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► To cite this version:

Germán Dario Fernández-Vavrik. Newleavers and Educational Institutions. Revisiting Schutz's Research on Strangers with an Intercultural Approach. Schutzian Research, 2019, 11, pp.75-102. 10.5840/schutz2019114 . hal-02505917

HAL Id: hal-02505917

<https://hal.science/hal-02505917>

Submitted on 8 Nov 2020

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Newleavers and educational institutions. Revisiting Schutz's research on strangers with an intercultural approach

Fernandez-Vavrik, G. D. (2019). Newleavers and Educational Institutions : Revisiting Schutz's Research on Strangers with an Intercultural Approach. *Schutzian Research*, 11, 75–101. <https://doi.org/10.5840/schutz2019114>

Abstract

As a consequence of the explosion of enrollments, higher education institutions have been confronted by new categories of students the last forty years. In this paper, cultural and political dimensions of the integration of students into educational institutions will be explored. The focus will be on the experience of what I called “newleavers,” namely, people who are leaving their environment of origin without knowing if they will return. The contradictory commitments and challenges faced by newleavers will be studied with a sociological approach based on intercultural, phenomenological and praxiological research. To sketch an analysis of the experience of newleavers in general, I will explore strangeness and uprooting in an educational setting; the research is based on the experience of Huarpes students at the University of Cuyo, in Argentina. I claim that newleavers who keep ties with their environment of origin develop an “ethnographic stance,” namely, a moral posture and a cognitive perspective allowing them to critically identify rules, norms, and values, by comparing environments and groups.

Key words: transition to higher education – educational institutions – strangers – interculturality – internal migration

Introduction

Higher education institutions have significantly changed their way of dealing with newcomers in the last forty years. As a consequence of the explosion of enrollments, educators, professional staff, and authorities have been confronted by new categories of students with various needs, backgrounds and expectations.¹ Fair procedures in transition to higher education, as well as intercultural engagement in welcome policies for diverse students, are central issues for democracy. Nevertheless, few studies have treated these phenomena integrally, including dimensions of the total experience of arriving in a new institutional and cultural environment. They tend to only focus on teaching, the admission process, the material conditions of life outside the university, mobility or employability.

In this paper, cultural and political dimensions of the integration of students into educational institutions will be explored. The focus will be on the experience of what I called “newleavers,” namely, people who are leaving their environment of origin without knowing if they return.

A key challenge for someone who approaches a new environment is to cunningly identify key components of their new cultural pattern. Two influential essays on the stranger, by G. Simmel and A. Schutz, explain that newcomers have a social and epistemological position

¹ Altbach, Reisberg, and de Wit 2017, Tinto, 2012; Buchbinder and Marquina, 2008; Mato, 2016.

which is extraordinary in their new environment. Unlike older members of the group, such a person is likely to assume an objective stance towards local interests. This is because they are “not bound to worship the ‘idols of the tribe’ and have a vivid feeling for the incoherence and inconsistency of the approached cultural pattern.”²

The objectivity of strangers has been largely discussed.³ Newcomers may display a capacity to question what seems unquestionable in the group and critically describe habits, norms and values. When analyzing objectivity, commentators have focused on the relationship between strangers and their new group. It is as if their partial exteriority helped strangers to become aware of the “relative natural conception of the world”⁴ only in their new environment.

An intercultural approach may be suitable for looking at things differently. As for the group of origin with which newcomers are by definition familiar, can they develop an objective attitude as well? If so, what does it mean for students to be both members and observers at home, insiders and outsiders of their environment of origin? This paper accounts for the contradictory commitments and challenges faced by newleavers. To sketch an intercultural analysis of the experience of newleavers in general, I will explore strangeness and uprooting in an educational setting. The experience of Huarpes Amerindians who left their rural communities to study at the University of Cuyo in Argentina, will be analyzed.⁵ Paying attention to transition to higher education is particularly fruitful since this is one of the periods of life that “condenses all the contradictions faced by [immigrants and members of minorities] who experience upward social mobility.”⁶

In the first section, I will present the fieldwork and the intercultural and sociological approach of the paper. Then, the concept of “newleavers” will be introduced to account for the new relationships that strangers entail with their environment of origin. Finally, I will explain how newleavers may develop a critical position towards expectations of both their group of origin and their new cultural environment.

1. Strangers, Huarpes people and interculturality

According to a well-known principle, nation states are externally bounded but internally fluid. Internal migration is supposed to be “both cause and consequence of internal cultural homogeneity.”⁷ Exploiting a case study on migration of educated young adults in Argentina from the Huarpes community, I will show how members of minorities deal with issues of cultural heterogeneity just like international immigrants. Paying attention to some of the challenges internal members of minorities face is a way to challenge the “nationalist imagination” according to which the nation state is “an undifferentiated, fluid totality, without fundamental class, regional, ethnic or caste divisions.”⁸

1.1. Indigenous people at the University of Cuyo: settling down in Mendoza

Huarpes people are Spanish speakers and mostly Catholic, like the majority of the population in Mendoza, a province located in western Argentina.⁹ Most live in rural areas of

² Schutz 1976c: 104.

³ See, for instance, Stavo-Debaugé, 2009 ; Ossewaarde 2007: 367 ; Penchaszadeh, 2008: 51–67; Lafontaine, 2018: 145–83; de Mello, 2015: 433–55.

⁴ Schutz 2010.

⁵ Huarpes students were concerned with their arrival in the city and the university. That is why I will preferably analyze how they strive to be accepted in the “new environment” in Mendoza rather than in a particular group.

⁶ Naudet 2012b: 161–89. The translation of excerpts that are in languages other than English is mine.

⁷ Brubaker 2010: 63.

⁸ Ibid., 68.

⁹ According to the 2010 National Census, one million inhabitants identify themselves as Amerindian in Argentina, that is 2.4% of the population INDEC, *Censo Nacional de Población, Hogares y Viviendas 2010 : Censo Del Bicentenario. Resultados Definitivos, Serie B Núm. 1*, vol. Tomo 1 (Buenos Aires: Instituto Nacional de

Lavalle and Las Heras like their ancestors. Rural schools follow the national curriculum, but they are under-resourced compared to average schools in Mendoza. The cultural and economic traditions of Huarpes people, based on practices of mutual solidarity and collective land ownership, are considered by some an alternative to capitalist marketisation.¹⁰

From 2003 until 2012, the University of Cuyo, a public and free mass university, implemented a scholarship program to enroll young Huarpes as students. This was the first affirmative action initiative set up by Argentine universities.¹¹ The recruited Huarpes benefited from a full scholarship to live on campus and pay for their living expenses. These scholarship holders became internal migrants. Most had until then had little contact with urban environments before the scholarship, and this was the first time that they were coming into daily contact with city dwellers, such as classmates, teachers, neighbors and shopkeepers.

