

Immigrant's Home in the Making through Spatial Practice: The Case of Iranians in Berlin

Dissertation zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades
Doktor- Philosophiae

an der Fakultät Architektur und Urbanistik
der
Bauhaus-Universität Weimar

vorgelegt von

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geb. 08 Sep. 1991

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INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

The number of non-nationals settled in Germany currently reaches around 10 million (Eurostat, 2020), expressing the urgency in addressing immigrant integration discourse. However, due to primarily top-down approaches used in literature and policies, relatively little attention has been paid to how migrants themselves feel about their home-making experiences and the process of belonging. On the other hand, on a local and national scale, not many studies focus on the physical context and explore how geographical aspects shape and influence the experience of different groups of immigrants. Overall, the gaps can be classified into four main sectors:

- Insight on the profile and classifications of immigrants
- Role of the spatial practices in immigrant's experiences and place-making
- Over-focusing on the neighborhood as the scale of analysis
- The emergence of belonging through immigrant's practices

Research Questions and Objectives

This research is an attempt to add to the body of knowledge and answer the following research questions in two sections:

Section one

- How is the home-making path for Iranian immigrants in Berlin?
- How does the process of objective integration (such as settlement experiences, education, work, language learning, and making network) in Berlin outline and influence Iranian immigrants' sense of belonging?

Through a bottom-up approach, I address Iranian immigrants' home-making, locality, and placemaking, addressing their process of attaining objective integration.

Section two

- How and to what extent do Iranian immigrants' social and spatial engagement and practice affect their placemaking and sense of belonging to Berlin's new home?

The migrant's experiences and sense of belonging are related to personal and ethnocultural factors (Halfacree & Boyle, 1993) and rely on routines and behaviors in daily life and their practical consciousness (Giddens, 1. 991). Therefore;

- I portrait the demographic data available on the settlement of Iranians in Berlin to represent ethnic urban performance. This step provides contextual data regarding Iranian immigrants' insight into Berlin's urban space. I investigate the reciprocal effect of the perception of the urban spaces of Berlin in settlement location choice and the immigrant's locality characteristics such as ethnic diversity in reading and perceiving the city.
- While looking at the influence of the possible established ethnic community, I explore the implications on the process of belonging and home-making through

- a. the extent and state of contacts, inclusion, or exclusion from activities or (in)visibility as an individual and ethnic community in space.
- b. feelings attributed to places such as comfort, fear, attachment, the role of the physical environment, and spatial knowledge of the space.

METHODOLOGY

The fundamental aim of this research is to uncover the immigrants' experiences and perceptions of the physical and social world and its intersection with their sense of belonging and home-making. This research is qualitative and descriptive in nature. Due to the different types of data-driven from the investigation of the bilateral effect of people and space interaction, I have applied the embedded mixed-method design. The use of quantitative analysis provides contextual data to answer the research questions within a broader qualitative and descriptive nature. The quantitative analysis uses Pearson's correlation technique to measure the strength of the association between Iranians' settlement location and variables that determine the characteristics of Berlin's districts. The units of place intend to demonstrate the case study's presence and possible interaction with places around their settlement location that relatively shapes their perception. The qualitative research comprises ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured in-depth interviews with a homogeneous sample of Iranian immigrants in Berlin, digital ethnography over Twitter, and several focused groups utilizing Clubhouse. The analysis provides data on individual and ethnic behaviors and trajectories and considers the complex interactions between the immigrant's experience and the role of place.

RESULTS

This research primarily uncovers a link between the socio-political circumstances and negotiation of belonging in the new society through the transformation of migration intentions. From 2008 onward, the socio-political events in Iran, such as the presidential election protest and the currency collapse due to the accumulative effect of the sanctions, alter the migration intention of many, from temporary to permanent. And therefore, categorize the Iranian international student as high-skilled immigrants (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020).

