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DOI:

[10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.07.023](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.07.023)

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Rojas Gaviria, PX 2016, 'Oneself for another: the construction of intimacy in a world of strangers', *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 69, no. 1, pp. 83-93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.07.023>

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Oneself for another: The construction of intimacy in a world of strangers

JOURNAL OF BUSINESS RESEARCH
Volume 69, Issue 1, January 2016, Pages 83-93

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Submission: Nov 2014

Revision: June 2015

Accepted: June 2015

1. ONESELF FOR ANOTHER: THE CONSTRUCTION OF INTIMACY IN A WORLD OF STRANGERS

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the stories of 12 migrants from Latin America who live in Belgium, and following a poetic methodological approach, this paper focuses on the extraordinary and magical moments of family vacation times in places where the family has biographical linkages. The work illustrates how traveling to these *mystical* places and immersing oneself back there temporarily on a typical day-to-day routine, supports the family in the process of re-imagining a past that was previously unknown for some family members and barely perceived in Belgium. The paper draws the reader's attention to how certain experiences of consumption, which occur in special micro-places, during exceptional times, play an essential role in the processes of shaping a unique family history in a world of strangers.

Key words: Life transformation, migration, parenthood, family consumption, narrative practices, traveling, tourism.

Oneself for another: The construction of intimacy in a world of strangers

“Everything returns to the void, including our words and gestures. But before disappearing, certain words, and gestures, by anticipating their demise, are able to exercise a seduction that the others will never know. Seduction's secret lies in this evocation and revocation of the other, with a slowness and suspense that are poetic, like the slow motion film of a fall or an explosion, because something had the time, prior to its completion, to makes its absence felt. ” [Extract from *Seduction*, Baudrillard, 2001: 84]

Introduction

Every family has a collective tale that keeps on changing and being interpreted as the family evolves. As life advances, new challenges arise. Some of them can be transformed into extraordinary opportunities to further leverage on some biographical linkages that can be contextualized in meaningful places. Drafting a history for the family when migration has occurred for at least one of its members, constitutes one of these extraordinary opportunities. In such cases, the door can be opened in the direction of a distinct and unique past road. Looking back at those places of the past and revisiting them as a family, with all one's senses, searching for a meaningful and collective interpretation, can become a transformational life experience.

Revisiting meaningful places in the life of some family members is an exercise in autobiographical consumption that is not necessarily linked to political notions of macro-places in the context of the Nation-State. The biographical traveling experiences captured by the participants' narratives included here, are instead connected to micro-places where contextual knowledge gives the consumption experience a situated meaning. This meaning is perceived as less present during classic consumption engagements that the migrants and their families undertake in day-to-day life, sometimes

displaying their “ethnicity” to persons external to the family, who are keen to know more. These consumption experiences do not necessarily relate to distant geographical micro-places where other kinds of autobiographical consumption can occur. Such decontextualized consumption engagements are documented extensively in the literature on consumer acculturation, describing how the migrant is able to recreate, by means of consumption, a self that can seem disconnected and “outdated” (Luedicke, 2011). By taking the less visited path of contextualized consumption experiences during travel, the paper illustrates how consumption experiences support family members in the process of negotiating their history as a family. It shows how, by sharing knowledge and sentiments through consumption experiences, the family negotiates its tensions and nourishes a collective “secret”, a “hidden treasure” that contributes to the construction of intimacy in a world of strangers.

From a methodological perspective, the paper follows both a phenomenological and a poetic path, drawing on the stories of 12 Latin American migrants living in Belgium together with their “new” families. After exploring the literature and detailing the methodology, the paper presents the findings in the form of a meditation. The paper concludes with some suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

The definition of “family” includes the construction of “a significant history” (Epp and Price, 2008, quoting the definition proposed by Galvin, Carma and Brommel, 2004) that ties members of the family together and differentiates them from other families. Becoming a family therefore implies “co-authoring” this collective history and populating it with the multiple common experiences involved in the endless process of building a shared identity.

The history of a family usually involves various generations, and entails multiple occasions and occurrences until a genealogical tree is created that can go back in history including various generations

of ancestors. The historical learning, originating from stories of other family members, constitutes invaluable symbolic resources that can be activated or contested later in life by new generations. In this sense, a family history can go beyond the here and now to explore the family heritage. A family past can indeed constitute a fundamental depository of valuable information. For instance, from a health perspective, members of a family connected by blood ties, can have access to important information regarding their clinical history. This information can explain, prevent the occurrence of and accelerate the treatment of certain health conditions or predispositions.

Family historical connections go beyond the functional and are usually re-enacted symbolically in a powerful collective exercise of faith and imagination. Families are, in this sense, repositories of a multiplicity of meanings and biographical trajectories that could eventually be reformulated and developed further during the process of constructing a history for the family. While consumer researchers have shown how personal history shapes consumer identity goals and actions (Ahuvia, 2005; Author 2010; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Schau, Gilly, and Wolfingarger, 2008; Thompson, 1996), less is known about how consumption experiences shape the history of the family when individual biographical trajectories, conflict, intersect and differ. This paper contributes to redressing this gap by illustrating how consumption experiences support the family in the process of negotiating and displaying biographical resources that originate from the migration experiences of one of its members.

As a family evolves through migration, love encounters, the arrival of babies, adoption of children, separation, illness, and death, ... there is a diverse set of biographical trajectories that come together, intersect and sometimes conflict. These biographical trajectories are not equally familiar to all members of the family. In the case of mixed families, in which at least one of its members has gone through direct migration experience, there are indeed “biographical boundaries” to overcome, “the different direct experience of immigration that first and second generations may or may not share”

(Regany, Visconti and Fosse-Gomez, 2012: 202). Second generations can, for instance, feel a connection with their parents' origin that can be described as less powerful, less vivid or "second-hand" (Regany et al., 2012: 202).

In this sense, migrants become special repositories of foreign-origin stories and perceptions of the world that may inspire or generate existential tensions for family members and their identity. These inspirations or existential tensions find direct expression in the marketplace, where all generations deal with their culturally complex identities and negotiate their biographical boundaries (Jamal and Shukor, 2014; Lindridge, Hogg and Shah, 2004; Sekhon and Szmigin, 2011). At the same time, mixed families adapt to the needs of first generation migrants, negotiating day-to-day consumption, including for instance, special brands or products charged with nostalgic value in the context of food consumption and meal preparation (Cross and Gilly, 2014). The family can also display its own "ethnicity" in contexts where multiculturalism applies more and more. Contributing in this way to enlarging the symbolic resources available for the consumption of culturally curious consumers (Jamal, 2003; Kim and Park, 2009).

Consumer research illustrates, in this context, how the marketplace transforms and is itself transformed by the presence of migrants. The local marketplace becomes modified through offering goods and services desired by or required for migrants and their families, in seeking to maintain previous cultural affiliations, while negotiating new cultural references (Peñaloza, 1994). Migrants in this sense navigate their multiple cultural affiliations, oscillating and swapping between local(s) and global cultural references (Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard, 2005, Oswald, 1999). The local marketplace also enlarges its multicultural offer in this manner, allowing consumers in a more general sense to endorse and express their multicultural appetite (Grier, Brumbaugh and Thornton, 2006). These consumption opportunities provide support in the day-to-day process of navigating between a

multiplicity of cultures that consumers experience progressively more over time, especially when living in global cities (Author, 2015).

