

IMMIGRATION: A SOCIOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW



INTRODUCTION

According to the Oxford Dictionary, immigration is "the process of coming to live permanently in a different country from the one you were born in". Immigration has become one of the most important phenomena for the past decades and most particularly in western countries. For example, Greece have seen this event increasing over the recently as it became the gateway to the Schengen area especially by migrants from the middle east and Asia. The reasons leading to immigration are wide and diverse and this phenomenon has always existed throughout the ages and across the world. However, such experience implies changes in psychological, sociological and mental health aspects that often are dismissed even though they are one of the secular pillars affected when someone migrates, even for a shorter period of time. These impacts can have real consequences on the core of one's identity and have a huge importance on the long term mental health stability of a person.

Here, we will explore some facets, in particular the sociological aspect, which is the key to understand the way migrants adapt to their new country. That may also help to grasp the behavior and feelings immigrants can have. We will see how it could lead to acculturation or assimilation or to a failure of adapting to the new culture.

It's necessary to keep in mind that these phenomena can't strictly be applied for every migrant, everyone has his own experience of expatriation and the steps and duration of each stage can differ from one to another person.

First, we will see migration from a historical point of view, especially in Greece, and the reason why immigration can occur, then we will explore the different stages of adaptation in a new country as well as some testimonies to illustrate these stages.

Finally, we will see migration from an external point of view and the conflicts or cohesion that can happen, to finally conclude.

IMMIGRATION IN GREECE: THROUGH THE AGES

Scientific researches on population migration have recently pointed out the omnipresence of waves of population moving since thousands of years.

As an example, in prehistory, Greece (along with other European countries) was characterized by a transition to a hunter gatherer lifestyle to agricultural and sedentary lifestyle. Thanks to paleogenetics, we now know that large waves of immigration in the early neolithic (10 000 - 6000 BCE) occurred from southwestern Asia to Europe. This immigration followed 2 roads, with one of them being a mainland road leading to Greece, propagating the early farmers lifestyle. These datas also proved the admixture of population at a large scale. This phenomenon was called the Neolithic transition, which also happened all over the world but not at the same time.

During the Iron age (1100 - 900 BC), a large-scale migration occurred with the dorians, one of the ethnic groups in ancient Greece, who invaded southern Greece, especially the region of Peloponnese, and brought with them their knowledge of ironworking.

More recently, the 1980s and the 1990s was the period when Greece became one of the important destinations for immigrants. Albanians constituted the majority of migrants in the 90s, almost 60% of them. This is due to the fall of the Soviet Union, creating turmoil in countries that were part of it.

The economical possibilities back then in Greece encouraged Albanians, along with other Balkanic countries like Bulgaria or Romania to seek opportunity in Greece.

Since the 2010s, migrants are also fleeing from Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan due to many internal wars. In 2021, the Taliban regime took over the power in Afghanistan, causing a part of the population to flee and seek asylum. This caused many more afghans to immigrate, and thus more afghans becoming refugees in Greece.

Immigration and admixture is therefore not only a widespread phenomenon, but also an ancient event throughout history. This look at the past can help to demystify immigration among people that might get afraid by the concept at present.

WHY PEOPLE IMMIGRATE ?

The reasons behind immigration can be diverse, but we can distinguish two categories called the “push factors” and the “pull factors”:

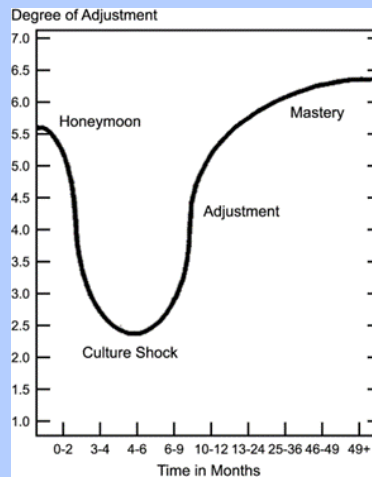
The “push factors” is what causes the migrant to flee his country, i.e. poverty, political or war conflicts and demographics reasons like the need for younger people to work.

The “pull factors” is what causes the migrant to choose a country of destination to settle there, i.e. financial stability, nature of economic activity (for example only migrants are willing to do low quality employment in the agricultural or the industrial field) and geographic location.

SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH OF IMMIGRATION

In 1955, Lysgaard, a sociologist, developed his “U- Curve” theory of cultural adjustment, describing the different phases occurring when facing a new cultural environment, especially for a certain amount of time. This “U-Curve” can explain the different behavior one can have when migrating to a new country. He says: “Adjustment as a process over time seems to follow a U-shaped curve: adjustment is felt to be easy and successful, to begin with; then follows a ‘crisis’ in which one feels less well adjusted, somewhat lonely and unhappy; finally one begins to feel better adjusted again, becoming more integrated into the foreign community.”

This U-curve theory is thus composed of four phases: Honeymoon/first impression, culture shock, adjustment and mastery. Each of these phases have their own duration but are only an indicative period. The testimonies given for each step is mostly from Asian migrants coming to Canada from the book "Teaching and Learning in Multicultural Schools: An Integrated Approach" by Elizabeth Coelho", but can be applied to any other migration.



Graphical representation of the U-Curve theory of adjustment

ARRIVAL AND FIRST IMPRESSION

When arriving in a new country, immigrants can feel excited and euphoric (this is the first phase, also called "honeymoon" phase), as some of them fled from a desperate situation in their country such as war, economical crisis, or political instability. This may lead to relief and hope after arriving and feeling thankful to have these difficulties left behind. They can also be amazed by the new surroundings. It usually lasts 2 months, and it can be compared to the same excitement one feels on holidays, with every simple task becoming surprising and being a new challenge.

"When I first saw Toronto from the airplane, it seemed so green. I remember looking out at the blue sky and feeling happy, excited, and a little scared. We had come prepared with our coats handy, waiting to face the 'frozen country' outside...We walked out on a June summer day with our coats on..."

Since then, Canada has held many surprises. The frozen country in my old geography book has come to life"

"I still remember the day I first arrived in Toronto from my country, Korea. I said to myself with my swollen heart that it was the place where my new life would begin and imagine my bright future. Everything was surprising and exciting to me from the first day. Everybody was friendly and kind, as I had heard they would be. Especially in my uncle's store, customers always said 'thank you' to me every time I finished serving them.

I was very happy. When summer came, it was more surprising. Most people walked almost naked and I found it fascinating that young couples kissed on the street, or even in school, and nobody seemed to be aware or care. However, it became usual and casual to me and I got used to seeing it."

CULTURE SHOCK

After some time, the newcomer often experiences a feeling of despair and hopelessness. He begins to see the difference between his own country (his identity) and the new country. The language barrier constitutes the first challenge the immigrant has to overcome. This creates difficulty to communicate in various situations such as school, work, and other everyday life situations, and can push the migrant to question his own identity.

Disorientation and confusion is strongly present among migrants as the culture of the welcoming country is usually quite different in other several aspects like food, tradition, music. This stage is also decisive for the next steps and how the migrants handle it.

This stage was also theorized by Edward.T Hall in 1976 as the “theory of proxemics”, also known as the “cultural iceberg”. Basically, between two people of two different backgrounds, we see differences in food, dance, language and tradition. This is the top of the iceberg, but deep differences lie also in beliefs, values, and point of views. This can also explain why the culture shock as well as other stages can be so violent. Due to the huge gap between two systems of beliefs, the inner identity becomes fragmented and shattered.

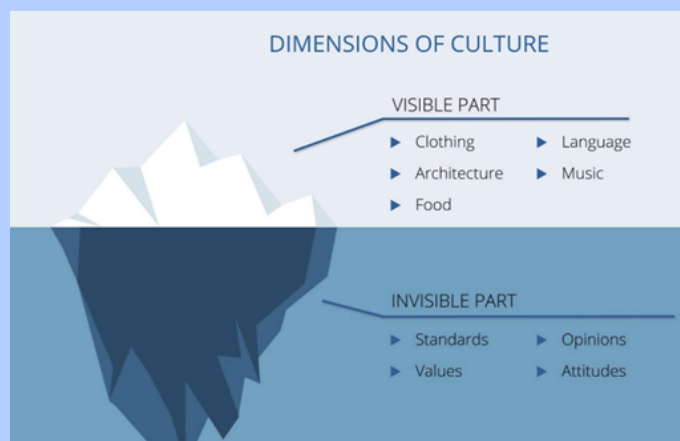


Illustration of the theory of proxemics in the context of acculturation

“When I first came to school I had the most terrible time because of the language problem. I was surprised and happy to see how each teacher was nice to me whenever I asked something. However, I noticed that many ignorant students discriminated against me because of the color of my skin and my poor english. I felt miserable and began to miss my country very much...I went half-crazy as I hardly said a word in school and understood none of what the teachers were saying. I didn't dare ask questions of the teachers because I was scared I would make mistakes. I began to hate our immigration to Canada. I hated my poor English. I hated school and I hated myself. It was much like living in hell.”

