Immigrant Perceptions of Their Adjustment to France: A phenomenology

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Abstract

While immigrants generally feel extreme pressure to assimilate and desire to be accepted by those in the host country, they face a number of challenges including inequitable schooling practices and lack of access to social and cultural capital that could further their entry into higher education and gainful employment outside of the service industry. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of three adult male immigrants from nonEuropean backgrounds: Malagasy, Moroccan, and Algerian. The research explores the ways in which they adjusted to French society and perceived the inclusion of those who comprise the nondominant group of immigrants and "immigrant citizens" in France. Findings reveal that all three experienced discrimination based on their colour, name, or ethnic origin. Yet, how they felt and perceived immigrant adjustment or integration differed based on their own experiences and values.

Key words: Immigrants, integration, identity, marginalization, perceptions

The purpose of this paper is to examine historical and experiential junctures which contextualize the evolving status, identity, and inclusion of immigrants in France (Pinar, 1995). The researcher provides a brief historical explanation about why individuals from former colonies immigrate to France as well as information about their subsequent marginalization.

Most immigrants leave their homeland to create a better life for themselves and their families. Immigrants also flee due to revolutionary upheaval, political crisis, as well as economic crisis. Opportunities to serve in the French Foreign Legion during the 1940s and subsequently become a citizen, with all the benefits that entails, drew others from places such as Algeria or as far away as Madagascar. In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, North Africans, sub-Saharan Africans, and those from the Caribbean were welcomed with open arms and given special visas to supply France with a workforce that would help France rebuild after World War II (Laachir, 2007; van Selm, 1999; van Zanten, 1992). However, during the 1970s, after the foreign oil crisis, less manpower was needed, but government policy still encouraged immigrants to remain in France. Despite this national policy, ultranationalist groups, such as Le Pen, politically beleaguered those of nonEuropean descent (Le Sueur, 2002). Today's nonEuropean immigrants and their descendents work primarily in France's service industry. Those of the second or third generation are more recently known

as "'second generation immigrants,' or 'young Arabs' with all the political and social implications these entail" (Laachir, 2007, p. 101) despite their citizenship status. Moreover, they do not assimilate or integrate in ways that espouse the societal norms and dominant discourse of the host country (Laachir, 2007). Additionally, the children of these individuals are tracked into vocational routes (Brinbaum & Cebolla-Boado, 2007; Marks, Cresswell, and Ainley, 2006; Welsh, 2002) which segregate them from their mainstream counterparts.

While vocational segregation exists, Connel (1994) notes that there is one powerful force that promotes nondominant group integration—sports. Those who are able to play soccer well become popular with mainstream peers. Beyond sports there are few ways that those of the nondominant group interact with mainstream peers. Minority as well as lower class French students are separated from their peers based on the vocational or academic routes they take. And, once students take vocational routes, they do not have access to academic routes that lead to academic and professional careers (Marks, Cresswell, & Ainley, 2006).

Despite the ideal behind the French Republic—equality and equal treatment for all individuals within its boundaries (Laachir, 2007), immigrants experience discrimination on educational and economic fronts and even moreso during economic downturns and recessions. Without hope of upward mobility, immigrants reveal their frustration via resistance. Some of this frustration culminated in the riots of 2005. Although Laachir (2007) notes the riots of 2005 was not the first time those of the nondominant group demonstrated their dissatisfaction in a society that does not allow for their inclusion or advancement, its significance was noted on a grander scale.

Theoretical Framework

Those who are socially and culturally marginalized due to their language and cultural status often become apathetic and disinterested as they perceive their intended role and place in society (Welsh, 2002). The nondominant groups are also denoted as the minority group especially if they are citizens of the state and retain little political power (Feagin, 1984). Members of the nondominant group are quite diverse and are often marginalized base on their physical and behavioural characteristics (Wirth, 1945). Members of the minority group differ from the mainstream which leads to their marginalization. The more the members of the minority group or nondominant group retain the physical and can learn the behavioural attitudes of the dominant mainstream group, they are more easily accepted. For instance, those of European ancestry such as the Spanish and Portuguese often resemble one another in terms of colour and religion. The difference stems from their names and their cultural heritage. Should immigrants of European descent adopt French mainstream ways, then they can more easily become part of the social fabric.

Individuals from nondominant groups often resist the norms and institutions that make up schools and society. Without a political voice in the school system or the public domain that advocates for their social progress, nondominant group members have no reason to move

forward, obey, and achieve. And, their displacement continues to make them outsiders, continues to keep them in their place as "immigrants" not citizens.

