

Losing, transporting and re-claiming identity

HCI Implications for prevention and counteraction of identity loss through (forced) migration

Andrea Hartmann, University of Siegen, Germany, andrea.hartmann@student.uni-siegen.de

ABSTRACT

The paper describes the difficulties that can arise for migrants, especially for refugees who are seeking a place in society in the country of arrival, in the working world and their private life. However, this often encounters great difficulties due to the lack of proven documentation of professionally and privately skills. These skills show the development of a person, usually also determine their position in society and their identity. The focus should now be placed on the partial loss of this identity. I argue for finding an approach in research how to counteract this, for example through and with digital technology.

Additional Keywords and Phrases: Migration, Refuge, Identity, Digital Device, HCI

1 INTRODUCTION

In November 2015, after graduating from a B.A. in Social Work, I started working as a social worker in the field of refugees and asylum in a small German town, in North Rhine-Westphalia with about 17,000 inhabitants. Currently, I am enrolled in the Master Social Work and Education M.A. program and the Social Sciences B.A. program at the University of Siegen and work as a student research assistant in the Collaborative Research Center (SFB) 1187 "Media of Cooperation" at the University of Siegen.

During my time as a social worker, people with a migration background, especially refugees, have repeatedly confronted me with the problem that once they arrive here in Germany, they are unable to reconnect with their old lives, either professionally or regarding their private lives. Important parts of their identity may have been lost due to migration. The possibility of re-entering life far from home is thus made difficult or even impossible.

To give some examples:

I know a young man from Afghanistan, who is known in his home country far beyond the borders of his village as a fantastic soccer player and has already played professionally there. A photo on his cell phone shows him with his team and the cup he won. Here he plays after a long start-up period in a team not far from his accommodation.

An older man from Iraq, who ran a restaurant back in the day, can only help out in the kitchen here, because he has no documents to prove his training

There is this young father of a Syrian family, who has already worked successfully for years in a car repair shop. In Germany, he is paid as an unskilled worker and is only allowed to do menial jobs because he lacks the documents to have his professional career recognized.

2 LEAVING BEHIND

In most cases, the people who had set out for Germany as refugees left everything behind. Much that is tangible, but equally much that cannot be easily transported, even if one had the choice of taking more with them than the clothes they wear on their bodies. The people have practiced a profession in their homeland, were often known far beyond the borders of their village for certain skills. For example, they were known in the neighborhood as an excellent football player or were very talented with the sewing machine. This type of interaction extends into the private sphere, albeit in a more moderate form, for example in sports or volunteer work.

There is no training system comparable to that in Germany [5]; in most cases, informal training takes place in the home countries of migrants with a history of flight and skills are communicated verbally, but only recognized in a demonstrably certified manner. This is often contrasted by a large amount of work experience and competence that they bring with them.

3 MIGRATION, REFUGE AND IDENTITY

In 2019, more than one in four people in Germany has a migration background. In numbers, this means that according to the Federal Statistical Office, 22.2 million people [8] in Germany have a migration background in the broader sense, which corresponds to 26% of the total population [5]. Worldwide 272 million people [6] live in a country other than the one in which they were born, and 79,5 million people are on the run [10].

Annette Treibel refers to the statement of the United Nations that one would only speak of migrants if they had left their "place of habitual residence" for longer than one year. According to recent research, however, there is also the possibility that, in addition to a shift in the center of life, a new center of life is added to the old one. [9]

Prof. Dr. Nadia Kutscher from the University of Vechta published the project report of her empirical study on the use of digital media by unaccompanied minor refugees in December 2015. [11] Even the title - quoting one of the interviewees - "Internet equals food" makes it clear how important the Internet is for those affected.

Kutscher explicitly examines the media use of those affected before fleeing and after arriving in Germany. She also shows how important it is for them to stay in touch with their families via cell phone or the Internet. She also questions the role of social services such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Overall, she examines how digital media are used to maintain contacts in the country of origin, to make new contacts, but also to orient themselves in the host country and to look for support options. [11]

Erikson describes the formation of an identity as a lifelong development. "largely unconscious to the individual and his society." Identifications from childhood would be abandoned or aligned in this process. [4]

These childhood identifications, accumulated in successive stages of development, constitute his "inner capital." The adolescent is initially concerned with "consolidating his social role." In doing so, he is decisively focused on the comparison between his own sense of self and his appearance in the eyes of others. [4]

The loss of the sense of identity ultimately leads to the individual having to deal again with conflicts from childhood. [4] The loss of the sense of identity can be caused, for example, by being torn out of the ancestral environment in connection with migration or flight. For Erikson, "identity" thus manifests a reciprocal relationship between self and society. In adulthood, according to Erikson, a "secure sense of identity" should then be achieved. [4]

In summary, this means that a person's identity develops and manifests individually and over a long period of time. During this process, setbacks can also occur again and again. Indispensable, however, is always the society, the environment, the culture, but also the image that society has formed of the individual.

