VIEWPOINTS

Migrants in critical circumstances: building bridges from fear to hope

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> "...the fleeing traveler
> Sooner or later stops his walk
> And though the oblivion
> that destroys everything
> Has killed my old illusion
> I keep hidden a humble hope
> Which is all the fortune of my heart".
> "Return", Carlos Gardel and Alfredo Lepera[1]

> "Only that which is gone is what belongs to us."
> Jorge Luis Borges[2]

1. Introduction

Tangos, in many cases composed by migrants or their descendants, evoke the nostalgia of not finding the everyday human or physical landscape that gives familiarity to existence.

In the life of migrants, even forced migrants, not everything is nostalgia and pain; migrants can also be happy and enterprising. However, this is easier to achieve in a favorable social environment where interculturality enriches society as a whole. Migrants' life projects encourage the fulfillment of ideals, especially where the host context has political and social characteristics that offer hospitality.

All migrants have made decisions in which a space between adventure and limit, "I" and "we", trust and risk, unfolds.

Since the 19th century, there has been an increase in displacements of different types, magnitude and direction. Migration has been facilitated by industrial revolution, demographic expansion, and improved and cheaper transportation. It was also in the 19th century that theoretical explanations of the phenomenon began to be proposed.[3] Among the current theories, pessimistic positions emphasize the problems in the country of origin and optimistic ones emphasize the reasons for attraction to the host country. The theories do not cover all the motivations for migration. They view the migrant

as responding only to structural issues. However, they do not value the game of propagandistic emissaries, or the role of unofficial information, and much less they consider migrants' family or personal motivations.[4]

In the countries of arrival, it is not only important to have niches that offer opportunities for insertion into the environment, but also the ethnic support networks or networks that favor employment opportunities. The social network model opposes the structuralist approach to society, hence placing value on the possible choices of migrants.[5]

Jacques Revel states that the insertion of migrants in possible spaces is influenced, among other factors, by individual capacities and/or cultural capitals. It is clear that migration must be approached in an interdisciplinary manner.[6]

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees statistics, as of the end of 2020, there were 82.4 million forcibly displaced persons and 26.4 million refugees, more than half of them under 18 years of age, in addition to stateless persons who have been denied nationality and access to basic rights.[7]

The numbers are impressive, but more impressive are the challenges that migrants face. For them, death threat is not a fantasy; it is a terrifying reality, and these people oscillate between fear and terror. These emotional states are located in a social and cultural context that can leave traumatic traces, as well as physical and mental health alterations. Almost all migrants face difficulties when it comes to their identity formation and when it comes to the survival of their life project, drastically interrupted by the migration.

Subjectivity passes from hell to purgatory, where fear-terror is conjured with some defensive possibilities, and terror may not be "closed". However, somehow life goes on, and with it, so does hope.

In this paper, we will present reflections on some recurrent topics that we encountered in a qualitative research conducted by our team, privileging the voices of the migrants themselves. A secondary source for this research was a workshop organized by our psychoanalytic association (APdeBA) aimed to accompany Latin American migrants arriving to Argentina.

We collaborated with professionals from Educreando© Binational project and the Research Department of the University Institute of Mental Health of the Psychoanalytic Association of Buenos Aires, IUSAM, Argentina, and professionals from IMAGO, an academic organization for the training of psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapists based in Italy.

The research team included experts in psychiatry, psychology, psychoanalysis, different fields of education: history, language, special education, among others, in order to guarantee a reading enriched by the contributions from different disciplines and for the purpose of triangulation of interpreters for epistemological vigilance in the production of knowledge.

Over the years, we have changed our approach to the reading of problems and conflicts by including interculturality from a human-rights perspective. We try to discern the factors of social exclusion related not only to the society of arrival and its prejudices, but also to the experiences of migrants who may fear "disturbing a society that has what is fair and necessary".[8]

2. Foundation

Today, there are at least two risk factors affecting the integral health and mental health in particular: constant exposure to an existential threat and vulnerability (product of abandonment and neglect of populations that are made invisible). This produces fragilization of the self, loss of social ties and segregation, with social exclusion being a significant variable in the health-illness continuum.

In this case, we conduct research that gathers from the community the voices of migrants and seeks to return to the community the knowledge that is transformed into data and information.

One of the purposes of this research was to build knowledge that allows understanding migrants and helping them with the inclusion in the society of arrival. Another, no less important, purpose was to provide the country of arrival with inputs to optimize reception projects.

3. The research objectives were as follows

- To explore non-conscious mental processes in the construction of subjectivity, both in migrations in critical contexts and in those guided by ideals.
- To categorize shared as well as divergent collective experiences and representations.
- To situate ideals and their transformations in the lives of migrants.
- To identify socio-cultural and personal factors in the context from which the migrants depart and to which they arrive.
- To recognize the ways in which different migrants cope with change.

