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Manifestations and Contestations of Borders and Boundaries in Everyday Understandings of Integration

Carolin Fischer¹

Abstract

This article asks how borders and boundaries manifest themselves in understandings of integration. Drawing on qualitative interviews with migrant descendants living in Zürich, Switzerland, it investigates how understandings of integration are experienced, interpreted, appropriated and modified, in relation to either the self or others. I employ de Certeau's theory of the practice of everyday life to establish how borders and boundaries are reflected in individual meaning-making, perceptions of self and other and the ways in which people situate themselves in society. I demonstrate not only that the interplay between borders and boundaries informs specific aspects of migration governance such as integration policies, but also that people employ tactics based on enunciations of integration to act upon the social position they are allocated as a result of ascribed, racialised markers of difference.

Keywords: borders; boundaries; practice of everyday life; integration.

Introduction

Nation-state borders play an important role in shaping forms, experiences and the governance of human mobility. In conjunction with global social inequalities, borders – in terms of migration policies, laws and regulations – define legal subjects (Fassin, 2020) and filter people's mobility (Bauder, 2017; Bakewell, 2008). Borders thus 'react to diverse kinds of migrant subjectivities and thereby operate to produce differentiated forms of access and "rights"' (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015: 57). As a result, migrants face different restrictions and enjoy different entitlements when seeking to cross borders and upon arrival at a destination. However, nation-state borders also delineate bounded and imagined communities (Anderson, 1983). Administratively, citizenship determines an individual's entitlements and restrictions in a given national context. It is also a marker of a symbolic distinction between inside and outside, us and them, foreign and familiar. People are assigned specific attributes on the basis of their place of origin. It is here that borders and boundaries coincide. As social constructs, boundaries establish symbolic differences between, for example, classes, gender, race and religion, and they produce identifications based on these classification markers. Boundaries thus separate people into groups, which foster feelings of similarity, membership and belonging (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). They can be mobilised to distinguish between those accepted as members and those classified as undesirable residents of the national territory.

The territorial fixing of borders contributes to the making of others. Borders thus impose their presence on both social relations and individual identification, for which boundary work is an

¹ Carolin Fischer, Ambizione Research Fellow, University of Bern, Institute of Social Anthropology, Lerchenweg 36, 3012 Bern, Switzerland. E-mail: carolin.fischer@anthro.unibe.ch.

essential element (Anderson, 2019; Amelina, 2017; Dahinden, 2016; Wimmer, 2008). As a result, migration involves constant processes of reinvention and self-definition among both migrants and the societies they enter (see van Houtum and van Naerssen, 2002). Such boundaries between migrants and those perceived as native citizens often extend across generations and continue to affect people and groups who are not migrants themselves (Dahinden et al., forthcoming; Dahinden et al., 2014). Recent debates about the emergence of ‘parallel societies’ in different European contexts (Bukow et al., 2007) exemplify how political and public discourses build on ideas of lasting otherness. That migrants and their descendants embody the articulation of borders and boundaries is now well established in migration studies and beyond (Fassin, 2005; Kearney, 1991). However, it is far from clear how and where the interlocking logics of inclusion, exclusion and distinction manifest themselves. Who exactly do they affect, under what circumstances and with what effects? So far, little attention has been paid to the articulations and consequences of the interplay between borders and boundaries at the level of individual meaning-making.

To understand how borders and boundaries coincide in people’s everyday lives, I examine the normative principle and politics of migrant integration. More specifically, I uncover how descendants of migrants mobilise understandings of integration to describe their experiences and sense of belonging or non-belonging to society. Drawing on qualitative interview data that were generated in Zürich, Switzerland, I investigate how people who were born and raised in immigrant families experience, interpret, appropriate and modify understandings of integration, in relation to either themselves or perceived others. I explore how the interplay of borders and boundaries affects individual meaning-making, perceptions of self and other and the ways in which people situate themselves in society. To this end, I employ de Certeau’s theory of the practice of everyday life to identify different understandings of the term ‘integration’. These understandings, I argue, reflect people’s positions in the interplay of borders and boundaries as well as the tactics they apply to manipulate these positions. First, however, I reflect on how the idea and politics of integration exemplify the coincidence of borders and boundaries.

