Bitter gifts: migrants’ exclusive inclusion

Condemned to consume

My migration newsfeed in the past few weeks has been dominated by news about the Syrian refugee crisis and the various European and international responses. But there have also been two other noteworthy migration news: one relates to the changing face of immigration to Canada as increasingly highly educated migrants are admitted and the other relates to revelations that the Australian 7-Eleven convenience stores systematically exploit international students and other temporary visa holders.

How do these various news hang together?

“Traditional” immigration countries such as Australia and Canada have a relatively small refugee intake in comparison to their various work migration schemes. While the former dominate the news, the latter dominate the numbers. According to ABS data, the net immigration to Australia, in the financial year 2013-14, for instance, was over 212,000 people; humanitarian entrants accounted for only around six percent of these. So, maybe unusually internationally, Australia accepts far more “economic migrants” than “refugees.”

The rationale for this selection is that skilled and well-educated migrants, who fill labour shortages, are good for the economy; while refugees are a “burden” on the economy. One of the many complexities that this dichotomy overlooks is, of course, that refugees are often likely to be skilled and well-educated, too.

Let’s ignore that detail for the moment and ask whether migrants’ skills and education necessarily lead to social inclusion.

Social inclusion is a notoriously difficult concept to define. Despite frequent references to social inclusion in contemporary national and international policies, there is actually a notable lack of consensus as to what constitutes social inclusion. Most commentators see the promotion of economic well-being as constituting the core of social inclusion. However, the contributors to two recent collections devoted to “Linguistic Diversity and Social Inclusion” that I (co)edited for the International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism and the Australian Review of Applied Linguistics found it necessary to go beyond the economic core meaning of social inclusion to also include a wider meaning of social inclusion as a sense of community participation and belonging. The contributors showed that inclusion is a multifaceted phenomenon and linguistically diverse populations may well be included on one level but excluded on another.
Recent research with Soviet Jewish migrants to Germany offers a highly pertinent discussion. The researcher, Sveta Roberman, undertook a year-long ethnographic project to examine the migration and settlement experiences of this group. She developed the concept of “inclusive exclusion” in response to the following observation:

I kept sensing a peculiar atmosphere, intangible and hard to describe, that pervades the lives of many, an aura of dissatisfaction and restlessness that borders on—or has become—apathy and resignation, articulated in an often-expressed sentiment: “We are kind of existing here, not really living.” (Roberman 2015, p. 744)

It’s an observation that resonates with a lot of the research into the language learning and settlement experiences of adult migrants conducted with very different origin groups by my students and myself here in Australia.

The people Roberman conducted her research with are Jewish migrants from the former Soviet Union, mostly from Russia and Ukraine, who settled in Germany in the 1990s and early 2000s. About 220,000 Soviet Jews were admitted during that period. For the re-unified Germany, accepting substantial numbers of Jewish migrants was yet another step on the long road of atonement for the Holocaust. It was hoped that these migrants would contribute to a revival of Jewish cultural and religious life in Germany.

Around 80% of these migrants were tertiary-educated and had established professional careers in the Soviet Union. Most of them were secular and, because “Jew” was an ethnic and not a religious category in the Soviet Union, only about a third of these migrants ended up joining Jewish religious communities in Germany. In fact, in contrast to Soviet Jews migrating to Israel or the USA, those coming to Germany were probably least motivated by ideological reasons. Roberman’s participants did not hesitate to explain that they had migrated for economic reasons, in search of a better life.

This context seems ideal to examine the social inclusion of migrants: a highly-educated migrant group, a high degree of cultural similarity between migrants and hosts, and public desire on the part of the destination society to embrace this particular migrant group.

A migration fairy-tale? Not quite.
In the way social inclusion is usually conceived as economic participation and cultural recognition, Roberman’s participants had little to complain:

When speaking about their encounters with the host country, my interviewees were not troubled by their economic situation; they felt secure and protected in that sphere of their lives. Neither did they complain about the lack of possibilities for the articulation of their Russian or Jewish identities: the former could be practiced at the range of Russian cultural centers, clubs, and libraries, while the latter could be actualized and maintained within Jewish communal centers and organizations. Even the constraint they faced in political participation, because many immigrants lacked full citizenship, was hardly an issue for my interviewees. (Roberman 2015, p. 747)

Migration had enabled the participants to partake of Western economic affluence, they had received significant, though not always full, legal and political citizenship rights, and, as a group, cultural recognition.

