The Power of Identity.

An empirical approach to the migration experience.

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Abstract

Through interviews and focus groups with immigrants, we try to gain insight into how immigrants cope with the disempowering experience of migration and, more specifically, into the empowerment process and the role of identity in mediating it. Through the change in social and cultural conditions, migration has a profound effect on the migrant's identity, thus questioning the ability of the migrant to make sense of the world and to act meaningfully.
For immigrants, empowerment can imply a process of identity re-negotiation that involves their host community, their country of origin, and their fellow immigrants.
Our goal is to look in detail at that negotiation process and at its consequences for the immigrants' ability to reconstruct their sense of agency, by developing *new* identity practices.
This paper presents the key concepts of the research and the first empirical examples obtained from the early stages of fieldwork.

Keywords: Immigrants, migration, identity, empowerment.

Key Concepts & Supporting theory

In this paper I want to present the main concepts and first empirical data obtained at the early stages of my Ph.D. dissertation, the relevance of which resides in the following points:

- Integration Policy: self-categorization *vs.* external categorization. Understanding of the first may influence the latter.

- Assessing the degree to which the individuals' identities underlie the culture of a collective.

- Identity studies help develop research and policy on discrimination and stereotypes.

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This paper is the result of reflections after exploratory fieldwork was conducted and all the concepts have been validated in the field.

Studying the phenomenon of migration is a challenge that implies conducting analysis at several levels and taking into account various variables at once.

Massey and colleagues state that it is impossible to study international migrations from the perspective of a unique discipline (Massey *et al.* 2005). Following this logic, this study is a multidisciplinary one which mainly combines concepts and methodologies of social psychology and sociology.

Initially, migration was approached as a historical and geographical phenomenon (Ravenstein, 1885) with impact on the cultural and political history of the world and on the social subject. This definition, while still valid, remains too wide and makes the phenomenon too complex to analyse in an empirical study. Thus, the migration phenomenon is here defined as an experience that begins before the individual leaves the country of origin, with a project of migration and continues in time after arrival in the country of destination. It is not a linear process that starts when the migrant leaves the country of origin and which ends upon arrival in the country of destination.

The project of migration is important because it is prior to migrating that expectations, illusions, plans, and fears are assessed. All of which have an impact on the experience. Therefore, migration can be seen as an on-going process of situation and re-situation of the subject in a new space "qualified in many ways; socially, economically, politically, culturally […], etc" (Sayad 1998: 15). With this definition, the phenomenon is situated in a space and time experienced by the migrant. This implies the major change that characterizes the challenge of migrating.

This research deals exclusively with international migration. Thus, an international migrant has been defined as one who crosses cultural, political and administrative borders as the result of a project of migration and who is confronted with a change of cultural and social systems. By defining the international borders not only as national, but also as cultural and political, we acknowledge the fact that the migration does not only occur on a geographical level.

Cultural relocation implies new ways of understanding social relations, that is, the subject is repositioned in several scenarios and spheres. Most social structures are affected during the process of migration. Studies regarding second generations have shown that family

relations and structures are questioned and must be redefined, ideas of community and work relations must be revised as well, and immigrants always mention the different ways in which they feel alienated (at least initially) when interacting with peers of the host community.

Most studies in the field of international migrations deal with issues like integration, cross-cultural relations, multicultural communities, etc., showing the evident cultural level of migrating.

According to Faist (2000) there are three generations that have conceptualised international migrations with three different focuses. The first one was based on a "push-pull" model, explaining population movements in relation to factors that *pushed* people away from their countries of birth and who were simultaneously *pulled* by other factors towards more industrialized countries. This model was mainly used to explain migrations from underdeveloped countries to more developed ones, though it was extended to all types of migration.

