

Adolescents' representations of close relationships in the context of parental migration: an exploratory study from Ecuador

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this study is to examine the association between parental migration and adolescents' styles of close relationships with parents, friends and romantic partners.*

Design/methodology/approach – *In total, 197 adolescents from Cuenca (Ecuador) participated in the study, of which 35% reported a background of parental migration. The Behavioral Systems Questionnaire was used to assess participants' relational styles.*

Findings – *The study reveals that, although parental migration is associated with the development of lower secure styles for parents and friends, it is not associated with the development of insecure styles. Moreover, parental migration does not appear to be associated with the development of romantic styles. Based on the differential impact of the migration of one or two parents, the migration of two parents appeared to have a stronger association with lower secure styles.*

Originality/value – *The results are discussed in light of the socio-cultural context in which parental migration occurs in Ecuador, which may offer clue variables in shaping the relational styles of adolescents. The study addresses an important consequence of migration focusing on a scarce studies group, adolescents who stay in their home country while their parents migrate. Moreover, its main findings challenge the preconceptions that parent-child separations necessarily involve a direct negative impact on relational functioning.*

Keywords *Adolescents, Ecuador, Close relationships, Parental migration, Relational styles*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction

Across the world, economic deprivation and inequality force many families to turn to transnational migration as a strategy for economic survival. In Ecuador, many families used transnational migration as a short-term coping strategy for dealing with economic crises during the past decades. Especially during the late 1990s, a severe economic crisis provoked an enormous wave of transnational migration with levels that have lead Ecuador to become the Andean country with the highest percentage of transnational migration (UNFPA-Ecuador, 2006). During this wave, apart from the huge number of people who left the country, i.e. about 20% of the economically active population, there was also a significant shift in the profile of the migrant person. While first, mostly single young men of families left the country, migration increasingly included more young parents, i.e. fathers and mothers who traveled to the USA or Spain in search of a job to financially support their broader family in Ecuador (Borrero, 2002; Herrera and Carrillo, 2009). In fact, among its various forms, the most common type of transnational migration in Ecuador consists of

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parental migration. This means that father, mother or both parents leave their country for an undefined time to work abroad without any intention to bring their children to the host country, implying that children can only see their parents again during occasional visits or upon their final return (Jokhan, 2008; Pottinger and Brown, 2006). Moreover, in Ecuador, parental migration has been mainly to distant countries, which prevents the possibility of intermediate visits which results in a prolonged separation between parents and children (Boccagni, 2012; Borrero, 2002; Herrera, 2004; Herrera and Carrillo, 2009; Jokisch and Pribilsky, 2002; Leifsen and Tymczuk, 2012).

Parental migration implies profound changes in family structures, leading to the development of “transnational families,” in which members maintain economic and emotional ties despite the physical distance (Hall, 2005; Herrera and Carrillo, 2009). This phenomenon of transnational families has attracted the interest of scholars, as reflected in a growing body of academic work that mainly focuses on the dynamics of relationships among the members (Bacigalupe and Cámara, 2012; Hall, 2005; Herrera and Carrillo, 2009; Leifsen and Tymczuk, 2012; López Montaña and Loaiza Orozco, 2009; Parella, 2007; Puyana and Rojas, 2011; Reist and Riaño, 2008), on transnational parenting practices (Boccagni, 2012; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Pedone, 2008; Pribilsky, 2012; Wagner, 2008) and on the impact of migration on family members (Olwig, 1999; Smith *et al.*, 2004; Sorensen, 2008; Suárez-Orozco *et al.*, 2011; Yarris, 2014). Here, many studies focus on the impact of migration on children who stay in their home country, as they are supposed to be the most vulnerable group (Dreby, 2007). In the literature, those who stay in their country while their parents migrate to search for work and leave their family for a period of more than six months have been ascribed the term “left behind” (Jokhan, 2008; Olwig, 1999; Qin and Albin, 2010; Smith *et al.*, 2004; Ten Doesschate *et al.*, 2012; Valtolina and Colombo, 2012). While several studies have focused on identifying the positive effects of parental migration on left-behind children (e.g. better health and educational opportunities), several studies documented adverse psychosocial consequences of parental migration on left-behind children (e.g. psychological difficulties, behavioral problems and challenges in family relationships) (for a review: see Dillon and Walsh, 2012).

