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Josefina Domínguez-Mujica *Editor*

Global Change and Human Mobility



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Chapter 13

Student on the Move: Academic Career and Life Transitions of Foreign PhD Students in Barcelona (Spain)

Cristóbal Mendoza and Anna Ortiz

Abstract This chapter focuses on PhD students' mobility and migration, a relatively unexplored topic in literature. Specifically it revolves around the motivations and expectations of 27 young PhD students at Catalan universities, their reasons for migration, their personal and labour transitions, their evaluation of the migration process and the role of the city of Barcelona as an attractive place for living and studying. Perhaps unexpectedly, migration motivations are not always associated with a clear decision to do a doctorate, but they relate to other reasons, such as the attractiveness of the city of Barcelona. Arrival in Barcelona is a point of rupture which, in some cases, coincides with leaving the family home. Thus, there are complex multiple processes associated with migration: emancipation from family, entry into a doctorate and adaptation to a new country. From that perspective, the city is perceived as a vital kaleidoscope with multiple edges that allows for a wide variety of experiences and exchanges. The chapter so analyses the use and appropriation of everyday spaces of students, in the framework of a temporary migration. Since migration occurs in a crucial time in their lives corresponding to a learning period in a city with different potentialities and constraints from their place of origin, immigrants' everyday practices and experiences may be "released" in a new territory. This positive scenario becomes gloomy and dark for the future due to the lack of opportunities in Catalan universities (yet it is accepted that geographical mobility is a feature of the current university job market).

Keywords PhD students • Young people • Migration • Life transition • Barcelona

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13.1 Introduction

The literature has long shown that contemporary societies are characterized by a period of hypermobility that was already foreseen in the early 1970s by Zelinsky (1971). Most studies on migration associate the increase in mobility with globalization and greater integration in the world economy (e.g. Castells 1996; Castles and Davidson 2000; Smith 2001). It is evident, however, that many of the movements that take place in this increasingly integrated world respond to reasons that cannot be described as “economic”, for example, tourism, family reunion or migration for study. Furthermore, the ease and speed with which people can communicate with different parts of the world have led scholars to rethink migration critically as not being a one-way process leading necessarily to integration into host societies.

Taking this into account, British sociologists have recently proposed the “new mobility paradigm” (Hannam et al. 2006; Urry 2007). This is an interesting conceptual and theoretical development that casts some doubt on the previous time-space assumptions of migration studies. This paradigm tries to overcome the concept of migration based on spatially fixed Euclidean identities and territories, since places are linked to many others through complex interwoven networks that exceed strict geographical limits (Sheller and Urry 2006). Conceptually, under this paradigm, “new” types of mobility and migration can be visualized and understood. In fact, it considers that people’s movements are of such intensity that they even affect the structure of contemporary society, which can no longer be defined as immovable or static.

Despite the recognition of new forms of mobility in the contemporary world, there is a scarcity of empirical research dealing with specific highly mobile groups and their problems and patterns of social inclusion (Favell 2001). In this respect, this chapter proposes the study of a group of people who constitute a good example of the growing diversity of contemporary international migration patterns: a group of young people carrying out doctoral studies in Catalan universities. Despite a significant increase in the number of international students in the world, this collective is one of the least-studied categories of migrants (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; King and Raghuram 2013). At first, students are temporary migrants, although some of them eventually decide to stay permanently (Hazen and Alberts 2006). Their main reason for migration is the improvement of their human capital (Baláz and Williams 2004). PhD students are considered desirable migrants because they bring skills and knowledge into the countries of destination (Raghuram 2013) and help establish sociocultural networks between countries (Waters and Brooks 2011), apart from the influx of money received by host universities. In short, the reasons for students to migrate are complex, ranging from improved qualifications and future labour prospects to the opportunity of an international experience away from the family home (Haverig 2011; Raghuram 2013).

Students’ migration has dramatically grown in the last 40 years. It has been calculated that it has increased fourfold from 1975 to 2008 (and in just the period

2000–2008, the number of international students rose by 40 %; Beine et al. 2013). In fact, UNESCO (2014) has estimated that there were at least four million foreign students developing their careers partially or totally in a country different from theirs in 2012, almost twice the number estimated for 2010. The preferred destination countries are the USA, Great Britain, France, Australia and Germany, which accounted for almost 50 % of the total numbers in 2012 (UNESCO 2014).

