

The Impact of the Return of Colombian Immigrants Resident in Bogota from the United States and the Implications for Their Families

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Abstract

Migration in Colombia, as in the rest of Latin America, is a complex and heterogeneous matter. This situation creates the need to investigate, from a qualitative perspective and based on the ethnographic method, the migration that leads into the United States. This migration causes a subsequent return of emigrants to their country of origin, which needs to be analyzed in depth. The return of the emigrant causes major demands and needs which have been synthesized into ten conclusions that must be known and valued in order to generate the groundwork for future psychosocial proposal for a critical and proactive reflection, to assist in the construction of the new identity of the person who returns and their families.

Keywords: Emigrants, Families, Come back, Intercultural, Gender, Psychosocial

1. Introduction

Colombian migration is a phenomenon of major proportions that has existed throughout the country's history. Currently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2009) estimates that one in ten Colombians is living outside the country, making Colombia one of the countries with the highest emigration in South America.

The Colombian international migration, according to the International Organization for Migration (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones OIM - 2009), amounts to 3,378,345 persons, ie about 7.5% of the total, an outrageously high figure that needs to be analyzed. It is estimated that the most important migration occurred in three distinct waves, which occurred in the second half of last century. The first, in the sixties; the second, in the eighties; and the third and final wave, at the end of the century, when over 120 thousand Colombians migrated to the United States of America.

According to the National Department of Statistics (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística - DANE) there are three main destinations chosen by Colombian migrants: United States (34.6%), Spain (23.1%) and Venezuela (20.0%); other countries do not reach 4% of the population. Therefore the United States is where the Colombian emigration have consolidated, looking for what many define as the "American dream." But these figures differ in each country's official records. Thus, according to DANE, 1,168,907 Colombians reside in the U.S.; while in the U.S. census only 589,000 are documented.

As you can see, almost half of Colombian emigrants in this country are undocumented ("illegal") and are, therefore, thousands of life stories "hidden" and legally invisible, but as human and existing as those that are recognized.

The comprehensive migration policy of Colombia promotes actions for the welfare of the migrant (right to freedom of movement, respect for individual rights, social consideration of migration as a positive phenomenon, etc), however, it seems these are not effective, as the increase in complaints confirm. The policies and the actions taken to support the emigration of Colombians abroad and the help provided to their families do not seem to work. Therefore, it becomes increasingly necessary and urgent, to have programs that have structure, functionality and the quality that meet the needs of the population and are consistent with the dynamics of this phenomenon. Nor are sufficient the initiatives and programs developed by the national government to welcome home the returnees. The limited or little attention given to the emigrant who returns (mostly "legal") guarantees the failure. The only beneficiaries (the "legal" migrants, as noted) are trained to facilitate their integration in the labor market as well as technical guidance and training on how to gain access to credit that enables the generation of productive projects, facilitating their full integration at home.

But the integration does not happen to the most disadvantaged migrant population, and their families, specifically to those returning from a situation of illegality and/or to the people who was deported, making the return involuntary. In any case, to achieve this goal, we need to know beforehand what the needs of this population are, in order to prioritize the purpose of our research.

The changes achieved or effective policies for handling the complex realities arising from migration processes are neither significant nor sufficient, in light of the impact that this situation generates in those who migrate and those who are waiting for their return. Talking about emigration necessarily implies thinking about complex concepts and philosophies emanating from very different political intervention, depending on each case. We refer in particular to the intracultural, intercultural, multicultural, transcultural, inclusion, etc., all implemented through the prism of training and, above all, a specific educational and social model of psychosocial intervention, encouraging interaction and dialogic interaction with others within their contexts and promoting self-management, autonomy, freedom and responsibility as generator principles of change. In short, education for development, a sustainable development (Boni and Pérez, 2006).