RECOVERY & OPTIMISM

In this stage, immigrants become accustomed to their surroundings, and show optimism about the future as they learn to speak and start to master the welcoming country's language. They start to acclimate to the country, by building relationships with people outside their community. More and more obstacles that the migrant was facing are falling and long term plans can be considered such as work plans or education plans in general. This phase is also characterized by being more assertive and trying to learn more about the values, culture, beliefs of the new country.

“After spending about a year feeling weak and grieving, I decided to console myself by studying hard and getting good marks. This made my classmates and my teachers aware of my vivid existence in the class. I began to feel self-confident and become vivacious. My family was really delighted to see me doing fine in school and I became their hope. Now, all I had to do was keep studying hard, go to university, and become a 'big' man, so my family would think that, after all, our immigration to Canada had been worthwhile.”

ACCULTURATION/ASSIMILIATION

The final stage, often called the mastery stage, is the node of successful integration, which relies on many circumstances.

For instance, premigration factors play a role in the acclimatization in a new country. The nature of migration and the condition of migration can have an impact both on mental health and sociological integration of refugees. For example, a study reported that nearly one third of Afghan refugees in the United States develop depression and 10 percent of these young afghans have PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).

Because of the traumatism of the war in the home country, the premigration phase was characterized by overwhelming stress, resulting in possibly huge impact on mental health later, even after fleeing the desperate situation. The preparation of the departure is thus crucial to determine the behavior in the following stages. The denial of the departure can induce frustration, struggle and often bitterness.

The following is an extract from an article (*"Afghans in Greece feel abandoned after getting asylum"* by Laurence Andrea for BalkanInsight) that also describe the condition of arriving by asylum seekers and mental health issues that it creates:

[...] Farzenah and Fatimah, the women from Bamyan, described living in the Moria camp on Lesbos as depressing and scary.

After a three-month journey to Greece, they spent the next seven months in a tent without electricity. The women said they often had to walk far from their makeshift home to use the bathroom, and were constantly worried for their safety.

At one point, they said, they were among a group of people attacked by men with knives. A woman's hand was cut in the attack, Farzenah said, and police arrested the men involved. The family was transferred off the island soon after.

"It was like hell," Farzenah recalls.

Such experiences affect the mental health of migrants, which adds to their difficulty in integrating into society, according to Gionakis, of the Babel Day Center.

"The dominant narrative is that the people who arrive here are traumatized and they bring issues from the past and so on," Gionakis told Balkan Insight. "But in general, we have seen that many people have to deal with everyday life challenges, and most of them are provoked by the way that we treat them when they arrive in the place where they think they will find safety, protection, security and all these things."

"Instead of that," he adds, "many times, they find dire conditions, with inhumane treatment, no safety, no perspectives for their future. All this, of course, affects their psychosocial well-being."

People need to feel safe for their mental well-being to flourish, according to Gionakis. His organization, which is funded by the Greek Ministry of Health, recommends camps take steps like putting lighting in bathrooms and separating men and women's bathrooms to try to alleviate some stress.

"We need to take into consideration the conditions under which they live," he says, "and of course not to let them stay [in camps] for long. We know that people who stay in a place like this for long, even if they are healthy, acquire mental health issues."

The final stage of acculturation is then very difficult to reach and can lead to rejection and huge identity crisis. Instead, migrants going through difficult times will potentially experience marginalization and exclusion inside both the welcoming country and his original community. The migration could have cut the links with family and friends. On another paradigm, migrants can feel cut from the society but not from the native community, directing them to separation.

Often, when the language barrier is crushed, the integration inside the welcoming country becomes easier. This is often the first step to assimilation or acculturation.

