

## Migrants Facing Cultural Challenges: Between Psychological Discomfort and Suffering Identity

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### ABSTRACT

In an ever-changing world where migrations and interactions between cultures are multiplying, intercultural contacts are becoming a structural phenomenon in our societies. These encounters, whether interpersonal or intergroup, permeate our daily lives and impact all individuals, without exception. Different models in psychology attempt to decipher intercultural dynamics and their effects on identity. Faced with the impossible choice of confining oneself to a single culture, identity and cultural mixing seems to emerge as a response to the complexity of the contemporary world. The identity elements and cultural dimensions of the immigrant play a crucial role in their mental and psychological health. Understanding these aspects is therefore essential to promoting their integration and well-being.

**Keywords:** *Migrants, Culture, Identity, Psychological Discomfort*

The problem of migrants does not lie in the cultures of origin of the migrant families, nor in that of the host country; it lies in the lack of frameworks and mechanisms that can contain the cultural mixing and dynamics of transition initiated by all the individual, family and social changes at work within the host society. While migration inevitably causes changes in migrant families, the work of culture becomes more intense in their children during adolescence. In order to grow up between two sometimes diametrically opposed worlds, these young people question the culture of origin of their parents as well as that of the host society. Cultural and identity mixing seems to be a compromise in the face of the impossible choice of being only from here or only from elsewhere. (Idris, 2009, p. 130)

### BASIC CONCEPTS

#### **Culture:**

According to the Norbert Sillamy dictionary, culture is the development of the body and mind under the influence of the social environment.

Every human society, even the most primitive, has its own culture that conditions the total development of its members. It is culture that transforms the individual into a determined type. The relationship between personality and culture is so close that it is possible to

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Received: March 03, 2024; Revision Received: April 10, 2024; Accepted: April 13, 2024

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describe an average type of Frenchman, Englishman, or Italian in which one finds the main national characteristics of each. Culture gives man his humanity. "Wild children", who have been raised by animals, no longer have anything human about them: they move on all fours, feed like animals, do not speak, and the expression of their emotions is incomprehensible to us.

Should we consider that culture is the prerogative of man? Many authors, such as the American R.M. Yerkes, the Japanese M. Kawai, the French Étienne Danchin or Frans de Waal think that this phenomenon also appears in animal societies. E. Kant (1803) had already observed, for example, that young sparrows placed in the middle of canaries imitate their song. On the other hand, young lorries isolated from their parents are capable of "inventing" an original song that, later, other young congeners will learn; thus, "a new school of loriote music" was created. (W. E. D. Scott). Culture is a phenomenon of socialization, based on learning, which allows the integration of the individual into his group. It exists in all human societies and, probably also, in certain animal species. (Sillamy, 2010)

Access to culture helps to discover the new country, its history, its codes, its values or traditions. For refugees, culture in all its forms: song, music, dance, theater, plastic arts, cuisine - allows them to overcome the language barrier, to express themselves in a different way, and therefore to share. An essential sharing around the understanding of the culture of the new country as much as the transmission of that of their country of origin.

### **Identity:**

Identity is a broad concept that encompasses several dimensions. It is both individual and collective. It is also multiple. We can talk about individual, social, collective, national, cultural identity, etc. We are interested in the latter form, as we are questioning the consequences of migrations on the identity of a cultural community.

Cultural identity is constructed on several dimensions. It is dialogical and lies at the junction of two axes: the real and the imaginary. Let's see what each element means.

Identity is alive. It is not fixed in time, said once and for all. It is the product of history. The construction of identity is in a tension between continuity (fidelity to traditions, transmission of a collective memory) and rupture (questioning, crises).

Identity is the junction of two axes: the real and the imaginary. It is formed by the physical, cultural and institutional environment, i.e. the real, material environment. It is also constructed from mental representations "which, without being in complete rupture with reality, reconstruct it" (Laurin-Dansereau, 2007, p. 27-30).

### **Migrant Identity:**

As Carmel Camilleri (1997, p. 32) reminds us, for contemporary theorists, "identity is not a given, but a dynamic." This is especially true for the construction of immigrant identity, which is a complex process of movement, dialogue, deconstruction, and reconstruction, involving memory and forgetting.

Several disciplines have contributed to the understanding of what we can call "migrant identity," including cultural psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history.

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The recent research of historians Andrée Courtemanche and Martin Pâquet (2001) on the notions of migratory experience and time provides a theoretical basis for analyzing "migrant identity." They define it as a personal identity (an organized set of feelings, representations, experiences of the past, and projects for the future), a social identity (influenced by the gaze of others and visibility), a desired identity, and a perceived identity. They also include the reflexive relationship to oneself (ontological function of identity) and the relationship to others (pragmatic function of identity) (Barreiro, 2004, p. 40).

### **Migration:**

The Secretariat of the World Health Organization defines migration as "A process of movement across an international border or within a country. It is a movement of population groups that includes all types of movement of people, regardless of its duration, composition or causes. Migrants themselves are made up of intermingled groups of migrant workers and their families, long-term or short-term displaced persons, and international students, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers and refugees, returnees, irregular migrants and victims of trafficking."

