Setting up and crossing borders: Migration issues and the self-other relationship

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Abstract

Borders and bordering are inevitably implicated in the migration phenomenon, from the perspective of both migrants and the receiving societies. We will highlight some of the ways in which borders are set and practiced. Specifically, we will argue that negative attitudes towards migrants and refugees are shaped by how people define their own identity. We will first focus on the dissolution and reconstruction of borders in the experience of migrants, then, based on a social psychology perspective, we will discuss how cognitive and symbolic borders separating immigrants from native-born people are built on the basic process of self- and other- social categorization. Finally, we will present some of the self and identity theories that make it possible to overlap and blur boundaries, hence opening routes for more positive social encounters.

Keywords: *migrants, social categorization, identity, self-expansion model, dialogical self.*

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Introduction

In recent years, the notion of borders/boundaries has increasingly drawn the attention of scholars across social sciences, gaining a pivotal role in the understanding of a number of different social phenomena. Among other fields, research on identity and social identity, group positioning and intergroup relationships, especially in connection with cultural diversity, intercultural relations and immigration issues, has variously dealt with the concept of borders.

In migration issues borders come in many forms. Migrants cross state borders, undergo the reshaping of social and space borders entailed in their forced displacement, and meet and struggle with new symbolic and social borders in the societies where they settle. Symbolic borders are internal in the person’s mind; they stem from deeply shared cognitive-affective-cultural processes, and result in conceptual distinctions that enable people to recognize, approach, make sense of the inner and outer world and agree upon the state of reality. In their basic form, symbolic borders are set through the development of intertwined systems of categories (and the related linguistic labels) into which people – individual and groups, including the self – and significant objects, practices and events are placed, organized and put in relation to each other. As detailed in the following, symbolic borders both differentiate and unite individuals and groups, along the same line that separates– yet in some cases overlaps– the self and the other.

When symbolic borders – which belong to the realm of intersubjectivity – reach consensus in a society, are widely shared and agreed upon, they are likely to turn into social borders, that is, into barriers and constraints based on social differences (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). These are external borders, division lines that turn into non neutral patterns of difference across race, gender, status, education, place, nationality, culture, etc., as well as in patterns of belonging, exclusion and inclusion. Here the politics of belonging and the bordering processes come into place (Yuval et al., 2018).

The migration experience: Dissolution and reconstruction of borders

The salience of borders clearly emerges in the migration experience, insofar as it unsettles the identity of those who voluntarily move or are forcefully displaced. The self has a close connection with the physical, social and temporal environment that sustains it (Luci, 2021).Indeed, according to Leon and Rebecca Grinberg (1989) (a) spatial links confer a sense of cohesion to the self, allow the feeling of individuation, self-other differentiation, hence the perception of one's own distinctiveness; (b) temporal links guarantee the principle of continuity between the different representations of the self over time, providing the basis for the feeling of being oneself; finally (c), social links capture the interaction between aspects of the self and the feeling of being part of a group, enabling individuals to establish a sense of belonging. Hence, if we look at identity as the result of the interrelation of these three links, which produce a unitary view of the self, we can also see how emigration, forced relocation, and exile not only tears off individuals from specific environmental and relational contexts, but may also disrupt the coherence and continuity of self-experience.

Psychosocial research on migrants has highlighted that the emigration/immigration

experience changes migrants' status, lifestyles, and material and symbolic conditions, as well as posing important challenges to identity. Indeed, settling into a new social and cultural context entails a variety of changes and adjustments of one's identity, which is threatened with regard to continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000). In social psychology acculturation research, it is implicitly assumed that as identity develops from changes in the environment, individuals who move into a new receiving culture and a new social environment are likely to undergo or actively negotiate some changes in their personal, social, ethnic, or cultural identity.

This complex process, where the previous established borders no longer work, is made even more complex by the fact that the receiving environment calls for new borders to be set that intersect with those on which identity is built. The scientific paradigms of the social sciences also contribute to creating new borders for migrants. Indeed, all the main psychosocial acculturation models (Berry, 2005; 2006; Bourhis et al., 1997; Navas, et al., 2005) have been developed on the principle that there are symbolic and social borders migrants have to deal with: these borders follow the line of culture (heritage culture vs. receiving culture) or the line of social contact (between the immigrants and the receiving population). In so doing, however, these models create new borders themselves – acculturation borders – since they conceive of different acculturation strategies/preferences as occurring within certain borders, which are termed 'boxes': assimilation (absorption into the receiving culture while abandoning the culture of origin), integration (maintenance of cultural heritage and simultaneous adoption of the receiving culture), separation (rejection of the receiving culture while preserving the culture of origin), and marginalization (lack of identification with either the culture of origin or the receiving culture, which may result in anomie or individualism, or the so-called 'third culture'). One of the faults of these models is that they do not include the possibility of crossing the borders, of moving from one acculturation box to another, or of moving outside any of these boxes.

