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Construction of Identity and Transnationalism: A Journey with Migrantour

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Abstract

Identities are formed through intertwined interactions amongst people, in the context of societal and institutional practices. Thus, experiences of migration impact the individual formation of different self-understandings, which need to navigate different cultures simultaneously. The study looks at the experiences of first and second-generation migrants who are intercultural companions in the Migrantour network. As Migrantour is a project aimed at creating a comprehensive view of cultures, combat stigma, and foster inclusion, the intercultural companions play a significant role in developing personalised narratives, mixing autobiographical and non-autobiographical testimonies with historical facts, to create a rich tour which makes everyone the protagonist of their own story. Through this acquired agency, intercultural companions develop a self-understanding of themselves, as well as a communal identity as part of a network.

Keywords: Transnationalism; emotional transnationalism; migration studies; transnational identity

Introduction

Migration entails the movement of people across countries, cultures, and social environments. In an increasingly connected world, one of the concepts to describe the cross-national links created by migrants has taken the name of transnationalism.

The term transmigrant is used to conceptualise how migrants develop and maintain relations - familial, economic, social, and political- across multiple countries (Schiller et al., 1992a). The literature highlights how the range of actions across national borders exacerbates concerns about rights and citizenship, as well as stirring an academic and emotional debate on the effects of double cultural influences on migrants. On one hand, the juxtaposition of various cultures can cause distress and negative emotional states in migrants and possibly lead to a perceived absence both from the culture of origin and in the new country of residency (Saada, 2000; Wolf, 2002). However, maintaining the beliefs and values of the culture of origin can also have a positive guiding value and result in positive behavioural and psychological consequences (Falicov, 2006; Gu, 2010).

The focus of this paper is the formation of identity by transnational migrants. Identity is understood as performed, dynamic, culturally located, and constructed via social interactions and in relation to the institutions (Benwell, 2006).

The paper presents a review of the concept of transnationalism and its more commonly understood applications and dwell specifically into emotional transnationalism and the theoretical framework of

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transnational identity. Then, after a detailed introduction to the Migrantour project, the analysis is presented, followed by the limitations and conclusion.

The initiative of Migrantour, developed in Turin in 2009 to foster new narratives about migration and social inclusion, is analysed. The Manifesto of Migrantour is inspired by an African proverb, "the footprints of people who walk together are never erased" ("Manifesto Migrantour", 2022). Through the project, first and second-generation migrants, trained as intercultural companions, accompany tours' participants along routes which represent key places for intercultural exchange, or places which have been stigmatised in negative ways, in order to challenge the stigma and stimulate the creation of a new narrative, in a joint moment of connection between the intercultural companion and the beneficiaries of the tour.

Becoming an intercultural companion means embarking on a journey through which, followed by the expertise of anthropologists and local experts (museum guides, academics, municipal leaders), first and second-generation migrants acquire professional competencies acquired in part from the expertise of cultural mediators and tour guides (Vietti, 2019). As a result, these new professional figures can merge their autobiographical stories with other migration testimonies and incorporate the multiculturality of the city, enriching the storytelling with objects, interviews, and pictures (Vietti, 2019).

During the training and the experience as an intercultural companion, the migrants themselves are encouraged to reflect on their own story and their own identity. The intercultural companions can also personalise the tour in different ways, relating it to their personal experiences or passions.

The project has now been extended to a wide network of European cities, and it provides training to people with a migration background to become "intercultural companions" along urban routes. This aspect sparked an interest in investigating whether this project has created or strengthened a transnational connection to their country of origin, as well as the host community.

In order to do this, we conducted in-depth interviews with ten intercultural companions, three of whom are local coordinators, with a focus on their individual identity reflections and how participation in the Migrantour project impacted the perception and construction of their identity, their connection with their home country, and with the host country.

As identity is constructed through the interaction with the social and institutional context, the opportunity given as an intercultural companion to meet and engage with a multitude of people, and reflect on one's own heritage and contribution to society, was expected to possibly contribute to the construction of certain aspects of identity. After offering an overview of the literature on transnationalism and emotional transnationalism, we focus on how that connects to identity and may explain identity as self-understanding. The analysis reveals how intercultural companions develop a different self-understanding related to their increased protagonism within the narrative about migration, and a feeling of agency and of giving back to society. Moreover, a communal identity is formed within the Migrantour network, promoting another form of self-understanding and sense of belonging.

