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FROM OTHERING TO BELONGING: INTEGRATION POLITICS, SOCIAL INTERVENTION AND THE LIMITS OF CULTURAL IDEOLOGY

With the shift of political discourse in the European Union away from the idea of multiculturalism, the notion of 'civic integration', frequently accompanied by the language of cultural differences, has become prominent in policies and social interventions. This study explores the experiences of an integration project entitled 'Cultural Friend Tibro', initiated in Western Sweden by local authorities. The main idea of the project is to bring together representatives of different cultural groups – immigrants and local residents – and facilitate the development of friendship-like relationships. Mutual learning, exchange and joy are especially emphasised as a means to overcoming prejudices and social divisions. No specific requirements in terms of ethnicity are demanded of the participants: local residents involved in the project are not expected to be of Swedish origin. Instead, the requirement is that they possess sufficient knowledge of Swedish culture and society. Both categories of participants are considered 'cultural friends'. The procedure of 'matching' newly arrived and 'established Swedes' is hoped to initiate interpersonal interactions. Matching couples individuals or families is done with reference to gender, family situation and possible common interests or hobbies. It is left to the participants themselves to decide whether they would like to develop further relationships. In spite of the seemingly open and friendly format initially promoted by the project organisers, practices of estrangement ('othering') have surfaced in participant reflections on how the project was implemented. In this study, I identify and critically examine manifestations

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of othering as an effect of employing the notion of culture in the project's rhetoric, as well as possible ways by which participants may spontaneously destabilise the constructed cultural boundaries. This case study is built on the analysis of multiple sources, including ten semi-structured interviews with project participants, inquiries with the project leader, analysis of project documents and advertisements and social media materials.

Introduction

In line with a decline of multiculturalist ideologies and policies across Europe, Sweden is increasingly embracing the idea of 'civic integration' with regard to immigrants. This entails turning away from the previously established national regime of structural inclusion and support for cultural diversity. The latter regime was developed in the 1960s and 1970s to address labour mobility and relied on strict border control. The welfare state was striving to ensure principles of social justice and undertook a responsibility for maintaining the cultural identities of immigrant minorities (Borevi 2014). With the shift in the character of immigration towards family reunion and asylum-seeking (Schierup et al. 2009) and a dramatic increase in the number of newcomers[1], the 'rights-based' approach, has been radically challenged. Capitalisation on the 'citizen as worker' (Borevi 2014: 711), which presupposes strict planning of migration in regards to the labour market demands, has become difficult to sustain. Increasing economic deregulation has made the situation even more complex. Moreover, complaints that, multiculturalism feeds social fragmentation have increased (Borevi 2014; Anthias 2013).

In this context, the notion of 'civic integration' has been embraced across the European Union (Goodman 2010). Civic integration aims to encourage immigrants to acquire nationally specific 'civic skills' (including a certain level of proficiency in the national language, knowledge of history and societal information) and adhere to a nationally shared value system (ibid: 754). Training programs relating to this emerged in several EU countries, including Sweden (Borevi 2014). Social analysis of such interventions has revealed that framed in terms of civic efficiency, integration policies and practices tend to explain immigrants' difficulties of adjustment in the new society by their cultural distinctiveness–a phenomenon termed 'culturalism' (Johnson et al. 2004: 255, see also Fassin 2001)–eventually reproducing the 'us' and 'them' division.

This paper addresses the issue of culturalism in the context of Sweden. It examines the integration project 'Cultural Friend' that local authorities launched

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[1] In 2015, the Swedish Migration Agency reported receiving 162 877 asylum-seeking applications, twice more than in 2014 (Swedish Migration Board 2016).

in the medium-size locality of Tibro in Western Sweden in the fall 2015. The data used for the analysis constitute part of a larger evaluation project initiated and financed by the Tibro commune. I identify and critically examine practices of 'othering' manifested in the project participants' reflections over the project implementation. Those practices are viewed to be an effect of framing the project in terms of cultural differences. Moreover, I look at the possible ways participants might spontaneously overcome the constructed cultural boundaries. The paper is divided into three parts. Firstly, we examine the ideas and procedures behind the 'Cultural Friend Tibro' programme. Secondly, a theoretical background to the study is provided, and, finally, we discuss the empirical results. The study highlights the discursive construction of the distinctive cultural group in terms of time ('temporalisation' (Fabian 2002)) when producing and challenging 'othering' rhetoric. I conclude by acknowledging the importance of critical thinking for social interventions in the field of migration and integration.

