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The Aim Was Not to Meet a German and Marry: experiences of Mexican women in intermarriages in Berlin[1]

Carlos Nazario Mora Duro[2]

Abstract

This paper aims to analyse recent Mexican migration to Germany and the forms of integration into their host society by addressing the experience of Mexican women married with Germans in the city of Berlin. Mixed marriage I understand as a journey in which the interplay between individual agency and structural opportunities and constraints substantially impacts personal experiences and the narratives thereof. I employ a biographical approach and follow this journey, which has its beginnings in a person's childhood as socialisation, socio-economic conditions and social imaginaries in the country of origin provide the foundation for a person's life course. It continues by way of meeting and engaging in a relationship with one's future husband and the decision to get married and migrate (permanently) for family reasons – a process involving negotiations, choices, and contingencies. The journey proceeds in the host country where settling down is connected to the experience of integration and to perceptions concerning restraints and opportunities in one's new life abroad. Questions guiding the analysis of these processes are: What (common) narratives can be identified during the life paths characterizing migration? How do personal agency and structural opportunities and constraints interplay? And how does this interplay influence the experience of migration and integration?

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Introduction

This paper aims to analyse recent Mexican migration to Germany and the forms of integration into their host society by addressing the experience of Mexican women married with Germans in the city of Berlin. I study this form of a transnational mixed as a journey which, as Therrien states, begins "before the romantic encounter" and "intensifies with migration" (Therrien 2012: 140), and in which the interplay between individual agency and structural opportunities and constraints substantially impacts personal experiences and the narratives thereof – the latter sometimes including the narrative of the tragedy or the epic story.

My description and analysis follow this journey which has its beginnings in a person's childhood as socialisation, socio-economic conditions and social imaginaries in the country of origin provide the foundation for a person's life course. It continues by way of meeting and engaging in a relationship with one's future husband and the decision to get married and migrate (permanently) for family reasons – a process involving negotiations, choices, and contingencies. The journey proceeds in the host country where settling down permanently is connected to the experience of integration and to perceptions concerning restraints and opportunities in one's new life abroad. To address and analyse the issues characterising the different phases of this journey I focus on the following questions: What (common) narratives can be identified during the life paths characterizing migration? How do personal agency and structural opportunities and constraints interplay? And how does this interplay influence the experience of migration and integration?

The Notion of Intermarriage

Transnational families and distant love across borders have become increasingly common in recent decades and are connected with specific restraints and opportunities wherever they are established. A wide variety of concepts has been developed to describe the phenomenon, e.g., interracial, mixed-ancestry, interethnic, intercultural, interfaith, international, intercountry, and binational unions. In this paper, I will use the notions of mixed marriage and intermarriage to refer to the union between spouses from different countries of origin.

One line of research on mixed couples refers to the dynamics of the marriage market to describe the general patterns of mate selection. The basic idea asserts that actors are operating within a market in which each individual selects from a group of potential spouses; their options and choices depend on structural conditions, as well as rational and emotional orientations (Albert and Masanet 2008; Francés and Santacreu 2008). Through the use of representative surveys, this approach highlights some structural variables that may increase the likelihood of exogamous unions, e.g. educational level, gender, ethnicity, place of origin, place of residence, or age of marriage partners (Klein 2001; Soehl and Yahirun 2011). However, because of its emphasis on quantitative analysis, this perspective pays less attention to the role of individual agency.[3]

Other studies have emphasised the implications of intermarriage in relation to the host society – that is to say, how the decision to marry may influence integration when one partner is a member of mainstream society while the other belongs to a minority (Therrien 2020; Therrien and Pellegrini 2015). Earlier findings have found that the relationship between intermarriage and integration is complex, as sometimes this status facilitates positive integration in some dimensions, whereas in others, the effect is quite different or may have not a direct role in the process (Rodríguez-García 2015a, 2015b, 2016). My approach in this research generally agrees with the argument that intermarriage has a complex influence on the different dimensions of integration, including the social, cultural, structural, and individual aspects.

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[3] The concept of agency suggests that within "the constraints of their world" individuals express plans and make choices among options, defining in this way their life course. Individual differences and selection processes therefore play an important role, "as they interact with changing environments to produce behavioral outcomes" (Elder 1994: 6).

Other investigations focus on the distinct narratives that social actors explain about the mixed marriage and on the meaning of this union as a social action (Santelli and Collet 2012). This type of research frequently uses qualitative methods to understand how the decision to get married and migrate was made, and how everyday obstacles and violence (symbolic and direct) are perceived by individuals (Ariza 2017; Gruner-Domic 2000; Hernández 2005, 2006, 2007). My work subscribes to the qualitative method using a life-history approach to analyse the experiences described by Mexican women in the city of Berlin. The biographical approach emphasises elements such as critical moments in the life experience, the interplay between individual agency and structural constraints/opportunities, and between social and individual history. In this sense, I agree with Ferrarotti that a life history implies a narrative of more or less determining conditions, but also of liberation strategies that individuals operate in order to access opportunities (Ferrarotti 2007: 28).

Methodological Note, Facts and Figures

My analysis is based on fieldwork that I carried out in Berlin between 2018 and 2019 as part of a research project on Mexican migration. I conducted semi-structured interviews with Mexican migrants married (heterosexually) with a German citizen, focusing on the three stages of the intermarriage journey outlined above and the experiences, narratives, and imaginaries of my informants. I collected about 40 hours of individual interviews, which were transcribed and analysed with the help of qualitative data analysis software. My fieldwork also involved participant observation at casual and formal events among the Mexican community in Berlin – e.g. *Día de Muertos*, *el Grito de Independencia*, gatherings to enjoy Mexican food, and other activities managed by the Mexican Embassy and various cultural and academic organisations.

1. Mexican Migration in Germany

The first time I gave a talk on my research project at a workshop in Germany, I was asked a question in the discussion that followed, which seemed rather unconnected to what I had just presented, namely "Do you know of a good place to get Mexican food in Berlin?" It became apparent to me that the popularity of Mexican food was increasing along with the numbers of Mexican migrants in Germany. According to Fernández (2011), there were 78 Mexican restaurants in Berlin in 2011, some of them managed by Mexicans, but others by other Latin Americans or by Indians, Spaniards, or Koreans.[4] My search yielded 90 restaurants in 2019.

During my fieldwork in Berlin, I saw Mexican flags permanently displayed in only two places of the city – the Mexican Embassy and a small store called 'Chili & Paprika' in the borough Prenzlauer Berg (Fig. 1). Its website advertises it as a place "for lovers of Latin American cuisine" established in 2013 in response to "the great demand for Mexican food". It has become a popular place for the

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[4] Fernández affirms that the Mexican population searched for the food they missed in restaurants run by Indians and Pakistanis, and found a completely different version of what they knew as Mexican food; some of them then launched their own businesses, attracting the attention of tourists as well as the local population (Fernández 2011: 195).

Mexican community in Berlin to buy "authentic" products – e.g., chillies, tortillas, tamales, tequila, corn, candies, and sauces. Gaytán asserts that the search for authenticity implies not just the reproduction of a particular culinary tradition, but aims at "the preservation of a greater cultural phenomenon – one that extends beyond the parameters of cuisine, and directs attention to representation, identity, and culture" (Gaytán 2008: 316).

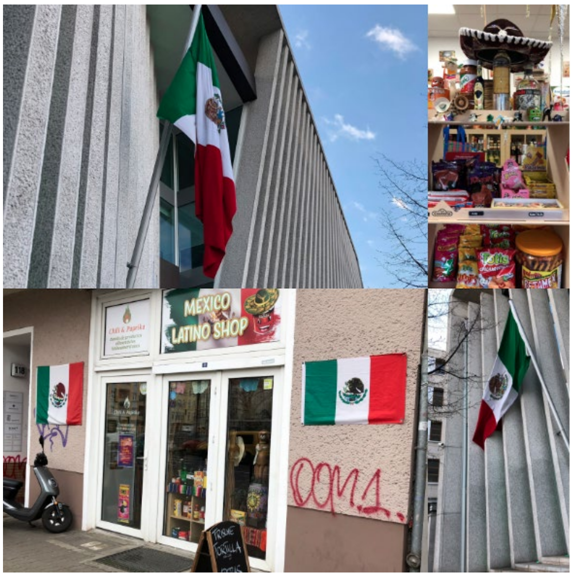

Figure 1. Mexican flags in the city, Berlin, 2019.

Studies have shown that Mexican cuisine has spread globally since the 1960s via the United States due to its popularisation and adaptation in this country, and also because of the growing number of Mexican migrants (Pilcher 2008). Some Mexican restaurants around the world are therefore the result of McDonaldisation processes – i.e., the global export of foods as interpreted by transnational industries –, whereas others were established in connection with the search for cultural 'authenticity' by a growing migrant community for whom Mexican food represents an important symbol of national identity and social cohesion (Pilcher 1996).