The reasons for migration are numerous and vary between economic, environmental, climatic and sometimes political exile refugees, which in all cases are factors that weaken individuals vulnerable to pressure and mental illness.

On the contrary, migration is a process of resettlement and acculturation that can negatively affect the mental health of migrants. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure the health of these people and to provide and guarantee their right to treatment and health services.

In addition, the identity elements and cultural dimensions of the immigrant play a fundamental role in their psychological and mental health. The integration of immigrants contributes to improving their psychological and mental health. (Tareck Alsamara; 2023, p. 1)

### **Psychic Discomfort:**

Psychic discomfort is a feeling of unease, tension, and a general sense of dissatisfaction with life. These signs can be observed in people's facial expressions, attitudes, and behaviors. Sometimes, these behaviors may be inappropriate or contradictory. This suggests an inability to adapt to change and rapid transformations.

As a result, we witness a daily flow of energy that constantly seeks guides, paths, and models with which it can express itself. In this sense, Freud pointed out that "culture demands that the subject give up his instinctual desires, his nature which involves discomfort, even suffering" (Benhalla, 2015, p. 40).

## **LANGUAGES, CULTURE AND IDENTITY**

Sociolinguists have studied situations of contact between different languages, mainly from the perspective of language evolution. In this perspective, as well as in that of second language learning (particularly the case of migrants), identification processes and the question of cultural identity play a fundamental role. This includes the analysis of phenomena of acculturation, assimilation, or rejection. Some reductionist analyses attempt to quantitatively measure the attitudes and behaviors of individuals in intercultural situations. However, the frequent contradictions between an individual's actions and the

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socially recognized attitudes of a group they claim to belong to highlight the notion of a subject capable of navigating paradoxes.

The question of cultural identity is part of the identification processes that are at the heart of the subject's construction (sexual, social, linguistic, national, religious, professional identities, etc.). (Rebaudières-Paty, 1987, p. 11)

Cultural dysfunctions arise from these situations of rupture between two cultural models, specific to geographical uprooting and emigration from non-industrialized to industrialized countries, but also to emigration from the rural world to the industrial and urban world, whether in Third World countries or in industrialized countries themselves. It is the "cultural codes" as meanings and guides of social behavior that then prove to be inadequate to these changes. Cultures appear as "the main means invented by humans to regulate the human psyche" and to respond to the lack of prescriptiveness of human nature. "Cultural formations", and first and foremost language, are thus a bridge between the indeterminate character of human nature and the demands of life in society."

However, human creativity and adaptability are such that new forms of regulation and new syntheses emerge from culture clashes, from "debris of cultures" and in these "forms of popular culture" that Gokalp evokes about "minibus music" in Turkey, "religion and politics often constituting the two poles of polarization of this culture in debris, of these cultures of uprooting." (Rebaudières-Paty, 1987, p. 16)

### **THE VULNERABILITY OF MIGRANT CHILDREN**

Moro M has long been interested in the vulnerability of children born in France to parents who come from elsewhere (Moro, 1998). While this vulnerability manifests itself at major moments of separation from family and culture, it intensifies during adolescence and highlights the vulnerability of institutions and professionals.

The confrontation with "cultural difference" inevitably generates counter-attitudes and manifestations of "cultural countertransference," an important concept in clinical work with people from other cultures (Moro et al., 2008).

However, during adolescence and the reconfiguration of alliance systems, vulnerability can lead to a form of disturbing strangeness within families. It could mobilize cultural defenses that ostentatiously mark a suffering identity through signs of revendication: headscarf, henna, beard, dreadlocks, etc., or through psychological disorders. In both cases, it is a modality of "paradoxical externalization of psychic life" in search of recognition, as a sign of resistance to a feeling of exclusion in a changing society (Idris, 2009, p. 135).

### **THE MIGRANT FACING THE NEW CULTURE**

A dual tension unfolds here. On the one hand, the immigrant perceives the non-conformity of certain aspects of their cultural heritage with those of their new country of residence, such as linguistic practices or marital customs. They may then decide to modify certain practices, for example, accepting monogamous marriage when polygamy is legal in their country of origin. This is a gesture of integration.

On the other hand, the political community of the host country, which has its own cultural traits, may be led to consider that certain cultural and social characteristics of the immigrant may go so far as to call into question the customs and traditions to which this community is

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attached and, therefore, the harmony that reigns there. This political community may then be offended by the introduction of certain cultural characteristics and may wish to oppose them. For example, many countries have set up training courses, often compulsory, to encourage immigrants to practice the language of the host country. (Dumont, 2018, p 288)

If the socio-cultural and symbolic environments are likely to engage an individual in a process of identity repositioning, then it becomes legitimate to focus on the socio-cultural characteristics specific to this environment. However, when it comes to "irregular migrants", these characteristics are particularly salient, if only because of the weight of the gaze that a society bears on this stigmatized group, which materializes through the discourses, rights and statuses that are granted to them, etc.

