

# Psychology and Immigration: Migration Process and Emotions.

## **My Personal Experience**

In my life, I have migrated many times, first as a child accompanying my family and later as an adult by my own choice. I have experienced both internal migrations and migrations abroad, which are very different from each other.

I am a clinical psychologist, and I have treated many patients over the past 30 years as they navigated their migration processes. In the early years, my approach to addressing foreignness in psychological practice was quite intuitive.

In 2018, I completed a university course in Montreal on migration and interethnic relations, which allowed me to develop a new theory that combines sociology, intercultural communication, anthropology, and psychology. For me, it was crucial to name the processes I had seen unfold in various treatments over the years, as well as in my own life.

Since 2020, I have been offering training courses on migration and emotional processes aimed at psychologists and members of organizations that support migrants in Argentina, Spain, Canada, and the Caribbean.

I often notice a sense of surprise in these meetings when my interlocutors discover the complexity of these processes, which were initially reduced to uprooting and mourning. The complexity arises from the dynamics of interactions generated between the migrant, their environment, and the constant conscious and unconscious projections that directly affect their identity.

This psychological theory of migration supports and facilitates the concrete and material processes of migration, aiding in its successful development. It also explains the reasons for distress, discomfort, or illness even in materially successful migrations.

I hope to convey this knowledge, the hypotheses, and the conclusions to continue expanding and enriching this conceptual framework.

## **Social Construction of Groups**

Women and men are born into a family, in a neighborhood, in a country where there are norms of conduct, economic laws, and political regulations that establish a specific and characteristic organization of that social group. The values, beliefs, and customs of that community are expressed through their behaviors and institutions, and are represented in their artistic and cultural productions.

According to Keesling, culture is a cognitive system that gives us a view of ourselves and the world; it governs and organizes the interpretation of reality, behavioral norms, and internal models. This worldview also establishes the norms of interaction among group members, as well as the relationships with those

outside the community. It is transmitted from generation to generation, ensuring continuity, although its transformation—slow but constant—is inevitable due to being a dynamic system.

Ethnic groups represent forms of social organization, each with its own norms of behavior, values, and internal dynamics. The exchanges that occur between people from different ethnic groups are very complex and often lead to relational and identity discomfort.

The concept of ethnic boundaries was developed by Frederick Barth, a German-born anthropologist, constructivist, and representative of the Scandinavian school. According to this scholar, it is through mechanisms of identification and ascription that members feel they belong to their ethnic group. It is through attribution that the exogroup is organized—those who do not belong, those who are outside the group.

The characteristics considered for making this distinction are subjective and go beyond visible diversity. Barth (1969) states that the “we” is constituted in relation to an “other.” What is significant about this conceptualization is that the function of the boundary allows for the constitution and preservation of groups.

Exchanges between different ethnic groups involve particular forms shaped by power relations. To better understand what we call power relations, we must first distinguish between the majority group and the minority group. Contrary to what these labels suggest, these groups are not defined by the greater or lesser number of members but by their possession or proximity to power, whether political, economic, or religious.

Racism, devaluation, stereotypes, discrimination, stigmatization, etc., are different forms and degrees of intensity in which superiority is exercised over other groups, with the intention of creating difficulties in accessing material goods and social advancement.

The aggressions and/or microaggressions directed at minorities can provoke trauma in their identity and in interactions between ethnic groups. The actors in these scenarios are not always aware of the long-term repercussions this has on relationships, both among groups and individuals.

In my experience as a speaker, I have noticed that, when it comes to this point, no one recognizes themselves as racist. Although this concept becomes evident when analyzing the behavior of others. Discrimination has become normalized, and when it is recognized, it is often minimized with justifications. Frequently, we carry prejudices passed down from generation to generation and analyze reality with entrenched stereotypes as normative.

Even the victims of racism are not always aware of it; racism remains hidden as a taboo, or as something that happens to others, far removed from my reality.

## **Construction of Reality and Identity**

The process of socialization refers to the meaningful interaction between people, through which we learn, accept, and integrate a set of behavioral guidelines, values, and beliefs. We adapt to them and adopt them as our own.