Although this research on consumption is fundamental to our understanding of migrant consumer processes of dealing with displacement and family construction, a large part of the consumption practices considered so far is oriented towards understanding the migrant's family life in his or her receiving country. Most studies undertaken in consumer acculturation and *home maintenance* have emphasized, for instance, the idea of a referential self in which consumption is undertaken to recreate or maintain a personal cultural tie, mediated by the market. In this context, the migrant is able to replicate, through consumption practices, a self that can seem disconnected and "outdated" (Luedicke, 2011) from relationships with "distant others". These "distant others" are paradoxically intended to be in an intimate relationship with the meaning of those "exotic" products.

Drawing on family biographical boundaries, this paper takes a less visited path, extending beyond the everyday self and looking more closely at the transformative and extraordinary experiences offered by vacation time. During this time, consumption display is used as a strategy to share with the family the knowledge and sentiments connected to particular biographical trajectories of one of the family members. Following the definition of Finch (2007: 67), "display is the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships." The process entails selecting, displaying, and preserving biographical relationships that otherwise would be at risk of loss, within the family history. This displaying exercise, achieved through consumption, establishes that those social relationships are actually "family-like". Thus, in addition to the normal routine of "doing family" (Morgan, 1996) — "that refers to the practicalities and activities that a family undertake as a means of building and strengthening their intimate familial social world."

(Higgins and Hamilton, 2014: 1591) — families also display their consumption experiences so as to claim historical connections.

In this context, during vacation time, these consumption experiences can be transformed into life epiphanies capable of significantly changing individual and collective trajectories (Woodside and Megehee, 2010). Such epiphanies awaken the imagination of the family and create a life experience, similar to a revelation, within a unique and sacred history. During these exceptional occasions, the here and now of day-to-day lives in the receiving country becomes transcendent (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989). If these simple, but extraordinary experiences, manage to seduce new generations, an irresistible desire to further recreate symbolic meanings, inspired by these remote places and memories, may have an impact on them for the rest of their lives.

In a nutshell, the study illustrates how the family legacy is negotiated and temporarily solidified through the means of consumption. In addition, it shows that this temporary solidification comes from quotidian and unspectacular consumption experiences that are used to share both the knowledge and the sentiments enclosed in the biographical patrimony of some of its members.

In this latter sense, the study also contributes to research on family heirlooms within the broader field of consumer research. Consumer researchers have indeed studied family heirlooms from the point of view of possessions and have shown how they carry a generational and sacred meaning for family members (Curasi, Price and Arnould, 2004; Mehta and Belk, 1991). This meaning is actualized through the recreation of an imagined past (Belk, 1990) and becomes mobilized through the practice of storytelling (Curasi et al., 2004). The stories in the family can change through the circulation of the object, enabling multiple possible biographies for objects and families to emerge (Epp and Price, 2010). The present studies extend this literature by illustrating how consumption experiences serve the needs of families with a migration background. In the process of negotiating and displaying the history of the

family, existential tensions emerge between the family members, some of whom are willing to dissimulate the past and others being willing to make it more predominant. The study shows how accepting or rejecting the family legacy (Arnould and Epp, 2006) is not only a matter of an individual decision, but a collective negotiation in which consumption plays a significant role. The multiple tensions and pressures that coexist within the family are indeed negotiated by displaying quotidian consumption activities during vacation times, which can result in building an immaterial patrimony for the generations to come.

Method

The paper draws on the stories of long-term migrants from Latin America who are now established in Belgium. The data for the study was collected in two stages. For the first stage, phenomenological interviews (Thompson, 1998; Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989; Thompson, et al.1990) were conducted with 12 participants, with the objective of understanding personal meanings that they constructed in relation to home places and with regard to their own social circumstances (Thompson, 1998). Phenomenological interviews were used to obtain extensive first person accounts. The researcher was therefore expected only to accompany the reflection, rather than to impose a highly structured interview guide. Phenomenological interviews lasted 1.5 hours on average and were conducted in private or public settings, often in houses, offices or public cafés. They were conducted in Spanish, the native language of both participants and the researcher.

At the second stage and in a precursor step to the transcription of stories, a piece of poetry was written on the basis of each interview, attempting to capture some special meanings that had been conveyed through gestures, interviews interruption because of emotional reactions, or simply transcribing poetically (Canniford, 2012) some ideas from the narratives produced during the interviews.

Poetry represents a “neuralgic” part of the manuscript, and contributed its content in two main forms. Firstly, it took the form of research memos expressing participants’ emotional dis/connections in the process of constructing their family life in the context of their long-term migration. Secondly, the specially composed poems contributed to the paper by describing and interpreting key findings (Canniford, 2012; Stern 1998). The inclusion of poetry in the paper entails a (poetic) level of truth that is far removed from strategy or tactics, aiming at achieving useful and rational objectives, but which responds to a poetic resonance, a poetic side of life connected to the history of one’s family, closer to the sacred (Belk et al., 1989).

After data collection, interviews were transcribed and analyzed individually and as a whole. At the same time, the poetry was shared with participants and spontaneous email exchange occurred between the researcher and four of them, which enlarged the data set and enriched its content at a more metaphorical level. As a result, not only was the analysis enriched, but also the structure for presenting the findings emerged as a form of meditation. In a nutshell, poetry enabled the researcher to express the data collected and coded in a more vivid and visceral language than had been possible during the transcription of the interviews. In that particular sense, it echoes Schouten and Sherry’s conviction that “consumer research that does not allow for the visceral collection, analysis, and representing of data is incomplete.” (Sherry and Schouten, 2002: 222).

The researcher embraced both a personal and intellectual dialogue with the narratives collected during the interviews. All were transcribed verbatim in their original language, producing in total 392 pages which were all coded. The coding and the writing process followed a hermeneutic approach (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander, 1994), through which a provisional emerging understanding was defined, challenged, and developed further through an iterative process enriched by each new interview. During this interpretative exercise, the researcher used her personal experience as lenses for reading the

narratives co-produced with participants. The researcher is herself a highly qualified long-term migrant. In this context, the researcher acknowledges and accepts that she does not innocently and unobtrusively enter the field without participating in the construction of meaning that emerges from the investigation. In Charmaz' (2005: 509) words, "what observers see and hear depends upon their prior interpretative frames, biographies, and interests as well as the research context, their relationships with research participants, concrete field experiences, and modes of generating and recording empirical materials."

The interview material, collected in this form, was expected to be rich and to help the researcher understand how participants make sense of personal choices and behavior in relation to the topic of study. These narratives are indeed often enriched with information on how these personal choices and behaviors are connected with biographical narratives and personal social relationships. These relationships often go beyond the transactional, to include asymmetrical exchanges and emotional manifestations (Belk and Coon, 1993; Thompson, 1998). At the same time, consumers' tales provide the researcher with important information about the social and cultural context that conditions and enables such stories to emerge. In this sense, consumers are seen as self-interpreters who position their experiences of consumption and sharing within a network that is created by their life condition and context: biographical, socio-cultural, relational and involving particular geographical places. The role of the researcher in dealing with this material was to become an interpreter who looks iteratively at the narratives, in the light of certain theories, and decides on the kind of story that the individual interpretations, taken as a whole, will support most effectively.

