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RELATIONAL ADJUSTMENT AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION IN IMMIGRANT COUPLES: A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

AJUSTAMENTO RELACIONAL E REGULAÇÃO EMOCIONAL EM CASAIS IMIGRANTES: UMA PERSPECTIVA SISTÊMICA

AJUSTE RELACIONAL Y REGULACIÓN EMOCIONAL EN PAREJAS INMIGRANTES: UNA PERSPECTIVA SISTÉMICA

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical article analyzes how migration and expatriation processes affect relational adjustment and emotional regulation in immigrant couples from a systemic family therapy perspective. Developed through a qualitative narrative review, the study integrates contributions from family systems theory, couple therapy, migration studies, cross-cultural psychology, and research on emotional regulation and dyadic coping. The analysis was organized into four thematic axes: migration and conjugal dynamics, systemic perspective on relational adjustment, emotional regulation in immigrant couples, and clinical implications for couple therapy. The review indicates that migration should not be understood merely as an individual adaptive challenge, but as a contextual and relational transition that reorganizes roles, boundaries, communication patterns, expectations, and forms of emotional co-regulation within the couple. Factors such as loss of support networks, legal insecurity, professional deskilling, changes in gender roles, and different acculturation rhythms may intensify marital tension, although they do not determine negative outcomes by themselves. The findings also suggest that, when couples are able to negotiate differences, communicate stress, and build shared responses, migration may foster intimacy, flexibility, and more egalitarian relational arrangements. The article concludes that clinical work with immigrant couples requires a culturally responsive and systemic approach attentive to structural asymmetries, relational patterns, and dyadic coping processes. It also highlights the need for more longitudinal, dyadic, and culturally diverse studies centered on couples in migratory contexts.

KEYWORDS: *Relational adjustment. Emotional regulation. Systemic family therapy.*

RESUMO

Este artigo teórico analisa como os processos de migração e expatriação afetam o ajustamento relacional e a regulação emocional em casais imigrantes, a partir da perspectiva sistêmica da terapia familiar. Desenvolvido por meio de uma revisão narrativa qualitativa, o estudo integra contribuições da teoria dos sistemas familiares, da terapia de casal, dos estudos migratórios, da psicologia transcultural e das pesquisas sobre regulação emocional e enfrentamento diádico. A análise foi organizada em quatro eixos temáticos: migração e dinâmica conjugal, perspectiva sistêmica sobre o ajustamento relacional, regulação emocional em casais imigrantes e implicações clínicas para a terapia de casal. A revisão indica que a migração não deve ser compreendida apenas como um desafio adaptativo individual, mas como uma transição contextual e relacional que reorganiza papéis, fronteiras, padrões de comunicação, expectativas e formas de corregulação emocional no casal. Fatores como perda de redes de apoio, insegurança jurídica, desqualificação profissional, mudanças nos papéis de gênero e diferentes ritmos de aculturação podem intensificar a tensão conjugal, embora não determinem, por si só, desfechos negativos. Os achados também sugerem que, quando os casais conseguem negociar diferenças, comunicar o estresse e construir respostas compartilhadas, a migração pode favorecer intimidade, flexibilidade e arranjos relacionais mais igualitários.

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O artigo conclui que o trabalho clínico com casais imigrantes requer uma abordagem sistêmica e culturalmente responsiva, atenta às assimetrias estruturais, aos padrões relacionais e aos processos de enfrentamento diádico. Destaca-se, ainda, a necessidade de mais estudos longitudinais, diádicos e culturalmente diversos centrados em casais em contextos migratórios.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ajustamento relacional. Regulação emocional. Terapia familiar sistêmica.

