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Last Stop: Imaginaries and Sources of Information of Central American Migrants

Última parada: imaginarios y fuentes de información de los migrantes centroamericanos

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ABSTRACT

The topic of migration in Mexico has gained relevance since there has been a significant increase of Central American migrants traveling through the country towards the United States, to achieve *the American dream*. This article identifies the imaginaries and sources of information of migrants regarding their transit and final destination. Sixty people were interviewed in a local shelter of the city of Monterrey with participants from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. The conclusions show romanticized imaginaries, founded primarily on interpersonal sources (other migrants and acquaintances who have made the trip) and media sources (television, cinema, the Internet, and journalism). From a sociological and information science perspective, this case study reviews the idea of imaginaries as a fundamental part in the decision making of migrants who risk their lives in order to reach target destinations.

Keywords: 1. Central American migrants, 2. interpersonal communication, 3. media communication, 4. imaginary of the American dream, 5. Mexico.

RESUMEN

El fenómeno migratorio en México ha cobrado relevancia debido al aumento del tránsito de centroamericanos por el país para llegar a Estados Unidos a cumplir el *sueño americano*. En este artículo se identifican los imaginarios y fuentes de información de los migrantes respecto a su trayectoria y destino final. Se llevaron a cabo 60 entrevistas en una casa del migrante en la ciudad de Monterrey a participantes provenientes de Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala y Nicaragua. Las conclusiones demuestran imaginarios romantizados, cuyos fundamentos son primordialmente fuentes interpersonales (otros migrantes y conocidos que ya han hecho el viaje) y fuentes mediáticas (televisión, cine, Internet y periodismo). Desde una perspectiva sociológica y de ciencias de la información, este caso de estudio revisa la idea de los imaginarios como parte elemental en la toma de decisiones de los migrantes que arriesgan sus vidas para alcanzar destinos meta.

Palabras clave: 1. migrantes centroamericanos, 2. comunicación interpersonal, 3. comunicación mediática, 4. imaginario del sueño americano, 5. México.

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INTRODUCTION

They should not stop fighting for their dreams, because what one dreams of, what one wants, is the American dream.
(Ruth, 20 years old, Honduras, personal communication, May 6, 2018).

Irregular migration types have not shown significant changes for decades, as they continue to be tied to structural determinants in both countries of origin (social inequality, unemployment, and economic, political and/or social uncertainty) and destination countries (cheap and flexible labor) (Bloch, & Chimienti, 2011). According to Castles' definition (2010, p. 15), "irregular migration" occurs when a person enters or inhabits a country of which they are not a citizen in violation of its migration regulations. In the words of the same author, there are no reliable estimates regarding global irregular migration statistics, but the ILO estimates that 15% of migration movements are irregular.

In 2015 (the relevant year for this study), the UN estimated that almost 15% of the planet's inhabitants lived in a place other than the one in which they were born. In 2020, this figure was updated to 272 million migrants in the world, of which 48% were women and 13.9% were children. Mexico and the United States make up the largest migratory corridor in the world, as the latter hosts 2 out of every 10 international migrants (Caicedo, & Morales Mena, 2015), especially from the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America:

> Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador are countries where poverty and violence prompt a climate that encourages their inhabitants to seek better living conditions outside their borders. According to Human Rights Watch, these countries have a rate of 53 murders a day, more than three times the world average [...] These types of conditions [...] are the main causes of the exodus experienced by these countries (Anguiano, 2016, paras. 13-14).

Despite the fact that media such as newscasts and newspapers disseminate information about the insecurity and risks faced by Central American migrants as they pass through Mexico, and anti-immigration policies and other programs, some studies show that attempts to cross into either country have not significantly decreased. To Cornelius (2001, p. 677), this is consistent with previous generations of Mexicans attempting to cross the border: "In fact, most migrants are not giving up after their first, second, third, fourth, or even fifth apprehension [...] they just keep trying to enter until they succeed."

Hernández (2016, p. 69) asserts how studies of the risks of Central American migration in Mexico have evolved, from first identifying the crossing of jungles or deserts to train accidents, rape and mistreatment at migratory stations or labor abuses; the current concern focuses on the safety threat posed by kidnapping, extortion, sexual abuse and murder at the hands of organized crime. Caicedo, and Morales Mena (2015) claim that in 2014 the U.S.-Mexico border was the third deadliest border crossing in the world, after Africa and the Mediterranean Sea.

These same difficulties have caused Mexico to become a destination and not only a transit country for some Central Americans in recent years (Anguiano, 2016). One of the cities that increasingly hosts more migrants from the Northern Triangle is precisely Monterrey, the place of study in this article. This metropolitan area is the third most populated in Mexico and the largest in the states bordering the United States. It is highly industrialized and, therefore, promises employment opportunities, albeit informal, for irregular migrants (García, 2016).

A phenomenon that began to occur in 2018 was the migrant caravans from Honduras and Guatemala. Thousands of migrants got organized to cross through Mexico and get to the United States as a group (Ahmed, & Dickerson, 2018). While this was not the way most interviewees traveled, it is possible to infer that these movements motivated more people to attempt to cross into the United States, as they felt greater safety in doing so this way. This is more evident when it comes to Central American migrants who do not have the information, means or resources to do so on their own.

