

Doing identity in transnationalised space: adolescents self-representation in urban Switzerland

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Doing identity in transnationalised space - adolescents self-representation in urban Switzerland

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Doing Identity in Transnationalised Space – Adolescents` Self-representation in Urban Switzerland

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Transnationalism has become one of the key concepts for the analysis of international migration. In recent years, technological innovations in transportation and communication have increasingly facilitated the establishment and maintenance of transnational ties and practices for migrants. Hence, “transnationalism from below” has become a reality, as has the more researched “transnationalism from above” which refers to cross-border activities initiated by influential players, such as multinational companies, nation states or educational and economic elites (Guarnizo 1997). The present paper gives insights into the mechanisms and effects of transnationalism from below, especially into the social mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. In an effort of “grounding transnationalism” (Guarnizo and Smith 1998: 11), we examine the identity management of adolescents in a highly transnationalised urban area in Switzerland. For these grassroots actors the “transnationalisation of the social world” (Pries 2008) has opened up a broad array of possible identity options which include among others the identification with the sending and/or receiving state, the diasporic community, etc. While the possible selves at an actor’s disposal have multiplied, new patterns of social integration into the host society emerge which have not been studied in detail (cf. Portes et al. 1999: 227). Using interviews and audio-visual means of self-representation, we investigate how migrant youths and their Swiss classmates represent and negotiate their heterogeneous backgrounds in the ethnically mixed and socioeconomically underprivileged suburb of Berne.

Berne West, the neighbourhood examined, is a socially disadvantaged area with more than 30 percent of non-Swiss inhabitants (Statistikdienste der Stadt Bern 2009: 32). Since many residents are naturalised Swiss citizens, the total number of inhabitants with a migrant background is undoubtedly higher and cultural diversity is manifest. Due to residential segregation, the proportion of foreign pupils at the local schools may be as high as 76 percent, as figures of the year 2005 show (Oester et al. 2008: 177). A transnational life is reality for many of the young migrants and their families in Berne West. It is by means of their everyday practices that they connect two or more societies across national borders. They, for instance, hold dual or multiple citizenship, use more than one language on a daily basis or maintain intensive cross-border family relations by means of improved transportation and communication technologies. These multifaceted worlds they live in are in sharp contrast to an assimilative school system. As Oester et al. (2008) show in their ethnographic study of schools in Berne West, the educational response to cultural diversity in the classrooms is an increased

assimilative pressure. According to the authors, this pressure is mainly related to the following causes: in the majority of cases, multiethnic schools are located in socioeconomically deprived areas which are strongly affected by residential segregation between “the established” and “the outsiders” (Elias/Scotson 1993). The established residents react with the application of exclusion strategies towards the new arrivals. For instance, they create assimilative pressure with reference to language, behavioural norms, clothing, etc. At the same time, right-wing politics, which equate integration with assimilation, have become more and more attractive to a growing proportion of the established population. Moreover, assimilative pressure is enhanced by the often unconscious middle class habitus of Swiss teachers. In Switzerland, many teachers come from politically conservative and ethnically homogenous rural areas, where assimilative concepts of integration prevail (Denzler et al. 2005). When confronted with transnationalised classes either defence mechanisms or certain forms of “ignorant tolerance” predominate in their attitudes. Heidrun Czock (1985) introduced the term in order to describe the following attitude: not knowing too much about a pupils’ social and cultural background protects the teacher from discrimination and in his or her own eyes facilitates equality in opportunity. Tolerance, in this context, does not mean to accept the other, but to ignore his or her difference. In fact, as Czock puts it, this kind of ignorant tolerance promotes further discrimination. Or, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1964) emphasized as early as the 1960s an equal treatment of underprivileged pupils leads to further inequality. Under these circumstances, having a successful school career for the pupil means to adopt the habitus of a Swiss middle class child. It is hardly surprising that young migrants in Switzerland are among those most affected by educational disadvantage (e.g. Schultheis et al. 2008, Corradi Vellacott et al. 2003).

There is only one way to break out of this vicious circle. As the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss puts it, one of the two main functions of a state’s educational system is to reproduce the central values of a society. The other function, however, is to foster social change. In order to fulfil this second function, a teacher in a transnationalised environment has to become an ethnographer in his or her own society, “in which the teaching methods learned are no longer applicable” (1993: 389). In other words, as Oester et al. (2008) conclude, assimilative learning has to be completed with new learning forms and contents developed in and adapted to the pupils’ transcultural environments, including multilingualism, migration experiences, and other aspects of the adolescents’ everyday lives.

These assumptions formed the basis of the anthropological research project “Adolescents’ audiovisual self-representations – a challenge for educational diversity research”. The pilot project financed by the University of Teacher Education, Berne, aims at making visible the multifaceted everyday lives of teenagers in transnationalised settings from their own perspective. The scientific interest in the project lies mainly in the following questions: which patterns of identity construction can be observed among migrant youths and their Swiss peers in transnationalised environments? Which opportunities and constraints characterise their lives between transnationalised realities and assimilative school structures? How do they negotiate, construct and represent their heterogeneous backgrounds and everyday experiences?

