

Conceptualizations of the migration phenomenon and its contribution to psychology

Conceptualización del fenómeno migratorio y su aporte a la Psicología

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the conceptualizations that arise from the migratory phenomenon and its psychological contribution, starting from the ideas of classical authors, who approach the theoretical approaches to the subject, as well as the contribution of psychology to the migratory phenomenon. It also compiles current information from authors who highlight the need to pay attention both to the existing theoretical work and to the immigrant's experiences. The reflection was made based on 27 articles that gather the theoretical and psychological aspects of the subject, from a tour of classical authors in the databases of Dialnet, Scielo, and PubMed. The aspects resulting from the conceptualization of the migratory phenomenon, reflect on the way the immigrant faces his/her process, which not only depends on the attitude he/she assumes of acculturation

but also on the forms (ways) of valuation (assessment) and meaning that he/she gives to his/her experience. The intention of the authors is reevaluated when clearing the migratory phenomenon from the conceptualizations that were emerging through time. From the Psychology of Liberation, towards a Psychology of Acculturation, which assumes the theories on the dual change (cultural and psychological) that an immigrant faces in his/her process of adaptation, attitude, and culture.

Keywords: Migration phenomenon, immigrants, acculturation, adaptation, coping.

RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es reflexionar sobre las conceptualizaciones que surgen del fenómeno migratorio y su aportación psicológica, partiendo de las ideas de autores clásicos, que abordan las aproximaciones teóricas al tema, así como la aportación de la psicología al fenómeno migratorio. También recoge información actual de autores que destacan la necesidad de prestar atención tanto a los trabajos teóricos existentes como a las experiencias de los inmigrantes. La reflexión se hizo a partir de 27 artículos que recogen los aspectos teóricos y psicológicos del tema, a partir de un recorrido por autores clásicos en las bases de datos de Dialnet, Scielo y PubMed. Los aspectos resultantes de la conceptualización del fenómeno migratorio, reflexionan sobre la forma en que el inmigrante enfrenta su proceso, que no sólo depende de la actitud que asume de aculturación, sino también de las formas (maneras) de valoración (evaluación) y significado que le da a su experiencia. La intención de los autores se revaloriza al despejar el fenómeno migratorio de las

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conceptualizaciones que fueron surgiendo a través del tiempo. De la Psicología de la Liberación, hacia una Psicología de la Aculturación, que asume las teorías sobre el doble cambio (cultural y psicológico) que enfrenta un inmigrante en su proceso de: adaptación, actitud y cultura.

Palabras clave: Fenómeno migratorio, inmigrantes, aculturación, adaptación, afrontamiento.

INTRODUCTION

The United States, the main receiving country for migrants in the world and the main source of international remittance flow from 2000 to 2010 (1), according to UN data (2), has received 3 167 072 people in recent years, being the main country of origin of immigration, Latin American countries, increasing annually by 1.78 %. The United States, both now and for many decades, has been the leading destination country for international migrants worldwide, topping the list of destination countries since UN DESA (3) began collecting and publishing. Thus, in 2020 a total of 50.63 million Latin American migrants were living in the country. Of the 25.4 million migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean in the region in 2020, 85 % (or 21.7 million) came from Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean. Among the 58.71 million migrants in 2020, 48.2 % were men and 51.8 % were women, this gender distribution among migrants in the region has remained relatively equal over the last three decades, with 29 % of them from 30 to 44 years old; 18 % from 15 to 29 years old; 5 % from 0 to 14 years old; 27 % from 45 to 59 years old and 22 % over 60 years old.

Migration, also called “emigration, immigration or return” (4), is considered a phenomenon that has been increasing in recent decades, and the trend is for it to increase even more (5), which has been demonstrated by current statistics (2) since Latin American immigrants are in constant challenges of adaptation and intercultural dialogues with the host country. Migration can thus result from cultural dialogue, as well as from the psychological processes of adaptation that an immigrant faces. With respect to this, Psychology has tried to contribute so that this process may be satisfactory in the psychological and cultural changes, to which it can respond.

Thus, immigrants appear as a focus of interest for research that focuses on diverse migratory

experiences: dreams, experiences, expectations, frustrations, and disappointments (6); not only because of the recurrence of immigrants but because of the psychological and cultural processes they face. In addition, there is a tendency to define the migratory phenomenon according to the experiences that immigrants describe and typecast as a “dream or a nightmare” (7). In this sense, this article aims to reflect on the conceptualizations that arise from the migratory phenomenon and its psychological contribution, based on the ideas of classical authors, who approach the theoretical approaches regarding the subject, as well as the contribution of psychology to the migratory phenomenon.