Until 2013, Mexicans were the largest population group living outside their homeland in the world, though in recent years the growth rate has dropped. Recent information indicates that the number of Mexican migrants to the US has decreased (Chiquiar and Salcedo 2013; Zong and Batalova 2019); however, the flow towards other nations has been increasing. This dynamic may be associated with the decrease of economic migration (to the US), and the increase of other types of movements (for education or family reasons) to alternative destinations. According to the Institute for Mexicans Abroad (2019), Mexican migrants in 2017 totalled 11,848,537, of whom 97.2% lived in the US, and 2.8% (331,162 individuals) lived in other nations such as Canada, Spain, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

My study focuses on the Mexicans who migrated to Germany in the last decade. Recent data (Fig. 2) shows that in 2011 there were 10,543 Mexicans in Germany, and increasing to 18,015 in 2019 (7% average annual growth), although the real figure is likely to be over 25,000 (Cedeño 2019). Despite trade and cultural and political cooperation between Mexico and Germany since the beginning of the twentieth century (Morfín and Segovia 2018; Rall and Rall 2004), the increasing Mexican migration to Germany seems unexpected in view of the geographical distance, language differences, and the lack of historical migrant networks. Hence, to understand why Mexicans migrate to Germany, it will help to clarify their socio-demographic profile and reasons for migration.

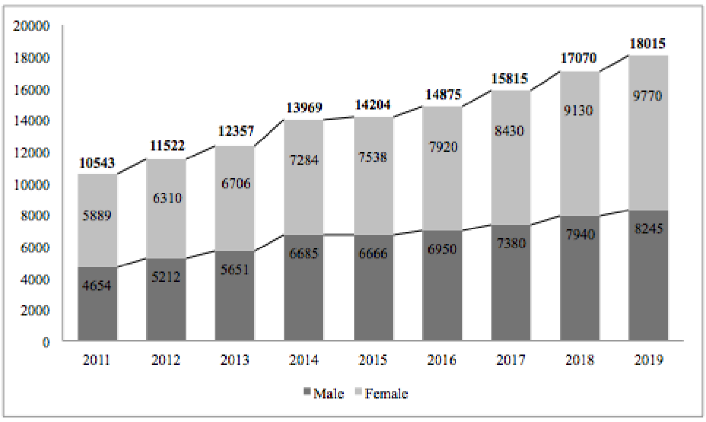

Figure 2. Mexican migration to Germany by sex and total, 2011–2019.
Source: Statistisches Bundesamt (DESTATIS 2020).

Mexican migration to Germany is characterised by a majority of migrant women, in contrast to the US where the majority of Mexican migrants are men. In 2019, 54% of Mexicans in Germany were women, 46% were men (Fig. 2). It has been suggested that this configuration is connected with the growing demand in destination countries for workers in typically female-dominated sectors, especially domestic work, health and social care, and manufacturing industries that hire 'flexible and cheap' labour based on gender stereotypes (Maymon 2017).[5] Maymon (2017) states that an important dimension of this phenomenon is that women have become 'economic providers' or independent actors who migrate not only for job opportunities as 'nannies, nurses, maids, or sex workers', or motivated by family reunification, but, I would add, for educational training, or the desire for multicultural experiences.

Mexicans in Germany are also primarily young people who migrated recently. In 2019, 78% of Mexicans in Germany were younger than 40, with an average age of 33 (32 for men and 35 for women). They had been in Germany an average of 6.8 years, which implies that they mostly left their homeland around 2012. During my investigation, I observed a similar pattern among my informants, most of whom began the migration process around 2009, whereas only two women had moved in the 1990s (Appendix 1).[6]

From a geographical perspective, recent data shows that 53% of the Mexicans living in Germany lived in the federal states (*Bundesländer*) of Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, and North Rhine-Westphalia; however, the highest per capita density of Mexican migrants is found in Berlin and Hamburg, which are both cities and *Bundesländer*. In 2019, the number of Mexican nationals per each 100,000 inhabitants in these metropolises was 59 and 45 respectively, while the national average was 22 people (Table 1). This regional distribution may be associated with the workforce needs in those *Bundesländer* with high amounts of industry; nevertheless, other relevant factors may include the presence of 'prestigious' academic institutions that attract Mexican students, and the influence of social variables such as family reunification.

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[5] In Germany, there is a substantial demand for health care workers, especially nurses for the care of elderly and hospitalised patients. The coronavirus pandemic further intensified this shortage of skilled personnel, resulting in the temporary recruitment of nurses from developing countries such as Mexico; these workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation (Argüeso and Richter 2020).

[6] Another relevant element to understand migration out of Mexico in this period is the dramatic increase of homicides and missing people registered in Mexico in connection with the "war on drug trafficking", i.e. the military fight against drug cartels started by President Felipe Calderón between 2006 and 2012 (Pereyra 2012; Rosen and Zepeda 2016). My interviews reveal one narrative on this issue (migration prompted by fear of drug cartels). The perception of security in the public sphere is an element commonly cited by informants as an advantage of living abroad, while they usually believe that their foreign spouse could be in "danger" in Mexico.

Bundesländer	**Total Population in Bundesländer**	**Total Mexican Population**	**Percentage by Total Mexican Population**	**Ratio of Mexican population per 100,000 inhabitans in Bundesländer**
Baden Wurttemberg	11 107 481	2 990	16.6	27
Bavaria	13 127 475	3 625	20.1	28
Berlin	**3 666 488**	**2 175**	**12.1**	**59**
Brandenburg	2 522 217	230	1.3	9
Bremen	684 376	180	1.0	26
Hamburg	1 845 115	835	4.6	45
Hessen	6 290 713	1 420	7.9	23
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	1 608 950	145	0.8	9
Niedersachsen	7 998 095	1 705	9.5	21
North Rhine-Westphalia	17 943 854	2 905	16.1	16
Rheinland-Pfalz	4 095 439	545	3.0	13
Saarland	987 226	125	0.7	13
Saxony	4 074 095	495	2.7	12
Saxony-Anhalt	2 196 389	180	1.0	8
Schleswig-Holstein	2 903 655	280	1.6	10
Thuringia	2 135 151	185	1.0	9
Total	**83 186 719**	**18 020**	***100 %***	22

Table 1. Total population of Mexicans by Bundesländer, 2019.
Percentages, and ratio per 100 000 inhabitants in Bundesländer. N: 18 020.
Source: Statistisches Bundesamt (DESTATIS 2020).

In terms of the reasons for migration, the publication *Mexican Professionals in Germany* found, based on a sample of 162 Mexicans, that 70% moved abroad for educational purposes, 50% for family motives, and 23% because of work (Piña 2017). The *Statistisches Bundesamt* (German Federal Statistical Office) shows that in 2019, 21.2% of the Mexicans in Germany had a residence permit for family reasons, 18.8% for the purpose of education, 16% for employment, and 1.9% for other reasons such as special rights of residency, international protection, and humanitarian or political reasons. The proportion of residence permits for family motives among Mexicans was even higher than that for 'permanent residence,' and this difference was greater for women than for men (Table 2).[7] One can see that substantial factors for the Mexican migration to Germany are the family, the labour market, and educational training.

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[7] Mexican women receive a higher proportion of residence permits for family reasons (+11.6%), and more permanent residency (+4.5%) than Mexican men, whereas males receive more permits for education (+6.9%) and employment (+8.6%) than females. Permanent residence does not represent a specific reason for migration, however, it is worth mentioning that in order to achieve this status, migrants previously received a temporary residence permit for a minimum number of years and subsequently had to qualify for a permanent permit. Temporary residence is likely to be related to a previous permit for family reasons, as this suggests a compelling reason to stay long-term in Germany, and the requirements may be less demanding for foreigners married to Germans.

Residence permit status	**Total population**	**Male**	**Female**
1. With residence permit:	77.8	77.3	78.2
1.1 Permanent	19.8	17.4	21.9
1.2 Temporary:	58.0	59.9	56.3
a) for the purpose of education	*18.8*	*22.5*	*15.6*
b) for the purpose of gainful employment	*16.0*	*20.7*	*12.1*
c) international protection, humanitarian, political reasons	*0.3*	*0.3*	*0.4*
d) family reasons	*21.2*	*15.0*	*26.6*
e) special residence rights	*1.6*	*1.5*	*1.6*
2 Application for residence permit made	6.7	6.9	6.5
3. Without residence permit:	11.8	12.9	10.9
3.1 Tolerance stay (Duldung)	0.1	0.1	0.1
3.2 Temporary stay (Aufenthaltsgestattung)	0.1	0.1	0.1
3.3 Without tolerance or permission	11.7	12.7	10.8
4. No residence permit required	3.7	2.8	4.5
Total	**100.00**	**100.00**	**100.00**

Table 2. Residence permit status of Mexicans in Germany, 2019.
Percentages. N: 18 015. 8 250 men and 9 765 women.
Source: Statistisches Bundesamt (DESTATIS 2020).

Within the category of family reasons, a relevant figure is reunification with the partner, regardless of the partner's nationality. Among Mexicans in Germany, recent information shows that nearly half of the women are married, and one in four was married to a German citizen. In particular, among Mexican adults, 49.3% of women and 31.5% of men are married, whereas the percentage of those married to German citizens is 26.1% for women and 11.3% for men (Fig. 3). A much larger portion of Mexican women marry German citizens than Mexican men do.

