



Motivations, Integration, Identity and Sense of Belonging:
African Immigrants in Sicily Assisting Other Immigrants

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Abstract

Sicily, the most Southern region of Italy, is the first destination in the EU that many African immigrants arrive to, sometimes through a problematic journey to cross the Mediterranean Sea. The aim with this thesis is to have a better understanding of the situation of the African community in Sicily. Specifically, it is going to look at immigrants who are volunteering in order to help other immigrants to deal with the Italian system. These are mainly cultural mediators, volunteers at help desks who assist immigrants and asylum seekers in their legal and sanitary processes as well as with daily matters. This study is based on a constructivist approach and uses semi-structured interviews with 6 African regular immigrants living in the region of Sicily. Those interviews try to examine their experience and motivations for assisting other migrants in their processes and to describe their feelings about belonging, identity and integration. In this study the concepts of social connections, stigma, prejudice, self and social identity, community and the functional theory of motives are used. The findings reveal that there is a common feeling of “continental identity” and that the feeling of “being home” is sometimes weakened by perceived stigmas and prejudices. The act of volunteering, though, empowers African immigrants and their social relations to both other immigrants, who see them as “mentors”, and the Italian colleagues who respect them for their social contribution.

Keywords: African Immigrants, Belonging, Identity, Integration, Sicily, Volunteering, Immigrants Volunteering.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Aim and Research Questions	1
3. Delimitations and Limitations	2
4. Academic Relevance and Contribution	2
5. Clarifying terminology: volunteering	3
6. Contextual and Geographical Background	3
7. Previous Research	4
7.1 Immigrants volunteers and Integration	4
7.2 African Immigrants in Italy	5
8. Theoretical Framework	6
8.1 Integration	6
8.1.1 Structural opportunity, prejudice, stigma	9
8.2 Identity	10
8.3 Sense of Belonging	11
8.4 Functional Theory of Motives	12
9. Methodology, Methods, Material	13
9.1 Philosophical considerations	13
9.2 Research Design	13
9.2.1 Qualitative Study Approach and Inductive Approach	14
9.2.2 Semi-structured interviews	14
9.2.3 Sample	15
9.2.4 Access	16
9.2.5 Analyzing Data	16
9.2.6 Role of the Researcher	16
9.2.7 Ethical Considerations	17
9.2.8 Validity and Reliability	18
10. Analysis and Discussion of the Results of the Interviews	20
10.1 Interviewees Profile	
10.2 Motivations for Volunteering	21
10.2.1 Life Experiences	21

10.2.2 Sense of Duty and Social Importance	22
10.3 Themes related to Integration	23
10.3.1 Feeling at Home vs Feeling a Stranger	23
10.3.2 Bridging Between Cultures	24
10.3.3 Stigmatization	25
10.4 Themes related to Identity	25
10.4.1 Self-Identity	26
10.4.2 Social Identity	27
10.4.3 Continental Identity	28
10.5 Themes related to Sense of Belonging	29
10.5.1 Empathy	29
10.5.2 Sense of Community	29
10.5.3 We, Africans	30
11. Conclusion	30
11.1 Concluding Remarks	31
11.2 Suggestions for Further Research	33
Bibliography	34
Appendix: Guide for the Semi-structured Interviews	38

1. Introduction

People who decide – for different reasons – to migrate to a new country often have to deal with many challenging issues. Suddenly, topics such as integration, belonging, questioning identity become a part of their life, sometimes more implicitly, other times more explicitly and according to different experiences and contexts they can be understood differently. The meanings and perceptions that migrants attach to those concepts are the center of focus of this study.

I myself have lived in different countries and I always tried to “integrate” and to get to know the local community. But what does that mean to various individuals? Depending on an ethnic background, history and culture, the answer can vary. The selected group for this research will be African immigrants who are volunteering mainly as cultural mediators, translators or more broadly assistants for new immigrants who reach the Italian territory. Sicily will be the setting of my thesis. Since it is the first Italian region reached by the boats coming from Libya, it is one of the places that represents the border to Europe for many African immigrants. I decided to conduct my research in Palermo, the regional county seat, because it has been described as the “capital city of hospitality” (L’Espresso, 2019) and as one of the most multicultural cities of Italy made up of a diverse population including immigrants from all the five continents. The African immigration represents 31,47% of the total immigration to the city of Palermo (Statistics Italy, 2018).

This thesis will look into the feelings and perceptions and approaches to integration, identity and sense of belonging of the African community of volunteers in Sicily by focusing on the city of Palermo. In order to achieve this goal, 6 semi-structured interviews with African immigrants who volunteer and help other immigrants were conducted and analyzed on the theoretical frame of integration, sense of belonging and identity.

2. Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to increase knowledge and awareness about the act of volunteering relating to feelings about integration of African immigrants in Sicily. In other words, it aims at understanding how African immigrants who are working as volunteers perceive themselves in relation to integration, identity and sense of belonging. This aim leads me to the following research questions:

1. Why do African immigrants decide to volunteer to provide assistance to other immigrants?
2. How is integration perceived by African immigrant volunteers who help other immigrants in Sicily?

3. What is their feeling of identity and sense of belonging?

3. Delimitations and Limitations

There are several delimitations when it comes to this study that should be discussed. Firstly, we can talk about a territorial delimitation: this study only focuses on immigrants coming from different parts of Africa who live in Palermo, Sicily, or in its greater metropolitan and suburban area. This is mainly due to practical reasons since I wished to conduct face-to-face interviews and it would have been financially and logistically impossible to travel across the region of Sicily in given period of time. I have done this with the awareness that the results from only one city might not be representative of the whole region and with the hope that this study may lead other researchers to increase the in-depth knowledge on this topic.

As mentioned before, the focus of this study are African volunteers whose main volunteering experience is based on cultural mediation and translation. Only African immigrants who have been living in Italy for at least three years were taken into account, since this amount of time is considered to be the minimum for the concerned immigrants to have a deep enough knowledge of Italy, its culture and language.

Additionally, this research only wants to use qualitative research methodology, by analyzing the perceptions and feelings of the interviewees: I do not try in any way to generalize or quantify the collected data which is why I conducted only six interviews.

The empirical data was collected between 2nd and 9th May 2019, having organized appointments with the volunteers in advance.

4. Academic Relevance and Contribution

This research is relevant to the IMER field as the concepts of integration, sense of belonging and identity in the context of a migration process are becoming more and more multifaceted, especially, from a European point of view, since the upsurge in migration tendencies - by some deemed migratory crisis - started in 2015. Tensions regarding migrants and refugees can be seen in different aspects of everyday life and politics of many European states, with politicians using it to fuel nationalist and xenophobic agenda. An Italian example of this trend can be noted examining the Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini, known for using anti-migrant narratives in his social media posts (Embury-Dennis, 2019). Other examples can be found in countries like Germany (The Migrant Project, 2019) or Sweden (Henley, 2018). As the subject of migration became so prevalent in political discourse in recent years, looking in-depth into migrant experiences has a very high societal impact.

This study focuses on Africans who, beside studying or working, dedicate their time as volunteers to help other immigrants in Sicily. The figure of immigrant volunteers in Italy has not been explored in detail yet, therefore this thesis wishes to be a starting point to create knowledge about this group.

5. Clarifying terminology: volunteering

At this stage, it is important to define what is meant by “volunteering” within the context of this research. This term, which is part of everyday language in Western countries, assumes various forms: one-to-one help, mutual aid, organizational participation and self-governance, etc. (Musick and Wilson, 2008: 3). In order to use the term for academic purposes, it is important that the concept is internally consistent and that we have a clear idea of where volunteerism ends. According to Musick and Wilson “volunteering is simply work done outside the home and outside the job market in an organizational setting, performed during the time left over from housework, childcare and paid work” (2008: 16). They also add that it is not a leisure because leisure tends to be left aside when gratification ends, while volunteerism continues even when it becomes unpleasant or heavy. Moreover, Campbell and Wood define volunteering as an act which is pure in motivation and therefore not lead by self-interest, but rather by generosity, compassion and desire for justice (1999:44).

In this thesis, volunteering is characterized by the following points: it is unpaid and performed at least weekly to guarantee that there is a regularity in the act. Also, in this study only volunteering in the field of immigration will be considered, which means that the informants volunteer as translators, mediators for other immigrants who, for example, do not speak Italian or are not yet familiar with the Italian reception system.

6. Contextual and Geographical Background

Located at the core of the Mediterranean Sea, Sicily has been a crossroads of cultures and trades with Africa and Western Asia in earlier times (Famoso and Cotugno, 2013: 147). This region, which during the second half of the nineteenth century saw many people emigrating due to the economic crises (ibid: 147), is now a reception land for many immigrants from outside Europe which hosts a multicultural society. The African immigration to Europe has grown significantly in the last decade (Pew Research Center, 2018). In 2010, of 5 million Africans living in the European Union, one fifth of them lived in Italy (Caritas Italiana, 2010). In Italy, in 2016, 20,7% of the immigrants came from the African continent (Comuni Italiani, 2016), even though African immigration is not recent in history. The first to arrive, during the sixties, were people from north Africa who until now represent most African immigrants (Famoso and Cotugno, 2013: 149) followed in the seventies by immigrants from the Horn of Africa, due to the colonial past of this area (Camilli, 2016).

