III. IN SEARCH OF SENSE OF BELONGING. MIGRATORY NARRATIVES

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Acculturation: Why Is It Not Always Desirable to 'Fit'? Migratory Narratives from Ireland

Abstract

It is commonly argued, that migration 'is a transformative process with profound implications for the family' (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco 2001) in terms of socio-cultural adjustment in the host country. Drawing primarily from the exploratory longitudinal qualitative panel study, I argue that acculturation of individuals translates to a wider meaning and it is reciprocally intertwined in relationships within social structures, moving the research field towards 'the diversity of the paradigms and findings' (Rudmin 2010). This article examines how young people define and relate to 'normlessness' (Neal, Collas 2000), aspects that 'refer to the inability to identify with the dominant values of society, or rather with what are perceived to be the dominant values of society' (Seeman 1959); paying particular attention to social integration versus esclusione sociale. The study captures the real experiences of Polish re-united immigrants. It brings to light exclusive data, life portraits of acculturating youth, revealing that it is not always desirable to 'fit' (Sam, Berry 2006) culturally.

Key words: acculturation, cultural fit, migrants, social space

Introduction: Migrants in Social Space

The large-scale transnational migration that began post the EU-enlargement, positioned Ireland as one of the favourite destinations. Many Poles who 'had a life', a house etc in Poland uprooted their children and moved across physical spaces to the 'unknown' social space, where their starting position in the social stratum was significantly lower than in Poland. Pierre Bourdieu (1996) asserts that social space is always socially constructive; it has social meaning and social dimension. Therefore, migrants entering social space usually have to negotiate their position in their new diverse context. While Henri Lefebvre (1991) outlines that migrants entering a new social space have neither the knowledge nor competences that are represented by the natives, who as the social actors are already familiar with the construct of their social context and their social space, Deborah Reed-Donahay (2010) asserts, that on top of this, migrants who enter their new social context are positioned on the existing hierarchy in the particular social space. Moreover, often this social space is dominated or occupied by other migrants' culture. The structure of social space thus manifests itself (Bourdieu 1996, p. 13) but it also implies that regardless of social

capital migrants have to learn their new settings via existing local communities. Such a reality has implications for immigrants. Polish families were no exception to this – acquisition of the above-mentioned knowledge enabled them with time to understand Irish culture and its symbols, which at the practical level translated for the 'insider knowledge' that permitted them to function in Ireland.

In the broad terms culture 'refers to shared values and concepts among people who most often speak the same language and live in proximity to each other' (Brislin 2000, p. 5), however, 'understanding a culture means detecting and interpreting its sign system' (Cavallaro 2001, p. 16). According to the evidence gathered during the Acculturation Study with Polish Immigrant Teenagers (LASPIT) research project, Polish adolescents and teenagers who follow their parents to Ireland have to modify their outlook and adjust to the new socio-economic situation which differentiate them from their Irish peers, who particularly during the Celtic Tiger had had no experience of forced migration or unemployment (Lalor et al. 2007). It was established, that usually during the transition period new arrivals acquire their new knowledge about their new 'nested context' (Thomas, Znaniecki 1918) and learn their new cultural repertoire epitomised in the mainstream culture and expressed by specific cultural codes and symbols.

Mary Douglas (1996) argues that 'symbols are the only means of communication. They are the only means of expressing value; the main instruments of thought, the only regulators of experience' (Douglas 1996, p. 38). Hence, in giving shape to their new socio-cultural reality, immigrants refer to their cultural heritage and use their dual comparative framework to assess their new social standing and the social environment. Their projection albeit through their own lenses helps them to formulate the best coping strategies and informs their behavioural repertoire. Unfolding acculturation and identity consciousness through the narratives of Polish teenagers indicate that new arrivals upon coming to Ireland lost their insider status and became outsiders and only with time will they be able to change their ascribed new position of 'strangers' to insiders. This shift according to Reed-Donahay (2010) includes also the symbolic notion in a new social space. Migrants' ways of seeing the world always shifts in terms of their position, in terms of their life styles, their tastes, languages and even their accent. Interestingly, during this shifting process acculturating individuals in order to make sense of their new social reality '[...] can reject a cultural value at one point in their lives and accept it at other times' (Brislin 2000, p. 19). This shifting process was captured by the LASPIT research project and examples of this process will be evidenced later in this article.