This growth in numbers goes hand in hand with the globalization of university studies. Iredale (2001) believes that curricula are increasingly similar worldwide as a response to a more global integrated labour market. The globalization of the university may therefore be considered a consequence of broader economic processes. More specifically, Findlay (2011) details several factors that push forward a university's globalization process: the increasing use of the English language both inside and outside universities, similarity in curricula across the globe, exchange university networks, international expansion of certain universities and greater worldwide recognition of diplomas.

The literature on migration has established different types of student migration according to the purpose and the time spent in the destination country. For instance, King and Raghuram (2013) distinguish between “credit mobility”, which is an exchange programme for studies of up to 1 year in a foreign university (e.g. Erasmus), and “degree mobility”, which implies that the new destination university gives a diploma. In their typology, these two authors also consider study trips that are not specifically geared towards obtaining an official certificate.

In our case, we suppose that the profile of students' migration is complex, since PhD students have stayed in Catalonia for more than 1 year, during which they are expected to carry out studies that are crucial to their future professional development. The completion of a PhD is associated with advance in their university career, to the extent that their future may depend on obtaining the PhD. Since their migration is, at least initially, restricted to a limited period, it is expected that their relationships, links and contacts with the country of origin are fluid and frequent.

Moreover, one aspect that is systematically ignored in the migration literature is the affective daily life aspects of the construction of migrant communities, which can be traced to more than one nation-state (Conradson and Latham 2005; Smith 2006). In this respect, this article revolves around the motivations and expectations of these young people, their reasons for migration, their personal and labour transitions, their evaluation of the migration process and the role of the city of Barcelona as an attractive place for living and studying. Regarding the latter point, we analyse the use and appropriation of everyday spaces, in the framework of a temporary migration. Since migration occurs in a crucial time in their lives corresponding to a learning period in a city with different potentialities and constraints from their place of origin, immigrants' everyday practices and experiences may be “released” in a new territory. This territory can enable new social relationships and “alternative” uses of time and space, but it may also imply some restrictions occasioned by its novelty.

13.2 Methods

The methodology for this research was qualitative. We carried out semi-structured interviews, to capture the complexity of the subjectivities of a group of young PhD students as regards their migration experiences and their daily life in Barcelona. In total, we interviewed 27 people (15 women and 12 men) in October 2012–October 2014. Interviewees were contacted following a snowball technique. The basic variables used to select the PhD studies were their sex, age, time of residence in Barcelona and nationality, in order to cover a great diversity of profiles, views and experiences of PhD students with contrasting personal backgrounds.

The interviews, which lasted an average of 1 h, were structured according to three broad themes (academia/work, social attachment and geography). Rather than obtaining specific data on each subject area, questions were left open to reveal individual opinions and concerns. This allowed us to obtain insights on questions as diverse as reasons for studying and living in Barcelona, the PhD syllabus, personal and labour transitions, everyday experiences in Barcelona as well as future plans. Finally, we asked the respondents both to draw a mental map of Barcelona and to send some photographs of Barcelona and their place of origin, in order to analyse their lived experience, personal appropriations of space and individual memory.

The interviewed group is very homogeneous, logically, in terms of educational levels, and the age range goes from 25 to 35 years. The residence time is also very similar, since the interviewed students had to have resided in the city for at least 1 year. They were also doing PhD studies at the time of the interview, although their arrival in the city may have been due to other factors (e.g. joining a partner). The interviewees were informed of the research objectives and they were assured that data would be treated confidentially. For this reason, this article always uses pseudonyms and there are no specific references to the university they are studying in.

As for their demographic profile, we interviewed 15 women (8 Latin Americans and 7 Europeans) and 12 men (9 Latin Americans and 3 Europeans). Of the total, 17 were single at the time of the interview, and 10 were married (8 women and 2 men). Interestingly, 11 of them have partners of a different nationality to their own. And another homogeneous pattern is as follows: no one lived alone; all of them lived either with a partner or with friends or acquaintances/friends. They had been living in Barcelona for 3 years and a half year on average. For many of these young people, this was not their first migration experience outside the country of origin: 13 people had lived in another country previously (for 1 month to 6 years), mainly due to studies. As regards their expectations for the future, many Latin Americans would like to return to their country of origin (and their scholarship often obliges them to do so). They also know that in Latin America, it will be much easier nowadays to find a job in their field of study. In contrast, most of the Europeans expressed their desire to continue living abroad and seek postdoctoral scholarships for further studies somewhere else.

