

Introduction: Ambivalence and the social processes of immigrant inclusion

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Abstract

Ambivalence as an interpretive tool in sociology refers to the social experience of any complex, cognitively confusing, or emotionally charged phenomenon that calls simultaneously for opposite reactions. Migrants' life conditions, as this Special Issue illustrates, are particularly subject to ambivalence. This introduction reviews the predominant understandings of ambivalence as a sociological category, its specific relevance in migration studies, and its implications for empirical research. It then reviews the articles in this Special Issue that are collectively intended to advance our understanding of the relevance of ambivalence for migration studies.

Keywords

Ambivalence, emotions, homeland, immigration, inclusion, receiving country

Introduction

In this article, and more broadly in this Special Issue of the *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, we aim to reveal conceptual and empirical ways in which ambivalence can yield fresh insights relevant to migration studies. In order to do so, we provide a three-step presentation: (1) a critical overview of the meanings and uses of ambivalence in the recent sociological literature, (2) an inquiry into its significance and implications under circumstances of international migration, and (3) a preliminary examination of its empirical applications and of the related gains, pitfalls, and ways ahead, in the light of the case studies presented in this issue.

On sociological ambivalence

Sociologists in the past have not embraced ambivalence in a significant way as a conceptual tool, and this remains an apt characterization today. Nevertheless, one can point to a small stream of publications over time that attempt to illustrate the utility of ambivalence for sociological analysis

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over a wide range of topics. This includes studies employing it in relation to alcohol problems (Room, 1976), a cervical screening program (Singleton and Michael, 1993), American Vietnam war resistance in Canada (Hagan, 2001), gender-role attitudes (Sjöberg, 2010), the order of scientific knowledge (Arribas-Ayllon and Bartlett, 2013), and funeral consumption (Szmigin and Canning, 2015). That being said, the two subfields that have witnessed more interest in ambivalence than others are the family (Connidis and McMullin, 2002a, 2002b; Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips, 2011, and Connidis, 2015) and immigration (Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola, 2013, 2015; McNevin, 2013; Morawska, 1987; Riccio, 2001; Uehling, 2002). This, we suspect, is not fortuitous. Rather, the complex emotional entanglements of primary groups in general and the family in particular and the dynamic of living between two worlds—the here of the receiving nation and the there of the homeland—are circumstances particularly conducive to feeling of ambivalence. It is the latter of the subfields that we are concerned with in this Special Issue.

In thinking theoretically about ambivalence, scholars have turned to a variety of theorists and theory schools for inspiration. Thus, recent efforts incorporate Zygmunt Bauman (Robinson, 1992), actor–network theory (Singleton and Michael, 1993), Niklas Luhmann (Berg, 2006), relational sociology (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips, 2011), and linking Giorgio Agamben to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (McNevin, 2013). However, most sociological efforts to employ ambivalence begin with the theorist who devoted more systematic attention to it than anyone else: Robert K. Merton.

As Merton was well aware, the origins of the term derive from psychology, not sociology. Specifically, the earliest use of the concept in a psychoanalytic framework can be attributed to Eugen Bleuler in 1910 and its subsequent articulation by Freud in numerous writings. Neil Smelser (1998), a sociologist and trained psychoanalyst, contends that whereas many of Freud’s ideas, such as “*eros* and *thanatos*, universal dream language, the psychosexual stages of development, [and] the primal horde” have been discredited, ambivalence “remains a cornerstone of psychoanalytic thought” (p. 5). The term referred primarily but not entirely to an affective state in which an individual harbors opposing emotions—love and hate—toward the same object. It is this understanding of the term that Merton embraced in a course in social psychology that he taught at Tulane University in the 1940–1941 academic year. Thus, in a handout to students, he offered the following definition:

Ambivalence means the double pull of emotion. There is both the tendency to love and to hate. Love is always on the border line of hate and hate on the border line of love ... the fact that there is this double pull or opposite tendencies [sic] illustrates the relation of emotion to conflict. (Quoted in Nichols, 2016: 369)

Over the course of his career, Merton sought to work with this concept and develop it into a distinctly sociological one that paralleled the psychoanalytic. He did so in numerous publications, including six articles that were republished in an edited collection of previously published work under the title *Sociological Ambivalence and Other Essays* (Merton, 1976). The most important essay in that collection, since it is the one that articulates his theoretical position rather than applying it to particular case studies (e.g. scientists, physicians, organizational leaders, and volunteers) was the essay titled simply “Sociological Ambivalence,” co-authored with Elinor Barber and first appearing in 1963 in a *Festschrift* for Pitirim Sorokin. That essay begins by citing Bleuler, expanding on the focus on ambivalence at the affective level to include the conative and cognitive levels. In other words, the term expanded, but remained a decidedly psychological one.