Acculturation: the Theory and the Practice

Problematising the acculturation of young Polish entrants in light of migration in the Irish context opens an interesting debate for the acculturation issues. It is commonly argued, that at an individual level 'acculturation denotes second-cultural acquisition [...] however, it does not entail expectations of the acculturating group moving the research field towards «the diversity of the paradigms and findings»' (Rudmin 2010, p. 310). A dynamic construct of acculturation that evolves in

response to contextual migratory factors constantly re-defines coping strategies and relations with peers accounting for variation in acculturation trajectories. The LASPIT research project as mentioned above investigates this issue in the Irish context and brings to light interesting findings about the acculturation discourse.

This article draws primarily from the qualitative data obtained during the exploratory LASPIT research project that was initiated in 2009 by the implementation of a longitudinal series of qualitative interviews with thirty-three Polish teenagers within an age bracket of twelve to twenty, who experienced 'dependant migration' (Zontini 2010). Moreover, The LASPIT includes an exploration of the perception of acculturation from Polish parents' and Irish teachers' perspectives. The total sample was recruited using chain-referral sampling on the basis of linkages between the parents and the teenagers.

The overarching theoretical framework of this research was initially based on John Berry's paradigm for conceptualising and studying acculturation (Berry et al. 1992). The main data collection consisted of three waves of qualitative interviews conducted between 2009 and 2011 along with a questionnaire based on the Vancouver Index of Acculturation (VIA) as well as focus groups. John Holland et al (2006) argues that 'there is much potential for collaboration between qualitative and quantitative approaches to longitudinal research. It has been suggested that existing and new longitudinal studies would benefit from the addition of qualitative elements; and that there is potential for purposive sampling within existing longitudinal studies in order to provide samples for qualitative enquiry' (Holland 2006, p. 3). Therefore, the LASPIT research project incorporates a combination of open and standardised data collection.

The acculturation trajectories of Polish respondents were measured via a visual analogue scale (VAS) carefully adapted to the Irish context, called the Vancouver Index of Acculturation, which is 'an effective instrument for studying acculturation of other culturally and linguistically different groups' (Ryder 2000). It was found that a modified version of the Vancouver Index of Acculturation is a powerful tool to measure attitudes and to elicit key patterns of acculturation trajectories. A psychometric response scale was introduced on-line in 2010 and again in 2011. The measurements were administered always post-interviewing session when the researcher obtained an email address and additionally oral permission to use the obtained domain to contact the interviewee via the Internet and run the quantitative part of the LASPIT research project.

In general, social demands for smooth assimilation create distinctive conflicts for personal and identity development. Moreover, there is unwritten social expectation for the newcomers to acquire language skills, to 'mix with', 'blend in' and to 'adjust to' or in other words to conform to the values and cultural patterns of behaviours in their new social setting. Thus 'paralleling the larger societal questions posed by immigration the considerable challenges newcomers are confronted with as individuals [...] who often find themselves in a veritable «crossfire» of social and psychological forces posing fundamental question as to what degree entrants should acculturate into the host society? (Kosic 2006, p. 113). Małgorzata, a 16-year-old girl

who arrived in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger, shed more light on this issue during our first interview in 2009. She asserted:

> I was not allowed to speak Polish at my school. I could hardly speak English and the Polish language was the only way of communicating and expressing myself. I have no one here. Parents think that if they can provide food or other basic stuff, that everything is OK! They don't think ahead of the consequences of their decisions. They don't see the implications of resettlement... I don't like Irish culture, I was brought up in Poland and I feel OK in Poland, but I am stuck here, uprooted and thrown in the deep end [...] But I will manage. I do what is expected of me, I socialise with Irish people and speak their language, but I am really Polish inside. Very soon I will finish in this school and I will be free to live my life the way I want to (Małgorzata, aged 16, I wave, Dec 2009).