So what was missing? Access to regular, stable and meaningful employment.

Participants who, at the time of migration, were in their mid-30s or older found it extremely difficult to find employment commensurate with their education, skills and experience. This was not for lack of trying. Participants were deeply influenced by the Soviet work ethos and extremely resourceful in their attempts to find work. The German state also helped with the provision of language and training courses and a suite of short-term work and internship programs designed to help migrants transition into full-time regular employment.

Except they didn’t.

The usual intangible barriers of accent, non-recognition of overseas qualifications, lack of local experience, etc. that we have often discussed here on Language on the Move applied in this case, too. Age discrimination was another factor. Middle-aged participants in the study ended up trying to secure stable employment for years. During that time they were supported by welfare and a range of casual short-term jobs, including state-sponsored employment schemes.

Olga, a qualified and experienced teacher, for instance, arrived in Germany when she was 40 years old. Her qualifications were not recognized and she was involved in various re-training schemes. She also held various casual jobs as an attendant in an aged-care home and as a social worker. When she turned 50 without having achieved regular standard employment, she was officially “removed” from the labour market and declared an “early retiree.”

Being unable to find regular employment meant that the participants struggled to construct a coherent life-story and to see meaning in their migration, as was the case for Olga:

I was sitting in her apartment as she tried to compose a coherent narrative of the 10-year period of her life in Germany. But that seemed to be an unachievable task: the flow of her life narrative stopped at the point of emigration. What followed were fragmented facts that she resisted bringing together into a meaningful story, seeing little achievement or sense in her 10-year migration experience. (Roberman 2015, p. 752)
Another participant, Mark, who had been a cameraman in Kiev and was 53 years old when he arrived in Germany had given up looking for work after six years and lived on welfare. He said, “Once I had some objectives in life, I aspired to something, I had some plans, [...] Today, I wake up in the morning, and I have one and the same question to ask myself: what do I do today?” (quoted in Roberman 2015, p. 754).

Like others in his situation, he filled his life with surfing the internet, watching TV, attending doctor’s appointments and, above all, shopping. Some developed elaborate routes to stretch out daily grocery shopping, others threw themselves into the pursuit of specials and sales. While these activities fill time, in the long run they breed a deep sense of isolation and loneliness. Being an anonymous shopper trapped them in the position of social strangers.

At one level, consumption spaces are some of the least discriminatory spaces imaginable; one participant made this point with regard to language proficiency:

One does not need language in the supermarket. The system is itself interested to sell you the thing, and the system finds its way to do it; they succeed in selling it to you in any way. It does not matter what language you speak. (quoted in Roberman 2015, p. 756)

At the same time, this participant makes the point that consumption spaces are spaces of extreme dislocation. In the supermarket or shopping mall it does not matter who you are. In fact, it does not even matter that you are there. Being reduced to filling their time with consumption resulted in a sharp feeling of невостребованность: “uselessness,” “redundancy,” like unclaimed luggage. One participant compared her situation to that of cows who are allowed to graze on lush green pastures but nobody bothers to come and milk them.

In short, participants were free to consume: they had achieved a comfortable and economically secure existence through their migration. However, their access to resources of real value – stable and meaningful work – was constrained. In this context, the freedom to consume condemned them to consume. Consumption did not result in a sense of dignity and self-worth, it did not allow them to forge coherent positive life-stories and it did not provide them with a sense of belonging. While included economically, legally and culturally, their participation is ultimately constrained – a condition Roberman calls “exclusive inclusion.”
Our economic system is characterised by overproduction and there is the regular need to dispose of surplus goods. Consequently, even relatively poor members of affluent consumer societies, such as Roberman’s irregularly employed and/or welfare-dependent interviewees, are readily included in the sphere of consumption. By contrast, stable and regular employment is in short supply. Exclusion from this scarce and valuable resource continues to be a powerful way to reproduce social hierarchies. Disadvantaged groups of local people may be similarly excluded but migrants are particularly vulnerable on post-industrial labour markets and to the unemployment, underemployment and exploitation that go for “flexibility.” As Roberman (2015, p. 759f.) concludes:

Exclusive inclusion is a much more civilized, camouflaged form of exclusion. It seems to be mild. But, in spite of its apparent mildness, exclusive inclusion, which limits access to social resources of real value and to participation in the arenas of social recognition and belonging, is no less destructive in the ways it undermines the excluded individual’s world, threatens humanness, and strains the social fabric as a whole.

References