This article also compiles current information from authors who highlight the need to pay attention, both to existing theoretical work and to immigrant experiences, to answer the following question: how do immigrants deal with the migratory phenomenon? Finally, the reflections on the subject are highlighted as well as the need to continue researching it.

METHOD

A literature review of scientific articles published in the 90s was carried out, collecting the classical authors who studied the migratory phenomenon, bringing together the theoretical and psychological aspects of the subject. In addition, these aspects were considered, from 2004 to 2020, to reflect in chronological order. A search process was followed in the Dialnet, Scielo, and PubMed databases, using the descriptors “migratory phenomenon” and “classical authors”. The criterion that each pair of terms appeared listed in the title of the article or the abstract was applied, identifying a total of 27 susceptible articles for this study. It is important to mention that the selected articles were imported into the Nvivo software, which produced a word cloud that will be important to highlight the theoretical evaluation of the scope according to the conceptualizations found.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Approaches to the Migratory Phenomenon

The study of migration was born in Great Britain and the United States at the end of the 19th century

and the beginning of the 20th century, due in large part to the fact that both countries had a large volume of immigrants and because of the possibility of generating scientific knowledge to face social problems that arose around the displacement of populations in space (8). The first studies on migrant populations focused on the study of sociodemographic characteristics, and on the regularity and social changes that occurred in migratory processes (8). Ravenstein (9), was one of the forerunners of studies on migrations, highlighting the characteristics of this population (10), in topics of “volume”, he built “the laws of migrations”, explained by Arango “one hundred years later”, developing the idea in which he explains:

The order of difficulties in the study of migratory movements, as a multifaceted phenomenon, would require an interdisciplinary treatment for its full understanding. Indeed, the dimensions of the migratory fact (event) are multiple, and, for this reason, it constitutes an object of interest for demographers, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, statisticians, social psychologists, and historians. As has often been pointed out, the explanation of migratory movements requires a prior understanding of the complex interrelationships between demographic factors and economic and social factors, paying due attention to the cultural and socio-psychological reference frameworks in which the decision to migrate is inserted (10).

On the other hand, Thomas et al. (11), were interested in knowing the social regularities related to migrations. In contrast to Ravenstein (9), these authors adopt a sociological perspective of social reality. While for Ravenstein the most important thing was the volume of migrants and their sociodemographic characteristics (9), these sociologists contrast the traditions, customs, social values, and individual attitudes, through which they consider that it is possible to obtain knowledge about the institutions and social organizations. Next, we reflect on the contribution of psychological theories that explain the migratory phenomenon.

Contribution of psychological theories from the classical authors

Haas (12) argues that psychological theories, especially neoclassical and other functionalist theories, which try to explain migrations, lack a comprehensive model of “behavior” and therefore

treat immigrants as “experiments” in a culture that is not their own. In this sense, from the Liberation Psychology current “it is about identifying, analyzing and transforming the situations that legitimize and sustain a *status quo*, in which asymmetrical relationships between groups are naturalized” (13). That is to say, the study of the migratory phenomenon is allowed, but internalizing the experience of those who live it. Coinciding with Sayad (14), it can be affirmed that migration is conceived as a transition process that implies incorporation into a new socio-cultural context. In this way, the dimension of vulnerability and risk of exclusion of the immigrant population is also considered, as well as the creation of mechanisms that are seeking to overcome said injustices.

In the Contributions of Liberation Psychology to the integration of the immigrant population, Albar et al. (15) define migration as an inherent dimension of the human being. However, the dominant psychological perspective in the study of international migration has been the *Psychology of Acculturation* (16). Therefore, together with the *Psychology of Liberation*, the psychological perspective adopted for the study of international migrations has been the *Psychology of Acculturation* (15), in which the concept of acculturation is understood as: “the dual process of cultural and psychological changes that take place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their members. At the social level, this concept implies changes in social structures, institutions, and cultural practices. At the individual level, it implies changes in the behavioral repertoire of people” (16). In this order of ideas, the primary psychological phenomenon that immigrants have to face is called acculturation (5) and it is the process of psychological and cultural change resulting from intercultural contact (17).

