

**Migration, vulnerability and resilience. Story and life history as narrative tools in social work****Migración, vulnerabilidad y resiliencia. Relato e Historia de vida como herramientas narrativas en el trabajo social**

GONZALEZ-REYES, Alba H.\*, HERNANDEZ-MAR, Sandra Luz, CHAVEZ-DIAZ, Leticia and COBOS-VICENCIO, Rosa María

*Universidad Veracruzana, Facultad de Trabajo Social, Calle 12 No. 215 Colonia cazonas, Poza Rica, Veracruz*

ID 1<sup>st</sup> Author: *Alba H. González-Reyes* / ORC ID 0000-0003-0928-0611, Researcher ID Thomson: IUN-6459-2023, CVU CONAHCYT ID: 47453

ID 1<sup>st</sup> Co-author: *Sandra Luz Hernández-Mar* / ORC ID: 0000-0001-7162-9963, Researcher ID Thomson: S-7602-2018, CVU CONAHCYT ID: 473381

ID 2<sup>nd</sup> Co-author: *Leticia Chávez-Díaz* / ORC ID: 0000-0002-3803-0403, Researcher ID Thomson: I-6708-2018, CVU- CONAHCYT ID: 902209

ID 3<sup>rd</sup> Co-author: *Rosa María Cobos-Vicencio* / ORC ID: 0000-0001-8683-2286, Researcher ID Thomson: S-7632-2018, CVU CONAHCYT ID: 450327

DOI: 10.35429/JTMS.2023.24.9.33.40

Received: January 30, 2023; Accepted: June 30, 2023

**Abstract**

This paper aims to intertwine the history of life as a technique within social work, to talk about family migration that goes from a Totonac town to the north of the Mexican Republic. The phenomenon of migration is generally associated with heartbreaking and sad stories. In this case, memory and life history go hand in hand to talk about the youthful subjective experience of effort, commitment, achievements, but also problems, illness, and the forced path towards resilience. With the use of qualitative methodology and specifically from narrative techniques, it presents us with another way of expressing the problem of youth migration. The narrative becomes, then, an example of how social research techniques come together to expose a daily experience of mobility, making it a reason for interdisciplinary study of social work with anthropology, under the auspices of hermeneutics.

**Narrative techniques, Youth, Migration****Resumen**

Esta ponencia tiene por objetivo entrelazar la historia de vida como técnica dentro del trabajo social, para hablarnos sobre la migración juvenil que va de un poblado totonaca hacia el norte de la república mexicana. El fenómeno de la migración, generalmente se asocia a historias desgarradoras y de tristeza. En este caso, la memoria y la historia de vida se acompañan para hablar de la experiencia subjetiva juvenil de empeño, compromiso, logros, pero también de problemas, enfermedad y el camino obligado hacia la resiliencia. Con el uso de la metodología cualitativa y en específico desde las técnicas narrativas, nos presenta otra forma de manifestar la problemática de la migración juvenil. La narrativa se convierte, entonces, en un ejemplo de cómo se unen las técnicas de investigación social para exponer una vivencia cotidiana de movilidad, convirtiéndola en un motivo de estudio interdisciplinaria del trabajo social con la antropología, bajo el auspicio de la hermenéutica.

**Técnicas narrativas, Juventud, Migración**

**Citation:** GONZALEZ-REYES, Alba H., HERNANDEZ-MAR, Sandra Luz, CHAVEZ-DIAZ, Leticia and COBOS-VICENCIO, Rosa María. Migration, vulnerability and resilience. Story and life history as narrative tools in social work. *Journal of Transdisciplinary Migratory Studies*. 2023. 9-24:33-40.

† Researcher contributing as first author.

## Introduction

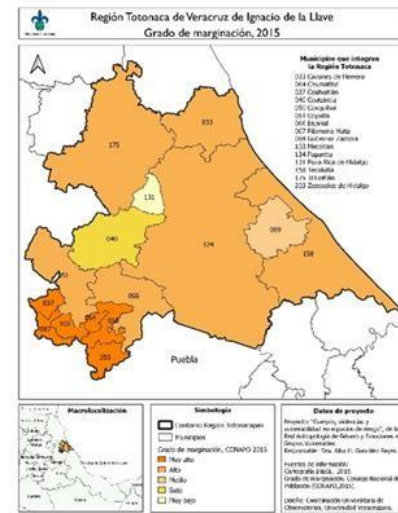
### Social Context

Zozocolco de Hidalgo, Veracruz is a magical town in the Sierra Madre Oriental of the Totonacapan region of Veracruz. "It is bordered to the north by the municipalities of Coxquihui and Espinal; to the east by the municipality of Espinal and the state of Puebla; to the south by the state of Puebla; to the west by the state of Puebla and the municipality of Coxquihui" (INEGI, 2010).