Most Huarpes students lived on campus from Monday until Friday and spent the weekend in their community, about 100 kilometers away from the city of Mendoza. Since public transport and roads in rural areas were in poor conditions, a single trip to a community was likely to last many hours. It might include hitchhiking for a part of the journey.

From the outset, university staff had to deal with the difficulties of the young Huarpes in adapting to the city and the university. First, they had been inadequately prepared for higher education in secondary schools. Second, they seemed to struggle to organize themselves as independent and autonomous individuals during the first months on campus. Finally, some of them suffered hostility and discrimination in the city.

Overall, they were the first among their family members to complete secondary school and begin higher education. In that sense, they were experiencing an upward social mobility process that would probably distinguish them from friends and relatives. Whether people surrounding them stayed home or emigrated, they were likely to enter the labor market as low-skilled manpower and/or become parents at the same age as Huarpes students were beginning to study at the university.

This paper draws on my doctoral research on the experience of Amerindians students of Huarpes communities at the University of Cuyo. The inquiry included ethnographic observations on campus, interviews with students (18 to 22 years old), as well as with academic and professional staff. In addition, documentary analysis of administrative regulations and linguistic analysis of audiovisual material I recorded with my cameras in a classroom were included. In this paper, I draw on excerpts of my fieldnotes and interviews I translated.¹² With a sociological approach on social action and strangeness, based on intercultural, phenomenological and praxiological research, I endeavor to account for the “critical abilities”¹³ and “reflexive stance”¹⁴ of newcomers by grasping their motifs for action and their logic of justification.

1.2. The stranger, the homecomer and the natural attitude

To analyze some intercultural aspects of Huarpes’ experience, I will especially draw on Schutz’s research on strangers and homecomers. The ideal types of the stranger and the homecomer are powerful insofar as they have transcended various time and social spaces. They

Estadística y Censos - Presidencia de la Nación Argentina, 2010), http://www.indec.gov.ar/ftp/cuadros/poblacion/censo2010_tomo1.pdf. Their illiteracy and poverty rates are higher than the average. Regarding the province of Mendoza, only 40,000 inhabitants (0.04% of the population) define themselves as Amerindians; 84% are Huarpes.

¹⁰ Moreno, Pessolano, and Accorinti 2013: 57–71.

¹¹ Fernández Vavrik 2016.

¹² The interviews and observations were conducted on campus and in people’s accommodation between 2006 and 2011. I use pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

¹³ Barber 2004.

¹⁴ Naudet 2012 : 9–36.

have been influential especially for researchers investigating immigration¹⁵ and intercultural issues,¹⁶ as well as upward social mobility,¹⁷ disabilities,¹⁸ gender inequalities¹⁹ and ageing.²⁰ Drawing on Schutz's social phenomenology, these researchers have richly studied biographical bifurcations and social exclusion related to the experience of arriving in a new group and striving for being accepted.

In the United States, Schutz published his papers on the stranger in 1944 and on the homecomer in 1945. The work of German sociologist Georg Simmel was well known at that time. In particular, sociologists from the University of Chicago had been drawing on Simmel's work to investigate deep social transformations related to rapid immigration and urbanisation.²¹

Simmel had published his classic study on the stranger in 1908. Drawing on his expertise in the history of European cities, he identified three features of the stranger.²² First, because of their mobility, they are not landowners – no property fixes them to a specific point of the space or to a social position. Second, since they are neither local dwellers nor complete outsiders, the stranger is expected to be objective, distant enough from local interest and quarrels.²³ Finally, local members establish an “abstract” or impersonal relationship with this “objective” person; on the contrary, local dwellers are bound together on the basis of similarity of specific features.

With a pragmatist and ethnographic approach, often accompanied by reformist intentions, sociologists from the Chicago School studied exclusion processes in their city. Not only did they focus on immigrants, but also on Afro-Americans and Jewish, among other groups.²⁴

As stated before, Schutz's research on strangers and homecomers has been influential in immigration studies. In addition, he explicitly takes the immigrant as an “outstanding example” of the stranger. However, the distinction between “stranger” and “immigrant” should be stressed. The French version of the text of 1944, by *Éditions Allia*, translated “approaching stranger” with various terms.²⁵ Some of them are close to the use of the original version: “étranger” (stranger), “étranger qui débarque” (stranger who arrives), “nouveau venu” (newcomer). Interestingly, other occurrences of the expression are different. The “approaching stranger” on pages 99 and 103 becomes “l'immigrant” (twice, on pages 25 et 26) and “l'étranger qui immigré” (p. 33, liberality, “the stranger who immigrates”). The choice of these last three translations seems to imply that Schutz's “stranger” is an “immigrant.” In reality, this is not necessarily the case.

Schutz was less concerned with particular kinds of people, for instance, immigrants, than with strangeness and familiarity as “general categories of our interpretation of the world”:

Strangeness and familiarity are not limited to the social field but are general categories of our interpretation of the world. If we encounter in our experience something previously unknown and which therefore stands out of the ordinary

¹⁵ Tisato 2017: 119–35; Canela Morales and Rincón Zárate 2016: 57–73; Rovallett 2014; Agier, Lussault, and Vet 2015: 27.

¹⁶ Smyrnelis 2017: 71–79; Stoiciu, 2008: 33–40; Smyrnelis 2006: 273–86; Zermani 2005: 99–103.

¹⁷ Naudet 2012a.

¹⁸ Rogers 2009.

¹⁹ Collins 1986: S14–32.

²⁰ Williams 2017.

²¹ Cefaï and Joseph 2002.

²² Simmel 2009: 601–20.

²³ Insofar as they are neither completely external nor internal, the political, cultural and social position of strangers in the new group is the homologue to that of the poor and other marginalized groups.

²⁴ William I. Thomas, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess were some of the leading figures of the first period of the “Chicago School,” until the 1930s Joas, 2002. The school regained visibility after the Second World War. Some of the members of this new generation were Herbert Blumer (who created the term “symbolic interactionism”) and Everett Hughes (one of the leading figures of sociology of work and professions) and their heirs were Anselm Strauss, Norman Denzin and Howard Becker, among others.

