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AGENCY, TEMPORALITY AND BIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS: AN ANALYTICAL MODEL FOR THE STUDY OF MIGRATION PROCESSES

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Abstract: The objective of this article is to build an analytical model to link the biographical analysis with the analysis of migratory processes. For this, the discussions about temporality in sociological analysis, the agency capacity of migrant subjects and experience as a category of social analysis are resumed. Specifically, a temporalized conception of the agency is taken up again and the articulation of the analysis of processes is proposed at two levels of observation and different temporalities: i) at the micro, individual level, based on a biographical temporality; and ii) at the macro, structural level, based on a historical temporality. With this objective, concepts and tools of the life course approach and the category of reception contexts are also taken up. Finally, the analytical model developed is presented.

Keywords: Agency – Temporality – Biographical analysis – Migration processes – Analytical model.

INTRODUCTION

This article intends to articulate the biographical perspectives with the analysis of the trajectories outlined by migrants. An analytical framework is built to study the relationship between the type of trajectories and the future plans of migrants in various migratory destinations. The biographical-narrative approach is taken up again to build the trajectories of the subjects from their stories. Additionally, life course approach tools are adopted. In short, it uses the discussions of contemporary social sciences on i) the temporal dimension in sociological analysis, ii) the agency capacity of the subjects and iii) experience as an object of sociological study.

Regarding the first item, the notions of plans and expectations are taken up again, as categories that represent the analytical basis to apprehend future plans that are visualized and expressed verbally from the current situation,

as a time line that extends from the present, towards the future. For the second question, a temporalized conception of the agency is taken up, which allows establishing links between different perspectives within the biographical approach. Finally, it concludes with the construction of an analytical model to study the relationship between the labor trajectories of migrants and the construction of future plans.

AN APPROACH TO TEMPORALITY IN SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Every sociological look realizes how the subjects anticipate, to one extent or another, the results of each action; that is, what they take as a reference to choose between the different possible courses of action (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). Attending to the temporalities in which the subjects perceive their lives and their actions implies considering different levels of analysis, to understand how present and future are intertwined in the lives of migrants. That is, how the immediate action is influenced by the contextual conditions, on the one hand, but also by certain expectations of the subjects in the medium and/or long term.

There are different approaches to approach the study of anticipation, and it was decided to recover a perspective from the agency, the biographical-narrative approach and incorporate some methodological tools and categories of the life course approach. Thus, future projects and plans can be understood as a starting point for action, and are organized/conceived from the skills, resources and expectations that are held at the present moment, from the current conditions in which the subject is located. Through the notions of plans and expectations, the idea of the future can be introduced in an analytically relevant way in sociological research, closely linked to the agency capacity of the subjects

(Mische, 2009: 695).

Following Tavory & Eliasoph (2013: 916), a plan can be defined as “a naturalized temporal orientation”, which evokes the idea of a path that already exists due to the fact that it has been visualized and expressed through the story, and what remains ahead is to walk it. Subjects build their future through both their actions and the meaning given to them, which cannot be separated from the socio-historical context in which they are framed. It is argued that migrants are producers of their future, in interaction with contextual conditions and the contingencies of any process (Mische, 2009). For this reason, situations such as the socio-sanitary and economic crisis of recent years imply a change in the time horizons in which subjects plan their future.

Through “the category of imaginary, one usually understands how people represent their present reality (and how the categories of these representations change), or how people imaginatively reconstruct the past” (Mische, 2009: 695, own translation). The representations suppose a kind of guide for the management and understanding of the world, a knowledge incorporated by the experience of the subjects in the social world in which they develop their lives, which helps them to understand their environment, guide their course of action, visualize their plans and objectives, and carry out actions to achieve them (Mische, 2009; Roberti, 2010). These issues are captured, mainly, through the analysis of life experience (Bertaux, 2011; Rivera, 2012).

