

Love in Changing Times: Experiences of Intimate Relationships Among Young Female Professionals from Mexico City

Daniel Nehring*

University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago

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ABSTRACT

This article explores experiences of love and intimate relationships among young, female middle-class professionals in Mexico City. While recently there has been much interest in transformations of intimate life in Mexico and Latin America, the region's urban middle classes have been largely ignored. Through an exploratory qualitative case study, based on 21 life story interviews, I seek to advance respective debates. On the one hand, my participants aspired to lasting intimate relationships grounded in love and personal attraction. On the other hand, self-fulfilment through individual projects focused on work and education played an equally significant role in their lives. While some of the women I interviewed felt largely unconstrained in their pursuit of their projects, a few found themselves confronted with patriarchal norms that significantly constrained their autonomy. Nonetheless, my findings are suggestive of a partial waning of patriarchal practices in the lives of young members of the urban middle classes. At the same time, they point to a cultural trends towards individualistic choice about matters of intimate life and the importance of companionate relationships among young urbanites.

Key Words: Mexico, intimacies, couple relationships, culture, narrative research

* Daniel Nehring is a lecturer of sociology at the University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago (Email: daniel.nehring@sta.uwi.edu / dfnehring@googlemail.com).

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, interest in transformations of intimacy in contemporary Latin America has burgeoned. A significant and growing number of studies has examined ways in which Latin Americans' experiences of sexuality, love, marriage, and intimate attachment are changing in the context of globalisation and modernisation (e.g. Gutmann 2007; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Padilla et al. 2007; Quiroga 2000). Nonetheless, significant knowledge gaps remain. In particular, the urban middle classes throughout the region have largely been ignored.

With this article, I seek to further respective debates. Through a small-scale qualitative case study, I aim to explore experiences and cultural meanings of love, marriage, and couple relationships among young, female middle-class professionals in Mexico City. My argument is based on 21 life story interviews with young women conducted as part of a larger study on transformations of intimacy in contemporary Mexico.

The Mexican gender order has in practice always been diverse, in terms of what González-López (2005) has described as 'regional patriarchies' emerging from locally specific socio-cultural, economic, and political configurations, and deviance from its norms has generally been possible to a certain extent for some –mostly male– Mexicans (Carrillo 2002; Irwin, Nasser, and McCaughan 2003). Nevertheless, a relatively clear set of patriarchal cultural logics has historically constituted a determinant point of reference for most Mexicans in their ways of understanding and experiencing intimate relationships. This concerns, for instance, the cultural meaning of potentially lifelong, preferably religiously sanctioned, heterosexual marriage internally stratified through clear divisions of tasks and power as the exclusively legitimate locus for love and sexual relationships.

While many elements of this patriarchal order continue to be highly significant in the lives of many Mexicans, its normative power has begun to decline in the context of rapid processes of social change over the past three decades (Ariza and de Oliveira 2004; Barros and Esteinou 2005; Salles and Tuirán 1998). Recent developments, such as the sanctioning of gay civil unions by the legislative assembly of Mexico City in late 2006 (Cuenca 2006) and by the state of Coahuila in 2005 (Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación 2007), demonstrate that diverse forms of couple relationships are increasingly acquiring cultural legitimacy in at least some sectors of Mexican society, although patriarchal cultural models continue to be dominant in others (González Ruiz 2002). At the moment, there is only a partial understanding of the ways in which

young people in Mexico understand, experience, and practice their personal lives in these times of change. By documenting the narratives of a small group of middle-class women, I seek to contribute to a better understanding of the diverse forms of intimate life that are possible in Mexican society today.

INTIMACIES AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO

It seems uncontentious to describe the hegemonic elements of the gender order that emerged after the Mexican Revolution as ‘patriarchal’. This label helps to bring out some central historical tendencies, although it should not obscure the fluidity and heterogeneity of ideas and practices –in Stern’s (1995) words, the ‘many Mexicos’– beyond these tendencies. Post-revolutionary patriarchy thus has involved certain widely acknowledged normative cultural logics of couple relationships and family life.

A first central element of post-revolutionary patriarchal culture has been the exclusive legitimacy of sexual and love relationships between men and women and the stigmatisation as immoral of such relationships between men or between women (Carrier 1995; Cano 2006; Irwin 2003; de la Mora 2006; Carrillo 2002). Furthermore, sexual and affective relationships between men and women only acquired full normative legitimacy in the context of a religiously sanctioned, ideally lifelong marriage (Rivas Zivy 1998).

