maps that helped Columbus get lost in the Atlantic in 1492, to the ultra-accurate aerial view available on Goggle Maps, maps have become inherent part of our thought parameters. Although we tend to think of maps as graphical representations, they can also take on more abstract forms, such as songs. An example of this are the Australian Aboriginal songs called *Dreaming Tracks*. The lyrics of these sung maps, along with the sequence and rhythm, guided Australian indigenous people travel through lands and cross deserts never seen by them before.

Although it is impossible to universalize maps, since they are objects that respond to specific needs and standards of a particular group (and therefore tend to be inherently different from place to place and time to time), they all share the function of locating a specific point in space. This point can be a mountain, a city, a house, or a person, that the map differentiates from its surroundings. Inspired by cartography, I decided to elaborate a graphic representation of the participants' accounts of themselves to be able to discriminate amongst the components of their narratives. While narratives are able to tell about the person, mapping allows to bring together different information in order to exercise further analysis. It is an attempt to visually conceptualize identity. Bringing different parts together in a map allows for the constitution of an idea that a person has about him/herself. In addition, and perhaps more to the point for a social scientist, mapping is a concrete tool of analysis and discussion, which develops as an independent dialogue between the subjectivity of the researched and the interpretation of the researcher. Such a dialogue transcends the research findings since it promotes new and different conclusions, which are based on the ongoing relation among located agents (Gergen 2009).

Maps are not new in social research. In communication, for instance, Lindlof, Shatzer, and Wilkinson used maps to understand the places in which American families station media devices, and how the different members of the family positioned themselves around these devices. In their work, maps are not mere physical descriptions of spaces, people, and objects, but have the deeper goal of following the nature of interactions among people and between them and the TV (Lindlof, Shatzer, and Wilkinson 1988, Lindlof and Taylor 2002). In Sociology, the idea of mapping is commonly linked to concept maps and knowledge maps. In addition, maps in Sociology have included photography as their central tool. A pioneer in the field of Visual sociology, Douglas Harper took a series of aerial photographs to explain farm organization

(2001). The pictures contributed to Harper's understanding of how the farmers organized their daily activities and social networks around their work.

In my research, narrative maps add a second visual dimension. While the first --the video interview-- could not be presented to the audience because of confidentiality issues, and possible risks for some participants, the second --the narrative maps-- switch actors and balance the act of seeing from me, the researcher watching the videos, to the audience watching the maps. Additionally, narrative maps present, at a glance, the basic content of the interviews, allowing the researcher to easily follow the parts where they talked about their children and families. Since the first interviews with the participants were open, and based upon a single question, maps help organize the information, facilitating access to different topics and themes in the particular way in which each participant presented them. With this, the audience has the potential to engage in a direct relation with the participants' stories. Additionally, the readers can also analyze the data, instead of being just the recipients of my conclusions. This strategy pursues the interaction of participants-readers and researcher-readers, since the participants' accounts have a more visible presence, allowing for the audience to draw their own conclusions. From this perspective, the narrative maps presented are a source of additional complexity, rather than attempts to solve it.

Narrative maps also include some pitfalls that need to be considered. The production of the maps implies important processes of data interpretation. While I could strive to realistically neutralize social influence and my own influence as a researcher during the data collection of the first interview, the same could not be done for the mapping. That is, each map could be modified depending on the analysis of the interviews. Although all of the information in the maps derived from the data, and the order in which it appeared was preserved, I chose which information to

include. After all, a map is not the territory, but rather an interpretation of the territory. For instance, I trimmed the information to important concepts and narratives that I deemed important for the research. Nonetheless, I tried to reproduce the complexity of the interviews. I like to compare this process to the option of selecting specific scenes from a DVD movie. In the movie menu, we see a picture that is a screenshot from the movie. This picture has been selected for its ability to sum up, or represent, a particular section of the movie. The choice of which screenshot should be included in the film menu is subjective, and results from an interpretive process. Chances are that, if asked to two different and independent technical designers to elaborate the scene-selection menu of a movie, they will select different screenshots out of the thousands available. Even more, not only the images chosen to represent each scene would be different, but also the choice and number of key scenes would vary notably from one designer to another. Still, all of these designers will provide valuable interpretations and choices that, like for my work, can be considered “neutrally subjective.”

A second consideration should be kept in mind when using the method of narrative mapping. Although the maps actively engage the watcher in the elaboration of personal conclusions, analysis, observation and more, maps tend to be seen as unchanging images. It is evident that the manifested appearance of the map does not change, but the understanding of maps as snapshots of static moments in a persons’ life contrasts with some of the main Postmodern and phenomenological positions on identity. As said in the introduction, identities are not a fixed intrinsic part of the person. Rather, identities are processes of self-identification that change in time and space, responding to relations and discourses of power, while at the same time creating them. Although, maps may be able to illustrate a person’s account of his or her identity, they risk encapsulating this person in a narrow view. First, a person’s telling may

change from today to tomorrow. His/her story varies not just by personal experiences, but is also based on what he/she may consider important to tell at that moment. Thus, in addition to life experiences, changes in personal interpretations and self-understandings shape the potential narratives going to be told. A person can read and tell his/her own stories differently at different points in time. The map, therefore, is a good picture-of-a-moment, but fails to capture the personal movement and change involved in identity development. Narrative maps cannot be used to claim to comprehend a person's identity. Rather, like photographs, they can be used to glance a person's self-perception in a frozen panoramic. The next time we revisit this snap-shot something will be inevitably transformed.

## **2.3 PRACTICAL ANALYSIS: DESCRIBING THE INTERVIEWS**

### **2.3.1 Participants' Recruitment**

I looked for potential participants through my contacts with the Latino community. The first requirement to be eligible to participate in this study was that subjects were not aware of my research topic. Consequently, I gave preference to women unaware of my work as researcher, and to women whom I did not know beforehand. Because immigrants tend to be a vulnerable population, issues of privacy and identity protection were some of the main points that were discussed with participants. Additionally, in order for most participants to feel safe, I emphasized the relational grounds that were common between the participant and myself. For instance, the fact that I worked with different Latino community leaders fostered the participants' sense of trust, as they could ask for references about me from people they trusted.

First, I asked three trustworthy contacts for names of possible participants. Only one of these contacts knew about my project, and she agreed not to tell possible participants. From these gatekeepers (who did not participate in the research), I received a total of nine names, five of which became participants. I recruited six more participants at various locations: playground, daycare, Latino Episcopalian Church, book club, translation services, and a women's health meeting. The participant whom I met at the women's health meeting provided me with the last interviewee. In total, I gathered contact information of 20 possible participants. I contacted 18 of them. I chose not to recruit the two other people because one had just become mother for the first time, and I thought she was still adjusting to the situation. The second person, I suspected, had some knowledge about my research topic. Four women out of the 18 declined to be part of the project. Only one of the four was concerned about the use of video. The remainder alleged lack of time and/or interest.

Although the woman who did not want to be videotaped blamed it on her shyness, other possibilities need to be considered. The camera collects more personal information about participants than other recording devices. It records both what is said, and who is saying it. In spite of all my efforts to guarantee participants the confidentiality of data (including images), the women who declined to participate in the project might have considered that showing their faces supposed a threat to their privacy. For some, the risk might have had an emotional origin: for example, the fear that whatever they said would always be attached to their faces. For other women, instead, the risk might have had a more concrete origin; this is particularly true for undocumented migrants, for whom showing the face symbolizes a dangerous level of exposure. With that said, we should not automatically assume that concerns about being video-recording



imply that the speaker is not an authorized resident, since fear of deportation comes even when holding proper working permit.

During the recruitment stage, I informed all of the candidates about the basic structure of the research project. Thus, although they did not know about the nature of my research or the question *per se*, those who agreed to be part of the study were aware that I was going to interview them twice. In addition, all knew of my intentions to videotape our first encounter. Nonetheless, two women dropped out of the project after the first interview. One of them asked me to eliminate the video recording of her, which I did in front of her without asking any questions about her motivations. The second woman never returned my calls to schedule the second interview. I therefore eliminated the video interview, and the transcripts as well, since they contained very personal information that could lead to her identification. Although I am unaware of the exact reasons these two participants dropped out of the research, it is my understanding that the video recording was not the main, or only, problem (especially since they knew about it beforehand). I suppose the issue was more related to the content of the interview, or a possible combination of both.

I conducted the interviews at different locations, depending on participants' preferences. As the first interview had to occur somewhere quiet, most participants chose their home. One woman came to my house, and a second participant preferred to do the interview at her best friends' house. On most occasions, their children were at school at the moment of the interview. Four women had small children with them during the interview. In those instances, I became an improvised babysitter and I took care of them while their mothers were responding, usually in a different room of the house. For the second interview, I met the participants at various locations.

Some selected their homes again, but few scheduled our second meeting at playgrounds or coffee houses.

### **2.3.2 First Interview**

After reading the inform consent with participants, I explained the basic structure of the interview, and gave them a few instructions. The instructions were important since they provided the participants with some guidelines. This helped them to feel more comfortable and less confused. I asked them not to use their real name and to elude any information about themselves or others that could be considered hazardous, such as immigration status, how they entered the United States, and so on. Next I showed them the interview question, “*Who are you?*” which I wrote on a board. I told them to answer the question by stating whatever they considered appropriate. I put a clock in a visible place so they had some control of the time, and asked them to speak for at least 30 minutes. In case they ran out of things to say, I asked them to repeat the question aloud, and say anything that came to their minds. I asked them not to touch the video camera, but they were free to move around the room if they wanted. I positioned the camera far enough to have a wide shot of each participant. However, in order to ensure the quality of the voice recording I placed a small digital voice recorder near the participants. Once they finished, participants called me into the room and I turned the video off.

Only one interviewee seemed to struggle with the 30-minute timeframe. This particular participant had to repeat the question, “*Who are you?*” several times and was very aware of the clock. Still, she managed to talk for 33 minutes. The rest of the participants averaged 36-38 minutes per interview. Two went over the 40 minutes. None of them touched the

camera, and most sat still in front of it. Only one kept moving around the room for the first part of the interview.

### **2.3.3 Second Interview**

The second interview took place one or two weeks after the first encounter. Between the first and second meeting, I transcribed the first interview and drafted the narrative map. This second meeting with participants covered some of the main aspects of this study. As I said before, this interview served as a parachute in case the participants' accounts had not mentioned the topic of motherhood. In this case, participants could have explained during the second face-to-face, and discussion-oriented, interview their reasons for this, giving me the possibility to analyze the "missing data." Additionally, the second interview was the time in which, as prearranged with the IRB, I had to reveal to the participants that my research focused on Latino women's mothering in the context of migration, and on the role that mothering from afar had in shaping personal identities and accounts of oneself.

I usually started the second interview by asking their impressions of the video-interview, and what they remembered from it. All of the participants agreed to think about things they forgot to mention in the first interview. Most women were curious to know what I thought about them after analyzing the tape recorder. In general, they could not really remember the specifics of their tales. All of them had the impression of having provided an irrational, sometimes contradictory, and above all disordered account of themselves. Although I did not review their first interview with them in detail, I always made sure to comfort them from the beginning, reassuring them that the first interview was very interesting and useful for my research.

Although all participants mentioned their children and families during the first interview, once they knew about the main focus of the research, few expressed concerns about not having “said enough” about them. Consequently, I dedicated the initial section of the second encounters with an invitation to cover the topics they felt they did not address or forgot to mention. After this opening, I interviewed them based on the observations from the first interview. I most frequently asked the participants to elaborate on their relationships with their children, and how mothering far from home shaped the view they had on mothering in general, and on themselves as women.

## 2.4 CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubt that Sociology and Social sciences in general have an increased array of methodologies available today. After careful considerations, I chose to use video interview and narrative maps for their potentials to bring interesting results to this research. Could I have reached similar results using different methodologies? This is a debatable question, but I believe that the methodologies I adopted best suited my research question, and the qualitative nature of the social phenomena I wanted to study.

Considering that a key trait of this research is the understanding of experiences participants highlight in order to narrate about themselves, it was imperative to look closely at each story in its complexity. Still, since these stories are central to the narrative analysis I present in the next chapter, it was indispensable to make them available in a useful, realistic, and sensible way to the general public. The narrative maps evolved from being a simple notes-taking

tool to becoming an analytical instrument, and eventually bringing a visual representation of identity to the readers.

Finally, the goal of this chapter was not only to describe the research methodology, but also the rationale behind my methodological choices. In my view, Social studies are not limited simply to the results they produce. Social research also implies an active engagement in the process of collecting and analyzing data, which in turns has an impact upon the sociological knowledge constructed by the study. Research is an exciting creative process of knowledge production that is intrinsically linked with the methodology used. Considering this, video interviews and narrative maps were not only strategies of data collection. Rather, they were active components of knowledge construction, and an essential part of the research process that contributed to the data and its interpretation.

### **3.0 NARRATING IDENTITY: STRUCTURE, COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter aims to highlight patterns, commonalities, differences, and inconsistencies among participant account structures during the first interview. It analyzes the general arrangement in which participants decided to respond to the question “*Who are you?*” and how the topic of motherhood emerged during the interviews. Based on this, the chapter is divided in three segments. The first examines the various topics that prompted participants to talk about themselves as mothers and/or about their children, and to what extent mothers used the maternal relationship as a referent to explain other relationships. The second analyzes the ways in which participants arranged their stories, with particular attention to the opening passages and the linearity/circularity of their organizational styles, as well as their interaction with the camera. The third concludes the chapter with reflections on unsolved issues and methodological limitations.

Before proceeding, two clarifications must be made. The first refers to the linguistic and analytical distinctions between story and narrative since, technically, the latter encompasses the former, but not the other way around. Or as Riessman says, “a story is one kind of narrative, while there are other kinds” (2008: 6). One must be aware of the sociolinguistic differences

between them - whereas a narrative has the potential to enclose many stories, only the stories together are able to define the general structure/style of the narrative. However, and in order to facilitate the flow of this document, I will use story and narrative interchangeably, along with other terms such as tale, account, and plot.<sup>6</sup> The second clarification concerns the meaning of the word “narrative” since various disciplines have produced different interpretations. In the context of this study, I have chosen a definition that is both simple and inclusive of most genres and forms in which narratives might occur - narrative is “the practice of story telling” (Altman, 2008: 1). One major advantage of this definition is that, in order to gain intelligibility, it does not need to differentiate its object from other forms; rather, it expands its possibilities. In addition, as Altman underscores, narratives are interactive practices since the storyteller, to be such, needs to tell her/his story to somebody. Consequently, story telling is a reciprocal endeavor of telling and listening within meaningful parameters of understanding. This process transcends the realm of participant/researcher to involve additional horizons of interpretation, such as the researcher’s engagement with the text/image/performance, and the possible dialogues between the research report and its different audiences. In the context of personal identity, narrative has been understood here as those stories used by a person to tell about her/himself to one or more audiences.

As elaborated in Chapter 2, an important part of my research methodology is to gather knowledge from the interview material in its content and form. Riessman (2007) states that the form tells us as much about the story as the story itself. Analyzing a broad and unstructured question like “*Who are you?*” implies to observe how a person wants to be known at the time the

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<sup>6</sup> Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein also use narrative, story, and account interchangeably in their book “Analyzing Narrative Reality” (2009).

question is posted. Following feminist traditions, the experiences and analysis of participants' accounts are placed at the center of this research. Or as Michal Krumer-Nevo states, "'Voice' is pivotal in feminist research concerned with the narratives, perspectives, and subjectivities of women and other marginalized groups" (2009: 279). The participants' stories were anchored in their experiences as immigrants in the United States. Some of them carefully reflected on their roles of mothers as the core of their identities, while others included that role into their narratives only as a way to explain particular dimensions of their lives. To show how participants developed their own narrative, I have included the twelve narrative maps in the Appendix. Participants' narratives are valuable in their own right (Nguyen 2009), and the presentation of each map acknowledges these women in all their complexities, legitimizing their narratives as actual voices driven by their lived experiences.

All participants are presented here with the pseudonyms they chose for themselves. The sample consisted of 12 women: 4 Mexican, 3 Colombian, 1 Bolivian, 1 Chilean, 1 Peruvian, 1 Puerto Rican and 1 Venezuelan. The participants' average age was 37, ranging from 31 to 50. Their total number of children was 22: 5 participants had a single child, 4 had two children, and 3 had three children each. All but 2 children were born in the United States. One child had special needs. Most participants had been professionals in their home countries, with the exception of two women who self-identified as housewives. In the United States, some changed their occupation: 2 were graduate students, 1 was an accountant, 1 an artist, 1 a full time employee in a cleaning service company, 2 were occasional housekeepers, 1 was a babysitter, 1 was an interior designer, and 3 were stay-at-home mothers, one of which volunteered part-time for a non-profit organization.



## 3.2 WHEN AND HOW DO WOMEN TALK ABOUT MOTHERHOOD?

### 3.2.1 Disclosing Motherhood from a Situational Standpoint

As stated before, two of the main reasons behind planning a non-traditional first interview were to avoid social desirability -to which the topic of motherhood is particularly sensitive- and observe when, and under what circumstances, such a topic emerged during the account. In a manner different from my past experiences interviewing participants around the topic of motherhood, the open interview gave a wider range of leading topics on which women centered their narratives. Even if motherhood was present in all 12 narratives, this topic did not structure all of the narratives in the same way, or with the same weight. Rather, the interviews showed a combination of various topics, one of which was motherhood. A crucial focus of analysis was the context in which motherhood was discussed and, more specifically, the life events and rapports that invited women to tell and explore their roles as mothers.

In general, motherhood was a topic that was scattered at different points of the interview, even if almost all of the participants mentioned being a mother at the beginning of the interview. In most cases, motherhood was included in a series of general demographic descriptors such as age, country of origin, marital status, and occasionally number of children. Many participants used this presentational strategy to open the interview. For instance, Elisenda said:

Soy una persona, bueno este, soy de México, de un pueblecito pequeño cercano a DF, y ahora estoy aquí. Tengo 35 años y soy una mujer que le hacen falta muchas cosas por hacer que no hizo lo suficiente antes... ah... este tengo dos hijos maravillosos, un esposo... pero no hice lo que tenía que hacer por venir a este país. uhhh antes estudié enfermería, era enfermera, este, por siete años... ah se me puso la oportunidad de venirme. Dejé la licenciatura de enfermería.

I am a person, well, I am from Mexico, from a small village near the DF [Mexico city], and now I am here. I am 35 years old, and I am woman who still has lots of things to finish [and] who did not do enough before... ah... I have two wonderful children, a spouse... but I did not do what I had to do to come to this country. Humm, I studied nursing, I was a nurse for seven years... [When] I got the opportunity to come, I dropped my nursing studies.

Similar to the opening shot of a movie, Elisenda was very good at situating herself in time and space for the audience. She offered a brief, but effective, general description; and although she did not spell out many details, her first paragraph still embodies valuable information about herself. Elisenda's opening succeeded particularly well at two levels. At the first level, she felt safer because she did not have to talk about her identity right away. This allowed her to choose the information she wanted to convey later on. At the second level, her opening paved the road for some of the main topics she was going to develop afterwards. In other words, the beginning of her interview provided a basic guideline for its unfolding.

Like Elisenda, other participants used the first introductory sentences to set the tone and the arguments for their narrative plot. As shown later in this chapter, this imaginary script was a point of reference to which the interviewees kept coming back to find coherence and order within their stories. For instance, the Elisenda's sentence starting with ("I am a woman who still has lots of things to finish") attracted my attention for the seeming simplicity with which she stated it. Yet, these words had a profound effect on the rest of her narrative. Although in the first sentence Elisenda's sense of "the unfinished" was in direct reference to her studies in nursing, it kept emerging at other times with newer and more profound meanings. For instance, Elisenda's story was deeply connected to feeling divided as a person and unfit for the American culture. A similar, although more positive structure, appeared in Angi's account. She began her tale in front of the camera with the following words:

Soy una mujer latina, soy madre, una madre de tres hijos: una niña de catorce, un niño de doce, y el bebé que tiene apenas siete meses. Quien soy yo? [pausa] soy una ama de casa, la cual está muy a gusto dentro del hogar eh... Quién soy yo? [risas] soy muchas cosas: soy una madre, una hermana, tengo una familia pequeña... papa, mamá, eh, mis tres hermanos y yo que soy la última. Soy la, soy la consentida. Podría decir también que soy una mujer muy especial, tengo un carácter muy especial

I am a Latino woman, I am a mother, a mother of three: a fourteen year old girl, a twelve year old boy, and the baby who just turned seven months. Who am I? [pause] I am a housewife who feels very comfortable within her home, eh... who am I? [laugh] I am many things: I am a mother, a sister, I have a small family... father, mother, eh, my three siblings and me, the youngest. I am, I am the spoiled one. I could also say that I am a very special woman, I have a very unique character

In Angi's case, the very first thing she told to audience after mentioning that she was a Latina was that she was a mother. Angi showed confidence and joy in her role as a full-time mother, and this set the general tone for her whole interview. Like Elisenda, Angi also mentioned the challenges she experienced as a mother in a foreign culture, but explained those episodes in terms of personal and family accomplishments rather than stress. It comes to no surprise that she liked to describe herself as a "luchona" (fighter), and as a woman who was not a dreamer, but liked to make dreams a reality. Another significant aspect of Angi's opening was the reference to her ethnic origins, which she further developed later in the interview. In fact, Angi dedicated a portion of the interview to detailing how being a Latina in an Anglo-Saxon culture vastly shaped her experiences as a person and a mother.

A few exceptions, Benjamina and Carmen talked extensively about their children during the interviews, but did not immediately disclose that information. Instead, they started with other aspects of their lives. Carmen, for instance, began the interview with the following reflection:

Quien soy yo... no se... espera... tengo que pensar [pausa 5 seg.]. Ya pues, supongo que si lo pienso tanto es porque tal vez no estoy muy segura de la respuesta.

De la forma en la que yo, en la que yo entiendo la pregunta es así como que qué es lo que me define, verdad? Sí, creo que así es como puedo abarcar una pregunta tan.. tan.. no se.. no quiero decir rara... es inesperada... quien soy yo... (sonrisas). Bueno, yo vengo de un pueblecito al norte de Bolivia; allá estudié; allá conocí al que es hoy mi esposo; allá tengo a mi familia; a mis cuates [amigas] más queridas, si, allá estaba mi vida antes

Who am I... I don't know... wait... I have to think [5-second pause]. Well, I guess that if I have to think about it so much it is because I am not sure about the answer. The way in which I, in which I understand the question is like, 'what defines me?', right? Yes, I think that's the way I can grasp such a ...I don't want to say strange...it's an unexpected question... who am I... [smiles] Well, I come from a village in Northern Bolivia, there I studied, there I met my husband, my family is there, my best friends, yes, my life was there before

Even if Carmen did not describe herself as a mother, or talk about her children, her initial words confirm what it seems to be a common thread in most interviews: the beginning plays an important function, rather than being just a neutral or soulless icebreaker. Although I will fully unfold the importance of the opening passage in the next section, I want to mention here that the first sentences surface as the actual space/time in which the respondent unveils several of the main topics to be discussed later. Likewise, it also gives certain idea about how the person will do this. As all other participants, Carmen initiated her interaction with the camera by disclosing valuable information about some of the important dimensions that defined her as a person. She also introduced keywords and sentences that presented a general direction for her narrative. Two main aspects stood out in the words of Carmen. First, she reflected on the question and gave her own personal interpretation ("What defines me?"), upon which she based her answer. Second, when she said, "yes, my life was there before" she was already displaying intriguing information about some of her main concerns. One of the main themes of Carmen's tale was her careful reflection about her life before and after migration, and before and after becoming a mother.

The fact that 10 out of 12 participants mentioned that they were mothers right at the beginning of their interviews seems to indicate that motherhood was viewed as a major experience shaping women's identities. However, as seen in the examples, it was not the first, or most noteworthy, descriptor, nor the only one mothers used. Instead, it was a descriptor used to position women. This seems to confirm that women, when asked about their identities with no references to motherhood, tend to give more complex responses in which motherhood appears as a variable among other characteristics, instead of the most crucial one.

### **3.2.2 Motherhood as a Way to Explain Relationships**

All participants elaborated more complex accounts of their roles as mothers right after they talked about their families back in their home countries, in particular their parents. Frequently, participants talked about their families while remembering their own childhood. They mentioned personal experiences with their parents, and linked those memories to their own motherhood and their relations with their own children. Benjamina's case was noteworthy. Although she was one of two participants who did not mention motherhood in the interview opening, she definitely used that role to exemplify the relationship she had with her own mother.

Benjamina is in her early thirties and she is the mother of a young toddler. In 1992, she arrived to the United States from Colombia to study. A few years later she met her husband, an American citizen. Benjamina started her story mentioning that she was born in Bogotá and that she was a student. In her opening, she carefully described some of the cities in which she had lived. Growing up in a middle-upper class family during times of tough violent turmoil and political instability sharply marked her life. In the United States by contrast, the freedom of

walking streets alone and discovering unexpected spots emerged as the recurrent thread running through Benjamina's tale. In fact, she opposed the act of walking to her country's political instability and to her overprotective parents. In a new narrative turn, the second part of Benjamina's interview was characterized by the family history, which she carefully unfolded in chronological order.

The detailed report on Benjamina's family was dotted with some recent events. While describing her relationship with her mother, she introduced brief, but significant, accounts of her experience as a mother. For instance, after talking about the important role religion has in her country and her family's life, she criticized her mother for giving more credit to God rather than her for Benjamina's child. Benjamina did not give details about her relationship with her son, but rather talked extensively about the social expectations on women and mothers. Those comments were in line with the way in which Benjamina presented herself up to that point, and until the end of the interview, which was very consistent. She constructed a narrative around describing herself as a person who liked to be in control of her future, to be able to explore her own possibilities, and enjoy the freedom to choose. Her opposition to her mother's traditional lifestyle shaped her identity as a woman and as a mother in more ways than expected. For instance, when Benjamina spoke about her son she did so in terms of his representation of some of the social expectations she could not escape as a woman, and as the channel to claim her independence.

