

Crossing Interstices: Understanding Transnational Identity Processes Through the Case of a Brazilian Immigrant Woman in Santiago

Transitar los intersticios: entendiendo procesos identitarios transnacionales desde el caso de una mujer inmigrante brasileña en Santiago

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the subjective identity processes produced in the transnational migration experience through the concept of interstitial identities. To illustrate the uses of this concept, a case built from life stories, in-depth interviews, and photostories is analyzed. Thus, María is identified, a skilled Brazilian immigrant in Santiago de Chile, who chooses to descend from the upper to low socioeconomic class in the destination country to construct herself as the subject of her history. In addition, it reflects on the *processuality* of their identities and on the identity negotiations that she establishes in the interstice between different cultural configurations she relates transnationally, in which gender and class are relevant categories. Finally, it is concluded that thinking about the migratory experience from interstitial identities does not allow to build identity typologies but to explore the articulations between subject and culture in migration.

Keywords: 1. identity, 2. transnational migration, 3. case study, 4. Brazil, 5. Chile.

RESUMEN

Se discute sobre los procesos identitarios subjetivos producidos en la experiencia migratoria transnacional a través de la noción de identidades intersticiales. Para ilustrar el uso de dicho concepto, se analiza un caso construido a partir de relatos de vida, entrevista en profundidad y fotohistorias. Así, se identifica que María, brasileña inmigrante calificada en Santiago de Chile, elige descender de clase en el país de destino para construirse a sí misma como sujeto de su historia. Además, se reflexiona sobre la *procesualidad* de sus identidades y sobre las negociaciones identitarias que ella establece en el intersticio de diferentes configuraciones culturales con las cuales se relaciona transnacionalmente, en un contexto en que las categorías de género y de clase son relevantes. Finalmente, se concluye que pensar la experiencia migratoria a partir de las identidades intersticiales no permite construir tipologías identitarias, sino explorar las articulaciones entre sujeto y cultura en la migración.

Palabras clave: 1. identidad, 2. migración internacional, 3. estudio de caso, 4. Brasil, 5. Chile.

Received: May 17, 2021

Accepted: December 20, 2021

Original version (Spanish) published online: May 15, 2023

Translation (English) published online: July 27, 2023

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INTRODUCTION³

Thinking about identities is a particularly important challenge in the 21st century, a time in which globalization processes have resulted in complex interactions between what is local and what is global, between the individual and the collective. Therefore, transnational migrations hold a privileged space in the study of these identities, as they make possible a plurality of encounters with that which is different for those who go through such experience (Bhatia, 2011). Thanks to the advances in transportation and communication technologies, it is possible to be in constant contact with the societies of origin and destination, which leads to the emergence of individuals and groups whose daily lives are constituted by multiple interconnections across national borders (Glick Schiller et al., 1995), and whose identities articulate more than one nation-State (Stefoni & Bonhomme, 2014).

To make sense of this complexity, the question of identity in a migratory context has had to overcome assimilation models based on the dualism between nations of origin and of destination, wherein identities would be the product of the assimilation of *one* or *another* culture, rather than thinking of identities as dynamic and unstable processes, negotiated between old and new identity frameworks of the societies in which migrants transit and with which they relate (Bhatia, 2011; Bhatia & Ram, 2009).

This paper addresses the subjective dimension of identities by means of the concept of *interstitial identities*, an interdisciplinary approach to the processes that take place in the transnational migratory experience built from the concepts of hybridization (Bhabha, 1998), narrative identities (Ricoeur, 2006), and cultural configurations (Grimson, 2011). The work is part of a doctoral research project aimed at understanding the identity processes of Brazilians living in Santiago de Chile (Chile).

From a comprehensive perspective, interstitial identities are thought in terms of two basic assumptions: a) in transnational migration, the socio-cultural configurations (Grimson, 2011) of origin and destination are different. These differences constitute themselves into interstices, that is to say, spaces of cultural hybridization in which alternative forms of identity construction are possible for individuals (Bhabha, 1998); b) these identity processes can be approached through the narrative of one's own life (Ricoeur, 2006).

³ Thanks are due to the National Agency for Research and Development (ANID, acronym in Spanish for Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo) of the Government of Chile (CONICYT-PFCHA/National Doctorate/2017-21171315) and the Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (COES, acronym in Spanish for Centro de Estudios de Conflicto y Cohesión Social) for funding the doctoral research project "Entre brasilidades y chilenidades: La (re)producción de identidades narrativas en la experiencia migratoria transnacional de brasileños/as en Santiago de Chile" ("Between Brazilianities and Chileanities: the (re)production of narrative identities in the transnational migratory experience of Brazilians in Santiago de Chile") which gave rise to this article. We also thank the philosopher and psychologist Rodrigo Borges Pereira for reviewing the coherence of the theoretical-philosophical aspects of the text in its first stages.

María's case illustrates the (re)productions and negotiations of identity in migration. She is a young Brazilian woman who migrated from an upper-middle-class sector of São Paulo to the peripheral areas of Santiago de Chile (Chile). The case was built from an articulation between the life histories method, in-depth interviewing, and the photo stories technique (participatory photography), developed in two meetings with the participant during the second half of 2018. The biographical approach made it possible to identify María as a product, an actress, and the author of her story at different stages of her narrated life (Cornejo, 2006). Likewise, the way in which she narrates herself amid tensions and negotiations *between* the cultural configurations of origin and destination, and between the different versions of herself that undergo changes throughout her history due to her experiences, is pointed out.

