

Established migrant women facing recent migration in Chile: Defensive and reflexive symbolic boundaries

Migrantes establecidas frente a la migración reciente en Chile: fronteras simbólicas defensivas y reflexivas

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Reception:
23/01/2026

Approval:
16/04/2026

Abstract: This article examines the orientations of long-settled Peruvian migrant women in Chile toward recent migration, focusing on processes of symbolic boundary-making in contexts of social diversification and growing hostility toward immigration. Drawing on ethnographic interviews with women who arrived in the country in the 1990s and 2000s, we propose the notions of defensive and reflexive symbolic boundaries as interdependent processes, challenging accounts that reduce these orientations to the reproduction of the “good” and “bad” migrant binary. The findings show that length of residence operates as a source of moral authority supporting judgments that associate recent migration with urban insecurity, labor precarization and state dependency. At the same time, persistent memories of exclusion and precarity activate a situational reflexivity that nuances those judgments by reorienting the critique from the individual migrant toward shared structural conditions. Defensiveness and reflexivity do not constitute opposing orientations, but processes that coexist and intertwine, offering a more complex understanding of symbolic boundary construction in South-South migration contexts.

Keywords: symbolic boundaries, diversity, defensive boundaries, situational reflexivity, South-South migration.



Resumen: Este artículo examina las orientaciones de mujeres migrantes peruanas de larga residencia en Chile frente a la migración reciente, centrándose en procesos de construcción de fronteras simbólicas en contextos de diversificación social y creciente hostilidad hacia la migración. A partir del análisis de entrevistas etnográficas con mujeres que llegaron al país en los años noventa y dos mil, proponemos las nociones de fronteras simbólicas defensivas y reflexivas como procesos interdependientes, cuestionando lecturas que reducen estas orientaciones a la reproducción del binario del “buen” y “mal” migrante. Los resultados muestran que el tiempo de residencia opera como una fuente de autoridad moral que sustenta juicios que asocian la migración reciente con inseguridad urbana, precarización laboral y dependencia del Estado. Al mismo tiempo, sus memorias persistentes de exclusión y precariedad activan una reflexividad situacional que matiza esos juicios al reorientar la crítica desde el migrante individual hacia condiciones estructurales compartidas. Defensividad y reflexividad no constituyen orientaciones opuestas, sino procesos que coexisten y se entrelazan, ofreciendo una comprensión más compleja de la construcción de fronteras en contextos de migración Sur-Sur.

Palabras clave: fronteras simbólicas, diversidad, fronteras defensivas, reflexividad situacional, migración Sur-Sur.

Introduction

When they arrived, they messed things up. Not all of them are the same, but there's always some scum... Peruvians too... But Chile wasn't like this before the Haitians and Venezuelans came (Gabriela).

Whenever people ask me [in Peru], I tell them not to come [to Chile]. It used to be very different, but not anymore. What would they come for? With the paperwork situation, with immigration we are doing terribly, and they will not give you documents, I can assure you that. [...] To this country, you don't exist, and, to put it plainly, as I said, if they kill you, for them it's a joy, one less foreigner. What would you come for? To earn 400,000 pesos if you do not have papers, and paying 200,000 in rent, what's left for you? (Marta).

Gabriela and Marta, two Peruvian women aged 64 and 57, arrived in Chile 18 and 25 years ago seeking to improve their living conditions and those of their families, especially to secure the care of their sons and daughters from a distance. Like other interviewees, they reported having overcome initial situations of labor abuse and residential overcrowding, and having contributed to the well-being of their families

in Peru. At the time of the interviews, however, both were still living in tenement housing¹ in central Santiago and working as domestic workers with varying degrees of stability. Reflecting on present-day Chile, they expressed concern over growing insecurity. Gabriela emphasized everyday urban insecurity, which she partly associated with recent migration from Venezuela and Haiti. Marta, by contrast, stressed labor insecurity, linking it to low wages and to the undocumented status of newcomers willing to accept poorly paid jobs. Taken together, their accounts show how long-established migrant women draw distinctions toward the “new migrants” within a shared context of persistent constraints and emerging uncertainties.

This article addresses the orientations that long-settled migrant women in their country of residence hold toward recent migration. In dialogue with Elias and Scotson (1994), we use the notion of “the established” to refer to migrant women who, after decades of residence in Chile, have constructed imaginaries, representations, and discourses about new migrant inhabitants, drawing distinctions in relation to their ways of dwelling, being, and belonging (or not) to the contexts of residence (Meier, 2013; Pérez *et al.*, 2025a; Ramírez and Stefoni, 2021; Wessendorf, 2020). Drawing on the experiences of Peruvian women who arrived in Chile during the 1990s and 2000s, this article contributes to theories on the construction of symbolic boundaries in migratory contexts.

We identify an ambivalent process of boundary-making that is, at once, defensive and reflexive. Ambivalence, as Boccagni and Kivisto (2019) remind us, describes a cognitive and emotional process in which people hold opposing orientations, simultaneously positive and negative appraisals directed toward the same object, person, or symbol. As we elaborate below, defensiveness describes processes of differentiation and closure toward difference, whereas reflexive moments nuance those prejudices and stigmas by introducing empathy and openness toward others. While the defensive dimension of boundaries in migratory contexts has received considerable attention (Berkovich, 2021; Pérez *et al.*, 2025a and 2025b; Warikoo and Bloemraad, 2018), more reflexive dispositions have been largely overlooked.