4. Methodology

This is an exploratory study using qualitative analysis methodology within the framework of Grounded Theory[9] that seeks to find the theory in the facts and experiences of the interviewees.

The cases selected corresponded to a purposive sample that included forced migrants in critical contexts (political, economic, dictatorships, wars, and others) and migrants who fled of their own free will guided by ideals.

The study involved people from Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America, Italy and Spain who migrated between 1950 and 1960 and between 2000 and 2010. The instrument used was a semi-structured interview that inquired about the historical context, the context of subjectivation (ideals, mourning, decisions, and experiences), and the context of interactions in and with the receiving community.

The findings obtained in the interviews allowed *a posteriori* elaboration of the analyzed categories.

We based our research on the theoretical perspectives laid out in Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents.* Freud states that human suffering has three possible sources: the force of nature, the finitude of the body, and the bond with human beings. He claims the latter to perhaps be the most painful.[10]

From this point of view, disruptive social phenomena may provoke a fracture in the psychic and relational fabric of the subject.

For psychoanalysis, the processes of identification have a preponderant and constitutive role in the psyche. However, the identifications that are inscribed both in the ego and in the superego are not closed processes, but are taken up by the groups of belonging and institutions, forming a "we".

When there is a rupture in the continuity of the past and the present, it is necessary to reconstruct a sense of the future. A project, a cause, creates the illusion of control over one's own destiny.[11]

5. Recurrent topics: analysis

These are the result of the combination of the data obtained and the theoretical framework.

5.1. Production of absences

The migrants' subjectivity encounters painful absences in their vital experience, that is to say, they do not yet find what they expect and need. When arriving to the host society, migrants try to recreate psychic and social ties that are indispensable to building "presences".[12]

When the latter does not occur and does not connect with the vital aspect, what remains unnamed cannot be shared, and the migrant runs the risk of integrating a "culture of absence", linked to nostalgia and to the duels that could not be processed.

5.2. Culture of silence

Faced with very painful experiences, some subjects voluntarily refuse to talk about social events that they seek to get rid of. Thus, a "culture of silence" is formed. These can be shameful events for the social memory of their people (dictatorships, genocides, terrorism) and for the identity of the subject.

5.3. Subjectivity in transit

The subjectivity of the migrant is a subjectivity in transit, on the one hand, anchored in cruel and violent environments of risk; and on the other hand, in building myths/beliefs/ideas/life projects from where meaning emerges.

5.4. Collectivities as a place of existence

In the context of change, migrants maintain religious beliefs, ideologies, music, political tradition, and spaces in which they keep their places of existence. Grouping by nationality helps maintaining the stability of an identity in transit. The hope of rootedness is usually deposited in the children, who quickly learn the local culture.

5.5. What is feared is their clothes

Traces of the social trauma experienced by migrants generate convictions and certainties sustaining the traumatic condition inside people, organizing representations of repetition of what is "feared" in the country of arrival. We define social trauma as a set of events that leave marks in a society and in an era, affecting the integral health of the people who experienced it.

Migrants live among realities and ghosts that haunt them and that mark the departure and sometimes the arrival to the host country, for a long time.

5.6. Weaving cultures

Diverse cultural forms (dialogue, shock, suffering) and spontaneous mediators appear: fellow countrymen, peers at school, etc. In this order of things, a "cultural interweaving" takes place since migrants usually look for something in common between their culture and the host culture (family values, religion) to acquire support and an organizer that provides long-term security.

5.7. Bridges in case doubts emerge

Migrants lose both material things and immaterial goods that define their identity, belonging, recognition, and security. The idea that they will return is usually recurrent, so they do not establish stable and lasting relationships in the country of arrival or they do not dispose of goods in the country of origin.

5.8. People who make the decision to migrate

Decision makers lead a life of permanent work, guided by the ideal of achieving social mobility and gaining prosperity for their families, which may have remained in the country of origin. Work/study becomes a stabilizer of identity and existence, generating a sense of empowerment.

5.9. The pushed ones

In migrant families, children and teenagers are the pushed ones. They understand intellectually the decisions made by their parents. However, when they are interviewed they resent having had no other way out or having not been listened to. These resentments allow some migrant children to sublimate/repair through writing or through other artistic or vocational expressions. However in others, there remains an experience of not being sufficiently recognized, which affects both the self and the community.

5.10. Transitioning through change

Moving from one culture to another causes some migrants to over-adapt and become part of a "micro culture of no contact with emotionality". Some practice endogamy by maintaining language and traditions. Still, others adapt and integrate, creating feedback links with the community.