The sample used for this project was not probabilistic. As the sample is relatively homogeneous, we believe that, with this number of interviewees, a level of saturation is reached; that is, answers were repeated and no new issues emerged from the questions addressed (Creswell 1998; Crouch and Mckenzie 2006). The non-representative sample used for this project tried to cover a similar number of both men and women and of Europeans and Latin Americans. Given the number of interviews, the objective of this article is not to make large-scale generalizations but to identify concerns, issues and trends regarding the migration processes and personal experiences of the studied group. Data were analysed by the content analysis method with the Atlas.ti software. This process included open coding, creating categories and abstracting (see Weber 1990).

Once the methodology is defined, the article focuses on the presentation of the main results of the research. The analysis is organized following a longitudinal approach. First of all, it addresses the reasons why this group decided to move to Barcelona. Subsequently, it focuses on the present and explores the group's experiences, perceptions and attitudes regarding their everyday life in the city of Barcelona. Finally, the article focuses on their projects for the future.

13.3 Arriving in Barcelona

The interviewed group of PhD students expresses very different reasons for migration to Barcelona. Perhaps unexpectedly, only a minority, and particularly those of European origin, sees their doctorate at a Catalan university within a well-defined academic project. Furthermore, most of the Latin American students consider PhD studies to be an option that had come up in their lives (e.g. after having abandoned studying for a while) and respond more to a desire for a life change, rather than academic reasons (see also Raghuram 2013). Yet, after the decision is taken, the PhD channels the majority of respondents into an academic career, although few interviewees state other future employment possibilities.

Lulú, a young Mexican woman, is a clear example of this. Before coming to Barcelona, she worked in an NGO that she set up with a close friend. Because of problems at work, she decided to leave behind the NGO, make a career change and pursue postgraduate studies. In her own words:

I set up a NGO in Xalapa (Mexico) with a friend. The NGO worked, but my friend and I had different views on how to manage it. It was frustrating. We used to say that this project was like our baby; we did everything. I looked for options to get out of this, and a PhD came out as the best choice. To be honest, I found the PhD at (a Catalan university) by chance. . . and in a month I had already bought the plane ticket. I came in here as a tourist. (Lulú, 32, México)

This interviewee felt frustrated in her job and sees the doctorate as an interesting option to break with the past. Lulú's case may be extreme, given that she left her job and bought a plane ticket in just 1 month. She entered Spain as a tourist, without a scholarship, and, at Barcelona airport, she phoned an old acquaintance she had had

a short romance with. These types of migration decisions, which may seem to be irrational and unplanned, are personal advancement strategies.

Similarly, Paola explains her arrival to Barcelona from Argentina as the result of many coincidences. She also sees her migration as a point of no return to her past (a permanent job in a lawyer's office and a 2-year relationship). In her own words:

When I think about it, I don't believe it. I had never crossed the Atlantic and I knew nobody in Barcelona. The master's programme began on Monday and I arrived in Barcelona the Friday before. I thought it was the right moment. My life in Mendoza [Argentina] was very stressful, my job, my political activism and also my boyfriend. I just wanted to leave everything behind. My colleagues at the lawyer's office [I used to work with] couldn't believe it. I quit a promising career. But I felt overwhelmed. (Paola, 34 years, Argentina)

Most of the Latin Americans did not have a clearly defined academic career when they decided to migrate to Barcelona. Furthermore, some of them had to postpone the decision to pursue a PhD for economic reasons. Indeed, they had already entered the labour market of their countries of origin and "found" the opportunity to pursue postgraduate studies at a special moment in their life. This is the case of two Colombians who worked while waiting for a grant: the first was employed in a call centre (after finishing a master's degree in Sweden) and the second on a construction site.

