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Immigrants' Perceptions on Integration in Two Institutional Frameworks: Sweden and Spain

Project summary

The aim of this research project is to examine how immigrants of diverse ethnic origins perceive their "integration," or incorporation, in two European multi-ethnic societies, Sweden and Spain/Catalonia, and cities, Stockholm and Barcelona. Based on earlier research on immigrants' self-perceptions by scholars as Shellenberg (2004, 2010), this project assumes that immigrants' own sense of social inclusion and fair treatment is essential for their wellbeing, as well as for their willingness to integrate. Negative experiences as discrimination and perceived non-acceptance are likely to decrease solidarity and identification with society. The emphasis lies on two central dimensions of self-perceived integration, or incorporation: i) the sense of belonging and ii) the perception of opportunities.

Background and conceptual framework

The integration of immigrated ethnic minorities is a large and increasing concern across Europe. Exclusion, and in extreme cases radicalization, of second generation immigrants, and simultaneously the reception of new arrivals, accentuated by the ongoing refugee crises, represent important challenges for societies where integration policies are generally discussed in terms of failure, while integration as concept is being contested both in policy-making and in academia. There is an increasing focus on the role of the receiving society for achieving a higher degree of integration, or incorporation, of immigrants, both among policymakers and scholars. A discursive shift towards a more reciprocal view on integration is represented by the intercultural policies that have been adopted in several European countries over the last decade, most importantly at the level of local administrations (Zapata-Barrero, 2012 and

2015, Gebhardt 2016). There is however also recognition that ethnic discrimination in practice affects immigrants' chances to participate in society on equal terms (e.g. Penninx and Garcés 2016). Integration is in this project defined as, ideally, a situation of *egalitarian coexistence in multi-ethnic societies*, and the process towards this stage as, in Penninx and Garcés' (ibid) terms, the process of *becoming an accepted part of society*. In the ideal case, this refers to a scenario where an individual's ethnic background is irrelevant for his or her opportunities and position in society. When defining what immigrants to include in the study, being categorized as an immigrant, and thereby risk being stereotyped in negative ways, was considered more important than who has actually migrated.

Sweden and Spain are both European welfare states where immigration and its consequences are often described as a major challenge for society. Vertovec (2007) uses the term *super-diversity* to define the diversification of ethnic origins among the inhabitants in western societies, which poses new challenges regarding the bases for social cohesion. In both Sweden and Spain, the foreign-born population has become "super-diverse" over the past decades. Sweden and Spain are also among the EU countries where the gap between immigrants and the native population is largest in terms of unemployment, poverty and over-qualification in employment, which indicates that the integration processes are seriously hampered (Eurostat 2011, Wiesbrock 2013). Despite these similarities, Sweden and Spain however represent very different cultural and institutional settings within a European context. Comparing the perceptions of immigrants of similar origins in these two countries makes it possible to identify what different obstacles and opportunities to integration/social inclusion that immigrants face in different institutional contexts.

Moreover, it may be argued that the city is more relevant than the national, or regional, level when studying integration processes. The empirical research for this project was conducted in the cities of Stockholm and Barcelona, and reflects an increasing emphasis on the city level in integration studies (e.g. Gilardoni et. al. 2015; Gebhardt 2014). The city, or the neighborhood, constitutes the physical space where interaction between people of multiple ethnic backgrounds takes place (or not) on an everyday basis.

Data and research methods

The empirical data for this research project is based upon semi-structured interviews with 48 immigrants of African, Asian, Muslim and Latin American origin in Stockholm and Barcelona during 2014 and 2015. To complement the narratives by immigrants who may be affected by ethnic and racial stereotyping, 12 interviews with a control

group of white, western migrants who moved voluntarily to Sweden and Spain out of personal or professional motives were included. Their migration experiences provide a valuable contrast to the non-western respondents, and insights into which dimensions of the migratory project are universal, and which are clearly differentiated along ethno-racial lines. In addition, 20 informative interviews with stakeholders involved in integration work were performed during the same time period.

Selective sampling was used to assure that the respondents would fit into the project definitions of "integration" and "immigrant." All of the immigrant respondents have in common that they aspire for participation on equal terms with the ethnic majority in the society where they live. Most of them have a high educational level and aspire for qualified employment. None of them have a strong religious identity or other characteristics that could make them more likely to not want to fully form part of a western society. It should be noted that this does not imply an assimilationist approach; acceptance of difference is in this project viewed as an essential component of the reciprocal integration process that is considered ideal in multiethnic societies. It is however based on the point of view that "strong multiculturalism," as the implementation of parallel legal systems, is not compatible with integration. The respondents were selected based on the assumption that stereotyping based on visible ethno-racial features as skin color influence on how people of diverse origins are treated in different spheres of society; on the labor and housing markets as well as in everyday interaction with people from the ethnic majority. This assumption was confirmed throughout the interviews.