'Cultural Friend Tibro' (Kulturvän Tibro)

Tibro is a commune in Western Sweden with 11 044 inhabitants (Statistics Sweden 2016). According to statistics provided by the Swedish Migration Board (personal communication 28 October 2016), 413 individuals (asylum-seekers and migrants with residence permits) were registered in the Tibro commune system in 2015. The project was initiated in autumn 2015 by the Integration Unit at the local administration, and it is still an ongoing enterprise. The initiative is thought to be a long-term arrangement, aimed 'to promote friendship and cultural understanding between newcomers and established residents in Tibro' (Tibro Commune 2015). The main idea is to bring together representatives of different cultural groups and facilitate the development of friendly relationships between, on the one hand, the newly arrived (*nyanlända*) who have been granted with a permission to stay in the country and demonstrate basic knowledge in Swedish and, from the other side, 'established Swedes' (*etablerade Svenskar*), who feel 'familiar with society and Swedish language' (ibid). In the project description provided on the Tibro commune website, the project's organisers emphasize that the initiative is about mutual learning, exchange and joy that can help overcome prejudices and social divisions. Increased language efficiency and cultural fluency of newcomers are supposed to be the outcome of 'non-demanding' interactions, alongside the discovery of possible similarities. No specific requirements in terms of ethnicity were set for the participants. For example, 'established Swedes' do not need to be Swedish-born. Both categories of the participants are considered 'cultural friends': individuals who are 'curious to get to know people from other cultures' and 'willing to share their own experiences' (Tibro Commune 2016).

The project builds on the idea of 'matching' between newly arrived and 'established Swedes'. It couples individuals or families on the basis of gender,

family situation and possible common interests or hobbies. The first round of matching started with an application call for both categories of prospective participants, followed by individual interviews and pairing performed by the project leader on the basis of the above variables. An initial meeting of the coupled candidates was organized at the commune office to test the arrangement and agree on the possible continuation of interactions. Furthermore, participants were encouraged to form relationships on their own and decide on how to continue communication. Thirty-eight couplings were made at the first round, some of which became respondents for the current study. A majority of pairings turned into successful relationships. Project leaders offered support to those pairings experiencing problems in their interactions. The commune additionally invites all interested participants to a variety of activities, including hiking, visiting local recreation areas, and traditional cultural celebrations. Participation is voluntary and free of charge; in this sense the project clearly differentiates itself from dating services (i.e., coupling of individuals for matrimony).

The notion of 'othering' in theory and research

I approached the case in focus with concepts of the 'other' and 'othering'. The development of the notion of the 'other' in the context of migration can be traced to Georg Simmel's writing on 'the stranger', published at the turn of the twentieth century. Simmel (1971:143) famously defined the stranger as 'the man who comes today and stays tomorrow'. The stranger is situated within the community in a particular way that incorporates his or her initial status and experiences of non-affiliation, while being viewed by the local inhabitants as potentially transgressive and fundamentally unfixed. Relationships with the stranger or the 'other' (Said 2003) are 'abstract' relationships in that they build on the recognition of general/universal communalities (e.g., national affiliation, profession, and 'general human nature') at the expense of more specific personal characteristics. Those relationships are moreover asymmetrical in that non-members are marked as passive, subjugated and objectified (Said 2003; Johnson et al. 2004; Neiterman et al. 2015). This is especially important since the 'other' and the 'self' are co-constitutive: construction of one's own identity unavoidably involves the idea of the alien (Said 2003).