This pattern of postponing an academic career can be also observed in some of the Europeans' labour trajectories. This is the case of Elena, who arrived in Barcelona, following her Catalan boyfriend (they had already met – and lived together – in Italy). She had to adapt her studies to her chosen university and changed her academic profile completely. However, for most interviewed Europeans, there is a clear pattern: many of them had already been in Barcelona to study their degrees in Catalan universities through European Union scholarships and afterwards they decided, for various reasons, to stay and undertake doctorate studies.

Indeed, in the European students, we find a few "pure" academic trajectories, without previous employment or with limited professional experience (e.g. training placements). But, even in this case, Marie (a French/Canadian student with an MA in international relations and currently doing a PhD) chose a Catalan university not only for its quality but also because of the city of Barcelona which is seen as both cosmopolitan and retaining a certain local neighbourhood flavour.

Reasons for moving to Barcelona are therefore complex. The academic and professional motivations are certainly relevant, specifically, the interest in continuing studies and a specialization in a specific field of knowledge. This choice meets professional expectations, since they consider that a PhD programme entails greater academic recognition and better opportunity for employment promotion. The other reason would be of personal nature: the challenge of living in another country and of developing a transition to adult life in a motivating city. This last aspect is addressed in the following section.

13.4 Growing Up: Times and Spaces of PhD Students' Life Transition

Leaving home is a key moment in the process of transition of young people towards independence and adulthood. It is a complex process that can be definitive or not, depending on factors such as the greater or lesser length and stability of paid work or the time spent in a “transition home” shared with friends or colleagues from school or work (Hopkins 2010). An adult person assumes, in principle, responsibility for their actions, for autonomous decisions and economic independence. In today's world, emancipation from family and paid work are key stages in the attainment of autonomy and personal self-esteem, although precarious labour conditions can make the transition to a new home somewhat difficult.

For immigrants, this process involves adapting to a new country and a new social reality, and probably also a new sense of belonging. According to Ley-Cervantes (2012), feelings of belonging – including those related to the construction of a new home in a foreign country – are not only experienced through the fixed and the stable, but they can also be achieved through mobility and temporality. Skilled migrants' sense of belonging may be developed through multiple everyday experiences, routines and habits undertaken in a new place (Ortiz and Mendoza 2008).

Significantly, a substantial number of those interviewed left their family home when migrating to Barcelona. In general, this emancipation process is seen in a positive light, as it is considered to be a crucial period for personal growth in the way to reach adulthood (Holdsworth and Morgan 2005; Holdsworth 2009). Economic independence undoubtedly emerges as an important factor in the process of emancipation, but other aspects (e.g. managing their own resources, sharing a flat with other people and doing housework chores) are also quoted as decisive when explaining this process. Women are more likely than men to openly express their emotions regarding this transition. As in Kennedy (2010) in her research on Manchester's young postgraduate women, our female interviewees declared that they had “rediscovered” themselves, “grown as a person”, “developed their own identity” and “were feeling happy” in the transition to a new period in their lives.

I feel more independent here, because I was still living with my parents in Serbia, at the age of 27. I finished my degree in 2005, and I worked for a research institute, but the payroll was not enough for a rent. This was one of the reasons why I decided to study abroad: get a job and leave home. I know it's a bit sad (...). I learned how to do practical things, put on the washing machine, pay the bills. I like this feeling. (Ivana, 32, Serbia)

Since I've been in Barcelona, I'm totally autonomous from my family (...). I'm alone and I love it. I work, I do the PhD, and I have my own time (...). No, I don't see myself in Brazil in the short term. I'm growing up as a person... I am developing my own identity. You walk away from the family. It's another language; you break with yours. (Maribel, 31 years old, Brazil)

Certainly a sense of freedom accompanies the process of leaving home, but, in some cases, they also feel homesick. Those who have grown up and lived in a small town, which is generally perceived as closed and traditional, value their experiences

of living in a culturally diverse city and find Barcelona “more relaxed” and “more informal” than their home towns.

