

Migration as an influencing factor on identity formation

(overview essay)

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Abstract: *The process of identity formation may be influenced by multiple factors. The study focuses on migration as one of these influencing factors. In a qualitative study, the researcher focused on the process of identity building and reconstructing after migrating from one country to another. It provides an analysis of the processes of adaptation in the new environment that people identified and could reflect upon after their experience of migrating from their countries of origin. Factors of age, language and culture in regard to attaining their new personal identities are considered. Migration is viewed from a perspective of an individual. The goal of the study was to capture personal reflections individuals on the process of their adaptation in a new environment. Data was collected by semi-structured interviews and processed through phenomenological analysis. The results pointed to questions of defining home, accepting or rejecting the local language and applying various ways of adaptation depending on age. The study provided insight into the topic and confirmed the importance of considering individual experience of individuals when analysing migration issues. The results of the study will further be used in creating educational and therapeutic programmes for people with the experience of migration.*

Keywords: *migration, identity, adaptation, home, language, culture*

1 Introduction

Self-perception consists of relatively stable personality traits. On the other hand, it is also created by a dynamic process of self-reflecting and re-creating self-image based on interactions with the environment. People gain and create their identity – personal, gender, social (age, family status, or family roles), national, local, cultural, religious, socio-economical, racial, language, professional, or political.

Identity represents a set of cognitive, behavioral and affective aspects of a person, based on which a person perceives their own existence, such as who they are and where they belong based on their attitudes and values. Personal identity includes life goals, values and beliefs in the area of career, relationships, or spirituality. Cultural identity relates to culturally and ethnically influenced values and practices. Searching for personal identity is the main issue for adolescents, whereas protecting cultural identity becomes important in case of migrating or being a minority population group (Schwartz et al., 2013).

Ting-Toomey (2005) elaborated on the identity negotiation theory that describes changes in identity and factors that influence it depending on social and cultural environments. She talks about the search for overlaps in belonging to a certain social or cultural group and in having a personal identity. It happens in intercultural and interpersonal communication.

Schwartz et al. (2013) studied acculturation of young adults of the first and second generation of immigrants in the United States dependent on their status and process of creating personal identities. The results across all ethnic groups suggested that individuals who were in the phase of social moratorium kept their cultural heritage as well as accepted American cultural practices and values. However, individuals who were in the phase of diffusion of personal identity were not identified with neither the values their original nor the new culture/country.

Identity formation is a natural process influenced by various life events, both significant and every-day ones. Massive changes in identity can be observed during and after overcoming psychosocial crises that are often connected with social rites of passage serving as supportive mechanisms; e.g.: school enrollment, employment changes, marriage, child birth, or retirement. Such changes are naturally connected with the life cycle as described by Satir (1991).

In case of forced identity changes, (e.g. loss of a family member, trauma, natural disasters, wars, or employment loss) natural rituals in the society are missing – probably with the exception of funerals. It is counted on with coping thanks to resilience of people (Antonovsky, 1996; Ťulák Krčmáriková, Kováčová, 2016). However, healthy coping mechanism may be substituted by maladaptive mechanism such as developing addictions – drug, alcohol or work addictions. Crises that a person was not able to cope with may lead to psychosomatic problems or social-emotional difficulties (behavior disorders, neurotic issues, or depression).

Migration as a life event may cause positive or negative emotions. It may belong to positive factors of influencing identity changes. For example, it can contribute to higher flexibility. However, it may cause negative distress. It may even be perceived as traumatic. The adaptation to migration depends on the characteristics of the event such as reasons, process, way of leaving, settling in the new country, conditions and

supportive mechanisms, barriers in the system, surroundings, close environment, personality and previous experience.

The results of Ascher's study (1989) suggested that adolescents who migrated at the age older than 11 years experienced the event as highly stressful because they were also going through changes in forming their personal identity. Tartakovsky (2013) mentioned that most of migrating adolescents is fully employed by their effort to survive – meaning learning the language and creating social networks; and in case of involuntary migration also by physical survival. If migration is voluntary, young people have chance to enrich their identity by cultural elements of the new country and to create a new concept of their own identity with a possibility to belong to both cultures. Migration therefore contributes to improving flexibility and supports mental and social wellbeing.