This research is relevant as it contributes to the academic debate on transnational identity, which is still a contested concept. It also connects the literature on emotional transnationalism, which is an under-researched field that so far mostly focuses on the familiar dimension; yet, this paper offers insights into the wider field of migrants' self-perception of identity and belonging in the sphere of social relations. Although the generalisability is not universal, as the focus is on participants of one specific project, the research aims to gain a rich understanding of those individual perceptions. Therefore, there is no intention to disproportionally apply this to a larger population. Moreover, on the societal level, reflecting on projects such as Migrantour and the impact they have on migrants can be informative for the development of future similar initiatives.

Literature review

What is transnationalism?

The concept of transnationalism originated at the end of the 19th century, when the United States received large numbers of immigrants from non-Anglo-Saxon countries, adding a new ethnic perspective

to the American landscape beyond the dominant racial discourse (Bradatan et al., 2010; Roudometof, 2005). Transnational feelings and ties played an important role in the lives and organisations of immigrant communities in the United States before 1950, making the concept of transnationalism a long-standing issue (Roudometof, 2005).

Globalisation has facilitated the creation of transnational social spaces, highlighting how the notion of transnationalism diminishes the importance of territoriality (Roudometof, 2005; Waldinger, 2013). Thus, transnationalism encompasses activities and beliefs that span across countries, and in doing so, it opposes the notion of nationalism, and to a certain extent to that of cosmopolitanism, which has a moral and ethical connotation (Roudometof, 2005; Waldinger, 2013).

Over the last decades, the concept has stretched to include a wide range of issues concerned with international migration. International migration inherently encompasses a multiplicity of involvements in the home and host societies, be it material, such as financial transactions known as remittances, letters, cross-border activism, and visits, or non-material, such as cross-border social movements, religious movements, maintaining beliefs, cultural capital, and emotional bonds (Roudometof, 2005; Schiller et al., 1992b; Waldinger, 2013). Transnational interactions are conceptualised as "taking place among people and institutions in two or more separate 'containers' or nation-states" (Roudometof, 2005, p. 199).

The transnationality of populations exists within the framework of nation-states and nationalism, which entails concerns on matters of rights, citizenship, political participation, and national identity in both the home and host countries (Waldinger, 2013). While acknowledging the impact that these forces exert on transnational interactions, in this paper, these aspects are not investigated in depth as they do not directly fall under the scope of this research.

The material connections of transnationality have been largely studied. The development in communication and transportation technologies has allowed cross-country and cross-continental connections through deliveries, mail, or phone calls (Waldinger, 2013). Moreover, mail allows for the sending of remittances, which started providing some countries with stable income flows and sometimes had a big economic impact (Esteves & Khoudour-Castéras, 2009). Since 2015, remittances have been the largest source of external finance flows to low-and middle-income countries (Ratha et al., 2023). As of 2023, there is an estimated increase of 3.8 percent in the remittance flows, which has come to reach about USD 669 billion (Ratha et al., 2023). Besides economic ties, political influence is also a key aspect of transnational activities: for instance, campaign contributions from the US account for 10 to 15% of the revenue of political parties in the Dominican Republic (Guarnizo et al., 2003). Another example is that of political support through cross-border voting, demonstrations, or engagement in hometown associations' projects in the region of origin (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003).

Emotional transnationalism

At the same time, there is another aspect of transnationalism, which goes beyond the circulation of material goods and ideas and focuses on the cultural and social relations between the home and host society. Wolf (2002) first conceptualised it as emotional transnationalism, when referring to second-generation migrants, who maintain ties "at the level of emotions, ideologies, and cultural code" in a way that places them "between different generational and locational points of reference, both the real and imagined – their parents, sometimes their grandparents and other relatives – and their own" (p. 258). This explains the juxtaposition of several cultural and emotional spheres while inhabiting one geographical location.

This weaving of identity out of multiple belonging and affiliation could also result in "double absence" (Saada, 2000, p. 37). This expression refers to the contradiction of being, on the one hand, absent from the society of origin, and somehow distant in cultural and psychological terms. On the other hand, the immigrant stays at the outskirts of the host society, even after naturalisation, as the legal recognition does not necessarily erase the stigma and change the immigrant's social condition (Saada, 2000).