We have also insisted on the migration process from the perspective of the families of the migrant, which although they remain in their home countries waiting for their relative, are also impacted by migration (Vega, 2005). Out of all legal protection, abandonment is palliated with moral support and the link to the economic remittance (Hammock, 2008). The family, therefore, is forced to set a new lifestyle, to interact with others, to communicate, to establish guidelines for parenting roles at home. Everything looks to be disrupted by the migration process, and what is worse, "remittances", become the (only) hope of achieving the desired and the strong bond to the family, based on their emotional and economic dependence. The remittance, unfortunately, becomes the lifeline and the invisible thread that tries to weave a new family dynamics amid the despair and complexity of their lives. So, we can see how the migrant, despite living in deplorable conditions at times, does everything necessary to continue sending these economic contributions with which sustains the family bond. His return, in any situation, would be considered a failure and humiliation. Therefore, the migrant remains in the destination country, despite the conditions are sometimes inhumane.

Our research is divided into two distinct blocks. The first corresponds to the work done with Colombian migrants deported from the United States and their families who waited in their home country. The second refers to the work done with Colombian emigrants who returned voluntarily from the United States and their families, who remained in Colombia.

Our main source of information are life histories and personal interviews with migrants and their families, and we have tried to reel the needs and shortcomings as well as strengths, that allow to build the basis and framework for the development and subsequent implementation of a future proposal for psychosocial support to migrants themselves and their families. And for that, we have relied on the research that M.V. Medina (2009) has been carrying on around the "psychosocial approach". Currently, several investigations are using this approach, which allows a comprehensive view of the human being as a subject that interacts with the other in a complex social context. Therefore, we see our research, not only from the perspective of the person who migrates, but with its own context, which includes, inevitably, his own family and the country of origin, where the person returns.

This triple conjunction: immigrant-family-home country, has forced us to make a more complex analysis of social reality, but in turn, more real and accurate. Hence, one of our greatest difficulties was to limit the number of emigrants with whom we were going to work. The sample should reflect all possible variables we intended to investigate in our analysis, covering the entire family who was resident in the city of Bogotá, throughout the migration process. We are aware that by including the family context, as we have noted, we would find a complex, different, virtually untested reality with a huge social and emotional impact that doesn't appear in the society due to their low profile, in the statistics and even in the media.

2. Objectives

The objective of this work is based on three main pillars: analyze and understand the meaning of the migration process (migration and return) to the United States in Colombian residents in the city of Bogotá and their families; assess the importance of the gender of Colombian emigrants to the United States; and finally protect the rights and responsibilities of the youngest who suffer direct and indirect consequences of the migration process. These three pillars will give information necessary to build a proposal for psychosocial support to migrants and their families, which is left open for future research.

3. Methodology

The methodological analysis was developed using qualitative approach, using ethnographic perspective and research techniques as in-depth interviews, focus groups, life histories and participant observation, in order to consolidate a comparative analysis of the migration process among deportees and migrants who returned voluntarily. We have always tried to apply a holistic, complex, multidimensional and systemic view of the reality experienced by migrants and their families. The participation of the subjects in the project was voluntary and motivated by their interest in contributing to the prevention, mitigation and / or solution of some of the many problems generated by migration.

From the beginning, it was necessary to establish four categories of different analyses, depending on the legal status of migrants in the destination country (legal or illegal) and depending on how they return (voluntary or deported). In each category of analysis we have tried to investigate the causes that led to the departure from Colombia and specifically from the city of Bogotá, the subsequent experience in the country of destination and finally, the return to the country of origin and to their families. In light of this perspective, we decided to approach our research using the interpretive qualitative model (Gialdino, 2006). Research is framed, as noted, in the field of knowledge of anthropology and the social sciences, based on the ethnographic method and the techniques and methodological approach used in those areas (Arnold, 2010).

3.1. The Research Sample

The sample of people who were chosen for our investigation respect a general and specific criteria, which has allowed us to subsequently distribute the people in three groups to facilitate further analysis.