The interest in focusing on a region such as Sicily is its location: as it is the most Southern region of Italy thanks to the small island of Lampedusa, it is the first part of the EU that many African immigrants arrive to, sometimes through a difficult journey across the Mediterranean Sea. The center of attention of this study is Palermo, the capital of the Sicilian region known as a multicultural city where people from all over the world live. Due to the number of immigrants that arrive here, the demand for cultural mediators has increased. However, it isn't always a professional figure who takes this position: it is often compatriots or immigrants who speak the same language and who know bureaucracy, usually because they went through the same process that new immigrants are currently going through. Immigrants that have experience of the Italian administrative system have the possibility through different organizations and associations immigrants interested, for various reasons, to help other immigrants with written or oral translations and have access to the field of cultural mediation.

7. Previous Research

The prior literature that will be mentioned in this section summarizes some of the key points that influenced the theoretical and methodological aspects of my research. Due to the lack of literature regarding African immigrants volunteering in Italy, the literature I referred to concerned on one hand immigrants who volunteer and their process of integration and on the other hand African immigrants in Italy and their integration. This study aims in fact to fill a gap by conducting a qualitative research regarding African immigrants who volunteer, in this specific case, in order to assist other immigrants.

7.1 Immigrants volunteers and Integration

Academic narratives about immigrants' integration are numerous. The concept of integration has been widely discussed in the IMER field.

Femida Handy and Itay Greenspan (2009) conducted a study investigating volunteering by immigrants in four different Canadian cities titled *Immigrant Volunteering: A Stepping Stone to Integration?* This long article examines how volunteering experiences can help immigrants to regain social and human capital lost during the migration process. The volunteering considered in this study was connected to congregations. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are used: 754 surveys, 33 focus groups and 34 in-depth interviews are conducted to show that volunteering activities do enhance social and human capital of the immigrants. The main reasons for volunteering are a desire for increasing their social capital and the will to make the labour market more accessible.

The same two scholars, together with Marlene Walk conducted a study in 2018, *Immigrant Integration Through Volunteering: The Importance of Contextual Factors*, trying to investigate the differences between immigrant volunteers and native volunteers in Germany. Through

a quantitative analysis of contextual factors such as cultural, social, organizational factors based on surveys, the findings show that, even though natives have a higher tendency to volunteer, once immigrants become volunteers there is not a significant difference in the analyzed factors. Moreover, social networks and organizational membership seem to be noteworthy motives of immigrant volunteering.

In 2011, Young Joo Lee and Seong Gin Moon published the research with the title *Mainstream and Ethnic Volunteering by Korean Immigrants in the United States*. It deals with Asian immigrants in the US, focusing on the volunteering patterns in ethnical and mainstream American organizations of Korean immigrants through the concepts of cohesion and bridging social capital. A quantitative method using a regression model and surveys is used to suggest that the English education of Asian immigrants could increase their participation in mainstream organizations without discouraging their participation in ethnical organizations.

Another study conducted in 2014 by Shibao Guo, *Immigrants as active citizens: exploring the volunteering experience of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver*, investigates the experiences of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver. It uses both 196 surveys and 30 personal interviews with informants, which outline that volunteering is a source of informal learning of the language and knowledge needed for the integration into Canadian society. Furthermore, volunteering helps build a sense of belonging and a community and can contribute to a full participation in the new society.

7.2 African Immigrants in Italy

Tineke Fokkema and Hein de Haas wrote an article, *Pre- and Post-Migration Determinants of Socio-Cultural Integration of African Immigrants in Italy and Spain* (2011), to examine pre- and post-migration determinants of integration of Moroccan and Senegalese migrants in Spain and Egyptian and Ghanaian migrants in Italy. Through a regression analyses, they found out that pre-migration socio-cultural factors have more impact on integration: in fact, well-educated young migrants achieve a better socio-cultural integration.

In the paper *From Libya to Lampedusa: creating a Cultural Identity Card: psycho-transcultural evaluation of integration potential* (2015), Rosalba Terranova Cecchini, Mary Ellen Toffle and Rosamaria Vitale investigate the ways to assist immigrants reaching Italy in the integration process, reporting the results of a test conducted in Milan to indicate the integration potential of migrants. They created a “Cultural Identity Card” that was used in focus groups and revealed to be a useful predictor of the immigration potential.

None of the mentioned studies has the same aim of this paper and very few of them use the same methods. Nevertheless, all of the research being based on integration helped me in a way to find my own path for my research, which puts the focus on the individual's feelings and experiences to give a voice to African immigrants in Sicily.

8. Theoretical Framework

The leading concepts of this study are motives for volunteering, integration, identity, and sense of belonging. Since various and wide discourses have been based on these concepts, I try in this research to define them as clearly as possible and to develop the most salient parts of the existing literature that could help answering the posed research questions. As I am interested in knowing about the feelings of African volunteers towards integration to both the Italian and to the immigrant community, the focus is on social relationships, feelings regarding the countries of origin and Italy, which are among the most instinctive topics to relate to concepts such as identity, sense of belonging, integration.

8.1 Integration

It is worth mentioning that the concept of integration is “a chaotic concept: a word used by many but understood differently by most” (Robinson, 1998: 118). Even though it is problematic to give a definition of integration that everyone would agree upon, it is still worth it trying to find an attempted definition to this concept. According to the *Integration Agreement* of the Italian nation, integration can be conceptualized as “the process which aims at encouraging the coexistence of Italian and foreign citizens, in the respect of the values established in the Italian Constitution and with the engagement of both parts to participate in social, economic and cultural life of society” (Integration Agreement, art. 4-bis). Jenkins defines integration as “equal opportunities accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance” (Jenkins, 1966), which basically indicates that everyone should have the same rights to work, education, housing, safety and so on despite their cultural background or their origins and that everyone has the right not to be discriminated according to his or her religious faith, ethnicity, color of skin.

After taking into consideration both a legal and an academic definition, the term *integration* will be discussed referring to a conceptual framework used by Ager and Strang (Figure 1) which clearly indicates the domains of integration through which a migrant's level of integration can be measured and investigated. In their study the framework is applied to refugees, but all the figured categories can easily be applied to immigrants in any set of circumstances as well.

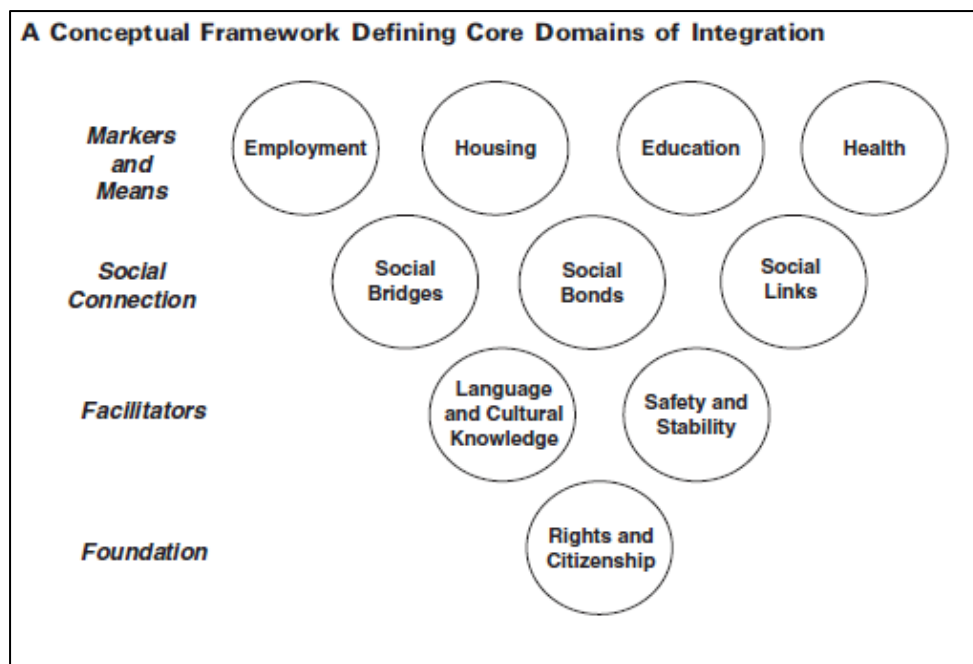


Figure 1. A conceptual framework of Integration. Source: Ager and Strang, 2008

Markers and Means refer to salient areas of activity in the public sphere, such as employment, education, health, housing which can be considered indicators of a favorable integration (Ager and Strang, 2008: 169). Another theme connected to the understanding of integration is called *foundation* by Ager and Strang and includes issues as the citizenship and rights associated to it (ibid: 173). The conception of citizenship can vary from country to country (for example, in Germany citizenship depends on *ius sanguinis* (acquisition by descent), while in France it depends on *ius solis* (acquisition by birth on the territory) and can be interpreted in a variety of ways, shaping differently the rights and responsibilities of immigrants in the destination country (ibid: 175). *Facilitators* are considered as factors that can “remove barriers” to integration (ibid: 181): social participation in the mainstream society is without a doubt facilitated by knowing the language and the culture of the country of destination and by feeling safe.

