Social Suffering and Return Migrations: A Conceptual Proposal

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Abstract. This article highlights how social suffering, conceived of as a manifestation of social oppression and injustice incorporated into the individual, has attributes that are evident in the different stages of the migratory return, which are marked by transnational and multilocal processes. To this end, the VIA Model – composed of the analytical axes of vulnerability, uncertainty and assistance – allows for the description, interpretation and analysis of social suffering during the return process through a multilevel analysis that connects the perceptions and experiences of the actors with structural inequalities.

Keywords: Return migration; social integration; suffering; social mobility; migrants; emigration and immigration.

1. Introduction

Return migration has generated more and more academic and political interest in recent decades, especially in the context of the Great Recession, which began in 2007 in Europe and the United States.[1] This crisis, with its serious consequences for unemployment rates among migrant populations, has triggered a reconfiguration of flows and an increase in returns and remigrations. Given this situation, many migrants have decided to return earlier than planned; for some, this has meant a break with their migration project, with considerable impact on their life and family courses.

In this context, most sending and receiving countries have implemented a series of measures to promote or support **voluntary** return (return to the country of origin as a result of the actor's own decision[2] as opposed to an expulsion order stemming from non-compliance with the administrative regulations imposed by receiving countries).

In the academic sphere, the transnational perspective has posed significant analytical challenges for the study of mobility, as many migrants organize their lives in social spaces that transcend national borders (Glick-Schiller, Basch, & Szanton, 1992). Based on this approach, return migration should be understood as a new migratory movement that is thought out (intention to return), undertaken (act of migrating/returning), and implies the individual's (re)adaptation to the territorial and social space to which they are returning. Moreover, it is realized through experiences of mobility that cross borders and can represent one stage in the migration trajectory, or else a **circular** pattern (Rivera, 2013). Returnees do not solely constitute groups of individuals united through ethnic links, but actors immersed in networks of relations capable of mobilizing resources (tangible and intangible) in a transnational space (Durand, 2004; Cassarino, 2004). In this context, migration networks and transnational social fields are configured as central elements (Vertovec, 2004).

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1   Internationally, the absence of databases and statistics on return migration makes it difficult to address this phenomenon with any degree of precision. However, Spain is one country that keeps Residential Variation Statistics (National Institute of Statistics) which, albeit approximately, make it possible to study migration flows (returnees in most cases, as various empirical studies have shown, but also remigration to a third country).

2   However, because return occasionally takes place amid situations of marked vulnerability in the destination country (irregular legal status, fear of deportation, lack of income, etc.) or because conditions in the country of origin lead to the individual's return in one way or another (for example, illness of a direct family member), it is difficult to measure the extent to which mobility is voluntary. For this reason, although the analytical model we propose could be applied, with some qualifications, to the study of "involuntary" or "forced" return, in this article we focus primarily on returns that are the result of a decision and not deportation.

The integrative vision of the transnational perspective is ratified by the theory of migratory circularity, for which return is part of a bi-directional or multi-directional migratory process between countries. In this way, return need not spell the end of the migration project. It could be a prelude to new episodes of remigration, and so would constitute a temporary return (Gualda, 2012; Jáuregui & Recaño, 2014). Newland (2009) points to how circular migration is not permanent, but implies migration from one country to another and allows for the repetition of migratory movement (successive comings and goings, cyclical or periodic movements, which at times are seasonal). This type of mobility, according to Constant and Zimmermann (2007), concerns not only certain formulas for managing labor migration, but is part of the increasing diversification of spontaneous forms of mobility adopted by migrants of differing legal status (Triandafyllidou, 2011).

Taking these elements as a starting point, this article first presents a review of the theoretical perspectives on return migration, exploring the different stages of the phenomenon: the intention to return, the act of returning, and the process of reintegrating into the country of origin; the second part is centered on the concept of social suffering; while the final part proposes a conceptual framework that places social suffering on the return-migration research agenda. The article underscores how social suffering possesses attributes that cut across the different stages of return migration, allowing these stages to be understood as a single phenomenon: multilevel, multicausal, transversal, multitemporal, multilocal, and transnational. Therefore, to analyze this phenomenon, we propose the VIA model, which is composed of three analytical axes: vulnerability, uncertainty, and support and assistance.

2. Analytical frameworks and social mechanisms of the stages of return migration

The literature on return migration makes a distinction, analytically and empirically, between return intention (motivation) and returning per se (behavior). According to Sayad (2000), the idea of returning is present in the imaginary of all migrants, and often constitutes a desire that, given social, economic, or political constraints, will not happen or will be put off indefinitely. Thus, return is a constituent element of the migrant condition and one that the migration project constantly undergoes, linking the places of emigration and immigration. Thus, return intention should be understood as a process during which temporal planning (the individual has more or less determined the moment of return) and logistical planning (the individual mobilizes resources to carry out the return) occur, leading up to the moment of return to the country of origin, whether permanently or temporarily.

