Cultural Interaction and Integration in the Context of Immigration: The Case Study of the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese in Adelaide[1]

Paola TINÈ

Abstract. One of the most striking elements, when looking at integration as a social problem, is the popular construction of the identity of the refugee in the hosting country, a rhetoric process often made of stereotypes supporting xenophobia largely spread by local media. In this paper, I will argue that a more positive construction of the social and cultural identity of refugees is a crucial element for meaningful integration policies. I will use a case study from my personal research conducted last year in the suburb of Salisbury in the city of Adelaide (in South Australia) with Professor John Gray, among the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees,[2] showing, in this way, a positive example of the Australian reception model. Here I will describe, from an anthropological perspective, why this arrangement has proven to be so effective.

Keywords: *cultural interaction, integration, immigration, Australia*

Introduction

We are in what has been defined the "age of migration" (Castles, Haas & Miller 1993, p.5), an historical phase, the consequences of which "raise critical questions pertaining to immigrant identities and multiculturalism" (Gibson & Rojas 2006, p. 69). More specifically, integration "is an interactive process between immigrants and the host society" (Bosswick & Heckman 2006, p. 11), and, as such, it needs to be studied as a social phenomenon.

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[2] The research that Paola Tinè and Professor John Gray of the University of Adelaide conducted in Salisbury focused on the cultural identity of the Bhutanese community and on their activities with a focus on the role of language, ritual and food for the affirmation of a specific socio-cultural belonging (Tinè & Gray 2017).

problem, is the popular construction of the identity of the refugee in the hosting country, a rhetoric process often made of stereotypes supporting xenophobia largely spread by local media. In this paper, I will argue that a more positive construction of the social and cultural identity of refugees is a crucial element for meaningful integration policies. I will use a case study from my personal research conducted last year in the suburb of Salisbury in the city of Adelaide (in South Australia) with Professor John Gray, among the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees,[3] showing, in this way, a positive example of the Australian reception model. Here I will describe, from an anthropological perspective, why this arrangement has proven to be so effective.

A brief overview on the immigration policies in Australia

The Humanitarian and Refugee Programme, together with the Migration Programme, represent the main pillars of the immigration regulation system in Australia.[4] In terms of numbers, the Migration Programme constitutes the largest component of the system. Under this programme, in the 2013-2014 period, the Australian state conferred 190,000 visas, of which roughly two thirds were skilled migrants and the remaining third were granted to incoming family members (OECD 2015, pp. 184-5). Furthermore, each year the government designates a certain number of visas that can be granted under the Humanitarian Programme.[5] In the period 2013-2014, Australia allotted 13,768 of these visas with 6,501 for refugee resettlement (Karlsen 2016, p.8). It should be noted that refugee resettlement is only 3.4% of the total migration. Since the establishment of the Department of Immigration in 1945, more than 7.5 million people have migrated to Australia. Among these people, over 800,000 arrived under the Humanitarian Programme as refugees (AGDIBP n.d.).

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[4] Australia adheres to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which is the key international legal document defining who is a refugee, their rights and the legal obligations of the signatory countries.

[5] Australia has four offshore refugee category visas: Refugee (visa subclass 200); In-Country Special Humanitarian (visa subclass 201); Emergency Rescue (visa subclass 203) and Woman at Risk (visa subclass 204).

It is interesting to note that in 2016, 28.5% of Australia's population was born overseas (ABS 2017) reinforcing the fact that Australia is a multicultural country.

Importantly for our discussion, Australia is one of the 37 countries that work closely with the United Nations Refugee Council (UNHCR), offering resettlement to refugees from refugee camps. Australia is consistently ranked in the top three countries offering resettlement alongside the USA and Canada (UNHCR, 2016, p.26). However, despite Australia being so open to collaboration with the UNHCR in relation to structured programmes of refugee resettlement, its way of dealing with people arriving 'illegally' via the sea, the so-called 'boat people' is strongly criticised by international public opinion for the "inhumane detention regime in which detainees, including young children, have been held for two to seven years" (Carr 2016, p. 239). The controversial birth of off-shore detention camps on the islands of Nauru and Papua New Guinea in 2001 was instigated by the then Prime Minister John Howard during his election campaign to combat the perceived threat of 'boat people' (Smit 2009, pp. 208-9). This treatment of asylum seekers is contrary to Article 31 of the Refugee Convention, of which Australia is a signatory, which states that refugees should not be penalised for entering a country illegally if they are seeking asylum (UNGA 1951).