1 Tenement housing (*viviendas tugurizadas*) refers to those deteriorated, subdivided, or overcrowded dwelling units with habitability deficits, in many cases with problems of ventilation, sanitation, safety, and adequate access to basic services, in which both nationals and migrants reside under conditions of residential precarity in Chile and Latin America.

Studies on how established migrants and ethnic minorities react to newcomers show that their responses are shaped by prior histories of exclusion, everyday practices of coexistence, and local regimes of belonging (Erel, 2011; Wessendorf, 2020). Emotions such as fear, anxiety, shame, and resentment have been described as crucial to the migratory experience (Ahmed, 2010). Galasińska (2010), for instance, examines the tensions between “old” and “new” Polish migrants in a community club in the United Kingdom, showing how gossip and everyday conversation operate as emotional strategies of differentiation and exclusion. Through these practices, established migrants express resentment and nostalgia for a lost local space, along with a sense of moral superiority grounded in longer residence among newcomers. Wise (2010), drawing on the concept of sensuous multiculturalism, shows that inter-ethnic coexistence is built through everyday interactions in which noises, smells, and visible uses of the environment activate affects and memories that can produce familiarity and belonging, or discomfort and a sense of socio-spatial displacement among migrants with different residential trajectories.

In Latin America, the study of symbolic boundaries among migrants has begun to develop from a perspective that articulates mobility, urban space, and internal differentiation. The case of Colonia Juárez in Mexico City (Matossian, 2024) shows how those seeking refuge (Venezuelan, Haitian, and Central American people) face exclusions expressed both in material devices (fences, surveillance) and in discourses about the legitimate use of public space, producing a moral geography that distinguishes between “deserving” and “out-of-place” migrants. Similarly, Caggiano and Segura (2014) show that markers such as nationality, length of residence, racialization, and ways of dwelling generate internal hierarchies structuring inclusion and legitimacy in urban space in Buenos Aires. In that same city, Vaccotti (2017) shows, through the case of the Playón de Chacarita, that urban informality also produces distinctions between migrants with a longer trajectory of local community insertion and newcomers, whose trajectories have not yet been recognized in place. These studies show that urban belonging depends not only on legal status, but on everyday practices, public visibility, and trajectories of insertion that produce unequal relations among migrants in contexts of precarity and segregation.

Given that migration-driven diversification is a recent process in Chile (or recently a more complex one), studies on the (re)configuration

of boundaries among migrants constitute an emerging field. The focus has been mainly on the attitudes and perceptions of “native” Chilean inhabitants (born in the place of residence and without recent migrant ancestry) toward migrants (Álvarez *et al.* 2020). The construction of symbolic boundaries among diverse migrants has been addressed from the angle of intercultural conviviality in contexts of insecurity (Ramírez and Chan, 2020) and from processes of spatial appropriation in commercial neighborhoods (Ramírez and Stefoni, 2021). Recent research has also extended this analysis toward street vending as a socio-material infrastructure of migrant incorporation in Santiago (Ramírez and Rojas, 2026). Although without using the symbolic boundaries framework, Doña-Reveco and Gouveia (2022) show that Venezuelan migrants settled in Chile adopt discriminatory discourses toward their recently arrived compatriots and express support for restrictive migration policies. In the residential domain, Pérez *et al.* (2025a and 2025b) observe that, in contexts of widespread stigmatization and criminalization of the migrant population, the latter seeks to discursively legitimize its right to the city through ideas of civility and deservingness. These forms of self-representation operate as a defensive strategy to differentiate themselves from neighbors associated with illicit activities, incivilities, and abuses, and from those perceived as transgressors of the moral order of the host society and a threat to their own dignity as “good migrants.” Likewise, recent studies show that length of residence is a key factor in the configuration of ethno-national identifications and differentiations among those who have migrated (Lara *et al.*, 2025).

The study of the construction of symbolic boundaries by the established migrant population is crucial insofar as the latter can have an impact on the incorporation of new inhabitants. Recently arrived migrants tend to settle in places with long trajectories of migrant settlement and diversification (Wessendorf, 2020); areas where established migrants generate social, material, and even affective resources that facilitate the incorporation of new arrivals (Wessendorf and Gembus, 2024). Nonetheless, problems present in Chile, such as restrictive and segmented migration policies (Andrade and Cociña, 2024; Stang *et al.*, 2020; Stang and Stefoni, 2016), a labor and housing market that is precarized and exclusionary toward the migrant population (Durán and Sato, 2023; Pérez *et al.*, 2025a), and anti-immigrant attitudes among the local population (Álvarez *et al.*, 2020; Tijoux, 2011; Vera *et*

al., 2017), are bound to affect the willingness of established migrants to build networks to channel and support the entry of new migrants, even to the point of discouraging their arrival (Bilecen and Lubbers, 2021).

Examining the dispositions of established migrants toward recent migration is particularly pertinent in a context where hostile discourses predominate. Migration is frequently portrayed by the media as a threat and a burden to society (Figueiredo *et al.*, 2023; Scherman *et al.*, 2022). These categories are not recent. They were also part of the representations of the migrant population in Chile during the 1990s and 2000s (Garcés, 2015; Poo, 2009). Such continuities in the way the other is constructed over time invite us to question simplistic distinctions between “old” and “new” migration.

In dialogue with this context and the studies presented, this article examines the interaction between defensive and reflexive processes in the construction of symbolic boundaries. We propose that the orientations of long-settled migrant women in Chile toward recently arrived migrants cannot be understood solely as the reproduction of the notions of “good” and “bad” migrant, but rather as relational and situated configurations that express ambivalent processes of differentiation, moral evaluation, and social positioning. From this perspective, the analysis contributes to complicating our understanding of the dynamics of belonging and exclusion in South-South migration contexts, attending to the coexistence of defensiveness and reflexivity in everyday social life.