Siempre me recuerda mi mamá que tengo un hijo, y que es un regalo de Dios y que qué hubiera pasado si yo no hubiera tenido hijos, etc., etc. ... Nunca me gustó esa idea de que mi vida ya estaba pre-establecida. Incluso hoy en día no me gusta la idea de que hoy yo tengo un hijo porque eso es lo que yo tenía que hacer.

My mother always reminds me that I have a son, that he is a gift from God, and what would have happened if I had not had children and so on... I never liked

the idea that my life was already pre-established. Still today I don't like the idea that I have a son because that is what I had to do.

Throughout the interview, Benjamina talked about herself in connection with her own experience as a daughter. Although Benjamina mentioned that she absolutely loved her mother, it was clear that in order to explain herself, Benjamina had to disengage from her mother's figure. Her mother represented the traditional role Benjamina was trying to escape, as a mother, a woman, and a Latina. Thus, Benjamina used the topic of her son to both highlight the differences between herself and her mother, and stress the idea that, although motherhood relates to women's traditional roles, it was her own choice: as she stated, "I could have chosen not to have him."

In a similar way to Benjamina, Elisenda also spoke of her children to explain her understanding of migration in relation to family separation. After her initial presentation in which she mentioned her children ("I have two wonderful children") she offered an extensive account of her nursing career, and the challenges she encountered in the United States in terms of language barriers and lack of professional access. This was in tune with the beginning of her interview, in which Elisenda foreshadowed one of her most significant themes: a sense of division. Immigration forced her to give up her professional aspirations, at least temporarily: "I did not do what I had to do to come to this country." The "unfinished" issues that Elisenda raised regularly during the interview evolved emotionally when, approximately halfway through her *testimonio*, her tale grew around issues of family separation. This was a significant turn in the interview as she started connecting to feelings of personal nostalgia for who she used to be: "This is who I am, that person who left behind many things (...) I only know what I have in my mind. How it was before, how 'I' [Elisenda's stress] was before." With these loaded words,

Elisenda began a new part of the interview in which division was present in terms of family separation. She explained her family's story and expressed her concerns with living far from her aging parents. It is in this context of family separation that Elisenda mentioned her children a second time.

ahora lo más importante son mis hijos para que salgan adelante, estudien ... estamos muy desunidos [la familia] no hay la unión que se requiere como para salir adelante. Tengo a mis padres allí [México]. Pero a veces las situaciones no te llevan por el camino que tú quieres ir, y a veces tienes que salir sola adelante, tienes que salir sola con tus hijos y con tu esposo, claro ... quisiera muchas cosas, quisiera que mi familia se volviera a unir.

the most important thing now is for my children to get ahead, to study... we are divided [the family] we do not have the necessary union to get ahead. I have my parents there [Mexico]. Sometimes circumstances do not take you the way you want to go, and sometimes one has to keep going ahead alone, one has to keep going ahead with ones' children and husband, of course... I would like many things, I would like my family to be together again.

Mentioning her children in this context allowed Elisenda to illustrate her personal experiences and dilemmas about immigration. Family separation was an important factor for her feelings of division. Yet, at the same time, Elisenda was able to incorporate accounts about her children to justify two different positions. On one hand, when talking about her children, she accentuated her feelings of family nostalgia, since she truly lamented seeing them grow up far from their grandparents, aunts, and cousins. On the other hand, Elisenda's children appear in her account as one of the motivations for migration. She presented her children in two paradoxical, yet reconcilable, positions. They were her main reason to be in the United States, but at the same time, seeing them grow up alone represented a source of sorrow in her life. In general, Elisenda positioned her children both in contrast to tales about her parents, and as a reminder of the physical and cultural separation between herself and her family in Mexico.



Expressing contradictory feelings while talking about parents and children is not rare. In fact, mothering in the migration context implies a series of cultural and emotional adjustments in women's perceptions of themselves as mothers, as well as daughters. Although it was uncommon for participants to directly correlate immigration with these changing relationships, mothering far from their own mothers was for most participants a sad experience that exacerbated and made them more conscious of their immigrant status. This is more easily understood if we consider that the parenting model for most migrant mothers typically comes from their experiences as daughters, combined with their own generational distinctiveness and particular cultural/national contexts. In other words, more often than not, migrant mothers lack an explicit mothering model within the migration context. None of these three variables (personal experience, generational variation, and cultural character) necessarily entails migration, and when it does, as in the case of an immigrant daughter of an immigrant mother, the same circumstances are not mimicked. Thus, longitudinal (generational) and transversal (geographical) differences urge an immigrant's daughter to make cultural, social, and emotional adjustments on her own.

At the same time, it is difficult for migrant mothers to mother in the same way as American mothers, since the prevalent narrative on mothering does not contemplate immigration as a common direct experience. As consequence, migrant mothers develop transitional patterns and models that show an interaction between what they experienced, what they know, and what they observe in the new setting. Remarkably, this intense and constant negotiation surfaced in the participants' narratives when they talked about their own parents, and compared their own practices and experiences with those of their mothers. Accordingly, participants talked about

their children to situate themselves relationally, and to position their motherhood roles outside of traditional standards.

Isabella's account is somewhat more positive but still mirrors a similar structure than that of Elisenda. Most of the time, she incorporated her motherhood role while talking about her family back in Colombia:

Estoy como en la mitad de catorce hermanos, tengo una familia muy grande de la cual me siento bastante orgullosa. Mi vida se ha enfocado siempre en la familia. He tenido el apoyo de todos ellos...ehh, siempre han estado para mí en las decisiones que he tomado. No me arrepiento, nunca me voy a arrepentir de haber dejado a mi país, a mi familia, para estar aquí. He iniciado una nueva vida. Quiero educar a mis hijos, quiero darles todas la oportunidades. Trabajo para él, para que lo tenga todo.

I am the middle of 14 siblings. I have a big family, and I feel quite proud of them. My life has always focused around the family. I have always had their support... ehh, they always were there for me in the decisions I made. I have no regrets; I will never regret leaving my country, my family, to be here. I have started a new life. I want to educate my children; I want to offer them all the opportunities. I work for him, so he'll have everything.

Isabella's spent most of the first half of her interview talking about her country and profession. Progressively, family life became a bigger part of her tale, and became the predominant theme of the second part of her interview. In Isabella's account two main subjects stood out. First, although she talked extensively about family relationships as a meaningful indicator of who she was, she barely spoke about her son. This was remarkable since her son was an infant and she was fully dedicated to his care. Second, although Isabella only had one child, she referred to "children" in plural. I mainly connect the first peculiarity to her mother's presence in the house at the time of the interview. In those days, Isabella's mother was visiting for the second time since the baby was born, and Isabella was extremely thankful for the help she provided. This, along with the fact that her mother's visit was coming to an end in few weeks, probably strengthened her acknowledgement of family ties and support. In her account, she

dedicated her sense of family collaboration and security to her son: “I work for him so he’ll have everything.” Compared to the ways in which she previously talked about her family, the above passage from Isabella’s first interview accounts for her views of motherhood at a deeper level. If taken individually, Isabella’s paragraph does not provide much information about her son and about the role that motherhood played in her life. However, the fact that she strongly emphasized her love for her family in Colombia, and that the times she briefly talked about her son were in that family context, suggests that motherhood was extremely important for her.

The second peculiarity, the use of “children” in plural, could simply be a trivial mistake. Still, deeper consideration of what Isabella said before allows for alternative understandings. As mentioned before, Isabella devoted part of the interview to stress her positive memories and experiences with her parents and siblings. For Isabella, the strong ties she still maintained with them, despite the distance, were evidence that her family was an important support. Moreover, during the second interview, she expressed her desire to have more children in the short run. Therefore, and in connection with the first point about reciprocity, for Isabella talk about her “children” (instead of her son) represented her wishes to re-create the same happy family life she once had for her son.

Benjamina, Isabella and Elisenda’s examples were not exceptions since most participants, 11 out of 12, followed the same pattern. When most participants talked about their experiences as daughters and/or about their parents, their need or desire to include their children into their accounts increased. Sometimes, participants did so to express feelings of nostalgia and personal division, as in Elisenda's case. Other times, like for Benjamina, interviewees wanted to highlight intimate rebellion from family norms and independence. Or, as for Isabella, they wanted to convey a sense of reciprocity and gratitude. But in general, to mention their children after

describing their own family life and childhood speaks of participants' identity construction. This is, participants used their own children and their own personal experiences as mothers as parameters to help re-define their interactions with their parents and other significant family members. In other words, migrant women incorporated motherhood into their tales to contrast past and current relationships with their family of origin. In conclusion, the importance of in-depth analysis on the interviews' interpretations should be highlighted. From a phenomenological perspective in particular, it is critical to connect research interests to other salient themes in the respondents' stories, and identify possible logic and additional meanings behind unplanned outlining. To appreciate the complexity of human experiences, and to avoid the isolation of phenomena from their larger background, patterns of meaning need to be analyzed within the particular context in which topics emerged and narratives were told.

### **3.3 STRUCTURING THE TALE: LINEARITY VERSUS CIRCULARITY**

#### **3.3.1 The Opening**

Before going on to the interview structure, the interview opening and its links to the general project interview structure should be further discussed. In the previous section, the first passages were analyzed as the space used by women to introduce the topic of motherhood. Additionally I indicated that the interview openings have indicated some general attributes in the participants' narratives. As the introductory passage provides and generates knowledge about the story's teller and content, the narrative analysis of the initial part of an interview requires a particular examination; especially in light of my interest in the phenomenological emergence of

motherhood in the participant's accounts. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of their interview, most participants mentioned their children, as well as other characteristics that were consecutively explored. Labov and Waletzky call this the "orientation section" (1997). Similar to the opening scene of a movie, the orientation section helps the teller situate the story in a historical and geographical space. Moreover, it sets up the attitude and style that will guide most of the narration<sup>7</sup>. In this way, the audience has the opportunity to quickly develop a basic, yet useful, background for the upcoming tale. Citing a succession of apparently unassuming characteristics, which will then be explored later in the narration, is an effective way to introduce the interviewee's context and style.

From the phenomenological framework of this study, the possibilities of unmediated and complete self-consciousness are questionable. Accordingly, even if the opening passage seems to contain a summary of the interview, this cannot be interpreted as if the participants knew in advance what they were going to say, and how they were going to say it. In other words, it is my understanding that participants did not start the interviews knowing exactly the ways in which

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<sup>7</sup> Compare, for instance, the opening shot of the movie *Delicatessen* (1991) with that of the movie *The Lives of Others* (2006). The details presented during the first minutes of these two movies establish the core of the story in two different, yet effective, ways. In *Delicatessen*, although the time and place are not specified, it shows a postwar-like situation. The light and colors are unrealistically dark and mysterious, and the first two characters engage in an unspoken interaction of fear and sadism. The shot of the tubes reflect the irremediably connected lives of those living in the building. Moreover, a nostalgic French ballad plays in the background, radically contrasting with images that foreshadow a fictitious exaggerated tragedy with notes of black humor. In contrast, the aperture in *The Lives of Others* is time/space specific. It narrates the real events of East Germany during the 1980s. Again, the colors and light parallel times of repression and lack of liberty. This "greyish" scenario is further emphasized by the narrow, limited, view of the long hallway and the first words we hear: "look down." I like to compare these two "incomparable" movies because they both are extremely effective in foreshadowing the story and establishing the ways in which it will be done. Both scenes are available online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaGQvhQvjIo>  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyRnL7\\_8tzw&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyRnL7_8tzw&feature=related)

they wanted to explain or describe themselves. To the contrary, participants engaged in a reflexive process to gain access, and to construct such knowledge. Since identity is viewed as an interpretive experience of the possible selves (Holstein & Gubrium 2008,) narratives are not just manifestations of identity, but active constituents within it. As Tataroddy says:

We understand ourselves as enduring single persons in large part because of the manner in which we are structured within our life stories, or personal narratives. The structuring of identity... involves the entire plot, of which it is a part and on which it depends. Identity does not precede narrative structure; it is expressed in and through it. (2008:38)

In regards to the open question, “*Who are you?*” participants did not require a pre-elaborated plan, or even specific pre-existing knowledge about themselves to respond. The opening paragraph does not, therefore, set the foundations of the interviewee’s argumentations or narratives. Rather, it gives a tone or rhythm, as well as a space of narration and exploration of one’s sense of self. Participants aimed at constructing a sense of personal history through a series of distinctive and representative tales. For instance, some of the participants chose to give long biographical accounts, others centered on meaningful life events, and the remainder favored stories describing their social relationships. In spite of this variety, a significant common aspect ran across all of the interviewees’ opening statements - motherhood. Motherhood was mentioned in all of them, but never as an isolated experience, process or event. Rather, it was always linked to other descriptors that became meaningful, yet flexible, referents for the narrative elaborations that followed.

To sum up, the opening set the tone and space for an undefined telling and suggested the initial topics of a story (about one’s self) that was still unfolding and in a process of construction. In addition, the participants used the opening sentences as referents to give a sense of coherence to their interview. During the interview, participants returned to themes or topics expressed in the

opening to “wrap up” their telling, and therefore give a sense of unity. This quest for coherence and for finding a thought-thread in the opening section is the second structural commonality across all of the 12 interviews (the first one was the topic of motherhood). It could be argued that such a desire to elaborate coherent and logic accounts might have driven the participants and their opening sections toward particular paths. Instead, rather than representing a structural agenda, the interview opening emerged more or less spontaneously and developed into a general guideline during the course of the interview. For instance, when the participants did not know what to say, lost their thread of thought, or felt that they were contradicting themselves, they tended to go back to the assertions they made at the beginning. This strategy allowed the participants to deal with the lack of structure of the open question and the researcher’s absence. They were also able to gain some control over the uneasiness of not knowing how to explain themselves. In other words, considering the open-endedness of the first interview, the participants tried to elaborate coherent stories by following those initial words as a self-regulating tactic.

In support of the statement above it should be mentioned that almost all of the participants started their introductory passage right after repeating the question “*Who are you?*” for the first time. Although a few reflected on how to interpret the question - this will be elaborated on further in Section 3.4- in general it can be said that participants did not need any reflexive pause at the beginning of the interview. This means they probably had no have time to organize a 30-plus minute-long interview, and summarize it in their introduction. Moreover, even if the participants could have had a few seconds to plan just the main themes to develop later, it is my believe that they would have had the tendency to unfold their stories in the same order in which they were exposed in the interview opening. This did not happen, though. For instance, Serena

was particularly good at addressing and developing most of the main themes that emerged during the first passage, but she did not do it in the same order. The table below (Table 1.) presents a quick review: Serena's whole introductory passage is situated in the left column,<sup>8</sup> which in turn is situated between the first and the second repetition of the "*Who are you?*" question. Following Riessman's style of narrative inquiry, the passage was divided into stanzas (or bullets) to better observe the different components involved. In the right column, examples I displayed the main thematic elements structuring Serena's narrative. These are presented in the same order in which she integrated them.

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<sup>8</sup> In general, I consider the first "introductory passage" as the narrative enclosed between the first time participants repeated the question "*Who are you?*" and the second time. In some cases I could not apply this rule since some participants interrupted the flow of their introduction with constant repetitions of the question. In those instances I designated the introductory passage through a consideration of thematic unity. Also, Serena offered a particular long and rich introductory passage, but the length and deepness of the account varies dramatically from one participant to the other.



**Table 1. Serena: First Passage vs. Storyline**

First Passage Transcript	Examples of the Stories Developed During the Narrative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who am I? My name is Serena and I am from Peru, from a little town 3 hours from Lima</li> <li>• My city is beautiful and the people are peaceful and gentle</li> <li>• But there are no jobs and people are forced to come here</li> <li>• as I did with my little son ... who at that time was 3 years old,</li> <li>• and with my husband</li> <li>• we had to leave him</li> <li>• now I am 41 years old and I came here 8 years ago</li> <li>• and here we had our other 2 children</li> <li>• I came here a long time ago, or at least is what it looks to me</li> <li>• I went back in few occasions but it is very expensive ...</li> <li>• I am a worker and I work in a hotel chain cleaning.</li> <li>• My family was a hard working family</li> <li>• It is not the best job ever, but it allows me to help my family</li> <li>• Here I have met lots of women like me, Mexican, Peruvian, Colombian and other Latinas who must work like me to help their families and in fact they are good friends of mine...</li> <li>• I like, yes, solidarity among women,</li> <li>• you learn it when you are outside because you need each other, yes they are your mothers and sisters and well... we help the ways we can.</li> </ul>	1. Family story: I come from a hard working family, my father worked hard to sustain me and my siblings, his work in a vegetable store provided enough for us, not for luxuries, but everything for school and other things. When he died things became very difficult for us
	2. Reasons to migrate: My husband and I got the opportunity to come here; he had a brother in Pittsburgh
	3. Working experience: I worked many years for a cotton processing factory before coming to the United States ... they paid us very little, but in my country is always like that
	4. Reasons to migrate: we are used to it, is what one's do to live more comfortably and to help your family. The solution is to come to the United States to work
	5. Reasons to migrate: when my father died somebody had to come. My older brother came ... he was the hero of the family
	6. Reasons to migrate: I got tired of being paid so little, I got tired of that awful cotton place, it was hard. Many hours standing, my legs were swollen, and my back hurt (...)
	7. Mother: My mother is a special woman (...) she is very strong and I adore her
	8. Older Son: We left our son [with the mother] and when we found a job we brought him with us ... that was the happiest day of my life.
	9. Travel back: we have no money to go back all together ... we do not want to be separated again ... we have papers but we are not from this country, what happens if they don't let us in?
	10. Children: My younger children are Americans but my older son is not. We have to do differently for them.
	11. Motherhood: as a mother I have to see that for my son things will be harder because he is not American
	12. Personal history: I work in a hotel, cleaning. I did not study that much I did not like it. I worked with cotton
	13. Family: I help my family, I send them money ... I am happy that we can support our children
	14. Older Son: My son is smart, he is in the gifted program, he understands he has to work hard in this country
	15. Mother: I miss my mother. Every two years we pay for her ticket so she can come.
	16. Motherhood: My children have to understand where they come from; I am the one fighting to keep our culture alive. That's what mothers do.
	17. Friends: My friends do the same. It is a fight with our children so they understand where we come from
	18. Family history: I keep the family tradition. I work hard. My parents did everything for us, ehh, you know... it is what my husband and I do now for ours.
	19. The end: I am a Peruvian woman who moved to Pittsburgh many years ago. I miss my country, my family, but I thank God because of all things I have. I am a woman who adores her family and who works hard to keep on going. I am a fighter.

A close comparison between the first and the second columns shows that, although there are strong thematic parallelisms between the columns. The way in which Serena presented the meaningful events and people in her life did not mimic the structure of the first passage. In order to allow for an easier linking between the two columns, I created the following diagram in which the thematic arguments come from the opening section, and the numbers on the right refer to the rows in the second column in which more information about that topic is given.

1. Country of origin and lack of opportunities: 3, 4, 19
2. Peruvian son: 8, 10,11,14
3. Separation from son: 8, 9
4. Children: 10, 16, 20
5. Time in Pittsburgh feeling an even longer time: 19
6. Expensive to go back: 9
7. Work in Peru/ hard worker: 3, 6
8. Family/to help family: 1, 4, 5, 13, 19
9. Actual work: 12
10. Friends: 17

During the interview, Serena did not address the interesting topic of women's solidarity, which emerged at the end of her introductory passage. She mentioned her friends only as women with whom she shared the educational role (as mother). She did not elaborate, however, on the sister/mother role she referred to at the beginning. Finally, during the interview, Serena explored in depth some areas that did not appear in the opening, such as her mother's role, which in her narrative appeared as the second most-discussed person, after her older son.

To sum up, the opening passage often created an invisible map of the interview. It provided a background and a space for the participants' explorations. With that said, what to say and how to say it was not purposefully instituted at that point, as if the narrative had an inner structure. Rather, in the course of their narratives, participants revisited their openings as a strategy to keep the flow and coherence of their accounts. I understand the opening passage not as the framework of the main themes and their arrangement, but as a general guideline that emerged as such throughout the narrative itself. In this way, participants generated a tool to help them answer a complex and unsettling question.

### **3.3.2 Linearity versus Circularity**

Two specific sociological viewpoints were most useful in the analysis of the participants' narratives. To illustrate the first of these analytical strategies, I will present a detailed analysis of two micro-stories from Serena, and the ways in which these relate to the larger narrative of her interview. The second analysis strategy entails looking at the data from a broader distance. Here, I will explore the general configuration of Marisol's story, with particular attention to the topics of motherhood and identity. The goal of this data reading is to understand the participants' structure and organization through sociological literature on identity and motherhood. By looking beyond the personal topics that triggered women to talk about their children and its specific content, the discussion will focus on the contexts in which the stories are embedded, and the ways in which participants describe the larger sociological contexts of their lives.

In this study, only two of the participants gave long detailed accounts of their children or mothering experiences. In general, most of the participants incorporated only short anecdotes about their children, or their roles as mothers as a tool to clarify or support other stories and

experiences. Moreover, none of the interviewees' narratives evolved around a single topic. The question, "*Who are you?*" itself is not topic-centered, as the construction of one's own identity is clearly a vast and never-ending process. This purposeful lack of structure notably increased the variety of plots and stories told by women, as well as the time spent on specific topics, the thickness of the stories, and their emotional intensity.

Sarah Ann Michaels' work on discursive strategies among African-American children's narratives is useful to further explain what a topic-centered story is and its cultural context (Michaels & Cook-Gumperz 1979, Michaels 1981). Michaels (1981) found that when first graders were asked to describe an important event from the past for their classmates, white students elaborated well-organized stories around a subject, or what she called center-topic style. In a different manner, African-American children tended to create tales consisting of apparently disconnected personal anecdotes and thoughts. Michaels called this "topic- associating style," and she convincingly argued that the thematic dispersion did not mean an erratic move from one unrelated topic to the next, or that children lacked thematic markers, but rather that the non-linearity of their plots was due to the absence of an explicitly verbalized thematic focus. African-American first graders knew the connection and saw the logic of their accounts, but failed to express it in a conventional way, since their "thematic development was typically accomplished through anecdotal association rather than linear description" (1981: 429). Michaels arrived to the conclusion that narrative styles were mostly derived from home-based experiences. Although Michaels's goal was to identify elements of discursive variation among ethnic groups in the school context, the same strategy can be applied to these interviews conducted on Latino mothers. In other words, in the same way in which children's cultural background shaped their narrative styles, immigrants' cultural practices are likely to shape their telling. It could be

considered then, that some of the narrative outlines depend on Latin American social discursive conventions and interpretive strategies that may not find easy parallels within the dominant narratives of other cultures.

Adding to the cultural considerations of topic-center versus association-center narratives, there is also the culturally correlated dilemma of linearity versus circularity. As Steven Otfinoski (2010) found in his study of Native American writers, people write and tell stories based on their cultural history. Western societies have developed a more linear narrative in which the events described are organized mostly in chronological order and, when the narration is episodic, the structure is dictated by hierarchical rankings of significance. Other cultures use a circular narrative instead, which, as Otfinoski indicates, is “a structure that folds back on itself, time may be fluid, plots nonlinear with events occurring out of sequence, forming pattern of intent that is often only understood at a work’s conclusion” (2010: 7-8). Linear narratives, indeed, refer to the chronological or sequential order in which the story is presented, while in circular narratives the flow of the story depends upon the personal associations of events and meanings of the teller. The latter follows a subjective, but still logic, order, which does not necessarily parallel common Western conventions and views of coherence and linearity. The participants in this study presented both types of narratives, although the circular, or non-linear, was the most common. To illustrate this, the following paragraph will compare two participants’ narratives.

Serena’s story, portrayed in Table 1.0, exemplifies circular narrative. Serena started her account talking about her family, describing the family business, and how hard everyone worked, specially her father, to send them to school and provide for them. She then moved on to talk about the reasons to migrate, but she did this with no transitional markers. For instance, it was implicit for her that, after her father’s death, the logic step was to migrate. The explanation for

this came later on, in Section 4, when she talked about the demands to leave within her home country: “We are used to it; it is what you do.” In the meantime, she engaged in a long account about her working conditions (3). Going back to reasons to migrate and in order to bring additional information on this process, Serena mentions again, in Section 5, her father’s death and about the fact she has a brother in the United States. However, it is not clear for the audience if her brother moved after or before her father’s death. In fact, when she mentioned her brother for the first and only time, Serena was focused on the topic of social pressure.

To include her brother's story could be seen as another side of the existing social pressures to migrate since she acknowledges him as “the hero of the family.” However, Serena’s brother's story, does not necessarily connect with the chronological order of events. Paying attention to stanza 5, while also considering the transcription as a whole, it was difficult to discern whether when she said, “Somebody had to come,” she was referring to herself or her brother. In fact, it could be either way. The first possible reading is that her brother moved to the United States when her father died, and then he became a hero for her. A second possibility is that her brother was a hero because he migrated and helped the family with his remittances. Consequently, when her father died, she also decided to follow his brother’s steps and leave Peru to help her family. In this passage, Serena is clearly using a topic association style. Her presentation of the events unfolds not around chronological priorities, but around its subjective organization, to which additional particulars are added in order to help explain the story.