²⁵ Schutz 2014.

order of our knowledge, we begin a process of inquiry [...] What is commonly called the process of social adjustment which the newcomer has to undergo is but a special case of this general principle. The adaptation of the newcomer to the in-group which at first seemed to be strange and unfamiliar to him is a continuous process of inquiry into the cultural pattern of the approached group.²⁶

Not only “strangers” but anyone may experience strangeness when confronted with unexpected situations and events. Schutz’s reflections on strangers and homecomers may be considered a test of his general framework on natural attitude and intersubjectivity. In the natural attitude of daily life, everyone tries to behave in such a way that others recognize the typical intentions and motifs of one’s behavior. When something unexpected comes up, members can draw on typical explanations to find out what is happening and use typical solutions: “Paradoxically formulated, there is even a routine way for handling the novel.”²⁷

The ideal type of the stranger accounts in particular for the “social adjustment” experienced by people who try to be accepted in a new group. As Smyrnelis puts it, “...the stranger is not only the individual in mobility; he is the one who is still ‘other’, someone who seeks the right distance” from members of their new group.²⁸

The “thinking as usual” helps members make use of ready-made “recipes” to apply typical solutions to typical issues. *The stranger...* accounts for the experience of an adult person willing to be accepted or, at least, tolerated in a new country, group or community. They have to deal with a mismatch between their normal way of thinking, their “thinking as usual,” and local habits and expectations.

The approaching stranger [...] becomes aware of the fact that an important element of his “thinking as usual” namely, his ideas of the foreign group, its cultural pattern, and its way of life, do not stand the test of vivid experience and social interaction.²⁹

Such a mismatch is the consequence of the newcomer having been socialized elsewhere.

“The Homecomer” also analyses a mismatch of cultural patterns, but the issue here is separation. The paper portrays the typical experience of people – for instance, war veterans – who return to their group after a couple of years. They perceive that part of their knowledge of the group is outdated. In addition, they may experience strangeness relating to the image that dwellers kept of them – including knowledge- and moral expectations.

1.3. Interculturality and power

In the natural attitude, people assume that typifications are intersubjectively congruent. When expectations are institutionalized by law, ordinance or tradition, reciprocity is more likely to occur among members of a group, since “the more highly standardized a given typifying scheme, the better is the subjective chance that the typifying scheme I ascribed to my partner is, indeed, shared by him.”³⁰ Therefore, social life is largely based on the confidence that every member of the group knows roughly what is expected from them and that everyone tries to honor common norms.

Drawing on Schutz’s ideas, ethnomethodologists analyze how these norms are taken for granted as background expectations in a group. H. Garfinkel explains that an act is viewed as

²⁶ Ibid., 105.

²⁷ Schutz, 1976b: 109.

²⁸ Smyrnelis 2017: 75.

²⁹ Schutz 1976c: 98.

³⁰ Schutz 1976a: 68.

“reasonable” when it may be interpreted as a “document of” an emerging pattern.³¹ Thus, people know how to gradually infer, sequence by sequence, typical motifs and intentions of other people in a given situation. To behave in such a reasonable way, as a matter of course, one needs to be a “competent member,” according to Garfinkel. When someone fails to honor normative expectations, some cognitive and moral issues may arise in the situation.³² The other members might feel somehow confused – it is not clear “what is really happening here” anymore – and upset – “who does this person think they are?,” “are they entitled to be here?,” “are they an authentic member?.” Misunderstandings may hinder the coordination of action and the definition of roles. When they become too frequent and offenders fail to repair them, the group may undergo a crisis.

This ethnomethodological scheme of group life and membership may be insufficient when taking into account participants’ origins and power issues. When one focuses only on “members” and roles of an imagined or typical group, one risks losing sight of people’s trajectories and the negotiation of the groups’ boundaries. Dealing with the practical question “what is happening here?,” for instance, implies for actors simultaneously facing related questions such as “who decides what normality is and who strangers are?” and “how do they decide it here and now, why strangers are here, where they come from, how we can help them?,” etc.

To deal with these questions, members may engage in inquiries with other members. To properly study this kind of inquiry, it seems pertinent to analyze both power and intercultural issues at stake. On the one hand, an intersubjective and relational definition of power is fruitful to study typifications and relevances.³³ Drawing on them, members of a group justify the persistence of inequalities.³⁴ The focus on power is intimately associated with the analysis of the distribution of knowledge in society. Insofar as typifications and relevances are taken for granted in a group as a matter of course, it is worth studying how people “living their everyday life in our modern civilization [...] accept unquestioningly some parts of the relatively natural concept of the world handed down to them and to subject other parts to question.”³⁵

On the other hand, an intercultural approach is suitable to analyze how groups conflictually negotiate symbolic boundaries.³⁶ M. Abdallah-Pretceille argues that interculturality is mainly concerned with the way a group, let us say, “we,” perceive others as well as the way we perceive and present ourselves to them in common activities.³⁷ Our perception depends on the relationship with them – cooperation, association, domination, conflict, etc. – and not on any particular feature that is supposed to identify groups – language, race, religion, etc. Such a conception aims at stressing the importance of communication and mutual influence among groups over essentialist definitions of culture.

Power, knowledge and intercultural issues are at stake when exploring the links between national citizenship and ethnicization. According to F. Lorcerie, nationalists tend to perceive

³¹ Garfinkel 1967.

³² Heritage 1984.

³³ According to M. Weber, power is the probability of imposing one’s will within a social relationship. Weber 1978.

³⁴ Dreher 2014.

³⁵ Schutz 1976d: 122.

³⁶ The term “interculturality” was conceived by the UNESCO in the 1970s as a way of promoting cultural relativism and dialogue among human groups, to counter segregation and ethnocentrism Françoise Lorcerie, “Différences culturelles, confrontations identitaires et universalisme : questions autour de l’éducation interculturelle,” *Carrefours de l’éducation* 2, 14 (2002): 22–39.. Following this path, intercultural ethics focuses on the “reconstruction of elementary discursive conditions for a dialogue based on the reciprocity of different forms of life” Arpini 2006: 7. From the 1980s onwards, the term “interculturality” has been revisited by researchers working on various topics, such as colonialism and immigration, ethnic diversity and nation-building, bilingualism and categorization, cultural boundaries and schooling of minorities.