Research on this period nevertheless points to notable opportunities for –mainly urban– women to participate in formal education and paid employment in the context of progressive industrialisation, urbanisation, and the prosperity of the ‘Mexican Miracle’ from 1940 to 1970 (Bridges 1980; Careaga 1984; 1997; Lewis 1975; McGinn 1966). However, these opportunities do not seem to have translated into substantial readjustments of domestic power and production divisions between couples or to drastic changes in cultural logics of intimacy. Research conducted by McGinn (1966) on middle-class families in the 1960s and by Bridges (1980) on families of different social sectors in the 1970s by and large points to a persistence of male dominance in the domestic sphere regardless of whether their spouses had an extra-domestic employment. These authors also point to a general acceptance of the outlined patriarchal cultural logics of pre-marital virginity, courtship, marriage, and paternal authority in families. More recent research among older women who were socialised

and spent most of their adult lives in the pre-1970s period has led to similar results (Rivas Zivy 1998).

Careaga's (1984) research on 1970s middle-class families in Mexico City offers interesting insights into the localised complexities of their gendered interactions. Among these families, according to Careaga, patriarchal beliefs seem to have been fairly dominant at the level of practice and accepted cultural models. While admiring and trying to emulate 'progressive' North American and European life styles through the consumption of imported goods and cultural products, such as Hollywood films, as well as through frequent shopping trips to the USA, many members of the middle classes still maintained established patriarchal gender divisions.

The middle-class men and women interviewed by Careaga commonly affirmed patriarchal divisions and gendered disparities of authority and power and had little tolerance for any deviance from these patterns. The maintenance of these patterns at the interpersonal level was facilitated at the structural level by the described prosperous economic environment, which, for example, allowed middle-class men to find well-paid employment allowing them a successful performance as main providers for their families and ensuring their authority.

Since the early 1970s, Mexicans' intimate lives have undergone profound changes in the context of wider transformations of the gender order. The socio-economic underpinnings of these transformations have been well documented (Ariza and de Oliveira 2004), and I will only rehearse them in passing here. Rather, it is my intention to highlight shifts in the cultural meanings through which Mexicans organise their everyday experiences and practices of family life, couple relationships, and sexuality.

PERSONAL LIFE AMONG THE MEXICAN MIDDLE CLASSES

Within this panorama, what has become of couple relationships and family life among the urban middle classes of Mexican society? There have been few systematic analyses of Mexico's overall social structure, and none of them recent¹. Nevertheless, research suggests that the constitution of couple relationships is shaped in important ways by variables such as occupation, education, and income. Based on these variables,

1 The most notable respective discussion can be found in Portes and Hoffman (2003). Also see Davis (2004).

researchers often differentiate between different ‘classes’ or ‘sectors’ of Mexican society.

Drawing on definitions used in previous research (e.g. García and de Oliveira 2005; Rojas Martínez 2008; Portes and Hoffman 2003), I characterise the Mexican middle classes provisionally as a primarily urban social group which can be distinguished according to, first, its relatively elevated academic capital, characterised by high levels of at least nine years of schooling and frequent access to university education, second, specific occupational positions ranging from the ownership of small businesses to middle-level white-collar employment in public administration, academia, and private enterprise, and, third, typical patterns of residence, variable but commonly strong access to property and consumer goods, and intermediate income levels sufficient to afford the outlined way of life. Within this overall pattern, variations in terms of the outlined indicators may differentiate a range of subgroups within the middle classes².

The few available studies on personal life among the middle classes are broadly concerned with the socio-economic analysis of gendered power relations and divisions of labour. The work of García and de Oliveira (1995; 1997; 1994; 2005) suggests a trend towards egalitarian relationships among middle-class couples, but emphasises the persistence of conventional ‘breadwinner-housewife’ task divisions among many couples, as well as a tendency for men to ultimately have the ‘final say’ regarding important decisions. Comparing working-sector and middle-class couples in different regions of Mexico, García and de Oliveira (2005) also point to the importance of women’s extra-domestic employment and couples’ level of education and type of occupation for achieving egalitarian relationships. Similarly, Rojas (2008) concludes that younger men, men whose spouses permanently participate in extra-domestic labour, and men belonging to the middle classes and thus having higher educational levels are more likely than others to openly discuss decisions about sexuality and childcare with their spouses. These studies point to a partial departure from patriarchal understandings and practices in earlier decades, characterised by a lack of open communication between spouses, fathers’ focus on their role as providers, and notable emotional distance between them and their children (Careaga 1984; Rojas Martínez 2008).

