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# “Se Van a Trabajar, Pero Se Quedan a Vivir”: A Qualitative Exploration into the Subjective Well-being of Mexican Women in a Migrant-Sending Community

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University of San Francisco

**“Se Van a Trabajar, Pero Se Quedan a Vivir”:  
A Qualitative Exploration into the Subjective  
Well-being of Mexican Women in a Migrant-Sending  
Community**

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master in Migration Studies

By  
Vanessa Saldivar  
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San Francisco, California

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## ABSTRACT

The study of subjective well-being and migration are two fields that have increased in prominence in recent decades. However, in the area where the two fields intersect, significant gaps exist. Meanwhile, the majority of research on migration ignores those who stay, resulting in an unbalanced and incomplete understanding of the phenomenon of migration. Using an ethnographic and life history approach, this study explores the subjective well-being of women residing in the migrant-sending community of Tlachichila. Narratives from semi-structured interviews and participant observation field notes were analyzed thematically and emergent themes were identified. Findings suggest that despite the hardship that underscores the literature on this population, women in Tlachichila express a clear and salient desire to stay. Furthermore, narratives suggest that women in migrant-sending communities use morality to redefine happiness and reconstruct their understandings of home, place, migratory behavior and gendered happiness. This process of reconstruction can be seen as an attempt to restore the dignity and agency that has been stripped away by the dominant narrative which labels those who stay, most commonly young women, as merely “left behind wives.” Findings from this study carry implications for migration policy aimed at slowing emigration out of migrant-sending areas as well as interventions aimed at improving the public opinion of immigrants within sending countries.

## Chapter I

### Introduction

International migration is one of the greatest contemporary challenges facing the global community. According to the Pew Research Center, the absolute number of international migrants has seen a staggering 200% increase in the last five decades leading to marked strain within and between countries (Connor, 2016). Notwithstanding the dramatic statistics, the fact remains that the vast majority of people, nearly 97%, do not leave their country of origin (Castles & Miller, 2003; Connor, 2016). The majority of literature on international migration focuses on those who go and on the countries and communities that receive them, thereby ignoring an elemental part of the migration phenomenon. The study of migrant-sending communities and those who do not migrate can lead to important insights for the broader migration debate, and although scholars have acknowledged the profound impacts that migration has on migrant-sending regions, there is still much to qualitatively understand about the experiences of non-migrants (Massey & Kandel 2002; Nguyen, Yeoh, & Toyota, 2006).

The archetypal migrant narrative is often a bleak one, fraught with suffering, loss, and despair (Appadurai, 2016). For non-migrants, that narrative becomes even more dismal and one dimensional. Non-migrants, most often women, are labeled “left-behind wives” and characterized as passive victims of the migratory behavior of men. Study after study stress the detrimental effects of migration on women who are left behind (Lu, Hu, & Trieman, 2012; Nguyen, Yeoh, & Toyota, 2006; Wilkerson, Yamawaki, & Downs, 2009; Radel & Schmook, 2009; Edelblute et al., 2013; Durand et al. ,1996). However,

some scholars have begun to question whether this is the whole story (Appadurai, 2016). Whom do we miss when we only look North? What do we miss when all we look for is darkness? These questions form the heart of inquiry of the present study, which focuses on the qualitative experiences of non-migrant Mexican women.

As the largest sustained migratory flow in the world, the significance of Mexico-US migration is substantial (Garip, 2017). Since its official start in the mid-1800's, Mexico-US migratory streams have undergone numerous changes, ultimately becoming more diverse in geographic origins, destinations, and settlement patterns within the United States (Garip, 2017). However, in terms of gender, Mexico-US migration flows have remained relatively consistent, with males making up roughly 70% of the total migrants (Garip, 2017). These male-dominated migratory streams have disproportionately left women to bear the burdens of living in a migrant-sending community (Ayala & Murga, 2016). This reality alludes to the importance of a gendered focus when it comes to the study of migrant-sending communities.

Tlachichila is a historically agricultural community in central Mexico with a robust migratory history. Repeated waves of emigration, clearly corresponding with US foreign and immigration policy, have resulted in a dramatic drop in population over a short period of time, widespread poverty, high rates of remission-dependent households, a limited local economy and a female-dominated citizenry. These major migratory trends are consistent across other sending communities throughout rural Mexico. Thus, Tlachichila is an ideal community for a case study on non-migrant women, as findings can be generalized across other regions with high levels of emigration.

By expanding the understanding of migrant-sending communities, this study seeks to challenge the dominant migrant narrative and present another side of the migration story. Suffering and hardship are undoubtedly part of the migrant experience, but there is much more to the story. At a time when the President of the United States uses profanity to describe sending countries<sup>1</sup>, it is more important than ever to shed light on migrant-sending communities and to challenge inaccurate and outright racist narratives. Evaluating the holistic experiences of non-migrants residing in sending communities helps build a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of migration and a more humanized migrant narrative, wide enough to hold both the suffering and great needs of a community, as well as their capacity to experience peace, satisfaction, and happiness.

This study hopes to contribute to the gap in qualitative literature focused on the lived experience of female non-migrants. From a socio-ethnographic perspective, the subjective well-being of non-migrant women residing in a migrant-sending community is explored. The study focuses on Tlachichila, a rural community in Central Mexico, and addresses two research questions:

- 1) How do Mexican women residing in Tlachichila experience subjective well-being?
- 2) What conceptions do Mexican women residing in Tlachichila have of migration and happiness?

The following chapter will review the literature on subjective well-being and non-migrants. It will begin by locating the concept of subjective well-being within the sociological discipline, as well as the most prominent determinants of happiness and

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<sup>1</sup>, Ryan Teague Beckwith. President Trump Called El Salvador, Haiti 'Shit-hole' Countries: Report. January 11, 2018.



current theories identified in the literature. Next, the limited research found at the intersection of subjective well-being and migration studies, in general, will be presented. Lastly, the body of literature focused on the subjective well-being of non-migrants, most commonly identified as those "left behind," will be discussed.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

#### *Subjective Well-being*

Positive psychology, defined as the empirical study of optimal human functioning, has been increasing in prominence since it first emerged as a defined field in the late 1990's (Linley et al., 2006). The field has grown impressively, encompassing a wide range of subjects within the individual, group, and subjective levels of human experiences (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Subjective well-being often used synonymously with happiness within the literature, is among the most well-researched areas of positive psychology (Vera-Villarroel et al., 2012). Since its birth as a subject, various theories utilizing the psychological lens have emerged which have shaped the current understanding of happiness (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Headey, 2010).