In the contemporary world, the experience of the subjects around working life is detached from the ideas of stability and certainty, unlike what happened decades ago (Roberti, 2010). For this reason, while work is an articulating axis of social life, subjects organize their lives and visualize their future under other logics. This current vision, linked to uncertainty

and immediacy, has implications for the development of work, migratory and family trajectories, and how these are projected in shorter time horizons, thus making it difficult to build long-term plans.

THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PROCESSES FROM A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

A social process is more than a sequence of events (Abbott, 1992); it is an analytical construct (Bidart et al., 2012; Griffin, 1993). The process can be thought of in a double sense, at two levels of analysis and observation, related both to sociohistorical and structural dynamics and to the subjective processes that the subjects experience, issues that are necessarily linked to each other (Boldt, 2012). The structural perspective (macro) represents the contextual support of the analyzes on the trajectories of the subjects and the development of their biographical itineraries, while at the individual and subjective level (micro), it focuses on the experience, which allows linking the subjects both with the contexts in which they develop their experiences, This allows linking the subjects both with the contexts in which they develop their experiences and with the frameworks of meaning on which they generate and sustain their meanings (Velasco and Gianturco, 2012).

When considering the development of social processes, the contingencies that arise during their occurrence must necessarily be taken into account (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Abbott, 1992), whether of a contextual or individual nature. Contexts and subjects are related to this from a perspective centered on agency, since it is in the face of contingencies that subjects express their capacity for individual agency more clearly, seeing themselves forced to redefine their courses of action and respond to changing social conditions (Hitlin and Elder, 2007;

Elder, 1994).

In closing, it must be noted that in this research two key elements are identified, which articulate the two levels of observation and analysis: i) migration as an event that articulates the biography, at the individual level and ii) the multiple crises (socio-sanitary, economic-labour, political) as events that define contemporary socio-structural contexts.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH AND THE ANALYSIS OF THE EXPERIENCE

The biographical approach represents a fertile analytical perspective for the study of the agency capacity of the subjects and for those analyzes that question the structuralist perspectives of a deterministic nature (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2005: 3); it makes it possible to find “the connections between individual life histories and the broader frames of reference and understanding” in which they are situated (Rustin, 2005: 42). The main contributions of the biographical-narrative approach to this analytical model are summarized in that it allows linking the subjective and objective levels that shape the experience, as well as the temporalities involved in the vital itineraries of the subjects –historical and biographical, on the one hand, and different stages of their lives, on the other– (Bertaux, 2011; Roberts, 2015; Elder, 1994).

It starts from the premise that the subjects manage to a certain extent the development of their biographies, which is visualized in the actions developed to face the situations of the present moment. The readings of both past and future situations are given by a look proper to the present significance, they are read in the light of current conditions (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013). The experience acquires its meaning in the

present, and it is in that reflective moment that its interpretation takes place (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 975; Bertaux, 2011).

We want to emphasize that taking experience as the unit of analysis does not imply an exclusively subjective approach; it starts from individual experience to make it the object of sociological analysis (Bertaux, 2011; Dubet, 2010; Boldt, 2012). That is, the experience is not conceived from essentialism, but is always socio-relational, and socially constructed (Dubet, 2010: 91).

The notion of experience implicitly implies a temporality, and does not refer solely to an isolated moment, as the independent reading of a particular event within a biography could suppose. The experience contains the before and after of such events and refers to the experiences experienced in specific intervals of time in the biography of a subject. These experiences have a cumulative nature and link the biographical history with the historical-contextual situation, on the one hand, and with events in other dimensions of their lives, on the other (Rivera, 2012).

THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE AS A CATEGORY OF SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Migratory experience is considered as the part of the life of the subjects that begins at the moment when migrating becomes a reality, from which they develop and/or accumulate experience related to the experience of leaving their place of origin (Boldt, 2012). It is always an unfinished process, which begins with the migratory decision (marked by the first trip from the place of origin) and the experiences as a migrant subject, so that expectations and future plans are built with respect to that experience.

The migratory experience can be observed from two dimensions: i) an objective one, referred to as factual migratory experience,

for which the migratory trajectory is reconstructed, thinking of the accumulation of migration events throughout a biography, the trajectory being a methodological instrument to systematize the experience; ii) a subjective one, the lived/narrated migratory experience, for which the experience narrated by the subjects, obtained from their accounts, is used.

