



## The integration of Iraqis in two European cities: Emotions and identity work<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

In this study of Iraqi refugees in Helsinki and Rome, we explore the verbal construction of identity as evidence of the process of integration into a new society. We make use of Snow and Anderson's idea of "identity work" and link it to McCall's idea of "not-me." The data for this paper derive from a larger comparative study conducted by the second author. They are based on the findings from forty-eight open-ended, semi-structured interviews, half conducted in each city. We argue that despite differences between the two locales regarding such things as the respective welfare regimes and relations with natives, the identity work required for refugees to reinscribe and reconstruct their sense of self was remarkably similar.

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Newcomers to a nation, particularly if they think that there is a reasonably high probability that they will remain, enter into a process of redefining their own identities in terms of their relationship to the nation they left and the one where they now dwell. This process of negotiating a sense of identity and a feeling of belonging is inherently complex, in no small part because migration is a paradigmatic instance of a situation that is capable of generating ambivalence—a mixture of attraction and repulsion. Indeed, as we have argued elsewhere, this is a situation characterized by a dual ambivalence insofar as it typically involves ambivalence toward both the homeland and the receiving society (Kivisto and La Vecchia-Mikkola, 2013). In this paper, we employ the idea of identity work to examine how migrants talk about integration, stressing the salience of very concrete features of landscape and of the routine and ordinary demands of everyday life. Agreeing with a growing body of scholarship (e.g., Svašek, 2012) that contends that emotions are often slighted in immigration research, we focus in particular on the emotional character of identity work. In doing so, we use migration as a particular example of a larger phenomenon, for ambivalence is a characteristic

response to many situations, one that evokes emotional responses and requires redefinitions of the self.

From the pioneering work of the members of the Chicago school of sociology up to the present, immigration scholars have sought to understand integration, which is to say the process by which migrants come to define themselves as members of the receiving society (Kivisto, 1990; Matthews, 1977; Persons, 1987). From the perspective of members of the receiving society, the question has to do with how "they" over time became part of the "we," while from the perspective of the migrants the question is how this newly acquired identity sits with their previous identity rooted in another time and place. Perhaps the earliest effort to conceptualize the process can be found in W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's classic work, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1927), where they employed the idea of migration as entailing disorganization—which had psychological, social, and cultural dimensions—and the subsequent effort at reorganization. Succinctly summarizing this theoretical perspective, with its emphasis on the agency of the migrants themselves, Andrew Abbott and Jolyon Wurr (2004: 149) depict migrants as having to "reinscribe and reconstruct themselves" (see also, Ahmed et al., 2004).

Skipping decades ahead to contemporary scholarship, the new assimilationism theory associated with Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2003) stresses the decline of the ethnic factor in the process of reinscribing and reconstructing, and the options migrants exercise, which often involves making room for the persistence of an ethnic

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hum that reduces ethnicity to a symbolic and limited aspect of identity. At the same time, advocates of transnationalism point to migrant efforts aimed at maintaining identification with and social relations in the sending country, while simultaneously seeking to become incorporated into the mainstream of the receiving society (Kivisto, 2001; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007; Waldinger, 2011). Finally, in an effort to bring the state back in, Roger Waldinger (2007) has argued that incorporation ought to be construed as a form of “political resocialization,” by which he means a shift of political allegiance from the nation of origin to the nation of settlement. Each of these approaches captures aspects of the way that inclusion is accomplished. In Waldinger’s case, it is clear that the role of migrants is secondary to the role of state actors intent on “caging” and resocializing a population, while in the two other approaches the agency of migrants is front and center. Even so, as is also true of psychological approaches (Berry, 1997, 2001; Deaux, 2006), the focus tends to be on outcomes rather than on various concrete practices—including actions and talk—of inclusion that migrants undertake and that lead to various outcomes. Moreover, we agree with Kay Deaux (2006: 131) that an “individual emphasis [that stresses] the central role of memories, sentiments, and intergroup attitudes” tends to be replaced in these approaches by various “external indicators as proxies for these internal experiences.” These neglected factors constitute the focus of this paper.

