

Migrants in Norway: On “Twisting Identity And Belonging Beyond Dichotomies”

Tuesday 31 January 2017, by [CHAUDHRY Asma](#), [JDID Noor](#) (Date first published: 26 July 2013).

“TO BE ABLE TO BELONG SOMEWHERE, OTHERS HAVE TO AGREE THAT YOU BELONG THERE”

Noor Jdid is the Oslo-based author of a new book called *Twisting Identity And Belonging Beyond Dichotomies*. She is a member of the board of directors of Minority Politics Think Tank (Minotenk) and advisory board member of Seema, a social entrepreneurship working for the empowerment of minority women in Norway. She currently works as a youth workshop facilitator for the Red Cross and Changemaker and contributes to the public debate on migration in Norwegian media with journalistic articles and as a blogger.

Asma Chaudhry - In your book you state “that spaces such as family and the larger Norwegian society flow into each other”. What are the consequences of that overlapping for the young female migrant?

Noor Jdid - What is problematic for me, and I believe for many other young female migrants too, is the experience of an opposition between the public sphere and the private sphere; e.g. the Norwegian society and the migrant family – where you sometimes feel you have to choose one of the two.

When I write that these spaces overlap, it doesn’t mean that they necessarily collide, but that they expand and contract mutually – there is a relation and a transition between the public and the private worlds, which is contrary to what the media and modern research on migrant women tell us.

The mainstream discourse on migrant women in Norway tells us that “our culture” is one thing and “Norway” is another thing. This discourse shapes migrant women’s self-perception as being “in-between cultures”, where in reality it is not about cultures (as “culture” is impossible to pin down as if it were a physical object) but about spaces that sometimes overlap and sometimes contradict, depending on the topic – for instance education or sexuality. It is not that my home is “Syrian culture” and that outside my home is “Norway” – there is a relation between my home-space and the society-space(s). When do these spaces overlap, when and why do they contradict? These are the important questions.

I believe that shifting our perception of these spaces from “dichotomy” to “relation” would have positive consequences on young migrants, as the struggle would no longer be about fitting into the hegemonic either-or definitions of cultures, but rather adapting to transitions.

In the end, it is up to every female migrant as to how she experiences her reality, and it is therefore up to her to find a strategy to deal with these transitions. The workshops I conducted with 17 young female migrants show just that: you cannot generalize “them” and how “they” deal with their realities. They show us various strategies of how they can transform their identity conflicts.

The media often pinpoints that immigrant women are weighed down by their parents' traditions and their cultural heritage and by oppressive men rendering them incapable of making their own decisions. What does this narrative do to the self image of immigrant women in general?

In my case, this narrative contributed to my perception of the public and the private spheres as dichotomies. I had an image in my head that only my parents and their traditions placed restrictions on me, while my Norwegian friends had "normal" parents and could do whatever they wanted to do. This not only gave me a self-image of being less worthy and less independent (which eventually led me to victimize myself), but also affected the way in which I viewed my parents and cultural heritage. Of course I developed a negative view of them over time.

I observe this with my brother today who came to Norway as an infant. He also thinks that my parents are "special" and are the only ones that place restrictions on him because they are "immigrants", while his friends are "free individuals" because they are "Norwegians".

The negative discourse on the relationship between parents and children within migrant societies in Norway is not only found in the mainstream media but also in public relations, where friends often ask "are your parents like this and like that?" Being subjected to these questions would naturally affect your self-image and your relationship to your parents in the end.

The ironic thing about this is that even though a young migrant like me often felt different and uncomfortable within her own home, I felt that I had to defend my parents and "our values" in public. I often had (and still do have) the need to correct misinterpretations in public, even though some of these misinterpretations might actually be true sometimes.

In my research I became aware of something crucial. As most of the girls who participated in my research were between 17 and 20 years old, their stories of rebellion and conflicts with their parents strongly resembled the "typical" teenage life. The problem is that once you have a non-Western ethnic background in Norway, mainstream media and research tend to place all your challenges in a box called "culture". Whereas when a Norwegian teenager experiences the same conflicts with his or her parents, it's not about culture. So one of the ways of publicly Othering young migrants is to analyze them through "culture".

For your research you conducted interviews with young migrants here in Oslo. How easy was it for you to recruit participants?

I conducted four workshops and talking circles for my research, rather than interviews. I had several reasons for that.

First of all, I believe the topic of identity and belonging is a collective one. The whole point was to share experiences collectively and show each other alternatives in dealing with identity/belonging conflicts.

Secondly, I was not comfortable in having the "researcher" role. In an interview, no matter how loosely structured it is, you would still have some sort of a hierarchy: interviewer/researcher and the subject of interview. Moreover, research is never objective, and even if I did conduct interviews or did observations, I am still part of the dynamic, and I therefore shape the answers and the actions of the participants. In these workshops, I took part in the discussions, and was therefore part of the group dynamic. Towards the end of the book I write a chapter where I reflect over my role as a facilitator in this research.

The initial idea was to have one workshop with six girls. But because I felt the work was important and being contacted by so many girls showed me just that, I ended up doing four workshops with 17 girls.

When it came to recruitment, I was concerned that collecting the empirical data through workshops would make it “terrifying” for girls to participate, because things could get less confidential when you share information with a group. However, many girls quickly showed an interest and with the help of contacts from various organizations in Oslo, I was granted access to “girl groups” that meet weekly to discuss issues that concern them. It was an important experience for me to be able to be part of these groups and do a workshop with them. Some of the girls really enjoyed the workshop and told their friends about it, who then contacted me and participated.