3.1.1. General Selection Criteria

- Migrants: they have migrated to the United States and have been there for more than 5 years (multiple visa) period, in condition of legality or illegality. Have returned to the country of origin and in particular to the city of Bogotá, voluntary and involuntary. Be "legal" and "illegal" immigrants. Have a household that was waiting for them in their home town (Bogotá). Have at least one year of residence in Colombia after their return.
- Families: have one member of the family who migrated to the United States for a period of 5 years or above, who returned voluntarily or deported to the city of Bogotá. Have stayed in their home country during the migration period of their relative. Currently in contact with their relative.

3.1.2. Specific Criteria

Based on the general criteria, we define other five specific criteria:

- Five migrants were deported
- Ten migrants returned home voluntarily and among these, five were legal and five were illegal migrants.
- The families of the emigrant remained in the city of Bogotá during the whole period (in total 52 people).
- All migrants were Colombian and resident in the city of Bogotá
- The migrant country of destination was the United States.

3.1.3. Analysis Groups

The 67 people selected are distributed into three groups for analysis: 5 deported migrants (group I); 5 illegal migrants with voluntary return (group II); and finally, 5 legal immigrants who voluntarily returned (group III). All of them, with their respective families. The characteristics of each group are the following:

- Group 1: Migrant deported (5 persons): three of them are male (two fathers and one son) and two female (two mothers). The average age of this group is 47,6 years (age between 29 and 63 years).

Their families: five families with 5 mothers and/or grandmother housekeepers, 4 student children, 2 retired persons and one merchant.

- Group 2: illegal migrant with voluntary return (5 persons): 3 men (three fathers) and two women (mother and daughter). The average age of this group is 48,2 years (age between 29 and 60 years).

Their families: five families with 4 mothers and/or grandmother, three of them housekeepers and one merchant, 1 retired grandfather, 15 son and daughter.

- Group 3: Legal migrant with voluntary return (5 persons): three male (father) and two women (mother and daughter). The average age of this group is 46,2 years (age between 36 and 59 years).

Their families: 5 families with 3 mother and/or grandmothers housekeepers, 4 student children, 3 sons in law, 1 sister in law, 5 grandchildren, 2 brothers, 1 retired person, 3 employees and 4 merchants.

3.2. Methodological Techniques

We have collected the information using four techniques, from an ethnographic point of view. Initially we have used the “in-depth” interview to the migrants, with the aim of understanding and interpret what migrating means for each of the migrants, for the deported as well as for the people who returned voluntarily and of course for their families.

Afterwards, we have used the “focused group” technique applied to the families of the migrant. The aim is to build a collective proposal of change and transformation that the migration conveys and its impact in the migrants and in the families waiting for their return. Finally, we have used the “participant observation” during the whole investigation process.

The three above mentioned technics enabled the consolidation of the last techniques and tool that is vital for our objective: the “Life Histories”.

3.3. Phases of the Investigation

The investigation was conducted in three phases, developed into a series of steps as explained below.

- Phase 1. Work carried out with deported migrants and their respective families
- Phase 2. Work carried out with migrants who returned voluntarily and their respective families
- Phase 3. During this phase, we have analyzed and compared the results of the previous phases that focused on the deported migrants and the ones who returned voluntarily, trying to find the similarities and the differences given to the meaning of “migrating process”.

4. Analysis

The fieldwork has allowed us to analyze both individual migrants and their families, who remained in the city of Bogotá. During our analysis, we have built different categories, to have, as defined by Hernández, Fernández and Baptista (2010), concepts, experiences, ideas, relevant facts with meaning, that allowed us to have an in-depth view of the data from a qualitative perspective, generating a specific understanding of the sample taken for the analysis.

