

Adolescent Migrants In The North Border Of Mexico: A Psychological Perspective

Marisela Gutiérrez Vega, PhD
Oscar Armando Esparza Del Villar, PhD
Priscila Montañez Alvarado, PhD
Irene Concepción Carrillo Saucedo, PhD
Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, México

Abstract

The goal of this work was to show the psychological perspective of 84 adolescent migrants who were caught by American authorities during the time period of July 2014 and January 2015. Adolescents answered the Child Manifest Anxiety Scale (CMAS-R) and a semi-structured interview. Depending on their place of origin, anxiety could be affecting some more than others. It is highly recommended continuing this line of research since there are very few studies on the psychological perspective of Mexican and Central-American migrants who try to cross to the United States. Having a broader idea of this matter could generate interventions that will benefit this vulnerable group.

Keywords: Adolescent, migration, migrants, Mexico, psychology

Introduction

Based on a previous work (Aguilar, Michel, & Gutiérrez, 2016) this work presents the psychological portrait of adolescents who decided to migrate to the United States of America (USA). These adolescents came from different countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, among other places, but did not make it to the USA because they got caught by American authorities. These adolescents are in search of their personal identity looking for values and roles to live for. Also, this work described the challenges during their transit, especially in Mexico, that migrants have to endure. The experiences they lived during their transit generated so much tension and anxiety that affected them differently depending on their place of origin.

Migration

Migration is the transit of people from one place to another, the purpose of this movement is to take a new residence in a permanent or semi-permanent way (National Geographic, 2005). It has been part of the human history since its beginning, so migration is not a recent phenomenon (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, n.d.). The causes of migration are many, past research (Musalo, Frydman, & Ceriani, 2015) have highlighted that the reasons of migration in Central and North America reside in the witnessing of violence, violation of human rights, social exclusion, lack of education and employment opportunities, lack of medical services, among other severe conditions. These harsh circumstances force many children, adolescents and their parents to move in search of better quality of life.

Adolescence and Personal Identity

It is important to define the period of maturity the group of migrants was experiencing in their lives. The group of migrants was composed of adolescents between the ages 11 and 17. During adolescence the person experiences important physical and psychological changes; it is a transition period that features the growth spurt and the onset of puberty (Nairne, 2000). According to the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, one of the most important milestones of social development is the formation of personal identity, a sense of self, of who you are as an individual and how well you measure up against peers. Erikson (1968) believed that personal identity is shaped by a series of psychological crises that each person must challenge at a characteristic stage in development. By the time we reach adolescence, our intellectual development has developed so we begin to consider personal qualities that are general and abstract.

Erikson proposed that adolescents have to deal with the fundamental crisis of identity versus role confusion. During this time the adolescent becomes concerned with three processes: testing roles, adopting their own values, and finding their true identity (Morris & Maisto, 2009). First, when adolescents test roles some choose the roles by modeling others: “I’m an honest and cooperative hard worker because that’s the way I was brought up by my parents” (Nairne, 2000, p. 154). In the search of their own identity, most adolescents continue doing what their parents taught them: farming, cattle raising, and commerce. But for some, there comes a point in time when they feel ready for a transition in life, something that will forge their own identity. Therefore, for some adolescents, part of this transition in life means the decision to migrate. Second, adolescents adopt their own values. When an adolescent questions his own values he is taking the first step towards adopting or rejecting them. Erikson describes this period as a time the

adolescent looks forward to travel, takes temporal jobs, and sets goals and values that will lead his path in life (Jiménez, Torregrosa, Burgos, & Uitzil, 2013). And third, the adolescent develops his identity during experiences that mark a difference. For instance, migration is something that many will consider a significant experience, this implies leaving their hometown, confronting experiences that make them adapt in a rapid way to a new socio-cultural environments. Therefore, migration produces identity changes for sure; the person has to assimilate new backgrounds that will make him redefine his previous social insertion (Velasco, 2008).

The anxiety of migration

The difficulties and traumatic events that migrants experience during their journey are countless. Migrants from South Mexico and Central-America usually have two options to go across Mexico: the *polleros* or the train called *La Bestia* (The beast). *Polleros* are people who charge a high amount of money for human smuggling to the USA. Those who decide for the *polleros* travel in truck trailers with no water, no food, and no ventilation for days (Riediger-Röhm, 2013). Even though migrants pay for this “service” there is no warranty they can make it safe. Many *polleros* abandon the migrants in the middle of the desert. Other migrants decide to go across Mexico, free of charge, using *La Bestia*, also known as the train of the death. The journey on board of this train takes place on top of the wagons, thus migrants have to endure the inclemency of the weather for weeks. However, the weather is the least of their preoccupations because there are so many threats aboard this train. Migrants worry about other crew members who try to kill each other, for this reason they have to stay awake the whole time; there is robbery, rapes, mutilations, among other terrible experiences (Riediger-Röhm, 2013). Those who make it to the north of Mexico they still have to cross the border without getting caught by the American authorities. Those who could not make it go through the repatriation process. Other migrants decide to stay close to the border and wait for the opportunity to cross to the USA; in the mean time they could be victims of extortion, prostitution and kidnapping.

