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Japanese Immigrants: Understanding the Process of Separation

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The goal of this work is to understand the experiences of the Japanese immigrants in the process of separation from their native land and the encounter with Brazilian lands. We attempted to recover the memories that were retained and confront them with the new situation found in Brazil. From this confrontation, we sought to understand how the adaptation occurred and how was the relationship between the idealized images brought from Japan and the ones experienced in Brazil, for the construction of a bond with the new land.

The research is based on psychoanalysis, and the object of analysis is the narratives of ten Japanese immigrants that came to Brazil from 1908 to 1941, which reveals a sample of people that arrived in this country without material possessions, workplaces and residences previously established.

The process of research is marked by the exploration of an unknown world that we attempted to unveil, trying to find the meaning and the comprehension of what was left in the mind of the immigrants; what they were able to narrate through a certain coherence that belonged to them, and only them.

Seeking references in the literature about this process experienced by them, we found the economical difficulties of Japan and the isolationist practice that kept that country distanced from the others for many centuries. In this study, we show that the population growth caused hunger and was one of the things that began to disturb the Japanese people. The poverty in the field came to an unbearable point, resulting in a process of internal migration.

History shows us that, in spite of people's resistance to reformulate the political system, the change from the feudal system to capitalism was inevitable with the Meiji reform. The resistance also existed in relation to the external emigration, due to the bond that these individuals shared with their native country.

But it was not possible to avoid the emigration, since the nation's concern in not losing its members led the government to authorize a temporary emigration. For being temporary, the mentality developed by its descendants was to seek material resources abroad, but always with the perspective of returning.

This is how the history of these people (the focus of our study) begins. People that came to Brazil despite the strong bond they shared with their native country, after having triumphing over too many barriers. They brought to this country the feeling of faithfulness, of obligation and debt towards their nation, projected in the figure of the Emperor. This feeling can be represented by the *on*, that is part of the culture and tradition of these people and, as a consequence, of their identity.

For Brazil, the receptor of this immigration contingent, the conditions were favorable for this

process, especially due to the economical growth experienced by the country. Another factors contributed to it on a massive scale: the need of labor force for the coffee production, the abolishment of slavery, the subsidized immigration, the commercial interest of the foreigners and the development of means of transportation.

The shock of cultures, the difficulty to learn the native language, the difficulty to create bonds with the new land or other issues related to the socialization of the Japanese immigrants in Brazil are subjects widely treated by the existing literature. This study was an attempt to amplify the horizons regarding this subject, paying more attention to the affective questions and allowing the reconstruction of both history and time in another country. It was an attempt to recover and understand the subjectivity of these immigrants in the process of establishing bonds with their new land.

The analysis of the collected data revealed that the hope of the Japanese people to obtain the necessary financial conditions and return to their native country became something impossible to achieve, because the land full of promises did not fulfill the dreams of the immigrants.

The image of Brazil internationally widespread was not real. The "propaganda" showed an abundance of food that was deceitful. Ultimately, the feeling of helplessness linked to external factors, such as the resistance of those who were rooted here, for example, together with the lack of perspectives of harvesting the desired fruits, provoked the feeling of loss and emptiness.

The loss of the vital space caused the pain of separation, which comes from the psychic disorganization, experienced due to the separation of the family members from their country. The rupture of a millenary culture integrated to the individual and the attempt of adaptation to a new situation was made more difficult due to the process of dissociation experienced by the immigrants in a new country.

In the history of these immigrants, there were two different forms of reaction facing the unknown: the experience of grief, a resource used by the ego to defend itself from the feeling of emptiness, and the experience of melancholy, in which the mechanisms are not possible to be activated, causing the psychic death. In any case, to elaborate the loss meant to overcome a situation similar to death, which may be both of the individual and of the other - the country that lives within oneself.

The absence of the beloved object that is, at the same time, a source of idealization, produces in the individual the mechanism of conflict in order to defend himself or herself from the feeling of emptiness caused by this absence. This conflict aims at the dissociation with the object, so that its image is no longer focused as a suffering. The elaboration of this sort of grief denotes an effort regarding the separation and, during this moment, the appearance of aggressive phenomena as a movement of dissociation towards this object of love or desire is frequent.

It is through the aggressivity directed to the beloved object that one can find the strength to depreciate it, because it is absent. This depreciation, through a mental list of negative aspects of what is absent, allows to the individual a transformation from the feeling of love to the feeling of hate and, as a consequence, a disconnection from it. This disconnection as a facilitator of the dissociation is, however, the mechanism through which one is able to cultivate it without any suffering. This is a very safe way to make the separation definitive and, at the same time, acceptable by the individual.

