



Univerzita Palackého  
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Dissertation Assessment

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Title: *Identities and Lives of Muslim Youth in the Czech Republic*

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### **Assesment**

The dissertation presents research results of young Muslim migrants in the Czech Republic. It is ethnographic research whose participants are between the ages of 17 and 22 and come from Syria, Iran, Yemen and Italy. The author uses semi-structured interviews as a primary mode of data collection and participant observations to explore topics related to gender, belonging, ethnicity and religion. The dissertation focuses on the stories of participants and explores how the systems within which the youth exist operate, influencing their quotidian experiences. The sociological aspect is present in the fact that the author strives for the understanding how the youth navigate, negotiate, and, in return, agentially influence the systems and structures around them. The whole text permeates the approach that youth cannot be conceptualized as passive recipients of migration processes.

It is typical for the whole dissertation that the author does not disappear her mental line. Author argues that the youth cannot be conceptualized as passive object of migration processes. We can only agree with that idea.

The key question that the author seeks to answer is what identity and integration of Muslim youth migrants in the Czech Republic look like. The dissertation addresses the topic in the context of debates on youth migration, particularly the Muslim youth, in other countries and offers up the case of the Czech Republic. This gives the thesis an international dimension and overlap.

The author writes: "Focusing on the experiences of young Muslim migrants in the Czech Republic, this research has a broader reach, implying insight into the lives of people on the margins of society..." She comes with a study that is quite common in migration studies and treats the research topic through a qualitative approach. But what is different/new is the added sociological perspective and method of interpretation that leads to an understanding how the identity and lives of the youth are influenced by and how the youth influences, in turn, the social structures surrounding them – their families, peers, societal realities like gender, race, ethnicities – that determine the youth's social and material worth. Author examines how the youth negotiate their lives perspectives under influence of social systems and structures.

Author puts three main questions, which show an emphasis on exploring the impact of migration on other aspects of migrant lives.

- How does migration influence the Muslim youth's gender identity?
- How does migration to the Czech Republic impact youth's sense of belonging?
- What tools and strategies do the migrants use, to integrate with the host and immigrant communities in the Czech Republic?

Since I have already assessed the thesis at the "small opponent" stage, I observe that the questions are better and more clearly formulated. As a reader, however, I must mention that I would have welcomed more clarification of the context of the three questions. It is not entirely clear how the author reached at them, I feel the lack a greater explanation of their origin, the "story" of their birth is unknown.

I am convinced that the author has dealt very well with the theoretical pitfalls that accompany the usual ethnographic approach. She did not get stuck in the usual lack of clarity and often vague conceptualizations of identity, but she used, in my opinion, Bronfrenbrenner's very effective ecological systems model surrounded by social structures, including influences and mail domains. This application of the ecological model is unique in our research field.

The author recognizes that identity construction and integration become a co-constitutive process whereby the non-passive youth multilaterally interact with the social influences asserting their place and re-signifying the norms on individual, communal, and even contemporary global order. It establishes a good theoretical basis for conceptualizing ethnographic research.

It cannot be overlooked that the text has moved forward significantly over the last year to a much better quality. It now has two strengths: a) a logical structure that makes the text look like a coherent and cohesive work and b) a good theoretical background that permeates the sub-chapters and which is also supported by field research. The chapters take the reader through each stage in turn and connect them in a logical and meaningful line.

The second chapter focuses on Muslims in the Czech Republic and structure vs agency debate. I know that it is complicated to list the main characteristics of Muslim immigration, but I will not allow myself to remark that the description seems disjointed, which is due to the fact that some of the sources are older. Also, the question of how many Muslims live in the Czech Republic already has a tentative and more precise answer, based on extrapolations over time. We have an outline of the characteristics of Muslims, also young Muslims.

The third chapter is devoted to the key concepts. There are described as the theories of identity and integration and also the ecological systems model. An understanding of the migrant youth's identity construction and integration processes emerges from the consequent themes: importance of gender, the role of belonging, and the significance of a cosmopolitan outlook. I consider the combination of identity and social identity theory to be a good basis for understanding and negotiation identity. The author writes on page 15: "Muslim migrant youth interact with socio-historical and political factors such as the Orientalist perspective in academic and public discourse, the history of colonialism, and Czech immigration laws and policies." What is meant by mentioning colonialism (in the Czech context)?

The author states that while studies recognize and acknowledge the presence of migrants from different sub-sects of Islam, which has led to the creation of separate Sunni and Shia mosques..., the Czech Muslim population is relatively very small to allow for such demographic concessions. While it may be true that the dominant Islamic field in the Czech Republic is Sunni, it is in fact very demographically, as well as sectarian, diverse. The author seems to have observed more of an environment of organized Islam. This would be worth a reflection (I can partially see it on page 17).

As the author rightly points out, an ecological systems perspective has been used to map the experiences of young migrants in several studies. She

explains her choice well to the reader and I agree that a systems perspective is an appropriate strategy for understanding identity formation in broader contexts. The model is powerful - it can account for socio-historical events that often precede the individual. Author grasps Bronfenbrenner's ecological model as a framework that helps her situate young people's experiences within structuration theory.

