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Editorial: Migration and Sexual Change

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Abstract

The current world is globally differentiated in many segmented sexual subcultures. Unsurprisingly, the existence of sexual differences – real or imagined, feared or desired – is embedded in the functioning of ethnocultural boundaries. As the papers published in this special issue show, migration challenges such boundaries in many ways – some obvious, some counter-intuitive - and through a variety of processes. In recent years, many studies of migration-related sexual change have legitimized the importance of this topic among migration scholars. We do not have yet, however, satisfactory analytical frameworks and cumulative research programs. In this introduction to the special issue, we show how future progress may be contingent upon the capacity to distinguish among different perspectives as well as towards a more explicit discussion of the existing narratives.

Keywords: migration; sexuality; gender; sexual behaviour.

Introduction

Migration is a process of social mobility taking place across socially meaningful spatial boundaries. Migration implies going through a variety of interactional experiences that help to create new, and often unexpected, publicly recognized social selves, each sustained by its own folk-knowledge, morality and, indeed, aesthetics (Cvajner,2019).

How "far", how "deep", does this transformative process go? Does migration change migrants also in their private, personal, intimate lives? Does it have an impact on what many, indeed most (including the migrants themselves) perceive as an unchangeable inner nature? Does the experience of mobility across geographical and socio-political boundaries change the way migrants experience not only their actions but also their "desires"? In what way do the new experiences (or the avoidance of them) shape the ways in which mobility is narrated, interpreted, circulated? To what extent do the newcomers strengthen the established dictionary of motives in the new location, rather than irritating or challenging it?

These questions are far from being an idle curiosity. To study how various forms of mobility patterns and migration systems interact with the erotic and sexual lives of those involved in it is an important way to explore in detail the subjective and cultural impacts of geographical mobility. Answering these questions sheds light on the cultural consequences of spatial mobility, the ways in which living under a different sun triggers – or fails to – the birth of new narratives, rhetorical tropes or even specific subcultures.

The interest, moreover, is not limited to migration studies alone. The above-mentioned questions are logically connected to some key research questions that are at the core of the very



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same project of the social sciences. Exploring how migration changes sex – and how sex changes migration - means to explore how changes (in behaviors and beliefs) are brought about by changes in the social environment. It requires us to understand better the degree to which cultural and structural forces are able to modify the practices and self-understanding of individuals and groups, the role played by social groups and networks in triggering, regulating or repressing potential changes. As the papers here published show, erotic life is, in fact, a wonderful "strategic research material" in R. K. Merton sense³. Strangely enough, the topic is – as of today - only very roughly surveyed.

An Enduring but Marginal Concern

Contrary to current folklore, the existing migration literature has surely not ignored nor silenced the sexual dimension of mobility. On the contrary, many studies - classic and contemporary - have highlighted how spatial mobility implies also the crossing of ethno-sexual frontiers. For example, migration is known to contribute to changes in sexual norms in both sending and receiving communities (Hirsh 2003, Parrado e Flippen 2010). It has been stressed how migration triggers processes of acculturation – and resistance thereof – concerning the sexual life of migrants (Ahmadi 2003). Classical studies have always stressed (usually to deplore it) that the loss of communitarian social control caused both by migration and urbanization enables radical changes in the sexual behavior of migrants (Thomas 1923). The barriers to the development of intimate relationships between natives and outsiders, usually accompanied (and legitimized) by forms of sexual prejudice, have been an ongoing concern in assimilation theory, motivating a longstanding concern for mixed dating and mating (Gordon 1964). Epidemiologists have regularly taken into account the sexual dimension of the mobility of populations, as migrants often function as bridge populations. The risk behaviors embedded and enabled by mobility play a key role in the spread of diseases, including many sexually transmitted ones (Vearey 2012). Psychologists and psychiatrists have often linked territorial displacement with the diffusion of sexually traumatic experiences (Pizzolato 2005). In the settlement histories of many ethnic groups, the memory of encountering strong forms of sexual prejudice is frequently described in detail. Particularly, the migration of women - nearly always suspected to overlap with sex work - has often been stigmatized as risky and immoral (Doezema 1999). This limited set of examples makes clear that sexuality has never been silenced in migration studies. It has, however, failed until now to become a systematic focus for migration research.