Although the first conceptualisation of the term entails a negative emotional state, namely distress, emotional transnationalism might also refer to positive emotions, which arise in individuals when they can embrace their culture, for instance (Gu, 2010). It is also possible to define emotional

transnationalism as “the emotions experienced when immigrants […] search for behavioural guidance and a foundation for moral judgments from the cultural norms of both their sending and receiving societies” (Gu, 2010, p. 691). In fact, perpetuating cultural narratives and maintaining a connection with the place of origin has a protective positive impact on migrants’ mental state, as opposed to rapid assimilation, which correlates more with symptoms of depression and anxiety (Falicov, 2006).

Most of the research on emotional transnationalism focuses on the familiar dimension, which entails the explanation of deep emotional bonds within a tight-knit circle of individuals. However, there is a lack of research on the emotional sphere of individuals regarding their own identity, in relation to their material and emotional engagement across their home and host societies.

The literature presented so far indicates that transnational activities that take place between different nation-states and cultures impact the emotional relations migrants hold across borders. Consequently, these relations impact their own self-understanding and how they relate to others.

Therefore, this research aims to investigate how participating in Migrantour as intercultural companions affects the construction of a transnational identity. Moreover, there is an expectation that, since the experience as intercultural companions has some impact on the construction of identity, it will also bear some impact on the relations with the home and host country. In the following paragraphs, the theoretical framework used to understand identity, as well as the methodology used to conduct the research, are explained.

Theoretical Framework

Transnational identity

The introductory outline on transnationalism above is meant to emphasise how migration generates cross-border connections, with the establishment of social fields across geographic and cultural borders (Schiller et al., 1992a). Thus, immigrants are understood to be transmigrants when they “develop and maintain multiple relations- familial, economic, social, organisational, religious, and political- that span borders” (Schiller et al., 1992a, p. ix).

The issue inevitably dwells on the identity and the construction of it, by migrants in the habitation of different societies simultaneously. The research takes a constructionist approach to identity, which sees it as performed, dynamic, culturally located, and constructed in interaction with other people and institutional structures (Benwell, 2006). Therefore, narration is a way of constructing identity as one can embody one’s experience in several ways to understand the world, oneself, and build different versions of this self (Benwell, 2006). Seeing identity as a building process of the self is congenial in the discourse on transnational immigrants, as it allows us to understand how the subject can maintain multiple identities.

Identities are not just articulated by the individual and their own social relations, but they are also constituted by public discourse, popular culture, and ideology (Ewing, 2004). Identity is both a category of practice and one of analysis (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). As a category of practice, it relates to everyday social experience, as it is experienced by social actors in their lives, without the abstractive lenses of analysis (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Therefore, we can also speak of social identity when it is “created and maintained through interaction with people belonging to the same social unit and language” (Bradatan et al. 2010, p.176). However, in this collective understanding, it could also be conceptualised as “sameness among members of a group or category” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 7). Brubaker and Cooper (2000) distinguish five analytical meanings, which can then be narrowed down to three spheres of the term identity. First, there is a general understanding of identity as a non-instrumental mode of social and political action. It refers to how actors are governed by particularistic self-understandings (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Self-understanding is a term that can designate the “situated subjectivity”, meaning how people make sense of who they are, their social location, and how they are prepared to act (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 17). This does not entail a unitary understanding of the self as homogenous and coherent, but rather as a web of intersecting categories with different proximity and intensity (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Secondly, identity can be used collectively to highlight fundamental

sameness across social groups (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Lastly, identity can be considered to be a product of social and political action, or a fragmented product of multiple and competing discourses (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).

While recognising the multifaceted theoretical bundle around the concept of identity, the present focus is on the first meaning of identity as one of self-understanding. Transmigrants can draw upon and create fluid identities grounded in the society of origin as well as the host societies (Schiller et al., 1992a). Transnational identities are social identities that transcend state boundaries (Cronin, 1998). Some migrants choose to define themselves through their place of origin, while others prefer to define themselves through the new country of residence (Bradatan et al., 2010). As identity is developed through interaction with other people and institutional structures, immigrants with little to no connection to the new people, culture, and society will be unlikely to experience a change in their identity, thus remaining more connected to their community of origin (Benwell, 2006; Bradatan et al., 2010).

Against this backdrop, the analysis of the experiences of intercultural companions of the Migrantour is guided through this conception of identity as a performed, dynamic, and constructed self-understanding.