Here, studies indicated how the psychosocial impact of parental migration might be more disruptive during adolescence probably due to specific characteristics of this developmental stage, when different psycho-social shifts have a place, including changes in a cognitive and representational capacity, as well as significant transitions in family and social role expectations (Doyle and Moretti, 2000). In specific, studies with left behind adolescents have documented the association between parental migration and lower self-esteem, emotional distress, feelings of abandonment, sadness, loneliness (Baltazar, 2003; López Montaña and Loaiza Orozco, 2009; Ron, 2010; Zárate *et al.*, 2013), as well as aggressiveness and resentment toward migrant parents (Baltazar, 2003; Dreby, 2007; López Montaña and Loaiza Orozco, 2009; Zárate *et al.*, 2013).

In explaining these potentially disruptive psychosocial sequelae of parental migration, studies have indicated the possible role of different relational processes. First, psychosocial problems could be evoked by prolonged parent-child separation, a separation that is often not communicated to children on beforehand and followed by a long-term limited contact between parents and children (Arnold, 2006; Dreby, 2007; Jokhan, 2008; Smith *et al.*, 2004; Zárate *et al.*, 2007). Further, others have argued that this adverse impact can be explained by changes in the family structure such as shifting of children between caregivers, the participation of the extended family and parentification of older siblings (Gutiérrez and Bedoya, 2007; Herrera and Carrillo, 2009; Jokhan, 2008; Orellana *et al.*, 2001; Pribilsky, 2012). Finally, the negative impact of parental migration might be exacerbated through negative responses in the broader social context of left-behind children, as it has been shown that in Ecuador, although transnational migration is an economic survival strategy accepted for families, the non-compliance to the model of the socially accepted nuclear

family may instigate strong processes of stigmatization toward members of transnational families (Boccagni, 2012; Carrillo, 2005; Gutiérrez and Bedoya, 2007; Herrera and Carrillo, 2009; Meñaca, 2005; Pedone, 2006; Reist and Riaño, 2008; Wagner, 2008).

As this body of research on transnational families points to several relational processes at stake in shaping the psychosocial sequelae of parental migration in left-behind children, it is remarkable that the vast majority of studies have focused on an assessment of individual functioning, rather than exploring the possible impact on adolescents' relational functioning.

In this respect, attachment theory provides a useful framework to inspire an exploration of the impact of parental migration on relational functioning (Pottinger, 2005; Smith *et al.*, 2004; Suárez-Orozco *et al.*, 2002). Indeed, from an attachment perspective, unplanned prolonged parent-child separations and transitioning to multiple caregivers have been documented as disruptions of attachment bonds and have found to be related to difficulties in developing secure attachment relationships (Kobak *et al.*, 2001).

To analyze the potential sequelae of parental migration on adolescents' understanding of close relationships, the concept of relational styles may provide an interesting window into adolescents' relational functioning. Attachment studies have documented how, based on experiences of early parent-child interactions, individuals develop expectations about close relationships that endure over time and shape subsequent close relationships (Flanagan and Furman, 2000; Simpson *et al.*, 2007; Zeifman and Hazan, 2008). Here, the concept of "relational styles" is used to explore these representations of close relationships during adolescence (Furman *et al.*, 2002; Furman and Simon, 2006). Relational styles include pre-conceptions, beliefs and expectations an individual holds about close relationships and these are assumed to stem from previous experiences with parents and caregivers. Individual differences in relational styles can be classified using the primary attachment categories of secure and insecure styles, with the insecure styles being classified in anxious-avoidant (dismissing) and anxious-ambivalent (preoccupied) styles (Furman *et al.*, 2002). During adolescence, individuals hold relational styles of parents but also of other close relationships such as with friends and romantic partners (Furman and Simon, 2006). Furman and colleagues have also emphasized that significant cognitive changes that occur during adolescence can shape perceptions of relationships such that these are qualitatively different from those of children but not yet comparable to those of adults. This suggests that an exploration of relational styles at this stage appears to be necessary (Furman and Simon, 1999).