'The call for immigrants to give up their languages, to leave their cultures behind, and to acculturate in a fast-forward way has unanticipated consequences. Such abrupt personal and social transformation undermines the cohesion and inherent authority of the immigrant family and community. Even as they build bridges to their new society, immigrant youth need to be able to continue bonding with and not to be alienated from their parents and relatives' (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008, p. 372). David Sam et al. (2006) outlines that from a societal point of view, the future of many societies lies in the hands of their children, therefore the welfare of all children including immigrant children constitute important ramification for contemporary societies in the context of transnational migration (Sam, Berry 2006, p. 404). Irish social structures dwell on emigration issues, on the one hand acknowledging immigrants as contributors to Irish welfare, and on the other such a giant immigration influx and multicultural diversity bring questions of a threat to Irish identity and the stability of everyday society. But it should not be forgotten that 'children help constitute and reconfigure transnational social fields, and transnational practices, in turn, shape the contours of particular childhoods' (Orellana et al. 2001), therefore their voices matter, particularly in the acculturation context.

Theoretical approaches to the study of acculturating adolescents and identity theory formation take up a prominent position in the broad literature. Acculturation changes social structures and individual agency per se, and it is perceived through the prism of successful integration, social inclusion, and social cohesion. However, what does successful integration mean? Bryan Fanning (2011) argues that there is 'the implicit assumption that [...] degree of conformity represents successful integration' (ibid., p. 2). Berry (1997) proposes an acculturation theory that conceptualises four distinctive acculturation attitudes based on the quadrants defined by mainstream culture and heritage dimension. Those are: *integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. Integration* 'involves maintaining cultural heritage while endorsing intergroup relations; *assimilation* involves relinquishing cultural heritage and adopting the beliefs and behaviors of the new culture; *separation* involves maintenance of heritage culture without intergroup relations; and *marginalization* involves non-adherence to either old or new culture' (Ryder et al. 2000, p. 50). Interestingly, among all four of Berry's acculturation

outcomes, *integration* is perceived as the most adaptive strategy (Sam, Berry 2006) incorporating 'a willingness for mutual accommodation and being flexible in personality' (Sam, Berry 2006, p. 51). Moreover, Berry (2002; 2006) concludes that among these four acculturation strategies *integration* seems to be the most effective, the most successful, positioning *assimilation* and *separation* as the intermediate strategies and advocating that *marginalization* is the least effective. The narrative below epitomises the dilemma that emerged among the sampled Polish immigrants engaged in extensive intercultural interactions:

> I have been here for five years. For example, at the beginning, I compared the Poles to the Irish and I was thinking that Irish girls are so fantastic because of the way they welcomed me. I even befriended a few Irish girls. With time I have changed my mind and now I consider Polish girls to be my real colleagues [...] Hence, I will maintain my Polish identity and I will never change my accent in order to make me sound more native. Some foreigners change their accents, and the way they speak in order to sound more Irish. They also try to do their hair and make-up in styles that are popular among Irish girls. They do a lot to make themselves similar to the Irish and to belong to Irish groups [...] At present, I don't make any friends with the Irish at all! I don't even speak to them – and I will not allow my cultural standards to be lowered to theirs. So I have friends from Romania and Latvia ... I only make friends with other girls from abroad and I am proud of being Polish (Julia, aged 15, I wave, 19 Jan 2010).