5.11. Loneliness

"Loneliness" appears because:

a) they feel how far their relatives are,

b) there is no one left alive in the family,

c) the fantasy of return is over,

d) the migrant was not included in the decision,

e) living ties were left behind.

5.12. Citizen versus hero

Obtaining documents for some is an important issue in order to get social and psychological support in the country of arrival. For others, it is a matter of pride to retain the nationality of origin. This is related to the defensive idealization of the country of departure, on this basis of which migrants construct themselves as heroes.

6. A practice of listening and intervention when accompanying migrants

Through an agreement with the International Organization for Migrants (IOM), our psychoanalytic association (APdeBA) organized a workshop to accompany Latin American migrants arriving to Argentina. This workshop became a secondary source for this research.

Although accompaniment is a different task from research, it provides inputs for further learning. As opposed to research, in accompaniment, the psychoanalyst is involved, even if he/she keeps an inner distance in order to observe and select an intervention strategy. The workshop creates the space and time for empathically shared elaboration in a group that allows the recreation

of bonds of trust, which are the first to be lost and the most difficult to rebuild. The persecutory anxieties that accompanied people when they were in danger are still active and are awakened in the face of any frustration.

a) The workshop welcomes the mobilization of identity and helps the migrants with the access to rights. It accompanies migrants in the process of acquiring documentation. Not having the right of citizenship imperils the integral health of migrants, a process that begins in the country of origin and adds to the reasons for departure.

b) The workshop becomes a cultural mediator facilitating the transformation from the initial distrust to a network of mutual help.

c) The workshop welcomes the context of protest that precedes that of the proposal and that interweaves the prejudices about one and the other.

d) In the workshop, persecutory, sinister experiences are named in order to be transformed into integrated learning experiences for life. This can be achieved if mediators from the field of creative expression are introduced, can help to deploy a scenario to inhabit where migrants feel part of the human community.

e) The gradual process of empowerment in the country of arrival requires the following:

- to feel recognized as a subject of rights and to act in this sense;

- to work or study in cultural interaction with practices and production.

f) The workshop allows migrants to imagine a parallel life in the country of origin until they manage to create roots. How do you create roots when you leave active ties that promote mourning? Creating roots overcomes the sensation of floating with the house and the identity on one's back. We believe that the social context of the host country can facilitate creating roots among migrants.

g) The workshop works as a reorganizer of the psychic and social life.

7. Conclusions

We were deeply moved by the readings of testimonial accounts. All the interviewees seemed to have always been waiting for us to talk to them. Far from assuming a romantic and nostalgic posture about the past and the immigrant situation, we shaped the encounter as an intersubjective experience, trying to generate spaces for the construction of collective memory.

We feel the need for an inquiry with epistemological vigilance in order to understand each migrant's experience, avoiding the homogenizing tendency of globalization.

We feel challenged and empathize with the stories of migrants who struggle to be recognized as constitutive of individual and social identity.

7.1. The work of analysis

When migrating, the human being lives a dilemma: to remain trapped in his or her origins or to begin an adventure of change that opens horizons but can also lead to mourning. It is in this space that the comedy and drama of the migrant's existence unfolds.

In today's world, human displacement is the norm, and identities become increasingly intertwined and denationalized. Sociologist Iain Chambers claims that the other cannot be fully interpreted, as a part of it is ungraspable and cannot be represented; his story, his dreams, his passions cannot be completed.[13] The exile and the migrant deploy strategies to be able to survive in identity and to improve personal and professional life, a clear sign of deterritorialization, a sign of our times.[14] They may seek to occupy a prominent position from which they can gain the respect and recognition of others. Or some may try to make themselves invisible in order to maintain a certain defensive silence because of fear of criticism and non-acceptance.

The limits of our possibilities as human beings, says Kaës, lead us to find a scene and a position that subjectifies us, to locate ourselves in a space that could otherwise be chaotic.[15]

If psychoanalytic institutions take into account the issue of migrants' subjectivity in transit, the challenge will arise how to include and interpret this subject who is in forced mourning, which may not end in the generation of those who migrate. How are they influenced by the reactions of the natives, while the gaze of others weighs on their self-awareness? The context is history and a mark.

We can venture that in a process of certain discomfort and need for adaptation, an identity is reconstructed that does not want to lose what it brought with it and that cannot avoid the impregnation of the new environment. What emerges is a hybrid identity.

To conclude: we try in our interdisciplinary approach to gain knowledge of the subjectivity of the protagonist, respecting as much as possible the textuality of the narrator, but entering into the plot of silences, oblivion, memories, symptoms.

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