The initial research question inquires about the home-making path of Iranian immigrants in Berlin. The findings reveal the integration process's dynamic character with objective and subjective aspects of a cooperative outlook. I argue that integration could not be seen as a dichotomy. Alongside, the process of home-making and belonging is unilinear and temporal. Immigrants define a new understanding of the dynamic aspect of home and belonging through a complex social and spatial relation, as Boccagni (2017) calls it "homing" to emphasize the vibrant sense of meaning-making in the process.

The second question inquires about the objective integration process that influences Iranian immigrants' sense of belonging. I have elucidated *language* and *citizenship* as indicators of the structural aspect of integration with attention to individuals and ethnic life history.

Speaking in the host society, language considers an indicator for faster integration both objectively and subjectively. In addition, the narratives suggest that language proficiency has a crucial impact in the

context of the workplace, which can exclude those who do not meet the expectation (Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005). The exclusion lies under the Iranian high-skilled immigrant's incapability to exercise their power in negotiating and persuasion in the workplace when the other party is dominated in the language (German). This almost unalterable condition results in less space for improvement and, consequently, a sense of disappointment in the workplace. This lack of self-confidence in everyday social practices in the public space results in timidity about speaking German and appearance as a tourist speaking English instead of an immigrant with average German proficiency in Berlin. The invisibility works as a mechanism to acquire an intended dignity. Therefore, I argue that in the case of Iranian high-skilled immigrants, it is not only borrowing a foreign vocabulary (Schimany & Kohlmeier, 2005) but the overall performative language in everyday social interaction involves the "questions of prestige and power" (Schimany & Kohlmeier, 2005, p. 36).

German citizenship is a medium that provides both rights and duties alongside benefits, and political power offers more security concerning discrimination. However, the process of naturalization is seen as an arrangement in exchange for adaptation and acculturation. Thus, it does not carry emotional entities and a sense of identity among Iranian high-skilled immigrants. As Simonsen (2017) studied, granting citizenship could only determine the immigrant's feeling of belonging if the host nationals credit this political right to indicate who belongs. Although the specific implication of this statement was not studied, the political right of citizenship was only mentioned to be a solution for socio-economic integration, especially regarding access to the housing market in Berlin, both in case of eligibility for a mortgage and closing a long-term rental agreement.

To answer the second section of the research question, I have formulated the findings that examine and portray how Iranian immigrants' identification and perception¹ of locality and Berlin's urban space affect their placemaking and belonging to Berlin.

- Identification Through Space

The narratives reveal that the desirable settlement location and use of space among Iranian high-skilled immigrants is closely associated with how they would like to portray themselves in the new society. Therefore, they would feel mostly belong when their locality aligns with their multifaceted identification practice.

- Diversity Impact in Transitional Localities

The emerging housing crisis in Berlin resulted in a massive housing shortage, high rent prices, and an additional unjust rental process¹. Therefore, some newly arrived high-skilled Iranian immigrants are bound to settle in — "zones of transition" (Schwirian as cited in Pemberton & Phillimore, 2016) or "Second contact zones" (Robinson, Reeve, & Casey, 2007), which accommodate mostly the working-class citizens in the periphery of Berlin center that forms around social housing. However, these districts have two major shortcomings. First, aligned with many previous studies, Iranian middle-class newcomers had limited social interactions at the neighborhood level in these districts with working-

¹ According to a new study by the German federal anti-discrimination office, in late 2019, 41% of the interviewees indicated that they find the idea of renting their apartment to migrants worrying. The survey found that more than a third of people from migrant backgrounds looking for an apartment in the last ten years have experienced discrimination because of their origins. https://www.antidiskriminierungsstelle.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/publikationen/Jahresberichte/2019.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3 (Last Access: 28.09.2020)

class residents and instead lived parallel lives (Pinkster, 2014; Savage, Bagnall, & Longhurst, 2005; Watt, 2009). While the findings reveal that newly-arrived Iranians did not sense any visible differences (Wessendorf, 2017), having less contact and, as narrated, the disparity in either class or lifestyle abstain them from spontaneously blending in their local proximity and “feel accepted in their otherness” (van Leeuwen as cited in Wessendorf, 2017). And second, there are fewer places for interaction implicate less attachment to place (Livingston, Bailey, & Kearns, 2010). Therefore, the newcomers may not feel at home in their local place, negatively affecting their sense of belonging.