³⁷ Abdallah-Pretceille 2017.

some people as the authentic members of a group with imagined roots.³⁸ Such a common origin is supposed to transcend class divisions. While this nationalistic and colonialist imaginary may bring together immigrants, strangers, and minorities on the same cultural side, it tends to consider them as people who supposedly threaten the way of life and privileges of the “established.”³⁹ Interculturality is helpful to illuminate the political issues that arise when members of the majority group categorize others as deviant and exclude them from common resources. Finally, interculturality promotes diversity and challenges monoculturalism, namely the imposition of a single cultural model in society.⁴⁰

In other words, the term “interculturality” refers neither to reified “cultures,” nor to plain dialoguing, nor to exclusive national boundaries. The term refers to relationships between minorities and majorities whose boundaries are fluid. Keeping these clarifications in mind, I define interculturality as an approach that explores the conflictual production of diversity in society by investigating (a) how groups’ boundaries are culturally and politically defined as a matter of course and (b) whether/how members agree to question their “thinking as usual” when interacting with other groups. In particular, I focus on the role origin plays in categorizing group members in intercultural situations.

2. *Newleavers*

According to Naudet,⁴¹ members of minorities who are experiencing upward social mobility have to deal with particular tensions. These are related to the fact that members have ties with two environments, that of origin and that of arrival. Four universal imperatives are derived from these tensions. First of all, strangers must be loyal to the environment of origin in order to avoid the “taboo of betrayal.” Secondly, they have to demonstrate a certain acculturation in their new environment to be properly recognized as fellow men and to achieve a certain status. These two imperatives are in tension. Newcomers try to reduce this tension by paying attention to their way of speaking, thinking, and acting. One of the reasons for this attention is that people from the environment of origin can feel that their dignity is challenged when members of their group behave according to standards of dominant groups. Finally, strangers are expected to develop a coherent narrative of their trajectory that provides meaning, stabilizes and justifies their position. Such symbolic stabilization is necessary insofar as their context is characterized by changes of environment and by an inevitable distance from both environments. In this section, I will explore how this applies to Huarpes students, torn between their origins and their professional ambitions in educational institutions.

2.1. To deal with the origin in educational institutions

Huarpes students were frequently reminded of their origins in institutional and informal settings. In particular, at ceremonies and public events, community leaders were mindful to recall where Huarpes students came from. Ceremonies may be analyzed as “cultural displays” that perform values considered by the group as basic.⁴² By promoting loyalty and pride, cultural displays contribute to the socialization of newcomers and social cohesion. However, ceremonies with these students were not at the service of a single group, namely, Huarpes people. The university was also interested in making students proud of their communitarian background. Academic and non-academic staff used to ask Huarpes also to talk about their

³⁸ Lorcerie 2002.

³⁹ Elias and Scotson 1994.

⁴⁰ According to Fornet-Betancourt, a key ethical commitment of this approach is to promote “translation zones.” These intercultural institutionalized spaces should help peoples and minorities find their political voice and free themselves from colonialist domination. Fornet-Betancourt 1994.

⁴¹ Naudet 2012a.

⁴² Merelman 1988: 335–54.

community in front of their classmates or other city dwellers. Sometimes, publicly assuming their origin was embarrassing to them. Romina remembers the first days at the university:

I preferred to sit in the back of the classroom. Because if I sat in the front row, the professor would ask us questions all the time [about the Huarpe community].
[...] Sometimes she would ask questions that I didn't know how to answer. And it made me nervous. (Romina, Huarpe student).

Huarpes leaders and university staff frequently reminded students that they were expected to return to the community what they had received as members after they graduated. This was the expression of a classical scheme of gift exchange and reciprocity in community life. This reciprocity mandate and the expectations of recognition were crucial dimensions of the students' experience.

Finally, students discovered how other people categorized them in informal settings. For Mabel, the ethnic categorization used to be problematic:

When I introduce myself, I say that my parents come from the countryside and not from a Huarpe community. Sometimes I feel that the people of the city are... It's not that they look at you in a strange way because you're from a Huarpe community, but it's something that people of the city don't understand very well yet... [Mabel, Huarpe student].

Mabel willingly agreed to be categorized as a “non-local” in the city.⁴³ Having said this, she preferred to be perceived simply as someone who comes from rural areas because “people of the city don't understand very well yet” what it means to be an Amerindian – even though the Huarpes have lived in Mendoza for centuries.

By interpreting others' perception, some students viewed their own trajectory in another light:

Researcher: - At that time [the first few weeks at the university], did you feel different from your classmates?

Enzo: - Different? Yes, I think so. The fact that they call us “Huarpes,” “the group of Huarpes.” It never bothered me. Well, the fact that they call you “the Huarpe” makes you feel different.

C: - Did you like it?

E: - Yes, um.... Yes, because... let's say, um... They make you feel... Not only for me, but for all my friends.... They made us value more the place where we came from [Enzo, Huarpe student].

Like Enzo explained it, the remarks, gestures and looks of city dwellers had an impact on the way Huarpes students categorized themselves. This was an intercultural condition to become interested in their origins. Finding out how others perceive them was important to accomplish their membership to an ethnic categorization.⁴⁴

By analyzing ethnic membership, I am trying to show that the act of arriving implies more than the challenge of integrating into the current environment. “Learning to arrive” also entails the opportunity for newcomers to settle their accounts with the community. In Sayad's terms, strangers have to deal with their presence in the new land and they are compelled to manage their absence from their land of origin.⁴⁵

⁴³Fernández Vavrik 2018, 99–116.

⁴⁴ Fernández2010b: 73–86.

⁴⁵ Sayad1999.

Following M. Weber, F. Barth argues that the members of an ethnic group are those who share alleged origins and background.⁴⁶ They are categorized as the members of the same group because they or other people believe they have the same origin –whether or not they actually have that same origin. The basis or the cement of ethnic groups is not culture, conceived as a collection of distinct marks or features such as the language, the habits, or the territory. Culture is merely the result of boundary-making process, namely, of categorization and classification practices. Boundary-making is usually conflictual given that there are common resources and privileges at stake. Whether members accept or reject such or such alleged origin, ethnic identification provides them with a social status in society, like sex and social class.

