The Immigrant Childhood in Chile[1]

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Abstract

The study is based on the Sociology of Childhood that defines childhood as a three-dimensional concept. The first-dimension addresses childhood as a social construction, which is separate from the essential idea of the childish being. This social construction has been expressed in different ways across history and in every sociopolitical context. The second dimension defines childhood as a permanent sociological category of the social structure, although its members are constantly renewed. The third dimension comprises children as "social actors with an agency capacity" that open generational and gender relations of power with other actors, both within their families and in other social areas. Nevertheless, that social role is not often recognized in society and in academics. This is due to the adult centrism that discriminates against them because of their age and economic dependence. In this research, the social integration of migrant children is analyzed through semi-structured interviews with migrant children aged 8 to 15, as well as by participant observation in state Offices of Rights Protection. It is taken to be the exercise of its rights and the development of transnational practices and how social intervention hinders and/or provides that integration. Finally, the research concludes stating that migratory trajectories and diverse social factors (such as gender, age, language, place of birth, nationality, and social position, among others) have an impact on the accommodation and social integration of the new immigrant generations living in Chile.

Abbreviations: immigrant, children, rights, social politics, Chile.

Introduction

Large numbers of Peruvians began arriving in Santiago starting in early 1996, consisting mainly of young and adult women who send remittances to their families in Peru. But it was not until 2000 when migration flows began to steadily accelerate, a situation that continues to this day. Since 2004 gradually accelerate the process of family reunification by Peruvian women pioneers in migratory chains and networks to Chile [1].

The long hours and the lack of a support network in the destination country hinder reunification of children with families. Parents and, especially, Peruvian mothers know that is difficult to reconcile childcare work with paid work without the support of their families. It has been observed [2] that once children come to Chile there is a possibility that they are without adult company when they come home from school and, therefore, in a situation of social vulnerability [3-5].

The incorporation rates of immigrant children in the Chilean school system include a number of requirements that sometimes are hard to achieve for some families due to lack of planning, money and time. In order to request the enrollment in any school or the student visa application, the necessary income and the legalization of documents at home are needed. However, this sometimes becomes a vicious circle, as the school requires to children to have the start visa regular tuition, but at the same time the Peruvian Consulate in Chile requests the Certificate of Regular Student school visa procedures [3]. According to the 2005 enrollment figures from the Ministry of Education, of a total of 3,779,459 (three million seven hundred seventy nine thousand four hundred fifty nine) students, 23,500 (twenty three thousand five hundred) are foreigners and, of these approximately 45% are undocumented [6].

Method

The information analyzed in this paper comes from an analysis of national and international legal regulations in force in Chile that affect the exercise of children's rights. In this research, the social integration of migrant children is analyzed through semi-structured interviews with migrant children aged 8 to 15, as well

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as by participant observation in state Offices of Rights Protection. It is taken to be the exercise of its rights and the development of transnational practices and how social intervention hinders and/or provides that integration. All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the information collected and the right to privacy of children, as it is stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The categorization and coding of the interviews was conducted with the computer program at last through the technique of critical discourse analysis [7]. The scope of this study is descriptive.

Theory

The study is based on the Sociology of Childhood that defines childhood as a three-dimensional concept. The first-dimension addresses childhood as a social construction, which is separate from the essential idea of the childish being. This social construction has been expressed in different ways across history and in every sociopolitical context. The second dimension defines childhood as a permanent sociological category of the social structure, although its members are constantly renewed. The third dimension comprises children as "social actors with an agency capacity" that open generational and gender relations of power with other actors, both within their families and in other social areas. Nevertheless, that social role is not often recognized in society and in academics. This is due to the adult centrism that discriminates against them because of their age and economic dependence [8-13].

Results and Analysis

In the fieldwork developed with parents where child migration processes (family reunification) were addressed, they comment that before the child arrival, they seek information about schools and the necessary documents for enrollment and subsequent regularization papers. Another aspect that families consider is referred to address changes and changes in working hours, in order to reconcile childcare with jobs. Sometimes families borrow money to finance the trip for children and accommodation expenses. Since many parents travel to Peru for the year-end holidays and the summer holidays (January-February) and then return to Chile, usually (but not always) the date of arrival of Peruvian children coincides with the beginning of the school year (March).

Motivations for Peruvian children around their own Migration

The motivations and emotions that children experience about their own migration, once their parents are already in Chile, are varied. Through the interviews, it is possible to verify that the desire to know other places operates as a travel facilitator of children. In the next segment, in the interview with Aurora -from Lima- is evident how anxious she was to know Chile, whose image had idealized presumably by the comments of her mother.

Yes, I wanted to come to Chile. I was anxious because I wanted to know, I wanted to know Chile, that's why. I thought everything was nice, and I realized that the school was nice, Chile was nice and I noticed it in that moment (Aurora, 9 years-old, Santiago).

This is similar to Kasumi's story, who openly admits that her mother gave her some determined ideas on Chilean society. She even warned her about possible racist attacks. As Fouron and Glick-Shiller [14] point out, transnational generations live permanently with ideas and imaginary scenarios about the country of destination, so when they migrate, the child has certain information and they, somehow, know the place:

As my mother had been here, she said it was very nice and there were plants everywhere, that it was better. She said that people were different, some of them will be very racist, and others will understand, things like that. (Kasumi 13 years-old, Santiago).

The transit of ideas, experiences and opinions on the place of destination is part of what Levitt [15] calls the "social remittances" that parents transmit to their offspring through the transnational social field and are constituted as symbolic exchanges [16].

