

MIGRATORY GRIEF, COPING, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS OF VULNERABLE GROUPS IN MOBILITY IN SPAIN

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Abstract

The present study aims to analyse migratory grief, coping (focusing on the problem, negative self-focus, positive reappraisal, open emotional expression, avoidance, search for social support, and religion), and psychological distress of people according to their main reasons for migrating. The sample consisted of 454 participants (48.7% men and 51.3% women) aged between 18 and 74 years ($M = 35.48$; $SD = 11.06$). The methodology used was quantitative and non-experimental design. The Migratory Grief Assessment Questionnaire, the Coping with Stress Questionnaire, and the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale K10 were used. The results indicate a significant and positive relationship between migratory grief, the passive coping styles, and psychological distress, as well as a negative relationship between migratory grief and the strategy focused on the problem. In addition, students are the group with the least migratory grief compared to groups who migrated for economic reasons, insecurity (wars, violence, threats), and sexual orientation. In addition, people fleeing because of security reasons are the ones who use less the strategy of seeking social support compared to the group of people studying. People migrating for economic reasons use religion more as a coping strategy compared to the groups motivated by sexual orientation and educational background. Regarding psychological distress, people who flee because of their sexual orientation have higher levels of psychological distress compared to those who have migrated for economic and academic reasons. The relevant and significant findings related to the variables investigated are discussed.

Keywords: *Migratory grief, coping, psychological distress, LGTBIQ+ community, migrants.*

1. Introduction

The increase of displaced populations reflects the need to investigate mental, affective, and psychosocial health factors during the migration process of adaptation in the host country. The reasons for these populations to move may vary according to personal and contextual needs, including the search for work and improved quality of life (Luque-Ribelles, Palacios-Galvez & Morales-Marente, 2018), educational training (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), sexual orientation (Círez, Lara, & López, 2020), insecurity (Lusk, Terrazas, Caro, Chaparro, & Puga, 2019), political ideology (Mahler, 1995), and religious beliefs (Thomas, Roberts, Luitel, Upadhaya & Tol, 2011). Thus, in order to understand the migration process from an ecological transition perspective, the significant changes that occur in the different spheres of the subjects as a result of uprooting and adaptation to the new environment must be considered (Berry, 1992; Moya & Puertas, 2008). Migratory grief is explained as the sensation and loss of ties (Arredondo-Dowd, 1981; Casado & Leung, 2002), both physical and symbolic, multiple and simultaneous (Aroian, 1990), and links with customs and cultural values (Hofstede, 2011). Various contextual and personal factors play an important role in grief processing. Therefore, coping strategies, considered as constantly changing resources to cope with situations that exceed personal resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986), promote alternatives that facilitate adaptation to the new environment (active) or increase the degree of emotional disturbance (passive). Problem focusing, positive restructuring, open emotional expression, problem avoidance, negative self-focus (Cano, Rodríguez & García, 2007), seeking social support (Lepore, Evan, & Schneider, 1991; Stewart et al., 2008), and religion (Sharp, 2010) are some recognised strategies. When coping resources are not sufficient and/or are maladaptive and demands exceed personal capacities, the emotional experience could lead to psychological distress (Lakatos, 1992; Prudent, 1988) understood as a direct consequence of the migration process.

Therefore, taking into consideration the study by Carta, Bernal, Hardoy, and Haro-Abad (2005), which refers that due to the existence of different migratory conditions and processes, it is impossible to homogenise the group of migrants within the mental health frameworks, and starting from the theoretical bases of cross-cultural psychology, the objectives of this study were: to assess the relationship between the variables of migratory grief, psychological distress, and coping strategy factors; and (2) to analyse the dependent variables according to the main reasons for migrating.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

Snowball and convenience sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) were used in order to integrate a larger and more difficult to access group. The sample consisted of 454 participants (48.7% men and 51.3% women) aged between 18 and 74 years ($M=35.48$; $SD=11.06$). The selection criteria were to be born outside Europe and North America and to be over 18 years of age.

2.2. Measures

A closed sociodemographic questionnaire was developed according to three categories: personal, immigration, and religion. To assess migrant grief, the Migratory Grief Assessment Questionnaire developed by De la Revilla et al. (2011) was used. This questionnaire measures migratory grief through 17 closed-ended questions related to fear, nostalgia, concern, and loss of identity. The Cronbach's reliability coefficient obtained for the total population is 0.74. Coping strategies were measured by means of the Coping with Stress Questionnaire (CSQ) developed by Sandín and Chorot (2003). This instrument measures generalised coping through a 42-item Likert-type scale. Among the factors that it assesses are: focus on the solution of the problem, negative self-focus, positive reappraisal, open emotional expression, avoidance, seeking social support, and religion. Finally, Cronbach's reliability coefficients are between 0.58 and 0.89. To assess levels of anxiety and depression, the Spanish adaptation of the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale [K10] (1994) by Sánchez-Sosa, Villareal-González, and Musitu (2011), which scores psychological distress through 10 items and has a Cronbach's reliability coefficient of 0.88, was used.