4.1. Categories

The first category of our analysis is the “emigrant”, since it’s the subject that starts the action. In this category, we analyze the interviews performed to each migrant of our sample, which will allow us to understand their life histories. At this point, we identify relevant aspects of their socio-economical, working and personal situation and their general perception in three moments of the migration period: before their migration to the United States (“before”), during their stay in the United States (“during”) and finally their return to Colombia (“after”). The migrant is the subject of the action, since he/she’s the one who migrates. However he/she is not alone, he/she is interacting with the others and he/she’s always accompanied by the families, even though from far away. We start the analysis of this category.

We begin the analysis of this category through a contextualization of the emigrant himself. And then, through the data collection techniques used and especially the in-depth interview, we structure the information gathered through four "key" concepts provided by migrants: perception, experience, relationships, and expectations. These will allow contextualize the situation of each immigrant.

The second category of analysis, the "family" or "others", is studied using focus groups with relatives of migrants. In this category we collect important data for understanding the history of life of the families and the impact that the emigration brought to the family. The family, from a psychosocial perspective, is the "other side of the emigration", since there is a direct connection with the migrant himself. As with the first category, we have contextualized and analyzed the situation of the family of each migrant using the same three migrant periods. The results are summarized in three concepts: migrant, family and condition.

The third condition of the analysis is created by the comparison of the interaction between the first and the second category. The result of this interaction gives birth to this new category, defined as "context" from a psychosocial point of view, and allows us to analyze the migration process from a holistic and integrated perspective.

So we should first start with the analysis of the basic concepts, in the first and second category and the comparative interaction between the migrants and the respective families.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Category I: "The migrant"

The "Life History" of each migrant included in our case study, is a methodological resource that complements and facilitates the analysis and facilitates more objective results for our research. The application of the methodological technique of "life history" allows us to know the "before", the "during" and "after" of the migration process for each migrant, allowing us to draw objective conclusions that further evidences the reality of our study.

Therefore, we try to analyze each of the fifteen "Life Histories" from the exhibit of our emigrants under study, as well as the family situation created after their departure. And to carry out our study, we considered appropriate to sequence the analysis in three different moments, as we described before.

After the analysis of the "Life Histories", we continue our investigation through the "in-depth interviews". The interviews were structured around four key concepts: "perception", "experience", "relationships" and "expectations".

In this first set of analysis, we identified the "perception" as a key concept for the strength of the word itself, for its constant appearance in different stories, since the way emigration is recognized, takes and feels the emigration depends on the perception. This concept has also a strong affinity with other concepts such as peace, search, opportunity, identity, alternative, travel, hope and leads us to build the "migration process" as a new subcategory of analysis.

In the same way, in the second block of analysis, we identify the "experience" as key concept, reflected in the in-depth interviews performed. From the "experience" depends the way the migration process is lived.

In the third block, we selected "relationship" as key concept, for the strength of the word and the constant appearance in the stories obtained. Its meaning has a great affinity with other concepts (codes), such as: family, love, rejection, humiliation, learning, nostalgia, pain, happiness and tranquility.

Finally, in the fourth and last set of analysis, we selected "expectation" as key concept. As the other key concepts, its meaning has a strong relationship with the family, business, independence, stability, life planning, travel and security.

After analyzing the interviews conducted, there is a strong tendency for migrants to consider migration as a way to search for better opportunities and to give financial support to the family. We could say that migration, in most situations, is caused by a feeling of support and assist financially the family instead of a selfish action that brings personal improvement, as we were able to demonstrate through the analysis of the four basic concepts they have used as structure of the study.

4.2.2. Category II: “The Family”

In this second category of analysis, we focus our attention in the “focus groups” with the migrant families. As mentioned before, in this category we collect important data in order to understand the history of life of the families and the impact that the emigration brought to the family. From our psychosocial focus, the family is identified as “the others”. During our fieldwork we kept in contact with different families trying to organize the information obtained in the same time sequence of our study.

