

# Registers of ambivalence: ‘Ambivalent belonging’ and ‘ambivalent longing’

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## Abstract

The idea of ambivalence is emerging as a powerful interpretive prism for analysing the experience of migration. Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola (2013) have provided a pioneering attempt to develop an ‘ambivalence lens’ drawing on Neil Smelser’s analysis of ambivalence. However, as they acknowledge, their paradigm is in a preliminary and exploratory phase and has yet to run the full course of the test of application. In this paper, I outline some limitations of the model they have proposed, and argue that a more systematic use of the social theoretical literature on ‘ambivalent modernity’ could enrich it. This work suggests a less restrictive understanding of the dynamics of ambivalence, and a new ‘register’ of ambivalence revolving around the idea that migration can occasion heightened self-awareness and reflexivity. To support this argument, I outline a register of ‘ambivalent longing’ which could complement the register of ‘ambivalent belonging’ that is more established in migration studies.

Keywords: ambivalence, migration, belonging, longing, modernity

## 1. Introduction

The multiple and often momentous displacements that accompany migrants' journeys from the known and familiar to new and strange worlds are well recognised in the sociological literature on migration. As Kivisto and Faist (2010) point out, across competing theoretical perspectives, scholars have agreed that the 'movement beyond borders entails psychological, social and cultural dislocations' (p.89). Inaugurating a significant development in migration studies, however, these writers alert us to an aspect of the disembedding that attends the migrant experience that has been less well explored: a common emotional reaction, they suggest, is *ambivalence* (p.90). Without suggesting ambivalence is a necessary or universal response to migration, it is, they argue a factor with significant consequences for migrants and the societies they traverse.

As Kivisto has noted elsewhere (Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola 2013), however, work in this paradigm is in a preliminary and exploratory phase. A handful of empirical studies have identified ambivalence as a notable feature of the migrant experience (Cooper et al .2009; McHugh; Andits 2010; White 1995), while Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola's (2013) analysis of Iraqi refugees in Rome and Stockholm stands alone as an attempt to use the idea of ambivalence as an analytical frame. Their approach has proved to be productive; they have succeeded in constructing a conceptual framework that identified different modes of ambivalence among their participants, and they have made a case for its analytical utility; modes of dealing with ambivalence, they argue, are likely to be a factor in issues such as migrant integration in destination societies (p.200). As they acknowledge, however, their approach has yet to run the full course of the test of 'application' (2013).

This paper has grown out of an effort to further that test of application; my original intention was to apply Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola's approach to the case of a migrant community in Australia. Applying their model, however, was not as straightforward as I had anticipated. Before I got very far, I encountered a significant conceptual difficulty that presented itself in the form of the question: how will I recognise ambivalence when I see it? Of course, interpretive

prisms always demands conceptual clarification; but the ‘essentially underdetermined’ nature of the idea of ambivalence intensified the interpretive issues involved.

There were two dimensions to this interpretive challenge. The first concerned the broadly conceived ‘content’ of ambivalence. Referring to the simultaneous presence of contradictory affects, there is no fixed content to the idea of ambivalence. Abstract formulations are often expressed in terms of positive and negative feelings, such as love/hate or attraction/repulsion. But the question of what constitutes these contradictory feelings in concrete and situationally specific domains such as migration is open to a wide range of interpretations. This was not, however, an issue Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola addressed. Primarily concerned to show the applicability of ambivalence to the experience of migrants, they took for granted that the range of feelings, thoughts and emotions they identified could be considered to be expressions of ambivalence, and did not raise the question of other possible forms. Their focus was on feelings towards country of origin, but they foreshadowed the need to look also at feelings towards countries of destination. Their model does not suggest that these are the only expressions ambivalence can take, but nor did it help me to identify or clarify ambivalence in my participants.