Insofar as the migratory experience is considered a category of analysis, the subjects' capacity to shape and direct the development of their biographies is captured through it, from a temporalized conception of agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013). The socio-structural and contextual constraints in which the subjects develop their lives are also considered. This is because the interpretation that subjects make of their experience and the way in which they narrate it depends on the social relations in which they are immersed, the events surrounding their experiences and, in general, on everything that influences the way in which experience is signified.

Moreover, experience is not purely individual or subjective, but intersubjective (Dubet, 2010; Emirbayer, 2009; Boldt, 2012), and must be analyzed as a totality - accumulated and accumulable - that is reformulated and reinterpreted according to the spatiotemporal framework in which it is observed and narrated (Bertaux, 2011; Rivera, 2012; Velasco and Gianturco, 2012; Leclerc-Olive, 2009; Polletta et al., 2011). Thus, "all experience takes place and makes sense in the present" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 975, own translation), and is marked by the past, as it is where/when the events took place and built the experience on which such interpretation is based. This is how future plans and their modifications can be apprehended through experience (Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013), so that questions can be raised about

what the subjects do to face diverse situations as migrants: how they respond to contextual and individual changes, how they insert themselves into the labor market, and how all this is related to their projects and future plans.

Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to three logics of the development of processes -social and biographical- such as those related to "change, transformation and continuity" (Rivera, 2012: 456). In turn, a distinction is made between two logics for thinking about biographies: i) that of trajectories, as a succession of events that occur throughout the life of the subjects; ii) that of a project or future plan, which gives meaning to the present actions of the subjects.

From the biographical-narrative approaches, an analytical cut of the experience is made, and what is captured through the interview is what we could call the narrated experience (Roberts, 2015). With this, the emphasis is placed on recovering, also, the subjective dimension of the experience as migrants (Masseroni, 2007), their experiences and the way they signify them and present them argumentatively to others.

However, we must be careful with the risk of subjectivizing the notion of experience to the extreme, detached from the "social system" in which it unfolds, as a sort of "floating experience" of the subject outside the relationships and the social and cultural context in which it is produced (Dubet, 2010: 125). For this reason, attention is repeatedly drawn to the ways in which this experience is articulated with the broader social processes in which migrants develop their lives. Resorting to the notion of reception contexts (Portes & Börcz, 1989; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990) as part of the analysis proposal, has the purpose of operationalizing contextual characteristics as relevant factors that influence the migratory experience and the development of migrants'

labor trajectories.

A PROPOSAL FOR EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Next, the model is presented in which the categories developed in the previous pages are collected and articulated, as support for carrying out empirical analysis. With this analytical model, it is intended to explain how migratory and labor experiences are linked to the construction of projects and plans for the future.

The biographical development of the subjects in these two areas will be captured through the construction of labor and migratory trajectories, which will be analyzed in an intertwined way, based on considering two factors: the person's age at the time of arrival in the city of destination and the time they have been residing in that city (exposure time). Once the individual trajectories have been built, it is proposed to contrast their characteristics and group them into types of labor trajectories. In such a way that, the types are a result of configurations of individual and contextual factors, which will later lead

to relate them to the future plans that these migrants elaborate/visualize, in three areas: work, migratory and family.

In order to include contextual factors in the analysis, the category of reception contexts is used (Portes & Börcz, 1989; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990) and they are constructed based on certain characteristics and conditions that prevail in the destination cities at the time of arrival of migrants. At that time, the different theories on the establishment of migrants in the destination societies are resumed, with the aim of understanding and analyzing how the development of their labor trajectories is affected by migration to different cities of international migratory destination, understanding migration as an articulating event of their biographies.

From this, a series of dimensions are proposed to build the reception contexts, based on the characteristics and conditions of the destination cities. Specifically, and updating to some extent the dimensions identified by Portes and colleagues, the following are proposed: institutional, economic-labour, and socio-community.