Another interesting example of circular narrative is found in Serena’s account of her mother and her older son. Although Serena already mentioned at the beginning (stanza 1) that when her father died her mother was the one who took over the family business, she later (stanza 7) explained her mother's role and their relationship. Serena transitioned from 6 to 7 by quickly

indicating that she and her husband lived with her mother, and that moving to Pittsburgh represented the first time they were on their own. After this passage, Serena talked about her mother and mentioned that she left her son behind, but did not go into much detail about this. Although (as indicated in the stanza 8) Serena left her son with her mother; she did not immediately say this. It was surprising to me that Serena did not say much about leaving her son, yet she later described this as causing the saddest period of her life. Instead, Serena quickly explained the sequential family reunification. Only after clarifying that the separation was short, and that she and her husband worked hard to reintegrate the family, she went back to elaborate the separation experience. This time, she provided more details to this story, such as the fact that she left her son with her mother. A standardized linear account would have given the following arrangement to the main elements:

1. Origin of the story: Immigration
2. Consequences: Leaving the son with her mother
3. Resolution: Bringing the son to Pittsburgh

In its place, Serena ordered her tale around the significance of the events. For her, the most difficult moment was the separation, as she indicated during the second interview. Accordingly, the happiest day of her life was the moment of reunification, as she mentioned in the first interview. Her tale was organized in the following way:

1. Origin of the story: To immigrate, leaving her son behind
2. Resolution: To bring the son to Pittsburgh
3. Details of the story: To leave the son with her mother

The two excerpts from Serena's interview, the one about her brother and the one on separation, are stories within the story. To understand their significance as integral parts of

Serena's larger narrative, it is necessary to understand that the family separation episode came after she first spoke about how people in her region are used to migrating and then secondly spoke about her brother's heroism. In addition, the telling of the separation from her son came before a third episode in which she addressed extensively her expectations as a mother with regards to her children's education. This represents specific cultural values and scripts: "That's what mothers do" (stanza 16). In this context, examples appear to provide some thematic information about Serena's identity or about her mothering experience. However, paying attention to the configuration of the story allows for an alternative interpretation in which Serena constructs a sense of herself deeply concerned with social judgment. Taking this into consideration allowed me to better understand the possible reasons why Serena wanted us to first know that she took her son back and, only after this point was clarified, provided additional details for her story.

In my view, Serena's organization of her tale is a personal strategy to ease the memories of a difficult and sad moment in her life. She was also concerned with social judgment and she did not want to give the impression of having abandoned her son. This is supported by the fact that, in the second interview, Serena declared to still have guilty feelings when thinking about that time of family separation. Although an in-depth analysis of the social pressure and social judgment on immigrant mothers will be presented in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, it can be said here that the perception of social judgments was not uncommon. Microanalyses like these take the story to a new level of consistency within the personal stories of each participant, within the general study, and among participants.

A second level of analysis uses a broader view of Serena's account. At this level it is also possible to see that Serena moved back and forth among different topics. She spoke about her



work experience in Peru several times and, at different moments of her narrative, restated the importance of her family. Interestingly, throughout the interview, she often went back to many of the issues she first mentioned in the opening passage. As stanzas 18 and 19 show, Serena returned to the description of her family's efforts to support her and her children, and she reported on her current efforts to do the same for her children. Finally, she also returned to issues of home, distance, and melancholy, which were very present at the opening as well. She ends with an important remark, "I am a fighter," which provided her own conclusion to her story. It was as if, in final comment about herself, she understood the direction of the story she just told, and those words acted as a summary of her narratives on identity. Nonetheless, that was the only time in which she directly addressed a personal quality not related to age or geographical origin. The number of "I am" was small in her account. Still, by using it at the very end, she was able to give a strong and deliberate closure to her story.

In the video interview, Serena comes across as a strong woman. She was also very centered on what she was saying, and aware of the camera. She looked straight into it almost all of the time. Her eyes wandered only when she repeated the question, "*Who am I?*" Additionally, during the interview she kept the same body position. She sat on a sofa in her living room. She looked comfortable, but not completely relaxed. Some times she crossed one of her arms along her chest holding her other arm. Other times she relaxed both arms leaning her hands on her lap and playing with the ring on her right hand. Her legs were uncrossed, but she restlessly moved her feet sideways while repeating the question to herself. Although Serena looked somewhat uncomfortable when she did not know what to say, she appeared much more relaxed, especially in her facial expressions, after starting a storyline. In general, Serena did not have many doubts or hesitations. Her voice was loud and clear. Her hands and facial expressions accompanied her

words only when she wanted to emphasize something. For instance, when she said that her brother was a hero, she opened her hands and brought them to her chest in a fast movement of assertion. Overall, Serena's story was, within its own logic, well organized and it effectively communicated her views about herself.

In contrast with Serena's narrative, Marisol's story was topic-centered and very successful in conveying certain points. Like Serena, Marisol also explained meaningful experiences of her life in greater detail, but followed a precise chronological assembly. The way in which Marisol presented her story made it easy to follow and remember. Table 2.0 gives examples of Marisol's story's organization.

**Table 2. Marisol: Linear Account**

<b>Table 2.0. Marisol: Linear Account</b>	
A. Opening:	1. Well, eh... Who am I? That's the kind of question you answer every day, I think that you are your experiences
B. Childhood:	2. I was born in Puerto Rico 3. From my parents' marriage I have two sisters, from my mother's first marriage a sister, and from my fathers' first marriage I have a brother and a sister 4. Growing up I was shy ... I always considered myself an intelligent person 5. up to today is something that defines me, my friends 6. when I was nine years old my mother took me to ballet lessons (...) To dance allowed me to be the Marisol I wanted to be and I could not be
C. Youth:	7. The first year of college I met my husband. The year of my life. He was completely different from other young men 8. I met him in a period in which I started to be who I am now, the Marisol of today. 9. My first professional job was here in the United States [as a dancer] he was only an hour away 10. This profession definitively defined who Marisol is today [talks in 3rd person] 11. He [husband] graduated 5 years later and we moved to D.C, he got a job. We were already married ... I auditioned for the local ballet company and I got the job. We were very excited, we never lived together before
D. Adult life:	12. I arrived first ... when he arrived I was already installed in our apartment and then he asked --my closet?-- and I said --well this is small, the one on the room, so I got you that one, no that one no [he said]—and that was our first fight 13. At that point Marisol was very much defined [she uses the 3rd person]. 14. I have always been proud of where I come from and that I have tried to pass it down to my son 15. But coming back to D.C., we lived there for five years and then we moved to Germany 16. We started talking about having a family. There started the saddest time of my life

E. Getting pregnant:	17. that was the closest thing to hell. For three years I did what I had to do to get pregnant 18. I developed a hard shell I didn't know I had 19. Then we moved to Mexico ... we were ready for adoption 20. we went to the Cathedral the birthday of the Virgin of Guadalupe and prayed for that child. That was in December and in February I got pregnant 21. And then a new period for Marisol started
F. Son:	22. my son arrived and a teacher arrived. He is like an old Marisol, like my mother says. I adore him 23. Every day I pretend to be a mom ... but I learn from him 24. I ask that the world treats him well
G. Friends:	25. my friends are still one of the most important parts of my life ... I identify with them
H. Now:	26. I am leaving now a period that I don't know if I like it. It is that period in which your father becomes your son and you become the father ahhh... 27. My mother died three years ago ... My father has Alzheimer 28. I would like to laugh more 29. But I am also in a very spiritual time of my life. 30. I did not talk about my profession now. After start being a mother, and mothering became my work, I decided that I still needed that creative part. Three years ago I started to design clothes. 31. I think about my son's life. He is more independent every day. He'll go to college. He'll want to try life and I will get into a new period
I. Conclusions:	32. Yolanda I arrived again to who I am... ahhh... the daughter of Juan and Ana, the spouse of Mario, the mother of Sergio, the sister of Teresa, Lourdes, Lidia and Alfonso, the friend of many.... Ahhh... I don't know if this answers your question about who I am ... Marisol is Marisol, sea and sun [mar and sol in Spanish] I grew up like that, and I love a day like this, I love it.

Sociologist Barbara Laslett (1999) said that most people create narratives that pinpoint specific times and geographical spaces. Clearly, this was the case for Marisol. The linear chronological order helped Marisol build the story of her life. She had a clear idea about how to construct a powerful story, and she structured her narrative to reflect this. Even if her narrative was one of most linear accounts analyzed for this research, linearity should not be mistaken with simplicity. Linear accounts often use an array of strategies to bring unexpected turns into the narration, and keep the attention of the reader/listener.

Marisol's story was catchy precisely because of the organization of her story. She used specific linguistic markers to introduce the different periods of her life, but also to make it appealing for the listener. For instance, in stanza 16, she said that "there started the saddest time

of my life;” and in stanza 21 she said “and then a new period for Marisol started.” Marisol used at least two communicative strategies. First, consciously or unconsciously, she divided her life into chapters which she then described. Marisol framed those periods by starting with introductory sentences or statements that acted as titles. By using dramatic wordings, like “the saddest,” she was able to foster the listener’s expectation for the upcoming story. Second Marisol used the third person, at very specific times (see stanzas 10, 13, 21). Used sparsely, this strategy had the power to intensify the validity of her accounts, since it positioned Marisol as a genuine, and almost neutral, storyteller. Another interesting aspect of Marisol’s linear narrative is that she was able to elaborate independent stories with a beginning, core, and conclusion; and was able to connect them to the next passage in a seemingly effortless manner. If, by using small anecdotic parenthesis, she lost track of her thoughts or her narration, she repositioned the listener at the right time and space with markers like, “But going back to D.C.” (stanza 15). In this way, she injected flashes of unpredictability into her account resulting in the rendering of a more dynamic narration.

Besides the general linear account embedded in Marisol’s tale, she finished the interview with a sudden circular turn: “Yolanda, I arrived again to who I am” (stanza 32). Once more, Marisol used her signature style to announce the next passage, in which she repeated her family line, and enumerated the roles she had experienced in her life: “I am the daughter of ..., the spouse of ..., the mother of ...” By doing this, Marisol was responding to the question with which she opened her account: “Who am I? That’s the kind of question you answer everyday. I think that you are your experiences” (stanza 1). Marisol concluded her tale by consciously reaffirming herself as a person in interaction with others. Marisol’s tendency towards linearity could have come from her familiarity with the American culture. As a Puerto Rican, she was

fluent in English and did not have many of the stigmas that other immigrants can carry, such as migratory status. Still, ethnically and culturally, Marisol classified herself as a Latina who “moved to the United States” as if it were a different country.

Like Serena, Marisol sat on a couch in front of the camera. Marisol, however, sat with her legs on the sofa. She was drinking tea. Her dog was beside her. Her tone was calmer than Serena’s, and she spoke slower. She tended to smile more, something that Serena did rarely, and moved her hands less to accompany her tale. Marisol did not look into the camera, and lowered her eyes only when she remembered the time in which she wanted to get pregnant. At that moment, she reached her dog and cuddled his back. It was clearly an emotional moment for her. She did not cry, but her look got serious and she stopped her account for few seconds. At that moment Marisol, who always appeared secure and comfortable, looked vulnerable. A similar vulnerability emerged again when she mentioned that her father was sick.

Serena and Marisol had two different ways of narrating their own stories, two different views and interpretations of the world and their own experiences. In other words, in the process of telling about themselves, Marisol and Serena exposed what Brunner (1990) calls narrative postures or schemas. While Serena explored the question “*Who are you?*” by describing meaningful experiences organized as personal priorities, Marisol responded with a straightforward chronological dissection of her life into which she inserted pockets of significant life episodes. Besides their differences, it is important to notice that the two women understood the question in very similar ways. Both decided to speak about themselves by telling about their lives, experiences, and relationships with others.

Like Serena, the rest of the participants tended to unfold their stories using non-linear narratives. In general, after the first introductory passage, most participants started explaining

were they came from. Many told about their past, family, childhood, and profession in the home country. After this common introduction, which probably served as an icebreaker, most of the participants engaged in a variety of narrative directions that, typically, were not organized linearly, or along a specific chronological order. In fact, most of them moved back and forth in time and space, alternating stories from their past and home country with more recent experiences in Pittsburgh. Sometimes it was difficult to follow the order of their plots, because they lacked markers such as "now," "then," "after that," and so on. Instead, they used their relationships to substitute those markers. Consequently, with the exception of Serena when she talked about her older son, most of the participants who used circular narratives talked about their children while indicating their experiences in the recent past, the present, or in Pittsburgh. Conversely, when participants talked about their parents, they situated themselves in the past, and before migration. The meaningful understanding of their stories requires considering the structure, as well as the content of the participants' narratives.

Chapter 1 argues that motherhood is culturally specific. This specificity also applies to the narratives that women develop around their identities and views of mothering in the context of migration. There was not enough evidence, however, to prove whether participants tended to deploy a circular narrative because of their non-Western cultural background or as a consequence of the openness of the "*Who are you?*" question. Perhaps it was both reasons. Previous research shows that some minorities develop narratives that seem less well organized by some standards. However, this does not mean that they are less meaningful or informative.

### 3.4 FINAL REFLECTIONS ON NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY

For Bruner (1990) narratives are the very process by which people attach meaning to particular experiences, events, objects, and subjects. In order for people to convey those meanings to others, they create stories with the aim to be intelligible. Straightforward accounts like Marisol's, were not the norm, though. During my second encounter with the participants, the main concern they voiced while remembering the first interview was, as Clara said, "I hope I made sense." Interesting enough, they did not express any concern for the videotape. Some of them had the impression to have forgotten something relevant to mention and nobody wanted to retract anything that was said in the first interview. Instead, all of the participants shared the fear of being incomprehensible. They wanted to make lucid narrations of their lives, and clear their stories from possible contradictions. The structure of narration, then, is important not only for the listener, but also for the storyteller. Their concerns were not as related to what they said, as to how they said it. Of course it is important to clarify that the former intrinsically depends upon the later. The first problem for many participants was understanding the question itself. For instance, Carmen said at the very beginning of the first interview:

Quien soy yo... no se... espera... tengo que pensar [5 seg. pausa] Ya pues, supongo que si lo pienso tanto es porque tal vez no estoy muy segura de la respuesta.

Who am I... don't know... wait... I have to think [5 sec. pause] Well, I guess if I think that much about it is because I am not that sure of the answer.

Since everyone answered, I do not believe that the question itself was at the root of the struggle. The problem instead was its novelty and the challenge of articulating the answer for the audience and translating into language cultural conventions, thoughts, and experiences that were often felt, rather than consciously thought. The participants had to bring into reality a self that

existed within contexts that were often implicit or assumed, and that only emerged through narratives. As Clara said, “I never thought about me, not in this way.” People in general are not used to talk about themselves. They speak, rather, about specific experiences or events in life, but are not generally prepared to ensemble meaningful experiences from the past to build on and create who they are now. However, all of the participants, some with more trepidation than others, constructed narratives around the idea of themselves. All of them collected various stories to represent who they were and, most important for this research, they included stories about their children and their roles as mothers. But those stories were not isolated. They interacted with tales about the participant’s own childhood, their relationships with other family members, the migration experience, and other significant events in their lives. This proves that women who mother consider this role a privilege, but are not reduced to it, or by it. To understand the ways in which a woman interprets her mothering experience, it is necessary to take into consideration her general account on identity and the ways in which that role emerges in the narration process. For instance, while in Marisol’s tale her son appeared as an important guide for her present and future life, for Serena the children were mentioned in connection with personal dilemmas of cultural belonging. These examples prove that to study motherhood from a decentering perspective can still bring significant knowledge about this role, and the ways in which women interpret it, and incorporate it into their sense of themselves.

### **3.4.1 Unsolved Dilemmas**

Narratives present some limitations on the study of identities that need to be addressed. The ability of a person to express herself in the context of an interview depends upon a combination of numerous factors, which can be grouped into three overlapping categories. First, aspects



concerning the interview situation, such as the grade of inhibition a person may feel in front of the camera (as in my research) or the interviewer, the tranquility of the setting, the participant's notion of how her account will be used and will benefit her, the community, or others in general. Second, personality traits of the interviewee (e.g., shyness, extroversion, openness, confidence, or propensity to be reflexive) may be influential. Third, the social and structural skills that the person has developed through her lifetime influences the forms and styles she may be able to adopt to describe herself. For instance, gender, education level, and class status may be included in this category.

Postmodernists like Butler (1993) and Foucault (1990), and poststructuralists like Bourdieu, consider that a subject makes him/herself intelligible through knowledge and narratives that are always embedded in specific discourses of power. When talking about identity, a person engages in a process deeply linked to social indoctrination –whether this is habitus for Bourdieu, or performativity for Butler. Such instructions happen mostly in the context of repetitive performances and meaningful discourses, but according to Kauffman (2006), can also occur at the narrative level. With that in mind, a clear difference was noticeable in the ways in which highly educated women portrayed themselves as compared with the rest. Benjamina and Simona, the two graduate students, used more sophisticated language, and were very critical about encapsulating themselves into narrow descriptions. They were more concerned about not being than being, and this came across in the complexity of their narratives. Additionally, they seemed more conscious about the form in which they were presenting their stories. For instance, when Benjamina said, “this is how I want to finish this interview,” she was taking charge of its content and shape. For the other participants, I did not observe any particular gap in language and narrative complexity between women with college education and the others.

A significant methodological dilemma rose in the process through which I identified meaningful events and experiences in the participants' stories. What was important to me could not have been a driving force for them, and vice versa. Analyzing data in qualitative research requires of a careful reflexive approach on the topics we include, and why. The same is true for those topics we decide to leave out of the analysis and the reasons for it (Elliot 2005). An example of this impasse regarded repetitions. How significant is a topic that has not been fully explored, but nonetheless is mentioned in several occasions during the interview? Should I center only on those topics that have been developed, disregarding the others? Although I found some literature on the persuasive effect of repetition as a strategy to generate emotional involvement with the audience (Yemenici 2002), questions of hierarchical classification and cross-cultural validity of inferences remained unanswered. Consequently, it was challenging for me to make decisions on what seemed to be more important for the participants. In order to do so, I had to rely on a variety of signals, besides the repetition aspect and the length of their plots, I observed also the emotion of their voice, their body language, the long pauses, and so on. Still, the issue of repetition is a subject that needs to be further explored.

Finally, here are some concluding observations to end this chapter. First, the opening passages are relevant to understanding the rest of the interview and its unfolding. Second, participants mentioned their children and/or mothering experiences mostly to explain relationships with other people outside of the mother/child bond. In most cases, the topic of motherhood was extensively discussed after talking about their families, particularly about their parents. Those external relationships shaped the women's identities and their views of mothering. Third, although few of the participants adopted a linear order of telling, which is typical of Western cultures, most of them gave a circular organization to their narratives. Rather

than seeing time as evolving from the past to the present and the future, they made a loop in which the past was used to explain mostly the present and, at the same time, the present allowed for specific readings of the past. Interesting enough, few references were made to the future. In other words, to mother in the migration context does not simply depend on the influence of previous models (e.g., one's own mother), but is rather based on models and experiences from the past subject to reinterpretations, and whether or not they can help explain migrant mothers' present.

## **4.0 FINDINGS**

### **4.1 THE TRANSNATIONAL SELF: STRATEGIES OF CONTINUITY**

This chapter presents the ways in which migrant mothers' identities are shaped within the migration context, based on two main topics: social expectations and ideas of home. Although the limited sample size and the extensive variety of responses made it difficult to generalize on the data based on the thematic analysis, one topic was present in most of the participants' narrative accounts: social expectations. The first part of this chapter exposes the existing social demands for Latino immigrant women to perform motherhood within certain cultural canons. Different ways of understanding mothering practices culturally influenced the social images and expectations held by Latino mothers in the sending society. Remarkably, the mothers in this research perceived such demands coming from two different sources, namely the receiving society and their own home countries. The following pages explore women's responses to those occasionally conflicting positions, and how these responses frame their identity formation. As shown later on in the chapter, the notion of limiting social stereotypes related to the participants' ethnic origins influenced their roles and identities as mothers. Participants then, understood stereotypes about motherhood as being intrinsically related to stereotypes about Latinas. At the same time, participants in this research stated that they received even stronger pressure from the family left behind. In this case, the sending society expected mothers to be cultural carriers for

their children without taking into account the economic social and cultural realities found in the new society. The tensions created around children's education transformed in many cases the established relationships with those family members who remained in the home country, in particular their own mothers.

While the role of social expectations was clearly identifiable as a leading presence in the women's narratives, the topic of home was more implicit. The second set of interviews with many of the participants allowed for the clarification of the participants' views and experiences of home, which contributed to elaborate a framework on identity construction and motherhood. The participants conceptualized home as a stable, permanent place. In spite of the changes immigration brought into participants' lives, keeping home static helped them maintain a sense of personal stability and continuity in contrast to their transforming selves. Immigrant mothers' peculiar constructions of home, and the ways in which their relationships with their children and other family members shaped this understanding are the foci of the second part of this chapter. Within narratives of home, children emerged as reference points through which the mothers understand the differences they see in themselves and their social relationships between, before, and after, migration. Mothering in the context of migration appears not only as a political and cultural practice, but also as a conceptual element to negotiate adjustment and change. This chapter develops as a reflection on the practices of identity and the ways in which migrants reposition themselves in time and space.

## 4.2 MOTHERHOOD, IDENTITY AND SOCIETY

### 4.2.1 Fitting In, Fitting Out

How do Latina mothers interpret general social perceptions of themselves as women, immigrants, mothers, and Latinas? How do they adopt cross-cultural images of ‘being a good mother’? What happens when the expected social standards diverge from their personal perceptions or expectations of themselves? Because of these issues’ complexity and breadth of immigrant life, aspects of social image emerged during most of the interviews and, therefore were one of the main targets of analysis. Participants invariably narrated their experiences through their perceptions of how others see them. Some women also elaborated on the impact of these perceptions on their identities and self-conceptions. Since migrant mothers often come from cultural backgrounds that contrast and challenge prevailing American discourses on “ideal motherhood” -the white middle-class stay-at-home style- (Hill Collins 1994), Latinas often offer diverse ways of understanding and practicing motherhood that are cast as “different” by the receiving society (Liam 1999, Liamputtong 2001). The following paragraphs argue that such constructions of practices as “different” entail a cultural view of “normalcy” that places assimilative pressure on mothers who, in turn tend to adjust their practices, and themselves consequently, to the new cultural and social context.

Despite the social and relational aspects of parenting, social persuasion and intervention do not ultimately replace parents’ accountability. In most instances, from a social perspective, parents are responsible for their children’s wellbeing and social adjustment. At the same time, the children’s social success implies a certain social judgment on the ways their parents have raised them. In this way, and in spite of the existing fabricated divisions addressed in Chapter 1,

the social and the personal remain inseparable, and therefore invite us to address motherhood from a double prism. As McMahon (1995) says, the hidden public dimension of motherhood accentuates the paradox of mothering because, even if motherhood extends beyond the direct relation mother-children, ultimately, mothers are in most cases, the bearers of final responsibility. Ana's case is an example of this:

No soy lo que ellos esperan de mí, ¿sabes? Los demás, la gente, los americanos, la familia de mi marido .... si, no soy lo que ellos esperan que yo sea. Yo hago lo que puedo o por lo menos lo intento [pausa] o tal vez soy yo. En este país, con los niños se hace difícil ¿sabes?

I am not what they expect me to be, you know? The others, the people, the Americans, my husband's family ... yes, I am not what they expect me to be. I do my best, at least I try [pause] or, maybe it's me. With the children, in this country, it's difficult, you know?

During the first encounter with Ana, she did not realize she was pinpointing a key question in family theory: Is motherhood a social or individual act? Although in Western societies parenting is far from being a collective practice (Imamoglu and Karakitapoglu-Aygün 2006), the motherhood role is deeply rooted in cultural prescriptions and social standards (Mooney 2009, Rich 1986, Ruddick 1989). Indeed, immigrant women are immersed in a series of social relationships in which their roles as mothers are highlighted. Motherhood becomes another of the many referents to position the immigrant. Yet, during collective arrangement, as Simmel (1908) emphasized in his essay about *The Stranger*, people tend to perceive differences over similarities, to the point of creating additional differences. Although Simmel considered the receiving society as the main agent instituting differences between the “natives” and the “newcomers,” it is argued here that, in this process, the outsider plays an active role. As identity definitions necessarily entail the double process of recognizing who and what we are, as well as who and what we are not (Hall 1996), immigrants engage in the self-distinction process by

identifying aspects belonging to them and differentiating themselves from the dominant practices in the host country. This process of identification, however, entails many emotional challenges related to the awareness of difference. In other words, taking into consideration that identity are social processes that also generate constructs of differentiation (Simmel 1908, Valenzuela 1998) it is understandable that for many participants, the newly acquired immigrant status also implied unexpected constructions with political, cultural and social distinctions. Personal identities are also part of these constructions of difference.

Ana's words convey her sense of difference, her "I am not." To adjust to the new society, newcomers pay close attention to dominant social standards. At the same time, the process of identifying the host's values, traditions, and norms also implies the discovery of immigrants' cultural, social, and personal distinctions. Such uniqueness triggers in turn an intimate inquiry about one's position in the world, since understanding identity as an ongoing process is deeply embedded in our personal history as well as in our histories and relationships (Gergen 1994). It was no surprise that, during the first round of interviews, all of the participants expressed contrasting feelings about their immersion in the new culture. Some of them had very positive experiences, such as Marisol, who affirmed that she never felt to be a stranger. Yet Marisol, together with Benjamina, were an exception. The remainder of the participants highlighted that, as immigrants, they felt different, and did not always feel at ease with their difference. For instance Flor, a Venezuelan accountant in her forties, said during the first interview:

Soy latina, vivo en un país extraño donde hay culturas diferentes, donde hay una lengua diferente al español...donde me he sentido algunas veces, eh, fuera de lugar, eh, me he sentido que no entiendo lo que me hablan, que no entiendo, eh, muchas, eh, comportamientos de otras personas que son diferentes a los valores y a la, y a mi propia cultura...he aprendido viviendo en este país a aprender a diferenciar que existen diferentes culturas...



I am Latina, I live in a foreign country, where there are different cultures, the language is different from Spanish ...where I have sometimes, um, felt out of place, um, I have felt I cannot understand what they say to me, that I don't understand, um, many, um, people's behaviors which are different from my values, and from my own culture... I have learned while living in this country to differentiate that there are different cultures...