Exploring the interplay of borders and boundaries through understandings of integration

‘Integration’ is a fuzzy concept with multiple definitions (Grillo, 2003), but common to all of them is that they produce and reproduce specific ideas of society, the state, the nation and the relationship between majorities and minorities. Integration is hence best described as a social imaginary (Rytter, 2019; Taylor, 2004) that is inextricably tied to the bounded territory of the modern nation-state. Indeed, ‘[t]he making of a unique, exclusive place goes hand in hand with governing practices of exclusion and purification’ (van Houtum and van Naerssen, 2002: 127). Through borders and the ways in which borders, the bounded territory and its people are governed, the nation-state becomes a container of an imagined pure and homogenous society (Anderson, 1983) whose members represent recognised parts of the assumed whole.

Integration is simultaneously an imaginary of a desirable society and an objective of political governance according to which immigrants are expected to blend into the majority society and become invisible. Recent critiques target integration as a policy goal in the context of migration policies and as a focus of scholarly analysis (Meissner and Heil, 2020; Favell, 2019; Schinkel, 2018). Other contributions focus on how the normative principle translates into policies that target perceived minority groups (Korteweg, 2017; Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). Boundary markers like gender, class, race, religion and legal status strongly influence whom politics of



integration affect and how (Anthias, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 2013). Integration policies not only perpetuate boundaries between perceived majorities and minorities, but also create distinctions between different minority groups, casting them as more or less compatible with the perceived majority.

In this article, I consider the ways in which integration is understood as resulting from how the term has been diffused through the media and public and political discourses. As such, the term addresses specific minorities and their often unsatisfactory ways of being and belonging in particular nation-states (see Rytter, 2019). So far, little attention has been paid to how the interplay of borders and boundaries inherent to fuzzy notions of integration affects individuals' everyday lives and meaning-making. The different ways in which members of perceived minority groups mobilise understandings of integration to adopt a certain position in society or to express their opinion relating to external ascriptions of (un)successful integration remain particularly underexplored (for an exception, see Bivand Erdal, 2013). For this reason, I examine how and why those targeted by public and political discourses around integration employ the concept themselves and turn it into a tool.

Theoretically, my analysis of how descendants of migrants experience, interpret, appropriate and modify understandings of integration in their everyday lives is inspired by de Certeau's reflections on the practice of everyday life (de Certeau, 1988). This theoretical anchorage helps me argue that, through the ways in which they employ understandings of integration, descendants of migrants 'find ways of using the constraining order of place or of the language. Without leaving the place where [they] have no choice but to live and which lays down its law for [them, they establish] within it a degree of plurality and creativity' (de Certeau, 1984: 30; italics in original). In this specific case, the constraining order of place manifests itself in understandings of integration that people apply to establish certain meanings or claim specific positions. By virtue of the fact that they are in between, descendants of migrants 'draw unexpected results from [their] situation' (de Certeau, 1984: 30).

According to de Certeau, it is through acts of enunciation that actors establish a present relative to time and place whilst being entangled in a network of places and relations (de Certeau, 1984: xiii). De Certeau refers to such everyday enunciations as 'tactics' (xix) through which the weak turn higher forces to their own ends. De Certeau seeks to establish how enunciations are constitutive of identity politics in a context that is structured by power relations. Although individuals may inhabit an inferior position in these power relations, they can subvert dominant laws, practices and representations from within. As a result, imposed knowledge, symbols and ideas – including integration – are manipulated by actors who have not produced them, but who are significantly affected by them (de Certeau, 1984: 32).

Although de Certeau's theorisation of everyday life practices grows out of studies of popular culture and consumption, it offers useful theoretical entry points for the issues at stake in this article. It is specifically the idea of enunciation, the articulation of words and meanings, that lends itself to analysing how persons employ understandings of integration. Understandings of integration thus serve as an entry point for the exploration of how the interplay of borders and boundaries affects individual meaning-making, perceptions of self and other and the ways in which people situate themselves in society. In the remainder of this article, I draw on qualitative interview data to demonstrate how descendants of migrants subvert dominant practices and representations from within.

Case study and methods

Empirically, this article draws on qualitative interview data that were generated as part of a research project examining how migrant descendants in Switzerland experience, interpret, appropriate and modify boundaries and experiences of discrimination in everyday life. The main focus of the overarching project was on encounters and engagements with institutional and everyday ethnicisation and otherness.

The research participants whose accounts inform this article were all born in Switzerland, and all except one have obtained Swiss citizenship. Yet, although research participants meet the formal criteria of belonging, they are often treated as if they were not fully part of Swiss society.