RESUMEN
Este artículo teórico-clínico analiza cómo los procesos de migración y expatriación repercuten en el ajuste relacional y en la regulación emocional de las parejas inmigrantes desde una perspectiva sistémica de la terapia familiar. Desarrollado mediante una revisión narrativa de enfoque cualitativo, el estudio articula aportes de la teoría sistémica familiar, la terapia de pareja, los estudios migratorios, la psicología transcultural y la investigación sobre regulación emocional y afrontamiento diádico. El análisis se organizó en cuatro ejes temáticos: migración y dinámica conyugal, perspectiva sistémica sobre el ajuste relacional, regulación emocional en parejas inmigrantes e implicaciones clínicas para la terapia de pareja. La revisión muestra que la migración no debe entenderse únicamente como un desafío adaptativo individual, sino como una transición contextual y relacional que reorganiza roles, límites, patrones de comunicación, expectativas y formas de corregulación emocional dentro de la pareja. Factores como la pérdida de redes de apoyo, la inseguridad jurídica, la descalificación profesional, los cambios en los roles de género y los distintos ritmos de aculturación pueden intensificar las tensiones conyugales, aunque no determinan por sí mismos desenlaces negativos. Los hallazgos también sugieren que, cuando las parejas logran negociar diferencias, comunicar el estrés y construir respuestas compartidas, la experiencia migratoria puede favorecer mayor intimidad, flexibilidad y arreglos relacionales más igualitarios. El artículo concluye que el trabajo clínico con parejas inmigrantes requiere un enfoque sistémico y culturalmente sensible, atento a las asimetrías estructurales, a los patrones relacionales y a los procesos de afrontamiento diádico. Asimismo, señala la necesidad de más estudios longitudinales, diádicos y diversos centrados en parejas en contextos migratorios.

***PALABRAS CLAVE**: Ajuste relacional. Regulación emocional. Terapia familiar sistémica.*

INTRODUCTION

Human mobility has ceased to be a peripheral phenomenon and has become one of the structuring conditions of contemporary life. In an increasingly globalized world, migration and expatriation affect millions of individuals, families, and couples across cultural, linguistic, and social contexts.[1] According to the Migration Data Portal, based on United Nations estimates, there were approximately 304 million international migrants worldwide in 2024.[2]

Yet, despite the scale and complexity of this reality, psychological and clinical research has continued to privilege indicators of individual adaptation, mental health, and sociocultural integration, while devoting comparatively less attention to the couple as a relational unit of analysis. [1, 2]

Reviews of the literature on migration and family dynamics have pointed to this asymmetry, showing that research on conjugal bonds, interactional patterns, and family processes remains less consolidated than studies centered on individual psychological distress. [1, 2]

This gap is particularly significant because, for many migrants, the couple becomes the primary relational context through which the demands of displacement are negotiated and endured. Rather than constituting only an individual challenge marked by acculturative stress, identity

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negotiation, and emotional distress, migration represents a profound contextual transition that reshapes relational patterns, emotional processes, and role distributions within intimate partnerships. [1, 3]

Couples navigating migration frequently face overlapping stressors, including separation from extended family networks, cultural dislocation, economic uncertainty, legal regularization processes, childcare demands, and changes in occupational status and social recognition. [1, 3]

Post-migration transformations often permeate conjugal life in multiple and simultaneous ways, including changes in gender roles and sexuality, the weakening or loss of support networks, and experiences of professional deskilling, with communication frequently emerging as a central and decisive dimension in how couples navigate these challenges.[3]

At the same time, differences in acculturation trajectories and in the meanings each partner assigns to the migratory experience may significantly shape both individual well-being and relationship functioning.[3]

Within a systemic framework, migration may thus be understood as a relational disruption that requires the couple to renegotiate equilibrium, boundaries, hierarchies, and shared forms of emotional regulation. Although such transitions may intensify vulnerability and destabilize familiar modes of interaction, they may also create opportunities for greater interdependence, relational growth, and the redefinition of shared meanings. [4, 5]

It is at this theoretical and clinical juncture that the present article is situated, conceptualizing migration as a systemic disruption that affects relational adjustment and emotional regulation in immigrant couples.

The general objective of this theoretical article is to analyze how migration and expatriation processes impact relational adjustment and emotional regulation in immigrant couples from a systemic family therapy perspective.

The specific objectives of this article are to examine changes in relational patterns following migration, analyze the challenges of emotional regulation in intercultural contexts, and discuss the clinical implications of these processes for marriage and family therapists working with immigrant couples in culturally responsive and relationally attuned ways.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative theoretical article based on a narrative review of the literature. The methodological design was chosen because narrative reviews allow the critical integration of theoretical, empirical, and clinical contributions from different fields of knowledge, especially when the objective is not to measure the prevalence of a phenomenon, but to interpret it conceptually and clinically.