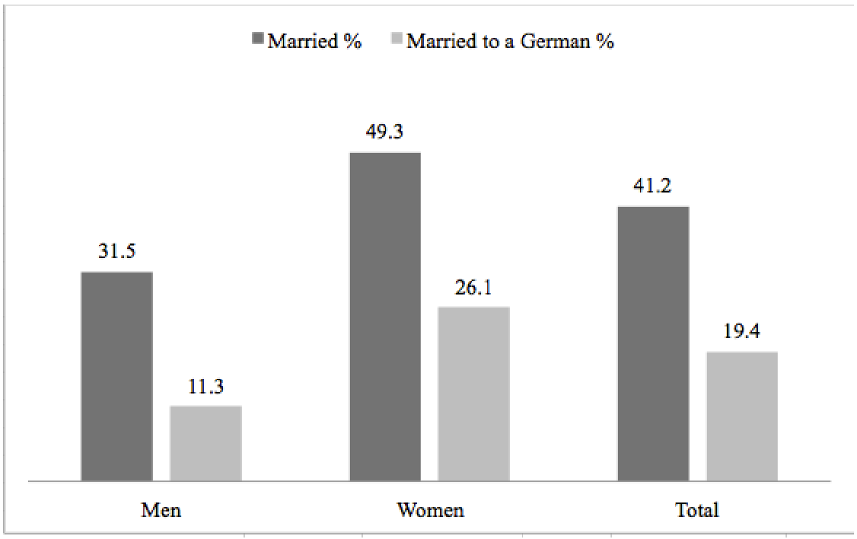

Figure 3. Marriage status of Mexicans in Germany, by sex and total, 2019.
Percentages. Estimation on Mexican adults: 7 550 men and 9 175 women.
Source: Statistisches Bundesamt (DESTATIS 2020).

To summarise, statistical information shows that contemporary Mexican migration to Germany is a movement of young persons, in their early thirties, with a slight majority of the female population. It seems that the search for professional development, further education, and family ties, such as endogamous (same-origin) and exogamous (mixed) unions, represent substantive factors in this mobility process. This migration has increased over the last decade, with migrants settling down in *Bundesländer* with a highly developed industrial sector, but also in important urban conglomerations such as Berlin and Hamburg, where in addition to a demand for workers in certain sectors, there are many educational institutions, and, of course, an ethnically diverse population. Concerning the question of where to settle in Germany, Pola (38), a *Kita* (kindergarten) schoolteacher, told me:[8]

> "Well, I know that in some areas there's no way, I mean it's full, isn't it? For example, in engineering, when they [German companies] need engineers they are in Hamburg (laughs) they are outside Berlin, but I think that in my area, it's an ideal city because there is a lack of educators in Berlin and the migrant population is growing more and more, and they need more and more Spanish-speaking or French-speaking or Italian-speaking educators because of the growing society." (Pola, 38. ID 007)

Along the same lines, another woman named Maya (29), commented about the Mexican community in Berlin:

> "I met several Mexicans, but to be honest (...) I perceived them as the typical Mexican elitist, 'I live in Germany', but you know, a Mexican abroad is always like, '*¡No mames güey*!' [friendly], as a brother, as a best friend, but they were no longer like that. However, something that I recently learnt, (...) that I was suddenly like those Mexicans. When I arrived, 'everything shines', but they [Mexicans] had lived here for years. The people I met were elderly, not students. Students come and go, but those who live here are established, and I arrived excited, 'we are all the same', and they said, '*chido* [well], good for you'. I noticed then, with a bad taste in the mouth, that I also became like them." (Maya, 29, ID 016)

One can recognise in Maya's comments spontaneous social characterisations of different types of Mexican migrants, such as the student, the worker, the temporary traveller, and the 'established' migrant (Elias and Scotson 1994). Similarly, a narrative of personal transition emerges, starting with the novelty of arrival and concluding with the disenchantment about integration into the host society. Georg Simmel contended that the stranger (*Fremde*) is not only a wanderer who comes today and leaves tomorrow, but rather one who comes today and stays, and who, despite settling down, is a potential wanderer who does not quite overcome the experience of coming and going (Simmel 1908: 509).

In what follows, I address experiences of Mexicans, particularly women as a significant group of Mexican migrants to Germany over the last decade. As mentioned above, my work focuses on individuals living in Berlin, where the Mexican community (2,200 people) constitutes the second-largest group of Latin American migrants, just after Brazilians (6,830), and above other Latin American groups who have historically migrated to Germany, such as Chileans (1,655), and Argentineans (1,190) (DESTATIS 2020).[9] In the next section, I examine various circumstances of early socialisation that may influence subsequent decision-making about one's life course, such as choosing an exogamous relationship, the decision to migrate, and the experience of integration in the host country.

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[8] For this research, I have translated into English the quotes and conversations I conducted in Spanish with the informants. I have not attempted to convert the imperfections of the communication into perfect English.

[9] Latin American migration to Germany can be divided into three distinct waves in the twentieth century: 1) Migration following military coups in the 1960s and 1970s – e.g., in Brazil (1964), Uruguay (1973), Chile (1973), and Argentina (1976) – which resulted in the movement of professionals, intellectuals, artists, and political opponents exiled because of their political positions and criticism of the regime. 2) Migration to East Germany in the 1980s based on bilateral agreements with Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Mexico, and other nations. This was mainly motivated by work and education opportunities and was interrupted by the fall of the Berlin Wall, leading to the return of a portion of the migrants to Latin America, while others stayed and looked for opportunities in unified Germany. 3) And, from the 1990s, migration based on diverse reasons, including the employment market, education and professional specialisation, as well as family reunification and individual motivations, e.g., the quest for global experiences in multicultural environments (Hernández 2006, 2007).

2. The Point of Departure

In this chapter, I focus on the beginning of the intermarriage journey, considering, as has already been stated, that this itinerary begins before the romantic encounter and continues throughout the migration process. I agree with Santelli and Collet (2012) that this phase, which they define as "pre-conjugal socialisation", shows how individuals' marital choices are constrained, to varying degrees, by their subjective experiences and objective social conditions. Therefore, using the narratives collected for this study, I put forward two propositions:

1. Concepts about the family are an important dimension of socialisation in Mexico and individuals also employ them to make sense of their subsequent individual choices and social interactions.
2. Mexican migrants in Germany generally come from a middle-class background, are well-educated and have worked as professionals in their country of origin. This also impacts the agency they display as migrants (in Germany).

During my interactions with informants in Berlin, their respective family of origin was the first topic we talked about. Their descriptions included perceptions concerning their family's social and economic background as well as value judgements. Value categories that frequently appeared in narratives describing the household in early socialisation were the notion of 'functional' families – accompanied by other analogous characterizations, e.g., 'classic', 'conventional', 'typical', or 'traditional' – and its opposite, the concept of 'dysfunctional' or 'atypical' families, as illustrated in the following quotes.

Asked to describe their family in Mexico, informants responded as follows:

> "A *classic family*; a family with a very loving mother, dedicated, a 24-hour housewife. A hard-working father, responsible, educated, the one who provided for us materially, the one who introduced me to reading, to history, to art. And my mother – my lifelong companion, the one who taught me to embroider, to weave, and *the values* of respect to grandparents, to maintain a traditional *Mexican family*. Although my parents migrated from Guanajuato to Colima, that was the background." (Ana, 48. ID 023)

> "My mother is from Veracruz, and my father from Hidalgo. (...) They had much in common, although they were mentally distinct. They come from different family compositions. My father's, completely *dysfunctional*, [he suffered] much abuse, mistreatments, and indirectly the same was the case with my mother because she left home when she was eight years old to live with an *interesting family*. She worked as a nanny for a couple, a Spanish woman and a German man. (...) They provided her education; she had *another way* in terms of education than my father (...), but this distinction involves a lot of conflict because my father does not know *what it is like to be a family*. He just experienced abuse, mistreatments, and that's all. He did not feel himself loved; he did not know *how to give and receive love*; he did not learn how to do it. And my mother learnt it, not within her own family, but from the married pair who hosted her. There she understood, 'well, *that is how a father and a mother are*, and *that is how things work*, and that is *how you have to take care of children*, and you must educate yourself, you must speak well and be well-dressed'." (Mia, 45. ID 012)

The narrative recollections show that the dichotomous classification of the family (on the one hand, the beloved and protective, and on the other, the conflictive and dysfunctional) serves as a code of conduct that structures the perception of the world and the behaviour of individuals, not only when talking about in the household, but during the evaluation of subsequent experiences, as will be discussed in connection with later phases of the migration journey. Moreover, this structural imaginary corresponds with historical and contextual configurations, insofar as the 'traditional' family model still represents the majority social order in Mexico, despite major demographic changes in recent decades.[10]

Socio-economically, most of my informants described a middle-class situation in early socialisation, which they also represented in opposition to lower- and upper-class lifestyles. In practical terms, this contrast implied fewer instances of objective family hardship (low per capita income, job instability, debt-to-asset ratio, and reported loss of income), and instead, access to social welfare and a regular household income provided by parents. Interestingly, several of the interviewees' parents worked in the private sector, but more of them in Mexican parastatal companies, a sector that benefited from the policies of the welfare state in the second half of the twentieth century.[11] These circumstances are illustrated in the following quotes.

Asked about parental support during childhood or family deprivation, informants responded:

> "As my parents were *lower class*, I would say (...) My father managed to study with a scholarship in Torreón, and so they climbed up the social ladder, what we call social mobility. He obtained a university degree and then a Master's degree. My mother also managed to study (...); she received support from her uncles, but she was really like an orphan. I think she had to struggle a lot, but at some point they managed to study, to get a good job. When we were born they [parents] were lower middle class, and by the time we [children] went to school they reached middle class, I would say." (Alma, 30. ID 021)

> "*We were not rich*, but we did not suffer deprivations like many families in Mexico. There was a time with ups and downs, as other families might also have. (...) My father was dismissed from work, and the youngest daughter, that is me, suffered the most. I mean, I could no longer take swimming lessons (...) or English classes (...) those things that a *family with low income* could not afford, but I do not consider that as a deprivation, just a wave of difficult times that ended later." (Gilda, 40. ID 005)

Within socio-economic status, one factor that stood out in the life stories was the role of education or vocational training in accessing the labour market. For most people, this goal represented a kind of 'family duty', so they made significant investments of time, resources, and effort to achieve it. It was not surprising that most of the interviewees expressed a firm commitment to education, whether in public or private schools. In fact, of those who obtained a university degree, 50% studied in public and 50% in private institutions, as exemplified by the following experiences. Questioned on what the growth environment was like, respondents commented:

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[10] In 2015, 89% of households in Mexico were family units, of which 70% comprised a nuclear family (parents and children), while 28% included other relatives, and 1% included the nuclear family and individuals not related to the head of household (INEGI 2015).