The potential land use is for agriculture and livestock. The climate is semi-humid with year-round rainfall (62%) and warm-humid with year-round rainfall (38%), and there are 26 indigenous rural localities and one urban locality. The largest number of people are young people and adults between 15 and 64 years of age, followed by children between 0 and 14 years of age. In terms of social development, the formal educational level has basic education from preschool to high school, starting with the highest number in primary school, with secondary school dropout rate of 2.2% and high school dropout rate of 3.5% and an illiteracy rate of 20.8% (INEGI 2021: p.5).

In terms of poverty, Zozocolco de Hidalgo, Veracruz, has 86.7% of its population living in poverty; 40.9% of its population in moderate poverty, 45.8% of its population in extreme poverty, 11.9% of its population is vulnerable due to social deprivation; 0.3% of the population is vulnerable due to income, and only 1.1% of the population is not poor and not vulnerable. In addition, the degree of social backwardness in 2015 was very high; by 2020 the backwardness decreased to high (INEGI 2021, p. 7).

González Reyes confirms that since 2010 the communities of this small municipality were covered under the Program for the Development of Priority Zones (PDZP) and population in Priority Attention Zones (ZAP) due to their high degree of marginalization. All these aspects increase inequalities between social sectors and, of them, youth are the most disadvantaged in contexts of poverty (2021, p. 28).



**Figure 1** Totonaca region of Veracruz. Degree of Marginalization, INEGI 2019. CUO design, UV.

### Problem statement

Zozocolco de Hidalgo, within the Sierra de Papantla is characterized, like many other native peoples, by its unfavorable conditions in economic development. Neoliberal policies and socioeconomic programs, detrimental to the Veracruz population of the sierra, resulted in falling prices of agricultural products in the face of overproduction in international markets or, in the absence of work, they joined the migration flows to the border area of Mexico, looking for better life opportunities. As Pérez Monterosas writes:

Veracruz has gradually lost its importance as a receiving state of national and foreign immigrants, to become an expeller, first by intrastate and national migrations of agricultural day laborers, and second as an expeller to the northern border, bound for the United States and Canada, of groups of people of both urban and rural origin (2018: p. 37).

Of urban, rural or indigenous origin young people from the Totonaca highlands are inserted into the migratory phenomenon that favor social interaction and mobilities not only from cities, but also from diverse areas of productive activities. As Hernández, Chávez and Cobos indicate in their study on the lives of native youth, with the experience of migration by their parents, they can suffer their absence and turn them into vulnerable children (2022, p. 160).

Nevertheless, adolescents and youth can take advantage of family-type networks, using social interaction for work, for example, in urban places near the northern border of Mexico. These family networks can be diffuse not only "because of the limited quantity and quality of resources they possess, but also because they allow only a few of their members to migrate". migrate to a few of its members" (Pérez, 2018: 48); adventure can also be part of the individual decision of mobility to other places, with the intentionality of knowing and experiencing different ways of life.

Adult men, but also young people and adolescents are part of the migratory flows; along with that experience, they are shaping migrant stories that they can tell us, and that can range from the various types of adversity, to life stories that can redefine their life expectations and decision making.

### **General Objective**

To interweave life history as a social research technique, to tell us about youth migration from a Totonaca village to the north of the Mexican Republic.

### **Specific Objectives**

- -To consider the story within the narrative techniques to know the youth subjective experience of commitment, commitment, achievements.
- -To recover the memory and life history to analyze the problems, the illness and the forced path towards resilience in young migrants.

### **Methodology**

Narrative and life history, from the point of view of social work. Within the qualitative methodology, we place the biographical method, which is excellent for narrative research, whose origin is linked to the life history of migrants and their families; for example, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (19018) by William I. Thomas and Florian Znanieck (19019) by William I. Thomas and Florian Znanieck (19019).

Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. Another ethnographic study, that of the Chicago school, mainly with Ezra Park, offers us with his essay *The City* (1925) an innovative sense of making an ethnography of the city, to tell us about the appropriation of the territory, of groups of migrant people to form a sense of rootedness, but also to face the urban reality fed by collective consciousness, social differentiation and the division of labor, as well as social mobility.

Social mobility that is not only the movement of bodies, but also of communication, education communication, of education, of the extension of the monetary economy to other spheres of life. Such as one dreams of when one is a migrant.

Life narratives and life histories describe the points of view in individual lives, they tell about their existence, their vital or critical moments of special interest, their ideas, objectives and life goals. But if we want to understand the difference between narrative and life story, in the former, we are only told about a certain fragment, focusing on their own individuality and personality (Montagud and Pérez, 2015, 244). The life history is closer to a case study, in which various forms of elaboration and analysis are presented. It is the construction of experiences that have influenced the personal or professional formation of a subject, it tells us how he has lived and gives it meaning, with his own prejudices, beliefs, his socialization, everything that forge his vision of the world.

Both in the story and in the life history, there is another person, the researcher, who actively listens and interprets what the participatory subject relates participatory subject. As interpreter, the researcher co-participates in the elaboration of the narrative, but with the understanding that she can be the narrator, never the owner of her story and her life history. In this exercise of writing about one's own life, in scientific terms "it is inscribed within the constructivist-interpretative paradigm and its interest revolves around the lived experience of social actors and the knowledge of social reality from the subjective" (2015, p. 252).

Montagud and Pérez consider these techniques for social work as a social research strategy for students to "allow them to make the personal conditioning factors of practice visible and consolidate their professional identity and as a means to improve professional practice" (2015, p. 252).

### **For his part Guerrero opines:**

These techniques are a means for the exploration and analysis of personal identity either to make diagnoses, for therapeutic or social intervention purposes; to rethink the relationship between the user and the professional favoring the humanization of the helping process and to allow to rewrite the own coordinates of the intervention aimed at changing and transforming reality (2014, pp. 63-79).

As an applied exercise, the implementation of narrative and life history of a social work student is presented here. He narrates his experience as a migrant and his achievements in lands far from his territory of origin. He also narrates his obstacles and experiences in his life, the courage and resilient power to get ahead being very young and in migration conditions, in which loneliness turns out to be the only ally, but always with the firm conviction of a sense of life, as Viktor Frankl father of logotherapy says (2020), the human being can only endure the worst and realize the impossible: his unrepeatable individuality, his freedom and responsibility for himself.

The story of a migrant and undergraduate student in social work.

I left my homeland at the age of 13, my father lived in the north of the country, in the state of Baja California, and I went alone to live with him. My parents decided to send me there for the best opportunities for me, living there for almost 5 years. This was not easy, leaving my place of residence for Playas de Rosarito in Baja California meant leaving my mother's care behind. I studied the last two years of junior high school and two years of high school, finishing high school in my place of residence in order to become independent.

My experience as a migrant far from home was the saddest when I lived moments of despair, fell into loneliness, went through many difficulties to start a new life and adapt to the context in which I found myself. In this process, between the first contacts and the relationship with new people in my life, I was gradually developing, assimilating the fact that I was away from home. I realized that being away from the people I grew up with is very difficult, especially because of cultural differences. Being in the north of the country I noticed that not all people were treated well, especially if you came from the south, discrimination was very noticeable either because of your skin color, way of speaking, way of dressing or if you came from an indigenous community.

As time went by, I observed that not all people had a discriminatory mentality.

Fortunately I met people who not only changed my way of thinking, but also taught me another culture, another way of living, very different from what I was used to. During my stay in Playas de Rosarito I was able to look for and find a job which taught me the value of earning money with my own effort, I also learned the responsibility of knowing how to manage and be autonomous. In my job everything was perfect, thanks to that I met many people who took me to know different kinds of places; but, above all, they helped me not to feel so far from home.

