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The Crucial Impact of Theoretical Lenses in Studying Members of the 1.5 Generation Returning to Mexico

Incidencia decisiva del enfoque teórico al estudiar el retorno a México de jóvenes de la generación 1.5

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INTRODUCTION

This critical note aims to examine prevailing perspectives in the literature on return migration, particularly the ways in which return is narrated and explained. Such perspectives often portray migrants as passive victims, mere by-products of macrostructural processes, or individuals discarded by systemic forces beyond their control.[2] To address this issue, this critical note compares two recently published articles: one by Alexis M. Silver (2018) and another by Mónica Jacobo and Colette Despagne (2022). These works can be considered emblematic of their respective perspectives. Silver's study depicts returnees as passive and powerless victims, whereas Jacobo and Despagne portray them as resourceful actors who navigate adversity and seize opportunities.

Despite their differing viewpoints, the two articles are directly comparable for this analysis. Both examine samples of young individuals who, while living in the United States, belonged to the 1.5 generation and both relied on non-probabilistic sampling. Silver's (2018) study is based on interviews with 28 young people working in Sayulita, Guadalajara, and Mexico City, whereas Jacobo and Despagne (2022) draw on two focus groups with 13 young people residing in Puebla and Mexico City. Each sample included youth who had experienced deportation as well as those who returned to Mexico voluntarily. Silver conducted fieldwork in the spring of 2015, while Jacobo and Despagne carried out theirs four years later. Both studies pursue the same objective: to analyze the integration processes—or their absence—of 1.5 generation youth in the early years of return to Mexico.

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[2] This perspective is dominant in works like Golash-Boza (2015), Gonzales and Chavez (2012), and Boehm (2017).

From the Nightmare of Living as Illegal in The United States to the Nightmare of Being Stigmatized in Mexico

Silver (2018) offers only a brief overview of what she terms the *contexts of exit* in the United States, arguing that some states present highly hostile conditions for 1.5-generation youth without legal authorization to reside in the country (for example, Arizona), while others are more welcoming (such as Oregon). According to the author, the degree of hostility explains what she calls *self- deportation*. From this perspective, 1.5-generation youth never return to Mexico voluntarily; rather, their return is always the outcome of violence exerted upon them in the United States. Yet, even within these adverse settings—including the most hostile states— "many express appreciation for the tranquility of non-urban, new destination areas... Thus, upon return to their countries of birth, many 1.5-generation immigrants from all regions in the US express nostalgia for the US" (Silver, 2018, p. 4). These remarks set the stage for understanding that the nightmare in the United States (Gonzales & Chavez, 2012) appears less horrifying than what awaits them upon their return to Mexico.

After analyzing the contexts of exit, the article turns to the *contexts of return*, understood as contexts of reception. In this section, the author reviews previous studies that suggest the return of young 1.5-generation individuals to their countries of origin constitutes an ordeal: they are criminalized, stigmatized as deportees, exposed to a different form of legal violence than that experienced in the United States, and confronted with multiple barriers—linguistic, cultural, social, institutional, and legal. They also face labor exclusion, often due to their manner of dressing, speaking, and interacting, and are further prevented from accessing universities. In short, return to their country of origin offers them no advantages.

An important observation is warranted here: many of the studies the author cites to describe the *contexts of return* were not conducted in Mexico, but rather in El Salvador, Jamaica, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala. The only reference that explicitly addresses the stigmatization of 1.5-generation youth as criminals in Mexico is Anderson (2015). However, Anderson's findings do not support the conclusion that these young people are viewed as criminals in Mexico City or in the call centers where they work. Instead, the narratives of the youth interviewed highlight what the author describes as "this sense of limbo within the post-deportation experience—defined by extreme vulnerability as well as new possibility" (Anderson, 2015, p. 15).