Migration pushed Flor into repositioning her identity with regards to a differing cultural experience. As will be discussed further in the next section, her feelings of being “out of place” are not unusual among immigrants. Although Ana and Flor engaged in subjective processes of personal and social re-positioning, they were aware of others’ influence on their self-perceptions. At times it was difficult for them to identify exactly who these influential “others” were and offer specific examples of their power over the women’s identity. The vagueness of the participants’ accounts is, however, quite understandable, especially considering that to talk about society entails identifying and accounting for complex tendencies and abstract presences. However, the non-figurative power of the dominant culture impacts many aspects of immigrants’ lives, including the constructions of gender that regulate family and social relations (Butler 1990, Collins 1994). The next two sections aim to show two distinctive dialectics in which immigrant mothers engage. The first one deals with the receiving society, and the second with their own sending societies.

#### **4.2.2 The Receiving Society: Perceptions of Otherness**

This section will explore Natasha and Clara's stories and their accounts of conflicting social images of motherhood. Their narratives testify to the challenge of keeping an ongoing dialogue among personal, social, and cultural expectations. Clara is a Chilean stay-at-home mother of two, in her late thirties, who, at the time of the interview, had been in the United States for almost 12

years. She was one of the participants who included her children most often in her narratives. This is understandable considering that her older daughter, Elvira, has a mental and physical disorder. As Clara stated, her daughter's condition changed her life significantly, to the point that she felt that all her decisions must first accommodate her family needs. For instance, one of her reasons for living in Pittsburgh was the excellent medical and educational support available for her daughter. Despite the importance Clara gave to her family life, she contested some of the stereotypes about Latino mothers:

[S]oy latina, sí, aunque yo a veces no esté muy de acuerdo [con esa clasificación], sí, estoy de acuerdo, pero creo que es una clasificación tan, no se, tan... que viene tan de fuera, que aunque la acepto, estoy orgullosa de ser latina, pero no creo que yo sea la típica latina, y no se como casar esas dos cosas. Mira, yo no parezco la típica latina, o al menos no soy la bajita morenita que todos se esperan encontrar. No, y no soy esa mami Latina que muchas maestras, por ejemplo, esperan encontrar, creo que cuando la gente oye la palabra latina se, este, se pierde en una serie de imágenes que no van conmigo... no para nada...me sigo considerando una profesional, sí, todavía pienso en mí como en una profesional que tiene un lapsus en su carrera, pero no soy de esas mamás sacrificadas, tú me entiendes?...Soy una mamá dedicada, pero no una mamá sacrificada...

I am Latina, yes, although sometimes I do not agree much [with this label], yes, I agree, but I feel it is a classification that is so, I don't know, so... from the outside, although I accept it, and I am proud to be Latina, I don't think I am the typical Latina, and I do not know how to join these two things. You see, I do not look like a typical Latina, at least I am not the short and brown skinned woman that everybody expects. No, and I am not that Latino mom that most teachers, for instance, expect. I think that when people hear the word 'Latina,' they get lost in a bunch of images that do not fit me... not at all...I still consider myself a professional, yes, I still think about me as a professional who took a break in a career, but I am not like those sacrificed mothers...I am a dedicated mother, but not a sacrificed one...

In this passage from the first interview, Clara shows her concerns with social images and constructions of two important aspects of her life: ethnicity and motherhood. For her, these two dimensions entailed symbolic representations that translated into specific social arrangements that strived to shape her actions. Clara's words questioned stereotypical classifications, and

challenged social expectations. She articulated the answer to the question, “*Who are you?*” by stating “who she is not.” Although she did not use an assertive language of dissent, as Ana did, her tale unfolded with obvious reservations about who she should be according to others' points of view. The way in which Clara put together and contested the two main labels on her life (motherhood and Latino ethnicity) was particularly poignant and meaningful: “I am not that Latino mom that most teachers, for instance, expect.” In fact, she could not separate her Latino identity from her mother identity. In the new society - Pittsburgh - she could only perceive herself as a Latino mother at all times. Clara’s life is dedicated to her children, particularly her older daughter. When socializing in American culture, she spent most of her time talking and collaborating with educators and health assistants. Consequently, her Latina perceptions were collected mostly throughout her experiences as a parent. This is something that notably contrasted with her husband’s experiences. He is a fulltime employee of an important firm and, as Clara stated during the second interview, he had to deal with being Latino “in a very different way.” When requested to offer examples, Clara mentioned that some people at her husband’s work did not know of Elvira’s condition. Clara instead felt on the other side of the spectrum since most of her socializing experiences were for and through Elvira.

Although Clara’s family situation was exceptional, it still shows the gender dimension of social labeling, and the way in which motherhood contributes to such classification. The stereotypes for Latino fathers involve the maintenance of their breadwinner status rather than a direct change on their fathering practices (Mirandé 2008). However, as long as men are employed, their fathering position/prestige does not radically change as much in the new culture as it does for immigrant mothers. Like Clara, immigrant mothers are much more likely than their male partners to interact with other parents and with official institutions, like schools and health

care providers. Given that culture-based standards for parenting are more likely to emerge in environments concerned with childcare, women are more vulnerable to be judged for their roles as mothers.

Mothers are subject to social standards of difference in peculiar ways that indistinctively incorporate their national/ethnic origins into their parenting role and vice versa. Clara was very aware of the social spaces that were available for her as a Latina mother living in the migration context, and she saw them as disguised limits to her personal freedom. On several occasions during the first interview, Clara pointed to the ways in which the migrant status introduced her to different understandings of her role as a mother, as well as her ethnic cultural background. For example, although she did not reject the “Latina” label, she did refuse the established *a priori* ideas about Latinas. Similarly, she loved being a mother, but she did not see herself as the classic “loving-by-nature” mother. At the social level, Clara’s position questioned dominant understandings of both motherhood and Latinas. At the personal level, her role as mother and her ethnic origins filtered through the eyes of a foreign culture and embodied new perceptions of herself. This social/personal paradigm of transformation emerged at various times. In her attempt to make sense of her position in the host society, Clara differentiated herself from the classic Latino/motherhood stereotypes, and at the same time, approached American society with a sense of sameness:

Yo cuando hablo con otras mamis en mi misma posición con un hijo enfermo, pues ellas no son latinas y te aseguro que están tan dedicadas como yo, ni más ni menos. Y eso, pues también soy una mamá a la que le gusta estar enterada de las cosas que pasan, que busca información, y a veces pienso como que les viene de nuevo, tú me entiendes? No lo esperan, no se si porque creen que si eres latina pues no tienes estudios, o no te interesa... se lo esperan de una madre americana, por qué no se lo pueden esperar de mí, por que soy latina? Porque hablo con acento? Porque yo me parezco a ellas, no soy tan diferente, podría pasar por americana perfectamente...

When I speak with other mothers in my same position, with a sick child, well, they are not Latinas, but I guarantee that they are as dedicated as I am, no more, no less. And well, I am also a mom who likes to know what it going on, who searches for information, and sometimes I think that it is new for them, do you understand me? They do not expect it, I don't know if is because they believe that if you are Latina well, then you don't have an education or you are just not interested...they expect it from an American mother, why don't they expect it from me, because I am Latina? Because I speak with an accent? Because I am like them, I am not that different, I could perfectly pass as American...

Clara's dichotomy of being a Latino mother, but not being "the" Latino mother some Americans expected, had a counterpart in her search for similarities with American mothers who are in her same situation (i.e., with a special-needs child). To do so, Clara addressed motherhood outside of her ethnic background, and concentrated on her position of the mother of a special-needs child: "They are as dedicated as I am, no more, no less." After this brief parenthesis, she quickly came back to her awareness of being perceived through an inescapable ethnic/cultural lens. She reproached the teachers' surprise in her involvement in her daughter education: "I think that it is new for them." During my second encounter with Clara, we talked extensively about her experiences with the educational system and the bias against non-American mothers. Despite being happy with the education and support her daughter received in Pittsburgh, she could not avoid feeling bitter for being treated differently. However, when asked if she could provide an example of those instances, she could not point out to a specific event. To the contrary, she mentioned she felt her daughter was treated in a right and fair way. For Clara, the perception of social stereotypes was at the level of personal intuition. The intangible feelings linked to her mother role, though, were strong enough to motivate Clara's adjustment to the new society at two levels. First, it regulated her behaviors. For instance, in her attempt to break the stereotype, she became more involved in her daughter's school, and she organized talks around children's safety and health. Second, she questioned her identity as a Latina and as a mother. The fact that

she is a Latina because others classify her that way, but at the same time feeling she “could perfectly pass by an American” re-creates Du Bois’ tridimensional concept of double consciousness (Levering Lewis 1995). First, it echoes the power that the dominant group's social stereotypes have over minorities. Second, it confirms Clara’s understanding that her mothering style is judged to be inseparable from her ethnic origins (as Latina), which creates a paradoxical inclusion/exclusion from the dominant group. Third, it represents the internal conflicts of being a mother and a Latina.

Clara’s double consciousness is perhaps aggravated by Pittsburgh's peculiar context. That is, a city with a relatively small rate of new immigrants, and where the Latino population lacks political representation. The participants depicted Pittsburgh as having established Latina stereotypes that were difficult to escape. Although a few of the participants openly agreed with attributions such as “happy” (alegres), “good dancers,” or “family oriented,” in general they felt inhibited by negative stereotypes, such as “illegal,” “lazy,” or “ignorant.” This was the case for Natasha, a 41 Mexican woman, mother of 3. Natasha lived in New York for several years before moving to Pittsburgh, and was having a tough time escaping the classic Latina stereotypes:

Aquí [en Pittsburgh] siempre soy la extranjera, la mejicana, pero que no parece mejicana, o la latina que tampoco parece latina, porque ¿dónde está mi pelo negro largo? ¿los ojos? no se, que vestida con tacones y faldas y súper diferente que lo latino...creo que estoy en una de las épocas más difíciles de mi vida porque no estoy aquí bien, no me siento como me sentía en New York, y creo que es la primera vez que en verdad estoy viviendo en Estados Unidos aunque llevo doce años en New York...

Here [in Pittsburgh] I am always the foreigner, the Mexican, but that doesn't look Mexican, or the Latina who does not look like a Latina either, because, where is my long, dark hair? the eyes? I don't know, I dress with high heels and skirts... very different from the Latino...I think this is one of the most difficult periods of my life because I don't feel good here, I don't feel like I did in New York, and I think this is the very first time I am living in the United States, even though I lived for 12 years in New York...

Those *a priori* images of Latinas that Natasha denounces in her first interview shaped her interactions with the receiving community, and had a negative effect on the way Natasha perceives herself as migrant and as Latina. Similar to Clara, but in a more explicit way, Natasha has mixed feelings about the Latino community in general. On the one hand, she did not want to be confused with “them” because as she said “we are very different.” On the other hand, she felt guilty for a sense of betrayal to her own people. It is important to highlight that, contrary to what she experienced in New York, Natasha observed strong negative Latino stereotypes in Pittsburgh. That was the reason why she intentionally tried to escape that category at first. Natasha’s response to discrimination in Pittsburgh was to limit her contacts with the Latino community, which in turn intensified her feelings of non-belonging.

Pittsburgh’s lack of familiarity with Latino immigrants deeply changed Natasha’s social relationships and self-identification. While being a Latina was never an issue in New York, to be a Latina in Pittsburgh became problematic. Natasha’s feelings were a central aspect of her narrative. They emerged through a variety of situations that went beyond the issues of cultural adaptation. Still, they were all strongly connected with immigration. For instance, she expressed her disappointment with her professional career. When she moved to Pittsburgh, she left her job and she became fully dedicated to her children. Now that her children are growing up and becoming more independent, she was trying to re-invent herself professionally. She started a new career, but she felt other women her age were more established, whereas she was still trying to figure out what to do. Natasha was grateful for the time she spent with her children, but also felt that mothering kept her “out of this planet” for ten years.

Pienso a veces en poner mi propio negocio, pero como soy extranjera siento que debo aprender bien como funcionan las cosas...después de diez años llego a la escuela y resulta que todo es en computadora, todo tecnológico, la manera de hacerlo es completamente diferente, y eso fue un shock muy grande para mí. Creo que ha

sido de los más grandes [sorpresas o retos], el sentirme que por diez años en donde me dedique a mis hijos, como que me salí del planeta...

I've thought of opening my own business, but since I am foreigner I feel I have to learn how things work well first...after 10 years, I went to school and everything is done with computers. Everything is technological. The way to do it is completely different and this was a big shock to me. I think it has been one of the biggest [surprises or challenges], to feel that the 10 years I dedicated to my children was like I was out of this planet...

In their ideal form, social images of mothers acknowledge and recognize their contribution to society as caretakers. Natasha did not perceive her experience as mother in that way. Her immigrant status put her at a disadvantage in the mother image negotiation. Natasha's words tell us about her professional concerns, which she linked to seeing herself as a foreigner. Like Clara, Natasha's identity dilemma as a mother and as a Latina parallel Du Bois' concept of twoness. Natasha's view of her social participation in the form of maternal care was paradoxically, the main reason she felt separated from society. That is, the 10 years dedicated to her family represented her alienation from society in other aspects that are also part of her life and that define her as a person as well, such as her job and career. The time during which she was "out of this planet" represents an interval in which she was mostly seen as a Latino mother.

Natasha was in the difficult process of claiming a new identity independent from her role as a mother. However, she was still struggling with the way in which her children were growing up. For instance, even if Natasha wanted to pass the Mexican culture down to her three children, she believed they were already too "Americanized" and she could do little to change that. I inquired more about this during the second interview, and she replied that because she understood the negative connotations of being Mexican in a society like Pittsburgh, she unconsciously sabotaged that aspect of the family education:

No se porqué lo hago, lo hago sin darme cuenta. Pero es cierto que los demás



nos ven tan malos, o tan poquita cosa (...) y yo no quiero que mis hijos se sientan así, yo no quiero que se les limite porque sus padres son mexicanos, entiendes? Quiero que se sientan orgullosos de ser Latinos, pero no quiero que los demás los vean así. Si estamos en la calle y me hablan en inglés pues lo acepto, lo entiendo, y yo les respondo en inglés también...

I don't know why I do it, I do it without realizing it. But it is true that others see us like bad people, or worthless (...) and I don't want that my children feel that way, I don't want them to be limited because their parents are Mexicans, you know? I want them to feel proud of being Latinos, but I don't want others to see them that way. When we are on the street and they talk to me in English I accept it, I understand it, and I reply in English as well...

Here as well, Natasha's understanding of the negative social images of Latinos put her in a divided and contradictory position between personal inclinations and her wish for social acceptance. Whereas she was clear about her desire to teach Spanish to her children, she avoided doing this in public. She wanted her children to be able to escape negative stereotypes by avoiding some behaviors in public. Although she clearly did it to protect her children, and to boost their chances for success in the American culture, this social act also represented a negation of her cultural heritage and a detachment of her roots as a Spanish-speaking immigrant. For Natasha, her new-constructed identity as a Latino mother increased her sense of non-belonging, and deeply shaped her self-perceptions. Her story describes a moment of personal rupture in her life since migration was not only a physical movement to another country, but also a psychological journey towards the re-construction of a new sense of self.

To conclude this section, it should be highlighted that most participants expressed an awareness of distinctions that were constructed in the migration context. It was very common to include their roles as mothers as part of the social markers that made them feel different. Interestingly, they always talked about motherhood in the context of migration, and in relation to their ethnic origins as Latinas. Consequently, the perception of limiting social stereotypes due to

their ethnic origins deeply shaped their roles and identities as mothers. As Natasha and Clara's stories confirmed, the need to classify the world around us implies the use of external and internal vehicles, since social differentiation is always connected with personal processes (Goldin 1999). Thus, in the participants' narratives, mothering practices in the context of migration emerged as a parameter for social identification.

#### **4.2.3 The Sending Society: Becoming the Other at Home**

Clara and Natasha's accounts were very open about social expectations on Latino mothers in Pittsburgh. Implicit in their reflections, however, was a second source of social influence equally pervasive: the sending society. If social stereotypes and images influence Latino mothers' identities in the host country, the social pressures mothers receive from their families and friends back in their home countries are no less influential. Latin American countries are societies with a long tradition of family ties and social bonds (Bacallao and Smokowski 2007). The data collected for this study contains numerous references to the cultural pressures the participants perceived. This section explores the ways in which the sending society also influence mothers' views of themselves, along with the reactions and feelings participants expressed in relation to particular pressures over their roles as mothers within the migration context. The goal here is to show that some immigrant women also receive strong social ideals of good motherhood from families left behind. In fact, for some mothers in this study, the social expectations in their home countries represented a source of tension, and had direct impact over their identities and sense of good mothering. This was particularly true because in most cases these social expectations conflicted with the economic, social, and cultural reality of the new country.

In the context of this research, all participants mentioned their parents during their first

interviews. Most of them remembered their childhood, and the education, values and traditions received from their parents. Although these were generally described as positive processes, during the first interview 3 out of the 12 participants also expressed differences that surfaced between them and their families after moving to the United States. In all of three cases, the reason was the same: their children's education. Serena's account is representative of the ways in which immigration shaped the relationships that participants had with their family.

Yo soy la que lucho para que ellos [sus hijos] se acuerden de lo que son, de dónde vienen. Mi mamá siempre me dice que los hijos son lo que las madres hacen de ellos, así que yo quiero que mis niños se acuerden de eso, de que son peruanos, de que hablan español, que es una lengua hermosa y de que tienen una cultura muy rica. Yo soy la que les tiene que inculcar eso. Mi madre a veces se preocupa y me dice - mira que los niños no comen nuestra comida, no saben nuestras canciones - si, ella me recuerda siempre que soy de allá y que es mi obligación hacérselo saber a mis niños, que ellos son de allá aunque tengan pasaporte Americano (...) si los dejo ellos [los hijos] se van para otras cosas y no quiero que que eso ocurra. No si este, si eso pasa mi mamá se enfadaría y, bueno no, no se enfadaría, pero se pondría triste, pero sabes? Es un problema porque mis hijos lo ven diferente...

I am the one who fights so they [her children] remember who they are, where they come from. My mother always says to me that children are what their mothers make of them, so I want my children to remember this: that they are Peruvian, that they speak Spanish, which is a beautiful language, and that they have a rich culture. I am who must teach this to them. My mother sometimes worries and she says to me: 'Look, the children do not eat our food, they don't know our songs.' Yes, she always reminds me that I am from there, and that it is my duty to teach it to my children, that they are from there even if they have American passport (...) if I leave them [the children] they get lost in other things, and I don't want that to happen. If that, if that happens my mother would get upset, well no, she would not get upset, but she would be sad. But you know what? It is a problem because my children see it differently...

Serena's passage conveys in few words three scenarios common to many Latin American migrant mothers. First, Serena assumes the main responsibility ("I am the one") of transferring the Peruvian traditions, language, and culture to her children. Second, she identifies her own mother as guiding her behaviors as a mother ("My mother always says to me that children are

what their mothers make of them”), and her feelings and emotions as an immigrant (“she always reminds me that I am from there”). Third, she also grasps the generational and cultural crash existing within her children (“it is a problem because my children see it differently”). For Serena, these three situations converge in a sort of balance between two different spaces: cultures and generations. Taking this into consideration, it is important to observe that Valentina (Serena’s mother) is not translating the already existing social conventions on good mothering practices onto her daughter’s new situation. Rather, Valentina is constructing a new one. In fact, to be the main Peruvian cultural translator is a new role that Serena has earned within the migration context. Probably, if she were still in Peru, she would not have been judged on that matter, since culture is transmitted through many other channels.

Valentina incorporated the migration variable into her idea of “the good mother.” This was, in my view, Valentina’s personal way of coping with her own feelings of separation and sorrow, while attempting to keep strong ties with her grandchildren. Regardless, Valentina’s latest interpretation of good mothering was based upon wishes of cultural continuity, a task that Serena was expected to carry on. However, the execution of this task was out of Valentina’s immediate knowledge. Valentina projected a somehow legitimate wish onto Serena, one that secured emotional ties with her grandchildren, but was unable to offer to the tools with which to do so. As one who remained behind, Valentina experienced migration in the third person. Valentina’s positioning was disconnected from the economic, social, and cultural reality of those who moved. Even more significantly, she was disconnected from the personal adjustment that Serena has had to endure as a mother and Latino immigrant. In the second interview, Serena mentioned that even if incidents like the one narrated above (in which her mother complained about the education that Serena’s children were receiving) were not the norm, they still occurred

with some regularity. Although Serena and Valentina maintained a great relationship, Serena confirmed that Valentina's worries and sporadic reproaches made her question the effectiveness of her mothering practices. In turn, this increased her sense of insecurity.

The occasional tensions between Valentina and Serena are not uncommon among family members who live apart. The ones who stay when their loved ones emigrate respond to separation in various ways. It is understandable that those that stay behind try hard to maintain emotional bonds, as Valentina did. To keep in touch has become easier than ever, especially considering that a major peculiarity of recent migratory flows is the widespread use of new technologies. We live in a constantly moving world or, as Giddens likes to say, in a "runaway world" (2000). People have always crossed borders in search of a better life, but in the last half century, the motion has become frenetic, since a much larger number of people are now able to go back and forth rapidly between host and home countries. Compared to past migration flows, the actual migration movements are shortening spaces in a dramatic way. The increase of social networking on the Internet, and other mass media has had a profound influence on the ways in which immigrants construct fluid narratives of identification. Consequently, the entrance into the post-modern era, which is marked by globalization and the development of international economic systems, trades, and political/ideological exchanges (Vattimo 1987), also represents the birth of a new generation of connected nomads.

The cybernetic migrant literally lives in in-between worlds as an agent that moves in various directions at the same time (Amit-Talai 1998, García-Canclini 1995). In this context of constant communication within intense processes of change, existing rapports between those who stay and those who leave must be transformed. In addition, immigrants tend to re-assess relationships according to geographical distance and multicultural exposure, which allows

immigrants to perceive aspects of their own culture and relationships that escaped to them before. This was the case for Simona, a 34 year-old Bolivian mother of a young child. She had been living in Pittsburgh for 5 years at the time of the interviews. During the first interview, Simona talked extensively about the expectations other people had for her, particularly with regards to her ethnicity, but also in her role as a mother. In her narration, she kept mentioning the “two spaces,” but did not specify one in particular. At times it was difficult to understand whether she was talking about her home country or Pittsburgh. In our second encounter, I asked her to elaborate on that issue and she responded with a long tale regarding external pressures coming from both sides. Regarding Bolivia and her mother, she said:

En mi país, pues ahí tienen una idea diferente de como educar a los hijos, y cuando les digo [a las personas de mi país] lo que hago pues entonces, ahí estoy siendo una mala madre, o una que no le da importancia a las cosas importantes. Mi madre me pregunta todo el rato -¿y la niña, cómo va con el español? y yo le digo, -pues bien- pero claro lo habla con un poquito de acento y eso les parece una barbaridad, como que es algo que no entienden, -como puede ser que la niña hable con acento!- (...) me molesta ese juicio fácil. Si mi niña se enferma, mi madre pues seguidito que me dice – es que la niña no come bien, es que en la escuela le dan hotdogs todo el rato y por eso se te enferma- Pues que le puedo hacer si le dan la comida que le dan?

In my country people have a different idea on how to educate children, and when I tell them [the people in the home country] what I do [here], well, then I am a bad mother, who does not prioritize important things. My mother asks me all the time, -How is the girl doing with her Spanish?- I say, -Well- but of course she speaks with a slight accent and to them that is awful, it is something they cannot understand. -how come the girl speaks with an accent?- (...) Such an easy judgment bothers me. If my girl gets sick, my mother immediately tells me -the girl does not eat well, in the school they give them hotdogs all the time, and that's the reason she gets sick- What can I do if they give her the food they give her?

Like Serena, Simona said that she had an excellent relationship with her family in Bolivia. She noticed, however, a change in her mother's attitude when they discussed issues of education and tradition. Serena's mother never questioned her sister's mothering practices back

in Bolivia, but felt the obligation to guide and advise Serena. Although Serena was aware of her mother's good intentions, she defended her right to do what she considered appropriate.

As for the other participants stating similar issues, culture transfer was at the center of the storm. Language and taste for food were common markers that family members in the home country (especially grandparents) used to infer children's level of assimilation or acculturation. Simona and Serena have very different economic backgrounds. Serena came from a working class family who struggled to survive. Simona was a graduate student whose parents have higher-education degrees, and who have substantial travelling experience. Despite the differences between Serena and Simona, parents' educational level did not seem to be an influential variable. Both families, and mothers in particular, felt they had the right to remind their immigrant daughters about women's ultimate obligation to carry on with the culture of origin. Indeed, by supervising or guiding their daughters, participants' mothers were enacting their roles as cultural carriers themselves.

None of the participants talked about their husbands having such responsibility or feeling such pressure. Their husbands were good providers, and that seemed to be enough representation of their proficient parenting. Meanwhile, Serena and Simona were targets of family complaints. This exposes to what extent gender dynamics are intensified in the migration context, not only due to the role each parent has to sustain, but also due to the entitlement some people feel to call the mother and not the father's attention. The interactions between the mothers who stayed and the daughters –migrant mothers- who left, impacted participant's views of themselves. While immigrant mothers had to cope with numerous comments and advise to “better” perform their role, fathers were never directly questioned on that matter. Participants had to deal with the conflicting expectations of distant relatives and friends on a matter (the transmission of the home

culture and, the struggle against cultural assimilation) they often felt escaped their control.

To conclude, the migration experience has impacted the life of most participants to such a degree that they felt different from their friends and relatives who remained home and who, like the participants, are now mothers. Not only are migrants “the other” in the host society, but also with time they easily become the other in their own home country (Akhtar 1999). In many cases, the migrant finds that s/he is not the same or an-other, or feels both at the same time. These narratives illuminate a variety of ways of understanding social images. This was the case for most participants who were aware of social expectations from home. For them the immigration experience offered a new prism through which to evaluate established relationships, such as the one with their parents. During the interviews, they recognized these pressures as additional sources of stress and of feelings of limitation and inadequacy. However, they did not openly react to or oppose these pressures, probably because of the geographical distance, the lack of daily contact, and the respect for their parents and family in the home country. It is likely that their desire to avoid conflicts with their family was the main reason for this. For instance, even if the participants did not mention a particular coping strategy regarding their social image back home, one of them stated that she does “not always say everything on the phone” as a way to veil problematic topics.

