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**THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY
IN NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN
IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES**

**Correspondences with the Romanian
Immigrant Experience in America**

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CHAPTER 1

IDENTITY, BELONGING, MIGRATION LITERATURE

This chapter will analyse the concepts of identity and belonging in relation to migration literature. These concepts are discussed below with reference to culture in order to understand the framework within which the immigrant narratives were written.

The first subchapter³ will discuss the concept of identity as it emerges from the widely accepted theories, whereas the second subchapter will focus on the concept of cultural identity in relation to immigration and on the immigrants' sense of belonging. The last subchapter will connect these concepts to migration literature, focusing on the role of immigrant narratives both in terms of expressing the immigrant experience and of contributing to the preservation of the homeland cultural heritage.

The decision to emigrate entails a great deal of courage to venture to cross an ocean, to live in a completely different environment, to become accustomed to a new way of life, a new language, a new culture. Naturally, the emigrants were driven by the need for a better material life or by the desire to accomplish more than what the homeland boundaries could permit. Armed with high expectations and ambition, they embarked on a perilous voyage, on a quest for self-determination. Nevertheless, the immigrant experience consists of more than just material betterment. The uprootedness from the land of the forefathers, the adaptation to a new environment, a new language, a new way of life, to a completely different culture generates conflicts and questions of identity and belonging. Once they found themselves in a foreign country, the immigrants began to analyse their decision to emigrate, to feel

³ The first and the second subchapters are based on the article "Exploring Immigrant Identity. A Sense of Belonging", Mureşan, Ioana-Andreea, in *PhD Studies in Norwegian Literature*, eds. Sanda Tomescu Baciu, Fartein Th. Øverland, Roxana-Ema Dreve, Raluca-Daniela Răduţ, Raluca Pop, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, 2020, pp. 135-146.

the distance between themselves and their relatives, questioning their place, their identity and their belonging to the homeland and to the new land. Their experience could only be understood by those who emigrated, as they no longer belonged to the homeland, nor fully to the adoptive land, as Ole Edvart Rølvaag well observed. The traits that, combined, make up one's identity, from a psychological point of view, are the elements that provide uniqueness and distinctiveness from others, but that also enhance connections with those that are similar. Hence, identity is the fine balance between the elements that isolate and those that unite individuals, and, naturally, this balance is rooted in culture, as identity is shaped by the cultural environment. Identifying with a certain culture provides security and gives us a sense of belonging, so cultural identity is essential for one's wellbeing. Uprootedness shatters the balance between the physical and metaphysical environment, generating insecurity and disorientation.

The quest for identity as it emerges from Norwegian- and Romanian-American narratives is central for this research, but the discussion ought to begin with an analysis of the meanings associated to the concepts of identity and belonging within the framework of immigrant life. Searching through the huge amount of literature focusing on identity is no easy undertaking, but it is necessary to distinguish between the many valences of identity, which reveal how important it is for us humans to feel anchored. The theme will be analysed in the context of immigrant experiences in relation to the immigrants' sense of belonging, whereas migration literature as a reflection of the acculturation process the departed go through is the central focus of this book.

WHO AM I? A FEW CONSIDERATIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

The concept of identity and its manifold interpretations will be discussed in this subchapter, with the purpose of identifying the meanings that are closer to immigrant identity. Without claiming a thorough knowledge of the various directions in which the concept has been analysed, the ones that are useful for this research have been filtered, underlying from the very beginning that identity was not perceived by nineteenth-century-immigrants the way we understand the concept today. As James D. Fearon observed, identity is a new concept, "not something that people have eternally needed or sought as

such.”, and they use different terms to indicate the way of establishing, defending or protecting their identities (Fearon, 1999, 10).

There is extensive literature on the concept of identity, as stated from the very beginning of this endeavour. Obviously, this generates difficulties in choosing the most suitable views on the subject. Moreover, the transversal, interdisciplinary character of the concept, encompassing a variety of perspectives due to debates in psychology, social anthropology, history, philosophy, can further entangle the directions followed by the scholar. The various ways in which identity was explored reveal the difficulty of elucidating such an abstract and virtual concept. Considering the divergent paths taken by sometimes by theorists, it is necessary to bear in mind that “identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think” (Hall, 1990, 222), and it can be misinterpreted despite the many approaches.

