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A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURE AND SOCIETY

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>**Book Review****Book review of *Gefühle im Prozess der Migration. Transkulturelle Narrationen zwischen Zugehörigkeit und Distanzierung* by Yvonne Albrecht (Wiesbaden: Springer VS. 2017)*****By Monika Verbalyte**Free University Berlin / Otto von Guericke University of Magdeburg
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Yvonne Albrecht's newly published doctoral thesis, *Feelings in the Migration Process. Transcultural Narrations between Belonging and Distance*, is a must-have for those who are interested in the nexus between migration and emotion. Beyond the pleasant reading, it is a seminal analysis on a subject that still lacks academic attention. The main research question is: what methods of handling their emotions do migrants use in order to be able to act in the challenging context of the country of arrival? The innovativeness of this research rests particularly in the non-pathologizing look at the ways migrants deal with their emotions. It contemplates not only the negative aspects of emotion regulation, its failures,

and migrants' suffering, but also the possibilities of autonomous and creative ways to handle emotions in the context of new expectations and requirements on their behavior.

This work is also original in its theoretical elaborations. First, it applies a non-essentialist definition of culture allowing ambivalences – an integral part of social life – to be resolved as well as ignored, maintained or even nurtured, in hybrid identities and multiple belongings. It criticizes the assimilative understanding of integration and suggests that there are many resources and meanings available for people to narrate their lives and many possibilities to deal with the demand for adjustment to the culture

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of arrival. In this regard, the distant, ambivalent, or “in-between” position of a migrant does not necessarily lead to discomfort for the individual and collective disintegration for the society of arrival.

Furthermore, to achieve the objective of not pathologizing any strategy for handling emotions in a migration context, the book revises the concept of emotion regulation, or emotion work. The social flexibility and adaptability of emotions remain the central part of understanding emotions, but their modification is not only seen as a volatile and conscious performative (“surface action”) or cognitive (“deep action”) strategy, as by Arlie Hochschild. Emotion, following Jack Katz and John Dewey, is more of a triple process including physical transformation, social interaction, and narration; therefore, it could be both a passive experience and an active meaning-making process from that experience. This definition of emotion has major implications on the way its regulation is understood. For example, emotion might be modified through long-term societal influences rather than will and cognition, as described by Sigmund Freud, or merely (ex)changed or neutralized by other emotion, as in William James’s work. However, first and foremost, emotion may resist emotion management, i.e. being controlled, appeased, or changed. Thus, the author compares emotion and emotion regulation to the constant inner dialogue between spontaneous emotions and the societal expectations internalized by the individual (“I” and “me” for George Herbert Mead), which may end in a lot of different constellations.

All this considered, Yvonne Albrecht conducts and analyzes 20 narrative interviews with Tunisian and Ethiopian migrants in Germany. In her analysis, she finds six ways that migrants handle emotions in the context of arrival, and groups them into three categories:

- 1) *One-sided solved ambivalence*, which includes two types of emotion regulation: *actively becoming the other*, representing the deep emotion work on oneself in order to adjust to the new surroundings as much as possible, and *finding support in faith*, including those migrants who deal with these challenges by relying or reverting to the religious traditions of their country of origin. The former category consists of people who modify their emotions by undertaking active work on their – according to the culture of arrival – “unsuitable” emotions, while the latter contains those who passively accept the same demands through the spiritual strength and ethics of their faith.
- 2) *Synthesized ambivalence*, which encompasses two types: *sometimes one, sometimes the other* and *almost the same*. The first keeps both identities, and in some situations leans towards the set of cultural meanings of the culture of arrival and in others to the meanings of the country of origin. The second one contains migrants who choose surface acting to adjust to the environment without going deeper.
- 3) *Not integrated ambivalence* includes two final types: *neither one thing nor the other* and *not to let in*. The former consists

of migrants who, in the meantime, feel they do not belong to either of the cultures and experience this position as extremely painful. In the latter are migrants who distance themselves from the requirements and emotion norms of the context of arrival by keeping open the possibility of returning to the country of origin or migrating to a third country.