Participant Profiles

Within the normal tensions one can encounter when facing international mobility, all participant accounts share a positive view of their migration experience. They decided to undertake a migration path, even though they had a clearly defined future in their countries of origin. All are highly qualified

and most had the possibility to continue their profession in Belgium. In all cases, they enjoy a high quality of life in Belgium and they also enjoyed a similar situation before migrating. They are highly integrated, most married to partners from different countries of origin. They have an extended network of family and friends in Belgium. For families with children (11 out of 12), all had their children in Belgium or arrived there with them when they were still young, in most cases infants. More specific information about participants can be found in Table 1.

Insert here Table 1: Participant Profile

Findings

Discovering one's wings

Being able to stretch their own limits – to follow a loved one, to triumph professionally through further training or exciting job options, or to cope with life disruptions such as divorce – motivated participant decisions to migrate. All describe the migration experience as a profound personal transformation enabling them to reach new horizons, change their visions of the world and feel a degree of liberation from ideological restrictions or contextual difficulties back home.

This association between migration and a sentiment of freedom is expressed verbally in the interviews in the use of air metaphors. Some, as Mr. Cárdenas, for instance, explained their international mobility as a need for “fresh air” or “to breathe”. In general, participant narratives are particularly rich in spatial images, such as “wings”, “sky”, “clouds”, “borderless” and “freedom”.

During the interviews, some participants actually explained how their metaphorical bodies grew wings. These additional body-parts provided them with a unique ability, the potential to reach levels of personal transformation that previously seemed impossible. Once those levels are reached, migrants feel

empowered to go further and fully enjoy the new resources and environment, as evident in Mr. González's reaction to one of the poems written by the author:

“Perhaps it is because I so much miss that endless sky of my dear Patagonia, where I grew up, where I dreamed... Perhaps it is also because it was there that my wings ‘appeared’; new wings of white plumage to grow and fly. That flight I knew for a long time to be borderless, since I decided that nothing and no one could make me give up, since I discovered how beautiful freedom could be”.

González's description, with its aerial metaphors, describes a personal discovery of the world as borderless and offering multiple possibilities for challenging established paths, thus enhancing the perception of personal freedom. In such a magical world, imagination and all the senses become stimulated, rising to previously unthinkable levels. As Bachelard (1988) expresses it, the air is a magical element facilitating looking at the world and at its materiality as capable of enchanting transformation. For most participants, a direct consequence of migration has been discovering this magical side of the world, and their own wings, as the poet would say: “In the dream world, we do not fly because we have wings; rather, we think we have wings because we have flown. Wings are a consequence.” (Bachelard, 1988: 27) Aerial imagination inspires migrants to feel lighter, while becoming enriched through direct access to different landscapes and cultural horizons.

The enhanced freedom obtained from migration, has an intrinsic relationship with the world of consumption, as participants are able to transform their consumption routines. Life in Belgium is indeed perceived by participants as offering them and their families new and exciting consumption experiences. In Belgium, they can, for instance, easily travel from one country to another, enjoy a more efficient and competitive transport system, have access to historical places or museums, enabling them to experience ancient battles or technological European discoveries, or become more involved with consumption activities related to the world of arts,... Participants' consumption routines in Belgium are, in this sense,

generally described as being life privileges, as Mr. Mejia explains: "...some privileges are extremely trivial, like here my favorite music bands come, and they come several times! Things such as that I am one of the few out of my group of friends who has felt snow..."

Besides having access to exciting consumption opportunities, participants feel that part of the freedom obtained with migration has been to experience trivial consumption activities, that are not necessarily exclusive of Belgium, such as cycling or running, in a safer environment. Participants value the freedom obtained from this consumption experience serenity, not only for themselves, but also for other members of the family. As they see it, the migration experience opens up multiple desirable possibilities for family members, especially children. Participants treasure the idea of being able to share with them a safer day-to-day life. In this context, they emphasize how migration has transformed their consumption life, making it very difficult to return home permanently as expressed by Mr. Restrepo:

"I can go back to Ecuador whenever I want. I even had professional job offers, with an equal salary or an even higher than what I earn here; but I could not explain to my daughter why I would not be able to take her to the park or why we could not take her bicycle with us to the park. I could not explain to my daughter why our house had to have security barriers and looked like a prison, so that it was no longer pretty. I could not explain to my wife why I could not take her to the movies at ten in the evening. I could not explain to myself why I should be stressed when held at a red light, looking at the trees in my wing mirrors, to avoid a bad guy coming and putting a gun to my head for a car worth 12,000 dollars. *I cannot do it anymore, before I could.*"

As with Mr. Restrepo, all the participants perceive that discovering their migrant "wings" has enabled them to settle into a new environment with new opportunities for the family. Along with all

these life innovations, participants, with equal strength, elaborate on their everlasting feeling of being different. A constitutive difference that is experienced as a personal existential secret.

Experiencing the secrecy of an intimate self

The experience of being a migrant, even when highly integrated, confronts participants daily with the existence of that other world of their previous life. One metaphorical key to accessing that part of the narratives is the “secret”. This notion encompasses a poetic power that participants’ narratives express vividly. Participants describe in their own, often very different words, this personal feeling that accompanies them at all times. Mr. Mejía declares, for instance, that part of the migration experience entails recognizing that migrants bring this constitutive difference with them secretly and everywhere. During the interview, he recalled a film he had seen recently and that he believes illustrates this feeling of being different. In the film, there was a sentence that attracted his attention:

“There was something that taught me something. A sentence from one of the actors saying that ‘in my place of origin, it is like Krypton, there is plenty of supermen, and where I live now, it is like planet earth where I am the only superman’. This may sound pretentious, like an existential scream, like saying ‘who I am and where I belong’ and it says that the most marvelous thing you have is being you, and that being you is also that difference...The moment you recognize that difference, all starts to change like a magical spell, everything falls into place. It is like saying to yourself ‘accept it’, I am different and I have an accent...”

Participants’ tales were rich in passages of self-reflection about the consumption experiences of the past that used to color their life in Latin America and that they regularly re-visit live or in their imaginations, seeking reconstruction, reflection and acceptance. Most of these narratives are told as personal secrets that are difficult to explain in words to others who may not really understand them.

Mr. Mejía for instance, mentioned how he feels uncomfortable when his little girl asks him in public about going back to Colombia:

“Sometimes when we are walking down the streets, she asks me ‘daddy when are we going back to Colombia?’ And she starts talking about Colombia, and I experience something very strange...like thinking all these people that are here would not be able to understand what she is talking about! What would they imagine about Colombia... like ‘look, this man is taking his little girl to a jungle!’”