These findings serve as a base for a more in-depth analysis of the cultural meanings and culturally situated experiences of different aspects

2 This definition is derived from the analysis of middle-class families’ socio-economic situation conducted over the past three decades by Loaeza (1983), Esteinou (1996), and García and de Oliveira (1997; 2005).

of intimate life. My own research (Nehring 2009a; 2009b) has shown that middle-class Mexicans today may be exposed to a very wide range of public discourses on relationships, sexuality, and family life, including both patriarchal, religious normative frameworks and highly individualistic accounts focused on individual fulfilment and happiness. However, the ways in which young people who have grown up in the times of change since the 1970s draw on these discourses to manage their personal lives has not been explored.

Addressing this gap, this article seeks to bring into focus young female professionals' understandings and experiences of intimacy. It is based on a larger study conducted between 2004 and 2009 in Mexico City, consisting of 43 life story interviews conducted, in Spanish, with both male and female professionals, a questionnaire survey of participants' socio-economic condition, as well as the analysis of a large sample of self-help texts on couple relationships. From these 43 interviews, I selected 20 interviews with female participants for further analysis here.

Given the obvious differences in the social structural position of women and men, it seems indicated not to overextend my argument by focusing on both groups. Young female professionals' cultural understandings of intimacy have so far not been explored in depth, rendering them an appropriate object of analysis. All of them had been educated at least to degree level and were at the time of the interviews employed in a range of white-collar professional occupations in public administration, higher education, or private business in Mexico City. Their ages ranged from 25 to 34, and their relationship status varied. However, they all described themselves as heterosexual.

Relying on contacts at companies and universities in Mexico City, I used chain referral sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981) to find participants. I conducted the interviews in several rounds between 2004 and 2009. They focused on participants' understandings and experiences of couple relationships, family life, and sexuality in the context of their overall biographical development. My interview guide was based on Plummer's (2001) model of the semi-structured life story interview and continually updated throughout the research process. The interviews generally took place in public places of participants' choosing, such as Starbucks cafes or Sanborns restaurants.

Mexico City, the single setting of my research, showcases the overall socio-cultural trends described in the preceding sections. As a long-standing focal point of socio-cultural development and change, it constitutes an appropriate strategic choice for this study. At the same time, as a 'global

city' (1998; 2000; García Canclini 1995) that concentrates a large part of the country's population, life in Mexico City is characterised by highly particular social dynamics (cf. Aguilar and Hernández 1997; Islas Rivera 2000; Pick and Butler 1997; Ward 2004). In this sense, my findings may manifest both global social trends in Mexico and developments particular to its capital. However, as a consequence of my sampling strategy, no empirical generalisations can be derived from my findings. Rather, it is my objective to generate theoretically valuable insights into possible ways in which young professional women in contemporary Mexico may understand and experience intimacy and articulate those understandings and experience.

As to the validity and reliability of my findings, I follow the stances taken by Plummer (2001). I assume that particular, contextually specific epistemological standpoints and forms of social interaction between researcher and researched are unavoidable. Plummer frames this issue concerning sociological research in terms of the issue of bias, distinguishing between "those arising from the subject being interviewed, those arising from the researcher and those arising from the subject-researcher interaction" (2001, 155). In this sense, the suppression of these standpoints and biases in the pursuit of objectivity constitutes a futile endeavour. Rather, the reflexive exploration and systematic and explicit articulation of the biases that have shaped research is of primary importance as a base for the validation of its knowledge claims. In this sense, my aim in the following is to render visible the material and non-material factors that shaped the interaction between my participants and me.

NARRATIVES OF LOVE, AUTONOMY AND COMMITMENT

No time for home – this was one of the most significant and recurrent themes in the stories of the young women I interviewed. Citlali, a 25-year-old lawyer who also took evening courses for a postgraduate degree in criminology, succinctly described this as follows:

Interviewer: So what is a typical day in your life like?