As a consequence of and in parallel to this process of elaboration, other protective resources are activated, so that the person is able to endure the separation. Together with the aggressive aspects, a movement of revalorization of the individual also occurs. The indifference and the attempt to escape from the situation of conflict are resources used by the immigrants to complete their goal: the preservation of the absent eternalized and purified from any contamination, but which is distant and felt as something unachievable; it is the ideal mystified image. Through this process of disconnection, the absent object "will be placed in the rigid and immobile eternity, where it will not grow old, will be neither indifferent, nor unfaithful" (Caruso, 1986, p.58). This interruption of time is possible and necessary, because the desire is timeless and not subjected to the rules of reality. The desire does not even confront itself with the question of temporality.

To overcome the separation, a defense mechanism of preservation of the object is produced in the conscience, which is retained, and is generally reinforced by the activities of the memories and the conscious ghosts that are linked to the loss. Every trauma related to the loss of the beloved object is linked to castration, which is an inhibition, a symptom of anguish.

The defense mechanisms that appear in the process of separation mainly focus the problems that were repressed in the conscience of the people that have suffered the loss:

[I]t is the experience of death in my conscience, thanks to the separation; complementary to this problem, there is another, which is narcissistically more painful for those who suffer it: the experience of my death in the conscience of another people." (Caruso, 1986, p. 26)

Since the separation causes the death of the other person in the conscience, the despair due to the loss of the beloved object is felt. Therefore, this experience results in a catastrophe of the ego due to the loss of the element of identification. An alternative used by the individuals to defend themselves from this absence is the depreciation of the absent object. Even when the person realized its negative aspects, there was a strong tendency for it to be the ideal of the ego. The aggressivity is a behavior that appears as a defense of the self due to the loss of the beloved object. In the process of separation, it is necessary to depreciate the other in order for the self to survive.

Another defense mechanism in the period of separation is indifference, since it results in repression and rejection of the process by the conscience: "The factors that act in the 'I don't care' are specially these: reduction of the ideal of the ego, weakness of the ego thanks to the dissociation and proportional increase of narcissism" (Caruso, 1986, p. 27). The ego and the superego (mechanism of censorship) are maintained in a defensive process in such a way that the feeling of 'I don't care' does not have enough strength to overcome the despair. This sort of commitment is activated aiming at the conservation of the ideal of the ego.

An apparent alternative of escape is the search of pleasure, commonly stimulated by the desire. Several forms of escape occur, such as the search of new objects that cause pleasure and the replacement of one for the other. The self that, in this moment, experiences a great suffering, needs consolation, and the past experiences show that it can be obtained through pleasure. However, it is not always that this sort of behavior overcomes the feeling of loss of the desired object.

It is important to stress that these behaviors are not presented in chronological order. Many times, they act in combination and can even coexist, resulting in ambivalent behaviors.

The final goal is the ideologization, which means “ultimately, the affirmation of a certain rebellion and, with this, a partial victory over the experienced death. Therefore, facing the separation, it is more likely that the ideologization crystallizes itself in a ‘no’ rather than in a ‘yes’.” (Caruso, 1986, p.28)

The process of separation causes pain and suffering. And this suffering emerges in the memories activated by the histories told by the immigrants. These memories seem to be loaded with feelings, sufferings, but also joys, and only emerge because the elaboration of facts or events occurred. The psychic work only becomes visible from what is remembered, in the colors of the images described, that are produced in the detachment of the fact itself.

The resistance to love the new due to their affective bond with their native land led the immigrants to perform a rupture in the passage of time. There was a temporal interruption, in order to preserve the image of Japan that existed within their psychisms. The mythical time permeated and made it difficult all the process of elaborating the bond with the new land. The mechanism of denying the existence of the other acted as a way of cultivating within them the image of their native country and the wish to return to it.

The physical space also did not facilitate the perception of the passage of life. The connection of the Japanese immigrants with the nature and the act of living the four seasons of the year were almost unavoidable in that situation. The loss of reference had led to the feeling of emptiness and also the feeling of being loose in an unknown space and time.

The crisis that began with the forced rupture of the bond with the native land caused some changes in the psychism of the family group. By emigrating, they had to reorganize themselves, because the relationship of familiarity with the space, with the collective habitat, where the boundaries were clear and marked by the sea, was broken. The space was not only discontinued, but without boundaries, without limits, and this made the immigrants loose and did not allow them to situate themselves in the new land. The disorganization in the representation of the spatial contour of the land also disorganized the psychic spatial contour of each person, breaking part of his or her identity.