Merton and Barber (1976) seek to complement this perspective, describing their sociological orientation as

one that focuses on the ways in which ambivalence comes to be built into the structure of social statuses and roles. It directs us to examine the processes in the social structure that affect the probability of ambivalence turning up in particular kinds of role-relations. And finally, it directs us to the social consequences of ambivalence for the workings of social structures. (p. 5)

While at one level this appears to be straightforward, in fact it raises a question. What, precisely, does it mean for ambivalence to become “built into the structure of social statuses and roles”? In distinguishing sociological ambivalence from psychological ambivalence, they contend that the former, by being “located in the social definition of roles and statuses” is therefore “not in the feeling-state of one or another type of personality” (Merton, 1976: 7). But can ambivalence exist if it does not register as an emotional, conative, or cognitive response? Lawrence Nichols (2016) contends that while Merton and Barber attempt to make this distinction between two types of ambivalence, they also “show that ambivalence at the social level does lead to ambivalence at the psychological level, and thus the phenomenon is fundamentally social psychological” (p. 374). This assessment is part of a larger argument Nichols advances about the underlying and often hidden social psychology shaping Merton’s work as a structuralist theorist.

We would suggest, in contrast to Merton’s articulated objective, that instead of seeking a sociological version of ambivalence, the task for sociologists is to examine factors built into the social structure—particularly statuses and roles—that are conducive to generating ambivalence as a state of mind as well as identifying those statuses and roles that are less likely to trigger ambivalence. Neil Smelser’s (1998) American Sociological Association Presidential Address, despite his assertion that his intrapsychic approach and Merton’s “greet one another in a friendly fashion,” ought to be read as a corrective to Merton’s quest, one that appropriately returns ambivalence to its psychoanalytic origins (p. 5). This is not to say that his perspective and Merton’s call for examining social structural factors cannot have a symbiotic relationship, as the articles in this Special Issue attest. Smelser (1998: 5) contends that the reason ambivalence has not taken hold in sociology is due to the discipline’s preference for univalent accounts that view people’s perspectives as holding either positive or negative views on any topic or object of interest—views that remain relatively stable over time. Ambivalence, in contrast, assumes that people can hold both positive and negative views simultaneously, or if not precisely at the same moment, at least in close temporal proximity. Moreover, those views are often quite unstable.

Merton and Barber (1976) single out the sociological ambivalence of immigrants, “those who have lived in two or more societies and so have become oriented to differing sets of cultural values” (pp. 11–12). They point to the idea of the “marginal man” developed by Robert E. Park and Everett V. Stonequist as exemplifying the situation many immigrants confront. In fact, in both the historiography of immigration, seen, for example, in Oscar Handlin’s (1973) classic study of alienation, *The Uprooted*, and in many sociological ethnographies, including the late Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad’s (2004) Bourdieu-inspired *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, one can find implicit recognition of the significance of ambivalence in the immigrant experience. And so, too, can one find it reflected in numerous fictional accounts of immigration.

What makes the situation distinctive for immigrants is that there is often a dual ambivalence at play, directed both at the place of origin and the place of settlement (that place can be narrowly perceived at, for example, the municipal level, or can be as expansive as the nation-state). Thus, the complex process of immigrant adjustment and incorporation into a new setting entails resolving both how one reacts to there and to here.

The papers contained in this Special Issue are intended to offer insights into that process, which we consider to be an underdeveloped area of investigation. Most sociological research focuses on outcomes rather than social processes. This is, for example, quite clear in a recent major work by

Richard Alba and Nancy Foner (2015) that looks at the integration of immigrants in six major immigrant-receiving nations in North America and Western Europe. They look at various indices intended to measure the level of integration, including economic status, levels of residential segregation, education, and mixed marital unions. This is, of course, of major value in assessing how well or poorly nations are doing in incorporating newcomers into their respective societal main-streams, but it does not get at the social processes involved in achieving inclusion. While we do not contend that ambivalence is the only factor involved in understanding those processes, we think it is both an important one and one that has been largely ignored.

