

“Don’t let people walk all over you”: Migrant women with tertiary education coping with essentialism in Italy and France

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Abstract

Although migrant women in Europe tend to be confined to jobs with low social recognition, regardless of their educational background, research has given little attention to the influence that essentialism has on limiting their access to work, and how migrant women react to it. This paper analyses how migrant women with tertiary education cope, resist, and eventually challenge the essentialist processes they face at work and in daily interactions. Six interlocking strategies are identified: distancing, surfing essentialism, proving one’s worth, resistance thinking, taking action individually, and organising collectively. The focus on migrant women with tertiary education makes it possible to complete existing typologies of coping strategies by stressing the role played by

educational background as well as that of class, including cultural, social, economic and symbolic capital, when responding to essentialism. The analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in Italy and France, consisting of 33 interviews of migrant women with tertiary education.

Keywords: coping strategies, essentialism, migrant women, resistance, highly educated, stereotype.

1. Introduction

Scholars have stressed that complex stratifications of the labour market exist, based on gender, nationality, and racialisation (Portes and Bach 1985; Saunders 1990; De Rudder and Vourc'h 2006; Reyneri 2011; Fullin 2016). Migrant women tend to be segregated to the lowest levels of the occupational structure, especially in the domestic and care work sectors (Scrinzi 2013; Parreñas 2015). They often perform jobs with lower social recognition and income compared to non-migrant women (Crawford *et al.* 2016; OECD 2019), including when they hold tertiary education¹ (Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Sandoz 2018).

The literature has explored some of the factors that influence the employment positioning of migrant women, including those with tertiary education, and that confine them to the bottom of the employment structure. Researchers that focus on global dynamics have argued that the increased participation of women in European labour markets and the lack of welfare support have led to the marketisation of care work. As a result, there is a high demand for a low-paid migrant and feminised workforce to cover the care needs that used to be carried out by women for free (Parreñas 2015). Scholars have also explored the impact of migration policies (Morris 2001; Raghuram 2004; Liversage 2009), of low recognition of educational qualifications and skills gained abroad (Chiswick and Miller 2009; Kofman 2012), and of networks (Piselli 1995;

¹ Tertiary education builds on secondary education and includes what is commonly understood as academic education as well as advanced vocational or professional education (Unesco 2012).

Tognetti Bordogna 2012) in confining migrant women to the bottom of the employment structure. Moreover, recent publications have analysed the strategies enacted by migrant women with tertiary education to cope with structural and personal constraints and to access jobs in line with their studies (Sandoz 2018; Di Martino *et al.* 2020). However, the literature on migrant women with tertiary education, and on so-called “high-skilled migrations”, has given little attention to the influence that essentialism has on limiting access to jobs and on the way migrant women react to it.

Essentialism is a process through which people become defined as a group based on alleged common biological or cultural characteristics. It entails that those defined as a group, for instance, in terms of gender, class, racialisation², country of birth, or religion, all share common “essential” characteristics which are fixed and ahistorical (Grosz 1990). Essentialism tends to be imposed by a dominant group on an oppressed group to justify inequality in access to resources, including access to graduate-level jobs. Stereotypes, on the other hand, correspond to beliefs about traits, characteristics, and behaviours of specific groups which justify stigma and prejudice. Both processes of essentialism and stereotyping are historically and structurally rooted (Rosenthal *et al.* 2020).

Migrant women are particularly exposed to intersectional essentialist processes connected to gender, migratory status, class, country of birth, and racialisation. In this regard, Wolkowitz (2006, 175) highlights that gender, racial, and class ideologies play a significant role in “naturalising aspects of bodily capacities”. Both in Italy (Allasino *et al.* 2004; Fullin 2016; Fellini *et al.* 2018; Vianello and Toffanin 2021) and France (De Rudder and Vourc’h 2006; Lendaro and Imdorf 2012; Scrinzi 2013) scholars have highlighted that both stereotypes and essentialism influence the access that migrants have to employment. However, existing studies have rarely focused on the specific essentialist processes that tackle migrant women with tertiary education (Killian and Manohar 2015). Moreover, this literature has mainly focused on stereotype content and consequences rather than on how migrant women react to essentialist processes. As happens