2.3 Data collection procedure and data analysis

Permission was sought from managers of non-governmental organisations and public and educational institutions working with migrants and refugees, and the surveys were administered in person to each person attending the centres. The implementation period was 6 months. In order to reach a wider population, a group of native professionals translated the Spanish questionnaires into French, English, Arabic, and Russian. Participants were informed verbally and in writing about informed consent and the use of the information for scientific purposes.

The study design is non-experimental and quantitative. Reliability testing was conducted for all scales. Pearson's correlation analysis and analysis of variance (ANOVA one-way) and post hoc tests were performed using Tuckey's procedure. These analyses were carried out using the SPSS 21 statistical package.

3. Results

According to the main reason for migrating to Spain, 29.3% of participants migrated due to economic and life improvement reasons, 17.4% because of educational reasons, 22% migrated due to insecurity, 9.5% due to sexual orientation, 7.7% because of political reasons, and 3.3% due to religious reasons. Pearson's correlation analysis confirms that there are statistically significant correlations between the variables of migratory grief, coping factors and psychological distress. It is observed that migrant grief (MG) correlates positively with psychological distress (PD) ($r=.381$, $p<.01$) and negative self-focused strategies (NSA) ($r=.235$, $p<.01$), open emotional expression (OEE) ($r=.135$, $p<.01$), avoidance (AVD) ($r=.136$, $p<.05$), and religion (RLG) ($r=.220$, $p<.01$). In addition, MG correlates negatively with problem-focused strategy (FOP) ($r=-.099$, $p<.5$). Also, PD correlates positively with MG ($r=.381$, $p<.01$), NSA ($r=.501$, $p<.01$), OEE ($r=.348$, $p<.01$) and AVD ($r=.189$, $p<.01$).

The results of the one-way ANOVA between groups show that there are statistically significant differences between the primary reason for immigration to Spain and MG ($F(6,438)=2.566$, $p<.05$), social support seeking (SSS) ($F(6,426)=2.360$, $p<.05$), religion (RLG) ($F(6,426)=5.063$, $p<.001$), and PD ($F(6,418)=3.788$, $p<.01$). This means concretely that subjects who immigrate to Spain for study reasons ($M=9.34$, $SD=2.76$) show less migratory grief than those who flee for reasons of insecurity ($M=10.96$, $SD=3.23$), and sexual orientation ($M=11.07$, $SD=3.02$). Migrants motivated by insecurity ($M=11.34$, $SD=6.51$) use less the strategy of seeking social support compared to migrants who study ($M=14.44$, $SD=6.55$). People migrating for economic reasons ($M=12.23$, $SD=6.87$) use the religion-based coping strategy more than LGTBI populations ($M=7.81$, $SD=6.18$) and students ($M=7.45$, $SD=7.29$). Populations who flee their home countries because of their sexual orientation ($M=19.29$, $SD=8.10$) have higher levels of psychological distress compared to the group who immigrate to improve their quality of life ($M=14.84$, $SD=7.65$) and those who migrate for study ($M=13.26$, $SD=6.37$).

4. Discussion

The first objective of this study was to analyse the relationship between migratory grief, coping strategies, and psychological distress in groups in mobility; and the second, to evaluate the dependent variables in terms of the reasons for immigrating to Spain. It is shown that there is a positive relationship between migratory grief and psychological distress, findings that confirm the results of other studies (Arredondo-Dowd, 1981; Casado & Leung 2001; Eisenbruch, 1984; Lakatos, 1992; Prudent, 1988). Moreover, the findings support the positive relationship of the use of negative self-focused, open emotional expression, and avoidance coping styles with the significant consequences of levels of migrant grief and psychological distress. In addition, migratory grief correlates negatively with problem-focused coping strategy. Thus, the greater the use of passive coping styles, the higher the levels of migrant grief and psychological distress, confirming Lazarus and Folkman's (1986) theory of passive and active coping. Religion as a coping style has a positive relationship with migratory grief, contradicting different arguments in the scientific literature, including Sharp (2010) who mentions that religion as a strategy allows coping with the grieving process.

Regarding migratory grief, students show lower levels of migratory grief compared to participants who migrate due to economic reasons, sexual orientation and insecurity. Students can be described as travellers and sojourners. This population is characterised by voluntary migration and advance planning to return home (Ward et al., 2001), as well as the availability of a range of personal and economic resources that may benefit better coping. The last result is consistent with the findings of some authors (Berry, 1992; Lusk et al., 2019) who indicate that reasons for mobility play an important role in understanding the levels of stress and the quality of proactive responses to migratory grief since, for instance, those who flee due to insecurity and sexual orientation must remain in Spain for an indefinite period of time without the opportunity to return to their countries, thus increasing the levels of nostalgia and the sense of physical and symbolic loss of their ties. On the other hand, employed people who have immigrated because of economic reasons and insecurity are subjected to oppression, discrimination, and exclusion (Luque-Ribelles et al., 2018; Moya & Puertas, 2008), aspects that increase their nostalgia for their past lifestyles, people, culture, space, etc., thus confirming the statements described in the study by Mahler (1995).