Therefore, based on the tenet of attachment theory emphasizing the potential role of disruptions of the affective bond in developing a secure attachment, we hypothesized that parental migration might adversely affect the formation and maintenance of secure relational styles for close relationships in left behind adolescents. Thus, the main aim of the present study was to examine the association between parental migration and adolescents' relational styles of close relationships with parents, friends and romantic partners – as these last two may operate as important sources of emotional support in the context of parental migration. Moreover, we aimed to explore the differential effect of migration of one or both parents, hypothesizing that the migration of both parents would have a larger impact on adolescent's relational styles of close relationships.

Methods

Participants

This study is part of a broader research project that aimed to investigate different aspects of romantic relationships in adolescents. In the overall project, 562 adolescents from different stages of adolescence participated. For the present study only adolescents in the stage of late adolescence, i.e. those between 17 to 19 years old, were included. At least two reasons inspired us to select this age group. First, several authors have suggested that during late

adolescence parents are still likely to be the primary attachment figures (Doyle and Moretti, 2000; Furman and Shaffer, 2003; Hazan and Zeifman, 1994). Especially in Ecuador, it is still a tradition that (unmarried) children continue to live together with their parents until they become more independent (usually) when they marry. Marriage is often occurring during the stage of young adulthood, and therefore the link between adolescents – even in late adolescence – and parents deserve special attention in research. Second, as most adolescents are eager to learn about romantic relationships, late adolescence has been considered a sensitive period in the development of attachment and caregiving (Overbeek et al., 2003). Moreover, we opted to focus on adolescents in the stage of late adolescence because we believe that most participants then would already have had a romantic relationship or would be in a relationship at the moment of the study. That would enable all participants to answer the questions from a double perspective: based on what they expect from a relationship based on experiences with other types of close relationships, and based on what they have experienced themselves in their romantic relationships.

The final sample ($n = 197$) consisted of 64 male (32.5%) and 133 female (67.5%) adolescents. The difference in the inclusion of male and female adolescents in this random sample is due to the fact that in Ecuador high school attendance is relatively higher in female adolescents (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2015). Between the ages of 15 and 17, some male adolescents start to work mainly because of economic needs (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2015). In total, 67 participants (35%) reported a background of parental migration with 38 (20%) who reported that one parent migrated and 29 (15%) who reported that both parents migrated. Participants varied in terms of sex, type of school and romantic involvement (Table 1).

Procedure

This study was approved by the Bio-Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Cuenca. Additionally, the local office of the Ministry of Education of Ecuador provided permission to conduct the research in the schools and provided a database of all public and private high schools in Cuenca. That database – was used to select a sample of high schools based on a randomized clustered sampling procedure. In all schools from the sample, the research protocol and methods used were discussed with the head of the school and the school psychologist. After approval, the survey was administered by trained pollsters in the school classrooms. Adolescents were informed about the aims of the study

Table 1 Demographic characteristics

Demographic variable	No migration		Migration of one parent		Migration of two parents	
	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
<i>Sex</i>						
Female	84	67	29	76	17	59
Male	42	33	9	24	12	41
<i>Type of school</i>						
Private	54	43	16	42	6	21
Public	72	57	22	58	23	79
<i>Age of first romantic involvement</i>						
Never in a relationship	7	6	5	13	1	4
<13 years	57	45	14	37	21	72
>14 years	61	49	19	50	7	24
<i>Current romantic involvement</i>						
Yes	61	48	22	58	8	28
No	65	52	16	42	21	72

Notes: The results for this table do not add until 197 because we miss information about the background of migration for 4 participants

and they were told that some survey items would address personal issues. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. All students who were selected in the sample consented to participate in the study and signed informed consent before completing the survey. After completing the survey, adolescents received a snack and a drink.

Measures

A short questionnaire was used to obtain demographic information including age, gender, parental migration and past and/or current involvement in a romantic relationship.