² Racialisation is a form of essentialism, which uses body and physiognomy to justify superiority and privilege (Quraishi and Philburn 2015). Grosfoguel *et al.* (2015, 637) specify that racialisation occurs through the ‘marking of bodies’, based on skin colour, but also on ethnic, linguistic, religious, or cultural markers.

with other minoritised groups (Rosenthal *et al.* 2020), migrant women are often approached in this literature as passive recipients of the harms, which might reinforce the stereotyping that associate them with vulnerability and lack of agency (Parolari 2019).

The paper aims to fill the gap in the literature by analysing how migrant women with tertiary education cope with, resist, and eventually challenge the essentialist processes they face at work and in daily interactions. It analyses practices and strategies from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1989; Bernardini 2018). Indeed, the way women perceive and react to essentialism, and the strategies they implement, vary according to class, racialisation, migratory status, as well as gender expectations and ideology. When it comes to class, the possibilities that women have to react and build strategies are conditioned by their economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986).

The perspective of this group of women to analyse coping strategies is of particular interest as, besides mobilising gender and their migratory background to react to essentialism, they might also refer to cultural capital and class. In this regard, Bourdieu and Passeron (1964) have stressed that schooling reproduces social inequalities; students who access university are mainly children of privileged classes (OECD 2010). As a result, before migration, migrant women with tertiary education were probably in privileged positions compared to the whole population. The fact that many of these women used to be in positions of power in their country of birth and have experienced a loss or reduction of power in the country in which they migrate has led Riaño (2015) to qualify them as “marginalised elites”. Similarly, Parreñas (2020) indicates that migrant women might experience “contradictory class mobility” as they can simultaneously experience upward mobility, connected to their increasing income, and downward mobility related to the decline of their professional and social status.

It should be emphasised that the practices and strategies that are analysed in this paper are interlocked. Migrant women do not follow a single path; rather, they implement different practices and strategies throughout their lives. Moreover, these women might also change their views and expectations. As a result, practices and strategies might evolve throughout their lives, based on their experience. As suggested by Miller and Kaiser (2001, 88), migrant women might try several alternatives, and “feedback from

one response alters other responses that are made”. Therefore, their responses are “dynamic, multifaceted and interdependent” (Ivi, 79).

The analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in two contexts. In this regard, scholars have argued that comparing the experience of similar groups of migrants in different places questions generalisations based on single case studies (Green 1994). It enables the researcher to de-centre factors taken for granted or seen as “natural” and helps to further contextualise a social phenomenon (Bloemraad 2013). Echoing the literature, the paper analyses coping strategies that have emerged from multi-sited fieldwork conducted in France and Italy. It does not attempt to compare both contexts, but, by multi-siting, it aims to enrich the analysis by crossing the gazes between women with tertiary education living in two European contexts.

The paper is structured in four sections. The first one discusses the literature on coping strategies, highlighting the input of the paper. The second part focuses on the literature on essentialism in Italy and France, stressing that in these contexts, essentialism tends to be understudied. The third section provides details on the methodology used to conduct fieldwork and analyse interviews, and presents participants in the research. The fourth section develops the findings of the research and analyses the coping strategies used by interviewees to face essentialism. Lastly, conclusions highlight the contribution that the paper brings to the literature.

2. Coping with essentialism

Scholars have been studying how people react to stigmatisation and essentialism for over sixty years. Departing from Goffman’s (1990) and Allport’s (2012) analysis of stigma and prejudice, part of the scholarship proposes that stigmatisation should be considered as a form of stress. According to the literature, this approach calls attention to how stigmatised people cope with the stress they endure due to their stigmatised status (Miller and Kaiser 2001; Allison 1998). In this literature, coping is understood as “conscious volitional efforts to regulate emotion, cognition, behaviour, physiology, and the environment in response to stressful events or circumstances” (Compas *et al.* 2001, 89).