For the purpose of this thesis I decided to focus on Ager and Strang’s category of *social connections*. The concept of social connections is in fact essential for the process of integration at a local level: local informants usually identify social connections as the “defining feature of an integrated community” (Ager and Strang, 2008: 177). Ager and Strang use the definition of *social connections* because they point out how important it is to perceive integration as a *mutual accommodation*, i.e. a “two-way” process (ibid: 178). Theorists including Putnam and Woolcock have widely described and distinguished three different types of social connections (1993; 1998): *social bonds*, with family and groups of same ethnicity, nationality, religion; *social bridges*, with other communities of different culture; *social links*, with institutions such as the state (Ager and

Strang, 2008: 178). *Social bonds* concern, as said, relationships to family and like-ethnic groups. They are considered to have an essential role in order to feel “settled”, as reported by Duke *et al.*, who think that the immigrant community (they talk about refugees, but it can be applied to all immigrants) is important because it can provide a voice for immigrants, contacts for individuals who are isolated and sensitive answers to their needs (Duke *et al.* 1999: 119). *Social bridges* refer instead to the relationship of immigrants with host communities and to immigrant participation in the host community (Ager and Strang, 2008: 179). Ager and Strang, in their study, say that an important factor to feel “at home” is to have the sociability and warmth of the local people, to be recognized and greeted (*ibid*: 180). This friendliness received from the host community helps the immigrant to feel welcomed and not a threat (*ibid*: 180). *Social links* indicate the connection between individuals and the state, which helps immigrants to have a better access to its services in order to facilitate integration (*ibid*: 181). In this paper I am going to put a focus on the first two listed social connections. Since I am focusing on volunteers as cultural mediators, I feel that the social part of integration is the most applicable aspect to concentrate on the purposes of this study.

Another important psychological concept in the field of integration is the concept of *home* (Mitzen, 2018: 1373). Home is to be understood both as a private and enclosed place and as a feeling to associate to a place, where individuals feel they belong to, feel safe and comfortable (*ibid*: 1375). For migrants, the sense of home does not relate to a geographical place -due to the ambiguity and fluidity of the concept of ethnicity (Barth, 1969)- but rather to particular social practices, to a place where it is possible to have spatial and social interaction (Karlsen and Nazroo, 2013: 690). The notion of home enables migrants to “act out particular social identities” (*ibid*: 690) and to be in a process of *self-stabilization* (Mitzen, 2018: 1376) since it is a place where internal psychological and emotional feelings are expressed (*ibid*: 1376). According to Mitzen, the home is a “bordered container of the Self” and has four characteristics (2018: 1376). Firstly, it is an environmental context that allows to reproduce the everyday routines; secondly, it is a place where to test new routines and consequently new identities, out of the view of a judgmental society; thirdly, it is a shelter from the world that can be upsetting; fourth and last, the home has a specific temporality, the one of biographical time, since the Self changes through time. (Mitzen, 2018: 1376).

8.1.1 Structural opportunity, prejudice, stigma

Among many other theories and concepts used to explain immigrants’ integration, two, strictly connected to each other, may be relevant and if related to this study: one is Blau’s *structural opportunity theory* (1977) and the other one is the concept of *prejudice* (Coenders, 2001; Brown, 1995). Blau’s theory is based on two main assumptions which state that people prefer to interact with

people from their same social standing and that people's interactions are influenced by the environment they live in (Van Tubergen, 2006: 22). This means that if on the one side interactions are influenced by one's environment (culture, neighborhood, ethnicity, religion, etc.), on the other side they are also shaped by one's social position, which would be pertinent when taking into consideration immigrants who are volunteers since their social position might be different if they were not involved in volunteering. In the case of volunteers, their social condition could potentially better their interaction process to the receiving community.

The concept of *prejudice* is widely spread in the sociological and socio-psychological narratives (Van Tubergen, 2006: 26) and is based on the belief that people's attitude is generally more positive towards their in-group rather than towards out-groups, and that a certain predisposition to out-groups can lead to negative action against them (ibid: 26). Prejudice can be more or less strong according to culture, physical appearance, social and economic background of the individual from the out-group. Another important concept that can be related to prejudice, is the concept of *stigma* elaborated by Erving Goffman in the 60s. This term is used to refer to attributes that are "deeply discrediting" (Goffman, 1990: 13) and it is applied to people who are not considered "normal" (ibid: 15), who are stigmatized from society for their skin color, IQ, sexual orientation, gender and so on (Link and Phelan, 2001: 367). Stigma presents itself when elements of labeling, stereotyping (having a set of ideas about someone founded on a given characteristic), separation, occur and can lead to status loss, discrimination (ibid: 377). Its importance lays in the fact that it focuses on the individuals who are stigmatized, which represents a challenge to social scientists who are usually not part of the stigmatized groups (ibid: 365). Moreover, it has an individualistic focus since it puts emphasis on the perceptions of the individual and of the micro-level interactions (ibid: 366). The word "stigma", in contrast to "discrimination" puts all the attention of research on the individuals who represent the recipient of the discriminatory behaviors (ibid: 366), which is why I have selected it for my study. What characterizes stigma is oversimplification: in order to create groups, individuals are put in "boxes" (like "black" or "white") despite the variability of nuances that there can be (ibid: 367). In addition, human categories vary according to time and space (ibid: 368). Another important aspect of stigma, is the relation between a *passive victim* and an *active challenger*: usually the stigmatized are also seen as "passive, helpless, acquiescent" (ibid: 378), even though there are reminders of people who challenge stigmatizing processes (Reissman, 2000).

The concept of stigma is strictly related to the one of identity, since it can affect the self-perception that an individual has.

8.2 Identity

The definition of identity used as a starting point is the following: “identity is the human capacity – rooted in language – to know ‘who’s who’ (and hence ‘what’s what’). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are, and so on” (Jenkins, 2008: 5). Identity can therefore concern ethnicity, gender, religion, occupation, class, lifestyles, history. Jenkins makes a clear distinction between *self-identity* and *social identity*, which are distinctively how an individual considers and defines him or herself and how society considers that same individual. Another form of identity is called *collective*, and it is the one that emphasizes similarity rather than differences and it relates to group membership, given by a common ethnicity, religion, nationality (Jenkins, 2008: 157). The different types of identities can correspond or not, nevertheless they both are part of what Jenkins calls the *human world* (Jenkins, 2002: 3-5), i.e. the field in which the individual and the collective converge. For the aim of this study, I will focus on two of the three categories developed by Erving Goffman which explain the world as it is experienced by humans: the *individual order* and the *interaction order* (Jenkins, 2008: 40), which are strictly connected to each other. The third one, the *institutional order*, is the totality of organizations and established institutions, which is not relevant for the kind of research questions of this study. While the individual order concerns self-identification, the interaction order refers to what other individuals think about us and the two go together since “Identity is never unilateral” (ibid: 42), meaning that our self-perception will always be influenced by how society defines and thinks about us and vice versa. Goffman’s explanation of the interaction order can be considered as a bridge between the individual and collectivity, between individual and collective identity, where individuals negotiate their identities that can be accepted or not by others (ibid: 93). Another important process of identification is *labelling*: the act of naming or categorizing an individual not only gives a perception of his/her identity but it also actively constructs it (ibid: 93). This means that self-identity does not always triumph over external claimed labels, which can often make a difference in the life of an individual.

In the context of identity, Gerd Baumann (1999) develops the so-called *multicultural riddle*, wanting to highlight the complications that identity can pose. According to the method used by Baumann, culture is based on a permutation among three terms: religion, nation, ethnicity (Baumann, 1999: chapter 2). In other words, the idea of culture is at the core of a riddle which involves these three concepts, and according to the permutations among these terms the notion of culture can vary a lot (ibid: chapter 2). In social sciences, we can distinguish two ideas of culture and identity defined by Baumann *essentialist* and *processual* (ibid: chapter 2): the essentialist view of culture, where culture is perceived as a “heritage with rules and norms that fixes the differences both between right and wrong and between Us and Them”, sees culture and identity as a static matter that defines identity (ibid: chapter 2). Culture in a processual understanding can never be still and changes through times

and circumstances (ibid: chapter 2). This second vision of culture, which is more fluid, is wanted by those who want to go beyond the stereotypes of a reifying discourse in culture (ibid: chapter 7). This implies that culture, and therefore identity, is a “dual discursive construction”, including the essence of someone as well as the new construction of this essence (ibid: chapter 7). In this view, the concept of identity can also be either essentialist or processual, according to the vision that someone has. Although the processual view is more recurrent in social sciences, the essentialist view cannot be omitted because it is still used a lot by society in order to identify themselves (ibid: chapter 7).

8.3 Sense of Belonging

When talking about belonging, one important distinction has to be made between *belonging* and the *politics of belonging* according to Yuval-Davis: belonging tout court is related to an “emotional attachment, feeling at home” (Yuval-Davis, 2011a: 18) while the politics of belonging consist of political projects, often related to territoriality, which aim at structuring belonging to a certain collectivity according to specific and strict boundaries (ibid: 18). The focus is here on belonging, which should be perceived as a fluid process in constant transition through time and space. The individual has got different belongings that can be important in their lives. Usually, the most emotional components of people’s belongings are the ones that are accepted with most difficulty or threatened (ibid: 21).