Complicating boundaries in contexts of migration-led diversification

Boundary-making concepts constitute a fertile framework for analyzing processes of social inclusion and exclusion in migratory contexts, emphasizing not only the explicit rules that define who belongs, but also the cultural repertoires, narratives, and inequalities that legitimize them (Wimmer, 2013). Within this approach, symbolic boundaries are “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (Lamont and Molnár, 2002, p. 168). These distinctions emerge from historical cultural repertoires and shared narrative conventions. In ethnic and migration studies, Barth (1969) was key in shifting the focus from cultural essence toward processes of differentiation, a move that Wimmer (2013) built on by conceiving boundaries not as individual tactics, but as responses to

historical configurations of national narratives, migration policies, and dominant public discourses.

More recent contributions have shown that, although in contexts of migration-led diversity these boundaries may be constructed in reference to certain ethno-national groups, criticisms of others tend rather to be linked to norms of civility, length of residence, and aspects related to ways of dwelling (Erel, 2011; Meier, 2013). In other words, behaviors that disrupt the established social order can be discursively explained (or ethnicized) as proper to certain migrant “groups.” This entails unreflexive explanations that fail to consider other variables and contextual factors at play. These boundaries are emphasized (and ethnicized) by long-settled migrants “to position their belonging in the neighborhood in a context of ongoing transformations and uncertainties” (Ramírez and Stefoni, 2021, p. 168).

Distinctions between newcomers and longer-settled residents are not grounded exclusively in the individual properties of people with ethno-national ancestries, but in a relational structure that reproduces the “established-outsiders” power dynamic proposed by Elias and Scotson (1994). According to these authors, the cohesion of “the established” lies not only in their length of residence, but in their control over prestige and the community networks, allowing them to monopolize recognition of the “us” and to stigmatize new members. Established inhabitants, Meier (2013) explains, drawing on these authors, evoke their ‘exclusive’ (and selective) memories of a place, delineating an authentic way of dwelling. The possession of these memories, rather than ethnicity *per se*, would generate cohesion among those who possess them and conflict with those who do not. Length of residence thus generates boundaries through shared memories and idealizations of how places were inhabited in the past. The generation of symbolic boundaries responds to logics of power in which delineating differences serves to maintain a position of prestige or privilege over others in particular spaces and social fields (Wimmer, 2013).

Looking at intra- and inter-ethnic distinctions and exclusions through processes of symbolic boundary construction invites us to de-essentialize migrant “groups.” In his influential work, Rogers Brubaker (2002) developed a critique of *groupism*, that is, of the tendency, present both in common sense and in the social sciences, to conceive of ethnic, national, or racialized groups as substantial

entities, internally homogeneous and clearly bounded, acting guided by shared principles, values, and identities. His proposal invites us to destabilize the lens of “ethnic groups” and to attend the experiences of people with shared ethno-national ancestries, given that at times other identifications and categories of difference (e.g., gender, length of residence, cohorts, status, roles) may more decisively shape their senses of belonging and social dispositions.

In studies on the production of boundaries in migratory contexts, recent contributions have examined the construction of defensive boundaries. Berkovich (2021) conceives of “defensive citizenship” as the reaction of “entitled” citizens (born in the country and of native-born parents) who, faced with a sense of threat, raise exclusive symbolic boundaries based on institutional distrust, anti-immigration attitudes, and experiences of socioeconomic precarity. Within that framework, newcomers are seen as competitors for resources and status, such that national identity closes itself off toward the other. Warikoo and Bloemraad (2018), for their part, analyze the “defensive inclusion” of the children of immigrants, expressed when they perceive that the dominant criteria of “Americanness” (whiteness, economic success, English speech) leave them out, leading them to re-appropriate these very criteria to widen symbolic boundaries and claim their national belonging, turning potentially exclusionary markers into vehicles of inclusion. While Berkovich describes a defensive orientation that closes the boundary to protect threatened material and symbolic privileges, Warikoo and Bloemraad (2018) show an orientation that, from subaltern positions, reconfigures the boundary to contest recognition.

Along these lines, Biehl (2020) proposes examining boundaries through a *dwelling lens*, attending both the places of residence and the practices of dwelling. Directing our attention to material and spatial components, and to the processes of meaning-making they involve, this perspective illuminates how residential forms and practices, together with the narratives that surround them, actively participate in the construction and resignification of social and symbolic differences. As Biehl (2020, p. 2241) puts it, the ‘dwelling lens’ allows us to explore both the places (*dwelling*s) and the processes of living (*to dwell*), and how both aspects are central to understanding the dynamics of migration-driven diversity in the contemporary city. This lens reveals that symbolic boundaries are not only negotiated discursively, but also materialized and transformed through everyday practices of coexistence and the concrete conditions of residential space.

His theoretical proposal has been productive in Latin America, where researchers have shown how migrants seek to distance themselves from various stigmas, presenting themselves as legitimate citizens who adhere to a virtuous and civilized way of dwelling in precarious urban contexts (Pérez *et al.*, 2025a) or making themselves visible as hardworking political subjects (Rho, 2021). “Defensiveness,” according to Pérez *et al.* (2025a, p. 297), “can also be used by migrants to claim their right to social citizenship in the face of those who question their belonging and their rights to belong.” Settled migrants, they explain, seek to differentiate themselves both from recent arrivals perceived as involved in criminal activities in the neighborhood, and from established neighbors engaging in morally questionable conduct. Faced with a precarious and unguaranteed belonging, differentiation toward others can be interpreted as a strategy to avoid the shame associated with stigmatization, and to mitigate the anxiety and fear that situations of uncertainty or racism generate (Ahmed, 2010). Boundaries, therefore, protect not only status, but also established migrants’ sense of self-worth and belonging.

