

Reinhilde Pulinx, Piet Van Avermaet

The impact of language and integration policies on the social participation of adult migrants

Abstract: Knowledge of the language of the so-called host society is considered as one of the most crucial elements for successful integration and as the main lever to increase immigrants' level of self-reliance and to stimulate social interaction and participation. This small-scale qualitative study, situated in Flanders (Belgium), aims to gain more insight into the impact of integration programmes, with knowledge of the language of the host society as nucleus, on opportunities for social participation and building sustainable social networks.

Résumé : Comprendre et parler la langue du pays d'accueil est considéré comme l'un des facteurs clés d'une intégration réussie et comme le principal levier pour renforcer le niveau de confiance en soi des migrants et stimuler l'interaction et la participation sociale. Cette étude qualitative menée à petite échelle en Flandre (Belgique) se propose de mieux comprendre les effets des programmes d'intégration centrés sur la connaissance de la langue du pays d'accueil, ainsi que sur les possibilités de participation sociale et de construction de réseaux sociaux durables.

1 Introduction

Over the last three decades, most western European societies have become characterized by diverse and transitory migration processes, consisting of migrants frequently moving within the European space, refugees and asylum seekers, migration in the context of family reunification, marriage migration, exchange students and high-skilled workers. Traditional processes of acculturation or intergenerational assimilation no longer seem to occur automatically. The recent wave of migration, the so-called European refugee crisis, consisting of refugees originating from war zones in the Middle East and Africa, exerts great pressure

Reinhilde Pulinx (corresponding author), Centre for Diversity and Learning, Linguistics Department, Ghent University, E-mail: Reinhilde.pulinx@ugent.be

Piet Van Avermaet, Centre for Diversity and Learning, Linguistics Department, Ghent University, E-mail: Piet.vanavermaet@ugent.be

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on western European societies when it comes to developing and implementing policies around concepts such as social cohesion, integration, citizenship, identity, and language (Van Avermaet 2009; Van Avermaet and Gysen 2009).

Questions about the meaning of national identity, maintaining social cohesion and preserving national, cultural and linguistic heritage are of growing concern for policy makers and society as a whole (Van Avermaet 2009; Van Avermaet and Gysen 2009). Proficiency in the national language and knowledge of society are considered essential and definable elements of citizenship and successful integration processes (Shohamy 2006).

In this contribution we report on the impact of the Flemish integration programmes, with knowledge of the language of the host society as nucleus, on creating opportunities for new migrants to engage in social participation and to build sustainable social networks.

2 Active citizenship: distinguishing “good” and “not so good” citizens

In western Europe, present-day integration policies often make use of the notion “active citizenship”, aimed at encouraging migrants to participate socially, politically and economically in the host society. New members of society are not only expected to respect the law, but in addition to make an active contribution to civil society initiatives (Verhoeven and Ham 2010).

In the literature, multiple definitions of “active citizenship” can be found, all including some common characteristics (Odé and Walraven 2013): 1) social involvement and participation; 2) active participation in public debate, political and democratic institutions; 3) active citizenship has to include all members of society; 4) active citizenship presupposes certain cognitive and social skills; and 5) loyalty towards the society a person lives in.

Hence, expectations are being created – by the government and the wider society – about what it means to be a good citizen and a not so good citizen (Odé and Walraven 2013). As Odé and Walraven (2013) explain further, a good citizen does what civil society asks of him or her: participating in the voluntary and associative sector, contributing to neighbourhood initiatives, and integrating as fully as possible in the host society. The not so good citizen takes a more passive attitude towards life and society, looking primarily to the government and its institutions and not him/herself when action is required (Odé and Walraven 2013).

In several western European countries new immigrants have to take an integration course that consists of a language course and a course in societal knowledge referred to as the norms and values of the so-called host society. In Flanders, this course is called *inburgering*, literally meaning ‘becoming a citizen’. This implies that immigrants are not seen as citizens before migration, or at least not citizens of the “right kind”, living by moral standards reconcilable with the host society. However, not only first-generation migrants have to demonstrate unremittingly and continually how good their linguistic and societal knowledge is, as pivotal parts of becoming a “good citizen”. The requirement to achieve and continuously demonstrate moral citizenship is passed on to the second and third (and now even fourth) generation of people with a migrant background. Members of the majority are exempted from this kind of scrutiny.

3 Social participation through social networks

Adult migrants often have to build completely new social networks in the host country – in unfamiliar surroundings, characterized by a different lingua franca, and different social agreements and conventions. At the same time, they try to maintain transnational social contacts with family and friends in their home country or elsewhere. These dynamic and complex social networks fulfil most essential functions for newcomers, regarding not only their socio-emotional well-being but also access to housing, the labour market, education and healthcare.

For an effective integration process, it is important that new migrants can build social networks that provide sufficient social capital to support social mobility and allow them to make use of their own economic, cultural or human capital and to undertake activities to accumulate such capital. This means that engaging in social bridging relations (relations with members of communities other than their own) and social linking relations (relations with organizations and public services) is of the greatest importance for new migrants. But even so, social bonding relations (relations with members of their own community) remain vital for the social well-being and identity construction of newcomers. Especially in a social and political context where active citizenship is identified as an essential instrument to establish social cohesion and democratic participation, integration policies should help new migrants to build social bridging and linking relations.