Among the most studied issues in the literature about return intention are the determinants of motivation and behavior. Various theoretical perspectives have attempted to identify the mechanisms that explain the reasons why migrants decide to return to their countries of origin (return intention), and the motivations for actually doing so (return). However, this is a complex phenomenon and the debate about determinants is ongoing in that the empirical findings have not led to a consensus on the matter. Moreover, some authors suggest that the determinants of return intention could be different than those which motivated the return itself (Waldorf, 1995).

2.1 Thinking about going back: the intention of returning to the country of origin

From the neoclassical perspective, return intention is the result of a rational evaluation of the benefits (tangible and intangible) that migrants can expect to obtain. Authors such as Van Baalen and Müller (2008) identify a dynamic of inconsistency in the evolution of return intention, associated with the fact that migrants tend to be overly optimistic regarding their capacity to save and achieve the objectives related to their projects. Given this disconnect between expectations and reality, their plans undergo continual revision and, on occasion, the decision to return ends up being postponed.

Other theories point to the importance of individual characteristics in explaining return intention. One such example is the level of education. Although the empirical results show distinct correlations between return intention and schooling, for some authors, possessing higher qualifications reduces the probabilities of expressing an intention to return (DaVanzo & Morrison, 1981; Curran & Rivero-Fuentes, 2003). However, others (Constant & Massey, 2003; King & Newbold, 2008) argue that there is a positive relationship between these variables. The same discrepancies can be seen in the case of legal status, because little is known about its effect on return intention (Agadjanian, Gorina, & Menjívar, 2014). On the other hand, from a transnational perspective, some authors observe that contact with the country of origin and transnational economic practices are positively linked to return intention (Carling & Erdal, 2014; De Haas & Fokkema, 2011).

Family and gender perspectives also play an important role in return intention. Women have a higher propensity to express such an intention, given that their caregiving responsibilities to their children and other family members are an element of strong social pressure (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991; Reagan & Olsen, 2000; Ravuri, 2014). Other studies find that the well-being of migrants' children can underlie return intention, while still others point to the opposite effect (Parreñas, 2001, 2005). Ultimately, given

the social pressure to improve the living conditions of their children or family members, migrants often end up postponing their decision to return.

Assimilationist/interventionist theories center on variables related to the length of stay in the destination country, and to the social ties migrants establish there. From this standpoint, the greater the time of residence, the lower the likelihood of wishing to return (Nekby, 2006; Jensen & Petersen, 2007). The same is true of ethnic communities already established in the destination country. The stronger the social networks, the weaker the return intention (Haug, 2008; Agadjanian *et al.*, 2014). However, such behavior can be altered under the influence of contextual factors, such as economic crises in the destination country. In this case, unemployed migrants are more inclined to express an intention to return (Constant & Massey, 2003).

When it comes to explaining return intentions, relatively few studies simultaneously incorporate variables related to identity and to transnational practices (Bilgili & Siegel, 2014). With a view to approximating both perspectives, scholars such as Carling and Pettersen (2014) use a theoretical framework to assess how integration and transnationalism overlap in explaining return intentions. These researchers show that intentions are conditioned by the level of attachment that individuals have to their countries of origin and residence.

Although none of these theoretical perspectives taken alone can explain the complexity of return, all are in agreement that no single mechanism determines the phenomenon. Rather, there is an interrelated series of motivations that contains micro-elements, which can be individual characteristics (gender, life cycle, legal status, etc.) and meso elements, such as variables related to integration (cultural attachment, links to the job market, duration of the migration project, etc.) as well as transnational links (transnational practices and/or networks, etc.).

In this regard, the concept of double embeddedness (King, 2002) offers outstanding contributions to the study of the causes of return intention. This approach takes into consideration the interplay between the different levels of analysis and the way in which agency (migrants' individual strategies) interconnects with meso- or macro-structures (the state or other institutions, as well as economic contexts) (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, & Taylor, 1998, p. 281; Morawska, 2012, pp. 65-70).

2.2 The main factors that influence the decision to return

If, for the neoclassical perspective, return intention is a product of the rational calculation of the benefits that migrants might obtain upon their return, the decision to return could be a consequence of the experience of failure in the destination country (Harris & Todaro, 1970). For the new economy

of labor migration, return supposes a strategy in which the individual weighs the attainment of economic goals set at the time of emigration. In this way, the decision to return will be based on the extent to which return compensates the migrant and the family as a whole (Stark, 1991; Adda, Dustmann, & Mestres, 2006).

Just as in the case of the determinants of return intention, the decision to return can be explained through the configuration of three levels of analysis (Faist, 1997). First, macro-structural implications operate in the areas of origin and of destination, and encourage or constrain the decision. The structural approach shows how institutional obstacles and the context of opportunities represent key variables in the decision to return (Jeffery & Murison, 2011). Thus, the level of economic development in the countries of origin or situations of crisis in the destination societies are crucial aspects (Cerase, 1974; Bastia, 2011). The micro level is focused on the normative and psychosocial factors that determine personal decisions (perceptions, motivations, aspirations, and expectations) (Ammasari & Black, 2001). Both levels are connected through the meso level, which encompasses social relations and social capital through an analysis of resources mobilized between groups, networks, and organizations. It is an essential aspect in analyzing migration trends (Faist, 1997).

