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# The Importance of Subjectively Constructed Meaning: Integration Viewed From the Perspective of Immigrants[1]

**Abstract** In political discourse, as much as in social studies, the term integration is commonly viewed in the context of migration. On the basis of 'objective' indicators and statistical analysis, the level of integration is measured and assessed as 'low' or 'high', 'sufficient' or 'insufficient'. This is the perspective of the receiving countries (not migrants), which clearly dominates in this field of study. Seeing this perspective as partial, we decided to ask migrants themselves what integration means to them. The analysis of the narrative interviews conducted with Ukrainian, Srilankese and Senegalese men and women living in the South of Italy has demonstrated that integration for them is more related to the notion of 'good life' than to a desire of becoming 'one of us'.[2] Our interviewees' approach to integration is very pragmatic as pursuing their own life projects, even if they turn out to be relatively modest, is after all their main concern. From their narratives emerges an idea of integration as acceptance and satisfaction, but without aspirations for equality, participation and full social and political rights, which calls for more active integration policies.

**Keywords** subjective meaning, integration, migration, biographical experiences, autobiographical narrative interviews

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## Introduction

Contrary to a great number of publications approaching the question of migrants' integration on the basis of 'objective' indicators (cf. Kearns & Whitley 2015; Ager & Strang 2004; Ager & Strang 2008; Cebolla-Boado & Finotelli 2015), in this paper we focus on the subjective meaning of integration as it is constructed in the narratives of immigrants. We argue that in order to understand the processes of integration it does not suffice to focus on the 'objective' indicators only, such as employment, living conditions, legal status and language skills, but also, or even first of all, the attention needs to be paid to the biographical experiences of migrants - before, during and after the transition - as well as their own understanding of integration. We recognize the fact that the 'objective' and subjective definitions of integration do not necessarily coincide, therefore, both of them need to be studied and then confronted.

The scope of this paper is to present the processes of integration from the bottom-up perspective rather than provide a detailed literature review on migrants' integration as it has been done elsewhere (Kindler et al. 2015; Penninx 2007; 2010) demonstrating that the concept of integration is highly normative, based on contradictory assumptions and ambiguous as it is understood differently by various users (Anthias et al. 2013). In order to focus in our analysis on the subjective perspective of immigrants, we conducted in-depth interviews (autobiographical narrative and semi-structured interviews) with 16 people coming from three groups, significantly present in the Southern regions of Italy and at the same time being very diverse in terms of migration, settlement and employment patterns: 6 coming from Ukraine (5 of them are women), 7 from Sri Lanka (5 men and 2 women), and 3 from Senegal, all of whom have been living in the South of Italy (Naples and Campania Region) at least for nine years, allowing us to view the processes of integration. The collected interviews capture the diversity of migration paths (there are both pioneers and those who reunified their families), the reasons for migration (those escaping from poverty and others having a desire for improvement of their economic and social status), family and housing arrangements (some live with their relatives, others alone or with their co-nationals) and working conditions (ranging from domestic workers[3] to an accountant and an entrepreneur). This diversity is linked to nationality, gender, class, cultural capital and the age at the moment of arrival.

[1] The material analyzed in the paper was collected within the project "Dimensioni, misure e determinanti dell'integrazione degli immigrati nelle società di destinazione" ["Dimensions, Measures and Determinants of Immigrants' Integration in the Societies of Destination"], coordinated Prof. Salvatore Strozza and co-financed by FARO: Finanziamenti per l'Avvio di Ricerche Originali [Italian Funding for the Launching of Original Research], University of Naples 'Federico II' and Compagna di San Paolo (CUP: E61J12000180005). The project results have been published in Donadio, P., Gabrielli, G., Massari, M. (eds.), 2014, *Uno come te. Europei e nuovi europei nei percorsi di integrazione* [*One Like You: Europeans, New Europeans and the Paths of Integration*], Collana Fondazione-ISMU, Milan: FrancoAngeli. In the volume there is also a longer and more detailed version of this paper published in Italian: Spanò, A. & Domecka, M. 'Cosa significa l'integrazione? Quando a rispondere sono gli immigrati' ['What does integration mean? When the ones to respond are the immigrants'], pp. 215-236.

[2] The 'one of us' perspective, underlying explicitly or implicitly many of the integration approaches, is the one formulated in light of 'national gaze', taking as a starting point the majority of society (cf. Erdal 2013: 992; Yuval-Davis 2010).

[3] Our Ukrainian female interviewees work predominantly in the sector of domestic labor. In this paper, however, we do not analyze in-depth their work and life conditions as it has been done very well elsewhere (see Näre 2013; Näre 2014; Spanò & Zaccaria 2003).

All of our interviewees had a residence permit (in one case, there was also an Italian citizenship obtained through marriage). All those differences have been analyzed and published before (Spanò & Domecka 2014) in a book summing the project findings. Here, we present an overview of our major results, focusing more on the similarities we found out than on the differences. The choice of the autobiographical narrative approach was meant not only to provide time and space for our interviewees to share their experiences, to 'give them the voice' but also to facilitate the expression of their agency: their reflexivity, their concerns and their projects as they are defined in the context they live in. We recognize the fact that in the autobiographical narratives the levels of agency and structure are linked as individual projects are presented in broader social and institutional contexts, where they can be facilitated, suspended or blocked.

In the paper we present the results of the analysis of collected narratives, which point first of all at a pragmatic approach towards integration, deeply rooted in the migrants' life projects. To our initial surprise, and in contrast to the significant presence of integration discourse in the public sphere, the topic of integration was not picked up easily by our interviewees. The word itself was not familiar to our narrators and the concern about rights and citizenship would not have been a part of their everyday reflection. As our interviewees did not have any ready-made definitions of integration at their disposal, they had to construct it while narrating their life experiences. Therefore, instead of the notion of integration as we know it from migration studies or from political discourse, our analysis found an idea of integration as 'good life'. To be integrated, according to our interviewees, means to have a job, a decent place to live, a status regulated with residence permit, to be surrounded by family and friends, to feel satisfied by accepting the constraints and by feeling free and accepted by others. The relative modesty of these expectations may be explained by temporarization: migration tends to be viewed as a transitory phase of our interviewees' lives. Temporarization makes the limitations encountered in the country of destination easier to accept and the discussions on rights and citizenship less relevant. The main reference points of the people interviewed were not here and now, but their past (often marked by poverty thus the current satisfaction and emphasis on 'good life') and their future in an unknown destination or in their countries of origin (thus the concern about Italian citizenship less pronounced).

