Exploring Immigrant's Self-States from an Intersectionality Lens: Finding Liberation in the "In-Between"

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The process of immigration (either forced or voluntary) is inherently disrupting and dislocating, as it challenges one's sense of identity integration. An individual's sense of self is not a cohesive and monadic structure but entails a plurality of "selves" with varying degrees of continuity and integration. This is what Psychoanalyst[1] Philip Bromberg (1993) refers to as "self-states". The idea that the personality is partitioned is one of the fundamental tenets of psychoanalytic theory. Bromberg (1993) claims that human experience is perpetually a condition in which human beings are attempting "to feel like one, while being many" (p. 166). The experience of "me-ness" is not one of a unifying harmonious self but a multiple, and at times conflicting, multitude of selves. Different relational contexts give rise to differing self-states (Ringstrom, 2014).

In the encounter with a new land and a new culture, the immigrant comes to inhabit multiple self-states, some of which are rooted in premigratory identities, while others are developed in the encounter with the new culture.

To cope with the disruption that immigration entails in their sense of continuity, some immigrants may activate psychic defenses, such as dissociation, to redirect their attention from painful memories or emotions. Often, the immigrants must give up parts of their individuality, at least temporarily, in order to become integrated in the new environment. The greater the difference between the new community and the one to which they once belonged, the more they will have to give up (Grinberg et al., 1989).

In this essay I argue that each of these pre- and post-migration self-states may feature different identity constellations of gender, sex, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. For example, an immigrant's premigratory identity may be of a different socioeconomic status, gender expression, or physical and mental ability. This article concludes that the lens of intersectionality serves as a vital tool to better understand the shifting identities occurring as a

1 See the articles by Burgermeister et al., Hinterschwepfinger or Zacharia for other psychoanalytical or depth psychological perspectives (eds. note).

result of the process of migration. One of the many roles of the therapist is to provide a new relational experience that facilitates the integration of self-states. A psychotherapist who utilizes the lens of intersectionality will be better equipped to help the patient gradually bridge these identity gaps resulting from dissociation as a survival mechanism, helping the patient navigate their multiple self-states and identities in a way that enriches the patient's subjectivity and self-expression in their multiple social domains.

Through the presentation of a clinical vignette, I will illustrate how utilizing the lens of intersectionality may facilitate the process of self-states integration in the immigrant patient and how the therapist can create a safe space where sequestered parts of the self can re-emerge safely, without threatening the patient's sense of self-cohesion. By integrating what has been previously dissociated, the patient's experience has the potential to become richer, more expansive and more authentic.

Dissociation of self-states and its function in immigration processes

Dissociation is a psychic mechanism in which parts of the self are temporarily sequestered from consciousness as a means of protection. Dissociation exists on a spectrum, it is designed by the mind to allow a necessary exchange of information while protecting the person from a psychic collapse, an affective shock that could threaten one's sense of self. By the usage of dissociation, the mind selects whichever self-state configuration is most adaptive at a given moment without compromising affective safety. Frequently, these versions of ourselves are dissociatively detached from one another and therefore are not readily recognizable (Bromberg, 2001). In cases where there is trauma, these versions of ourselves are experienced as holes in the fabric of experience without any meaningful connections between them (Tyminski, 2023).

Immigration, even in the most favorable circumstances, may precipitate the loss of conscious contact with self-states (Bromberg, 1998). Some of these states may be rooted in premigratory relationships, ethnic identifications, and cultural meanings. In the face of trauma, self-continuity is threatened, and in front of this threat, dissociation emerges as a survival response. In some cases, these states are sequestered and encrusted due to unbearable shame and envy (Aron et al., 2018).

Dissociation is not always considered a maladaptive response. In adaptive forms of dissociation, the person consciously redirects attention away

from something traumatic that might otherwise interfere with or overwhelm the psychic structure and functions (Alayarian, 2011). Dissociation is, thus, a vital mechanism that protects us from emotional pain and conflict. The process of immigration is linked to dissociation. By dissociating healthily from a particular experience temporarily, the immigrant gives the psyche a break to process and digest the occurrences within a safe and sound psychic space (Alayarian, 2011).

As a result of relocating to a new country, immigrants must often give up parts of their individuality, at least temporarily, in order to become integrated into the new environment. The greater the difference between the new community and the one to which they once belonged, the more they will have to give up (Grinberg et al., 1989).

In some cases, immigration, especially when done under less than ideal conditions, may precipitate more severe forms of trauma and therefore more severe forms of dissociation, such as: loss of conscious contact with self-states rooted in premigratory relationships, ethnic identifications, and cultural meanings. These disconnected aspects of the self are still reflected in one's decision-making, relationships, dreams, and the complex interplay of emotions between the client and therapist (Boulanger, 2015).