Between June 2016 and February 2018, the research team conducted 26 interviews with people whose parents came to Switzerland as immigrants from different countries of origin. All research participants are residents of the city of Zürich and aged between 25 and 40, and they come from different socio-economic, professional and religious backgrounds. Thematically, the interviews revolve around participants' life trajectories and experiences in Switzerland and focus specifically on experiences of othering and discrimination and the way participants attribute meaning to and act upon these experiences.

For the purpose of this article, the interviews were thematically coded according to explicit and implicit references to integration. The results were analysed according to the issues in relation to which research participants mobilise the term and how they position themselves vis-à-vis its meaning and implications. To this end, I applied a theoretical coding technique (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). Based on this systematic analysis, it is possible to identify different tactics revolving around enunciations of the concept of integration. In the remainder of this article, I present these tactical uses of integration and discuss how they reflect the interplay of borders and boundaries.

Mobilising understandings of integration

... to claim belonging or express non-belonging

In our interviews, participants often raised the issue of integration themselves, without prompting, in response to our questions. However, research participants mobilise understandings of integration in different ways, which is partly related to how they are situated in society and the interplay of borders and boundaries (Yuval-Davis, 2013). In line with their situatedness, they accept ascriptions of the perpetual immigrant other that have been imposed on them to varying extents. The account of Marta, a female participant of Albanian descent, for instance, reveals her ambiguous relationship with the concept of integration:

As far as the Swiss context is concerned, I ask myself [...]: 'Do we still need to discuss whether or not the second or third generation is integrated?' I get that we talk about integration in the case of refugees who have just arrived in Switzerland. But how can we talk about integration with regard to the third generation? How can we say, 'Yeah, integration means acquiring language skills'. Is that a joke? Our parents learned the language reasonably well, but there's no need to discuss the language skills of our generation. These are issues that I'm really eager to talk about publicly, and I find it important to express my own opinion. [...] At some point it simply has to sink in. But that's hard.



While questioning the applicability of the concept of integration in relation to herself, Marta employs it to classify others, such as newly arrived refugees. Her tactic (de Certeau, 1988: xix) consists in drawing a boundary between her own position in Swiss society and the assumed position of newly arrived refugees. In this way, she claims belonging to Swiss society and refutes the otherness ascribed to her when the concept of integration is used in relation to migrant descendants. Hence, while she criticises the concept, she also mobilises it to measure the extent to which people form part of society. The boundaries that Marta perceives as separating her from Switzerland's majority society require the nation-state and its defining borders as a frame of reference.

Marta's example also demonstrates that perceptions of otherness based on national origin may extend over several generations. Her perceived position as the perpetually non-integrated other reflects the interplay of borders and boundaries in the sense that her parents' national origin supersedes the fact that she was born and socialised in Switzerland and is a Swiss citizen. Marta also turns her discontent about integration into a political project. She emphasises that she is eager to engage in critical discussions that promote a wider awareness of her perspective. Marta mobilises the concept of integration to claim belonging to Swiss society and put forward a socio-political agenda. It is necessary to underline, however, that participants speak from different social positions as far as markers such as race, class and gender are concerned, and that these differences influence how they use the concept of integration. Marta, for instance, identifies differences between the external ascriptions she confronts as a Swiss-born daughter of immigrant parents and those imposed on her partner, who originates from the same village as her parents but came to Switzerland only recently. The following example highlights such intersectional variations (Yuval-Davis, 2013) even more explicitly.

Peter, a young man of Cameroonian descent, uses the concept of integration when we speak about his experiences of everyday racism. He says that he has encountered racism more frequently in recent years, which he links to the increased number of migrants and asylum seekers from Eritrea:

It's been worse since the Eritreans came. [...] I think this is important in my case. I was really well integrated. In fact, I was over-integrated. And then these Eritreans, Somalis and I don't know who came, and I just look too much like them. Now I have the feeling that everything's kaputt [that it has all been in vain]. That's how it is. [...] And I've been pretty pissed off since then. My status [in Swiss society] has literally dropped.

Peter's account underlines the generalising and racialising nature of integration, as a result of which individuals are reduced to members of certain constructed groups that are perceived as inferior, regardless of what they do or how they situate themselves. Peter confronts boundaries in the form of generalising and racist perceptions of himself as no different from other black men who are widely treated with considerable scepticism. He thought he had overcome these boundaries through his efforts at integration. He responds to these boundaries by distancing himself from the perceived others who – as he puts it – have damaged his status in Swiss society. Peter's tactic is similar to Marta's in the sense that the experience of boundaries prompts him to actively draw boundaries to claim belonging. However, being a male person of colour, the boundaries he confronts have different racist and gendered connotations. At the same time, Peter's example illustrates how borders impose their presence on social relations. He refers to distinct national groups whose arrival in Switzerland calls into question the position he believed he had achieved through successful integration. However, Peter's narrative also implies a critique of perceptions of Switzerland as a bounded community of white citizens.

