



## Acculturative integration, self and citizenship construction: The experience of *Amal-Andaluza*, a grassroots organization of Moroccan women in Andalusia

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### ABSTRACT

This paper describes the role of grassroots associations in the acculturative integration process from an approach that stresses the contributions of community and cultural psychologies. Community psychology allows us to understand the acculturative transition as an empowerment process by which immigrants transform both structural conditions and themselves. Cultural psychology explains this empowerment process as a self-construction through which immigrants acquire a new vision of the world and of themselves. From these insights, acculturative integration is understood as an active, multidimensional and ecological process in which immigrants become an accepted part of the new society through the development of critical awareness, gaining capacities and opportunities to influence their environment and involving themselves in activities which transform both their “self” and their environment. The promotion of grassroots organizations, as empowering community settings, is presented as a tool to bridge newcomers and the receiving society. This model is illustrated by the experience of *Amal*, a grassroots organization of Andalusian Moroccan women. Using the personal, organizational and community narratives of *Amal* (activists, recipients, community workers, policymakers and written documents), we describe the influence of citizen participation in the construction of self and citizenship among activists, the bettering of an integrative community, and the promotion of a fair multicultural society. Lessons learned will be summarized in order to pave the way for the implications of the *Amal* experience for acculturative research agendas and social policy and action.

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The multicultural transformation of societies is one of the most important phenomena of our times. Frequently, newcomers confront oppressive conditions in the transition to their new society, increasing the risks of social fragmentation. The development of models and strategies to guarantee the well-being of these new citizens – making it possible that they become an accepted and respected part of their new life settings – is an urgent responsibility confronted by the scientific community. The mainstream perspectives of acculturation psychology define integration as a state of harmony between the acquisition of certain aspects of the new culture and the conservation of primary aspects from the culture of origin (Berry, 2005). Going beyond that, we merge the contributions from community and cultural psychologies to tackle integration as an

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active, multidimensional and ecological process by which immigrants acquire critical awareness, gain capacities and opportunities to influence their environment and involve themselves in activities which transform both their “self” and their environment. In this way, integration is understood as a process of reconstruction of personal and community identity—citizenship (Paloma, García-Ramírez, De la Mata, & El Jebary, 2009).

From our experience conducting community-based research in collaboration with *Amal-Andaluza* (*Amal*)—an organization of Moroccan women—we propose a framework to explain how grassroots organizations can be useful tools to build bridges between newcomers and the receiving society, their social structures, resources and services. First, we will highlight the oppressive conditions that immigrants have to overcome during their transition and the necessity to see acculturative integration as an empowering process, involving people in the transformation of themselves and their life settings. Second, we state that in this process, grassroots organizations should be considered as empowering community settings (ECS, Maton, 2008), carrying out multilevel ecological changes, i.e., reconstruction of self and citizenship, bettering of integrative communities and promoting a fair multicultural society. We will justify and substantiate this framework using the experience of *Amal*. Before that, we will describe the collaborative nature of the partnership between our team of university researchers and the community activists of *Amal* which has permitted us to carry out this experience, as well as the methodological tools which made our activity possible.

## 1. Integration of Andalusian Moroccans: political, experiential and theoretical circumstances

This section depicts the social and political conditions, as well as the theoretical landscape, from which our model emerges and in which the *Amal* experience takes place. First, we describe the political discourse represented in Europe and Andalusia. The official position, coming from government documents of a political, legislative and strategic character, is later contrasted with actual immigrant experiences. Next, we synthesize the main challenges that mainstream models have to cope with. Finally, we propose grassroots organizations as a key tool in this pursuit.

### 1.1. The official and experiential discourses of migrant integration

Multicultural reality is a relatively new phenomenon in the South of Europe, and it has led to an awareness of the necessity for common policies of immigration on a European level. An analysis of the main official European discourses leads to the observation that governments are ready to promote the equality of rights and duties of all citizens. The Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council reaffirmed in 2003 its vision of Europe as “a multinational and multicultural society, where immigrants take part as equal members, on the basis of equality of rights and opportunities in return for equality of obligations, whilst respecting the rules of democracy, cultural diversity and the rule of law” (Parliamentary Assembly, 2003, article 5). This position is reflected in the objectives of the Spanish “Plan Estratégico para la Ciudadanía y la Integración” [Strategic Plan of Citizenship and Integration] (2007/2010): (1) to guarantee the exercise of civic and political rights; (2) to establish a system of fostering new citizens, especially the most vulnerable ones; (3) to guarantee their access to education, employment, housing, social and health care services in equal conditions; (4) to promote the knowledge and respect of the common values of the European Union and the Spanish society among the immigrant population; and (5) to overcome the various signs of discrimination, racism and xenophobia (Consejería de Gobernación, 2007; MTAS, 2007).

However, the official discourse is far from the reality that immigrant populations face. Racism and xenophobia among the Spanish population are gradual and advance with the growth of Spain as a receiver country (Cea D’Ancona & Valles, 2008). This is an expression of social paradox, “a normative awareness based on non-discrimination, democratic feelings and favor for immigrants to have access to equal rights and social opportunities, and a tendency for insiders to exclude outsiders” (Oliveri, 2008, p. 27); highlighting the necessity for further efforts to make what is legally in place reflect real life situations. This is the reality in Andalusia, where for more than a decade our team observed the integration processes of Moroccan immigrants, the most numerous immigrant group, with 11,962 registered Moroccans, although the high number of unregistered Andalusian Moroccans makes it very difficult to establish an accurate estimate (INE, 2007).

Diverse studies reveal that the Andalusian population often associates immigration with an increase in crime, a worsening of the labor market, an unwillingness to accept immigrants’ choice to live according to their traditions, and the overall view that there are too many of them (OPAM, 2008). In addition, immigrants from Magreb—the area of North Africa the Moroccan population comes from—frequently appear in Spanish opinion surveys as the group of immigrants with the worst image and the strongest negative stereotypes (Navas, Rojas, García, & Pumares, 2007). An ecological perspective permits us to examine the acculturative experience of Moroccans in Andalusia, as determined by unfair and oppressive social conditions.

Oppressive conditions for immigrants at the community level are exemplified by the kind of jobs they occupy, the neighborhoods they live in and the scarcity of effective community services (Penninx, Berger, & Kraal, 2006; Reinsch, 2001). They often work in very unsafe conditions and live without access to basic standards of housing, such as water, sewers or electricity (Hernández-Plaza, Pozo, & Alonso-Morillejo, 2004; Martínez, García-Ramírez, Maya-Jariego, Rodríguez, & Checa, 1996). Fear of their “illegal” status and the lack of information about their rights cause Moroccans to make very little use of public services, resulting in poor health care and welfare (Hernández-Plaza et al., 2004). Oppressive settlements become a breeding ground for psychosocial profiles among immigrants that often provoke fear and xenophobic attitudes among the host population. Conflictive intercultural contact increases the perceived threat among members of the dominant group,

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