Yes, I feel freer here, because my city, my society, is far more closed. There they know each other, what you do, what you think. They always have control of your life and here I feel that nobody cares. I can do what I want and nobody judges me. Now I realize that I accept more differences. Before I would think that everything I said was right and it was the way it should be, but now I see that there are other things, other opinions, that may be also good, interesting. Barcelona opened up my mind to other perspectives that previously did not even consider. In my city all the people are of the same nationality, from the same culture. There is not much diversity in my city. By contrast, here there is such a great diversity, many cultures. (Nina, 29 years, Slovenia)

My town is small and there everybody knows each other. You refrain from doing many things. Here no one knows you. I've changed the way I look at things. It is my life and nobody has the right to make any comment on it. And the fact of not being with my parents in some way makes you freer and more responsible. I've become much more responsible here. (Daniela, 34 years, Colombia)

Again, in the narratives of the interviewed women, the emotional ties that bind them to their parents are expressed more bluntly than in the case of their male counterparts. Rather than economic help (only two interviewed women declared they had economic help from their family), parents play an active role in encouraging and supporting their daughters' decisions. This is why some female PhD students expressed the difficulties they encountered in the emancipation process. In Daniela's words:

Here in Barcelona I have gone through a tough adaptation process, because I used to live with my parents in Colombia at the age of 30. I have to admit that it was comfortable. We are a big family and we, the young ones, were like chicks. Now, at 12,000 Km away from home, things are more complicated. I'm very attached to my family. (Daniela, 34 years, Colombia)

For European respondents, the process of leaving home and creating a new one is less traumatic, due to facilities of air transport on the continent. The possibility of visiting family at a low cost (or at least an affordable cost) is a key aspect of feeling at home in Barcelona, especially in the first months of their stay.

In the beginning [I would return] every month and a half, for a weekend or from Thursday to Sunday. But since last year I go every three months, three or four times a year (...). It is well connected and so I go there often. (Nina, 29 years, Slovenia)

Traditionally, for women, family emancipation was associated with marriage. Currently this emancipation comes in many ways, as in the case of our female interviewees. Interestingly, out of the 23 respondents, only three males (and no females) were married, two before their migration to Barcelona and the third in the Catalan city. For them, marriage is a crucial moment in their lives, and it is felt as a new life stage in which greater stability and personal maturity have been obtained. As an example of this, Paolo, an Ecuadorian student, who also has Italian nationality, decided to marry his girlfriend before migrating to Barcelona, so that they can both have legal status and the same labour opportunities in Barcelona. This bureaucratic step is experienced, however, in terms of personal and professional

commitment and as a moment of rupture with his life as a single person. José Luis views his marriage experience similarly. Married to a Catalan man, he considers his marriage to be a decisive step:

[A new cycle] began when I got married. I feel more mature (. . .). I don't know if this is going to be the same for the next 15 years. But I feel that right now I'm in a new process, enjoying greater stability. I feel more peaceful, more stable, more adult, happier. (José Luis, 30 years, Colombia)

In short, the interviewees undergo processes of growth and personal improvement that they feel in everyday experiences and personal relationships forged during their experience abroad as PhD scholars. Students are complex subjects with varied interests beyond their postdoctoral studies. They are simultaneously members of a family, citizens of a given country and/or workers. In the intersections of these multiple areas and perspectives, they develop their lives (King and Raghuram 2013).

13.5 Barcelona: Beyond Tourism

All the interviewees highlighted the attractiveness of Barcelona and valued it as a dynamic city with good living standards and a significant cultural and architectural heritage. Under the critical gaze, Barcelona appears as a cosmopolitan, multicultural, comfortable, vibrant and safe city.

I really like Barcelona. It is a city that seduces you. I love it. Whenever I go out walking, I see different streets, different people, I like it very much. (Daniela, 34 years, Colombia)

[It is] a beautiful city with many choices for everyone, a very well-organized clean city, which has been carefully designed and planned. The city catches you from the first moment, and it captures the heart of visitors, with its mountains, beaches and unique landscapes.... A cosmopolitan city. (Carolina, 30 years, Colombia)

These young people live the city through the neighbourhoods they reside in. Amongst the neighbourhood qualities mentioned, we found the quantity and proximity of services and shops, the good transport network and the relatively safe streets. All this makes the city a comfortable one in which a varied offer can be reached within walking distance. The city of Barcelona is thus seen as a multicultural kaleidoscope which, however, retains a strong identity in its neighbourhoods and a relatively high social cohesion. An Italian, Elena, highlights its multiculturalism and the possibilities to interact with people of different ethnic groups, cultures and languages. According to her, multiculturalism does not contradict a certain neighbourhood life and the anonymity of living in a big city. Barcelona would thus have the size that is perfect to allow both feelings.