In the first place, the objective of this study was to determine what information Central American migrants had in order to make their journey to whichever country was their destination. To this end, we explored the imaginaries about the course and their final destination, and analyzed the sources of information that contributed to the different elements of the imaginaries described. We also addressed the updates—that is, all the mutations that the imaginaries underwent due to new information they received—from the moment of departure, during their passage through Mexico, until they were in Monterrey, where the interviews were carried out.

Beyond merely contributing to the field of knowledge on migration in Mexico, this study contributes to communication sciences, since the role of information sources in the decision-making process of Central American migrants is paramount to understanding the risks they are willing to face to reach their destination. In addition, the configuration of their imaginaries regarding the final destination is highly influenced by the media (newscasts, soap operas, fiction programs and movies), as well as by interpersonal sources (family, friends and other migrants) with whom they interact in person or through sociodigital networks. To a lesser extent, there are intrapersonal sources, whose information is formed by the migrant's own experiences in previous attempts.

It is worthwhile noting that the interviews were conducted to people who decided to embark on the journey despite the imaginaries and/or information they had. Therefore, it is not possible to identify the effect that the negative campaigns or representations of migration may have had on people who were discouraged by these narratives.

IMAGINARIES AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Imaginaries are discursive structures that affect the subject's understanding of themselves, their practices and their roles in society (González-Vélez, 2002). Castoriadis discussed in *La institución imaginaria de la sociedad* (2007) the concept of social imaginaries as the result of social constructs that give meaning to reality and to themselves, through these imaginaries that are shared as a

community. They require a set of meanings that are sometimes institutionalized and regulate culture. As stated by García-Muñoz, and Gómez-Gallego (2021), social imaginaries are more than images or ideas and coherently motivate social action.

In the context of migration, the motivations for crossing borders have to do with the way of imagining other places and lives. While it is important to note that this group usually overestimates the economic opportunities and quality of life in the destination country (Salazar, 2012), that is to say, the expectation they have about their life once they settle in the United States or Mexico is to have a higher standard of living for people in their conditions as irregular migrants, or in the case of Mexico, higher than the average of the population, or at least, than that of their life in their country of origin. According to Arboleda-Ariza et al., (2020), "social imaginaries, as well as social memory, are domains of the possible that facilitate collective action" (p. 9). This suggests that imaginaries and decision making are broadly linked, which would explain the pursuit of the "American dream." To García-Muñoz, and Gómez-Gallego (2021), social imaginaries "are an explanatory construct of social phenomena and a hermeneutic tool to interpret the meanings that subjects experience" (p. 220).

This contributes to the fact that Central Americans, despite being aware of the dangers they will face along the way, decide to undertake the journey anyway, even if they have already experienced these risks on previous journeys. Such a phenomenon is consistent with Vigh's findings (2009) in his studies of migration from Africa. The author found that migrants from Africa see a promise of social progress in other countries, in a way that is almost discriminatory of their own countries of origin. They consider that in European countries there is a better organizational capacity and possibilities for their own social positioning than where they grew up, because these are *amateur* countries when it comes to society. Therefore, they are highly motivated to migrate despite the dangers they may face along the way.

The imaginary of the American dream "is defined as those expectations, conditions and situations expected, imagined or referred to by potential migrants or returnees with regard to the U.S." (Chacón et al., 2016, p. 266). In this sense, the social imaginary is key to anticipate the social scenarios where the migrant's life will develop (Vigh, 2009). This dream is built on the hope of solving for themselves the social problems faced by migrants in their country of origin, such as the need to find a better job to support their family, reunite with their relatives in the United States or escape violence (International Crisis Group, 2016).

The U.S. government, since Barack Obama's administration (2009-2017), revealed an increase in irregular migration by Central Americans. In conjunction with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), they launched an information campaign that highlighted the dangers migrants may face when making this journey, as well as a joint effort with Mexico to have stronger migration measures on the southern border (Hiskey et al., 2016). However, findings on the results of these measures show that they are flawed, as migrants consider that they are already at a disadvantage in their own countries. This indicates that they already know the risks, but consider

that there are possibilities for improvement and well-being by overcoming them (Hiskey et al., 2016; Alpes, & Sørensen, 2015).

Inzunza (2017) asserts that imaginaries are made up of three types of information sources: intrapersonal, interpersonal and mass. The intrapersonal source refers to the individual's experiences, so that they obtain *first-hand* information about an event or situation. Interpersonal sources are interactions with other individuals, who in this case are usually returnees, other migrants who are already at their destination or who are on the way, as well as other information agents such as public institutions, civil associations (shelters) or other people who contribute to the imaginaries. This information can be obtained directly (in conversations) or indirectly (sociodigital network posts). Finally, there are mass sources, that is, mass media such as television, cinema, journalistic sources, advertising or propaganda campaigns, among others, both in fiction and non-fiction formats.

According to Chacón et al., (2016), migrants gather information from two sources: the media and returnees. Both tend to idealize the destination country, as returnees' stories speak with a triumphalist discourse that contributes to romanticize the American (or Mexican) dream.

Nevertheless, not only returnees constitute this source of interpersonal information. Immigrants, for example, from their sociodigital networks contribute with photographs that promote displacement (Belloni, 2016). This is consistent with studies that analyze the effects of sociodigital networks on users. A recurrent example is the comparison migrants make of themselves in relation to other users, whom they envy for the lifestyle they have achieved (Krasnova et al., 2013), which motivates uninformed decisions based on appealing perceptions that turn out to be wrong, and advice to potential migrants on ways to cross (Dekker, & Engbersen, 2014). Additionally, migrant networks work as points of contact that support both financially and with information about transiting Mexico and crossing the border (Canales et al., 2019).