Learning to arrive implies a fundamental commitment, namely, dealing with origin. Not only one's own, but everyone's origin. Given the pervasive character of origin, I claim that the experience of strangers should be analyzed as the experience of people who are both newcomers and "newleavers." In daily interactions, newleavers learn differently what it means to be associated with such or such origin. Suspicion, renunciation, loyalty, pride, independence and dignity may be at stake. They can certainly refuse to accept this categorization but can hardly ignore it. Newleavers who are unable to deal with origin properly may experience acute feelings of guilt and, in extreme cases, these feelings may bring about physical pathologies and sickness.⁴⁷

2.2. Newleavers' vulnerability

Romina remembered well how strenuous her joining university was:

The first day at university, everything was going too fast. All the students who had attended secondary school here [in the city] knew a lot of things, everyone understood everything, while I was always lost (Romina, Huarpe student).

This young student sketches a horror script where "all the students," except her, the only Huarpe from a rural school, seem to be familiar with "everything" at the university from the first day of classes.

By the same token, Enzo explains that he and other students from rural areas were not at ease with their urban classmates. The first months at university, most of them felt embarrassed to realize that city dwellers were surprised at their rural accent. Frequently, there were misunderstandings: "Here, we have to explain all the time what we mean," stated Enzo.

As a way of solace, Huarpes and other rural areas students used to spend time together:

Every day, we longed for the end of the class to meet our friends on campus [Huarpes students]. The girls, in particular, suffered a lot, they felt lonelier than us. [...] In the evening, we usually met for dinner together (Enzo, Huarpe student).

Some students, like Enzo, conceived life on campus as a bubble. Huarpes and other students from rural areas, also scholarship holders, tried to preserve some intimacy, keeping distance from other students and university staff. He told me how lonely and sad he used to feel on campus on weekends, when his friends went to visit their family.

Most researchers have explored strangers' vulnerability by focusing on people who approach other environment for exceptional political and economic reasons. Refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced populations are probably some of the most vulnerable groups in the world nowadays.⁴⁸ These are cases of acute vulnerability provoked by exceptional

⁴⁶ Barth 1969.

⁴⁷ Sayad 1991.

⁴⁸ Naepels 2018; United Nations 2012.

conditions of conflict and war. Additionally, strangers may also be considered vulnerable in peaceful conditions. According to A. Sayad, immigrants for economic reasons suffer a “particular kind of vulnerability.”⁴⁹ This vulnerability stems both from their precarious position in the labor market in the new country and their constant feeling of absence in the native country.

While these studies have provided valuable insights into current global issues, their results are not always suitable to investigate internal and residential immigration and intercultural relationships in ordinary contexts, especially if people relocate for educational reasons.

To fill this gap, research on strangers, inspired by Simmel and Schutz, seems fruitful. It accounts for the general experience of strangers who are settling down in a new environment, without reducing the inquiry to a single aspect – legal, political, cultural or economic. Schutz’s proposal, in particular, has opened up original paths to investigate various forms of ordinary vulnerability that any newcomer may experience, even under peaceful conditions. I define “newcomer’s vulnerability” as the exposure to distress that any stranger may experience as a result of their change of environment. The experience of Romina, Enzo and of other newleavers was that of people who face a new kind of vulnerability. They suffered from a pervasive feeling of disorientation and incomprehension that they had never experienced before.

2.3. Objectivity

Schutz’s ideal types of the stranger and the homecomer depict the experience of people whose vulnerability is related to their lack of familiarity with typifications and relevances of the group. In that sense, one can say that their social position is negatively defined: what they don’t know seems an important dimension of their identification. In addition, the culture they inherited seems negatively described. As Lafontaine puts it, “[the] persistence of the culture of the native world, through sediments of past experience, familiar typifications and habits, is [...] portrayed in negative terms, as what makes strangers ‘reluctant’ to adjust or ‘unable’ to do so...”⁵⁰ In addition to exploring how much home typifications, relevances and habits may be an obstacle for newcomers to “adjust” to their new group, I will try to define their social position positively.

While strangers usually experience intercultural encounters as a source of uncertainty, Simmel and Schutz claim that their position and trajectory may also provide them with a particular objectivity. According to Simmel, the stranger has more freedom than members to assess what happens in the group:

By not being radically committed to individual components or one-sided tendencies of the group, the stranger faces all of them with the special attitude of the ‘objective’ person, which does not mean, perhaps, a mere aloofness or disengagement but a particular form of the far and near, indifference and engagement. [...] Objectivity can also be called freedom: The objective person is bound by no commitments that could prejudice the grasp, the understanding, and the evaluation of data [...] In practice and theory, the stranger has more freedom, observes circumstances with less prejudice, measures them against more general and more objective deals and is not bound in action by residence, loyalty, or precedents.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Sayad 1991.

⁵⁰ Lafontaine 2018: 150.

⁵¹ Simmel 2009 : 602–3.

Schutz does not seem to conceive objectivity in the same way as Simmel. While strangers are “not bound to worship the ‘idols of the tribe’” and experience “a vivid feeling for the incoherence and inconsistency of the approached cultural pattern,”⁵² this is not primarily a question of freedom of judgement:

This [objective] attitude originates far less in his propensity to judge the newly approached group by the standards brought from home than in his need to acquire full knowledge of the elements of the approached cultural pattern and to examine for this purpose with care and precision what seems self-explanatory to the in-group.⁵³

While Simmel claims that strangers are considered objective because of their position of outsiders, thanks to which they preserve a certain freedom of judgement, Schutz thinks that strangers become objective because they need to know how to be accepted as quickly as possible in their new group. In this sense, objectivity may be considered less a dimension of the freedom of strangers than the result of social constraints.

As for Huarpes students, they were acutely concerned about these acceptance issues and tried to familiarize themselves with the new cultural pattern in Mendoza. Their experience at the university was also that of newcomers discovering customs, music, clothing or fashionable language. In the interviews, Huarpes students seemed eager to describe how people lived in the city, usually displaying a mix of sympathetic attitude and critical distance. For instance, Mabel pointed out how close-minded and full of prejudices city dwellers sometimes were. For instance, they tend to think that people like her dress differently or even wear a feather because they are Amerindians or because they come from rural areas. With a pedagogic stance, she used to explain to her classmates and friends that their appearance is not difference and “in reality, the clothes we wear... that are sold there, they are the same as here.”

On a different note, Enzo felt sometimes that city dwellers mocked his rural accent. However, he explained to me that city dwellers did not speak Spanish correctly.⁵⁴ For instance, they said “acá” instead of “aquí” (both terms mean “here”) or “vení” instead of “ven” (the imperative form for “come”). I found particularly interesting that, regardless of the accuracy of his critique, the arguments were based on his familiarity with linguistic standards of the *Real Academia Española*. To reverse the stigma, the reference to standardized norms allowed him to position himself as an expert in front of city dwellers.