Over the last half-decade, the prominence of subjective well-being has grown beyond psychology. This growth has broadened the individual level lens traditionally used by psychology, to explore subjective well-being on the meso and macro levels. Most notably, disciplines such as economics, public policy, and sociology have engaged with the happiness research and have put forth cogent contributions to the literature (Veenhoven, 2008; Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2017). Economists introduced the Easterlin paradox, which asserts that above a certain threshold, an increase in income is not accompanied by an increase in happiness (Easterlin, 1974; 2006). Since the United Nations published the first "World Happiness Report" in 2012, an increasing number of governments have begun to use happiness indicators to measure progress and prosperity

and to inform public policy (Helliwell, Layard & Sachs, 2017). Lastly, sociologists now argue the salience of subjective well-being for societies, and, therefore, the relevance of the subject within the sociological discipline (Veenhoven, 2008).

Given its current interdisciplinary presence, subjective well-being is a nuanced concept defined differently amongst and between disciplines and scholars. One of the earlier scholars of positive psychology presented five distinct elements that make up subjective well-being: pleasure, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2006). A more contemporary scholar of subjective well-being offered a simplified definition; the presence of positive affect and life satisfaction (Diener, 1994). The present study uses the term “subjective well-being” interchangeably with “happiness”. Drawing from prominent scholars, subjective well-being is operationalized as an individualized conceptualization of the combination of life satisfaction, stemming from life circumstance, and personal happiness, stemming from psychological factors (Veenhoven, 2008; Easterlin, 2006).

One of the central subsets of the subjective well-being literature focuses on identifying the determinants of happiness. Out of the myriad of studies examining happiness, scholars have identified several distinct factors as key determinants of happiness. These include family and marital status, work and income, social support, health, and recreational, community and civic participation (Vera-Villarroel et al., 2012; Chuluun, Graham, & Myanganbuu, 2016; Veehoven, 2008; Garcia Vega, 2016). Slight variation does exist in the definition of key determinants across studies (Milan, 2016); however, by and large, significant convergence is present (Chuluun, Graham, & Myanganbuu, 2016).

A significant concurrence also exists within this body of literature with regards to methodology. The literature examining the determinants of subjective well-being almost exclusively use quantitative methods. It is widely accepted that concepts such as “family”, “community” or “work” carry distinct meaning across cultures, genders, or geographical regions. However, the quantitative studies leave no room for nuanced exploration into these concepts. In response to this gap, numerous scholars have called for further research into subjective well-being using a qualitative approach. In their quantitative study on subjective well-being in Mexico, Lever and Estrada end their article by concluding,

We believe there is also a need for more research on subjective well-being focused on learning more about the processes underlying happiness and subjective well-being...All of this must be viewed from the individual’s perspective and from a more qualitative perspective. (2016, p. 402)

Bartram (2013) also acknowledged the limitations of his quantitative study and emphasized the importance of the analysis of history and context on understanding the happiness of migrants and stayers.

One of the few qualitative studies in the happiness scholarship used life histories to examine social relationships in happiness among rural and indigenous women in Nicaragua (Cruz & Flores, 2016). Through their life narratives approach, Cruz and Flores (2016) present the concept of the social dimension as a core element of happiness. Both family and social support are common factors present in most quantitative studies; however, a qualitative approach allowed the authors to delve into this dimension much more in-depth. As such, the authors found that the social relationships described by the indigenous women were not only expressed as social networks, widely studied in the

field, but also as part of a collective and participative dimension with a more organizational or social movement nature (Cruz & Flores, 2016).

Despite the methodological limitations of the literature, the importance of subjective well-being is undisputed. Happiness has emerged as a strong predictor of numerous positive outcomes in nearly every aspect of human life and functioning. Subjective well-being has been shown to have a positive effect on physical and mental health, life expectancy, job performance satisfaction, and stability and satisfaction in interpersonal relationships (Veenhoven, 2008; Barak 2006; Demerouti & Sanz-Vergel, 2012; Gerstenbluth, Rossi & Triunfo, 2008; Lyumbomirsky, King & Diener, 2005; Mustaca, Kamenetzky & Vera-Villaruel, 2010). From a sociological lens, the impacts of happiness extend beyond the individual level. Subjective well-being has implications for communities because it is a determinant of individual social behavior. Individuals with higher levels of happiness are more politically engaged in their communities, vote more often, and are more involved in civil action (Lyubomirsky & Diener, 2005). Furthermore, happiness is also a determinant of decision making, such as the decision to migrate. The methodological gap in the literature on subjective well-being, coupled with the notable salience of happiness for both individuals and communities underscore the relevance of this study, which explores subjective well-being from a qualitative lens.

### *Subjective Well-being of Migrants and Non-migrants*

Regardless of the disciplines, happiness studies and migration studies have only recently begun to intersect. Much of the literature at the intersection of these disciplines has focused on understanding the impact of migratory behavior on the happiness levels of

migrants. Studies have measured individual happiness levels pre- and post-migration, and a myriad of convergent findings have emerged, suggesting a complex relationship between the two subjects (Amit & Riss, 2014; Ying & Leise, 1991; Nowok et al., 2013; Graham, 2016; Graham & Markowitz, 2011).

Besides the relationship between subjective well-being and migratory behavior, studies have also focused on the relationship between aspirations and the subjective well-being of migrants. These studies posit that overall, high aspirations are more likely to decrease subjective well-being (Knight & Gunatilaka, 2010; Graham & Markowitz, 2011; Easterlin, 2010). There are even studies that examine the impact of immigration on the happiness levels of natives, or those residing in migrant-receiving regions (Akay et al., 2014).

