

Work Unlimited: Identity construction in a Global Context

For the last 15 years, Europe has gone through a process of economic, political, and social integration, largely motivated by the goal of putting an end to lingering Cold War divisions. The main driving force has been the European Union, which today includes 27 of the 45 European states. The so-called "big bang" expansion in 2004 was unprecedented in terms of both scope and diversity. One of the goals of European integration since the Treaty of Rome has been to create a completely unified labor market. The process of integration has therefore also involved increased human mobility. Free movement of workers is defined in the European Union Law as one of the four freedoms ensuring a united and efficient European market. However, the heated debates prior to the enlargement demonstrated that these envisioned free movements represent a great source of worry on both sides of the east-west borders. Eastern European workers count for one third of the EU labor force, and due to great differences in relation to supply of skills, levels of employment, welfare systems, and income level, Westerners expected and feared a flood of east-west migration. At the same time, many also worried that manufacturing and other industries would prefer to install themselves in the east. These fears were paralleled by fears of annexation in the Eastern European prospective member states, in the sense that rich westerners would come east to buy up land and industries.

The movement of labor and companies across the geographic and administrative boundaries of European countries has formed the object of academic attention, especially from economists and sociologists. Yet, little research has aimed to explore the individual human experiences of these flows of labor and companies, although they require considerations of social and individual issues.

The proposed research project is concerned with temporary labor migration focusing on the personal experiences, interpretations and strategies of migrant workers. We are interested in how this kind of change is negotiated among individuals as agencies at local work places. In this project the main theme will therefore focus on the subjective experiences of migration. Key issues that will be explored are, for example, the subjective strategies behind migration patterns, the individual experience of migration and the learning effects of these experiences, and the relations between for example Norwegian and non-Norwegian workers at the work place.

Issues such as identity, attachment, and integration will be explored from the work migrants' perspectives. Of interest are the strategies of migrants and the determinants of their choices and decisions. Central in this respect is migrant networks that are assumed to play a central role in shaping the patterns of migration and influencing the rate of growth (Dølvik and Eldring 2005). Migrant networks refers to... "sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-

migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship and shared community origin” (Faist 1997). According to Faist, circular migration in which migrants retain contacts and routinely return home is likely to turn into chain migration (ibid). The project will also look at the role migrant networks play for the decision to go from temporary to permanent migration. Issue related to family and gender is relevant here since data shows that it is primarily men who dominate as migrant workers and eventually may bring their family once decisions are made of permanent migration.

Work migration also raises questions concerning the role of work as an orientation point for identity construction. Work migration is one aspect of the trend towards a linear career trajectories and short-term employment relations, which has lead for example Bauman (2001) to conclude that work no longer offers the secure axis around which to wrap and fix self-definitions, identities, life projects. The work place is to a much lesser degree an arena for personal development today, because this requires long-term relations (Sennet 1999). Rather than encouraging trust, loyalty and commitment, temporary relations often share the characteristics of a transaction or an encounter, where people remain strangers. Due to the temporality of their stays, migrant workers are generally both prevented from and presumably less motivated to integrate in the receiving society. We will therefore focus on the migrants’ own experiences and the influence this has on their feelings of attachment and perceptions of identity.

Relevant research questions can be, for example:

How do migrant workers conceptualize their presence in the receiving society?

What role do migrant networks play (family, friends etc)?

What is the influence of work migration on migrants’ occupational identity?

Does work migration influence gender and family roles?

The proposed project will be organized as a comparative study and data will be collected in two different geographical fieldwork contexts. One of the contexts will be in Norway and the other will be a country currently experiencing similar growing influx of migrant workers. The project will be foremost a qualitative and exploratory study of individual experiences of migrant workers.