In the following excerpt from Rosario's interview, these "social remittances" are shown, in terms of the ideas associated with the destination as a place with opportunities that should be seized [17,18]. Her response is very interesting when she was asked about her opinion regarding to the moment that her mother announces to the whole family that she is going to immigrate to Chile, where was the father. Despite her insecurities, she confesses her intrinsic motivation to travel to other countries and their desire to know the world.

Q: What did you think in that minute when she said she was coming to Chile?

R: I didn't feel too bad because I wanted to know more of the world, more countries.

Q: Did you want to come to Chile?

R: I wasn't so sure, but yes, I wanted to come...go (Rosario, 9 years-old, Santiago).

In the same direction is Matías' comment who just wanted to visit Chile during holidays, but he must stay there because he doesn't have the corresponding documents for an immigrant child.

"I wanted to come to Chile on vacation, because I wanted to see the place. And then I couldn't get out, I couldn't leave the country because of my ID, I don't have an ID" (Matías, 10 years-old, Santiago).

Estrella and María- who are twin sisters native to Chimbote- interpret their own migration as a way to escape the situation of abuse they received from the people who were in charge of their care- that is, their grandmother and grandfather. Estrella says her brother also assaulted her. All this is exacerbated by physical distance from their mother. In one point the story of Estrella and María agreed: they desired to travel to Chile to be near their mother.

The parent appears in this scene as a caregiver and attachment figure, coherent idea about what is expected of a "mother" from gender roles (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parella 2005; Lamas 2007) [19-21]. This is linked to the feeling of guilt experienced by Peruvian mothers and the eventual sense of abandonment felt by children, after separations from their mothers and the physical violence present in their families:

"I wanted to come for my mom. Because in Peru I almost didn't get use to my grandparents, they were very bad. They didn´t hit me because I didn't let them, I used to escape. But my dad worked at night [so] he left me there. Or my sister took me to school. Or my tedious brother grabbed me and kicked me. And one day my dad grabbed him up and hit him. To solve it, he hit him (laughs). (Estrella, 12 years-old, Santiago).

"I did want to come, because I wanted to be with my mom. I wanted to be with her. But in that part, I wanted to come and go with my mom to Peru.

Q: Did you want to come and look for her?

R: Yes (laughs). And I said: I want to go there and come back again, because I've already had my mom" (María, 12 years-old, Santiago).

Generational violence experienced by the girls in their places of origin may be considered as a cause of migration at the same analytical and empirical level that is wielded by some women victims of gender violence.

On the other hand, the contradictions felt by boys and girls about their own migration are well summarized in the following quote from Alexia. This situation has also appeared in other interviews conducted in Santiago and is probably due to the geographical proximity between Peru and Chile. It is also the result of an existing legal framework characterized by flexibility, allowing greater mobility of migrant families between both countries. The Alexia fragment allows understanding that children felt gains and losses involving migration, conclusions similar to those obtained by Suarez-Orozco [22] and Suarez-Orozco [23] studies:

Last year, I was told that I was going over there [Chile] on vacation. Ok, I went there. First, I went with my dad and my mom; we were in the car, and all. And then we come to Santiago and we got to the room and all. And then with my dad I went back to Peru ... and ... and then the year past. And the other year, and then they told me we're going to Chile and I was going to study there and all. One part of me wanted to go but the other one didn't. The part that I wanted to was because I could be with my mom and dad, and the part that I didn't want to was because I didn't want to leave my family and my friends and everything. (Alexia, 9 years-old, Santiago).

For Arturo, besides to appreciate the reunion with his parents, he considers that migration allows access to higher educational opportunities (more scholarships) and labor.

"The good thing is that you are with your parents...I mean, also to take advantage of what they have here. They give you more scholarships, more opportunities. I mean more opportunities to work" (Arturo, 14 years-old, Santiago).

The fragment of Mia's interview also appreciates the experience of being in Chile associated, in her case, to the fact that she could establish ties of friendship, but without hiding the difficulties for integration and, feeling the respective homesickness of being far from your home country:

"At first it was terrible because I couldn't find friends anywhere. Then, I was invited to the "group". I joined to participate to the group, I met more people. And now, I'm still not 100% adapted, but I'm adapted a little bit...I'm adapted a little bit. But I find life here is better than there. The good thing is I have friends who are nice, cool. The downside of being in Chile is that I miss too much; I really miss the place where I was born, friends, and the places where I hang out with my girlfriends. That's the bad thing about being here in Chile (...) Difficult, very difficult, because upon arrival, you have to adapt, try to adapt...because it is not easy to get there and adjust right away, it costs too much, that [is] difficult" (Mia, 14 years-old, Santiago).

Conclusion

The research concludes that migratory trajectories and diverse social factors (such as gender, age, language, place of birth, nationality, and social position, among others) have an impact on the accommodation and social integration of the new immigrant generations living in Chile. For girls and boys, participants in this study, their own migration mean time to reconnect with family as well as the opportunity to travel and to study in Chile. But they also know that their migration involves thoroughly away from their extended family, their friends and all the people that maintain close ties in Peru. From this point of view, a first conclusion is related to the child migration implies a loss of sense of belonging. Likewise, although the fieldwork shows that children's motivations for migration itself are varied, it is predominant the idealization of the country of destination. The participation of girls and boys in contemporary Peruvian migration processes is shown complex, contradictory and it varies in each context.

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