### **4.3 HOME AND NARRATIVES IN TRANSITION**

True reality is merely this process of reinstating self-identity, of reflecting into its own self in and from its other, and is not an original and primal unity as such, not an immediate unity as such. It is the process of its own becoming. (Hegel, 1967:81.)



The second subject explored here relates to the participants' constructions of their experience of home and the ways in which their identity as Latin American migrant mothers relates to those constructions. This is most important since re-defining one's identity in the migration context is surely a process that calls for a balance among multiple understandings of one's self at different times and spaces. Those aspects might break away from the notion of "being" as something static, natural, and intrinsic to the person. It is argued that the possibility of becoming, to which Hegel refers to, is deeply marked by the immigration process; and that the concept of home is one important factor that helps immigrants re-contextualize their identities in the multicultural context (1967). Participants narrated ideas of home as an identity anchor, and at the same time, as a point of orientation in a period of personal transition and emotional uncertainty. Additionally, participants elaborated an emotional idea of home intrinsically related to their children on one side, and their parents on the other.

Hegel criticized the tendency to think in absolute terms. When identity is understood as something done or inherent to the person, it falls into the category of absolute thinking. Conversely, from a phenomenological approach, social realities are not given, but rather experienced. The concept of identity acquires a new interpretation that moves from the place around which a person centers his/her life, to a "stable and coherent ensemble of characteristics defining groups or persons" (De Fina 2003:16). Such stability and coherence are not given or defined in absolute terms. They are found, rather, in the local and tentative harmonies that may arise from the ongoing tension between different views of one's selves, cultures and contexts of belonging. Similarly, the idea of home that appeared in the interviews entailed the cultural and personal necessity to rationalize identities "in transition," and give them some sort of continuity.

Clara said, for instance, “my parents are very important in my life, they remind me of who I am, they remind me where I come from.” Even if, at times, the new context intertwines with previous ideas of home, participants strove to keep their homes and their relationships before migration as stable as possible. By embracing a versatile view of the experience, individuals are able to re-position themselves in a new culture that is somehow coherent, meaningful, and a continuation of past identifications.

Clara, as all other participants in this study, belongs to recent migration flows based on global economies with a certain level of multicultural awareness. In his exploration of identity formation within the global context or ‘supermarket’, Gordon Mathew says, “you can’t return to a culturally given home, but only to a culturally chosen home” (2000:176). Mathew refers to people’s new and broader possibilities of choices for establishing their loyalties in societies that survive and reinvent themselves by using and borrowing symbols, meanings, and any kind of cultural artifacts from other cultures. In the case of immigrants, the situation emerged as significantly different. In the interviews conducted for this research, migrants’ ‘choice’ of cultural belonging seemed limited to the familiar old culture and the unfamiliar new one. None of them elaborated narratives about multiple belongings, as in the theory of transnational identities developed by Aihwa Ong (Ong 1999), nor the possibility of developing affiliations outside specific cultures or specific nation-states (Said 2000). Instead, they expressed their desire to belong to tangible cultural and national frameworks in order to ‘be.’ This was very evident considering that all of the interviewees mentioned their countries of origin several times during the interviews, and did it as a distinctive characteristic of their identities, opposing or resisting the idea of dramatic identity changes in new settings. To remember home was somehow to remember themselves, and differentiate between personal transformations and a desired stability.

Consequently, it is posed that, for most participants of this research the idea and experience of home acted as a referent to the idea of self. It facilitated the incorporation of changes and adjustments into the new setting without denying a sense of personal unity. The extent to which migrants found home and reconstructed a stable sense of their selves depended upon a constant dialogue between new and past experiences, new and past relationships. This research's findings and observations show that most participants' feelings were mixed and contradictory when talking about home. Still, they felt they had to talk about it as a way of explaining a before and an after in their 'beings.'

#### **4.3.1. Between "Home" and "Feeling at Home"**

What is it about home that is so appealing to those away from it and those looking for it? This was the second question of my inquiry, which aimed to understand the reasons why, and how, migrants employed the concept of home as a primary strategy of narrative to explore, understand, and construct themselves. The meaning of home in English finds an equivalent in Spanish not only in the word '*hogar*,' but also in the more extensive concept of '*patria*' [homeland], with clear nationalistic referents. However, the definition that best describes the idea of home as a cultural construct embedded with local practices is the German term "*heimisch*," which replaces nationalism and blind devotion to regional loyalties and emotional attachment, to an attachment to specific daily performances. Umbach and Hüppauf describe the psychological state of *heimisch* as a mental disposition toward an "emotional place of belonging" (2005:9-10). Similarly, Morley talks about *heimisch* as the known and familiar world in which we relate to others like us (2005). Yi-Fu Tuan notices the link between home and *heimat*, which is the native

land<sup>9</sup> out of the context of nation or even material terrain. He also reflects on the possibility of developing emotional attachments and ideas of home in a more general understanding, such as with Mother Earth for nomad tribes, or the ship for merchant marines (Tuan 1977). These two perspectives, home (*heimat*) and the feeling of being at home (*heimisch*), are reciprocal. The two entail profound sentiments attached to a place or space where the person is able to develop an intimate sense of belonging. Thus, the sense of belonging is what allows for the construction of a space, image, or symbol as home.

Immigrants carry their own particular meanings of home, or *heimisch*, when they move to another country. Still, it is reasonable to assume that such constructions are redirected in the new context. Symbolic representations of home depend on personal viewpoints and the possibility of developing them at different times and circumstances in the migration process. As previously stated, migration and displacement involve personal changes, it is likely that the migrants' ideas and feelings of home will shift as well. The cultural context to which migrants arrive also influences personal conceptualizations of home. Migrants move to a society that has its symbolic systems and in which home has been already articulated under different historical conditions.

With few exceptions, most of my interviewees, when talking about home, tended to describe meaningful interactions with their families situated in the past, and always before migration. This might seem paradoxical because, after the participants moved to the United States, the relationships with their families changed noticeably. For some, new tensions emerged. Even if the participants were undergoing important changes in their relational experiences, their allusions to home referred to past interactions with those left behind. When participants situated

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<sup>9</sup> The Dictionary of German Synonyms distinguishes between *Heinheimisch*, *Heimat*, and *Heimisch*. While the meaning of *Heinheimisch* is 'native' and is more commonly used to denote one's place of birth, *Heimat* (or *Vaterland*) refers to the feelings or love for the native land whether it is a local or national experience. *Heimisch* instead, denotes the "feeling of being at home in a place." (Farrell 1977:228)

their narratives back in time and space, they expressed a sort of absolute knowledge and certitude of home. They held to their idea of home in spite of personal, relational, and circumstantial changes. This contrast calls for a view of home as always being there, unaffected by changes, acting as an anchor to reality. These constructions of home are especially important for migrants. For instance, some of the participants were unable to return to their countries to visit family and friends due to economic or bureaucratic circumstances. Others waited several years before going back for the first time. Still, they talked about home as being “back there” and yet close to them.

A few participants attempted to include their opinions and attitudes towards their host society as "feeling at home." Those accounts, however, were usually family-related, such as the fact that their children were almost adults and were too incorporated into the new society. Another observation is that “feeling at home” precisely denotes that the place in which people “feel at home” is not home. It may be a similar place, familiar enough for the individual to feel comfortable, but it is still not *heimisch*. The 12 participants of this study referred to their homes when describing their relationships with their parents and their childhood. Although some, like Natasha and Flor, felt insecure in their countries due to widespread violence and micro-criminality, they still felt safe in the shelter of their family. Home was not a specific geographical space, but rather an emotional one. For instance, during the first interview Natasha said:

Méjico empezó a cambiar y ahorita para mí ya es como, como otro país. Como si soy de allí conozco de todo, pero yo ya no se como moverme. Cada vez que voy a Méjico me siento muy insegura, todo lo independiente que he sido aquí en Estados Unidos y todas mis decisiones que tomo cuando llego allá... me vuelvo, como quiero ser otra vez la hija de mis papas, que me lleven a todos los lados que me acompañen; un lugar que conozco perfecto [Méjico] se el idioma, se como hablar, se como moverme y al mismo tiempo es un lugar completamente extraño, ajeno...

Mexico started to change and now it is like another country to me. It is like I am from there, I know everything, but I don't know how to move around anymore. Every time I go back to Mexico I feel insecure, I am independent here in the United

States, but when I return there the decisions I make... I go back to wishing to be my parents' child again, with them taking me everywhere, being accompanied by them. [Mexico] is a place I know perfectly. I know the language, I know how to speak, I know how to move around, but at the same time to me it is a place completely unknown, strange...

As discussed in section 4.1.2, for Natasha the move to the United States represented a process of personal division. Probably due to those special circumstances, and unlike other participants, Natasha's feelings of home were detached from the idea of *patria*, and tended to intensify the meaning of relationships. Even if she said that she did not feel like she was from either place, she still thought of her parents as the home she left behind. After more than 18 years in the United States (6 of them in Pittsburgh), she stated she was in the process of building a home for her three children. This is a difficult task due to her conflicting feelings of belonging and her struggles to find personal identity outside particular stereotypes. For Natasha, as for all other participants, their parents or, better, their relationships with their parents before migration, symbolized home. Although these relationships changed, their ideas of home did not. Their children contributed to develop a sense of "feeling at home" - close to their sense of home, but not an immediate or direct substitute of it.

Along these same lines, "feeling like at home" brings opportunities for migrants to facilitate their integration in the new society. However, it is doubtful that such integration could mean a less problematic understanding of their identities. Does feeling like at home or the finding of a home assume that the old one can be or has been substituted? Or it is possible for a person to construct the idea of home in a transnational social space? Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) talks about how the knowledge of space and place are constructed through experiences. Is then the transnational experience of current migrants constructing new understandings of home, thus, new

understandings of belonging and self? A possible explanation for this comes from Bourdieu and his idea of *habitus*.

#### **4.3.2 Habitus, Identity and Home**

Berry (2002) argues that there are four main outcomes of acculturation: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. These categories are driven by the degree to which migrants maintain their cultural heritage, and the degree to which the migrant seeks relationships with the new culture. By centering this research on migrant mothers' identities, it was necessary to pay a closer look to those practices that are most related to the private sphere and the idea of home. Bourdieu considers that for a person to be integrated into a society or cultural field, the knowledge of language, symbolic values, and normativities are not enough. Rather, socialization must be embodied, since the body is the terrain of symbolic pleasure and pain, the realm of taste and dislikes that will shape the person's own representation and that of the group (Bourdieu 1979). For Bourdieu, places are meaningful because of the daily practices set there. Shared *habitus* creates the group through a practical relation with the world that organizes experience, while at the same time, the very practice of experience informs the regulation of *habitus*. This "doxic relation to the world" (Bourdieu 1980:110) comes into effect when the group is homogeneous since *habitus* is spontaneously inclined to acknowledge all of the expressions in which they recognize themselves. As *habitus* tends to reproduce itself over time, its presumed inherent traits are reinforced. Migrants take their sets of *habitus* across contexts, producing a cultural dislocation with no history that is recognized as "natural" (Bourdieu 1980:54). When an incomer brings a set of practices that is not identifiable with any other value or behavior, the migrant is forced to set apart her/his own codes to learn new ones. In fact, for many migration

theorists, migrants' ability to adapt quickly and better to a new society depends upon their capacity to learn the new language, both as a means to communicate and as an active player in the definition of the relation between signifiers and signifieds. The ability to embrace and reproduce accepted "truths," values, and norms is one of the best predictors of success in the new land (Berry 1997). Still, the main idea here is that habitus indeed shapes our constructions of home. For those with a different habitus, the closest idea to "a home away from home" is that "feeling at home."

In the case of migrant mothers, habitus and the idea of home as a place and space are deeply related. Bourdieu talks about the gender division of space in his study of the Kabyle house (Akham). The social division in which very specific parts of home are linked to women acquires a figurative correlation with childbirth. Similarly, the space-related relations developed in the domestic sphere are parallel to relations in public spaces. In addition to becoming a symbol of social structure, home is also the place in which daily practices drive our cultural understandings of the world (Bourdieu 1970). For instance, in his study of the Berber house, Bourdieu identified the fireplace with the mother's womb. From this perspective, the symbolic understanding of home is intertwined with gender divisions and the role of motherhood. Whether space refers to the materiality of house or the abstractedness of home, it is an arena for ideological constructions of interactions in which women perform and are expected to perform according to the social constructions of their identities. In light of this, ideas of home are likely to vary between genders. In other words, women will interpret the experience of being away from home differently from men. Although only one of the participants was separated from her older son, many international migrant women experience this situation. In these cases of separation, 'being at home' meant to be with their children. Even those migrant mothers who



were able to travel with their children still developed a sense of separation from the traditional idea or expectation of motherhood. As Tummala-Narra (2004) indicates, the psychological adaptation processes among migrant mothers, the separation from their own mothers and other maternal figures affect the ways in which women adapt into the new society, as well as the ways in which they mother and how they see themselves as women. Their identities as mothers are still linked to their homelands even in the presence of their children, because their habitus carries the constructed knowledge of motherhood as an intergenerational interaction. Mothers tend to mother in the same ways they were once mothered. They look back at their childhood for better ways to perform their function of mothers and nurtures, even if they are now in a different culture and society. If the idea of home is intrinsically linked to past relationships, particularly with parents, memories of home are, then, extremely important as cultural parameters, and as references for the negotiation of mothers' roles and identities.

#### **4.3.3 Memory and the Construction of Home**

In this research all the participants mentioned home in one sense or another. They missed home; they left home; they were homesick; they wanted a new home; they lost their home, and they wanted their home back. Regardless their representation of home, home was inherently related to the question "*Who are you?*" and, thus, to their identities. In order to 'be,' they had to recover and to reconstruct the concept of home separated by distance and by time. Interestingly, they did not narrate long descriptions of home, but rather gave long narratives of their relationships back home. Memory, in this sense, played a very important role in the participants' accounts of identity, in particular in those cases in which migration increased a negative view of the self. This was because remembering home implied remembering better perceptions of self. For

instance, during the second interview, Elisenda, who was having a tough time trying to figure out her future as a professional, gave the following answer to the question whether she considered Pittsburgh her home:

Si y no, mira cuando yo recuerdo mi hogar, este... la pregunta era, 'quien eres tú,' y para explicar eso yo tenía que hablar de mi hogar. Si pienso en mi hogar recuerdo mi infancia, recuerdo mi niñez, mis padres, mis hermanitos, mi abuelita. Pero mis padres es lo que me viene a la mente, los olores de la cocina de mi madre. Mi hogar lo tengo ahí clavado en mi recuerdo y, y eso no lo quita nadie. Por muy mal que vayan las cosas a veces. Ummm, pero tú sabes, tengo niños, mis niños son... sí son felices, están bien acá, y yo pues, donde estén ellos, esa es mi casa también. La siento casi como un hogar. Mis hijos me han ayudado mucho a considerar Pittsburgh mi segundo hogar. Tú me entiendes? Ya no sé si hay vuelta atrás...

Yes and no, look when I remember my home, hum... the question was, 'Who are you?' and to explain this, I had to talk about my home. If I think of my home, I remember my childhood, my parents, my younger siblings, my grandma. But my parents are what come to my mind, the smells of my mother's kitchen. My home is deeply engrained in my memories, and, and nobody can take that away. As bad as things may get sometimes. Ummm, but you know, I have children, my children are... yes they are happy, they are doing well here, and for me, well, wherever they are, there is my home as well. It almost feels like home. My children have helped me a lot in considering Pittsburgh as my second home. Do you know what I mean? I don't know if there's still an opportunity to turn back...

As is seen in Elisenda's words, 'remembering home' was no less important than the ways in which the participants presented their accounts. She talks of Pittsburgh as a second home, and her children are the main reason why she was able to make Pittsburgh her home. Representing home in the form of relationships, particularly with their parents and children, embodies the tension between the idealized thoughts of home and current experiences of displacement.

Participants with relatively stable economic situations, or with well-adapted children, were more likely to adopt Pittsburgh as their new home. Still, every time they talked about their parents, they traveled back in time figuratively, to a different concept of home, which symbolized more stable ideas of who they used to be before migrating. Independent from

migrants' level of acculturation, the memories and re-articulation of home emerged as a fundamental aspect of the participants' identities.

The geographical, cultural, emotional distance from home is, at the same time, a "distance from self" (Tuan 1977:47). Memories re-construct home in a time and a place. The narratives of those memories of home frequently try to close the gap between the now and the then, and at the same time, try to build a bridge with the future. For instance, those narratives that conceptualized home as a stable and permanent settlement, helped migrants find comfort in the new setting. In other words, home was a place to which migrants could travel back, even if just in their imagination. It is always a place of belonging because 'cognitively they never moved' (Rapport and Dawson 1998:22).

For participants then, incorporating a time-flexible notion of home, while keeping it as a mental representation of a permanent construct, helped them incorporate new understandings of the self. In my understanding, stable representations of home allow for the understanding of one's self in terms of change and adjustment, without betraying the necessary sense of continuity. If migrants' perceptions of home appear invented, imaginary, constructed and changeable, the process of adding an equally 'fragmented' (Gergen 1991) or 'shaken' identity might entail additional distress. These 'shaken' views of one's self may jeopardize the possibility for social adaptation and integration into the new culture. This was the case for some participants, such as Flor and Natasha, who expressed a conflictive sense of geographical displacement, since their countries had experienced critical vicissitudes that challenged their idea of a secure and never-changing home. For these participants, their sense of homeless with no hope for return to the place they once knew had deep emotional consequences. As some sort of reparation, though,

they narrated and therefore reminded themselves that they were able to recover a sense of home every time they were with their families, independent of context.

Along with space, time is another important aspect in the representation of home and the representation of self. Home is “an intimate experience of place” (Tuan 1977:47), but it is also an experience that needs some certitude in order to be felt as true to itself. For the participants it was either a 'present' that appeared real, or a reassurance of an 'unchanging past,' that was able to provide such a comforting certainty. The migration process usually dislocates the intimate interaction of a person with his or her home. For participants, the distance they experienced from their homes was the introspective distance from their 'known' self. Tuan contemplates human geography from a dynamic standpoint in which people interact with their environment at different levels. The first of these levels is concrete or objective, such as distance. Then, there is the level of the abstract or the psychological, such as emotions, feelings or imagination. Tuan articulates a qualitative sense of time, and links it to historical and cultural experiences. In history and its phenomenology, space and place are different concepts that depend upon our own spatial awareness and sensorial encounters with objects, subjects and events. Space contains places and moments.

As cultural understandings of reality influence how people situate themselves in the world, knowledge of space and time varies upon social interpretations and social performances, instead of being a fixed universal value that progress in a linear direction. This observation can be linked to the idea developed in Chapter 3, on how non-Western cultures move out of linear narratives, ordering stories outside chronological order. That is, traditional Latin American cultures tend to follow a more circular arrangement. This can be observed in the difficult ways in which some of the participants included their ideas of home into their narratives. Instead of

explaining “home before” and “home now,” they jumped back and forth several times, sometimes contradicting themselves. Isabella, for instance, said during the second interview, “my home is here, with my son,” and later on she said, “I am Colombian, my family is there, that’s my home.”

The sense of home, its absence, and everything in between, is a fundamental experience for migrants, and inevitably shapes the way they perceive themselves. The realization that home is not a static place entails that it becomes an interpretation of memory, and a desire for the future. The idea of home as being “fixed” is maintained in the imaginary. The realization of the changing nature of the world and its experiences makes home ‘home.’ From a phenomenological perspective, the idea of home becomes an unattainable fiction, seeking in the future what once was in the past. The present is then, the arena of tension and struggle, with an “ideal home,” mostly based upon preexisting ideas (past), which are recovered and re-constructed through the memory via interaction with the current reality (present).

For most participants, this dialectic also included a strong sense of nostalgia, which was very present in the narratives. This is not surprising, since nostalgia “raises the question of continuity and rupture, as elements that influence and define personal identity” (Ritivoi 2002: 46). From the perspective of this study, nostalgia of the “unquestioned self” is nostalgia of home and belonging. From Ritivoi’s integrationist model of the self, personal identity changes in time within specific frames of personal and discursive logic. People need to rely on others who (in their mind) remain more or less stable in time and space. For this reason, participants tried to portray their selves as coherent subjects. In the interviews it appeared that migrants missed a sense of coherent, and somehow effortless, ‘natural’ self, and instead found, or remembered, their social interactions back in their home country. Therefore, to explain the self in the context of

home “there” and “then” has a restorative function. Memories allow for a phenomenological experience of the past and present. In the 'here' and 'now' of remembrance, this experience expresses the temporal and spatial tension between the two tenses. So even if the idea of home inescapably entails an imaginary place, immigrants were able to articulate it with some certainty based on their memories and nostalgias. In turn, these narrations of home contributed to define their position as interpreters of their own identity and migration process (Riessman 2002).

While a migrant’s sense of home remains more or less unchanged in their minds, home itself changes (Sarup 1994). If migrants returned to their home country, fitting back into the sending society would require another process of adaptation and identity re-configuration. To some extent, the “search for home” highlights its absence, or at least the lack of a sense of home within familiar parameters. The paradoxes of home parallel those of identity representations in the migrants’ narratives. Both are related at multiple levels in a dialectic process of mutual dependency. As Ritivoi says, “individuals make sense of their realities and help others make sense, too, by interpreting them in narrative scenarios” (2002: 46). In this sense, home is a narrative that displays migrants' realities and self-understandings. In other words, although the idea of home is fluctuating and changing, it represents a stable point of reference in the lives and identity of migrants. From this perspective, identity formation is a cultural negotiation between the individual and the culture. However, the dominant culture in the new setting is not the only one to be considered. Through habitus and memory, migrants become cultural translators who offer personal insights and interpretations. Yet, at the same time, habitus and memory act as emotional referents to which the migrants can return to in the ongoing process of re-interpreting themselves. For many of the participants, home and its narrations were often symbolized by family relations and they helped preserve the sense of a coherent self. For migrant mothers,

thinking of their parents was to think of themselves before leaving their home country, but to think of their children was to think of themselves now. They used their maternal role as a point of reference that strongly influenced the ways in which they perceived themselves and their sense of home at different times and in different cultural contexts.

#### 4.4 CONCLUSIONS

The participants' stories presented an array of diverse meanings regarding social constructions of migration and motherhood. In the case of migrant mothers, different cultural definitions and avenues of representation influenced social images and expectations of Latino mothers in the sending society. Participants understood stereotypes about motherhood as being intrinsically related to stereotypes about Latinas. Their accounts also revealed that the migration process implied a transformation of established relationships with those family members who remained in the home country, in particular their own mothers. The cultural and linguistic distance that grandmothers noticed in their grandchildren was a major source of discrepancy, ambiguity, and challenge for the participants. From the grandmothers' perspective, their daughters were more accountable for this distance than their male partners. Thus, immigrant mothers not only had to learn strategies to adapt to the new society, but also they had to learn ways to re-connect and be a part of their own culture from a distance. Failing to create a bridge between their home and host cultures would have meant jeopardizing their own cultural background and the ways in which they were perceived by significant others in their home country.

As I have sustained in this chapter, the mothering role added a dimension of cultural distinction and difference between the sending and the receiving society. The cultural standards

of motherhood of the receiving society interplayed with social constructions from the sending society. Significant others in the home country have strong expectations about the ways in which migrant mothers should keep and transmit traditions, values, languages and practices. Therefore, the process of identity re-definition entailed in migration took place at multiple levels. As shown in the first part of the chapter, participants elaborated a sense of themselves through a variety of strategies. Yet, the awareness of how others classified them and how that shaped new self-identifications was common among all interviewees.

Such a process of identity re-definition entails a significant emotional toll. Personal dilemmas and a sense of un-fittingness were common among most participants. Although not all participants interpreted the process as negatively as Benjamina, for many the need to manage the double standards of mothering and motherhood implied a transformation of their personal image and identity. In addition, the ways in which others expected them to be as mothers in general and, more specifically, as Latino migrant mothers, did not always correspond with their personal views of motherhood. Most participants' narratives revealed that motherhood was an important, but not the only defining characteristic, of their identity. They sensed that the social pressures of the new society were in dissonance with their reality as migrants and their own ideas of what good mothering meant. For most participants, such a dissonance contributed to develop different and/or new interpretations of themselves as Latino women and as mothers, and modified their mothering practices and their identities as well.

Children also played an important role on mothers' conceptualization of home. In the second part of the chapter, I discussed how immigrant mothers used various relationships to establish ideas of themselves before and after migration, there and here. Home is a relational experience and a narrative that most participants connected with their parents, and the way they



were before migration. In discussions about their views of home, children of immigrant mothers served as a reference point to find a new sense of 'feeling at home' in the receiving society. In the process of searching and constructing home, participants were aware of the personal transformations that the immigration process implied and, yet, at the same time, were also able to reaffirm a sense of continuity of their selves through time and space.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research has been twofold. On one side, it has studied the ways in which Latin American migrant women incorporate their roles as mothers into their self-narratives. On the other, it has explored innovative qualitative methodologies to study identity and personal self-definitions. Regarding the first task, this study started with the premise that mothering in a foreign land has a specific impact on women's identities. However, participant's narratives showed that this impact was mostly caused by external sources, which highlighted motherhood over other significant personal characteristics. The narratives constructed by most of the participants around the question "*Who are you?*" dealt with conflicting social expectations of them as Latino mothers. There was actually less of a focus on their mothering experiences and relationships with their children. In addition to social expectations, participants' relationships with their families before migration were instrumental dimensions of their identities. Participants treasured, and capitalized on, static ideas of home, anchored in their past relationships with close family members. Such fixed conceptualizations of home served as referents for their changing selves. For instance, when interviewees noticed evident changes in their way of thinking, or way of perceiving themselves, their memories of home helped them keep a sense of continuity in their identities. This allowed them to detach from their current challenges and see them in perspective, resulting in the gaining of a sense of agency over social pressures they could not control.

