Contested concepts in a predominantly anglophone publication market

Dirk Jacobs

To cite this article: Dirk Jacobs (2022): Contested concepts in a predominantly anglophone publication market, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2022.2146452

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2146452

Published online: 22 Nov 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Contested concepts in a predominantly anglophone publication market

Dirk Jacobs

Institut de Sociologie, Group for Research on Ethnic Relations, Migration & Equality (GERME), Université libre de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, Belgium

ABSTRACT

Critical readers of the book “Contested concepts” have pointed out the choice of concepts that are being treated is debatable. It has also been said that the book suffers from “European parochialism”. However, it could be argued that a more valid criticism would be that we should have focussed more on the effects of language, linguistically embedded discourses and the difference of perspective of scholars living in “sending” countries of migration flows rather than focus on the point of view of scholars working in “destination countries”.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 3 November 2022; Accepted 8 November 2022

KEYWORDS Concepts; language; eurocentrism; global south; migration; diversity

The feedback and reviews on our edited volume Contested Concepts in Migration Studies are highly welcomed and much appreciated. The comments and criticisms substantially contribute to an ongoing intellectual exchange across national and disciplinary boundaries on the study of migration-related phenomena. In one of the first book reviews, published in the journal Ethnic and Racial Studies, which praised the edited volume for its informative and compelling nature, Erdem Dikici said we should have also included “anti-racism”, “Islamophobia”, and “solidarity”. John Mollenkopf on his part (see the review in this journal) regrets that “ethnicity” and “race” were not covered.

We could have long discussions on that. For instance, one could counter-argue that “solidarity” falls outside the scope of the book because it is more often used in other types of debates than in those on migration or in ethnic studies. If we would discuss Islamophobia, then we also need to take anti-Semitism and anti-Hinduism (etc.) on board. It is true that anti-racism is not discussed head on in the volume, but it is indirectly covered in the chapter.
on discrimination. Ethnicity and race are treated – at least partly – in the identity chapter.

Colleagues Dikici and Mollenkopf do obviously raise a legitimate remark: the choice of contested concepts can also be… contested. In all fairness, we had to make some pragmatic choices too, so some decisions are indeed arbitrary. Choosing is losing. Let me recall what the book is not. It is not a glossary or a dictionary. The ambition was furthermore not to settle or “end” debates and establish the “proper way” in which the different terms mobilized in the book should be used in our disciplines. The different contributors do not have the hubris to claim they “know better”. We did, however, have the objective to embark on a reflective conceptual exercise.

While a few decades ago ethnic and migration studies were rather “marginal” topics in the social sciences and migration was already an important but not a main political topic, these days the situation is quite different. In most industrialized countries, the topics of migration and ethnic diversity have risen to the top of political debate and ethnic and migration studies have moved to the core of the social sciences. This evolution has highlighted even more that concepts mobilized in our fields do not exist in a vacuum, but get picked up (and in the process are often altered or criticized) in public debate, in politics, in the media, and sometimes even in everyday language. The movement also goes the other way around: our field of study is impacted by (sometimes heated) political and public debates and our conceptual thinking can be influenced by the political and societal contexts in which we work. All concepts have a history and often their significance and uses evolve. We felt it is important to have a critical reflection on this and to make more explicit what the impact on our use of core concepts is. That was the aim of our book.

As one of the authors and editors it led me to ask myself some tough questions. It made me look at my own previous work and forced me to come to terms with several implicit assumptions and political and normative choices that I had made but was not necessarily so conscious about. The concept of “integration” is a good example. While once only a sociological concept, with a century and a half of history in the social sciences, it has now not only become a very current word in media and political debates but is even used in everyday language. “Are migrants sufficiently integrated?” is a question that makes sense for most people, even in ordinary conversations. When you scratch the surface, you see that the same word can mean a number of things and sometimes these significances or uses are even contradictory. Sometimes one actually means “assimilation” – a concept which needs a definition too by the way – in other cases one thinks more of “inclusion”. We could now in fact start discussing how these other concepts – assimilation, inclusion – that we have just introduced are being used and
what they mean or could mean. One of the contributions in our volume, written by Adrian Favell, actually criticizes the implications of the use of the notion of integration and, among other things, discusses the “organicist” use of integration, as if we are talking about cells in a body. Using this kind of metaphorical thinking has a number of implications that we as social researchers should reflect on. Reflecting on my own work in the past, this critical perspective puts me in a tight spot and raises some uncomfortable issues. Before him, authors such as Willem Schinkel had already criticized the organicist perspective which is implicitly present in the notion of integration. Society (or the nation) is presented as an entity or a body in which individual elements can – and should – be incorporated. The European Union for a long time talked about integration being “a two way process”: migrants adapting to the receiving society and the society of destination facilitating the incorporation of newcomers. At first sight a noble idea, but this kind of metaphorical thinking has all kinds of implications, presupposing the existence of clear boundaries being one of them and the essentialization of the nation-state perspective being another one. In his 2022 book “The Integration Nation”, published by Polity Press, Favell develops his dissection of “immigrant integration” as policy and doxa even further. Favell argues that the notion of integration is the continuance of a long-standing colonial development paradigm:

Immigrant integration sits at the heart of the neo-liberal racial capitalism of recent decades, in which tight control of nation building and bordering selectively enables some citizens to enjoy the mobilities of a globally integrating worlds, as other populations are left behind and locked out.

Favell and Schinkel have forced me to reflect on a few implications of the use of the concept of “integration”. Having worked on the development of “migrant integration indicators”, their critical remarks highlight a set of political consequences that do not entirely correspond with my own normative positions but of which it could be said that I nevertheless helped to promote them. Either I accepted the institutional context in which I was working (i.e. official policy goals of Belgium or the EU), or I did not really grasp all the consequences of methodological choices on the conceptual level. Even if I always rejected the idea that one could simply measure integration on the individual level, I did accept and develop the idea that migrant integration could be monitored by comparing participation rates of newcomers and established groups in different fields of society – with the aim of reducing the “gaps’ between sociological categories. Such an approach does bring about nasty questions. A situation in which there is no gap in educational attainment levels or employment levels could be called integration. But what if there is no gap between groups but all groups are performing badly? If all groups are performing well (education
or employment wise) but some are still outperforming others – controlling for socio-economic position –, that would then be a lack of integration? As we can see, we quickly run into fundamental conceptual and normative issues when the “receiving society” and “established groups” are the point of reference. In sum, I am being forced to no longer use the concept of “migrant integration” in such an uncritical way. Mind you, at my university I still teach a master-level course entitled “migrant integration policies in Europe” and have decided to stick to the course name but have been pushed in having far more reflection and debate on the conceptual level of what “integration” means than before.

John Mollenkopf raises an interesting critique that the edited volume has a fair degree of European parochialism. The point is taken, even if, in all honesty, it did first surprise me. A few sentences ago I did, however, mobilize the EU-jargon about “integration as a two-way process”, which is quite telling of my EU-frame of reference. Admittedly, as a West-European scholar I try and keep track of academic and political debate on migration across the European Union but am less acquainted with what happens and is produced in the Americas, Africa, Asia or the Middle East. Did this bias of mine as one of the editors lead or contribute to a bias of the edited volume? Probably it has, as even the criticism pointing to European parochialism caught me off guard.

In our defense it could be argued that for illustrating the impact of political and societal contexts on conceptual thinking about migration, the diversity of Europe itself already provides abundant material to investigate. The main point is that our concepts are not the product of a political or historical vacuum. A point that we perhaps could and should have developed more forcefully and explicitly is the linguistic dimension of the creation, diffusion, and modification of concepts. Even if academics engage in international debate and exchange, they do work in nationally regulated educational settings and dwell in particular linguistic settings (with varying market logics, different sizes of audiences and important variability in the numbers of colleagues who are knowledgeable in specific languages). In this respect it does astonish me a bit that the book would be too European and would have been radically different if more US scholars would have contributed to it, as John Mollenkopf suggests. Without wanting to give a too “cryptic complaint about American dominance of the literature”, it is a fact that the academic world is dominated by the use of the English language and hence the question is perhaps more whether a book on concepts would have been different if it had been written by authors expressing themselves in – say – French, German, Chinese, Swahili, Spanish or Arabic. Note for instance that in contemporary French, Dutch or German academic texts you will almost never find the word or notion of “race” being mobilized routinely as this is being done in Anglo-Saxon literature.
In a similar – and actually more important – vein one can wonder how different a reflective book on concepts linked to migration would look if not written mainly by scholars living in countries of destination of migration flows but rather in sending countries? This is, in my opinion, a much more important dimension to be added than focussing on local variations within western national settings – be it Europe or North America. Is the perspective on migration concepts looked upon from the Global South different and what can we learn from this in the North? What then becomes interesting is to see whether other concepts – brain drain, global chain of care, intersectionality, remittances, etc. – that we now omitted, would gain prominence. Perhaps even concepts that I am currently incapable of thinking of, would require a central place.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**ORCID**

*Dirk Jacobs* http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6079-8427