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Effects of the community engagement of migrants on their well-being: The case of Moroccan leaders in southern Spain

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ABSTRACT

Community engagement of migrants has been identified as an important element in developing both individual well-being and cohesive multicultural receiving communities. Through 10 in-depth interviews, this study explores the profile of Moroccan migrant leaders in community organizations in the receiving context (south of Spain) and the reasons for which they engage. Moreover, it analyzes the relationship established between community engagement and their well-being. The results show that migrants commit for both intrinsic (e.g., support their compatriots) and extrinsic (e.g., increase their social connection) reasons. Their social action has a positive influence on their well-being because it activates the following paths: (1) improvement of bicultural competences; (2) development of social relationships with receiving members; (3) strengthening of social bonds with compatriots; (4) increase of abilities in dealing with unjust social conditions in the new environment; and (5) decrease of prejudice towards their own cultural group.

KEYWORDS

Activism; community engagement; migration; voluntary work; volunteering; well-being

Migrants' expectations for a better life in the receiving society are often hampered in contexts that relegate them to lower levels of society. On arrival in a new country, migrants usually face language and cultural barriers, discrimination, and other unjust conditions, which limit their opportunities for a successful experience (Handy & Greenspan, 2009). This is the case for Moroccan migrants in southern Spain, who face a perception of threat that their arrival awakens in the receiving society. This scenario compromises well-being in the migrants and accentuates a tendency towards social fragmentation in the places of settlement (García-Ramírez, De la Mata, Paloma, & Hernández-Plaza, 2011). In such situations, the community engagement of migrants in civic life has been identified as an important element for developing both individual well-being and cohesive communities (Gilster, 2012; Stoll & Wong, 2007). This study analyzes the profile of Moroccan migrants, specifically those that have a leader role in the arrival community as founders or official coordinators of migrants'

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associations. This article explores their motivation to engage and the relationship established between community engagement and their own well-being.

Well-being is defined as a positive state brought about by simultaneous and balanced satisfaction of migrants' personal, relational and collective needs and it is strongly connected to the norms and values of social justice in the receiving society (Hernández-Plaza, García-Ramírez, Camacho, & Paloma, 2010; Prilleltensky, 2008). Also, we define *community engagement* as the process through which migrants are actively participating in the life of their communities (Gele & Harslof, 2012). The term includes two different but related forms of community engagement —voluntary work and activism. Voluntary work is defined as long-term, planned, helping activities that benefit others and occurs within an organizational setting (Penner, 2002; Wilson, 2000). Activism is an important form of participation through which people seek to create changes at the community or structural level (Gilster, 2012). Some authors argue that activists are oriented toward politics and social change, whereas volunteers are oriented toward providing services to ameliorate individual problems (Gilster, 2012; Wilson, 2000). However, we prefer to use a broader and more inclusive term because interviewed migrants involved in our study carry out both kinds of tasks in their community organizations. Most community organizations run by migrants in southern Spain have both a relief and a political function (Espadas, Aboussi, & Raya, 2013). In this sense, research shows how volunteers usually see themselves as active citizens (Marta, Pozzi, & Marzana, 2010).

A contextualization of migrants in southern Spain

Andalusia is the southernmost region of Spain and one of migrants' main gateways to Europe from Africa. The Moroccan community is the largest migrant population living in the region, with a percentage of residents that rises to 19.7% in the eastern part (SIMA, 2013). The main reasons concerning the decision to migrate are related to their desire to raise their standard of life. Also, more intangible priorities are central to the decision to migrate, such as personal and cultural values, e.g., children's education and the enjoyment of liberty and rights of autonomy (Paloma, Herrera, & García-Ramírez, 2009).

However, the asymmetrical distribution of power in the receiving context generates a segmented labor market where Moroccans work in the most precarious positions (i.e., intensive agriculture, construction labor and domestic service), which in turn lead them to live in segregated rural areas or marginalized urban neighborhoods with limited access to community resources (Hernández-Plaza, Pozo, & Alonso, 2004). Hernández-Plaza (2003) found that Moroccan migrants use community resources sparingly due to a lack of trust in the services and a lack of information about how to access them (Ingleby, Chimienti, Hatziprokopiou, Ormond, & De Freitas, 2005).

Research shows how these life conditions result in a downward spiral of marginalization that increases prejudice among the receiving population (García-Ramírez et al., 2011). The concept of prejudice is defined as a defense mechanism by the dominant groups against perceived dangers and challenges to maintaining their own privileges (Quillian, 1995). Thus, the Andalusian population often associates migration with an increase in crime, a worsening of the job market, and the overall view that there are too many migrants (OPAM, 2008). As a consequence, the social network of the migrant group usually has a low number of members from the receiving population (Martínez, García-Ramírez, & Maya-Jariego, 2001) and scarce opportunities for social support provision among family members due to problems faced over family regrouping (Hernández-Plaza, 2003).