By describing how arrogant or ignorant city dwellers were, Enzo expressed his disappointment. After four years in the city, Enzo said that he did not want to “adapt” to their way of life:

In the city, it's a totally different pace of life that I don't want to adapt to. I don't want to live like them, always running around. Living like that, isolated in your small world, I don't like it. There is a lot of individualism, materialism, a lot of materialism. Uh, something really strong happened to me for my birthday, this year. I have one of those little mobile phones, like this [he shows it to me]. A girl wanted to give me a new mobile phone as a gift. With a camera, with video, with everything. And... I didn't want to receive it. “No, I told her, I already have one. It's more than enough to send messages.”

⁵² Schutz 1976c: 104.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Fernández 2010: 371–93.

Enzo seemed to experience strangeness regarding habits and values of the city. In this excerpt, he explained how acute his frustrations were and clearly manifested his convictions. “Adapting” means living in a hurry all the time and being isolated from other people, becoming consumerist and materialist. He marks clear-cut boundaries with city dwellers.

The attitude of Mabel was rather different from Enzo’s. Besides criticizing the ignorance and parochial attitudes of city dwellers, she tried to display an empathetic stance towards them. She explained to me that Huarpes communities “follow the idea of a communitarian land. That’s the concept that people from the city don’t understand sometimes. You say, ‘how is it possible...?’” To her, it is important to understand why city dwellers have prejudices toward Huarpes’ collective property of lands. Mabel perceived that they were the type of people who might be skeptical about communitarian way of life or collective land ownership.

She seemed empathetic also when telling anecdotes of her arrival in the city. In this excerpt, she depicts contrasting ways of interacting with people in the street:

[People of the city] don't understand that in my village, you say hello to everyone you come across on your way [...] Here, in the city, people stare at you with an air of saying “who knows you?” or “why are you doing this?” When in fact, it's just saying hello [Mabel, Huarpe student]

Unlike in the city, people were used to greeting everyone on their way. She perfectly acknowledged that this was not typical in the city – where, after all, indifference towards others is the “normal attitude.”⁵⁵ She also understood that this kind of behavior might be surprising to them. On the other hand, she was kindly mocking the surprise of the city dwellers, who seemed to take the matter too seriously. After all, they should not “stare at you” that way, “it’s just saying hello.”

Finally, students were concerned with the perspective of the world of Huarpes people too. Hector explained to me that using fashionable lingo imported from the city was likely to run counter to tacit community norms:

When you arrive in the country, you begin to speak with somebody, and they immediately realize [that you’re talking like the people of the city]. You can’t imagine how people of the community react! They... they immediately label you. Labels... People use the term “arrogant” (*agrandado*) all the time. “How arrogant he has become!” they say.

Hector was a keen observer of the transformations that some young Huarpes began to manifest in their behavior after arriving in the city. Like him, most students were very attentive to the opinion of the Huarpes who did not emigrate, and some tried to be sympathetic with them too.

Mabel admitted to being a little ignorant of Huarpes traditions. For her sake and for the sake of her new friends in the city, who were willing to know more about it, she undertook to investigate the genealogy of the Amerindian branch of her family. She always asked her father questions “about life in the community” and she was “still trying to understand a little more” about it.⁵⁶

The objective attitude of Huarpes students was based on the need to understand what was happening to them. In any given situation, they struggled to grasp whether their behavior was

⁵⁵ Stichweh, 1997: 1–16.

⁵⁶ She continued the inquiry for many years after my research and eventually became a specialist on the subject.

actually perceived as typical, reasonable, and normal.⁵⁷ Paying attention to ordinary language was crucial. According to Schutz, vernacular language is “a kind of ‘treasure house’ or ‘storage bin’”⁵⁸ for what Scheler called the “relative natural conception of the world.” This conception is taken for granted by the group members as a matter of course.

The gestures and words we use express “our accepting or taking for granted the social, cultural and physical world in which we live.”⁵⁹ By carefully paying attention to language and gestures, these newleavers typified expectations of city dwellers and, sometimes, put themselves in their shoes. They were able to identify, analyze and denaturalize norms and “relevances” that were taken for granted as a matter of course in their new environment.⁶⁰

3. *A critical position*

In the previous sections, I explained how origin-related categorizations matter for newcomers and people surrounding them. In this section, I will explain why political conditions in the environment of origin might be pervasive in the experience of newleavers. Politics here refers to emancipation and collective forms of decision-making.

3.1. The “ethnographic stance”

In *The Homecomer*, Schutz explains how people who spent a long time away from the group may experience strangeness when they return for good: “each homecomer has tasted the magic fruit of strangeness, be it sweet or bitter.”⁶¹ During their absence, they did not share with the other members the “inner time which characterizes collective actions.”⁶² They did not take part in the daily activities of the community and were not involved in the search for solutions to common problems. When they were elsewhere, new events and experiences received additional interpretations within the group, which enriched their stock of knowledge.⁶³ As homecomers cannot be aware of all the facets of this enrichment of the stock of knowledge, they struggle to plainly recognize that cultural environment. Things do not seem as familiar as before anymore and they may feel like “a stranger among strangers.”⁶⁴

With a few adjustments, this analysis may also apply to newleavers. Like Huarpes students, newleavers, who stay in communication with their group of origin, may experience strangeness there. This happens because they “tasted” the natural conception of the world of another group, and not only because their group of origin changed since their departure. Certainly, distance may entail pseudo-typifications and pseudo-relevances that become “obstacles to mutual re-establishment of the disrupted we-relations.”⁶⁵ However, I think that distance may also be the source of a productive critical stance. In other words, newleavers gain in objectivity in their new environment, certainly, but also in their environment of origin.

I claim that newleavers who keep ties with their environment of origin develop an “ethnographic stance.” This is both a moral posture and a cognitive perspective allowing them to critically identify rules, norms and values, by comparing environments and groups. Like

⁵⁷ Fernández 2010c.

⁵⁸ Schutz 2010: 64.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ If one metaphorically considers membership as a game, one can say that Huarpes students seemed to be losing their *illusio* as members of their group of origin, namely the “fundamental belief in the interest of the game and the value of the stakes which is inherent in that membership,” Bourdieu 2000: 11.