The short nine-item version of the Behavioral Systems Questionnaire (BSQ) (Furman, 2002; Furman and Wehner, 1999) was used to assess adolescents' relational styles for parents, friends and romantic partners. For each of the three types of relationships, relational styles were measured. The scales on friends and romantic partners were focused on participants' beliefs about these types of relationships, in general, and thus were applicable regardless of whether the participant ever had a romantic relationship. Sample items of the BSQ include: for secure styles e.g.: "I seek my romantic partner/friends/parents when something bad happens;" for dismissing styles e.g.: "I do not often ask my romantic partner/friends/parents to comfort me," and for preoccupied styles e.g.: "I feel that my romantic partner/friends/parents believe that I depend on them too often." As there was no Spanish version of the BSQ available, the instrument was translated into Spanish using the formal procedure of forward-backward translation (Cull, 2002; International Test Commission, 2010). The scoring of the BSQ is based on a five-point Likert-scale with scores ranging from 1 "Strongly Disagree" to 5 "Strongly Agree," with higher scores indicating greater consistency with the assessed relational style. The BSQ allowed for an assessment of levels of both security and insecurity in relational styles, considering within the insecure styles the dismissing and preoccupied ones. The BSQ has shown good psychometric qualities (Furman *et al.*, 2002). In the present study, the internal consistency of the three style scores for each type of relationship were all satisfactory (all Cronbach's alphas > 0.70; *M* alpha = 0.79).

Statistical analyzes

For gender, parental migration and current romantic involvement, descriptive analyzes, i.e. frequencies and percentages, were calculated. For relational styles and past romantic involvement, means and standard deviations were calculated. Equivalence between the groups with and without a background of parental migration was tested with χ^2 -tests looking for associations with gender, school type and current romantic involvement. A meta-analysis using Phi and Cramer's V to measure the effect size was applied. Comparisons of relational styles were conducted in two stages. In the first stage, the relationship styles of the groups of adolescents with and without a background of parental migration were compared using *t*-tests. In a second stage, adolescents with a history of parental migration were split into those with the experience of one and those with two parents who migrated, thus ending with three groups to compare. Differences between these three groups were measured using one-way ANOVAs including post hoc Bonferroni corrections. The level of significance was set at $p < 0.5$. Statistical analyzes were performed using SPSS 18.0.

Results

Demographic and relationship variables

Adolescents with and without a background of parental migration did not differ in terms of association with gender, $\chi^2(1) = 0.079$, $p = 0.872$, $\emptyset = -0.020$; school type, $\chi^2(1) = 1.840$, $p = 0.216$, $\emptyset = 0.098$; current romantic involvement, $\chi^2(1) = 0.232$, $p = 0.652$, $\emptyset = 0.035$ (Table 2).

Table 2 Distribution of adolescents according to age, type of school and romantic involvement

Demographic variable	No background of parental migration (%) <i>n</i> = 126 64%	Adolescents with a background of parental migration (%) <i>n</i> = 67 34%	<i>p</i> -value
	<i>Gender</i>		
Male	33.3	31.3	
Female	66.7	68.7	
<i>High school type</i>			0.216
Private	42.9	32.8	
Public	57.1	67.2	
<i>Current romantic involvement</i>			0.652
No	48.4	44.8	
Yes	51.6	55.2	

Notes: The results for this table include missing data of four participants

Parental migration and relational styles

When comparing secure relational styles between adolescents with and without a background of parental migration, it was found that adolescents with a background of parental migration had significantly lower scores on secure styles for friends ($t(189) = 2.071$, $p = 0.040$, $r = 0.14$), but no significant differences were found on the secure styles for parents ($t(187) = 1.610$, $p = 0.109$, $r = 0.12$) or on secure styles for romantic partners ($t(182) = 1.749$, $p = 0.082$, $r = 0.13$). While comparing insecure relational styles between these groups, no significant differences were found in any of the studied relationships, neither for the dismissing nor the preoccupied styles (Table 3).

When comparing relational styles between those without a background of parental migration, those with the migration of one parent and those with the migration of two parents, significant group differences were found for the secure styles for parents ($F(2,186) = 4.85$, $p = 0.009$, $r = 0.22$) and for friends ($F(2,188) = 3.21$, $p = 0.042$, $r = 0.18$), but not for the secure styles for romantic partners. Moreover, no significant differences were found in the insecure relational styles, neither dismissing nor preoccupied for any of the studied relationships (Table 4).