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In this article, the narrative review supports the articulation of studies related to family systems theory, couple and family therapy, migration studies, cross-cultural psychology, emotional regulation, dyadic coping, and culturally responsive clinical interventions with immigrant couples.

The literature search was conducted through academic databases and scientific search platforms, including Google Scholar, PubMed, SciELO, Scopus and Web of Science. Complementary searches were also carried out in institutional and specialized sources related to migration and family studies, such as the Migration Data Portal and materials from institutions dedicated to systemic family theory.

The search strategy combined terms in English, Portuguese, and Spanish, using descriptors such as “immigrant couples”, “migration and marital relationships”, “relational adjustment”, “emotional regulation”, “dyadic coping”, “acculturation”, “systemic family therapy”, “cross-cultural couple therapy”, “casais imigrantes”, “ajustamento conjugal”, “regulação emocional”, “afrontamento diádico” and “terapia familiar sistêmica”.

The selection of materials followed criteria of thematic relevance and theoretical contribution to the object of study. Articles, theoretical essays, reviews, empirical studies, clinical studies, and institutional documents were included when they addressed at least one of the following dimensions: migration and family or conjugal dynamics; systemic perspectives on couple functioning; relational adjustment in migratory contexts; emotional regulation and co-regulation in romantic relationships; dyadic coping; acculturation processes; and culturally responsive therapeutic practices with immigrant or intercultural couples.

Preference was given to peer-reviewed scientific publications, although institutional materials were included when they provided updated contextual data on international migration or relevant theoretical foundations.

The exclusion criteria comprised publications unrelated to conjugal or family dynamics, studies focused exclusively on individual psychopathology without relational analysis, texts without clear theoretical or empirical relevance to the proposed objectives, duplicate materials, and publications whose content did not contribute directly to the construction of the four thematic axes of the review. Studies centered only on migration policy, labor mobility, or demographic data were not included unless they contributed to the contextual understanding of immigrant couples’ relational experiences.

Regarding temporal delimitation, priority was given to publications from the last fifteen years, especially studies published between 2010 and 2026, in order to incorporate recent debates on migration, acculturation, emotional regulation, and dyadic coping.

However, classical theoretical references in systemic family therapy and family systems theory were also considered when necessary for conceptual grounding, particularly because they provide the interpretive basis for understanding the couple as a relational and emotional unit.

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After the initial identification of the literature, the selected materials were read interpretively and organized according to their contribution to the objectives of the study. The analysis was structured into four interconnected thematic axes: migration and conjugal dynamics; systemic perspective on relational adjustment; emotional regulation in immigrant couples; and clinical implications for couple therapy.

This organization allowed the study to integrate contextual stressors, relational patterns, emotional co-regulation processes, acculturation differences, and therapeutic possibilities within a systemic framework.

Because this is a theoretical study, the methodological emphasis does not fall on field data collection or statistical generalization, but on conceptual integration and critical interpretation. Therefore, the article does not aim to exhaust all available evidence on the subject, as would be expected in a systematic review, but to construct a theoretically grounded and clinically relevant synthesis.

The review seeks to contribute to the understanding of how migration and expatriation processes affect relational adjustment and emotional regulation in immigrant couples, offering reflections applicable to culturally responsive couple and family therapy.

MIGRATION AND CONJUGAL DYNAMICS

In the family literature, migration is understood as a non-normative transition in the life cycle, that is, an event that imposes additional adaptive demands on the family system and requires the simultaneous reorganization of routines, bonds, identities, and life projects. Reviews of the scientific literature indicate that the migratory experience affects not only the individual's sociocultural integration, but also significant support networks, shared meanings, and the temporality of the family life cycle.[1]

When kinship, friendship, and community networks are disrupted, the couple tends to concentrate on emotional, instrumental, and decision-making functions that were previously distributed across multiple relationships, thereby becoming more vulnerable to relational overload. [1]

A metasynthesis conducted in Canada identified four dimensions that are particularly sensitive in post-migration conjugal relationships, namely changes in gender relations and sexuality, loss of support networks, deskilling and de-professionalization, and communication as a transversal issue across all the others.[3] The same study also highlighted a recurrent pattern in the reconfiguration of gender roles among migrant couples.