Besides the general images people may have from organized trips or the media in general, there are indeed nuances of the day-to-day life back in Latin America that seemed to be out of reach for most potential audiences in Belgium. In most cases, this lack of understanding is even manifested at the family level. Members of the family are sometimes described by participants as potentially becoming ‘strangers’. They lack first person experience that would support them in fully understanding the existential secrets behind these symbolic places.

For this group of migrants, part of their biographies remained in a distant place, apparently invisible to all the others who now share their day-to-day life. A biographical border (Regany et al., 2012) seems to form around them. Among those others witnesses of their present life, there are some more relevant to them, namely those living with them, side by side, as members of the family. This group of “relevant others” may lose visibility and therefore lack understanding of the migrant’s biographical secrets.

As for the others in Belgium, those uninitiated ones are, in addition to this lack of experience, constantly exposed to the information available through the media, where negative references usually abound. Mrs. Toledo, for instance, explained how she was concerned about showing to her own adolescent child the beauty of Ecuador, in a context where this beauty was not immediately evident to

him. He used to spend his holidays in Spain with his divorced father, while his mother was traveling back to Ecuador:

“He arrived in Belgium when he was eight years old and did not return to Ecuador for a long time. With all that brainwashing they receive about our countries – ‘those developing countries are so poor’ – and with all those other bad images of our countries that are publicized here in Europe: poverty, delinquency, insecurity, disorder, corruption... The image that occidental countries promote about our countries is the worst; my son had it in his head despite my always pushing the idea that Ecuador was really beautiful”.

The day-to-day life in Belgium, together with the media exposure, put the family members at risk of lacking first-hand experience of the places of origin of one or two of its members. Most participants see this situation as worrying, with regard to the potential loss of enriching resources for the family history. For Mrs. Perez, for instance, there is a big concern of eventually not being able to share with her daughter every day, mundane activities in places of her own childhood:

“I always think ‘ah, when I was a little girl...’ I won’t be able to show to my daughter where I liked to play. It is like a part of you that is not here. I don’t know, it’s not that it has been erased, instead, it’s like it remains in some place like that. It is like a hidden treasure that is difficult to explain. ”

Most participant narratives are indeed enriched with images related to “hidden treasures”, “hidden paradise”, or family “secrets”. These images are considered as valuable interpretative keys, allowing others to know them deeply, with all the risks and pleasures this can entail. They are also valuables that could eventually be offered as a cultural inheritance to the relevant others who are now members of the family, as expressed by Mr. Mejia: “... like me, they also have this *hidden paradise*. And that is *their secret*; it is going to be *their secret* all their lives... [Talking about his children]”

While all participants experience a constitutive difference that they perceive as difficult to understand for people in Belgium, they differ in their willingness to share their secret as an inheritance for future generations. There is, for instance, the case of Mrs. Laercio, who describes how she does not consider her personal background as creating any meaningful resources for the future of her son: “My son is Belgian and I want him to feel Belgian, with his own friends and his own culture. His mother is Colombian, yes, she is Colombian, but this is just the same as my mother having blue eyes – or black eyes – or my father being tall and my mother short – simply a personal feature.”

Mrs. Laercio describes herself as a citizen of the world. She considers that her family should live wherever is better for them and does not generally look nostalgically back at the past in an exercise that she describes as “false nationalism”. Consistent with these sentiments, Mrs. Laercio has designed her house interior in harmony with her willingness to achieve “neutrality”:

“My house does not have anything [referring to any national-related decoration], anything, anything, nor one flag, nor a *silleta* [a chair decorated with flowers, typical of Medellin-Colombia], nothing! But, neither does it have a picture of the King of Belgium, nor the Flemish flag, nothing. My house is neutral, one you could simply take and move to Australia or France or Calcutta...”

Once more, her behavior contrasts with the rest of the participants, for whom having visible traces of their previous background seems natural. Ms. Santos is a good example of the shared views: “Here, they will never see me as Belgian and I also claim to be Latin. This identity is very important to me ... I started having more Latin friends, always looking to give to my life a Latin touch, like starting to ask myself ‘where I put something that it is seen to be different, that is something of mine, that is my touch’. This is my way of decorating the house, my way of doing things.”

Besides the individual decision of the migrant to disclose or not disclose symbolic references of their existential secrets, participants describe the vivid “pressure” they receive from beloved ones, reclaiming the past to be shared.

Oneself for another

Among these beloved ones, the children emerge as particularly relevant actors to whom participants dedicate much of their narratives. Their children’s birth is a turning point in their lives that awakens multiple identity reflections, especially with regard to their childhood in a totally different context. This is, for instance, the case of Mr. Mejía for whom some early memories from his parental house in Colombia started emerging when he became a father:

“... Don’t ask me why, but since my children were born, I can remember new things even from when I was two years old...I can remember my mother cooking together with another woman and I can even smell the food! And I remember that I was playing and that this was happening in our kitchen in a rural house...”

It is common in participants’ narratives, to recall their own infancy when describing raising their children or trying to get pregnant. For migrants, infancy occurred in foreign landscapes, with other colors, languages and smells, as well as social, political, cultural and economic differences. All those contextual differences nourish their imaginary, while recalling their own childhood conditions and comparing it with that which their children have or will have in Belgium.

At the same time, foreign roots in the family, originating from the migrant’s background, awaken beloved ones’ natural curiosity. Some members of the family spontaneously ask for more and more information about this intriguing past. Sometimes, grown up children wish to reclaim their parents’ roots, and push their parents to go back more often or to expect their children to go back to study or start working there. This was the case in three families among the interviewees. Mr. González explains, for

instance, how he feels “forced” to go back to Argentina once or twice a year, as his grown up daughter decided to make her life in Buenos Aires.

Similar to grown up children coming back to their parents’ birth places, there is also the influence of the remaining family that did not accompany the migrant in his adventure of leaving the country. Mrs. Rodríguez, for instance, mentioned during the interview how his brother, also a migrant living in Ireland, was very different from her in the sense that he does not derive any inspiration from his personal roots in Honduras or his Spanish background, when educating his own children in Ireland. He does not even return to Honduras to visit the family. Nevertheless, his family in Honduras, in the US and in Belgium does not give up on reminding him about this state of “past amnesia” and symbolically pushing him to be reflective. His parents for instance, still living in Honduras, planted two mahogany trees in their backyard on the occasion of the birth of their two grandchildren in Ireland. They told him that they would like those trees in Honduras to grow parallel with their little children so they could go back to Honduras and check on them. This highly symbolic exercise does not seem to have had an impact on him, but the pressure is not about to stop, according to Mrs. Rodríguez...Mrs. Laercio also declares having a similar kind of pressure from her family back in Colombia, who associates her willingness to forget and disconnect with a sentiment of selfishness regarding his son. They believe she is refusing him the affection and ties he deserves. Mrs. Laercio still comes back once a year, even though she always suffer from certain tensions in the family in this regard when visiting Colombia.