Within the limited research intersecting happiness and migration studies, the focus is forward, either on individuals who migrate or on those residing in receiving communities, leaving those who stay grossly understudied (Akay et al., 2014; Simpson, 2012). One of the only studies on subjective well-being which include non-migrants focused on five countries in Europe. Bertram (2013) compared the happiness levels of migrants and those who stayed in their country of origin and found that in general, migrants were happier than stayers. However, within the study's own data, evidence also emerged suggesting the possibility that those who migrated were already experiencing higher levels of happiness, thus weakening the findings. Those who stay are a crucial aspect of the migration phenomenon but they are virtually absent from the literature. Thus, this study shifts the focus from those who move to those who stay, for the purpose of increasing the holistic understanding of the migration phenomenon.

Despite the disproportionate burden apportioned on women residing in migrant-sending communities, studies focused on women who stay are nominal (Ayala & Murga, 2016). Male-dominated migratory streams have historically prevailed, particularly in the context of US-Mexico migration, leading to a narrow view of women within migration studies. The literature has historically portrayed women as passive participants of international migration and therefore have ignored them as primary research subjects (Cerrutti & Massey, 2004). As the number of women migrants, especially young and unmarried women has increased, scholars have tried to understand the “feminization of migration” that has taken place over the last three decades (Chammartin, 2001; Donato & Patterson, 2004; Donato, 1993). Studies exploring the gendered nature of the migratory phenomenon, such as social networks and remittance patterns have also increased (Menjívar, 2000, Vullnetari & King, 2011, Cerrutti & Massey, 2004).

While some scholars identify positive impacts of male out-migration to the status of women (Chant, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Yabiku, Agadjandian, & Sevoyan, 2001), the literature focusing on the psychological well-being of women who stay has predominantly identified negative impacts, including decreased mental health, increased stress and greater levels of depressive symptoms (Lu, Hu, & Trieman, 2012; Nguyen, Yeoh, & Toyota, 2006; Wilkerson, Yamawaki, & Downs, 2009; Radel & Schmook, 2009; Edelblute et al., 2013; Durand et al., 1996). The subjective well-being of women is critical and worth studying because women are at the center of community development, especially in places with a strong culture of migration. For these reasons, this study focuses on the lived experiences of women.

As this review of the literature shows, multiple gaps exist in the body of work at the intersection of happiness and migration. Women who stay in sending communities are doubly understudied on account of their non-migrant status and their gender, resulting in a limited understanding of the subjective well-being of women in migrant-sending communities. Furthermore, there is a demonstrated need for qualitative studies within the field of subjective well-being, in order to arrive at a more holistic, in-depth and nuanced understanding of the complicated phenomenon of subjective well-being. These gaps underscore the importance of a study which explores the subjective well-being of women who stay in sending communities from a qualitative approach, as well as the potential for substantive contributions to the fields of both subjective well-being and migration.



## Chapter III

### Methodology

Using a life narratives approach, this qualitative study examines the narratives of twenty-five women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight who either resided or worked in a migrant-sending community in rural Mexico. The broad participant eligibility criteria (age and residence) resulted in a diverse sample of women. Of the complete participant pool (*Appendix A*), 52% of participants were married, 56% had at least one child, and 56% were employed. While every participant had at least one member of their extended family in the United States (aunt, uncle or cousin), just under half (48%) had an immediate family member (parent or sibling) in the United States. Only seven of the twenty-five participants (28%) had a spouse residing in the United States at the time of the study.

The research received ethical clearance from the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board and was data collection occurred in the summer of 2017 during a period of six weeks. The narratives were collected from semi-structured ethnographic life history interviews using a sixty-three question instrument (*Appendix B*). The interviews for this study were intended to collect narratives from participants about their life experiences, beliefs, feelings, and conceptions with and about migration and happiness. A guide was developed and used to provide structure to the interviews. The interview guide was organized into eight categories: 1) Place & Community 2) Family 3) Education 4) Economic Status 5) Spatial Aspirations 6) Health 7) Happiness. The first seven categories corresponded with the most common determinants of happiness

currently recognized in the literature on subjective well-being, while the last category focused on the participant's overall conceptions and experience with happiness. The questions were both factual and interpretive in nature. To avoid unintentionally influencing participant responses, care was taken to frame questions in a broad and open-ended manner. Broad questions were followed by probing questions intended to obtain more detailed information about their experiences. Probing questions were posed to explore both positive and negative experiences and feelings about a subject, with the aim of eliciting a balanced perspective.

The importance and effectiveness of life histories in sociological research is widely recognized among scholars, despite critics arguing that the subjective nature of personal accounts renders them unreliable and that participants are likely to engage in deliberate or unwilling deception (Dyson, 2003). The former is particularly true in the study of complex phenomena, such as happiness, where the subjective story is precisely the information needed (Cruz & Flores, 2016). Proponents of life history research also point out that life history methods can provide a mechanism for disenfranchised communities to have a voice where they lack representation (Dyson, 2003). This makes a life history approach particularly appropriate for analyzing the subjective well-being of non-migrant women, as their voice is virtually absent from the literature on migration.

The methods used in this study were also informed by feminist theory. Feminist theory seeks to provide an opportunity for women to produce their own knowledge about themselves, in direct contrast to the knowledge produced about women by the patriarchy (Risman, 2004). This study sought to particularize and contextualize the lived experience of subjective well-being among women (Ghorashi, 2005; Risman, 2004). This is

especially important in sending communities, where the mainstream narrative is focused around the migration trajectories of men. This methodology positions women as active agents and challenges the tendency to portray them as passive participants or victims who are “left behind” (Harding, 1991; Rivera, 2004; Slater, 2004; Butalia, 2000; Kassem, 2011).

A snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants, and participants chose the location of the interviews. Locations included the author’s home, participant’s homes, and outside the participants' children's schools. All interviews were conducted one-on-one. However, several took place in the presence of infants or very young children (under the age of five). Written consent was obtained from participants and interviews were recorded with the permission of participants. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, the native language of all participants. Interviews were transcribed and translated by the author.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. As such, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. Using constant comparison and open coding techniques, emergent themes were identified and codes were generated. Narrative data from semi-structured interviews were supplemented with field notes collected through participant observation. This combination of methods allowed for a juxtaposition of what participants said they were doing with observations of what they were actually doing. This helped to triangulate the findings in an effort to both understand and explain the lived reality of the participants as thoroughly and accurately as possible (Burawoy et al, 1991). In the end, the methods used helped to examine the collective experience of

women in a rural sending community, through the observance of the lived experiences of young women residing in this community.