Next, the theoretical foundation that gave rise to the notion of interstitial identities is presented. Then, the contexts of María's transnational migratory experience are described. After, the methodological details of the research and its main results are shared. Finally, the scope and limits of the concept of interstitial identities for the study of transnational identity processes are laid out.

Cultural Configurations, Interstitial Identities, and Narrative

Cultural configurations (Grimson, 2011) are shared frameworks that articulate the heterogeneity, historicity, and power relations that make up that which is social; these are *fields of possibility* that include institutions, representations, and the social practices made possible or not possible in a given context and by those other practices that have become hegemonic. These configurations are *fields of interlocution*, as they share common meanings through a system of meanings and identifications, ways of enunciating and interpreting reality that are understood by their members; they constitute *identity toolboxes*, sets of classifications and categories produced in society, whose meanings are linked to a specific historical moment. Individuals learn these tools in their socialization process, allowing them to recognize themselves and identify others in certain contexts (Grimson, 2010, 2011). Finally, cultural configurations are *heterogeneous fields* where diverse inequalities (gender, race, class, etc.) are managed based on hierarchical relationships between social categories (Grimson, 2011).

Taking María's case as an example, the cultural configurations for her migratory experience would be São Paulo and Santiago,⁴ which are delimited by the lifestyle of each metropolis, as well as by their respective languages and linguistic nuances (the São Paulo Portuguese of Brazil and the Spanish of Chile's urban areas). Such configurations are made up of different identity toolboxes, that is, by the ways in which each city is organized according to the particularities of gender, class, ethnicity, state of origin, citizenship status, among others, and by how subjects relate to each other on the basis of these categories. Moreover, non-national cultural configurations

⁴ These cities are not addressed as geographical points in this paper; rather, the focus is placed on the discursive, symbolic, cultural, and socially constructed dimension of these spaces, accessed through María's narrative.

maintain links with those configurations that make up a nation (Grimson, 2011), so that coming from São Paulo also means relating to the meanings of being Brazilian in that context and sharing common systems of meaning and interpretation with individuals from other Brazilian cities.

As such, the contexts of migrant experience would be cultural configurations with more or less established frameworks. It is hypothesized that the latter do not necessarily overlap, however similar they may be in terms of interpretation of reality and social organization. Thus, the concept of *third space* (Bhabha, 1998) is addressed: the space-time between old and new cultural models that emerges when the hegemonic discursive structures are in crisis at a given historical moment. This notion would allow the expression of dissident identities that bring within themselves traces of the traditions called into question in a translation of sorts (what the author calls *cultural hybridization*).⁵

Migration is considered to enable the emergence of this third space between cultural borders (Bhabha, 1998)⁶ by encouraging migrants to question the hegemonic ways of being in the place of origin, this by establishing links with otherness in the receiving society. Likewise, by arriving in the new society with the identity toolbox of their place of origin, migrants can also question the elements that structure the culture of destination. However, at a subjective level, this entails a constant negotiation between the individual and the identity limits imposed on him/her in each context.

Ricoeur (2006) contributes to the understanding of identity negotiations in the space between cultural configurations. This author discussed the process of identity production based on the dialectical relationship between identifications (*idem*) and differentiations (*ipse*) in each life experience so that personal identity would be the whole emerging from the set of experiences lived up to a certain moment in time, in which such identity is subject to the contingent possibilities of being⁷ (Ricoeur, 2006). The above points to the processuality of identities: even the most stable areas of the personal identity, such as character, are produced over time through experiences of interlocation in specific contexts. Given the volatile nature of identity and its close relationship with lived experience, Ricoeur (2006) assumes that it is only possible to approach it indirectly, through the narration of life histories.

Identity is understood as a process constructed based on the relationships between individuals and the cultural configurations in which they are inserted. These conditions define what it is and what it is not possible to be in each situation. It is surmised that when subjects move from one cultural configuration to another in migration, they cross the borders of their systems of meaning,

⁵ In studying the postcolonial context, Bhabha (1998) asserted that translation would be disruptive because, even when the colonized seeks to mimic the colonizer, such mimesis is never perfect, resulting in cultural heterogeneity.

⁶ Bhabha (1998) quotes Heidegger in defining borders as the point where something new begins to unfold, where one begins to have contact with difference in relation to a hegemonic system of meanings. The author criticizes the idea of a nation as the location of culture (p. 199).

⁷ Context or condition that occurs historically in a specific space and time (Bhabha, 1998).

their social and institutional practices, and move minimally away from the identity toolbox (Grimson, 2011) of the place of origin as they come into contact with that of the place of destination. In the case of transnational migration, the possibility of keeping simultaneous contact with the configurations of origin and destination would provide subjects with life experiences in both cultural frameworks. If we take into account that between one and the other there are interstitial spaces in which it is possible to configure alternative ways of being (Bhabha, 1998), then the successive transnational experiences would make possible the emergent identity production between their borders through the subjective experience of migration.

Viewed in this way, interstitial identities are the subjective identity processes made possible by transnational migration, produced by the concrete experiences of moving between the limits of the cultural configurations of the societies of origin and destination. Such experiences would be shaped by encounters with otherness in each contingency,⁸ leading to processes of identification and differentiation (Ricoeur, 2006). These processes would not depend solely on individual volition but, taking into account the power relations and inequalities present in cultural configurations (Grimson, 2011), would be continuously negotiated between individuals and the conditions of possibility of each experience, thus sustaining the dynamics of identity production between agency and subjection⁹ to social structures (Hall, 2003). Finally, it is hypothesized that it is possible to find clues to these complex identity processes through the narration of one's own life (Ricoeur, 2006).

