



# Exclusionary moments: Queer desires and migrants' sense of (un)belonging

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## ABSTRACT

Migration to Iceland has increased considerably in recent decades, and after the labour market was opened up to EU workers in 2006, migrants from countries in Central and Eastern Europe have become by far the largest immigrant group. The Nordic countries have increasingly been seen as a “safe space” for people with queer desires, and Iceland is no exception to that trend. This article discusses an under-researched area within queer migration studies: migrations from Central and Eastern Europe to a small population in Northern Europe, and their sense of belonging to their ethnic community, the queer community and wider Icelandic society. The overarching theme of this study is “exclusionary moments,” while the sub-themes relate to social class (dis) identification, shame and emotional work, and participants' sense of (un)belonging. This study is based on semi-structured interviews, and argues that shame is placed on participants through differential power structures, but also highlights participants' agency within those cultural scenarios. It applies theories of affect and emotions, and the concept of a global hierarchy of value, to demonstrate how exclusionary moments materialise in everyday settings.

## 1. Introduction

Despite a relatively large body of scholarship on queer<sup>1</sup> migration internationally, few studies have focused on migration to a country with a small population. This article highlights the “exclusionary moments” of LGPQ<sup>2</sup> individuals who have migrated from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and their sense of belonging within a remote Nordic country, Iceland. The term exclusionary moments is used in line with Crenshaw's (1991) notions of intersectionality to refer to those moments when exclusion occurs in particular circumstances, and when “new realities” are generated. This does not simply relate to having queer desires, or being an immigrant, and is not merely the sum of various marginalised identities, such as ethnicity, sexuality, ability, or class, but emerges when these multiple identifications intersect (Kuhar, 2009). Moments of social stigma and subordination can range from passing inconvenience to long-term repercussion, and make those who experience them feel displaced. Shame and humiliation are attached to participants in this study through differential social structures, which engender moments of exclusion that participants must navigate. Exclusion occurs, for example, through religious and governmental

institutions, as well as through the legacies of communism and the cultural attitudes toward sexual orientation in their countries of origin. In Iceland participants faced exclusion, for example, stemming from racial and ethnic stereotyping in the queer community and in wider Icelandic society, as well as homophobia in their immigrant communities. Consequently, participants often demonstrated their agency through what Hochschild (1983) terms “emotional work,” to maintain connections with family members, better fit within various cultural scenarios, and attain what Butler (2004) calls “liveable lives”.

Recent studies discussing issues of queer migration in Sweden have covered narratives of intimacy relating to affect and emotions in partner migration (Ahlstedt, 2016), as well as gay and lesbian internal migration and mobility decisions in connection to family ties (Wilmark, 2016a, 2016b). Studies on queer asylum seekers in Norway include an examination of sexual norms regarding immigration policy (Mühleisen et al., 2012), and the issue of translating the “genuineness” of sexuality when applying for asylum (Akin, 2016). Scholars focusing on internal migration have traditionally described gay and lesbian migration as a rural to urban phenomenon, driven by the perception that there are more possibilities and less homophobia in urban areas, and in the

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<sup>1</sup> Queer can refer to variety of identity markers, such as, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, transgender, and intersex, as well as gender identities and sexual practices which do not follow the dominant norm, such as genderqueer individuals and BDSM practices. More importantly for this study, queer can also refer to the process of queering migration studies, by denaturalising categories of analysis within the study of gender and sexuality, and separating the “normative” which is morally determined from the “normal” as statistically determined (Giffney, 2004), and thus relating to queer theory.

<sup>2</sup> This acronym derives from the self-identification of the participants in this study as lesbian, gay, pansexual and queer. However, when referring to other scholarly studies, this article will use the acronyms that appear in those studies.

process have skewed the focus towards larger cities (Weston, 1995; Knopp, 2004; Wilmark and Östh, 2013; Jennings and Millward, 2016). Some studies have, nonetheless, stressed that other migration trends and destinations are possible (Gorman-Murray, 2007, 2009; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2011; Lewis, 2012). Studies have also shown that gay couples tend to migrate to high-amenity and dense regions regardless of tolerance, while lesbian couples tend to migrate to regions that are not as dense or rich in amenities but are more tolerant, and that lesbian couples are more likely to have children (Cooke, 2005; Brown and Knopp, 2006). An under-researched area in queer migration studies in Northern Europe, thus, relates to transnational migration from CEE to the Nordic countries, and more specifically, migrants' resocialisation into a small population such as that of Iceland. The vast majority of immigrants in Iceland come from countries in CEE, yet, based on the outreach undertaken in the course of this study, social participation and visibility of LGBTQ+ immigrants from CEE seems disproportionately lacking. This paved the way for the research questions: How do migrants with queer desires from the CEE experience exclusion, and how do they find a sense of belonging within Icelandic society, their ethnic community and the queer community? This study applies approaches involving affect and emotions to engage with participants' mixed feelings of queer commitment (Hall and Jagose, 2012), and also highlights the dynamics of intersecting positions, making uneven power relations visible.

