



Articles

Friendship and Internal Migration in Brazil: Vulnerability and Coping

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Abstract

Friendship has been investigated in the context of international migration, but little is known about the subject in relation to internal migration, a phenomenon of great social importance in Brazil. The purpose of this article is to present and discuss data obtained in an investigation on the relations between internal migration and friendship as perceived by citizens from the state of Espírito Santo who were living in other states of Brazil, in the North, Northeast, Midwest, South and Southeast regions. Twenty adults born in the state and who had migrated to another Brazilian state participated in the investigation. The participants have been interviewed about how they perceived the relationship between friendship and migration and the data were subjected to thematic content analysis. Among the results difficulties to maintain friendships with people of the place of origin as well as difficulties in forming new friendships were observed. Friends were considered relevant for adaptation to the new state, affecting the perception of the same. The article also discusses the origin of friends, the perception of cultural differences and difficulties to make friends in another state. It is concluded that friends play a relevant role in the lives of Brazilian internal migrants and further investigations are necessary.

Keywords: friendship, migration, personal relationships

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Internal and international migrants are in a condition of vulnerability. This could be understood as a “heterogeneously imposed condition of powerlessness” (Bustamante, 2011, p. 565). According to this author, “the same person that migrates has more resources to defend or protect herself when she is at home prior to moving elsewhere than after the outward movement has taken place” (Bustamante, 2011, p. 565). Migration may cause stress on migrants and several vulnerability factors are involved in migration, including culture shock and changed cultural identity (Bhugra & Ayonrinde, 2004).

On the other hand, migrants develop strategies for coping with problems arising from migration, mainly the social and institutional environment of the place of destination (Kosic & Triandafyllidou, 2003). Several authors have discussed stress and coping in the lives of recent immigrants and refugees (e.g. Yakushko, Watson, & Thompson, 2008). Difficulties and coping strategies have been addressed in different migrant populations, such as refugees. In a qualitative investigation on Sudanese refugees, different coping strategies have been identified across all phases. The coping strategies included the use of religious beliefs, cognitive strategies such as focusing on future aspirations and social support (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008).

According to the IBGE (2010), in 2009, there were more than 20 million internal migrants in Brazil. Although internal and international migratory movements affect the social life of migrants, how friendships are affected by the migratory contexts is not widely investigated (Garcia & Miranda, 2012). The same is observed in Brazil, and despite internal migration is a relevant Brazilian social phenomenon, the relationships between friendship and internal migration are still little known. Often, references to friendship in studies about migration are peripheral, although the authors recognize that social networks, including family members and friends, are important in migration. In Brazil, Matos and Ferreira (2004) highlighted that family, friends and workmates contribute to migrant well-being. Tassara and Rabinovich (2007) also observed that internal migrants are welcomed by friends and family members in Brazil. According to Gomes (2006), competition and solidary relations are present in migration, and Lyra (2005) showed that family, friends and people from the same origin were relevant for migrants returning to their cities. According to Gonçalves (2001) migration causes serious problems as migrants feel alone and miss their home land and friends become important as well as contact with other migrants.

This work is an extension of a previous investigation conducted in Brazil in which Garcia, Lucas, and Rodrigues (2014) investigated the friendships of 20 internal migrants from all regions of Brazil living in the State of Espírito Santo, Brazil. In sum, the authors concluded that friends had a limited influence on the decision to migrate; that migration affected negatively previous friendships, and new friendships were formed in the destination state, mainly with other internal migrants. Difficulties to make friends were recurrent, especially with local people and cultural differences have been recognized. Friends were considered relevant in the migration process and a source of support.

This study aimed to investigate friendships of Brazilian internal migrants who, having been born in the state of Espírito Santo, migrated to other state as an adult. Specific objectives were to investigate: (a) the perception of friendships with people from the origin state, from the destination state and other states; (b) the perception of cultural differences in shared activities, common interests and conflicts in friendships; (c) the meaning of friends in the life history, including adaptation to the place, relationship with family members and plans to further displacement; (d) the perception of difficulties to make friends due to be someone from another state.