It is important to mention some differences and similarities regarding concepts such as Turner's (1988) *liminal states*, addressed by researchers of identities in migration such as Hernández Pulgarín (2010). Although both interstitial identities and liminal states make use of the idea of locating oneself in the interstices of social structures, the original point of the latter refers to a deconstructive state of passage concerning the initial characteristics of an individual or group to subsequently find a new place in the community (Turner, 1988). Conversely, interstitial identities do not comprise a final stage of integration or assimilation into a new culture but are the continuous exercise of being between different cultural frameworks. Moreover, unlike liminal identities, which pertain to individuals on the margins of legal apparatuses and social structures (Hernández Pulgarín, 2010), the concept of interstitial identities implies foregrounding the levels of agency of individuals: migrants are actors who negotiate their identities, but they are also the product of the social conditions in which they find themselves (Cornejo, 2006).

⁸ Language, identity toolboxes, and the systems of meaning of the host society, but also other versions of self at different moments of the subject's life trajectory, the *otherness* of the society of origin that changes over time, and so on.

⁹ Hall (2003) discusses the aspects of the individual that are the product of discursive systems that provide the conditions for identity production. In this article, subjection refers to what the individual can do in the face of those elements of social and material life that they cannot change, and those without which they could not think of themselves or coexist in society. However, according to Hall (2003), it should be understood that the individual is not entirely subjected to hegemonic discourses.

*Cultural Configurations for the Case of María:
São Paulo and Santiago*

The life and migratory experience as recorded in this case study mainly went through two cultural configurations: the city of São Paulo (Brazil) and the Metropolitan Region of Santiago (Chile). These territories share some common characteristics: both are metropolitan cities in South American countries, characterized by high demographic density—São Paulo is the most populated city in Brazil (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2011, p. 38), while Santiago de Chile concentrates 40.5% of the people residing in Chile, according to the last census (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas [INE], 2018, p. 5)—. Moreover, both cities are known for their high levels of social inequality and territorial segregation, a result of the recent urbanization of these countries only in the second half of the 20th century (Fuentes & Rodríguez-Leiva, 2020; Marques, 2014; Ropert Lackington et al., 2021). Thus, inhabiting different sectors of them produces different life experiences for people at both the subjective and intersubjective levels (Ropert Lackington et al., 2021).

São Paulo is the capital of the state of São Paulo, in southeastern Brazil, and concentrates much of the country's economic and industrial activities (Bógus & Pasternak, 2019; Magalhães et al., 2018). This feature attracts migrants from other Brazilian regions (Barbosa de Souza, 2019; Braga & Matos, 2017) and from countries as diverse as Bolivia, Haiti, and Japan (Fantin, 2015; Magalhães et al., 2018). It also holds deep social inequalities and urban violence in the public and private spheres of social life (Amparo Alves, 2011; Marques, 2014; Villaça, 2011). The southern zone, where María lived while in Brazil, is characterized by the heterogeneity of sectors that concentrate middle and upper-middle-class residences, although there are also some upper-class neighborhoods such as Campo Grande and Santo Amaro (Bógus & Pasternak, 2019).

As for Santiago, the city is inserted in the context of the recent growth of migratory flows to Chile. The number of foreigners increased from 187 008 to 746 465 (INE, 2018) between the 2002 and 2017 censuses and reached 1 492 522, according to more recent estimates (INE, 2020a). In 2019, most (77.6%) of those migrants were of Latin American and Caribbean origin, Venezuela, Peru, Haiti, Colombia, and Bolivia¹⁰ respectively being the five most important groups in terms of numbers, Brazil ranking tenth (INE, 2020a). This immigration is slightly masculinized (about 105 men for every 100 women), while Brazil is the third most feminized group (83.7 men for every 100 women) (INE, 2020a). 59.4% of the total foreign population in Chile resides in Santiago (INE, 2020b).

Despite the existing heterogeneity among migrants, they still have been mainly characterized by having limited economic resources, having Afro-descendant or indigenous features (Stefoni & Stang, 2017), and migrating in search of a better socioeconomic standing (Márquez, 2014; Rojas Pedemonte & Silva Dittborn, 2016; Salgado Bustillos et al., 2018). These characteristics threaten the imaginary of

¹⁰ Since 2010, the pace of growth of Venezuelan, Haitian and Colombian migration has accelerated, to the extent of surpassing, for example, the more traditional Peruvian migration, which until 2015 was the largest migrant group in Chile (Soto-Alvarado et al., 2019).

white-European national identity that has historically been attempted to be implemented in Chile (Sirlopú & Van Oudenhoven, 2013; Tijoux, 2016). The differentiated treatment towards migrants in Santiago has depended on the valuation that local people attribute to them based on their nationality, skin color and socioeconomic status, as locals prefer light-skinned migrants of higher schooling levels (Sirlopú et al., 2015, p. 11).

As a result, there is a recurrent lack of acknowledgment of immigrant sociocultural and identity diversity and of their condition of otherness in their daily encounter with the native Chilean population, which makes Santiago an arena of significant identity disputes, wherein migrants are constantly placed as an other “between what is their own and what is foreign” (Márquez & Correa, 2015, p. 168). On the other hand, migrants have constructed transnational ways of being and inhabiting Santiago’s society by incorporating cultural elements and daily practices that update their relations with the societies of origin and partake in dialogue with the ways of living in their new place of residence (Márquez, 2014).