The idea of sense of belonging is connected to the sense of *community*, since community membership lays on a series of similarities and creates differences and boundaries with other communities: when the focus comes to those boundaries, the sense of belonging becomes relevant (Cohen, 1982 in Jenkins, 2008: 135). Community in the broader sense indicates a group of people who live in the same space or have one or more common characteristics. Belonging to a community tends to lead to a dual perception of “us” and “them” (ibid: 135). This opposition is also highlighted by Thomas J. Scheff when he states that language can indicate the social relation between two people with the use of pronouns, which can express feelings of solidarity, isolation, engulfment (Scheff, 2007: 581), and therefore represent more or less symmetrical interactions. According to Scheff, solidarity is expressed by the pronouns “I-I”, as if there was no difference between the people interacting and there was a sort of fusion (ibid: 581). Alienation can be voiced by “I-you”, which indicates a sort of isolation of the object by the subject, or by “me-I” where the “you” completely disappears and is ignored as if it didn’t exist, as if it was engulfed (ibid: 581). Another way to separate “us” from “them” is when a person is thought to *be* the thing he or she is labeled (Estroff, 1989): to give an example, some people speak of persons who *have* cancer, a flu and others to *be* epileptics or schizophrenic instead of saying they *have* epilepsy or schizophrenia, which indicates the will to dissociate from that person (Link and Phelan, 2001: 370).

Awareness about culture and sense of belonging usually take place when a migration process takes place too, since it can represent the moment in which individuals start questioning their own identity and become aware of the sense of community (Cohen, 1982 in Jenkins, 2008: 135.).

The creation of a sense of belonging and of community can on the one hand value people's diversity in backgrounds, creating similar life opportunities and developing a great cross-cultural contact, or, on the other hand, create conflicts and an imaginary wall among communities living in the same country, city, neighborhood (Cantle, 2005: 174). Sense of belonging can therefore be addressed both to the country of origin and the destination country and can create different perceptions and feelings about being part of a community, being excluded by another or not being able to actively participate.

8.4 Functional Theory of Motives

One of the best-known theories to explain why people volunteer is called functional theory of motives. Volunteering assumes that people have universal psychological needs (Musick and Wilson, 2008: 54) and it is called "functional" since it is based on functional analysis. Functional analysis is based on the belief that the reasons for doing something create beliefs and actions (ibid: 54).

In the context of this theory, the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) has been theorized, with six different motivations for volunteering, which can be combined to explain why an individual volunteers: Values, Enhancement, Social, Career, Protective, Understanding (ibid: 56). *Values* means that someone volunteers in order to achieve a goal. When someone volunteers because it is something important for him/her we can relate it to values. In fact, behaving in a "good way to people" enables people to express their ideals and principles (ibid: 58). *Enhancement* happens when volunteers learn about new places, people, skills while volunteering (ibid: 58), while the *Social* function reflects the need to get on well and gain respect from the members of a relevant group for us (ibid: 59). The *Career* function takes place when the volunteer wants to get career-related interests such as contacts to enter a certain field of work or specific skills (ibid: 60). The fifth function is defined *Protective* because it helps people dealing with their personal issues, problems or conflicts and the last one, called *Understanding*, refers to the act of volunteering as an opportunity of growth, of making someone feel "important" because of what he's standing for (ibid: 62-63).

These are the concepts and theories used as a guide for the analysis of the collected data. The following section will describe the methodology that I chose for this research.

9. Methodology, Methods, Material

Qualitative methods are at the core of my research. Conducting interviews seems to be the most appropriate method to answer my research questions. A qualitative method allows in fact the researcher to investigate the meaning attached to people's behaviors, actions, words.

9.1 Philosophical considerations

Taking a certain philosophical standpoint determines what kind of knowledge we want to produce as researchers (Rosenberg, 2008: 4) and through which methods we are going to produce it. This study mainly focuses on the concept of integration, identity and sense of belonging which were approached relying on social constructivism: this means that all social phenomena are believed to exist only due to people's definitions and actions and the researcher's role is to "reveal the conventional constructed nature of society and thereby show that it can be changed" (Rosenberg, 2012: 130). I take a perspective where there is not one objective reality, but rather a multiplicity of realities which rely on our personal and cultural experiences (Merriam, 2014: 9). Our perception of the world is therefore influenced by our own ethnicity, color of skin, personal experiences, interactions with people, etc.

As a researcher I am also engaged in what May calls the *double-hermeneutics*: since I myself am part of this world, I will to some extent influence the data collected and their analysis will derive from my own understanding of the interviews (2011: 37).

9.2 Research Design

This research is built on an inductive qualitative approach, which I will explain in the following sections. I used semi-structured interviews that were conducted in Palermo between 2nd and 9th May 2019. The collected data together with the theoretical framework will be used to answer the research questions.

9.2.1 Qualitative Study Approach and Inductive Approach

This study is based on a qualitative approach which is the most appropriate to collect the data needed and consents to provide a multitude of details which explains how informants make sense of the world and how they attribute meaning to their experiences (Merriam, 2009: 13).

Qualitative research "can give us compelling descriptions of the qualitative human world" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 47) and it allows for a complete understanding of the informants' points of view and social processes (May, 2011: 126). A qualitative approach also makes it possible to gather

information through a vis-à-vis interaction, by analyzing people's behaviors in a determinate context (Creswell, 2014: 185). This approach allowed me to collect data through interviews. The choice of using a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach is that the focus of the study is on perceptions and behaviors of the interviewees, which is much more achievable having a personal interaction rather than using a quantitative method such as questionnaires.

An inductive approach was used, which means that the research "is used to develop such a statement from a position in which we have no real idea of what might turn out to be plausible, relevant or helpful about the subject of interest" (6 and Bellamy 2012: 76). In such an approach, there is no theory to verify or falsify, since it is material-driven which means that the research starts with a question which is answered only after the data has been collected and analyzed. Moreover, when using this approach, researchers are supposed to create their own categories and patterns from the bottom to a more theoretical and abstract frame (Creswell, 2014: 186). For this study, I first studied the collected data and only afterwards I selected theories and concepts that could be useful for the analysis of this data. Nevertheless, the method I used is not completely inductive since I already had some ideas about the theoretical frame that this research would have. That means that before conducting the interviews I had some theories and concepts that I thought would be relevant to the study, but I later modified and adapted them to the collected data.

9.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

There are various interviews that can be used in social research, however, for this research, semi-structured interviews were chosen. Semi-structured interviews usually involve a small number of interviews (May, 2011: 132). They include both structured questions, in order to acquire reliable information and unstructured questions that allow the researcher to have a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences (ibid: 132). Also, questions are often based on a guide, but the researcher has the right to go beyond the answer with follow-up questions which allow the interviewee to articulate more about his/her experience in their own terms (ibid: 136).

Following this approach, I conducted six semi-structured interviews, conducted individually and face-to-face. I tried to let the interviewees be storytellers to develop their own narration only guided by a general list of topics and open questions divided into different categories. Semi-structured interviews are suitable for the purpose of this study, not only because they allowed me to answer my research questions, but because they also gave me the possibility to ask specific follow-up questions when needed (Bryman, 2012: 471).

All the interviews took place in person and lasted between 25 and 65 minutes. With a signed consent form, I recorded all interviews and later transcribed them. All interviews took place in Italian,

only 10 minutes of one of the interviews was in English because the interviewee said he could not explain his idea correctly in Italian. The setting for the interviews were two social spaces in one of the central neighborhoods of Palermo. Both places were known before by the interviewees, which allowed them to feel comfortable since they are frequented by the individuals being interviewed and by their friends. One is a cultural and anti-fascist association which organizes a help desk for immigrants every Wednesday, where some of the interviewees volunteer. The other is a restaurant and co-working space where mainly immigrants work, cooking food which is a fusion between Sicilian and African food. The empirical data was collected from May 2nd to 9th 2019, with a previous agreement on dates with the informants. I tried to avoid leading questions and to reduce error due to the interviewer variability (Bryman, 2016: 210), considering when variations in the answers were real or due to the interview context.

The guide to the questions I asked can be found in the appendix of this study.

9.2.3. Sample

This research is based on a sample of African immigrants who came to Italy for different reasons but who are all dedicating some of their weekly time to volunteer in order to help other immigrants to get to know the Italian system, culture, their rights and duties.

I conducted six semi structured interviews with volunteers originally from different parts of Africa. I won't mention the country of origin in order to preserve their anonymity. The sample comprises two people from North Africa, three from West and Central Africa and one from East Africa. Two of the interviewees are women and they come from North and East Africa. The interviewees are between 22 and 47 years old and have been living in Italy between three and 35 years. They are all legally living in Italy and live in Palermo, except one who recently moved out, in a smaller city not far from Palermo.

9.2.4 Access

In order to gather the data, I mainly used personal connections through which I could contact possible interviewees. Through personal connections I got the contacts of a few individuals who work in the field of immigration in Sicily and sent them an explanation of the aims of my thesis and the characteristics of the informants I was looking for, which was forwarded to their contacts who they considered as possible interviewees. After that, they sent me a list of the phone numbers of their connections who agreed to be contacted by me. After six contacts accepted to meet me for an interview, we discussed when to meet and fixed an appointment. Unfortunately, once I was in

Palermo, some of the informants had to cancel the interview due to several reasons, some for health and one of them had to travel to Northern Italy to get his new passport. At that point I had to use the snowball sampling technique (Bryman, 2012: 424), which means that I asked the other interviewees if they knew other African volunteers. This technique was successful, even though I had to broaden the characteristics of my sample when considering their origins, which did not impact the overall results of my thesis.