[11] Public companies were an important structural factor in the conditions experienced by most respondents, 58% indicated that at least one of their parents worked in the state sector. This is not atypical, considering that between 1970 and 1988 the number of state companies increased from 180 to 1,155, and the number of workers in the public sector increased from 1 million to 2.2 million, as noted in Cleaves and Stephens (1991).

> "Well, my parents were teachers in the SNTE [teachers' union in the public education system]. My father is also, in addition to being a professor, a teacher and a lawyer; and I consider that, since my sister and I were children, a fundamental component at home has been education, and *becoming a professional*. My father always supported us in our career choices. He wanted us to be lawyers, but neither of us chose that. My sister is a photographer and studied art, while I [chose] social sciences." (Miriam, 45. ID 002).

> "At that time, I remember my parents found it difficult to pay the fees for my brother and me. I think it was a bit difficult, but it was the most convenient thing to do. Afterwards, I do believe that my parents were always oriented towards giving us everything educational, whatever the cost. So, with a scholarship, they enrolled us in high school at El Tec [a private Mexican education system]. (...) It seems that my father grew up always with [the notion] that 'education is what will allow you to move forward'. Education, education [she insisted]. I feel my father has always followed the *path of education* [*el camino de la educación*], 'that is what we are going to give you and that is what we are going to pay for, no matter the sacrifices'." (Alma, 30. ID 021).

The 'path of education' is not an ungrounded hope among Mexican families as a way to secure a stable future. Previous studies have shown that a rise in the educational level results in socio-economic mobility of individuals, mainly in terms of better income, and this effect is more prominent when parents' educational level is lower than that of their children (De Hoyos, Martínez de la Calle, and Székely 2011). My research reveals that the 'duty' of education and professionalisation is especially emphasised when the narrative involves parents who are the first generation in their family to access higher education and who also experienced internal migration processes.

My research suggests that middle-class living conditions at home, coupled with the "path of education" and the support of the family network, are substantive factors that seem to influence my informants' trajectory and help them be successful. That is to say, individuals tend to take advantage of favourable circumstances for the acquisition of an educational degree and subsequent integration into the labour market. Most of the respondents (88%) reported having a university diploma or a postgraduate degree, while only three of them had completed vocational training. The following excerpts illustrate some of these circumstances:

> "In Guadalajara, I studied industrial design for four years (...) after that, I went back to Tlaxcala and looked for a job (...), but I knew I couldn't find work in my home city. (...) 'I will try in Mexico City.' (...) So I moved, but my brother went to Paris on an academic exchange, or something like that, for BUAP [Public University of Puebla]. That's when he told me, 'you can do it too'. I saw how he [my brother] made his live, and I said, 'I want to do the same,' and I looked on the Internet. I looked for scholarships." (Thalia, 36. ID 004)

> "During my Master's studies, I was in contact with people in the Mexico City Government, and thanks to these contacts, which I interviewed for my Master's thesis, they offered me a job in the Ministry of Social Development (…); I enjoyed working there because it was about public policies, social policies like the ones I studied in my Master's dissertation, and I had a lot of freedom to work (…). I really liked that job, but then I met my current husband, and the question was always, when do we want to plan a life together?" (Miriam, 45. ID 002)

Recent research in Mexico has found that relevant variables influencing social actors' achievements include the 'solidarity' of social institutions, the support of family, job opportunities in the labour market, and individual agency in decision-making (Mora and de Oliveira 2014). Without downplaying the importance of the various factors, I particularly agree with the relevance of individual agency, although I would also add, that this agency is exerted in association with the objective socio-economic situation. In his 1994 classic paper, *Time, Human Agency, and Social Change*, Glen H. Elder argued that the vicious circle of family hardship, conflict in marriage, and "disrupted and nonnurturing" behaviours from parents undermined children's "self-confidence, peer acceptance, and school performance" (Elder 1994: 12). My findings suggest that the converse also applies, in the sense that social and economic stability and the perception of family support fostered self-confidence and agency among my informants.

'Control' and 'mobilisation' of resources in the face of 'challenging' scenarios describes how individuals deploy their power of agency during their life course (Elder 1994). According to the interviews I conducted, this possibility of individual choice is often manifested during the biographical story as a desire to do certain things – "I always wanted to" –, which implies an expectation to achieve goals such as learning, traveling, accumulating global experiences, and so forth. In this sense, I consider that Mexican migrants' narratives provide evidence of projective agency, which, according to Mora and de Oliveira (2014), implies an affirmative pursuit of plans, goals, and purposes directed towards future possibilities in one's life course.[12] This can be illustrated with the narratives of Martha and Thalia.

Martha studied mathematics and economics in Mexico, during which time she spent a year in France. She told me about her expectations:

> "I always really liked [travelling abroad], well *it has always called to me* since I was very young. I think that the trip to France was what I liked so much; it was *what I wanted*. After I went on that trip, *all I wanted to do* was to go abroad. I also liked languages a lot, so I wanted to learn French well. I could also speak English at school, and I really liked international people (...), and another thing was that I was an only child (...). I wanted to become a bit more independent, and I didn't think I could do that if I didn't go abroad." (Martha, 33. ID 001)

Motivated by this aspiration, Martha started a Master's degree in Germany, financed by Conacyt (Mexican Council for Science and Technology); she subsequently remained in Germany to look for work, and later met her husband there. Another informant called Thalia also described her intentions to travel abroad from a very young age.

> "When I was very young, *I always wanted to* go to Japan, it's still my dream. I still haven't achieved it. I also told my mum, 'mum, I want to learn Japanese', and my mum always said 'yes, let's go look for it (...). We were looking for schools, but it was too expensive, so we couldn't, but my mum, she always imagined me [living] abroad. I mean, it was a dream, but I didn't think it would come true, nor for so long. But yes, I always liked that, but my mother instilled in the three of us [her and her siblings] the idea of *spreading our wings*." (Thalia, 36. ID 004)

The notion of "spreading one's wings" involves the support of the family network to put individual agency into operation, thus giving rise to different goals such as obtaining national and international study scholarships, travelling abroad, learning new languages, and thus meeting people with diverse backgrounds. It is in this sense that one can identify within this stage of the migrants' trajectory the conditions that make it possible to access diversified social networks and novel socio-cultural interactions – including, meeting the future partner, not as an objective in itself, but as a consequence of the journey undertaken by the individual since the first socialisation.

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[12] Mora and de Oliveira, return to the concept of projective agency from the 1998 article *What is Agency?* by Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische. According to the authors, the projection of future plans contrasts with the subordinate agency that occurs when individuals perceive the future as unpredictable. All energies are placed in the present. In the face of the daily imperative of survival, there is no room for planning for the future (Mora and de Oliveira 2014: 94).

3. The (First) Romantic Encounter and the Decision to Migrate

Concerning the second phase of the intermarriage journey, I describe and analyse the places and circumstances of the (first) romantic encounter up to the decision to marry and migrate. Regarding the feeling of love, Max Weber, wrote that "He to whom it is given may speak of fate's fortune and grace – not of his own 'merit.'" (Weber 1991: 350) I would argue, however, that much of the 'merit' for the love encounter lies in the agency deployed by individuals – the migrants who initiate plans and choose between options through their constraints and opportunities, thereby defining their life course (Elder 1994).

"Where did he fall in love with you?" (*¿En qué lugar se enamoró de ti?*) This is the chorus of a 1982 Spanish ballad by singer-songwriter José Luis Perales. The phrase is also the title of an article by Cortina and Esteve (2012), which focuses on endogamy rates among international migrants in Spain. According to the authors, the couple's meeting place is crucial for endogamy, but the conclusion might also apply to the occurrence of exogamy. Of the Mexican migrants I interviewed, 54% told me they met their partner abroad (mainly in Germany), and 46% in Mexico (Fig. 4). This provides initial indications about how these individuals 'find love' during dynamic decision-making processes and mobilisation of resources to achieve personal goals, such as specialised training or intercultural experiences.

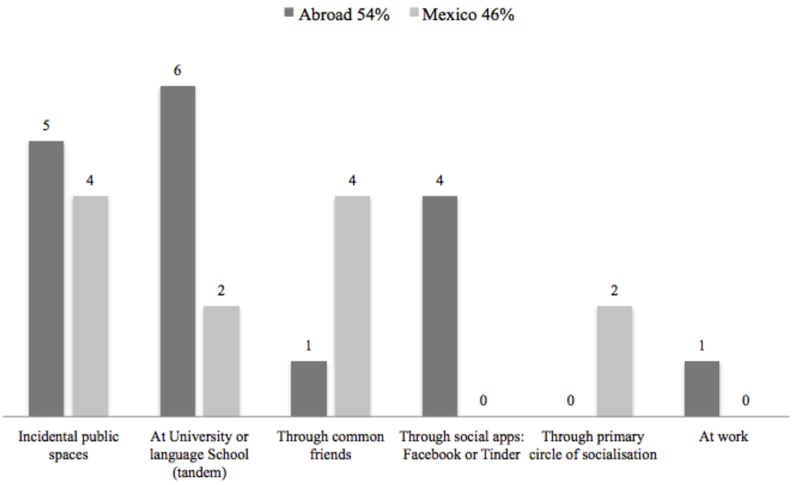

Figure 4. Meeting places for mixed couples.
Total narrative mentions. An interview may include one or more references. "Abroad" implies that the respondent met his/her partner (mainly) in Germany, but also in other nations.
Source: fieldwork interviews (24).