### *Positionality Considerations*

Subjects of life history research may attempt to create a story dependent on their beliefs about what is being asked of them and more importantly, from whom the account is for (Dyson, 2003; Radley & Billig, 1996). From this internalization, a "public" and "private" account will be presented (Dyson, 2003). A private account is more likely to be offered if trust is established and if the interviewee views the interviewer as more of an equal and less of an authority (Cornwell, 1984). The building of trust is enhanced by a shared language and characteristics and if the interviewer invites the interviewee to "tell stories" as opposed to answering questions (Dyson, 2003; Cornwell, 1984). According to Cornwell (1984), once trust is established, speakers will relax into "private" accounts and divulge more of themselves to the interviewers and thus, providing more reliable narratives for analysis.

The researcher shared the same ethnicity, gender, and language of the participants. Because of these shared characteristics, trust was easily established with most participants. Furthermore, the interviewer engaged in selective disclosure (Carling et al, 2013) in order to facilitate the establishment of trust. However, there was a significant difference in class, religion, and education. Most of the participants had only attended primary school. The researcher attempted to diminish any sense of authority by explaining that there were no right or wrong answers to the interview questions.

The researcher was born in the community being studied and had significant familial ties within the community. Due to the size of the community and the extensive familial ties, several participants knew facts about the researcher that the researcher did not herself disclose, which may have impacted the data collected. For example, some participants knew that the researcher had worked in the field of immigration law and it became clear that the researcher was seen as a potential source of assistance with the immigration process because several participants asked questions about their immigration proceedings. The researcher responded by explaining that her role and informing participants that she was not able to help in that capacity. However, as scholars have identified, regardless of the thoroughness of informed consent (*Appendix C*), participants may still believe that the researcher or their participation in the research can have an impact on their migration issues and therefore could impact the answers they give (Carling et al., 2013).

### *The Research Setting*

Tlachichila, which translates to “red dirt” in the Nahuatl language, is a small rural *pueblo* located in the municipality of Nochistlan de Mejia in the Mexican state of Zacatecas. Zacatecas is situated in the Central region of Mexico and is the top sending state in Mexico (INEGI). The first emigrants out of this state were contracted by the United States to build railroads and work in agriculture and mining more than a century ago. However, there were two distinct waves of migration out of Tlachichila, documented scarcely through the census and parochial records. The agricultural guest worker program known as the Bracero Program, marked the beginning of the forceful migratory history of

Tlachichila, as it did for many other sending communities. The program, which was initiated in 1942, was responsible for bringing over five million Mexican agricultural workers to the United States and creating a powerful dependency on both sides of the border (Hing and Romero, 2004). Employers soon discovered they could pay undocumented workers even less than Braceros, thus the demand for undocumented workers surged even after the program was terminated in 1964, as did the flow of men out of Tlachichila to fill the demand (Hing and Romero, 2004).

The second wave out of Tlachichila occurred in 1984, with the introduction of the Seasonal Agricultural Worker program. This time, the stream included women and children who were able to reunite with their farmworker husbands. At its peak, before the introduction of the Bracero Program, Tlachichila's population hovered around 8,000. In 2010, the population of Tlachichila was recorded at 1,514. More recently, emigration out of Tlachichila has slowed to a crawl. Despite the recent decrease in migration, the historically high levels of migration, most commonly of men, still, impact the gender ratio. The female to male ratio is 1: 1.172 (INEGI).

Tlachichila suffers from widespread poverty, a very high rate of unemployment and very low levels of educational attainment. Only 28.07% of the population over the age of 12 work, and there are significant gender disparities in the employment rate. Only 14.08% of women in Tlachichila work, as compared to 44.48% of men (INEGI). Education levels are equally low for both men and women. Only 6.27% of people living in Tlachichila are illiterate; however, the average number of years completed of schooling is 6.75. Women in Tlachichila tend to give birth to children as teenagers and have an average of 3.15 children.

Most of the people who currently reside in Tlachichila were born there. Only 14.13% of the population of Tlachichila is from outside the state of Zacatecas. The immigration interface of Tlachichila is limited, as few options for legal immigration exist. Recently, predatory work visa recruiters have visited Tlachichila, but this option is very expensive and is most often only available to men. Transnational family and social networks are widespread, as virtually every inhabitant of Tlachichila has family in the United States. However, most people in Tlachichila do not have the means to migrate, legally or otherwise. These characteristics are common across rural communities in the states with the highest rates of out-migration, making Tlachichila an appropriate place for an investigation of migrant-sending communities. Despite the undeniable existence of a strong culture of migration, there are many people who choose to stay and this study sought to shine the light on them.

Historically, Tlachichila had a strong patriarchal gender structure. Commonly described in the literature as *machismo*, the culture in Tlachichila is one of male dominance. At the time of the study, it appeared that the culture of machismo was shifting, most significantly evidenced by the growing number of women working. However, the oppressive gendered structures were still intact. For example, my field observations found that there is no cultural or physical space in Tlachichila for women to engage in any kind of social, recreational or cultural enrichment activities. By contrast, there are over ten establishments, mostly bars and pool halls, that cater exclusively to men. Even though these businesses do not outwardly prohibit women from entering, it is clear, based on participant observations and interviews that women should not enter such establishments, and therefore they do not. Furthermore, women are commonly prohibited

from working by their fathers or husbands, and rigid and traditional gender roles are still widespread (Ayala & Murga, 2016; Risman, 2004).



## Chapter 5

### Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the side of the migration story that is often untold. Within the literature, women who stay in migrant-sending communities appear to have one story to tell, which most often begins and ends with suffering. The findings of this study offer a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of this population.

#### *Suffering as a Starting Point*

Consistent with the literature, the narratives revealed that having a loved one, especially a spouse in the United States impacts the happiness levels of non-migrant women.

I can't say I'm 100% happy because my husband is not here with us. There are twelve months in the year. He has a contract to work in the US for none of those months. So I can't be completely happy when he isn't here. My happiness is split in half because of this situation. ("Lupe", 26)

It is evident that Lupe's happiness is tied to her husband's absence and his return. It is possible to view this finding as yet another convergence with the literature on "left behind wives," and it would be easy to leave things there (Lu, Hu, & Trieman, 2012; Nguyen, Yeoh, & Toyota, 2006; Wilkerson, Yamawaki, & Downs, 2009; Radel & Schmook, 2009; Edelblute et al., 2013; Durand et al., 1996). However, this study found that suffering was merely a starting point, not the final word. It is common sense that

family separation would cause suffering to those involved. But what else do women who remain in migrant-sending communities have to say?