On the other hand, scholars have highlighted that Goffman's (1990) approach and the analysis of coping strategies mentioned above tend to give little room to resistance (Riessman 2009). In Goffman's theory, stigmatised individuals can hardly destigmatise themselves or put forth their stigma as a "simple and not especially discredited difference" rather than a "failure" (Gussow and Tracy 1968, 317). According to Goffman (1990), individuals "manage" information about themselves and "react" rather than resist or reject negative appraisals from others. Riessman (2000, 114) stresses that Goffman assumes that stigmatised persons hold the same beliefs about their condition as the rest of society, while "in the empirical world" there are countless instances in which individuals disavow dominant perspectives.

This paper takes into account these critics. As a result, it analyses women's reactions and strategies that either cope with essentialism and stratifications without questioning them, or conversely that resist and challenge these processes. In addition, reactions might be individual or collective. Moreover, they can be visible to some and invisible to others. As stressed by Riessman (2000), invisible practices can also correspond to resistance towards essentialism.

Recent publications have stressed that research on coping strategies is often carried out in artificial settings and lacks insight into real-life dynamics (Eijberts and Roggeband 2016; Hametner *et al.* 2021). Analysing how migrant women react to stereotypes in everyday life makes it possible to highlight how coping strategies are interwoven and change over time, as individuals might adopt different strategies throughout their lives. Moreover, scholars have also emphasised that research on the topic still tends to adopt a single-axis approach in studying stereotyping that focuses on gender, ethnicity or age, which are analysed separately (Rosenthal *et al.* 2020). The paper answers this criticism by adopting an intersectional perspective to study how migrant women react to essentialism.

When it comes to the strategies implemented by migrant women to react to stigma, recent studies conducted in Europe that focus on the experience of Muslim migrant women have developed useful typologies (Eijberts and Roggeband 2016; Hametner *et al.* 2021). However, in this literature, there is a lack of studies that give attention to the specific strategies implemented by migrant women with tertiary education.

3. Researching essentialism in Italy and France

In Italy and France, a limited number of publications analyse the essentialist processes that target migrant women and eventually limit their access to employment. In Italy, few scholars have studied the discriminations that migrants face when accessing employment and at work (Allasino *et al.* 2004; Fullin 2016; Fellini *et al.* 2018). For instance, Vianello and Toffanin (2021) have studied how migrants perceive that ethnic discrimination interwoven with gender stereotypes limits their access to employment. Other publications have stressed that recruitment procedures can be influenced by essentialism, based on the intersection between gender and racialisation, which associate specific “races” and “cultures of origin” with skills or behaviours that are valued or depreciated by employers. The phenomenon has been highlighted in the domestic and care work sector (Scrinzi 2013), as well as in the hospitality industry (Alberti and Iannuzzi 2020).

In France, few scholars have studied how essentialism impacts migrants’ access and their everyday life. One of the few publications that focuses on the essentialism that harasses migrant women with tertiary education is that of Killian and Manohar (2015). Their study highlights that essentialism based on colonial past imaginary limits the access that Northern African women have to employment in France, even when they hold tertiary education. Other studies have focused on essentialist processes in the domestic and care sector. Lendaro and Imdorf (2012) analyse the use of ethnic and gender categories in recruiting domestic workers in France. Although the use of these categories might not always be explicit, they observe that migrant women tend to be associated with a cheap and readily available workforce that is particularly suitable for domestic work because of their gender. When comparing France and Italy, Scrinzi (2013, 168-169) concludes that the recruitment, training, and managing practices of domestic workers in these contexts represent two faces of essentialism and racialisation: otherness is “validated and censured” in the context of French republican universalism, while it is “idealised and stigmatised” under Italian differentialism.