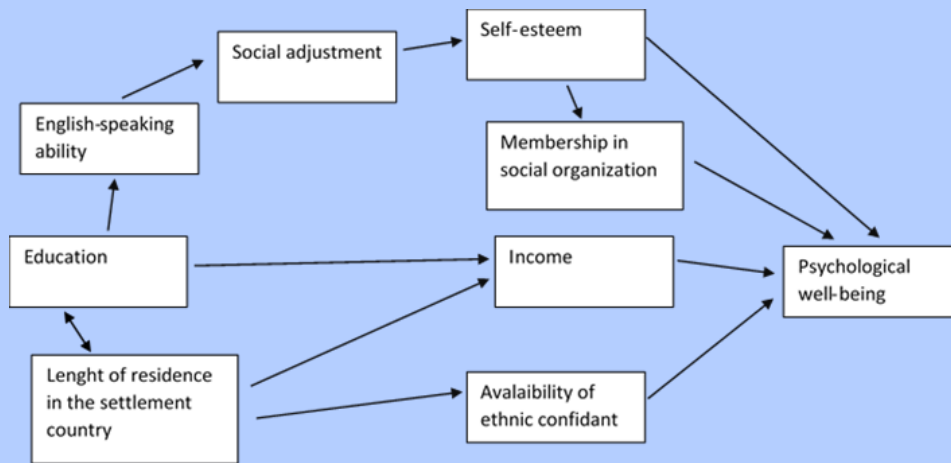
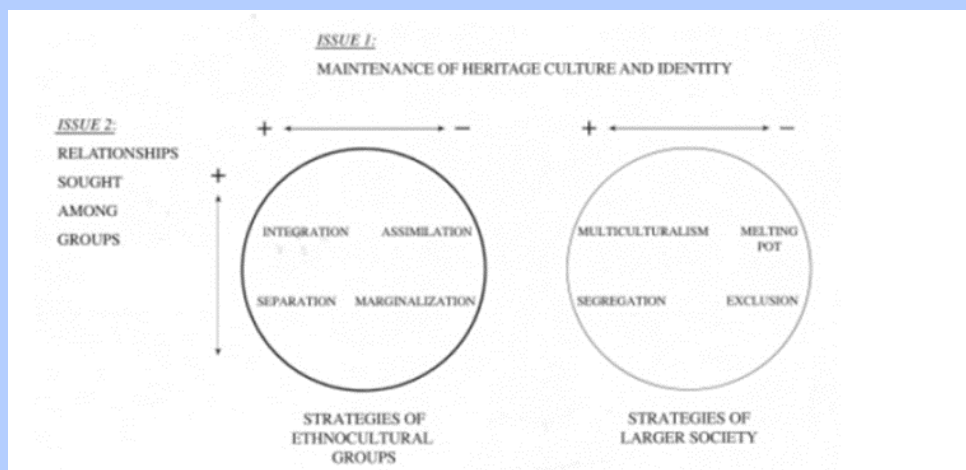


Illustration of the psychological impact of crushing the language barrier. Here, english is taken as an example as the dominant language.

The identity crisis might also push the migrant to seek permanency by complete assimilation, which is the rejection of the former culture. This implies the bereavement of the previous cultural identity to the complete adoption of a new one. This kind of behavior can however result in huge collisions with one perception of himself, as it implies a change in profound characteristics of beliefs developed during one lifetime. Usually, migrants manage to keep both cultural identities after some years, this is the last stage of the U-curve, that is to say, acculturation.



Varieties of intercultural strategies in immigrant groups and in the receiving society.

"It seems to me that my immigration to Canada has changed me a great deal. It makes me feel independent when I compare myself to other Canadian teenagers. Because it is a struggle for me to become fluent in English, I am more quiet than I used to be or would like to be. Coming to Canada has also made me more mature than I used to be because I have to worry about many things which I never had to worry about in my native country. For example, I have to worry about my mother. Will she be able to keep her job? I worry about my father. Will he be able to leave Vietnam and join us soon? I worry about our finances. How can we save more money? These questions have gradually made me into a more serious person."

"...Now I find that being an immigrant is an added advantage, because I know at least two cultures and two languages. This means I have more choices in daily entertainment and job opportunities than do native-born Canadians. Although I have been in Toronto for six years now, I still miss my native country occasionally, but I know I would also miss Canada tremendously if I went back. Slowly I have built around me a world which is part of me and of which I am part."

"To be Canadian I simply have to be myself. If I cannot accept myself or appreciate others, how can I expect to live in this multicultural nation? To make my life in Canada worthwhile, I must share my unique heritage?"