In the paper we also demonstrate how much the meaning of integration differs if we take it as a theoretical construct, a social policy goal and a lived experience of the immigrants. Viewed from the bottom-up perspective, integration has first of all a pragmatic character as it is not that much a matter of becoming 'one of us', but it is about the possibility of realizing the projects of 'good life', where individual agency and structural context play equally important roles.

## The Subjective Side of Integration

In some countries, such as the Netherlands, Norway and others, some rather elaborated ceremonies have been introduced for the 'new national citizens' (Erdal, 2013). It is a symbolic rite of passage, which is to mark that the final point of integration, becoming 'one of us', has been achieved. However, contrary to the expectations, the participation rates in those ceremonies are very low (Hagelund et al. 2009, cfr. Erdal 2013). How can we explain the fact that apparently well-integrated immigrants do not want to celebrate their new national citizenship, their becoming 'one of us'? If we took into account only the 'objective' indicators of integration models, we would describe these people as clearly well-integrated, in a sense that they are in employment, have good housing conditions, speak the language of the recipient country, et cetera. Therefore, this last step, granting citizenship and citizens' rights would be expected to represent a moment worth celebrating. In order to explain why it was not considered as such, the statistical data do not suffice as understanding why people act in a particular way requires taking into account their own perspective, their experiences, their lived life and their own meaning of integration, which may differ significantly from the ones of researchers and policy makers.

If somebody had asked these new citizens why they did not participate in the ceremony, perhaps they would have heard that citizenship for immigrants has first of all a practical meaning, well-grounded in their life projects. It could have been discovered that if a migrant person has a plan to get married and buy a house in the country of origin and then after some years go back there for good, then the new citizenship, in many cases requiring the cancellation of the previous one as many countries do not allow dual citizenship, would not be perceived as an attractive option. In some other cases it could have been found that for people coming from the countries which passports do not provide access to global mobility, the importance of new citizenship lies rather in the acquisition of a Western passport than the desire of becoming 'one of us' (cf. Erdal 2013). It could have been also noticed that the notion of becoming 'one of us' is not clear at all, as 'us' is such a heterogeneous category. Perhaps becoming 'one of us' should not even be considered as a goal of integration as other ideas, such as staying himself or herself in good relations with others may be not only clearer but also more respectful for the various identities of newer society members. This change in the thinking of integration would also mark a shift from the ideas pursued for the good of receiving societies to those recognizing the good of receivers and newcomers as equally important.

Discoveries of this type may have led to a conclusion that integration is understood differently by policy makers, who propose to celebrate new citizens, by researchers, who are surprised that the 'integrated ones' do not want to celebrate their new citizenship, and by immigrants themselves, who develop their own projects and meanings that researchers and policy makers may not be aware of. From this point of view it becomes clear that integration as a political goal, as a theoretical construct and as migrants' lived experience takes quite distinct meanings.

Our choice of approaching integration from the subjective perspective (which may be of individual, as well as collective character) comes not only from a general need to 'give the voice' (Bogdan & Biklen 1998) to allow people, who otherwise may be left in

silence, to have their voices be heard. However, 'giving the voice' is not enough as the real point of qualitative research is not only to gather the information on the lived experiences but to facilitate the expression of agency, which means to listen carefully to the narrations, evaluations, argumentations, and interpretations people build over their experiences, the contexts they live in and their interdependence. The idea is to conduct research *with* people rather than *on* people.

One of the best ways of capturing agency is the one through autobiographical narration. Following the classics, we can say that "the self-biography is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life is confronting us" (Dilthey 1962 [1924]) as it links the level of individual experiences and the level of structurally given circumstances, enabling us to relate life projects to the contexts where they can be defined and realized and vice versa, to establish a connection between structural possibilities and impossibilities and the projects developed. The construction of a life story is a way of presenting those aspects of one's past, which are relevant for the current situation, as well as for the future projects guiding the present actions (Kohli 1981). Therefore, in the narration, the processes of migration and integration are contextualized, incorporated in the life histories and in the agency of narrators. By agency we mean the capacity of changing one's own projects in relation to the context and making a difference in the context in the light of one's projects. The projects play here a crucial role as they are oriented towards the future, but come from the past and condition the present. Narrating one's life also means doing biographical work (Strauss, 1987; Schütze, 2008), which can be described as an effort of re-reading of, reflecting upon and eventually integrating one's past experiences. Biographical work undertaken during autobiographical narration means that different interpretations of one's life course are taken into account and struggled with. It is a self-critical effort meant to evaluate one's biographical development in order to establish a plausible version of one's life (and one's identity) with its many contradictions, impediments (both internal and external), turning points and the paths considered, but never taken. In this particular research project, we looked at biographical work as the capacity of evaluating one's choices and linking one's dreams, hopes and projects to the existing opportunity structures, as well as the capacity of changing the context in order to make their subsequent steps possible. Biographical work, conceptualized in this way, plays the role of a crucial resource in the integration process.

In order to understand what integration means to them, we asked all our interviewees to share with us their experiences not only of migration but also their lives before and after this turning point. We chose the autobiographical narrative approach[4] as we knew from our previous research experiences that conducting life story interviews gives us a chance to approach people in their world of everyday life and to be offered not only a story of events, decisions and turning points but also their reflexive elaboration in relation to the changing context. By careful listening, transcribing and analyzing the narratives we take into account both life experiences and personal theories people construct around them including their own explanations and argumentations. As all the events and experiences are put into context and include different types of significant others, the biographical account is not only a methodological model of hermeneutical understanding of individual lives but also a privileged way of approaching social reality (Domecka et al. 2012:21). Studying integration from the immigrants' point of view, which presupposes knowledge and understanding of their experiences, their ways of thinking and talking about integration, the value they ascribe to it and the paradoxes they see in it, not only enriches our understanding of the processes of integration but also helps us to explain why in a certain context integration takes a particular form. The objective of the following parts of this article is to present the notion of integration as it is viewed from the perspective of immigrants.