The second generation was developed on a *macro-level,* where the structural dependence of some regions in relation to other regions was the focus. That is, core and periphery concepts were introduced on a global level which were defined in terms of a global capitalist economy. This line of study argued that there were "structured relationships between emigration and immigration states" (Faist, 2000: 12). Here, migrations were seen as "a response to differences" following that "a world of growing differences between nations and stronger networks over borders means there are more reasons and additional means to cross borders" (Martin *et al.* 2006: 11)

Finally, the third generation is situated on a *meso-level* and takes into account the analysis of the creation of *transnational social spaces*. This current deals with "the recognition of the practices of migrants and stayers connecting both worlds and the activities of institutions such as nation-states that try to control these spaces" (Faist, 2000: 12)

Using this genealogy of the study of migrations developed by Thomas Faist, this research can be framed within the third generation of migration studies, where the main focus is on the new cultural contexts where migration is developing, their characterization and the analysis of their constitution. That is, the interstices of social and geographical spaces or the transnational social spaces.

Transnational social spaces

As stated above, there are several ways of looking at the processes of migration. One of them implies that a migrant is an individual that leaves the home country to arrive in a host country, assuming both countries are homogeneous "cultures" and different from each other. Only after arrival does cross-cultural contact take place, which sets acculturation processes in motion (Oßenbrügge *et al.* 2004). Other perspectives assume that the migrant never really leaves and never really arrives. That is, the migrant is always present and absent (on the periphery) in both home and host societies. This research assumes that neither home countries nor host countries are homogeneous regions and that the centre and the periphery of those regions are not only related to territory.

I would thus argue for a transnational approach. The concept of space is well suited to overcome the limitations that territorial conceptualizations of nation-states and cultures may bring along. Moreover, space is "a sort of container to a socially, politically, and economically relevant construct" (Faist, 2000: 18).

Furthermore, there are interstices between spaces, that turn the interaction scenario into a continuous flow of experiences and exchanges, divorcing them from an exclusively geographical scenario.

Therefore it is more accurate to define international migration in terms of spaces and interstices because of its multidimensional features, being an "economic, political, cultural, and demographic process which encapsulates various links between two or more settings in various nation-states and manifold ties of movers and stayers between them" (Faist, 2000: 8).

In this regard this study is situated at a *meso-level* that deals with the type of ties that immigrants form. Through and with these ties, they create and recreate spaces, which are the combination of cultures and interactions. When those spaces turn into transnational social spaces they become dual, hybrid. This is how migrants dwell in multiple spaces. There is a duality in the lives of migrants, where they become architects of a new environment, building structures in a *new* social context with the tools that they brought from an *old* social space. New and old, here and there, familiar and foreign, all those are sides of the same construction that is the migrants' life and his or her experience of migration.

Interaction

At stake in the *meso-level* of analysis is the interaction between actors, that is, their interaction with each other and the organization and characterization of such interactions. Thus, I want to focus on the "interstices of individual and collective action" (Faist, 2000). While focusing on the interaction between the actors and the spaces configured by those actions, I want also to pay attention to the consequences that they have on individual experiences and, furthermore, how those experiences affect collective action. Therefore, I am talking about the connections between individuals and the mutual influences they have on each other and on the spaces they occupy:
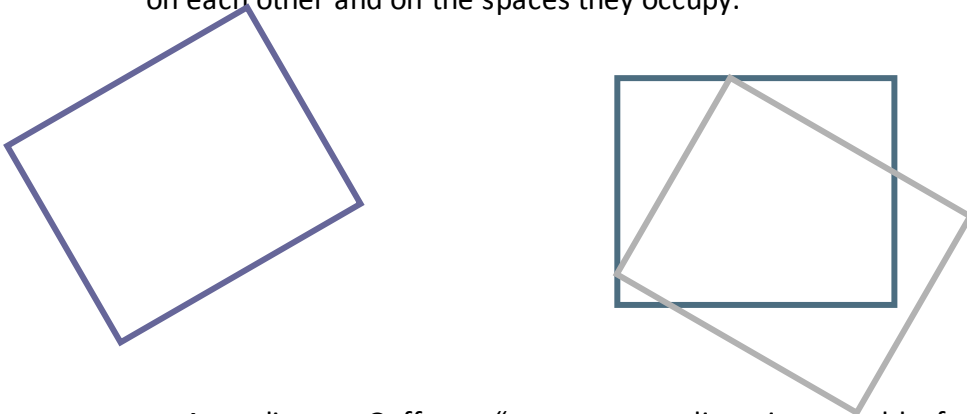
According to Goffman "every person lives in a world of social encounters" (Goffman, 1967: 5) and furthermore, every one of those encounters is dictated by a pattern of actions, which is used consciously or unconsciously. Thus, interaction follows some rules of action and that those rules are engendered in interaction. That is, the set of rules, norms and habits of interactions are known to most of the members of a society. With this I don't intend to imply the homogeneous nature of cultures or societies nor do I want to limit interaction to the relation between members of the same "group" or culture. However, I do want to acknowledge the existence of a certain shared symbolic system that allows people to know what to expect from each other and what is expected of themselves. This is what Goffman calls a "system of etiquette". I am then, simply highlighting the existence of a certain shared symbolic system that is fundamentally necessary for any interaction to take place.