We have taken into account those aspects that have allowed us to know and understand each life story, as well as the perception that the migration represented. To this, we must add additional work that we considered meaningful in our study, since it allowed us to specify this analysis through the categories defined before. Prior to the contextual analysis of each family, we should point out their family structure through three basic elements: the relationship, age and sex. As in typical Latin American family structure, families of migrants included in this investigation, are made up of parents and children as a core family and in many cases the presence of grandparents and uncles who share the same family environment. In most cases it was the father as provider and protector of the traditional home of a sexist society with great influence, who emigrated in search of a better future for their loved ones. Nevertheless, female migration has also happened (García, 1970).

We proceed to analyze three key variables in each family relationships, such as, among others, the problems of the couple as to the situation in which the children are, the economic hardship and disruption of life project as a result of the migration. These three variables of analysis have been considered in the time sequence of the process. Through fieldwork, we could interpret the responses in each one of these three temporal sequences and, we brought together the results in three major areas of information, which could reach even the range of subcategories of analysis: relationship problems or childcare; economic difficulties and impaired life project.

We have noted that the problems in the relationship and/or in childcare are common in the fifteen families studied, through the whole time period. It had negative repercussion during the migration process, regardless of the legal status of the migrant or whether the return was voluntary or not. It is an issue to consider and a quick and appropriate response from the authorities and the competent bodies is necessary.

The direct involvement of the families in the study allowed us to learn and investigate more about the migration reality, how they lived the migration process and find ways to support this invisible population, which remains without the necessary attention. Our analysis showed that the families live, feel and suffer, even though in a different way, the human problem generated by the migration and therefore require attention and support before, during and after the beloved person has left. The family is the main driver for migrating, since the migrant holds on to the idea of changing the family life, improve the financial income, offer a better future for its children and be together again in the future. However, in times of crisis, especially for the children, that inspiration generates a feeling of guilt, in interpreting that they are directly responsible for the migration of their nearest relative, which in most cases is their own parent. So, the family is thrown into a hurricane of emotions, tensions, hopes, expectations and failures, simultaneous to the immigrant experience, albeit with different sensations, but no less easy to bear.

The migration process, without any doubt, has a major impact that causes changes in the family dynamics, in the interactions and relations between the members and their psychosocial health, as described by Achótegui (2002). Initially, the family chooses to hold onto the hope of progress, represented by the promise of a new income to mitigate their immediate economic needs. However, this hope is very difficult to achieve by the emigrant, whom the family calls for support. The difficulties encountered by the migrant in the destination country, prevent the migrant from saving money. This means that, upon return (forced or voluntary), the migrant financial situation is equal of when they left, or worse. This stress generates feelings and conducts in the behavior of the emigrant, triggering emotional states linked to fear, anguish, anxiety, insecurity and frustration (Aparicio y Delgado 2011). This causes negative memories for both the migrant and his family, and in the majority of cases, they aren't sure to be able to state whether it was really worth all the sacrifice and effort.

4.2.3. Category III: “The Context”

In the present study category, we conducted a comparative analysis among the deported migrants and those who returned voluntary, taking into account their situation of legality and illegality and the involvement of their families throughout the migration process.

We will therefore analyze the contextualization of the migration process, through common points, the similarities and differences in each one of these three migration groups and their respective families. In the first case, we have considered the four "key concepts" categories of analysis derived from the qualitative "in depth" interview ("perception" "experience", "relationships" and "expectations"), and we analyzed these four key concepts, relating them to the set of people who emigrated, regardless of their situation and method of return to Colombia. As we already noted, we insist on the importance of the migrant families as direct and indirect core of the process. As stated before, Colombia in general and Bogotá in particular lacks in orientation and support to these families.