[4] The initial research design assumed conducting autobiographical narrative interviews as developed by Fritz Schütze (2005 [1984]) followed then by a list of questions directly related to the project objectives. As in some cases it was possible to conduct autobiographical narrative interviews, in some others, due to language difficulties (not all the interviewees were fluent in Italian and no interpreters and written translations were available because of very limited budgeting) and due to the lack of experience with this particular method of some of the interviewers (researchers coming from different disciplines), our approach had to be modified. The result is that some of the interviews conducted do not contain a long autobiographical narrative part, but consist of the answers to the questions asked, which then enabled the reconstruction of the life course.

## Integration as a Pragmatic Matter

The questions about integration (*What does integration mean to you? What comes to your mind when you hear the word integration?*)[5] were asked later in the interviews, after the narrative part where interviewees would share their experiences related to migration, their lives in their home countries and then in Italy.

Our first finding about integration from the immigrants perspective is that, despite the fact that their integration appears frequently in the public discourse, it is not the word which is spontaneously used in immigrants' narratives. Unlike other elements of public discourse, such as the crisis, which perforated the interviewees' ways of talking and thinking, the very word integration is not a part of their vocabulary. Moreover, despite their different characteristics, our interviewees' reactions suggested an unfamiliarity with the term, even among those who know Italian language well: *I didn't understand, tell me* [laughing]; *I don't know how to respond*; *integration, I didn't understand what…*; *I don't know what you mean by integration*.

The sense of strangeness demonstrated towards the word integration can be explained by the fact that the current debate on immigrants integration is focused mainly on the issues of citizenship and voting rights, an issue that is not within the main concerns of our respondents. In fact, they appear guided by a pragmatic principle (cf. Penninx 2007), which - rather than the assertion of rights - makes them interested in what actually can be useful in their daily lives, dealing with the difficulties they encounter: securing sufficient income and decent, housing conditions for themselves and their families, education for their children, access to healthcare. Italian citizenship and citizens' rights seem to be abstract as they do not provide anymore practical

[5] The project aimed at confronting the official measures of integration with immigrants' own understanding of these processes. Direct questions were asked about integration and the responses were then analyzed by the team of sociologists, anthropologists and linguists.

solutions readily applicable in their everyday lives other than the residence permit (*permesso di soggiorno*) our interviewees have already acquired.

The way the citizenship, voting rights and language skills, treated as crucial elements of immigrants' integration in migration studies and political discourse, are perceived by the people we interviewed clearly demonstrates their pragmatism. The possibility of being granted Italian citizenship does not represent any added value, neither politically nor symbolically. What counts, however, is the citizenship's meaning for their current life situation and their future projects. The new citizenship, providing access to free movement in the European Union, may be taken into account only by those who have a desire to move as it is confirmed by Stella, a 39-year-old Ukrainian domestic worker:

> [I want] just one citizenship [Ukrainian], you say more than one maybe to travel the world…but I'm not a globe trotter. [Stella, Ukrainian, 39 years old]

Regarding the future, if one thinks about Italy as a transition country, a place of temporary work aimed at accumulation of resources that can be used later in the home country, then Italian citizenship is not only unattractive but also problematic if one's country of origin does not allow dual citizenship as it is demonstrated in the cases of Susante, a 35-year-old Srilankese man and Lesia, a 40-year-old Ukrainian women, both of whom have been working in Italy for about 15 years as domestic workers:

> Italian [citizenship]? I don't need it at all because if I take Italian citizenship and lose the Srilankese one, I can't…you need to have tourist [visa] in Sri Lanka, you have to pay. It's useless because later on, after some years, I have to go to live there. [Susante, Srilankese, 35 years old]

> The dual citizenship? I don't think so because our country doesn't allow dual citizenship [even if it was possible] I'd have to see because we have some property there, in Ukraine, so one has to see how to…so I don't know. [Lesia, Ukrainian, 40 years old]

On the contrary, for those who want to stay, the already worked out projects change the optics completely. In particular, for the children of immigrants, brought up in Italy, the new citizenship seems to be not only practical but also symbolically relevant, not considered only in practical terms but also in terms of identity resources, as identity statement and confirmation. Nathan, a young Srilankese man, currently unemployed, who came to Italy as a teenager, seems to have a clear project of not returning to his home country, at least until his retirement, and getting married preferably in Northern Europe. Asked about his choice of citizenship, he mentions the Italian one, but in a broader sense, as resource providing access to the European space, to free movement and other social rights:

> If you take European citizenship, I mean, it makes your life easier in the European community, so an Italian one or a Spanish one are equal, let's say, your life's easier in a sense, I think…just to go to England I need to have a visa, so… [Nathan, Srilankese, 27 years old]

Later, however, Nathan, who declares he is *Srilankese by birth and Italian by upbringing*, says:

> I wanted to apply for the citizenship, but I left my work, so I couldn't do it anymore…[I'd like to do it] at least, I mean, I've been here for more or less 15 years, so I feel…I'm 27 and I feel half and half, I'm here and I'll stay here, so I'd better do it. [Nathan, Srilankese, 27 years old]

Similarly Tani, who was brought to Italy by her family when she was only four, recalls living all those years as if developing *a double personality*:

> If I could choose, I think it would be a dual citizenship (…) I feel there's a part missing and until I resolve it, I won't be able to say that I feel more Italian or more Srilankese. In fact, I don't know it yet [laughing] to be honest. Also for the future…Where do I see my future? For now, here in Naples and then I don't know [laughing]. [Tani, Srilankese, 23 years old]

The way of thinking about citizenship as related to the voting rights is marked by the same kind of pragmatism. The point expressed by Yuri, a Ukrainian pizza chef living in Italy for the last nine years, is the most common one:

> The citizenship…to have the right to vote…not…maybe yes, but…to be honest I didn't think about getting the [Italian] citizenship because in the end what is it needed for?...to have the right to vote? For me it's not that important because in the end there's not that much difference who you are as a citizen…also without the citizenship you can be fine. [Yuri, Ukrainian, 36 years old]

Also in this case, the exception is represented by those who were brought up in Italy. The right to vote, in fact, was assessed as important only by Nathan, who did not mention it spontaneously, however, but was asked directly about his opinion on this issue:

> [I miss the right to vote] of course, in a sense that all of us have duties, in a sense that we pay taxes and not all of us have let's say rights ((pause)) that is all have duties, but not all have rights…that is, in a sense if you elect a government it still influences also the foreign community so that's let's say a bad thing. [Nathan, Srilankese, 27 years old]

