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For a Cognitive Turn in Migration Studies

Ilka Vari-Lavoisier

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Cognitive scientists shed new light on core concepts of the social sciences: rationality, expectation, identity, social status, intergroup communication, and time perception to name a few. At the crossroads of disciplines, a burgeoning literature (in social neurosciences: Swencionis and Fiske 2014; cognitive sociology: Zerubavel 1999; Cerulo 2014; or cognitive social sciences: Lizardo 2014) creates fascinating opportunities to advance our understanding of the sociocultural underpinnings of mental processes (Zerubavel 1999; Zerubavel and Smith 2010; Turner 2001; Lizardo 2014; Cerulo 2010; Cerulo 2014; Zerubavel 2015).

This project joins this endeavor by pairing the discoveries of social and cognitive scientists to revisit focal issues of the migration studies literature. We argue that, instead of relying on implicit assumptions about cognitive processes (DiMaggio 1997; DiMaggio and Markus 2010), social scientists can gain much from incorporating cognitivists' empirical perspective (Massey 2002). In turn, international migration leads individuals to experience contrasted environments; we posit that a sociocognitive approach to migration as an extreme form of social mobility will help decipher thought processes relative to the broader sociocultural contexts.

To initiate a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue, our transatlantic network has identified three strategic themes: (1) the time-space nexus; (2) identity formation; and (3) social cognition.

1. Individual and Collective Dimensions of Decision Making

Memories of migration and migratory projects have been addressed separately in the literature – but they have obvious linkages and, at times, curious disconnections. The knowledge of past moves, accumulated at family or group levels, serves as a compass for orienting newcomers. Yet, political or social constraints can distort narratives and alter individual and collective memories (Zerubavel 2012); and, in turn, affect individuals' decision (for instance regarding the opportunity to migrate).

To date, we have a limited understanding of the extent to which migratory projects draw upon memories, elements that occur in the course of the migration (such as legal obstacles, new opportunities, or encounters), or long-term aspirations (Czaika and Vothknecht 2014). While migration scholars increasingly investigate the complexity of migratory projects (Flahaux 2016), their research remains limited by the absence of a behavioral framework providing a convincing alternative to the neo-classical migration theory (Massey 2002; Fokkema and de Haas 2011). However, over the last decades, social scientists explored how individuals base their choices on socially constructed perceptions of time (Fleming et al. 2016) and space (Zerubavel 1981; Zerubavel 1992; Koikkalainen and Kyle 2016); while, important steps have been taken by cognitivists to empirically question social actors' multiple forms of rationality (Kahneman, and al. 1982; Seligman 2016). In this respect, further connecting research conducted by cognitive scientists and social scientists could now further our understanding of human decision-making.

2. Multi-polarized Identities

Migration is a journey through categories. Individuals are attributed an array of administrative statuses over the course of their trajectory (Vickstrom and Beauchemin 2016). People can shift, from asylum seeker to unaccompanied minor, from tourist to deportee... And the state is not the only "identifier" (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004). Migrants' social and professional

trajectories entail a transformation of their self-perception: emigrants become immigrants, children whose journey was once mandated by their parents become parents in the place of arrival, while peasants become factory workers with a new political identity (Lacroix, Sall, and Salzbrunn 2008)... Migrants cope with contradictory and, at times, degrading obligations deriving from their multiple social backgrounds. This is the case, for example, for those coming from upper-class families who fulfill underpaid jobs at destination – leading to forms of social schizophrenia.

Today there is virtually no research investigating the cognitive implications and psychological pathologies that stem from identity conundrums induced by migration trajectories. However the multipolarization of individuals' identity illustrates the urge to move beyond theorization “forged for the study of social processes in self-contained societies” (Lacroix 2014; Lacroix 2015:201). This is all the more the case since the current focus on the multiplication of identity referentials illustrates the convergence of migration studies (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2013; Lacroix 2015), cognitive sociology (Ridgeway and Cornell 2006; Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004; Brubaker and Cooper 2000), and social psychology (Lee and Fiske 2006; Fiske 2010). Indeed researchers in these different fields increasingly underline the fluidity of identification processes and the propensity of social actors to have multifaceted identities (Fiske and Markus 2012; DiMaggio and Markus 2010). In this respect, exploring identity formation in mobility will illuminate the consequences of migrants' journey through categories, be they administrative (official), exogenous (unofficial denominations attributed by others, at destination), or intragroup (self-perception of minorities).

3. Migration, Social Cognition, and Development

The migration-development nexus has attracted sustained academic attention over the last decades (Massey 1988; Massey et al. 1993) – but the jury is still out regarding the impact of mobility on receiving and sending areas (Kapur 2010). Some researchers associate return migration with

socioeconomic benefits (because migrants come back with skills and know-how that they then put to use in their home countries). Others claim that mobility exacerbates social inequalities (Kapur and McHale 2005a). Still others see returnees as partially compensating their homelands for the loss of intellectual and technical knowledge and skills sustained while they lived abroad (Agrawal et al. 2011). Ultimately the state of the art (Clemens, Özden, and Rapoport 2015) raises the question of individuals' propensity to acquire, and transfer, skills during their exile.

While some researchers have explored newcomers' linguistic skills (Rumbaut 1995; Rumbaut and Massey 2013), the social sciences do not seem equipped to further scrutinize the complexity of learning processes. However, current research on cognition advanced significantly the understanding of the acquisition of linguistic skills and, more broadly, unpacks the channels through which skill acquisition is shaped by social settings and interpersonal interactions. A stimulating body of work shows that individuals learn new skills more easily if they "experience a sense of fit and identification" with their environment (Brannon, Markus, and Taylor 2015). For instance students perform better if they share with their teachers a similar cultural, socioeconomic, or ethnic background (Leung et al. 2008; Lakin 2012; Kim and Lundberg 2015). Despite evidence of the extent to which apprenticeship is facilitated by sharing common characteristics, there is a dearth of research on skill acquisition among international migrants. In this respect, the literature on international students (Éyébiyi and Mazzella 2014; Dia 2015; Docquier and Machado 2016; Kapur and McHale 2005a; Kapur and McHale 2005b) could gauge the generalizability of the latest findings in the field of social cognition. Indeed the scholarship remains limited by the absence of research conducted beyond the (very specific) North American context (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010). While Europeans are poorly represented, citizens born in non-Western countries are largely absent from research in social psychology and cognitive science today – a situation that our network strives to challenge.

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