*The Desire to Stay*

I'm happy here. I live well here. I'm just missing my husband. But I don't ever want to leave here. ("Brenda", 23)

I feel happiest at home. If you go, you suffer. If you don't leave, nothing bad can happen. I am safe here...I don't want to live in the US, even if they earn dollars. ("Cuca", 18)

The place I feel happiest is at home with my family...I am comfortable here so I have no desire to leave. ("Andrea", 21)

The quotes from Brenda, Cuca and Andrea reveal a strong and clearly expressed desire to stay home, consistent throughout the vast majority of the participant narratives. However, it is essential to consider how "place" and "home" interact. The narratives address the attributes which facilitate staying in Tlachichila by bringing to light culturally specific constructs of importance to participants. Two major constructs emerged from the participant narratives which address the attributes which facilitate staying in Tlachichila. These constructs, previously missed by the typical quantitative methodology, also contribute to the identification of the determinants of subjective well-being.

*Tranquilidad* was by far the most common word participants used to describe why they were happy living in Tlachichila. The word can be translated as "tranquil," "calm," or "peaceful", however, the narratives suggest a deeper meaning involving a connection to nature and the environment.

I am happy here. It is very tranquilo here. The air is clean. You can go to the rivers with your family and spend the day outdoors. You can look out and it is beautiful to your eyes. I love to go out walking, breathing the clean air. You don't have to worry about traffic. You are at ease. Walking. Peaceful. There is only tranquilidad. ("Andrea", 21)

Whenever *tranquilidad* was used, it was directly followed by or preceded by an environmental reference, either to the landscape, the air, the rivers or the trees. Given the frequency of use, *tranquilidad* appears to be a salient determinant of subjective well-being for women in this community. Organista (2016) and his work on *desesperacion*, a popular Latino idiom of distress, demonstrate that qualitative research can lead to insights into culturally relevant constructs that cannot be translated or defined. *Tranquilidad* may be used synonymously with "peace" by the general Spanish speaking population, but, it appears given the frequency of use, to be conceptualized in a culturally specific way for women residing in Tlachichila (Organista et al, 2016).

The other construct which was most frequently described by participants as a determinant of happiness was associated with community. Consistent with much of the literature on the determinants of subjective well-being, the "social dimension," as described by Cruz and Flores (2016), emerged as a salient factor in the happiness of the study participants.

People in Tlachichila are happy because here, se convive. Everyone is your friend. You go out on the streets and everyone talks to each other because they know each other. Even if you don't get along with someone, or you don't know them very well, or they are much older or younger than you, they still greet you, say good afternoon. They will help you if you need something. Everyone is united. ("Alejandra, 21)

Within the quantitative literature on subjective well-being, "Community" is often left unpacked. *Convivencia* was used by participants to describe what community looks

like, how it operates and its function within Tlachichila. Nearly every participant mentioned that the people in Tlachichila make it a happy place to live. Like the quote above references, simple acts of neighborliness, such as greeting one another on the streets, reinforce social cohesion and in turn, boost happiness among community members. Even as participants lamented the gossip and pettiness ubiquitous in their small town, they still described Tlachichila as a united community.

The term *convivir* is often translated as “to get along with,” though it literally means “to live with.” The narratives allude to a meaning in-between these two translations, where the walls separating neighbors are thinner than usual and a sense of emotional cohabitation exists, derived from the active and meaningful role that neighbors play in each other’s lives.

Community attachment has been shown to be a much stronger predictor of staying than personal characteristics or the level of satisfaction with the services of a community, and the (Erickson et al., 2018) and culturally specific constructs, such as *tranquilidad* and *convivir* are useful in measuring community attachment. In turn, these constructs shed light on a potential path forward for migration policy makers. Those with an interest in slowing emigration out of migrant-sending communities would be wise to consider the environment in their political interventions. Attempts to strengthen the weak economies in migrant-sending communities, such as the opening of factories, could lead to environmental degradations which would impact the subjective well-being of those residing in those communities and diminish their community attachment. In addition to protecting and preserving the environment in migrant-sending communities, local governments should consider the impacts of policy or economic interventions on social

cohesion, and aim to protect and preserve the lifestyle which promotes the high levels of community attachment.

### *Constructing Place*

I imagine life in the US as full of pressure. You wake up early, work all day, come home... The next day is the same. Every day the same routine... The routine is heavier there. That's what they say. It's a very tiring routine over there. ("Estela," 21)

In addition to culturally specific constructs, such as *Tranquilidad* and *convivir*, the narratives revealed the construction of a rigid dichotomy between the United States and Tlachichila (and in many cases, Mexico as a whole) and between working and living. Over and over, participants described the US as a place filled with stress, pollution, and unending routine. To them, the US was merely a place to work and incompatible with notions of home and happiness. In contrast, Tlachichila was constructed as a place to live and experience peace and happiness. To participants, Tlachichila was, and would forever be home.

The working versus living dichotomy present in the narratives from women in Tlachichila shed light on the internal processes taking place for those who stay in migrant-sending communities. In her seminal work, *The Dignity of Working Men*, Michele Lamont (2000) explores the reality of lower-middle-class men through the stories they tell. The narratives of blue-collar and lower white-collar men reveal the ways in which they construct a sense of self-worth, interpret differences between themselves and others to create their own understanding of social hierarchy, and differentiate between those who are part of their community those who were not. The narratives of the

women in Tlachichila echo the findings of Lamont (2000) and suggest that this process occurs not only between classes but also transnationally between entire nations.

According to Lamont (2000), morality is at the center of this process. Constructed moral standards serve as an alternative to the traditional definitions of success, most commonly money. However, in a migrant-sending community with a strong culture of migration, those traditional definitions of success are also associated with migratory behavior, namely leaving. Participant narratives suggest that women in Tlachichila use morality to construct their own ways of conceiving of and measuring happiness.