Erik H. Erikson, a psychologist, was the first to concentrate on the concept of identity starting from the discussion on what it means to be American, suggesting that questions of identity, the concepts of identity and identity crisis emerged from the very experience of immigration. An immigrant himself, he considered that “Identity problems were in the mental baggage of generations of new Americans, who left their motherlands and fatherlands behind to merge their ancestral identities in the common one of self-made men.”. Furthermore, Erikson admits emigration can be difficult and heartless “in terms of what is abandoned in the old country and what is usurped in the new one” (Erikson, 1970, 748). Thus, he distinguished between the ego identity, or the self, the personal identity, the set of traits that singularize an individual from the other, and the social or cultural identity, namely the social roles played by an individual.

Starting from Erikson’s vision on identity, anthropologists have focused on the traits and characteristics that render uniqueness to an individual, that distinguish her or him from the others, and the related concept of ethnicity also played an important role. Hence, identity as coined by Erikson, remained dominant, so the concept continued to be used in a socio-historical manner of focusing on the characteristics that provide cohesion within a group, on sameness, seen rather as similar and not necessarily with a unifying dimension. Moreover, there are two main approaches regarding the character of the concept. One approach sees identity and belonging to a group as fixed, based on ancestry and common biological traits, whereas a

second approach questions identity as fixed, as a natural given, and considers identity as formed by choice. Fearon, as well as Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argue that the concept of identity needs clarification, and that many scholars tend to abide by their preconceptions of identity and avoid taking into account the way in which identity emerges as reality. Moreover, the sociologist Klaus Eder concentrates on collective identity, the belonging to a group shared with others, and believes in a better use of the concept as the more societies are differentiated, the more they need collective identity. Yet, building on the concept of identity, the concept of cultural identity stems from the important role played by culture in the shaping of identity. The sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall discussed the concept of cultural identity by stressing the relevance of our cultural background for our identity. In his view, cultural identity is fluid and ever-changing, constantly shaped by life experiences, a sort of collective self that is shared by people that have the same ancestry and history. In addition, Homi K. Bhabha's post-colonial approach focuses on the ambivalence of culture.

Fearon performs a language analysis of the meanings of 'identity and he considers the concept requires clarifications due to its many uses in various areas. He claims that, in order to show how identity is socially constructed and historically contingent it is necessary to work with a concept of identity that applies both transhistorically and transculturally (Fearon, 1999, 10). Yet, there is more to take into account, and a better understanding should begin with a discussion on the term as it first emerged.

Erik H. Erikson, the reputed psychologist and psychoanalyst, considered as the father of "identity" and "identity crisis", highlights the complexity of the concept and stresses that identity formation, in psychological terms, makes use of a process of concomitant reflection and observation. Hence, this process allows the individual to judge himself "in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him." It is necessary to mention that this process is unconscious, except for situations when a combination between the interior conditions and the exterior circumstances "aggravate a painful, or elated, "identity consciousness". (Erikson, 1968, 22-23).

Identity is thus seen by Erikson as a unified concept that has both individual and social dimensions, because our identity is shaped by the way others perceive ourselves. Fearon also supports this view and mentions that the term ‘identity’ has two intertwined meanings and that the force of the concept relies on how these meanings intertwine (Fearon, 1999, 10). He then analyses the differences between personal identity and social identity, considering personal identity to be “a set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that a person thinks distinguish her in socially relevant ways” and completes the assertion by referring to the fact that the individual may either take pride in these attributes, or may take no special pride in them, but acts according to them and feels lost without them, while the individual may simply feel she or he cannot change despite the desire to change (Fearon, 1999, 25).