Methods

Participants

The study included a group of 84 adolescents caught by American authorities in the border of Mexico and the USA and brought to a shelter in the border town of Juarez City, Mexico. These adolescents were caught during the time period of July 2014 and January 2015. There were 16 females and 68 males; the age range was from 11 to 17 years old, mean age was 15.32, standard deviation (SD) = 1.69.

The group was divided in 3 groups depending on their place of origin. Local migrants were living at Juarez City (38 adolescents); national migrants (20 adolescents) were from South Mexico from states like Guerrero, Oaxaca, Tabasco, Chiapas, among other states; and international migrants (26) from Central-America from countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Ecuador, among other countries.

Instruments

Adolescents answered a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. The information obtained was recorded, analyzed and codified for keeping its confidentiality. They also were evaluated using the Child Manifest Anxiety Scale (CMAS-R). The scale has 37 items; the answer options were “yes” or “no” for each of the items. The scale has 6 components: concealment of anxiety, inconsistent answers, total anxiety, physiological anxiety, general concern, and social concerns.

Results

There was a significant difference for age, $F(2, 83) = 24.763, p < .001$, adolescents from local procedence were significantly younger ($M = 14.18, SD = 1.76$), as compared to those coming from South Mexico ($M = 16.40, SD = .88$) and from outside Mexico ($M = 16.15, SD = .88$).

There were no significant differences between groups for inconsistent answers, total anxiety, physiological anxiety, and general concern. There were significant differences between groups for social concerns, $F(2, 83) = 2.956, p = .05$, and for concealment of anxiety $F(2, 83) = 10.781, p < .001$. In order to determine which of the three groups differed from one another a post hoc test (Dunnett) was performed. For social concerns it was found that local migrants differ from those of South Mexico, mean difference = 2.38, standard error (SE) = .99, $p = .03$. For concealment of anxiety, local migrants differ from those of South Mexico, mean difference = 1.82, SE = .66, $p < .01$; and from those of other countries, mean difference = 2.74, SE = .61, $p < .01$.

Testimonials

Some adolescents have testimonials of their own experiences. For instance, “Juanito”, 16 years old from Chiapas, shared that when he was about to cross to the USA, he and his father were so close to make it, but his father had cut his leg during the trip that he could not walk anymore, so he asked Juanito to leave him in the middle of the road, Juanito knew his father was going to die so he decided to return to Mexico with his father.

Another testimonial from “Sandra”, 15 years old from Tabasco, she reported that she had a lot of problems with her mother, so she left home and decided to quit school. Sandra and one of her best friends decided they

wanted to move to the USA, but they did not have the means to go across Mexico. They asked some trailer drivers for a free ride, however the drivers accepted to take them in exchange of some sexual favors; the adolescents took the offers of the drivers so that was how they got to Juarez City. In one occasion they attended a party with some new friend they made, they drank so much that the next morning Sandra did not remember anything. She woke up in a different place alone, so she started walking on the streets looking for her friend. Sandra was walking close to the border when she saw Mexican authorities who took her to the shelter for adolescent migrants.

The story of “Pedro”, 12 years old from Guatemala, his family experienced a terrible economic situation, some days they had something to eat, other days had nothing. Pedro decided to quit school and started to work so that he could help his family with some money. Pedro’s uncle suggested to Pedro he should go to the USA and work. Pedro got excited and started to work harder to make some savings for the trip. Pedro’s uncle got some savings for Pedro, so with both savings they paid a *pollero*. Pedro and a group of 4 more people got into the border between Mexico and USA, the *pollero* started to walk with them for some minutes then said “keep walking, you are about to get there” and left. Pedro said they walked for a long time by themselves until the American authorities got them.

These are only a few of the many tragic stories of many adolescents who get caught by Mexican and American authorities in the border area of Mexico and the USA.

Discussion

Surprisingly, the age of the migrant adolescents from Juarez City was significantly lower as compared to those from South Mexico and other countries. Adolescents from Juarez City try to illegally cross to the USA at age 14, while adolescents from South Mexico and other countries try to cross at age 16. Many adolescents from Juarez City reported that their families have put them in this illegal situation because that is what they do for a living: human smuggling. These adolescents are asked by their parents to distract the authorities in the border area so that the parents can sneak in migrants to the other side of the border. Thus, these local adolescents can get caught as many times as they want, their families will pick them up at the shelter and continue with their “business”, because there are no legal consequences to regret. Many of these adolescents have made this routine their way of living, so it has been very convenient for them to live in this border town (Aguilar, Michel & Gutiérrez, 2016).