According to respondents, incidental public spaces (e.g., "on the street", cafeterias, bars, and museums) and educational centres (universities or language schools) are the most favourable places for encounters that lead to an exogamous union. However, there are interesting differences depending on whether the couples met in Mexico or elsewhere. Educational facilities were the site par excellence for love encounters outside Mexico and, conversely, social circles such as family and mutual friends played the least relevant role. By contrast, for those who met their partner in Mexico, social networks were crucial, in addition to incidental contact in public spaces (Fig. 4). Some examples are given below.

Chela is a Mexican woman who studied German in Mexico and always planned on, according to her narrative, "coming to Germany to do a PhD". Although she did not achieve her initial goal after emigrating, she got a job with a professor at the university in Berlin. When asked, how she did meet her husband, she said:

> "At lunch, in the *Mensa* [canteen] at the university. (...) I met him almost when I arrived. I had several addresses in Germany, but I wanted... *didn't want to get married* like that. I mean, I came here as an adult, already having boyfriends, but no marriage proposals, but I didn't really want to, and I didn't want to know if I wanted to have children or not. I hadn't thought about it. I said, 'I will go to university, I will be a teacher and advise companies', but then the situation changed." (Chela, 49. ID 009)

Another example is Gilda, quoted earlier, who met her husband in Mexico. She told me her father, an aircraft mechanic, was a "fan" of "German culture" because he "noticed that all the tools in his workplace came from China and broke. He associated quality with the Germans, and he was always interested in German history". This memory was an important basis for Gilda to make several decisions, among them learning German, her choice of career and, in a way, the possibility of meeting her spouse.

> "I also started to study German, not by *aras del destino* [destiny] but because I think my father influenced me to study German culture. I started to study German literature at the UNAM [Autonomous National University of Mexico], and of course *the aim was not to meet a German and marry him* but to come and spend some time in Germany, preferably in Berlin because I had heard that Berlin was interesting. When I finished my degree in 2003 I had already planned to come with my sister so that she could help me with the financing, and that was it. Nevertheless, during that time a friend of mine, from the university, met a German who was a friend of (...) my husband (laughs). So I met him, and we became a couple, well not at that moment, but we started a relationship without knowing what was going to happen, and I had a long-distance relationship with him for about six years." (Gilda, 40. ID 005)

According to Santillán (2017), who analyses the academic migration of Mexicans in Spain and the movement related to marital ties (the author calls "pink migration" the phenomenon of people who settle in another country by establishing marriage ties with local people), the civil contract provides a structural advantage to migrants, mainly in legal terms, for settling in the host society. Despite the above, it's worth noting that the recapitulation of the love encounter highlights individual agency as respondents frequently stressed that their first idea was never marriage. A Mexican nurse named Monica (42), who studied and worked in the Netherlands and Madrid before coming to Berlin, told me in this regard, "My stay in Europe was never based on a person (…). I mean, it was my profession that brought me here in the first place and [that is] why I am still here".

Rather than an ulterior aim, marriage can thus be seen as an unplanned but understandable outcome of the individual trajectory of international specialisation and experiences within the structural constraints and opportunities of one's life history. The career status of the Mexicans at the time they met their future partner seems to support this hypothesis, considering that this included both students and employees. It implies that these persons already possessed residency documents at the time they met their partner abroad, or that they showed considerable professional development while living in Mexico.

Figure 5 shows that ‘student’ was the most common status for Mexicans who met their partners in Mexico as well as for those who met their partners abroad. ‘Employee’ status was also significant for Mexican nationals, followed by the category of ‘traveller’. In the case of Germans, ‘student’ status was also a major context for meeting the partner, especially in Germany, while travel (to Mexico) was the second most frequent circumstance, followed finally by the status as an ‘employee’.

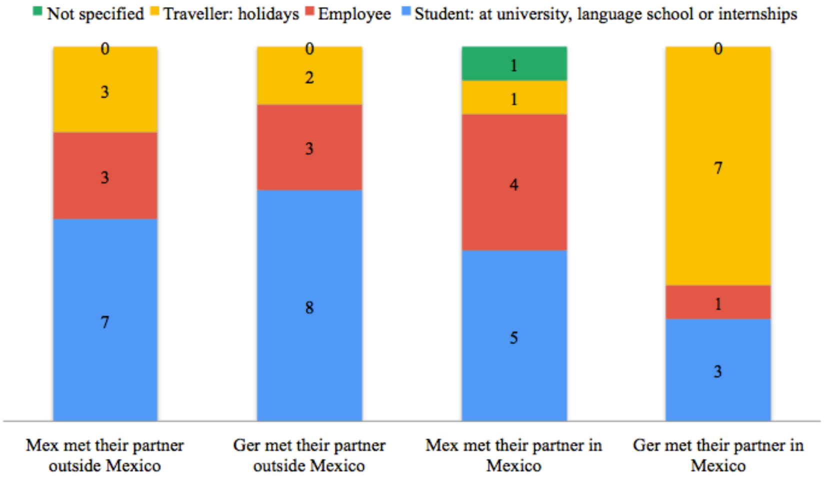

Figure 5. Social context of the first meeting between couples.
Mex: Mexicans; Ger: Germans (characterised by their partners).
Source: fieldwork interviews (24).

For both Mexicans and Germans who met outside Mexico (mainly in Germany), ‘being a student’ was the principal status. However, when the meeting took place in Mexico, the most frequent combination among couples was Mexican students and German travellers. References to ‘German travellers’ occurred in several interviews, mostly associated with young people who move to different countries, e.g. Mexico, and “fall in love with the local culture”. This configuration undoubtedly describes structural opportunities, insofar as being able to travel also depends on consumption and economic possibilities.

What follows the first meeting between couples is not a straightforward declaration, “and everyone lived happily ever after”. In fact, respondents frequently talked about a period of geographically ‘distant love’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014) that lasted a few months or even years. There is not enough space here to analyse this phase of the life trajectory at length, but it is important to highlight two aspects. First, during the period of distant love, several interviewees described a feeling of detachment from their affective relationship, summed up in the phrase “whatever happens”, which one can interpret as a first reflection upon their own future; but the narrative also continues with the expression of doubt preceding the decision to begin a conjugal relationship abroad. The question “what follows for us now?” represents a more detailed evaluation of the life course and the possibilities in a new context overseas. Miriam (45) described to me her experience after meeting her partner in Mexico. Asked if she started a relationship in that moment, she said:

> "Yes, it was a long-distance relationship, but when I was in Tijuana, in a way I broke off that relationship very often because I didn't trust that anything would develop. I said well, he is in Germany, and I am in Tijuana. There is a 9-hour time difference in the first place, and that already seemed very big to me. And despite that, he visited me in Tijuana, we met in Mexico, every time I had holidays I came to Germany too, while I was doing my Master's degree, to get to know his family. So it was a bit complicated, because *I didn't believe in the relationship*, but we were doing things like we were forming a relationship (...), but then the question came up again, 'what are we going to do?' And that's when I decided to apply for scholarships to come to Germany for my PhD." (Miriam, 45. ID 002)

The decision to continue a romantic relationship abroad undoubtedly involves an emotional resolve, but also a rational evaluation of individual resources and structural opportunities and constraints. Migrants' narratives show that this choice precipitates a turning point in the life course, which entails different complexities depending on the individual's social role and geographical location. For Mexican women already settled in Germany, intermarriage is a continuation of their 'enrichment' process, while for those who had been living in Mexico, often with a stable job, the commitment to a marital relationship abroad means leaving the stability achieved to build another 'path' in the host society. There are, however, some elements that compensate for the potential 'losses' of moving abroad for marriage – the romantic aspect of course, but likewise the perception of public safety offered by the European context, access to new international experiences, and even the possibility of acquiring new and multicultural knowledge.[13] Luna (38), a Mexican who arrived in Berlin in 2014, shared the following with me.

> "It was difficult to make the decision because I was at an excellent moment in Mexico in terms of work; I was in *the best moment of my career*. So it also meant leaving everything and coming here, and I felt conflicted. But when we talked, 'if I live in Germany, I will live nowhere else but Berlin'. I realised it was Berlin because I was in love with this city. So if it wasn't here, it wasn't anywhere. And he, although he was not thrilled to come to Berlin, agreed to the idea (...). Of course it was difficult for me to decide because, as I said, it meant not only quitting my job, it meant giving up my family to a certain degree, my friends, the life I had in Mexico; and I thought I didn't want to come here, (...) well, I can come, and we have a life project together as a couple, but there is also my own life." (Luna, 38. ID 006)

Luna told me that, before embarking on her marriage and migration process, she looked for "alternatives" for herself abroad and found an academic opportunity: "there was a call for a scholarship prior to doctoral studies. So I applied, and I got it, and I think that receiving the scholarship was one of the elements that allowed me to say yes, let's go to Germany". At that point, she remarked, "I came with my own plans".