Othering is '*a process that identifies those that are thought to be different from oneself or the mainstream, and it can reinforce and reproduce positions of domination and subordination*' (Johnson et al. 2004: 253). Othering is dialectically coupled with the notion of belonging, 'an emotional (or even ontological) attachment', 'feeling "at home"' (Yuval-Davis 2011) and the related 'experiential' and 'practical' aspects (Anthias 2013). Belonging is shaped by power and presupposes a boundary that would differentiate between those who do and do not belong. It works by producing identities, emotions and ideologies (Yuval-Davis 2011). Both processes–othering and belonging–might be

self-oriented or imposed on the person by his/her surroundings. Both processes are unfixed and enacted (Neiterman et al. 2015).

A growing body of research addresses othering and belonging in the context of migration and integration. The common focus is on practices of estrangement of immigrants in education (Jönsson, Rubinstein-Reich 2006), health care organisation and provision (Johnson et al. 2004), spirituality (Narkowicz, Pedziwiatr 2016), employment (Behtoui 2008), work life (Harrison 2013) and entrepreneurship (Essers, Tedmanson 2014). As an illustration, a study of structural integration of schoolteachers with foreign backgrounds demonstrated that othering may bind together teachers and foreign-born pupils – non-Swedes are typically hired to teach non-Swedish children – which, it can be argued, risks ghettoisation of non-natives within the educational system (Jönsson, Rubinstein-Reich 2006). Other studies (Johnson et al. 2004) analysed the practices and experiences behind the othering of Asian women in the context of their interaction with Canadian health-care professionals. What was revealed was that the 'culturalism' exercized by the Canadian physicians leads to discriminatory effects and strengthens the disadvantaged position of the non-native ethnic groups. Furthermore, this functions like an ideology that is internalized by doctors in the course of their training; 'othering language' was identified as an element of discursive repertoire of doctors recognising themselves as members of ethnic minorities.

Moreover, migration scholarship has addressed the possibilities for marginalized groups to challenge estrangement, counteract it or subvert its effects through pragmatic choices and the exercise of individual power in framing their own social identities and positions or appropriating and destabilising the ascribed statuses. An analysis of othering within a group of medical professionals (Neiterman et al. 2015) uncovered the complexity of related interactive and signifying processes. Migrant doctors continually maintained their status by navigating between different identity elements, such as ethnicity and profession, emphasising one or the other in a particular situation. The study further demonstrated that self-directed estrangement can imply positive connotations for the immigrant doctors and can be purposefully employed to strengthen their overall social status. In this way, belonging to a professional group can compete with national belonging, a fact that allows recognition of the intersectional and multi-layered nature of identity processes for immigrants. Another example is a study that highlighted practices of 'pragmatic assimilation' such as Middle Eastern migrants adopting Swedish nationally-specific personal names as manifestations of individual sovereignty, appropriating the cultural symbolism of the host society for personal ends of social inclusion (Bursell 2012).

Most scholarly attention has largely been on the side of disadvantaged groups, identifying and subjecting estrangement and its effects to close scrutiny, as well as highlighting individuals' strategies for coping with or resisting marginalization. Attitudes and behavioural models of the dominant group

were assumed to be naturalized and stable over time. This project attempts to problematize this view and explore possible dynamics of othering rhetoric among representatives of the hosting society.

Towards belonging: An empirical conversation

This study utilized a case study design, a multi-method approach that scrutinizes 'bounded system/systems' (Creswell 2012). The study data set is comprised of ten interviews with project participants, inquiries with the project leader, and an analysis of project documents (i.e. logbook), project advertisements, media and social media materials. Interviewees are represented by two categories of project participants: the 'newly arrived' (mostly male refugees from Syria with an average stay in Sweden of 1.5 years) and 'established Swedes' (men and women almost all of whom turned to be Sweden-born local residents). Research conversations were conducted in Swedish with the assistance of a professional interpreter of Arabic when needed. Audio records of interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. Interview questions addressed participants' interpretation of the project's goals and procedures, as well as their expectations and experiences of interactions with a 'cultural friend'.