This shared system of values, norms and symbols or *etiquette*, can be seen at the *meso-level* as a combination of the macro and the micro, that is, as a part of the social structure which has to be internalized. In short, shared information makes interaction work. Similarly, Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *"doxa"* refers to things that are taken for granted in society,

the unquestionable truths. The tradition of *symbolic interactionism* tells us that those "truths" that are represented as symbolic systems (again a term that Bourdieu recycles) or symbols, are necessary for us to interact with one another and for that interaction to be successful. That is, thanks to the common knowledge of those symbols we know "*who we are*" because we were able to define "*who they are*". If we don't share those symbols or we don't know what to expect from the other, we are lost on many levels.

Bourdieu states that cognitive and social structures are connected (Bourdieu, 1984), because they are internalized. This is what he calls *habitus*, *i.e.* the dispositions that inform action based on past experiences (Bourdieu, 1977). Moreover, he argues that changes in the *habitus* disempower those operating by rules of an older *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984).

This feeling lost and disoriented is what, in this research, is regarded as the disempowering feature of migration.

In order to test the concepts here presented, in depth interviews were conducted with several immigrants from various nationalities, both in Lisbon and in Washington, DC. The strategy here, in a phase of preliminary fieldwork, was to exaggerate the differences in the sample and in the context, to test the validity of the concepts in a wide range of scenarios. These interviews were undertaken with only one sampling criteria: being an immigrant. As it was expected, the interviewees, of the most varied backgrounds and characteristics, presented several commonalities, that will be illustrated here with some excerpts from some selected interviews.

For example, the following interviewee mentioned a feeling of being lost that is close to our concept of disempowerment:

> [...] you don't really take anything for granted anymore, you know you live someplace and you take it for granted that people do things this way or that way and all you really have to do is do things that ways and that's normal. And after you adapt to a new system, nothing's really 'normal' anymore, you know you realize that other things can become normal and that kind of means that anything can become normal... you don't have that standard norm anymore of normal [...] (American citizen, 2 years in Lisbon)

The interest here lies at the intersection of the individual and the collective which is where social actors give meaning to their experiences. The apparatus that "produce those meanings" can be found at that intersection (Rose 1996). According to Woodward, "those meanings only make sense if we have some idea of what subject-positions they produce and how we as subjects can be positioned within them" (Woodward, 1997: 14). Once again, this

shows how the set of rules and symbols and an overall understanding of the environment is critical for interaction.

The path of transnational networks and the social capital embedded in them, which is shared in interaction, has led me to define identity as a tool that informs action for interaction.

Identities are created through representation systems, because they serve to "classify the world and our relationships within it" (Hall, 1997) and allow us to position ourselves in and for interaction.

Identity

If "representations produce meanings through which we can make sense of our experience and who we are" (Woodward, 1997:14), then identity (which is created through representation) is a construction of symbolic systems and cultural patterns that acts as a tool to configure the individual's vision of the world and to give meaning to their experience. It is the cultural tool that informs action for interaction and is, therefore, crucial for understanding the immigrants' interactions in their host communities.

According to Baumeister, one of the functions of identity is to provide "a sense of strength and resilience so that one's life can be oriented toward specific goals" (Baumeister, 1986: 19). The relevance of identity then lies in the fact that it is important to act in the world, to position ourselves in it and to categorise and be categorised.