This situation influences the migrants' well-being by creating a structure that limits their access to economic, material and psychosocial resources (Sonn & Lewis, 2009). Thus, Moroccans show low levels of well-being in this region (Hernández-Plaza et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, though the settlement process under these experiences are debilitating, it can also be strengthening because every human group has the capacity to resist and transform the contexts that impede their well-being (Watts & Serrano-García, 2003). For those groups that are in the "exclusion" category, community engagement of their members is influenced by the group's history of being consistently rejected by the dominant group (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002). Jensen (2008) suggests that migrant community engagement is a way to assert the voice of one's cultural group regarding the discrimination they suffer. Community organizations such as mosques, grassroots organizations, or faith-based congregations, play a prominent role in confronting situations of injustice. Paloma and Manzano-Arrondo (2011) considered the importance of community engagement of migrants through community organizations for carrying out collective actions that promote contextual changes. Involvement in these organizations leads to development of self, the creation of cohesive communities, and the construction of a fairer multicultural society (Paloma, García-Ramírez, De la Mata, & Amal, 2010).

This study explores how the community engagement of Moroccan leaders in southern Spain contributes to their well-being in their new settlement context. Indeed, this study explores (a) the profile and the motivations that Moroccan migrant leaders have in engaging in community organizations and (b) the relationship established between community engagement and Moroccan migrant well-being.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from community organizations in southern Spain that have been set up and managed by Moroccan migrants. These

organizations assist migrants in settling into the new country offering them various services (e.g., language courses, assistance in business bureaucracy, etc.). Participants, who were the founders or official leaders of these community organizations, were recruited according to two criteria: they had to be born in Morocco and to have performed their community engagement for at least a year on a voluntary basis.

Ten Moroccan migrant adults aged between 27–53-years-old ($M = 38$ years), ($SD 6.95$; seven males and three females) were interviewed. Five of them were married and eight participants were educated with university degrees. The remaining two migrants had completed secondary school. Six of them worked in the social sphere as social educators or intercultural mediators. Nine participants described themselves as Muslim believers. Most of them moved to Spain in early 2000.

Instruments

We carried out an in-depth face-to-face interview with each participant. During the first part, the participant was asked to provide his/her personal information (e.g., age, marital status). The second part of the interview was made up of seven open ended questions posed to explore the thematic areas of interest. We conducted a semistructured interview that stimulated two way conversation and allowed us to develop relationships with the interviewees based on reciprocal trust, and to let the participants feel more comfortable in sharing the stories about their social and psychological worlds (Marta et al., 2010).

The profile and migrant reasons for being involved in community activities were explored through asking these questions – (1) What is your role within the association? (2) Why do you engage in community activities? (3) Were you engaged in community activity before coming to Spain? The meaning that the participants gave to their community activity and the perception of its influence on their well-being were examined by asking (4) How do you believe community activity influences your well-being and your process of settlement in Spain? (5) Do you think that your cultural group is not appreciated in Spanish society? (If yes, do you think it is possible to change the situation?) (6) How did your social engagement influence your way of analyzing the reality in which you live? (7) Do you think that your participation in community organization helps to generate some kind of social change?

Procedure

After reviewing all the Moroccan migrant community organizations in southern Spain, we contacted them by telephone to present the research project and to hold a meeting with their founders or official leaders. To

ensure the quality of the collected data, all participants were interviewed by the same researcher.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed through the theoretical thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With this method we elaborated different themes: “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). The steps that guided us in the thematic analysis are the ones elaborated from Braun and Clarke (2006): (a) first analysis to become familiar with the data, (b) generation of initial codes, (c) search for the themes, (d) review of the themes, (e) definition and naming of the themes and (f) the production of the final report.

Results from the thematic analysis and discussion

Migrants' profile and motivations to community engagement

With regards to the first thematic area of exploration, it is interesting to note that most of these migrants started their community involvement during their university years. The relationship between a high degree of education and community engagement has been previously demonstrated (Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Wilson, 2000).

This study suggests that migrants feel motivated to engage in the community for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. Five participants expressed that they wanted to support their compatriots out of a feeling of gratitude towards others for all the good that they had received in life. Possibly, a natural inclination to assist a person with whom it is easy to identify, plays a key role in the decision to be committed (Simon, Sturmer, & Steffens, 2000). Among the oldest, two participants connected their motivation to a special period of their lives (for example to facilitate his sons' social integration). Both situations can be viewed through Godbout's (1992) theory of the three-phased cycle of giving, characterized by the actions of “giving-receiving-returning.” According to this author, the feeling of being grateful to others is the consequence of the perception of having received a lot from life. This condition of personal life satisfaction drives people to return favors to those considered less fortunate, and to the new generation.