2 Goal of the study

From the position of the author as a helping professional in therapy and education, the goal of the paper is to emphasize the need of psychosocial support of people before, during and after the process of migration with the focus on reconstructing and developing their personal identity. The goal of the study was to gain insight into the situation of migration and the process of adaptation in the environment of the new country. Through a self-reflective view of an individual on the process it was possible to discuss identity changes based on the migration process. The results of the study will be later used in creating and performing support programs for people in the process of migration and adaptation periods.

3 Research participants

The study was based on an interview with a female participant (P1), who reflected upon her own situation as well as described and commented on experiences of other people who have the experience of migrating and they presented their views in a public discussion focused on this topic. Data from the interview is complemented by information from informal talks and additional research questions (P2) and case studies from the practice of the author (P3). The participants are described in Table 1.

Table 1: *Description of the participants*

Participant	Current age	Age at the time of migration	Gender	Migration route	Description
P1	22	15	female	Iran – > Slovakia	migration for parent employment
P2	31	30	female	Slovakia – > Germany	migration for a partner
P3	40	40	male	Slovakia – > England	migration for work

4 Research methodology

Qualitative methodology was chosen for the study based on the need to understand personal experiences of the participants. The interview with P1 was audio-recorded. Data collection was conducted through a semi-structured interview. The questions of the interview were focused on describing the strategies of adaptation in the new environment after participant's migration. Other collected data was based on field notes of the author. Collected data was processed through phenomenological analysis, coded and categorized. The interpretation of the categories is provided in the results section of the paper.

5 Results and discussion

P1 is a 22-year old woman from Iran who moved to Slovakia with her whole family (mother, father, older brother, younger brother) at the age of 15. From her own reflection of the situation we learned that her main effort after the arrival to the country was to fully merge with the new environment, not to stick out, accept her new identity and to get rid of her original one. She tried many ways how to fit in, which is natural in adolescence, however, the need was even stronger based on the effort to overcome the feeling of being different. Later, she found her identity in accepting who she was with keeping her original cultural/national identity and with gaining a feeling of belonging to the new environment.

P2 is a 30-year old woman from Slovakia who left the country to follow her partner to Germany, his country of origin. She has been in the new environment for a year and she is experiencing an "identity crisis" and a feeling of frustration connected with it. She identified several reasons: 1) loss of social status – from a profession in her field in the country of origin, she became an unqualified part-time worker in another field; 2) language barrier; 3) cultural barrier – as a foreigner she does not feel accepted by the social environment; 4) limited social contacts.

P3 is a 40-year old man who left Slovakia in order to go to work in England. He worked manually and did not speak the language of the country at all. He was isolated from all social contacts. After three months, schizophrenia occurred (note: it is necessary to consider factors of mental vulnerability predispositions), based on which he returned his country of origin.

From the interview, several key categories (C1-C5) were identified, which are connected with forming and reconstructing personal identity (Table 2).

Table 2 *Description of identified categories*

Category		Description
C1	Home	Perception of a place or concept where/when a person experiences a feeling of belonging
C2	Language	Knowledge of language of the target country as a means of adaptation
C3	Work	Changes in professional orientation influenced by migration
C4	Strategies of adaptation	Strategies of conduct of behavior and processing of emotions when reconstructing one's own identity
C5	Cultural negotiation	Comparing culture of the new and the original country and effort to find individual balance

One of the key questions of the study was to describe the concept of home (C1). P1 mentioned her own experience and commented on what other participants of the public discussion mentioned. She said that home, mainly for older people with the experience of migration, is not a particular place in a certain country. However, it is a place where: a) people have their family, b) people feel welcome, c) people know it there. People need to be surrounded by loving others who create a safe environment and this does not depend on a mutual cultural consonance. At first, home is the country of origin. After a while of living in the new place (and the length of the period is very individual), home is in the new country and home is in the country of origin. For P1 it took two to three years to start feeling like at home in the new country (C1, C5).