Descriptions of these types are illustrated with specific cases, some of them being more prototypical than others and some belonging to several types at once or throughout their life course. The book ends with the conclusion and critical reflection on the results as well as with the epilogue, which states the necessity of letting migrants create more space for their inner dialogue and, therewith to give them the freedom to choose the manner of handling emotions they prefer rather than prioritizing the type of cognitive emotion modification (the first one). This conclusion reinforces the book’s strong commitment to the non-pathologizing way of analyzing emotions in relation to migration.

In general, this work leaves a positive impression: the concepts used are explained, the assumptions are well-founded, the theoretical framework is elaborated and original, the empirical analysis draws on and complements the theory, the interpretation of the interviews is sensitive and reflective, the empirical material is thoroughly presented, the conclusions are justified, and the writing is coherent and accessible. Nevertheless, I have a few remarks that might be better understood as suggestions in order to improve, clarify, and reflect upon some aspects of the research rather than a substantial critique.

To begin with, personally to me, the choice of the specific groups of migrants interviewed was not sufficiently explained. The difference between the Tunisian and Ethiopian contexts of origin is described; however, it is not clear why these two groups of migrants were the best options through which to answer the stated research question. If the goal of the case selection procedure was to have the biggest possible contrast, then, I think, young professionals coming from other prosperous European countries would have been a better choice, as they would represent the biggest possible difference from migrants from developing African countries, Tunisia or Ethiopia.

In the second place, I found it disappointing that the author states that people have multiple migration motivations but does not try to disentangle them. I believe the reasons for migration, which shape the expectations about the new living environment, might be stronger determinants of the post-migration biographical trajectories and related emotional experiences than culture of origin, religion, or gender. Let me illustrate it with the following example: The interviews of type five, *neither one nor the other*, stand out for the high degree of personal suffering which is mainly caused by their failed biography projects. The prototype for this type of emotion management is the woman who left Tunisia fleeing her violent husband, and even when already in Germany

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had to hide from his persecution. It seems very likely she had neither the intention nor the possibility of getting to know or to adjust to the emotion culture of the society of arrival, what might have resulted in the one-sided or synthesized solution of ambivalence. Interviewees of types two and four who (among other reasons) came to Germany with educational ambitions seem to have had other incentives, opportunities and resources to work on their emotions. Even though these expectations were often disappointed, postponed, unfulfilled or followed by harsh strikes of fate (like cancer or divorce), migrants of these types have chosen other options to handle their emotions.

Along the same lines of reasoning, I generally wished for more effort in trying to distinguish between different factors influencing the ways migrants regulate emotions in the context of arrival: migration motivation, biographical path dependencies, emotions evoked by life events, specific situations in which emotion regulation was required, sense of belonging, etc. In principle, it is not false to treat them all as related parts of the individual's life story; however, for the stated research question, it is problematic. Reaction to emotion regulation demands, even though in most cases it is learnt throughout the personal history, is still a situational decision which might build a behavioral pattern, but also represents a one-time or new adaptive response. Thus, I do not deny the importance of biography in the chosen types of emotion regulation, but I believe that it would have been better to analyze the different factors of impact separately. For example, if the type-five cases had fewer opportunities to work on their migration-related emotions, given that they were overwhelmed by major changes in their personal lives, then I do not find it very meaningful to relate all these life facets to the migration experience or to the emotion requirements of the new context. The emotional processes evoked by the migration experience and other biographical events could have been also more strongly differentiated in other cases, e.g., a woman returning to faith after surviving cancer (an event probably independent of migration experience) and only then becoming type-two of the emotion regulation classification.