Responses to immigrants: Setting symbolic borders

In the perspective of the receiving societies, the very definition of 'migrants' points directly to the issue of symbolic borders. Before going into the psychosocial process of the self-other relationship, we do notice that the current social scenario has made immigration a salient issue. Not only have migrants become an intrinsic and permanent component of many societies, but migration issues currently dominate the international agenda and are a motive of political division, both across and between parties and countries. In the last few decades, public attitudes and representations of migrants have also become a salient issue. The media, social media, political discourse and the general public's representations of migrants have been thoroughly investigated as to their capacity to shape more or less supportive environments for immigrants and refugees (see among others, de Rosa et al., 2020; 2021; Mazzara et al., 2021), and also for the circular influence that connects them to the political agenda and national immigration policies (Verkuyten, 2021). Recent polls suggest that European citizens have become on the average slightly more accepting of migrants (Ademmer & Stör, 2018) compared to 2002,

yet that the issue has undergone a dramatic polarization within the member states. As for Italy, polls between 2016 and 2020 show that Italians are in the main quite hostile to immigrants (Holloway et al., 2021).

Research suggests that public attitudes towards migrants can be differentiated based on three main factors (Verkuyten, 2021). The first is context: indeed, there are differences between countries and continents (North Americans are on the average more welcoming than Europeans, and Western Europeans more welcoming towards immigrants than Eastern Europeans). Within countries, public opinion is in some cases quite homogeneous (in favor, as in Canada, or against, as in Hungary), in others it is divided and polarized. The second factor points to individual differences in the receiving population: educated people with a progressive political orientation are more accepting of migrants, while nationalistic and authoritarian attitudes, feelings of deprivation and a tendency to maintain the status quo are associated with hostile feelings. Finally, attitudes vary according to different types of migrants (e.g., EU and non-EU, regular and irregular, economic migrants and forced or involuntary migrants such as refugees), who trigger different responses: typically, refugees activate empathic responses, while alleged voluntary migrants are perceived as a threat and hence associated to hostile responses.

This last point introduces the issue of symbolic borders. Many different labels are used to refer to different types of migrants: refugees, asylum-seekers, economic migrants, immigrants, migrants, foreigners, undocumented, illegal, unauthorized, unaccompanied migrants, just to name the most popular. Each and all of these labels create categories that set up multiple symbolic borders. Above all, they introduce a system of differentiation –a hierarchy – that contrasts all types of migrants to what Valsiner (2022, p. 4) has defined ‘counter-migrants’: “Somebody sets out on the move towards some other place without the reverse move. The migrant emerges. Together with that emerge the roles of counter-migrants—the ‘watchful others’ who—maintaining the stability of the given stationary community—carefully observe the migration process [...] Counter-Migrants—they are the ones who create the ‘migrant situation’ by their apprehension of the migrants who either move in or walk by”. In the end, migration is essentially an issue of borders differentiating migrants from counter-migrants.

What are these categories built on, and for what purpose? In social psychology it is widely agreed that we do need to positively differentiate from others for identity motives, and that cognitive and symbolic borders are the device through which we fulfil this basic need, while at the same time setting the conditions for the development of prejudice. A large body of research has found support for the theoretical hypothesis that a part of our self-concept and our identity is provided by our social belonging, and that we have a basic motivation to protect our ‘good’ self (SIT, Social Identity Theory – Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Moreover, based on context, we categorize ourselves and others at three different levels of inclusiveness (SCT, Social Categorization Theory – Turner et al., 1987): the personal, social or human level (or global level). When we categorize on a social level of inclusiveness, and we convey this cognitive process through language and social labels, group membership becomes salient. This leads us to foreground differences between groups and similarities within groups; in addition, social categorization consolidates our identification with our

ingroup norms and values, bringing to the surface the phenomenon known as ingroup favoritism, that is the tendency to favor members of one's ingroup over outgroup members. This bias is explained as the outcome of the desire to maintain a positive image of the self through the group, thereby viewing one's own group in a positive light, and by contrast, outside groups in a less positive (or negative) light. In this perspective, differentiation fulfills an identity function. Indeed, it is because we struggle for positive identities that we positively differentiate our ingroup from outgroups (migrants, for instance). While there may also be an instrumental function for intergroup differentiation (i.e., achieving a specific goal), identity function is primary (Scheepers et al., 2002): a group must first be meaningful to its members, and only after a distinctive identity is obtained, can the instrumental function come into play as a motive for differentiation.

