

Mexican Retornados: The Re-acculturation of Mexican Emigrants

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Abstract

This paper focuses on retornados (the returning migrants) in Jalisco, Mexico. One hundred thirty-eight men who returned at different times, between 1970 and 2011 were studied. These men work on their own land or for an agri-industry doing livestock-related work. Qualitative analysis was done from retornados' surveys and employers' interviews. Their words reveal a re-acculturation process. During their absence, they and their homes and families changed. Retornados experience re-acculturation stress because they have to adjust back into their families, work and community. While the family is a key resource to ease the re-acculturation, it also experiences challenges in the reintegration; therefore, intervention programs can be developed to help this process.

Key Words: returning migrants, re-acculturation, stressors, family resources

1. Introduction

As in the Ulysses myth, coming home is marked as a moment of celebration, joy, achievement, and pride, but also as a challenge to gain one's place at home after the absence. This paper reveals the story of what happens when the returning migrants (*retornados*) come back home and how they adjust. First, I will talk about the migration of return in the context of this region, and why returning emigrants come back in the first place. Then I will examine the concept of re-acculturation, with examples of stressors these retornados experienced; next will be a discussion of resources and strengths that helped them cope with this adjustment process; finally, there is a summary of some considerations for people working with returning emigrants to be aware of when planning and developing psychosocial interventions. Participants in this study were all retornados from Jalisco, Mexico. In total, 138 returning emigrant men were studied, 116 were working in agri-industry in one company, and 22 were working in the countryside on their own land. A survey with closed and open-ended questions was administered by me, the main researcher, and two trained former college students.

Open-ended questions and interviews were organized with analyses of categories. The questions asked to the retornados were related to the migration experience, for example: Did you have support from your family when you returned? How did they support you? What kind of difficulties did you encounter from your family when you returned? How did your relationship with your family change when you returned to Mexico? How did the community, your neighbors, and friends receive you when you returned?, among others. For the employers, a semi-structured interview was used. Some of the questions included: What differences have you observed between returned migrants and non-migrants? What needs do you recognize among the returned migrants and their families? What are the main strengths and weakness perceived from the returned migrants?

The information is part of a bigger data set from the author's dissertation; material related to a qualitative analyses is presented. The retornados experience was selected and organized into categories: motives to return; re-acculturation stressors in the family, work, and community; and resources used to cope with the adjustment process. In this manuscript, I try to integrate the acculturation concept proposed by Berry (1997) in the experience of those who return, suggesting the concept of re-acculturation related to the stress and adaptation process experienced for the retornados.

2. Characteristics of participants

The average age of the 138 men was 36.6 years with a range from 16 to 79 years old. Most of them have only basic education (57% elementary school; 34% middle school; and 9% high school). Home ownership was 59%; 22% rented and 19% lived with a relative for no rent. Most were married (87%), had children living at home, (44% had 1 or 2, 33% had 3 or 4 and 5% had 5 or more). Households were mainly nuclear families with husband and wife, (64%); 32.1% had more than three adults living at home; only 3.1% had one adult. Only 22% migrated more than once. The average migration length was 3.6 years. They reported that they all returned freely.

3. Migration Stress

3.1. Return Migration

Migration has been studied in many ways. Some have studied the impact that remittances (money sent by immigrants to their home country) have on the communities of origin (Soltero, 2011); others have focused on diseases transmitted by emigrants (Jimenez, Romero, & del Rio-Valdes, 2010). Changes in the flow of migration (Mendoza, 2011) have also been studied. There are also studies that have shown the negative impact migration has on people's mental health (Achoategui, 2005; Breslau, Borges, Tancredi, Saito, Anderson, Kravitz, & Medina-Mora, 2011). Studies have compared the health of immigrants with other groups in the United States (Teruya & Bazargan-Hejazi, 2013). Studies of immigrants have also identified changes in family dynamics such as gender roles (Decena, Shedlin, & Martinez, 2006) and parenting responsibilities (Rodriguez, Donovan, & Crowley, 2009). Many studies have examined how immigrants adapt in the host countries and focus on acculturation (Berry, 1997; Riosmena, Wong, & Palloni, 2013). Related to this last area of interest, acculturation is an adaptation process in which immigrants have to cope and adjust to a new culture using different strategies. The final stage of migration (the immigrant returns home to the country of origin) is one of the least studied aspects of migration. The migration of return also requires an adaptation process for those who return as well as for the family left behind. The United Nations created a definition of the returnee as someone that has the nationality from the country when he or she arrives, having been in a foreign country for at least one year and having been back in the country of origin for at least one year (Egea, Nieto & Jimenez 2002).