Moreover, the concept of contact zones implies the intersection of immigrants’ experience and ethnic diversity as place characteristics. Although these second contact zones host some immigrant workers nonetheless have a relatively limited history with newly arrived ethnic settlements and emerging diversity. Three Districts of Berlin located in the East (Marzahn-Hellersdorf, Treptow-Köpenick, and Lichtenberg) have significantly lower ethnic diversity than other districts of Berlin (just 10% of the district population) in comparison to the 35% average percentage in Berlin. As embeddedness (Portes, 1995) implies, a sense of security and identity is provided through the established ethnic communities where the diversity of the new immigrant’s locality is low (Yuval-Davis, 2006). However, there are significantly higher shares of Iranian immigrants to naturalized Iranians within the mentioned districts. Hence, almost no established ethnic communities in these localities can stimulate the newly-arrived Iranian immigrants’ belonging who live in these transition zones (Finney & Jivraj, 2013).

In contrast, a sizeable population of Iranian immigrants lives in ethnically diverse districts of Kreuzberg, Neukölln, and Wedding occupied over 50%, with non-Germans hosting predominantly Arab and Turkish ethnicity. Some studies argued that ethnic minorities desire to live in proximity of their own or similar ethnic group (Bolt et al., 1998; Phillips, 2007); However, although the overall multiculturality of Berlin is appreciated as an alternative to blending in, these districts are perceived as ‘too much diverse’ for Iranian immigrants’ prospect of integration. While living in the mentioned neighborhood that hosts many Middle-Eastern immigrants is believed to result in the generalization of Iranian nationality. As Khosravi (2011) argued, through “performing whiteness,” the Iranians attempt to differentiate themselves from the so-called visible or different ethnic groups to increase their chance of integration. Thus, as the previous literature explored otherness between white middle-class against minority groups (El-Tayeb, 2011) and interethnic boundary-making (Moghaddari, 2020); many Iranian immigrants realize the negative impacts of spatial concentration of culturally close ethnicities as the basis for exclusion and increase the negative discernment of mainstream society and count it as a drawback for integration and belonging.

- Ethnic Place-making

The two districts of Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf and Steglitz-Zehlendorf, located on the West side of Berlin, are the primary residential location of both Iranian immigrants and the whole Iranian diaspora. Although the Iranian-related businesses are concentrated in these neighborhoods, and the spaces of consumption like restaurants and ethnic grocery shops could be an ‘ethnic marker’ that can imply a sense of belonging for immigrants (Rabikowska and Burrell as cited in McGhee et al., 2015); However, the clustering of Iranians in these two districts seems to not motivated by closeness to other Iranian

cultures and do not hold much value in stimulating a sense of attachment and belonging. In contrast, the motivation lies under urban quality. The correlation analysis confirmed this finding by significant correlation of the Iranian settlement location with *Gute Wohnlage* (good residential areas) in Berlin, alongside the sense of upward mobility and how others perceive the specific locality. Therefore, the familiarity with their ethnic culture and nostalgia does not necessarily bring comfort and feel at home. Thus, the spatial practice of Iranians confirms the notion of reverse cultural alienation also explains the act of Iranian immigrants who attempts to differentiate themselves from their co-nationals who may hold a lower level of cultural capital and are perceived as “not valued by others” (Bryceson and Vuorela as cited in McGhee, Travena, & Heath, 2015). Moreover, due to political, ideological, and cultural differences that resulted in distrust and skepticism (McAuliffe, 2007; Spellman, 2004), many Iranian immigrants avoid membership in established organizations and participation in community events and gatherings with the fear of choosing a specific political orientation. Therefore, the findings explained Iranian immigrants' place-making in the neighborhood's scoop and the mechanism of invisibility as an ethnic community in Berlin's public sphere.

CONCLUSION

As a final observation, Iranian highly skilled immigrants successfully integrate objectively; While having sufficient competency, their sense of belonging to Berlin is only partially linked to the possibility of accessing equal opportunity through their objective integration processes.