The core of the project was a pedagogic intervention which lasted from 2008 to 2010. Five multiethnic classes with a proportion of migrants from 70 to 80 percent were instructed by an anthropologist to produce videos of their everyday lives during several months. In the compulsory classes, the migrant youths and their Swiss classmates worked in small groups of two or three pupils on topics such as “future”, “home” or “space”, which can be interpreted in many different ways. The videos constituted a possibility for the fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds to represent, reflect on and communicate their everyday experiences, hopes and dreams. At the end of the project, the teenage filmmakers had the possibility to publish their videos on the project website (www.jumpcuts.net) to make the audiovisual material available to a wider audience.

We adapted Jean Rouch’s concept of a shared anthropology to the classroom setting. Already in the 1950s, Rouch (1917-2004), a French anthropologist and filmmaker, questioned the separate roles of filmmaker and protagonists, and researcher and researched respectively. He advocated a participatory approach which produces knowledge in a steady dialogue and in close collaboration between the researcher and the researched in order to overcome hierarchies. Following the Rouchian tradition, the teenagers in the described research project received camcorders to explore their everyday lives, fantasies, hopes and dreams. As a consequence, the study does not focus on an empiricist view of the teenagers’ reality, uninfluenced by the presence of the anthropologists, but on the act of representation itself. Through the combination of fictional and documentary parts, Rouch’s films introduce the spectator not only to the real but also to the imaginary worlds of his informants. Correspondingly, we believe that the imaginary is a crucial element in identity formation. Or, as the Aus-

tralian filmmaker David MacDougall (2003: 135) emphasises: “The values of a society lie as much in its dreams as in the reality it has built”. To work with audiovisual media was crucial in our project insofar as film, compared to text, facilitates the expression of imaginary as well as emotional or ambiguous parts of the self. An approach which includes visual methods recognizes, as Sarah Pink (2001: 6) puts it, “the interwovenness of objects, texts, images and technologies in people’s everyday lives and identities”. Stuart Hall (2000: 21) points out the close relationship between identity and representation. He describes identity as “a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.” However, he argues that identity is not only a matter of “becoming” but also a matter of “being”, i.e., “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (ibid. 23). In the present paper, we address “identity as becoming” with the term of identification, whereas “identity as being” is addressed as identity. The former term refers to the processes of positioning the self in different situations, the latter to the distinctive inner unity of a person, the sameness of the self.

The videos provided an opportunity for the youths to draft, test and depict possible identifications. The audiovisual material produced by the teenage film teams constitutes a rich data source. Besides the youths’ self-representations, the research included participant observation during lessons, shoots and montage as well as narrative interviews with the pupils and their teachers in order to obtain context information for the analysis of the videos. As we will see, this triangulation of methods is a fruitful way to grasp different perspectives.

On the whole, the film teams used the videos to construct and foster group identities. The adolescents focused on common interests representing the team members, e.g., a certain youth culture, friendship ideals or fantasies of empowerment. At the same time, their short films show how they construct themselves as being different from other youth cultural groups, other generations, persons of authority or the opposite sex. Since most of the film teams were ethnically mixed, there were only few references to cultural backgrounds in the videos. However, the fact of being a migrant created a base for a common group identity in some teams. The short film “One week with three guys in Berne West”, produced by three ninth graders, is a good example for this. The filmmakers do not come from the same country nor do they possess similar residence permits, share remigration plans or belong to the same generation of immigrants. Despite these differences, they by means of their filming construct a shared migrant identity. In one scene, titled “Solution Against [sic] Racism”, one of the three semi-fictional protagonists is faced with racist aggression of an “authentic” Swiss.

His friends come to his defence, and what begins with severe verbal assaults ends in a funny fight with no identifiable winner. By this ironic enactment of intercultural tensions, an in-group of migrants is constructed in contrast to a threatening Swiss other. The role of the racist was deliberately given to their only male Swiss classmate, who gladly collaborated in the video. This parody of a moralistic educational film on discrimination can be considered a symbolic expression of diverse experiences of exclusion. As we will see below, not only migrant youths have such experiences but also young Swiss, who represent a minority among adolescents in the transnationalised environment of Berne West. As this example shows, adolescents often do not process their experiences directly into a documentary form. They prefer fictional forms using drama and irony in order to create distance between themselves and specific forms of discrimination.