Methodology

To investigate how the experience as intercultural companions in the Migrantour network has a role in the building of identity of migrants and their feelings towards the home and host country, we conducted in-depth interviews with people with a migratory background who are, or have been active as, intercultural companions in a city of the Migrantour network.

As a sample, we considered the entirety of intercultural companions from the cities adhering to the Migrantour project. The first criterion was that the participants have a migration background, thus they are first-generation migrants or second-generation migrants, as the research dwells on the self-identity of migrants. The second criterion was that they speak English and/or Italian proficiently, as they were asked to deliberate on several topics, which required proficiency and comfort in speaking the language. Lastly, an additional criterion was the availability of technology, and the proficiency in the use of apps like Zoom, Google Meet, or the WhatsApp video call function, as the interviews were held online to increase the geographical scope of the sample and include respondents from several cities of the Migrantour network.

In all, we conducted ten semi-structured interviews with intercultural companions, three of which are local coordinators in Turin, Milan, and Utrecht. The semi-structured format was chosen because of its flexible nature, which allows the researcher to pick up on important themes that emerge during the interviews, while having some common ground among the interviews for analysis (Bryman, 2012). The questions were open-ended to encourage a detailed and personalised narration by the interviewees. In fact, the use of in-depth interviews was considered an appropriate method for the scope of this research topic as it allowed the researcher to create a connection with the interviewees and understand the participants' social reality, thus the process of constructing their identity (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). The questions touched upon the participants' perception of themselves, then the connection to Migrantour, what it represented for them, and in what way they felt affected by the participation in the network. Moreover, questions focused on the relationship with other intercultural companions, the meaning of having a network of people with similar experiences around, and the significance of the interaction with other people who partake in the tours as beneficiaries, or secondary participants (e.g., business owners, market vendors). The questions are presented in Appendix A.

The interviews were then transcribed in full and coded in several rounds by using Atlas.ti to identify common themes. Most of the interviews were conducted in Italian; therefore, the transcripts are in the original language, while the themes emerging from them were then translated into English for the analysis.

Ethical Issues

The participants were recruited through email or WhatsApp private messages. In the messages, the scope of the interviews, the aims of the paper, and what the participation entailed (i.e., an interview of about thirty minutes, online, with an interviewer) were explained. Those who agreed to take part were also asked for consent before proceeding with the interview and its recording. Moreover, the interviewees were informed that the recordings were going to be transcribed, with the eventual anonymised transcriptions being used for the analysis. The real names of the interviewees were thus hidden, and in this paper, we do not share any personal information about them besides the country of origin, on those occasions when it is mentioned in the quotes used in the analysis.

Operationalisation

For its operationalisation, the concept of identity can be quite a broad term. Therefore, the term self-understanding (concezione di sè, in Italian) was also used to ask participants to reflect on their experience. This was done by asking interviewees to reflect on how they see themselves, and how this perception has changed as a result of external factors relating to their experience with Migrantour. Then, since identity is formed also through interaction with other people and institutional structures (Benwell, 2006), some questions were directed towards the relationship of the participants with other intercultural companions and the broader public (participants who attend the tours, local municipalities…).

Analysis

Introduction to Migrantour

Migrantour is an initiative first developed in 2009 in Turin, Italy, by a group of anthropologists from the University of Turin, the University of Genoa, and the Intercultural Centre of Turin (Centro Interculturale della Città di Torino) (Vietti, 2019). The initial idea was to promote a form of responsible tourism that has citizens with a background of migration in their personal or familiar history as the protagonists of intercultural urban tours (Migrantour, 2024). The narrators of the tours are first- or second-generation migrants who develop the tour trajectories, connect with other residents of the neighbourhoods and other local bodies, and therefore develop the narrative accordingly. Thus, the role of the intercultural companion who creates a bridge between the expertise of an intercultural mediator and a touristic guide was born (Vietti, 2019). The first course for intercultural companions was held in Turin by Viaggi Solidali, a tour operator for responsible tourism. The intercultural companions are trained by learning different techniques of storytelling, autobiographic narration, and ethnography to investigate the field and carry on participant observations, interviews, and mapping the urban neighbourhoods where the tours are done, and create a heritage of common practices and knowledge (Vietti, 2019, 2020).