Citlali: Get up, take a bath, get ready, quickly have breakfast, go to work, do my work, do my homework if I have time, eat, go to study my master's, get home at 10, have dinner, sleep.

Interviewer: So how do you feel about this routine?

Citlali: I don't like it. I have very little time for myself.
(Extract 1; author's translation)

Citlali here builds a notable contrast between time devoted to work and study and what she labels as "time for myself". Citlali did view work and study as integral parts of her personal development, and she told me that her agitated life "in the long run can bring me important benefits" (author's translation). From the beginning of our conversation, she explained her daily life in terms of the distinction between her public life of work and studies and her, in her words, "social life" with family, boyfriend, and friends. "Time for myself" in her imagining are the few moments she has to develop these personal relationships. While she resented this fact, she nonetheless stated clearly that her social life was, for the time being, much less important to her than her professional and academic development.

It is interesting to note that all the young women I interviewed spent the vast majority of their time away from their families and intimate partners. When I began to analyse our interviews, I moreover discovered a propensity towards highly individualised forms of storytelling that placed the fulfilment of reflexively defined personal goals and ambitions centre-stage. My participants tended to experience their biographical trajectories in terms of a voluntaristic life plan. They generally formulated precise hierarchies of priorities and were able to clearly rationalise these priorities upon request. Notions of happiness and self-fulfilment constituted the guiding principles of these rationalisations.

Paula's story convincingly foregrounds ideals of individual autonomy and self-fulfilment. At the time of our interview, Paula was 28 years old and at the same time studying for an MA in social anthropology and collaborating in a research project at another university. Previously, she had simultaneously studied history and ethnology at two different universities. Since that time, she had been involved in a relationship with her boyfriend, but was still living with her parents.

Paula told me about the way in which her strong and time-consuming commitment to her studies and research activities had recently led to a crisis between her and her boyfriend. For Paula, this crisis required a re-consideration of her priorities in life and the status of her relationship, including an affair:

Paula: This [having an affair] is something that happens, that is inevitable, and it may be that you find another person attractive but do not stop loving your partner.

Interviewer: Have you had any experiences in this regard?

Paula: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: What were they like?

Paula: Well, well, it happened at work, and I found someone interesting, and I found him attractive and –but this does not imply that I would have stopped loving my partner– for me it was something like the novelty.

Interviewer: So how much happened between you?

Paula: Well, I did have sex with this person.

Interviewer: And how did you feel about this?

Paula: Well, I was surprised about myself, because I thought that I would feel bad. I had expected this of myself, but for me it was a learning process, and it also was important for me because it was like a way to choose my partner again. I sort of think that I needed a certain distance to say with whom I wanted to be was with my partner.

(Extract 2; author's translation)

Paula's final comment about her affair helping her to choose again her original partner further documents an outlook on life that emphasises personal development through intimate relationships with others. Paula does not express any explicit concerns about the moral implications of her infidelity or the potential reactions of others, and her interpretation of her actions does not seem to be embedded in such external standards of conduct. Rather, she interprets her affair in terms of its significance for her personal life plan, concerning specifically the choice of the right partner for a long-term relationship, as part of a process of self-discovery or 'learning' which enabled her to take an appropriate decision. In Paula's narrative, her affair and the way she evaluated it during our interview were not contingent upon external social norms or social-structural constraints, but rather upon specific events in her life –the crisis in the relationship with her boyfriend and the feeling of sexual attraction towards her colleague– and upon her personal preferences, specifically with regard to the choice of a right long-term relationship. In this sense, Paula's narrative acquires a strong reflexive dynamic; she seems to understand her life as a self-enclosed process of personal development and discovery.

Within this mode of experiencing self and the world, the meaning of couple relationships and marriage unequivocally resides in the extent to which they act as a source of individual happiness and satisfaction by providing intimacy, companionship, and the feeling of being loved and understood by another. At the same time, intimate attachment needs to be balanced against the need for individual autonomy; commitment

to a partner may not forestall the ability to pursue individual projects, such as a professional career. Adriana, a 29-year-old public relations professional, thus argued that her ideal relationship would mean that “each one was self-sufficient, that there was absolute trust, that the other’s personality could make oneself grow, that they complemented each other, that there weren’t things like pushing, like ‘don’t grow anymore’ or ‘don’t do this’, because of the insecurity of the other” (Extract 3; author’s translation). Adriana’s emphasis on self-sufficiency and the need to avoid constraining one’s partner’s self-development highlights the role of autonomy as an organising principle of her sense of self and intimate relationships with others. In Adriana’s life, having a relationship and marrying is desirable, but not a matter of course. She spoke about it as an important priority, but not as something she would pursue at the cost of her professional development. At the time of our interview, in fact, she was quite happy with being single and “the owner of my own time and my life in general”, and she described having a relationship and eventually marrying as secondary priorities.

