

Status: Preprint has not been submitted for publication

A critical reflection on the notions of family in migration studies

Igor José de Renó Machado

DOI: 10.1590/SciELOPreprints.1384

This preprint was submitted under the following conditions:

- The authors declare that they are aware that they are solely responsible for the content of the preprint and that the deposit in SciELO Preprints does not mean any commitment on the part of SciELO, except its preservation and dissemination.
- The authors declare that the research that originated the manuscript followed good ethical practices and that the necessary approvals from research ethics committees are described in the manuscript, when applicable.
- The authors declare that the necessary Terms of Free and Informed Consent of participants or patients in the research were obtained and are described in the manuscript, when applicable.
- The authors declare that the preparation of the manuscript followed the ethical norms of scientific communication.
- The authors declare that the manuscript was not deposited and/or previously made available on another preprint server.
- The submitting author declares that all authors responsible for preparing the manuscript agree with this deposit.
- The authors declare that in the event that this manuscript has previously been submitted to a journal and being evaluated, they have received the journal's consent to make the deposit on the SciELO Preprints server.
- The submitting author declares that all authors' contributions are included on the manuscript.
- The authors declare that if the manuscript is posted on the SciELO Preprints server, it will be available under a [Creative Commons CC-BY](#) license.
- The deposited manuscript is in PDF format.
- If the manuscript is being reviewed and published by a journal, the authors declare that they have received authorization from the journal to make this deposit.

Submitted on (YYYY-MM-DD): 2020-10-20

Posted on (YYYY-MM-DD): 2020-10-21

A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE NOTIONS OF FAMILY IN MIGRATION STUDIES

Igor José de Renó Machado*

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7811-2641>

Declaro que não há conflito de interesses no manuscrito

Abstract

In this paper I intend to discuss the issue of the relationship between the vague notion of "family" and a more thorough discussion of "kinship", always based on migratory contexts. Taking as example three cases studied within my research group, I want to highlight a critical reflection on the position of the family in migration studies. I intend to demonstrate how it is more common that the term "family" operate as an extinguisher for the differences and as part of machineries that would have difficulty being maintained in case the issue of kinship was to be seriously taken.

Keywords: Family, kinship, migration

Resumo:

Nesse artigo pretendo discutir a questão da relação entre a noção vaga de "família" e uma discussão mais cuidadosa sobre "parentesco", sempre a partir de contextos migratórios. Usando como exemplo 3 casos estudados no seio do meu grupo de pesquisa, pretendo evidenciar uma reflexão crítica sobre o lugar da família nos estudos migratórios. Pretendo demonstrar como é mais comum que o termo "família" opere como um apagador de diferenças e como parte de maquinários que teriam dificuldade em se manter caso considerassem a sério a questão do parentesco.

Palavras-chave: Família, parentesco, migração

* Titular Professor at Federal University of São Carlos, Brazil (UFSCar).

Introduction

In this speech** I intend to discuss the issue of the relationship between the vague notion of "family" and a more thorough discussion of "kinship", always based on migratory contexts. Taking as example three cases studied within my research group, I want to highlight a critical reflection on the position of the family in migration studies. I intend to demonstrate how it is more common that the term "family" operate as an extinguisher for the differences and as part of machineries that would have difficulty being maintained in case the issue of kinship was to be seriously taken.

The first thing to do is to define what I call 'the machinery': I use the term as a metaphor for the construction of theoretical and analytical models of explanation (sociological, anthropological etc.). This metaphor helps me to think the models as a set of machines, gears and devices organizing a general machinery of thinking. Thus, we need to be aware and understand that the machines are not things in themselves: they are tools we use to think about the events and processes that interest us.

The machinery should be constantly changing, because reality never responds exactly to our models. This leads to several possibilities, and a very common one is the machinery stiffening: in this case, we force reality to fit the models and the machinery is transformed from a tool to aid reflection into something that hinders the understanding of the phenomena. Therefore, machinery helps or hinders. And when it hinders, the result is that what it was supposed to understand, ends up being concealed by the machinery.

The first symptom of stiff, rusty machinery is its tendency to become a "thing." We could call this trend "objectification". An outstanding example

** Paper presented at IUAES 2016 INTER CONGRESS, Palace Hotel, Dubrovnik, Croacia, May 4-9 May, 2016.

for migration studies is the machinery of "ethnicity". Formerly used to think critically about the adamant persistence of difference in contexts where gradual "acculturation" was expected, replacing machinery that hindered the understanding of phenomena (the machinery of acculturation), became itself a "thing". People have ethnicity, ethnicity are objects as palpable as this table. When the machinery turns into thing, it is very easy to confuse the process with the machinery itself, producing new stiffening.