When working with the immigrant patient who navigates multiple cultural contexts, the clinician should expect the emergence of multiple, potentially conflicting self-states that are connected to different countries, or country representations. By reconnecting with these previously dissociated parts, the therapist helps the patient "stand in the spaces" (Bromberg, 1998, p. 267) between their different self-state and their respective intersectionalities. In the cases of refugees and exiles, the process of remaining connected with their premigratory selves can be even more fraught with conflict (Lijtmaer, 2022). Unlike the immigrant, the exile's migration is precipitated by sociopolitical traumatic events. When working with exiles and refugees, therapists should keep in mind and demonstrate to the clients that the catastrophe that forced them out of their homeland is precisely what renders them unable to recall anything positive about their homelands (Akhtar, 2011).

Weaving a third thread: consequences of fluid and conflicting intersectional self-states

Each of the immigrant's self-states may have different constellations of identity factors, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, and age. Some client's pre- and post-migration self-states may have different names, speak different languages, and have different gender expressions, mannerisms, and ways of relating.

Occupying the margins between nationalities, ethnicities, and genders creates confusion in others, so immigrants often seek to comply by fitting in. This is commonly observed in immigrants who, once in the new country, change their names to a more *culturally resonant* one or switch from their first to their middle name as their preferred one, or vice versa. This process is not always voluntary: depending on the language and culture of the immigrant's host country, the name pronunciations may be modified by the immigrant's social world and the institutions they are part of. Names and name changes can reorganize cultural experience and identity. Therapists should, therefore, be aware of the client's cultural history and the meanings accompanying these histories (Tummala-Narra, 2016) and use an intersectionality-informed approach to better understand how language, nationality, race and ethnicity interact and shape the ways in which we are named by others.

The academic concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), with origins in the Black Women's Movement, serves as a useful lens to understand how dynamics of privilege and oppression interact and influence the immigrant's subjectivity. Its perspective goes beyond seeing individuals from a single lens of class, gender, race, ability, etc., but instead examining how power interlocks and intersects across these domains.

An intersectional sensibility can sensitize clinicians to the different organizations of power their clients are subject to, and how they are manifested in different self-states. An intersectionality-informed clinician would, therefore, understand how the process of immigration impacts the client's positionality. The immigrant's experiences of privilege and oppression can, in some cases, dramatically vary in the transition from one country to another. Each of the self-states of the immigrant may display constellations of different positionalities in the matrix of power and oppression. Intersectionality resists the neoliberal injunction to focus on the individual causes of social inequality. It invites us to look beyond the intrapsychic and

into the structural factors leading to oppression and marginalization (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Case vignette: Cecilia

In the following, I use a case vignette from my counselling sessions with Cecilia[2] to illustrate a) multiple self-states and the negative impact of migration-based dissociated self-states for mental health, b) suggestions for dealing with them in counselling from an intersectionality-informed perspective, and c) the role of building bridges between pre- and postmigratory self-states from an intersectional lens.

a) Two countries, multiple self-states

The process of dissociation of self-states can be menacing to oneself and to one's relationships. When one has little or no access to one's dissociated self-states, it may lead people to experience a sense of discontinuity in their experience of being oneself, in which those parts are fragmented and unintegrated. One striking example of this phenomenon was observed in my psychoanalytic work in New York with Cecilia, a 28-year-old cisgender pansexual woman, born and raised in a small town in Argentina, with whom I had worked for three years in individual psychotherapy twice a week. Cecilia first came to New York in 2011 for a study abroad program. She then met her partner and decided to lay roots in New York. Cecilia consulted with me to address her panic attacks, which were triggered by apparently unrelated day-to-day tasks, such as buying groceries, home decorations, or filling out paperwork to apply for her residency. Over time, we identified the common thread of these triggers: they were markers of her slowly establishing roots in New York and away from her Argentinian roots. This unconsciously filled her with ambivalent emotions: the joy and guilt of having escaped an abusive household, the desire to assimilate into the new culture, and the fear of losing her Argentinian self. Cecilia also complained of persistent nightmares, which always involved some type of loss. "I dreamed that a tsunami took over my New York apartment and I lost everything…" Other nightmares involved lost passports, green cards, broken airplanes, etc.