Although few publications exist in France and Italy that tackle the issue, the essentialist processes that migrant women face and their strategies to react to them tend to be understudied in these two contexts. In France, although debates concerning essentialism

and racialisation are finding their way into academia (Balibar 2005; Fassin and Fassin 2006; Ndaye 2008; Dorlin 2009; Bentouhami-Molino 2015; Onasch 2017), institutions and much of the scholarship tend to be reluctant to refer to these concepts as a lens of analysis and prefer to adopt a universalist and colour-blind republican model. In this regard, until the 1990s, the strength of the republican model pushed French public authorities to refuse any reference to racial discrimination. From their point of view, any mention of racial prejudice would implicitly give credit to the idea that races exist. However, by absolutely rejecting the notion of race in the name of anti-racism, it becomes impossible to develop a profound reflection on the discriminations that are precisely based on it (Ndiaye 2008).

Similarly, in Italy, scholars have argued that, following the narration of *Italiani brava gente*, “Italians good people” (Del Boca 2011), racism was until recently perceived as mainly existing in other parts of the world and was diminished and denied within the country (Petrovich Njegosh and Scacchi 2012; Giuliani 2015; Petrarca 2015, 32). Meanwhile, Italian colonisation was presented as having positive effects or being less violent and racist than that of other colonial powers, such as France (Petrarca 2015, 33).

While academics and institutions tend to be reluctant to analyse the essentialist processes that condition access to jobs, essentialist and, more specifically, racialising discourses are far from being absent from the public debate. In France, since the middle of the 2000s, national debates, such as that on hijab-wearing, and those following the urban riots of 2005 and the “terrorist attacks” of the 2010s, are saturated with racialised and often racist representations of the social world (Fassin and Fassin 2006). In the same vein, scholars have observed the trivialisation and legitimisation of the themes promoted by far-right parties such as the former *Front National*, particularly concerning migration, while media commentators have depoliticised the criticism towards these radical right parties (Mahler and Salingue 2014).

Similarly, in Italy, the former *Lega Nord* party gained media attention, in particular from the 1990s onward, precisely when the party started stigmatising migrants instead of targeting Southern Italians (Barcella 2018). Since then, the party has grown exponentially. In the election of March 2018, the Lega obtained 124 seats in the Italian Chamber of Deputies, and its leader accessed the position of Ministry of Home Affairs for over a

year. Meanwhile, essentialist and racist representations of migrants have proliferated in the Italian media during the last several decades (Ghebremariam Tesfau and Picker 2020), especially around the so-called “migrant crisis” (De Genova 2018).

4. Methodology

The paper is based on fieldwork that consisted of 33 interviews with migrant women with tertiary education. Conducting *narrative interviews* (Flick 2018) was identified as the method that would make it possible to give voice to migrant women’s subjectivity, in order to understand how they perceive the essentialist processes that target them and how they cope with them.

Fifteen of the interviewees lived in Italy, while 18 lived or had previously lived in France. More specifically, fieldwork was conducted in Veneto, Italy, and Alsace, France. These two regions share a series of features. Compared to other regions in Italy and France, Veneto and Alsace have lower levels of unemployment, a relatively high proportion of migrants in the overall population, and a majority of women amongst migrants (Istat 2018; Insee 2018). Moreover, there is differentiated access to employment in both regions according to gender and country of birth. More specifically, migrant women with a university degree are more affected by unemployment and have less access to graduate-level jobs compared to non-migrants (Insee 2017; Romens 2019).

The migrant women that participated in the research were born and had completed at least their secondary school in countries either of Subsaharan Africa or Europe outside of the EU³. These two groups of women were selected for the study as, according to the literature, they are likely to face different forms of racialisation (Grosfoguel *et al.* 2015) which intersect with gender and other forms of essentialism. For instance, in Italy, researchers retain that migrants from Subsaharan Africa are particularly exposed to discrimination at work (Fellini *et al.* 2018). On the other hand, scholars have called for further research on “skilled” African women to challenge the dominant tropes that see

³ Countries of birth from Subsaharan Africa were Cameroon, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa. European non-EU countries of birth were Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine.

these women as being uneducated, “unskilled”, “immiserated”, and disempowered (Wong 2014, 41).