In her thesis on emigrants of return, Medina (2011) used Portes and Zhou's (1993) incorporation model to point out the challenges that occur when immigrants return home. She found that returning migrants struggle with government policies and rules, how they are socially received and perceived, and with re-incorporation into co-ethnic communities. She concluded that returnee families received little support from family members to re-integrate into their home society. For example, government regulations made it difficult for American-born children of Mexican parents to enter school. At school and in the community, some of the American-born children of returning immigrants experienced bullying by Mexican children. She also found that there were no co-ethnic communities in Mexico where they could receive support from other mixed families (Mexican parents and American children). Returning immigrants reported that they were received well only by their own family members (Medina, 2011). Another study done in Colombia that focused on the adaptation process of returning migrants found that what helped retornados in their process of adaptation was to have a job and a comfortable economic situation as well as family support (Gutierrez & Ramirez, 2011). Mexico shares similarities and differences with countries which receive their emigrants of return. Specifically in Mexico, changes in families are associated not only with international migration, but with the economic situation, employment and socio-demographic changes (Arias, 2013).

3.2. Changing Context Shaping the Return Migration Decision

In more recent years, there has been less circular migration between Mexico and the United States. (Mexican Census, INEGI, 2010). Migrants are deciding to stay longer in the USA or alternatively, to return home for good. On the American side, it has been estimated that there were 12.2 million unauthorized immigrants in 2007; by 2012 this number had fallen to 11.7 million (Passel, 2013). Similarly, the Mexican national census has shown an increase in the number of Mexicans who had lived in the United States; in 2000, 230,000 people reported they had lived in USA, but in the 2010 Mexican census, 980,000 individuals reported that they had lived in the USA (INEGI, 2010). The number of returning emigrants has quadrupled between 2000 and 2010. In particular, people from the central-occidental part of Mexico who traditionally migrated to the USA for several generations are increasingly returning home for longer periods (Massey, Durand, & Riosmena, 2010). Another reason for return migration is that the economy in Mexico was improving, resulting in increasing numbers of retornados voluntarily

returning (Arias, 2013). In addition, an increasing number of immigrants in the U.S. are being deported back to Mexico. In the period of 2000-2005 Jalisco State had the fifth largest number of emigrants returned by the border patrol. Bhugra (2004) pointed out that "It is clear that the process of migration, preparation leading up to migration and the post migration stress will influence different individuals in different ways and the individual will respond in different ways as well. The flexibility demonstrated by the individual in preparation and the altered expectations, do play a role in helping the individual manage transitions into the recipient culture" (p. 244). This paper focuses on why immigrants decide to return and what they experience upon return. What are the re-acculturation stressors in the family, work and community? How family resources help returning emigrants to adjust in this re-acculturation process? And what should social services and health providers know when working with retornados and their families? These questions are address here.

3.3. Reasons to return

Much of the current research on migration focuses on the individual experience. Migration is conceptualized as an individual decision; people decide to move to have a better life (Arias, 2013), to escape from war or violence in their own country (Cabrera, 2010), and to achieve higher education (Moctezuma, Perez, and Martinez, 2012). When emigrants return they give plenty of individual reasons as well; nevertheless, these returning emigrants say that "family" is the most important reason to return. Several men said the reason for their return was their emotional attachment to their families. Missing their families was a common reason to return. One man (25 year old, returned in 2007) expressed, "I want to see my family and be with them" ("*Las ganas de ver a mi familia y estar con ellos*"). Another man (60 years old, returned in 2001) said, "It is better be with the family than being alone. I love the family very much. I don't want to go the United States ("*Es mejor estar con la familia que estar uno solo, a la familia la quiero mucho, no quiero ir a Estados Unidos*"). These findings show that "family" was the main reason to return and are similar to findings in a study about Colombian emigrants; in that study of 20 Colombian emigrants, 16 out of 20 said "family" was the main reason for their return (Gutierrez, 2011). Other family reasons given were related to fulfilling family roles as fathers, husbands, sons, siblings, and bachelors. Some of them who were single returned to be married. One man said "I was engaged to get married with my girlfriend (fiancé)" ("*Porque tenía un compromiso para casarme con mi novia*") (32 year old, returned in 2005); others talked about being with their parents: "I returned to see my mother and to tell her how much I love her and I stayed" ("*Regresé a ver a mi madre que la quería ver y decirle cuánto la quiero, regresé a ver a mi mamá y me quedé*") (25 year old, returned in 2009).