Male partners tend to experience loss of power, identity crisis, and decreased self-esteem when former patriarchal references or breadwinner roles are destabilized, whereas female partners often gain financial autonomy, decision-making voice, and self-efficacy, although they also face role

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conflict. Importantly, these processes do not produce conflict alone. They may also create room for greater intimacy, shared decision-making, and more egalitarian redefinitions of the relationship.[3]

This dual potential of migration, which involves generating tension and, at the same time, fostering growth, emerges clearly in qualitative studies with Muslim migrant women. Migration was described as a challenge because it compels couples to renegotiate values, expectations, and reciprocal obligations, but also as an opportunity to experience greater conjugal closeness outside the intensive control of the extended family.[4]

In other words, separation from the original support networks may destabilize the system, but it may also reduce triangulation and create space for a more autonomous conjugal relationship. This ambivalence is clinically central. The migratory stressor does not determine the outcome, but rather intensifies preexisting patterns and accelerates the need for change.[4]

Dyadic studies on post-immigration gaps describe with precision where conflict tends to become concentrated. Differences between partners regarding employment, income, housing, legal status, and satisfaction with life in the new country become particularly problematic when one partner feels unsupported, when responsibility for family stability falls disproportionately on one member, or when the couple loses the ability to make joint decisions about work, housing, and permanence.[6]

Under such conditions, the issue is no longer merely about content, such as whether to stay or leave, whether to accept a job, or which housing option to choose, but comes to express a rupture in the relational process of mutual recognition.[6]

In the context of expatriation, the literature reveals an additional analytical limitation. For many years, scholarly attention remained centered predominantly on the expatriate employee, while spouses and children occupied a secondary position in empirical and theoretical discussions. As noted by Filipič Sterle *et al.* (2018), family systems theory has frequently served as a general interpretive background for the study of expatriate families, yet more comprehensive integrative models are still lacking, particularly those capable of articulating cultural, identity-related, and family dimensions within a coherent analytical framework.[7]

The literature further indicates that changes in routines, financial arrangements, and family roles constitute recurrent sources of stress, while organizational support tends to facilitate the adjustment of expatriates, spouses, and children, even though such processes do not unfold in identical ways across family members.[7]

SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE ON RELATIONAL ADJUSTMENT

From a systemic perspective, the couple may be understood as a self-regulating system organized through patterns of reciprocity, feedback, and mutual accommodation. Bowen's theory describes the family as an emotional unit in which changes in the functioning of one member tend to

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produce reciprocal changes in the others, while classical systemic formulations emphasize circularity and the tendency of systems to preserve equilibrium through corrective feedback processes.[8]

In the context of migration, this means that one partner's suffering cannot be understood as exclusively individual. Rather, it elicits responses from the other partner and reshapes boundaries, power distributions, expectations of care, and patterns of proximity and distance.

This perspective brings into focus a decisive distinction between homeostasis and adaptation. Conjugal systems may attempt to restore a prior equilibrium by responding to migration with rigidity, an intensification of traditional patterns, or a defensive redistribution of responsibilities.[9]

They may also, however, when returning to the previous status quo becomes impossible, generate new relational arrangements. Migration, precisely because of its intensity, becomes a test of the system's plasticity. More flexible couples are able to transform disruption into structural change, whereas more rigidly organized couples tend to experience difference as threat. [9]

It is at this point that the construct of differentiation of self acquires particular interpretive value. A broad scoping review of this central concept in Bowenian theory found consistent support for an association between differentiation of self, better psychological health, and higher marital quality.

In light of this, it is plausible to infer that migratory contexts, by heightening systemic anxiety, identity ambiguity, and reciprocal dependence, place particular pressure on each partner's capacity to preserve reflective autonomy without resorting to hostile distance, anxious fusion, or excessive accommodation.[10]

In clinical terms, migration may either undermine or facilitate differentiation. It undermines it when the partner becomes the sole source of support and validation. It facilitates it when the couple is able to sustain intimacy without collapsing difference.