Differently than the citizenship and voting rights, the residence permit for its direct impact on the immigrants' concrete life conditions, is highly valued by our interviewees. It is in fact the most crucial resource for those who possess it and the main obstacle for those who lost it or never managed to obtain it. Liliana, a Ukrainian woman who used to work as domestic help, but then managed to open a very much dreamed about shop, admits it was possible thanks to her own and her husband's regulated status:

> We took this decision to try with the shop as we had the documents. The residence permit allows us to take these steps, let's say. [Liliana, Ukrainian, 35 years old]

It is commonly agreed among our interviewees that the residence permit is enough to live well in the South of Italy. Previously introduced Susante, after declaring to have no problems *as there is the residence and the health insurance,* confirms with full conviction that *here it's enough to have the residence, the residence is enough to live peacefully.*

On the other hand, there are stories of the difficulties experienced due to the lack of residence permit. There are some projects reported, such as getting married abroad, which had to be changed due to the lack of valid documents. There are also the police controls described, which were experienced in the transitory periods before acquiring residence permit, as in case of Sanjeev, and between its renewals:

> When I came here, I had problems to learn the language, for more than 5 months I was without work… but then slowly, slowly I learnt the language, found a job, my sister helped me to find the job, to find signori/ those signori…a few times the police [carabinieri] controlled me and asked "residence permit?", I said: "I have no residence permit, without residence permit we're poor, I don't want to be sent back and so on", but they let me out, didn't say anything, they said "don't worry, but try not to go out and walk the streets without the permit" like that because I explained my situation that I don't want to go back ((pause)) that's important, right? If you go to Germany they send you back immediately! Look what the carabinieri did, what they said: "go home, don't go out during the night." [Sanjeev, Srilankese, 36 years old]

The story of police controls told by Sanjeev shows the importance of regulated status in order to avoid problems and lead a peaceful life, the condition very much emphasized by our interviewees. The cited passage demonstrates the belief that in Europe there exist different control systems: one less and one more severe (Southern Italy and Germany respectively), but even in the milder and more understanding system the minimum of requirements needs to be met. It is not accidental that the story about the police control is embedded in the larger narrative on searching for a job and getting one. The family that employed Sanjeev did it legally and in this way enabled the regularization of his status. Applying for the residence permit, which gives access also to health insurance, is the first and final step taken by the immigrants as it is commonly believed to be sufficient for a 'good life'.

The same pragmatic attitude is expressed towards the language learning. Italian is treated as an essential tool for finding and doing work, but as it is explained by Yuri, language proficiency is not considered to be necessary:

> In Italian there are still some complicated things, but if once learnt…if one studies, if I go to school that's one thing, but I've learnt it on my own and it's not that I need so many things, I don't write books, right? [Yuri, Ukrainian, 36 years old]

Having discussed briefly the elements usually treated in migration studies and political discourse as the pillars of immigrants' integration: citizenship, citizens' rights and language skills, in the following parts of the paper we will show how our interviewees build their own meanings of integration. The initially demonstrated unfamiliarity with the word 'integration' together with the pragmatic approach towards citizenship, the right to vote and language learning, do not preclude, as we will show, a development of one's own understanding of integration process, associating it with building a 'good life', satisfaction and acceptance.





**Integration as 'Good Life'**

After analyzing the narratives of our interviewees and their responses to the questions if and to what extent they feel integrated, it became clear that integration from their perspective is no more and no less than 'good life',[6] where the adjective 'good' refers to the condition where all basic human needs can be satisfied: housing, work, family, friendship and freedom. These are in fact the necessary ingredients for life to be considered as 'good', described by our narrators also as 'normal'. The passages taken from the interviews with Natalia and Susante, both of whom employed as domestic workers, show the conversations they had with the interviewers, which demonstrate very well the distance between the formal and the substantive definitions of integration:

> Now I don't, I don't know how to reply about integration, as you were saying, it means I don't know, I'm fine in a country, this means integration.
> Q: What are the necessary elements for a person to say 'I'm integrated'?
> A: Ah! That's it! Now I understand it, now, for the life I have now, I think I'm integrated also because now I'm better with Italians than with foreigners… The life I have now, having a flat, having a job, having friends from this country, now as I feel free, I feel integrated. [Natalia, Ukrainian, 55 years old]

> Integration, I didn't understand what…
> Q: Getting integrated means, let's say, becoming a part of this society, do you have this feeling of being fine here, of being a part of this society?
> A: No, there's nothing, me, let's say, it's not bad, I don't know what to say, there's nothing…let's say, for me it's better, let's say, however, we spend time in a nice way, let's say, it's not bad… [Susante, Srilankese, 35 years old]

The passages that follow demonstrate that –in addition to material elements such as work and housing conditions - a crucial element of a 'good life' is the respect showed by the natives, meaning social recognition and self-esteem that comes from it:

> Let's say that I accept everything in life, um, which makes me feel good, let's say. This work is hard, demanding. I get up at 7 am, 7:30, and go to bed at 11 pm. It's very hard, but I have my two hours of detachment in the afternoon. I enter my room, close the door, switch on my computer, then I take a rest, I do something I like, don't think about work. Let's say that with this family we've found an agreement that I don't invade their life and they don't invade my life. I do things without saying that much, also I don't ask lots of questions, I don't interfere, I just do my work, that's the condition of my signora that we've found. They're satisfied how I work and I'm satisfied how they pay me because they pay well, they appreciate me, they respect me, that's it. [Natalia, Ukrainian, 55 years old]

[6] The idea of integration as 'good life' appeared much earlier in the report on the migrants' integration in Italy (Zincone, 2000), where three different interpretations of integration have been distinguished, depending on the types of relations between immigrants and natives: (a) integration as *equality* (of rights and resources), (b) integration seen *instrumentally*, where newcomers are assessed on the basis of what they bring to the host society (workforce, tax contributions), (c) integration as the process of shortening the distance between natives and immigrants and becoming *similar*. On top of these three types, Zincone proposes a model of integration understood as integrity of a person: good life, as a positive interaction, as a peaceful coexistence. In this context, the migrants' integration is viewed not only from the perspective of newcomers but also the point of view of natives, whose concerns must be taken into consideration in order to build the conditions for successful integration (Zincone 2000).