Integration practices and policies in Australia

According to Article 34 of the 1951 Refugee Convention,

> The Contracting States shall as far as possible facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees. They shall in particular make every effort to expedite naturalization proceedings and to reduce as far as possible the charges and costs of such proceedings (UNGA 1951).

In terms of respecting the cultural and social identity of refugees, however, states are largely left to pursue their own interests and policies. Some countries, such as Australia, take a multicultural approach allowing for cultural groups to remain and interact within the larger social system.

The Migrant Integration Policy Index provides a rough overview of how different countries are handling integration through policy. It takes the following eight policy areas into account: labour market mobility, education of children, political participation, family reunion, access to nationality, health, permanent

residence and anti-discrimination. Overall, Australia ranks highly at number 8 with a score of 66 out of a possible 100 in 2014 (MIPEX 2015, p. 3). European Union countries average a score of 60 in this analysis.

Social integration is a factor that is often overlooked or assumed to take care of itself in state led approaches to resettlement and integration, but in terms of wellbeing after resettlement, it is a vital factor. This issue becomes particularly important after migrants have satisfied their basic needs, such as hunger, thirst and safety (Kim, Ehrich & Ficorilli 2012). To help with social integration, in Australia there are many activities and programs that the government offers to newly resettled people. Upon arrival, a Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) provider delivers basic services on behalf of the Australian government with the goal of helping people belonging to refugee and humanitarian backgrounds to start their new lives. This includes assistance with finding long-term accommodation and instructions on how to access services, such as health care, schools, welfare, and language services. This assistance generally lasts between six months and a year, but it will continue until the newly arrived people have achieved competency in accessing general services, such as renting property, using the transport system, understanding Australian law, finding employment and accessing education. In addition, other government-funded services include: translating and interpreting services that are provided 24 hours a day, seven days a week and trauma counselling.

One important point that should be made here is that the assistance provided by the Australian government can be seen as a type of social investment. Apart from minimising interruptions to other citizens and services, the refugees themselves make important economic, civil and social contributions to Australian society after resettlement (AGDIC 2011, p. 55). In particular, people from refugee backgrounds have proven to have entrepreneurial qualities, tending to engage in small and medium business enterprises. Furthermore, many humanitarian entrants maintain economic links with their country of origin, in this way providing monetary development to their home country, which may reduce some of the causes of displacement, but also may have the effect of increasing trade and strengthening the Australian economy (AGDIC 2011, pp. 40-1). Additionally, through volunteer work, participation in community projects and engagement with local institutions, refugees have become fundamental and positive actors in a vibrant multicultural society.

The story of exile, migration and resettlement of the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees

The Nepali-speaking Bhutanese or Lhotshampa[6], are descendants of Nepalese migrants that settled in Southern Bhutan in the late 1890's. After a period of pacific coexistence in 1988, they were culturally repressed and forced to assimilate or be forcibly ejected from the country (Hutt 2003).[7] They were forced to seek refuge in Nepal and in 1992, the UNHCR established camps in Eastern Nepal, built to house more than 100,000 refugees (IOM 2008).

From 2007, with the help of the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Nepali-speaking Bhutanese people started resettling in eight hosting countries. Since the beginning of this initiative, the UNHCR has relocated over 100,000 refugees, the majority of which have resettled in the United States (Shrestha 2015).[8]

In Adelaide, The Nepali-speaking Bhutanese community of Salisbury is now a compact and socially active community. Overall, the results of our research have shown that their process of integration into Australian society has been successful.