Regarding the media, Salazar (2012) points out that American popular fiction often represents a utopian life of wealth and perseverance. Kamalipour (1999) has claimed for decades that the world contains images that are consciously manipulated or created to generate a status or identity to promote, among other things, some nations. To him, no other country has more power in terms of reach and penetration in culture than the United States, and he attributes the *McDonaldization* of the global village to this phenomenon; as a result, the process of globalization, as part of a process of progress in the world, is understood as synonymous with Americanization.

More precisely, Bakewell, and Jolivet (2015) suggest that narratives speaking of migration motivate or spark interest in migrating. Martínez-Zalce (2017) gives an account of the figure of the migrant in cinema, where they are characterized by their vulnerability. Films such as *El Norte* (Nava, 1983), *La bestia* (Kuttikatt et al., 2020), *Sin nombre* (Fukunaga, 2009) and *La jaula de oro* (Quemada-Diez, 2013) show the perilous journey faced by Central Americans in their transit through Mexico, and mostly conclude that the American dream is unattainable. While this vision is relatively fatalistic, it is worthwhile noting that Mexican soap operas and cinema do illustrate a

life of many possibilities in Mexico, as they use American-formula narratives with a message suggesting that those who work consistently and long hours will achieve wealth.

It is important to consider, however, that even when migrants have some information regarding their journey, their knowledge remains insufficient or inaccurate. Llanes, and Ghys (2021) assert that migrants are unaware of their rights even though they can exercise them in Mexico, for example, access to public health care. This may be due to their self-perception as *illegal* or *undocumented*, as these terms (and the roles they self-assume) fuel anxiety and fear among migrants (Willen, 2007), and they choose not to seek support from public institutions for fear of being deported.

Alpes, and Sørensen (2015) actually maintain that to migrants it is not so much the information about dangers that weighs on their decisions, but the trust they have in this information. Inzunza (2017) names two primary elements to determine the role played by information sources in the construction of imaginaries: credibility and frequency. Credibility, on the one hand, responds to what Alpes, and Sørensen mentioned, and is important because migrants do discriminate information both in their country of origin and in transit. On the other hand, frequency has to do with the access migrants may have to this source in their country of origin and on their journey. In the absence of other sources, this access can largely determine whether or not there will be trust in the information received. In general, migrant shelters usually offer access to some media such as television and radio, or allow Internet connection; but not all migrants make use of these media, nor are they interested in doing so.

In addition, Inzunza (2017) considers one's own experiences as a source of intrapersonal information. Here we would particularly have to take into account immigrants who are repeating the journey, either for reasons of deportation, voluntary return or to bring their family with them (among the people interviewed, three had come to Mexico only and 12 had managed to cross or live in the United States). To this end, it is pertinent to reflect on what Arboleda-Ariza et al., (2020) propose to relate the concepts of social memory, social imaginary and horizons of expectation, terms that are relevant to this research. These authors place

> memory as a human product that is enunciated from a present-past that can be affected and traversed by the innumerable networks of meaning from which it is enunciated, as well as by the institutional forms acquired by the presumed hierarchies expressing it. In turn, the analytical proposal also includes that a horizon of expectation is equally impacted by the assumption of a condition of constant mutability of memory projected into the present-future (p. 15).

This literature review allows us to reflect on the data obtained through the interviews from the perspective of sociology and information sciences. On the one hand, it is essential to recognize the dynamics of this phenomenon that has occurred for decades and that, despite political attempts to reduce transit to Mexico and the United States, no significant change has been achieved. Beyond taking a stance in the debate on what effect each information source has on the migrant’s decision

making, we seek to recognize the imaginaries: how they are formed and what is the information that the Central American migrant has from their places of origin.

Studying from the perspective of the imaginaries of active migrants makes it possible to identify the information sources they have, not only from their origin but also those that they have collected along their journey. By interviewing migrants who have made quite progress in their path and are so close to the border, it is possible to have an idea of the transformations that their imaginary has undergone along the way, and how their experiences have contributed to these changes. Another benefit of studying migrants who have not yet reached their destination (at least not the one they initially planned) is that it tells a story that is still in process, and thus *eliminates* the bias of success. Frank-Vitale (2020) clearly indicates that the in-transit story sounds different from a story told by migrants after they have succeeded (p. 70).

METHOD

The fieldwork was conducted from a qualitative perspective, applying the focused interview technique. These interviews were carried out in a migrant shelter from April 2017 to May 2018. A total of 60 interviews were obtained, which were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis through NVivo software.

The interview guide consisted of an introductory section that collected demographic information and *push-pull* factors;[3] followed by questions about imaginaries and information sources in three stages: when leaving home, in transit, and at the time of the interview (conducted in the city of Monterrey). In the closing section, they were asked about their contact with their city of origin, their imaginaries about their country, if they talked to other migrants and if they were aware of the political situation in the United States.[4]

The participant profile is characterized as follows: 45 out of 60 interviewees are men (75%); the average age is 29 years old, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest 55; most come from Honduras (44/60), while the rest are originally from Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Regarding their educational level, 21 of them finished elementary school, while 12 dropped out before reaching the third grade. Only four finished a technical career and five finished high school. Of the participants, 45 are making the journey for the first time (75%), while 15 had previously come to Mexico, and of these, 12 made it to the United States. The average length of the interview was 37 minutes, with the shortest being 15 minutes and the longest 98 minutes.