Such a clear sense of autonomy was a pervasive feature of all the stories I heard. Maria, 31, had trained as a forensic psychologist and was working for a large bank. When we met, she was living with her boyfriend in a shared flat. Before their relationship had begun a couple of years ago, Maria had gone through numerous relationships, and she told me that she had enjoyed experimenting with her sexuality and having different partners. At the time of our interview, the love and attachment to her boyfriend had become central in her life. Nevertheless, she spoke forcefully of her need for freedom, which had made her averse to the idea of marriage:

Freedom is knowing that you are totally independent – economically independent. [...] I come from a traditional family with the idea that the woman has to marry [*la mujer tiene que casarse*], have children and do so early on, while she is young. Like this, one finds stability and happiness. [...] What happened was that I needed to experience something different. [...] When I was a teenager, the women around me started to get married – friends, sisters –, and I dreamt of them as if they were dead; I associated marriage with death. [...] Above all I want to love passionately [*locamente*], intensely. [...] Now I still want to experience things, but with him [her boyfriend], travel with him, enjoy myself with him. Maybe because sexually I have already experienced what I had to experience. I wouldn’t have felt stable if I hadn’t experienced what I have. You have to try many things, [...] so that later you can say ‘that’s what I want and it’s really tasty [*sabrosísimo*]. (Extract 4; author’s translation)

Maria's perspective is, in a sense, atypical of the other interviews I conducted. She was far more forceful in her rejection of conventionalist marriage than all my other participants, and none of them quite professed a sense of sexual inquisitiveness like Maria. However, I found this to be only a difference of degrees. Maria's account is an extreme and therefore illustrative example of a sense of autonomy that I found to be pervasive. Her allusion to economic independence is indicative of the importance all my interviewees accorded to the pursuit of an independent career and income. Moreover, Maria's desire to "love passionately" and experience a lasting affective bond characterises the meaning of couple relationships at the heart of all the interview narratives I heard. While most of the other interviewed women desired marriage or had already married, they all rejected the idea of marrying primarily as a matter of convention and to satisfy the expectations of others. Passionate and intense love as a key source of self-fulfilment emerged as a central dimension of their life plans.

This fashioning of a life plan from aspirations subjectively perceived as self-defined and habitual reflexive self-examination in relation to these objectives are key features of the late modern individualism described by scholars in the Global Northwest. Nevertheless, I wish to argue that the life stories of the women I interviewed in Mexico City do not correspond to the diagnoses of 'cold intimacies' (Hochschild 2003; Illouz 2007; 2008), 'liquid love' (Bauman 2003), and the brittle, temporary human bonds diagnosed by leading Western individualisation theorists (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Elliot and Lemert 2006; Giddens 1992). Rather, my participants' narratives are structured by a significant commitment to lasting personal ties with family and an intimate partner. Their emphasis on family, marriage, and lifelong attachment to an intimate partner as sources of social stability and individual happiness provided my participants with a horizon of cultural meaning in terms of which they organised, with some notable variations, their understandings and experiences of personal life. At the same time, in their narratives, they reorganised this traditional meaning system so as to make it compatible with notions of self-determination and personal fulfilment, which, throughout large parts of Mexican history, had remained largely unintelligible and overshadowed by religiously inspired discourses of familial duty and female obedience (cf. Olcott, Vaughan and Cano 2006).

The case of Roberta, a 30-year-old estate agent and postgraduate student, is illustrative in this regard. Roberta had grown up in a small town in the State of Mexico (*Estado de México*). Her family, which she described

as “traditional” and “narrowminded”, had been supportive of her education. After Roberta had finished school, her father –described by Roberta as “somewhat *machista*”– planned to send her to study at an expensive private university. Edit by this time, in her words, had “become independent”, and she refused this offer, instead choosing to live alone in Mexico City, attend a public university, and support herself by working. This choice for Roberta meant rejecting the cultural model of the ‘self-sacrificing woman’ (*mujer abnegada*) as a means for preserving her dignity:

Interviewer: What is a self-sacrificing woman?