The nondominant group as defined within the context of this article refers to marginalized individuals who immigrate or have a history of immigration from countries that were dominated by the host country and who are often culturally, physically, and linguistically different. For example, the United States has a long history of war and territorial conflict with Mexico. Additionally, Mexicans immigrants have provided the United States with a valuable labour source that has been welcomed and then subsequently ignored and marginalized during economic downturns. During the Great Depression, many of Mexican descent who became citizens were unconstitutionally deported to Mexico and some could not even speak Spanish (Valenciana, 2006). Similarly, immigrants from prior French colonies have been welcomed and have even become citizens; however, their immigrant status does not change despite being in the country more than three generations. In addition, North African immigrants, especially Algerians, have to overcome the stigma of the French-Algerian War. Similarly, Japan's domination of Korea during World War II has also led to the marginalization of Koreans in Japan. Koreans who have been there for generations do not have the right to participate in elections and they underperform on achievement tests when compared to their mainstream Japanese counterparts (Okano, 1997).

The literature provides a basis for understanding the devaluation of the nondominant group's linguistic and cultural capital in France (Young & Helot, 2005; Young & Helot, 2003; Helot, 2002; Fanon, 2004 [1961]), Boyer, 2001; Anzaldúa, 1999; Bhabha, 1994; Darder, 1991), how this lack of recognition affects inclusion as well as educational success (Brinbaum & Cebolla-Boado, 2007; Nieto, 2004; Cummins, 2001; Valenzuela, 1991; Ogbu, 1982); and, how national policy promotes hierarchical labelling and lower status for nondominant group languages (Young & Helot, 2003).

Devaluation of Bilingual and Bicultural Capital

As many post-colonial writers have noted (Anzaldúa, 1999; Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 2004 [1961]), the recognition of oneself as a bicultural individual growing up in and surviving a racist and monocultural society can lead to a feeling of duality, splitting, or double-consciousness, which can be both a great resource and a source of conflict and tension. So, if the second language does not carry sufficient status in the dominant culture, it is devalued whether it is the Spanish spoken by Mexicans in the United States or the various derivations of Arabic spoken by North Africans in France. In France, German and Spanish languages are more popular while "[...] the bilingualism of migrant children remains overlooked and is believed by many to delay the acquisition of French" (Young & Helot, 2003, p. 235).

Young and Helot (2003) describe how languages are officially categorized into categories as (1) foreign languages (e.g., German, Spanish), (2) regional languages (e.g., Basque), and (3) languages of *origine [origin]* (e.g., Arabic, Polish). The authors question the use of the term and emphasis placed on "*origine*". They suggest that the classification system could more

positively value second language spoken by Arabs and others by using the terms "patrimonial" or "heritage language". It is as if the origin of the language defines that person's identity and instead of being an added part of their French identity as a citizen.

Thus, language minority children often experience extensive devaluation of their native languages and cultures and feel extreme pressure to assimilate into the dominant mainstream culture in their attempts to be included (Cummins, 2001; Okano, 1997; Valenzuela 1991). This type of linguistic and cultural devaluation can be especially noted as the source of minority failures in schools. However, Ogbu (1992) points out, "[…] mere cultural and language differences cannot account for school failure of some minorities and the school successes of others" (p. 11). What appears to matter more is the sociohistorical context that affects the value or the devaluation of a particular immigrant group within the dominant host country.

While the sociohistorical context plays a role in school achievement, Brinbaum and Cebolla-Boado (2007) assert that the lower performance in addition to the high number of North Africans who drop out before attending public compulsory education in France can be based on additional factors: North Africans (1) enter schools at older ages than their French counterparts, (2) lack of formal education, and (3) lack of familiarity with the cultural and social workings of the French school system. The researchers conclude that the high drop-out rate overall signifies frustration and translates into resistance toward the presence schooling system. They also note that this type of resistant behaviour denotes not only frustration with school system but is evinced by avoidance (skipping school). Welsh (2002) also notes that resistance and a sense of alienation may emerge if the social, cultural and linguistic discourse of the school does not match the discourse of the nondominant group.

Methodology

This study took a phenomenological approach that pieces together the experiential perspectives as well as the cultural, linguistic, as well as physical context of their environments and backgrounds (Hall, 2000). This combined with the prior historical review, provides a backdrop that helps the reader understand the lived experiences of Jean, Mouneer, and Ahmed. Thus, the researcher pieces together what is implicit about their human experiences and made them explicit for the reader (Sanders, 1982) including researcher orientation to the phenomenon, organization of themes, and examples tied to those themes that represent the lived experiences of the participants (van Manen, 1990).