In the case of migration, we have several machines operating more or less in an objectified manner. But this speech is not to criticize today's most hegemonic models. The intention is to think the place of "family" in this machinery, i.e., how the family is a gear in the machinery of explanations based on networks and transnational theory. Being a gear, what do we leave behind when family is only one piece in the machinery? And if, alternatively, we think of a machinery based on kinship idea, what is revealed?

Theories and gears

In the theory of networks (Portes 1995), machinery tries to overcome the economism of the rational action explanations for migration. The point is to explain the displacement in terms of social relations and not the cold calculation of average income differences. Here, social relationships gain prominence and the family is a privileged place of social relations: the family is a fundamental connection of networks, as a primary node of any migratory network. But the family that emerges from this perspective is a generic and universal family, disconnected from any anthropological discussion on kinship. It is assumed a generic family, that articulates any migratory network in order to then understand the network and not the structures that give rise to it (family, friendship, vicinality, all these categories that could be inserted into what we mean by kinship).

In the context of transnational machinery (see Baubock and Faist 2010), the issues revolve around the way and the consequences of the lives of migrants taking place in two or more countries simultaneously with the political and sociological implications of a double engagement. A wide field and uneven of concerns, it is true, but in all the incarnations of transnationalism we see a centrality of the family as the privileged and preferred driver link to this dual affiliation. But just like the theories of networks, the family itself is just a gear in the machinery of linking between two realities, between national policy and the rights of migrants, a link in the narrative for the establishment of national powers, discrimination, and in the very constitution of "world-system".

In both cases, what family is, it is contingent. It is contingent because either it is irrelevant or family is presupposed as some underlying model uncritically smuggled into the machinery. Obviously, the underlying model of family is a Western model based on the nuclear family, on the consanguinity and the importance of the biological. However, if we take the kinship itself as a machinery to think migration, our concerns about what "family" is cannot be contingent: they are central. The first thing to note is that family is a bad name from the start: kinship relationships of the most varied order are left behind when we talk about family. Family carries too much the Western responsibility of being an effective gear. And even the definition of kinship must be redesigned to escape the old traps of anthropological knowledge.

Based on these criticisms from Schneider, a fresh impetus to the studies on kinship came to light, concerned to accept the various and different relationships as kinship relations: friendship, companionship, shared suffering etc. without mentioning the appreciation of same-sex relationships as kinship relations. We have an emphasis on the plasticity of relations as plasticity of kinship. This little digression makes us think how

family is a very limited label for a large set of relationships that could be defined as kinship.

When we think kinship as a machinery to understand migration, we immediately gain what the current models conceal: the diversity of relationships that make up the thousands of migrants kinships. I want to emphasize that the current models assume family as part of other links of sociological attention, but a limited, stiffened and rusty idea of family: a family which, for being so similarly thought, results in an obliteration of the real diversity of migrants kinships. Let us now learn three examples that illustrate something of the diversity of migrant kinships, so as to illustrate how this difference is ignored by the existing machinery.

Two kinship relations or one?

Brazilian people in Portugal still constitute the largest group of migrants in the country. Despite the crisis, the return rates, or remigration, are relatively small, indicating the entrenchment of the Brazilian community in Portugal (Machado 2014). From two sets of fieldwork, I will expose some internal differences to that Brazilian community which indicate the operation of distinguished kinship modes, leading to different ways of relating to the country.

In the first case (Machado 2009), a result from my PhD research carried out almost fifteen years ago, we had a specific population of Brazilians: a set of immigrants mostly men, single, young and living around jobs in the sector of restaurants. They formed a collective of people who knew each other, visited, related and lived the Portuguese life in the city of Porto, in 2000. The lives of these Brazilians were outlined by the Portuguese kinship networks, basically the lower classes. They produced, thus, a specific reality of life, marked by the integration into the labor market and by the

inclusion into Portuguese kinship networks. From this Brazilian universe in Porto, I want to highlight something interesting in this speech: the relationship they constituted with Brazil. For a number of factors that are not to be explained here, clearly allied to the inclusion into Portuguese kinship networks, these immigrants did not think about, and did not visualize in their horizons, the return to Brazil. Coming to Brazil was important, but only as a way to "recharge" something like a Brazilianness index that had importance in the internal relations of these Brazilians in the city of Porto.