Here we propose to examine the defensive dimension of symbolic boundaries alongside the reflexive dimension of their deployment, which has been largely overlooked. Being reflexive, we argue, does not imply losing sight of one’s own social location or of the distinctions toward others. Rather, it entails the capacity to imagine (and reaffirm) one’s own place and that of the other (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Reflexivity emerges situationally and not as a permanent critical disposition. Gieryn (2008) conceptualizes a shift from ‘settled’ boundaries, which operate automatically, invisible and unproblematic, toward ‘unsettled’ boundaries, which, in times of crisis or conflict, become objects of reflection, debate, and open dispute.

These latter boundaries “move into the foreground of discursive consciousness. Their location and even their existence become a matter for people to negotiate explicitly as they reflect on the potentially wide-ranging implications of a boundary becoming real here or there” (Gieryn, 2008, p. 96). In these moments of destabilization, boundary work becomes explicit, and actors argue, justify, and negotiate their positions and senses of belonging.

This suggests that reflexivity emerges relationally and not as an individual aptitude or process. For Sayer (2011), the relational character of reflexivity refers not only to the relationship with others, nor to a

reflexivity whose judgments are based on abstract logic or general rules. Quite the contrary, such judgments must begin from the concrete to identify the structures and conditions that underpin the problem. The key to the “situational” lies in “practical reason,” which “requires experience of past cases and attention to the specificities of present cases and contexts” (Sayer, 2011, p. 79). In acting, people draw on this practical reason to make judgments attuned to the particularities of history, context, and situation.

We propose that attending to the interaction between defensiveness and reflexivity offers a more complex understanding of symbolic boundaries in migratory contexts, one that moves beyond dualism and considers their articulations, their dynamics of destabilization, and their situated processes of negotiation.

Methodology and context

This article draws on ethnographic interviews carried out within two projects: a Fondecyt project (2019-2023) and a Mini-COES project (2024-2025). The first involved two years of ethnographic fieldwork in several neighborhoods with a high migrant population in Santiago Centro between 2021 and 2023, with participant observation in various public and semi-public spaces, and 58 ethnographic interviews. The focus of this project was to analyze the emerging practices and meanings built around coexistence by established and recently arrived migrants, in urban areas with different trajectories of migrant settlement and social diversification. Other analyses derived from this fieldwork have examined dynamics of neighborly care in these same contexts (Ramírez, 2023). The second project, by contrast, focused on eight ethnographic interviews with long-settled migrant women, deepening aspects that had emerged in the previous study, particularly around the processes of symbolic boundary construction.

We analyzed 16 interviews with late-middle-aged Peruvian migrant women (between 55 and 65 years old), corresponding to 14 participants, two of whom were interviewed twice in order to deepen some themes that emerged in their accounts. The interviewees had between 15 and 32 years of residence, having arrived in Chile during the 1990s and 2000s. This period was marked by feminized intraregional migration, in which Santiago was a preferred destination (Stefoni, 2003; Tijoux, 2011). Peruvian women were incorporated mostly as live-

in domestic workers, a sector historically racialized and feminized in Chile (Stefoni, 2003; Stefoni and Fernández, 2011; Vera *et al.*, 2017), characterized by marked asymmetries of power analyzed as a relational, situated, and historical practice between employers and workers (Fernández Ossandón, 2021). In the early 2000s, it was estimated that 43% of Peruvian women were concentrated in domestic work (Dirección del Trabajo, 2005).

Migratory regularization depended on the “contract-bound visa” of Decree Law 1.094, which required two continuous years with the same employer in order to apply for permanent residence, reinforcing vulnerability (Stefoni and Fernández, 2011). In this context, Peruvian live-in domestic workers were constructed as “good nannies” on account of their supposed “submissive and docile disposition”, turning feminized Peruvian migration into an “object of desire for otherness” in the form of the “permitted nanny” (Vera *et al.*, 2017, p. 26).

Today, Chile has consolidated itself as a major destination for migrants from Latin American and Caribbean countries. At the end of 2022, 1,625,074 migrants were recorded (SERMIG, 2023). Whereas at the beginning of this century the migrant population was mostly from neighboring countries (Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina), with Peru in the lead, the Venezuelan (32.8%), Peruvian (15.4%), Colombian (11.7%), and Haitian (11.4%) populations now stand out. In addition, in 2022 it was estimated that 13.1% of migrants were 50 years old or older, a predominantly female population (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia, 2022). At the national level, the Metropolitan Region concentrates 56.8% of the total foreign population, serving as the country’s main migratory hub (INE and SERMIG, 2024).

Globally, Chile ranks as the fourth destination for Peruvian migration, concentrating 11.7% of the more than 3.4 million who live outside that country, behind only the United States, Spain, and Argentina (INEI, 2023). Settlement is markedly urban: 74% reside in the Metropolitan Region and, within it, Greater Santiago concentrates the largest number of Peruvians in a single city worldwide.