In the subsequent sections of Silver's (2018) article, the author presents the methodology of the fieldwork and then categorizes the main findings from the 28 interviews into two groups: *a)* in the places where the interviewees lived before returning to Mexico, they faced limited opportunities in environments marked by constant fear; and *b)* upon arriving in Mexico, they encountered new constraints, as they were monitored and judged for their "conspicuous US - American style and mannerisms" (Silver, 2018, p. 9). They were rejected on the basis of their appearance. One interviewee explained that "he felt he had been racially profiled by the police in North Carolina, but he felt far more socially surveilled in Mexico" (Silver, 2018, p. 9).

Returnees were also chastised for speaking English and mocked for their Spanish pronunciation. They faced multiple obstacles when seeking to enroll in high schools and encountered the same difficulties when attempting to access Mexican universities. One informant reported that universities in Mexico were prohibitively expensive and charged them foreign-student tuition fees despite their being born in that state.[3] Furthermore, returnees encounter linguistic barriers in securing employment. Paradoxically, however, one interviewee recounted an incident of discrimination at a restaurant in Cancún, where members of the waitstaff told him: "You immigrants must come down here and think you can steal our jobs because you speak English" (Silver, 2018, p. 11).

In conclusion, the study highlights the stigmatization and exclusion faced by 1.5-generation youth upon their return to Mexico: "As the narratives in this article illustrate, young return migrants often find themselves excluded from national membership despite their citizenship in one country and their social connections to another" (Silver, 2018, p. 14).

From Learning to Be Illegal in The United States to Learning to Be Legal in Mexico

Jacobo and Despagne's (2022) article takes as its theoretical point of departure the distinction between formal and substantive citizenship proposed by Isin (2008). The former refers to the legal foundations of citizenship and recognizes it as a status granted by nation-states, while the latter encompasses the dimensions that Rosaldo (1994) includes within the notion of cultural citizenship. In the cases of Mexico and the United States, legal citizenship is a right tied to birthplace and parental nationality. Substantive citizenship, by contrast, is acquired only through a lengthy process of socialization that culminates when individuals become skilled social actors capable of engaging in the social, cultural, symbolic, and political practices associated with a nation-state.

Building on these distinctions, the authors argue that 1.5-generation youth challenge canonical definitions of citizenship. Having arrived in the United States at an early age, their substantive citizenship corresponds to that of U.S. citizens, while their formal citizenship remains Mexican. They speak, act, interact, and imagine themselves as U.S. citizens—*de facto* U.S. "citizens," but *de jure* Mexicans.

Confronted with this contradiction and the tensions it entails, returnees embark on a subjective journey (Hirai & Sandoval, 2016), which Jacobo and Despagne (2022) analyze in detail. Of the thirteen young people in their study, four returned voluntarily, recognizing the severe limitations they faced in the United States in terms of employment and education, while the rest were deported. Regardless of the reason for their return, however, the participants moved in two main directions. The first was the adoption of political citizenship, which granted them rights previously denied in the United States: the right to vote, to make claims, to move freely within the national territory, and to access financial resources. They described this dimension as the political

[3] It is interesting to note that the author did not question the informant's statements regarding the cost of tuitions in Mexico compared to U.S. universities.

right *"to have a voice here"* (Jacobo & Despagne, 2022, p. 502). They could also pursue higher education and freely practice their professions. In addition, they referred to access to the right to identity—especially the right to use their own name in legal procedures and contracts—as well as the possibility of purchasing property in their own name, without resorting to false Social Security numbers or fictitious identities.

The second direction involves the long and difficult acquisition of substantive citizenship. Testimonies in this regard focused primarily on mastering spoken and written Spanish. Interviewees reported being systematically identified as outsiders—or even as non-Mexicans—because of their accent when speaking Spanish. Acquiring substantive citizenship, much like acquiring a language, is a process that often takes years. Even those who had lived in Mexico for a decade or more still felt they had not yet completed the journey.