Primary socialization occurs in the early years of life and is the stage where the self begins to form through interaction and identification with significant people in our environment. The most important agents of socialization during this period are family and school.

In secondary socialization, the child moves into contexts outside of their family, broadening their contacts and knowledge by accessing different behavioral models. Peer groups and educational institutions serve as agents of secondary socialization.

Tertiary socialization represents a significant step in the construction of the self in a global context, allowing individuals to view the world from a different perspective and outside their culture of origin.

From this new perspective, answers can be found to the complexity of individual identities and their various worldviews, while the self-identity itself becomes more complex.

According to Berger and Luckmann, reality is a social construction that is generated through a cyclical process of internalization and externalization of values, cultural creations, and institutions. Values, social roles, and institutions are modified over time and through human exchanges. These changes are internalized by new generations.

Just as reality is socially constructed, identity is the result of the dialectic between the social and the personal.

### **The Intercultural Mirror and Interethnic Relationships**

Using Jacques Lacan's Mirror Stage theory as a starting point, we will explain the concept of the intercultural mirror. In this psychoanalytic theory, Lacan theorizes about the formation of the self-image in the young child. Supported by a significant person, the child recognizes their image in the mirror. Through the gaze, words, and gestures of this adult—who identifies the image in the mirror with the child's image—the child feels the emotion of recognition.

The particular image in the mirror is initially “the other” and later becomes “the self.”

In the field of linguistics, Patron and Kraven developed the theory of the intercultural mirror in 2019. The image we receive of ourselves in the eye of the culturally distinct other can be unexpectedly new, either positively or negatively. This image reflected back can confirm or contradict our self-perception, which has been constructed through interactions with our group of belonging.

Attempting to understand how these culturally distinct others perceive us adds more complex layers to self-perception and identity. This new experience enriches the narrative we build around our “self.”

The concept of identity we are discussing is developed from a constructivist perspective.

In the intercultural experience of migrants, an individual's identity necessarily changes.

Identity, understood as a narrative that provides cohesion and coherence, a sense of continuity throughout life, adding meaning to it, is a continuous and dynamic process. Migration brings about a destabilization and a transient loss of meaning. This loss is a source of great anxiety and discomfort.

In the field of intercultural communication, Milton Bennett works with multicultural teams and groups to implement rules for conflict resolution.

He states that applying the “Platinum Rule” is the best tool to ensure conflict resolution among culturally distinct members. He advises making the effort to understand how the culturally different other might perceive and experience reality. In this way, we can coordinate different viewpoints without ranking them and demonstrating empathy to achieve this.

A great deal of emotional maturity is needed for differences to be effectively addressed.

### **The Migration Process**

Currently, there are 220 million migrants in the world. The reasons that motivate people to migrate are numerous.

Generally, when migration is a planned project, it stems from a desire to seek a better life or achieve more security. There is a period prior to the journey during which individuals actively prepare by gathering necessary documentation for the destination country, saving money, and learning the language and culture of the host country.

At other times, the motivation is to flee danger or risky situations. In this case, there is little time for preparation, and individuals find themselves in a state of greater vulnerability, as sometimes there isn't

even time to obtain a passport.

Once in the host country, legal status will be crucial for settling in. It is different to arrive with the right to residency and work than to be a refugee waiting for an application to be accepted or to stay illegally. Legal status grants or denies rights to the immigrant, which will be essential when seeking housing and employment.

Psychologically, the immigrant must internally process the loss of significant emotional ties, their belongings, their daily life, their previous life, their identity, and their professional status, all while learning about their new reality and trying to fit into it. It's as if they are undergoing two simultaneous processes of deconstruction and reconstruction of their identity.

Integration into the new society occurs over time.

Initially, it is necessary to address material needs, find a place to live, and secure a job for survival. Once these basic needs are minimally met, subsequent stages will lead them to establish meaningful connections in the new country and even develop personal projects. Participation in neighborhood or community activities is also important.