Since the 1990s, a migratory governance regime has taken shape around a moral framework that opposes the “good migrant” —productive, regular, and desirable— to the “bad migrant,” associated with illegality and the threat to security, a distinction that permeates both legislation and public discussion (Brumat and Vera Espinoza, 2024; Stang *et al.*, 2020). More recently, Law 21.325 of 2021 reinforced visas tied to

formal employment and established expedited expulsion mechanisms, consolidating the figure of the “contributing migrant” while defining “illegality” as both a legal offense and a moral defect (Andrade and Cociña, 2024).

The arrival of more than 700,000 Venezuelans between 2018 and 2024 represented the largest intraregional migratory movement in Chile, sharpening both the securitizing rhetoric of the State and citizens’ perception of a “migratory crisis” (Andrade and Cociña, 2024). This social climate is reflected in various national surveys showing a restrictive turn. For example, in December 2024, 79% supported “closing the border to new immigration” and only a third viewed the arrival of foreigners positively, down 15 points from 2022 (Cadem, 2024).

Various reports also document a rise in episodes of physical and symbolic xenophobia against Venezuelans and people of other nationalities, who are accused of “taking advantage” of the State, reflecting the competition for symbolic and material resources between groups (Sheehan, 2022). The good/bad migrant interface not only demands that the other fulfill a stereotyped role of “good migrant” (Vera *et al.* 2017); it also operates as a device of government and control that socially naturalizes legal hierarchies and legitimizes the exclusion of those who fall outside the category of the “contributing migrant” (Brumat and Vera Espinoza, 2024).

This political, economic, and media landscape helps situate the trajectories and contexts of long-settled migrant women in Chile, as well as their everyday dispositions toward an ever-changing migratory regime.

Symbolic boundaries toward recent migration

Through inductive analysis, three analytical axes emerge from the categories and distinctions through which the interviewees refer to recently arrived people: urban insecurity and incivility; labor market precarization; and self-sufficiency and (in)dependence on the State. Drawing on these axes, the analysis examines the processes of symbolic boundary construction, tracing the articulation between defensive and reflexive dimensions in each case.

Insecurity and (In)civility: boundaries of order and respectability

The perception of a rise in crime, illicit acts, and disorder in public spaces was widespread among our interviewees. Defensiveness emerged as a direct response to a felt deterioration of the social order in their neighborhoods, where the presence of certain migrant “groups” was associated with insecurity and crime. In their accounts, they spoke of the loss of the tranquility that had characterized their life in Chile. Describing a neighborhood that is “no longer safe,” Marilí noted: “I’m even afraid to go out now. I work [and go] from my house to my work, from my work to my house. I no longer go out for that very reason, out of fear.” Marta added: “At six or seven in the evening you won’t see me on the street. I get home from work, I take a shower and go to bed; I don’t go out at all.”

Venezuelans and Haitians were perceived as drivers of insecurity. Some interviewees noted, however, that within the Venezuelan population one had to differentiate between “professionals,” “very educated people,” and recent migrants who had brought what Gabriela so bluntly describes at the beginning of this article as “scum.” This is linked to the articulation of a “we” that generates differences grounded in temporality rather than ethno-national ancestry, as Eliza suggests:

Look, the migrants from back in the day, us, we’ve always behaved well. But the ones coming now, even from our own country... there’s all kinds, I mean, Colombians, Venezuelans, Peruvians clashing with each other.

Criticisms of drug and alcohol consumption are added to this association between recent migration and urban crime and incivilities. A defensive stance emerges, set against a past of relative tranquility and a present marked by insecurity. Marta recalled walking peacefully at night in earlier years, capturing this loss of urban peace, noting that “I used to like to sit in the little square, and I was happy, because there were activities, there were street fairs. Now all of that is gone. Nothing but druggies and drunks, every single day of my life.”

These accounts reveal emotional and embodied responses to the disruption of everyday routines, along with a sense of displacement and restriction in the use of public spaces (Wise, 2010). Defensiveness finds expression in the prioritization of moral order and civil respectability, through the production of internal hierarchies and differentiation toward recent arrivals, drawing on markers such as length of residence and place memory (Elias and Scotson, 1994; Meier, 2013). In this

frame, others appear as a threat to the city as a space of belonging. The critique of incivilities and urban disorder not only produces a moral differentiation, but operates as an affective strategy aimed at protecting the sense of belonging and avoiding socio-spatial exclusion.

Just as widespread as the association of new migration with insecurity and incivility was the reference to structural factors underpinning these problems. Across their accounts, the interviewees displaced responsibility for crime from recently arrived migrants toward the sociopolitical context and Chilean authorities, at times adopting punitive language that called for a “heavy hand” on the part of the State. In particular, the social transformations following the 2019 social uprising, the consequent loss of respect for Carabineros, and the supposed passivity of the Chilean judicial system, would, in their view, promote and perpetuate disruptive behavior in public spaces. Marilí, for example, exclaimed that “The laws must be toughened!” arguing that crime persists because the laws are too lax, a critique directed at the State for its failure to maintain order.

Similarly, Eliza criticized Chilean culture for being “very liberal.” In her view, the lack of “more of a heavy hand” would also be felt in child-rearing, which she associated with the disorder among young people that affects Chileans and migrants alike. By blaming both institutions and the host society for the deterioration of security, they perform an act of situational reflexivity that, while drawing on discourses of order and control, situates the problem within broader failures affecting the population as a whole. The articulation of defensive and reflexive boundaries reveals a complex ambivalence in which, on the one hand, they use the moral differentiation of others to protect their dignity and, on the other, they place the problem within a shared context and direct a critique at Chilean law-and-order policies.