One of the advantages of this profile is that, since they are transmigrants, it is possible to have an acceptable degree of memory of their imaginary upon leaving their country, as well as of the updates and changes that occurred during their journey. Likewise, with the exception of returns

[3] *Push* factors are understood as the reasons mentioned by the participants for leaving their country, and *pull* factors are the reasons why they chose the destination countries.

[4] Donald Trump was the president of the United States at the time.

(12), the imaginaries of the final destination are still free of personal experience, which makes it possible to identify the role of interpersonal and media information sources.

On the other hand, the limitations to be considered have to do with the circumstances in which the interviews were carried out, since for security reasons they were not conducted in private rooms, but in the courtyard of the shelter or in social areas. This could have affected the *rapport* expressed by the participants in terms of their openness, trust, honesty and desire to share their imaginary, opinion or experiences. Although it was explained to them before starting the recordings that a confidentiality agreement would be maintained and that they could choose their own pseudonym, some of the participants who suffered from persecution, mistreatment or were victims of crime were distrustful of the project. Even when it was stated that their stay in the shelter would not be affected by refusing the interview, many of them decided to participate even though they were noticeably unwilling to do so.

RESULTS

Interviewer: And what did you hear from the United States?
Luis Carlos: The land of dreams.
(Luis Carlos, 29 years old, Guatemala, first attempt,
personal communication, April 28, 2018).

The analysis of results will be presented in two subsections: imaginaries and information on the course and the final destination. Each section will also address the sources of information mentioned by the participants, which influenced their decision making about the route, transportation, destination, among others.

The Transit

There are three relevant issues that arise regarding the path to follow to their final destination: the route and means of transportation, the dangers, and crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

The route they followed to get to Monterrey is similar, as most of them talked about having crossed through the state of Chiapas, making stops at various points in the states of Veracruz, San Luis Potosí and Coahuila. The means of transportation depends to a great extent on the economic resources they have, but also on the imaginary or information they have about some of them. Some mentioned the use of *polleros* and others pointed out the use of public transportation, mainly the bus.

To others, the most viable option was the use of the train nicknamed “The Beast.” However, the general imaginary about this means of transportation is so negative that the participants stated that if they had had another option, they would have taken it.

Another means of transportation was walking, and most of those who use this alternative follow the railway track so as not to get lost along the way. This is how Christian (29 years old, Honduras, first attempt) explains it: “The journey is very hard [...] one day when I almost fainted I walked

almost about 50 miles, just walking along the train track" (Christian, personal communication, February 25, 2018).

When discussing this, the topic of dangers came up, since they were aware of being exposed to possibly being victims of crime, as mentioned by Alison (18 years old, Honduras, first attempt) in her testimony: "Risk of kidnapping, rape, many things, human trafficking [...] there are many things that you see [...] on the news" (Alison, personal communication, January 15, 2018). In addition, a recurrent comment was that the area they feared the most because of the presence of criminal groups is the state of Veracruz.

At this point it is important to note that, although not all had been victims of crime, the perception of the journey was equally dangerous. On the one hand, the use of information sources such as newscasts about transmigration from Central America to the United States through Mexico was frequently raised. To a lesser extent, there were cases of those who researched on the Internet—on platforms such as YouTube—, videos about crossing the border, like Messi (21 years old, Honduras, first attempt):

> I watched on Internet, in the week before leaving, I watched on YouTube how the border was like, each of these places, what you do to cross, and ugly things came out: migration, when they kidnapped her, how they grabbed her [...] but it didn't scare me (Messi, personal communication, April 8, 2018).

Of the 16 migrants who talked about using a smartphone, only four used it to search for information on Google and YouTube. The rest used these devices only to stay in communication with their family or contacts in the United States. Only a couple of cases, for example, went to the Red Cross to ask for maps and to know the route they needed to follow to reach their destination. Even though most of those who did resort to official sources had a good experience, the general perception is that government institutions are neither efficient nor reliable. In relation to civil society organizations (CSOs) and civil associations, it was perceived that respondents showed greater trust. However, it is important to consider that the fieldwork was done in a migrant shelter, so cases of those who do not go to this type of shelters were not researched.

The vast majority informed their knowledge about which route to take based on versions of family, friends or acquaintances who had made the journey before. Exceptionally, other cases that resorted to the accompaniment of people knowing the course were the members of the various caravans organized during this period, such as Luis Carlos:

> By the grace of God, I came across the caravan, I am a former member of the caravan [...] They say they started it on Facebook, on everything that is social media, the person who was planning it had about 600 people in mind, but it got out of hand because 3 200 people gathered. [The organizer] Mapica, he is Honduran, but he has American papers and nationality (Luis Carlos, personal communication, April 28, 2018).

The imaginaries about the course are negative, and their sources of information are mostly interpersonal. Migrants tend to rely first on people with whom they are in contact or who are

already at the destination, usually family members. If they do not have this type of relationships, they turn to other migrants along the way to obtain information about the route to follow.