As for the concept of integration, the author reflects on its complexity and ultimately misses the point by focusing on young people's strategies for integrating into society. I must ask the author, based on these cited studies, which approach to integration prevails? The notion of integration as an individual process or the notion of integration as achieving a desired goal/outcome? In the Structure vs. Agency debate, I was surprised that A. Giddens' structuration theory was not mentioned.

In Chapter 4 is presented the methodology of ethnography based on which the next topics were explored: topics related to gender, belonging, and tools of integration into the host and immigrant. I have nothing to say about the description of ethnography. However, the sampling is somewhat unclear. Participants were recruited via purposive, conventional and snowball sampling. How can we understand it in the case of six participants? Did researcher use three ways of sampling? The mention of the snowball selection technique is without further comment, yet it is quite a risky selection method. Overall, I miss the reflection of the selection made, e.g. language restriction, student status, residence status (mentioned participation in the SIP) etc. The choice of data analysis and coding strategy was well done. Next chapter introduces the reader to the participants in this research. The descriptions are appropriate, coming at a good time and providing deep insight into the context of the interviews and the lives of the participants.

Chapter 6 is concerned with the ways in which Muslim migrant youth negotiate their masculinities and femininities through their bodies making them sites of exploitation/exploration. Using the works of Ahmed, Butler and Foucault, the chapter has aimed to upset the orientalist discursive notion wherein men are singularly portrayed as oppressors and women are relegated to the role of the victim. It explores negotiations of masculinities and femininities and its impacts. The chapter is well presented, but I miss (as with the research question in the introduction) the larger explanation of why the choice fell on the gender category. However, it is clear from the entire text that the topic is legitimate.

The chapter has a rather critical-reflective character and relies on good quality sources. The literature review allows the author to apply a critical approach and to notice amalgamated cultural forms.

Furthermore, Yuval-Davis' framework of belonging has been used to analyse the extent to which and the ways in which the youth facilitate their inclusions. In chapter 7, the author explores different levels of belonging (three levels). Author argues that the youth's sense of belonging is diasporically mediated due to issues of access or a lack thereof across racial lines. This chapter, like the previous one, is well grounded in theory. It is accompanied by references to scientific literature and relevant ideas and passages.

I have a comment on some of the given examples, I would be more cautious in their interpretation. Racism can be present in stories, I don't deny it, but it can also be absent, and it is used to interpret human behavior that is incomprehensible. In the aforementioned case of technical error in student attendance, it may be a question of the teacher's consistency (see p. 97).

The last thematic chapter focuses on how the Muslim migrant youth become active stakeholders in the cosmopolitan project. I am glad that the author included this chapter, because we have the opportunity to observe how the migrant youth's interactions with multiple cultures contributes to their identity and integration process leading to a cosmopolitan outlook and how everyday processes help the migrant youth integrate into society in the larger global framework.

The whole text concludes with a conclusion. The reader learns the answers to the questions posed in the introduction. The answers are in line with the passages given earlier. The results concerning situating the youth experiences within an ecological framework gain more space. In my opinion, the conclusion could be presented more as a whole, rather than answers to individual questions. I would also expect a greater discussion of the findings and their introduction into a "specific Czech" context.

In conclusion, there are some, in my opinion, "strong" statements that require much more contextualization. E.g. "The Czech Republic with its conservative admission of non-European immigrants is an unfavorable destination" (p. 123) – how can we explain the growing number of people (interest) coming from so-called third countries? And how can we explain the wide and long-term acceptance of Vietnamese people?

## **Conclusion**

What to say in conclusion? The reader has before him an interesting text that reflects the enthusiasm of the author. It comes with interesting approaches and findings. Its strengths include that it is logically structured and has a sociological dimension, presented by the framework of structuration theory. I especially appreciate the application of the ecological model. It turned out to be very interesting and useful for research practice. I also appreciate the emphasis on the cosmopolitan dimension of integration. An interesting

finding also relates to the importance of diaspora. In the very conclusion, we encounter a reflection of the position of the research participants.

The author demonstrated the ability to work methodologically. The work is in order from a formal point of view, it contains only minor and insignificant formal flaws. What is important, I evaluate overall the text as good. Nevertheless, I find some flaws there.

a) The author could have emphasized more the novelty and originality of her approach. Although she used various theoretical approaches, their larger evaluation is missing in the conclusion. E.g. taking into account the experience gained with the application of the ecological model.

b) The author is less familiar with some Czech realities (integration policy, estimates of the number of Muslims, evaluation of their degree of integration), she was dependent on selective information from texts written in English, which limited her potential in the conclusion when contextualizing the studied phenomena. (e.g. I miss the reference to the useful study *The drama of social identities: Coping with otherness and the adaptation strategy of the second generation of Muslims in the Czech Republic* by Zuzana Rendek).

c) The text does little to reflect the different conceptualizations of migration, religiosity and ethnicity, which unfortunately tend to merge in academic research.

Overall, I consider the dissertation to be of high quality and recommend it for defense.

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