Research Question

More than 20 years ago when I attended Lyon University in France, I had begun to wonder why Arabs, Africans, and North Africans appeared to be segregated from the mainstream French. Today, the questions are similar: What are the experiences of first-generation immigrants of African descent in France? More specifically, what are their experiential

perceptions of their adjustment to French society as well as their perceptions of others who are first-, second-, third-, and fourth-generation immigrants.

Data Collection

In the existential investigation, the researcher conducted oral interviews to solicit attitudes and experiential information related to their adjustment to French society and field notes. Pseudonyms were used to identify the participants: Jean, Mouneer, and Ahmed. The two- to three- hour individual interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed to find emerging themes that included similarities and differences in their experiential adjustment. Secondly, the researcher observed these individuals in light of the public locations in which they were interviewed, primarily coffee shops. Field notes were taken to reflect on their behaviour when in a mainstream public area as well as to reflect on what the individuals said or indicated before or after the tape-recording began.

Setting and Participant Background

The study took place in Lyon, France. The following information provides a glimpse of each participant's origin, home language, cultural, and religious background, reasons for their immigration to France, as well as aspects of their social and cultural adjustment.

Jean

Jean is the son of a Christian mother and a Muslim father. He left Madagascar and went to France at the age of 10 to live with his estranged father and attend French schools. Because his grandfather was part of the French Legion during the 1940s, he explained that he, like his father, could become a French citizen. The Portuguese, French, and British played a role in the occupation of what we now know as Madagascar. The French became interested in Madagascar as early as the 1700s but did not emerge as a colony until 1904. In between the years of 1904 to 1942, power see-sawed between the hands of the British or the French. At the time of the Second World War, the British had control of the island(s), but the Malagasy aligned themselves with Vichy France to defeat them in 1942. Thus, Madagascar was again in the hands of the French until 1960 when Madagascar became independent. Jean's father served in the French military during the time in which France controlled Madagascar. As a member of the French Foreign Legion, he was able to gain citizenship and move to France, creating a French legacy for his grandson, Jean.

Once Jean finished primary education in France, he returned to Madagascar to finish high school. Just after graduation, he decided to apply for a scholarship to attend university in France. He received the scholarship and completed what could be compared to a bachelor's degree in sociology. Although he has citizenship and experience as a primary student and later a university student in France, he considers himself, in many respects, a first-generation immigrant.

Jean believes that one reason he has been able to partially integrate and be accepted in France was due to his ability to play soccer well. However, he noted that building relationships with the French in higher education was not as easy. Most of his friends come from his neighbourhood about an hour from the city center (e.g., Moroccan, Algerian). Thus, the physical distance made it more difficult to retain relationships with mainstream French at the university. He also said that while he would attend French parties, he never truly felt as socially accepted as he did with members of his own community. He asserts, despite the integration with language and culture, one is still exists on the periphery and life is influenced and dictated by policy, societal norms, and how the immigrant is treated in schools (Brinbaum & Cebolla-Boado, 2007).

Mouneer

Mouneer was born in Morocco 43 years ago. He grew up poor and lived in what might be considered a hut in a small village near Casablanca. His mother was illiterate, but his father could read and write Arabic. Born the eldest of four children, his father had high expectations for his children to better their life in Europe. He was the only Moroccan in his school in the 1980s. He said he was quite privileged by the Director and teachers of the school noting, "The professors would invite me to their homes to learn French."

Living physically close to mainstream French in an upscale neighbourhood, Mouneer refers to himself as fully integrated and promotes his French-ness, his ability to get along socially with anyone at a party, and his ability to succeed within French society. He talks little about his Moroccan- or Arab-ness noting that those who do not conform to French society should return to their homeland.

Ahmed

Ahmed decided to come to France in the year 2002 to escape the pauperization of Algeria (Martin, 2003). After his graduation though, there were very few jobs opportunities due to a recession in Algeria despite his middle-class family background, education, and command of the French language. Ahmed moved here due to economic need and had not necessarily planned to stay, but stated that the situation in Algeria still has not truly improved. Within five years of working illegally at a restaurant, he met and married a French woman. While they are married in French in a western wedding, the he and his wife have decided to ensure that their children bear Muslim names. Ahmed is extremely proud of his Algerian heritage and being a Muslim. And, his identity as a first-generation immigrant is explicitly tied with his religion as well as being Alerican and Arabic. Despite being married to a French woman whose family is very accepting and having fair skin, he does not feel integrated in French society. Ahmed believes that second- through fourth-generation Algerians have lost their Arab identity by adopting and mixing French customs with religious beliefs.