It is possible that, my own status as an immigrant who speaks Swedish and is affiliated with a Swedish university, affected my role as an interviewer or, in other words, left me with 'third place' positioning within the matrices of 'firstness and otherness' (Jensen 2011: 74). I would argue my positionality facilitated reflexive turns in the discussions with both local residents and newcomers. This contributed to the greater richness of the data. The respondents' accounts, media materials and project logbooks were further coded for possible manifestations of othering as verbalisations of 'forms of difference' (Bhabha 1983: 19). I identified and interpreted practices of othering in the accounts of 'established Swedes', as well as the participants' responses to the contexts in which the difference-sameness dimension becomes prominent. In the following presentation, the data are organized into themes contextualising manifestations of othering practices.

Culture as a starting point

The project's description on the official website and in multiple advertising materials, the notion of culture is actively employed, producing a specific discourse of apparent cultural distinctiveness that, as emerged in the interviews, shaped the experiences of its participants. Thus, a young Syrian man, a holder of a graduate degree in a technical discipline, was puzzled by an invitation to visit his cultural friends' home and stay overnight. He was anxious about his ability to manage even ordinary situations in this new context.

> At first, I was surprised, I was very confused and didn't know what I should do. Should I go to someone who has another culture that I have, a new culture for me? The simplest example is that they have a dog and three cats, just

how one can handle or something. I was very nervous, confused the first time I was there (IP 9).

However, it seems that the project leaders were less concerned with culture-based effects than with individuals' primary psychosocial adaptation. The project logbook and notes show that the theoretical constructs addressing social-psychological aspects of individual coping with demanding situations were initially central for the evaluation of the project's outcomes. Thus, 'culturalism' had become rather a latent background of the intervention. The cultural framework was thought to be mainly employed to organize a space for bringing people together. As noted by some respondents, one needs a topic to initiate an interaction, and cultural differences are a good starting point when one meets strangers.

Newcomers and locals as 'others'

'Us-them' language was identified in the accounts of both categories of informants, natives and foreign born. Almost every interview produced a list of cultural differences that parties discovered and exchanged about during interactions. Those dissimilarities were frequently explained in terms of time, or in Johannes Fabian's terms (2002)'temporalized'. In his contestation of modern social research, Fabian highlighted the role of time in signifying practices of Western scholarship:

> Time, much like language or money, is a carrier of significance, a form through which we define the content of relations between the Self and the Other. <…> Time may give form to relations of power and inequality under the conditions of capitalist industrial production (2002: xxxix).

In anthropological accounts, Fabian further maintained, as representatives of the dominant group, researchers typically appear to be separated from the study participants ('others'). This effect is achieved by application of 'political physics': two distinctive entities cannot be simultaneously positioned at the same location:

> When in the course of colonial expansion a Western body politic came to occupy, literally, the space of an autochthonous body, several alternatives were conceived to deal with that violation of the rule <…>. Most often the preferred strategy had been simply to manipulate the other variable – Time (Ibid: 29–30).

Fabian used the term 'denial of coevalness' (ibid: 31) to emphasize stabilized practices of differentiating and levelling cultures with reference to time. Time in this framework is 'chronological time' that calls out imperatives of development and advancement (ibid: 144). An illustration of 'denial of coevalness' manifested itself in an interview with a middle-aged well-off 'established Swede'. The participant reflects upon a discussion about food habits he had with this cultural friend:

> Then we laugh a lot just as there are some differences, like when we eat food, for example. We always eat warm food in Sweden; they eat almost cold or cold food. They cook food first and then allow it to stay until it cools down and then they eat. 'Why do you do this?', I asked. 'A-a it has become like that'. 'OK'. [Laughs]. It probably is because we have a super modern kitchen, which doesn't exist in other countries. And they have much larger families than ours. When they eat, they need to cook a lot of food and this food will cool down when it is all set up at the table and when all food is ready, so it is already cooled down. And this is also a cool thing. It's nothing that he thought about (IP 4).