2 Anonymized pseudonym.

Cecilia and her partner (also from Argentina) would visit the country every year during the holidays. These yearly trips filled her with even more ambivalent emotions: the desire to reconnect with her friends, a sense of dread and guilt for not wanting to spend time with her emotionally abusive family, the urge to reconnect with the Argentinian parts she dearly missed, while simultaneously feeling "homesick for New York". She also complained, with great shame, about an irrational fear that "New York would magically disappear" the second she landed in her home country. This fear felt so real to her that she even took measures to remain connected to New York: She scheduled additional sessions and asked her New York friends to do video chats while she was away. It was almost as though the coexistence of multiple self-states attached to different countries was too much to bear, so her mind dissociated some parts of herself to create a better sense of coherence of her here-and-now experience, dissociating from consciousness the parts of the self-attached to the other country. We scheduled our next session the day she arrived in Argentina, following her request. As soon as the Zoom camera went on, I greeted her with a genuine and curious smile, as though I intuitively felt the need. Upon seeing my expression, Cecilia's eyes welled up with tears. After a moment of silence, she explained, preceded with a long sigh, "You are the first person in New York I am seeing since I've landed here." She explained that seeing my face, hearing my voice, and looking at the buildings from my window felt as a confirmation "that New York was still there". The depth of her affect made me realize the depth of her dissociation: Only after seeing my face and hearing my voice she was able to confirm, at an emotional level, that her connection to her New York relationships remained intact. Even though our sessions were predominantly in Spanish, we would usually use English expressions embedded in our Spanish conversation. At one point in the session, I muttered the word "right" (in English) to convey that I was agreeing with what she was saying. Cecilia began to cry again, she explained (now switching to English) that hearing me utter English words while being in Argentina felt quite different: "Hearing you speak English felt as though I was standing by the beach, at night, alone, looking at the horizon… and suddenly catching a glimpse of the light of a lighthouse, far, far away." Year after year, I began to notice that, as her social connections strengthened, Cecilia's Holiday trips to Argentina became less and less fraught with the anxiety that "New York would magically disappear" the moment she landed in Argentina. When I noticed this change and pointed it out to her, she said, "I've made lots of plans for when I go back to New York." This had

been the first time that Cecilia dared to imagine a future in which she could immerse herself in her Argentinian self-states without being engulfed in them. She became her own lighthouse, able to illuminate a future in which she no longer felt that the collusion of these two worlds would be traumatic.

If the self-states of the immigrant are dissociated to the point of no connection, like it happened to Cecilia, the sense of continuity of the self is threatened. This clinical vignette illustrates the constructive potential of *standing in the in-between* self-states and the importance of creating an intersectionality-informed safe space, in which sequestered self-states may emerge. Helping Cecilia stand in the spaces between these states allowed her to move back and forth from two different countries and cultures in a way that does not threaten her sense of self. She increasingly began to see herself through the lens of both cultures, gradually understanding how her experience of being a brown-skinned pansexual Latina impacts the way she interacts with her different social worlds and how she perceives herself.

Cecilia often complained how, whenever she filled out any demographic form or office paperwork, her middle name was often omitted (most American demographic forms do not include a space for a middle name, just a middle initial) and how at times her two last names were used interchangeably and, at other times, confused with one of her first names. Throughout the years, Cecilia found herself adopting several defensive maneuvers to feel more adapted to the new culture. Initially, she would not correct people whenever her name was mispronounced or whenever one of her names was omitted, as she felt this would be met with frustration or, perhaps, even worse: indifference.

This process of disavowing parts of the self, although initially adaptive, became a source of resentment and loneliness in Cecilia. Over time, the therapeutic space helped her gain enough psychic space to observe herself from multiple lenses, perhaps for the first time since she arrived in the U.S. By enacting what has hurt her in the past in the therapeutic relationship, Cecilia was able to internalize my presence as an accepting other. She gradually experienced me as an empathic other that did not demand she choose one of her self-states but, instead, showed curiosity and attunement to her different ways of being in the world and their interlocking identities. This led to Cecilia experimenting with different constellations of self-expression. She gradually realized that she did not have to choose between different names, languages, sexual orientations, or racial constructions. She could inhabit her Argentine self-states and their corresponding identities as well

as her immigrant self in the U.S. without fearing she will be engulfed by one of her selves.

b) Therapeutic enactments regarding being one and many in the room

In the process of psychoanalytic work, clients find themselves acting out patterns, feelings or dynamics from their past in their interactions with the psychotherapist. The therapeutic processes of transference and countertransference can be understood as enactments which arise from the unconscious to recreate familiar patterns of relationships (Mitchell, 1988). These inevitable psychoanalytic processes communicate a message to therapists while also allowing them to get in contact with, and re-experienced through the transference, part of what is repeated is the client's attachment patterns to their objects (Grinberg et al., 1989).