Regarding the introduction of innovative qualitative methodologies, I designed this research around the idea of developing inclusive and participatory understandings of mothers. In order to do so, I decided to explore the identity of women who mother in the context of migration, but in a way that does not foreground their role as mothers. As a research strategy, this *de-centering* approach allowed me to explore narratives of identity, while at the same time countering the desire to provide standardized responses to the highly sensitive topic of motherhood. For this reason, I videotaped the first interview, leaving the participants alone to respond to a single question: “*Who are you?*” Also, in order to present women’s accounts in their full complexity, I developed a narrative map for the first interview with each of the 12 participants. This tool incorporated a visual component of the main themes that emerged in each story, and the order in which they appeared. The narrative maps displayed the complex personal and social dynamics involved in constructing identity and highlighted the social “territory” that influences motherhood in the context of migration. Rather than interpreting motherhood as essential to a mother’s identity, the previous observation indicates the participants’ perception of the complex system of relationships that is implicated in mothering.

This dissertation shows the extent to which the participants' narratives challenged their own personal and social identity constructions of themselves as just, only, or above all, mothers. Thus, even if were true that motherhood implies a responsibility subject to personal dilemmas of multicultural survival and endurance, ideas of immigrant mothering are deeply engrained in the social imaginary of nation-states. The deep tie between personal constructions and social expectations increased the participants’ acculturative stress. They faced discrimination at two additional interdependent levels. First, at the gender level (i.e., as women), since they were

expected to be responsible for the transmission of cultural values, practices, and identities to their children. Second, they were, or felt, limited for been interpreted as specifically *Latina* mothers.

In the following pages, I will revisit the most important conclusions regarding identity, motherhood, and migration. Then, I will examine some of the main contributions that this research may offer regarding theory and method, and its practical implications. Lastly, I finish the chapter proposing some future avenues for the study of identity, migration and visual sociology.

## **5.1 TRANSNATIONAL MOTHERING AND PERSONAL IDENTITIES**

Identity is a mediated experience deeply related to cultural practices and perceptions. I started Chapter 1 problematizing motherhood as conveniently understood as a “natural” act. Also, I sustained that migrant mothers have to adjust to the new culture as both migrants and mothers. The research conducted for this dissertation showed that the process of translating the emotional and practical experience of motherhood into a different culture implied a series of personal modifications for participants. This challenges the very idea of universality and naturalness of motherhood. For participants, the identity of mother emerged as a complex territory of social constructions that were both assigned to the women, and internalized/reproduced by them, through their daily interactions and practices. Because of this, it is difficult (if not impossible) to understand motherhood and its role in someone’s identity if these experiences and processes are seen as isolated from the social contexts and dynamics in which they occur. In the data collected and analyzed in this research, 'motherhood' appeared to be intrinsically correlated to other equally important factors, such as ethnicity and citizenship.

The following paragraphs present the main conclusions regarding the topics of identity, motherhood, and immigration that support the idea that identity is a social practice in constant process of elaboration, rather than a stable and inner feature. The narrative methodology adopted for this study is based both on the narrative analysis of content and the narrative analysis of the structure and organization of the participants' tales. Therefore, the conclusions have been clustered into two groups: First, the analysis of the main themes as they emerged from the stories. The second is the narrative analysis of the structure and ways in which the participants arranged their stories.

### **5.1.1 Thematic Narrative**

The study of identity and motherhood implies understanding personal histories and social interactions within particular cultural contexts of power (Foucault 1975). Migrant mothers provided accounts of a world in constant interaction (Gergen 2009) in which the prevailing power differences and the exclusion/inclusion of social groups were part of the ongoing dialogue about emotional and cultural bridges between the participants' children and families, and between their children and the new culture. Developing such bridges, however, implies long-term personal investments. As Anzaldúa sharply acknowledges, “[it] means loosening our borders, not closing off to others. Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without” (2009: 246). For migrant mothers, the act of “bridging” takes place within cultural, social, and political contexts that are more inclined to borders of cultural containment and persistence than to multicultural networks of change. Some people and institutions in the sending and the receiving societies expect migrant mothers to become “bridges,” not only between cultures, but also between generations. Arguments regarding “good mothering” become

transnational points of reference that attempt to exercise power over migrant women by constructing meta-discourses of distinction. Migrant women experience a conflict related to the pressure to adjust their mothering practices in such ways that they can balance dominant discourses and their multicultural reality.

Immigration had a profound impact on these women's construction of the self. Most of the participants talked about their selves before migration as "I was..." and after migration as "I am now..." This sharp divide between the past and the present indicates the personal transformations that immigrants sustain during the migratory process. These transformations go beyond everyday issues of language and cultural adaptation. For the migrant, they entail finding new positions of agency and entitlement in both the society of origin and in the resettlement society. Linked to this process is the inevitable transformation of the sense that a person has of him/herself.

Identity is inherently social and relational. Without exception, all participants addressed the question "*Who are you?*" by talking about their relationships with others. In order to explain or describe themselves, mothers felt the need to tell about their rapports with others, including their children. However, even if most of the participants' narratives revealed that motherhood was an important aspect of their lives, it was not the only defining characteristic of their identity. Experiences concerning mothering challenges and practices mostly emerged at the times when participants wanted to offer conclusive support for their points, or as a way to counterbalance some of their affirmations. In fact, only a few participants presented long narratives about their children or their roles as mothers. Instead, they tended to present longer narratives about their relationships with their family back home.

Even when participants did not reveal many details about their children, or their role as child-bearers, their narratives still showed that motherhood was an important way of re-positioning themselves in the world. In some instances, children accentuated differences between the new and old societies. But in many cases, children acted as symbolic reminders of new realities. At the same time, social stereotypes around the ideas of “good mothering” had a profound impact on these women’s construction of identity. This study confirms that migration embodies a process of cognitive re-organization in which the readings of women as mothers are molded by conflicting cultural conceptions of what it means to be a good mother. When participants included accounts of motherhood to explain themselves, they recounted their personal struggles to keep up with ideal standards. The social image of these women as Latinas and migrants also had to cohabitate with unanticipated public expectations regarding their roles as mothers. The migrant mothers of this study had to acquire new strategies to navigate the simultaneous expectations coming from at least two cultures.

In the receiving society, it was difficult for women to separate Latina stereotypes from their mothering practices. For some participants, social constructions regarding Latinas were present throughout their parenting experience. Negative opinions regarding Latinos tended to have a negative impact on the ways in which these women perceived their mothering roles. Although it was difficult for them to identify specific examples, the participants intuitively noticed that mothering in Pittsburgh was “different” from being a mother back in their home countries. They sensed a dissonance between the social pressures of the new society, their reality as migrants, and their own ideas of good mothering.

The participants also received explicit pressures from their families in the home countries. In most instances, these pressures were related to the ways in which migrant mothers

“should” educate their children in the immigration context. Wishing to keep emotional ties with their overseas grandchildren, some grandmothers expressed strong judgments and disagreements with the ways in which the children were brought up. The mothers, rather than the fathers, were the targets of these criticisms. In addition to the traditional mothering practices, the immigration process gave mothers the responsibility to carry and facilitate cultural transitions. For most of the interviewees, however, mothering in the migration context meant to balance new economic, social, and political realities with the absence of support networks that were culturally familiar. Consequently, migrant mothers lacked specific models to follow. They had to develop new strategies that differed from those learned as daughters and from those observed in the receiving society, since neither of them included the migration experience.

The participants preferred to articulate themselves within parameters of continuity and stability. In spite of the drastic changes brought by migration into their daily life, and even if they acknowledged significant personal transformations, participants still enacted narratives about themselves that strove to be coherent. In this context, children served as points of reference to situate mothers in time and space: "before" and "after," "there" and "here." For many participants, their family relations often symbolized home. Expressing home in the form of relationships, particularly with their parents and children, represented the tension between idealized ideas of home and current experiences of displacement. Mothering far from their own mothers was, for most participants, a sad experience that intensified, and constantly reminded them, of their migrant status. While their parents symbolized the home they once had, their children represented a passport to feeling like-at-home in the new location. Expressing contradictory feelings while talking about parents and children was very common among interviewees. In fact, mothering in the migration context seems to imply a series of cultural and



emotional adjustments in women's perceptions of themselves as mothers, and as daughters. Women in this study counterbalanced the sense of uncertainty represented by personal/emotional changes by making a conscious effort to articulate stable selves. Such sense of identity coherence and unity was mostly articulated through memories and re-constructions of home, which emerged as a fundamental aspect of the participants' identity.

To the idea of home as a spatial location, the participants in this research also added the dimension of time. For migrant mothers, thinking of their parents brought up the thought of themselves before they left their home country. Thinking of their children positioned their personal perceptions in the present. Although most participants' relationships with their families changed to some extent, their ideas of home remained fixed. In fact, to think of home in the past tense helped preserve the sense of a coherent self. Therefore, rationalizing the self in the context of home "there" and "then" balances the important life changes that immigration represents, and the sense of uncertainty regarding the near future. In turn, these narrations of home contribute to position migrants as interpreters of their own identity and migration process (Riessman 2007 2008b.)

For participants, home was inherently related to the question "*Who are you?*" and thus, to their identities. Interestingly, the tension and struggle for an "ideal home" relied on ideas of home that were, at the same time, based on the past (parents) and re-constructed through current relations (children), with little references to the future. Using a similar arrangement, participants anchored their responses to the "*Who are you?*" question around stories of their past before migration, which they combined with a few accounts of their present, mostly regarding their children. On the few occasions in which participants looked towards their future lives, again, they expressed desires and wishes for their children.

In summary, Lewis and Sandra Hinchman (1997) remind us of the power of narratives to shape personal identities. The interview and analysis process was similar to putting together a 1000 piece puzzle with no idea of what the final image would look like. The choice to not ask about motherhood directly while studying it shortened the quantity, but not the quality, of information. It definitely made the research more inductive and required the stretching of analysis and interpretation horizons. More importantly, it required working without a fixed vision of what was expected, but this –after all – is one of the fundamental dimensions of qualitative inquiry (Denzin 2001, Gubrium and Holstein 2000). Continuing with the puzzle analogy, there is no doubt that a 2000 pieces puzzle that recreates the exact image of the picture on the box presents both challenges and opportunities for valuable knowledge on the subject of study. However, it always represents what was already there. It constructs a non-constructed puzzle of an already pre-established image that marks the structure. Since identity works as a process and not as an object, persons enact identity when they engage in its narration. Because of this, in order to elaborate complex yet meaningful interpretations of the participants’ tales, it is fundamental to study both the “what” and the “how” of storytelling.

### **5.1.2 Narrative Analysis of Form**

Narrative analysis attempts to explain the person within her or his story, going beyond a simple summary of events (Riessman 1993). Since telling implies the sharing of perceived experiences, as well as their understanding, narrative analysis emphasizes those qualities of the telling that also produce information about the person. However, unwrapping participants’ stories from a narrative perspective, implies not only paying attention to the content of the story, but also to the ways in which a person presents it, its arrangement and structure. It is important to notice the

wide range of narrative styles that narrators can use. A meaningful story is constructed by choosing the order in which we present the events and the connections among them, but the logic for each arrangement varies for each person. Since narratives are an integral part of personal identities, the themes, topics, and stories that emerge in each tale help the storyteller reinterpret their experiences and feelings according to the personal and social circumstances of the telling. Regarding the narrative forms found in this research, five significant commonalities were observed in the participants' approach to telling about their selves.

First, although participants did not know that motherhood was the research topic of interest, and the question used for the interview did not mention it, all the participants stated their roles of mothers. Motherhood therefore, emerges as an important part of women's lives, which to some extent shaped their identity. This aspect of the participants' lives, however, was not as dominant or central as expected. It was just one of the descriptors chosen to represent their identities. Still, to study the ways in which the topic of motherhood emerged spontaneously during the narration brought meaningful knowledge regarding the participants' feelings and attitudes towards it. Rather than a fixed dimension centered on children, motherhood entailed a dynamic and intimate dialogue between participants' relationships with their own parents, their childhood memories, their feelings of separation, and their cultural locations.

Second, the women of this study often included stories about their children into their accounts, right after they spoke about their own parents. Motherhood was strongly associated to the participants' own experiences as daughters. In this study, only two participants gave detailed accounts of their children, or of mothering experiences. For the most part, most participants integrated only short anecdotes about their children, or of their roles as mothers. In these cases, mothering narratives were predominantly a tool to clarify, or support, other stories and

experiences. Participants tended to talk about their families while remembering their own childhood. They mentioned personal experiences with their parents, and associated those experiences to their own motherhood and experiences with their own children. On some occasions, participants mentioned the tensions that occurred between them and their families in the home country due to their children's education. At other times, participants brought their children into the conversation to compare cultures, relationships and life styles.

A third common aspect in the participants' narrative structure was their non-linearity. In 10 out of 12 narratives, the thematic development of the stories was obtained through anecdotal association rather than chronological accounts. Due in part to the fact that the "*Who are you?*" question was not topic-centered, none of the interviewees' narratives evolved around a single topic. The openness of the question significantly increased the range of plots and stories told by women in this study. The participants jumped from one topic to another, regardless of the order in which the events occurred. The participants, therefore, followed narrative styles that were not oriented toward chronological or cause-effect arrangements. Presentations were ordered according to their value in helping to explain women's understandings of themselves, in what could be seen as an emotion-centered arrangement.

As culture influences narrative styles, immigrants' multicultural experiences likely impact the variety of their narration styles. Thus, cultural, political, and historical differences between the two regions (the United States and Latin America) make it difficult to translate participants' social discursive conventions and interpretive strategies into narrative styles that tend to be more common or dominant in North America.

The fourth commonality is the fact that almost all of the participants mentioned being a mother at the beginning of the interview, although tales of motherhood were scattered at

different points of the interview. In most cases, motherhood was included in a series of general demographic descriptors such as age, country of origin, marital status, and occasionally, number of children. The introductory passage served not only as an icebreaker for the participants' interaction with the camera, but also as the moment in which the respondents disclosed several of the main topics they were going to elaborate on later in the interview. It also gave some indication of the narrative style adopted by the participants. The fact that 10 out of 12 participants mentioned they were mothers right at the beginning of their interviews seems to indicate that motherhood is viewed as a major experience shaping these women's identities. As previously said, however, it was not the only, or the major, descriptor. The *de-centering* approach I adopted in this study, by avoiding to assume the centrality of motherhood, was also reflected in the participants' act of broadening social constructions of their identities. For them, de-centering was a way to open up other possibilities and to extend their narratives of identity beyond established scripts of mothering. Often, the narrating practice of going back to the opening statements reassured interviewees with a sense of coherence.

The opening passage brings us to the fifth and final structural commonality - the drive to elaborate comprehensible accounts. In order to increase the "credibility" of their tales, participants made a conscious effort to articulate honest and eloquent narrations of their lives that were free from contradictions and inconsistencies. Again, the openness of the question, and the lack of interaction with the researcher left the participants with the freedom, but also the responsibility, of directing their own stories. The "tyranny of freedom" over their full accounts was a source of stress and concern that was openly expressed during the first interview. One of the strategies the participants adopted to find consistency, despite the lack of guidance, was to go back and forth to the opening passage. In other words, during the first interview, participants

returned to themes or topics expressed in the opening to “wrap up” their narrative and provide a sense of coherence and unity.

## **5.2 POSITIONING THE RESEARCH: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

For this research I applied a *de-centering* approach, which allowed me to study the ways in which the topic of motherhood emerged spontaneously in women’s narratives. To do so, the participants in this project were not informed that mothering was my area of interest. The first interview with participants was based on a single question in which motherhood was not mentioned at all. This strategy helped counter the risk of receiving responses that were standardized to meet the demands of external influences, as well as to counter the social desirability based on the participants’ own expectations and constructions of the researcher’s expectations. The *de-centering* approach entailed a wider range of undirected, spontaneous responses. It also involved a series of limitations that need to be taken into consideration, and which I discuss below.

The first interview was based on one open question (“*Who are you?*”), which was enough to elicit long and complex narratives on diverse topics, including motherhood. Nonetheless, the wide range of topics, the lack of details, and the particular organization of the stories made it difficult to establish generalizations. To solve this, the second interview was conducted to deepen and clarify central themes. It also helped gather more data regarding motherhood, ideas of home and social pressures. Since all of the participants talked about their roles as mothers and/or about their children during the first interview, the *de-centering* approach

proved successful for this particular research. Still, this strategy of data collection could be less effective in inquiries that explore stigmatizing topics (e.g., drug addictions, forms of discrimination, or sexual abuse) since the participants, if not asked, would prefer to hide those aspects of their lives. Similarly, other participants could avoid or forget topics because they do not consider them meaningful or relevant.

Since it was not always easy to respond the “*Who are you?*” question, the production of sociological knowledge through this question needs further reflections. The question was new and unexplored for most of the women involved in this research. It implied a personal investment in terms of reflection and memory combined with some ability to narrate stories. Although I feel this question is an appropriate one considering the topic of identity, it is imperative to ponder its potential, along with the research interest subject, of disclosing painful memories and experiences that could distress the respondent. The researcher using this question will have to address ethical concerns regarding what to do with information that could damage the participant—whether emotionally or legally—and what to do with information that involves third parties.

Additionally, by answering the “*Who are you?*” question, the participants became aware of aspects of their identity or life that were implicit or assumed. At times, as some of participants stated, these were topics explored or discussed for the first time. Researchers willing to use this open question as their main tool to gather data have to consider that, for many, it may be challenging to verbally translate cultural conventions, thoughts, and experiences that are often felt intuitively, but rarely expressed. Generally speaking, people’s ability to narrate stories about themselves based on a single question is likely to intertwine with their level of education and personality features, such as shyness, or comfort level with the interview process. In other words, although everybody has some sense of who they are, not everyone is ready to articulate a

response in that regard. This is particularly true if we consider that most people are used to direct questions that fragment the person's personal information into precise evidence (e.g. 'what's your name?,' 'where are you from?,' 'how old are you?,' etc.), rather than general questions that require a long process of personal construction.

This research, however, had a major omission regarding immigrants' status. Because of IRB limitations, and in order to protect the participants' privacy and confidentiality, I asked all interviewees to avoid any information regarding their immigration status. As agreed with the IRB board members, if something regarding this topic emerged during the interviews, I had to delete it and ignore it. In a qualitative study, the absence of such information embodies an important ethical debate about the politics surrounding topics of study within social research. The disregard of the effect that "illegality" could have on mothering performances and their self-perceptions is a serious constraint that, in my view, may weaken this research's relevance to identity and migration studies. Although the main reason behind this was the fundamental protection of the participants, as social scientists, we also have to think, analyze, and critically challenge the convenience this limitation of information may have for legal authorities, political parties, and different sectors of the population. It is my opinion that this restriction helps maintain dominant narratives and myths about undocumented immigrants, insuring their invisibility. Ignoring such sensible, yet meaningful, material might mean purposefully ignoring the direct effects that law and policies have over immigrants' identity, their general wellbeing, cultural adaptation, and in the case of this research, their family relations. Concealing this information translates into keeping some immigrants underground, marginalizing them even more, and perpetuating the politically opportune belief that being undocumented is a crime.



Another important innovative feature of this research was the use of video to collect data during the first interview. All of the interviewees knew beforehand that they were going to be videotaped. Although most participants felt comfortable in front of the camera, two women dropped out of the project after the first interview. Neither woman indicated the video as their reason to leave the study, but there is no conclusive evidence to exclude the video as an influential factor for their withdrawal. Together with the previous statement regarding immigrant status, this suspicion suggests that researchers should be extremely careful when using video or other sort of image representation with a population-at-risk. This was a small-scale study, so it was easy to control for variance at an informal level. However, we have to consider that a vulnerable population is less likely to participate in visual studies. This fact represents an additional limitation for social researchers, in particular for studies with large numbers of participants, since the under-representation of a group will create a biased sample.

I incorporated the information obtained from the video interview into a new visual and organizational technique that I named narrative maps. Narrative maps presented, at a glance, the basic content of the interviews, and facilitated quick reference to topics and themes and the particular way in which each participant presented them. By observing the maps, the audience can engage with the participants' stories and can receive information on their accounts that were not explicitly discussed in the study. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to encourage the interaction of participants-readers and researcher-readers. Through the use of narrative maps, the aim was to explore new strategies of visually engaging the reader in each participant's story. Each map is unique and is based on the participant's personal story and my own interpretive analysis when organizing the map. For this reason, it is difficult to generate consistent rules to standardize this technique. In spite of this, researchers can attempt to develop their own narrative

maps. This tool is exceptionally informative. It promotes further considerations of the research process, digs into data that could be dismissed, and narrows the gap between participants and observers or readers.

I also would like to reflect on the narrative analysis approach used in this research. As Riessman said:

The approach is slow and painstaking, requiring attention to subtlety: nuances of speech, the organization of a response, relations between researcher and subject, social and historical contexts. It is not suitable for researchers who seek a clear and unobstructed view of subject's lives, and the analytic detail required may seem excessive to those who orient to language as a transparent medium. (2002b: 706)

Narrative analysis is “doable” only with a limited number of participants. Because of this, generalizations are always difficult to make. However, narrative analysis is not an exclusive method. As with the narrative maps, it can be easily combined with other types of analysis. With this said, narrative analysis in the social sciences is mostly limited to verbal or written accounts. Researchers may want to expand their fields of observation to other narrative forms and dimensions that are also likely to express a person's stories, like artistic expressions.

The main interest of this study was to explore how immigrant women incorporate their roles as mothers into narratives of identity. To this aim, the experimental methodology used in this research proved effective. The question, “Who are you?” in combination with the use of video and the absence of the researcher in the room during the first interview helped participants to elaborate a wide variety of sophisticated self-narratives that did not fall into the “good mother” rhetoric. To ensure this, participants did not know that motherhood was at the center of my research. The goal of this unusual approach was to counterbalance for social desirability and social expectations on the topic of motherhood that could have greatly influenced the participants' accounts. Using this strategy, participants included the topic of motherhood into

their narratives in a more spontaneous way, since the structure of the interview was open for other topics to be explored as well. Even if could be argued that participants could still tend to present positive images of themselves, the specific impact over the highly-judged role of women who mother was reduced to the extend of the possible.

Concerning reliability as indicator of research quality, I align with Denzin (1988), Riessman and Quinney (2005), and Seale (2002) in their principle that qualitative research has develop a different and more appropriate set of evaluative criteria such reflexivity. From this approach, the concepts of validity and reliability belong to positivist and post-positivist paradigms of research. They are still significant for social sciences, but they are seen through different analytical parameters in qualitative research. For instance, the 12 narrative maps I present in the index are part of my personal interpretation of the data in which any social researcher has to engage in order to produce knowledge. I fostered a trustworthy analysis of the data through “in vivo” references. Every expression that appears between quotations in the narrative maps comes directly from the verbatim transcripts of the first interview. Nonetheless, the presence of the researcher is not an aspect to exclude or necessarily isolate in qualitative research. For instance, the codes I applied depended upon my personal interpretation/reflexion. These codes mirror the particularities of each participant in the research context. Generalizability is not a major goal of this study, as my aim was to present each participant’s voice in its own. Although another researcher could easily design different codes, this does not invalid the validity of the ones I used. To the contrary, it supports my effort to engage in an open dialogue with the possibilities of data interpretation. The visual dimension of the narrative maps accentuates the participatory quality of this project.

In summary, dominant ideas about womanhood are culturally and politically linked to ideas of motherhood, in particular “good mothering.” Migrant mothers move within social milieus of contrasting forces, acquiring new experiences that transform their identities. This research supports two main points. First, non-traditional interviews allow the theme of identity to emerge in unexpected, yet interesting, ways that are capable of producing knowledge about the person and about the group. Second, motherhood is a terrain of conflict and tension for many women, since they limit how women are viewed in society, as well as in their roles, competences and interests. All of these considerations corroborate one of the important observations drawn from this study: dominant aspects of the participants’ identity, like cultural backgrounds, families, children and differences from the dominant values and practices of the American society, emerge as relational processes, rather than as static entities. The idea that personal identity is a relational experience of the self was a common implication of all of the participants’ narratives.

### **5.3 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

As previously said, mothers are among the most unsuspected and transnational agents of interaction. By analyzing motherhood and identity within the migration context, this dissertation has attempted to show that both are linked to society and particular cultural context. Since personal identity is relational, analyzing the processes of identity construction always implies an analysis of society. Although it is difficult to generalize from the participants’ stories, these still offer a deep level of understanding of the dynamics of interaction that people use to shape identity and, in turn, behaviors. Since the immigrant mothers who participated in this study were

located within two diverse cultural frameworks, they were exposed to different conceptualizations of “good motherhood.” They had to perform their roles considering the influence of, at times, opposing social expectations. I hope to have shown that, in the current global context where transnational communities develop and move, the dialogue between the receiving group and the migrant population must be widened to include a third party - the sending society-. Immigrants, then, are not the “problem” of a single society. Rather, transnational migrants are a reality for both the sending and the receiving communities. This consideration calls for the study and comparing of elements and phenomena across cultures. Policies and programs that work only within the context of a one nation-state ignore the complexities of current migratory flows, and will fail to find long-term strategies of reciprocal adjustment and inclusion.

As shown in this research, mothers are important social agents that move between worlds. The knowledge gathered from this particular group has contributed to the understanding not only of cultural tensions, but generational gaps as well. Accordingly, studies involving migrant mothers inherently explore the longitudinal and transversal dimensions of resettlement. From the interactions between society and individuals, numerous dilemmas involving the politics of citizenship, belonging, exclusion and acceptance emerge. This dissertation hopes to have proven that being mother in the migration context shapes women’s identities in a way that belongs mostly to their particular gendered role.