Time went by and I started to meet more and more people learning new things and getting to know different ways of thinking and seeing things, for all that was very enriching since they not only changed my perspective but also integrated a new knowledge to my knowledge about a specific topic and that was very satisfying. Playas de Rosarito is a small city, but with great job opportunities, excellent people and beautiful beaches, thanks to my work I was generating knowledge about leadership since, shortly after I started working I was given the position of

I was given the position of manager because of my responsibility and above all my commitment. The management gave me the opportunity to learn how to handle stress, to better manage my time at work and my personal life, since all of this was helping me in the new city where I was living.

Yes, I had met many people, but I recognize that many times I needed the warmth of my family, to be able to get home and tell someone about your day, but unfortunately there was no one else and I had to keep that desire to myself. As the months went by, I got used to living alone and to solve the problems that came up in my daily life. My life began to change, also in the work environment in Playas de Rosarito, Baja California.

When I was 16 years old, I won a trip to Guadalajara from Arcos Dorados (McDonalds). Just when I was 4 months working in that company, I found out that they chose an employee every year to send him/her to a trip to Guadalajara with all expenses paid and they chose only one from each branch of the country, the award was called "employee of the year"; as I had been working there for a short time, I didn't have much knowledge about that award knowledge about this award. One day at the end of my shift, all my coworkers got together as they were going to name the employee of the year. My boss told me to come in and open a large blue box with a picture of an airplane on it. I was so surprised that when I opened the box many balloons came out and a folder that said: Congratulations, Ramon you are going to Guadalajara! I could not believe it, since I had been with the company for the shortest time and I never imagined that this prize would be for me.

The day arrived, I was very nervous because it was the first time I was going on a trip by myself and I did not know who was going to go with me, since I had to be at the Tijuana Airport together with other people from the Baja California branches. The hotel that the company had paid for us to stay at was called Hotel Villa Primavera, a beautiful hotel that was inside a forest. Nearby there were fields where you could play soccer and do different activities. Thanks to that trip I met many people, I had a lot of fun, and I made several friends from different parts of the Republic, most of those who went were of age, but that was not an obstacle.

I made several friends from different parts of the country, most of them were older, but that was not an obstacle for us to get along.

I enjoyed the stay very much, we did many activities and dynamics that the organizers of the event had prepared, the hard part was to return because the extraordinary of everything lived, a great experience. When I got home I reflected on that trip and realized that when your work is recognized, it is a pleasant feeling. One of the points mentioned by my bosses was that, despite the short time working in the company, I was very responsible, mature and, above all, a person committed to the job, that was an important factor in choosing the right person. Knowing that at my young age I was considered a very mature and committed person, filled me with a lot of satisfaction and joy, that motivated me to continue learning many more things and always giving the best of me in everything I was given.

This award would not have been possible if I had stayed to live in Veracruz. It was when I realized the positive aspects of migration, many times it is very necessary to be able to have great opportunities not only in the job market but also on the opportunities not only in terms of work but also in terms of student preparation. The trip helped me to know many cities of the Republic, to know their culture and their way of living. Changing your place of residence is difficult, especially if you are alone and with the different situations that can be a little complicated, especially if you study and work at the same time.

Today I see many things that have changed in me and in my way of thinking, thanks to the fact that I left my place of origin. I lost my fear of a lot of things, I learned to be independent and, above all, I learned to be alone with myself in an unknown place and to get ahead by my own efforts. Migrating is not something easy because the adaptation process is complicated for many and they choose to return to their place of origin, it is difficult to be away from home and their loved ones, but others make huge sacrifices to excel in their day to day life and thus achieve their goal.

Today I am so grateful for the opportunity I had to move to another state of the republic, to know places, people and other forms of culture. My experience has been very different from many people's. I guess it depends a lot on where you go. I guess it depends a lot on the place where you go or the people you meet; thank God I always met good people, who always taught me good things, especially that serve you for life.

With the achievements in the labor aspect, I have also suffered setbacks in my health. As a young migrant, the subject of illness also deserves to be narrated.

### **Life story during my time as a migrant**

I will describe one of the most difficult stages that has left its mark on my life during my stay in Baja California. Before I finished my high school studies, I began to have very strong and intense pains in my abdomen, which caused me nausea, vomiting and heartburn. As time went by, the pain became more intense and that did not allow me to continue with my normal life. After undergoing several tests, none of the doctors could find the cause of my symptoms, so I decided to leave the city to look for other specialists, until I found Dr. Jonathan, who was originally from San Diego, California originally from San Diego, California. He was the one who diagnosed me with a disease called stage 1 carcinoma in situ. At that time, the doctor told me that, although it was very expensive, there was a 30% chance that the radiotherapy treatment would work and the other 70% that it would have no effect. When I received that news I felt that my world was falling apart and my dreams would not come true, since this disease was stomach cancer and when that word was mentioned the first thing that came to my mind was death.