In a similar vein, some participants become inspired and motivated to come back and share their origins by means of their personal memories of their late grandparents. This is, for instance, the case of Mr. González, whose maternal grandfather always proclaimed his personal gratitude for everything that his experience of migration to Argentina had made possible for him and his family. Mr. González has

always him in mind and remembers their exchanges when catching planes between Belgium and Argentina:

“I remember that when I got into the plane, I remembered my grandfather. He was Spanish and had escaped from Spain. He escaped the Spanish army travelling undercover in a ship, arriving as an illegal immigrant in Argentina... He always used to say: ‘remember and have absolute respect for all that this country has given to us’. Another very important thing was that my grandfather was illiterate when he arrived in Argentina and for him, it was marvelous that half of his children achieved a university level education... My maternal grandfather was very important to me and my cultural roots are as well. I think he gave that to me also.”

Life partners can also campaign for preserving the foreign cultural roots of migrants. Mrs. Perez discussed, for instance, how she keeps celebrating Christmas with all Peruvian traditions, as his Belgian husband expected them and enjoyed them a lot. Similarly, Mrs. Laercio’s husband learned how to make “buñuelos” (typical fried pastry from Colombia) and took considerable pride and pleasure in it, even though Mrs. Laercio is not particularly fond of preserving Colombian cooking traditions. He is also a big supporter of their trips back to Colombia.

In a sense, these examples show how the personal past of a migrant does not belong entirely to him and the existence of that particular past is not just a historical fact that is only revisited in individualistic, nostalgic ways. Consumption behavior after migration also responds to the demands of many others life companions. The past is always full of consequences that are not controlled completely by the migrant and his ultimate willingness to let the past rest in peace. This idea of the past as having many ongoing consequences is vividly expressed in Borges’ tale *The Other Death*: “To change the past is not to change a mere single event, it is to annul all its consequences, which tend to infinity” (Borges, 2000: 60).

When one evaluates migration as a fundamental life experience with many practical consequences that are intrinsically connected to the present and future lives of many others, a theoretical “movement” is required. It is necessary to proceed from a traditional point of view of a “self-regarding self” (Jenkins, Nixon and Molesworth, 2011; Joy, Sherry Jr., Troilo and Deschenes, 2010), a migrant in the process of facing his or her own process of international mobility, to an alternative viewpoint related to what a migrant self becomes for other members of the family. From the narratives, one can see that migrants, in their role of parents, children, grandchildren, spouses or members of the family in law, feel existentially concerned about their (in)capacity to offer “raw materials” to relevant others, about their (in) capacity to nourish others’ life paths with their own. In their role of parents, they are, for instance, aware that they will be sources of dis/inspiration and form cultural grids in their children through the construction of life trajectories. In the process of performing their life roles, migrants experience the intensity of having a secret that they or other members of the family want to share. They are seen as possessors of the key for opening a set of meaningful resources to enrich the history of the family.

The Construction of Intimacy in a World of Strangers

In this context, although, in all narratives, participants declare their desire to let their children “fly freely” in life with their own personal discoveries, their “own wings” and with their European references, participants were nevertheless concerned with their (in)capacity to offer them and other members of the family the possibility to access what they, and/or their families back in Latin America, and/or their grown up children consider to be important interpretative keys of the intimate world of their ‘foreign’ family member. Participants found themselves, from a hermeneutic perspective, in the position of *selves for another*. In fulfilling this personal position, consumption experiences play a paramount role. Through consumption, migrants and their families nourish and preserves the history of the family.

Traveling back is one of the most powerful consumption experiences that enable the family members to nourish that part of their family history. All participants indeed alluded to tourism activities in the departure territories with their foreign partners, family-in-law, children or close friends. They explain these touristic experiences partially as a personal strategy to enable others to understand them better. Sharing the intimacy of a secret world is an exercise that can be categorized through the two of knowledge and sentiments. Mr. Mejia makes this theoretical distinction clear when talking about his construction of an intimate relationship with his family in regard to his personal roots: “For me, being Colombian is a concept, an idea that idea is in my head. Being Colombian is a sentiment and that sentiment is in my heart”.

Sharing the Knowledge

Among partners in mixed couples, traveling is useful in the process of negotiating differences and agreeing on ways of living and consuming. Mrs. Perez, for instance, explained that she needed to take her Belgian husband to Peru for a visit and declares that, even if he was partially shocked by some images he discovered of the “harsh reality”, she needed him to understand why they sometimes have conflicts because of their differences. Similarly, for Mrs. Laercio, it was extremely important that her future husband could see the high standard of life that she had in Colombia. He traveled there three times, for periods of three weeks, before getting engaged. These traveling experiences were concentrated on learning about the ordinary life, the unspectacular places most tourists do not see. These experiences were fundamental for the future life of the couple in Belgium. Mr. Laercio wanted him to understand, for instance, why she could not fully adopt what she believed to be the lifestyle of a traditional Belgian family, adopting the European “do-it-yourself” philosophy, but, needed instead to have the support of domestic personnel:

“I told him: ‘Look, I see that in Europe you do not have a cleaning lady and that is an issue that we need to discuss... I am not used to that, never in my life, and I do not accept, psychologically, that one comes to a different country where the language is new, the weather is new, the country is darker with shorter days, where you are far from your family..., you leave absolutely everything behind and in addition to that psychological shock, you arrive at a house and have to clean the toilets yourself!’”

As illustrated in Mrs. Laercio’s example, knowing the life context of the migrant partner can be useful for future partners’ agreements. In this case, the couple invest in compensatory consumption seeking to preserve a certain standard of life for a foreign partner who faces the challenges of migration. Traveling is then used as a strategy for showing relevant others how life used to be. Shared consumption experiences in places of origin — like walking in nature, horse riding, living an ordinary day-to-day journey or going out to dance...— recreate a live experience of “otherness” and constitute a learning experience for the family. This knowledge is useful for the decision making of the family, with regard to negotiating lifestyle, housing decisions, cooking innovations, free time activities, the way the family budget gets spent and also how the offspring will be educated.

Traveling-back journeys are also learning experiences for the children. Holidays are often spent visiting places of infancy where in some cases, the family house still remains. There, the children can visualize how childhood was for the parents or grandparents. During those visits, going to markets and supermarkets, showing the other person around and testing particular flavors are very pleasurable for most participants. Mr. Mejia, for instance, expressed intense emotion when his children discovered “chitos” [typical children’s snacks in Colombia], as it was something he had enjoyed a lot as a child.

Visiting familiar places also implies interacting with the remaining family. During those exchanges, the children gain from their grandparent’s knowledge and, through trivial consumption activities, they recreate fun holiday adventures for their little children. For instance, they offer typical

cooking, some even do the cooking together with the children, or they teach the kids how to dance or ride a horse. Grandparents are fundamental initiators of their children's discoveries. Mr. Mejia explains, for instance, how his mother always had new suggestions for the children when they were in Colombia. For instance, she arranged for the girl to take dancing lessons in Colombia and added "she needs dancing lessons to dance like Shakira!" Grandparents also contribute to enhancing the children's knowledge by the use of storytelling. For Mr. Cardenas and his Spanish wife, their mothers are pillars in the education of their children as he explains:

"Grandmothers are the foundation of both the Spanish and the Colombian education ... why? Because of the food, the way of being, I have lost the accent a bit... Well the accent, the stories they tell about the old life in Colombia or in Spain. They are "El Libro Gordo the Petete" [a very famous children's encyclopedia during the 1970s and 1980s in South America]... when my mother tells a story, it is a way for her to create an image of what Colombia looked like then and to draw a contrast with what they see today, in order to understand the way things are now...and where they come from."