Method

A total of 20 participants (nine males and 11 females, aged 20 to 50 years old), born in Espírito Santo who moved to states of all Brazilian regions at the age of 18 years, or later, took part in the investigation. Participants were identified in social networks and from indications of friends and / or relatives. They were interviewed individually via Skype based on a pre-established script focused on the relationship between friendships and the migration process. Data were analyzed according to their content in topics (Flick, 2009). The answers were classified in previous categories of analysis. Within a few categories of analysis were proposed subcategories.

Results

Friends and the Decision to Migrate

Friends may or may not have an influence on the idea to live in another place, depending on the situation. The influence was perceived mainly among university students: “I was convinced by a friend to go, as well. My other friends were in favor and their opinion mattered much” (P2). Friends were “enormously important ... especially because they would also go” (P16). In another case, “I have several friends who came before me and encouraged me to move” (P17). On the other hand, the influence was not recognized, as “they did not have a decisive role” (P15), especially considering the motive to move as professional or study: “I did not think much about my friends, the important thing was the result of the examinations” (P13). The decision to migrate was taken independently of the opinion of friends, especially to work: “their opinion had no effect on my change because I had got an opportunity that could not be repeated, so I decided to come” (P1). Another form of participation was the support for migrating or returning. Thus, “all supported me” (P15), and “many supported me” (P19) or “gave a lot of support” (P20). On the other hand, “some even today insist that I return” (P13). In sum, the influence was perceived in cases that friends would migrate along with the participant or had migrated stimulating their moving. When friends were not directly involved in the migration process their influence was not perceived as important.

Old and New Friends

After moving, some previous friendships remained and others declined. For some, the distance “was continuously growing” (P14), and “I lost contact with many friends who remained at ES” (P17). Some friends, however, remained in the case of “true friends” (P12), or “the stronger friendships still exist” (P19). Even in the case of friends who remained, “there was a change in the way we interact” (P12). The contact with friends is done through visits, but mostly with the use of Internet resources, such as social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), and Smartphones (Whatsapp, Snapchat, etc.): “Some friendships are at the level they were before, and I communicate by cellphone and through social networks” (P5). In a case, migration strengthened the previous friendships: “the closest friendships became stronger, contrary to what I imagined!” (P7). So, old friendships were affected by migration, and most seemed to decline. In the case friendships remained, the relationship contents changed.

New friendships have been established mainly at the university for students or in the workplace for those who moved for professional reasons, as “almost all friendships are from work” (P11) and “most of my friends are from college” (P12). People living together and neighbors also became friends and some activities also facilitated new friendships such as “college parties” (P13) or “dance lessons” (P15). This way of making friends may be considered as direct. Friends also resulted from the intermediation of existing social networks: “I became closer of my colleagues, and most are from here. Over time I made friends with the friends of my co-workers” (P3). For another, “these early friends were neighbors and parents of classmates of my children and people from the church I began attending” (P18), and “other friends were made through friends and my girlfriend, who already lived there” (P11) and “I became a friend of the family of my son’s wife” (P20). So, the social network of friends, family members or romantic partners was the origin of some new friendships.

The origin of new friends is diverse, including people from the home state, the new state and other states. Sometimes, migrants had friends in all three situations: “Most new friends were born in this state, but some had migrated previously by the same professional reason. Coincidentally, some ES friends also moved here and

stayed close” (P11). In some cases, one group is highlighted: “most are from here (new state)” (P19), “are from my home state” (P20), or “people born in different states, not my home state, and that came with the same goal, for the same work” (P17). Sometimes, migrants seemed to attract themselves, making friends with “workmates who were in the same situation, who had moved recently” (P17) and “people of my work, and from my companion’s work, most of them are not from Curitiba, people like us who came from different states to work here” (P14). Another said: “I first initiated a very strong friendship with a group of girls from other towns, some from the State of Rio de Janeiro and others from São Paulo state, so this was a strong point in common among all of us, and to this day they are my best friends in college” (P13).

In the only case in which it was mentioned a best friend, this was from the home state: “my closest friend is from my state” (P15). Thus, data indicate a distancing from friends of the place of origin and the formation of new friendships. Some reported some difficulties to start new friendships due to differences in the way of relating and personality: “Here in Curitiba people are very closed! Until today I did not adapt. The difference is huge, closed, too formal people” (P14).