Table 3 Comparison of relational styles of adolescents with and without parental migration

Relational style	No migration		Migration	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Parents style</i>				
Secure	3.64	0.85	3.43	0.93
Dismissing	2.65	0.68	2.67	0.80
Preoccupied	2.90	0.69	2.90	0.83
<i>Friendship style</i>				
Secure*	3.72	0.77	3.48	0.80
Dismissing	2.41	0.66	2.62	0.87
Preoccupied	2.61	0.62	2.66	0.71
<i>Romantic Style</i>				
Secure	3.68	0.60	3.49	0.80
Dismissing	2.62	0.57	2.61	0.73
Preoccupied	2.62	0.61	2.74	0.80

Notes: An asterisk indicates a significant difference between the two means in that row. * $p < 0.05$

Table 4 Comparison of relational styles based on the number of migrant parents

Relational style	No migration		One migrant parent		Two migrant parents	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Parents style						
Secure**	3.64	0.85	3.68	0.68	3.11	0.69
Dismissing	2.65	0.90	2.64	0.78	2.71	0.84
Preoccupied	2.90	0.89	2.94	0.83	2.85	0.82
Friendship style						
Secure*	3.72	0.77	3.60	0.85	3.32	0.72
Dismissing	2.41	0.66	2.56	0.78	2.70	0.98
Preoccupied	2.61	0.62	2.58	0.65	2.77	0.77
Romantic style						
Secure	3.68	0.60	3.55	0.79	3.41	0.68
Dismissing	2.62	0.57	2.50	0.66	2.75	0.80
Preoccupied	2.62	0.61	2.61	0.71	2.90	0.88

Notes: Asterisks indicates significant differences between the two means in that row; * $p < 0.05$; and ** $p < 0.01$

For the relational styles showing a significant difference between groups, a post hoc Bonferroni correction was carried out. For the secure styles for parents, the results indicated that the mean score of those having two migrant parents ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.69$) was significantly lower compared to the other two groups, i.e. those with one migrant parent ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.68$) and those without a background of parental migration ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.85$). For the secure styles for friends, the results indicated that the mean score of those with two migrant parents ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.72$) was significantly lower than that of those without a background of parental migration ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.77$), while there was no significant difference with those with one migrant parent ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.85$).

Additionally, comparisons were made while taking into account the age at which parental migration occurred. When comparing relational styles among those whose parents did not migrate, those whose parent (s) migrated when they were under five years, those whose parent (s) migrated when they were 6 to 10 years and, those whose parent (s) migrated when they were 11 to 15 years, no significant group differences were found in any of the studied relationships (Table 5).

Table 5 Comparison of relational styles based on the age of the child when his/her parent (s) migrated

Relational style	0-5 y		6-10 y		11-15 y	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Parents style						
Secure	3.41	0.95	3.47	0.97	3.41	0.92
Dismissing	2.83	0.83	2.50	0.76	2.61	0.80
Preoccupied	2.91	0.89	2.85	0.83	2.90	0.72
Friendship style						
Secure	3.50	0.84	3.50	0.84	3.35	0.61
Dismissing	2.76	1.03	2.52	0.72	2.46	0.68
Preoccupied	2.63	0.82	2.69	0.63	2.68	0.68
Romantic style						
Secure	3.57	0.71	3.36	0.93	3.48	0.80
Dismissing	2.70	0.69	2.52	0.71	2.51	0.71
Preoccupied	2.80	0.84	2.65	0.70	2.66	0.90

Notes: Asterisks indicates significant differences between the two means in that row; * $p < 0.05$; and ** $p < 0.01$

Parental migration and romantic involvement

When comparing the age at which adolescents with and without a background of parental migration engaged in romantic relationships, it was found that adolescents with a background of parental migration were significantly younger at their first romantic involvement ($t(173) = 2.141, p = 0.034, r = 0.16$), while in terms of the number of romantic partners they had had, no significant differences were found ($t(176) = -0.0580, p = 0.562, r = 0.04$) (Table 6).

