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Migrant Masculinities: The Experiences of Latin-American Migrant Men in Australia

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Introduction

Our research project on Migrant Masculinities involves a comparative inquiry into the gendered subjectivities of men who have migrated to Australia from four culturally-diverse regions of the world: East Africa, the Middle East, Southern Asia and Latin America. The project investigates the impact of migration on the (re)construction of male gender identity by examining the impact of contemporary Australian society and the men’s native cultural traditions on their experience of masculinity in Australia. The focus is on the men’s experiences of migration and settlement and the extent to which they impact on men’s patriarchal attitudes and their gendered behaviour and identity. In this article, we report on the initial stages of the study with six Latin American male migrants within the wider context of the growing literature on Latin American masculinity and migration studies.

In spite of ethnic and cultural diversity in Australia, there has been very little acknowledgement in either the academic or the social policy literature of the gendered migration experiences of men, as men. This means that we know little about how migration experiences have influenced the social construction of masculinities. Chambers noted over fourteen years ago that there had been few attempts to analyse the changing modes of masculinity resulting from migration to Australia and that we know little about the effects of migration on men’s work, leisure and domestic relations. This observation is equally true in 2004. When male migrants arrive in Australia, they are exposed to a diversity of different ethnic groups and multiple forms of masculinity and they respond to these different representations in a variety of ways. Gilbert and Gilbert argue that race and ethnicity construct different sets of relations with gender, pointing out that men who are not part of the dominant culture need to work out their gender identity by ‘negotiating the meanings and practices of their own original culture and that of the dominant majority’. Our current research

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is intended to illuminate the meanings of gender identity for migrant men as they engage in that process of negotiation.

We adopt a social constructionist approach to gender. In this view, masculinity is socially constructed within specific historical and cultural contexts of gender relations. This approach emphasises the variation of masculinities between different cultures and within different historical moments, as well as the range of gender differences arising from race, class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, region of the country within particular cultures. If men’s subjectivities are socially constructed, they are therefore open to change. This study is concerned with how this process of change occurs for men who are subordinated and marginalised within the hierarchies of male dominance.

Many writers argue that migration provides women and men with the opportunity to transcend traditional sex roles. Boyle and Halfacree, for example, argue that it can ‘act as an escape route from oppressive patriarchal societies’. Willis and Yeoh emphasise how ‘a new location provides a space in which gender relations can be renegotiated’. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner, for example, have observed that Mexican immigrants in the United States found that their patriarchal privileges were significantly diminished by the process of migration: they no longer exercised a monopoly over decision-making and became more involved in domestic labour. However, other studies have demonstrated that while the ‘patriarchal bargain’ can be ‘renegotiated’ upon arrival in a new country, ‘many elements of gender relations remain the same’ and may even be reinforced. Some of these studies also indicate that Latin American men may enact dominant expressions of masculinity in the home, as a consequence of their devalued status in the economy. Messner, for example, discusses how Mexican men in the United States ‘displace their class antagonism into the arena of gender relations’. Because they are unable to challenge their class oppressors, Mexican immigrant men display exaggerated expression of masculinity to express power over women within the context of their relative powerlessness.

**Latin American Masculinities**

When discussing Latin American masculinities, we should acknowledge that while male stereotypes may share many similarities across Latin America, there are also many differences reflecting the unique histories, cultures and the myriad day-to-day realities of each country. Methodologically, this makes it difficult to generalise about ‘Latinos’, ‘Hispanic’ men or even Latin American men as a comprehensible category as the differences are often as great as the similarities.

Notwithstanding the above, the topic of Latin American masculinity is commonly dominated by machismo. In fact, machismo is often seen as being
men are synonymous with Latin American masculinity. Much of this thinking about masculinity has been derived from the region's historical and cultural context, particularly as it relates to the influences of colonialism, capitalism, colonialism, and the resultant social and cultural changes. These historical and cultural elements are embedded in the everyday lives of Latin American men, underscoring the ways in which the machismo stereotype developed and the ways in which the stereotype continues to influence the construction of masculinity.

Part of this naturalisation of machismo is reflected in the discourse about masculinities. The study of masculinity has developed into a broader examination of the ways in which men and their sense of masculinity are shaped by historical and cultural contexts. This study has expanded to include the examination of masculinities in the context of Latin American societies, focusing on a range of overlapping and interrelated characteristics of masculinity, including behaviour, beliefs, ideas, and attitudes. The focus on masculinity in Latin America has led to a more nuanced understanding of the origins of masculinity, including its historical and cultural context.

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main aspects that are attributed to machos are perhaps best represented as ‘tendencies and possibilities that individuals have more or less access to, at different points in time, and [which] coexist in an uneasy and messy alliance’.10

These points are especially true for migrant men from Latin America in the contexts of engaging with Australian masculinities. Masculinities, and machismos, are ‘imported’ along with migrant men and are enacted in different cultural and social settings in interaction with a range of diverse masculinities in Australia. While migrant masculinities may be developed in relation to a dominant ‘Anglo’ masculinity, they are also developed alongside a plurality of local ‘ethnic’ masculinities and varied gender relations with differing configurations of masculinities and even machismo emerging.

**Latin American Men in Australia**

We will illustrate some of these themes with reference to the experiences of six Latin-American male migrants: from Cuba, Mexico, Bolivia, Peru, Argentina and Chile. The men came to Australia in their mid-to-late twenties. They come from a range of working class and middle-class backgrounds and possess varying reasons for migration. While there are a number of similarities in the men’s experiences, the differences that emerged reflect a range of complex and changing masculinities both within Latin America and in Australia. In this section we will explore the following themes: the importance of the provider role, the impact of migration on men’s status and authority in the home and the perception of the universality of gender roles across different cultures.

