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High-skilled immigrants in times of crisis. A cross-European analysis

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ABSTRACT

In times of economic turmoil, do high-skilled immigrants (HSIMs) tremble, or are they better suited than non-immigrants or low-skill immigrants to cope with such instability? This paper sheds some light on HSIMs' social integration during crisis by considering their life satisfaction, ability to get paid work, and civic participation. European Social Survey (ESS) data are used in multilevel models aiming to disentangle the effect of recession in the host economy from that of living through times of crisis. The existing literature does not point in a clear direction, but the use of acculturation perspective, along with the self-selection hypothesis, help to derive clearer expectations. Diverse pathways are revealed. In troubled economies, HSIMs succeed in increasing their access to paid work and involvement in organizations, but their life satisfaction decreases. In functional economies, the situation is reversed: Life satisfaction seems to have a protective role in relation to the slightly higher difficulties in the labor market and lesser civic participation.

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1. Introduction

Salt (1992) drew attention to the paucity of data and literature on the patterns and processes linked to the migration of highly skilled workers. Efforts have been made by researchers to fill this gap, but studies in this field remain modest compared to those concerning low-skilled migration (Huber, Landesmann, Robinson, & Stehrer, 2010). Some authors observed a current tendency toward positive selection with respect to the education of migrants in the current context of European enlargement (Verwiebe, 2008; Verwiebe, Mau, Seidel, & Kathmann, 2010), and at the same time, a diversification of highly skilled migrants (Iredale, 2005), with women accounting for more than half of them (Kofman, 2012). This paper delves into high-skilled immigrants' integration into European societies, investigating the effects of the economic recession.

While it has been acknowledged that the ongoing economic crisis has had an impact on many categories of labor migrants, there is little empirical evidence on how specific categories are affected and how they cope with such economic challenges. Recent studies have addressed the question of return migration as a response of low-skilled migrants in the context of economic strain, but there is a dearth of knowledge concerning highly skilled migrants. It is also known that job losses vary across countries and between different economic sectors within each country (Martin, 2009). The global crisis led governments to limit the intake of new highly skilled migrants and sometimes to implement programs for promoting voluntary return (Cerna, 2010; Kiwan, 2010). It is assumed, however, that labor shortages will continue to exist in specific

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highly skilled domains (e.g., health care, IT, engineering). In light of evidence from past economic crises (e.g., the Great Depression, the 1973 oil crisis), one may actually expect migration trends to continue (Koser, 2010), and it is important to consider the consequences of such developments.

The key term here is integration, a broad phenomenon that arouses competing theoretical models (Esser, 2010; Safi, 2006) and raises important measurement challenges (Ward, 2013). The acculturation perspective in cross-cultural psychology (Berry, 1997, 2005) sees integration as the result of both preservation of cultural heritage and participation in host societies. For the purpose of this paper, also forced by data availability in cross-national context, we focus on the second aspect, and consider three core domains that capture much of integration's facets: access to labor market, involvement in associations, and subjective wellbeing. For the first, we consider employment and gaining higher incomes. For the second, we look to civic participation, one of the indicators of successful social integration (Myrberg, 2011; Paloma, Garcia-Ramirez, de la Mata, & AMAL-Andaluza, 2010; Handy & Greenspan, 2008). For the third, we consider life satisfaction as sign of personal achievement of wellbeing (Bartram, 2011) that can also be a measure of psychological adaptation and lack of acculturation stress (Berry, 2005). Our choice of indicators also reflects Esser's (2004) argument that access to better paid jobs is the main indication of immigrants' upward mobility, while participation in associations enables migrants to voice and gain self-confidence by bridging elements of receiving and ethnic contexts.

To discuss how these three areas might be subject to changes in the relative position of HSIMs as compared to other groups – including medium- and low-skilled immigrants, high-, medium- and low-skilled native people, we start by inspecting the literature in the three domains. Somehow contradictory evidences arise, but the use of the self-selection hypothesis and of the acculturation perspective help to reach unambiguous hypotheses.

For testing, we employ data from three waves of the European Social Survey (ESS), collected in 2006, 2008–2009, and 2010–2011; that is, before, during, and when the crisis started to produce effects. We look at how being a high-skilled migrant prevents proper integration into the host society, both as compared to natives and to low-skilled migrants. Controlling for growth rates, we are able to isolate the effect of living in a troubled economy and to separate it from that of living under the global crisis.

2. Social integration of immigrants in times of crisis

Integration, compared with alternative strategies of acculturation (i.e. assimilation, separation, marginalization), is seen as the most beneficial way of migrants' incorporation in host societies (Berry, 1997; Evanoff, 2006) because it enables migrants to both selectively preserve norms of their cultural heritage and actively engage in contacts with members of host countries. As a consequence, the latter also tend to critically reassess their norms and values in order to accommodate this diverse population with different cultural backgrounds. Integration is associated with less adaptive stress, leading to higher subjective well-being or life satisfaction, and better socioeconomic and cultural outcomes (e.g. access to paid jobs, participation in associations, language proficiency). However, integration is difficult to achieve and it is easily to jeopardize it in times of economic strain. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches to integration of immigrants are likely to be impacted by the ongoing economic crisis. The former approach to integration is usually referred to as the states' policies to incorporate immigrants building on their different philosophies with respect to migrants' contribution to the progress of European societies. Governments have therefore set up, designed and financed various integration measures targeting specific groups of migrant population. Under the budgetary constraints brought about by the current economic downturn many governments in Europe have decided to reduce integration spending (Collett, 2011). Such budgetary cutbacks may unevenly affect immigrant groups depending on their degree of reliance on such services for language learning, enhancement of employment prospects or better health protecting behaviors. Recent evidences suggest that overall migrants' employment situation has been more severely damaged compared to natives. However, the extent of jobs' loss, the uptake level of welfare benefits, and the shifts of work domains occur unevenly across migrant groups defined by their intermingled belongings to gender, age, skill level and ethnicity (Koehler, Laczko, Aghazarm, & Schad, 2010) and might hold various consequences for different migrant groups. The second approach to integration refers to migrants' agency and their strategies to cope with uncertainties of host societies by drawing on local resources whose access is facilitated and enabled by grass-root organizations. The latter approach is most often assessed as more effective for the integration of immigrants. In his account of acculturation consequences for international migration, Berry (1997, 2009) stated that adaptive effects might occur. Adaptation to the local environment may lead to a better or to a lesser 'fit' between the immigrant and the context (Berry, 1997: 14). Such effects may become visible when the context in the host society changes, as it happens during major economic crisis. For pragmatic reasons related to data availability and the size of the paper, we consider only one of Berry's original dimensions of integration – the contact-participation side, for which we select two indicators (accessing jobs and civic participation), along with subjective wellbeing as indicator of personal achievement. The indicators also address the dimensions of adaptation described by Berry (1997: 14) – psychological, socio-cultural, and economic.

Time of crisis may become difficult for immigrant's integration, since they have to face more traditional attitudes expressed by the entire population (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), including decreasing tolerance and increasing ethnic discrimination. Such attitudes find echoes in the "silent counter-revolution" (Ignazi, 2006), which enabled the most traditional groups to voice up their conservative and intolerant views in order to fight against the societal trend toward postmodernization. Even before the recession started, there were trends to indicate that discrimination against ethnic minorities was steadfast or growing in all 27 EU countries (Constant, Kahanec, & Zimmermann, 2009). The extent to which discrimination

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