The added value: social identity and cultural diversity (NGO and BAASA)

Australia values the qualities of refugees as survivors and it believes that by assisting the newly arrived to recover from their past, they are more likely to become actors that contribute to Australian society (AGDIC 2011). It is important to note here that Australia is a multicultural country with multicultural policies. This means that there is a focus on integrating new arrivals and even ethnic groups into a society without forced assimilation. For example, the Australian government provides grants for the formation of non-profit ethnic community organisations that have the ability to advocate on behalf of its members, in this way building strong communities.

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[6] The meaning of Lhotshampa is "Southern".

[7] This cultural policy stipulated that only the traditional Bhutanese language (Dzongkha) and the traditional dress (driglam namza) were allowed in Bhutan.

[8] The countries of resettlement are: the United States of America (84,819), Canada (6,500), Australia (5,554), New Zealand (1002), Denmark (874), Norway (566), the United Kingdom (358) and the Netherlands (327).

The multicultural approach of the Australian government has allowed the Bhutanese community to form the Bhutanese Australian Association of South Australia (BAASA). This organisation is community based and run by elected members of the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese community. It works two-fold, cooperating with and implementing government assisted settlement projects, but also advocating for the Bhutanese community, giving its members a voice amongst the larger Australian community. Furthermore, this organisation provides jobs for the chosen representatives, thus helping with one of the most difficult aspects of integration. The government is supplying the spaces for several cultural activities organised by BAASA. The following are some of the main activities that they organise:

- The Bhutanese Ethnic School: organised to teach Australian Nepali-speaking children how to read and write Nepali language and some other elements of their culture and traditions.
- Nepali-speaking Bhutanese Radio, based in Adelaide.
- The Seniors Social Support Program: born with the specific aim of 'making people happy', and explaining basic things, such as how to cross the street, understanding traffic and advice about nutrition.[9]
- Cultural events to promote Nepali culture, such as 'Resettlement Day'. Sporting activities for young people.

From the perspective of the refugees

The Nepali-speaking Bhutanese show a great appreciation for their newly received citizenship certificates by the Australian Government and many say that they are "proud to be citizens of this great country" and "happy to be graced with a peaceful environment and fully content with their life".

Nevertheless, cultural identity still constitutes a more complicated issue. During the forced movement from Bhutan to Nepal, their culture was all that they had left to them, and they protected it fiercely, in order not to lose their identity during that period of displacement. Now in their current context, they are aware of the importance of their culture and they work hard to preserve it through the generations. Amongst people that we have interviewed within the community, the

majority have reported having made a conscious effort to preserve their cultural heritage and have expressed a will to pass it on to their children and grandchildren.

One man said that he wanted his children to learn Nepali, so he lied to them saying that he couldn't speak English and so at home they had to speak Nepali. He said:

> "One day my son and I were at the market and I was talking in English with a Filipino friend. Afterwards, on the way back home my son asked me: 'why did you tell me that you could not speak English?' I said: 'it is because I wanted you to learn our language. This is the language of our culture, without it you don't know where you come from. Even if you learn English, if at home you speak Nepali this makes it easier if one day you want to go to visit Nepal'".

Another man underlined the importance of learning English to live and integrate in the new context of Australia, when he said:

> When I arrived, my wife asked me to go to the shop Woolworths, but I couldn't buy anything because they didn't understand me, so I came back with empty hands. I felt frustrated and inadequate so we both went to TAFE to learn English.

A teenager used the metaphor of the traveling up a mountain to explain that cultural adaptation should not affect the cultural belonging: "if you go on the top of a mountain you have to adapt your clothing, but you don't change yourself".

Why Social identity and Cultural diversity matters: social identity and cultural diversity among the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese

Many sociologists demonstrate that the social identity of immigrants constitutes a vital factor when studying the processes of cultural interaction (Verkuyten & Martinovic 2012; Mana, Orr & Mana 2009; Pfeifer et al. 2007; Phinney et al. 2001). Moreover, recent research has added empirical evidence to the assumption that "social exclusion encourages separate identity" (Collier 2013) showing that the level of integration of immigrants is strictly linked to the level of trust offered by the hosting people (Herreros and Criado 2009).