When comparing the age of first romantic involvement between adolescents with no parental migration, one migrant parent, two migrant parents, a certain decrease in the age of first romantic involvement was observed, but the differences between the groups were not significant ($F(2.172) = 2.58, p = 0.079, r = 0.17$). Moreover, the number of romantic partners in the past was not significantly different between the groups with different backgrounds of parental migration ($F(2.175) = 1.53, p = 0.221, r = 0.13$) (Table 7).

Discussion

In the current study, the association between parental migration and the development of relational styles of close relationships was examined in a sample of late adolescents living in the urban environment of Cuenca (Ecuador). The main findings of the study are discussed and related to some complex family and societal processes that accompany parental migration in Ecuador.

Nature of parental migration

The percentage of left behind adolescents due to parental migration that was found in the present study, i.e. In total, 35%, was similar to percentages found in previous studies (Ron, 2010). This high percentage confirms that Ecuador – specifically Cuenca – is faced with a significant number of adolescents who have been left behind by their parents (Reist and Riaño, 2008). Furthermore, the finding that 15% of the total sample reported that both parents migrated, points to the fact that in such a context new family structures might occur and develop. It was previously shown that paternal, maternal or combined migration may have a differential impact on family structure (Herrera and Carrillo, 2009; Ten Doesschate et al., 2012). In the case of paternal migration, children usually stay with the mother which implies that the nuclear family remains intact, however, with substantial changes in family roles. In case of maternal migration, it seems that the nuclear family is more under pressure

Table 6 Comparison of romantic involvement based on the background of parental migration

Romantic involvement	No migration		Migration	
	M	SD	M	SD
Age of first romantic involvement*	13.40	2.10	12.63	2.52
Number of romantic partners in the past	3.93	1.86	4.10	1.90

Notes: An asterisk indicates a significant difference between the two means in that row. * $p < 0.05$

Table 7 Comparison of romantic involvement based on parental migration

Romantic involvement	No migration		One migrant parent		Two migrant parents	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Age of first romantic involvement	13.40	2.10	12.84	3.09	12.39	1.71
Number of romantic partners in the past	3.93	1.86	3.74	1.89	4.54	1.85

Notes: An asterisk indicates a significant difference between the two means in that row. * $p < 0.05$

because other female members of the extended family (rather than the father) take over the care of those left behind, i.e. children, adolescents and even the father (Hall, 2005; Herrera and Carrillo, 2009). Clearly, the situation is more complex when the two parents migrate, in which case the participation of surrogate caregivers from the extended family is clearly needed (Arnold, 2006; Feuk *et al.*, 2010; Hall, 2005; Herrera and Carrillo, 2009; Jokhan, 2008; López Montaña and Loaiza Orozco, 2009; Olwig, 1999; Orellana *et al.*, 2001; Smith *et al.*, 2004). The high percentage of double parental migration found in the current study clearly indicates the relevance of further research into these evolving family structures that result from single and double parental migration.

Parental migration and relational styles

In the present study, it was hypothesized that left behind adolescents would present difficulties in the development of secure relational styles, thus would report lower scores in secure styles toward close relationships with parents, friends and romantic partners. In specific, it was hypothesized that adolescents with migrant parents would report lower secure relational styles and complementary, higher insecure, i.e. dismissing and preoccupied styles.

This study revealed that parental migration was only associated with lower secure styles for parents and friends, but not with lower secure styles for romantic partners. Furthermore, it was found that the migration of two parents might lead adolescents to develop even lower secure relational styles for parents and for friends. It was found also that secure styles for parents differed when the number of migrated parents was taken into account. Surprisingly, adolescents with one migrant parent did not differ in the level of security compared to those without a background of double parental migration.