The second concerned dynamics of ambivalence. If Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola devote little attention to a justification or clarification of the content of their ambivalence lens, reflection on responses to ambivalence – crucial to their emphasis on the analytical payoff of the ambivalence lens as a factor in how well they integrate into their countries of destination - is at the centre of their project. To conceptualise the dynamic of ambivalence, they draw on Neil Smelser’s analysis to argue that people respond to ambivalence by seeking to compensate for or resolve it; they either attempt to overcome feelings of ambivalence by denying one side or the other of the polarity, or resolve it by encompassing and maintaining a balance between the conflicting feelings (Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola 2013, p.201). But there is an interpretive issue here too: what constitutes ‘denial’ and ‘resolution’ in the attitudes and emotions of migrants?

Confronting these challenges drew me back to a broader reflection on the conceptual framework of the ambivalence prism; further application of this potentially fruitful notion, it seemed to me,

required more systematic consideration of what forms ambivalence might take in the context of migration. And in this context, a wider review of the sociological literature on ambivalence seemed called for. As Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola observe, the idea of ambivalence did not figure prominently in mainstream sociological theory dominated by rationalist paradigms and Smelser's work is a landmark among what was for a long time a limited field. However, as they also note, the theme of ambivalence has achieved a new prominence in recent social theorising, where a number of theorists have identified it as emblematic of modernity. Most often associated with Bauman (1991), Giddens (1991) and Beck (1994), ambivalence is a pervasive theme among theorists of the contemporary world (Smart 1999; Levine 1985; Touraine 1995). The influence and resonance of this perspective demanded a more systematic consideration than Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola had offered.

Taking up this challenge in a comprehensive way is a major undertaking, and one that is beyond the scope of this paper. A preliminary review, however, has already thrown up a number of themes with the potential to significantly broaden the ambivalence 'lens'. In the space that is available, I will outline the theoretical perspectives that have or could inform analysis of ambivalence in migration studies, before considering what 'registers of ambivalence' they suggest.

## *2. Theoretical frameworks*

As Andrew Weigert (1991, p.21) notes, the concept of ambivalence arose first within psychoanalytic discourse, and was only later and gradually adopted by sociologists and anthropologists. Since then, there have been a handful of works which have argued for a broader consideration of ambivalence in social life. In early attempts to bring it into sociological analysis, there was an attempt to rid it of its psychological foundations and ground it rather in social circumstances. The classic formulation of such 'sociological' ambivalence is Robert Merton's conception of ambivalence as 'conflicting normative expectations socially defined for a particular social role associated with a single social status' (Merton 1963; 1976 p.8). More recently, Hillcoat-Nallemby and Phillips (2011) have sought to base a similarly sociological conception in relational sociology, but their focus on divesting their framework of the psychological dimension of ambivalence means that their analysis adds much to the analysis of

complex, multidimensional and tension-filled relational networks which produce ambivalence, but little to that the analysis of those contradictory emotions.

For Neil Smelser (1998), treating ambivalence as a psychological construct was not a barrier to sociological analysis of its social dimensions and consequences, but an essential component of a comprehensive analysis of them; introducing the 'psychological postulate' of ambivalence, he argued is a necessary complement to the more widely prevalent psychological postulate of rational choice (Smelser 1998, p.2). In this conceptual framework, ambivalence, understood as an affective state in which a person simultaneously experiences 'the existence of both attraction and repulsion, of love and hate' (Smelser 1998, p. 5), is seen as a universal part of the human condition, but is most closely connected with psychological imperatives that arise in situations of dependence (Smelser 1998, p. 13). For this reason, it is most conspicuous in social situations of political, ideological or emotional dependency, such as childhood, emotional relationships, 'total institutions', groups and social movements which demand commitment and adherence, including churches and ethnic identity and labour movements, and consumer markets. The focus of Smelser's account is the personal and social consequences of ambivalence. His main point in this regard, drawn from Albert Hirschman, is that people respond to ambivalence by seeking to compensate for it or resolve it. On the one hand, people attempt to overcome feelings of ambivalence once and for all by denying one side or other of the polarity. On the other hand, they may attempt to find a balance, and this involves changing the situation to prevent ambivalence from overwhelming the individual (Smelser 1998). In this approach, emphasis is on potentially problematic aspects of ambivalence; if left unresolved, ambivalence can have harmful effects, for society and/or the individual.