While configuring the vision of the world, identity is, at the same time, configured by external influences. "Culture shapes identity through giving meaning to experience" (Woodward, 1997: 15). It is not only a characteristic of the individual, but is also created in interaction. In accordance with this idea of external influences in social identity, Goffman describes social identity as a component of the interests and representations that "the others" elaborate to exercise a certain control over the individuals (Goffman, 1959). He writes that

> when an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. (…) Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. (Goffman 1959:1)

That information is what has been put together under the concept of identity and, also following Goffman, has been highlighted that it is important to act in the world, to know how to react and what reactions to expect. Identities then are shared, insofar as they provide guidance for interaction. The power of identity can thus be found precisely in the fact that it is shared.

Moreover, I believe that immigrants collectively construct identities that will help them interact in the countries of destination. However, their identity practices can be more complex since they have a multiplicity of relationships that weigh on their identification processes. "In space, co-presence and absences, participation and exclusion, as well as access, control and restrictions to economic and cultural resources – including communication infrastructures – become both tools and contexts for constructing identities" (Georgiou, 2006).

In a context of migration, the actor faces new ways of understanding social relations (visions of the world) and of positioning himself/herself in front of new and more varied groups of comparison (host community, other migrants, community of origin), which leads to a sort of alienation that calls for adjustment. This alienation could be observed in several interviews, such as the one below:

> […] Sinto-me outra pessoa. Há mesmo uma grande diferença entre a minha forma de viver a vida e de ver os outros… na maneira de me por em relação aos outros, ao mundo e às coisas que acontecem na vida, sinto-me estrangeira.[2]

> […] I feel like another person. There is really a big difference between my way of living life and of seeing others… my way of relating to others, to the world and to the things that happen in life, I feel like a foreigner.[3]

> (Italian citizen, 7 years in Lisbon)

According to Hashmi "immigrant identity is a particular one since it involves the re-evaluation of oneself and one's identity when being situated in a strange environment and surrounded by different customs, traditions, and language to which the immigrant is expected to adjust" (Hashmi, 2000).

Identity and language

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[2] Original
[3] My translation

Martin and Daiute explain the relevance of speaking a language in relation to identity by saying that "speaking a language is a socially and historically situated action through which speakers define themselves in relation to others" (Martin & Daiute, 2013: 1). When trying to analyse the integration of immigrants into a new community, it is essential to see the perception of learning the local language as a means of (re)construction of the migrant's identity in a context of migration.

Furthermore, integration is usually regarded as a process of empowerment, or more precisely, as a process that aids the overcoming of the cultural disempowerment that the migration experience entails.

Ataca and Berry, in a study concerning psychological and sociocultural adaptation of Turkish immigrant couples in Canada, argue that sociocultural adaptation refers to acquiring appropriate skills in order to improve one's "ability to interact with the new culture" and they continue, arguing that "individuals experiencing a culture change are socially unskilled in the new cultural setting" (Ataca & Berry, 2010)

A clear example of what we call disempowerment can be seen in the ability to speak a language or not. Language is an important tool for interaction, when it is missing the actor perceives a change in his personality, as expressed by this interviewee:

[...] going somewhere where you spoke a different language meant that your personality had to change because you didn't really had the tools to have the same personality or at least to project it."

(American citizen, in Lisbon for 2 years)

Another example is mentioned later on in the same interview by the same interviewee:

[...] and you have to figure out what you have to do to be perceived in the same way... you know you need to do different things to tell people who you are... it just takes different tools [...]

(American citizen, living in Lisbon for 2 years)

Preliminary fieldwork has shown that interaction is not defined or limited to groups of the same nationality. Among the groups who were interviewed; the Latino community in Washington, DC and nationals of several PALOP countries, the main source of identification seems to be the language.

[…]Si tuviera que decir que tenemos algo en común sería que hablamos el mismo idioma. Si es sobre comida o cultura, sí… hay bastante diferencia entre sus culturas y la mía, entonces así no lo relacionaríamos […][4]

[…]If I had to say we have something in common then I would say that it was the language. If you're talking about food or culture, yes…there is a big difference between their culture and mine so we wouldn't have that in common.[…][5]

(S#2 Mexican, Focus group DC)

Identity has proven to be understood in terms of a negotiation of difference, which was readily visible in all the interviews, focus groups and observations in DC as well as in Lisbon. According to Woodward (1997) identity is relational and it "relies for its existence on something outside itself, namely, another identity (…) which it is not" and she concludes that "identity is thus marked out by difference" (Woodward, 1997: 9). The migrant realizes differences and similarities between the cultural environment that he is used to acting in and the new set of references. Also according to Woodward, that assessment of similarities and differences is not unproblematic, because it involves a simultaneous denial of both similarities and differences. She gives the example of the Serbs and Croats, who on one hand maintain that they are completely different, but end up arguing that they are *the same* "Balkan rubbish" (Woodward, 1997: 9).