That news was something very shocking in my life and I could not assimilate it, and I constantly asked myself the why of my situation. I was filled with despair for not finding a way out of my problem, at that moment I needed the affection of my family, but because of the distance it was not possible.

Even with everything I started my treatment, having as a priority to recover my health, although at the beginning it was very difficult because receiving radiotherapy causes a lot of weakness, both physical and emotional. I radically changed my life in terms of nutrition, physical activities and above all, I was advised not to fall into depression, so as not to aggravate my health not to aggravate my health. The doctor who treated me was a specialist in his area, and at every check-up he gave me words of encouragement and motivated me to continue, even though the chances of the treatment working were very slim.

For me it was a great challenge to go through this process; financially because the treatment was expensive and to cover it I had to work hard. Due to the fear of being rejected by my colleagues and fired, I decided to keep my problem to myself, but that did not prevent me from being competent at work. At that time I worked at Café Sirena (Starbucks), the company valued very much the effort of each employee, there was a good work environment and it was very pleasant to go to work. There were days in which I felt very weak and emotionally tired because the treatment I was receiving was very aggressive with my body and that was reflecting on me, but thanks to the fact that I was always surrounded by friends who gave me their love and support, I never lost faith, that strengthened me enormously.

As time went by, the treatment began to give positive results and that gave me more motivation and hope to keep going and hope to keep going. After 2 years fighting against this disease, I could finally breathe a sigh of relief when I found out that the medications had been beneficial for my body, and the trace of cancer had disappeared. Today I can say that when I received the news of my illness my life took a 180 degree turn, it moved all my stability; but, above all, it changed my perspective on life. At some point I came to think that I could have avoided it and I would say to myself: "if I had done such and such exercise, or eaten more of that".

I tell you a secret: you cannot avoid it, I could not foresee it, but I could overcome it, I could take control of my life again. Thanks to cancer I see life in a different way, I faithfully believe that courage was an important factor in facing this problem. Being brave is natural and there is no possibility of not being brave, being afraid is natural, but everyone has it in their own way, and being unbearable at times is a logical consequence of the stress of living through a treatment that in order to heal you needs to destroy you in part.

In my living and in my thinking I am grateful to have gone through this adversity from which I learned a lot; because when the path is easy, each person goes through life naturally, normally, there are few lessons that life gives when nothing happens to you. My illness has taught me to grasp life with strength and with a will to live, it has shown me that life does not end if you do not want it to, and it has taught me to value things more, the simple fact that now I am telling all this is the perfect gift from God and I feel that I have been born again.

I think the key is to see more possibilities than limitations, when we have problems in our life we only see the difficulty, the problem. It is better to change the focus and give more importance to the answer, to the solution in the good and the positive that always, no matter how negative the reality is, no matter how black we see everything, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel. You will never know how strong you are until being strong is your only option. I feel that people run away from adversity, difficulty and it should be the opposite, because they should focus and face what is necessary, because in this way they will meet their new self, their new self they will meet their new, much stronger self.

This part of my life marked a before and after and there is a phrase that accompanied me throughout this process which says "son I will make you strong and confident, but you must stumble to learn, so I will give you human strengths, giving you much love and much confidence in yourself; but I will not remove the stones from your path, because the more stones you find and the heavier they are, the bigger and stronger you will build your castle".

### **Resilience as a tool to change the meaning of life**

Trauma is a deep wound that starts with a first blow received from reality, the second one is the one that is embedded in the representation of reality and causes suffering from the memory of having been humiliated, abandoned, excluded (Cyrułnik, :24). After the event happens, the person can avoid, evade the external situation whether it is blows, pains or other sufferings. This situation can be delayed or even forgotten, but the social environment is structured so that the suffering person is forced to use mechanisms to avoid the situation is forced to use defense mechanisms such as denial, secrecy or anguish (:27).