For the theorists of ambivalent modernity, the emphasis is on the pervasiveness and permanence of ambivalence in contemporary life that is rooted in the contradictory, tension-ridden and ambiguous character of modernity. Beck argues 'irreducible ambivalences' are the hallmark of the risk societies that characterise high modernity (1994, p.12), while Giddens (1990, p.139) suggests that in modernity 'feelings of ontological security and existential anxiety ... co-exist in ambivalence'. Weigert, working within a sociology of emotions framework, explores ambivalence at length from this perspective. He sums up an emblematic theme of the ambivalent modernity approach when he notes that 'to feel ambivalence is to be quintessentially modern'

(Weigert 1999, p.52). And he articulates a shared assumption when he suggests that the potential for ambivalence has existential roots in the universal contradictions of the human condition (which stem, as he puts it from the passage of time, the impossibility of complete knowledge and the fusion of antithetical interpretations); but where traditional culture functioned to resolve ambivalence, modern culture increasingly generates it (Weigert 1999, p.21).

### *3. Registers of ambivalence for migration studies*

#### Ambivalent belonging

As noted above, Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola focus their analysis of ambivalence on migrant's feelings towards countries of origin and destination. While little conceptual clarification is engaged, their 'thick' descriptive analyses range widely over feelings of belonging, home and identity. This broad focus is in line with the main trend in the empirical studies on ambivalence and migration (Andits 2010; Cooper et al, 2009; McHugh 2000), and is well summed up in Cooper et al's notion of 'ambivalent belonging'. As would be expected in light of the 'underdetermination' of the concept of ambivalence mentioned above, while this literature shares a general focus on themes of belonging, it identifies a range of particular emotions and feelings as expressions of ambivalent belonging.

In the empirical studies, these expressions of ambivalence are 'findings' that are discovered, and their diversity reflects the different settings of the various studies. For Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola, however, ambivalence is an interpretive and analytical prism through which migrants' experiences and statements are interpreted. It is in this context, where 'ambivalence' is partly discovered and partly imposed, that the question of what constitutes ambivalence in migration settings takes on significance, and underlying theoretical and conceptual assumptions play a crucial role.

Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola's Smelserian approach did not determine the broad domain of their register of ambivalent belonging, but it does structure their version of it. Key here is the emphasis on responses to ambivalence, which leads them to read ambivalence through its tripartite structure of two forms of denial (exclusively stressing the positive or negative aspects of one's country of origin, or destination), and resolution (maintaining a balanced view of the

positives and negatives, of each). In the register of ambivalent belonging that emerges here, 'denial' is identified with distancing from the homeland, evident in a repudiation of the longing to return on the one hand, and on the other, with expressions of homesickness which take the form of a desire to reconnect with one's nation, in spite (as in the case of the Iraqis) of a history of conflict. The balanced response is identified with attempts to remain connected to homeland and nation of settlement, based on a recognition of positive and negative aspects of homeland and new home (Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola 2013, 211-2).

Leaving aside the question of quality of interpretation here (these are not the only feelings that could be identified with each position), this model raises a number of issues. For example, while conceived as a model that could be applied to countries of origin and destination separately, as Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola's analysis shows, these are often interconnected, and feelings about one are often closely interwoven with those about the other. In addition, the idea of a 'balanced' response takes on a normative force that raises questions that require more explicit consideration than they give. For example, for Iraqi refugees, a 'balanced' view of Iraq seems an altogether different proposition to the kind of 'balanced' response a labour migrant might have to their country of origin. And more generally, the manifold questions raised in Smelser's (p.12) adoption of Hirschman's suggestion that the balanced response to ambivalence can involve 'any attempt to change rather than escape from an objectionable state of affairs' – the possibilities seem so broad as to render the idea so vague as to be of little analytical use - are not considered.