As mentioned above, there are few cases of returnees who are repeating the trip. Although not all of them have new or reliable information, there are those who did make changes to their first experience to improve it, such as Carla (43 years old, Honduras, second attempt):

> On the first trip I spent a lot of money to come here [...] and this time I didn't spend as much. [It was] less than 3 000 pesos [...] The first time I spent more than 10 000 pesos, almost 15 000 [...] As you're moving around and take buses outside of the bus station, or take a cab, or take a regular car, they charge you double (Carla, personal communication, April 23, 2017).

By way of context, on her first trip, Carla used polleros in order to avoid encounters with migration agents or organized crime. On the second trip, she opted to travel by commercial bus lines along traditional routes, which are more direct to the destinations she planned to reach. However, she claims that it is the polleros who instill fear so that they use their services, which may be compatible with the findings of Alpes (2013), who carried out a study with migration brokers,[5] whom she classifies according to how they carry out the procedures in Cameroon for those who wish to migrate. Given that obtaining papers varies in degrees of illegality (forgery, corruption of agents or simple fraud), it is the brokers themselves who use certain discourses with their potential clients so that they make use of their services and dissuade them to try another method. This hypothesis holds true in many cases in this study, since the migrants interviewed often spoke of decisions based on fear, whose source of information is not clear.

Or there is the case of the polleros themselves, who know the route at an expert level, like Luis (23 years old, Honduras, several crossings):

> All on foot from Nuevo Laredo, in three days [...] they crossed the river, I asked who could swim. Some would tell me "Yes, I can swim; man, I'm a shark," when they got to the middle of the river they were asking me for help [...] then I grabbed a rope, tied it around my waist and swam [...] I got to the other side, tied the rope and asked someone to help me and tie it on the other side, then they all swam away, but holding on to the rope [...].From there I already knew where the *migras* were, I knew how to avoid them, I'd go behind and sweep with a branch the tracks that my companions were leaving. I already knew where the lasers [laser beams] were [...] you can't jump over them [...] so the cameras turn on [...] but I already knew, so I'd stop my group, I'd leave, I' look at them and go around them. I'd arrive in San Antonio, hand over the people, and go back[...] now you have to go up with a code, they now have some very strange laws at the border [...] to enter Nuevo Laredo, Piedras Negras, Matamoros, Reynosa, you have to carry a code. The password is given to you by the polleros. But the polleros are paying the Zetas (Luis, personal communication, April 8, 2018).

[5] People whose occupation is to manage the paperwork and procedures required to migrate.

Demonstrations of knowledge such as these legitimize their work enough for migrants to believe in them and decide to work to pay for their service, imagining that it will be a safe and guaranteed way to get to the United States.

The Final Destination

The description of the imaginary about the final destination was explored from three themes: choice of destination, expectations of their life while there, and their medium- and long-term goals.

Regarding their choice of destination, this is primarily the United States, then Mexico, and to a much lesser extent Canada. When asked how they physically imagine the cities where they plan to go, their descriptions are usually simple, using adjectives such as *nice*, *pretty*, *big*, or talking about tall buildings or wide streets. On some occasions, they allude to some iconic space in cities such as the twin towers in New York or the Aztec stadium in Mexico City. Although most of the imaginaries are romanticized—based on the use of positive adjectives in almost all the descriptions—there are times when they point to negative elements, like Monica (24 years old, Honduras, first attempt) who imagines Mexico as a racist country; or Noviembre (54 years old, El Salvador, first attempt) who thinks of the United States as a country where immigration agents constantly raid residences looking for migrants.

For participants, the anti-migration policies promoted by former U.S. President Donald Trump were not a sufficient reason to think that they would not be able to cross into the United States. This is consistent with European findings where Africans' decisions to migrate are not influenced by knowledge of other countries' anti-migration policies (Crawley, & Hagen-Zanker, 2018).

The American dream is described in all cases in economic terms. Allusion is made to the job they can get and, above all, to the profit they can make from it. This aligns with the theme of medium- and long-term goals, which will be discussed in greater detail in this section.

Another similar case that has more specific expectations about the city of destination is that of Venado (21 years old, El Salvador, first attempt):

> [Houston] is big, very nice, very comfortable where migration isn’t as annoying or anything like that. And of course, there’s a lot of work [...] on top of that, they say they’re going to pay me very well, that they’re going to pay $25 an hour (Venado, personal communication, April 28, 2018).

In both cases, the source of information is interpersonal, as they base their imaginary on what relatives or acquaintances share with them. Although when asked about media sources, the majority (52 out of 60) confirmed having seen the United States in fiction programs, movies, newscasts, newspapers, among others, on a few occasions some people mentioned a particular content. An example of this was Alberto (25 years old, Guatemala, two previous trips to Mexico without crossing into the United States):

> so many movies [in which] you see New York, Los Angeles, Miami, I don't know so many places like that, I don't know, I’d like to see the Bronx, in New York or see something else

> over there [...] I don't know, something like the story of Jennifer Lopez [...] I kind of like those stories a lot (Alberto, personal communication, October 22, 2017).