The initiative raised interest and proved to be successful; therefore, the project “Migrantour: a European network of migrant driven intercultural routes to understand cultural diversity” was born as a European Union (EU) co-funded project conducted in 9 European cities (Vietti, 2019). The network further expanded in 2018, when Brussels and Ljubljana joined the network, as well as new Italian cities (Vietti, 2019).

The model proposed by Migrantour considers migration as a synthesis of stories, memories, practices, knowledge, places, urbanistic and architectonic heritage, material and non-material goods, which generations of migrants can trace back to and use to reclaim their identity, their voice, and their contribution to the urbanistic and societal changes (Vietti, 2019). In the first ten years of activity, around six hundred migrants were trained as intercultural companions, and an estimated 30,000 people participated in the tours (Vietti, 2019).

Turning to the aims of the project, the core of the initiative revolves around encounter and participation (Vietti, 2020). The protagonists of the stories are the migrants who narrate their own life experience, their family history, and the city in which they live every day. At the same time, those

narratives also allow for other people's stories to blend in; shop owners, bakers, butchers, and workers of the city are invited in to share their culture and their perspective.

After conducting interviews with ten intercultural companions, the analysis highlights two dimensions in which participation in Migrantour has influenced the construction of identity: on an individual level, through active participation, which entails a confirmation of personal values, a sense of giving to others, and the self-worth associated with becoming a protagonist. Then, there is a communal dimension related to the exchange with others. Moreover, the analysis dwells on the applicability of the term transnational to describe the individual and communal identities that are constructed.

Themes

The ten interviewees were all women, of different ages, occupations, and backgrounds. Eight of them were first-generation migrants, and two were second-generation migrants who were born in Italy. All participants but one currently live in Italy, and are intercultural companions in the Migrantour Milano, Torino, and Roma.

Self-Awareness

The first pattern that was uncovered during the analysis was the difference between people's predispositions for self-reflection. Some people spoke at length about how they have learned to appease different parts of their identity throughout their whole lives.

In one interview, C. reveals:

> "I have always felt and clearly knew where I came from, how I am, and the role I have here; I didn't discover it here. I picture in my head perfectly my situation, who I am, and how my identity is shaped […]. However, yes, I feel like it (Migrantour) was a beautiful way to tell other people who I am."

This quote illustrates how people who were already confident in their identity and how they wanted to configure it, what words to use to describe it, found in Migrantour a way to illustrate this previous conception of themselves, and celebrate it.

L. described that for her, finding the project was "Like a ring that perfectly fits my finger […] and it has reiterated, complemented, and enhanced my (cultural) diversity."

This sense of awareness of one's perception of self was always accompanied by an understanding of the different parts of their identity. The participants all explained how their family and personal history were entrenched in multiculturalism, being immersed in different environments and traditions, and making sense of those from very early on in life.

For them, the participation in Migrantour was therefore not an occasion to change their own perception of their culture, belonging, or personal history as migrants in Italy, but rather a way to showcase those stories to others and partake in a project that celebrates the personal identities of migrants.

At the same time, other participants highlighted how their work on self-reflection and understanding was stimulated by their participation in Migrantour and therefore sparked an exploration of their positionality as migrants in society and sometimes of their culture. When speaking with these interviewees, what was clear was that the exposure to other cultures and the curiosity of other people expressed during the tours instigated personal research about their own culture(s) of origin and their identity.

This quick distinction between previous levels of self-awareness of one's identity brings us to the main dimensions of analysis discussed below.

Giving as a gain

As previously discussed, one of the main premises proposed by Migrantour is the effort to empower migrants to become protagonists of their own narratives. This is seen as a counteraction to those mainstream discourses which stigmatise migrants either under a negative lens as criminals, relating to spheres of illegality, taking advantage of the system, or leaching off the rest of the citizens (Kubal, 2014),

or a more feel-good narrative which victimises migrants as powerless and incapable (Smets et al., 2019). Conversely, in Migrantour, intercultural companions are locals who contribute to and extensively know the places in which they live and operate the tours, therefore gaining agency to speak not only about their own stories, but also about these locations (Ormond & Vietti, 2022). Thus, the intercultural companions become protagonists both as locals who experience the city every day and as migrants who have a cultural baggage of heritage, knowledge, and tradition.