Roberta: Well, one case is my mother. It’s the woman who allows everything and doesn’t have dignity, who doesn’t value herself as a woman – just having a man by your side means that you should be happy. (Extract 5; author’s translation)

Roberta presented herself as a “rebel” against the cultural complex of machismo and female self-sacrifice. She framed this in terms of the cultural contrasts between “village life”, predicated upon family relationships, ascribed social roles characterised by specific gendered obligations, and tight social control, and “city life”, characterised by relative freedom, anonymity, and the possibility to freely pursue one’s personal development.

In her account, Roberta’s rebellion did not entail noteworthy ruptures in her everyday relationships with her family. After graduating from her first degree, she joined her sister’s real estate business, and she was attentive to meeting her family’s expectations while simultaneously pursuing her own interests:

I have become totally independent because I began [...] to live by myself, independently, visiting my parents on weekends. This has meant for me a certain independence and [...] autonomy. Although in certain ways I have been independent, I have kept following certain rules a daughter [*hija de familia*]. Even though they don’t support me financially, I think I follow certain family rules [...] because I have been brought up like this, as in a village one lives in a more narrow-minded way.

(Extract 6; author’s translation)

So, for instance, while Roberta moved about freely in Mexico City, she refrained from coming home late when visiting her parents, in order to meet her father’s expectations regarding female decorum. Roberta had liberated herself from paternalistic control over her life through a series of conscious choices, while at the same time avoiding conflicts and maintaining, as she told me, the idea that her family was one of the

central sources of personal stability and wellbeing in her life. Like Roberta, all the women I interviewed consciously rejected external control over their lives, which they framed in terms of notions of “machismo”, “patriarchy”, or “traditional family”, while at the same time doing their best to meet familial expectations.

Their understandings of couple relationship showed structural parallels to their views of family life. The following extracts illustrate a recurring respective pattern in the interviews:

Interviewer: What do you expect of a couple relationship?

Rosario: (29, PR professional; single) That there is commitment, that there is sincerity, that there is love, that we share interests. [...]

Interviewer: How important is love in a relationship?

Rosario: [...] From when I was little, I have believed that love is not everything in a relationship. There should be communication, there should be trust, there should be commitment, tolerance, so, but I think that love is a fundamental ingredient.
(Extract 7; author's translation)

Interviewer: So, [...] how important is being in a relationship in your life?

Karla: (27, public official; single) It's essential. I am a person who can't live without being in love. [...] My relationship is central in my life, to be well emotionally.
[...]

Interviewer: So what would an ideal relationship be like for you?

Karla: I think freedom – there should be freedom of action [...]. Communication is essential, communication matters a lot, and it leads to trust. [...] He should be a person who entertains me, [...] who draws my attention. The relationship must be constantly renewed so that it's not boring.
(Extract 8; author's translation)

Interviewer: Is love necessary for good sex?

Bertha: (31, PR professional; single) [...] Yes, I think that it can be satisfying simply in physical terms [...] – it can be very satisfying, but at the emotional level, if there is no love, if there is not this emotional bond, I think that it can be something empty.
(Extract 9; author's translation)

The young women I interviewed consistently accorded priority to lasting, ideally lifelong relationships resulting from romantic love. While sexual experimentation and short-term relationships may be interesting and satisfactory, they regarded the achievement of lasting intimate attachment

as far more significant.

In this sense, love, sexual attraction, and companionship constitute the exclusive causes of attachment to a partner. While my participants were acutely conscious of persistent social expectations as to marriage, they were all determined to take their time to find the right partner. Rosario, Karla, and Bertha, for instance, had been in several long-term relationships, which they had left because they had experienced a lack of love or personal affinity. In so far as relationships hinge on their emotional content and the subjective satisfaction derived from it, they moreover viewed the dissolution of long-term relationships as legitimate and occasionally necessary.

Olga, a 25-year-old teacher soon to be married to her partner, summarised this point particularly well:

Interviewer: What do you think about divorce, if a relationship does not work?

Olga: Yes, definitely. [...] Why live with a person whose face you don't even want to see when you get up and look at him?

Interviewer: But there are many couples who have been together for fifty years without getting along.

Olga: Sure, but that doesn't mean that I have to do this. I wouldn't put up with it, I think.