On the other hand, adolescents from South Mexico and other countries decide to move to the USA at age 16, which is 2 years after compared to local migrants from Juarez City. This age difference may

represent a more mature decision for migrating, and their reasons could be more personal in the sense that family members did not asked them to migrate to the USA as compared to local migrants.

Migrants experience very stressful situations which makes them a vulnerable group for experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression (García, Hijano, Carreño, Martín, Gisbert, & Peña, 2006; Kaltman, Green, Mete, Shara, & Miranda, 2010). Particularly migrant adolescents are at risk of developing high anxiety levels due to the severe difficulties. It was found that adolescents coming from Southern Mexico have higher anxiety related to socio-cultural stressors. Many of these adolescents are the main economic support of their families, thus they feel a greater commitment for improving the quality of life of their families, for this reason they decide to migrate to the USA. Also, it was found that migrants from Central-American origin (for example Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras) reported the highest levels of concealment of anxiety. This particular finding reflects a defensive attitude in order to cover any sign of anxiety. Past studies suggest that concealment of anxiety is predictive of anxiety (Pina, Silverman, Saavedra & Weems, 2001). It is reasonable to think that international migrants conceal their anxiety as a defense mechanism. After all, coming from another country, getting caught by authorities, and returned to their place of origin take its toll on them. Psychologically they feel defeated after having invested their resources (food, time, family savings, effort, emotional and psychological losses). The journey ends right where they first started, back in their country where they idealized with a better life for them and their families.

Conclusion

The goal of this work was to describe the psychological perspective of adolescent migrants who were caught by the authorities in the Norther border of Mexico during the time period of July 2014 and January 2015. Adolescents, as part of their natural development, experience the need to attach to values, roles and most important their personal identity. The reality for some of these adolescents was that in search of those values, roles and identity they put the needs of their family members first. Then, the decision to migrate becomes the first step in the journey of their maturation.

In general, illegal migration is a major concern for many; however migration of adolescent should be of greater concern. For this reason, research on this matter must be continued and expanded in order to generate interventions and promote policies that will protect vulnerable groups such as adolescent migrants.

References:

- Aguilar, C.J., Michel, N., & Gutiérrez, M. (2016). Ansiedad en adolescentes migrantes: Un estudio en la frontera norte de México. *Enseñanza e Investigación en Psicología*, 21(2).
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- García, C., Hijano, A., Carreño, P., Martín, M., Gisbert, J., & Peña, E. (2006). Ansiedad en adolescentes de un barrio de Madrid. *Atención Primaria*, 38(3), 155-158.
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (n.d.). The phenomenon of migration: Its significance or meaning in human societies throughout history. Retrieved from http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/89397/the%20phenomenon%20of%20migration_TYPEFI_final_En.pdf
- Jiménez, C., Torregrosa, E.M., Burgos, J.C., & Uitzil, L.A. (2013). Conformación de valores entre adolescentes. *Revista Electrónica de Psicología Iztacala*, 16(3), 848-863.
- Kaltman, S., Green B.L., Mete, M., Shara, N., and Miranda, J. (2010). Trauma, depression, and comorbid PTSD/depression in a community sample of Latina migrants. *Psychological Trauma*, 2 (1), 31-39. DOI: 10.1037/a0018952
- Morris, C. & Maisto, A. (2009). *Psicología*. México: Pearson.
- Musalo, K., Frydman, L., & Ceriani, P. (2015). *Childhood and Migration in Central and North America: Causes, Policies, Practices and Challenges*. Retrieved from http://cgrs.uchastings.edu/sites/default/files/Childhood_Migration_HumanRights_FullBook_English.pdf
- Nairne, J. *Psychology: the Adaptive Mind*. (2000). United States of America: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- National Geographic Society. (2005). *Human Migration Guide*. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/lessons/09/g68/migrationguidestudent.pdf>
- Pina, A., Silverman, W., Saavedra, L., & Weems, C. (2001). An Analysis of the RCMAS Lie Scale in a Clinic Sample of Anxious Children. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 15, 443-457.
- Riediger-Röhm, L. (2013). ¿México: Ruta de la muerte o camino hacia una vida mejor? *Iberofórum: Revista de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad Iberoamericana*, 16, 167-182.
- Velasco, L. (2008). *Migración, fronteras e identidades étnicas transnacionales*. Tijuana, México: Colegio de la Frontera Norte.