The Participation of Friends in the Migrant’s Adaptation

Friends were important to reduce loneliness at the beginning and were responsible for the feeling of inclusion in existing social circles. Their presence helped to overcome the difficulty of living away from family and old friends. When facing difficulties in adapting to university and housing, friends motivated them to remain in the new state: “the new friends helped a lot making company and helped to overcome loneliness” (P1). Friends also provided informational support, acting as guides in the new city, indicating good places to live in, for leisure, guidance on traffic and transportation. Friends were important for adapting and accepting local culture.

In order to facilitate the adaptation of new migrants, participants would introduce the place, pointing out good places to live in, places of leisure and useful services (supermarket, pharmacy, etc.) and insert the migrant in an existing circle of friends to help the newcomer to create new friends, and to receive emotional support. Migrants should also be advised to avoid comparing the new and origin states, and should always have in mind the goal that led him/her to make the decision to move, because that would be a way to help to overcome longing for family. “At first, I was going to convince him that here there are many opportunities for professional growth (...) Having a goal is essential for the person does not regret in the future” (P7).

Participants attributed great importance to the role of friends in adapting to the new place, “friends were more important than my family in this process” (P17) in several situations, including the workplace or university. In one case, friends were not considered important because the participant lived with her family (son), “then he helped me” (P20). “The role of friends is crucial to understand how social relations, particularly in the workplace, work. Every place and every service works one way and generally adaptation was relatively easy due to the receptivity of new friends in the workplace” (P11).

Another participant said that friends “provide the basis for that change. Often I felt out of place and they put me up and helped me to adapt myself to the new environment” (P19). Some highlighted the hospitality of friends who “supported me. They made me feel at home” (P12) and “made me feel good, comfortable, at home really” (P15). In one case, the participant began to like the place “after I began to rebuild my bonds of friendship” (P14). Emotional support was also present “in times to think about coming or not ... they supported me” (P16).

They helped to know and understand the social, cultural and functional aspects of the new environment, “understand social relations, particularly in the workplace” (P11), “to know how things work, how people are” (P18). Mutual help of friends who were also going through the same situation was fundamental, “they were all going through the same situation, then one helped the other to get used to the new environment, to get to know the new city” (P13).

Common Interests, Shared Activities and Cultural Differences

Participants reported cultural differences in the activities and shared interests, such as leisure, music styles, among others, and so they had to adapt to the new situation, but these differences were not considered large enough to affect friendship: “I think they suffer cultural influence of the place. Leisure activities, the way of thinking, the possibilities offered by the city, the weather, the accent. Differences create a new way of living. The common activities are influenced in the sense that to be part of a new group, of course we change some of our preferences to participate in a new and culturally distinct social group” (P11).

For others, cultural differences related to common interests and shared activities with new friends did not exist or they were barely perceptible: “I think there are some differences yes, but they are so minimal in my opinion” (P14). Sometimes cultural differences were perceived in the activities available in the destination state, “many things that were more common for me in the ES are not as common here, and vice versa” (P12), “the activities available are a bit different from what I had” (P17) and “in my state I was used to listen to *axé* and *farró*, and most people enjoyed that style. Here in the South, I see many young people enjoying local music, and having more contact with the local culture” (P19).

In other cases, differences were noted in terms of conservatism, as the participant was from a countryside town and became less conservative when she moved, “after some time living and talking to my friends, they were responsible for changing my way of thinking” (P13), “as I was from countryside I was or I am much more conservative, shy, and my friends here are more 'loose', ... open-minded, but I think this is positive” (P15), “there are some differences in the people, here they have different ways to deal with things, the *carioca* looks carefree, very open minded, and I'm more conservative” (P18).

Overall, cultural influence was perceived not only in activities (including leisure), but also in the way of perceiving reality (conservative or liberal), although these differences did not create greater difficulties in friendships. While some did not observe conflicts in friendships generated by cultural differences, others have pointed out different ways of speaking, habits and punctuality as cultural conflicts. In the case of way of speaking: “I have already noticed conflict specifically in relation to the accent, because some people believe that talking in a specific way is right, when in fact they are all similar ways of expressing the same language. There is no right or wrong. When people think that their way is right, a conflict arises” (P11).