Similarly to Peter, Simon, a research participant of Italian descent, employs the concept of integration when describing himself as part of Swiss society, which he frames in very positive terms. Integration to him means becoming Swiss and thus has a strong assimilationist connotation. However, due to his ethnic and migratory background Simon speaks from a very different position than Peter:

I think that we Italians are well regarded here in Switzerland. We've successfully integrated and become part of society. That's why I think we're well respected. Well, obviously, if we exaggerate or are too noisy, it's normal that [it bothers people]. But that's come to bother me too, when an Italian makes too much noise. That's something typically Swiss that I've adopted.

Simon reproduces the idea that there is something genuinely Swiss that differs from what he considers as genuinely Italian. Without denying his Italian 'roots', he emphasises that his efforts to blend into Swiss society have been successful. To this end, he echoes a generalised perception of Italian migrants in Switzerland that differs strongly from the generalised perception Peter feels exposed to. Simon refers to his perception of annoying Italians as an indicator of his successful integration. For him there is a clear difference between being Swiss and being Italian. Hence, Simon reproduces widespread ideas of difference and sameness that are based on national origin but turns them to his own advantage. This is one way of making a dominant order function in another register (de Certeau, 1988).

The examples of Peter and Simon demonstrate that the ways in which people embrace the idea of integration are mediated by race and national origin. As a result of their ethnic backgrounds, their parents' migratory histories and the changing political and discursive environment in Switzerland, the boundaries that Peter and Simon confront and the boundaries they actively reproduce when using the concept of integration have very different, racialised connotations. The interplay between borders and boundaries thus manifests itself differently and has very different effects in these two cases. For this reason, their enunciations of integration result from specific positions in given power relations and different tactics. Simon demonstrates how borders in the form of certain nation-states and national backgrounds may acquire a positive connotation. Nationality-based boundary work still occurs, but – paradoxically – Simon mobilises nationality to make a case for belonging to Switzerland and Swiss society, a claim that Peter is far from able to make for himself. Both Peter and Simon employ the concept of integration to indicate their perceived position in Swiss society and the dominant representations that are constitutive of that position. However, Peter employs integration to specify his struggles and draw attention to the prevalence of racialised boundary work, whereas Simon uses it to tell a success story of belonging.

... to amend its meaning and scale of reference

Tim, whose parents originate from Bangladesh, deliberately inverts the logic of integration when he uses the concept to describe relationships among his peers when he was a teenager. In response to being asked about the ways in which distinctions between 'us' and 'them', and between majority and minority, marked his childhood and teenage friendships, he states:

T: I think I wasn't very aware of it back then. And the Swiss kids [in our class at school] were so strongly integrated into us that we never noticed a big difference.

C: In what sense were they 'integrated into you'?



T: Well, in the sense that... we had a certain atmosphere in that class and a particular way of engaging with and treating each other. It might have been different if the class had consisted entirely of Swiss kids; maybe it wouldn't have been like it was. It's probably a question of small nuances. That's why I say 'integrated into us'.

According to Tim's inverted logic, it is not the deficient immigrant minority that integrated into the dominant majority society, nor did the perceived majority adapt to the differences of the immigrant minority. Instead, integration is about establishing a form of joint communication and a way of getting along. However, Tim still reproduces boundaries along the lines of national belonging and membership in a nation-state by framing his social environment in terms of 'Swiss' and 'others'. Hence, although he makes a plea for integration in a more classical sense of the term (see for example Durkheim, 2006), his use of the concept is not devoid of borders and boundary work based on national origin.

Finally, Amanda, a participant of Serbian descent considers integration as subject to individual responsibility. Hence, she reproduces what Schinkel criticises as integration detached from societal responsibility and turned into a subject of individual responsibility (Schinkel, 2018):

Well, Switzerland is very open and tries to integrate everyone. I always think that if people don't manage [to integrate], it's their own fault. That's my opinion, obviously. Partly this comes from my own history. We wanted to be integrated, by all means, and we did it, although it wasn't easy. But now, when I look at the situation in the city of Zürich, I really think that whoever fails to integrate should blame themselves.