Regarding the Mexican dream, although it is mentioned as a place with a better economic situation than their country of origin, this factor does not always constitute their imaginary. Osmín (33 years old, Honduras, first attempt) says that "all the people from work talk about Monterrey, everyone in the state of Chiapas talks a lot about Monterrey, about the wellbeing there" (Osmín, personal communication, April 29, 2018). It is also important to note that oftentimes, the Mexican dream is constructed when they already are in their transit through Mexico, once they are confronted with the difficulties of crossing into the United States or in the face of obtaining a relatively steady job (though informal). That is to say, their initial intention was not to migrate to Mexico, but when they see that there are job possibilities (especially informal ones) and that the culture is not significantly different (emphasis on the language), they begin to construct an imaginary of their future in the country. Similarly, this construction of the Mexican imaginary is influenced by updating information sources (such as new people with whom they interact), their personal experiences and the breaking of stigmas—or even idealizations on some occasions—that they originally had.

By exploring the expectations of their life in the final destination, different categories of analysis such as self-imaginaries, housing, work, lifestyle and sociability were addressed.

With relation to self-imaginaries, the questions they were asked were specific as to how they saw themselves in appearance, habits or personality. Most mentioned how they wished they could go back to dressing like they did in their home country, suggesting that, at the time of the interview, they were already dependent on clothing donations. Women alluded to the makeup or dresses they used to wear, or the way they did their hair; while men like Antonio (23 years old, Honduras, first attempt) said they would get clothes that were better "tailored" to them (Antonio, personal communication, May 27, 2018).

The case of Arturo (34 years old, El Salvador, first attempt) highlights the fact that he has no intention of sending money to his family back home, so he considers making use of his earnings for himself and for his new life in Canada: "I like to live well, wear original clothes [from brands such as] Levi's, Tom [...] and I only like to give my wife Carolina Herrera" (Arturo, personal communication, May 24, 2017).

Less frequently, they spoke of simple looks in order to save more money. Such is the case of Luis Carlos: "I think that humbleness makes a person [...] You can go buy second-hand clothes, to save a little money. And start sending money for your family right away" (Luis Carlos, personal communication, April 28, 2018).

Regarding habits and personality, they described themselves with qualities and virtues as a sign of improved character. Some talked about quitting smoking or drinking alcohol, described themselves as happier, more hardworking, and more satisfied in providing for their families.

The same alternatives between ostentatious and humble appear with respect to how they imagine the place where they will live. On the one hand, there are those who spoke of large houses, with a spacious garden and a swimming pool, located in pleasant neighborhoods, among other elements. Many of them are looking for this dimension in order to comfortably house their family. Those who opt for a more austere idea, express the intention of saving to cover other expenses or send more money to their country.

The most frequently mentioned trades to which they aspire usually belong to the informal sector, such as cleaning, cooking, agriculture, gardening, construction, etc. Some think of these sectors because of the experience they already have from their country of origin or from working in Mexico; but others do express a genuine joy for these trades, or a desire to learn to work in them.

To a lesser extent, jobs that require a certain degree of professionalization were raised, as in the case of Juan (18 years old, Honduras, first attempt):

> I would imagine working in a company, where the sun doesn't hit me [...] in an office, let's say [...] understanding how to use a computer because I don't know, something like waiting for people, talking to people, serving them (Juan, personal communication, May 17, 2017).

When asked about their free time, most of them talked about spending time with their family or partner, either the one they have from their country of origin or a new one they would meet in the destination country. This is the case of Arturo, who shares:

> [My wife] is going to be blond, I imagine she's very pretty, so beautiful [...] with blue eyes, she isn't black [...] I imagine a new family, with kiddos, maybe two more, being with my wife. I like the fact that my wife doesn't work because she doesn't lack anything and she wants to go out somewhere, she can go out, it's OK, but I like she takes good care of me. I like that I can hire domestic workers for my kids, but I want my wife to always take good care of me when I'm home (Arturo, personal communication, May 24, 2017).

Others who imagine their life by themselves, talk about hobbies, sports or habits they used to have in their country of origin, such as running, watching or playing soccer. Antonio (23 years old, Honduras, first attempt), as well as others who are followers of their religion, mentioned attending church.

Few, like Gonzalo (age omitted, Honduras, first attempt), have a more pessimistic view[6] regarding his free time: "Well, the thing is that in the United States there's no freedom for us" (Gonzalo, personal communication, May 6, 2018). Therefore, he considers that his only outings are to go to work, and not to expose himself to being deported for being in a public place.

On the same topic of free time, they also talked about the social relationships they imagine having at their destination, and most agree that, while they would be looking for Latino

[6] It is interpreted as pessimistic since, in contrast to the cases previously described, his imaginary is not told in terms of an improvement in life or of elements that express joy on his part.

communities to make new friendships, they are also open to meeting people from other countries because, as Osvaldo (33 years old, Honduras, first attempt) says, "everyone talks different things" (Osvaldo, personal communication, March 11, 2018). To others, the relationships they will build will only be through their work.

Again, most of the sources of information for the construction of these imaginaries constitute interpersonal sources, as it is their relatives, friends and contacts in the destination country who tell them about the circumstances in which they live. Sometimes, sociodigital networks contribute, on which they see photographs and give them a more concrete image to stick to, which is consistent with Belloni (2016). An example of this is seen in the testimony of Perico (29 years old, Honduras, first attempt), who chatted with his cousin on Facebook: "Yes, he'd show me the city and I'd say 'look at the freeway, what it looks like'. It looked amazing" (Perico, personal communication, April 23, 2017).

Their imaginaries of success are shaped by their personal experience (intrapersonal source), witnessing from their countries of origin how others have built their homes, set up their businesses, provide for their families, etc.