Regarding habits, one participant considered, at least initially, that “people from São Paulo usually got more involved with work, even in leisure time” (P17). The issue of punctuality was also seen as a cultural conflict (“if a person does not arrive at the accorded time, they get upset, different from the ES culture”, P19). On the contrary, a participant noted cultural conflicts “in everyday life, in routine activities, but they do not hinder friendship” (P18).

The Influence of Friends in the Perception of the New State and Future Plans

Respondents reported that friendships in the destination state were one of the reasons that made them unwilling to return to the ES. They said to like the local culture, but one participant pointed out that the population of the new state was extremely sexist. However, she said she respected the ways of acting of people, as his grandfather was a native of the state and therefore she was accustomed to such behavior. Several informed to be open to new changes and were willing to move again for work purposes. They would not hesitate to move and they counted on the support of friends to this decision: "In future, if necessary, I'll go where the work calls. My friends understand and support me, because you cannot miss a chance to work" (P1). Only one participant expressed a desire to return to the ES, but friends in the new town were against this decision. Others did not wish to leave the new state. Participants recognized the role of friendships for building or changing the image of the state: "The image of the destination state, and especially the new town, is fully linked to people who become new friends and a new social environment" (P11).

Some had a negative view of the destination state but, after forming bonds with people from the state, started to like the place, "I hated the city, but maybe one day I will have a more positive view, now that I getting closer to some people" (P14). And also: "As I had good meetings, I built a positive idea about this place, I see it as a place that can give me many opportunities to grow, and contrary to what I thought, nice to live in." (P15). "When I moved, I thought about returning every day. Today I admit the possibility of staying here, and I think that was mainly because I have built a favorable image through people I met" (P17).

Others had already a positive view of the place and forming new friendships strengthened this image. "I already had a pretty good idea about the RJ state, and always wanted to live here, and my current friendships will be essential for all my life ... and I will always remember Niterói as the place where I found these friendships that are very important to me today" (P13).

Sometimes, friends helped to form a more adequate image of the place regarding security, for instance "as I came from a small town, I learned from them to take some care" (P12). Some did not relate friendships and plans to move in the future: "I think that friends do not play a role in decision" (P11) or "my friends do not interfere in it" (P12), "even if I build-important friends here, very unlikely I would change the course of my life for them" (P14), "the friendships have no role in this decision" (P15), "I do not think that there is any role of friends" (P16). Only in one case friendships were considered relevant to future plans, "because these people I met, I admit the possibility of staying here" (P17).

Difficulties to Make Friends as a Migrant

Although some faced no problem to establish new friendships ("the locals are very nice and I have never had any problems", P12), difficulties to make friends were mentioned. Some difficulties have been attributed to the social context. An example is that local inhabitants already had friendship networks established: "as Niterói is not a big city, it is very similar to Vitória, then many people already knew each other and there are groups of friends already formed, which makes a little hard to make new friends" (P13).

In other cases, difficulties were attributed to cultural factors, such as different lifestyles: "it has to do with the lifestyle of people from Curitiba" (P14). Another group of difficulties stem from the participants themselves, their personality or situation, such as "I felt some difficulty, but it is my own fault for being very shy and closed" (P15) or "I think the difficulty is more mine, as I am a bit lazy to make friends" (P16), "I am a housewife, then I have

not work friendships. Friendships are more restricted” (P20). Some attributed difficulties to cultural differences and even prejudice: “There is a veiled prejudice ... especially in relation to the accent... But that is not something that makes it impossible to make friends” (P11). Although not considered prejudice, there were differences that were highlighted, jokes and even competition, “there are those silly little things about accent, but nothing to interfere with the construction of new bonds” (P18), or a form of competition as “people from South want to show why their state is better than others” (P19). The use of nicknames was another way to highlight a different origin:

“My nickname at university is capixaba, nobody knows me by name, and everybody makes jokes about the origin state of the other” (P1).

On the other hand, some believed that being from another state was positive to make new friends because it was possible to share different backgrounds. The multicultural environment of universities also hindered the occurrence of prejudice: “As I work at the University, it is by nature a multicultural environment. On the street sometimes I feel a strangeness for my body type ... Everyone knows that I am not from here, but I do not consider this prejudice” (P8). Some acknowledged difficulties because they were migrants, but these were not assigned to prejudice. They were perceived as small difficulties that every migrant faces after moving.