A Growing Research Interest, but (not yet?) a Research Field

If we search the main bibliographic databases for the social sciences, the only publicly acknowledged corpus dealing with migration and sexuality is the large stream of works devoted to sex trafficking. Although commendable in humanitarian terms, these studies – supported by foundations, NGOs and international organizations – nearly always follow an advocacy goal, achieved through the search for worst-case scenarios. Consequently, they have often been criticized for lacking an adequate theoretical and methodological sophistication (Weitzer 2014).

Focusing on more analytical projects, it is fair to say that in the last decade there have been a growing number of studies reclaiming the importance of ethno-sexual boundaries in defining the



³ Merton defines strategic research materials (SRMs) as those «strategic research sites, objects, or events that exhibit the phenomena to be explained or interpreted to such advantage and in such accessible form that they enable the fruitful investigation of previously stubborn problems and the discovery of new problems for further inquiry». See Merton (1987:1-2).

experience of migration. There has also been a more explicit attention to the role played by sexuality in defining the experience of migration itself (Manalansan 2006, Nagel 2006, Cantú, Naples et al. 2009). They have remained, however, largely disjointed and scattered. The plea for a sustained attention to the interrelations between geographical mobility and sexual change, advanced just a decade ago (Mai e King 2009), has been only partially fulfilled. Sex has become a legitimate topic in migration research, without, however, developing into one or more systematic research programs.

One of the reasons for such shortcoming, the multiplication of studies notwithstanding, has to do with an unsatisfactory level of analytical differentiation. In order to make visible – and legitimize – the research interests on migrant sexualities, many researchers have subsumed and conflated very different perspectives and research problems under the same generic reference to "migration and sexuality". On the contrary, we believe we need to distinguish at least three very different perspectives. While they are not necessarily in conflict (and they may have a complementary usefulness in exploring given empirical puzzles), each of them needs its own analytical framework and its own research frame. More precisely, we argue it is necessary to distinguish among (a) sexuality as a motivation for migration, (b) sexual change triggered by migration and (c) the structural changes in sexual stratifications owing to emigration or immigration.

Sexual Migrations

The first, and by far the most popular, of the current lines of research stresses the importance, previously largely neglected, of sexual aspirations as a driver for migration. Mobility is here seen as one of the ways through which members of disadvantaged sexual categories try to escape repression or pursue greater autonomy. Hector Carillo has suggested to define as "sexual migrations" those international relocations motivated by the sexuality of those who migrate. Carrillo includes a variety of sexually-related aspirations "including motivations connected to sexual desires and pleasures, the pursuit of romantic relations with foreign partners, the exploration of new self-definitions of sexual identity, the need to distance oneself from experiences of discrimination or oppression caused by sexual difference, or the search for greater sexual equality and rights" (Carrillo 2004: 59).

The importance of sexual migrations should not be underestimated. Migration makes it possible to escape the traditional mechanisms of social control in order to be able to explore a broader range of sentimental and erotic options (Mole, Parutis et al. 2014). Most current studies of sexual migrations are focused on LGBTQ+ migrants. The logic of sexual migration - to move in order to escape constraints or to pursue opportunities of sexual recognition - is however surely wider and it applies also to important sectors of heterosexual population. For example, middle-aged women that are excluded owing to age discrimination by local sexual markets may move– more or less easily – towards places where their enduring interest in potential partners is felt as legitimate. Migration thus becomes an experience of re-sexualization, a form of re-inclusion in the circuit of intimate memberships (Lulle e King 2016, Cvajner, 2011).

The Sexuality of Migration

The empirical importance of sexual migrations, however, should not lead researchers to underestimate a second, broader, if sometimes more ambiguous, process of interaction between geographical mobility and sexual change. We refer to what can be called the "sexuality *of* migration", the sexual changes triggered by the train of experience defining migration. This is the area of behavioral and symbolic transformations that subjectively accompany - from the early exploration of the new environment to the management of the pleasures and strains triggered by



long-term settlement - the movement through many ethno-sexual boundaries. These changes do not derive from a pre-emigration aspiration to modify one's sexual location and biography. Sexual change is often completely absent from the migrants' initial definition of the situation. It is a set of changes triggered by the experiences encountered during the migration process as well as by the new balance of opportunities and constraints defining the migrant's lifeworld (Gonzales-Lopez 2005, Parrado e Flippen 2010, Blanchard 2018). An important question in this regard is how much sexual change during migration leads to assimilation to the sexual folkways of the native population, at least at the normative level, or if it may become the base for a distinctive – and sometime oppositional – identity (Espiritu 2001, Röder e Lubbers 2016, Soehl 2017, Kalmijn e Kraaykamp 2018). The papers here published – concerning Senegalese women in Marseille, Filipino maids in the Gulf States, Eritreans refugees directed to Western Europe and Eastern European women migrating to North-Eastern Italy – are able to document how pervasive such mobility-related changes are, across very different migration patterns and regimes.