In the following parts of this contribution we will report on the impact of Flemish integration programmes on the opportunities provided for new migrants to engage in social participation and build social networks.

4 Research questions and methodology

Before discussing the research questions and the methodology used, the research context is briefly described. In most western European countries, new immigrants have to take an integration course that consists of a language course and a course in societal knowledge referred to as the norms and values of the host society (Pulinx, Van Avermaet and Extramiana 2014). In Flanders, this course is called *inburgering*, literally meaning ‘becoming a citizen’. These integration courses provide newcomers, as defined by the Flemish government, with an accompanied trajectory towards integration. The courses consist of a specific and personalized program aimed at increasing newcomers’ self-reliance as well as their professional, educational and social participation. In other words, stimulating social participation has been made an explicit objective of Flemish integration policies, but always closely linked to increasing proficiency in the dominant language: “An important aspect in realizing proportional participation is Dutch. Someone who speaks Dutch, understands, reads, can find information, will find a job more easily, has increasing access to education and social services, will participate more in public debate and the democratic process. Good knowledge of the Dutch language increases self-reliance, makes them less dependent of others” (Policy brief, Flemish Minister of Integration, 2014).

By conducting a small-scale, exploratory, qualitative research project in Flanders, the impact of language and integration policies on the social participation of adult migrants is being looked at. Nine in-depth interviews were conducted, based on semi-structured interviews and the use of an instrument for mapping social networks. All the respondents were female, lived at the time of the interview in the same Flemish city, migrated three to five years ago from an eastern European country, and had school-age children. The interviews were mainly conducted in Dutch; only two were conducted in English. Excerpts from the interviews conducted in Dutch have been translated into English.

The research questions were: What social networks do adult newcomers have? What kind of social contact do newcomers have (bonding, bridging, linking)? What was the impact of participating in integration courses and Dutch language courses on building social networks? How and when are social networks being used?

5 Main findings

5.1 What social networks do adult newcomers have?

The social networks of all the respondents who participated in this research project were very limited. Most of their social contacts included members of the nuclear family (whether or not in the home country or a third country) and a few close friends, often with a migration background as well and originating from the same home country as the respondents. The main social contacts, as reported by the respondents, were social bonding relations.

“I am living now for two years in [name of city]. I have one friend, she is also Polish. Sometimes I go shopping, or walking or drinking coffee, but I always speak Polish. I don’t have any contact with Belgian people.”

Social bridging relations, relations with members of other communities, and more specifically with members of the Flemish community, seem to be absent in the social networks of the respondents. The absence of these relations is mainly explained – by the respondents themselves – by referring to their insufficient proficiency in the Dutch language.

“You can meet a lot of Romanian people and speak your own language. But in the beginning I didn’t speak another language. And then it is very hard to make connections.”

5.2 What kind of social contact do newcomers have (bonding, bridging, linking)?

In addition, participating in organized leisure-time activities, e.g. sports clubs or other associations, was hardly mentioned by the respondents. It was also striking that social linking relations (i.e., relations with organizations and public services) were only reported to a limited extent. These social linking relations included for the most part Dutch language teachers, teachers at their children’s school, and career orientation counsellors.

“The school of the children, the teachers. I can always ask them for help. They always help me. At first, I didn’t understand all the notes the children brought home. I tried to translate via Google translate, but it wasn’t always correct. I asked the teachers and they helped me. They are always very friendly.”

5.3 What was the impact of participating in integration courses and Dutch language courses on building social networks?

The respondents indicated that social contacts were made during integration and Dutch language courses, but in most cases these contacts did not last beyond the duration of the integration and language courses.

“After [the course], I have to work every day. I have two children. My husband works. I only go to school [the course] two times a week. I don’t have time for friends.”

Respondents expressed a need to engage in social bridging relations, making social contacts with members of Flemish society. They were offered few opportunities to do this during the integration courses.

“Here at school is fine. I want to come every day to school. Here you can talk to people as friends. I want more contact, know more people. But I have to speak Dutch better in order to do that.”

Because of the limited social contacts of the participating newcomers, it was impossible to answer the last question on how and in which situations these social networks are used.

6 Conclusions

These findings clearly show that it cannot be taken for granted – at least for the respondents involved in this study – that participating in a compulsory *inburgering* program has a positive impact on immigrants’ inter-ethnic social networks.

Given that this is a small scale study with a non-random sample, one has to be careful in generalizing the findings that were summarized in section 5. As an exploratory study, however, it allows us to formulate hypotheses for further qualitative and quantitative research.

In most (mainly quantitative) research on this topic the voice of the immigrants is absent. This exploratory study shows the value of a more qualitative approach in researching immigrants’ social networks. At the start of the study we encountered obstacles and fears when contacting the respondents directly. This in itself is an interesting finding. The assumption that people can automatically and independently build strong social networks after attending an integration course, ignores the real dynamics and complexities of processes of social bridging. It took us quite some time to get in touch with the respondents, approaching

them indirectly via local NGOs. Based on the methodology used to conduct this study, we see the potential for the development of a tool for (self-)monitoring of social participation processes.

Building new social networks is not an individual but a shared process, including both newcomers and members of the host society. New migrants expressed the need for bridging relations, but do not appear to be able to engage in these relations without support and guidance from, e.g., integration services and counsellors. This means that facilitating social relations (bonding, bridging and linking relations) is an essential part of an “active” policy aiming at social participation and active citizenship of all members of society.

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