From the intimacy of an intergenerational exchange, from the simplicity of storytelling practices, grandparents in distant places participate in conveying to their little children the specificities of language and tradition. Sharing with grandparents and other members of the staying family is an opportunity for children to enjoy times when their lives take place only in Spanish. Vacation time is indeed ideal for the children to appreciate the value of being able to communicate in Spanish, otherwise, most will simply refuse to learn it. The participants' views are compatible with the recommendations of the psycholinguistic Francois Grosjean (2009: 1):

"First, the input should come from interaction with people (talking, playing, or reading) and not just from DVDs and television. Children will develop a language if they feel they need it and human interactants create that need. Second, moments should be reserved where the input comes from people

who do not know the other language, if at all possible, so that the input is free of elements of that other language in the form of code-switches and borrowings. Bringing in the other language is normal in a bilingual environment but it is important that bilingual children realize that they will also find themselves in monolingual situations at various times where only one language can be used.”

This linguistic aspect indeed emerged as a major parental preoccupation during the interviews. Learning Spanish in the Belgian context where children would be more naturally exposed to Flemish, French, German or English is described as an enormous challenge. All participants elaborate on their concerns regarding their willingness to share their first language with their children, as well as on the challenges inherent to their wish. Mr. Mejia, for instance, comments on how he finds it difficult not to talk to their children in French. He reads to them in Spanish every night but, sometimes during conversations, he had the impression that he needs to explain in French as well, to be sure his children understand. He finds this situation frustrating, as for him, Spanish is a fundamental element he wants to pass on to his children, “after all, Spanish is one of the main world languages with more than 400 million native speakers!”

Storytelling, linguistic immersion and all the associated activities are enjoyable and relaxing ways for the children to learn more about their parents’ background. Once the holiday period is over, there are trees planted in their names, some have horses, own new toys and books, have enjoyed classes they joined, discovered many stories told by grandparents and remember the friends they met.

In addition to visiting familiar places, migrants also feel the need to offer a more comprehensive view of their country to their children by traveling to other places that are different from the familiar ones. Mr. Trujillo, in this sense, echoes the narrative of various participants:

“And next year, we are thinking of travelling around. Perhaps, because when we have gone [to Peru] we have always stayed there [at the beach in the grandmother’s house] and the image [the

children] have of Peru is just the beach. Well, *we have to fix this* and so maybe we are going to travel around this time.” This willingness often results in the family getting to know different regions of the country, extending their horizons, as expressed by Mr. Angulo:

“Now, we know more about the country than when we lived there, because we go there and we always lack time, we go to the north and to the south. Last time, we went to the Galapagos Islands, because I promised that to the kids, and we went and took the opportunity to make a tour of the orient that I knew from my work, but my kids did not.”

Besides becoming more knowledgeable about Latin American countries and the family life there, these experiences are also associated with sharing profound sentiments that migrants connect strongly with their places of departure.

Sharing the sentiments

An important sentiment described as key in the construction of intimacy within the family, is the language. Besides the usefulness of being knowledgeable about Spanish, participants see their native language as being one of the most intimate connections they have with their origins, as expressed by Mr. González:

Mr. González: “I read the Argentinean press every day, every day. My cultural references remain Argentineans, mostly, but also some Latin American.”

Interviewer: “In what ways have you noticed this?”

Mr. González: “Bah, music, for instance, you see, I listen to more music in Spanish than I do in either French or in English. I watch more movies in Spanish than in other languages too. I read books mainly from Latin American writers, though I do read a bit of everything, but if I suggest 10 books the list is likely to have a certain tendency...”

Mr. González echoes the famous answer of the political theorist Hanna Arendt – who, during the Nazi period, left Germany and went into exile. In her conversation with Günter Gaus, back in 1964: “For myself I can put it extremely simply: In German I know a rather large part of German poetry by heart; the poems are always somehow in the back of my mind. I can never do that again ... The German language is the essential thing that has remained and that I have always consciously preserved.” (Arendt, 2000: 13)

In the same interview, she also declared always having kept a “certain distance” with the English language. Arendt’s case is a telling illustration of how one’s mother tongue can be an intimate connection to the world. From the sounds of one’s mother tongue, intense emotions can be understood. There is obviously an intense desire to share that emotional intensity with other members of the family.

In harmony with this point of view, participants see their trips back to Latin America as unique opportunities for their children to be exposed to the local meanings of the language. Mr. Cardenas for instance, explained that he nevertheless uses various strategies to support his children’s education in Spanish. However, he regards sharing the most sophisticated nuances of his mother tongue and cultural background as a substantial challenge. In his case, his wife is from Spain, so both are native Spanish speakers. However, he emphasizes the multiple differences that exist between the Spanish that is spoken in Colombia and that of continental Spain. For him, the mother tongue becomes customized by specific contextual information. As he sees it, the use of Spanish in Colombia, with its lively slang, symbolizes certain values expressing for instance, openness, simplicity and a positive attitude. In his case, inheriting the language also involves sharing a particular vision of the world, a life attitude.

The native language is also associated with intense religious emotions that some participants are willing to convey to their children with. Mr. Mejia, for instance, acquired a doll in Colombia that tells the Guardian Angel Prayer. His children listen to it every night, Mr. Mejia recalls doing the same as a

child. Some participants like Mr. Retrepo has lose their faith, but are nevertheless happy with their vacation time, as they believe during that time, their children can access those aspects they do not feel able to teach, and on which they can later make an informed decision on their own.

Independently of religious beliefs, during childhood, most participants collected vivid memories of a society that was evolving and enduring its own “reality”. Mr. Trujillo explains, for instance, his experiences at the school:

“I studied in Peru in a Jesuit school, in Piura... Jesuits had that vision of more social things and now I feel grateful to them, because they made us visit the jail to see the prisoners or go to small towns in the mountains and take things to people there or work there. For instance, during that year, there was a flood and they took us to the affected towns, to help get rid of the water, and what rotten water it was! I always remember that and when I see my kids here, I feel sad, because they have everything and they do not see that other reality.”

As is evident from his account, Mr. Trujillo realized that his own children most probably will not have access to that part of the “reality” he knew, and he considers this a disadvantage. Traveling back represents an opportunity for him and other participants to share some images of their own childhood with their children. These images are seen as a complementary background to what their children have in Belgium. All participants describe how the life in Belgium differs dramatically from that in Latin America. Most fear that their children’s day-to-day routines include a conspicuous abundance of goods and prosperity that does not get contrasted with the images of another less privileged world. Mrs. Rodríguez, for instance, explains how her father used to work on a coffee farm to pay for her studies, that as a child, she lived in rural Honduras and visited coffee farms: “I saw how people earned their livelihood selling coffee. It is poorly paid, a lot of work for very little money, because of the existence of intermediaries everywhere...” For her, the family farm in Honduras is a place of memory she can use for

transferring to her future child the values of hard work and solidarity: “I feel that place is in my blood, so to speak; it is where my roots are. For me, for the future, it is important that my child understands where we come from, because we had to work very hard to be here. My father did not have all this...I do not want my children to grow up in a place where you get ‘ah, cool I have my latest Nintendo’ or whatever, ‘I have great Internet’ and ‘excellent, nothing bad happens!’”