Motherhood is not a well-defined category. On the contrary, to make sense of it, we need to consider an array of other categories. Since motherhood is social and personal, to study mothers in the context of the household and its relationships is likely to be quite limiting, and cannot account for the complexities involved in the mothering practices occurring outside the

mothers' direct relationship with their children. Additionally, this research has confirmed that there is no single dominant discourse around migration. Rather, there are many micro-discourses formed throughout the political and cultural background of the moment, and which are in constant dialogue with the fundamental characteristics of the migrants, such as ethnic origins, gender, migratory status and class, among others. Still, in the social sciences, identity has been largely studied around issues of gender, race, class, ethnicity, citizenship, and sexuality, with little attention to motherhood as a political dimension and tool for social change.

This study ends with the acknowledgement that immigrant mothers bring difference into a practice that is often considered “natural,” “universal,” and therefore out of the particular contexts of history and culture. The participants, in their roles as mothers, felt classified as Latinas by the American society. In their views, their “racialized” motherhood hindered their perceptions of being accepted in the new society. Conversely, relatives in the home country did not take into consideration the challenges and tensions the migrant family endured. They asked the participants to become culture carriers and to pass language, traditions, and values to their children. It is evident, then, that the roles of migrant women in general, and migrant mothers in particular, are arenas of international, cultural, and political clashes.

The “in-between” situation of migrant families is the origin of much social pressure for the mothers, who at the same time are struggling with their own cultural adaptation. The study of migrant mothers allows for the tailoring of prevention and intervention programs on behalf of the immigrant population, and around the specific experiences and needs of mothers. Women who mother in the context of migration are often considered “deviant,” or different, from the standardized practices of “good mothering.” In turn, this negative stereotype about immigrant mothers is likely to have a negative effect not only on their self-perceptions but also on the views

that their own children may have of them as mothers. Potentially, this situation could create family tensions and obstruct the process of developing effective strategies to incorporate mothers, their children and families into the new society, while still embracing their cultural origins.

Finally, the participants' accounts in this research exposed that the identity of migrant women is strongly influenced by social pressures and expectations on the particular role of motherhood. Still, they constructed accounts of themselves that explored many other aspects of their lives, in addition to motherhood. In other words, mothers are complex social subjects beyond that particular role. For public institutions, being able to acknowledge migrant mothers as more than mothers would validate that they can develop successful forms of cultural engagement, even if migration entails important personal and emotional changes at that level. This is very important since it connects the *de-centering* approach theory with pragmatic strategies of intervention. Instead of improving mothers' conditions to increase their general wellbeing as women, I propose to intensify those social programs that include them as active citizens. This approach will give them the tools to fight discrimination and social exclusion, and allow them to construct a more flexible, yet rewarding, sense of home through which migrant women can develop more realistic (and do justice to the complexity of) their perceptions of themselves as mothers.

#### **5.4 FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The overall argument presented in this study was that motherhood impacts identity formations and personal perceptions of migrant women. This research provides empirical evidence for this

intuitive finding, and reveals the dynamics through which dominant discourses on motherhood shape one's identity within contexts and experiences of migration. The methodology and theory developed in this study lead to new research questions. This research opened three main paths to pursue. The first refers to concepts of 'home' and the missing allusions to the future in most interviews. For example, interviews could be conducted using the same question and methodological and theoretical strategies (video, de-centering approach), but including American citizens into the sample. The hypothesis presented in that case would be that people who have not experienced migration are more inclined to produce accounts of identity that look at the future, while immigrants will tend to anchor their identities in the past.

A second research question that has emerged in the course of this inquiry concerns issues of gender and social pressures. This research could benefit from comparing accounts of migrant mothers to those of migrant men. Again, and using the same research strategies, accounts of Latino immigrants would be recorded to understand the social pressures that Latino men encounter in their daily life. My hypothesis is that migrant fathers deal with less social expectations regarding emotional ties than migrant mothers. This has the potential of intensifying traditional gender divisions at home – a phenomenon that tends to carry negative consequences for mothers.

Finally, this study produced enough material to elaborate a more exhaustive and incipient description of the interactions that participants had with the camera. A visual narrative analysis of identity would bring additional knowledge to the constructions of identity in the process of telling a story. It may also lend “visibility” to an otherwise invisible population, and in the process, help construct new spaces of understanding.



## APPENDIX A

### KEY TO NARRATIVE MAPS

1. Sentences: I selected a series of sentences that better represented a passage. When the passage was too long, I selected two sentences to indicate the extension of the account. All of the words that appear between quotation marks come directly from the 1<sup>st</sup> interview transcripts. Words that are not between quotation marks are mine. For instance, in Ana's map entrance #20 says "good friend" with no quotation marks. The reason for it is that Ana engaged in a long tale describing herself has a good friend even if she never said those exact words. Moreover, this topic emerged inside explicit accounts such as "being a good person" (#18) and being "a good daughter" (#21).
2. Order of the narrative: I numbered each sentence in order of appearance. So, sentence #1 was said before sentence #3, and so on. Some sentences have more than one number indicating that the participant went back to the same topic using the exact (or very similar) words. The number indicates the order.
3. Codes: I clustered all the sentences into analytical codes that could reflect better the participant's interest. The codes were not generalized for all participants although many of them are similar. I also tried to code the clusters using participants' own words when

the meaning was relevant for the grouping. The reason for such variety was to reflect better the particularities of each participant. For instance, in Ana's map I grouped her experiences with her husband under the group #15 "I married an American" this is because Ana, while talking about her husband, stressed the cultural differences between them. Instead, in Carmen's map, sentences #2 and #3 fall into the category that I named "husband." This is because Carmen's account portrayed her husband, but did not significantly position her in relation with her husband.

4. Interactive arrows: The blue arrows indicate the themes that come before and after the topic of motherhood as a way to visually represent the connections that participants made in relation to that role.
5. The grey boxes are inferences that I have made on the maps. Those codes are my own interpretation and are connected to the sentences that I believe produce such knowledge.
6. The opening is not numbered since it was not developed as a set of stories, but as a set of independent descriptors enumerated at the beginning.