The respondent actualizes images of primitive cooking equipment and pre-industrial large-size families, clearly establishing difference in technological and social development between the two societies. As Sergei Prozorov (2011) noted, denial of the 'other' is in fact a denial of one's own (immature) past. The respondent moves further to emphasize a lack of cultural introspection with his cultural friend. Commenting on the hierarchical order of signification of alien cultures, Edward Said (2003) suggested that in the dominant group's definition, 'barbarians' are not always conscious about their difference. This reflexivity, however, is almost unnecessary for constructing an image of a subordinated stranger.

Another related example deals with framing the practices of time management observed by a female Sweden-born participant in the daily routines of her cultural friends:

> They have another day rhythm also. They are up later in the evening, maybe up till 1 at night, and they sleep until 7–7.30 in the morning, and they drink a bit coffee and then they eat breakfast when we eat lunch, and then they sleep a bit in the afternoon and eat late in the evening. And they then are up until 1 at night and then they go to bed, so it's a bit different. And now they are having Ramadan, they cannot eat or drink, then after sunset they can eat and drink. They start to serve food at ten in the evening. I think it's very strange, but it's very rewarding. One will be so clean [laughs] (IP 5).

The slow tempo of the newcomers evokes an association with 'lazy' rural life during winter that dramatically contrasts with the busy days of urbanized contemporaries, even those (as is evident from the interviews) who are already retired. Apart from that, the presented extract addresses the issue of strict adherence to religious beliefs and rituals. Kathleen Davis (2008) pointed out that in modern scientific and political discourses, 'religion' typically has a connotation of 'pre-modern', 'non-European' and 'uncivilized'. The actualisation of religion is typically associated with populations that are either far away or on the margins of one's own society.

Moreover, temporalisation might be achieved by the emphasis on emotionality. A senior female Sweden-born respondent framed a copying approach used by her cultural friend, a very young Syrian woman, in affective terms: '*[W]hen she is sad, she dances...cries and dances. And it feels easier. So they have a nice way to get rid of this, while we push problems down to the stomach [laughs]*' (IP 5).

The rationality of the modern life and the related technologized responses to threatening situations are contrasted in this interview extract with 'natural' attitudes observed in pre-modern cultures. By this means, a hierarchy of cultures is established. 'They' are turned into an object of a fascinated colonial gaze. Emotionally and pre-linguistic expressiveness culminates in the image of a dancing girl, a traditional element of colonial imagery (Said 2003).

The 'othered' culture can appear intriguing and interesting. Many Sweden-born participants reported being involved in the project because of their curiosity. According to Said (2003), the will to know about distant cultures goes hand in hand with the will to power. A specific academic discipline – Orientalism – arose in the West with the aspiration to learn about geographically distant societies. Frequently, however, the production of knowledge on the Orient was far from politically neutral, serving the imperial interests of Western countries: '*knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control*' (ibid: 37). Cultural awareness was especially important since a distinctive culture can be experienced as a threat to one's own beliefs, traditions and customs. A respondent who identified himself as an 'old Swede' expressed frustration over a communication format 'imposed' on him by his cultural friend:

> He invited me for coffee, for example, and suddenly the whole flat was full of his other friends who came and also drunk coffee, and that's their way. And I don't have any problem with that. But the risk is that when one comes here as a migrant, then one tries to transmit one's own cultural habits or forms of social interactions as one does in the home country. And there, I understood, people very much come and go. This we don't do so often here in Sweden, but one invites friends into the home and if one is a real friend, then one can come and go, but with them, one comes and goes anyway (IP 1).

The abstract declaration of personal tolerance coexists in this interview extract with non-acceptance of differences in a direct encounter with estranged cultural habits. The respondent finally reported feeling overwhelmed and needing to establish some control over the situation by means of, for example, arranging for cultural friends to meet in a public space to avoid unlimited exposure to foreign customs. In fact, matching procedures performed in the course of the project implementation facilitated not only to actualize elements of sameness among participants, but also to protect 'established Swedes' from encountering radical religiosity, psychological disturbances caused by traumatic experience of war conflict, or just unsuitable attitudes. As Floya Anthias (2013) noted, within the integration discourse some cultural differences are marked as 'positive', useful differences that can valorise their carrier or an organisation he or she works for, while others are labelled 'negative' differences that could provoke conflict or unrest. Social integration policies and increasingly managerial technologies tend to highlight 'good' differences.