Changing Lovescapes, Evolving Stratifications

A third line of research connects migration and sexuality through the study of the changes brought about by immigration to the "lovescape" of both sending and receiving communities.

In fact, migration modifies the sexual landscape for both migrants and natives. It alters its social stratification. The fact that migration modifies the sexual markets at both origin and destination is a well-established fact. Such change, however, has been traditionally understood merely in terms of a quantitative alteration between "supply" and "demand". At most, migration has been seen – in the tradition of status-exchange mating – as providing "weak" sectors of the native population with a new opportunity to mate upwards (Guetto e Azzolini 2015).

Recently, however, the emphasis has shifted in a more cultural direction. It has been argued that migration modifies also the shared criteria of desirability, opening up new categories of erotic recognition (and misrecognition). In many, if not even all, societies, there is a widespread belief that ethno-cultural differences – real or imagined – are identified and connected to differences in sexual inclinations and lifestyles. Sexuality is thus among the main markers employed to build ethnic boundaries. In Western societies, one of the most important legacies of colonialism is precisely the vast repertoire of regional or racial sexual icons and stereotypes evolved during the colonial experience (Voss e Casella 2011). Unsurprisingly, these banks of knowledge may be used to characterize immigrants as sexually different, through heavily gendered joint process of ethnicization and sexualization (Schaper, Beljan et al. 2018). Needless to say, such a process is contingent upon a process of signification that is – in a semiotic sense – largely arbitrary (Sciortino, 2012).

New systems of sexual expectations are developed and tried out to regulate the new sexual chances opened by migration. And they become reference points for the very same attempts of immigrant groups to attain recognition (Chang e Groves 2000). Unsurprisingly, the migrant alleged 'sexual' difference plays a key role also in any attempt to 'exclude' them. The claim that they are either 'over-sexed' or 'under-sexed' – either too aggressive or too passive – is frequently used in any attempt to proclaim them unfit for full-membership. While usually exploitative and stigmatizing, the development of these forms of "sexotic" desire, however, may also open new spaces the sexual agency of migrants and natives alike (Hoang e Yeoh 2015).



Migration as a Narrative of Sexual Change

Sexual migrations, mobility-related sexual change and the erotization of difference are three perspectives that highlight the importance of paying the sexual dimension of migration its due. While different, they all highlight how geographical mobility is a breeding ground for important changes in sexual practices, norms and identities. Crossing social and national boundaries, either intentionally or not, migrants encounter – among many other things - different erotic orders, that expose them to different, often contradictory, expectations and norms. These encounters will play a role both in their personal biographies and in their settlement patterns.

Cross-cutting these perspectives, however, the literature offers a certain number of processual schemes, concerning the (broad) directions of migration-related sexual change. Why certain flows quickly assimilate within already existing sexual subcultures, while others create and nurture, even inter-generationally, a strongly distinctive self-understanding in sexual terms (Espiritu 2001)? Why the settlement strategies of certain groups are based on systematic forms of de-sexualization, while in other cases the search for recognition assume the form of blatant, hyper-sexualized performances (Cvajner 2011)? While mobility is associated in certain cases to sudden changes in sexual practices, while in other cases recorded changes are slower and less intense? Why in certain cases the presence of immigrants becomes a staple of sexual imaginaries while in others cases they fail to activate any erotic imagination (Shepard 2012, Shield 2017)? We are still far from having developed a systematic and consistent conceptual framework to deal with this kind of processual questions. Indeed, even the language necessary to build such a framework is not yet available.

A review of the literature reveals, however, the existence of a number of broad narratives that frame and sustain, sometimes only implicitly, the existing studies of migration and sexuality. We identify here two highly polarized narratives -(a) migration as sexual alienation and (b) migration as emancipation - and two moderate versions: (c) migration as sexual acculturation and (d) migration as selective maintenance of a distinctive sexual identity.