"I like the political freedom in Canadian society. Anyone can openly discuss international or domestic politics and politicians. This was not the case in my motherland, China. I also enjoy personal privacy in this society with regard to life-style and personal belongings such as bank accounts.

However, I feel that in some respects Canadians get carried away with freedom of expression. For instance, we, especially the younger generation, are exposed to excessive violence, obscene language, drugs, sex, and infidelity in movies, television programs, magazines, radio, and books. As a result, we may question our family values and weaken our sense of responsibility towards others and towards society as a whole. I cannot help but remember my golden years as a teenager in China. Unlike many teens in Canada who are too much in a hurry to be like adults without fully realizing the implications, I loved my childhood. In those green years I learned many new ideas and enjoyed invaluable experiences in a safe and innocent environment where drugs and sex were never heard of. I grew up in a society with strong moral values and strong family ties. These I believe are very important to keep in my family in Canada."

ACCULTURATION ACHIEVEMENT EXAMPLE

Here is another testimony to illustrate acculturation achievement by an afghan family that immigrated in Greece:

"We need to think outside the box...because you learn more things outside the box. It's like a cage, you need to be a free bird" says Arezu, an incredibly talented and eloquent Afghan refugee of just 12-years-old, currently living on Lesbos island in Greece.

This week is the return to school for many children around the world, including in Greece. For many, it is the first time they will re-enter the classrooms following many months of remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For others, COVID-19 is not the only barrier to accessing education. A report published by UNHCR last week highlighted that only 34% of school aged refugee children are currently enrolled in secondary level education. Arezu is one of the lucky ones.

In Arezu's native Afghanistan, access to education, particularly for girls, is a huge challenge, particularly given the ongoing humanitarian crisis where more than 600,000 people have been internally displaced this year alone.

Arezu arrived in Greece in 2019 with her parents and her younger sister. When she was just seven years old and her mother was 8 months pregnant with her younger sister Aylin, her parents came to the conclusion that they could no longer stay in Northern Afghanistan. As the conflict escalated, their lives and that of their daughter and unborn child were at risk. They fled to Turkey and later to Greece.

Having had a more comfortable life in Afghanistan and working in education, Mariam, the mother of Arezu, remembers the challenges of arriving in Greece and having to prove herself all over again. But this didn't deter her. Despite the challenges, she remains upbeat.

"You must start over again and step by step, people will see your capacities and doors will open for you. Everyone is different. You must make a goal and follow your path and it will be achieved. I'm always on the positive path and this brings the positive people to me" she says.

Upon arriving in the camp in Moria in 2019, Mariam immediately set to work volunteering as an interpreter. She has worked for several NGOs and is now a Community Liaison Officer with a UNHCR-funded Greek NGO supporting survivors of gender-based violence. Not only that, but she is an active member of the refugee community, working to support the integration of other refugees in Greece.

For Mariam, before anything else, education comes first. She has instilled this value in her oldest daughter. It was very difficult for Arezu to join the local primary school on Lesbos but due to Mariam's perseverance, Arezu was finally given the opportunity and she didn't disappoint. Within 3 months she had integrated and was speaking Greek quite fluently. Quickly she began to achieve the highest grades in her class.

Her mother recognized her talents and, determined to give her every opportunity in life, she knocked on every door she could find to seek a scholarship for secondary education for her daughter. She finally received a response from the US Embassy in Greece who encouraged her to apply for a scholarship to the International School of Boston. Once more, Arezu excelled in her exam and her interview.

In May this year, the family learned that Arezu had been accepted for the scholarship – a fully funded 5-year secondary school scholarship.

“We were visiting the spot where our boat had landed in Mytilene [Lesvos]. It was at that very moment that I received a call from the school in the US. That was a moment that shone in our dark times” says Mariam.

Arezu is now preparing to depart for Boston in the coming weeks. While her paperwork is processed, she has begun learning online. It wasn't easy for her to settle into school in Greece, but she has the same positive outlook as her mother. “School is good. I love Greek people. But sometimes it is difficult. Some days are good and some are bad” she says.

At just 12 years old, despite the multiple challenges she has faced throughout her life, her resilience and strength are abundant. “I want to go, I want to stand on my own two feet. I'm excited. I'm looking forward to education and to being a doctor so I can help people and help my family. I want to be a cardiologist or maybe a brain surgeon” she adds enthusiastically.