The problematization of culture

Integration policies and projects tend to present culture as an indispensable, stable over time and internally coherent phenomenon (Anthias 2013).[1] The Cultural Friend initiative was not an exception. It actualized a specific discourse on culture that manifested itself in the respondents' relationships and surfaced in interview accounts. As one of the respondents expressed it, '*I think it's very important to have an opportunity to meet a Swede who has Swedish culture from the start*' (IP 8). In this expression, culture is imagined as a 'backpack' that one carries with him or her throughout life (Ibid: 324). This 'static' and 'essentialistic' interpretation of culture, however, was eventually challenged by experiences of interpersonal exchange. Thus, the very understanding of culture as homogeneous and evenly distributed among members of a cultural group was problematized. Syrians engaged in the project frequently highlighted multiple variations in language, customs, food traditions and clothing existing in their home country. Some Swedish-born participants pointed out that national celebrations and ceremonies presented to the newcomers as fundamental for the national culture and that constituted the core of group activities organized within the project are rather contextual. One respondent commented about the traditional Christmas and New Year holiday season celebrations, which constituted a core of the project's group activities but were scarcely attended by the local residents,

> This [traditional celebrations] is not what we do! No! It's just when our children are small we have to engage us at the kindergarten and at school, here and there in the Christmas Treat. And then we stop with this. It's not about culture in Sweden. And then there will be a lot of old ladies who do this [for migrants] with all the best intentions and they do a very good job. No other Swedes come (IP 4).

The same respondent pointed to a rather narrow interpretation of culture that was frequently observed among the project's organisers. This associates culture with cooking and food consumption. This emphasis can be misleading, as another respondent indicated, since culturally distinctive food may equally provoke alienation, as when one party is unfamiliar with national dishes and may be self-conscious at the dinner table.

Some local residents who participated in the project might feel uncomfortable with the label 'cultural barrier'. They may start wondering if they are efficient enough in their own culture to take on the responsibility of introducing it to others. As an illustration, a female respondent reported the difficulties she experienced in explaining some linguistic aspects to her cultural friends: '*Am I good enough in Swedish myself?*' (IP 2). Alternatively, the respondents might decentre elements of their own culture by acknowledging the value of foreign ones. While conducting interviews, I talked to a Swedish-born

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[1] As an anonymous reviewer noted, an essentialistic view of culture that frames integration might evoke an association with earlier policies of assimilation.

female participant in the project who was frustrated about the food issue. This did not deal with the respondent's cooking skills but rather her concern over the overall non-sophisticated character of Swedish cuisine that, she claimed, cannot compete with well-developed food traditions of the Middle East. As Berber Bevernage (2008) argues, problematization of the dominant culture as the central point of reference can facilitate restoration of 'coevalness'.

Overcoming othering towards belonging

Interactions and shared experiences may help overcome othering by developing reflexivity that facilitates the creation of what Fabian (2002) identified as 'intersubjective knowledge' and 'intersubjective time':

> We have the ability to present (make present) our past experiences to ourselves. More than that, this reflexive ability enables us to be in the presence of others precisely inasmuch as the Other has become the content of our experience. This brings us to the conditions of possibility of intersubjective knowledge. Somehow we must be able to share each other's past in order to be knowingly in each other's present (ibid: 91–92, original emphasis).

The actualisation of reflexivity can eventually help restore 'coevalness', as this extract from an interview with an 'established Swede' about his cultural friend shows:

> He started working when he was fourteen and what did I do when I was fourteen? Ah, wait. I played badminton and then started to play basketball, then, and, oh, we had hardly finished playing war games in the forest behind the house then. He was already working. He had a profession already, even when he hardly would have finished grammar school in Sweden (IP 4).