In a way, the decision of not returning was deeply connected to the insertion into the Portuguese kinship networks, as well as much of the collective life of these Brazilians had to do with the same networks: girlfriends, employers, customers. What I want to highlight is that this insertion permanently modulated the experience of these Brazilians in the city of Porto.

In the other case I intend to briefly explore, we look at other Brazilian immigrants in Portugal, but now from a different point of view: from the family members who remain in Brazil, more specifically in the city of Governador Valadares. For these migrants, the issue was different: they lived the experience in Portugal as "target migrants", with specific goals to amass during migration. A specific amount for building their homes and setting up a business that would guarantee the family's livelihood. The experience of these immigrants is the result of an obvious kinship order in Governador Valadares. As I have previously demonstrated elsewhere, this kinship order was based on the desire of constituting standalone family units which simultaneously concentrate relationship bundles.

The most common was the migration of married men, leaving their families in Brazil, waiting for their return (although several other configurations were possible). But they all aimed at coming back and reestablish the relations in Valadares. This trip organized around kinship

processes in Valadares had consequences in the way Brazilians lived their lives in Portugal. Some of the consequences that we can highlight are: a tendency to escape the maximum from any public exhibition, longer working hours seeking to accumulate more money, predominant living among Valadares migrants and a greater inclination to join Brazilian Protestant religious communities in Portugal.

The experience of these people from Valadares in Portugal is, in a sense, a reverse of Brazilian life in Porto: if the latter were keen to show themselves as Brazilian to get the opportunity in the labor market that valued such Brazilianness, the former try to conceal any Brazilianness, as a way to not jeopardize the original migration plans.

We can see how Brazilian migrations in Portugal produce completely distinct realities and the kinship machinery causes this difference to emerge, which would probably be less important with other machinery. Both transnationalism and the theory of networks (or variations of sociology of migrations) would tend to look more at other processes rather than look at kinship orders producing such different realities, to an extent that we can say they are radically different. They are kinship orders producing very dissonant realities.

Okinawans and Japanese in transit

Nadia Kubota (2014) shows us how the relationship between immigrants from Okinawa and from "traditional" Japan has always been tense in Campo Grande (MS/ Brazil). Living together was difficult, and the Second World War marked a profound rupture between "defeatist" and "victorist", between those who believed in Japan's defeat and those who did not - conflict known for having generated Shindo Renmei, a small victorist army aiming at punishing the "defeatist". In Campo Grande, just like in

several other places of Japanese/Okinawan migration, there has been a division between Okinawans/ “defeatist” and Japanese/ “victorist”.

This division gave rise to two distinct associations, to lives lived in parallel. In a large notarial survey, Kubota was able to identify that marriage rates between Okinawans and Japanese in Campo Grande have always been minimal, lower than marriage rates between Okinawans and Brazilian and Japanese and Brazilian. Ethnography shows a systematic process of non-relationship between Okinawans and Japanese (Naichi), identified in the refusal to make relatives, to produce kinship. The cases of marriage between Japanese and Okinawan are extremely rare. We can see here the kinship as a certain political expression of colonial relations between Japan and Okinawa. And this expression in Brazil persisted almost throughout the twentieth century.

But something happened from the end of the twentieth century: the migration of those Naichis and Okinawans to Japan (not to Okinawa, in Japan). In these new streams, the flowing of this entire Nikkei population to Japan (either descending from Naichis or Okinawans, or spouses with no bloodline) put them before a society resistant to the difference, experiencing intense racism and prejudice. This experience of painful processes eventually diminished (or mitigated) the internal differences between Okinawans and Naichis, constituting Brazilian communities in Japan that crossed the dividing lines in Brazil.

In Japan, we have indications of kinship blending what was separated in Brazil. Thus, we see two distinct forms of kinship organizations, having the migration itself as the engine of change. New ways of life in Japan produced new forms of kinship. Therefore, a family of Okinawan parentage in Brazil is not the same as it is in Japan today. Migration produced distinguished kinship systems, which now radically affect the lives of both the people who have gone to Japan, and those who stayed, as Kubota states:

those who stay begin to reorganize their set of relations based more on the neighborhood than on the blood. Members of families emptied by emigration tend to join and form new families. We are, therefore, talking about a third kinship system that seems to still retain something of the division between Okinawans and Japanese.