There are no simple explanations when enquiring about motives for queer migrations, as they are as much economic as they are a search for sexual freedom (Binnie, 2004). None of the participants in this study initially migrated to Iceland in search of greater opportunities for sexual citizenship. But some stated that they decided to extend their stay in Iceland because of their ability to produce a self that was more in line with their sexual orientation, and because they enjoyed better legal status and social welfare. This is in accordance with the findings of Stella et al. (2017) in their study on LGBT migrants from CEE in Scotland. Thus, while participants in this study were initially motivated by economics, sexuality played a role in their long-term decision-making. Consequently, it is important to recognise contradictions inherent in neoliberal processes, make visible the class dimension of sexualities and examine them critically (Binnie, 2013).

Queer knowledge production and sexual politics in CEE has been described by Mizelińska and Kulpa (2013) with the concept of “knotted temporality,” which describes the appropriation of the Western hegemonic discourses of “secularism,” “gay rights,” and “progress” into cultures in the CEE, while stigma is attached to CEE countries through notions of “nationalism,” “homophobia,” and “backwardness”. Thus, thinking beyond “centrism” is fundamental to the ongoing efforts to decentre Western sexualities. This article does not seek to reproduce notions of the East lagging behind the West, but rather, to put into context how lived lives of transnational migrants from CEE materialise in the Nordic context, and demonstrate how their migration is contributing to the ongoing process of decentring Western sexualities. The article begins by discussing theoretical perspectives relevant for this study, then addresses the Icelandic context and methods, before moving on to the specific findings and concluding remarks. The overarching theme of this article is exclusionary moments, as this seemed, in many ways, to be the thread that tied the sub-themes together. The three sub-themes relate to issues of social class (dis)identification, shame and emotional work, and participants' sense of (un)belonging.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives

A theoretical discussion relating to the “othering” process and racialisation is pivotal when referring to LGPQ migrants' experiences of residing in Iceland. The geographical boundaries of Said's (1979) notions of the “Orient” or the “other” have shifted throughout history, but the concept itself has remained more or less consistent. The gradation of Orients has been termed “nesting orientalism” by Bakić-Hayden

(1995), and describes a pattern that classifies Asia as the most “Eastern” or “other,” followed by the Balkans, and then Eastern Europe, in a hierarchical construction aimed towards the West as the centre. Herzfeld's (2004) “global hierarchy of value” has a similar disposition, where a universal value has been attached to one's “culture,” which is then ranked and “othered” according to the gradient of nesting orientalism. Moreover, there is a tendency to isolate and essentialise features of specific groups or cultures, and make those thoughts and practices seem unchangeable and especially true for that group compared to others (Bakić-Hayden, 1995). Racialisation has always involved a consolidation of biological and cultural arguments; nonetheless, “old” racism has mainly been based on “blackness”. But as racism has increasingly been regarded as socially unacceptable, “new racism” revolves more around how socially defined groups are systematically categorised with regards to culture, religion (Harrison, 2002), and ethnicity (Brah, 2000), where some groups are further seen as incompatible with modern society, and where the idea of separate races is still prevalent the wider societal discourse (Bauman, 2000). The concept of a global hierarchy of value frames participants' experiences of racial and ethnic stereotyping within the Icelandic context in many ways, especially with regards to generalizations of socio-economic status and “backwardness”.

This article addresses various forms of exclusionary moments, and thus, a theoretical deliberation of social class as it relates to structure and agency is relevant. The concepts of inclusion and exclusion are often related to social identities, and have important structuring effects with regards to why, how, and where particular boundaries are formed (Anthias, 2001). Within the European context, exclusion is often regarded as a lack of social integration and social cohesion, which is perhaps just another way of describing poverty and its effects (Berkel, 1997). Bourdieu (1990) applied the notion of *habitus* to describe how something that is socially constructed, such as a person's social class (as well as one's ethnicity and sexual orientation), can appear to be inevitable and natural, and the ways in which the social is incorporated into the self while the self is constituted in social relations. The identity assigned by society might not be the identity people would want to claim for themselves, and they might seek to avoid social spaces where they are so designated (Skeggs, 1999). Personal agency, whether it is understood as free will, resistance, or a sort of mediating relationality (Kockelman, 2007), is always negotiated within the matrix of power, and often emerges as a political privilege within the gaps of regulative norms (Miller et al., 2006). Participants in this study expressed their agency in various ways, for example, as resistance to exclusionary processes and to their assigned identities, and this will be highlighted to some extent.

Exclusionary moments are in many ways governed by shame and humiliation, and a brief discussion of theories relating to gay or queer shame is thus applicable. According to Sedgwick (1993), queer identity and queer resistance are rooted in experiences of shame, because shame generates conceptual understandings and linkages between identity and performativity. Lui (2017) discusses how the two streams of thought which have previously tackled gay shame either focus on assimilation to the dominant society to reduce shame in queer subjects, or on embracing shame in order to repoliticise the queer subject through the approach of antinormativity. However, both models produce shame as a localising object attached to a single subject, and thus, do not conceptualise shame as a movement and circulatory process between bodies. Emotions, such as shame and humiliation, are thus neither innate nor merely imposed on stigmatised subjects through social structures, but are created through this capacity to “affect and be affected” (Blackman and Venn, 2010, p. 9). Notions of shame arose in the analysis of the interviews; participants were not asked directly about these feelings, but some did mention them in connection to exclusionary moments in various social situations.

Contrasting exclusionary moments are moments of inclusion, or a sense of belonging. Baumeister and Leary (1995) have maintained that

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