The SIT-SCT framework, so intimately connecting the self to the group, to the others we feel similar to and to those we feel different from, paves the way for a closer scrutiny of bordering in the self-other relationship.

Identity, belonging, and bordering

If social identities are anchored to group memberships, it is because individuals develop a sense of meaningful belonging. Belonging can be considered “the quintessential mode of being human” (Miller, 2003, p. 218), based on a primary unconditioned need. As Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497) state: “Human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships”, and groups are one of the main channels to fulfil this need.

In migrants’ experience, belonging– so crucial to define their position in the receiving societies –is largely affected by othering processes, that is, being perceived, categorized and treated as ‘them’. The disruption of the spatial, temporal and social links brought about by displacement (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1984) forces immigrants to renegotiate their sense of belonging, which is intimately connected to how they see themselves and others, and to the extent to which they feel ‘at home’ in the new society (Amit & Bar-Lev, 2015). As a matter of fact, their sense of belonging is undermined by the experience of discrimination and social exclusion. Significantly, as a consequence of the othering processes, migrants are likely to develop feelings of non-belonging (Giralt, 2015).

Indeed, if we look at how belonging is constructed and maintained, we can see how it may be transformed into the ‘politics of belonging’ that constructs borders.

According to Yuval (2006) belonging is built on social locations, group identification/emotional attachment, and ethical and political values. Social locations refer to the position of individuals in society, based on gender, age, race, class, nation, etc. It is the intersection of this multiple belonging that defines the concrete social location of migrants, irrespectively of which single belonging they value most or identify with. Indeed, all these locations are embedded in the power relation system, working as axes of differentiation and inclusion/exclusion. Identification and emotional attachments refer to the twofold nature of identities, which are narratives about belonging, and about who people are (and who they are not), but are also “desire for attachments […] wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fueled by yearning rather than positing of identity as a stable state”

(Yuval, 2006 p, 202). Finally, belonging is about the ways identities are judged, it is about ethics, values and ideologies that establish where and how categorical and symbolic boundaries are to be drawn, and turned into social borders, that is, patterns of inclusion/exclusion.

This last point is the essence of the 'politics of belonging': "the dirty work of boundary maintenance" (Crowley, 1999, cit. in Yuval, 2006) that indicates who is in and who is out. Indeed, the final result of this politics is exactly the process of bordering (Yuval et al., 2018, p. 230), that is, "the everyday construction of borders through ideology, cultural mediation, discourses, political institutions, attitudes and everyday forms of transnationalism". Bordering and othering processes differentiate between us and them, in and out, citizens and noncitizens, migrants and counter-migrants. Even though these are political projects, specific ways of constructing belonging and identity, they exploit the human tendency to set symbolic borders at the very heart of their self- other definition.

Self-other relationship: overlapping/blurring borders

From the theories discussed so far it follows that the act of self-definition (and by contrast, the act of other-definition) is – or at least can be, at the social categorization level of inclusiveness –a driver of prejudice. Yet these theories do not account for the complexity of social identities, which sheds light on the possible role of the self in *reducing* prejudice. The notion of social identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) refers to an individual's subjective representation of the interrelations among his/her multiple group identities, hence it reflects the degree of perceived overlap between the different group memberships. High overlap is associated with low identity complexity, since the different belongings converge in one prevailing ingroup identification. On the other hand, low overlap is associated with high identity complexity, meaning that individuals who acknowledge partially or fully diverging memberships, develop a more intricate and inclusive identity structure.

The concept of complexity suggests that there are ways in which we can move, cross, blur or overlap the symbolic borders that separate the self from others, and when we do that we also become more accepting of others and neutralize the exclusionary functions of borders. Specifically, two theories of self suggest this opportunity.