It was these issues which led me to consider what the perspective of 'ambivalent modernity' might add to the analysis of ambivalence among migrants. My initial intention was to look for insights which could enrich the register of 'ambivalent belonging'. As I reflected on this body of work, however, a more radical broadening of the register of ambivalence presented itself. The key here was Weigert's stress on the positive and productive dimensions of ambivalence. In a society that is built on contradictory imperatives that routinely elicit ambivalence, he argues, ambivalence is not only inevitable and normal (Weigert 1999, p.27) but also at least potentially a well-informed, and even 'intellectually courageous' response to the pluralistic complexity of contemporary life (Weigert 1999, p.26). Most significantly, he argues that ambivalence generates ambiguity and anxiety - toward self, other and action – that can heighten self consciousness (Weigert 1999, p.29). Drawing on the themes of ambivalent modernity, this suggested a new

register of ambivalence that could help illuminate the migrant experience. This register points to a meaning of ambivalence which lies outside of feelings of (non) belonging to a nation or collectivity, and therefore is proposed as a complement rather than alternative to that of ambivalent belonging. I propose calling this register ‘ambivalent longing’.

### *Ambivalent longing*

The reference to ‘longing’ may have more poetic than analytical justification. I adopt it to underline the connotation of longing which emerges from Weigert’s conception of ambivalence as ‘the confrontation between the consolation of the known past and the threat of the imagined future’. But the essence of this mode of ambivalence lies more in the heightened reflexivity and new forms of subjectivity that are characteristic of modernity, and sometimes intensified in the experience of migration. Two themes of the ambivalent modernity theorists in particular are relevant. The first is that modernity has eroded once secure frameworks for social and personal life, leaving individuals to deal with multiple and contradictory social imperatives and cultural values, and increasingly thrown back on their own resources to create their identities and meaning. The second is that a major source of ambivalence is the intensification of reflexivity and subjectivity that modernity produces.

At the centre of the register of ambivalent longing, therefore, is the idea that one response to the profound psychological as well as social and cultural dislocations that migration entails is the possibility of heightened reflexivity and subjectivity. When thrust into new and challenging situations, migrants encounter a privileged insight into the diversity of socio-cultural life that is one of the wellsprings of modern reflexivity. For migrants, too, the imperative to (re)create oneself, identified as a salient characteristic of modernity, is also often intensified.

I am not suggesting that migrants always embrace the possibilities for heightened reflexivity and subjectivity that can accompany migration, but rather that this is one, little recognised or studied, potential response to the dislocations of migration. The point of the register of ‘ambivalent longing’ I am proposing here is rather to distinguish between responses to these possibilities. A starting point here could be a distinction between those who embrace the new opportunities for

reflexivity and subjectivity, and those who resist or deny it, or in Weigert's terms, between those who seek the consolation of the past and those who embrace the threat of future.

Such a register would introduce a new and I argue valuable perspective into migration studies. Among other insights, the pairings of contradictory emotions suggested would give attention to a dimension of migration that has received relatively little attention in the literature. The idea that the disembedding associated with migration leads some migrant communities to hold tightly to their traditions is well rehearsed, and clearly speaks to a significant phenomenon. However, the other side of this coin, when the openness of the imagined future is met with heightened self-consciousness and reflexivity, has been little recognised.

### ***Conclusion***

The emergence of an 'ambivalence lens' has opened up rich new lines of analysis in migration studies. I hope I have shown here the potential that lies in bringing analyses of subjectivity and reflexivity of the kind articulated by theorists of ambivalent modernity into its orbit. Migration is not the only or even primary source of modern reflexivity and subjectivity. But as the repeated invocation of the migrant as an exemplar of ambivalence suggests, it is a process which exposes people to the diversity of 'ways of being' - one of the well springs of reflexivity - and one which intensifies the modern imperative to create and recreate identities. Recognising this possibility is the first step towards empirical studies which might establish the extent and consequences of 'ambivalent longing' among migrants.

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