People from Brazil, like María, stand out in this scenario more for their sociocultural particularities than for their numbers. The fact that said country was a colony of the Portuguese and not of Spaniards, as most Latin American countries were, has had an impact on it being an *other* in the region (Lima, 2017). The difference in the mother tongue, that is, Portuguese versus Spanish, and the fact of residing mainly in sectors of the city with better socioeconomic levels (Servicio Nacional de Migraciones [SERMIG], 2022) makes Brazilians an otherness also in relation to their Latin American immigrant peers.¹¹ This condition makes their life and migration experiences a propitious space for the investigation of identity dynamics in the specific context of international south-south migration. Furthermore, Brazilians are usually welcome in Santiago because of the portrayals of joy and sympathy built around this nationality and due to no colonial history or territorial dispute between Chile and Brazil (Silva Villar et al., 2021; Lima, 2017).

Additionally, Santiago is characterized by social inequality and spatial segregation that forces people from the lowest socioeconomic strata to inhabit marginalized sectors of the territory (Fuentes & Rodríguez-Leiva, 2020; Ropert Lackington et al., 2021). The district of La Granja—the locality in Santiago frequented the most by María—¹² is one of the most impoverished territories; located southwest of Santiago, it holds higher levels of multidimensional poverty¹³ and a higher percentage of people living in overcrowded conditions (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile [BCN], 2021a).

This way, María’s history is based on two quite different sociocultural experiences: on the one hand, the experiences of the upper-middle class of São Paulo; on the other, the relationship with the way of being and living of the lower classes of Santiago.

¹¹ Who generally concentrate in working-class sectors of Santiago (Sermig, 2022).

¹² During the interviews, María lived in San Miguel, a multi-class district in south-central Santiago (BCN, 2021b).

¹³ It refers to thinking of poverty from five dimensions: education, health, work, social security and housing, and environmental conditions (Ministry of Social Development [Ministerio de Desarrollo Social], 2018).

METHODOLOGY

María's case is part of a qualitative research aimed at understanding the subjective identity processes of Brazilians living in Santiago. Given that the narratives of one's own life are mediators to access identities (Ricoeur, 2006), the biographical approach was agreed upon as the most appropriate since identities are understood as narrative processes (De Gaulejac, 1996; Sharim Kovalskys, 2005). Furthermore, from the notion of interstitial identities, people are conceived as agents and subjects in the construction of their lives as narratives (Cornejo, 2006).

Of the 16 cases produced in the research, María's was selected because she was a young Brazilian woman with high financial resources who migrated with her ex-partner to *find herself* and because she chose the lower classes in Santiago to integrate into Chilean society.

The case was built from the articulation of three narrative methods—life histories (Correa, 2001; De Gaulejac, 1996; Sharim Kovalskys, 2005), in-depth interviews (Gáinza-Veloso, 2006), and photo stories (Gómez, 2016, 2017; Yefimova et al., 2015)—, organized in two meetings with the participant. These three methods have in common the inductive logic for the production of knowledge and the use of narrative language as a way to access the data and respond to the research objective (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014).

María was contacted to participate in the research through a key informant in 2018. At our first meeting, she was invited to tell her life history freely; her account lasted one hour and ten minutes, was audio-recorded, transcribed to a Word document, and then sent to the participant in the following week (life histories method).

She was then asked to read the transcribed account and take photos of her daily life, to be shown at the second meeting. Meanwhile, the interview was reviewed and discussed with a third party, with the aim of elucidating aspects of the case not identified by the researcher-interviewer (inter-analysis).

In the second meeting, the participant was allowed to request changes to her life history. Subsequently, the researcher-interviewer developed a semi-structured interview with questions pertaining to the research objectives (in-depth interview). Finally, María was invited to show the photos she had taken, telling the interviewer the meanings of each one (photo stories). This second session lasted two hours, and was audio-recorded and transcribed.¹⁴

It should be noted that the research was carried out with the approval of the university's Ethics Committee. The participant signed an informed consent form in which she authorized the use of the interviews and photos for academic purposes, also choosing a pseudonym to protect her identity. By the same token, the professionals who participated in the inter-analysis and the transcription of the interviews signed a certificate of confidentiality.

¹⁴ Both sessions were conducted in Portuguese; however, excerpts from the interviews were originally translated into Spanish for this paper, and then into English by this journal's translator.

It is worth mentioning that, at the time of the interviews, the participant was six months pregnant and living with her Chilean partner, which is why the meetings took place at her home in Santiago. María's history was fluid and in-depth, which may have been encouraged by our researcher-interviewer being a woman and a Brazilian migrant. The participant also admitted to feeling comfortable conversing with a psychologist—the researcher-interviewer's main profession—in Portuguese, her mother tongue. Finally, between the first and second meetings, María took a trip to Brazil with her partner to visit family and friends, which apparently influenced her account in the subsequent interview.

DATA ANALYSIS

In order to organize the narrative data of María's case, we made use of the analytical triad of the biographical approach, as presented by Vincent de Gaulejac (Cornejo, 2006): *individuals as products of a story*, subordinated to the facts and material/structural conditions surrounding them and to the discourses crossing them; *individuals as actors in the story*, able of intervening in their biography, developing and providing it with meaning, within the possibilities of a specific context; *individuals as authors of their stories*, capable of creating (themselves) through action in the world (Cornejo, 2006).