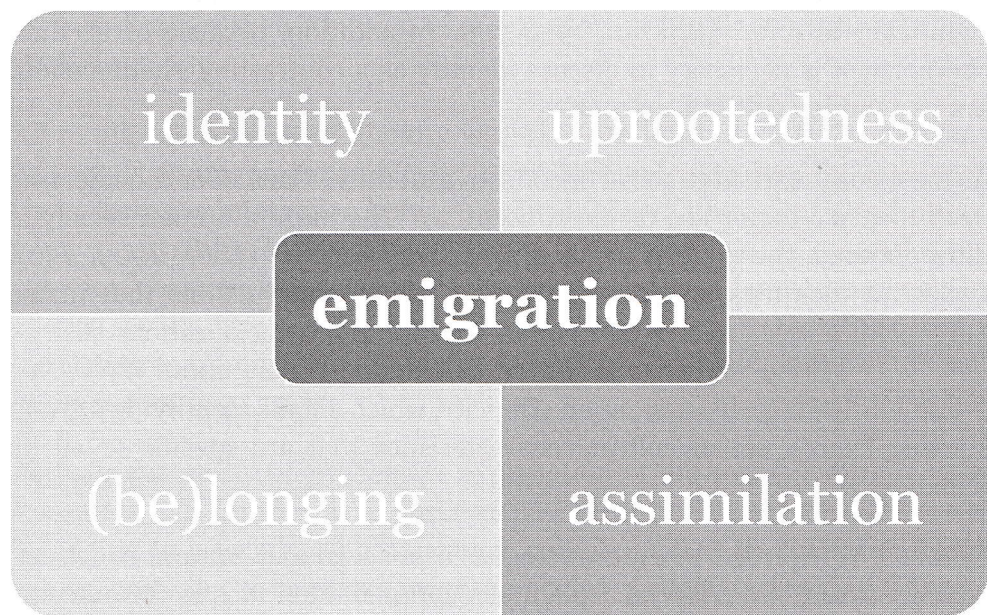


Figure 1. *The concepts tackled in this research*

Discussions and debates on identity have become overwhelming, too present in social sciences and humanities. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper rebuke such extensive use of the term and focus on the social dimension of identity, which, understood as a collective phenomenon, they argue, denotes sameness among the individuals pertaining to a group. Further on, they

consider sameness is expected to be expressed through solidarity or shared action. Identity perceived as a fundamental condition of a social being is an indicator of something basic, foundational, deep, in contrast with the more superficial and contingent attributes of the self, being thus “understood as something to be valued, cultivated, supported, recognized, and preserved” (Brubaker, Cooper, 2000, 7).

The relation between individual and society lies at the basis of identity, which acts as a mirror, revealing the individual in the way others perceive her or him, but also what distinguishes him from others. Identity acts hence as a bridge between the personal and the public worlds (Hall, 1992, 276), but not as something fixed, unchangeable, as it is “always changing and developing: at its best it is a process of increasing differentiation, and it becomes ever more inclusive as the individual grows aware of a widening circle of others significant to him.” (Erikson, 1968, 23). In addition, because of its fluid character, it is necessary to discuss identity as a contrasting phenomenon, not as a unified cultural concept.

As the focus is shifted to social or collective identity, Klaus Eder considers we need to make better use of the concept, as “The more a human society is differentiated, the more it needs a collective identity.” (Eder, 2009, 430). Collective identities are thus defined as social constructions that utilise psychological need and motives in an attempt to answer questions such as *who do I belong to?* or *who do we belong to?* (Eder, 2009, 431). This eventually leads to discussions on ethnicity, which entails identifying a group starting from a set of cultural characteristics that are specific to all its members.

Ethnicity is regarded by anthropologists as a social and cultural construct, which makes it necessary to explain perception of identities as the outcome of a specific social, cultural milieu. Moreover, ethnicity is grounded on shared ancestry, cultural traditions and language, used in relation to the cultural identity of a group of people. When discussing the ethnic groups in America, Glazer and Moynihan observe how the ethnic groups in America were transformed by various influences, but then recreated as something new, still as identifiable groups. As individuals think of themselves as members of a particular group with a particular name, they come to be considered by others as members of that group, being ultimately linked to the other members of the group with attributes that they, as original immigrants,

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couldn't have recognized as pertaining to their group. These new attributes distinguish the immigrants in the third-generation and even beyond by more than just name and association (Glazer & Moynihan 1964, 13). Nevertheless, Sollors argues that ethnicity is not necessarily the most suitable term for defining the concept, and considers that ethnicity may function as a construct that evokes nature, blood, and descent in American social symbolism, while national identity may be connected to law, conduct, and consent (Sollors, 1986, 151).

Writing about the concept of identity from a historical perspective, Johan Schimanski highlights how "the concept wanders between different antipoles: individual/collective, constructed/ essentialist"⁴ (Schimanski, 2001, 59-60). However, identity has long been defined starting from similarities, but Stuart Hall argues that it is a marker of difference and exclusion rather than "the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity" (Hall, 1996, 4).

All in all, the concept of identity is difficult to grasp because of its many valences, because of its complexity, as well as contradictions. Its dynamism stems from the interaction between individual and others, but also from its ambivalent nature, as it points to differences and sameness, to particular and common characteristics, being all the time influenced by environment, by context, by life experiences. It is all the more relevant to analyse the concept in relation to immigration, as the process of forging an identity is poignant in the case of immigrants.