I think [migrating] is bad. The people who go to the United States say they go to help their families, but sometimes it makes things worse. Much worse. They want to find easy solutions. They go to work and make dollars, dollars, dollars... In the US, it's all about dollars, dollars, dollars. But sometimes they come back with nothing more than vices. Life is not easy there. They don't want you there if you are a Mexican. And the discrimination is capable of killing you. ("Maria," 18)

As Maria's narrative demonstrates, the United States is constructed as a place where vices and greed are widespread and happiness is measured in dollars, vastly different than Tlachichila, which measures happiness in more virtuous constructs, such as *tranquilidad* and *convivencia*. Through her moralizing narrative, Maria is engaging in defining the limits of the community, by establishing an "us" versus "them" world.

Across the narratives, a forcefulness can be heard which suggests that the construction of these dichotomies and delimitations are a direct challenge to the dominant discourse that dehumanizes Mexicans, and especially Mexicans in migrant-sending communities. Maria recognizing the gravity of discrimination against her in the United States but does not let that define her. On the contrary, the women in Tlachichila collectively flip the script. Defining happiness on their own terms, therefore, could be

seen as an act of resistance, aimed at restoring their sense of agency, missing in the literature, as well as their dignity, which has also been lost in the narrow narratives describing Mexican women who stay in migrant-sending communities.

### *Gendered Happiness*

I am 90% happy. The 10% that is missing is more education and a career. In my family, I wouldn't be permitted to go to a big city where I could study a career...but with a spouse, they can't tell me I have to stay here anymore. A spouse would mean leaving, liberating myself from my parents, and continuing my studies. But I would need to talk it through very well with the man and explain to them that I want to study. If he agrees, then great, but if they say no, then I might as well just stay home...Two years ago, I had a boyfriend who lived in Guadalajara. He would tell me, 'if you go with me, you could study.' It was an enchantment for me because he was giving me the opportunity to go to the city and study, which is all I wanted. It was the ultimate. ("Dania," 21)

As a whole, the narratives point to the gendered nature of happiness. How happiness is defined, how it shapes aspirations, and how it ultimately determines an individual's decision to stay is shaped by gender. Dania's narrative sheds light on the interaction between social structures and the happiness of women and suggests that unmarried women living with their fathers engage in patriarchal bargaining to increase their happiness potentials (Kandiyoti, 1988). This type of coping strategy not only relieves some of the pressures of the patriarchal system for women, but it also informs their choice and the unconscious aspects of their gendered subjectivity, including the way they pursue and experience happiness. Dania would marry someone if they could offer her an opportunity to pursue her education, which to her, means more happiness.

On the other hand, Dania's experience also highlights an opportunity for policy to effectively intervene. The 10% that is missing from Dania's happiness is education. Therefore, programs that provide opportunities for women to pursue educational aspirations could help increase the happiness of stayers as well as the likelihood that they will continue to stay. This could be important to policymakers who are concerned with the high level of out-migration from rural communities. However, financial assistance alone is not enough. As this narrative demonstrates, gender impacts a women's ability to access more happiness, beginning with her own beliefs about what opportunities are available to her to pursue her aspirations. The culture of *machismo* present in Tlachichila designates men, whether husbands, fathers, brothers, as the ticket holders of the happiness potentials of women and Dania's narrative suggests the internalization of the limitations perpetuated by this patriarchal system. As such, the power structures underlying gender roles must be taken into consideration when political or programmatic interventions are introduced for women in migrant-sending communities. Programs offering support to women pursuing an education should also include education and emotional support for their family members and community, who may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with their female family members pursuing an education.



## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

At a time when migrant-sending countries are denigrated and the eyes of migration studies are fixated on those who leave and on the countries who receive them, this study turns towards those who choose to stay in search of a better understanding of the lived experience of non-migrants. Specifically, this study examined the subjective well-being of women in a rural migrant-sending community in rural Mexico. Using life history interviews informed by feminist methodology, this study analyzed the narratives of twenty-five young women.

Findings from the study contributed to the lack of literature at the intersection of happiness studies and research on non-migrants. Notably, the findings from the qualitative data contribute voices to the literature on "left behind wives" in order to presents a more nuanced landscape of the lived experiences of non-migrant women. Consistent with the literature, this study affirms that family separation stemming from the continued out-migration of men impacts happiness for women who stay. However, the narratives challenged the prevailing literature which describes non-migrant women as "left behind wives." By and large, participants described Tlachichila and the ways in which their community contributed to their happiness, specifically through the use of culturally specific constructs previously missed by the quantitative literature on subjective well-being. These descriptions ultimately reveal that non-migrant women are not "left behind" as the literature depicts that as rather they are engaging in a choice to stay in the place that brings them the most happiness.

Besides a clear desire to stay in Tlachichila, the individual narratives of non-migrant women also revealed a collective story, that women have woven, complete with heroes and villains. Moral standards were used to construct rigid dichotomies between them, both individually and as Mexicans at large, and the United States. The United States was constructed as an immoral place void of true happiness. Considering the present political moment, this collective narrative can be understood as both a response and challenge to the demeaning rhetoric propagated by the current US Administration. Lastly, this study revealed insights into the gendered nature of happiness. The participants described the intricate relationship between gender and happiness in a myriad of settings. Specifically, the narratives revealed how the culture of machismo impacts the happiness potentials of women, first by limiting the aspirations that women have around happiness but also in more concrete ways, such as prohibiting women from leaving the community without a man or limiting the amount of education women can attain. Findings in this study echo feminist literature describing the ways that women respond to the demands of a patriarchal system. Specifically, the narratives revealed what is described as patriarchal bargaining and suggest that the culture of machismo impacts the happiness of women are both prevalent and profound.

What is happening in migrant-sending communities is important to the immigration debate and more attention should be spent studying the experience of staying. Specifically, this study has implications for policymakers in both sending and receiving communities, which are concerned with slowing emigration out of areas with historically elevated levels of out-migration. Findings from the study identifying what people value about their own countries and what makes them happy at home suggest that

policies which strengthen environmental preservation and community cohesion could be most effective at increasing community attachment and in turn, increasing staying behavior. Furthermore, the findings of the study reiterate the importance of migration policies which take into account gender. Numerous participants mentioned the impact that the culture of *machismo* had on their happiness, particularly in the area of educational aspirations. Introducing programs which provide women with opportunities to stretch beyond the boundaries of the dominating social structures would also strengthen the culture of staying by increasing the happiness potentials of women in their own communities.