These axes were taken as starting points to understand the mechanism by which María negotiates and produces identities in the migratory context; three guiding questions were elaborated, considering the concept of interstitial identities proposed above.

- How do the cultural configurations among which María moves condition her identity narratives? (Individual as products of a story).
- How does María negotiate her identity narratives in the face of what is imposed on her through the cultural configurations she finds herself in? (Individuals as actors in the story).
- How does María differentiate herself from the identities imposed on her, and what identity dynamics does she present from her subjective agency? (Individuals as authors of their stories).

In the following, this case is analyzed on the basis of the aforementioned analytical triad and the concept of interstitial identities.

RESULTS

María's Story

María is a 26-year-old white woman from an upper-middle-class family in southern São Paulo, Brazil. She introduced herself as an only child, whose father died when she was still a child. She described her mother as a woman who worked very hard throughout her life to provide her with the best possible education, allowing María to study at top private schools in her city. Towards the end of María's high school years, she did not know which path to take, so she decided to fulfill her family's wishes and study law at one of the top private universities in Brazil.

María told us how she was surrounded by upper-class people in Brazil and that she existed in a *bubble*, alienated from societal problems. However, she also stated having been afraid of the violence characteristic of São Paulo.

She made the decision to migrate upon graduating as a lawyer. Her boyfriend at the time (a son of Chileans) received a job offer in Santiago and invited her to join him, which María accepted as an opportunity to try something new, experience changes in her life, and discover herself.

Once in Santiago, María reports having been a victim of physical and psychological violence by her boyfriend, one of the few social networks she had in Chile. Despite this, she did not return to São Paulo; she believed that Santiago was a safe city where she could walk down the street without fear of being raped. Three months after arriving, María managed to leave the abusive relationship with the help of a psychologist and her cousin—who had been living in Chile for five years—and moved to live with this cousin on the outskirts of Santiago.

She later found a job selling tourist package deals, and it was there that she met Esteban, a Chilean colleague. He comes from a lower-class family from La Granja district; María fell in love with him and became pregnant a few months into the relationship. She relates that she felt very comfortable in his family and their way of life, mainly because they were happy with the little they had. She also stated feeling very happy with her current condition, regardless of her limited economic situation, mainly because of the good relationship she has with her partner and because she has finally been able to find herself in a life where the standards are very different from those of her family of origin. By pairing up with a poorer person and getting pregnant *by accident*, María realized that for the first time she was defining her own life, given that her Brazilian family is characterized by detailed planning of pregnancies and prioritizing professional careers. She also stated that Esteban's family welcomed the news, and she associated it with the fact that it is common for them to have children at a young age—a cousin of Esteban's became a mother at the age of 16—.

At the time of this research, María was living in an apartment in the San Miguel district with her partner. She left her job because of the pregnancy, and her leaving the house was limited to medical check-ups at the family health center in her neighborhood; they also visited Esteban's relatives' house on weekends. The migrant reports having been in daily contact with her friends and family in Brazil through social media, in addition to visiting them periodically and following news about her country of origin over the internet. Nevertheless, she did not participate in the Brazilian community of Santiago, as she preferred to live with people from the country where she was and learn their customs instead of being in the midst of other people of her same nationality.

It is worth mentioning that the participant showed essential differences in her identity narratives between the first and second interview sessions. In the first, the story revolved around the radical change from what María was in Brazil (a spoiled girl living in a *bubble* of privilege) to what she had become in Santiago (her awakening to things that really matter and getting to know the culture of the popular classes in Santiago), passing through the threshold of transformation represented by

the three months of violence suffered with her ex-partner. Despite the difficulties of that stage, she emphasized how happy and calm she felt, and claimed to have no intention of returning to Brazil.

The second interview, however, took place after the participant returned from a trip to São Paulo accompanied by her boyfriend and a friend of both of them, also Chilean and the future godfather of her son. María stated that her two worlds met on that trip when she introduced her Chilean boyfriend and friend to her family. In addition, during her stay, her Brazilian family and friends organized a baby shower for her, which made María feel truly welcomed by her people in Brazil, as she stated.

After narrating that experience, she oriented her story towards talking about the limitations of the Chilean working-class lifestyle and distanced herself from the optimistic perspective with which she had developed the previous narrative. Her partner's family, which in the first interview appeared as welcoming and affectionate—as her real home—now appeared as “dirty people”, sexist, who intervened in their life as a couple and who did not know how to be available as Brazilians do.

The Chilean lower class was now, in her story, an *other* different from *us*. The figure of María's mother appeared strongly as a heroine now, and her family and friends in Brazil as the ones who really care about her. At this stage, our interviewee expressed her desire to stay in Brazil, and that, if her decision depended on her emotions, she would surely return there. At this point, she associated having to return to Chile with her pregnancy, since she already had her delivery scheduled in Santiago and because she considered that this city would be a better place for her child.

María as a Product of a Story

Each cultural configuration is composed of fields of heterogeneity and possibility that limit the actions of individuals regardless of their will (Grimson, 2011). It is understood that the subjective migratory experiences depend on the social position of the migrant and his or her place in the hierarchy of social relations according to gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, among others (Pessar & Mahler, 2003). This position defines life experiences and influences how each person constructs his or her identity in the migration process.