As to social networks, authors stress the mobilization of resources and the role played by links between the societies of origin and destination once return becomes possible (Durand & Massey, 2003; Rivera, 2013). In these terms, Cassarino (2004) establishes a relationship between the provision/mobilization of tangible and intangible resources (level of preparedness) and the post-return processes. Cobo (2008), for his part, also underlines these aspects and places emphasis on the series of stages that make up the migration cycle, not just on the moment prior to return. Thus, migration experiences equip new immigrants with assets in terms of human capital (knowledge, skills), physical assets (remittances), or social assets (social networks). The effectiveness of these assets will depend on the ability of individuals to capitalize on them once they have returned, as well as the value they acquire in the place to which they return.

2.3   Going back: a holistic look at post-return

When analyzing the post-return, a key aspect is the sustainability of the (re)insertion: a) on an individual level (the returnee's adaptation or reinsertion in the place of origin); b) in terms of community development (the subject's "contributions" upon returning) (Bastia, 2011); and c) at the level of macroeconomic and political indicators (the role of the state in managing return and reintegration) (Black & Gent, 2006). In this regard, it is worth

noting that for many migrants, post-return processes involve starting from scratch in environments that are practically new to them. After many years of possible disconnect (physical and/or social), the contexts that they left behind can become hostile spaces. On occasion, these readaptation processes are even harder, as the strength of push factors can compound precarious labor, and often social, insertion prior to emigration. Thus, more than a reincorporation, the post-return can be an incorporation for individuals who had already experienced difficulties fitting into the social and productive structure of their country of origin.

While there has been copious scientific output on the models of incorporation, insertion, or assimilation of migrant individuals into receptor societies, studies about the reverse process faced by returnees are scant (Rivera, 2015). In recent years the issue has become increasingly relevant, in view of the heavy flows of migrant returnees from countries hit by economic crises. Although return can be regarded as voluntary, there are some returnees who take the decision to return having been "pushed" by the vulnerability of their situation in the destination country. These returnees do not have access to an accumulation of economic resources, and are more materially and psychosocially vulnerable than earlier flows of returnees.

While the neoclassical perspective and the new economics of labor migration approach the phenomena of migration and return by relating them to subjects' rational and economic decisions, reflection from these perspectives does not consider the processes of reincorporation into the country of origin. For the structural approach, return should not be studied simply from particular experiences, but in reference to social and institutional factors in the country of origin. As such, the starting point should be the existing correlation between the economic, political, and social reality in the country of origin and the expectations of the returnee.

Consequently, there is often a mismatch between reality and an individual's expectations, since, much of the time, the returnee has incomplete information about the environment to which they are going back (Cerase, 1974; Gmelch, 1980). This can make the processes of reincorporation difficult to accomplish. Moreover, structural conditions in the place of origin determine the capacity to apply capital accumulated abroad, and, thus, the level of success of the return (Gmelch, 1980).

The lack of information transmitted between the sending and receiving countries is challenged by the transnational perspective and social network theory, which defend the existence of regular and consecutive social contact over time between those who have remained in the country of origin and those who have migrated (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999; Rivera, 2009;

Schramm, 2011). Thus, the provision and maintenance of social capital in the country of origin can favor information flow and access to resources for reinsertion into working and community life (Aznar, 2009; Nieto, 2011; Schramm, 2011).

However, regardless of access to information about the context to which a migrant is returning, the country's capacity, or lack thereof, to absorb the skills acquired abroad is a key element in explaining the incorporation of returnees (Conway & Cohen, 1998; Alfaro & Izaguirre, 2010; Lobo, 2011). Also of relevance is the individual's capacity for innovation (Cassarino, 2008; De Bree, Davids, & De Haas, 2010), as well as the sociocultural mismatches between the job markets in the two contexts.

For her part, Aznar (2009) casts an eye on the place of return. She notes that the geographical locations in which returnees are concentrated, and their relationships with urban contexts, are important insofar as they undergo structural changes such as urbanization processes, internal migration, transformations in local job markets, sociocultural shifts influenced by migration, legislative changes, and so on.

Finally, it is worth referring to the subjective meanings and identities of the returnees. To this end, it is important to analyze the social recognition of these persons in the urban contexts into which they are (re)incorporated, as well as exploring the extent to which their symbolic references can be adapted, or not, to the community. These questions could generate new dimensions of social exclusion as social relations become more complex (Arowolo, 2000; Aznar, 2009). Another relevant aspect is the reconstruction of social relations in the home environment (Aznar, 2009). Family and personal relationships require new dynamics after returning, which requires processes of (re)adaptation, adjustment of expectations, and conflict management (Alfaro & Izaguirre, 2010). In those cases in which offspring remain in the country of origin during their parents' (and especially their mother's) migration experience, the returnee's readaptation process and individual well-being may be marked by efforts to recover the maternal-filial ties that have been affected by the experience (Parella & Petroff, 2016).