Through this particular situation, Cecilia regressed in our zoom-session when she arrived in Argentina to a self-state in which she experienced herself as a helpless child, a child who didn't feel safe, crying as she used to be physically punished by her parents. In that moment, Cecilia was not talking *about* her helpless inner child, she was *becoming* it. In being attuned to the non-verbal dimension of the experience, I intuitively found myself adjusting my voice, tone, and volume, as though I was speaking to a distressed child. Cecilia responded in kind and expressed how scary and comforting crying was. (As a child, Cecilia was often physically punished whenever she cried.) In that moment, Cecilia had to negotiate two adversarial realities: crying is unsafe versus crying is a necessary part of mourning.

Robert Stolorow (2007) suggests that "trauma is constituted in an intersubjective context in which severe emotional pain cannot find a relational home in which it can be held" (p. 10). Part of the therapeutic work with Cecilia was to provide a relational home and a containing environment in which she could explore traumatized past versions of herself unfolding in the here and now without having to exclude one another. In doing so, I, too, had to confront my own different selves and intersectional identity dimensions. As someone born and raised in a neighboring country, Uruguay, I needed to reflect on how my own experiences of privilege and oppression positioned me in the context of our work and in relation to Cecilia. I reflected on my own experience as a South American immigrant and remembered the experiences of discrimination I faced in the U.S. for merely existing as a queer femme Latinx cisgender woman with an accent.

I was reminded of post Donald Trump election times and how soon after the 2016 U.S. election I was told multiple times to "go back to my country" by strangers on the street, and how I, too, had to dissociate parts of myself in order to fit in with different contexts and protect myself from further discrimination. Becoming aware of my own experiences of oppression and their resulting emotions helped me remain grounded in my psychoanalytic stance and avoid colluding with Cecilia's pain and, instead, understand it and create a space where it could unfold.

Meeting and recognizing the multiple emerging selves were transformative for both of us. I also found myself oscillating between my Uruguayan and New York selves; this was evidenced in my choice of words, tone, affect, pronunciation, and use of slang and pop culture expressions. Through our sessions in New York and Argentina, I was able to witness the emergence of multiple, competing, and unintegrated selves in both me and Cecilia. At times we found ourselves switching to English sentences during our Spanish sessions, and at others I found myself using Uruguayan expressions I had used many years ago and had since then forgotten. At times our sessions felt like a dance between our multiple selves; at times she recruited me in our immigrant gaze to criticize the U.S., at others, she recruited me as a witness to her pain. If a therapist is attuned to these shifts, client's sequestered self-states come alive as a *remembered present* (Edelman, 1989), which can be made productive in therapy.

During her visit to Argentina, Cecilia first made use of me as her *lighthouse*, as a bridge between worlds. The fact that I was in New York while she was away meant that New York had not disappeared and that, while in Argentina, she did not have to surrender her other identities, language, memories, different expectations or self-states, gender roles, etc. Her being able to hear me speak Spanish with a very similar accent as hers, occasionally mixed with English expressions, while knowing I was in New York seemed comforting to her. It made her feel that she did not have to choose between one of her self-states and corresponding identities but could shift freely from one to the other and inhabit multiple at the same time. I explained it made sense she felt that way: It was a new and healing experience of emotional relatedness. By allowing multiple and contradictory self-states to emerge, clients like Cecilia can learn to internalize the illuminating function of the lighthouse, shedding light into the separate lands/selves that exist in their psychic landscape. The more she became able to move between self-states, the less her trips were filled with anxiety and dread, since they no longer represented the fear of impending loss.

c) Building bridges from an intersectional lens

As we began to unpack Cecilia's "fear of New York disappearing" while she was away, we discovered that this fear represented the fear of losing some of the new self-states that were emerging in New York. Her selves became more independent and mature, finally safe from family violence, but they nevertheless remained subjected to structural violence in the U.S.A. Her selves were conflicting regarding class[3], gender, religion, and race.

With regards to class, as her self-states shifted from one country to the other, so did the value attributed to money and power. In her mind, Cecilia couldn't reconcile growing up poor and now being a financially independent woman who was earning an income that, by Argentinian standards, could lead her to being perceived as rich – an image that was far from the reality of her life in the U.S.A. The economic crisis in Argentina and the devaluation of the Argentine Peso dramatically changed her power acquisition whenever she visited her home country, making her feel like a very affluent person for the first time in her life. An immigrant's social position and class in their home country comes to affect their self-perceptions in the receiving country, especially when there is a change in socioeconomic status (Ainslie, 1998). Through our work together, Cecilia was able to explore dynamics around guilt and shame for having more resources than her loved ones in her home country.