Two major social dimensions frame María's narrative: gender and social class. First, although the relationship between sex and gender is a social construct (Butler, 2007). By being a woman, María is placed in a lower position in the hierarchy of social relations (Nawyn, 2010; Stang, 2014). Gender establishes important differences in the migratory experience of men vs. women—reasons for migrating, meanings attributed to migration, and mode of integration into the destination society, among others (Gissi Barbieri & Martínez Ruiz, 2018; Godoy, 2007)—and is considered as the category that most determines inequalities in migration (Magliano, 2015). Being a migrant woman also places the person in a position of vulnerability and risks that implies experiencing situations of violence before, during, and/or after migration (Asakura & Torres Falcón, 2013; Cárdenas-Rodríguez et al., 2018).

Gender is a transversal axis in María's story: her migration project was built upon the foundation of a love relationship, something common among migrant women (Cárdenas-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Roca Girona et al., 2012); she suffered gender-based violence by her ex-partner upon arriving in Santiago; her pregnancy became a fundamental factor to stay in Chile, which shows the central role of motherhood as a significant aspect in women's migratory decisions (Gregorio-Gil & González-Torralbo, 2012; Stang, 2014).

In María's case, gender, understood as a way of acting in society (Butler, 2007), creates tension for what is expected of her as a woman in each sociocultural configuration. In São Paulo, this role is related to financial independence and she is expected to achieve professional success through formal education, while in Santiago she is expected to perform well in household tasks, and success lies in the family.

I don't do the cooking here in the house. Esteban does it. I help with what I know, but I don't know how to cook and he's very good at it (...) Everyone says, "this is great, but is Esteban the one who does the cooking?" So, it's like they think that maybe I am very feminist, so it makes them wonder (María, personal communication, October 25, 2018).

As for these tensions, social class both draws and blurs the limits of the cultural configurations that María knows: being in Brazil is linked to the experience of gender in the upper classes of São Paulo; while her encounter with Chilean cultural elements, as well as gender roles, took place in coexistence with the working classes of Santiago. Thus, her cultural adaptation processes are necessarily traversed by identifying with or differentiating from these classes in specific contexts.

However, her sense of belonging to the way of life of the popular classes, quite present in the first interview, is neither total nor definitive. It appeared in the different ways in which María describes Esteban's family in the first and second research encounters, where she went from feeling "more at home than in my own house" (María, personal communication, September 5, 2018) to questioning her way of living among Chileans and disapproving of the differences between them and her Brazilian family.

The above is linked to another dimension not related to the sense of belonging to a particular class, but rather to resources that a migrant may have and how these become the field of possibilities (Grimson, 2011) for his or her processes of identity negotiation. María is a skilled migrant (Stang, 2014) and is white, which in Brazil (Cardoso, 2010; Dupas & Romero, 2017) and in Chile (Sirlopú & Van Oudenhoven, 2013; Tijoux, 2016) positions her in a privileged social position. Also, as a Latin American migrant, having Brazilian nationality plays out in her favor in a social context in which this is positively valued (Silva Villar et al., 2021; Lima, 2017).

These conditions would give her a certain objective advantage in social relations in the context of migration and position her in better conditions compared to other Latin American migrant women from lower classes (Stang, 2014). Likewise, although María suffered gender-based violence, her account still lacks any problems related to racial discrimination or xenophobia.

Finally, we hypothesize that the change of tones in María's account, referring to what for her is *Chilean culture*—as represented by Esteban's family—connects to her last visit to São Paulo, since she may have been more intensely linked to the identity toolbox of the place of origin. Upon returning to Chile, she related to Santiago from the perspective of someone from abroad, an alterity, which allowed her to compare both social realities and at that time identify more with the cultural configuration of origin than with that of destination. Additionally, having a support network in Brazil with ties sustained over time, as well as having financial resources that allow her to travel periodically to visit her relatives and friends in that country, would allow her a certain flexibility to return there when she needs to, and to sustain the tensions with the cultural configuration of the destination when they become evident.

María as an Actress in the Story

Although María acts within the possibilities of her conditions, migration expanded her identity toolboxes, allowing her to use them in both cultural settings (origin and destination) according to her needs and to question their limitations. Thus, she is understood to be between agency and subjection: she acts out her social roles (she is subjected to them) but provides them with new meaning to her life trajectory (agency) in her search for herself. Some examples meant to illustrate this mechanism are given below.

First, when she decided to migrate to Santiago, María used the migration project of another person (her boyfriend at the time) to build her own life project. On the one hand, she has acted according to the expectations around the role of women in being the companion of a man in migration (Roca Girona, 2016; Roca Girona et al., 2012). On the other hand, this migration meant the beginning of a new narrative for herself, a new way of telling her story: now, she is María from “The Adventures of María lost in Chile” (María, personal communication, September 5, 2018), someone different from the María who “goes with the flow” of her family's mandates.¹⁵

Then, María suffered gender violence and accepted working as a tourist package deals saleswoman, even though she is a lawyer, to get out of this situation. She experienced something common among skilled migrant women in Santiago: underemployment (Roca Girona, 2016; Roca Girona et al., 2012). However, through that undertaking, she could distance herself from her aggressor boyfriend and provide a new meaning to her decision to stay in Santiago.

Third, motherhood is one of the most emblematic female roles and is considered an exercise of societal power over women's bodies (Stang, 2014). However, by becoming pregnant without planning it, she differentiated herself from her family of origin:

¹⁵ It should be highlighted that María changing how she narrates herself cannot be understood as merely an individual achievement. Her migration experience relied on various affective and material resources from her support networks, such as the fact that her boyfriend and a cousin lived in Santiago, the possibility of leaving her job in São Paulo, financing her trip with the help of her family, and being able to return to her place of origin when she needed to.

