



The voices of newcomers. A qualitative analysis of the construction of transnational identity



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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, globalization is connected with the emergence and reconstruction of new identities. For instance, the migration process implies the generation of new forms of identity, questioning the traditional homogeneous and static notions of identity. In this regard, the term "transnational identity" or "bicultural identity" has been suggested for these people that live in between two cultural frameworks and has to establish a dialogue between the country of origin ("there") and the host country ("here"). This study shows the bicultural and multiple nature of ten immigrant life stories. These narratives illustrate how bicultural and multilingual skills become part of the self definition through the appropriation of cultural voices that manage the origin and host lifestyles, building hybrid and multiple identities that preserve certain ties with the origin society and take certain forms of life of the new culture and society. The novelty embodied in this work is the qualitative approach taken in the research. Most of the literature on transnational identity and transnationalism are based on theoretical discussions or quantitative data.
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Las voces de los que vienen. Un análisis cualitativo sobre la construcción de la identidad transnacional

RESUMEN

En la actualidad, la globalización se asocia con la emergencia y reconstrucción de nuevas identidades. Por ejemplo, los procesos migratorios conllevan la generación de nuevas formas de identidad que cuestionan las nociones estáticas y homogéneas tradicionales. En este sentido, se ha sugerido el concepto de "identidad transnacional" o "identidad bicultural" para hacer referencia a las personas que viven entre dos o más modelos culturales distintos y deben, en consecuencia, mantener un diálogo entre la sociedad de origen ("allí") y la de destino ("aquí"). Este estudio muestra la naturaleza bicultural y múltiple de diez historias de vida de inmigrantes. Estas narrativas ilustran cómo las habilidades biculturales y multilingües devienen parte de la definición identitaria a través de la apropiación de voces culturales que establecen un diálogo entre la sociedad de origen y de destino, facilitando la construcción de identidades híbridas y múltiples. La novedad de este trabajo reside en la aproximación cualitativa llevada a cabo dado que la mayoría de estudios en la literatura sobre identidad transnacional y transnacionalismo se basan bien en discusiones teóricas o bien en estudios cuantitativos.
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Palabras clave:

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Identidad nacional
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Aproximación cualitativa

Globalization, on the one hand, and the demands of the so-called 'cultural minorities' – immigrants, stateless nations, indigenous peoples – (Kymlicka, 1995), on the other hand, have called into question the traditional homogeneous notions of identity whereby the state contains and ensures social ties and political agreement via the homogenization of citizenship based on the "one language, one territory, one identity, one nation-state" formula. For instance, by "stateless nations" it is meant an

(ethnic, religious, linguistic) social group which is not the majority population in any nation state. The term implies that the group "should have" such a state, and thus expresses irredentism (Minahan, 2002).

Globalization, taken as a process of basically economic, but also political and social interconnection, has led to a *detritorialization* of the centres of political and economic decisions (De Lucas, 1999). Thus the nation-state is no longer alone in regulating social control, since there are now other supranational, political, and economic institutions which dictate the rules of economic, social, and political organization. In this sense, the European Union, the International Mone-

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tary Fund, the NATO, and the UN are agencies that regulate and constrain the decision-making capacity of countries such as Spain, France, Portugal, the USA, and Japan.

On the other hand, there are forces from 'within' the nation-states that question the nation-state's model of rationality. For example, minority groups of stateless nations that demand that the nation-state allows them the right to self-determination, ethnic groups of immigrants that seek recognition of religious rights or the right to vote in the new host society, or indigenous populations demanding territorial rights over certain areas.

International mobility – a result of the processes of globalization, of advances in information and communication technology, and of deterritorialization (Bauman, 2001; Castells, 1997) – has increased the linguistic, cultural, and identity diversity of countries such as Spain and especially certain areas such as Catalonia, which has in recent years received nearly a million foreigners, bringing the total up to 1,241,522 foreigners (16.4% of the total population) registered in Catalonia in the year 2010 (IDESCAT, 2011).

This leads, in terms of identity, to a proliferation of different frameworks of values and cultural repertoires placed within in the same context or situation. It also leads to demands for the rights of minority groups (indigenous, immigrant, or stateless) – the so-called 'cultural rights', 'minority rights', or 'group-differentiated citizenship rights' (Kymlicka, 1995, 1997). Such demands – now from the grassroots – call into question the organization and rationality of the traditional model of the nation-state. This illustrates the effects of linguistic, ethnic, religious, and identity diversity on Western societies as a product of globalization.

Thus, new social phenomena, globalization and the *politics of recognition*, produce new perceptions of the nation-state and the configuration of identities that results from it – what some have called 'the crisis of the nation-state' (see, for example, Villoro, 1998).