3.4. Challenges of return

Acculturation happens when groups of individuals from different cultures come into continuous contact with one another; changes can happen in one or both groups (Berry, 2001). In the psychological acculturation individuals can respond with different strategies toward or against the dominant culture (Berry, 1997). Nevertheless, there is also a bicultural strategy of being competent in both cultures (LaFramboise, Coleman, and Gerton, 1993). Those who return must adjust yet again, this time into their home cultures, which requires a new adaptation process and new transitions. Returning immigrants experience both an internal and external adaptation process in which the culture plays a significant role. The individual perceives himself as culturally different because not only has he changed but the community culture into which the returnado arrives has changed as well. "I can feel the difference of the life in there and in here" ("*Se siente la diferencia de la vida de allá y de aquí*") (36 year old, returned in 2000), "It is difficult, I was used to the life in the USA" ("*Algo difícil, me había acostumbrado al tipo de vida en EU*"), (29 year old, returned in 2007). Coming back is an adaptation process full of challenges for the family and in other contexts. Neither those who left nor those who stayed behind are the same people upon return. There were changes in the culture inside and outside the family. It is a reacculturation because the migrant has to make adaptations to fit into the hostess culture when being in the EU; by returning to the home country, the retornados are engaged in a reacculturation process, bringing with them what they learn and how they change living outside of their country, but changing again in their home country.

4. Re-acculturation stressors of coming back home

Coming home is not easy for those who left or for those who return. While the men were away, things changed at home. The absence of the father on a daily basis changed the family dynamics; for example, small children grew up without their fathers. Fathers and children do not know each other when fathers return. Some of the retornados expressed regret about how much family life they had missed.

“I was not very well acquainted with the family and it was not easy because when I left, they were children, and when I returned they were young adults and I didn’t really know them very well” (“Ya no conoce uno muy bien, la familia, y no es fácil empezar, cuando se va uno, están chicos y cuando uno viene están grandes y a veces ni los conoces”) (50 year old, returned in 2002)

Sometimes the change is that either the men or women cannot get along anymore; moreover, the relationship of the retornados with their kids can be difficult; they must learn to develop trust and confidence in each other.

Marcos mentioned that one of the most difficult things in addition to finding a job, was to get along with his daughters. When he left they were very little, [and now] they did not know him; he mentioned that his relationship with his wife was affected as well. (*Marcos dice que una de las cosas que le costó más trabajo es la convivencia con sus hijas, debido a que cuando se fue eran muy pequeñas, (ahora) ellas no lo reconocían como su padre, su vida de pareja también se vio afectada por la distancia*) (Notes from an interview with a 37 year old returned emigrant company worker). Other parenting issues cited by retornados were their own needs for acceptance, compensating for their feelings of guilt over the long absence by giving their kids too many material things, and having difficulties establishing limits. Retornados also recognized difficulties with their partners:

“Problems with my wife (“Problemas con mi esposa”) (28 year old, returned in 2008), *“My wife was jealous because she thought that I was unfaithful” (“Mi esposa estaba celosa, creyó que le fui infiel”)* (60 year old, returned in 2001). *“The reunion was not the same, things had changed” (“El reencuentro que ya no era el mismo, que había cambiado”)* (29 year old, returned in 2007).