At first sight, Amanda fully embraces the principle of integration with its normative, neoliberal connotations, which place the burden on individuals' shoulders (Matejskova, 2013). In this way, she situates herself among those who have succeeded, whom she distinguishes from those who do not try hard enough. Again, we can discern a tactic of using the dominant understanding of integration to draw boundaries to one's own advantage. However, with her statement she also makes an important concession by underlining that it makes a significant difference which spatial and social entity one is trying to integrate into. Amanda refers to integration in the city of Zürich rather than Switzerland as a whole. Hence, it is not only parental descent and race that shape the position individuals are allocated and respond to when using the concept of integration; it also matters which social and spatial entity they refer to (Hadj Abdou, 2019). Whilst integration in Switzerland in general may be subject to a certain set of generalised expectations, integrating in a cosmopolitan place like the city of Zürich rest on very different requirements. Notwithstanding such variations, the normative underpinnings of integration as a principle prevail.

Other research participants echoed Amanda's spatial adjustments to the concept of integration. Several participants referred to the specificities of Zürich. For instance, Antonio, a young man of Spanish descent, emphasises that one can only be a part of Zürich by being different. People are not united through their shared ancestral origin, but through their lifestyle, worldview and attitudes. Through this emphasis, Antonio develops his own, highly locality-based definition of Swissness. Boundaries of belonging vary according to different localities and may be detached from the territorial and political entity of the nation-state and the borders that delineate it.

The interview sections above exemplify how participants engage with the boundaries that they experience themselves or which affect other groups in society. By applying different tactics, participants bend and sometimes undermine state-centred ideas of integration. To some extent, they

challenge framings of membership in terms of national origin that necessarily involve the drawing of boundaries between those defined as the majority and minorities on the basis of various markers of difference. The tactics participants employ clearly reflect their ethnicised and racialised position in society as well as the social and spatial entity in relation to which they use the concept of integration.

Conclusion

With its focus on the interplay of borders and boundaries in understandings of integration, this article contributes to and establishes links between important areas of debate in contemporary migration studies. It adopts an original entry point to these debates by exploring how descendants of migrants mobilise understandings of integration to describe their experiences and sense of belonging or non-belonging to society.

The narratives featured in the empirical sections of this article demonstrate that migration and the crossing of national borders promote constant processes of self-definition and sometimes self-reinvention (van Houtum and van Naerssen, 2002) in the sense that people respond to ascriptions of being different from the imagined native Swiss majority society. The fact that our research participants did not migrate themselves but are mostly Swiss nationals who grew up in immigrant families accentuates the stickiness of perceived differences and related understandings of integration. Through enunciations of integration, they position themselves and others in light of certain normative principles that cannot be detached from the bounded entity of the nation-state. In other words, nation-state borders play an important role in shaping the boundaries our research participants confront and to which they respond with various tactics. One of these tactics, as my final examples demonstrate, consists in explicitly undermining such nation-state-centred principles of membership by referring to alternative scales of belonging, such as specific cities.

Otherness based on perceived non-belonging to the bounded national community forms an important dimension of our research participants' everyday lives in Switzerland. At the same time, however, confrontations with an integration paradigm may also lead to the reproduction of that very paradigm. Applying de Certeau's idea of tactics helps us understand the ways in which the people under study mobilise understandings of integration to substantiate their own perceived position in Swiss society or to allocate a certain position to other minority groups. Other identified tactics consist of moving away from and assigning different meanings to state-led understandings of integration, or relating integration to a different scale that is detached from the nation-state as a frame of reference for ideas of belonging.

My analysis of everyday understandings of integration demonstrates that the interplay between borders and boundaries not only informs specific fields of migration governance but also shapes individuals' sense of self and others and the ways in which people claim positions in society and pursue certain political objectives. Through tactics based on enunciations of integration, people establish a presence that is not only relative to time and place, but which also reflects the social position they are allocated as a result of ascribed markers of difference like race, class and gender that cause them to stick out as not fully integrated. In response to this – often inferior – position, enunciations of integration can be interpreted as micro-level identity politics through which people either subvert or assert dominant orders of belonging to Swiss society and their inherent interplay of borders and boundaries. A fuller understanding of the driving forces, effects and intersectional nature of these micro-level politics of belonging would require further research that goes beyond the Swiss context to unpack temporal and local parallels and contingencies.



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