Organization of Themes

All three individuals come to France at different times in their lives with different backgrounds, yet they do harbour similar perspectives and beliefs about themselves and other who are first-, second-, third-generation, as well as fourth-generation children who are descendants of Africans (e.g., *Maghrebins*, Moroccans, Malagasy, Algerians) that are revealed in terms of emerging themes: (1) immigrant exclusion and identity, and (2) hierarchical and peripheral stratification (see Table 1).

Table 1. Organization of Themes Based on Interviews

Identity and Exclusion	Hierarchical and Peripheral Stratification in Schools
name origin religion color	children tracked into vocational routes (e.g., service-oriented industries) location of immigrant primary, secondary, and high schools on the peripheries of society also affect educational opportunity—little ability to build relationship capital students are socially excluded from the mainstream because they are physically distant from mainstream French populations (e.g., oftentimes living in underprivileged neighbourhoods with groups of others who are of various ethnic origins)—loss of relationship capital

Findings

Identity and Exclusion

All participants referred to themselves as French and then noted their country of origin. Mouneer, identified himself in initial conversations as more French than Moroccan. He receives praise by others for his native French-speaking ability and suggests that those who do not like France's rules should leave. He notes, "Sincerely, I don't see French or Moroccan or the opposite. This is our world […] It's not about the parents. If you don't like it here, then you can leave." The researcher noticed a change in his attitude when there was no French in the vicinity of where he was being interviewed. It was then he revealed a negative experience.

> It was like Starsky and Hutch. I was driving with my French girlfriend. They pulled me over, and then placed my arms behind my back and my face into the ground with a gun at my back. I had the wrong face.

Thus, their features, skin colour, as well as names and surnames played a role in their identification as foreigners, outsiders. While Jean and Ahmed did not mention any violence, they noted how their skin colour or surnames played a role in their identification by others and denied opportunities.

Ahmed was planning to buy a café. He speaks French fluently and he is fair skinned: He looks French. He talked about the time that he and his wife first received verbal approval to

get a loan to buy a coffee shop. However, he said that once the lenders found out he had an Arab surname, he was denied the loan.

Jean mentioned that he has been trying to get a job since leaving the university over three years ago. He says he has filled out hundreds of applications but not one was answered. He also believes that his surname and his black skin are obstacles for obtaining gainful employment in government or business. So, he like others such as Moroccans and Algerians continues to work in the service industry.

Despite these experiences, Mouneer, Jean, and Ahmed (to a lesser extent) have a desire to fit in and be accepted in mainstream French society. While they try to fit in, however, those in the mainstream who are curious about them constantly ask questions about those who come from an immigrant background whether they are second-, third-, or fourth-generation. Mouneer, Ahmed, and Jean note that those who do not look typically look French Caucasian must often define themselves in terms of their country of origin or their parents' country of origin. Jean clarifies:

> In France, we have the habit of saying French of origin 'something'. So, if you say that you are French. They say, "Yes, you are French of what origin, where?" Well, I'm French of Madagascar origin.

Ahmed agrees with this assessment and has referred to himself as French-Algerian on one or two occasions. However, when asked explicitly about his identity, he was adamant that he was Algerian, that he is Arab, not French (Laachir, 2007).[1]

> The origin is the origin. One cannot change. I am not French. What do you want me to do? I am Algerian. You can't say that you're French.

When asked if Muslims of African origin lived a double culture, he agreed. Ahmed then alluded to those that live a double culture or claim a double culture in France are not truly Arab:

> They have lost their identity […] For me, I am Algerian and I have the culture, am Muslim and Arab. For example, you [referring to second generation North African Muslims] drink alcohol. Well, how is it that you drink alcohol? [Then he notes the response of the North African] "I am French."

While Ahmed believes that identity should be based on religion as well as origin, he does note that identifying with the host country changes that identity. It is difficult for Ahmed to

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[1] It should be noted that Ahmed identifies with being Arab, Algerian as well as Muslim. He does not state that there are not those who are French and Muslim or others that consider themselves French-Algerian as well as Muslims, but he does believe that those who have become more French have compromised their identity. Muslim and country of origin are two different things, yet for Ahmed his identity is tied to his Algerian and Arab origin as well as his religion.

adopt the cultural practices of the mainstream population and adopt the dominant discourse since he has such a strong tie to his religious practices (Laachir, 2007).

Unlike Ahmed, Jean sees identity as additive—a connection to the language and culture that one adopts when living in the host country which leads to the development of a newer identity and integration.