Self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1997; Aron et al., 2008; 2022) was first developed in the area of close relationships. It is based on the assumption that human beings have a fundamental motivation to expand their self through interpersonal relationships, incorporating others' resources into themselves so as to enhance their personal sense of efficacy, sense of competence, and agency. They do so by introjecting perspectives, information, social support, emotional satisfaction, and other assets from others. This self-expansion process results in the (partial) inclusion of the other in the self, which makes people feel that they share the same resources, opinions, and identity with others. Different degrees of inclusion are conceivable and experienceable, from no overlap to almost complete overlap between the self and the other (figure 1).

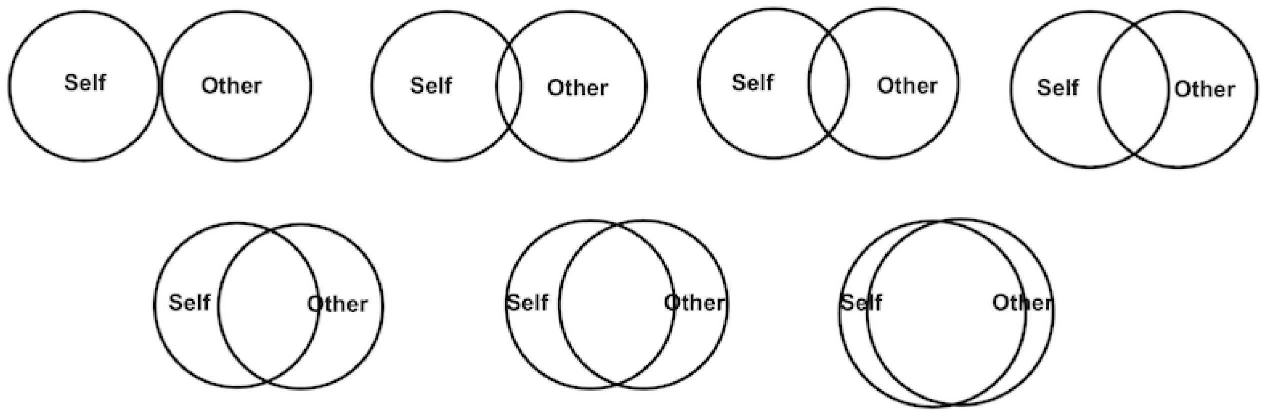

Figure 1. Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale (Source: https://sparqtools.org/mobility-measure/inclusion-of-other-in-the-self-ios-scale/)

Others are not just single individuals, but also groups, and specifically ingroups (i.e., groups to which an individual belongs and identifies with): hence, the level of identification with an ingroup can be conceived of as the degree to which a person includes the ingroup in the self (Trop & Wright, 2001). In this case, the ingroup's resources are used to increase self-confidence and self-efficacy, making the potential for self-expansion one of the attractive factors of groups. More interestingly, for the reduction of prejudice (namely, prejudice against migrants), individuals can also include an outgroup in the self. Seminal Allport's (1954) hypothesis, supported by decades of research (Vezzali & Stathi, 2017), suggests that interpersonal contact between members of different groups can reduce negative intergroup attitudes, because individuals are no longer categorized as members of a group but as individuals (i.e., at the interpersonal level). Yet the problem is how to generalize such an effect from single members to the entire outgroup: the inclusion of the outgroup in the self has been invoked as the device that enables this generalization (Wright et al., 2002; 2004). Indeed, as a person becomes acquainted with an outgroup member (e.g., a migrant), the resources of the outgroup (i.e., the migrants) are included in the self-concept, so that the outgroup is no longer perceived as 'out'. This process, which brings the other closer to the self and blurs the boundaries between the self and the other, the counter-migrants and the migrants, accounts for the reduction of negative attitudes towards outgroups.

One more theory that, though differently from the self-expansion model, allows the self-other border to dissolve is *dialogical self theory* (Hermans, 2001a; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), which has proved especially fruitful for intercultural intergroup relations and acculturation processes. Indeed, as Hermans (2001b) himself claimed, "mixing and moving cultures require a dialogical self". Recalling the concept of self as a "society of mind" (Hermans, 2012), dialogical self theory brings together the notions of self, traditionally conceived of as an inner space, and dialogue, which is typically related to the external world, to the act of communicating with someone else. The self is then an extended self, which includes and incorporates individ-

uals, groups and the society, all of which populate the self as a multiplicity of internal and external positions. The latter conceive of the other as “another I”, so that the other becomes an intrinsic part of the self, is the other-in-the-self, transcending the borders between I and you. Dialogue occurs not only externally, but also internally, between different positions in the self: for dialogue to take place, there must be symmetry between the different positions, meaning that positions are accepted in their differences (both within and between the internal and external domains of the self). When one position prevails, dominates or silences the other, monologue takes over. Indeed, the self is made up of fields of tension where processes of positioning and counter-positioning and power relationships unfold.