People who migrate due to insecurity make less use of the strategy of seeking social support compared to those who migrate due to study. This result is interesting because it could be understood that the objective of people seeking refuge in Spain would be to seek economic, social, and personal support, and above all to find security. However, they are the people who least use the strategy of seeking support, possibly due to other variables such as language, trust in others and the lack of information prior to their arrival in the country. For people displaced due to war and violence (Silove, Ventevogel, & Rees, 2017; Thomas et al., 2011), trust in others might be affected due to trauma and feelings of insecurity causing a significant impact on the use of social support seeking, as reflected in the study by Stewart et al. (2008). However, for foreign students, establishing interpersonal relationships and seeking social support are elementary factors in fulfilling their goals of studying, making new friends and generating cultural exchange, aspects that are confirmed by Ward et al. (2001) and Lepore et al. (1991) who report that foreign students focus more on social interaction and support as an indicator of psychological well-being.

Religion as a coping strategy is more used by people who immigrate to Spain to improve their economic situation, find a job and increase their quality of life in comparison to groups who decide to immigrate to study and those who flee due to their sexual orientation. Culturally, migrants (due to economic reasons) who come from southern regions have greater religious expressions which influence their personal development in the host country, as referred to in Mahler's (1995) study. On the other hand, historically, different sectors of society, especially churches and spiritual cults in the countries of expulsion have promoted heteronormativity, discrimination and negative stigma associated with the LGTBI community, which could possibly cause a greater rejection of religions by this community (Foster et al., 2017). At the same time, according to training and level of education, people who migrate due to educational reasons have greater personal resources to cope with the dimensions of the migration project.

Sexual orientation is the reason that produces the greatest psychological distress in comparison with people who immigrate to Spain to improve their quality of life and also those who migrate to study. The LGTBI community (mostly asylum seekers and refugees) not only experience the stress and difficulties associated with the migration project, but also experience a set of symptomatological factors that characterise the traumatic experiences of survival of this population. Specifically, and depending on the type of society of expulsion, LGTBI people experience stressful and traumatic events at school and in the family (rejection, isolation, dishonour, abuse), at work (harassment, exclusion, dismissal), in health (hormone treatment, conversion therapies) and in society (discrimination, imprisonment, persecution, murder). Both past events, as well as those occurring during and after arrival in the host country, may

have a significant negative impact. For example, incorporation into a diverse cultural and social code system within the reception centres may further increase symptoms of distress. Therefore, LGTBI people suffer from polyvictimisation in different spheres of life, thus causing negative consequences on their mental health (loneliness, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation), as recognised by some studies and global reports (Círez et al., 2020; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [IACHR], 2018; International Lesbian and Gay Association [ILGA], 2021). Whereas, the characteristic features of voluntariness in other collectives and the provision of greater protective resources could provide better adaptation and management of the consequences of stress as referred to by Berry (1992). Finally, it is important to highlight that the LGTBI collective presents significant levels of psychological distress, but not in migratory grief, therefore, it is expected that there are other intervening variables that increase emotional maladjustment such as those relating to acculturation stress, contextual variables, policies and the reception system in Spain, the resources they have for survival and the same traumatic experiences that these subjects have gone through.

Regarding limitations, this study has incorporated the participation of groups with different cultures and different styles of managing cognitive and emotional processes, therefore, these results could not be generalised. Furthermore, several of the participants expressed and, in some cases, responded that they had more than one reason for migrating. The coping and psychological distress questionnaires are not adapted for foreign populations, therefore, when translating them, some words in them were modified according to the results of the pilot test applied at the beginning of the research. In the analysis of the migratory grief questionnaire, some response options had to be dichotomised in order to homogenise the scores. Due to the considerable number of items in the four questionnaires, several participants did not continue to answer the surveys.

As recommendations, it is proposed that in the future comparisons of the variables of psychological distress and coping strategies be made with the native Spanish population and other European and North American countries, as well as the incorporation of other instruments that investigate stereotypes, prejudices and the acculturation process. Finally, the needs of the most at-risk populations presented here should be specially considered in the intervention, at the level of prevention and intervention, and the public and private reception systems should direct their efforts to promote projects and social programmes that integrate all aspects, not only those of survival, but also those concerning mental health. In conclusion, this study of 454 migrants and refugees according to the main reason for migration allows us to recognise the state of mental health and the need to prevent the psychosocial maladjustment of the population in mobility.

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