4.1. Re-acculturation stress at work

Retornados may experience acculturation stress through discrimination and prejudice in the work place due to perceived cultural differences. Here are examples from employers:

“Yes, here young men came looking as posh person, dressing in a different way and with different attitude as well. I think that... we are not talking about generalities; there are also people that return and that is very good and is okay, but really, a lot of people get lost in that adventure (of migrating)”

“Si muchachos que vienen desde en fachas, vistiendo de otra manera diferente y con una actitud diferente también, yo creo que ...no estamos hablando de generalidades, también hay gente que regresa y que es muy muy buena que regresa y está bien, pero realmente si se pierde mucha gente en esa aventura”(Employer man, 65 years old).

Here we observe how some retornados are seen as different from the organizational culture; there is the belief that some of them bring negative attitudes to the workplace. They are viewed as having changed their outlook and ideas so that they no longer fit the organizational culture. And of course, they have absorbed ideas and attitudes from their emigration countries. A large difference between Mexico and the USA are the salaries. Salaries and the value of money is not the same as it was in the USA. They want to earn similar wages and have their work valued more. This is perceived by both retornados and employers. *“It was difficult to accept working for less money” (“Fue difícil aceptar trabajar por poco dinero”)* (35 year old, returned in 2003), *“The hardest part was the low salaries” (“Lo más difícil fue lo poquito pagado”)* (28 year old, returned in 2007). At work some of them are perceived as overestimating their working skills.

“..there are people that said -“listen, I know to speak English, more or less, I work in there as manager and if in here there is not that opportunity, they said: “Here you don’t value me, I can.. I can give more than others that have not being there” (“..hay personas que dicen “oyes es que, yo sé hablar inglés, yo allá más o menos trabajé de manager” y si aquí no hay esas oportunidades dicen “No es que aquí no me lo valoran, es que yo... yo te puedo dar más que otros que no han ido para allá”) (Employer man, 37 years old).

In fact, some retornados have developed new skills in their migration experience and feel proud of those; often this pride is perceived as grandiosity. Men who migrate to the US have a higher status in the Mexican culture. This can be sensed by the home community and by the emigrants themselves depending if the retornado is perceived as successful or as a loser in their migration experience.

4.2 Re-acculturation stress of returning to their communities

Retornados also have challenges adjusting to the community, which is another part of re-acculturation stress. They mentioned difficulties getting used to the food, the people, and to starting over:

“It was difficult. I was used to a life style from the USA” (“*Algo difícil, me había acostumbrado al tipo de vida en EU*”) (29 year old, returned 2007), “I did not know Mexico” (“*No conocer México*”) (16 year old, returned in 2010), “I got sick of the stomach” (“*me enfermé del estómago*”) (48 year old, returned in 1998).

Some of them also had difficulties with language, amenities, and feeling homesick. “It was difficult to understand the jokes, the double meaning” (“*Fue difícil entender los albures, el doble sentido*”) (36 year old, returned in 2000), the amenities” (“*Lo mas difícil fue la diferencia de cómo vive uno en EU, La comodidad* (related to the amenities that are in EU and not in Mexico) (42 year old, returned in 1993). The hardest part... was to communicate with your memories of before” (“*Lo más difícil... tratar de comunicarte con tus recuerdos de antes*”) (22 year old, returned in 2010). “I miss my friends in the USA” (“*Extraño a mis amigos de USA*”) (42 year old, returned in 2003).

4.3. Family as a resource to cope with reacculturation

One of the most significant resources for retornados was their family, to facilitate the emigration and returning experience. In the returning process they reported receiving support in different ways from relatives including economic support, “They gave me money to buy the fly ticket” (“*Me dieron dinero para el avión*”) (51 year old, returned in 1989); “My family help me with everything I needed” (“*Mis familiares me ayudaron con lo que me hacía falta*”) (31 year old, returned in 2006); helping them to get a job: “My cousin help me to get a job” (“*Me ayudó un primo para conseguir trabajo*”) (38 year old, returned in 1993). Their family also give them support morally and emotionally. “My family let me know that I could count with them in any moment” (“*La familia me hizo saber que podía contar con ellos en cualquier caso*”) (23 year old, returned in 2008), “They gave me encouragement and love” (“*Dándome ánimos y cariño*”), (43 year old, returned in 2001), “They received me with a lot of happiness” (“*Me recibieron con mucho gusto*”) (32 year old, returned in 2005). Family also convinced them to stay (do not migrate again) “They motivate me to stay (home)” (“*Me motivaron para quedarme*”) (67 year old, returned in 1970).