The implications of this study reach beyond the realm of public policy and have the potential of influencing public opinion. There is an inherent loss of dignity when migrants and non-migrants are only permitted to tell one story of suffering, need and despair. When the general public can no longer relate to the human residing in a migrant-sending community, it is more likely that restrictive and anti-immigrant laws prevail. This research offers a step towards a more nuanced and inclusive narrative, wide enough to hold both the suffering of a community and their capacity to experience peace, satisfaction, and happiness. This step is also an important step in the process of humanizing the other and improving the public opinions about people in sending communities, pre and post-migration, that are all too common in receiving countries.

Further research on happiness and non-migrants is needed to continue to widen the narratives surrounding this population. Specifically, more qualitative studies which contribute insights into the lived experience of marginalized communities in their own words are needed in the literature on happiness and on migration alike. Furthermore,

research on the impacts of higher or lower levels of happiness among women on migrant-sending communities would be helpful to solidify the important role of women in these areas and strengthen efforts to improve the living conditions of women. Lastly, the parallels that emerged between the strategies and coping mechanisms employed by working-class men in the United States and non-migrant Mexican women should be explored further. This unlikely concurrence could have implications for the sociological study of marginalized communities and for migration scholars seeking to uncover the similarities between populations in order to build connection and understanding. For women in Tlachichila specifically, further research is needed to evaluate the response of the local government in addressing the particular needs of this population and the ways in which they are protecting and promoting their right to stay in the place where they experience the most happiness.

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## Appendix A

**Table of Participant Demographics**

No.	Age	Occupation	Highest Education Completed	Marital Status	Number of Children	Head of Household	Current Familial Ties to the United States
1	18	Teacher	High School	Single	0	Father	Extended Family
2	19	Internet Installer	High School	Married	0	Husband	Extended Family
3	18	Homemaker	High School	Single	0	Mother	Immediate Family
4	22	Teacher	High School	Married	1	Mother	Husband
5	23	Homemaker	High School	Married	1	Father	Husband
6	26	Homemaker	High School	Married	2	Self	Husband
7	23	Homemaker	High School	Married	1	Husband	Immediate Family
8	21	Jewelry Maker	Middle School	Married	1	Husband	Immediate Family
9	27	Zumba Teacher	High School	Single	3	Self	Extended Family
10	21	Clerk	Middle School	Single	0	Father	Immediate Family
11	18	Food Vendor	Middle School	Single	0	Father	Immediate Family
12	26	Store Owner	Middle School	Married	2	Husband	Immediate Family
13	27	Homemaker	Middle School	Married	1	Husband	Immediate Family
14	20	Store Clerk	Middle School	Single	0	Father	Immediate Family
15	25	Homemaker	Middle School	Married	2	Husband	Husband
16	20	Homemaker	Middle School	Married	2	Husband	Immediate Family
17	21	Store Clerk	Middle School	Single	0	Father	Immediate Family
18	21	Student	High School	Married	1	Father	Husband
19	24	Store Clerk	Middle school	Single	0	Father	Immediate Family
20	21	Store Clerk	Middle School	Single	0	Father	Extended Family
21	21	Student	High School	Single	1	Mother	Extended Family
22	21	Homemaker	Middle School	Single	0	Father	Husband
23	24	Nurse	Bachelors	Single	1	Father	Extended Family
24	25	Store Clerk	High School	Single	0	Father	Immediate Family
25	23	Homemaker	Middle School	Married	1	Self	Husband

## Appendix B

**Study Interview Guide**


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 CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

- I. Introduction/Community
  - A. How did you end up living in Tlachichila?  
 Probe: How long has your family lived in Tlachichila?  
 Probe: If you grew up in here, how would you describe your childhood?
  - B. Have you ever lived in or visited any other place?  
 Probe: How was that place different or the same?
  - C. Can you tell me about life in Tlachichila?  
 Probe: What is a typical day like for women here?  
 Probe: What is a typical day like for you?
  - D. What do you like most about living here?
  - E. What is the most challenging part of living here?
  - F. In what ways do you feel like you are a part of this community?
  - G. In what ways do you feel supported by the community?
  - H. What kinds of community events or activities do you participate in here?
  - I. If you needed help with something, who would you call?
  - J. What makes you feel safe in your community?  
 Probe: When are the moments when you feel most safe in your life?
  - K. How would you describe your social life in Tlachichila?  
 Probe: Can you tell me about any friends you have?  
 Probe: How do you like to spend your free time?
  - L. Would you want to spend the rest of your life in Tlachichila?
- II. Family
  - A. What significance does family have for you?
  - B. Can you tell me about your family?  
 Probe: Who do you consider as part of your family?

Probe: Who do you live with?

Probe: Does all your family live here?

C. If you have family who do not live here, can you tell me about them?

Probe: Who are they?

Probe: Where are they?

Probe: When did they leave?

Probe: What kind of contact do you maintain with them?

Probe: What is your relationship like with them?

Probe: How do you feel about them not living here?

Probe: Do you feel left behind by your family?

D. If you have children, can you tell me about them?

E. If you are married, can you tell me about your spouse?

F. In what ways do you feel supported by your family?

### III. Education

A. Can you tell me about your educational experience?

Probe: Are you currently in school?

Probe: What is/was school like for you?

B. What do you think about the level of education that you have received?

Probe: Do you wish you could have gone to school for longer?

Probe: If you had an opportunity, would you further your education?

Probe: Do you feel that furthering your education is possible?

C. What are your opinions about education in general?

Probe: How important is education to you?

D. If you have children, how important is the education of your children?

Probe: How do you feel about the education they are receiving?

### IV. Economic

A. What are your opinions about work?

B. How would you describe your economic situation?

C. If you work, can you tell me about your job?

Probe: How did you decide to work at your current job?

Probe: How do you feel about your job?

Probe: Is there a job you would rather do?

D. If you do not work, how do you feel about not working?

Probe: Do you wish you were working?

Probe: What is preventing you from working?

Probe: What job would you like to have?

E. What other ways do you receive income?

Probe: Do you receive remittances?