> [talking about the satisfaction he feels about his work as an accountant] the main motivation is this one, I'm well accepted and socially satisfied. [Amadu, Senegalese, 42 years old]

Making a reference to Archer (2000; 2003), we can say that for our interviewees, the condition of being integrated includes the satisfaction of needs in three orders constituting reality: *natural order*, referring to body conservation, *practical order*, related to subsistence through work, and *social order*, where one develops self-esteem as a social being. The hierarchy of these needs varies across cases, but our analysis has demonstrated that if we want to talk about a real-life integration process, the three orders of reality need to be taken into account and all the needs pertaining to them, satisfied. Without social recognition (including mutual acceptance, respect and genuine interest) integration is not possible, even if the needs of natural and practical orders are satisfied.

It can also be affirmed, in reference to the different dimensions, the concept of integration is usually made of (the economic, cultural, social and political ones)[7], in case of all our interviewees there emerges the centrality of the economic dimension (work) and the social (relationships), and the importance of cultural and political dimensions. If the relative importance of political dimension (the one that refers to citizenship and rights) can be explained by the pragmatic attitude analyzed above, the lack of emphasis on the problems of cultural order is explained by the general tendency to minimize the weight of cultural differences and the tendency to perform some intercultural mixing that we find in all of our narrators. The fact of maintaining one's roots, in fact, is not perceived as an obstacle to inclusion. On the contrary, being a migrant does not pose a problem of abandoning one's cultural origins as it is well-demonstrated by Natalia, of Russian origin who lived for many years in Ukraine and nine years ago arrived in Italy:

> Let's say that you can't feel inside of another nation ever because even if you're fine in a country where you are well-integrated, inside I'm always Russian, not even Ukrainian because even while living in Ukraine inside I always stay Russian, I don't know why! Maybe because it's the mother tongue, because I grew up with Russian culture, it's difficult to change the inside. [Natalia, Ukrainian, 55 years old]

The erasing of one's cultural identity is not taken into account not only because it is deemed hardly possible (*it's difficult to change the inside*) but also no need is felt of doing so. Instead, the diverse forms of cultural exchange are developed and Natalia provides some beautiful examples of this intercultural giving and taking:

> With our women because now in the morning we have the [Italian] lessons and then we go to the room we've rented, and we do an evening of romance because lots of our women sing and I write poems, let's say, there are people who play [instruments], we often do them, um the poetic evenings with songs, also dedicated... as we did the evening of Totò because many people don't know he was not only an actor, he was also a poet, also a director, and did lots of things in life. And now we even have a project with Italians, we do an Association of Maxim Gorky, um, let's say a show dedicated to Pulcinella, our character is Petrushka, because Petrushka is very similar to Pulcinella, the same character, only Petrushka has a red shirt and Pulcinella a white one (…) it's very interesting to make comparisons, let's say our cultures are attached also in this way, we've borrowed so much of music and arts from Italy (...) Italians often come because there are people who are interested, also when we did an evening dedicated to Vladimir Vysotsky, people came and brought CDs swith these songs translated in Italian, one brought a book of poems by Vysotsky translated in Italian, let's say we discovered something, that Italians also want to know our culture. [Natalia, Ukrainian, 55 years old]

Discovering the similarities and differences on the personal as much as cultural level, mutual interest, showed by the native and the immigrant groups, as well as intercultural exchange lead us to the next dimension of integration strongly emphasized by our interviewees: integration as acceptance.

**Integration as Acceptance**

The perspective emphasizing the importance of acceptance for successful integration, was found in all the interviews conducted. Integration was described as 'good life', the condition of "being fine", "leaving peacefully", "feeling at home", for which mutual acceptance was needed. The acceptance was understood as on the one hand, the condition of being accepted, being treated by others as a fellow citizen not a stranger, and on the other hand, as one's own capacity to accept the limitations imposed by the context. What emerges from the narratives, goes very much hand in hand with the basic definition of integration by Rinus Penninx as "the process of becoming an accepted part of society" (Penninx 2007:10).

Yuri, who recognizes the fact of being partially integrated, complains about being treated as a foreigner. He is critical about the way Italians treat the immigrants, but then ends up by accepting the social and spacial limits of integration. He concludes declaring not only that 'he has no complaints', but also admitting that he himself has a similar attitude towards the people he does not know:

> [I don't feel integrated], not completely, but I don't complain. Not completely because in the end, if you're a part of society, I think you need to have all the rights as an Italian has, if you live here, right? You need at least…Instead there's this thing of saying 'he's a foreigner', right? For so many Italians you're a foreigner, they look at you in a different way. If you have in front of you a foreigner and an Italian, you see them in a different way, that's right…because that one is your countryman and this one is a foreigner, let's say 80% of people see it like this…If I feel at home, I'm integrated. Me personally, I'm quite well-integrated, but in the end, if you take into account that when you go to a part where people don't know you, if you live in one area, everybody knows

[7] Lacroix (2010) shows how the "various dimensions, domains, levels or 'types' of integration have been categorized in many different ways, the most popular of which have been discussed under the groupings of economic, social, legal and cultural integration. Of course, none of these aspects of integration are isolated, and more often than not, one will influence the other. Insofar as this work is concerned, integration can be categorized into two major 'dimensions': (1) the structural, which includes all aspects of the social participation of individuals and groups into a larger society, including legal, political, labor, citizenship and so on; and (2) the affective, which refers to the processes of value orientation and identification (Lacroix 2010, p. 13).

> you, neighbors, clients, where I work, everybody's known me for years, so I feel like at home because they know me well, and knowing me, they talk, chat, right? They behave in a way…It's a different thing when you go close to a person who doesn't know you and he understands that you're a foreigner, one understands immediately, the way you speak, it's already…the atmosphere is more… how can I explain you it…let's be clear, Italians when they see that one is a foreigner, they don't treat him as an Italian because you never know, because they same thing is with me, if I see a foreigner and say: well…you know, I'm always a bit careful. Sometimes there are some situations that Italians think they're on a higher level than a foreigner, even if it's not the case, they think so, right? [Yuri, Ukrainian, 36 years old]

Among our interviewees there are also some who express directly what in other stories is communicated implicitly, that is, the semantic proximity between integration and acceptance:

> Integration means accepting. I came here, so I have to accept the rules here, I need to appreciate the things here, have Italian friends. [Liliana, Ukrainian, 35 years old]

It is important to stress the fact that also those who, like Liliana, put the weight of accepting mainly on the immigrants' shoulders, they are more hesitant to do the same in case of second generation, especially their own children. Liliana talking about her previous experiences as a domestic worker, found it understandable to conform to the demands of *signore* as she was *paid per hour and had to do what they wanted*. Her attitude changes, however, when she talks about some negative incidents, which have happened to her children. What in her own case could have been understood and accepted as necessary, in case of her sons, was simply unacceptable:

> In the emergency room there was me and my younger son Amir who was three, I think two or three, and my husband and me, we were explaining to this doctor that Amir had pain in his ear and he was insisting: 'But did you bring your documents? Did you? Are you from outside EU, illegal [extracomunitario] or do you have a residence permit?', 'No, look, we're here with residence permit, everything's all right'. Anyway, the attitude was very bad, but it's not even this attitude that bothered me but the moment my little son came close to this doctor's desk and he said: 'Go away!' with a disgusted face and I felt sorry for this child who didn't [do anything bad]. Yes, he came close to the desk, but didn't touch anything, he came close to see what the doctor was writing and he said with this face, with disgusted voice: 'Go away!', you know, as if he was…And this situation, really, when I left the room, I felt very bad, really bad because I'd never been in a situation where somebody would have told me: 'You're a foreigner, illegal [extracomunitarioa] as if…no. In this case, the doctor didn't even refer to me, but to my little son, an ignorant, I can't say anything else. [Liliana, Ukrainian, 35 years old]

The inter-generational differences are very clearly described in the narratives. On the one hand, there are the expectations which the first generation immigrants, even treating their stay abroad as temporary may legitimately have, and on the other, there are the rights of the second generation (previously analyzed in Spanò 2011). Being brought up and educated in Italy, the children of immigrants need to be recognized as Italian citizens and given all the citizens' rights. Their parents' country of destination has become their home and their main reference point, therefore, the limitations experienced in their case are more readily verbalized and contested.

***The Reasons for the Acceptance of Status Quo***

On the basis of the collected narratives it is possible to reconstruct the argumentation lines meant to explain why it is necessary to accept the life conditions and the structural and social constraints of the context our interviewees live in. The first reason for acceptance presented comes from the immigrants' conviction that they cannot aspire to equality:

> Let's say, it's not that I'm asking a lot. Of course, we know that we weren't asked to come here, we came here, it was our will to come here, nobody forced us and that's why I'm content with what I have. Work for me doesn't mean doing who knows what, it's enough to do honest work, so I'm glad with what I've got, I'm not asking a lot, let's say…To be equal, I can't say to be equal because I understand that I'm a foreigner and I'm in this country and I can't compare myself with an Italian person, that is, I don't pretend…I don't think that [foreigners] get fully inserted, that they can get inserted, anyway one is always a foreigner who comes and always there's something left that isn't…nobody gets fully integrated. [Lesia, Ukrainian, 40 years old]

> Why do I have to feel equal to an Italian citizen? I never even pretended to have the same weight on the scale because as I say, the path, the path I did, I left Senegal to come here and it's on me, it's on me the possibility of getting integrated. It's not that I have to come to impose the direction, I should be able to find a common point knowing that I've got an external view, an external request for a country. [Amadu, Senegalese, 42 years old]

The feeling of *not having the same weight* on the social scale is a sign of the failure of integration policies. The low expectations immigrants have towards institutions may suggest that they did not encounter any tangible help from them. The discourse of equal rights did not penetrate the level of everyday life and equality has never become reality for them. Our interviewees are stigmatized and then also stigmatize themselves as those 'naturally' occupying lower positions. As a result, they do not aspire for anything better than the immediately available niches left by the Italian majority society.

There are also other reasons given, implicitly, for the low expectations and the general acceptance of the status quo. First of them is the economic crisis and the resulting difficulties to find and keep a job, the second one is the vision of migration (and life in Italy) as a transitory phase and the third one is the overall satisfaction our interviewees feel about the shape their current lives have taken.

1. The perception of crisis

The immigrants, who shared their life stories with us, are fully aware of the existing segregation in the labor market. They know that the work available to them *are those jobs that Italians don't do.* Our narrators perceive also the phenomenon of over-education

and this is exactly the reason why one of our Senegalese interviewees discourages his brother from migrating: *it's better to stay in Senegal than to come to Italy because when you come here, you need to forget you've studied, you need to forget everything*. Both vertical and horizontal segregation in the labor market is well recognized. Our interviewees see that they are meant to fill the gaps left by the natives, but, what is crucial here, this perception of inequality does not lead them to anger and contestation. On the contrary, the existing conditions are silently accepted and explained with the help of crisis discourse. The economic crisis is viewed as the phenomenon beyond control (again the state or the EU institutions do not appear in this context at all), affecting immigrants as much as the natives. The dominating perspective is the following one: *if there is no work for Italians, even the graduates, what can the foreigners say?* Therefore, in the light of the difficulties encountered by all, those who have jobs, express their satisfaction and gratitude to the extent of feeling 'lucky':

> [talking about the work opportunities for immigrants in Italy] the only opportunities are that we have to do domestic work, home carers, babysitters because there's so much unemployment that thinking about something else would be just stupid. [Natalia, Ukrainian, 55 years old]

> [talking about his work as a pizza chef] it's not that it's the max, right, it's not that I like it so much, but for now, at least it can be accepted…when we talk about migrants, it's normal that it's more difficult to find a job because there's the crisis and nobody wants to pay. In fact there are many Italians who are looking for a job and they don't find it, in facts it's like 10%, 14%, what's the unemployment now? …For the immigrants it's even more difficult because it's not only those who are looking for a job but there's a queue of those who want to work, right. [Yuri, Ukrainian, 36 years old]

The perceived opportunity structure is so restricted that any change in employment, any improvement, becomes 'unthinkable'. Better jobs are thought to be so scarce that they become defined as 'not for us'. This mechanism leads our interviewees to give up any aspirations as thinking about any significant improvement is readily labelled as unthinkable or 'stupid' (an exception here is Liliana who took the risk of leaving her job of a domestic worker and opening a shop together with her husband).