9.2.5 Analyzing Data

As mentioned in section 9.1, this research uses a hermeneutic approach. Thematic analysis was chosen to suit this approach as it is based on identifiable patterns (Paterson, 2005: 345). After having conducted, recorded and created a transcript of the interviews, I followed with the coding of the collected material. Coding is one of the key parts of research and includes two stages: first of all the material needs to be divided into different categories, once the researcher has found common patterns in the collected answers; second, the researcher has to find labels to these categories (Bryman, 2016: 247). Before starting to code the material, a profound analysis of the data was needed. After labeling the categories, a consistent and articulate narrative including quotes from the interviews were redacted. I chose to code by hand which allowed me to easily identify patterns and to focus on relevant parts of the data for this research. Previous research and theoretical framework were kept in mind and helpful while analyzing the data.

9.2.6 Role of the Researcher

A fundamental aspect to consider is the researcher's role and his/her relationship with the researched. In qualitative research a sort of hierarchical power relationship is established between the interviewer - who is in a higher position since she/he chooses the questions and looks for information from his/her perspective - and the interviewee (Bryman, 2016: 492). The notion of power in interviews is as important as in any other social situation (Cohen et al. 2004: 122). In this specific case, I am aware of my own position as a white, female Italian researcher who interviewed African people, which implies some biases because of my strong empathy to the situations and stories of the informants. Using a constructivist approach, implies that I construct reality in my own terms and with my own ideas; however, I minimized my personal standpoint and focused entirely on what the informants told me (Lapan and Quartaroli 2011: 23). The concept of ethnicity of the people involved in the research process is irrefutably present throughout the different steps of the interviews. "Characteristics such as class, sex and race belong not just to the people who we conduct our research on or about but are also characteristics of the researcher" (Edwards, 1990: 482): this is something that, as a researcher, I must acknowledge.

Another aspect to clarify is that, as a researcher, I am obliged to reflect upon my personal interpretation of the world (Creswell, 2014: 187). Having a certain interest in the experiences of immigrants, I am aware I unavoidably had my own opinions on the topic before starting this research. The case of Italy seems interesting to me, not only because it is my home country and a reality that I know well, but also because of the last policies that have been taken concerning immigration issues. My standpoint could represent a potential bias of objectivity. Nevertheless, I focused very much on the informants' experiences, presented them as clearly as possible and analyzing them in a transparent way.

Even if I didn't have a close relationship at the time of the interviews, I had texted and had phone calls with many of the interviewees before meeting them, in order to inform them about the study and to arrange the dates of our interviews, which created a sort of trust between us before even meeting. Despite my strong interest in the subject I attempted to always remain objective and not to show my emotions.

9.2.7 Ethical Considerations

When considering ethical principles in research, Diener and Crandall have distinguished four main areas to take into account (1978 in Bryman, 2016: 135): it is essential not to harm the participants, to always make sure to ask for consent, to protect the privacy and not to involve any deception.

I accomplished these four points firstly by maintaining anonymity. Personal information which could reveal the identity of the respondents such as names, surnames, origin country, were not included in the research. Real names of the interviewees were replaced by fictitious ones and any data that is not relevant to the research aims was kept confidential. Confidentiality of sensitive information assures interviewees to share ideas privately and to ask for deletion or omission of material from the research (Piper and Simons, 2001: 56). Therefore, I did not consider information that the informants requested to exclude from the study.

Secondly, every interviewee was informed about the purposes and processes of the study beforehand and was asked for his/her consent for the interview with a signature on a consent form before the beginning of the interview. The consent form also clearly stated that the interviewee could withdraw at any time during the interview and had the right not to answer some questions if considered inappropriate or too personal. Informants were also told about the possibility to skip a question, stop the interview or even withdraw if they considered any aspect of the research to be uncomfortable for them.

Thirdly, in order to protect the privacy of the interviewees, it is important to consider the usability of the collected data: I made it clear that the collected material was going to be used for this research

exclusively. Another aspect to mention, is that the new regulations in the field of qualitative research states that it threatens the interviewees' anonymity to have their voice recorded. Therefore, after having created a transcript in Italian, that can be translated if needed, of the interviews and after getting the grade for my thesis, I will destroy the recordings to guarantee the protection of the interviewees' identities

Fourthly, I was clear about my role as a researcher, stating that these interviews did not have an influence on the situation of the informants, and it wouldn't in any way better their legal status. In that sense, there was no deception about the intentions and purposes of the research.

9.2.8 Validity and Reliability

As a study using a qualitative approach, this investigation claims a high internal validity, which is the extent to which the collected data can demonstrate something asserted before or asked before in the research questions (6 and Bellamy, 2012: 21). External validity, which happens when our results are representative of a bigger group, in other situations or studies (ibid: 21), is practically impossible to reach in a case study, since the results depend on the very sample that was selected and could not speak for a larger group. In this case the results cannot be illustrative of the whole African community engaged in volunteering in Italy since the sample is too small to generalize and the data collected are strictly related to the informants' personal stories.

Reliability can be assessed in two ways (ibid: 21). Either it has to do with how we measure things to attain consistency (ibid: 21) or it should enable other researchers to use our same tools and achieve similar results (Creswell, 2014: 201, 6 and Bellamy 2012: 21). Reliability in the first sense has been reached with as much transparency as possible throughout all the steps of the analysis of the data. For example, the interviews were recorded, and a transcript of the interviews was redacted.

Reliability in the second sense is though unfeasible: in a qualitative research, in fact, the results can vary according to different contexts and people. Results are affected by the researchers, who can use different approaches with the interviewees, that can create a different relationship with different researchers and therefore answer in different ways. For example, if a researcher has the same cultural background as the interviewees, the given answer will hardly be the same as if the researcher had a different cultural background. Therefore, informants would not give the same answers on their perception of the analyzed concepts of integration, sense of belonging and identity.

There is no guarantee that the interviews would show the same answers if the study was repeated. Therefore, this research aims at reliability mainly through transparency and consistency.

10 Analysis and Discussion of the Results of the Interviews

The following section begins with a brief description of the sample. Subsequently, different subsections present the recurrent and most salient themes that came out of the interviews. The voices of the interviewees are here portrayed, analyzed and discussed.

10.1 Interviewees Profile

As mentioned in section 9.2.7 all the names of the interviewees are fictitious in order to guarantee anonymity. The chosen names are chosen randomly and were not chosen based on the religious background of the interviewees. Another thing to notice is that the names of the countries will be substituted by North, West and East Africa, both in the descriptions of the interviewees and in the transcriptions of the data.

Samar is 37 years old and she comes from North Africa. She arrived in Italy when she was 20 with a tourist visa and got married to an Italian man, which led to her receiving the Italian citizenship. As she arrived in Italy, she started volunteering with an NGO and working as a cultural mediator. Through these experiences she got to know the field of immigration to Sicily by boat and started volunteering in different associations, mainly on boats, rescuing immigrants and being their cultural mediator.

Khalid is 29 years old; he also comes from North Africa and has been living in Palermo for 14 years. He first arrived in Italy thanks to a family reunion with his dad who works in the street market. Everybody knows him in the center of Palermo for his social engagement. He is a volunteer in different associations as a cultural mediator and he is always available to help anyone in need of an interpreter.

Nardos is 47 years old, she was born in East Africa. She has been living in Italy for more than 30 years. Nevertheless, she does not have an Italian citizenship but only a long-term residence permit. She works in the field of migration, but she also volunteers every time some of the immigrants she works with need a cultural mediator. Moreover, she volunteers in other realities such as schools, institutions and help desks.

Baba is 25 years old; he comes from West Africa and has been living in Italy for three years. He obtained the subsidiary protection (given when you do not fulfill the requirements for refugee status, but you still could face a serious harm or persecution back in the country of origin) and is now

studying Italian at school. He is volunteering in an association as a cultural mediator at a weekly help desk for immigrants, also accompanying people to buy train tickets, going to the hospital or talking with their lawyers.

Ibrahim is 27 years old, from West Africa, he has been living in Italy for three years. He also obtained the subsidiary protection in Italy and is now attending classes to become a professional cultural mediator. In the meanwhile, he volunteers with Baba and Khalid as an interpreter and mediator.

Yazid is 22 years old, from West Africa. He has been living in Italy for eight years. He arrived in Italy as an unaccompanied minor and is now studying at university. He also volunteers at a helpdesk weekly, as a mediator but also bringing food and blankets to homeless shelters.

10.2 Motivations for volunteering

One of the aims of this study is to understand the reasons for volunteering. Every human behavior must in fact refer to intentions, motives, reasons (Musick and Wilson, 2008: 54). Here below the interview responses are followed by observations. When interviewees were asked why they decided to volunteer, responses were of mixed nature.