The acculturation literature offers an important complement to this perspective. Bidimensional models maintain that migratory adaptation should not be understood as a simple replacement of the culture of origin by the culture of settlement, but rather as an articulation, in varying degrees, between orientations toward the heritage culture and toward the receiving culture.[11]

Studies on dyadic acculturation suggest that discrepancies between partners may threaten the couple's shared reality when each begins to interpret routines, roles, and interactions through divergent cultural frames of reference.[11]

At the same time, empirical findings are less linear than certain gap-distress formulations might suggest. In some cases, similarity between partners appears to protect well-being, whereas in others the effects seem to fall more heavily on individual well-being than on the overall quality of the relationship.[11]

In one study of migrant couples, similarity in both partners' cultural orientations was more clearly associated with personal well-being, for example when both maintained a strong orientation

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toward the culture of origin or when both expanded their orientation toward the culture of settlement, than with the global evaluation of relationship quality. By contrast, studies involving couples of Mexican origin suggest that higher levels of congruence in cultural adaptation and language proficiency may be associated with better marital quality. [12, 13, 14, 15]

Taken together, these findings caution against any simplistic view according to which all intra-dyadic cultural difference is automatically pathological. What matters is how difference is mentalized, negotiated, and integrated into the functioning of the system.

EMOTIONAL REGULATION IN IMMIGRANT COUPLES

The literature on emotional regulation strengthens a systemic understanding of immigrant couples by showing that emotions are shaped within relational processes rather than existing only as internal states.

Research on co-regulation indicates that romantic partners play a central role in modulating affect through mechanisms such as disclosure, responsiveness, psychological intimacy, and social proximity. In the context of migration, this becomes especially relevant because migratory stress affects emotional life, communication, and relationship satisfaction at the same time. [11]

Empirical studies suggest that common dyadic coping and supportive dyadic coping can reduce the negative effects of immigration-related stress on relationship satisfaction, while broader reviews confirm that these forms of coping are associated with better communication, greater stability, and higher relational well-being. [16, 17, 18]

At the same time, emotional regulation in immigrant couples depends not only on visible support but also on the ability to communicate distress in ways that can be understood and responded to by the partner. Evidence shows that emotional regulation abilities are linked to dyadic coping partly through stress communication, which suggests that relational difficulties often arise more from emotional intensity itself than from failures to translate migratory experiences into understandable requests for support, negotiation, or limits. [11, 16, 17, 18]

This process is further complicated by cultural pressure, since emotional adaptation to the receiving society may favor inclusion and well-being, but may also become harmful when dominant emotional norms are negative. [11, 16, 17, 18] For this reason, the clinical goal should not be simple conformity to majority norms, but the development of affective flexibility and bicultural competence that allows multiple forms of belonging to coexist.

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CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR COUPLE THERAPY

Clinical work with immigrant couples requires a systemic, cultural, and ethical orientation. Rather than focusing exclusively on individual symptoms, therapy must examine the relational patterns that emerge under migratory pressure, including escalation, withdrawal, triangulation, unilateral decision-making, and asymmetries in adaptation. [6, 16, 19, 20]

At the same time, culturally informed practice requires recognizing that structural inequality, racism, sociocultural trauma, and language barriers are not external background conditions, but part of the clinical reality itself. In this sense, cultural humility is essential because it shifts the therapist away from any illusion of cultural mastery and toward a reflexive stance attentive to bias, power asymmetries, and the lived complexity of migrant family life. [6, 16, 19, 20]

From an assessment and intervention perspective, the most clinically revealing questions are often those that explore how migration has reorganized the couple's functioning. It is important to investigate who lost more social support, who carries the burden of legal or migratory status, whose professional trajectory was interrupted, who adapted more quickly to the host language, who assumed new parental or work-related responsibilities, and who began making decisions alone. Such asymmetries often crystallize into marital conflict. [6, 16, 19, 20]

For this reason, intervention should aim to restore shared decision-making, validate mutual losses and sacrifices, and strengthen the communication of stress. The literature on dyadic coping indicates that couples function better when stress is reframed as a shared challenge rather than as the personal failing of one partner, which requires helping them communicate needs, negotiate different acculturative rhythms, and redistribute responsibilities without turning the relationship into a space of accusation or moral accounting. [6, 16, 19, 20]