Mrs. Rodríguez uses part of her income to support her parents’ coffee farm in Honduras and works together with the rest of the family to pay, for instance, the school fees of the workers’ children, so that ‘they at least have a better future’. Her parents once reached the point of wanting to sell the coffee farm, as all their children now live abroad permanently. But Mrs. Rodríguez was determined not to let this happen and to do her best to preserve it within the family.

It is interesting to observe, in this and many other testimonies in the study, that there are images of social inequalities, but they are never isolated from those of collective solidarity. Thus, the important learning process of visiting certain places with the children is not only to see social injustices in a kind of “negative sightseeing” (MacCannell, 1976), but to participate on how this is faced and dealt with on a day-to-day basis and in many cases, through collective collaboration.

The sentiments that motivate such sharing experiences are not really nationalistic, but more part of transmitting certain values that the migrants have and which are associated with their childhood places. Mr. Cardenas, for instance, is highly committed to developing his children’s empathy. During trips to Colombia, whenever possible, he invites children living on the streets to join family dinners and to share leisure activities with his family and especially with his children:

“Children on the streets suffer a lot and are badly treated. With my kids, we sometimes have dinner with them or we go and play with them. We sometimes play football or we go and eat empanadas and sodas...When we go to Colombia with my children and we see children living on the streets, I tell

them to look at that reality. One day, we went to a restaurant and we all wanted to eat chicken and we invited a whole family and the kids there with us. It is good to let my children see their privileges and they can remember this experience, that's the good thing."

For Mr. Cardenas, sharing the experience of living on the streets with the children is a way for connecting his children with a strong sentiment in his heart. This sentiment is related to "the happiness of collective solidarity", which he wishes to share with his children every time they visit Colombia.

During vacation times, participants' families enjoy the opportunity of experiencing the world from a certain perspective. An important element of this perspective is the practice of everyday life activities, the attention paid to the unspectacular. From the simple, sweet and beautiful encounters with the staying family and the local places, an incredible magical power opens up a full world of possibilities. Family members are able "to see", "to feel", "to experience" the local context, a way of intimately sharing the migrant's background and at the same time, collecting experiences as valuable heirlooms.

Summary of Findings

For this group of participants, migration is associated with the possibility to enjoy consumption privileges in a safer environment. However, achieving those consumption goals after migration is not free from unanticipated consequences (Mick and Fournier, 1998; Thompson, 1996), making some members of the family feel the absence of the past. The uniqueness of their biographical trajectories seems opaque and invisible in Belgium: places are missing, experiences and relationships are absent. This absence is more salient, as most people obtain from organized trips and media communication all what they know about Latin American countries. This lack of intimacy means that most people, and sometimes other members of the family, look like strangers. Participants then see themselves as more

“objective observers” of that now invisible “reality”. Their intimate views on previous places of dwelling involve both knowledge and sentiments. While some are eager to share their biographical trajectories and infuse their family life with symbolic resources by, for instance, decorating houses or investing in preserving local cuisine, others would rather let the past rest in peace. In both cases, they find themselves involved in a network of social relations that intensify, challenge, provoke and nourish their (un)willingness to share. This network is composed of a multiplicity of “others”, such as own children, life partners, parents, or even grandparents who have passed away.

Vacation times are ideal occasions for the family members, who have asymmetrical exposure to certain places of the past, to meet and enjoy day-to-day, unspectacular consumption. These consumption experiences support them in the process of displaying the family history with regard to the migrant past. Thus, through consumption experiences, the family claim, negotiate, and retrieve both the knowledge and the sentiments from the migrant past. The consumption experiences include: Paying a visit to family places and houses, enjoying the scenery and local food, spending time together with staying family members such as grandparents, learning to speak Spanish and getting real practice in monolingual contexts, improving their dancing or horse-riding skills, sharing with local people, learning about the geography of the place and its agricultural routines, extending their family trip to other regions in the country,... In a nutshell, by displaying these consumption experiences, they collect a set of knowledge and sentiments that support them in claiming certain family roots.

Discussion

This research extends the literature on family identity construction, on family heirlooms and on family acculturation, by taking the viewpoint of the migrant self in its existential role of being a self for another. By adopting this perspective, the paper illustrates how consumption experiences contribute to

plotting a family history that involves influences and tendencies originating from different, sometimes previously unknown, biographical horizons. The work emphasizes how, during vacations, sharing consumption experiences provide a vehicle for the process of making home abroad (Higgins and Hamilton, 2014; Obrador, 2012) and facilitate displaying historical meanings. Some of those historical meanings are otherwise at risk of being lost among the multiplicity of biographical trajectories that are encountered in a unit that happens to be called “a family”. This perspective challenges the idea of the migrant as being a solitary individual in the process of deciding and controlling his future personal identity and that of his family. Instead, it illustrates how the theoretical perspective of a self for another supports the researcher in understanding the tensions and challenges of families negotiating various cultural horizons. During these negotiations, place-based practices are predominant.

These place-based sharing experiences are in harmony with the notion of a “place-world” which refers to a “world that is not only perceived or conceived but also actively lived and receptively experienced” (Casey, 2001: 687). In Casey’s sense, the notion of place refers to the concreteness, the contingent, the particular, and the sensorial elements of lived human experience. Meaningful places in life are experienced with all senses and are so deeply known and familiar that one incorporates them into one’s very identity. At the same time, meaningful places are also transformed by the kind of practices one undertakes. By visiting them, the family constructs their own vision of the place, discovering many potential stories. There are no official screenplays. Traveling back is inseparable from social relations. Local places are “inhabited” by social interactions of those many individuals who become marginally involved, by accident, or consciously and passionately in the continuous construction of a collective identity. Locations are “meeting places” (Massey, 1994), constructed on an ongoing basis by individuals encountering and negotiating with each other. In this sense, the biographical traveling of the family is less related to the idea of discovering the official “National Culture”, and more to the idea of sharing the

value of an ancestral learning, through knowledge and sentiment. This happens in a collective willingness to gather one's own memories for that particular past, in harmony with what Daly (2001:288) illustrates in his study of family time in which "family time was all about the social production of memories". Constructing family intimacy is then more about displaying together, through consumption, than the by-the-book learning of some of pre-defined stereotype.

In this sense, day-to-day consumption activities involved in travel experiences reach far beyond national or ethnic loyalties and revert more to symbolic aspects linked to special visions of the world that are collectively perceived as typical of certain micro-places. These places, due to their emotional and biographical linkages for the family, can become inspirational raw material in the process of enacting a compelling story (Woodside and Megehee, 2009) for the family. Accordingly, the traveling experience has much to do with "seducing" other family members into adopting certain social and moral sensibilities that the migrant associates with mystical places of his or her origins. While traveling, the family reshapes a past that is supposed to belong to them, and connects this imagined past with current existential concerns in life. The past becomes actualized.