The importance of this aspect was reiterated during the interviews. As previously discussed, some participants became intercultural companions while coming from a position of interest, but lacking awareness of their value as migrants or the importance of their voices. Participants reported how sometimes they felt ashamed because of the stigmatisation of people from their country as criminals, or the widespread idea of a migrant as someone "who only comes to take from the country" (M, 2024). The feeling of shame sometimes caused efforts to refrain from speaking the mother tongue in public or trying to learn the language better.

However, their experience with Migrantour led to the realisation of the relevance, richness, and importance of the cultural background of migration they carry with them.

M. summarised the experience of acquired awareness in a salient way:

> "With Migrantour I understood that as a migrant I was important, very important […] I could also give a lot to others […] I brought with me a baggage of many things, cultures, knowledge, traditions, which are also significant for the society that I came to."

Gaining awareness of the richness of the culture and stories contributed to more curiosity and growth in confidence, as well as efforts to connect to the culture of origin. This change of narrative of the migrant being able to give something back contributes to the acceptance of one's role in society as an active member. This connects to the notion of self-understanding, which entails people's awareness of who they are and how they are prepared to act (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Respondents highlighted how they came to discover the importance of their stories, how they can be "healthy carriers of culture and traditions", and how, as migrants, they are worthy" (M, 2024). Moreover, the emphasis put by the Migrantour training on personal experiences enhances the individual perceptions of the burden to represent a whole culture. R. explained how she feels like she cannot "represent all Romanians" or be an "absolute carrier of the culture", but she can represent her lived experience in certain places at certain given times.

The dimension of being able to give, therefore, becomes formative to a conception of the self as an active agent of society. The value it acquires is both relevant on the individual level, as their personal or familiar stories matter, and on the community level, as the narrative enriches others and allows for traditions and heritage to shine. The gain of confidence and pride in the identity of migrant also contributes to an added exploration and interplay between the cultures.

One intercultural companion highlighted how she included the cultural relevance of products from her home country in the tours she conducts; another woman focused on how the possibility to embrace her culture and share it with other people also sparked her curiosity in getting involved with the Romanian community in her city and in discovering new traditions. Therefore, the participation in Migrantour reinforces the identitarian aspect of being a migrant, which consequently directs action in the form of increased engagement in the culture of origin and an enhanced establishment of the participants' perceived worth.

Lastly, the importance of the aspect of giving was particularly highlighted when speaking of educating others. As previously stated, the intercultural companions participate in the co-creation of the maps of the tours. Then, even once the tours are established, each companion can personalise the narration according to their personal experiences, affiliations, and preferences.

Intercultural companions feel like their role is "educational" and enables them to "contrast other narrations that they (participants to the tours) hear elsewhere, for them to learn to critically reflect on what they hear" (A, 2024). For example, the educational sphere became a great theme of discussion related to the participation of schools in the tours, as it is an opportunity to speak with younger generations about racism, and Italy's history as a country of emigration as well as immigration.

Part of the educational aspect also lies in the humanisation of the phenomenon of migration. Intercultural companions can offer a new perspective on the neighbourhoods, the people who live in them, and the phenomenon of migration in general, which entails not only their own stories but the stories of other people as well. Therefore, the stops of the tour include the halal butchery at the Porta Palazzo market in Turin, the Peruvian grocery store in Via Padova in Milan, or the House of Islamic Culture in Milan.

Creating empathy is also a goal of the Migrantour. Narrating a migration story and then adding biographical elements or introducing the participants to people who can share their own stories is deemed to be very impactful. “I think people are left most changed when they understand something from an experience that someone has had, and that has emotion in it, and that has stakes to it.” (M, 2024).

Therefore, through the intercultural companion’s narratives, the participants can get in touch with realities that they have never had a direct connection with before, and this helps them to be “more human”, “closer to each other”, as well as “forge empathy for people”.

As the educational aspect enriches the self-understanding of the intercultural companion singularly, it also contributes to the relational aspect of identity, which is further expanded on in the next section.

To conclude, a personal interest and sensitivity towards specific topics, such as the sensitisation to racist narratives or the reflection upon emigration and immigration in the Italian context, can shape the direction of the tour and contribute to the participation and agency over the narrative by the intercultural companions.

Encounter with others: becoming all protagonists

Another fundamental aspect of the construction of identity through participation in Migrantour lies within the relational aspect of identity. When seen as a dialectic interplay of relations with the social and institutional environment, the way in which relations are created with others impacts the self-understanding of people (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).