Culture, identity, integration- all these are subjects that are covered on a daily basis by the media in Europe. Will we still be discussing these topics in twenty years from now?

I hope so. As long as the discussion is based on mutual empathy and recognition that every one has the desire to belong. This empathy can only arise in situations where everybody’s right to feel home is respected. In order to really be able to belong somewhere, others have to agree that you belong there. The basis of a harmonious society is therefore not a forced assimilation into one notion of “home”, but the basic recognition that everybody wishes to belong.

The problem today is that debates on immigration, culture and citizenship are constructed in a way where some people have the primordial right to feel at home while others do not. For example, the historical and nostalgic rooting of contemporary citizenship encourages the belief among native populations that they naturally have the most right to feel at home. New immigrants who were never part of that history are therefore marginalized.

A newborn native is considered less as a newcomer to the Norwegian society than a Pakistani who has lived here for more than 30 years and contributed to the society. I hope that in 20 years we would have gone beyond a racial understanding of culture and identity.

There are generally two understandings of integration. The official definition of integration is based on the person learning the Norwegian language, finding work and obeying the law. I do not see a problem with that. However, there is also an unofficial cultural/nationalist understanding of integration which is more like assimilation – the migrant is expected to leave his or her values and beliefs behind and “become Norwegian”. Yet, in the Norwegian context, because the term “immigrant” has a racial connotation, any colored person is considered an immigrant.

Today in Norway, and generally in Western Europe, we are witnessing the rise of what I would call populist nationalism, where the majority claims the nation-state as its property and demands from the minority that it adapts (or disappear). This “heaven” concept of the nation is a de facto negation of the heterogeneity of the politico-cultural sphere – and as such the end of democratic politics. I hope that we do not end up there in twenty years!

What has it been like for you to write about a subject that is quite personal and how do you distance yourself emotionally from your research (findings)?

My master’s in Peace and Conflict Studies was personal to me. It was therefore natural for me to write about a subject that was as such personal to me. It was a tough journey to be honest, but I have never learned so much about myself as I did during the period of research. I did not always manage to distance myself emotionally, but for me that was the whole point. And besides, objective research does not exist anyway.

I would like to quote Foucault who sums it up perfectly: "I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing, because my problem is my own transformation [...]. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?"

Society preaches about the need to be a unique individual because egalitarianism is a key feature of Norwegian life, yet the desire to see a more homogenous society is in the forefront of many an election campaign. Is there a middle ground?

This is a good question as it basically sums up the paradox in Norwegian politics of identity: individualism grounded in an imaginary sameness. If we want to have a true democracy, we should seek the middle ground, which I believe exists. We have to re-think the meaning of "home" and "place".

I believe we can honor the native's feelings of attachment without excluding newcomers. As Doreen Massey eloquently outlines: "What gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together as a particular locus [...] Instead then of thinking about places as areas with boundaries around them, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings [...] And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrate in a positive way the global and the local" (Massey, 2007).

So we need a switch from a temporal to an open, spatial perspective, and this is very welcome in today's Western Europe. Nationalist conceptions of space are not only exclusionary due to their historical rooting, but because their notion of "home" produces many Others as well. The politico-cultural sphere needs to balance the shadow sides of exclusionary individual, private and homogenous forms of belonging. I believe that feeling at home in the nation-state is the capacity to experience comfort among relative strangers. This is not the same as the cosmopolitan dream, but the daily reality of an ever-growing group of grounded people living their home feelings "lightly".

Is it possible for young migrant women to reconcile the private and public worlds? How can they be helped and by whom?

I believe so, yes. However (and I am speaking from a postmodern perspective), our identities are shaped within discourse, and we therefore have to accept that we are part of the dichotomist modern discourse that separates the public and the private worlds. Since identity is situational and relational, I believe that it is in situations and relations that we can reconcile these worlds. I do not believe that I can wake up one day and say to myself "now I have reconciled the private and the public", because it's not an end. The reconciliation is rather the means to recreate our identities "everyday", and not the end.

When it comes to "help" or support, I believe it is important that we do not look at this group through the victim stereotype. My research reveals this group as self-conscious, strong-willed and determined young women whose background has prompted sophisticated reflections on identity and flexible strategies allowing them to reconcile opposing expectations in specific contexts.

Another thing is to accept the fact that the experience of tension between the private and the public worlds is not something that only young migrant women struggle with. I believe everyone goes through that more or less some time in their lives.

Towards the end of your book you state that your aim was to "re-imagine identity as relative, relational, and a transition between differences so there will be no need to turn difference into

deviance." Do you think you were successful?

I would like to think that on a theoretical and rational level my arguments have been successfully convincing. Yet, on the emotional and spiritual level, this aim is a daily practice for me. I live in a society where I am Othered but where I also find myself through stereotypes and prejudice Othering others. I am shaped by public discourses that define identity as a separation between the Self and the Other, the native and the immigrant, the heterosexual and the gay, but I believe I am also able to see beyond these discourses.

By Asma Chaudhry

The book is available through the following websites :

http://www.litwebshop.de/index.php?main_page=product_info&products_id=10534&number_of_uploads=0&language=en

http://www.amazon.com/Twisting-Identity-Belonging-beyond-Dichotomies/dp/3643903561/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1374758149&sr=8-1&keywords=noor+jdid

Noor blogs at <http://migrantfeminist.wordpress.com/about/>

P.S.

* July 26, 2013:

<https://northernchowk.wordpress.com/2013/07/26/to-be-able-to-belong-somewhere-others-have-to-agree-that-you-belong-there/>

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