The first narrative is clearly marked by a vision of migration as an experience of alienation and solitude. This is the narrative more frequently employed, at least since the early '90s, to describe the lives of guest-workers and post-colonial migrants in Western Europe. As these flows were also marked by heavy gender imbalances, it is not surprising that "sentimental and sexual misery" appeared to many researchers as an appropriate description of the situation (Jelloun 1997). Similar accounts are often found in many studies of women migrants in the Gulf, the Levant or in South-East Asia. Here the goal of maintaining a systematic segregation and subordination of the immigrant workforce is pursued, among other things, through a pervasive control of their sexual agency (Moukarbel 2009, Lee 2011). While this control is far from being foolproof, and many migrants do have new sexual experiences in emigration, these are inevitably marked by several constraints and by specific forms of power asymmetries (Lai 2018). It would be wrong, however, to link the experiences of solitude and sexual alienation only to highly segregationist immigration regimes. Geographical mobility is often associated to long spells of loneliness that may become chronic. Lonely migrants may otherwise accept greater sexual risks and try out new practices and forms of relationships (Munoz-Laboy, Hirsch et al. 2009, Yang, Kelly et al. 2015).

On the opposite side of the spectrum, there is a narrative of migration as an experience of sexual modernization and emancipation. Migrants moving from patriarchal and homophobic contexts quickly discover that their new location allows for a far greater space of sexual agency and – equally important – for the legitimation of different (and more individualized) self-understanding of their desires (Ahmadi 2003, Mole, Parutis et al. 2014). Migrant singles, even under severely



discriminatory conditions, may discover that migration entices new erotic possibilities, thanks to easier sociability and relaxed social controls⁴. Women migrants experience a process of empowerment that translates – although often ambiguously – in a major equalization of the conjugal couple. This expresses itself, among many things, in a legitimation of female pleasure and an increased importance of consent and foreplay (Gonzales-Lopez 2005). Members of Eastern European sexual minorities find in migration an access to better economic opportunities and a means of "escape and self-realization" (Binnie 1997). The emancipation narrative tends to describe migration as a form and mechanism of transition from tradition to modernity and from rurality to urbanization. Not only does migration enable greater sexual agency for migrants, but migrants themselves become actors of sexual change, in a modernizing direction, for their sending communities (Hirsh 2003, Lindstrom e Muñoz-Franco 2005).

According to the third narrative, the direction of change is still sizeable, but murkier and ambiguous. Originally developed by the Chicago school, it stresses mobility as an experience of "excessive" freedom, often marked by a phase of sexual anomy⁵. This, in turn, will inevitably shatter the "cake of custom" of traditional mores, exposing migrants to various forms of social "disorganization", including many sexual ones (Thomas e Znaniecki 1918). Disorganization, however, is seen as a transitional phase, followed by accommodation and, in due course, assimilation. The process of migration-related sexual change is thus described in largely modernizing terms, without however neglecting the presence of psychological pathologies and downward social mobility (Thomas 1923).

The last narrative is centered on the idea of sexual change as a process of selective adaptation. Migrants prefer, particularly in the early phases, risk-avoidance over risk-taking. Opportunities will be explored only very cautiously in the beginning, particularly when migrants are families rather than single individuals. While they will incorporate – particularly intergenerationally – sizeable changes, they may also opt for the maintenance of specific sexual subcultures, as a way to protect their children from downward assimilation (Espiritu 2001, Abboud, Jemmott et al. 2015).

Conclusion

The current world is globally differentiated in many segmented sexual subcultures. Unsurprisingly, the existence of sexual differences – real or imagined, feared or desired – is embedded in the functioning of ethno-cultural boundaries. As the papers published in this special issue show, migration challenges such boundaries in many ways – some obvious, some counter-intuitive - and through a variety of processes. In recent years, many studies of migration-related sexual change have legitimized the importance of this topic among migration scholars. We do not have yet, however, satisfactory analytical frameworks and cumulative research programs. In this introduction to the special issue, we have shown how future progress may be contingent upon the capacity to distinguish among different perspectives as well as towards a more explicit discussion of the existing narratives.

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⁵ For the notion of sexual anomy, see Tiryakian (1981).



⁴ For an example, https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/fifty-years-of-turkish-immigration-guest-workers-relive-their-journey-to-germany-a-795054-2.html

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