Luna's use of educational funds as a facilitator for integration into the host society is consistent with the trends I have described above regarding the overall level of education of my respondents, as well as the social imaginary of the duty and benefits of education from early socialisation. For Mexican migrants, student status not only means opportunities for funding and specialisation, but also makes it easier to negotiate with the German state and its bureaucracies. What I would like to emphasise in the migrant narratives is the interplay between emotional reasons and material aims or, in other words, between emotional and goal-rational action.[14]

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[13] Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, present this situation aesthetically: "A window opens out onto his or her partner's native country, its history and present situation, people and landscapes there. Distant love, then, means travelling in one's mind to faraway places while sitting at home in one's living room. Life in a mixed-nationality, intercultural relationship can be an education in knowledge of the world" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014: 37).

The decision to enter into a mixed marriage can be interpreted as demonstrating the triumph of love and its potential emotional advantages despite the structural challenges; sometimes informants even emphasise the role of serendipity. However, this decision is also based on various goal-rational motivations, such as an interest in living in an 'attractive' city like Berlin or the pursuit of education to enable integration into German society. It is therefore important to analyse how respondents experienced some of the implications of this choice once on German soil.

4. Narratives of Integration in Germany

Among my informants, Rita (54) is the one with the longest trajectory in terms of the history of migration and integration. She came to Germany in 1994 and vividly remembers the decisive moment.

> "*I was very lucky* because there is an important detail, when he [her spouse] asked me to marry him. He asked me over the phone, but he told me, 'consider if you also want to marry me. I love you, but I don't want an answer, please, until you have lived a winter in Germany. At the end of the winter, you tell me if you want to marry me because if we get married we are going to live in Germany, I have no chance of living in Mexico'. So I had known Europe before but in the summer, however I had never known the winters in Germany. So when I came in winter, I understood what it was all about [laughs]. The cold was tremendous! I didn't know temperatures below zero." (Rita, 54. ID 008)

The experience of winter can serve as a metaphor for the challenging conditions after migration to Germany, especially for those who left behind a stable situation in Mexico to get married, but equally for Mexicans who had already settled abroad prior to marriage. The notion of integration is pertinent to understanding the third stage of the marital journey, taking into account the diverse dimensions and outcomes of this phenomenon, and thus its different and sometimes contrasting narratives of experience. Following Rother (2008), I identify four dimensions of integration: a) cultural, e.g. the use of the local language (German) in everyday life; b) structural, illustrated, for example, through participation in the local labour market; c) social, involving interactions in the local context with friends, neighbours, colleagues, etc.; and, d) emotional, concerning individual identification with the codes of the mainstream society.

In line with the biographical perspective, one can identify that individuals' narratives correspond to specific experiences of integration. Some aspects of these descriptions are suggestive of a tragedy in which the principal character (the informant) succumbs to enemies and structural conditions. In other respects, they may resemble an epic journey, expressing tensions and battles where the heroine eventually prevails and achieves a satisfactory outcome. Ana's narrative exposes some of these notions of struggle in her account of what happens after migration. Arriving in Germany in 2000, she identified herself as part of the population that migrates "not to study, but for the family". In the following excerpt, one also sees the weight of family values assimilated in early socialisation.

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[14] Regarding this interplay, I agree with Weber that interests (material and ideal) and not ideas directly govern people's behaviour; but very often the world images that are created through ideas determine, like a switchman, the lanes in which the dynamics of interests move behaviour (Weber 1986: 262).

> "We come to this country not to study, but to *make a family*. We come with that context of family value, to find a way to make a couple. This does not mean that Mexican women are submissive, but that they come with a willingness to *fight* for their dream, which is a family. I don't know, I honestly don't know a woman who has come here to get married because of the [legal] papers (...), that afterwards love *valga cacahuate* [becomes worthless], because the migration process is very *abrupt*, it is very *violent*. You have many *enemies* here, the major enemy, the climate; the second enemy, the language; the third, the way of life (*idiosincrasia*) (...). So first you have to learn or assimilate this to really get used to the society you have arrived in. Sometimes we fall, or we just try unsuccessfully, because you have many processes that are much more complex. People who come with a career, with many years of successful professional performance, who only came here to be a family, then arrive here, and *you are nobody* professionally." (Ana, 48. ID 023).

The concept of 'enemy', as defined by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2014) refers to prejudices and barriers encountered by "mixed-nationality/intercultural couples". For example, objections from the parents of one partner, which may be avoided, say the authors, by breaking family contact (and rules); but also trying obstacles such as those of the "legendary" bureaucracy in Germany, which often asserts its authority in interactions with the migrant population.

> "Such people are forced to submit to endless scrutiny, searches and inspections so as to forestall possible threats. These efforts are further intensified when it comes to marriage and the family, which are the special responsibility of the state. In Germany you have to produce all sorts of papers for this – documents, stamps, certificates, written endorsements and translations. Such investigations may well serve to reassure the native population. But they inevitably lead to a clash between alien worlds (...). This makes mixed couples appear abnormal, suspect even." (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014: 42)

Besides the adaptation to the harsh climate, the narrative of enemies is an additional metaphor for the restrictions and challenges experienced by the Mexican women during their process of integration into German society. Table 3 provides a classification of some of the obstacles commonly mentioned by respondents.

Cultural	Structural	Social	Emotional
Difficulties with local language (German); cultural exoticism; discrimination	Insecure legal status (bureaucracy); educational and professional downgrading; unemployment and economic dependence	Segregation; exclusion; marginalisation	Conflicting emotions: frustration; depression; regret

Table 3. Enemies of integration by dimension.
Source: fieldwork interviews (24).

In the overall experience described by migrants, especially during the period of arrival in the host society, these challenges converge and affect the various dimensions of integration, increasing the perception that structural constraints are prevailing over individual agency. For example, difficulties with the German language, even after several years of living in Germany, may converge with social segregation and sometimes also with discrimination; this situation may contribute to conflicting emotional narratives, such as social 'invisibility'. Rita (54) recounted an episode of this sort to me.

> "We had to exchange a pair of shoes (...) the woman [the saleswoman] said to me, 'what do you want?' And I answered in German, 'I would like to pick up these shoes' (...). Another customer came, and she took him, then a second, and a third, and I said, 'I am waiting for the shoes in this receipt', and she answered, 'I have no idea what you're talking about.'. (...) Other customers came, and she did not answer me, and I said, 'can't you hear me, I want to pick these up?' (...) I could not say a word in German, and I called my husband and said, 'this woman won't give me the shoes, she won't give me the box, she is ignoring me *as if I were invisible*'. (...) I said to the woman 'my husband wants to talk with you', and she said, 'I don't have to talk to anyone'. (...) Taking my receipt, I went out feeling like crying (...). After a week we received a letter. They apologised because they do not accept racism in their company. (...) They sent me a *Gutschein* [voucher] for 15 euros, saying that the unkind person no longer worked there, that she had been transferred to a different job role." (Rita, 54. ID 008)

Although all the obstacles in the table above are relevant in the biographical narrative, the evidence gathered suggests that structural challenges seem to have the strongest impact on the experience of integration. The lack of recognition of migrants' educational qualifications, for example, results in severe dissonance, considering that most of these individuals were brought up to consider school achievement an important social imaginary and have attained a high level of education or even had successful careers in Mexico. To get a job in Germany, one possibility available to individuals is to do unskilled work instead of seeking jobs that reflect their professional training. Studies such as Reyneri's have found that "socio-professional downgrading is the norm" for non-European migrants in Spain (mainly Moroccans and Central South Americans) who were employed prior to migration, meaning that the employment in the receiving country rarely corresponds to their educational achievement (Reyneri 2001: 16).

Regarding the study group's participation in the labour market in Germany, despite the high level of education among the informants (88% have a university degree or a postgraduate degree), only 21% had a permanent job at the time of the interview, while the rest were engaged in temporary occupations or additional activities such as self-employment, freelance, student, volunteer, and/or housewife. Several interviews highlighted that the prospect of professional downgrading associated with the condition of unemployment and the "unplanned" role of housewife give rise to various feelings such as frustration, a sense of dependence, and even depression in the face of structural constraints on individual choice. As an example, Lana (32), a law graduate from an institution in Mexico, told me that after two years in Berlin she had no job and therefore she took a German course to "be able" to enter the labour market.

> "For me, it [to migrate] implied, new culture, new house, husband, and children. (...) [In Mexico I had] a lot of independence, and that is quite frustrating for me. Believe me, it was never my desire to stay *de mantenidota* [financially dependent] at home. I would very much like *to be able* to find a job, but it is clear to me that it is important to speak the language." (Lana, 32. ID 013)

Another informant named Marta (33) also expressed her reluctance to play the role of "housewife" or "mother" and "staying at home".

> "Both my parents always worked. It is an idea they *planted in me* my entire life since I was a little girl that you have to study, you have to work, 'women have to be independent of men'. And I felt sorry because I said 'I went to school, the university was expensive' and then I got a scholarship for my Master's degree and, well, they spent so much money, so to speak, and then

> to *stay at home*, it weighed on me, no, no, no, no, no. It didn't fit in my mind." (Martha, 33. ID 001)

Finally, the case of Rodrigo (40), a Mexican doctoral graduate who lost his job in the second year after migration to Germany, is also illustrative.