Those two excerpts (Małgorzata's and Julia's) clearly denote that the émigré parents and their uprooted children must often find their own ways of navigating in their new social arena. The data from the LASPIT research project indicates that in the process of learning the new culture Polish newcomers also assess the system of values and patterns of behaviour characteristic for Irish social structures. By and large, acculturation as a term encompasses enculturation, culture learning, assessment, and adjustment. The assessment of a new social landscape takes place constantly forming and redefining coping strategies and influencing acculturation outcomes. Consequently, acculturating Polish teenagers who were brought up in Poland, and who have been exposed to Polish cultural values assess the values of Irish culture. They take what suits them in a particular moment and later they often re-enter their heritage culture because they find themselves more comfortable and more familiar with the Polish values and the childhood experiences that inculcated them to their culture. Narratives from Ireland indicate that Polish teenagers as mentioned above just 'shop' around during the acculturation process. Hence, given which life domain we take under the loop we can see an *assimilation* attitude swapped for both *integration* and *separation* or the other way around depending on the context and the social landscape. Concomitantly, nobody within the interviewed group, neither Polish teenagers nor their parents, has ever rejected their own cultural heritage culture or the culture of their mainstream society (*marginalization)* unequivocally proving that Berry's acculturation paradigm has limited applicability at the practical level.

Drawing from the gathered acculturation encounters, it is indisputable that immigrant youth have a unique set of their own personal characteristics and that

they carry an exclusive set of own experiences, and therefore, they acculturate to a different degree. The social construct and individual factors along with the 'nested context' (Thomas, Znaniecki 1918) characterise every acculturation process and influence acculturation outcomes moving the research field towards 'the diversity of the paradigms and findings' (Rudmin 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising that managing acculturation discourses of being once the 'insider' with being an 'outsider' constitutes discursive incongruities in the newcomers' life.

Michał arrived in Ireland in the summer of 2009 at the age of sixteen. Due to his low proficiency in English, he was moved to the second year in his new secondary school in Dublin. He was welcomed in his new class but despite this, he felt lonely, he felt that he was not part of them. His interaction with peers was very limited. Moreover, he felt that his fellow students were only waiting for his grammatical mistakes. His initial acculturation experience made him feel a stranger. Nobody has ever treated him badly but the feeling that he did not belong there accompanied him for the next few months. By nature, Michał is a shy, quiet person but his coping acculturation strategy was based on being approachable and open towards people. It was not easy but proved to be successful. Since the new academic year, Michał has noticed a significant change. His schoolmates are nicer to him, they talk to him, and they express real interest in him and in his opinion: 'I think that they eventually accepted that I am a foreigner, my accent is different, but I am not a stranger any more. I am OK now'. Michał has gained a few good friends and he feels accepted. Michał's behavioural repertoire changes regularly. He is open and extroverted in relation to Irish peers. In Poland, he is back to his old self – quiet and introverted, and at home, he is himself. Despite being exposed to the variety of culture and food, he still loves Polish traditional food and the way young Poles are brought up. He likes Ireland and recognises the opportunities open before him but he strongly adheres to Polish values, especially those which clearly define borders between teenagers and their parents in terms of behaviour, respect and mutual understanding. His capacity for social critique has taken me by surprise. However, Michał clearly articulates why he is not interested in fitting in culturally:

> It is difficult to be a Polish teenager in the Irish context. I still find it difficult to express myself, and I don't like it when they laugh at me when I can't express myself. I don't sense this culture and I don't really care. I think I will never feel it... the cultural distance... I behave differently. I have different standards. I am happy here but I don't care about making friends with the Irish... I miss my Polish friends sometimes and the Polish environment where you are understood between words, where you can laugh. I have good contact with immigrants, who come from a similar cultural background and I have satisfactory contact with Irish peers particularly Irish girls. However, the Irish can often behave so childishly and the way they speak sometimes drives me mad [...] I am very proud of being Polish. I am proud that I speak the Polish language and when I am in my class I am filled with the feeling of pride in being Polish. I have never thought about it. I've realised here how much my Polishness matters to me. Of course, being here influences us. We are happier, we smile more often, we don't snap [...] I would be happier if the Irish started to appreciate the richness of Polish culture and what it can offer (Michał, aged 17, III wave, 2 June 2011).