In cases where the process is experienced as a family, couple, or group, it is likely that the integration timelines for each member will differ. This discrepancy can lead to discomfort or conflict within the group dynamic and may change how they relate to one another.

Roles within the family often change in the host society. The member who goes out to work will socialize more quickly than the one who stays at home. Children, upon attending school, are usually stimulated and tend to learn the language and certain customs of the place before their parents do.

Acculturation is the process that occurs when individuals from different cultures come into contact and gradually adopt behaviors and cultural values of the other group. At the same time, attachment to aspects of their own culture diminishes over time. This process occurs in both directions, although typically, the dominant ethnic group tends to impose its worldview more strongly on the minority group.

### **The Identity of the Foreigner**

The awareness of one's own culture only arises in the encounter with the culturally different other, especially when a person crosses the border of their home country.

Being a foreigner is defined in the context of cultural otherness; one is a foreigner in relation to the "local." The intercultural mirror activates our sense of being different or unknown. In this encounter, there can be multiple possibilities, but the feeling is always one of vulnerability.

Political, historical, or religious determinations influence how the migrant will be received in the host country. These factors can reactivate power relations that existed prior to their arrival and complicate the migrant's integration. However, they can also contribute to better integration and facilitate the emergence of certain skills and abilities that were hidden or suppressed in the country of origin.

Second and third-generation migrants from visibly diverse cultural communities continue to be questioned about their origins and belonging, despite having been born in the host country. The feeling of being a foreigner endures across time and generations.

### **Acculturation Stress**

The process of adapting to a new culture involves significant psychological effort for the migrant.

Learning the language, understanding how healthcare systems, education, and public and private administration operate in the new country requires considerable intellectual and emotional work.

The loss of social status, marginalization, alienation, and discrimination, combined with the fragility of cultural identity, test the mental health of the migrant. Economic disadvantage, unemployment, or low

educational levels are some of the realities faced by migrants that turn this process of acculturation into a risk factor.

As mentioned earlier, the stress of acculturation is experienced differently among family members, causing desynchronization in their individual experiences. This often leads to distancing and misunderstanding among them.

Traditions and values differ in the new country. The role and concept of women change in more advanced societies. The freedom of children, as well as communication styles, can vary greatly from what parents experienced in the past. The role of men may be questioned, breaking stereotypes and cultural traditions that characterized those established in the country of origin. Adults who do not work may find themselves isolated if they do not learn the language or customs of the host community. These are some of the issues that affect families and their members, causing conflict and instability.

Most migrants will adapt in one way or another to their new life, although trauma stemming from experiences of racism leads to adverse effects on health and mental well-being, such as hypertension, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression; hypervigilance, dissociation, and psychological disorders.

If the migrant is aware of the disruptive effects of this process, accessing appropriate and relevant healthcare services becomes complex. The interpretation of psychological symptoms varies according to each culture, leading to misunderstandings between healthcare personnel and migrant patients.

Healthcare services must establish trusting relationships with the migrant community, which is essential for intervening in cases of domestic violence and abuse within ethnic groups. To achieve this goal, they must maintain dynamic communication with the migrant community, understand the specific culture of their patients, and work internally on their own biases to ensure effective care.

## **Psychology of Immigration**

When we listen to the accounts of migrants about the early moments of their journey, describing the difficulties they faced with cultural barriers, as well as those that seemed insurmountable, we can see the immense psychological effort and work required to adapt and integrate into the new society.

Beyond the success of their projects and the sense of having built a satisfactory life in the host country, their narratives often reference feelings of frustration, anger, sadness, loss, fear, struggle, and exhaustion.

Based on what has been presented in this essay, we can affirm that the process of loss and identity restructuring that occurs when a migrant integrates into the receiving community happens at very unconscious levels and is a source of significant distress that endures over time.

We find it essential to situate the analysis of this identity reconstruction within the specific context of migration. Of course, we will take into account the structure of personality, identifications, defense mechanisms, and traumas experienced in their life history.

The complexity in the case of migration is that these elements will be analyzed and articulated within a different social context. What is specific to the psychology of immigration is that we must examine them in light of the dynamics generated in interethnic relationships.

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