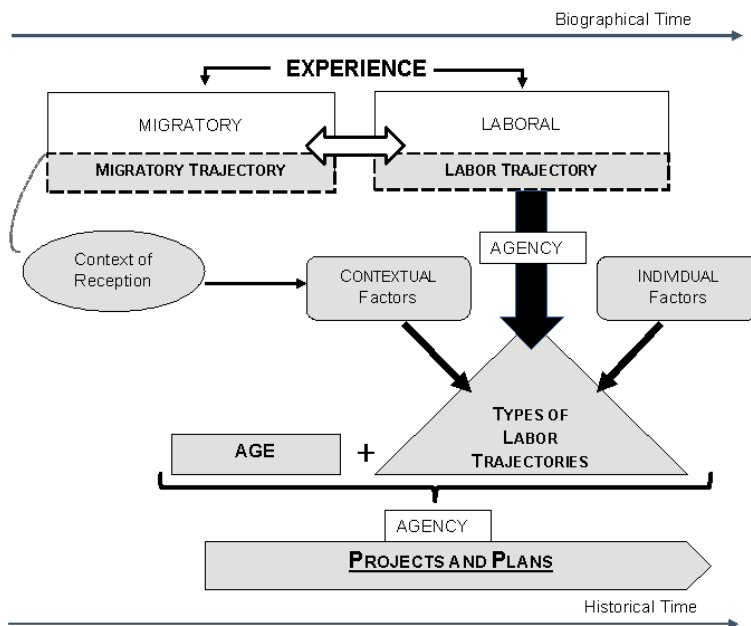


Diagram 1. The analytical model

Source: self made

Based on these dimensions, factors such as the laws that regulate the entry and stay of foreigners in the country, the type of work activity available and the possibilities of employability for migrants, the structure and dynamics of the labor markets of destination cities or the presence of a community of migrants of the same origin in these places, among others. This exercise is developed mainly in dialogue with the works of Portes and Börcz (1989) and Portes and Rumbaut (1990). With this, it is expected to include in the analysis the dimensions and contextual factors in an explicit and empirically based way.

This is necessary because it is based on the assumption that the labor trajectories of migrants are outlined both by their individual characteristics and by the contextual conditions in which they carry out their lives. In addition, a certain margin of maneuver is assumed for them, since they can shape their professional trajectories to a certain extent, depending on the courses of action they decide to take at certain moments in their biographies and their professional trajectories. In other words, based on the courses of action adopted, migrants can outline to some extent the development of their trajectories. At this point, the notion of critical events becomes central.

Finally, the agency of migrants is recognized from the decision-making that they carry out at different moments of the life course, and that have effects on their trajectories. The proposal of this model is that the agency of migrants can also be appreciated in its anticipatory dimension: how they visualize, plan and anticipate actions to fulfill their expectations (Mische, 2009; Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013).

Specifically, it will be observed how they acted at the beginning of their professional trajectories, observing what jobs they obtained, at what age they began to work and how they

were outlining their trajectories, since the beginnings of working life significantly mark the subsequent steps (Roberti, 2010; Rivera, 2013). Subsequently, the actions carried out in particular socio-historical moments are observed, such as moments of crisis (economic, socio-sanitary, etc.), appreciating how they responded to negative and changing contextual conditions. Here we will look at how migration appears as an action to face crisis contexts, and how it is linked to the development of their labor trajectories. Finally, the decisions and courses of action followed after the arrival of the migrants to the cities of destination are observed, as well as the way in which they visualize and build their plans for the future, understanding that said anticipatory views represent a frame of reference to guide action in the present moment. Likewise, at the time of the interview, they exercise their agency capacity by visualizing potential future scenarios, in dialogue with their expectations, based on which they act, with the aim of materializing said plans or expectations.

This way, it is possible to capture both the agency already “exercised” throughout his biographical itinerary, and that of an anticipatory type, which serves as a basis for decision-making in the present, with a view to the future. In summary, an analytical model is proposed to study the relationship between the migratory and work experience with the construction of future plans by migrants.

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