When addressing the variables in question, it is vital to study returnees not as a group with homogeneous characteristics, but as individuals who despite sharing the experience of returning, manifest different motivations, migration trajectories, and experiences of returning. Although this has different implications for the subjects, it is necessary to think about the reincorporation processes in the place of origin from a holistic perspective in terms of the different factors at play (Rivera, 2015). To this end, taking into account the interaction between the structural level and the individual

(the socio-symbolic benchmark) is fundamental. This interaction demonstrates the diversity of the return itineraries based on other variables, such as gender, age, class, ethnicity, educational level, family composition, etc. The changes that returnees experience following their migration experience, as well as the transformations in their places of origin and in their family and social relations, pose significant adaptation challenges.

Van Houte and Davids (2008) propose a conceptual framework for analyzing sustainability of return based on the concept of re-embeddedness. This concept conceives of return as a process and explains post-return in terms of sustainability, based on a process of mixed embeddedness. While it was Granovetter (1985) who coined the concept of embeddedness and Rath and Kloosterman (1999) who devised the mixed embeddedness model, Van Houte and Davids (2008) were the first to apply this category to the analysis of return.

These authors operationalize the concept based on three interrelated, mutually reinforcing concepts: economics, psychology, and social networks. "Economic embeddedness" refers to the extent to which a returnee has access to basic resources, such as income, housing, land, transportation, education, healthcare, etc.; "psychological embeddedness" measures an individual's means and ability to acquire feelings of belonging and connection to society; and finally, "social embeddedness" refers to the availability and configuration of social networks that provide information, make it possible to share personal and intimate relations, and mobilize resources. Most returnees will avail themselves of a support network that is restricted to the nuclear family. For others, meanwhile, belonging to a religious or associative entity has a substitution effect in the absence of social contacts.

For the specific case of return, far from considering only the stage at which migrants return to their place of origin, Van Houte and Davids (2008) look at all aspects of the migration cycle together, considering it to be an intrinsically transnational phenomenon. Moreover, opportunities for returnees depend to a large extent on the contextual factors they face upon their return, as well as their living conditions during the migration stage. This transnational embeddedness explains that, in the face of precarious and restrictive conditions at the destination (irregularity, obstacles to mobility, precariousness, etc.) the effects on the prospects of re-embeddedness are negative (Van Houte & Davids, 2008).

3. Social suffering and return migration

The reasons and determinants behind intentionality, the return itself, and subsequent (re)integration have been subject to extensive academic debate.

Finding an approach that can integrate the micro, meso, and macro levels, as well as different temporalities and their social spaces (the pre-return, the decision to return, and the post-return), continues to be a major challenge facing studies on the topic. The complexity of return migration, marked by transnationalism and multilocality, as well as the participation of different individual and collective actors in multiple dynamics, poses different analytical challenges. At the same time, these elements make return migration a phenomenon exposed to invisibilities, stereotypes, and stigmas. To contribute to these analytical challenges, we propose a conceptual framework of return migration based on the concept of **social suffering**.[3]

3.1 Social suffering: concept, agenda, and potentialities

Social suffering is of central social importance, in that many contemporary problems cannot be interpreted in all their complexity without considering the analysis of their psychosocial consequences. Based on the use of this concept, a transdisciplinary project has progressively emerged, drawing on different disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology (Renault, 2010, pp. 221-228). The use of this broad space, and more intensive use of social suffering as a concept in the social sciences, has been established for more than two decades, pioneered by Bourdieu (1999), Kleinman, Das and Lock (1997), and Das (1997). This project has also come to incorporate different subdisciplines, such as medical anthropology (Kleinman *et al.*, 1997), literature (Hron, 2009), religious studies (Bowker, 1997), political anthropology (Auyero & Swistun, 2009), psychodynamics of work (Dejours, 2009) and the anthropology of migration (Sayad, 2004).