Friends and Family in the Migratory Context

Family and friends are of utmost importance for migrants. Apparently friends become still more important in the migratory context as migrants are far away from family. In this situation, friends are sometimes seen as family: “When I left the countryside to live in Vitória, my friends and I were a family and we still are” (P16). Although friends may become family they do not replace family relationships, “friends are friends and family is family ... friends become family, however, will never replace family” (P12). Family relations are unique: “there are some problems in life that only your family can help you” (P13) and “family is still in first place” (P20). Friendships and family relations are different but both are important: “friendships can be as strong as family relationships, even if there are differences, especially the family history and what it means” (P8).

In the migratory context, even not replacing family, friends seem to grow in importance in function of distance from family: “often the affection of friendship supplies the lack of family” (P14), or “friends are more present than family. Friends are with you every day, and then ends up becoming closer, but does not replace it” (P18), “here they are the closest people. They share your routine” (P17), “they compensate the absence of family” (P19), “I think it may have some ... compensation for the distance (...) affection and attention gestures [of friends] can address the lack of parents and family who are far away” (P10). In sum, family remains important in the migratory context, but friends grow in importance as they are geographically closer than family.

The Meaning of Friendship

Finally, friendships were considered of great importance, “fundamental to the meaning of life” (P11), “they become essential for your daily life” (P13), “I cannot imagine my life without the presence of friends” (P17), and “it's always good to have friends” (P20). Friendships provide companionship and support: “I spend with them the happy, funny, sad, difficult times” (P12), “I think friendship provides support. Friends are those who provide the foundation you need to go on. They give you security, and are with you not only in happy times, but especially in those moments when all seems lost” (P14), “it would not be possible to live without their support” (P15), “it is something fundamental to human health and honestly I do not know if you can live without friends” (P16), “without friends it is impossible to live well” (P18) and “without them I would not be who I am today”

(P19). So, friends are relevant in the migratory context, and they are also perceived as fundamental for life in general, supplying support and companionship contributing to health and personal development.

Discussion and Conclusions

Participants migrated to study or work in another state and new friendships developed mainly at universities and workplaces. Previous friendships tended to become weaker with time and new friends were from the destination state, other states and the origin state, as solidarity networks between migrants themselves are important (Gonçalves, 2001).

The decision to migrate was influenced by friends when they shared a similar situation, as having migrated previously to the same place and friends became important social partners in the destination state. Migrants usually contacted family members in the destination town (Tassara & Rabinovich, 2007). In this investigation, as participants usually had not family in the new place, they turned to friends. Some participants reported difficulties to relate to people from the destination state, possibly due to different habits and behaviors (Bezerra & Vieira, 2013). Sometimes, migrants found it easier making friends with people from their origin state, possibly due to cultural identification. While migrants reported difficulties in making friends for being from another state, the presence of prejudices was hardly perceived. Some participants mentioned some difficulty in making friends with the local people, considering them 'closed' or not available.

Differences in culture have been observed, but they were not considered as obstacles to new friendships. Migrant families also adapt to another place by assimilating new habits and values (Silva, Melo, & Anastácio, 2009). Friendship was perceived to facilitate the adaptation to a new state and it was considered important and necessary by all participants. Data suggest that friends have several functions in the migrant's adaptation, ranging from social support (allowing the expansion of social network) (Silva, Melo, & Anastácio, 2009); informational support (regarding places and local culture); and, emotional support (Bezerra & Vieira, 2013).

In general, data are similar to those obtained in a previous investigation (Garcia, Lucas, & Rodrigues, 2014) about friendships of internal migrants in the State of Espírito Santo, Brazil, although in this case, some participants recognized the influence of friends in their decision to migrate. Other aspects were similar, as the gradual weakening of previous friendships, difficulties to form new friendships, the tendency to befriend other internal migrants. In both cases, friends were considered supportive in the migratory context.

In the context of vulnerability and coping, friendships appears as an additional resource in the social and institutional environment in the place of destination (Kosic & Triandafyllidou, 2003) and social support from friends may also be included as important coping strategies, besides the use of religious beliefs and cognitive strategies (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008). Finally, family kept complex relations with friends, ranging from replacement, performance of family roles by friends, consideration of friends as family members and compensation, but with different roles. New friends assumed roles previously attributed to family members.

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Competing Interests

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