(Extract 10; author's translation)

The ideas of love and lasting attachment provided my participants with a framework of aspirations whose achievement they viewed as contingent upon the inherently unpredictable development of the relationships they actually engaged in. They strongly desired a lifelong relationship, assuming that this would provide them with stability, security, and continuity of family life. They were, however, unwilling to maintain such a relationship at the expense of their happiness or autonomy. Patricia, for instance, had broken up with a boyfriend she loved very much due to his opposition to women's extradomestic work.

Systems of cultural meaning become significant as organising principles of experience and practice in so far as they resonate with the institutional arrangements in which actors conduct their everyday lives (Swidler 2001). This statement provides grounds for a partial explanation of my participants' cultural understandings of intimate life. To begin with, they told their professional careers as central objects of time, attention, interest, and self-definition, and they emphasised the material autonomy they derived from work. Nearly half of them had also eschewed the traditional pattern

of female patrilocal residence until marriage in favour of living alone or with friends. They generally reported long working hours of up to twelve hours every day, and most of them only spent a relatively small part of their time with their families and possible partners. Importantly, they received support for their professional development from their parents, family members, and partners. For instance, while Roberta viewed her father as a traditional *macho*, he nevertheless accepted her choice to live by herself without significant conflicts. Like this, most families had supported their daughters' plans without question.

In a small minority of cases, my participants told me about notable resistance against their way of life. Maria, whom I have quoted above, explained that she had been discriminated against and denied promotion because she had not married and single women were regarded as "vulnerable" by her employer. She intended to address this issue by finding a new job, and, while being angry, she did not seem seriously concerned. More serious was the case of Claudia, a 30-year-old journalist. Claudia had grown up in a large provincial city, where she had attended university. After her graduation, whom she described as "patriarchal" and "controlling" wished her to marry, have children, and settle down into life as a housewife. Instead, Claudia chose to move by herself to Mexico City, study a postgraduate degree, and develop her career. There, she met a film director with whom she fell in love and whom she eventually married. Claudia's family forcefully disapproved of Claudia's choices and shunned her for a number of years. However, seeing that Claudia would not relent, they eventually gave in, and Claudia's family relations had normalised by the time we met. Maria's and Claudia's high level of professional qualifications and diverse social support networks thus allowed them to overcome resistance against their life plans. I found no other instances of serious conflict.

My participants therefore had, on the one hand, the material and practical freedom to pursue their individual projects beyond their influence, as they simply spend little time with them and did not depend on them financially. The anonymity afforded by the vast urban space of Mexico City may have facilitated this independence further. On the other hand, being independent, my participants were also faced with the task of organising their long-term life plans and making sense of their everyday experiences on their own. Notions of family, love, and long-term intimate attachment clearly served them as important cognitive and emotional anchors in this endeavour.

CONCLUSION: LOVE IN CHANGING TIMES

Among the women I interviewed for this study, there seemed to be an overall trend towards the pursuit of companionate ideals of couple relationships built on love and personal affinity between the partners and profound emotional and sexual involvement. This trend was framed in several significant ways by elements of patriarchal cultural logics of intimacy. First, for a few of my participants, external expectations of family members and other important individuals within their immediate social environment played an important role for the ways in which they managed their couple relationships. In these few cases, for instance, the mandate of formal marriage and the illegitimacy of divorce amounted to norms to which certain social pressures and sanctions were attached. The fact that I discovered such understandings only among a limited number of my participants might, as a matter of speculation, be understood as a further illustration of the limited binding power of patriarchal cultural models in contemporary urban Mexico. In this context, it is also notable that religion did not surface as a significant topic in any of the interviews.

Second, particular elements of patriarchal cultural logics played a major part in the interviews as meaning-constitutive traditions (Gross 2005) around which important aspects of my participants' stories were organised. Notable examples in this regard were their general preference for deeply involving long-term relationships, often in the context of formal marriage, and their common view that sexual encounters should ideally take place within such long-term relationships. In most cases these understandings were not related in significant ways to experiences of concrete social pressure, the expectations of family members, or such.