The way in which intercultural companions experience the connection with other people is through exchange. The exchange is a mutual process happening both with the other intercultural companions, with the beneficiaries of the tours, and with the people who are involved in the tours during the various stops.

The exchange with other intercultural companions is a dimension the relevance of which is posited from the co-creation of the tours to the creation of friendships, and the occasional gatherings of the network to discuss common practices, experiences, share personal stories, or foods from different parts of the world.

The exchange provides an occasion to learn information to share during the tours, as well as for personal enrichment:

> “We bring our food, we tell stories from our countries about different traditions […] so when I go to the halal butcher, I am able to say accurate things and talk about real traditions with factual knowledge because it's things I heard of and experienced myself” (M. 2024).

The relational aspect is thus of the utmost importance, and it is seen as a mutual enrichment. Moreover, united by the fact that there are widespread self-understandings of the self as migrants, this individual-level awareness contributes to the creation of a sense of belonging.

Intercultural companions explained in the interviews how experiencing stigmatisation, difficulties on the job market, or accustoming to living in a new country, had created a feeling which can be described using the concept of “double absence”, thus not fully participating in either the country of origin or the new country of residence (Sayad, 1988 in Saada, 2000, p.37). This was described negatively as not feeling important, trying to hide foreign origins, or feeling out of place. However, participating in the Migrantour has provided a sense of belonging to a group.

> ”It is important to me to know that there is this group to which I feel I belong to, no? When I feel like I don’t belong in other groups, at least I have this, to know I belong to the Migrantour group, and this is crucial to me” (L. 2024).

As it is exemplified by this quote by L., the construction of the understanding of the self transcends the individual sphere and contributes to the creation of a collective identity.

This sentiment is fostered, starting with participation in the training. O. recalls that "the way in which they organised the training, the way in which we interacted with each other, the stories we told, etc., they made me feel at home, since I was able to build an identity in this way".

Collective identities entail an emotionally laden sense of solidarity to a specific group (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). In this sense, commonality, meaning the sharing of common attributes, and connectedness, meaning the linkage between members of the group, can be used to describe how the commonality of relatable experiences, and the participation to a common project guided by similar aims, create a feeling of belonging thus a collective identity as parts of the Migrantour network (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Moreover, another sphere is that of the exchange with beneficiaries of the tours and other people who also participate in the new narratives portrayed during the walks.

As many intercultural companions explain, a part of the training and of the tours is that of giving access to the stories of other people and allowing them to have the spotlight to narrate their experiences and let them become protagonists of their own stories. In this sense, Migrantour allows migrants to be protagonists in a broader sense, which includes both the intercultural companions who, during the tours, represent the main voice, but also the people they choose to include during the tours. As already mentioned, the aspect of humanisation of migration also has a great emotional impact. The construction of a narrative that entails personal stories, as well as demographic and historical information about immigration to specific cities or neighbourhoods, allows for a greater understanding and for forging empathy, which therefore corresponds to the creation of new narratives and understandings. In this process, different people contribute, and they all share the spotlight and the agency over the narration. As O. mentioned, she likes to bring groups to a small Indian shop in Milan, where she has forged a relationship with the owners who know her and participate in the tour by answering questions and creating a direct contact both amongst the narrators and between the narrators and the beneficiaries of the tour.

The centrality of the figure of the migrant during the Migrantour also includes participation from the public. Especially within classrooms, there is rich cultural diversity. M. mentioned how she likes to include kids from different cultures during the tours:

> "when I explain the tradition of the red egg, which is made for Easter in Romania and there is a Romanian kid in the group, I ask him to join me in telling the others about it, and so he also becomes a protagonist, he changes in the eyes of the others and he is so proud of knowing something the others don't."

This example showcases how shedding light on other experiences is also a widespread practice that allows for a communal experience to be formed. In this sense, the purpose of making the migrant protagonist of the new narratives that are created during the tours is achieved on a larger scale than by only looking at the experiences of those leading the tours.

Why transnationalism?

All in all, the involvement with Migrantour as intercultural companions contributes to the participants' definition of self-understanding as migrants, belonging to several cultures, as active members of a community, as worthy and able to give and educate others. Moreover, the shared experiences and linkages created between members of the network of intercultural companions foster a sense of belonging together, which defines a collective identity as part of the Migrantour network. The exchange of experiences and empathy is not confined to the in-group of companions, but it is widened to comprise all participants in the tours, including locals whose shops or stories become the subject of the tours, and the public who takes part in the tours and is invited to share their perspectives.