And resilience is to change the idea that the subject who suffers from what has happened to him, can manage to modify the representation of his misfortune, for this it is necessary to take care of the environment, to act on the family, to shake the cultural routines, the beliefs with which we justify our interpretations and reactions to events such as the disease.

The neuroscientist Boris Cyrułnik:

Resilience is explained as that long-term work, a project to move away from the past, to transmute the pain of the moment to become a remembrance with an emotional distancing. This is possible thanks to some defense mechanisms and their process: a) denial: the person adopts attitudes of not suffering; b) isolation: the person remembers the event by stripping it of affectivity, withdraws into himself; c) flight forward: constantly fighting to avoid the return of the anguish; d) intellectualization: the more I try to understand, the more I master the unbearable emotion; and the most important point, creativity: the person expresses the emotion by expressing it in a way that is not only emotional, but also emotional; e) the person expresses the emotion in an emotional way: the more I try to understand, the more I master the unbearable emotion creativity: the person expresses the unspeakable thanks to the resource of the work of art (: 33).

And returning home does not mean returning to a sweet place or safe from problems, it is returning to the test, but the resilient person can return with less shame of being afraid, can make up for the feeling of not being able to and discover his worth. Resilient people become sensitive to the pain of others because of the lived experience, they attend to others excessively and although they are afraid of receiving love, they experience a strong feeling of gratitude.

### By way of conclusion

The so-called neuroscience of education, neuroscience of well-being and art therapy are the possibilities we now have as alternatives for intervention in social work. The approach of linking narrative qualitative methodologies with others, for example, art therapy and mindfulness meditation practices as a tool of mindfulness for young people, to indicate that, although adversity left them with a wound inscribed in their history, it is not fate and life can be continued with joy. The path that leads from suffering to survival has phases for change.

In this model of significant action with narrative methodologies and creativity, it is a learning proposal to later carry out the intervention exercise accompanied by tools such as: creativity, imagination, compassion, leisure, empathy; which make up a possibility that grants a cognition and emotion contrary to fear or anxiety, with a right to life experience.

The encounter with the interviewees and their testimonies constitute a point of reflection on anthropological ethics about what information and in terms of dense description should be presented to the public the stories of illness, or suffering, in consideration of those young people who have suffered from chronic-infectious diseases.

Social anthropology, as well as social work in the interdisciplinary concatenation rely on qualitative social research techniques, through narrative techniques, to instruct students in intervention work intervention work.

And it has been the qualitative techniques and specifically the reflexivity and narratives, which favor the sensitization of learning and the opening of the narratives of the students themselves, understanding that these exercises are not only anecdotes of life, but acquire a significant force, through another discovery, that of having acquired a great knowledge, called resilience.

### References

- Cyrulnik, B. (2019). *Los patitos feos: la resiliencia. Una infancia infeliz no determina la vida*. Gedisa Editorial: Barcelona.
- González R. A. H. (2021). *Trabajo de Intervención Social con niñas, desde la transdisciplina*. Editorial Universidad de Guadalajara, Centro Universitario Los Lagos: Guadalajara Jalisco, México.
- Hernández M.S.L, Chávez L., Cobos V. R. M. (2022). “Experiencias de vida de jóvenes originarios de los municipios de Poza Rica y Tuxpan Veracruz que afrontan la migración de uno de los padres de familia”. *Problemas sociales en contextos diversos; un análisis desde el Trabajo Social*. (Cota E.B.D., Camacho B.G.I., Domínguez M.M. Coords.). México: ACANITS-UASinaloa. p. 160.
- Hernández M.S.L, Chávez L., Cobos V. R. M. (2019). “Movilidad laboral y sus efectos en la dinámica familiar”. *ECORFAN: Journal-Republic of Cameroon*. pp. 8-16.
- Montagud Mayor, X. y Pérez Cosín J. V. (2015). “La otra mirada: reflexividad e investigación narrativa”. *Métodos y técnicas de investigación en trabajo social*. Madrid, Editorial Grupo 5, pp. 233-255.
- Pérez Monterosas, M. (2018). “Las migraciones en el norte de Veracruz, México. Redes, rutas y ruralidades”. *Si Somos Americanos. Revista de Estudios Transfronterizos: Vol.18, núm. 2*. Santiago de Chile. pp. 34-52.