The family helped to make the adjustment easier, to help them feel supported and to reinitiate their life projects; one retornado mentioned that he was having very serious addiction problems when he returned, but he felt that his family saved him. “It has been 6 years from his return. The main reason to return was his family, his oldest daughter. Having contact with drugs was another reason. Getting use to the life in his country was very difficult for him because his friends were making fun of him because of the way he was. The support from the family was very important for him, saying “they (his family) did not rest until they took me out of the hole”. Now he has a job working with his siblings, on the family farm from where they make a living”. (“*Hace 6 años de su regreso, le hizo regresar su familia principalmente su hija mayor, el tener contacto con las drogas fue otro motivo, adaptarse a la vida de su país le costó mucho trabajo ya que sus amigos se burlaban de el de como andaba, el apoyo que recibió de su familia fue de importancia ya que comenta que “no descansaron hasta que me sacaron del hoyo”, ahora tiene trabajo con sus hermanos, tienen entre todos un establo del cual sale para mantenerse.*”)(Notes from information from retornado 28 years old, from a rural community)

5. Miscellaneous reflections

The migration experience is not just going there; it is also about the process of return. In the US, there is much research on the acculturation process for immigrants as host country. In this process of acculturation, there are many ways in which the individual can adjust to this new context, such as assimilation, integration, separation, and segregation (Berry, 2001). In some way, the integration implies the development of bicultural competencies which can appear separately or combined (LaFramboise, Coleman, and Gerton, 1993). Rumbaut (1991) cited by Yakushko & Chronister (2005) pointed out that the migration experience, even in the most welcoming environment with the most prepared people can provoke profound psychological distress. When people go back to their countries, there is the adaptation process of re-acculturation. In the original country, things have changed as well.

Therefore, retornados experience stress in this adjustment journey (re-acculturation process). Social services as well as health providers should consider the following points:

1. Migration and returning is more than an individual decision and is not only about migration, but returning.

2. Even though each man made an individual journey, in this study they reported that the family (the group) eased their re-acculturation process. Therefore, family should be included in the therapeutic scenario. Let every member tell their story, and integrate them into the family story.
3. To facilitate the re-acculturation process with the family, professionals should play a mediator role integrating different therapeutic tools: art, narrative, contracts renewal and rituals (Falicov, 2005, 2003, 2001). Moreover, when working with families of retornados, therapists should know and analyze the influence culture has on family dynamics to help them cope with the challenges.
4. Community and work are very significant for retornados. There does not seem to be enough national, community, and family awareness to provide a welcoming environment for retornados, and to understand and appreciate the new skills they can offer. Many see them as a threat instead of as an asset, especially in the work environment. Therefore, community awareness activities should be developed to encourage both workplace and community acceptance and understanding toward retornados and their families.

6. Conclusions

With current socio-economic changes, migration of return will continue to increase. To know who this population is, what motivation they have, what the adjustment difficulties are, and what resources are available is crucial information in guiding professionals and agencies. Providing targeted services for retornados and their families at both micro and macro levels can benefit the society immersed in this phenomenon. From these retornados, we learned that they experience a re-acculturation process comprised of multiple stressors in a variety of contexts upon return. More research on retornados must continue in order to differentiate the strategies that the returned used in this adaptation process. The context most affected by the migration journey while also providing key support to retornados is the family. Therefore, interventions to support re-acculturation can be most effective when the family is involved. From this study we learned about the experience of returned men. We do not have firsthand data about the family who was waiting, the women and children. How prepared are the home countries, their health and workplace organizations to receive these retornados as their numbers continue to increase? These are questions to be answered in future research so action can be taken in Mexico and in other countries with significant numbers of returning immigrants to be repatriated. Many retornados have new skills as well as new ideas to consider; these can enrich the native countries if they can collectively support and learn from this population while retaining core national values and mores.

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