A possible interpretation of these findings is that when one parent migrates, the parent who stays at home might strongly invest in the maintenance of a cohesive parent-child bond. In the same line of thought, it might be that the separation from partner and parent is strengthening the relationship between the staying parent and the children. The finding that adolescents with two migrant parents reported the lowest levels of security for relationships with parents suggests that, despite the efforts of migrant parents to keep a close bond with their children who remain in the country of origin (Leifsen and Tymczuk, 2012; Pribilsky, 2012), the lengthy separation and the difficulties in the communication can compromise the levels of security in parent-child relationships. Moreover, it suggests that the efforts of surrogate caregivers are not always able to maintain or restore security in relationships with parents. Indeed, while some studies have shown that surrogate caregivers can fulfill the role of attachment figures (Smith *et al.*, 2004), other studies revealed difficulties that seem to be related to the additional burden created by parental migration on the extended family (Hall, 2005; López Montaña and Loaiza Orozco, 2009). These include generational gaps of grandparents caring for children and adolescents (Carrillo, 2005; Parella, 2007) and the relocation of children who, in some cases, are regularly shifted from one caregiver to another, including moving from a rural to an urban area (Jokhan, 2008; Pribilsky, 2001). Another interpretation of the finding that adolescents without and with one parent did not differ in parental relational styles refers to certain family dynamics that might have occurred preceding the parental migration. Indeed, it has been documented that parental migration often occurs in a context of problematic and fragile relationships in which domestic violence is often prevalent (Carrillo *et al.*, 2008; Gutiérrez and Bedoya, 2007; Lagomarsino, 2005; Parella, 2007; Pedone, 2008; Sorensen, 2008; Wagner, 2008). It could be that migration of one parent in a context of high family conflict might be experienced as a kind of relief and, hence, enables restoration of security in the representations of relationships with parents.

Regarding secure styles for friends, the results of the current study show that parental migration is associated with the development of lower secure styles for friends, an effect that was even stronger in adolescents with two migrant parents. The lower levels of security

in left behind adolescents could be explained not only by difficulties in developing social skills in a context of scarce communication within the family (Reist and Riaño, 2008) but also by processes of pervasive stigmatization that exist toward families with migrant parents (Carrillo, 2005; Gutiérrez and Bedoya, 2007; Herrera and Carrillo, 2009; Meñaca, 2005; Pedone, 2008). Indeed, in such a context of stigmatization, left behind adolescents could avoid sharing with friends the fact of having migrant parents as they may distrust their friends' goodwill, and strive to maintain behavioral independence and emotional distance in relationship with them.

Further, the exploration of insecure styles toward close relationships did not reveal significant differences, showing that parental migration seems not associated with the development of higher insecure styles. Moreover, the current findings do not reveal a differential impact according to the age at which the migration of the parent (s) occurred. This suggests that future research should focus on analyzing the possible protective factors that could be mitigating the impact of a parent (s)-child separation in the context of parental migration.

As already mentioned, the emotional and relational impact of parent-child separation due to migration may be mitigated by the presence of caring surrogate caregivers, i.e. members of the extended family who could assume the role of attachment figures (Jokhan, 2008; Smith *et al.*, 2004). The findings of this study, thus corroborate findings from scholars that plea for a more cultural-sensitive study and understanding of attachment and that suggest that in the study of attachment we need a change from a dyadic perspective to a network approach (Keller, 2012), as well as a change from parental caregivers to multiple caregiving arrangements that form a communal caregiving system and caregiving environment (Keller, 2016). In fact, in Ecuador, extended families are the second most common family structure after the nuclear family (Schvaneveldt, 2014). Therefore, the findings of the present study highlight the importance of exploring the dynamics of families that could play an important role in preventing the supposed strong negative consequences of parental migration based on attachment theory.

In addition, specific strategies developed within transnational families such as the use of different modern communication means may support the maintenance of the sense of proximity in relationships, allowing for a mitigation of the effects of physical distance (Jokhan, 2008; Jokisch and Pribilsky, 2002; López Montaña and Loiza Orozco, 2009; Orellana *et al.*, 2001).