2. The transitory character of migration experience

The tendency to view the migration as a transitory phase of one's life as in the condition of permanent temporariness (Cekiera, 2014) is another reason to accept the existing social and structural conditions. This feeling of a transitory experience comes from the fact that in many cases the extension of the residency in the host country is not that much intentional and planned as it is the result of contingencies, a product of unintended events and situations. Many of our interviewees came to Italy with an idea of staying for a limited period of time only. *I thought: I'll stay two or three years and I'll go back*; *I was thinking to stay for a year, I'd never have thought to stay here for 14 years*, these are the most common phrases appearing in the interviews. The plan in most cases was to go back home with significant savings, but in the end, all our interviewees were forced to stay longer due to various economic reasons (the savings were not as big as expected, the employment possibilities in the country of origin were very limited, wages in the home country were too low compared to the costs of living) or family reasons (mixed marriages and families started in the host country, children beginning Italian schools). Equally strong was the need to maintain a 'successful story' of migration for oneself, as well as for the others. Homecoming before achieving certain goals could be interpreted as a failure, especially in case of our Senegalese interviewees, sent to Italy to study and reach high positions, and treated as a collective investment. The decision to return is also postponed because of the fear of finding oneself in worse conditions, limiting the opportunities for children, and the fear of feeling as a stranger (Simmel 1972) in their countries of origin.

The strategy of temporarization, shortening the time horizon and focusing on the present, on the one hand comes from a fatalistic belief that 'everything is volatile and sooner or later it will end' and on the other hand, it has a very practical meaning: it facilitates accepting the constraints and preserving peaceful life (repetitively stressed by our interviewees) as much as it allows to avoid the responsibility of decision making and the risk of change.

3. The overall satisfaction

The acceptance, understood by our interviewees as a central element of integration, is very much related to the satisfaction about their current lives. The satisfaction expressed by people occupying low positions in the labor market, not adequate to their preparation (typical of the Mediterranean model of immigration as described by Pugliese 2002 and the metropolitan economy by Ambrosini 2011) may seem initially surprising, but it can be explained by the frames of reference our interviewees have. They feel 'lucky' as they compare their current situation with their past living conditions: *before coming to Italy, there was fear because sometimes we didn't eat*; they compare themselves with other migrants: *here there are friends without work, without food, also because they can't pay the rent, some go back, without work, without residence permit renewed, without contract*; but first of all the comparison is made with people who stayed in their home countries and live in much worse conditions:

> There are countries and people, let's say, there's nothing to eat…because here, anyway, my countrymen live well. If one is not good, I don't know, is not good because is without work, but anyway, after a year, two years, three years they're fine easily, it's not that there's nothing. I don't, I don't think of those who arrived in Italy, who have no problems, but I always look at those who can't come to Italy or other countries…Many people stay there because…many people anyway came here, my countrymen, and they don't work, go to church to eat, somehow they will make it, here nobody dies…nobody dies…Instead, there are really difficulties, like the Third World, Sri Lanka, let's say, lots of difficulties. There's a part living well, but how they live in my city, close to the sea, there are still people, on TV, with no home, no bikes for kids, few clothes, no toys, so here where we work, we bring some toys and things and send them to where these people live. [Susante, Srilankese, 35 years old]

The poverty as a direct biographical and social reference point brings about a feeling of gratitude: *Now, in Italy, thank God, we're fine, thank goodness we came to Italy, I always need to thank God in a sense that I always make a comparison what I was doing before*, which we can find across our interviews. The poverty once sharply experienced as incapacity and a trap is never forgotten:

> The moments really difficult, really difficult moments were more in Ukraine because I believe that difficult moments are when one feels incapable in a sense that you don't have a job and as a result you can't buy food, clothes, nothing and if something happens, someone needs to go to hospital, even for buying medicine you'd get no money there. There's a feeling of being incapable, of being really…here, I've always worked, so the superficial things, clothes were enough and have been enough till now. Getting out of poverty I do appreciate those 10 euros a day, let's say… [Liliana, Ukrainian, 35 years old]

To the feeling of satisfaction contributes also the recognition of the tangible achievements, possible thanks to work and sacrifices made abroad, such as a house constructed in the country of origin, University education for children, weddings and other ceremonies paid and many other forms of help provided for their families. A different type of achievement for women working as domestic and care workers, is the possibility of leaving the employers' house (where they often initially live) and renting a room or a flat on their own. This move changes their work relations, and even though it increases the costs of living, it is highly appreciated as it responds to a widespread need for autonomy and the reappropriation of one's time. It's a strategy of 'liberation' that brings about a transition from *an imprisoned person* to *a normal person who works and lives*.

The satisfaction our interviewees feel comes also from their idea that the context where they live, contrary to their high expectations before migration, is in fact very difficult. The idea that *there's no work for Italian graduates, what can the foreigners say*, is followed by the conviction that once in employment, one cannot complain. At the same time, our interviewees working in the rich neighborhoods and living in the poor ones, understand perfectly that there is no equality and the difficulties are not experienced by all in the same way. They also observe that economic divisions do not go along the ethnic lines as many of their poor neighbors are in fact Italians or fellow immigrants coming from different backgrounds. It is one of the reasons why the existing inequalities are not viewed as ethnic discrimination and do not become contested. Neither their idea of integration puts the inequalities into question. For the immigrants we interviewed, integration and equality do not necessarily come together, as it is possible, as their own cases show, to be integrated but only in the lower strata of the society of destination.

There is one more element that works as a tranquillizer, helping the immigrants to accept all the constraints. It is the frequent help of the natives. In the system that often turns out to be slow and inefficient, due to budget constraints providing only minimum services, this is the tangible help of many Neapolitans that makes the lives of our interviewees bearable. The families employing immigrants help them learn Italian (in some cases there are the stories of regular lessons given), help them to deal with bureaucratic issues and help them to accommodate the relatives that follow. Then there is the role played by the Catholic Church and other religious organizations providing the space and the activities for children after school, organizing language and professional courses, as well as offering jobs (as in the case of one of our interviewees who got a chance of employment as an intercultural worker). As this help is crucial, it still does not fill the gap. Instead of full rights and reliable services offered on the European, national and local level, the immigrants receive some discretional acts of kindness keeping them dependent on individual good will. The failure of integration policies can be seen in the fact that our interviewees do not see equality as important for integration, they do not aspire to be treated equally as the natives and only one of them sees the current situation where "all of us have duties, but not all have rights" as disturbing.[8] It should be noted that even though, for the reasons just given, there is a strong tendency to accept the conditions of life and work, and sometimes the narrators explicitly theorize that, as foreigners, they have the *duty* to accept what the host environment offers, the vision of integration that emerges is that the one of a one-way process, where the responsibility to fit is designed as an exclusively immigrants' task. On the contrary, the narratives show - even if implicitly - that the vision of our interviewees the opportunity to achieve a 'good life' cannot be separated from the natives. Not surprisingly, the positive experiences as much as the negative episodes are always centered around the natives (employers, neighbors, classmates and teachers), who for better or worse, seem to have a great influence on the overall evaluation of life experiences of our interviewees.[9]