In the case below, the intervention in a focus group conducted in Washington, DC shows that there is a conflict or contradiction of wanting to assert that we are the same and different at the same time.

[…]Depends on how they say it. Because some are really mean like "go back to where you're from" blah blah blah blah and I'm just like "wow buddy, I'm from here, let's get that straight"

"And then I think but dude, your ancestors are immigrants so don't come in here saying that" […]

(S#1 Focus group DC- Mexican American[6])

When the interviewee says "I'm from here" she wants to make clear that she is not one of "the others", and at the same time by saying "your ancestors are immigrants" she wants to include her interlocutor into the group of "the others".

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[4] Original.
[5] My translation.
[6] This is the subject's own definition of herself.

Preliminary conclusions and comments

The word *same* occurs constantly in all the interviews and as often as the word *different*. It frequently refers to the "experience" or the "process" of migration which was similarly constructed by all migrants. There is, however, no doubt that some differences are more important than others (Woodward, 1997). In the context of migration it often occurs (and this was clearly seen during fieldwork) that nationalities are not very relevant when there was a shared language or a shared ethnic background, as was the case with the Latinos in the United States.

In some cases, even the political and ideological commonalities were seen as the most important features, as is shown in the interview excerpt below:

> [...] nosotros estamos en la misma lucha, todos queremos lo mismo y tenemos los mismos sueños, no importa de dónde venimos, todos creemos que tenemos los mismos derechos y tenemos la fuerza para luchar por ellos [...][7]

> [...] we're all in the same fight, we all want the same thing and we have the same dreams it doesn't matter where we come from. All of us believe we have the same rights and we have the strength to fight for them [...] [8]

> (Interview DC - Mexican-American)

The word "difference" or "different" has also proven to refer to the group of immigrants as a minority defined as "the other". Most of the time, the host community is referred to as "they" and it is made clear that "we" means all immigrants.

The notion of difference as expressed by "different" and "not the same" indicates a lack of capacity to fully interact with the environment. These notions therefore potentially account for the process of disempowerment experienced by an individual in a migration context.

When analysing the relation between identity and difference, Woodward argues that "identities are not unified. There may be contradictions within them which have to be negotiated" (Woodward, 1997: 12). Those negotiations occur at all levels and the migrant is aware of them, as we can see in the interview excerpt below:

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[7] Original.
[8] My translation.

[…] if you're the funny guy you don't get to be the funny guy if you don't speak the language and also that some of those things don't translate the same way even once you do speak the language, you know some places people just don't understand the same kind of humour or something like that, you know like certain manners and things like that. And you have to figure out what you have to do to be perceived in the same way. If you think of yourself like being the nice guy, maybe helping people in one place tells them that you're the nice guy, and maybe in other place it's calling them all the time you know or things like that, you know you need to do different things to tell people who you are, you know to project… it just takes different tools more or less.

(Interview US American, Lisbon)

The aim of this paper has been to present the ongoing work and reflections produced by this research, as well as the first results obtained from the early stages of fieldwork.

Further steps will study and introduce suggestions from experts in the field, such as those of Prof. Olga Solovova, who on the occasion of the IV Colóquio de Doutorandos/as CES suggested exploring concepts such as that of *"symbolic repertoires"* instead of speaking in terms of a single language, as the latter could prove too linear for such a complex context. Furthermore, Prof. Solovova suggested the introduction of concepts such as trajectory, which implies movement and flow as well as *"identity resources"* instead of simply using the term identity, which is in danger of foundering in essentialist statements and conclusions. The use of *symbolic configurations* as a part of the theoretical core presents possibilities for new paths of reflection. The contribution of Prof. Solovova and the other colleagues present at the conference have proved immensely important in thinking more in terms of "transitional identities" and their capacities for transforming the spaces occupied by the social actors.

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