International migration and (as) ambivalence

To better understand ambivalence as a potential aspect of migrant inclusion or exclusion, further clarification is necessary. While ambivalence is only one in a larger repertoire of migrants' "out of place emotions" (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015), it can be more than a reaction toward a particularly critical or confusing event or situation. In fact, it potentially encompasses a range of emotional opposites, sometimes resulting in a protracted emotional experience, requiring ongoing negotiations and re-positionings. In examining any case, the emotional depth of ambivalence should never be disconnected from the competing role-based normative expectations nor from the broader societal contradictions that engender it.

Ambivalence should not be taken as a synonym of ambiguity, inconsistency, uncertainty, or disorientation. What is distinctive about ambivalence is the coexistence of opposing emotional and cognitive orientations "toward the same person, object or symbol" (Smelser 1998: 1, Morawska 1987). In a sociological optic (Merton, 1976), such a coexistence is inherent in particular social positions and in the social norms that define them, rather than being "only" an outcome of individual emotions. Ambivalence is, in other words, a matter of "socially structured contradictions made manifest in interaction" (Connidis and McMullin, 2012a: 565). This can be appreciated at a number of levels in migrants' everyday lives, marked as they are, on one hand, by contrasting and sometimes contradictory roles and fluid identities and, on the other, by a cognitive and practical need to make their roles more reconcilable and consistent, and their identities more clearly defined, even at a risk of essentializing them.

In the first place, the processes of adaptation of first-generation migrants can be fruitfully revisited as a matter of protracted ambivalence and of ways of coping with it. There are expectations related to embracing modernity, pursuing wealth and personal advancement, and claiming recognition, or at least pragmatic acceptance. And there are, inseparable from the former, confronting a longing for tradition, constraints on upward social mobility, and negative feelings about ongoing marginalization and rejection, along with feelings of alienation. In short, aspiration and actual achievement exist in a state of tension. This reveals a major "discrepancy" (*à la* Merton) between the values they cultivate and the means available to fulfill them; in fact, between "the desirable goods available on the outside and their limited opportunities to acquire and enjoy them" (Morawska, 1987: 243).

Likewise, migrants' relationships with their countries of origin may engender ambivalence, the product of what has been described as "ambiguous loss" (Boss, 1999). This is a contradictory emotional stance toward people and things that are present in an emotional and social sense, but absent in a physical one—and possibly at risk of further distancing and mutual estrangement—as the time spent as a migrant goes by. Along these lines, ambivalence has been highlighted as a salient aspect of migrants' transnational family life (Madianou, 2012; Sun, 2017) but also, interestingly, of their reactions to diaspora-reaching discourses and policies promulgated by the governments of sending countries. Extra-territorial voting rights are a case in point (McIlwaine and Bermudez,

2015; see also, on diasporic relations in a context of “forced” migration, Belloni, 2018). Ambivalence here has to do not only with the coexistence of migrant “distant status” and “local status” (Morawska, 1987), but also with the contrasting reactions elicited by each status. In a nutshell, the country or local community of origin is a source of ambivalence insofar as it tends to be constructed as “home” in some (affective) sense, and as a deeply unhomey environment in other more pragmatic respects (Bocagni, 2017; Constable, 1999).

What is characteristic of migrant ambivalence, therefore, is primarily the dual focality of their everyday lives, and the tension between the expectations and claims to which they are exposed both from the receiving and the sending societies, while occupying a relatively marginal position in both. The simultaneity of these different sources of conflicting pressures is arguably what makes migrant ambivalence unique. Where one ultimately belongs, or what one’s ultimate “place in the world” is, are questions that migrants must address out of necessity.

However, the abundance of ambivalence migrants must negotiate does not involve only the present. The constant referencing to both “here” and “there,” each of them with its opposite “pulls,” is a *temporal* as much as a *spatial* one. It means setting different temporalities and stages of the life course against each other. In this sense, migrant future life projects are another privileged domain for the experience and the study of ambivalence. The coexistence of emotional and cognitive opposites, in this case, involves the allure of a prospective homecoming, or return to the place where one “naturally belongs,” set against an equally significant pressure: the greater opportunities typically afforded by everyday life abroad, and the uncertainties inherent in a permanent return (cf. Gallo, 2018 and Bolzman and Bridji, 2019). Once again, ambivalence—in this case, what some call the “myth of return”—results in decisional trade-offs, and possibly in a reiterated procrastination of any long-term decision. A particularly evocative material indicator of future-related ambivalence is provided by so-called remittance houses (López, 2015): the new, often conspicuous and somehow out-of-place buildings that appear in the countries of origin because of migrant transnational housing investments. As many ethnographies suggest, it is not uncommon for these buildings to turn into “empty nests,” thus instantiating the ambivalent position of their owners, in fact, making visible the “tension between the yearning for belonging and the wish to be independent” and successful (Flam and Terpe, 2009: 4). While remittance houses are a tangible proof of migrants’ attachment to the communities of origin and of their expectation to return at some point, they are also an enduring reminder of all the factors that militate against this decision. Wherever these houses remain half-finished, empty, or even in decay, they are a powerful symbol of the “stuckedness” to which protracted ambivalence leads.