Perhaps the most comprehensive explanation of the concept was given by Rosemary C. Salomone, who observes how identity "suggests one's sense of belonging to a group, within a larger culture, united by shared customs, values, behavioural roles, language, and rules of social interaction tied to a common ancestry" (Salomone, 2010, 70).

Hence, this book grounds the analysis of the chosen narratives in the concept of identity seen, on the one hand, as a process influenced by immigration, by the uprooting from the home culture, and, on the other hand, as a process analysed in relation to the self and to the others. Identity will be discussed as

⁴ Original text in Norwegian: "Identitetsbegrepet har en historie. I denne historien vandrer begrepet mellom forskjellige motpoler: individuelt/kollektivt, konstruert/essensialistisk." (Schimanski, 2001, 59-60).

a fluid phenomenon that undergoes constant change due to the exposure to different cultural environments. The purpose is to highlight its fluent character under the influence of both external and internal factors, all the time in connection to the immigrant experience. This fluid character of identity can be understood from the influence of external factors, for a macrolevel perspective, as one's identity is liable to change due to immigration by being uprooted from one's home culture, but it is also an inner process, under the influence of inner factors, since it triggers a repositioning and understanding of the self in relation to the other.

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND IMMIGRATION. IMMIGRANTS AND BELONGING

This subchapter will discuss the concept of identity and cultural identity in connection to immigration. A second concept will be introduced, namely belonging, with a focus on its role in the immigrant experience. Several perspectives on cultural identity and belonging are presented further on for a better understanding of how immigration was perceived in the light of the cultural background of each immigrant.

A first perspective is provided by Stuart Hall who begins his study *Culture and Diaspora* by stating that “we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context’, *positioned*.” (Hall, 1994, 222), suggesting that our cultural background is the cradle of our identity, as culture determines who we are in a tremendous way.

Moreover, as shown above, identity reflects people's need to define themselves (Versluys, 2007, 90), although not as an independent reality that exists outside the individual, but as constructed by the individual (Versluys, 2007, 92). Cultural identity is, on the other hand, “a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.” (Hall, 1992, 223), and these shared cultural codes represent stable frames of reference and meaning, providing ‘oneness’ to individuals (Hall, 1992, 223). Thus, cultural identity is an anchor that fosters connections between individuals, offering stability.

with difficulties during their acculturation, the process of adapting to the adoptive culture, particularly as they find themselves torn between the desire to preserve their homeland culture and the need to adapt, to find their place in their new country. Their inner struggle, the personal stories of migration that reveal the immigrants' quest for identity, their need to belong, provide a better understanding of the difficulties of adaptation and integration, allowing us to grasp the deep implications of the incessant migrations.

Immigration, Maalouf suggests when referring to his life story, has a great influence on the individual, as his identity is enriched by the additional cultural experience, underlining that "What makes me myself rather than anyone else is the very fact that I am poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions. It is precisely this that defines my identity. Would I exist more authentically if I cut off a part of myself?" (Maalouf, 2000, 3). His more modern approach on identity is also useful for this discussion as he highlights how cultural differences generate misunderstandings, but, at the same time, belonging to more than one culture contributes to a more complex identity. However, identity, he claims, cannot be compartmentalised. Moreover, he criticises the fact that deeply rooted habits and simplistic attitudes tend to reduce identity to one affiliation, but identity is made up of a series of elements that combine uniquely within each individual, preventing him "from being identical to anybody else." (Maalouf, 2000, 10). Maalouf also distinguishes between two heritages that can be found within each individual: a 'vertical' heritage, stemming from the ancestors, the religious community and the traditions, and a 'horizontal' heritage that comes from the contemporaries and the age, which, he argues, exerts more influence, despite the fact that we invoke more frequently the first one (Maalouf, 2000, 86). Norwegian-Americans, in their attempt to create homemaking-myths that could account for their place in the larger American culture, have often referred to their Viking ancestors, stressing the vertical heritage.

As mentioned before, the concept of identity is not always comprehensive enough to encompass all the aspects of the self, especially when referring to migration. There is, however, a "return to the performance of identity as iteration, the re-creation of the self in the world of travel, the resettlement of the borderline community of migration." (Bhabha, 2004, 12), but the concept of belonging needs to be discussed as a complementary dimension. Floya Anthias discusses belonging and considers it "is always in relation to