Besides that, the space in Brazil is seen and felt in a completely different way: the place is extremely aggressive, and this aggression is seen in a sensitive way, because the ego is fragile and, as a consequence, the individual feels diminished in his or her self-esteem.

The decrease of the self-esteem provokes the aggressivity and also the mechanism of ambivalent defense of both love and hate. The manifestation of the desire of being loved is not obtained, due to the absence of the ideal embodied in the individual, resulting in a sort of love with no content and also from despair with no content.

It was hard to face the new. The space was hostile, the people made it difficult the possibility of developing bonds and, at the same time, the response of the immigrants, due to fear or because they felt fragile, was also a response of rejection. We tend to reject what rejects us. Or was it the opposite that happened? The rejecter, by feeling rejected in the origins, initiated the rejection?

The depreciation of what was absent, which means the denial of the positive aspects of the native land, while in search of its own way, is more difficult due to the rejection of the land in which they are currently living. Although the only alternative for this predicament is the depreciation, aggressive as it is, the passage for the idealization of what was absent is difficult. The experience of loss, by means of erosion of the ideal image, is the mechanism used to allow the enlargement of this lost bond, in a process of reparation and projection for the past. This idealization of returning to the old love is also evident in the difficulty to establish roots in the new land.

The resistance against fixating themselves in their own place of reference could mean for the immigrants the impossibility of returning, i.e., to stay forever in Brazil. It is an attempt to defend the ego so as not to dissociate it with the beloved object.

The difficulty to distance themselves from the native land causes a confrontation with reality. Since the moment that they decided to leave Japan, the denial of the time concerning life in another country began. Living the time in the presence of the beloved object is different than living this time in its absence. As a result, living a time full of life is different than living a "dead time."

Due to the difficult history of these people in the process of separation, they used all the possible psychic resources to allow them the strengthening of their ego. The act of living the ambivalence between the idealized memory and the fragile commitment with the new space was a conflict very much present and that needed a suitable solution. But this feeling was already an indication of change.

A new encounter, after some time of separation, allows the individuals to realize the discrepancy between the ideal mystified image and the real image that was found. This disillusion may be projected to their country of origin, as a discharge. This way, we can understand that the process of grief is made concrete with the process of differentiation, as the individual begins to perceive the new and separate himself or herself from the other. This separation does not implicate in complete forgetfulness, since this condition would mean the death of the ego.

In the separation, the person should dissociate himself or herself from the idealized image of what is absent and try to replace it for other ideals. Besides that, he or she needs to continue to develop his or her daily activities to allow the continuity of the ego. The separation consists, therefore, in the attempt to overcome the feelings of ambivalence between the idealized image and the fragile commitment with the object currently in question. The suitable way to solve the conflicts is to make use of the defenses. These are the mechanisms that will allow the development and the adaptation to the new situation in Brazil. The life of the people is surrounded by ambivalent feelings and desires: love and hate, want and not want to, like or reject, and the function of the defense mechanisms is to control this ambivalence.

Having experienced moments of anguish and despair, the fact that they dedicated themselves to the work and were recognized by their commitment to it became one of the ways of being accepted, both socially and internally. This was the object through which the ego could create conditions to reorganize itself and allow the bond with other people, catching a glimpse on the positive aspects of the new land.

In order to survive the separation, a person must have hope. The ego, through the means of

defensive mechanisms, allows the absorption of the loss, recovering itself from the attacks suffered, in a process of experiencing the pain. In the phase of ideologization that causes the lack of criticism, the individual ends up giving another interpretation to the powers that he or she has placed for himself or herself, naming them as powers of life.

We have verified in the narratives that the affective factor, little explored in the literature, has decisively influenced the life of these people, as a facilitating aspect for them to live the present based on the past and allowing projections for the future. This process was the basis of the immigrants' subjective temporality. And it is only when the individual is able to integrate these three times in his or her psychism that the conditions and motivations to live and to be born again are created.

The strengthened ego can witness and feel the passage of life, and it can even establish relationships with the seasons of the year, such as to feel that spring was born again in its world. The image of Japan was idealized and this meant the possibility of loving Brazil. In the separative process, one cannot affirm that the immigrants won the struggle for life, but this meant that the possibility of life really existed. And this meant more: this meant that they struggled, worked and also lived, together with the time that renews itself in each season of the year.

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