Immigration as a Psychological Phenomenon of Acculturation: Conceptualizations

Cultural changes have been primarily highlighted in the study of the phenomenon of immigration; these include alterations in customs and the economic and political life of immigrants. Regarding these alterations, in 2019 ECLAC (18), reported that the social, economic, and cultural impact of migration is notoriously positive for the countries of Latin America, this has to do with the need for the immigrant to connect, not only to a new culture but also to a new

form (way) of social organization, which implies the rethinking and resignification of their identity.

Following Ferrer (4), cultural changes require introspection of the concept of adaptation, which has been studied since the 1990s, to explain the changes that immigrants have to face. In 1990, Lambert and Taylor (19) called the “Melting Pot” the basic idea that immigrants, whatever their culture, once they arrive in the host society gradually assume the new culture as their own and they build with all the others a common cultural life. However, this theory was not enough to explain all the difficulties, especially psychological, of the immigration phenomenon, so the concepts of acculturation are assumed to explain the attitudes of immigrants in the receiving country.

Thus changes, not only cultural but also psychological ones, are explained from the theory of psychological acculturation, which involves attitudes towards the acculturation process, one’s own identity, and behaviors towards the host culture (16). Therefore, the adaptation can be psychological or cultural (20). Psychological adaptation is related to the well-being experienced as a result of cultural contact. Cultural adaptation involves the implementation of social skills that are necessary to function adequately in a complex cultural environment (16). In this way, the authors propose that the successful solution, when facing these changes, is about having knowledge of the host culture, and having contact with them, even from Psychology contributions can be made in the development of “intercultural competencies”, which facilitate the immigration process (5).

From this perspective, the phenomenon of immigration is understood from the integration of the four “acculturative” strategies (21), which result from the study of two dimensions, with this, the immigrant population seeks to achieve its well-being based on: (dimension 1) the relative preference for maintaining one’s own identity and culture; and (dimension 2) the preference for having contact with other cultural groups. Combining these two dimensions, the Psychology of Acculturation proposes four possible acculturation strategies, which, in turn, can be seen as a practical solution to this process:

Integration, in which it is considered valuable to maintain the identity and culture of origin and develop relationships with the receiving society.

Assimilation, in which it is considered valuable to maintain relations with the groups of the receiving society.

Separation, in which identity and cultural characteristics are preserved, avoids relationships with the receiving society.

Marginalization is characterized by the loss of cultural identity and avoidance of the receiving society.

In parallel, Berry (21) proposes four acculturative strategies in the receiving society:

The host (receiving) country accepts and values cultural diversity: multiculturalism.

The receiving (host) country considers establishing relationships with immigrants: assimilation.

The cultural characteristics of immigrants are maintained, but relationships with them have been rejected: segregation.

The force of the receiver causes them to lose contact with the culture of origin: exclusion.

Here, *culture* plays a preponderant role, the authors consider that acculturation is a process that can make one forget the culture of origin (5). In this sense, acculturation denotes psychological and cultural changes resulting from intercultural interaction. However, Berry’s research and experiments (21) with immigrants denote an “attitude towards acculturation”, in which he proposes a model with an interactional impact, in response to the acculturative strategies of the receiving country:

Immigrants consider their cultural identity and customs valuable enough that they can maintain them in the receiving country (maintenance).

Relationships with other people or groups in society are really valuable enough to seek and foster them (participation).

Starting from these attitudes, and seeing immigration as a psychological phenomenon, capable of being addressed, the immigrant has the possibility of maintaining his/her culture, and in turn, maintaining contact with the people of the receiving (host) country. Also, it may happen that the immigrant does not want to maintain his/her culture and his/her native language (marginalization), that is, the attitude toward the acculturation of this migratory phenomenon, depends on the immigrant, on his/her dream and his/her way of facing the dual change of the phenomenon.

In this order of ideas, another conceptualization arises in the phenomenon of immigration, because, if the practical solution of the immigration process is found in the attitude of acculturation, the need

arises to ask, how do immigrants face the migratory phenomenon? Initially, the Acculturation theory responds to attitudes, however, Lazarus and Folkman (22) consider that any event will have different meanings for each individual, and the stress that harms them is the result of that assessment. Thus, coping, according to this theory, is the adaptive response as response to stress in the face of a threatening event (personal experiences of immigrants), and it is understood as the way that a person has to overcome the demands that are presented to him or her throughout life. In this sense, reference is made to *coping strategies* as the resources that the subject uses (cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses) in the assessment of a situation (to immigrate), and to the reaction (attitude of acculturation) that he/she has when coping with the situation (23,24).