The questions then arise of the subjective reading that the "irregular migrant" makes of this same society in the context that is his or hers, that is to say the meaning he or she gives to his or her situation, the way he or she perceives and accepts his or her social status, etc., but also of the interactions (both material, cognitive, affective and symbolic) that constantly redefine the links between a society and the members or groups that compose it, including those who happen to be stigmatized for one reason or another. If this dialogue is central, it is because of the fundamentally constructed nature of the status of "irregular migrant", a construction that will clothe the individual with representations that will have every opportunity to be internalized in one way or another. In this sense, to dress a migrant with "irregularity" is to construct them as irregular. (Pointet, Achermann, Alberti, 2015, p 05)

### ***Identity and the Challenge of Multiple Cultures for Migrants:***

Before the generalization of the migratory phenomenon, Dubar (2002) proposed a two-level model to apprehend the identity of an individual in relation to their cultural belonging. The spoke of a general identity that can only support the individual in articulation with their particular identity. However, the formation of modern states and the establishment of borders defining the territory of each nation have generated new fictions and realities: a collective "we", the inside and outside of countries, as well as national languages often in conflict with regional and foreign languages. All these changes have led to new forms of belonging that more or less supplant the old clan, ethnic, religious, etc.

Therefore, migration leads to adding an additional level to the identity model proposed by Dubar, that of a global and unsuspected identity, the humanity of man and the universal part of his culture. Indeed, migration upsets the limits not only of the normal and the pathological, but also of the universal and the particular. It implies the renunciation of a culturally constructed identity and imposes on migrants and the host society a "non-self" that they must domesticate.

Moreover, the birth in a migratory land of the children of migrants entails, for them, a double renunciation of identity to elaborate a double belonging to the groups of origin and to the host society of their parents. A psychic movement of great magnitude, the renunciation of identity sometimes leads to infidelity to all the cultures and languages present in order to avoid annihilation. (Idris, 2009, p 134)

Chambers I use the figure of the migrant. In a space that is increasingly mobile due to globalization, "borders become porous". Moving away from the rigidity that once characterized them, the migrant is faced with a new form of flexibility, where they come and

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go almost at will. This mobility constantly calls into question the components of our identity, as immigration also brings about cultural changes. (Sallabery, 2010)

### **THE MENTAL HEALTH OF MIGRANTS**

Two factors are associated with the condition of the immigrant: the cultural gap between the society of origin and the host society, both in terms of religion, moral codes, traditions and mentality, and the disruption of emotional ties. Indeed, migration itself has traumatic potential, due to the rupture of the cultural container it implies. At the origin of any migratory trajectory, there is a situation of loss. Grievances are to be worked through: of people, of country, of social status. To migrate is of course to leave behind: family, friends, a job, a social status, the land of the living and dead ancestors... This implies renunciation, nostalgia, the "return" blues, therefore something that must (or should) be healed by the return. It is a painful separation, a mobilization of anxiety or malaise that the individual is supposed to manage by investing a lot of psychic, psychosomatic and psychosocial energy.

Mourning is sometimes unacceptable. The initial feelings of intense pain for what has been lost, accompanied by anxious disorganization in a feeling of distress, loneliness and abandonment, gradually give way to depressive affects (and eventually to manic defenses resulting in a minimization or denial of the change that has occurred). This double movement of trauma and loss redoubles that which is linked to the events experienced. Escaping with the difficult hope of returning requires more difficult and complex work. The situation of asylum seekers is even more complicated, with the risk of being denied asylum and being threatened with deportation. It is easy to imagine how this threat resonates with the feeling of inner anxiety. The disorders observed are often sensitive to cultural coding. The latter is situated at an ontological level (existence constructed from cultural representations) which determines the patient's etiology (the meaning) and the therapeutic logic. (Tareck Alsamara; 2023, p 1)

#### ***The Consequences of Immigration on The Migrant's Identity***

Research highlights the importance of value and self-esteem in identity formation. Studies show that young people of Maghreb origin often develop negative self-identities that are internalized very early in childhood. Researchers attribute this to the negative judgment that society casts on these populations, which is linked to issues of discrimination, rejection, and stigmatization.

Faced with these negative images, the devalued individual may, at best, adopt a strategy aimed at demonstrating the opposite: excelling in their studies and work. Conversely, they may internalize the negative messages they receive from society and become what they are perceived to be, for example, by adopting deviant behaviors such as delinquency. (Guerraoui, 2019)

### **CONCLUSION**

Immigration is a complex experience that can have a profound impact on the mental health, identity, and well-being of individuals. Immigrants may face a number of challenges, including, these challenges can have a negative impact on immigrants' identity and sense of belonging. They can also make them more vulnerable to psychological distress.

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### **Acknowledgment**

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Berkouche, F. (2024). Migrants Facing Cultural Challenges: Between Psychological Discomfort and Suffering Identity. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(2), 108-114. DIP: 18.01.012.20241202, DOI: 10.25215/1202.012