10.2.1 Life Experiences

When asked why they started volunteering to help other migrants, informants had different reasons and life experiences that pushed them to volunteer. Baba's answer is linked to personal experiences of migration: *"I do it because I went through this, when I arrived in Italy, they gave me a paper saying I have 7 days to leave the country. [...] Then I met ***, and he helped me."* Now, he explains, he wants to help people because *"maybe they don't know the procedures"* and the steps to follow, as it happened to him when he first arrived.

Samar, instead, relates her will to volunteer to her experience with the scouts, back in her home country. Since her adolescence she has been used to helping others on different occasions. After a period of break from volunteering, the death of her father in an ambulance made her want to volunteer in an NGO, through which she discovered the field of immigration.

"It's by habit, because of my educational model. I mean, I come from a context where I grew up in a community, my grandparents have always been really welcoming, I didn't have a home, but rather a shelter home, where all these people came and left, so it was natural", says Nardos, talking about her childhood in her country of origin, where it was ordinary to help people and host them when they needed it.

According to the VFI (*Volunteer Functions Inventory*), motives for volunteering can include *altruism*, which happens when the concern for other people's welfare pushes to volunteer (Musick and Wilson, 2008, 58), especially when the volunteer passed through the same experience as the new immigrant and does not want other people to struggle as he did. This is a sort of identification with other immigrants and the will to make their experience a little less difficult than their own. There is a "feeling of compassion or sympathy with a value that attaches importance to help those toward whom one feels compassion" (Wuthnow, 1995:66), that pushes informants to help others and this feeling seems to come from life experience. There is also an idea of wanting to "give back something that was received" that evokes the norm of *reciprocity*, as in the case of Baba, (ibid:75), stating that helping others is a way of returning something good that has been received by the community. In the case of Samar, on the other hand, the *protective* function can be applied: in fact volunteering can be a way to recover from illness, drug abuse, the loss of a loved one (Musick and Wilson, 2008: 62) and represents the will to do something about a problem.

10.2.2 Sense of Duty and Social Relevance

Other patterns for volunteering are related to sense of duty. This is explicit in Nardos' words when she says: "*It's something that must be done. There was no reflection on it... It must be done, full stop. There is a problem, and a solution has to be found. I'm really reactive from this point of view, I'm pro problem solving*".

Ibrahim decided to volunteer because "*it is something really important, not only for immigrants but also for the persons in charge of them, lawyers, and judges. Sometimes there are no cultural mediators, and people are given negative answers for misunderstandings*"

These two kinds of answer are related to the function of *value* (Musick and Wilson, 2008: 58). When we treat people in a certain way it helps us to act out our values, therefore by our own actions we can express our values. This was defined "pursuit of objective meaning" by Teske (1997:125). The informants are aware of the social importance of the position they have, and this consciousness comes, again, by previous life experiences and habits that their families and the environments they lived in transmitted to them. The act of volunteering is the continuum of values passed on from generation to generation. Also, the idea of doing something important that can make a difference for the community, refers to what Musick and Wilson define *self-efficacy*: efficacy is the trait of personality that creates a transition from empathy and responsibility into action (2008: 47). The interviewees believe that their contribution can make a difference: in this sense they are efficacious

people because they do not think they are wasting their time and they are trying to attain realistic rather than idealistic goals (ibid.).

Another recurrent answer was related to the fact that the act of volunteering makes the informants “feel good”. Samar states: “*Maybe I also wanted to do something that makes me feel good. [...] Inside me I don’t know why I feel so good when I do it.*”

Khalid also feels that “*inside me there’s a person who really wants to help others*” and he is happy about his contribution because he wants to see a better society, since he’s interested in human affairs.

To conclude, what pushed the interviewees to volunteer is not an altruism per se. The will of offering assistance to other immigrants does not come from the mere wish of helping people. It is more related to a sense of reciprocity, i.e. giving back to society what was given to them (Wuthnow, 1995: 75). A sort of empathy towards other immigrants and what they are going through is also a strong factor that encourages the informants to volunteer as cultural mediators. On the other hand, the experience of the loss of a dear one can also affect the decision to volunteer, which refers to the protective function of the VFI (Musick and Wilson, 2008: 62). If this idea of altruism resulting from similar experience is very much described by the informants, on the other there is a sense of self-satisfaction narrated by Samar and Khalid, who state that volunteering makes them feel good. Values are also essential to understand why the informants are volunteering: “values are standards by which things are compared as more or less correct, more or less good, more or less honorable” (ibid: 83). When people say they volunteer because “it is the right thing to do” they are invoking values that can pertain to subjects such as migration, racism, poverty (ibid.). Sometimes these values are transmitted from family, sometimes they come from personality traits, such as self-efficacy.

10.3 Themes related to Integration

The interviewees talked about their feelings about integration from many different angles, through daily life examples, cultural differences, religious perspectives. These feelings were often also dictated by their social interaction with other people. The act of volunteering seems to influence social connections to both the Italian and African community. The tendency is to frequent many immigrants through volunteering but also to connect more to the Italian community involved in volunteering, which allows them to acquire professional skills, to grow both personally and professionally and also to gain respect in the field.

10.3.1 Feeling at Home vs. Feeling a Stranger

Feelings about living in Italy vary according to different situations and experiences. Samar for example states that she feels North African when she's in North Africa and Italian when she's in Italy. Nevertheless, the last time she went to her home country she missed her *home* (referring to Italy) and she wanted to see *her country*, she wanted to go *home*.

Khalid, tells me that in the last 14 years he has gone back to North Africa only twice and he felt like a *stranger* there: “*Even if that's my country, my homeland [...] I have a real connection to this city (Palermo). There's a family who owns a bar here and when I go there, I feel at home.*”

Ibrahim says that he feels free to profess his religion since he prayed in the tribunal of Palermo and no one said anything. At the same time, he states: “*I feel good here in Italy but I've been waiting for my papers for so long... I don't know where they are*”.

There seems to be a double-faced feeling about living in Italy, if on one side it feels like home and there are positive feelings about the Italian society, on the other side there is always an awareness of “being a stranger”:

“*Institutions tell you it's okay, you are integrated, you speak good Italian, you have lots of friends, but you're always a stranger. Sometimes you encounter people who make you understand that you're not home. So, I feel integrated, settled, but there is something missing.*” says Khalid.

Baba supports this idea stating that he has lots of Italian friends but when it comes to getting the papers, as an immigrant you are *alone*, there is no one to help you.

All the informants affirm “feeling at home” in Italy, to having Italian friends -to different extents- and to frequenting them during volunteering time as well as in their free time. The act of feeling at home allows the interviewees to express a new self, which exists in the new society and with new routines, as in the case of Khalid, who feels part of a new group in the bar he frequents (Mitzen, 2018: 1376). What is important to highlight, is that *social bridges*, that is the relationship between immigrants and the local community (Ager and Strang, 2008: 181), can hold back the feeling of being home or enhance it. The Italian community can help these people to feel part of it or at a distance. This section can also be related to what Ager and Strang define the *social links*, i.e. the link between individuals and the structures of the state (2008: 181). Not knowing where his papers are, makes Ibrahim feel uncomfortable and unsure despite that he has a good Italian social network. Institutions and bureaucracy are perceived as an obstacle to feeling home. There is a gap between the micro level, where the individual feels at home, and the macro level, where institutions make individuals feel that, regardless if they feel home, there is something missing, as Khalid states.

10.3.2 Bridging Between Cultures

Another recurrent pattern is that African immigrant volunteers behave as a bridge between two or more cultures, trying to introduce the African culture to the Italian society and vice versa, explaining and justifying attitudes that could seem aggressive or not collaborative, but that are indeed only caused by fear and uncertainties. Besides the idea of bridging, that can easily be related to the figure of a cultural mediator, there's a will of *educating* people through mediation. Baba's and Khalid's words are a clear example of this:

"African immigrants here don't know how Italian people behave, that's why we go to the shelter houses, to make them understand the culture of the others" explains Baba.

"Integration is also when I enter a bar and I hear something that's not good, I am the one who answers and I want to explain to people... [...] Sometimes they tell me Muslim people do not want Christians in their countries... But Christians come from those areas- I tell them do you really know where Christianity was born? Do you know where Jesus was born?" narrates Khalid.

Here we see that the idea of feeling at home is not enough for the informants: in order to really feel part of a community they feel the need to educate the Italian community, to let them know where they come from, and that they did not come to Italy to cause trouble as many Italians think. The determination to show other people that they might have a misperception of what is happening, highlights the will of the informants to affirm their identity and share it with their social bridges, not in order to be accepted but rather to open people's minds. The will of the informants is to look for a connection to the Italian community and to be welcomed and recognized (Ager and Strang, 2008: 180). The desire to be recognized could be due, among other reasons, to the social position of volunteers of the informants since this tendency to educate might be related to the fact of being interested in migration issues and being part of them in a dual sense, being themselves immigrants and helping other immigrants (Blau, 1977).

10.3.3 Stigmatization and Prejudice

Stigma and prejudices seem to affect feelings about integration. Even though there is a strong feeling of being Italian, what is said about the informants affects their 'perception of integration. *"I don't feel safe as before,"* says Yazid, *"because with this new government which promotes hate... People follow those people and they see you as a threat. Once I was entering university with some colleagues and the guardian told me to stay out. I asked the reason and he told me that black guys use to beg here for money"*.