Furthermore, nine participants deemed that being a practicing muslim was a determining factor for their engagement. Penner's (2002) study concluded that people involved in community activities are more religious than people who are not. Stoll and Wong (2007) similarly found that attending a religious institution is a significant predictor of migrant participation in community activities.

Also, others, particularly younger volunteers, consider community engagement as a useful activity in helping them obtain extrinsic rewards. Thus, some migrants in our study were driven by the desire to expand their networking in order to find new friends. Similarly, others tend to become attached to the organizational context so that they can develop the necessary skills for finding a job in the receiving society. These results agree with Handy and Greenspan's (2009) study, which found that the main motivation for migrants to volunteer was the creation of social connection, acquisition of useful skills and access to the job market.

Community engagement and migrants' well-being

In relation to the second thematic area of exploration, the participants said that their social action increased their well-being because they felt useful in helping someone else. One argued that "giving help to the others is for me essential! It makes me feel good and it makes the others [migrants who received the help] feel good!" The community engagement stimulates a strengthening of volunteers' social identity (Sonn, 2002), as well as a positive view of the self and an opportunity to boost their self-efficacy, as previously demonstrated by Marta and Pozzi (2007). Beyond this, we have observed that community engagement affects several paths leading to migrant well-being. These paths are described below.

Path one: Improvement of migrants' bicultural competences

Participants were active in organizations which offer services aimed to facilitate migrants' well-being during their migration experience. These organizations give recipients the opportunity to attend Spanish language lessons, provide them assistance with bureaucratic issues, help them in finding jobs, etc. When migrants approach these kinds of organizations they are in most cases lost, without any linguistic competence for communicating with the receiving population, or any knowledge needed for finding a home or a job. The task of the volunteers is to guide migrants in understanding how to create a new life in the new country. The interviews showed that, to fulfill this aim, volunteers must necessarily acquire a body of practical knowledge and competences, in both the original culture and the culture of the receiving country. As one migrant stated, "How can you work with these people in order to give them the adequate instruments to adapt themselves if you do not have them first?" The development of these skills is not only crucial for the support of the users, but also it is of decisive importance in facilitating the well-being of the volunteers through self-awareness of their own abilities (Amerio, Fedi, & Tartaglia, 2003).

Path two: Development of social relationships with receiving members

To support as fully as possible migrants who come to their organizations, participants told us that it is necessary to have constant contact with key people in the receiving population who guarantee the necessary resources for helping. This led most participants to expand their friendship networks in the receiving population. As one migrant stated: “Getting involved in a community activity means that a lot of Spanish people get to know you in a more direct way.” In this sense, Gilster (2012) found people who are involved in community activities have higher social connectedness than those people who are not. This result is consistent with Jensen’s (2008) and Handy and Greenspan’s (2009) studies which found that the community engagement of migrants was an efficient way to create a new social network. An indicator that shows the success of the settlement process is the presence of receiving members among the migrants’ supporting persons.

Path three: Strengthening of social bonds with their own cultural group members

All participants claimed to be deeply loyal to their cultural roots and religious traditions. Participants usually organize cultural activities to celebrate their own traditions as part of their community engagement. This is not insignificant, since we know migrants need to remember and maintain their ethnic identity and traditions (Jensen, 2008). Thus, one migrant created a program to safeguard the Moroccan cultural roots in his community organization to “work on the value and pride of the people who feel that they belong to something, to a group, to a land.” A strong ethnic identity is related to a high sense of belonging to the cultural group, which in turn boosts life satisfaction (Reitz, Banerjee, Phan, & Thompson, 2009). Clauss-Ehlers (2008) considers the connection with their ethnic group as a stress mediator for the difficult reality of the migrant experience.

Path four: Increase of abilities for being active citizens regarding unjust social conditions in the new environment

Community organizations facilitate contact among migrants, who can discuss the conditions in which they have to live. Through such discussions they develop critical thinking that leads them to acquire the abilities necessary to transform those situations that impede their well-being (Paloma & Manzano-Arrondo, 2011). As a result of collective reflection within the community organizations, migrants who volunteer engage in a diverse range of activities addressed to change those conditions that impede the well-being of all their ethnic group in the receiving country. For instance, the aim of one migrant’s community organization is to create new niches of employment for compatriots. The goal of another organization is to

support their countrymen in becoming citizens and in obtaining the right to vote.