## Conclusions

Our study on the integration viewed from the perspective of immigrants was motivated by our observation that there is much ambiguity over the concept of integration and the definitions used in migration studies, in social policy and in public discourse do not necessarily overlap. We were convinced that our understanding of the integration processes requires the voice of the immigrants themselves. Our choice of a qualitative approach comes directly from the assumption that in order to understand and explain what people do, and what they refrain from doing, does not involve only a reference to the acts observable from outside, but calls for the reconstruction of the subjective and the reflexive part of human life. It requires a link with the projects people make and the concerns they have (cf. Archer, 2003: Archer, 2007). The meanings people construct, the expectations they have and the strategies they develop are rooted in their life stories. Each immigrant is also an emigrant and a migrant, a social actor, but first

[8] In the previous, longer and more detailed, version of the paper we analyzed also the narratives of those who are not satisfied with their life conditions, who give examples of discrimination in the sphere of work and in relations with the natives. It is important to note that those narrators have better life conditions (in respect to work, income and housing) than others we interviewed. Their dissatisfaction is closely related to their aspirations (much higher than in other cases) and the meaning constructed of their migration, which is experienced here as a failure.

[9] The importance of the social context and the interactions with the natives for the construction of 'good life' is clearly visible in the narratives as a large part of them is dedicated to the descriptions and explanations of the decision to settle in the South, where the jobs opportunities are more limited, but at the same time, there is more openness and human warmth than in the North of the country.

of all, a person with his or her particular baggage of experiences. The migration does not reset previous experiences. On the contrary, the past together with the imagined future shape the present and have a direct impact on the integration processes. Biographical research enables us to take this time perspective into account. Stressing the importance of the subjective perspective we do not aim to cancel the importance of the objective, structural life context. Reconstructing the subjective in fact, developed over time, we always link it to the objectified life conditions influenced by the structural opportunities and constraints, labor and housing markets, regularization policies, as well as social and political rights granted.

The reconstruction of the immigrants' perspective on integration enables us to provide some indications for theory development, as well as some policy recommendations. On the level of the theory, we may suggest a closer link between the theoretical debates and the empirical analysis as current discussions on integration understood as inclusion, equality and multiculturalism (Anthias et al. 2013; Wingens et al. 2011; Lacroix 2010) seem very distant from the reality the immigrants live in and their own understanding of integration. Only by adopting a bottom-up perspective and taking into account people's projects, concerns and actually lived lives, it is possible to bring up the understanding of integration as 'good life' (even if it is in a relatively modest version), as acceptance (accepting the rules and constraints by immigrants to the extent of self-limitation, as well as being accepted and respected by the natives), as satisfaction (coming from important (even if relatively small) achievements and meeting the needs of natural, practical and social order) and as freedom (both as freedom from poverty and incapacity and freedom to define and to follow one's projects). In the narratives of the immigrants we met, we found a curious case of integration without equality (*Italians are Italians*, they say), but with the opportunity to realize their relatively modest projects in the market niches left by the natives. For them, to be integrated it means to *live peacefully* with others, even if the 'others' are reduced to their relatives, countrymen, friends, neighbors and employers. Their vision resembles restricted integration, often limited to a single city or a neighborhood and a (lower) fraction of social structure. The participation in broader social and institutional contexts is not even taken into account, therefore not considered as necessary for integration. This is exactly the point, which requires active social policies. The satisfaction and acceptance we see in the immigrants' narratives and their idea of integration without equality, without participation and without full rights, calls for change. A person who does not see a way out, loses the courage to dream (Sen 1984), therefore the task is to create the opportunity structure, which could stimulate the aspirations. The aspirations, on the others hand, in the form of slightly more ambitious plans for the future, play a crucial role in transforming people's life conditions (Appadurai 2004) and therefore constitute an essential element of integration processes. Bringing the structural change (in housing and labor markets, in education, in social and political rights) is the first and necessary step as the capacity to aspire arises in the present because in order to feed the aspirations there must exist a "minimum basis of objective possibilities" (Mandich 2012). It is also self-evident that the context devoid of opportunities that does not provides the adequate resources, undermines the capacity to aspire to a better future, making people trim their life projects according to the existing constraints. It needs to be recognized and emphasized that the project of a more integrated society requires also the agency, the motivated social actors capable of creating new opportunities and making use of the existing ones. The traditional top-down perspective of policy-making needs to be therefore overcome and complemented by a variety of alternative approaches. Moreover, it needs to be emphasized that if integration is to be a multi-sided process, it clearly does not involve the immigrants only but all the society members, from whom effort, acceptance and responsibility is expected.

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## Waga subiektywnie konstruowanego znaczenia: integracja widziana z perspektywy imigrantów

**Abstrakt:** W dyskursie politycznym, podobnie jak w naukach społecznych, termin integracja występuje zazwyczaj w kontekście migracji. Na bazie „obiektywnych" wskaźników i analizy statystycznej dokonuje się pomiaru i oceny poziomu integracji jako „niskiego" lub "wysokiego", „wystarczającego" bądź nie. Dominuje na tym polu perspektywa krajów przyjmujących, pomijająca nierzadko punkt widzenia imigrantów. Aby przezwyciężyć jednostronność tej dominującej perspektywy, postanowiliśmy zapytać samych imigrantów, czym jest dla nich integracja. Analiza wywiadów narracyjnych przeprowadzonych z osobami pochodzącymi z Ukrainy, Sri Lanki i Senegalu, mieszkającymi od lat w południowych Włoszech, pokazała nam, że integracja dla nich jest bardziej związana z pojęciem „dobrego życia" niż z pragnieniem stania się „jednym z nas". Podejście naszych narratorów do integracji jest pragmatyczne, ponieważ jest ono skierowane przede wszystkim na realizację ich projektów życiowych. Z narracji naszych rozmówców wyłania się obraz integracji jako akceptacji i satysfakcji, jednakże bez aspiracji do równości, uczestnictwa i pełnych praw politycznych i społecznych, co oznacza, że polityka integracyjna musi być dużo bardziej aktywna.

**Słowa kluczowe:** subiektywne znaczenie, integracja, migracja, doświadczenia biograficzne, autobiograficzne wywiady narracyjne