Migrants’ ambivalence can also be appreciated in their everyday production of social identities and in their forms of collective identification (Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola, 2015). This holds whenever the duality of their terms of reference and self-definition turns out to be less an additional opportunity than a burden and a source of contradictions, misalignments, and stigmatization. The current debate on the integration of the immigrant second generation in all receiving nations would have much to gain from taking seriously the ambivalence migrants’ descendants may experience, and the resources available to them to cope with it. However, this identificational ambivalence does not necessarily fall into the binary of *here vs there*. It is also related to the inadequacy of any univalent identification and categorization in a context of so-called super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007): the overlapping of a multiplicity of axes of identification related to ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, place of settlement, and so forth results in different identity markers competing among each other, none of them being necessarily the last word. In the poignant formulation of Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah (2010), “you can’t put me in a box.” This is not always perceived positively, especially by those who do not possess adequate resources or opportunities to navigate it in their own terms. Whenever people, and most notably immigrants or ethnic minorities, are

stuck between alternative frames of identity definition—related to gender, ethnicity, religion, household affiliation, and so on.—they are encountering a protracted condition of ambivalence.

In all these domains, ambivalence need not be either the prevalent condition or an immutable one. The core point is, rather, how successful people are in negotiating it, which in part depends on the resources available to them (Connidis and McMullin, 2002a). Even with adequate resources, a migration background is likely to engender some level of ambivalence. Those with high levels of human and social capital are still inevitably exposed to “new feeling rules” and emotional cultures, “some of which may contradict [in uncomfortable ways] the old ones” (Flam and Terpe, 2009). It is no coincidence that “the migrant” or “the stranger” has long been considered, from Simmel onwards, both an ideal typical embodiment of ambivalence and an elicitor of ambivalence within the ranks of the publics of receiving societies.

Having said this, sociological ambivalence is much more than an ideal type, an abstract condition or a static emotion. It does not pertain only to a decontextualized and isolated individual. Rather, it is inherently relational and societally embedded. In other words, ambivalence is a multi-dimensional and multi-level construct. It is temporally patterned and rooted in socio-structural circumstances, as much as in individual trajectories (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips, 2011). Whether for migrants or anybody else, ambivalence needs to be appreciated in its evolving interdependence with the outer social environment, as well as with the family and individual life course of those who experience it.

Ambivalence may be part and parcel of the development of intergenerational relationships, particularly between older parents and adult children (Lendon et al., 2014; Pillemer et al., 2012, for an instance in migration studies, see Gallo, 2018). It can also be constitutive of the social process of aging (Bolzman and Bridji, 2019; Palmberger, 2019). Still more specific forms of ambivalence have to do less with the migrant condition as such, than with the structural requirements of the jobs in which migrants are employed. Many instances of ambivalence in Merton’s sense can be found here: “the product of conflicting norms and counter-norms associated with particular social positions” (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips, 2011). A case in point is that of migrant paid care workers with fragile elderly clients. The definition of their social role entails both strong emotional involvement and professional detachment. They must mediate between altruistic engagement and economic self-interest, intimacy, and commodification. Immigrant care workers themselves are a target of protracted (and structural) ambivalence from the client side, whenever the latter are simultaneously prone to avoid contact with ethno-racial diversity and very much in need of it, in a literal sense, for their everyday social reproduction (Rodríguez, 2007).

With this framing, the case studies in this Special Issue include several empirical contributions that advance our understanding of the interpretative benefit of an ambivalence lens for the sociology of migration. Besides their own substantive findings, these papers illuminate the potentials and limitations of social research on ambivalence in general. Through this optic, we examine the implications of these cases for advancing a comparative sociological agenda on ambivalence.