The model of the Democratic Organization of the Self (figure 2) recently developed by Hermans et al. (2017) takes into account the Social Categorization Theory’s three levels of inclusiveness described above (personal, social, and human). Dialogue can take place at each of these levels, and during a dialogue individuals can shift from one level to the other, in so doing repositioning their own identity. Each level corresponds to a specific type of responsibility (response + ability): personal responsibility is the ability to give dialogical answers to others and oneself from one’s personal I-positions; social responsibility is the ability to give dialogical answers to others and oneself from the we-positions of the group to which one belongs; finally, global responsibility is the ability to provide dialogical responses to others and oneself from the general position of a human being. The ability to move between the different levels, and especially to move up towards the global level, can favor positive self-other relations, both at the interpersonal and at the intergroup level, especially in conflict situations (Imperato & Mancini, 2022).

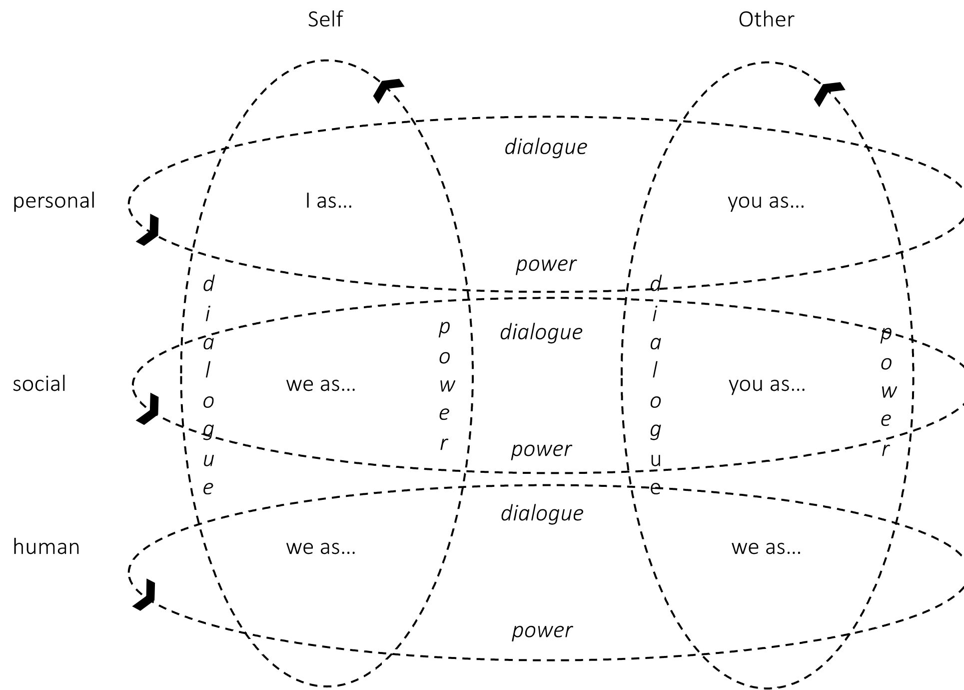

Figure 2. The democratic organization of the self (adapted from Hermans et al., 2017)

Conclusions

Migration issues are profoundly shaped by symbolic and social borders, as well as by the politics of belonging. General negative attitudes towards migrants and refugees emerge almost everywhere as a consequence of self-definition, an act that triggers othering processes, and hence discrimination and exclusion, and establishes cognitive and symbolic borders that oppose migrants to counter-migrants (Valsiner, 2022). Although the basic processes of self- and other- social categorization set the premises for prejudice and rejection of diverse cultural groups, an opportunity for more positive social encounters lies in an extended version of the self and in the possibility to cross the borders that separate the self from the other by incorporating the other-in-the-self and by pushing the level of inclusiveness to the superordinate human level. In a time of migrations, diaspora, and intercultural contact such as the one we live in, where cultures are mixing and intergroup tensions are rising and multiplying, we cannot ignore the challenges posed by the dynamics of identity. We may not be able to do without borders, but we can make them crossable and movable inside and outside the self.

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