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3   The importance of analyzing return migration based on social suffering has emerged as part of the project "Migración de retorno y remigración: nuevas dinámicas migratorias de marroquíes y bolivianos y los retos para la gestión de la movilidad" (Remimab; Programa Estatal de I+D+I Orientada a los Retos de la Sociedad, Mineco 2014-2017, Ministerio de Economía e Innovación, CSO2013-40834-R, Spain). This project analyzes the dynamics of mobility that have arisen in the context of the economic crisis in Spain. For the analysis of the migration dynamics of Bolivian migrants, a mixed design was used. A survey was conducted of returnees to the cities of Cochabamba and Santa Cruz, with a total sample of 400 persons (200 from each city). This quantitative stage was complemented by a qualitative one involving 20 in-depth interviews with individuals who have returned to these cities, whether through assisted return programs or otherwise. This analysis has yielded empirical content for the proposed theoretical model (VIA), as well as enabling the identification of different returnee profiles: one in which return is accomplished without suffering due to high levels of resilience and strong personal networks that allow swift and normalized working, family, and emotional re-incorporation; one of relative suffering, where institutional support (in the form of assisted return programs) and family support exist, but there remains a mismatch in the emotional reincorporation that precipitates vulnerability and uncertainty, with major consequences for labor and residential reincorporation; and finally, a profile marked by social suffering where, despite institutional support, the lack of other (social and economic) resources have an impact on emotional and family incorporation, with serious consequences in terms of vulnerability and uncertainty that severely affect other areas of life.

As well as these recent fields of study, **social suffering** has been a central component in the tradition of critical theory, especially in the writings of Adorno (2001) and Honneth (2010).

Although this concept has allowed for the building of some bridges — as well as giving rise to some divergences — the notion has been characterized by its great polysemy, which has hampered its operational use (Anderson, 2014, p. 4) and its comparability with different studies. Moreover, it is a term that is difficult to conceptualize given the varied, intense, and negative experiences and processes involved.

According to Anderson (2014), suffering can vary in type, intensity, duration, source, and awareness. Starting with a basic typology, it is possible to distinguish between physical suffering (the result of threat or damage to physical well-being) and mental suffering (a product of distress originating in cognitive or affective self-identity). In this regard, physical suffering refers to the concept of pain, while mental suffering concerns the emotional and the cognitive (thoughts that cause suffering) (Anderson, 2014, 2015; Francis, 2006).

However, it is important to stress the social elements that influence physical and mental suffering. According to Kleinman (1997), all suffering is social to some extent; but what marks out social suffering is its origin and the way in which it is incorporated by the individual. When suffering is collective or is linked, directly or indirectly, to an institutional or social context (local and global economies, political environment, social relations, culture, etc.), it can be said to be **social suffering** (Kleinman, 2010). Social suffering is the process by which social forces cause threats, deprivation, or damage to the identity or body of the individual as a result of direct institutional action (or inaction), social conditions or situations of vulnerability, or certain cultural conditions (Anderson, 2014, p. 2; Kleinman *et al.*, 1997; Wilkinson, 2012, p. 146).

In this way, social suffering encompasses any significant suffering that occurs in a social context and which necessarily affects other persons in a negative way (Kleinman *et al.*, 1997). Discrimination, poverty, and treatment as "second-class citizens" are some examples of social suffering (Anderson, 2015, p. 5). Thus, the concept of suffering is centered on how the experiences of pain or penury are caused, constituted, or conditioned by the social circumstances in which a person has to live (Wilkinson, 2015, p. 45).

Social suffering can be analyzed based on indicators such as social exclusion, discrimination, persecution, shame, relative deprivation, unemployment, and discrimination (Wilkinson, 2005; Anderson, 2014; Bourdieu, 1999); it normally occurs alongside other types of suffering (mental

and physical), and the links between them can be captured analytically (Anderson, 2014, p. 2). For instance, poverty or the lack of an adequate healthcare system (social suffering) explain, to a large extent, the increase in the number of infectious diseases that in turn cause physical and mental suffering. Consequently, studying social suffering aids in the identification of what institutions do to create or worsen social and health problems. According to Anderson (2015, p. 4), different types of social suffering tend to co-occur more frequently when the suffering is more intense, potentially giving rise to situations of **total suffering** in which physical, mental, and social suffering occur simultaneously (Saunders, 2006).

Moreover, suffering is not socially distributed in an equal manner, in that there may be differences according to geography-territory, gender, ethnicity, and so forth. The further one is from economic, political, and social power, the greater the possibility of experiencing suffering (Anderson, 2014, p. 11), given that a significant part thereof stems from material scarcity (and inequality). Here, we refer to specific institutional arrangements whose structures of power can perpetuate existing inequalities and cause suffering in individuals. In response to this, one of the fundamental characteristics of social suffering is that it is possible to prevent through public policies and profound social transformations (Fancher, 2003; Anderson, 2014, p. 69). Specifically, this concerns the attribute of reversibility and inevitability that links social suffering to social injustice and, thus, to human rights, legal norms and status, and economic and social development (Wronka, 2008; Anderson, 2014, p. 71).

The paradox of social suffering existing in a world with the resources to eradicate it (a central issue for critical theory - for example, in Adorno, 2001) means that the concept is used with the intention of analyzing the interrelations between the social and subjective aspects of experiences of injustice (Renault, 2009, p. 160). Social suffering occurs when there is a negative experience (whose causes are social) that gives rise to certain mismatches of expectations in individuals. This is linked directly with the expectation that individuals have regarding the "good life" and what would constitute an adequate social protection system (Anderson, 2014, p. 62).