It is worth noting that the construction of the recently arrived “bad migrant” tends to be masculinized and juvenilized; young men with attitudes that disrupt everyday coexistence. These images contrast with the self-definition of these late-middle-aged women: people who “have always behaved well” and have come to work honestly. Here, the initial distinctions blur, extending beyond newcomers. The Peruvian women were particularly critical of the conduct of some Peruvian men who, although recognized as hardworking, were criticized for lacking civility through their festive behavior and public alcohol consumption. While Gabriela lamented, “It saddens me. I say, you come here, work hard,

only to get your paycheck and start drinking,” Marilí repeatedly returned to this theme:

So, I listen and I think, well, patience, you know, because sometimes they act like they’re in their own backyard. And Peruvians get a lot of heat for that, because they love to party, they like their music loud. My husband is actually one of those... The Peruvian pulls out his speaker, pulls out his little chairs, invites his friends over, the women come too. They all get together and they’re bringing drinks. So, we kind of make a scene. And Chileans here just aren’t like that.

The critique of the Peruvian “party-loving” Peruvian man allows them to distinguish themselves morally as hardworking and responsible women who respect the dominant norms of coexistence in the Chilean context. This strategy of moral differentiation is linked to the need to adhere to a stereotyped role of respectability, grounded in the fulfillment of moral demands directed at those who are marked as others and who must behave in a virtuous and legible manner to be recognized (Pérez *et al.*, 2025a; Vera *et al.*, 2017). By rejecting the disruptive behavior of their compatriots, the interviewees reaffirm their moral legitimacy as exemplary and integrated migrant women, distancing themselves from the stigma that has historically marked their own migration.

Defensiveness thus operates as a mechanism of internal hierarchization grounded in respectability and compliance with the norms of civility, while simultaneously articulating with moments of reflexivity. Through intra-ethnic distinctions, the interviewees hold that incivility would not be inherent to an ethno-national ancestry, but rather linked to situated practices and conduct. As Eliza puts it, “we can’t lump everyone together, because I have friends from work who are nannies and are Venezuelan, but they’re a different caliber of people.” These defensive distinctions are reflexively nuanced when the interviewees avoid “groupism” (Brubaker, 2002) and recognize that the transgression of the norms of coexistence constitutes a behavioral problem that (although gendered) cuts across nationalities, without being an exclusive characteristic of recent migration.

Boundaries within labor precarity: Between self-sufficiency and structural hostility

Perceptions of recent migration are also traversed by migratory irregularity, constructed in public discourse as a threat to the labor market, blamed for downward pressure on wages and the deterioration

of working conditions built up after years of labor market insertion. These widely circulating interpretations activate defensive boundaries grounded in a morality of work, at times sacrificial, and in the protection of a precarious economic status. This response, we propose, does not stem from a direct empirical evaluation, but must be read as a reaction to the persistent uncertainty, labor exclusion, and structural hostility that mark migrant experiences.

The interviewees demarcate a legal and socioeconomic boundary between themselves (regularized workers, with “papers”) and the recently arrived labor force they perceive as undocumented and, therefore, willing to accept low wages. This would include work in feminized sectors such as domestic service. “There are a lot of people who charge less, and that brings down the wages for those of us who do have papers. For example, I might charge fifty thousand for a day, but then another woman comes along with no papers and charges you twenty-five or thirty thousand, and that really hurts us,” Marta notes, pointing to an unfair competition that directly threatens her economic stability. Legality thus becomes an axis of stratification that shapes migrant incorporation by reinforcing hierarchies (Menjívar and Abrego, 2012).

This narrative emerges in the context of competition for scarce resources in an already precarious and exclusionary labor market (Durán and Sato, 2023). For Lissette, the owner of a small business in the neighborhood, irregularity brings with it informal street commerce, which would affect those who, like her, depend on “day-to-day” earnings and whose profits would decline with the new competition. This perception contrasts with ethnographic research showing how that very street vending serves, for those who practice it, as a platform for accessing income and networks in an exclusionary labor market (Ramírez and Rojas, 2026). By constructing this distinction, the interviewees present themselves as adherents to the moral mandates of the Chilean State, such as contributing to the country and economic self-sufficiency (Pérez *et al.*, 2025a).

During the interviews, the women also tempered their recriminations when recalling their initial experiences in live-in domestic work. These were described as “practically slavery,” with jobs “from Monday to Monday,” or where they “started Sunday night,” for example. Overcoming these conditions (managing to set “my own hours” and be “well valued in the labor market”) allowed them to display a sense of superiority that they project onto recently arrived migrants. Yet, their own memory

of early exploitation gave them a basis for reflexivity. Marilí, for example, having obtained her residence and a certain labor stability, was aware of the disadvantage faced by recently arrived migrants:

Here I can keep working... maybe it's still easier for me, because I have my residency. But if someone new were to come, well, they'd have to work under the table, and on top of that they'd be exposed to a lot of things.

The negative generalizations about a supposed labor disloyalty are nuanced, situated within an adverse socioeconomic context that the interviewees both perceive and criticize. They recognize that rising requirements and costs of regularization have turned obtaining documents into a challenge, making irregularity more prolonged and, therefore, exploitation more likely and lasting. This perception of present-day difficulty is a central element that nuances the defensive critique:

Before it was a lot easier. Easy in one way and hard in another: easy, because they processed it [the visa] quickly. ... we paid eight thousand pesos, and now it's eighty thousand. You had to be with the same person for three years to get permanent residence... But now there are people who have been here five years, three years, and the papers don't come. And it's because there are too many foreigners. Way too many foreigners (Marta).