My cousins who are married and live with their partners still don't have any children, because that is something you should plan. And then I show up with a child, you know? (...) It surprised them: 'María is pregnant, but how come? She is just starting her relationship with her partner' (María, personal communication, September 5, 2018).

Furthermore, with her pregnancy, María got even closer to the cultural configurations of her destination, which made her feel welcome in Santiago. In her words: "In Chile, a pregnant woman is immaculate. Being pregnant is good, I recommend it, they treat you very well (...) it is also good in Brazil, but I feel that here they idolize mothers a little bit" (María, personal communication, September 5, 2018).

Finally, despite the limitations of belonging to the working classes in Santiago, María defied the rules of socioeconomic ascent associated with highly educated migrants (Gissi Barbieri & Martínez Ruiz, 2018), especially due to her coming from a well-to-do family, and created spaces to develop her story in a different way than what was expected of her. It does not necessarily mean that María has completely freed herself from the standards imposed by her family—one might even think that, by constructing her narrative in opposition, she would be in the background still linked to them from denial—. In fact, identity production occurs through differentiation and mimesis of the other, that is, in relation to something or someone necessarily (Ricoeur, 2006). However, it is also understood that even when attempts are made to mimic the object of identification, the original discourse does not translate identically, which allows certain levels of identity creation that can escape from what is already established (Bhabha, 1998). Therefore, although María's identity production is not free from negotiations with the cultural configurations through which she transits, she can incorporate another form of self-construction, a third way of narrating herself.

María as the Author of her Story

María's case also shows how transnational migration promotes the transformation and mobility of personal identities by making it possible to exist between different cultural configurations, understanding that these identities are produced "from relationships and multiple interactions" (Bejarano Rodríguez, 2006, p. 6). In this sense, the migratory experience amplifies such relationships and encounters with what is different (Bhatia, 2011), which favors other ways of constructing the narrative about oneself and producing identities (Ricoeur, 2006).

The question of identity is a structural axis in María's narrative: she decided to venture to live in another country because she did not know who she was and did not recognize herself in her life in São Paulo. Despite the financial stability and privilege, she enjoyed, she felt she was merely "going with the flow", without a life purpose that was her own.

Migration to Santiago was the "biggest happening" she has had in her life, which made her trajectory take a drastic turn. Migrating brought about her identity transformation and made her perceive herself as a different person, as can be seen in this quote: "I changed. I am a different

person from Brazil to Chile (...) Living in another country makes you see other things you were not used to” (María, personal communication, September 5, 2018).

However, María’s identity change is more inscribed in transformations related to social class than those related to the national identities¹⁶ of the countries of origin and destination. Her encounter with otherness was framed in the reality of the working classes of Santiago, as represented by the family of her Chilean partner. The encounters with this specific cultural framework allowed her *to break free from the bubble* and become a different person.

I think I have come to realize to be more grateful, to see that you can live with less (...), and also to see that happiness is not related to money (...) Some people sometimes live with very little, and you can’t even compare to how happy they are. (...) I see people in my family who have everything, and you see the difference in terms of happiness (María, personal communication, October 25, 2018).

María’s identity changes and production are also related to the gap between the limited agency over her life in Brazil and the capability to choose for herself in Chile. For María, migration to Santiago represents the possibility of being someone who is the author of her own history.

In this sense, María perceived poverty as a cultural and a self-experience because it allowed her to produce new ways of inhabiting the world, relating to people, and perceiving social reality. Because of the privilege of being someone of good financial standing guaranteed in Brazil, she could choose the culture of the working classes of Santiago as part of a, according to her, more authentic *self*.

So I got to know another reality of life, you know? People who live with far less, (...) who really need their jobs. (...) Back in São Paulo, for me it was like this: “I don’t like this job, they don’t treat me well, I’m going to quit. I will find something else eventually”. Here I see that people can’t afford to do the same, because they rely on their salary single day (...) I started to look at myself differently. I was so used to so many things that are not really like that... Then another world opened up to me (María, personal communication, September 5, 2018).

However, María’s identity-construction process did not end when upon integrating into the Chilean-Santiago culture as a way of life. She stayed in contact with her family and friends in São Paulo, traveled to visit them, and, in doing so, she changed her narrative of identification with the Chilean way of life of the working classes to a posture more in line with her Brazilian-Paulista origins of the wealthy class, something that is evidenced in the second interview, wherein she aimed at differentiating herself from the way of life of her partner’s family.

¹⁶ After Brettell (2003), national identities are understood in this article as a set of plural and socially constructed practices, discourses, symbols, and cultural artifacts shared by individuals and groups around an ideal of an imagined cultural community linked to a particular nation-State. For this author, the relationship with the national identity of origin can intensify when the migrant is confronted with cultural otherness in the destination territory. However, in María’s case, belonging to a Brazilian national identity was not her story’s most important identity element.

As a hypothesis, we propose that the identities negotiated by María in her encounter with otherness through the migratory experience are constantly destabilized in the very exercise of relating to both sociocultural frameworks, and function as a pendulum swinging back and forth in the symbolic and material space between the Chilean and Brazilian cultural configurations she has experienced. This swinging makes María's identity process mutable and continuous, even producing a polarized attitude in terms of belonging to one or another cultural configuration, depending on the experiences she has undergone at a given point. The very exercise of differentiating from one or the other in each encounter with otherness makes the identities that María is constructing characterized by its dynamism (Hall, 2003).