> "It was too difficult for me in 2017 (...). I was not working, and I asked myself afterwards, 'what do we do?' [he and his family]. It affected me a lot because I did not know what to do. (...) I had the *Arbeitslosengeld* [unemployment benefit], and savings. The problem was not financial at all, but 'what to do?' For a year I was unemployed. (...) The first three months were part of the process [of adaptation], but after the fourth and fifth month I got depressed, 'what is going on?'" (Rodrigo, 40. ID 024)

In recognition of the growing problem of depression and other issues such as family violence, legal instability and unemployment, various institutional actors have worked in recent years to promote 'mental health' for Latin American migrants.[15] In August 2019, the Mexican Embassy in Berlin organised the event "Viviendo plena, sana, feliz y completamente en el extranjero" (Healthy, Happy and Fulfilled Life Abroad). The meeting offered advice and guidance for the Spanish-speaking community in Germany, and especially for Mexicans, in dealing with "the challenge of migration". It included panel discussions on topics such as "What can I do to improve my emotional and physical health?" "When do I need therapy and what options do I have in Germany?", "Studying abroad: the importance of being aware of emotions", "Substance abuse in the migration process", "Psychosomatic illnesses", and "Integration as a process of transformation".[16]

It seems reasonable to suggest that some of the "mental health" problems of the migrant population emerge in conjunction with the restriction of individual agency in the face of structural factors that are experienced as enemies in the integration process. What is important to highlight is that several of these challenges involve temporary instabilities which are supposed to gradually dissipate after a certain period in the host society (e.g. gaining citizenship[17] and emerging victorious from the battle against the bureaucratic apparatus of the state or improving future social prospects by learning the local language), while others may have broader implications due to their structural configuration (gaining a permanent job or perceiving oneself as part of the local culture).

The narratives of migrants who have lived abroad for a long time suggest that some structural challenges may persist long-term together with other constraints. For example, the lack of integration into the labour market affects social interactions with peers and hinders the acquisition of knowledge and skill in the German language even after several years in the host society. I return to the experience of Rita (54), who described how she did not immerse herself in the local language until a German friend confronted her, saying:

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[15] The Embassy of Mexico reported that, between 2014 and 2015, 42% of the hospitalised Mexicans in its records suffered from psychological issues. According to the institution, the distance from the place of origin, language difficulties, cultural differences, and other challenges associated with a life abroad increasingly produce cases of Mexicans with a psychological problem or emotional disorder (SRE 2021).

[16] Particularly, in the panel on integration and transformation, a coordinator specialised in psychology argued that migration implies a process of "adaptation and a change of direction", advising a "change of expectations" to cope with the harsh structural conditions in the German context. In addition, the speaker noted that some people feel anxious because of the integration process, but even in a complicated labour situation "we should highlight the other dimensions of life" – i.e., more positive circumstances and experiences such as family, social-emotional relationships, and new experiences.

[17] Following Vetters et al., the notion of graduated citizenship refers to what happens after leaving behind "the secure and temporally stable basic legal position" in the home country for an "initially insecure and temporally shifting legal position" with varying options for gradual consolidation over time in the host society (Vetters et al. 2017: 18).

> "'I'm going to speak to you directly hoping you don't take this the wrong way, but it turns out that you have lived here in Germany for 20 years; and you already speak German, but you speak it too slowly, and you are always speaking in Spanish with your husband and (...) German sticks to your tongue quite a bit'." (Rita, 54. ID 008)

On the level of emotional integration, it is possible that the restriction of individual agency also influences the feeling described by individuals as nostalgia for the distant homeland or *Heimweh* (homesickness). According to Cacciari (2012), the exile and the peregrine do not experience a simple uprooting, because they do not cease to have a homeland, and they are always experiencing some kind of pain from the desire to return; when they have left the homeland with no possibility of returning or when they have a little hope of returning. Mexican migrants also describe this nostalgic impulse as explained by Ana (48), who told me about her wish to return to Mexico at the end of her life, referring to her current integration into the labour market in Germany.

> "I dream of returning to Mexico. I don't want to die in this country. This country is horrible in old age, (...). But here, if you don't have anyone, *te lleva la chingada* [you are screwed] (...). Unfortunately, I can't tell you, I've had a steady job, I'm contributing to social security, blah, blah, so that when *me vaya a llevar la chingada* [I go to hell], I'll go to Mexico and the pension I get here in euros can be useful to me there in Mexico." (Ana, 48. ID 023)

Despite all the above challenges, the Mexican women I studied continued to seek ways to integrate into the host society using diverse strategies. Observations show these migrants can 1) adapt their job profiles to work in a field other than their training and level of education, e.g., women with postgraduate degrees working as children's teachers or in some branch of industry. 2) Others turn to self-employment or freelance work using their social networks and cultural resources; this includes individuals who start small businesses with Mexican-themed products (e.g., decoration, food, and clothing) or those working remotely for Mexican employers. 3) Still others engage in acquiring knowledge and building social networks through language classes, postgraduate studies with Mexican or international scholarships, volunteer work, etc. 4) Finally, some women embrace the role of 'mother' and 'housewife' as a relevant function for their family and their own life story. It does not mean that they subordinate themselves and their goals to the private space; rather, in most cases, they see it as a kind of pause so that they can later undertake future plans with better prospects of success.

Thalia (36) did a Master's degree in Italy and then migrated to Berlin, where she had her first baby. In this new stage of life, she started selling piñatas, which she believes could be a useful activity for a later project. In her words:

> "My original idea was to use those figures (piñatas) and make a story for them, like a profile of each character and then maybe make a book for children (...). As my husband writes I said, 'well, maybe the two of us can do the project together, you write the story and that, and then I can illustrate it'. I didn't study illustration, but I know how to draw and illustrate. That's like my project, I mean, if not the next one, if I don't have time, maybe in two years, and not just piñatas, but to start making other products for children." (Thalia, 36. ID 004)

According to Thalia, the partnership with her spouse is a substantial element for the projection of a successful work plan. My interviews reveal that marriage to a German citizen has a positive influence on some dimensions of integration. This impact can be seen, for instance, in the German spouses' support for their partner in learning German or interacting with the German state (and its bureaucracy), or through the access to social interactions with locals, using the social networks of the partner – “friends of my husband are my friends”. An interesting example is Pola’s account of learning German and her husband’s support.

> “I always say that my German was supermarket-German, wasn’t it? I only used it for shopping; so no, I had a hard time at the beginning. I suffered too much because I didn’t understand. I had a lot of trouble, and it even cost me *tears of blood*. (...) But my husband helped me a lot, he corrected me a lot; he helped me a lot, and in the end, well, yes, it was possible [laughs]. In other words, if there is one thing I can feel very proud of [laughs], it is that training because it cost me *tears of blood*.” (Pola, 38. ID 007)

Recent studies have found that intermarriage does not guarantee that migrants will cease to experience everyday social exclusion (Milewski and Kulu 2014). In addition, some researchers argue that intermarriage has a direct effect on some dimensions of integration, while it shows no relationship, or multiple relationships with other dimensions, depending on factors such as country of origin, gender, length of residence, and social class (Rodríguez-García 2015b) – in other words, factors related to historical background and intercultural interactions and which are sometimes shaped by past colonial domination.[18] In my research I found that intermarriage seems to influence the emotional and the social aspects of integration, while its impact on cultural and structural aspects is often less significant, probably because the native partner hardly alter social structures and social imaginaries to facilitate the integration process of the Mexican partner (Fig. 6).

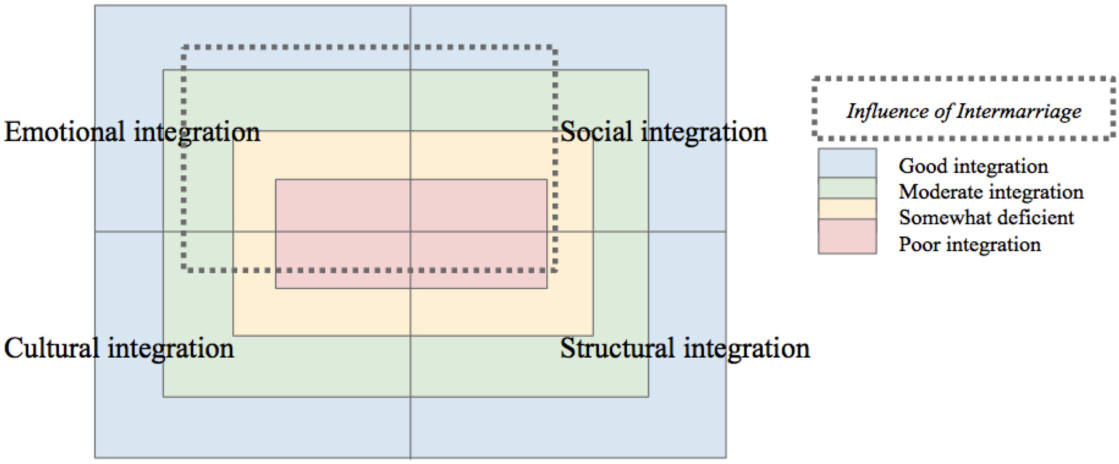

Figure 6. Dimensions of integration and influence of intermarriage.
Source: Author’s diagram.