I like to go to local markets. I always buy bread at the local bakery. I know the people behind the counter. There is a Pakistani shop in my neighbourhood. As they know that I speak Urdu, they talk to me in the language. But if I want to be completely anonymous, or I want to go to a part of the city that I've never been before and feel like a tourist, I also can do it. It's not a suffocating small town. (Elena, 28 years, Italy)

Comparisons with the cities of origin are numerous and constant. The majority feel that standards of living are more satisfactory in Barcelona than in their cities of origin. But while the Europeans stress the welcoming side of Barcelona, a certain lifestyle, the tranquillity of a “livable” city and issues like service quality (with the exception of a young Polish man who finds it a bit overwhelming, full of traffic and with few green spaces), the Latin Americans describe the convenience and ease of public transportation, cycling or walking in the city (compared with difficulties and time devoted to moving around in large cities like Bogotá, Mexico City and Santiago) and the perceived safety in the city (as opposed to their home towns).

[In Colombia] I felt stress everywhere. You need to be aware of dangers: If you’re going to withdraw money from an ATM, you must be very careful. It is sad but it becomes standard practice. You live with this feeling, you get used to it. And when I came here [in Barcelona], I just felt relieved. (Edmundo, 30 years, Colombia)

Specifically, in the narratives of Latin American women, safety comes out consistently. They stress that the city is a safe one which allows them to freely develop their daily lives. Some of them also say that they could dress more freely in Barcelona than in their home towns. Similarly, but in the opposite direction, research that was carried out with Spaniards in Mexico City points out that women changed their lifestyle and the way they dress in Mexico City according to perceptions of safety and perceived local cultural values (Mendoza and Ortiz 2006). In Barcelona, by contrast, “everyone is free to do whatever they want” (Daniela, 34 years, Colombia). To sum up this feeling, Paola explains her experience with these words:

In Mendoza [Argentina] I used to take a taxi for five blocks at midnight. I was afraid (...) I could be robbed or sexually harassed. I remember when I came to Barcelona. I was with friends, and I told them “there is no metro. I’m going to take a taxi”, and their reply “but your place is ten minutes’ walk”. “But look at the time”, “Just relax, everything is fine”. And then I realized that I could walk down the street at any time at night, and people don’t harass me. This was a big change for me. (Paola, 34 years, Argentina)

Even if not directly asked in the semi-structured interviews, Catalan language and culture arise repeatedly in the narratives. At the time of arriving in the city, some interviewees were surprised that the Catalan language was normally used everywhere in society. After their initial surprise, this fact does not seem to be an obstacle to social incorporation. In fact, a few occasionally use Catalan in everyday life, and one interview (out of 27), with a young Colombian, was carried out in Catalan. Most declared that they were able to understand the language after a few months in the city, or attending courses. A minority, however, considered the Catalan language a barrier that hinders social integration. The following narratives express these two opposing views:

In Barcelona, I experienced something very strange. I was completely ignorant about the Catalan situation, to the point that I only knew that there was a Catalan language three months before arriving here. I became amazed at discovering every single thing about the Catalan culture. (José Luis, 30 years, Colombia)

In the master, there were two Latin Americans, and at first I did not mingle much with them, because I did not want to make a sort of “ghetto”. But finally, and even if they were not my friends, I ended up talking to them, because they spoke to me. With the others, there was a language barrier. When I talked to them, they answered me in Catalan, or they talked to each other in Catalan. They did not even make an effort. I don’t know how to call it, maybe a little bit of courtesy to use Spanish with you, because when you arrive, you don’t understand, you can get a few things, but you miss others. And they only spoke Catalan (...). I felt it as a barrier. It is a form of social exclusion. If they do not want to mingle, they keep talking in Catalan. I don’t speak it, but I understand it. I have a basic vocabulary (Alvaro, 27 years, Mexico).

13.6 The Future

Future projects are strongly influenced by the Spanish economic situation. In the context of economic crisis, high rates of youth unemployment and budget cuts in education, there are not many job options at the university where they are pursuing their graduate studies. So many Latin American students see universities in their countries of origin as attractive labour destinations.