Khalid explains clearly how the idea of the "North African" (refers to the specific country) is completely deformed:

“for them the North African is the one who sells stuff in the streets, he cannot be mediator, own a shop, have a family, wife and children that he sends to school, he cannot have a normal life as an Italian does. [...] Being North African is an offense, North Africans are all the guys selling in the streets, it doesn't matter if you actually are Bengalese, Senegalese, they call them all North African”.

Prejudice coming from social bridges can cause a feeling of threat in the immigrants, which makes them analyze their identity and want to belong to a “safe place” (Yuval-Davis, 2011b :5), which can be found in the volunteering. Comments made by the in-group, the Italian community, show a negative predisposition towards the out-group (Van Tubergen, 2006: 26), which are perceived as a threat and troublemakers. In Khalid's example stigma contributes to the idea of status loss in the eyes of the receiving community, since a North African is seen as someone who has no chance of having a regular job and a family (Link and Phelan, 2001: 377). The stigmatization is even misplaced, since the attribution of that specific stigma doesn't match reality and street sellers do not only come from North Africa.

10.4 Themes related to Identity

One of the main concerns of this thesis is trying to understand how African immigrant volunteers identify themselves. The simplest way to describe identity, as stated by Jenkins, is “our understanding of who we are” (Jenkins, 2008: 14). Nardos talks about identity as

“something determined by experiences, it's recognizing yourself in a context... It's not something static, it's a process in constant evolution. It's a set of elements that cannot be reduced to a nationality. [...] I don't recognize myself in a territorial context”.

Nardos seems to have a clear definition of identity. Referring to the literature, her description of identity is *processual*: it evolves through time and space and it is affected by life experiences (Baumann, 1999, chapter 2). It opposes to an *essentialist* idea of identity, which is more static and anchored to concept as nation or ethnicity (ibid: chapter 2).

10.4.1 Self-identity

For most of the interviewees, self-identity is not related to religion and some of them seem to feel having a sort of “dual identity”. Samar states that it doesn't depend on clothes, religion, it is all about how she feels inside. Nardos states to be *“Italian, East African: this is my reality and my identity”*. She also says that Sicily is the perfect place where to express both her African and Italian identity, since *“being in Sicily is a little bit like putting a foot in Africa”* and she feels that all the different parts of her identity can live in harmony there.

Self-identity awareness is reinforced by the will to affirm this identity and defend it against stigma and prejudice. Khalid's disappointment is evident when he tells me: "*When they say oh, Arabs are terrorists, or Muslim people are terrorists, it's something that offends me, and I really want it to be clear that we are also subjected to these wars. [...] I say no, I want to defend myself and defend people whose voice can't be heard.*"

Only Ibrahim has an explicit religious concept of identity. He is a religious figure and, due to his religion, he cannot shake hands with girls, because it is considered impure and a sin. Because of this reason he is often considered unfriendly, and, as a result of his will to keep on following this rule that his faith imposes him, he suffers and feels sad.

In the theoretical section we touched the concept of the *multicultural riddle* (Baumann, 1999), in which Baumann explains that culture -and therefore identity- can be shaped to different extents by ethnicity, nationality and religion and that they can be perceived in a processual or essentialist way (Baumann, 1999, chapter 2). For our informants, identity seems to be more processual than essentialist. It doesn't depend on nationality because the nation is not considered "the final expression of this cultural unity" (ibid: chapter 2). "A nation is one or several ethnic groups whose members think, or are thought in some way, to "own" a state, that is, to carry a special responsibility for it" (ibid: chapter 2): in each of the interviews there was a connection made between one nation and ethnicity. In the case of Ibrahim, there is a part of his identity related to religion that influences his relationship to the social bridges. In his case, religion is an essential part of his identity, he'd rather be judged by people as unpleasant than leave this rule of his religion apart. In this sense, he is the only interviewee that has a more essentialist view of identity.

Moreover, there is a general tendency from the part of the interviewees to defend their identity against stigma and labelling, that associate human differences with negative attributes (Link and Phelan, 2001:368). This idea is distant from the image of the "stigmatized person who is a passive victim against an active challenger" (ibid:377), as in this case the stigmatized person wants to react in order to preserve his/her identity. Khalid is offended by the stigma that all Arabs are terrorists and responds to it, giving another example of opposition to the stigmatization processes (Reissman, 2000).

10.4.2 Social Identity

In this section, the focus is on what Goffman calls the *interaction order*, which explains how other individuals identify us (Jenkins, 2008: 40). There is a main distinction to make: the identity attributed by the African community and the one given by the Italian community. According to the informants, the African immigrants they assist, see them as *mentors*, *guides* to follow, reliable persons that they

can refer to when they need help. If this is the main tendency, Ibrahim says that he sometimes had problems with immigrants he was helping since they blamed him sometimes if their appeal to the Court was not accepted.

“When they get a negative answer, it’s not my fault, it depends on their story. [...] The example was an Ivorian guy I talked with, telling him that what he was telling the Court was not enough, he needed to find a job and get a contract to stay. When the judge said no to his case, he called me, insulting me because he said it was my fault”.

When it comes to families in the origin country, sometimes the informants are perceived as *tourists, Italians* who have a different way of thinking and acting.

Social identity is here based on *trustworthiness* (or a lack of it) by the immigrant community: other immigrants with co-ethnic and cultural background see a guide to trust in the African volunteers who assist them, and someone who can give them a voice (Duke *et al.* 1999: 119). Nevertheless, sometimes, if the asylum processes do not give the answers that they hoped for, the guilt can fall back on the mediator. The families who stay in the country of origin, on the other side, see the informants as a sort of hybrid, who of course present traits of the culture of origin but have been influenced by the culture of the destination, in this case Italy.

Concerning the social identity attributed by the Italian community, there are of course people who volunteer with the informants who respect them and value their job and collaboration with them, but the general predisposition of Italians towards them seems to be negative in their eyes. Yazid says that, while in the city center there are many immigrants and people are used to them but *“if you go to the suburbs no, you are the black guy, you are African, because of course people are not used to it. But suddenly, if they hear you talking Italian and you tell them you are studying, they say: Oh, then you are a good guy!”*.

If on the one hand respect and profession are recognized by the circle of Italian people working and volunteering with the informants (Ager and Strang, 2008: 180), on the other hand prejudices from people who are not used to living together with immigrants, especially outside of the city center, which is the multicultural heart of Palermo, have a negative effect on the social identity of the informants. Labels such as “black guy” and “African” demonstrate an oversimplification used in order to create categories of people (Link and Phelan, 2001: 367). Nevertheless, such prejudices and labels might disappear after the first contact, when the person has more knowledge about the immigrant.

10.4.3 Continental Identity

When I say *continental identity*, I refer to a feeling of being African without considering which nation an individual comes from, but instead adopting a broader sense of the collective identity. When Baba says “*we Africans are all friends*” or “*we are black so we understand each other*”, when Khalid states “*the majority of people I frequent are my brothers and sisters*”, referring to African people, there is a feeling that goes beyond national borders and puts together African people as one collectivity.

Rather than a national identity, it is more appropriate to talk about a continental identity, which could be a broader collective identity (Jenkins, 2008: 157) that includes people from a whole continent who have something in common after migrating, such as migration processes or experiences in the destination country. The words of the informants make us understand that since they arrived in Italy, they felt as one big family. Suddenly national borders fade away to let space to a brotherhood dictated maybe by sympathy for the struggle experienced, maybe by a need to belong to something, maybe by customs and traditions.

10.5 Themes related to Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging intended as emotional attachment (Yuval-Davis, 2011b: 18) can be identified in different parts of the interviews. The following subsections will describe some aspects of sense of belonging that relate to some of the theoretical points touched in section 8.

10.5.1 Empathy

In many occasions during the interviews, empathy towards other immigrants could be perceived. It is the case especially for Samar who states that “*we received a warning that the Coast Guard was not treating immigrants so well, I have a really strict personality and nobody can touch an immigrant when I am there, so I would stay awake on the boat 24 hours a day, you cannot imagine, because I really care about these people because I know well what they, I mean it’s not only that you know or you hear it, but you can actually see what they had to go through in Libya*” and for Khalid who says that he wants to be close to these people because he knows how difficult it is for them to be far from home and to cope with all the administrative process in order to get their papers, they need support and he wants to be there to let them know they are not alone.

Empathizing means “recognizing what another person may be feeling or thinking and responding to those feelings with an appropriate emotion of one’s own” (Musick and Wilson, 2008:43). In these

statements there is a manifest emotional attachment to those immigrants, which evokes a feeling of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011a: 18). It is palpable how emotional this aspect of the informants' belonging is, since informants feel how the life of the immigrants they are helping is difficult, threatened or in danger (ibid: 21). This sort of empathy towards other immigrants and their tough experiences shows a feeling of solidarity which, according to Scheff, can be expressed by the pronouns "I, I" which illustrates the identification of the subject with the object (Scheff, 2007: 581).

10.5.2 Sense of Community

Feeling part of a community or not feeling part of it, was also a recurrent theme of the interviews. Places as the associations where the informants volunteer, bars, parts of the city make them feel like belonging somewhere and to a group.