Finally, concerning their medium- and long-term goals, again they set them in economic terms. Although they do not always have an amount of money in mind, they do set it in terms of what they will be able to pay for: debt repayment, a house, a business, among others. Eventually, most of them talk about being able to return to their country, although this is not the case for all of them.

Family plays an important factor in goal setting, as for most of the participants it is the greatest motivation to go to the United States or Mexico to work. This is exemplified by Perico:

> I think in a year I'll pay all my debts and start building my house [then] go back to my country [...] see that my family is happy [...] that my daughter tells me "daddy, thank you for what you have given me" (Perico, personal communication, April 23, 2017).

To others, the goal is to settle in the destination. When we asked Osmín if imagines spending the rest of his life in Monterrey, he said, "To be honest, if it was possible, yes [...] I imagine that I can bring my family, and be happy with my two children, and seeing they're doing well and that they have gotten ahead" (Osmín, personal communication, April 29, 2018).

Within the possibilities of staying in the destination, there are those who, as in the case of Osmín, are the first of their family to arrive there. To others, the goal in itself is to reunite with their family and adopt the lifestyle they lead in the destination, as in the case of Frelin (18 years old, Honduras, first attempt): "I want them to welcome me there, with all family gathered to prepare dinner for me" (Frelin, personal communication, April 8, 2018).

Both interpersonal and media sources of information frequently appear in the construction of the imaginary of the final destination. While the contribution of the interpersonal ones consists of the possibilities of improvement, work, the journey as such or the border crossing, the media sources provide concrete images of the cities, and to a lesser extent other types of data. Such is the case of Alison, who shares her vision: "[I imagine] like buildings, just like what you see on the TV

show [in] 'El Señor de los Cielos,' where the big buildings appeared" (Alison, personal communication, January 15, 2018). For his part, Luis Carlos says that in the newscast he has seen "little [...] about the economy being better than that of my country" (Luis Carlos, personal communication, April 28, 2018).

In this sense, although most participants did not manage to remember the name of shows or films at the time of the interview, some movies mentioned by the migrants were *Rambo*, *Godzilla* or *King Kong*. In other cases, like La Morena (32 years old, Honduras, first attempt), she spoke specifically of a panning shot she saw constantly in Mexican soap operas, where she suggested (according to her description) having seen the Angel of Independence roundabout in Mexico City. When talking about non-fiction content, particularly journalistic content, only reference was made to former President Donald Trump and his anti-immigration policies, although none of the people interviewed took his threats seriously. On the contrary, they talked about how people made jokes and they had seen *funny* posts on social media regarding Trump.

The role of interpersonal and media sources of information is relevant because they shape in a very positive—and therefore appealing—way an imaginary about the United States and Mexico. Although there is content in movies and television that is of a more pessimistic or realistic nature, it is not usually mentioned for purposes of what they imagine their life will be like in their final destination. The same happens with their interpersonal sources, which according to them are highly romanticized discourses about the life they lead in the destination where they are.

The returnees, on the other hand, do not show much difference in their discourses despite having information from their first-hand experience. Like those who would cross for the first time, they do not feel intimidated by the threats of the then President Donald Trump. This is how Luis explains it:

> With the immigration issue, look, it is like drug lords, they will never stop us [...] They'll catch ten, but a hundred of us will cross [...] Donald Trump, as for me, he won't stop me. He can deport me a hundred times, I'm going to get in a hundred and twenty. Why? [...] because I have God's license, as simple as that (Luis, personal communication, April 8, 2018).

Regarding their own imaginaries, they have expectations of similar trades or educational aspirations. Jacobo (39 years old, El Salvador, lived in California for 14 years) said that he would look for work in gardening, but what he really likes is construction and would like to learn how to draw up plans on a computer. For her part, Carla imagines herself learning beauty trades so that when she returns to her country she can start her own business. Or, there is the case of those who would like to start their own business in the destination, such as Gulia (43 years old, El Salvador, returned for her children): "Look, what I would like is to start a business, a *pupusa* place" (Gulia, personal communication, November 5, 2017).

Although they have information from their own experiences, their imaginaries and expectations are influenced by other sources of information, as in the case of Jacobo:

> Well, of the people in my neighborhood, where I live [...] I saw that their family began to overcome, since they bought their little house [...] I saw that the neighbors are doing well there, so I'm going there too (Jacobo, personal communication, February 18, 2018).

It is important to consider that, in the case of returnees, greater assurance is perceived when they express their goals and this may be due to a bias of bias, thanks to the fact that they have succeeded in crossing and settling in before. The truth is that the mass media are not as present a source of information as among migrants crossing for the first time. The hypothesis that arises in this regard is that they already have a network of contacts and their own experience to form an imaginary and expectation.

CONCLUSIONS

First, it is possible to conclude that migrants in general have a limited amount of information about both the destination and the journey, particularly information coming from official sources, even when it is not their first time migrating. The process that follows the Central American's decision to migrate to Mexico or the United States does not consider in-depth research of ways, transportation or lodging. In other words, when asked how they chose their next destination or how they arrived, it could be perceived that their answers were very improvised.

Second, the information and imaginaries they have are distorted. There is a lot of romanticized talk about the destination and the perceived risks are also minimized. What is not known about this finding is the reason for this distortion. A proposed hypothesis is that there is manipulation by polleros or *coyotes*, who instill fear to attract more *clients* to their services, instead of using traditional or public means such as buses for transportation, shelters for lodging, or public health and safety services. Evidently, the high risks to their health and/or life is not disregarded, but some migrants said that their experience through the use of commercial, legal or institutional means was safer and more reliable than those who paid high sums of money (higher than the former) to use illegal means of transit.