Final considerations

What do these three examples tell us about family and kinship in a migratory context? What do they say about the prevailing machinery today? What is, specifically, my point in this speech? Let's start by the second question: about the dominant machinery. The intention here is not to criticize or say they are outdated, or anything to this effect. The purpose is to expose such working machinery and demonstrate that they operate with relatively emptied notions of family, from general considerations and different intentions. None of them wants to explain the family itself, but other things (from the nation-state to a group of migrant social relations). This means that, in order to achieve their explanatory goals and, thus, shed light on certain issues, this machinery leaves the family gear in the gloom.

Distinctions between the two Brazilian kinships in Portugal and the three kinships generated by the Okinawan experience in Brazil and Japan would simply be contingent to other analytical intentions. They would not appear as the differences they produce on a daily basis. And here, I answer the question about my point in this speech: a machinery centered on kinship allows me to bring out these so intense and meaningful differences. This way, I place an anthropological conception of kinship in favor of highlighting the differences created by the various kinships migrants.

And what these examples tell us about the family and the migrant kinship is ultimately something we should stand out as central to a number of

migrant experiences: the set of relationships involving more affective, moral and financial investment are the relations of kinship that are not obvious, though. These do not follow any model: the same nationality produces different kinships in Portugal, depending on where you invest emotionally: either in Portuguese networks or in the maintenance of the home networks; the same historical process, such as the migration of Okinawans to Brazil, followed by the migration of their descendants to Japan, more than half a century later, generated three distinct kinship systems that have been changing and significantly affecting the life experience of these people. We, therefore, restate an ethnographic approach to give any meaning to the different notions of family that migration entails, produces and transforms throughout its course.

References

BAUBÖCK, Rainer; FAIST, Thomas (Ed.). *Diaspora and transnationalism: concepts, theories and methods*. Amsterdam University Press, 2010.

CARSTEN, Janet. *After kinship*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

DEZEM, Rogério, and Maria Luiza Tucci Carneiro. *Shindô-renmei: terrorismo e repressão*. Arquivo do Estado, Imprensa Oficial, 2000.

KEBBE, Victor Hugo. *Quando os mortos chamam - Parentesco, Imigração e Religião vistos nas práticas da Yuta no Brasil*. Projeto de pós-doutorado, FAPESP, São Paulo, 2013.

KUBOTA, Nádia. *Okinawanos e não-okinawanos em Campo Grande: Relações de Parentesco e Famílias*. Qualificação de doutorado, UFSCar, São Carlos, 2014.

MACHADO, I. J. R. Cárcere Público: Processos de exotização entre brasileiros no Porto. 1. ed. Lisboa: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2009. v. 1. 256p

MACHADO, I. J. R. O ponto de vista das famílias: etnografia sobre os emigrantes internacionais valadarenses (Brasil). Revista Migrações, v. 05, p. 155-168, 2009.

MACHADO, I. J. R. Reordenações da Casa no contexto migratório de Governador Valadares, Brasil.. Etnográfica (Lisboa), v. 14, p. 5-26, 2010.

MACHADO, I. J. R. ; ALMEIDA, Alexandra Gomes de ; REIS, Ellen Saraiva . Algumas características do fluxo migratório de brasileiros de Governador Valadares para Portugal. Antropológicas (Porto), v. 11, p. 111-126, 2009.

MACHADO, I. J. R. ; REIS, Ellen Saraiva . Algumas conclusões acerca do fluxo de valadarenses para Portugal. Teoria & Pesquisa, v. 16, p. 153-166, 2007.

MACHADO, I. J. R. O futuro do passado: imigrantes brasileiros em Portugal e diferentes entrelaçamentos. In REMHU, n^a 44, 2014 (no prelo).

MACHADO, I. J. R. Imigração em Portugal. Estudos Avançados, v. 20, p. 119-135, 2006.

MACHADO, I. J. R. Interação das fronteiras e o ponto de vista etnográfico: dinâmicas migratórias recentes em Governador Valadares. Horizontes Antropológicos, v. 15, p. 167-187, 2009b.

PORTES, Alejandro (1995b), "Economic sociology and the sociology of immigration: a conceptual overview", in A. Portes (Ed.), The Economic Sociology of Immigration. Essays on Networks, Ethnicity and Entrepreneurship, Nova Iorque, Russel Sage Foundation, pp. 1-41

SAHLINS, Marshall. What Kinship is-and is Not. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

SAITO, Hiroshi; WILLEMS, Emílio. Shindo Renmei—um problema de aculturação. *Revista de Sociologia*, 1947.

SCHNEIDER, David M. *American kinship: A cultural account*. University of Chicago Press, 1980.

SCHNEIDER, David Murray. *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*. University of Michigan Press, 1984.