A further implication is that therapy should not rely on the dyad alone, but should expand resources beyond the couple. Research suggests that external support structures such as peer mentors, intercultural ties, and family-oriented organizational support can reduce relational overload and improve adjustment for spouses, children, and the family system as a whole. [6, 16, 19, 20]

Evidence from culturally adapted interventions such as *Juntos en Pareja* shows that this direction is promising, since programs that integrate emotional regulation, communication, and the management of material stressors can improve financial stress, emotional functioning, relationship satisfaction, and dyadic coping simultaneously. [21]

DISCUSSION

The central contribution of this article lies in proposing an integrative systemic reading of immigrant couples' relational adjustment and emotional regulation. Rather than treating migration,

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acculturation, marital functioning, and emotional regulation as separate domains, the review suggests that these processes operate simultaneously and recursively within the couple system.

In this sense, migration may be understood as a relational stressor that activates three interconnected levels of change: the structural-contextual level, the dyadic-systemic level, and the affective-regulatory level.

At the structural-contextual level, migration produces external pressures that cannot be reduced to individual adaptation. Legal insecurity, occupational downgrading, loss of social networks, economic instability, racism, linguistic barriers, and changes in gender expectations reorganize the conditions under which the couple functions.

These elements are not merely background variables; they shape the possibilities of communication, reciprocity, autonomy, and emotional availability within the relationship. Therefore, one of the limitations of approaches centered exclusively on individual acculturative stress is that they risk psychologizing difficulties that are also produced by social, economic, cultural, and institutional asymmetries.

At the dyadic-systemic level, these contextual pressures are translated into relational patterns. Migration may intensify preexisting forms of interaction, such as dependence, withdrawal, conflict escalation, rigid role distribution, or emotional fusion. However, the same process may also open space for renegotiation, greater intimacy, redistribution of responsibilities, and more flexible arrangements.

This ambivalence is analytically important because it prevents migration from being interpreted either as a risk factor that necessarily damages the couple or as an opportunity that automatically promotes growth. The relational outcome depends on how the couple processes disruption, negotiates difference, distributes burdens, and constructs shared meanings.

At the affective-regulatory level, the review indicates that emotional regulation in immigrant couples cannot be understood only as an individual psychological skill. In migratory contexts, emotional regulation becomes a dyadic and cultural process. Partners regulate one another through communication, responsiveness, proximity, validation, and shared coping.

Nevertheless, this process may become fragile when one partner is unable to translate distress into communicable needs, when the other partner experiences the request for support as accusation or overload, or when both partners interpret the same migratory event through different cultural and emotional frameworks. Thus, emotional dysregulation is not only an intrapsychic difficulty, but may also indicate a rupture in the couple's capacity for co-regulation.

The articulation among these three levels allows the formulation of a theoretical model that may be described as a systemic-relational model of migratory adjustment. According to this model, migration affects the couple through the interaction between contextual stressors, relational organization, and emotional co-regulation.

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Contextual stressors create pressure; the couple's systemic organization determines how this pressure is distributed and interpreted; and dyadic emotional regulation influences whether the stressor becomes a source of rupture, rigidity, negotiation, or transformation. This model contributes to the field by shifting the focus from migration as an individual adaptive challenge to migration as a relational process mediated by structure, culture, and affective exchange.

This discussion also reveals important tensions in the literature. One of them concerns the concept of acculturation gap. Although differences in cultural adaptation between partners may produce conflict, the available evidence does not support a linear assumption that cultural difference necessarily leads to relational deterioration.

In some contexts, similarity between partners appears to favor well-being, whereas in others, difference may be negotiated without damaging relationship quality. Therefore, the problem is not difference itself, but the couple's capacity to mentalize, communicate, and integrate difference into its relational functioning. This point is clinically relevant because therapeutic practice should not aim to eliminate cultural asymmetry, but to help couples transform asymmetry into negotiated coexistence.

Another tension concerns gender. Migration may destabilize traditional gender roles, particularly when professional status, income, language competence, or access to social institutions change after relocation. For some couples, this destabilization produces loss, resentment, or threats to identity; for others, it enables more egalitarian arrangements.