On the other hand, it is worth noting that the same mechanisms that create social injustice are able to silence social suffering, producing "muted subjects" (Renault, 2009, p. 62). Thus, the character of social suffering brings with it a difficulty for the actors to construct definitions and narratives (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 117). In this regard, ethnographic practice can recognize social suffering and make it heard (Das, 1995; Wilkinson, 2005). Comparative research on quality of life complements qualitative studies

about social suffering in that it enables analysis of social situations based on constant and readily comparable social variables. This serves to legitimize the need to link social suffering to debates about social justice. This articulation is fundamental and necessary (Anderson, 2015, p. 3), so that ethnography contributes to quantitative quality of life studies as a way of reducing the risk of symbolic violence borne of reductionist quantitative categories, which end up labeling some collectives (and their negative experiences) as "problematic" (Bourdieu, 1999, pp. 3-5).

The complementarity between studies on social suffering and those on quality of life is analogous to that defended by Wilkinson (2005, pp. 11-12) between studies on risk and those on social suffering. However, it is important not to fall into the trap of rationalizing suffering, which can act as a tool of social control and domination (Wilkinson, 2013). Other possible risks are mediatization (distant suffering) and commodification (commodified suffering) (Boltanski, 1999). According to Boltanski, the mediatization of suffering represents an obstacle to solidarity and commitment to those who suffer, given that it promotes an erosion of the sense of co-responsibility.

The concept of social suffering allows us, through the "feeling individual" approach (Wilkinson, 2013), to connect individual experiences with structural disjunctions. Thus, the influence and causality that social suffering exerts on physical and mental suffering is of significant methodological consequence. Through the analysis of actors' perceptions of suffering, linked to the subjective importance of social conditions, it is possible to conduct a multilevel analysis of social suffering (Francis, 2006; Petroff, De la Torre, Piqueras, & Speroni, 2016).

In view of the objectives of this article, we will now outline several of the strengths of the social suffering perspective.

- It serves as the basis for multilevel analysis: by connecting social conditions and individual experiences through an approach that takes into account the structural, relational, and individual levels.
- It recognizes social agency: by emphasizing the agency of individuals and their capacity for resilience, so that the actors are not blamed for their own suffering.
- It promotes critical analysis: by recognizing suffering in different social situations, including in cases where there are institutional policies in place designed to combat it, but end up compounding it (Anderson, 2014, p. 6).
- It promotes a sympathetic and humanistic position on the part of the researcher: by describing, in an empathetic manner, the consequences

of complex social configurations, bringing to light the invisible dimension of social suffering.
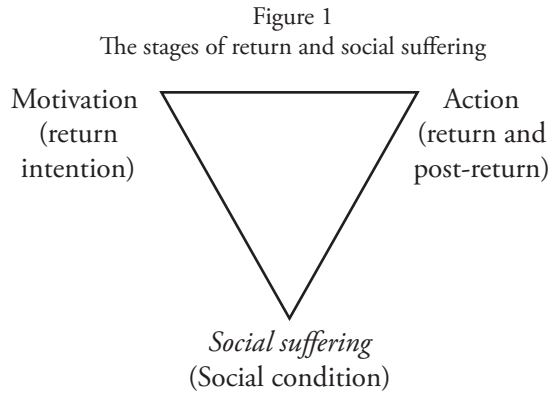
3.2 The analysis of return migrations based on social suffering

The purpose of this final section is to build possible bridges between processes of return migration and the social suffering approach. We do not conceive of return migration here as a distressing or negative process for subjects limited by the precariousness of material and social life, but concede that it is the nature of return and the experience of structural dysfunctions and injustices that can lead to different contents of social suffering. Thinking about return holistically by incorporating all stages of the process, as well as acknowledging the complexity of mobility by assuming that it can respond to multiple factors at different levels, allows simplistic dichotomies — such as the explanation of return in dichotomous terms of success/failure — to be overcome.

The coherence of the social suffering agenda applied to migration studies lies in the particularity of the migrant experience: navigation in social worlds with different "aspirational capacities" (Appadurai, 2004). This mobility between worlds, which are more than mere geographical spaces, has great potential for the study of return (voluntary or forced) from the perspective of social suffering. If social suffering results in the individual incorporating certain configurations of social forces, then it is possible to analyze the experience of suffering and ultimately identify and reverse the institutional arrangements that enable these negative experiences.