By identifying the exponential increase in the cost of these procedures and criticizing the migration bureaucracy, Marta makes clear that the precarization of newcomers is institutionally promoted and prolonged, going beyond the individual morality of the migrant. Drawing on lived experiences, the interviewees identify conditions of existence and broader structural aspects (Sayer, 2011) that facilitate institutional hostility, without simply blaming the individual. Gabriela reinforces this perspective, interpreting the situation as a sign of an anti-immigrant state policy:

I have people I know who submitted their papers three, four years ago and they're only getting them now. To me, it's because Chile doesn't want as much immigration anymore, so it's all been made very slow.

The comparison between the relative ease of their own regularization and the barriers faced by recently arrived migrants, in a context of restrictive and segmented migration policies, entails a situational reflexivity.

Marta points out that labor precarity is not limited to migration. She notes that it also affects Chileans, who:

are living on the edge, really on the edge... The economy hits hard. The helplessness of... it's the money... just imagine, there are people who have to go to work, get up super early to earn minimum wage that isn't enough to pay for a house.

By placing instability within a broader economic and social context, the interviewees draw on a form of reflexivity that de-essentializes the labor conflict, recognizing that precarity is not exclusive to the migrant population, but runs through society as a whole.

While defensiveness led the interviewees to distinguish themselves, having lived through conditions of high vulnerability during their first years in Chile allowed them to recognize the situation of recently arrived people. Marilí, who arrived without networks in the mid-1990s and, in those early days, slept out in the open in the Plaza de Armas while looking for housing alongside other Peruvians, noted that, although the current situation was more critical, “we too had to go through” experiences of extreme precarity and overcrowding. Bárbara, who faced racism, mistreatment, and eviction, also recognizes the growing hostility of her surroundings.

This recognition of shared vulnerability translates into an explicit warning to fellow Peruvians not to come to Chile, as Marta expresses in one of the opening quotes of this article. This attitude, although indicating a lack of active solidarity with newcomers, is a reflexive act grounded in their knowledge of the adverse and precarious context. Their warnings (“I tell them not to come [...] what would they come for?”) constitute a recognition of the material conditions imposed on newcomers. These women's perceptions are not purely xenophobic, but shaped by the recognition of a migratory regime grounded in control, exclusion, and expulsion (Stang *et al.*, 2020), and by a context in which their jobs remain unstable, with relatively low wages and varying degrees of informality.

Self-sufficiency, state dependency, and the morality of deservingness

The late-middle-aged, long-settled Peruvian migrant women interviewed perceived that recent migrants would have a demanding attitude toward the Chilean State, contrasting with their own morality of self-sufficiency and the culture of effort. These criticisms echoed ideas widely circulating in public opinion, in which the demands made on the State by recently arrived people would clash with their principles of

“hard work” and independence. “They feel like the State owes them something,” Lissette said, and went on:

I hear them talk about how the State needs to give them things, like it’s an obligation. But that’s what you have hands and feet for — to work. No matter what, you gotta work. The State has never given us Peruvians anything for free, at least it never gave me anything. Everything I have, even my house, I got it with a subsidy, I bought it through my own hard work, and you feel more satisfied when you get things through your own effort.

Marilí echoes this, describing recent migrants as feeling “like the country of Chile owes them something. And that really clashes with me.” The interviewees even position themselves as “grateful to the Chilean State,” contrasting this attitude with that of others. Lissette goes on:

I hear a lot of people who, sometimes, I just think are hypocrites. Because Chile opened its doors to them, they got settled, they have their jobs, they got a lot of things... But then they start complaining about the rent and all that. So sometimes I think, come on, why are they so ungrateful?

In this domain, the interviewees also turn their critique toward the authorities. Echoing perceptions widely held in the local context, Gabriela draws on the opinion attributed to “Chilean ladies,” who say that “the government cares about foreigners and not about us,” alluding, for example, to the handing out of “many benefits, many, many cash transfers during the pandemic and ever since.” Through these kinds of statements, long-settled migrant women not only express a defensive stance but also claim recognition and a sense of belonging as women settled in the host society.

The perception that recent migrants are prioritized extends to services such as health care. Among our interviewees circulated the idea that migrants wanted to “demand” things and that Chileans should be pushed aside so that newcomers get preference for medical procedures. The supposed easy access to social housing was also criticized, with Gabriela mentioning the case of a Venezuelan woman who had obtained a house “outside Santiago” that many Chileans have never been able to get. This perception of the migrant as an “abuser” is a recurring theme in the moral panic about immigration and social housing, documented in other contexts such as the United Kingdom, where newcomers are assumed to be “skilled players of the generosity” of the State (Robinson, 2010, p. 64). “In establishing such a moral distinction,” as Pérez *et al.* (2025b, p. 566) put it, “our interlocutors

denied other migrants the capacity to demand rights in the political community, while affirming their own subjectivity as bearers of rights.”

The critique of the “demanding attitude” of recent migrants sits uneasily against the docility and submission historically demanded of racialized women in Chile, including Peruvian migrants (Vera *et al.*, 2017). In this sense, the current critique of the “demandingness” of newcomers rests in part on the reaffirmation that deservingness is earned by maintaining a low profile and through silent effort.

The defensive boundary around state dependency takes on a gender dimension when it invokes a reproductive morality. In line with existing studies, Afro-descendant women and their motherhood tend to be framed through xenophobic, racist, gendered, and class-based prejudices (frames that have often resulted in discrimination and violations within medical services, rather than verifiable privileges or benefits) (e.g., Reyes Muñoz *et al.*, 2021). Here, the critique is directed at recent migrant women who, in Gabriela’s view, would have children to access state benefits, a strategy seen as “taking advantage.”