The authors found that experiences of linguistic discrimination prompted returning youth to devise and implement four strategies of resistance:

a. Creating bicultural communities: "Yes, I'm 'pocho' and I say it proudly" (Jacobo & Despagne, 2022, p. 508).

b. Asserting bilingualism and biculturalism as assets: when returnees recognize the value these skills hold in the labor market, their perspective shifts dramatically. In the United States, they had experienced bilingualism as a burden, whereas in Mexico they discovered it to be an asset.

c. Replacing the narrative of precarity in the United States with one of upward mobility in Mexico: "In the United States I was a dishwasher; now I am an engineer" (Jacobo & Despagne, 2022, p. 509).

d. Crafting their own definition of Mexican identity: returnees move from identifying as "fake Mexicans" or second-class citizens to affirming, "I am bilingual and bicultural." This represents a different and innovative way of being Mexican.

In conclusion, the authors show that returning young migrants undergo two overlapping, rather than sequential, processes. The first is learning to be legal, and the second is acquiring substantive citizenship and developing resistance strategies. This latter process often entails phases of depression, isolation, and uprooting, during which emotional support and familial, institutional, and social accompaniment are crucial.

Why Are the Findings of These Two Research Studies so Different?

Certainly, the two investigations yield diametrically opposed results. In the first, returning young migrants are doubly victimized—first in the United States and then again in Mexico. In the second, these same youth are depicted as architects of their own trajectories, capable of devising and implementing strategies. One explanation for these differences may lie in the samples and the methods used to select them. In Jacobo and Despagne's (2022) study, the participants were connected to associations that provided various forms of support, and the authors obtained permission from these organizations to conduct focus group sessions. Moreover, all of the youth

in this sample had already been living in Mexico for several years. By contrast, Silver's (2018) sample consisted of young people who appeared to lack institutional support, working instead in restaurants managed by English-speaking employers or in call centers.[4] However, readers are not informed about how long these young people had been living in Mexico, although it appears that some had only a short time to adapt to life there.

Certainly, differences in the samples may have influenced the results. However, this factor alone does not suffice to explain why diametrically opposed conclusions were reached. My position is that the divergence stems primarily from the theoretical premises adopted by the authors, rather than from their methods or samples. Jacobo and Despagne (2022) adopt a perspective in which Mexico, as a return destination, appears as an option for these youth and, in a certain sense, even as a desirable one. The young people are defined as possessing agency, as actors in their own trajectories, including those who returned as a result of deportation. From a theoretical standpoint, the authors interpret the data as a process of construction or as a negotiated itinerary.

In contrast, Silver's (2018) study begins from the premise that it is unthinkable for young people to view Mexico as a desirable destination. Indeed, the article maintains that the only desirable option is returning to the United States—even when this is not possible. The theoretical perspective reflects a conjectural stance common in studies of return migration, in which returnees are portrayed as helpless, as by-products of macrostructural forces, as powerless victims, as vulnerable individuals, and at times even as naïve. Ultimately, the interpretation of the data suggests that return is not conceived as a process but rather as a static and definitive event.

The central point is that the lens through which return migration is observed inevitably shapes the conclusions drawn. If young people returning from the United States to Mexico are framed as victims, the research will focus primarily on identifying the mechanisms through which they became victims. Conversely, if members of the 1.5 generation are viewed as agents upon their return, they are cast as protagonists. One perspective emphasizes domination, control, and systemic forces, while the other highlights migrants as creative actors who navigate hostile environments and structures.

Another possible explanation for the differences between the articles compared in this critical note lies in the authors' positionality. While theoretical premises account for part of the divergence, positionality also plays a significant role. Jacobo and Despagne both reside in Mexico, with Jacobo having personal experience of living abroad. Despagne, a French scholar at a Mexican university, chose to return to Mexico after completing her doctoral studies in Canada. By contrast,

[4] A brief remark of the studies conducted in call centers based in Mexico and Central America: it appears to me that these studies replicate the axiom of the lamp in the street: at night someone sees a person on the street searching for something and asks him: "What are you looking for?". The person replies: "My car keys." The passerby asks again: "Did you lose them in this part of the street?". And the person responds: "I don't know, but this is the only illuminated place" (See the definition of *Le Théorème du Lampadaire* in Fitoussi, 2013).

Silver appears not to have experienced life as an immigrant, a distinction that underscores the importance of positionality in shaping scholarly perspectives.

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