Tedesco (1999), for instance, advocates the need to articulate multiple identities that are able to develop a dual bond: the first being one of solidarity and identification with the human species, the second being one that preserves the sense of *belonging* at the local level.

With this solution – developed in response to the creation of 'murderous identities' (Maalouf, 1999), which propagate self-recognition based on denial and annihilation of one or more cultural groups – it is hoped that equality and social cohesion will be based on the recognition of a certain difference which allows one to recognize the cultural values of the groups that coexist in the same area so that some of what is 'them' can be recognized in the individual 'us' – in contrast to the traditional view that sees a common 'us' versus a strange and dangerous 'them' (Vila, 2006; Vila, Esteban-Guitart, & Oller, 2010).

Indeed, immigrants have always been at the boundaries of two cultures and this unquestionably determines the ways they construct identity. According to Stonequist (1937), "having a dual cultural framework can hinder the location of *here* and *there*, leaving them 'on the edge' of each culture, but not fully belonging to either" (p. 4). Immigrants can successfully enter a society and live out their lives, only to be recognized – through their accent, their family, their beliefs or their skin colour – as second-class citizens by the host society *and* by their society of origin (Esteban-Guitart, Monreal-Bosch, & Vila, 2013). Their new experiences have changed the filters through which they see the world and this can lead to discontinuities with their cultural group of origin. Thus they can be transformed into what Stonequist calls 'marginal man' in terms of identity, politics, and culture. Indeed, the concept of 'transnational identity' refers to the bicultural character of immigrants who must negotiate their two forms of cultural socialization.

The Concept of Transnational Identity

According to Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2003), in the case of immigrants, there are three strategies of constructing identity: ethnic flight, active opposition, and biculturalism. In the case of

'ethnic flight', immigrants identify so strongly with the dominant culture that they may even renounce the way of life and identity of their society of origin. Therefore, this assimilation results in a weakening of ties with their own groups – often perceived as 'inferior' or 'marginal' and one which they want to leave. In contrast, with 'active opposition' the construction of identity revolves around the rejection of the institutions of the dominant culture, usually after being rejected by them. This would be the case, for example, of certain gangs of youths such as the *Latin Kings*, who develop forms of social bonding and identity completely separate from the host society, which they feel rejects them.

However, according to the study by Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2003, p. 193), "the vast majority of immigrant children develop an adaptive style situated between the extremes of *opposition* and *ethnic flight*. Immigration leads them to construct bicultural identities." By *bicultural identity*, the authors mean the creative fusion between their family tradition and the new culture, combining the two systems through the development of multicultural and multilingual skills, which become part of their identity.

Their theory is that "the creation of transcultural identities is the most adaptive of the three styles. It preserves the affective bonds with the culture of origin, but allows the child to acquire the skills necessary to function successfully in the dominant culture (...) and in acquiring the skills that enable them to cope with more than one cultural code, young immigrants have an advantage" (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2003, p. 193-199).

Therefore, according to this line of reasoning, transcultural identities are the most adaptive because participating successfully in multiple social and cultural contexts becomes a necessary condition for one's development in the globalized and deeply diverse societies of the present day.

A number of studies empirically support the hypothesis presented by Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (2003). The most important is probably the *International Comparative Study of Ethnocultural Youth* (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006), an international study carried out in thirteen countries and involving over seven thousand young immigrants from different cultural backgrounds. They found four adaptive patterns or strategies: 1) the diffuse model, in which there is uncertainty and confusion about how to live between two cultures, 2) the national pattern, in which young people assimilate and identify with the national group of the host society, 3) the ethnic model, in which the orientation is mainly towards their own reference group of origin, and 4) the integration model, in which young people identify with both cultures, preserving the ethnic codes of their tradition and integrating the lifestyles of the host society.

In this study, they found that the integration strategy correlates best with psychological adaptation (personal wellbeing and optimal mental health) and sociocultural adaptation (academic performance, social integration, management of daily life). The diffuse model correlates with the lowest indicators of psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Berry et al., 2006).

Similarly, a study by Wangaruro (2011), made with Kenyan immigrants residing in the UK, suggests that transnational identity correlates positively with personal and family wellbeing, since maintaining links with the society of origin while developing new social connections with the host country increases the chances of support.

It is important to note that the concept of 'transnational identity' (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2013; Portes, 1997; Vertovec, 2001; Wangaruro, 2011) is a type of 'national identity' linked to at least two national referents: the society of origin and the host society – the national link with the society of origin being an aspect that cannot be wholly replaced by a possible national link with the host society, or, indeed, vice versa.

In this sense, the study by Vila et al. (2010) shows how the construction of identity by young immigrant students with different origins, mother tongues, and length of residence in Catalonia is based on the importance of the place of origin, on the one hand, and on the social

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