The literature therefore suggests that gender reorganization should not be interpreted only as a source of conflict, but as a relational field in which power, recognition, dependency, and autonomy are renegotiated. A systemic approach must be attentive to these dynamics without assuming that the restoration of previous roles is clinically desirable.

A further contradiction appears in the relationship between support and overload. The couple often becomes the main source of emotional and practical support after migration, especially when extended family and community networks are weakened.

However, the intensification of dependence on the partner may simultaneously strengthen intimacy and increase relational burden. In this sense, the couple may become both a protective resource and a site of vulnerability.

This paradox is central to the clinical understanding of immigrant couples, because interventions that focus only on strengthening the dyad may unintentionally increase pressure on a relationship already overloaded by structural and emotional demands.

The reviewed literature also exposes a relevant gap in the field: many studies continue to examine migration through individual indicators of adaptation, mental health, or sociocultural integration, while the couple remains underexplored as a unit of analysis.

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Even when conjugal relationships are addressed, there is still a limited number of longitudinal, dyadic, and culturally diverse studies capable of following both partners over time. This limits the understanding of how relational adjustment changes across different phases of migration, such as pre-migration expectations, arrival, legal stabilization, occupational reorganization, parenting in the host country, and possible return or onward migration.

From a clinical perspective, the proposed integrative model suggests that couple therapy with immigrants should avoid two reductionisms. The first is individual reductionism, which interprets suffering primarily as anxiety, depression, trauma, or adjustment difficulty located within one partner.

The second is cultural reductionism, which explains conflict mainly as a product of cultural difference. Although both dimensions may be relevant, the systemic perspective indicates that immigrant couples' difficulties emerge from the interaction among emotional regulation, relational patterns, cultural meanings, and structural conditions. Clinical work should therefore investigate not only what each partner feels, but how distress circulates within the relationship and how external pressures are absorbed by the couple system.

The originality of this article, therefore, does not reside in presenting migration, emotional regulation, or systemic family therapy as isolated themes, but in articulating them within a single interpretive framework.

The proposed model highlights that relational adjustment in immigrant couples depends on the couple's capacity to transform contextual disruption into negotiated relational reorganization. When this process fails, migration may intensify rigidity, emotional isolation, asymmetrical burden, and conflict. When it succeeds, migration may foster differentiation, shared coping, flexible belonging, and new forms of intimacy.

Finally, the discussion points to the need for future research that is more process-oriented and less merely descriptive. Studies should investigate how immigrant couples move from disruption to reorganization, which relational mechanisms mediate this transition, and under what social and cultural conditions dyadic coping becomes protective or insufficient.

Research should also include diverse couple configurations, different migration statuses, distinct ethnic and cultural groups, and the influence of structural inequalities on relational adjustment. Such an agenda would allow the field to move beyond the general statement that migration affects couples and toward a more precise understanding of how, when, and through which mechanisms this transformation occurs.

CONSIDERATIONS

The synthesis of the findings indicates that migration should not be understood merely as an individual adaptive challenge, but as a contextual and relational transition that reorganizes roles,

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boundaries, expectations, communication patterns, and forms of emotional co-regulation within the dyad.

The review showed that factors such as loss of support networks, legal insecurity, changes in gender roles, professional deskilling, and different acculturation rhythms may intensify marital tensions, but do not in themselves determine negative outcomes.

On the contrary, when couples are able to negotiate differences, communicate stress, and develop shared responses, the migratory experience may also foster greater intimacy, relational flexibility, and a more egalitarian redefinition of life together.

As for its limitations, this is a theoretical study based on a narrative review, which does not allow for broad empirical generalizations, and it draws on a field that remains fragmented, with a limited number of longitudinal, dyadic, and culturally diverse studies centered on couples.

Even so, the article offers relevant implications by arguing that clinical work with immigrant couples should move beyond an exclusive focus on isolated individual suffering and instead address the relational patterns produced under migratory pressure, incorporating cultural sensitivity, attention to structural asymmetries, and the strengthening of dyadic coping.

For future research, there is a need for studies that follow both partners over time, include different migratory contexts, couple configurations, and social conditions, and further deepen the understanding of how relational adjustment, emotional regulation, and bicultural competence are articulated in adaptation processes and clinical care.

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