⁶¹ Schutz 1976b: 116.

⁶² Bonotti 2013: 23–36.

⁶³ One can say that the experience of a homecomer is analogous to that of a spectator in a cinema who returns to the movie after a couple of minutes. They might feel a bit confused and struggle to grasp new meanings, interpretations and emotions experienced by the other spectators who continued to share an “inner time” during their absence.

⁶⁴ Schutz 1976b:106.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 114.

professional ethnographers, they aim at making explicit the relative natural conception of the world in both environments.

This ethnographic stance helps newcomers understand how misunderstandings may arise from the coexistence of various cultural backgrounds.⁶⁶ In “mixed contacts,”⁶⁷ dwellers may interpret simple mistakes as moral faults, as if the offender was not ready to honor common values. When the offender is a newcomer, participants’ origin may be the source of confusion or, on the contrary, it may become a resource to master alternative interpretations. The ethnographic stance allows them to claim that no disdain should be justified, members of both environments must open up to new conceptions of the world.

Therefore, experiencing strangeness in the group of origin is an essential dimension of their ethnographic stance thanks to which they can assess the environment of origin as outsiders (Mabel: being a Huarpe “is something that people of the city don’t understand very well yet”). To do so, they try to understand how outsiders might perceive their group of origin. Then, they do the same with the members of this group of origin. They critically assess how these members perceive the environment where they are trying to be accepted – the city and the university, in their case. They also assess how origin members judge the integration into their new environment and the distance from their group of origin. Newleavers seem to seek acceptance not only in their new group, but in their group of origin too. When comparing various cultural patterns, they become aware of the habits or terms that are more difficult to “translate.” They also realize how much misunderstanding depends on their failing to communicate the relevance of these habits and terms for the in-group.

Insofar as newleavers develop a more holistic vision of “arriving” and “leaving” processes, the ethnographic stance is suitable to denaturalize various forms of life. They can better grasp how arbitrary norms and allegiances are. By taking a step back from socially approved knowledge, newleavers gain a fresh understanding of what it means to be an ordinary member in various environments. By finding out how others perceive their origins or their new environment and by explaining to outsiders how things work in both environments, newcomers make their experience “tellable.” Not only does this allow them to justify their trajectory, as Naudet puts it, but also to present themselves as ordinary and sensible people in both environments.⁶⁸

3.2. Emigration: to manage expectations

The research in Mendoza is fruitful to illustrate that assuming or resisting the alleged origin is partially a political act: there are rights, symbolic classifications, access to common goods, decision-making and power at stake. To account for these power issues, it seems necessary to complement the literature on strangers with other sources.

There are two paths to explore links between origin and power in the experience of newleavers. Firstly, it seems crucial to depict the economic, cultural, and political conditions in the country or land of origin. The presence of the stranger “here” is likely to be the signal that something unfair or dangerous is happening “there.” In particular, it seems crucial to explain whether/how the presence of the stranger here stems from the “collapse of frameworks that sustain social cohesion” there.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Gumperz 1982.

⁶⁷ Goffman 1963.

⁶⁸ Fernández 2010: 23–39.

⁶⁹ Sayad 1999: 165.

State consolidation in Mendoza was favored by the dispossession of lands and the murder of thousands of Amerindian populations in the late 19th century.⁷⁰ Emigration to the city has historically been a strategy for Amerindians to escape poverty and exclusion in rural areas.⁷¹ Those who stay in Huarpes communities, preserving traditions and economic activities, may consider emigrants traitors.

However, reactions to young members who have been migrating to study in the city since 2000s have been contrasted. Certainly, suspicion arose in rural areas when the University of Cuyo implemented the affirmation action program. Not only did Huarpes, but also some teachers working in these areas did believe that the initiative was a Trojan Horse that would attract trained people to the city and further drain the younger population from rural areas and surrounding villages.

By contrast, some community leaders thought that the university was providing an opportunity to train a new Amerindian elite. During a meeting with students, community members and university staff in 2006, a Huarpe leader declared: “Don't feel that the community has given up on you. You represent our hope.”

Before settling down in the city, students had little participation in local political activities and decision-making spaces. Now their position was different, and this may explain why the demands of the community were sometimes experienced as an opportunity to make themselves heard. Enzo, who would drop out two years after this interview, tried to manage expectations:

When I started at the university, I... I didn't believe in myself. But for the people of my village I eventually stayed, I didn't abandon. [...] Because in my village, and in all the surrounding areas, it was such a novelty that I was studying here. [...] It was for them (short laugh) a feat, and they felt very happy. They used to say to me: “you have to go on,” “you have to go on,” “you have to become a teacher.” If I quit, well, I'm going to be indebted to them.

Most students felt that people were expecting too much from them. This might be a burden:

I think that Huarpes students sometimes feel a burden imposed by society. Or by the family or by the community. That's why they may feel that it's a great failure to choose the wrong university degree. That, it seems to me, is... it shouldn't be like that [Esteban, program teacher].

Because of the scholarship program, which was largely publicized, students were placed in an unusual position in their communities and in the city, one of great visibility. As the university teacher explained it, many students experienced this visibility as an unbearable pressure to succeed. Their right to hesitation, regarding professional ambitions and cultural attachments, was undermined.

3.3. Social control and autonomy

The second political dimension of emigration is related to personal autonomy and social control. In *The well-informed citizen...*, Schutz distinguishes two kinds of “social knowledge.”⁷² Most of the people's actual and potential knowledge originates in the experience of other

⁷⁰ The elites then monopolized access to water, to the detriment of peasants and Indians. The habitat of the Huarpes changed in a dramatic way. As the Guanacache Lakes gradually dried up, they had to modify their way of living. Instead of fishermen and farmers, they became breeders of wild goats and llamas, an activity adapted to the new semi-arid environmental conditions. See Martín, Rojas, and Saldi 2010: 159–88.

⁷¹ Escolar 2005: 45–77.

⁷² Schutz 1976d.

people, either contemporary or predecessors.⁷³ This “socially derived knowledge” largely relies on their capacity to critically analyze not only the surrounding information but also the source of information. By contrast, the power of “socially approved knowledge” is strongly grounded in the authority of the whole in-group. Actors tend to take for granted this or that piece of information following the opinion of authoritative members:

If I consider my father, my priest, my government to be authoritative, then their opinions have special weight and this weight itself has the character of an imposed relevance. The power of socially approved knowledge is so extended that what the whole in-group approves - ways of thinking and acting, such as mores, folkways, habits - is simply taken for granted; it becomes an element of the relatively natural concept of the world, although the source of such knowledge remains entirely hidden in its anonymity.⁷⁴

By imposing “relevances” to members, socially approved knowledge is a means of social control. Newcomers in Mendoza display a critical stance regarding “imposed relevances.”