Most studies on return migration focus specifically on the causes and determinants of the decision to return (the migrants' agency and attributes in the face of structural contingencies); meanwhile, little is known about how returnees and those who decide to return interpret and undergo this decision-making process and lived experience. The analysis of the consequences of suffering for individuals (Wilkinson, 2013) is fundamental for understanding the relationship between agency and structure in international mobility.
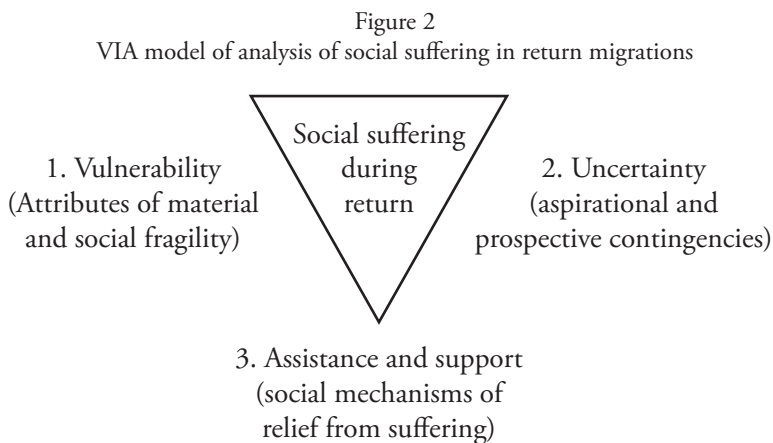
From the perspective of social suffering, it is possible to complement the analysis of the reasons (for the desire to return and the return itself) and the resources (set of skills and capacities and accumulated stocks of financial and social resources) together with an analysis of the **embodied social conditions**, which underlie the reasons and the resources and their particular realizations (Figure 1).

Figure 1
The stages of return and social suffering

Motivation   Action
(return   (return and
intention)   post-return)

Social suffering
(Social condition)

Social suffering, as it is conceived here, possesses attributes that cut across the different stages of return migration, making it a concept suited to the study of the phenomenon of return. It allows for an approach that is:
- Multilevel (individual, interactions and structural and conjuctural conditions)
- Multicausal
- Transversal and multitemporal
- Multilocal and transnational
- Multiformat
- Comprehensive, reflexive, and critical

To apply the social suffering framework to the analysis of different stages of return, we propose the VIA model (Figure 2).

Figure 2
VIA model of analysis of social suffering in return migrations

Social suffering
1. Vulnerability   during   2. Uncertainty
(Attributes of material   return   (aspirational and
and social fragility)   prospective contingencies)

3. Assistance and support
(social mechanisms of
relief from suffering)

The VIA model is made up of three analytical axes that serve as the basis for describing, interpreting, and analyzing social suffering in the different

stages of return (intention, action, post-return). The first axis, vulnerability, encompasses the set of attributes that denote material or social fragility. These attributes are linked to the abilities and desires of individuals, their social and legal status in the different territories, and their economic resources and social capital. The second axis is uncertainty, which refers to the expected and existing contingencies and difficulties facing the subjects' plans and aspirations. Uncertainty is a characteristic feature of migrations in general and return migration in particular. No migration project can cover all process contingencies. This explains the analytical difficulties associated with separating a "final" return migration from an "experimental" visit to the country of origin to validate whether the return can be accomplished in fulfillment of the expectations set. Finally, the axis of assistance comprises the institutional or personal support (protection) networks that can relieve suffering by reducing vulnerability (and/or its consequences) and/or the uncertainty that characterizes the process. Below, we set out the three axes of suffering identified in relation to different dimensions and indicators, and which are present in the three identified stages of the return process (intentionality, return, reincorporation) (Table 1).

Table 1
The three axes of social suffering in the return

Axes	Definition	Dimensions	Indicators
Vulnerability	Current and multilocal situation and condition of individual fragility Absence or scarcity of a given social resource	Emotional	Lack of emotional well-being Difficulties with family care Feelings of guilt and/or shame
		Physical	Precariousness of returnee's physical health or environment Types of violence and sensations of fear
		Cultural	Social stigma
		Legal	Legal status (irregularity, residence, citizenship)
		Work-related	Obstacles to access to the labor market Precariousness of work and employment Low pay
		Economic/ material	Lack of economic resources Lack of resources for the family's social reproduction (provisions, healthcare, education, own housing, etc.)

Uncertainty	Situation and condition of perception of instability about the future Fear of loss of a social resource that the individual possesses	Physical	Fear of personal or family health problems
		Bureaucracy	Uncertainty about bureaucratic procedures (residency, citizenship, recognition of credentials, economic ventures, options for children's schooling, etc.)
		Family	Uncertainty about the quality of family relations Doubts about possible citizenship arrangements
		Social ties	Distrust regarding social relations Maintenance and use of social capital Fear of social stigma
		Work-related	Insecurity regarding future employment Recognition of skills
		Economic	Uncertainty regarding the sustainability of economic resources accumulated Fear of non-payment of debts
Assistance	Processes and mechanisms of support for the individual (whether specific to return or not)	Formal social protection	Rights of the migration itinerary associated with different nation states General public policies (not specific to returnees)
		Formal social protection relating to the return	Local/state and non-governmental actions and programs supporting the return
		Informal social protection	Care networks Interpersonal links (social capital)

Each of these axes has different relevance, content, and configuration in each stage of the return migration process, depending on the individual's migration trajectory and life cycle. The content of these particularities enables an understanding of the specific ways in which social suffering presents itself in return migrations.