Results

The findings reflect that the perceived sense of belonging and opportunities in society are clearly racialized: experiences of rejection and discrimination are overall common among the respondents of African, Muslim and Latin American origin in both of the cities (altogether, 27 out of 36 respondents of these origins shared this perception), and most of these respondents perceive that their origin is negative for their chances on the labor market. Most of the African respondents, as well The Asian respondents reflect more ambiguousness: on the one hand, the Chinese perceive that they are positively valued as "hard-working" and "non-conflictive", but also frequently bullied and ridiculed based on their physical appearance, while all the Western respondents in both cities coincide in feeling entirely accepted in the society where they live. There are however vast differences between the respondents in Stockholm and Barcelona, most strikingly in terms of perceived inclusion in society, which is far lower among the non-Western respondents in Stockholm compared to Barcelona. Moreover, the

impact of the economic crisis represents a central impediment for integration processes according to both immigrant respondents and integration stakeholders in Catalonia, while in Sweden, the most central concern is negative attitudes and racism among the majority society, which appears to hamper the opportunities of immigrants despite a comparably prosperous economy.

All in all, whether positive or negative, stereotypes based on ethno-racial features and national origin are central for most of the respondents in their everyday lives. These stereotypes become incorporated in their self-perceptions and affect their relations with the ethnic majority society in several ways. For instance, some Kurdish and Chilean respondents in Sweden aim lower when applying for a job than they would like to as they perceive that it is "pointless" (they expect to be discriminated against based on their earlier experiences), while Norwegian and Canadian respondents in Spain perceive that their nationality gives them "carte blanche" from integration expectations, and advantages on the job and housing markets also compared to native Spaniards.

Other factors that were identified during the data analysis, and that influence on the respondents' perceptions and experiences of integration/incorporation to varying degrees, are the motives behind their migration projects, their gender, and whether they migrated as adults or were born/grew up in the country where they live. Overall, the second generation immigrant respondents suffer more from perceptions of exclusion, discrimination and non-belonging than the first generation respondents, which is consistent with contemporary research within this field (e.g. Crul & Schneider 2013, Portes & Aparicio 2014, Safi 2010). A common experience that several of the second generation immigrant respondents in both countries share is that of *not being "allowed" to belong*; that no matter how hard they try to adopt national customs and how much they declare that they feel "Swedish" or "Catalan", the majority society constantly questions their identity, which creates frustration and detachment.

Concluding remarks

Based on the rich data material generated by the 80 interviews and complemented by policy documents, reports and earlier research, this project is concluded with some general statements, reflections and policy implications:

➢ Two interrelated integration obstacles appear particularly central: socio-economic disadvantage and negative stereotyping, which results in ethnic

discrimination and thereby reinforces socio-economic disadvantage (through lacking access to (quality) employment, housing in attractive areas, etc.).

➢ A vast majority of the respondents (56/60) argue that "race" (skin color) is central for how people are treated by the majority society, and what opportunities he or she has.

➢ Most of the immigrant respondents in both countries with largely negative perceptions and experiences think that their ethnic origin is devalued by the majority society, and that they are perceived as less skilled and competent based on stereotypes of their home countries.

➢ In Stockholm, the lack of everyday, interethnic contacts because of the cemented housing segregation is perceived as a major problem with negative effects for integration. In Barcelona, contrastingly, many of the respondents consider the existence of frequent interethnic contacts in streets and squares as an important asset and part of the city's much-appreciated "cosmopolitan" character.

➢ In Spain/Catalonia/Barcelona, instead, acute socio-economic marginalization and extreme precariousness among immigrants are central concerns, while in Sweden/Stockholm, this is not the issue.

➢ Finally, both immigrant respondents and integration stakeholders largely agree that empowering non-Western immigrants is central, together with more efficient anti-discrimination work, in order to improve immigrant incorporation. Two concrete suggestions for how to do this are:

i) Facilitating the recognition of non-EU university degrees and access to public employment for foreigners.

ii) Awareness-raising campaigns emphasizing the international competence of immigrants (as language skills in French, Arabic and Chinese, or the cultural competence that is useful to develop business contacts with the countries of origin). The purpose of this measure is not only to stimulate actual transnational relations, but also to increase the status of immigrants in the majority society. Many respondents furthermore believe that a general "internationalization" of European societies, where larger numbers of people from the ethnic majority speak foreign languages and have lived abroad, potentially could foster more positive attitudes towards "super-diversity."