It is interesting to observe the reactions of inhabitants of the new country when they react to the migrants' statements of the country being their home. They are surprised that people can consider home a certain place even though they are not proficient in the language or the culture is vastly different. It is the unacceptance of the environment that makes people who migrated not to feel at home. P1 said: "*When I was a teenager I did everything just to fit in. I did everything that Slovak teenagers did, but I did not feel fully accepted. And I do not think it is necessarily connected only with the Slovak culture ... it is more based on age ... as teenagers we are not sure about our identity anyways. We are not sure who we are and when we move it may or may not be even more confusing for us. For me it was confusing*" (C5).

People who lived in several (or many) places are not able to answer the question of where they are from. The answer is not so simple, or actually, the question is not correctly posed. It is necessary to substitute it with more specific questions depending on the real interest, such as: Where were you born? Where do you live? Where have you lived? What languages do you speak? What country was your passport issued by? Where were your parents born? Where did you go to school? Even though in many national European countries the answer for all these question is the same, it is not so for many people. The pressure that the environment creates and poses on a person to identify the concept of home (C1) as a fixed place may lead to feelings of differentness and may shake the definition of one's personal identity (C4, C5).

The feeling of belonging in the new country can be supported by moments of friendly contact with the local inhabitants. That is possible when people who migrated speak the local language (C2). According to the research participants, learning the language contributes to raising mutual respect and understanding. Thus, it belongs to one of the basic adaptation strategies (C4) and means of identity reconstruction.

P2 comments on her process of migration and adaptation: *"The decision to leave the country was very straightforward for me and was convinced from the first moment. I knew that the beginning would not be easy. I was often visited by frustration, which sometimes lasted for days, or weeks; and even now it is still tuned in with 'my office hours'. It became regular... The perceived identity crisis manifested because of the change in my social status (C3), I felt it that way. But later, cultural and language barriers climbed on the top (C4). I accept this challenge; change is life (C5) and I am determined to the essence of being and to take care of myself."*

When people move to another country, on one hand, they are trying to find positives there, but suddenly they start realizing also the positives of their country of origin which they were not aware of before or they were overlooking because they considered them normal/natural and they are not present in the new country, for example. On the other hand, they sense aspects that were missing in their culture of origin and they would like to transfer them there (C5). Influenced by the evaluation of pros and cons of both cultures, reflecting upon them, identity of a person changes. Awareness is raised and various ways of functioning and thinking are developed.

The mentioned results are based on experiences of migrants who left their countries legally and after certain time of planning, even though their reasons might have been different (economical, political, or personal). Migration happened based on a decision of one family member or as a consensus of the whole family, or their compromise and some members had to adjust. Even though the migration into another country was "without major problems", the identity of the individuals went through certain shock and reconstruction.

In the ideal case, migration brings enrichment and has positive influence on identity building. However, migration may cause strong distress. People may feel the distress during migration or during the adaptation period in the new environment. Distress can be caused by the feeling of loss of safety, loss of home, loss of roots, fear of change, change of social status, limited social contacts, or superficial relationships in the new environment. The situation of migration may even be connected with trauma, which happens mainly in cases of illegal migration (forced to leave home, physical and mental strain, or life threats), but may be present in cases of legal migration as well. Distress can lead to mental and psychosomatic problems, such as depression, neurotic disorders, even psychoses.

Supporting the process of identity reconstruction in the new environment seems to be an important demand towards professionals in helping professions such as social workers, therapeutic pedagogues, psychologists, or therapists). The question remaining are the language and cultural competencies of these professionals for working with people migrating from different countries. From this regard, methods of work that do not require language skills, such as art or nonverbal techniques used in expressive therapies (art therapy, drama therapy, music therapy, etc.) provide space for expressing the needs of individuals, sharing experience and offer psychosocial support in the period of adaptation to the environment. The research results will therefore be implemented in creating support programs for people who experienced migration.

6 Conclusions

As a result of the processes of migration and adaptation to the new environment, various changes in person's identity are caused. Based on the research interviews, several relating areas were identified. These areas included: the concept of home, overcoming language barriers, changes of social and professional status, using adaptation strategies and cultural negotiation. The goal of the study was achieved by providing insight into the topic. The results of the study will be applied in planning programs for supporting the process of adaptation and identity reconstruction.

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