Michał's account is one of many. Culture clash, the issue of belongingness, values and the upbringing have an obvious impact on individual choices. The LASPIT data obtained during this exploratory longitudinal study also examines how young personages define and relate to 'normlessness' (Neal, Collas 2000) or what Durkheim referred to as *anomie*; aspects that 'refer to the inability to identify with the dominant values of society, or rather with what are perceived to be the dominant values of society' (Seeman 1959, p. 754); paying particular attention to the degree of emotional investment: *social integration* versus *esclusione sociale*. At the same time, narratives from Ireland unequivocally outline how the social context, an individual's uniqueness, emotions, and social imperatives are reciprocally intertwined in the acculturation process:

> I have no friends because we immigrants distanced ourselves. We are stuck... stranded here... We have been uprooted from where we have been living for a long time [...] I am convinced that I will not stay here forever where I cannot have 'real' friends. I could leave one day and we would lose the contact... or they could leave as Spanish girls do... I will go back to Poland one day; they will go to Spain. Some of them [school peers] express an interest, but it is more a question of being polite than being really interested in what I am doing during the break. It is so false to me – this kind of pretending to be interested in [...] I've even noticed that they treat each other in the same way. Even among the Irish, they will show off how caring they are, and when one of them turns around another one easily gossips or says nasty things about someone out of earshot. It's something that prevents me from being involved in. I don't approve of such behaviour [...] However there is a mixed group of Irish and foreigners. Apparently, there is even one Irish girl, who truly likes me. Nevertheless, even that Irish girl who is very kind to me, who sits with me at the same desk and talks to me during breaks – she doesn't go beyond this. I don't call for her and we never go anywhere during the weekends, so this relationship has its boundaries – school boundaries. I would love to spend my time differently, I would love to go out, to go to the cinema with somebody like I used to in Poland, but it is not the case [...] Of course, I 'befriended' some colleagues here but my main contacts are with my Polish friends in Poland and this keeps me going. I tried to get used to my new school, to the new language and the new environment – slowly I progressed [...] but at the end of the day you are really lonely here. You don't feel that you belong here. I still feel an outsider [...] watching life that is lived by others but I am not a part of it. I am standing aside because I don't fit in. But the bottom line is that – as I mentioned before – I don't always want to 'fit'... (Patrycja, aged 17, III wave, 14 May 2011).

The limited practical applicability of Berry's fourfold theory in light of the LASPIT findings forced the researcher to search for a more flexible paradigm. Mary Douglas (1970; 1973; 1996) identifies distinctive social patterns epitomised by the 'grid and group' theory, which offers a multi-dimensional approach to acculturation study, accounting for social variables, interconnection and eventually social change with all its dynamics both at the individual level and at the societal level. The 'group' interestingly translates to a wider meaning and splits the world into outsiders and insiders, while the 'grid' outlines the degree to which various cultural behaviours are classified and differentiated. Hence, for instance Julia's whole description of her new social landscape, her initial reaction to her new social setting, and the reaction

of the native peers in her class visibly contrast with her 'awakening' (Douglas 1996). Her narratives clearly illustrate that suddenly she became aware that the values of her heritage culture are no longer applicable in her new realm. At this point, she becomes what Douglas coined 'an awakened one', who is aware that the cultural dissonance or more precisely the culture clash creates distinctive conflict for her 'nested context' (Thomas, Znaniecki 1918). In this perspective, deconstruction of her own social settings enriched by her reflexivity approach triggers a change in her attitude and her behavioural repertoire. By contrast, Małgorzata and Patrycja are fully aware that they are anchored in their socio-cultural context on the temporary basis. It is unquestionable that they would love to free themselves from the social ties and that they would like to be free to live their lives the way they want to but the social pressure and its demand for conformity is too strong. In terms of social pressure, Douglas (1970; 1973; 1996) argues that interaction of the individual take place within two social dimensions. One of them is order – the symbolic system, while the other is pressure – the experience of having no option but to consent to the overwhelming demands of other people ('when in Rome, do as the Romans do').