Whereas the videos are particularly revealing in terms of group identities and communication among youths, the individual interviews give insight into individual identity management. Free from peer pressure, the youths speak readily about their individual backgrounds and migration biography, appreciating the researcher's interest. Like the videos, the statements made in the interviews depict daily life in Berne West as being highly transnationalised. The youths consider the heterogeneous backgrounds of their classmates as normal, as they do the close contact with relatives in other countries, everyday multilingualism or dual citizenship. Among peers, having a migrant background seems not only normal but an appreciated resource, as the following quotation of a sixteen-year-old with one Swiss and one non-European parent shows: "We are proud of our foreign roots. It is almost something to boast about: my relatives travel much and I speak another language than German. The Swiss are not that interesting." Non-migrant youths react either with an attitude of reinforced national consciousness to these "standards" or regret that they cannot benefit from the advantages of migration, as does the following teenager: "Well, I'd love to be a foreigner. I don't mind being Swiss, but actually I would consider it much more interesting if my mother or my father were from another country, especially because of the language. It would already do for me if my mom was from the Romandie ." Swiss youths aspiring to or imitating a migrant's habitus in their mode of speaking or style of clothing are pejoratively called "wannabe foreigners" by their migrant peers.

In the interviews, several adolescents constructed an in-group of migrants opposed to the Swiss others in a similar way that the three boys did in the described video. Being a migrant

is regarded as a connecting bond regardless of one's origins, as the following statement underlines: "We have Swiss passports but it's obvious that we are different because we have another skin colour or speak with an accent. We consider ourselves as being one group and accept one another. For us, we are all foreigners. It is rather the question if we accept the Swiss, because there are so few Swiss here, that it [Berne West, B.B./K.O.] has become almost like a country of its own." Migrant youths feel at ease in Berne West, because there they are not approached as foreigners on the street as is the case in the city centre. They feel accepted. An acceptance, which leads to a new self-awareness as migrants: established hierarchies are not adopted without being questioned, assimilation is not aspired to at any price. Various linguistic innovations express the differences the adolescents perceive between the socially recognised, "true" Swiss and the "pro forma" Swiss. "Authentic" Swiss are called farmers, small cheeses, federal ("eidgenössische") or fondue Swiss as opposed to self-descriptions as paper Swiss, Albanian or Tamil Swiss. For many of the adolescents concerned their being Swiss is of precarious nature. Here, the somehow upset reaction of a fourteen-year-old boy to be naturalised shortly after, on the interviewer's comment, that he will be Swiss soon: "Yes, but a Swiss on paper! My parents are not Swiss, and a Swiss passport doesn't make me a Swiss. I mean, foreigners say of themselves, that they are paper Swiss and the Swiss say the same." Again and again, naturalised youths are made aware that in spite of holding a Swiss passport they are not considered legitimate Swiss. One pupil with a Swiss name and Swiss citizenship but Asian looks reported the disappointed reaction of a job interviewer when first seeing her: "Oh, a foreigner." Frustrated, the girl reacted by ethnising herself: "Actually it doesn't matter to me. The important thing is that I am Chinese and proud of it." As a result, most naturalised youths do not claim a Swiss identity, as the following statement of a sixteen-year-old shows: "I never say that I am Swiss. Only sometimes in job interviews I say that I have a Swiss passport." Only those whose migration background does not show in their looks, in their name or accent openly express being Swiss. Multiple cultural identification is not only considered suspicious by society in general but also in peer contexts. Identification with a Swiss as well as a migrant background provokes suspicion and indignation among adolescents regardless of their own cultural roots. As the interviews show, only definite identities are socially accepted. Therefore, the adolescents often keep multiple identification secret or live it in private spaces or their minds only, as psychologist Paul Mecheril (2003: 332) states.

As this brief outline of some of our research results shows, the transnationalisation of social worlds creates spaces within society where widespread social hierarchies and integration

patterns are questioned by grassroots actors. In their everyday practices, young second or third generation migrants in Berne West prove wrong linear models of social integration which inevitably lead to the assimilation of immigrants into the host society. In fact, we observed self-confident adolescents demanding from their Swiss peers the acceptance which Swiss society as a whole denies them. However, this self-confidence was mostly limited to peer contexts and absent when it came to school or career matters. Here, Swiss youths were more confident to succeed and at the same time overcame peer hierarchies.

As we have seen, many Swiss schools react to growing cultural diversity in their classrooms with increased assimilative pressure. As a result teachers often focus on the migrant learners' deficiencies instead of on their resources. New learning strategies adapted to transnationalised environments, new contents and didactic methods inviting all pupils to contribute with their different language abilities, social and cultural backgrounds would increase the students' motivation and help them to succeed. Switzerland, however, is still far away from seeing itself as an immigration country and therefore assimilation remains the leading paradigm. Due to this lack of recognition migrant adolescents are still forced to look at themselves as either being Swiss or migrant, and Swiss society is still far away from accepting "hyphenated identities" (Minh-ha 1996). This might be the reason why hardly any of the studied youths called themselves Tamil-Swiss, Kosova- or Italian-Swiss. Further analysis of the research data is needed to extend our understanding of the processes outlined in this paper.

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