In line with Gross (2005), I would argue that this pattern is related to the way in which culturally deeply rooted traditions, such as compulsory marriage and the exclusive legitimacy of sexual activity in its context, may continue to shape individuals' understandings, experiences, and practices of intimate life even in detachment from their overt normative binding power. Such traditions furnish the semiotic cultural resources on whose base meaningful practices of intimacy, including novel companionate forms, must be constructed. They establish the limits or cultural frames within which couple relationships and sexuality are 'thinkable' and meaningful (Gross 2005). The women I interviewed aspired to individual autonomy and self-fulfilment, manifest both in their desire to develop successful professional careers and in their aspiration to forming a love relationship characterised by egalitarian internal dynamics.

This pattern, in a sense, points to novel developments in Mexican society, in so far as it departs in very significant ways from the relationship patterns described for earlier generations by authors such as McGinn (1966), Careaga (1984), Tuñón (1987), or Rivas Zivy (1998). Nonetheless, my participants' understandings, experiences, and practices of their intimate lives were also invariably built upon the historical cultural traditions that had been transmitted to them by a range of cultural sources, such as their families, and these cultural roots manifested themselves in their attitudes and experiences regarding family and long-term relationships.

The interview narratives thus may be interpreted as hybrid mixtures of different cultural elements used by my participants to account for their experiences and practices of couple relationships in daily life. In somewhat varying ways, they drew on elements of historically established, traditional forms of couple relationships and family life as well as on companionate ideals that have only recently been described as an important aspect of intimate life among some sectors of Mexican society (Carrillo 2002; Gutmann 1996; Hirsch 2003; Salles and Valenzuela 1998).

As I have argued before, it is not possible to precisely identify a set of causal influences that might have shaped the outlined patterns in my participants' understandings and experiences of couple relationships. Nevertheless, my findings allow me to identify certain links between my participants' individual life stories and wider dynamics of modernisation and globalisation in urban Mexico. This concerns, first, the consequences which the partially locally specific dynamics of modernisation in Mexico have had for urban development throughout the 20th century. One significant element of these dynamics has been the creation of a large number of universities and other institutions offering academic degrees in a wide range of disciplines. Furthermore, the development of the Mexican economy has led to the establishment in urban centres such as Mexico City of a significant number of service and industrial enterprises, often with a transnational background. Both processes are highly significant to the lives of my participants in general and the ways in which they conduct their intimate lives. Their academic education and access to professional employment had important consequences for the ways in which my participants understood and experienced their couple relationships and the respective opportunities and constraints they faced on a daily basis.

First, their aspirations to leading egalitarian companionate relationships alongside the development of their individual life projects through academic education and professional careers were facilitated in important ways by

the access to education and employment they had in the urban setting of Mexico City. Their daily routines within this urban setting also afforded a number of my participants, according to what they told me, with a certain degree of liberty that enabled them to disregard pressure they might have experienced from their family, work colleagues or others to adhere to particular patriarchal standards of intimate life. Finally, the fact that those of my participants who lived with their partners were able to circumvent the thorny issue of the division of housework by delegating it to a hired help³ was equally related to their substantial income in relation to their professional careers and the education that enabled them to pursue these careers.

The locally specific dynamics of modernisation and urbanisation in Mexico and the structural opportunities with which they afforded my participants for leading their intimate lives are in turn related to wider, globalising social processes. At the most basic level, this concerns the global economic and technological developments which first enabled the 'Mexican miracle' of sustained economic growth and development for several decades of the 20th century and then contributed to the crisis of the Mexican economy of the early 1980s, its opening towards foreign investment and commercial activities in the context of neoliberal reforms, and the establishment of dependencies of a wide variety of transnational corporations in Mexico (Dawson 2006; Dietz 1995). These economic processes involved the establishment in Mexico of a number of the educational institutions which provided my participants with an opportunity to study, as well as of many of the national and transnational enterprises at which they later found employment.

However, while these social and economic arrangements might be necessary conditions for the outlined dynamics of my participants' intimate lives, they are by themselves not sufficient for explaining these dynamics. Rather, as my discussion throughout this study has shown, a range of cultural factors seem to have equal weight in shaping my participants' intimate lives, such as their exposure to different respective cultural logics in their daily lives or the normative expectations of family members and other significant individuals in their immediate social environment. These cultural factors interact with the outlined material social forces to create particular frames of reference and sets of opportunities within which my participants reflexively engage with different cultural logics of intimacy to account for and manage their respective experiences and practices.

3 For a discussion of the related issues of gender, class, and power, see, for instance, Chaney and Garcia Castro (1989) and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001).

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