Moreover, regarding their state of belonging, it could be concluded that the following impact their sense of belonging and place-making:

- The sequence of socio-ethnic culture in regards to the denotation of home and belonging;
- Iranian high-skilled immigrants' efforts towards reaching a level of upward mobility overshadow their attempt to shape social and spatial interaction with Berliners and Berlin itself, which manifests both in their perception and use of urban space;
- And finally, the identification practice and the distancing oneself from the public image of Iran and Iranian as an act of reassurance and self-protection against the generalization of adjacent nationalities that is traced in the intersection of demographical settlement distribution of Iranians in Berlin.

The main focus of this research is exploring the spatial practice of Iranian immigrants, revealing that place is being understood as a location with both physical and social meaning, where immigrants could both imply as welcoming or exclusionary. The identity and culture prevailing in a place could not only provide security and a sense of belonging for individuals, but it could also lead to the isolation of those who are distinctive and different. In review, different dimensions of place matter in the experiences of new immigrants; however, elucidating the details and their interconnectivity of the elements and outcomes is challenging. For instance, much literature explored that the local arena diversity has a positive correlation with the experience of immigrants regarding their sense of place. However, as stated in this research, the ethnically diverse areas are sometimes perceived as inadequate and considered a negative factor in the experience of belonging and attachment. Therefore, there is a multifaceted relationship between the variable of context while considering the element of culture.

In closing, the process of belonging from an urban practice lens reveals the complexity of place-related characteristics and dynamics. By uncovering the Iranian immigrant's interpretation of where they live and where they use or are present in the city, this research provides new insight on the link between individuals' and ethnics' perception of daily social interaction spatial practices and constructing the narratives of belonging.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER STUDY

This research has focused on the overall migration experiences and home-making path for highly skilled and educated Iranian immigrants who choose Germany and Berlin as their new cities. I argued that for illustrating the process, it is vital to consider and reflect on the events and circumstances of the migration journey even before their migration. Previous literature discusses a distinction between temporary and long-term migration experiences (Ottonelli & Torresi, 2010; Tazreiter, 2019). As the intention for migration could have a significant influence on the process of subjective integration and unique feeling of belonging, this research could be a departure point to investigate further how the socio-political shift in Iran during the recent decade has manifested in the Iranian high-skilled home-making process by reflecting on a mindset shift from temporary to permanent migration decisions that I believe is unique to this period. Although the circumstances are different from the vast literature on the guest-worker program, there are similarities in the process of belonging in Germany. The initial temporality of migration results in high-skilled Iranian immigrants focusing on their work, study, and livelihood more than investing in their socio-cultural link to the host society as the resource for their future sense of belonging. However, through time, many decided to call Germany their new home.

Furthermore, this research reported the relatively integrated and simultaneously disengaged highly skilled immigrants and their dissatisfaction with their level of belonging. Further studies can examine the premise of the "integration paradox" among Iranian immigrants that can provide new angles and investigate the causalities. While within the notion of integration paradox, the close association of objective integration and the emotional attachment to the host society is assessed. This paradox pointed out that more educated immigrants have a more negative view regarding their subjective integration perception, as discussed in this research regarding having equal opportunities and acceptance while comparing oneself to the host society. Therefore, future research should also focus on awareness of acceptance and discrimination (Steinmann, 2019) among Iranian immigrant groups concerning their visibility as an ethnic and in their spatial practice (Tuppat & Gerhards, 2021) as an indicator of inequality and social crisis that closely affect the sense of belonging.

Moreover, investigating migrants' sense of belonging transnational relation to home country as the central theme of migration studies also deal with the intersection of the ethnic community and place and acknowledges hybrid identities for immigrants. While having forms of capital within the home country, migration results in a disjunction between identity and place as the immigrant's experience altered social location (Gilmartin, 2008). Therefore, closely investigating the intensity and strength of an individual's transnational relation as the unfixed and metaphoric places of belonging (Leitner & Ehrkamp, 2006) can be a site for the reconceptualization of home and identity belonging.

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