Leaving the community was sometimes considered an act of emancipation by most students, their family and institutional staff. These students perceived their scholarship in the city as an opportunity to gain some freedom from family and other adults surrounding them.

Indeed, Huarpes students seemed really concerned with informal sanctions in their community. Hector told me that growing long hair was fashionable in the city. If a Huarpe student did so, people from their community would criticize them. In addition, as I said before, he was really worried about “labels.” Here is reproduced a broader excerpt of our conversation:

When you arrive in the country, you begin to speak with somebody, and they immediately realize [that you’re talking like the people of the city]. You can’t imagine how country people react! They... they immediately label you. Labels... People use the term “arrogant” (*agrandado*) all the time. “How arrogant he has become!” they say.

Researcher: –Have you ever been told that you’ve become “arrogant”?

Hector: –No, not yet. But I think I’ll be labelled as such soon. Because I realize a change in the way I speak [Hector, Huarpe student].

With an ethnographic stance, Hector identified the role of labels and concluded that he would not necessarily be spared from them. He explained how Huarpes people ensured that the youth conform to the standards in the community. To him, labels were mechanisms of social control: “There are resistance elements and also control elements in the community. And a key element of control is when they say: ‘Oh, you’ve changed!’ . Yes, yes, yes, yes, this is the label!”

In addition, I was surprised that Enzo, one of the students who seemed most proud of being a Huarpe, told me he did not want to return to his community after graduating. As he was planning to become a secondary school teacher, he seemed horrified by the danger of gossiping: “What will the old hags of the community say when they see me dressed in the teacher’s blouse? ‘Who does he think he is?’ they’ll say.”

⁷³ Schutz includes four ideal types of “socially derived knowledge”: eyewitnesses (people who communicate their experience to me), insiders (individuals who have been engaged in a reported fact or event), analysts (individuals who collect information for me and share my “system of relevances”) or commentators (individuals who collect information for me and do not share my “system of relevances”).

⁷⁴ Ibid., 133.

From the students' perspective, Huarpes people try to control youngsters' taste and behavior with gossiping and "labelling." The students realized that not only the inhabitants of the city may believe that their loyalty is ambiguous, but also the members of the group of origin.

To avoid "labels," almost all Huarpes students were concerned with the marks urban life could leave on their bodies and dispositions: they paid careful attention to the way they spoke, stood, sat, dressed, etc. Sometimes, they experienced these marks as stigmas that could reveal a cultural contamination in the city of some sort. Certainly, this concern with contamination issues might entail cultural confinement. Some Huarpes families, rural teachers and even university staff used to mobilize old stereotypes according to which "the city" was a source of vices – by contrast with the supposed purity of rural life. Some believed that the university should protect or isolate young Huarpes from this supposed evil.

Yet, students used to tell this story of cultural contamination differently. Perceiving their behavior as the outcome of a contamination process was a way to fight fate. Instead of stressing how treacherous city life may be, they used to stress what they were actually capable of doing to protect themselves from contamination:

Professor X always says to me, You're the only one who isn't "agringado." I use the term "agringado" all the time [...] "Agringado" is someone who lives like a person from the city of Mendoza. It means not to be anymore... not to live like in the country [Enzo, Huarpe student].

Enzo, one of the earliest scholarship holders at the moment of the fieldwork, represented himself as someone who learnt not to become "agringado." This moral posture provided him with an aura of "untouchability," that is, of cultural endurance.⁷⁵ Such endurance is the other side of the concern for independence. Either contaminated or untouchable, newcomers are involved in a politicization experience shaped by divergent processes of independence, social control and loyalty.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I proposed a framework to account for the intercultural experience of people who are leaving their environment of origin to enroll in educational institutions. By analyzing intercultural issues at stake, I explored how people define and challenge group boundaries regardless of their actual or "real" origins.

An intercultural approach is fruitful to analyze how strangers, who may be immigrants or members of minorities, take part in large-scale processes of nation building, ethnicization and diversity production. To explain how strangers deal with their alleged origin in daily life, I proposed considering newcomers as newleavers. Their experience entails the effort not only to learn "how to arrive," namely, to settle down, to progress in their studies, to find a job, to make friends, etc., but also to learn "how to leave."

The experience of newleavers in their new environment is shaped by their relationship to the origin: arriving in an environment implies moral duties towards the community of origin and the opportunity to settle their accounts with them. The difficulties to decipher rules of social life in various environments make them vulnerable too. Newleavers are expected to carve a position for themselves, frequently, a precarious one, between acculturation, loyalty, estrangement and uprooting. In addition, they are expected to mobilize compelling narratives to justify their positions and relocations.

To deal with contradictory expectations and challenges, newleavers may develop what I called an "ethnographic stance," namely, a moral posture and a cognitive perspective to

⁷⁵ Fernández 2010: 23–39.

critically identify rules, norms and values. In that sense, their ties with the in-group are not necessarily a burden, something to discard, as the literature on strangers sometimes suggests, but it may be a resource, too. Discussing Simmel and Schutz's ideas, I claim that newleavers may gain in objectivity to analyze the life not only in their new environment, but in their environment of origin too. As a loop effect, they draw on their competences as members to see their in-group as if they were not members. Eventually, the ethnographic stance allows newleavers to follow various aims: understanding how they are perceived by other people – from their in-group or from outside; to justify their status– scholarship holders and members of an ethnic group in the case of Huarpes; to keep away from urban people and from staff members – to preserve an intimacy of some sort regarding institutional constraints; to fight stereotypes and to empower themselves as autonomous subjects in relation to the community's demands.

My research in Mendoza shows that the ethnographic stance helps newleavers find a place between indifference, recognition and exoticism. They seek to deactivate the emotional charge of prejudices and to foresee the discriminatory effects of stereotypes. To shun essentialist expectations and binary categorization, newleavers seem to claim what I. Joseph named, in a different context, a “right to hesitation.”⁷⁶ That is, they strive not to be reduced to an alleged cultural difference and do not want to be considered simple city dwellers, perpetual strangers or out-of-the-ordinary people.

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⁷⁶ Joseph 2007 : 221–30.

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