5. Conclusions

Through the analysis of results, applying the techniques of data collection that we have described, we reached the following ten conclusions that achieve the three objectives proposed:

1. The deported migrants suffer a double frustration that nullifies their life story, forcing them to begin again from failure and humiliation. In short, their status is in even worse than before leaving and they don't have any institutional help that softens the psychosocial and economic impact.
2. The illegal immigrants also represent the negative side of the migration process. Their forced departure, requires us also to assume their "invisibility" in the destination country and accept, when it occurs, their frustrated return impacting their being and the one of the family. Upon return, they experience a sense of triple failure (family, work and social), which has no institutional support.
3. Legal migrant sees their return from the perspective of labor and social success, justifying the first as the resting phase (retirement) and the second as emotional compensation (family support). Anyway, they also suffer the emotional consequences originated by the migration and therefore also need external support in their family reunion, despite having kept in touch more often with loved ones.
4. The return of the migrant is not always negative. When this return is voluntary, the migrant is able to control the time (when) and the way (how) of the return, planning the future expectations. Decisions are usually shared with family, reinforcing self-esteem of immigrant and expanding their psychosocial well-being. The variables of legality and illegality of the emigrant, is conditional to the voluntariness of the decision to return.
5. Education and culture favorably influence the process of adaptation and social integration not only for the migrant but also for their children and their own family in the country of origin.
6. Colombian immigrant who arrives in the United States, experiences deep cultural and reflection changes. For the latter, religion comes to deeply modify the mechanisms of social interaction, as pointed out by Aparicio and Delgado (2014).
7. Colombian woman suffers a triple social discrimination in the migration process: migrant, Latino and women and when she is in the home country waiting for the migrant relative, she has to play the role of mother, father and wife on the which rests the future of the whole family.
8. The man still has a significant weight in the Colombian migration to the United States and the family, by consensus, assumes the fact. The children indirectly feel responsible and guilty for the absence and the possible family breakdown, being indirectly the cause of the migration process. In addition, the return sometimes generates situations of lack of knowledge, creating new and different family roles.
9. The family in the home country is the fulcrum that supports the entire migration process, and suffers many of the problems that this situation creates. Despite the two alternatives experienced by children of migrants (positive investing remittances in their studies and negative wasting money that comes easy), they all experience the void that comes with the physical absence of the paternal or maternal reference. Those lacks of stimulation, affection and protection, which cannot be complemented by money, leave deep scars in the construction of their personality and the subsequent reintegration of the migrant in the family.
10. In Bogotá, the lack of programs or projects to support migrants and their families with psychosocial help doesn't facilitate the process of adapting to the new situation.

The above conclusions evidence the need of psychosocial support, with general guidelines that adapt to the situation and reality of each family. We highlight our proposal of psychosocial rehabilitation in order to guide the migrant through the recovery of the lost equilibrium of their life, together with building a new life. From this perspective, we present the strategic structure focused on the psychosocial support for migrant and their families, with three main areas: two linked to the attention and intervention (one for the migrant and another for the family) and a third one for community education and interculturalism.

The program should be planned adequately to meet the requirements presented, with care and intervention proposed from a phenomenological-existential basis.

We think it's not possible to build sustainable and viable changes in the life of the people who suffers if we do not know, live, feel and perceive and understand their experience. The fieldwork and action on the ground is fundamental to really know what the needs of the people are and the capabilities they have to be able to solve the problem themselves. We do not want to be just spectator, we want to be facilitators and mentors engaged with the migrants and their families. We do not want to focus on the shortfalls or what they miss, we want them to think on what they still have, what really counts despite the adversity, their purpose of existence.

The support to the migrant and the family is not a static book, with a structured text or a lecture. There is the need to live their reality, to feel, to put ourselves in their shoes, to listen, to vibrate with their stories, to dream with them, to fight with them, in short we should work together in building their new beginning. This requires an integrated vision of the human being, from a holistic and complex perspective. It requires a supporting process before, during and after the migration; avoiding isolated actions, crisis intervention or short-term measures. Requires a break with welfare and recognize the people as being able to overcome themselves despite adversity. It is therefore initiating the way so that they can manage their own transformation, become empowered and find a meaning to the pain, so that they can recognize migration as an opportunity to transcend from experience, this being unique and unrepeatable in each and every immigrant family.

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