All components of the VIA model have multilevel expressions. Vulnerability and uncertainty are conditions and situations identifiable on a micro scale (individuals and families), but also on a meso scale (collectives and social ties) and on a macro scale (social mechanisms that create inequality and risk). The same is true in the case of assistance, which can be either interpersonal (micro) or a state or non-governmental organization program

(meso), but may also be seen through a macro lens, in terms of a certain flow pattern of economic and social resources for (and from) return migration. Thus, the VIA model has the following strengths both for the study of migration in general and the study of return migration in particular. In terms of its implications for migration studies, this model:

- Allows for a multilevel analysis which, on the one hand, sidesteps fundamental risks, such as a subjectivism that limits itself to the description of particular situations, or the inability to analyze structural contingencies (which leads to a tendency to blame subjects for their own fate); and which, on the other hand, goes beyond a narrative "without actors" that evades the agency inherent to the act of migrating.
- Contributes to the analysis of the different social and geographic scales of **social suffering**, which includes an approach to suffering in transnational spaces.
- Connects the approaches of transnational social protection (Levitt & Rajaram, 2013; Faist, Bilecen, Barglowski, & Sienkiewicz, 2015; Faist, 2014) and the perspectives of **social suffering**. Conceiving of migration as a form of social protection (Sabates-Wheeler & Feldman, 2011) requires identification of the mechanisms that link international mobility with protection, of which suffering could be one.
- Complements quality of life indicators, given the potential of the concept to deal with the "lived" and not just the available resources. Moreover, while quality of life indicators cannot be readily adapted to transnational approaches, the VIA model can, at the same time as it allows these different scales to be interwoven into the trajectory of individuals and collectives

As to the model's contributions to return migration, it is worth noting that:

- It takes into account the approach to "preparedness" proposed by Cassarino (2004). Although for the author, this variable is central to the identification and description of return processes (and especially reincorporation), the VIA model allows for an understanding and explanation of situations in which there are return experiences with similar levels of preparedness, but with different results in terms of reintegration in the place of origin. The model's capacity in this regard is due to the transversal and multilevel conceptualization of **social suffering**.
- It includes different temporalities in the analysis of return migrations. If the return is a component of **being a migrant** — in terms of the

intention as much as the act of returning — then it is vital to include an aspirational dimension in the analysis, especially with regard to the contingencies for these aspirations to be achieved (uncertainty).

- It links social suffering and the return processes in theoretical terms, which enables exploration of the relationship between the three proposed dimensions (vulnerability, uncertainty, and assistance). This is not only for the case of voluntary returns, but also for deportations, the impact and intensity of which probably require the incorporation of new returnee indicators and typologies.

- Analyzing and explaining the causes of social suffering in returnees requires better adaptation of the instruments of intervention: specifically, return policies implemented by the countries of origin. Better knowledge of individuals' subjective experiences will enable the design of more precise and sustainable mechanisms of detection and action when dealing with vulnerable profiles, which in many cases remain invisibilized.

* * *

It is worth noting that while this conceptual proposal is centered on the impact of return in terms of social suffering, it does not associate this phenomenon exclusively with its negative consequences. That is, this approach does not seek to equate return to suffering, assuming that there are returnee profiles that do not necessarily pass through the three proposed stages of the model: vulnerability, uncertainty, and lack of support. However, focusing attention on this area in present and future research allows these profiles to be visibilized, whether they concern individuals with a greater propensity to experience suffering due to determinants of vulnerability, or whether they are profiles that, temporarily, may have experienced some of these stages of suffering. The perspective of social suffering allows, in the case of those who may be subject to structural vulnerability, for the conception and construction of mechanisms and proposals at the public-policy level to alleviate and improve their living conditions. Moreover, identifying and analyzing the trajectories of those persons who have faced but overcome these situations allows for the visibalization of strategies that have successfully reduced or eradicated suffering. Possessing the discourse of such profiles means incorporating the agency of these subjects into the design of public policies that aim to respond to the most vulnerable profiles. To this end, a first step would be take into account the following premises and develop them in future studies:

- Recognition of the diversity of social suffering in return migration, as well as in different ways and strategies to overcome it.

- Consideration of vulnerability and uncertainty as variables that feed into one another. Thus, to move beyond assessments and actions centered exclusively on objective determinants, it is important to have jointly coordinated policies in place that allow actor subjectivity to be incorporated.
- The need for a transnational and multilevel perspective on vulnerability — since to understand the realities and needs of returnees, it is necessary to reconstruct their life journeys and analyze their macro, meso, and micro conditions in the sending and receiving countries, while considering the transnational spaces that these individuals create during their migration projects.
- The importance of incorporating uncertainty as a component of social suffering — a necessary object for public policies related to quality of life. As such, there is a need to operationalize the concept of uncertainty linked to suffering and to return, in order to understand the different degrees of vulnerability to which returnees are exposed.

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