A family and its multiple biographical resources – the collection of all stories lived by its current members and ancestors – can thus be seen as networks in which a multiplicity of stories are available for potential future life innovations (Author, 2010). In this manner, life changes such as migration can be disruptive events that impact not only on the migrant's path, but also on those of all others who share their lives with them and vice-versa. In Ricœur's words (2005: 125), –"change that is an aspect of identity – of ideas and of things – involves a dramatic aspect at the human level: the fact that one's personal story is intertwined with the countless stories of those many others with whom one shares his existence."

In the context of a family as a network of biographical trajectories, shared consumption experiences produce historical value (Belk, 2010; Carù and Cova, 2006) for the family. This value comes from family excursions that privilege the unspectacular, the mundane day-to-day life that is still “sitting” there (Escobar, 2001), as a strategy to recreate a history for the family. Bearings in life and attached places (Bude and Dürrschmidt, 2010; Schütz, 1964), are in this sense shared with others to enrich experiences of the family. Thus, excursions constitute magical trips that can become epiphanies for the family or its individual members. Traveling back can support the family members in establishing their co-authored and shared life history.

This traveling time ultimately colors and nourishes their imagination when building their own identity. In Nussbaum’s words (2002), the family members are called to become “intelligent readers” of one another’s “story”. This enhances their “narrative imagination”, “the ability to imagine what it would be like to be in the position of someone very different from oneself” (Nussbaum, 2002: 289). The capacity to encounter “otherness” and to recognize how this otherness or strangeness can be included as part of themselves, enriches their current and future lives. The “narrative imagination” supports the process of actualizing a common past by collectively imagining a common world, which helps migrants and their families to cope with biographical distances and win family intimacy. Through this coping process, migrants certainly look back, but they do not lament the better and golden times that seem to be forever lost. Instead, they feel inspired and empowered to stimulate a symbolic dialogue within their families, with meaningful raw material contributing to the process of building a common family identity that is not pre-defined.

Directions for Future Research

In the context of international mobility, through which more and more family members bring their international background to the family (Epp, Schau and Price 2014), families negotiate a shared

history, integrating elements from different places and times. While the literature on consumer research shows how personal history shapes consumer identity goals and actions (Ahuvia, 2005; Author, 2010; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Schau, Gilly, and Wolfingarger 2008; Thompson, 1996), less is known about the consumption of one's own or collective biography, the autobiographical consumption. If the past is to be reimagined and "jointly enacted" (Belk, 1990), how exactly its consumption is "enacted" within the family remains a fertile terrain for investigation with multiple promising contexts. For instance, chronic illness and family memories could be a fruitful context. How does a person suffering from Alzheimers consume together with other family members what constitutes his or her own forgotten biography?

Within the autobiographical consumption, presented in this study, there is a particular experience of tourism that occurs when a family finds itself visiting autobiographical places and beloved ones. This kind of tourism does not seek the spectacular but rather the quotidian, the images of everydayness. Such a family strategy of revisiting its historical roots contrasts with classical theories on tourism, where traveling practices are "treated as an escape from everyday life and tourism theory is concerned with extraordinary places" (Larsen, 2008). Larsen shows how tourism practices involve more and more connecting of people, instead of helping them to escape the construction of social relations in the quotidian sphere. Moreover, Larsen emphasizes how "more and more tourism concerns visiting friends and family members living elsewhere". As family visits extend internationally, the construction of family intimacy involves touristic experiences. While consumer researchers have extensively studied migrants and their families in the countries of arrival, much less is known about the sending countries and about the role consumption plays in constructing family identity while being abroad. This study contributes to this literature by illustrating how, through consumption, the family creates common memories and re-appropriate their patrimony while traveling. However, a limitation of this research is that it was conducted in Belgium, with participants remembering their holiday times. More research is

needed with migrants temporarily returning home, so as to further understand their practices of doing and displaying the family, as well as to identify how the marketplace adjusts to the consequences of various decades of migration in sending countries.

In the same vein, this study shows how family history is constructed by mobilizing relationships with places where a profound emotional attachment exists. For instance, some participants explain how Latin American contexts are enriched, not only with unique local resources, but also with alternative ways of doing things, most of them rooted in solidarity principles. Their narratives often involve the notion of contrasting symbolically, through Belgium and places in departure countries, images of the “developed” and “developing” worlds. This emotional attachment can have several implications for the literature on solidarity and moral commitment. The present research project can thus lead to further inquiry on how consumption activities such as traveling, and the stories that are told (Woodside and Megehee, 2009) through them, can make a difference, fostering for instance, human commitment to cooperative action and inquiry.

The Dutch psychologist Nico Frijda (1996: 2) argues that intensive emotions may be the key to further understanding the motivation behind prosocial commitment. As important resources for decoding and understanding human prosocial behavior, consumer researchers include for instance, intergenerational transfers (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991), family identity (Epp and Price, 2008), the socialization of children (John, 1999), the extended self (Belk, 1988) and the notion of sharing, with its differentiation between “sharing in” and “sharing out” (Belk, 2010). This insightful set of resources represents a major theoretical toolkit for future research on geographical and intergenerational extensions of personal moral commitments that are intimately linked to intensifying sharing experiences and alternative consumption practices. Taking a more active role in such a debate should enable

consumer researchers to approach their moral and political role in contemporary society in a more comprehensive manner (Sherry, 2000).

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Table 1 – Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Country of Birth	Years Abroad	Family Status	University Education	Occupation in Belgium
Mr. Angulo	Late 50s	Ecuador	14	Married (partner from Ecuador), three children	MBA	Chauffeur
Mr. Cárdenas	Mid 40s	Colombia	24	Married (partner from Spain), two children	Business/architecture	Entrepreneur/construction business
Mr. González	Late 30s	Argentina	12	Married (partner from Belgium), three children	Medical doctor	Doctor specialist institute
Mrs. Laercio	Late 30s	Colombia	6	Married (partner from Belgium), one child	Masters in Marketing	Maternity - career interruption
Mr. Mejía	Mid 30s	Colombia	10	Married (partner from Belgium), two children	Masters in cyber-communications	Manager/multimedia company
Mrs. Pérez	Mid 30s	Peru	8	Married (partner from Belgium), one child	Translator	Executive assistant/public company

Mr. Restrepo	Mid 30s	Ecuador	18	Married (partner from Costa Rica), one child	Business	Manager/international company (food sector)
Mrs. Rodríguez	Mid 30s	Honduras	16	Married (partner from Belgium), planning a baby	MBA	Manager/international company (food sector)
Mrs. Ruiz	Early 50s	Peru	4	Divorced, two children	Law	Factory employee
Ms. Santos	Late 40s	Colombia	23	Living with long-term boyfriend	PhD in biology	Senior researcher /scientific organization
Mrs. Toledo	Mid 40s	Ecuador	16	Divorced, one child	Masters in sociology	Professional/NGO
Mr. Trujillo	Mid 30s	Peru	8	Married (partner from Belgium), two children	Masters in finance	Manager/financial services institution