Alternately, it seems relevant to question whether within transnational families new ideas about "motherhood," "fatherhood" and "family" are emerging (Pedone, 2008; Pribilsky, 2012, 2004; Wagner, 2008); new ideas in which the conceptualizations of the role of parents are much more based on the satisfaction of basic economic needs, rather than on meeting, physical contact and emotional needs (Orellana *et al.*, 2001). Indeed, in Ecuador, the conditions under which parental migration occurs are directly related to the economic and social inequity and the conditions of poverty in which several families develop. In this context, a sense of reliability and security of parents may become fundamentally related to economic stability (Herrera and Carrillo, 2009; Olwig, 1999). In this respect, it has been suggested that in the context of poverty and adversity – i.e. the context of extreme financial constraint and the need to migrate in irregular and dangerous conditions, – the availability of caregivers may be reduced, resulting in a shift toward prioritizing basic needs satisfaction (Otto *et al.*, 2017).

Finally, contrary to our hypothesis that parental migration would have a negative impact on the development of romantic styles, the current study revealed no association between parental migration and romantic styles. This lack of association confirms that adversity during development can have a differentiated impact on representations of close relationships (Flanagan and Furman, 2000; Furman *et al.*, 2002). In turn, this different

impact might be explained by developmental characteristics of adolescence as, during late adolescence, romantic partners may represent a new kind of relationship that might better meet attachment needs than parental relationships (Allen, 2008; Doyle and Moretti, 2000; Furman *et al.*, 2002; Furman and Buhrmester, 2009; Furman and Simon, 1999) in which adolescents may strongly invest to restore their sense of security.

Parental migration and romantic involvement

The possibility that, in the context of parental migration, romantic relationships may constitute protective relationships for adolescents, led to exploring the romantic involvement of participant adolescents. The present study shows that, while no differences were found in the number of romantic partners reported by those with or without a background of parental migration, left behind adolescents did differ in as far as they had their first romantic partner at a younger age. In the context of parental migration, engaging in a romantic relationship at an early age could be understood as a strategy to adapt to and compensate for the absence of the parental figure. As in late adolescence, a romantic partner could potentially become an attachment figure (Allen, 2008). It is not unlikely that for adolescents with a background of parental migration, the disruption of attachment bonds initiates a search for an attachment figure in a romantic partner at an earlier age. The association between parental migration and early romantic involvement deserves further study.

Several limitations need to be considered when interpreting the present results. First, the results of the present study are exclusively based on self-report measures, implying that the gathered information relies on adolescents' perceptions, and thus not necessarily correspond with their behavior. Moreover, as self-report might be influenced by social desirability, this may even be more important in the current study when we take into account the stigmatization of migrant families in Ecuador, which could be led left behind adolescents to not share their real perceptions of their parents.

Second, the current study was based on cross-sectional data, and thus not allows for inferences about causality. Future research on relational styles should ideally use a longitudinal methodology – including an analysis of relational styles before, during and after parental migration. Such studies could provide important information about the development, confirmation and stability of relational styles, as well as could be helpful in identifying other possible factors – such as family dynamics before parental migration – that might play an important role in the development of adolescents' relational styles of close relationships.

Conclusions

In this study, an attempt was made to unravel the association between parental migration and relational styles in late adolescence. This study revealed that although parental migration is associated with the development of lower secure styles for parents and friends, it seems not associated with developing insecure styles for close relationships. Moreover, parental migration does not appear to be associated with the development of romantic relational styles during adolescence. The lack of robust findings regarding the negative impact of parental migration on development of relational styles challenges the preconceptions that parent-child separations necessarily involve direct negative impact on relational functioning and raises the need for a broader understanding of the socio-affective development of adolescents in the context of parental migration, reinforcing the call for a cross-cultural perspective in understanding migration-related parent-child separations. The results of the present study also challenge and question whether the term “left behind adolescents” is the best fitting description to characterize children of migrant parents that are well-being cared for.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study highlight the importance of further in-depth studies focusing on the role and meaning of close relationships in the psychosocial development of these adolescents. Such studies should use a qualitative methodology, as they should focus on the experiences of adolescents with a history of parental migration. These studies are likely to lead to a better understanding of the quality of security in relationships in a specific socio-cultural context, where the dynamics of family – including important participation of extended family network – and the broader social processes – including particular contexts of socio-economic inequity – that accompany the separation may be clue variables in shaping their relational styles. Such studies will enable us to better understand, support and help the growing number of children in our globalized world that is “left behind” by their parents based on their hope to create a better life for their children.

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