Fuller has noted that masculinity has been associated with the provider role in all Latin American countries.11 The issue of being the economic provider was central to all of the men interviewed. Being a man was based on providing for a family and being a ‘family-man’; that is, by ‘having kids – you become a man’. Being responsible and having employment to ensure economic stability were the prerequisites for starting a family:

- I always wanted to be the man who . . . supported a family. (Chile)
- You have to be married and have kids and work and maintain the family and your wife has to be at home. (Argentina)
- [Paid work] is the fundamental basis . . . for any man. (Bolivia)

The migration experience often challenged these ideas with some men being forced to take up employment below their qualifications and expectations. At the same time, though, this reinforced the importance of employment in their sense of selves. The importance of paid work figured very high in their estimations as a marker of masculinity. The Cuban man remarked that it was hard to come to Australia and ‘become a father and head of family
almost overnight.' His assumed role as the head of the family was challenged by the fact that he couldn't work for the first twelve months and had to stay at home and look after a young baby while his wife went out and worked. This was a difficult experience for a man used to being looked after by the women in his life and being told that men had no place in the family kitchen.

If you are ... growing up as a boy, they don't let you into the kitchen.
The idea is that the women should work at home and the men outside the house. (Cuba)

The men's focus on the family was contrasted by their perception that men of the older generation did not really help out with the raising of children or the care of the household. The process of migrating to Australia contributes to these shifts in the household division of labour. Men's authority in different realms is challenged because of a change in their public status and of the nature of socially legitimated forms of behaviour, as the following comments illustrate:

I had my own chauffer in Mexico. I had power ... coming to Australia I was known by no one. (Mexico)

So overnight from gallivanting around Havana, I had to be stuck in my house 24 hours a day, mowing the lawn, and cleaning the dishes and cooking ... I had to change my whole background, my whole identity. (Cuba)

It would be better to be a man in Bolivia ... There's a saying in Bolivia. That it's better to be the head of a mouse than the tail of a lion. In Bolivia at least, I would be the head of a mouse. Here, I am pretty close to being the tail of a lion. (Bolivia)

Many of the men mentioned that their initial period in Australia was very difficult in terms of their ability to provide for their family and get accustomed to different social and cultural environments. The increase in opportunities for women and their greater economic and social independence has provided a further challenge in the 'traditional' social roles of men.

In spite of the above, however, the discussion on what was involved in being a man often reflected a sense of an unchanging masculine identity as many of the core elements that the men felt their masculinity rested on were felt to be the same here and there. That is, all of the men said that very little had changed in their own sense of masculinity and being a man as a result of migration, even when some of their practices had changed. The man from Argentina said that now, due to changes in technology and globalisation, similar cultural and social trends in both Australia and Argentina influence men here and there. As such, there were now similar forms of masculinity in both places. This did not mean that there were not changes involved in
migration, but that these were managed and dealt with from a similar and already strongly developed sense of what it meant to be a man. At the same time, these often emerged in essentialised versions of being a man:

Ahhh, it’s the same. I listen to a lot of talk back radio and there’s a lot of ‘machista’ people . . . You’re a man no matter where you are. Man is a man is a man, here, there, anywhere. (Argentina)

Machismo was thus felt to be a part of Australian masculinities with some of the men suggesting that it was less here and others feeling that Australian men were just as macho. That is, machismo was not necessarily seen as being different between ‘here’ and ‘there’. Rather, it exists in greater or lesser degrees reinforcing the notion that machismo exists as a global category in some form everywhere. But the stereotype of the Latin American macho still plays a role in relationships with Australian born men and women. All of the men said that their closest male friends were other Latin American men and a number of the men felt that they were seen by Australian-born women either as incorrigible machos to be avoided or as ‘Latin lovers’ who were good for dancing, romance and having fun, but not for a serious relationship.

Conclusion

These responses from our initial interviews with Latin American men are consistent with the literature on Latin American male migrants in the United States. Torres, for example, found that Latino men experienced internal conflict as a result of their attempts to adhere to a traditional form of masculinity that was no longer attainable to them in the United States. Abalos also found that Latino men in the United States felt powerless because they were unable to live up to the ideals of the macho identity.

This research confirms that culture and ethnicity play an important part in the way in which masculinity is constructed and expressed. It also emphasises the need to research the interaction ‘between class structures and the social relations of racism in the making and remaking of forms of masculinity’. Much of the sociological study on machismo focuses overwhelmingly on working-class men and the relations between class and education, poverty, and ethnicity, and their impact on the formation of different forms of masculinity requires further elaboration. In Australia, this class factor, along with the influence of multicultural policies, have historically been an important factor in the construction of Australian masculinities and therefore, in the ways in which migrant men have negotiated their own sense of masculinity.

These issues point to the need for further research that explores men’s migration experiences and the impact that migration has on the construction of masculinities in Australia. We need to understand that the factors that influence masculinities are broad and constituted by both
larger macro factors such as class, race, culture and social hierarchies, and micro factors that include the personal impacts of divorce, political change, personal life histories, and the local impact of global forces. We anticipate that further interviews with migrant men will shed more light on how these micro and macro factors contribute to the reconstruction of migrant masculinities in Australia.

Notes


7 Willis and Yeoh, *Gender and Migration*, pp. xv–xvi.


14 Scott Poynting, Greg Noble and Paul Tabar, "If Anybody Calls Me a Wog, They Wouldn't Be Speaking To Me Alone": Protest Masculinity and Lebanese Youth in Western Sydney*, Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies*, 3:2, 1998, p. 78.