In order to elaborate a theory of integration in the context of immigration, I apply the 'theory of social integration' by Peter Blau (1960) within

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[9] This information was gained through interviews with the organisers of the seniors group.

a multicultural context. Blau started his discussion from Émile Durkheim's (2014 [1893]) social theory, that speculates on social change, social integration and collective consciousness. Durkheim argued that the division of labour would not necessarily create social solidarity and that mediation between the individual and the society might be required and this could be provided by the state. Expanding on this theory, Blau underlined the role of acceptance and attraction as the driving factors for integration in a group. By applying this theory in the context of multiculturalism, we can define the boundaries of social identity and cultural diversity within which the dualism of integration/segregation is displayed. This theory of social integration suggests that people in a group accept each other according to a 'mechanism of exchange' (Homans 1958), in which each actor has something to give to the other that will improve the potential and capability of the group as a whole. In multicultural contexts, immigrants are the new introduced elements, and as such, they will be accepted if they are portrayed to society as a positive addition, bringing knowledge, experience and culture. This means constructing the social identity of immigrants as worthy individuals.

The concept of trust, elaborated by Herreros and Criado (2009), is useful here to explain the relationship between immigrants and state. By giving refugees the trust and respect that is accorded to every regular citizen, governments can act as the cohesive function that Durkheim proposes in his model, as an entity able to "foster the general interest of society at a level that most citizens can understand and accept" (Grabb 1990, p. 88). It is crucial that the state intervenes to create more inclusive integration policies, as studies have shown "that more inclusive integration policies may reduce the general public's feelings of threat and, perhaps, anti-immigrant attitudes" (Callens 2015, p. 11). This is the point on which we can say Australia has succeeded.

Australia has policies in place that allows immigrants to construct themselves in their own way while simultaneously feeling wanted and useful for society. The Australian government achieves this by celebrating cultural diversity, sponsoring cultural events that are open to the public and providing mechanisms for helping them to fully integrate into society. In the Australian context, the social identity of the 'legal' immigrant is built around the category of trust and respect.[10]

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[10] This is vastly different, however, from the treatment and construction of the 'boat people' for which Prime Minister John Howard specifically required that the media not take any photos that humanise them (Smit 2009, p. 211).

Under this anthropological framework, we can conclude that it is not important whether or not people assimilate or keep their culture, however it is important that these people cooperate in the social and economic context, feeling in this way part of the community. This will occur more easily if assimilation is a choice and not enforced. Having an awareness of the laws of the hosting country, being in possession of a national citizenship certificate, but at the same time having the freedom to express their own culture, migrants will usually reciprocate with economic and social engagement and participation.

Concluding Remarks

Research has demonstrated that refugees have a strong impact on Australian society. Their positive actions have occurred and continue to occur within the Australian context largely due to the willingness of arrivals to participate in society. In understanding why this occurs, we have adopted an anthropological approach to deconstruct the mechanisms that are taking place. We have argued that the construction of social identity is vital in this context and this construction can be effectively assisted by the state. One theme that has occurred while interviewing people from the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese community is that individual and cultural practices of the refugees had been respected and encouraged. This is important as it allowed the individuals to interact with society at large, on their own terms and from their own cultural experience.

The Nepali-speaking Bhutanese community were able to form their own NGO, under governmental guidance, in order to advocate for their own ethnic group. In this way, the newly resettled residents were able to interact with the Australian institutions and become a meaningful part of the community. The reciprocal trust between the refugees and government quickly led the Bhutanese community to reconstruct themselves as 'Australian Nepali-speaking Bhutanese'. As such, there was a willingness to participate in community issues, to join the workforce and to contribute to society, not just for themselves, but also for the wider Australian community. This is the major goal of integration policies and should be considered as a positive example of successful integration across the globe.

Acknowledgements

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