Probe: If you receive remittances, how do you feel about receiving remittances?

Probe: What other resources do you have access to that help you financially?

- F. Do you feel your basic needs are met?
  - G. In what ways do you feel rich or poor?
- V. Aspirations
- A. How would you like your life to be in 5 years?  
 Probe: Where would you like to be living?  
 Probe: How likely do you think it is that you will be able to attain this life?
  - B. Can you tell me about your experience with migration?  
 Probe: How did you first learn about migration?  
 Probe: What are your opinions and feelings about migration?  
 Probe: If you have left, how did you decide to go?
  - C. If you wish to leave, can you tell me about your desires?  
 Probe: When did you decide you wanted to migrate to the United States?  
 Probe: Why do you want to leave?  
 Probe: What are the reasons you do not want to leave?  
 Probe: What kind of life do you imagine for yourself in another place?  
 Probe: How do you feel about your desires to leave/not leave?  
 Probe: What, if anything, would make you change your mind about leaving?  
 Probe: Do you think you will be able to carry out your desires? Why or why not?
- VI. Health
- A. What does it mean to you to be healthy?
  - B. When do you feel healthy?
  - C. How healthy would you describe yourself?  
 Probe: Can you describe how healthy you feel physically? What does that kind of health look like for you?  
 Probe: Can you describe how healthy you feel mentally?  
 Probe: Can you describe how healthy you feel spiritually?  
 Probe: Can you describe how healthy you feel psychologically?
  - D. How easy is it for you to go to the doctor if you need to go?
- VII. Religion & Spirituality
- A. What role does religion or spirituality play in your life?
- VIII. Autonomy
- A. What parts of your life do you feel you have/do not have control of?
- IX. Happiness
- A. How happy do you think other people are here?  
 Probe: How happy do you think your children are?  
 Probe: How happy do you think your friends are?

Probe: How happy do you think your partner is are?  
 Probe: How happy do you think your family is?  
 Probe: How happy do you think your neighbors are?

- B. Where are the places you feel most happy?
- C. Where do you think you would be most happy?  
 Probe: What is it about that place would make you most happy?
- D. What do you think you need in your life to be happy?  
 Probe: What do you feel is missing from your life right now?
- E. How happy are you with our life right now?  
 Probe: How happy are you with your social life?  
 Probe: How happy are you with your family situation?  
 Probe: How happy are you with your living situation?  
 Probe: How happy are you with your economic situation?  
 Probe: How happy are you with your health?
- F. What and how do things impact your happiness?  
 Probe: How do your children impact your happiness?  
 Probe: How does your primary relationship impact your happiness?  
 Probe: How does your children's education impact your happiness?  
 Probe: How does your economic situation impact your happiness?  
 Probe: How do you think your aspirations impact your happiness?  
 Probe: How does your health impact your happiness?
- G. How happy do you think other people think you are?
- H. How happy do you think people in other places think people in Tlachichila are?
- I. When do you feel the happiest?
- J. What are three of your happiest memories?
- K. Overall, how satisfied are you with your life?

X. Competence

- A. What do you think you do really well?  
 Probe: What would others say you do really well?
- B. When do you feel most confident?

XI. Conclusion

- A. Is there anything that I may have forgotten to ask that you think is important?
- B. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

## Appendix C

**Informed Consent****Consentimiento a Participar en un Estudio de Investigación**

Mi nombre es Vanessa Saldivar y soy estudiante de la Universidad de San Francisco. Se le pide que participe en un estudio de investigación sobre las mujeres que viven en Tlachichila. Antes de que decida si va a participar o no, es importante que haya recibido una explicación oral de este estudio en un idioma que entienda. Este documento explica los procedimientos de la investigación y tus derechos como participante. Si usted está de acuerdo, se le pide que firme el documento. Usted recibirá una copia de este documento.

**¿Qué haré si participo en este estudio?**

Si usted acepta participar en este estudio, le pediré que me hable de su vida en Tlachichila. La entrevista durará entre 60 y 90 minutos. La entrevista se llevará a cabo en un lugar de su elección. Le pediré su permiso para grabar nuestra entrevista para que pueda recordar exactamente lo que usted dice. Si tengo más preguntas para usted, es posible que le pregunte si estaría dispuesta a hablar conmigo de nuevo, pero es completamente tu decisión si quieres hablar conmigo otra vez.

**¿Seré herido o perjudicado al participar en este estudio?**

Participar en este estudio no le traerá ningún daño. Algunas preguntas pueden parecer personales y es posible que pueda experimentar incomodidad u otras emociones potencialmente desagradables. Si comienza a sentirse incómoda, puede pedir un descanso, pedir que salte la pregunta o pedir que termine la entrevista. No hay beneficios directos de participar en este estudio. Sin embargo, espero que la información que consigo me ayude a aprender sobre las experiencias de mujeres en comunidades como Tlachichila e identificar cómo sus vidas pueden ser mejoradas.

**¿Mi información personal será privada?**

Estoy atado a leyes con respecto a estudios de investigación que me requieren cuidar su privacidad muy seriamente. Su identidad y su información personal se va a mantener completamente confidencial. No anotaré ninguna información de identificación personal sobre usted y le daré un nombre falso en mis notas. No le diré a nadie que participó en este estudio y no compartiré ninguna de sus respuestas con nadie. Es posible que sus

respuestas a preguntas puedan ser incluidas en una publicación final, pero serian incluidas en una manera anónima.

**¿Recibiré algo por participar en este estudio?**

No hay pago u otra forma de compensación por su participación en este estudio.

**¿Tengo que participar en este estudio?**

Tu participación es completamente voluntaria. Usted puede decidir no participar en cualquier momento sin ningún tipo de repercusiones. Incluso si acepta participar y firmar este formulario, puede cambiar de opinión más tarde y dejar de participar en cualquier momento.

**¿Si tengo más preguntas sobre el estudio, con quien puedo hablar?**

Vanessa Saldivar

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Universidad de San Francisco

Junta de Revisión Institucional

Correo electrónico: irbphs@usfca.edu

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Acepto participar en el estudio de investigación descrito anteriormente

Acepto que mi entrevista grabada en audio

Nombre: \_\_\_\_\_

Fecha de firma: \_\_\_\_\_