Consistent with the literature, the types of sources that feed their imaginaries and decision making are interpersonal (either other migrants in the destination country or in transit, returnees and other figures at different points in their journey), media (both in fiction and non-fiction formats); and in the case of those who attempt for the second, third or more times to migrate either to Mexico or the United States, intrapersonal (Inzunza, 2017; Chacón et al., 2016).

In terms of the elements noted by Inzunza (2017) on information sources, it is concluded that some media play a relevant role in the construction of the imaginary about the destination country, as they are constantly used as references to describe the cities where they plan to settle. This is due to the fact that shows and fiction movies are accessible sources, whose contents are present throughout their lives, from their childhood or youth. However, in terms of credibility, more emphasis is placed on the use of newscasts and the Internet, since they use these media to identify both the risks they face in their transit through Mexico, as well as to know the route, among others.

From this analysis of the use of information sources, it is concluded that fictional narratives contribute to the imaginaries in terms of images, while newscasts and the Internet provide *useful* information.

On the other hand, interpersonal sources are used more when there is contact with a returnee or a migrant who has already managed to settle in the destination country; as well as in transit through Mexico when meeting other migrants along the way. In this case, given the circumstances of not having access to the media, interpersonal sources become the only ones accessible, although they are not always trusted by the migrant. Participants frequently expressed that they only believe in other people when, intuitively, they appear to be trustworthy. In this sense, although migrants demonstrate the ability to discriminate information, on many occasions they judge by the convenience of whether or not it contributes to achieving their American dream, and it does not depend precisely on critical thinking but, as mentioned above, on intuitive thinking, as noted by Alpes, and Sørensen (2015). Certainly, it cannot be ignored that, for many, in the first place there are more *push factors*. That is, they feel pressured or forced to leave their country, so the first motivation is to emigrate, while the decision of where to migrate is motivated by the American—or Mexican—dream.

In this sense, it is observed that the imaginaries are shaped by television and film fiction content with a positive tone, and in the case of those who use sociodigital networks (mainly Facebook or WhatsApp), by the images they see of their contacts through these applications. For the purposes of shaping the imaginary, information from sociodigital networks is also considered glorified in that they are the filtered product that the user consciously decides to publish for others to see that aspect of their life, regardless of whether it is accurate, true or precise. While Krasnova et al., (2013) mention some alarming consequences of the effects of sociodigital networks on their users, it is necessary to pay attention when individuals use these images to make a decision that involves risking their own lives to reach a target destination in the United States or Mexico, and that is why it is pertinent to investigate the sources of information used by Central American migrants. In this line of thought, cultural studies should place emphasis on the concept of active audiences proposed by Hall (2001), which sustains that the viewer not only passively receives information from the media, but also interprets it using their mediations (ideologies, beliefs, attitudes and previous knowledge, among others). This could explain one of the reasons why the anti-immigration campaigns do not have the expected effect on the people interviewed, since together with the Hollywood media narratives, they are left behind and discriminated against by their demotivating messages.

It is proven through these interviews that migrants do consume information about negative issues (Trump's international policies, dangers, etc.). The question that could be raised in future research is why they opt for a romanticized imaginary to make their decision: on the one hand, it is assumed that this is what they *want to* believe in order to achieve their aspirations, but on the other, it would also be necessary to evaluate how much *they need to* believe this imaginary to justify having left their homes—either for economic or safety grounds—. Several participants

accept the negative because they believe that they will be able to avoid it by making the right decisions or even by adhering faithfully to their religious beliefs.

Another important finding is that, regardless of whether the motive for migrating is violence or poverty-driven, the American—or Mexican—dream is described in economic terms (i.e., there is no talk of less crime or organized crime in the United States). This shows that, while the push factors in their country are often related to threats or violence due to organized crime, the pull factors in the destination country are, in all cases in this study, linked to economic stability, employment, earnings or acquisition of material goods. This further confirms what Salazar (2012) indicates, since many of the migrants have the (over)expectation of finding a solution to all their problems once they arrive in the United States. Many even express the expectation of finding a partner to settle down and have a family. In this case, it is interesting to quote Arturo, who in discriminatory terms towards his own ethnicity (consistent with Vigh's findings [2009]), is looking for a woman with an American phenotype. Romantic discourses about the American dream transcend into how to succeed in mingling in the target societies as members of local families.

In line with Llanes, and Ghys (2021), there are certain differences with the group studied, since mention was made of official sources such as the Human Rights Commission, the Red Cross or the migrant shelters themselves, whose information is greatly trusted by many. It is important to remember that, as a limitation for this conclusion, only people inside a shelter were interviewed, and therefore the perception of migrants who do not go to these types of institutions is unknown.

Another relevant topic for future articles and studies is to know in greater depth the role played by religion, since the people interviewed frequently raised it to express how they made their decisions. It is suggested that this is a determining factor in the decision to emigrate and how to do so, since it is part of the individual mediations of migrants in their way of understanding and interpreting reality. In addition, it is urgent for the research agenda to identify the information disseminated by polleros or criminal groups, and to observe how much it influences the imaginaries that Central Americans have in their transit through Mexico.

Translation: Paola Salinas.

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