Placing his own memories in relationship to the experiences of his cultural friend, the respondent created a shared space that may allow problematizing and even diverting one-directional signification of historical events, practices and identities. Another opportunity of creating intersubjective time lies in construction of a shared 'horizon of expectations' (Bevernage 2008). During one interview, a female Sweden-born respondent, a former nurse, proudly reported that her cultural friend, a very young Syrian woman, is not only a perfect mother for her new-born child, but also wants to continue her education and become a doctor. In this way, a shared horizon in terms of professional affiliation was established.

Discussion and conclusion

In the framework of the 'Cultural Friend' program, immigrants are recognised as strangers who have no options apart from staying in Sweden due to political unrest and generally unfavourable conditions in their region of origin. The program started by emphasising the cultural differences of the participants

and their abstract all-human sameness, but it also organized an opportunity for Sweden-born individuals and newcomers to meet, develop relationships and explore possible similarities in individual characteristics, values, preferences and life orientations. The established interpersonal relationships further stimulated reflexivity in the Swedish-born participants that, as Fabian (2002) suggested, has the potential to destabilize existing hierarchies, overcome otherness and open new possibilities for the creation of shared spaces of communication. Thus, some of the program's effects might be viewed in terms of 'interculturalism', a mode of exchange between distinctive cultures characterized, in distinction to multiculturalism, by recognition of 'the importance of dialogue and interaction at a more transformatory level' (Anthias 2013: 337). Anthias (2013) warns, however, that the very use of the notion of culture in interculturality may automatically trigger binary thinking and thus reinstall divisions. Not surprisingly, othering was present in the majority of the respondents' accounts, both in interviews with 'newcomers' and 'established Swedes'. Othering language ascribed pre-modern characteristics to immigrants, framing them as, if not dangerous, then hardly fitting the contemporary Western context. Temporalisation was the central tool for problematizing and potentially overcoming estrangement. It was used to cope with othering as well and to nourish a sense of sameness and belonging.

According to Anthias (2013: 336–337), interculturalism has the potential to produce effects similar to those of social solidarity, which creates 'bonds across difference'. It needs, however, developed mechanisms to account for the complexity of people's positioning within the matrix of domination and for the interplay of different variables (e.g. class, gender, race and age). The overall culturalisation frame of the project focused the participants' attention on symbolic aspects, marginalising the material dimension of people's lives and interpersonal relationships. Differences in the economic status of the project participants were muted, and the structural inequality and exclusion that migrants typically faced were barely addressed. If the notion of 'culture' is to be used in social interventions, it needs to be clearly de-essentialized and framed into relationships with material conditions of the group involved (ibid.; see also Fassin 2001). Such an approach should allow us 'to see boundaries as variable and shifting rather than monolithic and given, and to recognise that there are different articulations of the boundaries which do not always reproduce strongly the "us" and "them" binary' (Anthias 2013: 337).

As confirmed in the current research, othering and belonging are not unidirectional and fixed processes. They are instead characterized by a certain dynamic and are results of deliberate constructive practices of social actors. While previous research was predominantly attentive to the issue of othering and belonging for migrants, the present study contributes to this with an emphasis on the cultural identity of the dominant group as being open to fragmentation and flexiblisation in the course of reflexive engagement with distinctive values and experiences.

'Cultural Friend' is an ongoing enterprise that has no specific termination date. The data presented and discussed in this paper are part of an intermediate evaluation. As demonstrated, the emphasis on culture in integration projects may actualize symbolic boundaries between migrants and the hosting community. It is therefore important to recognise the risks of othering and discrimination by initiators of such interventions. Taking a critical approach in the training of public servants engaged with integration policies and practice is important even within national contexts that are typically dissociated from imperial or colonial history. The project is one among many integration initiatives carried out in different parts of the country. A cross-project comparison and analysis of the government's response to experiences and outcomes of such interventions could be a topic for further research.

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