The establishment of formal relationships between the migrants' community organizations and institutions from the receiving community, such as the university, helped to develop a more direct communication with their official leaders, such as the university dean. These new connections strengthened the migrants to point out which are the conditions that impede their well-being in order to fight against them. Thus, one migrant said, "Unity is our strength! If you go to an office to defend a right on your own, you're told 'the law is such and such, and you can not have this.' However, if you go with a hundred people or you say 'I speak on behalf of such and such organization,' you're seriously taken into consideration; it [the right] is given to you and you're respected." The social power thus obtained makes migrants able to have a real influence on policy issues and the opportunity to change the situations they need to change, in order to improve their well-being (Paloma et al., 2010).

Path five: Change of prejudice against their own cultural group in the receiving context

From the interviews it is clear that migrants' well-being is influenced by the high degree of prejudice shown by receiving members towards them. Some participants believed that bonds with the Maghreb Arab lineage made them targets of prejudice. "You know, one Moroccan does something wrong, so all Moroccans are bad; it is natural, we generalize: if you know one Moroccan, he or she represents the entire ethnic group" (a migrant woman).

Although the situation is complicated, participants believe that the condition of Moroccans in Spain will improve. Most of them declared that through the activities carried out by their community organizations, the prejudices against them and against their own ethnic group have diminished. Participants pointed out how their community organizations become a meeting point for different cultures. One stated: "the participation in activities can break down many stereotypes imposed on the Moroccan ethnicity." Prejudice has decreased also through relationships with the receiving members. Interviewed migrants admitted that contact with the Spanish and with many other cultural groups took place during the hours of volunteer work. This opportunity of contact changed many of their preconceptions and helped them become much more open and tolerant. Moreover, it confirms how physical proximity between people belonging to different cultures favors the reduction of prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). These contextual changes, related to a more tolerant vision of their neighbors towards them and vice versa, make them feel comfortable in Spain and appreciate Spanish citizens.

Conclusions

This research suggests that Moroccan migrant leaders living in southern Spain engage in community activities for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. Also, this article argues that there is a positive relationship between the involvement of migrants in community activities and their well-being. This is because migrant community engagement influences their well-being via the five main paths we described.

These results agree with other authors' works. First, research suggests that migrants need to have bicultural competencies (knowledge, communication skills, and appropriate roles in the two cultures) that assist them in the development of relationships and in navigating their new surroundings. LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton (1993) state that the possession of bicultural competences is linked with migrant well-being. Second, past work suggests that migrants need to develop feelings of belonging and positive attitudes toward the receiving context (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). Thus, Yoon, Lee, and Goh (2008) found that identification with the new culture had a positive effect on the well-being of migrants. This is only possible through the development of egalitarian relationships with receiving members and through migrant participation within the community life. Third, Phinney and Ong (2007) found that a scarce presence of fellow compatriots leads migrants to the loss of cultural heritage, a lack of emotional support, and a decrease in well-being as a consequence. Fourth, other studies argue that the coping strategies used by migrants to overcome the stress that arises from suffering unjust social conditions in the receiving context are determinants of their well-being. Thus, Paloma, García-Ramírez, and Camacho (2014) found that the use of active coping strategies (belief in the possibility of social change and the self-perceived capacity to influence the context) is related positively to migrant well-being. Fifth, research suggests that the level of social justice of receiving contexts is positively related to the level of well-being manifested by the migrant residents (Paloma et al., 2014; Prilleltensky, 2012). A strong indicator of social justice in the receiving society is a tolerant vision towards cultural diversity. In fact, migrants who live with neighbors who have a low degree of prejudice against them, and who live in neighborhoods with community services characterized by sensitivity to diversity, enjoy a greater level of well-being (Paloma, García-Ramírez, & Camacho, 2012).

Our study clarifies how the community engagement performed by migrants promotes their well-being during their settlement process in the new country. Through social action, migrants develop more self confidence, social relatedness, and sociopolitical control for transforming the contexts which facilitate their well-being. Under conditions of inequity, sociopolitical control may play a key role in the promotion of well-being and social justice, through the active

involvement of migrants in community organizations (Balcazar et al., 2012; Paloma et al., 2010). Thus, community organizations play a key role in collective experiences of resistance to asymmetrical power relationships, allowing migrants the ability to respond as active agents of community change for the promotion of well-being (Paloma & Manzano-Arrondo, 2011). Migrants who become politically active members contribute widely to the development of a fairer multicultural society. The flourishing of migrants' community organizations is necessary to foster both their own well-being and the existence of cohesive multicultural communities at the receiving contexts.

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