Definitely, all of them are genuinely complex life situations, hardly differentiable between specific factors. However, I believe it is possible to reduce this complexity. To begin with, by purposively interviewing individuals with more crystallized reasons for migration, making that one of the sampling criteria. In the second place, by conceptually distinguishing more clearly between situational and long-term impact factors on migrants' emotion regulation. Moreover, by reconsidering the use of narrative interviews and thinking of a different interviewing strategy, like problem-centered interviews. Finally, in the interpretation phase, by working not with the complete biographies as things to typify, but with life constellations, opportunity structures, available resources, and specific situations requiring people's attention to their emotions. It would mean to abstract and distance oneself from specific personalities and their stories, and to concentrate on

the ways migrants flexibly use the different emotion regulation strategies available for them in the new context.

Maybe it is just me talking from the discursive psychology perspective, but I would leave the concepts of subject and belonging aside and speak more of emotion management types as discursive positions. This way, different emotion modification strategies could be undertaken by the same individual in different situations, providing her/him different subjectivity opportunities and different narratives of her/himself. Here, I could relate to my own experience as a Lithuanian migrant in Germany: I personally know all of the six types of response to new expectations on my emotions. Even if I would describe myself primarily as a synthesizing type, sometimes I choose surface acting to avoid uncomfortable situations or decide to really work on some aspects of my emotions if I find it reasonable. By applying these strategies, I consider myself an autonomous actor and a strong personality, someone capable of having a positive identification with my country of origin as well as related to and integrated into the new context. Nevertheless, in difficult and frustrating situations, I start to feel helpless and foreign to the culture I live in. In these situations, I start considering or dreaming about the exit option. And ultimately, even though I am not religious, there have been times when I thought that going to my country of origin for holidays would provide me with the spiritual strength to carry forward in the context of arrival.

For me, subjectivity and belonging are elusive discursive categories rather than one-time biographical decisions, as seems to be conceptualized in this work. I do understand this comes from the author's strong commitment to the subject and her/his sight of events, but from my point of view it leads to a rather trivial conclusion: that migrants should have more space for their inner dialogue or, in other words, their subjectivity. It means that there should be no external standards on the appropriateness or quality of these individuals' inner dialogues. Yet, this idea is misleading since it suggests that the quality or ability to engage in a productive inner dialogue depends on the restrictiveness of these norms, when in fact they also relate strongly to the personality factors as well as the life situation and opportunity structures of a migrant. Moreover, as much as I agree with the ideal of not pathologizing specific ways in which people deal with their emotions, I believe there are possibilities to consider some of those ways as being more successful than others, not in terms of being more convenient to the society of arrival, but in terms of the inner well-being of a migrant. For example, suffering (type-five) is nothing to be encouraged, but it appears to happen with the very general appeal for inner dialogues without clear addressees or visible directions of change. Would it not be more useful (at least here) to focus on resources, opportunities, or situations than on life stories and subjectivity?

Thus, even though the inner dialogue approach is well-meant, I do not agree this is the most fruitful one. The chosen non-

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pathologizing perspective leads to the paradoxical result that some types of emotion regulation, like adjustment (e.g. type-one *becoming the other* and four *almost the same*), are held for assimilation or mimicry, devaluated and therewith pathologized. The use of critical postcolonial theory in interpretation of empirical results is interesting yet problematic. For example, I find unfortunate the usage of the word "other" in type-one's title. Not every adjustment is one of conscious emotion work: it might also be a life-long accommodation to the new environment (precisely as in Freud's work), since migrants grow, develop, become acquainted with, and find their way to live in the society of arrival. Suddenly, the other is naturally becoming not that other anymore. As for myself, the German identity is as mine as all the

others, sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, sometimes fully acknowledged, sometimes problematized, sometimes even—though it is not uncommon for other identities either—contested or denied.

To conclude, I want to stress that these notes do not deny in any way the value of the reviewed work. Yet, as much as I admire the main endeavor of this research, I have a different opinion regarding some of the author's theoretical and methodological choices as well as some of her lines of interpretation. However, though I would prefer a more flexible way to analyze different types of emotion modification, I still find the classification proposed by Yvonne Albrecht to be a valuable starting point for further elaborations, and therefore the main benefit to be taken from her work. So all in all, it was a very enlightening read.

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