Using Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to explore the cultural identities of children of Chinese migrants in Spain

This paper draws on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to analyze the cultural identity orientations of children of Chinese migrants in Spain. A qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews and observations was conducted among 22 participants with the aim of exploring their different cultural identity orientations and the possible factors having conditioned those orientations. Preliminary findings revealed a significant heterogeneity, nuance and complexity in the ways the participants conceptualized these issues. Cultural identity emerged as a temporal, changing and elusive variable inscribed within the continuity of individual existence and connected to past, present and future as well as to a large number of factors not strictly related to the migration experience. Whereas previous research has largely emphasized categories such as hybrid, transnational or hyphenated identities and has addressed cultural identity from an outcome-based perspective, these findings point to the need to shift to a more holistic and personalized approach that addresses the continuity and temporal dimension of cultural identity in the context of individuals’ specific life histories.

Bourdieu defines habitus as the internal logic and structures that unconsciously govern our thoughts, perceptions and actions, and which is the product of our personal histories and past. Habitus is referred to as ‘embedded history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history—it is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p.56). Such view implies that our internalized lived experiences in different realms (family, education, society, to name a few) and the values that we have unconsciously interiorized through those experiences have shaped our practices and inclinations, feelings and perceptions, including our self-ascribed cultural identity. From this perspective, cultural identity orientations cannot be apprehended in isolation but through a reconstruction of their making and of the social, economic, personal, and material conditions of existence from which they have emerged. This approach addresses some of the limitations of more traditional perspectives. It suggests that meaning cannot be produced through specified fixed categories and introduces a more holistic, temporal and multidimensional outlook to the study of migrant identities.