One way in which this initial conflict manifested was via Cecilia's attempts to *blend* into the background of the social contexts she inhabited. This was even reflected in her wardrobe choices. She would feel more comfortable wearing colorful clothes and high heels in New York, while tending to dress in simple and discreet clothes in Argentina. We explored the many meanings of her self-expression via clothes and the unconscious fantasies associated with the fear and wish of being seen on her terms. Trip after trip, she gradually began to become more playful and take more risks in her physical presentation in both countries.

On religion, being raised in a catholic household with values competing with her new versions of herself was also a point of conflict. While in the U.S., Cecilia openly talked about her pansexuality. In Argentina, however, she would not discuss this aspect of her identity. She was assumed to be

3 See the article by Zacharia in this book about how class differences might influence the therapy (eds. note).

heterosexual for dating a male partner, and she felt that correcting this misperception could be dangerous and lead to further abuse.

With racial identity, Cecilia went from "never thinking of herself as a racial minority" to reckoning with the effects of colorism, racism, and xenophobia intertwined with sexism that she suffered in the U.S.A. Upon landing in the U.S., she became, for the American gaze, a racialized other. Never had she wondered about what her race or ethnicity was, she explained that the first time she had to select her race or ethnicity when filling out any paperwork was in the U.S.A. "We don't talk much about race or ethnicity in Argentina, we don't even consider ourselves 'Latinos', we identify ourselves based on our nationality, not our ethnic heritage", she explained.

The immigrant's subjectivity is deeply affected by the dominant ideologies of the host culture. In Cecilia's mind, her Argentine self-states could not coexist with her New York self-states. Just like Cecilia, many immigrants protect themselves by dissociating from those self-states that are more associated with being othered. Boulanger (2015) writes that bridging the gap between two countries and between the self-states that represent these two countries is a dialectical process and not a forced choice. This was the case for Cecilia, who was gradually able to give up the dissociation of her pre- and post-migration self-states and simultaneously inhabit the symbolic space between her multiple identities and self-expressions around race, class, sexual orientation, and language.

Conclusion: Finding liberation in the in-between

The disruptions in self-cohesiveness and the subsequent anxieties that accompany immigration can have profound impacts on both the immigrant and the host community regarding belonging or well-being. I argue that applying an intersectionality-informed approach acknowledging the concept of multiple, potentially conflicting pre- and post-migration self-states is crucial to assist immigrant clients. This therapeutic assistance includes identifying dissociated aspects of themselves, mourning certain identity factors that may no longer resonate with their new culture, and identifying a place in between self-states where the immigrant clients' hyphenated identity can emerge and thrive.

Through my case vignette with Cecilia I illustrated the beginnings of the journey from dissociation to integration of self-states, creating more psychic space for her to experiment with different versions of being in the world. Had

I not adopted an intersectional lens to understand these multiple self-states, I would have been highly mis-attuned to one of her core conflicts: "I can't hold many versions of myself at the same time, I have to choose". This is the core conflict of many immigrants, a conflict that, rather than intrapsychic, is shaped by the cultural discourses and ideologies of each land.

Why is this approach liberatory? Because it pays attention to the impact of social and political systems and structures and the ways they impact one's relationship with the rest of our self-states. This approach understands that dissociation is initially an adaptive mechanism – one which, if unanalyzed, may lead to identity fragmentation and loss of contact between pre- and post-migration selves.

The multiple self-state model of our mind provides a theoretical basis to consider the immigrant's dilemma without having to settle on one identity or another. It allows us to be playful with our own shifts in identity and to exist also in the in-between creating new identities. Such exploration cannot be done without considering the intersectionality of each of the self-states that emerge in the clinical encounter.

Assessing the intersectionality of self-states encourages us to move beyond seeing social inequality through race-only or class-only lenses. It allows us to identify the complexity of these interlocking and changing identity factors that can help immigrant clients move away from essentialist positions of being privileged and/or oppressed, as those experiences are intersectional and fluid depending on geopolitical and historical contexts. Moreover, an intersectional perspective on multiple self-states helps to find new ways of being in the (new and old) world according to one's identified self-states, and it helps for these states to resist classification and exist in the in-between. As a clinical tool, intersectionality gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). This applies for both therapists and clients.

In contrast to upholding essentialized, individual identities, intersectionality-informed clinicians, therapists, and counsellors see their clients as having multiple subjectivities that they (de-)construct from one country to the next. This practice encourages clients and clinicians to move away from reified positions of oppression and marginalization and allows them to create spaces in which each of these self-states' creativity, playfulness, and agency can emerge.

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