CONCLUSION

This article discusses identities in transnational migration and proposes the notion of interstitial identities: a way of understanding identities as a process that occurs between identifications and differentiations negotiated in the interstice of the frames of the cultural configurations of origin and destination within the subjective migratory experience. The way to approach these processes is through narrated life (Ricoeur, 2006).

In analyzing María's case, the exercise of understanding the interstices in which this migrant woman finds herself was carried out. Placing herself between the experiences of upper-middle-class privilege in São Paulo and the ways of life of the working classes in Santiago de Chile allows her to question both cultural configurations. María's identity processes: a) are hybrid (Bhabha, 1998), as they hold elements of the two cultural frameworks in question; b) are processual, because the identity conformations she presents are changing over time and, like a pendulum, adjust to each sociocultural experience of her daily life; and c) provide clues on the interlocution between identities and experiences (Ricoeur, 2006), and on the articulations between subjectivity and social structures where identities are produced (Hall, 2003). When before migration, María did not know herself and was limited to a *bubble* of what she knew as reality in São Paulo, now she moved from one side to the other of these two regimes of meaning, becoming part of both and producing a third space (Bhabha, 1998) for her identities.

To operationalize the understanding of interstitial identities, a mapping was made of the cultural configurations among which the interviewee moves (María as a product of a story), how she relates to those sociocultural frameworks and diverse toolboxes (María as an actress in the story), and how she transforms her personal identity process from the interstices made possible by the migratory experience (María as an author of her story).

As a product of a story, we observed that María's experience was strongly influenced by gender and social class categories, so that being a woman of good financial standing assured her a favorable social position in the migratory experience compared to other migrant women with fewer resources (Stang, 2014). Despite this privilege, María still suffered domestic violence and was in constant negotiations with gender role expectations in Chile and Brazil, which speaks to the subaltern role of women in social relations in both cultural configurations. In addition, nationality

appears in the background in relation to gender and class in her identity processes, which leads us to question, echoing other authors, accepting¹⁷ national identity as the main marker of difference and its decisive role in the construction of identities (Bhabha, 1998; Bejarano Rodríguez, 2006).

As an actress in the story, María embodies gender roles and class rules in different ways: she is subjected to them but attributes other meanings to them. For example, motherhood, deemed the most distinctive way for women to perform their gender (Stang, 2014), is for our interviewee an important part of that history that she can build for herself, a third narrative in her biography that is produced in opposition to her family and in negotiations with the discourses imposed on her. Moreover, she uses the *sacredness* attributed to pregnancy in the destination territory to improve her social position and receive better treatment in interpersonal relationships.

As the author of her story, María ceases not to know who she is or what she likes and places herself in a back-and-forth position from which she constantly evaluates with which elements of each experience in the origin and destination cultural configurations she identifies with and/or differentiates from. From this new place, she claims to feel freer as she builds her path, which invites us to reflect on the possibilities of expanding the levels of subjective agency that emerge with migration. The above has also been reported in other research projects, especially those dealing with female migrants, who usually record an expansion in female autonomy after migrating—as in the case of some Peruvian (Godoy, 2007) and Mexican (Gissi Barbieri & Martínez Ruiz, 2018) women in Santiago—, as well as an increase in self-esteem and greater decision-making power in their families, as observed in studies on Mexican migration in the United States (Woo Morales, 2007). Likewise, the increase in the levels of agency tends to be greater among skilled women, such as María, than among those from working-class backgrounds (Godoy, 2007; Stang, 2014). In this sense, we return to the first level of analysis by understanding that the privileged social position is what allows her greater flexibility in her identity negotiations with the cultural configurations of origin and destination, and even the possibility of pendulum swinging her identity processes, by attributing to the coexistence with the working classes in Santiago meaning as a cultural experience and a manifestation of her freedom.

It is interesting to note how, by deepening on the subjective migratory experience, it becomes possible to access other dimensions of social life that are often not accounted for in massive and traditional studies on international migration. Although Latin American migration in Santiago de Chile is characterized by the search for better socioeconomic conditions (Márquez, 2014; Rojas Pedemonte & Silva Dittborn, 2016; Salgado-Bustillos et al., 2018), María's case points to the relevance of migration as a self-searching project.

¹⁷ In the social sciences, the nation-State and its borders have been accepted “as a given in social analysis” (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004, p. 65). For that reason, “researchers often take rootedness and incorporation in the nation-state as the norm and social identities and practices enacted across state boundaries as out of the ordinary” (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004, p. 65).

In this sense, some contributions of the interstitial identities concept to the study of transnational migrations were identified: a) they allow exploring the subjective dimension of the migration experience, an otherwise notorious lack in the field of migration studies in Chile (Stefoni & Stang, 2017); and b) they invite to map the sociocultural and structural frameworks that define the migration experience, the social positions of individuals and their ways of negotiating their identities (i.e., the articulations between individuals and their contexts) in the subjective narrative.

Summarizing, this concept broadens and deepens into the complexities of the identity phenomenon, also serving to explore the dynamic identity processes that articulate the individual and society. For this reason, its main limitation is that it does not provide definitive answers or a typology of identities in transnational migration, which could be useful for research with narrower objectives.

The limitations within the use of the interstitial identities notion are reflected in this article: María's case analysis covers interesting topics that allows to understand migration as heterogeneous processes that could not be developed within these pages. The role of motherhood in the processes of agency and subjection of qualified migrant women, and the relationship between the possibility of choosing to descend in social class and the condition of privilege in their country of origin, are some examples of discussions that were not addressed in depth in this article, and that could give rise to further research.

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