Mixed marriage of course plays a role in migrants’ adaptation to the host society; however, the spouse is not the only ally that aids migrants in their struggle against the ‘enemies’ of integration, i.e., the constraints and challenges of the environment. These allies include a variety of actors, institutions and environments that positively influence the different spheres of integration. My investigation found that several Mexican women were involved with social organisations in Berlin such as

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[18] According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, “mixed-nationality couples experience the tensions that exist between two countries or between a host society and a minority group. Immigrant families experience the tensions between the developed and developing world, the global inequalities together with the colonial history, whose after-effects persist in the minds of those living to this day, producing reluctance to face the truth in some people and rage and despair in others.” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014: 16)

Xochicuicatl e.V., MaMis en Movimiento e.V., and Oficina Precaria Berlín; others participated regularly in events hosted by the Mexican Embassy; and some others maintained connections with academic institutions in the country of origin, using these institutional networks to facilitate their settlement in Germany.

In interaction with these allies, a decisive component in the integration narratives is personal agency that allows individuals to adopt strategies, plans, and choices among the options and constraints of the migration context. While informants exhibit projective agency during early socialisation, which is later put into action in the educational trajectory and in the first steps in the labour market, the same vision for the future that encouraged individuals to pursue specialisation and global experiences – among them, intermarriage – has to contend with structural circumstances after migration and become accustomed to the imperatives of the mainstream society. This does not imply the hero/heroine's resignation (a passive adaptation), but the unfolding of adaptive agency[19] described *a posteriori* in terms of an epic narrative in which the main character, accompanied by his/her partner and allies, confronts various obstacles with the possibility of a more or less satisfactory outcome. Ema (51) told me that her role as a "mother", which she learned to "enjoy", represents a commitment even equal or similar to that of a formal job.

> "The only difference is that you can always screw up at work, and it always has a solution; (...) but here, with your children maybe not. So, *it became another job*, a much more detailed area of work, and *I've always enjoyed it a lot*. Also, because the truth is that I didn't find a job. I always said, 'if I start to feel frustrated because I'm not working, I'm going to fuck it up with my kids. So, look, *God doesn't want me to find a job*. Okay, that's enough, I dedicate myself to them'." (Ema, 51. ID 020)

Naturally, one cannot entirely erase or level out the structural asymmetries (enemies) that appear in the journey of integration and intermarriage, starting with unequal citizenship in the couple (Collet 2012). However, what I would like to underline is the role of the individual agency during this stage. That said, if intermarriage involves, as previous studies suggest, transgression and relativisation of social norms (Therrien 2012), the individual assumption of this status means a daily struggle against the normative definitions attributed to the migrant. Social actors deploy their different resources and imaginaries, such as the value of the family or the duty of education, in order to embark on certain paths of integration, and also make connections in their surroundings and find allies (including the native partner) to facilitate their adaptation in the receiving society. In my view, this finding contrasts with the idea that migrants are passive subjects, or, in the case of women, have been "transported" to the new location rather than travelling of their own volition (Hernández 2005, 2006, 2007). Research should instead highlight migrants' – particularly female migrants' – diverse experiences and strategies, including of course objective and emotional motivations, in recognition of the ways that migrants now tend to generate and influence their social systems (Knörr and Meier 2000).

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[19] Habitual-adaptive agency appears, according to Mora and De Oliveira (2014), in response to structural constraints and the "imperative of survival, i.e. in the midst of situations of great hostility such as wars, famines, revolutions, and other events, among which I would include the trauma of the migration process.

Conclusion

Mexican migration represents one of the most important demographic flows in the world in recent decades. My approach showed that the movement to Germany involves mainly a group of middle-class migrants consisting of young people with a slight majority of women. These migrants move abroad not only for economic or employment reasons but also for professional training, pursuit of educational goals, and family ties. This last reason can be seen in exogamous unions, a frequent phenomenon that applies to one in four Mexican migrant women in Germany. The analysis of the narratives of Mexican women married to German citizens in the city of Berlin suggests that intermarriage represents a journey, but one which is part of a larger itinerary initiated by individual agency long before meeting the romantic partner.

Following a biographical approach, I traced the starting point of this journey to early socialisation in the country of origin. In this phase, individuals described social imaginaries relevant to their biographical trajectories, such as the value of family and education. The duty to pursue education, in particular, was visible in the life courses of my informants, who exhibited high educational rates, sometimes successful integration into the labour market, and projective agency ("I always wanted to") deployed in the pursuit of individual goals such as national or international scholarships, travel abroad, and language acquisition. This evidence also supports the hypothesis that the encounter with the German partner does not represent an end in itself, but rather a circumstance correlated with the paths outlined by their individual agency.

The second phase of the biographical analysis showed that the most common places and circumstances of the meeting that ultimately resulted in mixed unions between Mexicans and Germans were workplaces, social networks, friends and family, incidental public spaces and, most frequently, educational institutions such as university or language schools. However, the patterns were different depending on the country of the encounter. An interesting finding is that almost half of the informants met their spouse in the their country of origin (Mexico), while slightly more than half met abroad (mainly in Germany) through typical social roles such as student, employee, and/or traveller. The narratives about this phase suggest that the Mexicans interviewed are not passive actors in the migration process, but individuals who evaluate their migration and choose the path of intermarriage, not only in emotional terms but also through a material rationalisation. In other words, they show active agency through which they define their life courses, despite the general structural conditions that may entail certain objective losses when moving out of their country.

Finally, the analysis of integration narratives in Germany showed some recurrent elements that Mexican migrants perceive as environmental constraints, such as painful adaptation to the "climate" and "enemies" that hinder emotional, social, cultural, and structural integration. Structural constraints in particular represented a major challenge, and the perception of exclusion in this dimension seems to directly affect migrants' subjective narratives. Against this background, findings suggest that the native partner assists in the various adaptation processes, but that the partner's ability to intervene is most limited precisely in the structural domain that determines, for example, whether an individual is able to fully and successfully develop their professional career. Even so, individuals adopted a variety of strategies, plans, and choices among the restricted options in migration, accompanied by the support of the partner and institutions in Mexico and Germany (allies), which provide some opportunities of integration. The women interviewed thus showed a relevant adaptive agency visible in the adjustment of their job profiles to the demands of the labour market, in the acquisition of new skills and resources to improve their prospects, in their strategies for self-employment, or in the active re-signification of domestic work. I would argue that this orientation implies continued resistance to normative patterns, including categorisation as passive migrants or reproduction of the role of mother or housewife.

Recent Mexican migration to Germany generally takes place within the accepted regulatory frameworks of the state, especially in the form of migration for family reasons, work, or education. However, the narratives of migrants suggest that the integration of those who choose the path of intermarriage – referred to in some of the literature as “pink migration” – is far from being an ideal process, and involves a period of confrontation during which the individual must rally his or her resources and agency in order to activate the possibility of reconfiguring life history.

Appendix 1. Characteristics of respondents

ID	Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Marriage Status	Educational degree	Occupation	From (State in Mexico)	Place in Berlin	Year of Migration
1	Martha	33	F	Civ	Pos ma	Job pe	Puebla	Lichtenberg	2008
2	Miriam	45	F	Civ	Pos do	Stu	Mexico City	Neukölln	2004
3	Perla	39	F	Civ	Bac	Stu, Job te	Mexico City	Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf	2008
4	Thalia	36	F	Civ	Pos ma	Fre	Tlaxcala	Neukölln	2010
5	Gilda	40	F	Civ	Bac	Job te	Mexico City	Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg	2009
6	Luna	38	F	Civ	Pos ma	Stu	Mexico City	Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg	2014
7	Pola	38	F	Civ	Tec	Job te	Mexico City	Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg	2009
8	Rita	54	F	Civ	Tec	Hou, Vol	Mexico City	Pankow	1994
9	Chela	49	F	Civ	Pos do	Une	Guerrero	Mitte	2002
10	Alejandro	46	M	Sep	Tec	Une	Mexico City	Pankow	2014
11	Sofía	27	F	Civ	Pos ma	Stu, Fre	Mexico City	Treptow	2019
12	Mia	45	F	Civ	Und	Hou	Mexico City	Pankow	2008
13	Lana	32	F	Civ	Bac	Stu, Hou	Tamaulipas	Pankow	2017
14	Camelia	32	F	Civ	Bac	Hou; Self	Campeche	Pankow	2016
15	Monica	42	F	Div	Pos ma	Job pe	Yucatán	Mitte	2000
16	Maya	29	F	Civ	Bac	Job pe	Jalisco	Neukölln	2014
17	Mercedes	35	F	Civ	Pos ma	Hou	Campeche	Pankow	2009
18	Pedro	35	M	Civ	Bac	Job pe	Puebla	Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg	2018
19	Amanda	29	F	CLM	Bac	Job pe	State of Mexico	Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg	2009
20	Ema	51	F	Civ	Bac	Hous	Mexico City	Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf	1997
21	Alma	30	F	Civ	Pos ma	Stu	Coahuila	Mitte	2014
22	Luisa	31	F	Civ	Pos ma	Self	San Luis Potosí	Mitte	2000
23	Ana	48	F	Civ	Pos ma	Hou, Job te	Colima	Pankow	2000
24	Rodrigo	40	M	Civ	Pos do	Self	San Luis Potosí	Pankow	2015

Sex – F: female; M: male. **Marriage Status** – Civ: Civil marriage; Sep: Separation; Div: Divorce; CU: Consensual union. **Educational Degree** – Pos: Postgraduate; ma: Master; do: PhD; Bac: Bachelor; Und: Undergraduate; Tec: Technical career. **Occupation** – Hou: Housewife; Stu: Student; Self: Self-employed; Fre: Freelance; Une: Unemployed; pe: permanent job; te: temporary Job; Vol: Volunteering. (Source: Author's compilation from own data)

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