Case studies and ways ahead

The papers herein address ambivalence as the core issue, rather than a secondary topic or a synonym for less specific notions, fruitful both in terms of empirical findings and theoretical elaboration. A case in point is Claudio Bolzman and Bridji Slim’s paper investigating migrant ambivalence from a life course perspective, building on a survey on the intentions to return among Southern European retirees in Switzerland. On the top of the ambivalence that is inherent in the migrant condition, elderly guest workers must negotiate the tension between the affective

lure of homecoming and the practical convenience of permanently staying abroad. Whichever option they take depends on the interaction between four main variables: socio-legal status, subjective assessment of the migration experience, persistence of transnational ties, and the individual's health status. Among the authors' respondents, the typically "ambivalent"—those who intended to return but have not done so yet—are more likely to have fewer social ties, a weaker legal position and a more difficult social experience in Switzerland. Instead, the prototypically "non-ambivalent" present "the classical traits of successfully integrated migrants," as upwardly mobile dual citizens that have settled permanently in their receiving country. This, however, should not lead to reframe ambivalence as failure in achieving migrants' projects of social and existential mobility. Rather, ambivalence works out as a prism that refracts a broader variety of biographical and societal circumstances.

These circumstances include, importantly, family and intergenerational dynamics, as exemplified in the paper by Ester Gallo. This is an ethnographic study of migrant kin relations with a focus on older middle-class returnees in Kerala, India. Ambivalence, the author argues, is constitutive of intergenerational relations under circumstances of transnational migration, as kin negotiate from a distance their mutual expectations and obligations over time, particularly when it comes to the provision of family care. However, this tension between different attitudes and views has little of a simply individual and intimate experience. Rather, ambivalence between returnees and their counterparts (be they ancestors or adult children) is embedded in a historically shaped moral economy of intergenerational relations. This requires a balancing act between "traditional" and "postcolonial" values—norms of family solidarity versus desires of individual autonomy. Gallo also highlights the transformative potential inherent in ambivalence concerning the distribution of care responsibilities between genders and generations, parallel to the transformation in family structures and to the achievement of a middle-class status through international migration. Once again, ambivalence is also a matter of temporality. This calls for historical and class-sensitive accounts, well beyond the single individual in the here-and-now.

In the following paper, by Milena Belloni, ambivalence emerges as a constitutive dimension of the relations between migrants and their countries of origin, in this case, of Eritrean forced migrants who fled their native country and found asylum in Europe. Through the lens of ambivalence, the author illuminates the interplay between their status as *refugees from* a country and *citizens of it*. Ambivalence, for the young Eritreans in this study, stems from "overlapping levels of normative inconsistency": not just between the conflicting rules and values of two nation-states, but also between the variety of roles they individually embody (refugee, family provider, even patriot) and the conflicting expectations attached to their life course position (state loyalty, family connectedness, personal autonomy).

Ambivalence provides a valuable framing in understanding why Eritrean refugees may show little interest in political opposition to the Eritrean regime and in Eritrean politics at large while displaying a remarkable national pride and attachment despite their status as refugees. This is due to the juxtaposition of different emotional, affective, and moral ties to their homeland, a consequence of their socialization backgrounds in Eritrea. Such an attitude tends to reproduce itself over time as Eritreans navigate the opposing pressures they are subject to as refugees (in their countries of settlement), citizens (for their countries of origin), and breadwinners (for their families left behind). This conflation of different roles and expectations opens an intriguing perspective for the literature on diasporic connections between emigration countries and their citizens abroad. Interestingly, as Belloni shows, diaspora policies in Eritrea tend to be no less ambivalent than the attitudes cultivated by Eritreans abroad. While the latter are officially portrayed as "traitors," they can regain "external" citizenship rights, based on the commitment to support the national economy through their remittances. In this case study, as much as in the previous ones, making sense of

individual ambivalence requires not only a relational lens but also a broader understanding of the historical and structural circumstances in which ambivalence is embedded.

Monika Palmberger's case examines long-term Turkish migrants in Vienna who are either retired or contemplating retirement—in short at a life course moment that raises the question of where to spend one's life once the demands of employment have ended. Attentive to the emotional valence attached to her interviewees' accounts, she realized that they often expressed a tension between competing and contrasting emotions, the classic indication of ambivalence. This led her to link those individual emotions to relations with intimates, particularly the marital partner. She calls this "relational ambivalence," which she describes in a manner that parallels Merton's understanding of the impact of roles and statuses on feelings of ambivalence.