As exemplified above, Małgorzata and Patrycja took their own distinctive social standings, however, both girls elicited the value of real friendship. Both girls abjured the importance of social status in comparison to the true friendship concluding with the elaborated Wilkinsonian point, that 'social status (dominance, hierarchies, pecking order) are orderings based on power, coercion and privileged access to resources regardless of the needs of others. Friendship by contrast, is based on reciprocity, mutuality, social obligations, sharing and recognition of each other's needs' (Wilkinson 2011). Because of this disjunction 'we hear the more insistent demand of the inner self to be given full expression' (Douglas 1996, p. 109).

A Closing Thought on Why It Is Not Always Desirable to 'Fit'

Given the rapid socio-cultural change that accompanies migrants it is inevitable that familiarity and comfort with the heritage culture settings is not easily transferable into the new culture in which immigrants are expected to socialise and participate (Brislin 2000; Sam, Berry 2006; Suárez-Orozco 2008). In general, acculturation findings denote many levels of interpretations. However, only a closer look at the micro level – particularly during the qualitative social enquiry – offers a real insight into acculturation phenomena revealing that it is not always desirable to 'fit' (Sam, Berry 2006) culturally. The narratives from Polish newcomers in the LASPIT research project encourage the emergence of new perspectives of acculturation. Social integration versus *esclusione sociale* experienced socially reinforces or weakens social bonds and social cohesion, creating various types of relations. Therefore, it is axiomatic that the dichotomy of acculturation attitudes increase resilience within the social dimension to meet with the needs of the ever--changing society in which we live. In this instance, the standing point of the large percentage of Polish respondents is deeply embedded in their cultural heritage, in Polish values often carried on through the generations. Consequently, their socio-cultural predilection is primarily derived from their Polish upbringing.

Therefore, their new context encroaches the process of achieving and maintaining congruence between the control systems for the identity – an awareness that social structure expects them to perform up to certain standards causing interruption and subsequently distress (Burke 1991). A large percent of the respondents asserted that they have never before thought about their Polishness. Conversely, their new social dimension impinges questions of identity, of cultural heritage and it forces the newcomers to question the values of the host society. In doing so Polish teenagers reflect on, evaluate their social position and take a stand, framing narrative evidence which in some aspects challenges the common assumption that is it always desirable to fit culturally.

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Streszczenie

Uważa się, iż migracja „jest procesem dotyczącym gruntownego przeobrażenia, które niesie ze sobą istotne skutki dla rodziny" (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco 2001) w postaci społeczno-kulturowego dostosowania się do kraju przyjmującego. Opierając się głównie na eksploracyjnych długotrwałych jakościowych badaniach panelowych, twierdzę iż akulturacja jednostek ma nieco szersze znaczenie i jest uwikłana we wzajemne relacje w ramach struktury społecznej, co przesuwa pole badawcze w kierunku „różnorodności paradygmatów i odkryć badawczych" (Rudmin 2010). Niniejszy artykuł ukazuje, w jaki sposób młode osoby rozumieją i odnoszą się do sytuacji „braku norm" (Neal, Collas 2000), do aspektów które „odnoszą się do niemożliwości identyfikacji z dominującymi wartościami społeczeństwa, czy raczej z tymi wartościami, które są uznawane za dominujące w społeczeństwie" (Seeman 1959); poświęcając szczególną uwagę integracji społecznej versus społeczne wykluczenie. Poniższy artykuł opisuje rzeczywiste doświadczenia polskich imigrantów, ukazując w pełnym świetle wyjątkowe dane: portrety życiowe młodych ludzi, którzy podlegając procesowi akulturacji, wskazują iż nie zawsze „kulturowe dostosowanie się" jest pożądane (Sam, Berry 2006).