My friends told me that now is the right time to get a job in Latin American universities; particularly in Brazil. (Carlos, 29 years old, Brazil)

Furthermore, a group of Latin American PhD students must return to their place of origin (e.g. Chile, Ecuador, Mexico), when finishing their doctoral studies, since they had been granted fellowships in their countries. Otherwise, they would have to pay back their funding.

My immediate future after completing the Phd is going back to Chile. My scholarship requires my return and a stay in the country twice the time I’ve been out, unless I continue with postdoctoral studies. In the latter case, the return is “frozen.” (Lucas, 30 years, Chile)

I’ve got a problem. My Ecuador scholarship asks me to return to my country after three years [the time to finish the PhD]. So I have to go back to Ecuador, unless I get a super good job that allows me to stay and pay back the grant. And this is not going to happen. That’s why we don’t even consider staying in Barcelona as an option. Before the scholarship, we discussed the possibility of not returning, because, despite family and friends, Ecuador is a violent insecure country (...). Now we don’t think about this anymore. We are forced to go back for six years. (Pedro, 35 years, Ecuador)

From a totally different perspective, another smaller group decides to live in Barcelona, despite the current economic situation, since they believe that work opportunities may be better in the future. To take this decision, aspects related to partners and the city’s everyday life are crucial. Elena, an Italian national, epitomizes this feeling. She declares her love for Barcelona and her Catalan boyfriend, and she is pondering a 2-year postdoctoral fellowship in India, with the aim of having greater job opportunities in her current university afterwards. This interviewee wants to stay in Barcelona and is happy not only with her academic life but also with her personal and everyday life. Uncertainties about the future are seen as characteristic of the present times. In a similar vein, José Luis

expresses his ideas about personal and everyday life but, in this case, he opts for a new migration, perhaps to Canada. The reason for this lies in the bad economic situation.

I'm staying in Barcelona for three more years at least. The crisis situation in Spain makes it difficult to consider staying here. I've already talked about this with my partner, the possibility of going elsewhere, and he's happy with the idea of living abroad. (José Luis, 30 years, Colombia)

In fact, the opinion of José Luis is shared by the majority. They do not want to leave Barcelona; they are generally happy in the city and with their PhD studies. However, the scarce employment prospects in Catalan universities push their work options towards universities in other countries, if they want to stay in academia. In this sense, the good economic situation, at least comparatively, of some Latin American countries makes the return to their countries of origin attractive:

At the moment, it's far easier to get a well-paid job in Ecuador than here, because there is no competition for jobs. They just changed the higher education law. All the professors need a doctorate, and there aren't many people with doctorates in Ecuador. If I go back with a PhD, I'm going to have at least three or four job offers. Obviously this is not the case here. I've got a colleague in my department, with a brilliant thesis, and an excellent CV, and he cannot find work at Spanish universities. He's thinking about migration to England, United States and Chile. Here it's certainly complicated. (Pedro, 35 years, Ecuador)

I want to finish my PhD. That is clear. I would like to go back to Mexico, but I don't know when or where. Right now I would like to stay in Barcelona, because it's one of my favourite cities, but the future is dark and gloomy here (...). Sometimes I feel tired of not having a real life. Sometimes I've got the feeling of living in a bubble. All my friends are already married and with children. This is not the life I would like to have, but you keep thinking that something is wrong with you (..) I guess that I'll be living here for two more years, and then we'll see. I know, though, that I have more professional choices in Mexico. (Lulú, 34, Mexico)

Lulú also introduces an interesting nuance, as she has the feeling of not having a "real life" and staying "in a bubble", as compared to the lifestyle of her friends back in Mexico who are married and with children. This is a boring model of life, however, for the interviewee, but, at the same time, it remains a key reference for her. Having a partner is very relevant for the interviewees. People who are in a relationship, irrespective of being married, give much importance to it, to the extent that any decision on a future migration (or otherwise) goes necessarily through an agreement with the partner. Finally, beyond migration, we find a minority of interviewees who describe their lives as transnational. As Ivana (32 years, Serbia) said, "once you leave home, it is easier to stay abroad". They believe that their professional future is not linked to a permanent residence anymore, but it may be developed in different countries at least in the short term. This is the case of Daniel who imagines himself and her wife in the future as follows:

Upon completion of the PhD thesis, we will see if there are job offers outside Barcelona. I'd like to go, at least for two or three years, to the United States, Australia or Canada to practice my English a little more, because you lose a lot, if you don't practice. If I get a postdoc position, my wife could come with me as a visiting researcher. She [also doing a PhD at the same University] could have her viva afterwards. She does not need to be here to work [on the thesis]. (Daniel, 29 years old, Poland)

Or the example of Nina:

When I finish, I would like to do a postdoc. I'd like to go to the United States to do a postdoc and then return here. I love my country, but I do not believe I could do the things I am interested in there. (Nina, 29 years, Slovenia)

These two interviewees have a temporary position in Spain but a permanent transnational life. They see themselves moving around the global university system until the right position eventually comes up. Their situation certainly fits what Williams and Hall (2002) defined as “transnational temporary mobility”. Students’ mobility is thus composed of different decisions made within people’s life course and academic career without any clear idea of settling down (see also Frändberg 2014). Adding a further twist to this argument, King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) refer to “mobility links”, in the sense that decisions made in a specific point of people’s lives and careers determine future migrations. In any case, it seems clear that students’ mobility puts into question strict definitions of mobility and migration, as understood in conventional binary terms of movement/settlement.

13.7 Conclusions

From the interviewees’ narrations, and following a longitudinal perspective, this article has studied motivations to migrate, personal transitions at a crucial life stage and future prospects of a collective of migrant young people who are pursuing a PhD at a Catalan university and live in the city of Barcelona. This group is part of what has recently been called “migrants on the middle”, referring to those migrants with middle or high levels of formal education who, because of their age and (lack of) experience, are located in intermediate positions in the labour market. Empirical studies of these groups have been scarce (e.g. see Conradson and Latham 2005; Wiles 2008; and for the specific case of university students, King and Ranghuram 2013).

The first conclusion of our research revolves around the reasons for living in Barcelona. Perhaps unexpectedly, motivations are not always associated with a clear decision to do a doctorate. Specially in the Latin Americans, we found very few “pure” academic careers, rather than people who, at some point in their lives, have joined the labour market in their countries of origin and have decided to return to the academia (e.g. after leaving a job or a sentimental break-up). In contrast, a few interviewees experience the reverse process: they made a key decision in their personal life (e.g. marriage) before their migration to Spain to carry out doctoral studies. This is in line with previous research that also has pointed out great diversity in students’ reasons for migrating (Haverig 2011; Ranghuram 2013).

In any case, arrival in Barcelona is a point of rupture (or even a point of no return) which, in some cases, coincides with leaving the family home. This pattern is observed more amongst the Europeans, because, in general, they do a PhD at a younger age than Latin Americans. Thus, there is a complex multiple process

associated with migration: emancipation from family, entry into a doctorate and adaptation to a new country. Particularly amongst the interviewed women, this threefold process is experienced with great intensity in positive narrations (see also Holdsworth and Morgan 2005; Holdsworth 2009). From that perspective, the city is perceived as a vital kaleidoscope with multiple edges that allows for a wide variety of experiences and exchanges. Amongst these exchanges, the formation of a new household emerges as a key factor, since most of the interviewees decided to start living with her/his partner in the city (also Hopkins 2010).

This positive scenario becomes gloomy and dark for the future. However, broadly speaking, it is accepted that labour and geographical mobilities are features of the current university job market. Moreover, because of changing labour conditions, some believe that they are not going to reside permanently in a single country, thus internalizing migration as a part of their lives (also King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Frändberg 2014). Furthermore, for some Latin Americans with financial support from their countries of origin, the return to their country is inevitable, since this is stipulated in their scholarships. For others, though, this would be an undesirable return, given the reduced quality of life in many Latin American cities. Finally, almost all the interviewees consider that decisions about the future should be discussed and agreed with her/his partner. With few exceptions, the interviewees' partners are happy to accompany their partner in a new migration, if the right labour opportunities arise. The life stage is seen by both the interviewees and their partners as a transition to adulthood that triggers new decisions.

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