Khalid narrates that he has been going to a bar in his neighborhood for over ten years, he knows the family who owns it and he feels "*one of them*". Nardos explains that she has more significant personal relationships to Italians to claims to feel Italian stating:

"Absolutely yes. I feel Italian. I feel so Italian that I don't need to ask for the citizenship to confirm this identity of mine, this belonging... I feel Italian and it seems abnormal to me that I should ask for it or someone should give it to me, like, that they should give me something that already belongs to me, something that is already there."

Others, like Ibrahim, refers to a community when speaking of people who come from West Africa since they speak the same language.

Samar has an experience with other immigrants that live in her neighborhood. She says that she tried to present a project on culture in her children's school but the other parents of children with an immigrant background were not interested because "*they want to mind their business*".

Relationships with the social bridges, in this case with the Italian community, can reinforce the sense of belonging to the receiving community. In Nardos' words, a clear boundary divides the notion of *belonging* to the one of *politics of belonging* (Yuval-Davis, 2011a: 18). If on the one side from a legal point of view she is not Italian, on the other side her emotional attachment makes her feel Italian, no matter her legal status (ibid: 18).

Samar talks instead of other social bridges than the Italian community or the African community, other immigrants who live in her neighborhood. They do not seem to be interested in creating a wider community of immigrants, using a "me-I" narrative (Scheff, 2007: 581), where there is no relationship between the subject and the object.

10.5.3 We, Africans

The concept of “us vs them” described in section 8.3 has been salient for the analysis of the interviews. It is recurrent and important to have a better understanding of the idea the informants have of their connection to other Africans. Khalid, Ibrahim and Baba, when talking about the African community, they refer to them as “*my brothers and sisters*” The sense of belonging to the same continent somehow, seems stronger than any national, cultural, religious belonging.

Baba makes a clear distinction between Africans and Italians

“They don’t know our culture and we don’t know their culture and if we go to the centers we explain them how to behave on us and the way they (African immigrants) are behaving doesn’t mean they are bad or something like that...It’s just the mood that they are into that make them not doing what they are asked for. We black people, we understand each other, it’s different if I explain something to a black person, she/he might get it, it’s not as if you (talking to me) explain them something”.

When the interviewees refer to the African people as to their brothers and sisters, Scheff’s narrative of the pronouns “I-I” is used to create a sense of community, characterized by having, somehow, the same cultural background (Scheff, 2007: 581; Cohen, 1982 in Jenkins, 2008: 135).

When Baba speaks about the differences between the Italian and the African communities in Palermo, and how they need a mediation in order to understand each other, he uses the narrative of “I-you” which shows the will of tracing a limit between the two communities and of presenting the differences between them (Scheff, 2007: 581). Therefore, according to Baba, a mediation is needed for an understanding between Africans and Italians.

11. Conclusion

In this final section, I will summarize the main theories and concepts used and draw a final discussion of my findings. I will end this section by providing some suggestions for further research.

11.1 Concluding remarks

This research was designed to answer my interest in the African community volunteering in the south of Italy and in understanding their motivations for volunteering and how they felt about living in Italy, within both the African and the Italian communities. This was explored through the functional theory of motives and the concepts of integration, identity and sense of belonging. I wanted to know more about how the interviewees define their identities and sense of belonging, how they feel they

are perceived by people, to what extent they feel integrated. Moreover, I was curious to understand if and how the act of volunteering affected feelings about the concepts mentioned above.

In order to attain the answers I needed for the aim of my thesis, I decided to use a qualitative approach as a method and to conduct six semi-structured interviews with African immigrants who volunteer in Sicily in order to help and assist other immigrants to deal with bureaucracy and other daily issues. All the interviews were conducted individually, face-to-face and were held in Palermo. The interviewees have all been living for more than three years in Italy and are all above the age of 22. The reason for choosing this group of people to interview was to let their voices be heard, since the field of immigrants volunteering to help other migrants is still unexplored. I chose to conduct my study in the south of Italy because of its strategic position for African immigration to Europe.

As a theoretical frame, I used relevant theories and concepts that could be related to my aim and research questions that could be recognized in the answers of my interviewees.

In the analysis of the collected data, I have summarized the salient points of the interviews, trying to connect them to the theories and concept in order to fortify my coding of the data. After transcribing the collected material, I divided my analysis into four main categories: motivations, integration, identity and sense of belonging, dividing each of them into more specific subcategories. At the end of each category I explained and discussed the answers given by my informants, always trying to connect them to the theory in the most consistent way I could.

The analysis highlighted some interesting remarks that can be used regarding the different points touched in the theoretical part. Below, I will outline the main themes that African immigrants volunteering in Sicily have developed about motivations, integration, identity and sense of belonging.

The informants went through the reasons why they volunteer in order to assist other immigrants arriving in Sicily. Among the main motives, the influence of their own life experiences and the sense of duty are the most significant. Volunteering in the field of migration is important to them to express their own values regarding the issue of migration, that they define as something important, that needs to be taken care of. Moreover, their interest in the topic has an impact on motivations too, since they are migrants themselves and they lived similar experiences to the ones of the immigrants they work with. Their will is therefore to protect new immigrants and help them in the process of making their experience easier than the one of the informants. Nevertheless, reciprocity and altruism are not the only motives that push the interviewees to volunteer. There is also a sense of self-satisfaction, the awareness of knowing that volunteering with immigrants is something good that makes consequently make them feel good.

When it comes to feelings about integration, the informants feel at home but are still considered as strangers by the majority. Even though on a micro level, the interviewees see Italy as their new home, on a macro level bureaucracy is perceived as a factor reminding them that they are strangers: documents and procedures are slow and keep the informants waiting with no deadline. Being a volunteer helping other migrants seem to have an influence on their feelings about integration, identity and belonging. With regard to the Italian community, they feel the need to be educators, to tell their stories and why they migrated to Italy in order to avoid stigmatization and prejudices against them. They want the Italian community to get to know them and to recognize their social position. They feel well integrated to the Italian community who volunteers with them, and they integrate new Africans to their community in turn through their service.

When asked about their identity, the majority of the interviewees showed to have a processual idea of self-identity, that in general seems to have changed in the migration process from their country of origin to Italy. There is a feeling of being between two cultures but also a will to defend the identity related to the country of origin, which is sometimes shaped by stereotypes and stigmas. The informants have different social identities, such as mentors, respected co-workers, strangers. Firstly, thanks to their social position as volunteers, they are mentors for other African immigrants. They are reliable people that can create a bridge between new immigrants and the Italian society and its system. Secondly, there are two tendencies among the Italian community: on the one side people working and volunteering with the informants trust and respect them for their social role, on the other side they are labelled and stigmatized by people who do not know them: this is what creates the need to defend their identity and educate the Italian community. The interviewees expressed their feeling of belonging to an African community, that is what I called “continental identity”: once the informants migrate, the feeling of a broader collective community starts to appear among the informants, that defines other immigrants coming from all over African as brothers and sisters.

The informants, during the interviews, showed empathy towards the immigrants they assist, and their emotional attachment towards them demonstrates a sense of belonging to an African community that they need to protect. On the other side, there is also a strong sense of community towards the Italians, with whom most of the interviewees have their closest relationships.

To conclude, being a volunteer in the field of immigration seems to have an impact on feelings about integration, identity, belonging for the informants of this research. Volunteering entails different dynamics within the immigrant community and with the local community, such as, for example, being recognized and respected by the Italian co-workers or being a guide for new immigrants.

With this short study, I hope to contribute to the academic discussions about the concepts of integration, sense of belonging and identity, which should be looked at as something in constant evolution. I also hope I gave enough focus to my informants and to their answers to provide a deep understanding of their feelings, opinions, viewpoints.

11.2 Suggestions for Further Research

My desire with this thesis is to start exploring a small part of a more complex phenomenon which is immigrants volunteering in the field of cultural mediation. More research is needed about African immigrants who volunteer to assist other migrants in Italy, since their work certainly has a societal importance. Since my study only considers one city in Sicily, it would be interesting and important to see the impact of those people on a regional and national level, maybe using a quantitative approach. Considering that this study focused on the informants' perception on integration, further research should include the perspective of the receiving society, in this case Italians, in order to see how they perceive and feel about African immigrants.

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Appendix

Guide for the semi-structured interviews

1. Where are you from and what is your legal status here in Italy?
2. What is your job as a volunteer and why did you decide to become a volunteer?
3. Which ethnical and national background do the immigrants you are helping have?
4. Do you stay in contact with immigrants you help? Explain.
5. Tell me about your relationship to your Italian colleagues when you volunteer.
6. Do you interact with Italian people? Are you friend with them?
7. Do you interact with other African people? Where are they from? Are you friend with them?
8. How do you think the relationships you establish are affected by the fact you are a volunteer?
9. How do you feel here in Italy? Do you feel a member of the Italian society? Explain.
10. How do you feel you are perceived by people outside your community? Explain.
11. How do you feel you are perceived by people of your community? Explain.
12. Tell me about your experiences here. Family, friends, relationships.
13. Do you feel part of a community? Which one is it?
14. Do you feel you belong to Italy? In which ways?
15. Do you feel you belong to Africa? In which ways?
16. Would you like to add something else?