**APPENDIX B**

**NARRATIVE MAPS**

Figure 3. Ana

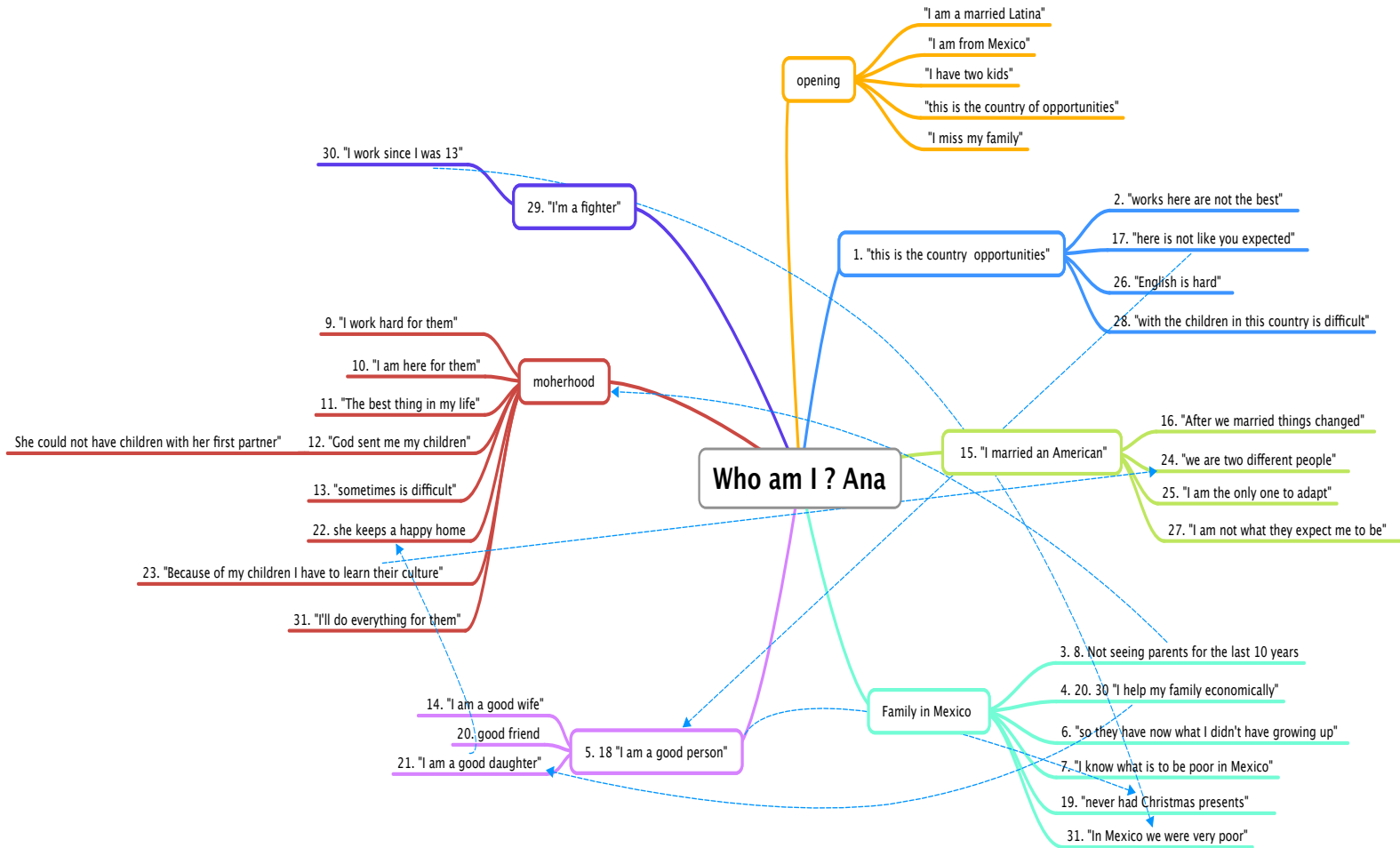


Figure 4. Angi

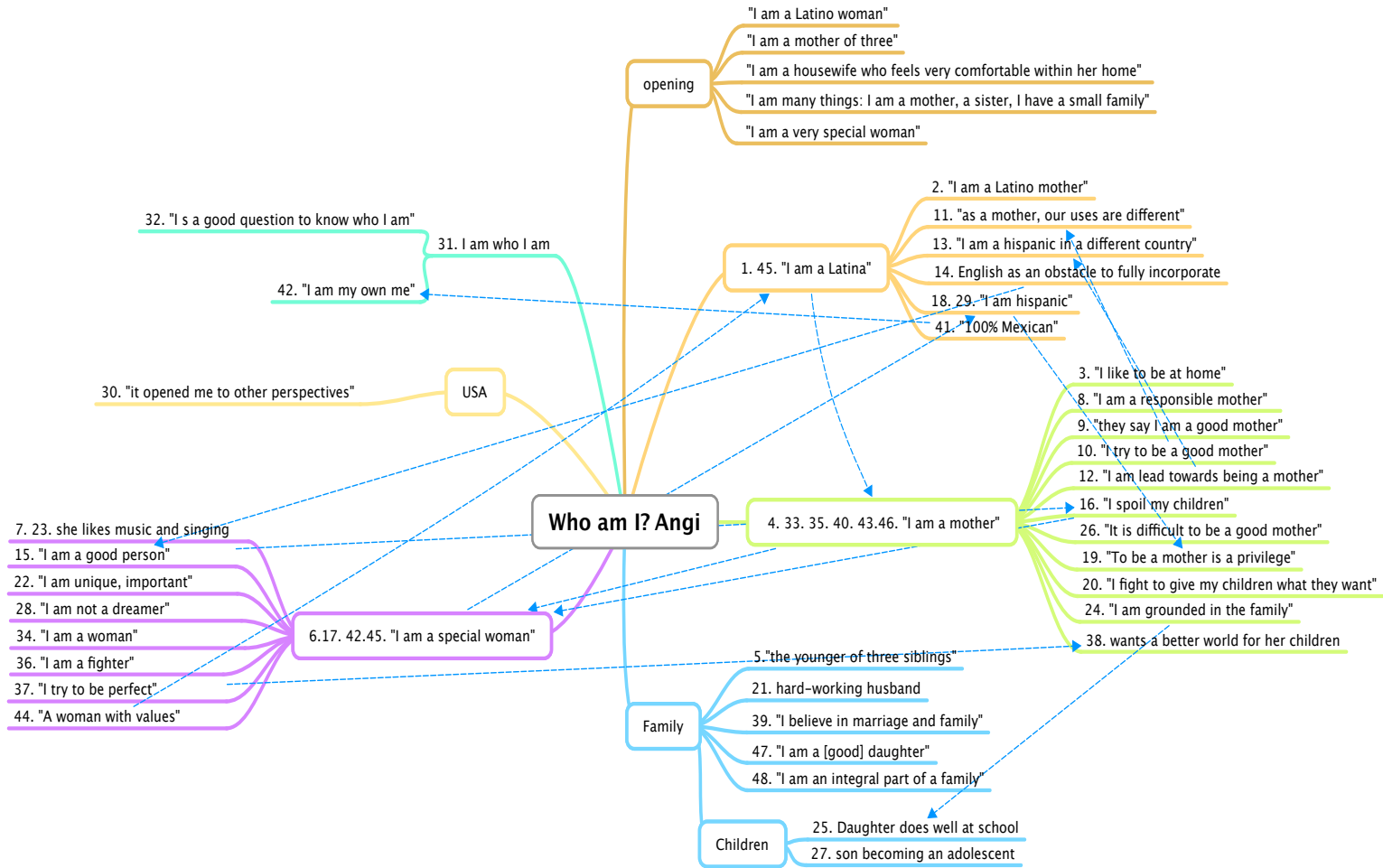


Figure 5. Benjamina

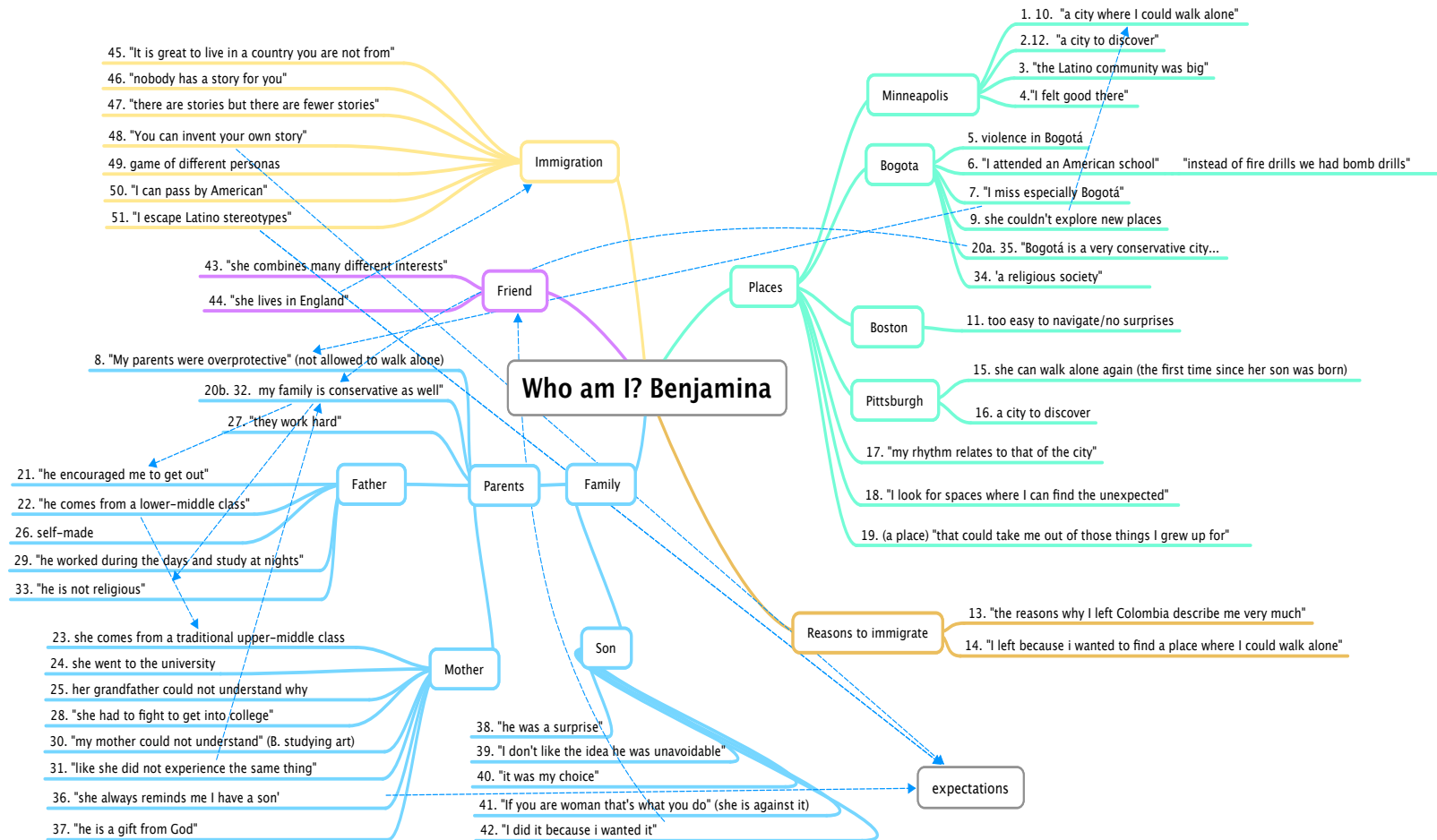


Figure 6. Carmen

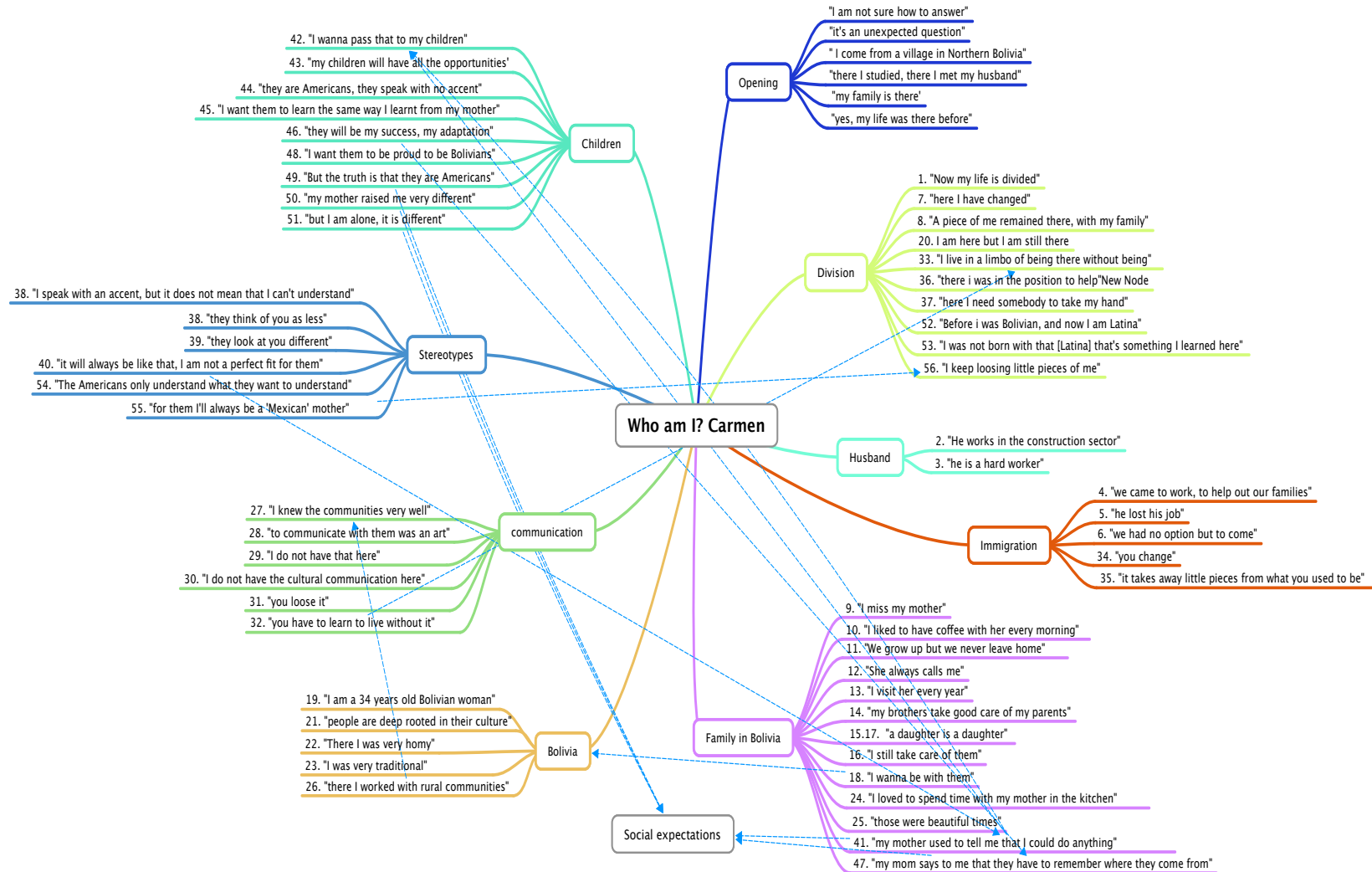


Figure 7. Clara

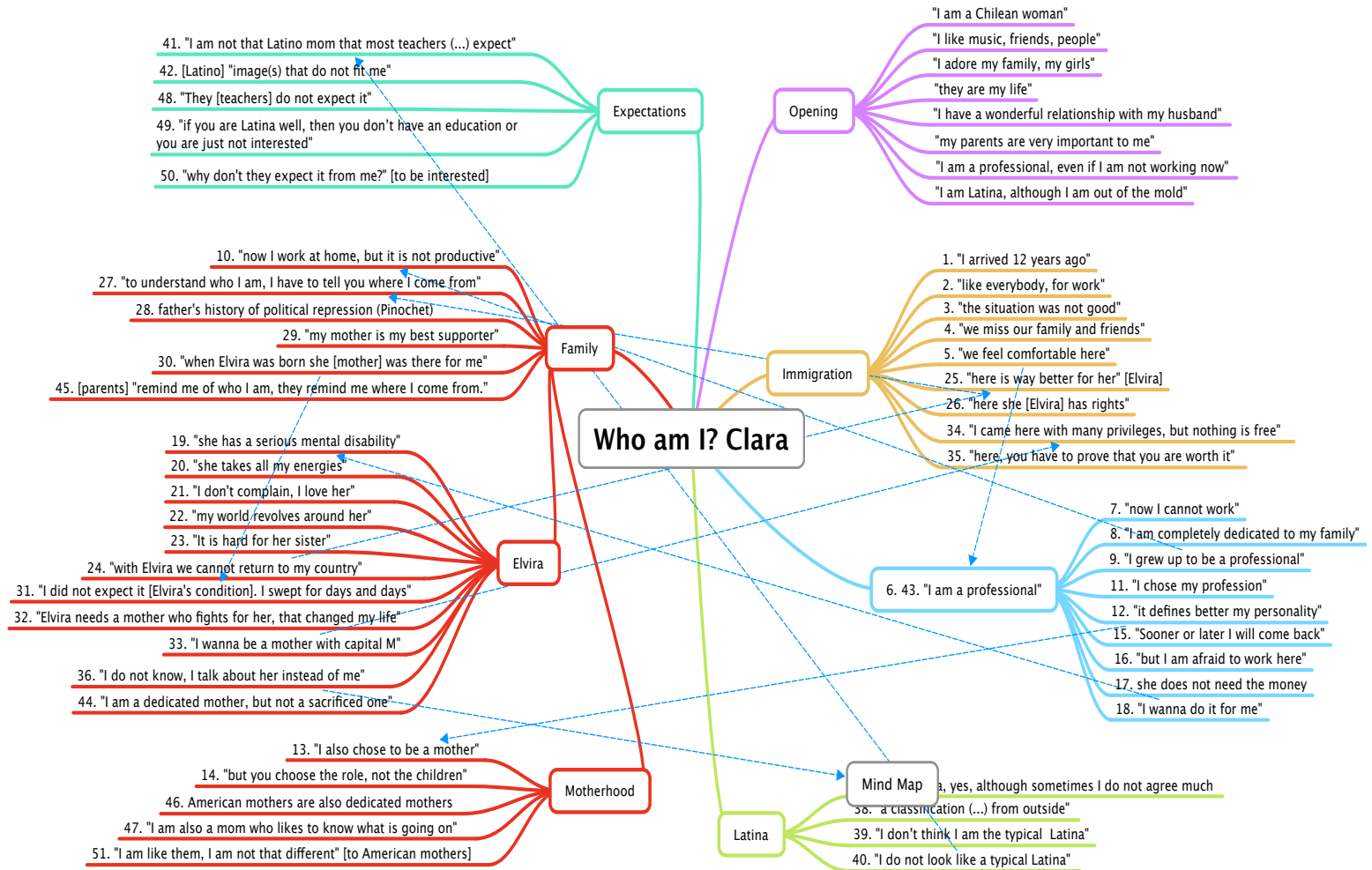




Figure 8. Elisenda

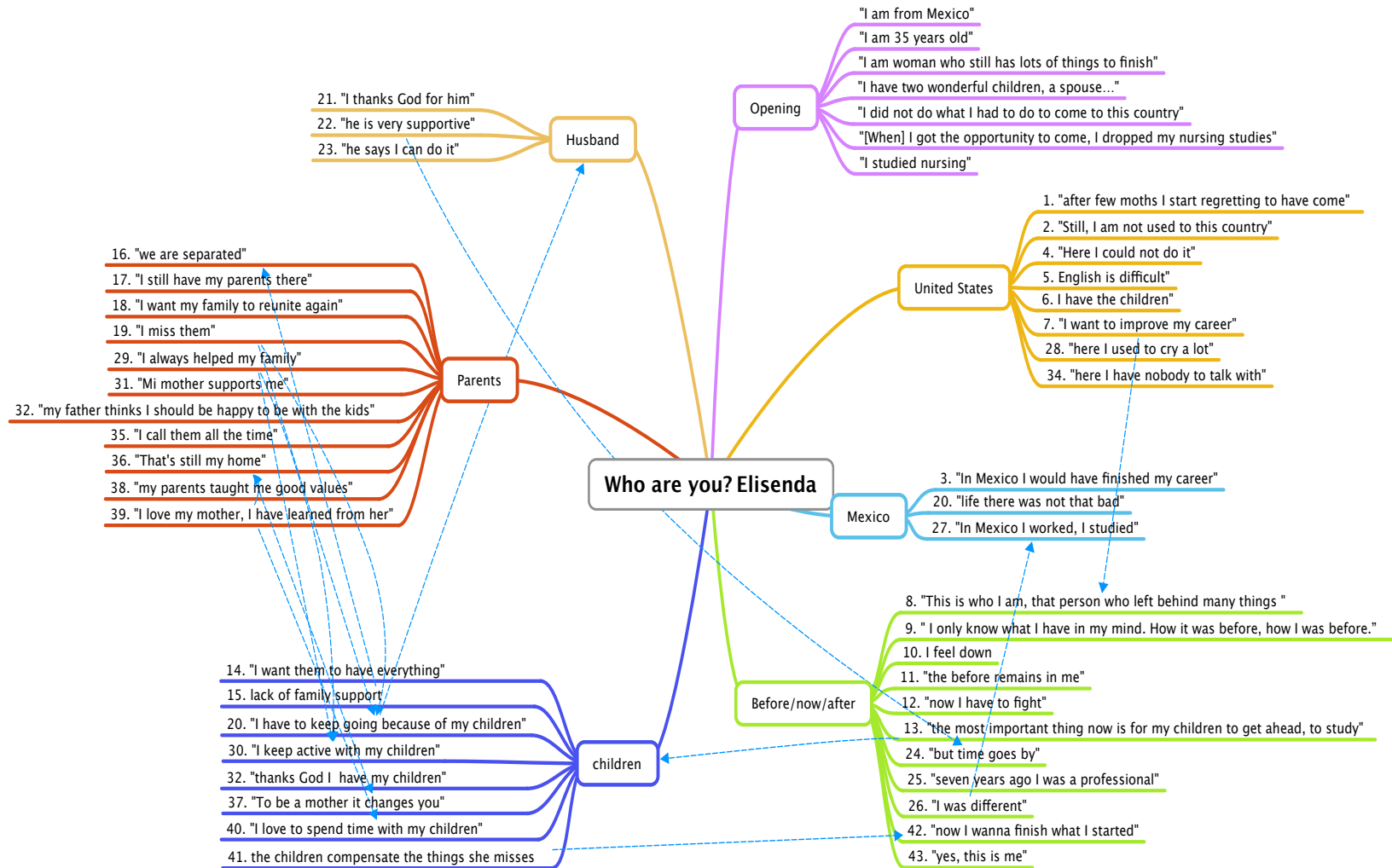


Figure 9. Flor

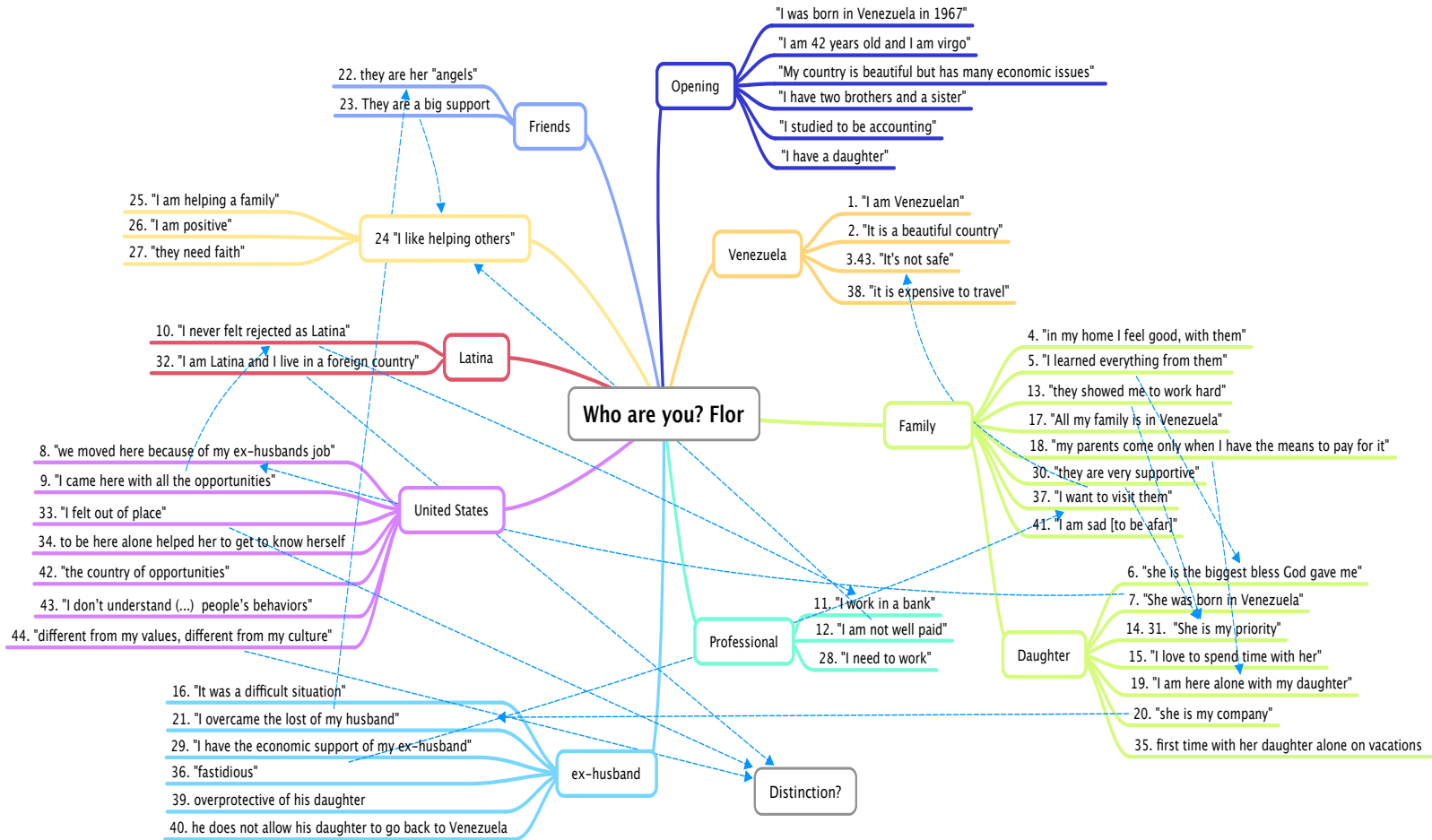


Figure 10. Isabella

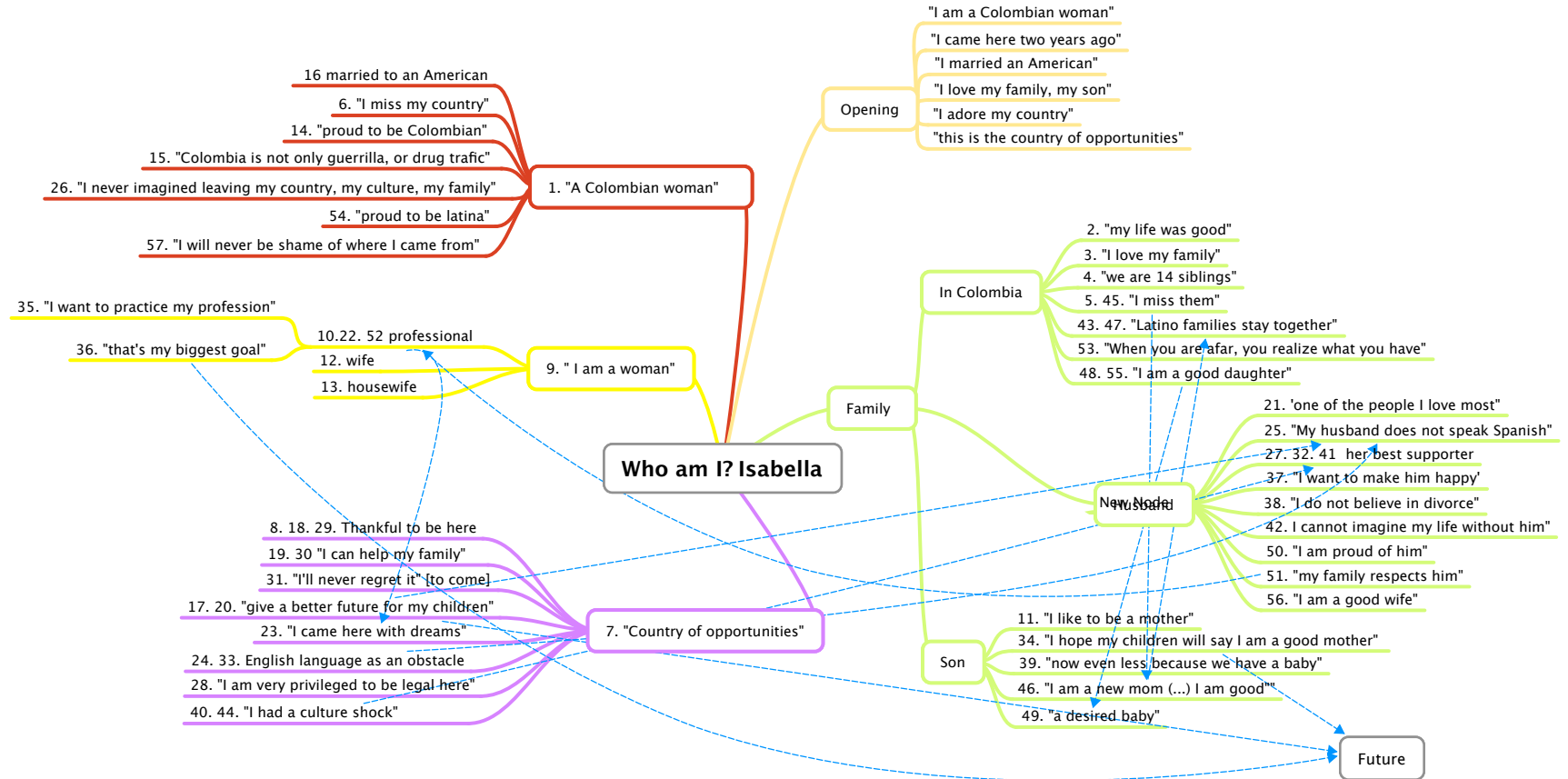


Figure 11. Marisol

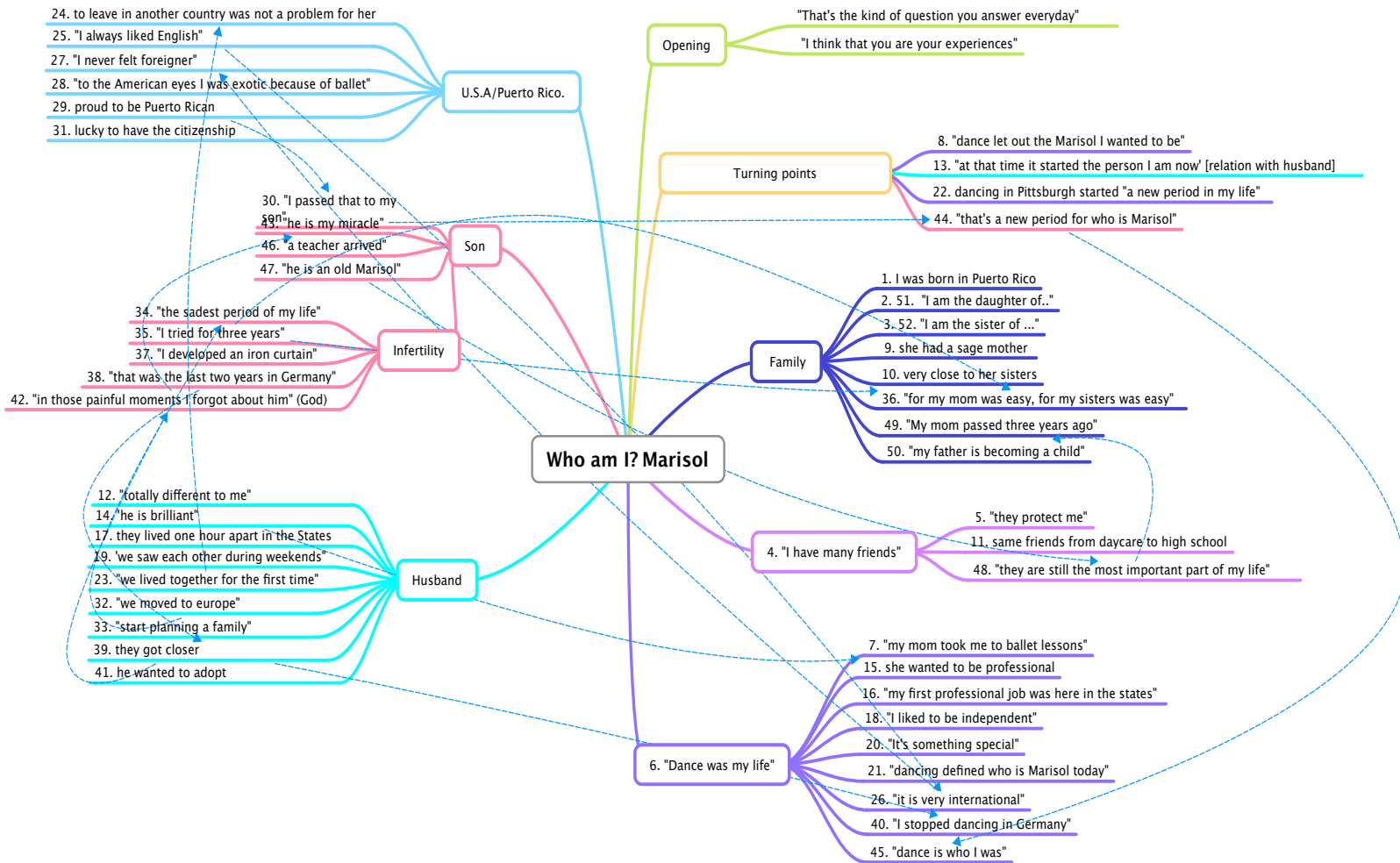


Figure 12. Natasha

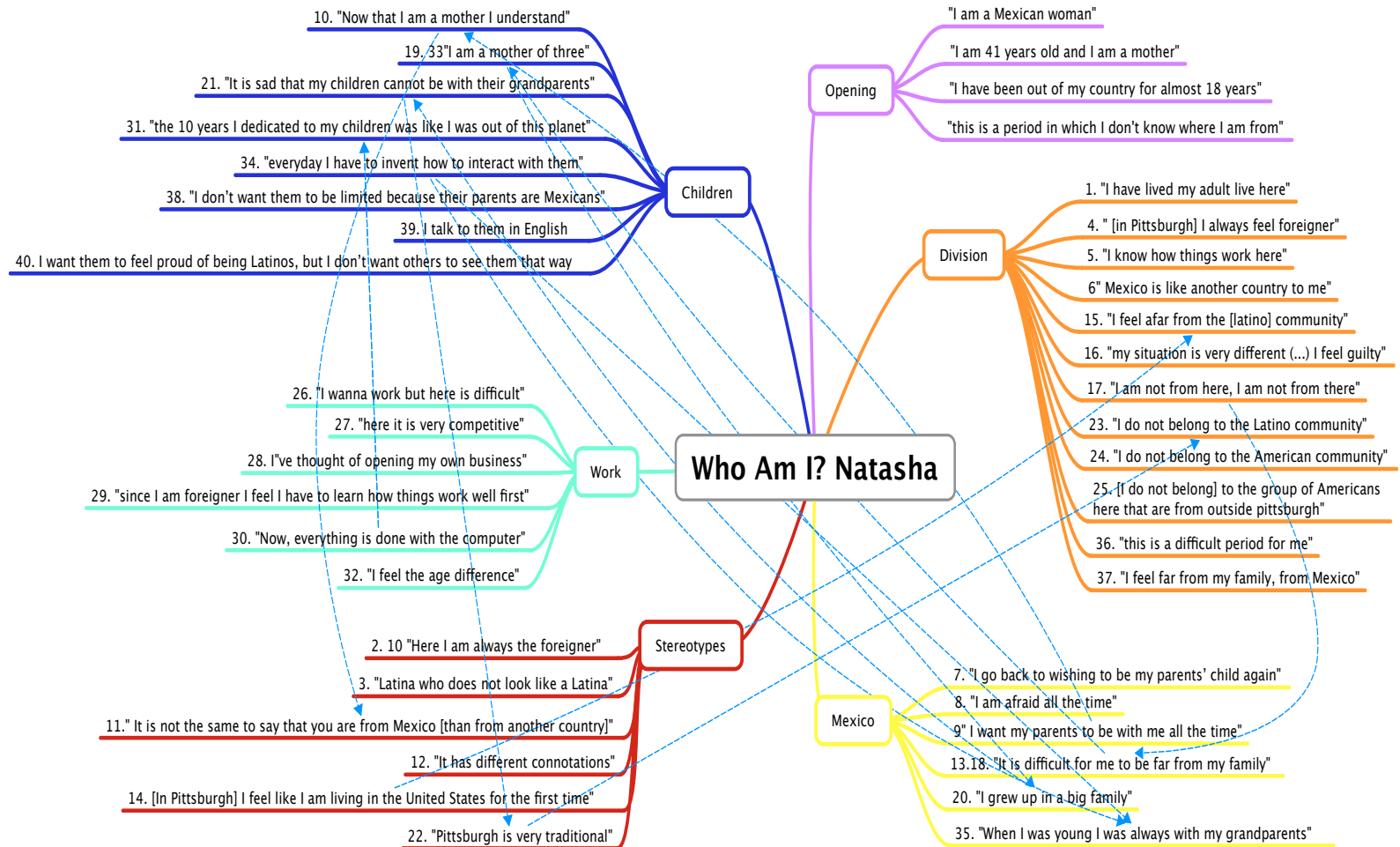


Figure 13. Serena

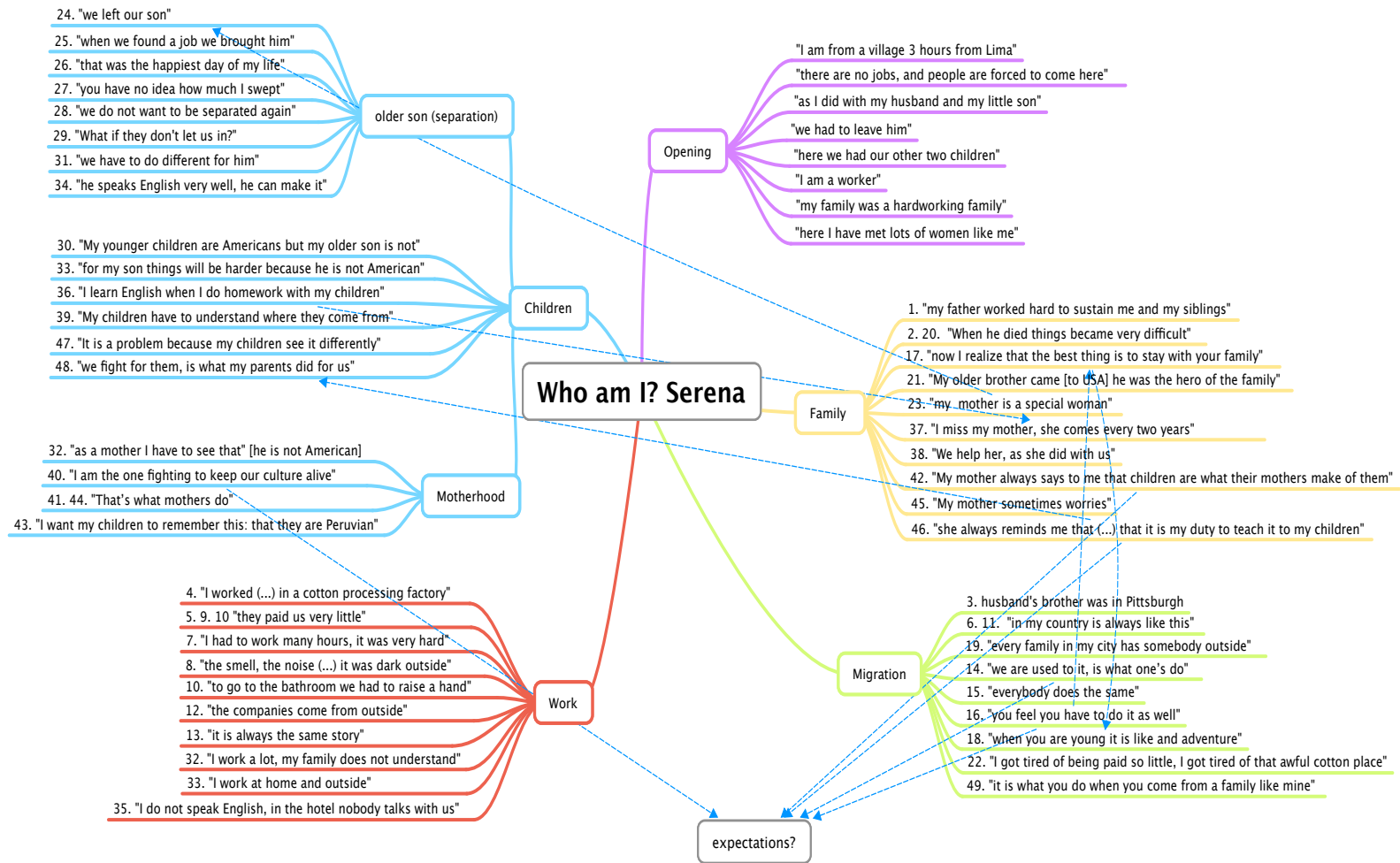
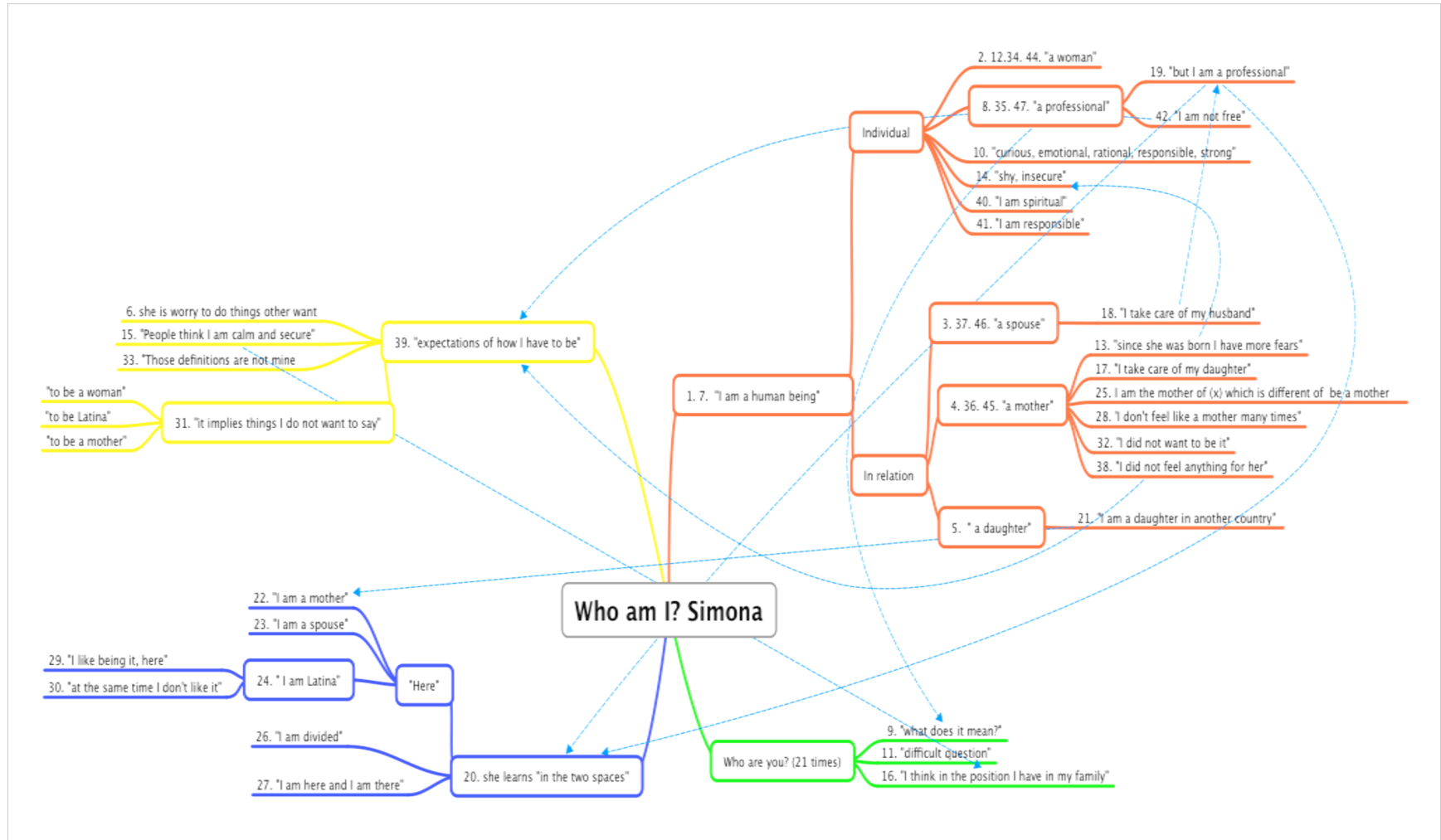


Figure 14. Simona



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