Coping is defined as “the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts that are carried out to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are evaluated as exceeding or overflowing a person’s resources” (25 p.164). In accordance with the above, Lázarus and Folkman (25) propose two ways of dealing with situations:

Problem-focused coping: These are actions focused to solve the problem, as well as the developing of new resources to deal with the situation.

Emotion-focused coping: Actions carried out by people who are focused on redirecting and controlling the emotional repercussions experienced by stressful situations. It is based on the feeling of lack of control over the threatening situation.

Complementing Ferrer (4), this cognitive assessment model of Lázarus and Folkman (26) applied to the phenomenon of immigration is recognized, from:

The immigrant’s assessment of the act of emigrating (cognitive coping).

The way of behaving in the new culture (behavioral coping).

The regulation of emotional aspects and the attempt to maintain emotional balance in his/her adaptation process (affective coping).

Considering these last aspects of the conceptualization of the phenomenon, we reflect on the way immigrants face their process, which not only

depends on the attitude they assume of acculturation but also on the ways of assessment and meaning that he/she gives to his/her experience.

CONCLUSION

From the reflection proposed in this article on the theoretical perspective, which highlights the beginning of migratory studies, which were initially focused on the statistics of the recurrence of immigrants and later, focused on social changes, the dialogical character (nature) that allowed the contribution of psychological theories on the subject is considered. In fact, although there are currently statistical studies of migration, the position of the immigrant is even recognized in relation to a psychological and cultural state, in the social context. Therefore, the intention of the authors is revalued when clearing the migratory phenomenon from the conceptualizations that were emerging over time. From the Psychology of Liberation, towards a Psychology of Acculturation, which assumes the theories on the dual change (cultural and psychological) that an immigrant faces in his/her process of adaptation, taking the attitude of acculturation that he/she decides, in the resignification of his/her experience, and the rethinking of assimilating, maintaining or segregating his/her culture. And, in turn, the importance of the assessment that an immigrant gives to his/her experience is highlighted, from the cognitive, behavioral and emotional coping towards the migratory phenomenon. Which clears the way for the researcher interested in contributing from the cultural, social, and psychological from an integrating look at the phenomenon of study. Here, new ways of studying attitudes, adaptation, and coping with migration begin to be reconsidered, from intercultural dialogue; personal decisions about multicultural interaction; the individual experiences of immigrants; the ways of reacting to social discourse; and the new ways of studying culture, from its maintenance to its dissociation; new ways of social interaction; the new social changes; the mental conceptions of the immigrant in response to the attitudes and changes of the receiving country; from the integration of all these aspects in Psychology.

Table 1
Theoretical evaluation of the scope according to the conceptualizations found

Authors	Year	Keywords	Fundamental elements	Critical analysis
Ravenstein; Arango; Thomas et al.; Lambert and Taylor	The 90's: 1976 1985 1990 1996	Volume, migratory processes, social changes.	Theoretical aspects of the phenomenon. Migration is a multifaceted phenomenon that deserves interdisciplinary treatment.	At the beginning of the study of migrations, statistical and sociodemographic aspects were considered. Then, the need to study the phenomenon from interdisciplinarity was created.
Ward; Sayad; Hass; Sevillano; Sam; Berry; Castro	2004 2005 2006 2010 2011	Liberation Psychology. Psychology of Acculturation. Adaptation. Dual changes: cultural and psychological	Psychological theories that explain the phenomenon. Strategies and “acculturative” dimensions.	The primordial psychological phenomenon that the immigrant has to face is acculturation. Seen as an attitude that he/she assumes when he/she arrives in the host country, the r eceiving country.
Ferrer Cepal Freier UN	2014 2019 2020	Changes, adaptation, impact	Social, cultural, and economic impact.	Culture plays a predominant role in this study since acculturation can make the immigrant forget his/her culture of origin.
Lázarus and Folkman; Fernández et al., Ferrer.	1991 1984 1986 1987 2014	Coping strategies	Assessment of the immigrant experience. Meaning he/she gives to his/her experience.	If the practical solution is found in the attitude of acculturation; the psychological solution lies in coping.

Source: Data Analysis Nvivo 12.

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