Bárbara, who also mentions having “heard” that migrants have brought over their families to get benefits, feels that “it shouldn’t be that way, because here too there are a lot of people who have been working for many years.” These perceptions use motherhood and the family as a moral marker of difference, set against the ethic of sacrifice, reflected in Peruvian women’s experiences of being “solo mothers” in Chile (Maldonado, 2022), and in the sacrifices of long-distance motherhood that marked many of their experiences upon arriving in Chile during the 1990s and 2000s (Stefoni, 2003).

This critique is rooted in the perception, not without contradictions, that today’s migrants would acquire status and stability more quickly and easily than the interviewees did in their own time. Along these lines, one interviewee noted that recently arrived migrants “have everything handed to them, you see it in the cars they drive, something we could never have.”

Yet this defensive boundary is nuanced, for example, when the critique of state dependency is complicated by the recognition of the extreme housing precarity that new migrants face. One of our interviewees recalled that “they used to put up signs that said ‘Room for rent. No foreigners.’” Marilí, recalling that Peruvians “also had to go through” situations of overcrowding, acknowledges the continuity of

residential exclusion, challenging the idea that newcomers would easily obtain social benefits:

There are a lot of families who live in overcrowded conditions, which at the time we Peruvians also had to go through, overcrowded, right? I mean, back then up to 20 people would pile into one place, and the same thing is happening now, especially with the Haitians, because I have Haitian friends, and I've actually seen it myself, up to 10 people living in a single room, and in a room, not even a house, a room. Can you imagine?

On this axis, reflexivity appears in a less clear or more limited way, articulated through the contradictions between the discourse of “state dependency” and the material reality they observe. By recognizing the continuity of residential exclusion, for example, they nuance and complicate the idea that new migrants would easily obtain benefits.

By framing the distinctions within cultural repertoires of “deservingness” and “dignity” (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Pérez *et al.*, 2025b), it becomes clear that prejudices are sustained not only by dominant discourses, but also by the need to secure a sense of self-worth (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012) within a system that does not recognize trajectories of sustained effort.

The perception that the State favors recently arrived migrants also triggers a critique of unequal treatment (Araujo, 2019). Here, defensiveness is oriented not only toward the behavior or morality of the migrant, but toward a State that appears incapable of recognizing prior sacrifices and ensuring fair treatment.

Conclusions

This article analyzed the orientations of long-settled Peruvian migrant women in Chile toward recent migration, situating them in dialogue with their life trajectories and with meso- and macro-structural contexts marked by negative media representation, precarization, and structural hostility toward migration. Drawing on ethnographic interviews, we show that these orientations cannot be understood solely as an uncritical reproduction of dominant prejudices, but rather as the result of ambivalent processes of symbolic boundary construction articulating defensiveness and reflexivity.

Defensiveness emerges as a strategy for managing dignity and protection against stigmatization (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012), especially in contexts of urban insecurity, labor precarity, and competition

for scarce resources. In this sense, defensive boundaries allow established migrant women to affirm their moral respectability, their belonging, and their right to inhabit urban space, faced with an environment perceived as increasingly uncertain and hostile. These boundaries draw on repertoires widely available in the public sphere (order, self-sufficiency, deservingness) and are shaped by axes of gender, age, and length of residence.

Yet one of the main contributions of this study is to show that these boundaries do not operate in a closed or homogeneous way. The interviewees also deploy moments of situational reflexivity that nuance, complicate, and at times contradict their own defensive stances. This reflexivity does not emerge as a stable disposition or a general stance of solidarity, but in specific moments activated by their own memories of exclusion and precarity, by the recognition of shared structural conditions, and by an awareness of the institutional hostility that runs through migrant experiences more broadly.

In dialogue with Elias and Scotson (1994), we show that length of residence does not operate as a mere chronological fact, but as a source of moral authority that simultaneously enables differentiation toward newcomers and empathy for them, anchored in their own memories of exclusion and precarity. This moral authority, understood as a relational and sociohistorical practice (Fernández Ossandón, 2021), does not operate in the abstract but from concrete positions of gender, class, and migratory trajectory.

The analysis of the three axes —urban insecurity and incivility, labor precarity, and state dependency— shows that defensiveness and reflexivity coexist ambivalently, activated differently according to the topic, the moment, and the type of perceived threat. Along the axis of insecurity, reflexivity emerges most clearly, shifting the critique from the individual migrant toward institutional and structural failures. Along the labor axis, memories of personal exploitation activate recognition of newcomers' situations, without necessarily translating into active solidarity. Along the axis of state dependency, reflexivity appears in a more limited and contradictory manner, challenged by perceptions of unequal treatment and the need to affirm one's own deservingness.

These findings contribute to complicating studies on symbolic boundaries in migratory contexts, showing that the orientations of established migrants cannot be reduced to the “good” and “bad” migrant

binary, nor read solely as a reproduction of the host society's prejudices. Rather, they express relational and situated configurations that account for differentiated trajectories of incorporation, specific social positions, and forms of agency that, while limited by adverse structural conditions, are nonetheless significant.

Finally, this study invites us to rethink the dynamics of belonging and exclusion in South-South migration contexts, attending to the complexity of relations among migrants with different trajectories of settlement. In a context of growing hostility toward migration, understanding these dynamics is crucial for avoiding simplistic readings that homogenize migrant populations and for advancing toward policies and practices that recognize the internal diversity among migrants and the structural conditions that shape their orientations and positions.

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