At this point, I would like to turn to a specific aspect, which is that of transnationalism. As previously defined, transnationalism broadly encompasses beliefs and actions taking place across national borders (Roudometof, 2005). Going beyond material interactions, emotional transnationalism entails the

"emotions experienced when immigrants […] search for behavioural guidance and a foundation for moral judgments from the cultural norms of both their sending and receiving societies" (Gu, 2010, p. 691).

After offering an interpretation of the ways in which identities are constructed through participation in Migrantour, I would like to argue that these identities are transnational.

As a first point to mention, both first- and second-generation migrants have explained in their own words how the adherence to labels which categorise them as either coming from one country, or two, is not enough to capture the complexity of the personal and inherited story of each person.

All the intercultural companions who participated in the interviews highlighted how they often felt forced to put themselves in categories, while reality is more complex than that.

> "When people ask me where I'm from, my husband says, "Why don't you say just one country?". But I can't, it's not how I am" (L. 2024). "We get influenced, I'm Romanian, but in 15 years I acquired pieces of Italian cultures, some habits, even without doing it on purpose, it's natural that it happens" (R. 2024)."

Thus, feelings of being "divided", "made of small pieces of identity coming together", "in between cultures", as came up in the interviews, can be reunited under the term transnational as it does not necessarily bind identity to a specific country, nor two. In fact, this entails the wielding of identity across borders, in different levels of proximity and intensity, and even while inhabiting one other geographical location.

The previous points of analysis highlighted the emergence of "migrant" as an aspect of self-understanding and communal identity. This already transcends the conceptualisations of strong identity which relate it to race, gender, social status, or nationality (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). As the term migrant in its wider meaning entails a movement across space, transnationalism embraces the practices of connection to different cultures, which is practiced and encouraged throughout participation in Migrantour. Moreover, for some intercultural companions, the referral to different cultural norms and heritages throughout their lives is a common practice that denotes aspects of transnationalism (Gu, 2010). Especially second-generation migrants expressed how they have experienced feelings of "not fitting in either one or the other" category and feeling "alien". Here, the notion of emotional transnationalism can help reach an interpretation of this phenomenon, as it surpasses the need to choose a set of values and norms exclusively related to one culture, and thus widens the scope to any set of values one feels the need to adhere to. Therefore, the engagement in Migrantour gives an opportunity to explore and delve into different understandings of the self and how they are constantly formed throughout the years, and some features of these self-understandings can be described as transnational.

Conclusion and limitations

Migrantour is a project that, in over ten years of activity, has engaged hundreds of migrants as intercultural companions. With the focus on making migrants the protagonists of new narratives focused on humanisation of the other, empathy, and offering new perspectives, it has emerged as a significant work of self-understanding and reflection on one's position in society. With that, a sense of importance and worthiness as a migrant, as someone who can give something to others, a "healthy carrier of culture" who can educate others, contributes to the formation of individual aspects of identity. Moreover, the unceasing exchanges of common practices, personal stories, points of reflection, and emotions also constitute shared features and linkages that have led to the blossoming of a sense of belonging and what can be understood as a communal identity.

These understandings of identity can be deemed transnational as they challenge strong conceptualisations of identity related to categories of race, gender, religion, social status, or nationality, and encompass an understanding of the self which belongs to multiple cultures, or to the "world", and to the constant relational interplay with other cultures as a formative experience, creating an intricate web of connections to heritages with different levels of proximity. Thus, transnationalism can impact the

perceptions of society and belonging by changing the borders of people's nationalities and creating more fluid understandings of descent, lived experience, and how one places oneself in the world.

The interpretations offered in this research have a limited scope as they entail the subjective experiences of intercultural companions. Conceptualisations of identity and transnationalism are both debated and subject to incessant change. However, offering interpretations of individual experiences is important for shedding light on formative practices that have a positive impact on the individual as well as a socially relevant aim of creating new narratives around migration. Thus, although the singular experiences cannot be generalised and the concepts used in this research could be challenged, this paper aims to provide an interpretation of the creation of self- and communal understandings, which are a part of the experience of migration. In this respect, further research on transnationalism and emotional transnationalism and its interplay with identity formation can follow up with a view to investigating how the social and institutional context complements the individual understandings.

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