Last, Claudia Tazreiter investigates the significance of ambivalence in the lived experience of temporary Indonesian workers in Australia. Temporariness and legal liminality are the key features of ambivalence in this case study. No wonder, Tazreiter says that the narratives of these people are informed by an ambivalent attitude vis-à-vis citizens and permanent residents. Ambivalence toward the majority society is actually a rational, even predictable reaction, whenever a temporary status intersects with severe vulnerability. Based on this insight, the author highlights the coexistence of a variety of emotional states among her informants, as forms of "affect" that are hard to categorize in a stark way, unless under the broader frame of ambivalence. In short, as Tazreiter concludes, "balancing multiple and conflicting emotions about a homeland, and contradictory plans for settlement or return is not a pathological response to the pressures migrants face, but rather an expression of the complexities faced in the contemporary world."

These articles show that rather similar social and emotional patterns of ambivalence take place across very different societal, cultural, and socio-demographic backgrounds. This opens a promising terrain for comparative analyses. In this regard, it is necessary to speculate about what aspects of migration should inform such a framework of analysis: (1) what are the typical drivers of ambivalence, (2) the strategies and resources deployed to cope with it, and (3) the outcomes associated with ambivalence over time? As to the *circumstances*, the study of migration and ambivalence reconfirms the need to move beyond methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller, 2002).

Based on the evidence, migrant ambivalence appears to be driven by the discrepancy between one or more of the following: incompatible roles and aspirations, contradictory expectations attached to the same roles, and the need to mediate between different groups and frames of reference that lie apart from each other: different social systems (those based in the countries of origin and of settlement), different scales of action (from primary groups to public institutions), and different temporal frames (the opposing pulls exercised by past memories and by future dreams or concerns, rather than solely by the present).

A comparative understanding of the coping *strategies* and *resources* mobilized by social actors requires further exploration. However, it is clear that ambivalence does not necessarily make people passive, immobile, or perennially unsettled. In many respects, migrants, as much as anybody else, engage with ambivalence and navigate their ways through and (sometimes) beyond it. From a sociological perspective, illuminating actors' potential to react is as critical as recognizing ambivalence in the first place:

Assuming ambivalence in interpersonal relationships and in structural arrangements forces us to consider how ambivalence is resolved. In daily life, it is resolved not merely by choosing between roles but also by redefining them. Emphasizing ambivalence forces an examination of how the taken-for-grantedness of roles is negotiated. [...] [S]ocial actors regularly attempt to reconcile ambivalence or risk living in a constant state of inaction. (Connidis and McMullin, 2002a: 562–563)

Ambivalence can also be a catalyst for social change. However, this calls for yet another analytical distinction, between ambivalence as a *time-specific* or *place-specific experience*, and ambivalence as a *protracted condition*. Many forms of ambivalence are only associated with particularly critical transitions or events over the life course. Some of them, however, end up being the implicit and structural subtext of a particular social position, or subjective condition, with all the uncertainty and distress this may cause. The point, for those involved, is then less solving ambivalence than relativizing its salience. Migrant ways of managing their self-identifications and external categorizations, through identity work, are a case in point. Cultivating meaningful ties with their communities of origin is another common way of managing the protracted ambivalence related to be “perceived as and to feel like aliens” in the country where they live, no matter their length of stay (Bolzman and Bridji, 2019).


Analytically speaking, ambivalence calls for doing justice to societal complexity. It highlights that some social phenomena are not only irreducible to forms of neat categorization but are also imbued with internal contradictions that are by no means random. Rather, they are constitutive of a social fact as such. Moreover, ambivalence, as both a sociological and a psychosocial construct, works out as an interdisciplinary bridge between the level of individual emotional life and that of overarching social structures.

Having said this, one can still wonder whether we possess the analytic tools adequate to determine whether ambivalence pertains in any particular case. How can we assess whether we are using the concept with sufficient analytic and definitional rigor, or rather are deploying it merely as a sensitizing concept? The danger is obvious: if researchers proceed by overstressing the concept such that it appears to be everywhere, it leads to it ultimately being nowhere. We believe there is merit in further unpacking and refining the determinants of ambivalence as a social experience and applying the concept to illuminate the complexity and contradictions of many but by no means all social phenomena. The same does not hold for ambivalence as a research outcome. A recognition of the prevalence of social ambivalence should not lead to *epistemological* ambivalence, for the failure to produce relatively clear and intersubjectively relevant findings amounts to a failure of sociology to deliver on its promise to advance our understanding of the complex dynamics of social life.

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