> Your manner of living is more French. We *maitrise* the language […] There is a conflict of identity between the people that are first generation and that has to do with language…Evidently, most of the immigration is with the immigrants, not with the French at school.

Like Connel (1994), Jean notes that sports can be true integrative factor that unites those from the nondominant group with those from the mainstream:

> First it's the sport, that's how you go, that's how it begins. The identity is complex. You speak French […] When we go to school, integration is by way of language and sports.

However, Jean also notes the difficulty of building relationship capital with mainstream French when one is primarily exposed to others who are immigrants or citizens from nondominant groups—not the mainstream French. This distancing is further emphasized as most immigrants from the nondominant group live near and attend schools on the physical and social peripheries of French society.

Hierarchical and Peripheral Stratification

Mouneer, unlike Jean or Ahmed, speaks proudly of the French schooling system, his academic success, and his treatment by the school administration, faculty and staff while growing up in the Pyrenees. He sums up his experience:

> When I arrived at the new school, I sat on the Director's lap. I arrived in March. There was a problem. What level do I get placed in? I was placed in the first level. I learned French in two months […] It's funny, at my first school, I was the only Moroccan. The professors invited me to their houses to learn French. I had the chance to study. […] I wanted to be a professor of English when I was younger. I was "so-so" in French. Now I'm in *gestion et technique de vente de comercialization* [financial advising].

Mouneer has succeeded in integrating into French society as he mastered the French language early and was socially successful. He married a French woman and decided to give their young daughter a French name and get her into the best schools. The experience of Jean and Ahmed are distinct and provide other lenses from which to view the nonEuropean immigrant experience. Jean, who is Black and began as a citizen (due to his grandfather's

prior immigration and participation in the French military) made it through higher education despite the barriers, yet he has not been able to find a job other than waiter at a café.

The reproduction of inequalities pervade society as well as the schooling system and parallel some of the issues faced by other marginalized immigrants (e.g., Mexican, Central American) in countries such as the United States (Nieto, 2004). Jean notes that in the French schooling system as well as higher education there are few teachers of colour. In addition, those in the present schooling system encourage those who are considered immigrants to go into vocational tracks generally in the service industries.

> In France they have found a solution. You don't have the level for this, so you are going to go for the professional route. [The instructors say,] "You will take a *métier manuelle* (manual/vocational career), cooking, and you learn that, and you do the studies, you don't speak well, you will not be able to go far, but look you can do this.

The location and the reputation of the school can affect whether you are headed for the more academic or vocational routes. According to Jean, once newcomer immigrants enter the system and have taken anywhere from one to three years and pass French language courses, there is no ongoing academic support for them. They are left to sink or swim. Additionally, if one does not live in more fortunate zones, their ability to be tracked into the academic route is limited. "The problem is that everything depends on the *college* [school] one is from. It depends on your zone."

Summary and Conclusion

The voices of first-generation immigrants reveal that not much has changed in France in terms of ameliorating the lives of individuals who are from nondominant groups. Even those who are second-, third-, and fourth-generation immigrants who should be referred to as French citizens are still, in many respects, considered immigrants as their status is tied to their name, country, and their origin of their parents. In France and other European countries it is not as easy to change your name as in the United States or Canada. Thus, while it appears that the origin is recognized, immigrants cannot escape their name and background and become fully included in the host country. And, if they do integrate, they generally socialize with other immigrant peers (not the French mainstream) in physically remote locations outside French city-centers.

This peripheral as well as hierarchical stratification prevents immigrants from becoming part of the mainstream. Jean, who has retained his native language and culture but has also dominated the French language, says he is not fully included and that he cannot erase his "blackness." Ahmed, wants to succeed in French society as well and retain not only language and culture, but most importantly his identity which is tied to his religion—Islam.

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According to Helot (2002), it is difficult to retain cultural and linguistic identity when the second language (e.g., Arabic) is seen to interfere with learning the dominant language—French. Thus, there is a sense that one has to give up one set of linguistic and cultural beliefs and adopt others to become a citizen and be successful. Mouneer says that he has integrated, and although he retains his language and his culture, he does not reveal this side while in mainstream French circles.

Cultural and linguistic alienation of nondominant individuals or groups is not just a French issue but an international phenomenon. Marginalized groups in France (e.g., North Africans), the United States (e.g. Mexicans), and Japan (e.g., Koreans) experience underachievement when compared to their mainstream counterparts (Brinbaum & Cebolla-Boado, 2007; Nieto, 2004; Okano, 1997) and continue to remain on the hierarchical and physical peripheries of the host societies.

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