While Arezu has worked hard with the support of her loving family, she has been lucky to get this opportunity. Sadly, almost half of school aged refugee children globally remain out of school.

MIGRATION FROM AN EXTERNAL POINT OF VIEW

These migrations also imply changes and initiatives toward the refugees. Different reactions can occur by the locals, the government and in Europe by the European Union. This is to take into account for the integration of asylum seekers and immigrants.

GREEK'S OPINIONS ABOUT REFUGEES AND IMMIGRATION

First, on the population level, thoughts and reflection are diverse. Since the 1990s with Albanian immigration, the opinions about refugees and immigrants by Greeks have evolved. Some Greeks developed mostly negative opinions about immigration.

Therefore, according to the report of More in Common (2019) on attitudes toward immigration by the population in Greece, Greeks think the effects of immigration are negative to the national identity of Greece, and even more since the 2008 debt crisis. Only 21% believe that “immigration is good for the Greek economy”. Still, according to the More in Common report, 51 per cent of the population is agreeing that immigration is “bad for Greece, costing the welfare state and draining resources that could be spent on Greeks”.

Moreover, people are anxious about Islam and muslims. For 57% of greeks, Islam and greek society can't coexist.

Despite this opinion, Greeks overall have less polarized opinions than other countries about immigration. Thus, 77% of overall greeks think that immigrants are more willing to do low pay jobs than greeks.

One of the greek interviewed in this report says: *"It is a misfortune that arrival of the migrants coincided with the years of the economic crisis... the boatloads in Mytilene and Chios [while we were] simultaneously stuck in austerity programs. That unfortunately did not leave us with a capacity to empathize with those people. There is little we could do about it. When you are deprived, it is difficult to help the other person."*

Society's perception about immigration shapes the environment in which the refugee will evolve. Racism and the feeling of exclusion in work, school and everyday life increases the chance of marginalization and separation from society, and even from the native community.

INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES

On an institutional level, some programs and institutions have been created to try to alleviate marginalization of immigrants.

Thus, in 2019, the International Organization of Migration (IOM) created HELIOS, an integration program for refugees in Greece. It provides integration courses (language classes), accommodation support, employability support, integration monitoring and sensitization of the host community. The goal of this program is to facilitate the integration of migrants into Greek society.

Funds are also given at the European level to assist and improve procedures for migration management, such as the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund for 2021-2027 which provides 9.9 billion euros for this cause. Among these are humanitarian organizations and many accommodation facilities for asylum seekers exist to support refugees for their request. They provide them accommodation, food, and also language courses.

Even though the program can fail among some migrants who reject it, these initiatives are encouraging to learn the language and thus are helping the migrant to achieve acculturation and feel integrated.

CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS : CONSEQUENCES

Children of immigrant parents are also facing in some ways the same identity crisis as their parents. They grew up in the country of immigration so they might relate to the culture of the born country, however the feeling of betrayal may be present toward the parents. Because the parents belong to a culture different from the settling country and thus their child's school, the child may feel a disconnection and question himself on which culture he should choose.

Frustration and a strong wish of appartenance with a group can lead to internal conflicts and eventually having to choose only one culture. Another result in this situation would be to accept the two cultures, and so reach the acculturation stage. Most of the time, the culture of origin is lost throughout the generation. Therefore, children of the first generation can generally speak the language of their community, the children of the second can understand the language, and by the third generation, the use of language is already lost.

Another consequence of immigration for the children is growing in poverty. As a result, the chance of academic failure for children is higher, compared with children of the dominant culture of the country. The probability among minorities of feeling excluded and marginalized is therefore raised.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, migration is a complex phenomenon which leads to various consequences, particularly on a psychological level. It also holds many issues, such as how to integrate in a new society with a whole system of beliefs and traditions. Identity crisis is often a stage gone through by many migrants, hindering the achievement of the acculturation stage.

Hostility by the country of settlement and poorly managed immigration can result in failure, or even in traumatism for people fleeing from dangerous situations. One the other hand, solidarity from locals, and initiatives taken by organizations tend to ease the integration of newcomers.

Deciphering immigration and understanding each migrant, with his own uniqueness, allows us to highlight the complexity and the large spectrum of adaptations that can exist in human being.

"We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails" (Aristoteles)

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