To underscore the need for a closer look at the issue, the study by Dinesh Bhugra and Matthew A. Becker from 2005 [3] can be cited, who looked at the consequences of identity loss. According to Bhugra and Becker, this can even lead to the development of mental illness.

According to Irina Shklovski, Janet Vertesi and Silvia Lindtner from 2013 [7] computer technologies play an increasing role in forming and maintaining social and economic bonds. Because of that HCI (Human-Computer Interaction) researchers are well positioned to study and shape this aspect of sociotechnical exchange.

4 IMPLICATIONS FOR HCI

The affinity for digital media is strong among people with a migration background and a history of flight, regardless of age and gender. Specifically, with respect to gender, Kasky Bisimwa Bacishoga and Kevin Allan Johnston (2015) confirmed in their study that they found no association [1]. This affinity is so pronounced because contact with the homeland is usually maintained exclusively through social media. Hence, owning a smartphone is so important. With reference to Deana Brown (2015) [2], the use of the cell phone also plays a major role in the development of strategies that also include family life.

All of the above raises the question of what computer-based, digital options can be found to counteract the loss of identity caused by migration. Which technical possibilities would be an option to store "identity" and thus make it transportable with any kind of digital device?

For a research project, this could mean dealing with the personal, stored data of a person that they - consciously or unconsciously - transported during the flight or migration with the help of their smartphone or comparable devices. This raises the question of whether this data opens up the possibility of maintaining or transporting an already formed identity of a young adult through the process of migration. Digital technology could so be used to preserve, use, and transport personal data. Digital data that can represent a partial image of the person chosen by the user himself and thus also reduced, provided he allows the insight. At this point, however, one must also ask to what extent the person thereby becomes part of the technology, or how a demarcation could run.

If one examines data for the possibility that it can preserve or transport an identity, one must first take a closer look at the term "identity" itself.

In the workshop, I would like to engage in discussions about the following:

- Does this problem exist for migrants only in the German context, or is it known across borders?
- Are these difficulties rather related to the own person or is it a structural social problem?
- Which approaches can be pushed from the perspective of HCI?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my colleagues from the University of Siegen, Sarah Rüller and Konstantin Aal, who motivated and supported me at any time in getting this paper off the ground. Being part of the CRC 1187 (Media of Cooperation), specifically the B04 team gives me the opportunity to get to know and participate in academic work.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bacishoga, Kasky Bicimwa, Kevin Allan Johnston. "Impact of mobile phones of integration: The case of refugees in South Africa". *The Journal of Community Informatics*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2013)
- [2] Brown, Deana. "Designing technologies to support immigrants and refugees." *School of Interactive Computing, Georgia Institute of Technology* (2015): 1-149
- [3] Bughra, Dinesh, Becker, A. Matthew. "Migration, cultural bereavement and cultural identity". *World Psychiatry* 4:1 (2005): 18-24
- [4] Erikson, Erik H. "Identity and the life cycle". Three essays. 1st ed. (1973) Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 16. 27th ed. (2015)
- [5] Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft Köln (2017): https://www.bq-portal.de/sites/default/files/iw-report_2017_37_bildungssysteme_in_den_herkunftslandern_gefluechteter.pdf (last visit 03.03.2021)
- [6] IOM (2020): <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2020-german-chapter-2>
- [7] Shlovski, Irina, Janet Vertesi, and Silvia Lindtner. "Introduction to this special issue on transnational HCI." *Human-Computer-Interaction* 29.1 (2014): 1-21.
- [8] Statistisches Bundesamt (2021): https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/_inhalt.html (last visit: 03.03.2021)
- [9] Treibel, Annette. „Migration“, in: Baur, Nina et al. (ed.): "Handbook of sociology", Springer VS (2008): 295- 317
- [10] UNHCR (2020): <https://www.unhcr.org/dach/de/services/statistiken> (last visited 03.03.2021)
- [11] University of Vechta (2015): https://images.dkhw.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/1.1_Startseite/3_Nachrichten/Studie_Fluechtlingskinder-digitale_Medien/Studie_Fluechtlingskinder_und_digitale_Medien_Zusammenfassung.pdf (last visit 03.03.2021)