### 1. Identity work and emotional responses

The idea of “identity work” (Snow and Anderson, 1987), like its correlate, “emotion work” (Hochschild, 1979) derives from social constructionist theorizing. While the focus herein will be on the former, we operate with the presupposition that emotion factors into the equation insofar as identity work inevitably entails both a cognitive and emotional dimension (Weigert, 1991). When identities appear to be stable, when habitual activities prevail and the cake of custom has not cracked, the work done in achieving and maintaining identity and in managing emotion often goes unnoticed—operating below the radar. However, in circumstances which call into question the viability, credibility, or moral worthiness of existing identities, the work involved in either shoring up or redefining identity becomes visible. This is nowhere more evident than in situations that call for what Anselm Strauss (1991: 313–338) referred to as “transformations of identity” and Peter Burke (2006) calls “identity change.” It is our view that while migration may be seen as a paradigmatic example, situations that call for what Strauss and Burke describe are, in fact, evident in many social contexts.

David Snow and Leon Anderson (1987: 1337) sought to modify role-identity theory by introducing the idea of process, whereby actors seek to shape structurally defined roles in terms of their own individual interests in “generating and maintaining a sense of meaning and self-worth.” They do so by focusing on identity work at the individual level, and not as a group process (for a contrasting perspective, see Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock, 1996). In describing the concrete manifestations of the process, they identified four non-mutually exclusive activities that can be observed in identity work, including shaping the social environment, the presentation of self in social interaction, the choice of associates and group attachments, and the verbal construction of individual identity. Like their focus in this classic article, this paper is concerned with the last of these activities. Snow and Anderson studied the homeless, a particularly stigmatized group, and found that there were three patterns of verbal work involved in their identity talk: distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling. Distancing could be divided into three subsets: associational, role, and institutional distancing. Likewise, embracement could be divided into role, associational,

and ideological embracement, while fictive storytelling could involve embellishment or fantasizing (Snow and Anderson, 1987).

As will be seen in the analysis of our findings, not all of these are germane to the migrants we studied. This is due to the fact that the homeless constitute a particularly stigmatized group whose identities, to borrow the language of Erving Goffman (1963: 4), are perceived to be the result of “blemishes of individual character” and thus are deeply “spoiled.” Moreover, the homeless population functions with very few resources. While migrants suffer from marginalization and stigmatization and often have fewer resources than are optimal, they nonetheless tend to be in a “better place” than the homeless (this being said, the two populations are not mutually exclusive and a homeless migrant may find that her status as homeless is more deleteriously significant than her status as migrant).

A study of North African immigrant women in France conducted by Caitlin Killian and Cathryn Johnson (2006) that examined the process of negotiating identities found that the interviewees’ identity work in part entailed defining the self in terms of the “not-me” (see for a detailed discussion of “not-me,” McCall, 2003). The researchers discovered that many of their subjects resisted the imposed definition of immigrant, while at the same time seeking to maintain an appreciation of difference in a context where French republican values are associated with assimilation. By refusing to embrace the externally imposed definition of immigrant, with all the negative associations it conveyed, they resisted, as one immigrant described it, “the gaze of others, which is devaluing, and assimilating you to something other than what you are” (quoted in Killian and Johnson, 2006: 68).

To the extent that the negotiation of identity can be deemed successful from the perspective of the individuals engaged in identity work, one can assume that they had the resources necessary to make that possible. Among the resources the authors point to are socioeconomic status, educational attainment, French fluency, and indications of Westernization. A similar process is described in Steven Gold’s (1997) study of Israeli immigrants to the United States. Although many have become naturalized, because departing the homeland for another country is seen in Israel as undermining Zionism, they often employ vocabularies of motive that suggest that the move may not be permanent and that a return to Israel remains within the realm of the possible.

In this study, we provide evidence of the process at a point in which the migrants are working through what it means for their self-understanding to be residing in the receiving society and not in the country of origin, with part of the process entailing the psychological moving back and forth between here and there, between past and present, followed by an effort to develop a sense of belonging in the new homeland that operates at both a cognitive and emotional level.

### 2. Data

The data for this paper derive from a larger comparative study of Iraqi immigrants in two European cities—Helsinki and Rome—that have been collected by the second author. While the larger project includes participant observation in various ethnic institutional settings, this paper will only make use of her recorded interviews. Forty-eight open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted, half in each city. The interviews in Helsinki took place during the first half of 2007 and those in Rome were conducted in late 2007 and early 2008. The recorded interviews were between one and two hours long. English was the primary language used in Finland. In a few cases, when it was determined that the interviewee and interviewer possessed complementary levels of Finnish-language proficiency, Finnish was used. Two interviews

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