The analysis gives voice to both women who obtained tertiary education abroad and those who gained it in the country of immigration, in order to highlight the impact of the country where qualifications were obtained via professional trajectories and representations. More specifically, twenty-five of the migrant women interviewed already had tertiary education before migrating to Italy and France and, in some cases, re-studied after migration, while 8 participants enrolled in tertiary education for the first time only after migration. Table 1 gives further details on the educational and professional experience of these women. To preserve the anonymity of participants, their names were changed.

Over 37 NGOs, networks and associations were contacted in Veneto and Alsace to get in touch with migrant women with tertiary education. Participants were also reached through a *snowball technique* (Handcock and Gile 2011), thanks to the support of previously interviewed women, and via personal networks.

Interviews with migrant women were composed of three phases. The first focused on life-telling by participants and started with one open question asking them to recount their trajectory since childhood. Narrative follow-up questions completed this phase. The second phase of the interviews corresponded to episodic interviews (Flick 2018). In the third phase, participants were asked to give their opinion and views on the positioning of migrant women with tertiary education in the labour market and on the challenges they might face. The interviews lasted from half an hour to one hour and forty minutes. They were all recorded after obtaining the consent of participants.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), although some aspects of grounded theory were also introduced, especially for coding (Charmaz 2006). The initial coding tended to stick to the data, using words that corresponded to actions rather than topics, and reflected the specific wording used by participants. The second stage of coding involved merging codes with similar significance, and the third stage consisted of collating codes into potential themes.

<i>Alias</i>	<i>Born in</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Experience abroad</i>	<i>Experience in the area (Alsace/Veneto)</i>
Alsace (France)				
<i>Callaia</i>	Niger	Midwife school (Niger); Nursing school (France)	Midwife	Nursing assistant in maternity; nurse
<i>Abelia</i>	Russia (Soviet Union)	Master's degree in pedagogy and literature (Russia); Master's in Slavic literature (France); librarian degree (France)		Shop assistant; librarian
<i>Amapola</i>	Albania	Master's in French Literature (Albania)		Diplomat; bilingual administrative assistant
<i>Colombine</i>	South Africa	Bachelor's in theology (South Africa); Master's in English language; CAPES public competition (France)	Secretary; Personal Assistant	English tutor; English teacher
<i>Amaryllis</i>	Armenia (Soviet Union)	Bachelor's in Pedagogy (Armenia); Master's in Slavic literature (France)	Teacher of Russian and English; translator	Flyer distributor; translator; cultural mediator; tutor
<i>Araluen</i>	Russia (Soviet Union)	Master's degree in literature (Russia); CAPES public competition (France)	Teacher of French language	Teacher of Russian language
<i>Clemensia</i>	Senegal	PhD in sociology (France)		Unemployed
<i>Carmel</i>	Nigeria	Bachelor's in French language (Nigeria); Master's in human resources (France)	Bilingual secretary	English teacher; cleaner; hostess; grape picker; bilingual secretary; consultant; administrative assistant
<i>Alexandra</i>	Russia (Soviet Union)	Master's in literature (France); School for translation (France); PhD in Russian literature (San Marino)		Hostess; baby-sitter; translator; librarian; secretary; university professor
<i>Azalea</i>	Russia (Soviet Union)	Master's in Economics (Russia)	Business manager	Flyer distributor; administrative assistant
<i>Acacia</i>	Moldova (Soviet Union)	Master's in Romanian and French literature (Moldova); Master's in education sciences (France)	Publisher; university lecturer; administrative civil servant	Tutor - private lessons; librarian; leader in a community center; receptionist
<i>Acantha</i>	Russia (Soviet Union)	Master's degree in Economics (Russia); Master's in Eco-counseling (France)	Commercial assistant; university lecturer	Translator; immovable consultant; local authority officer

<i>Camellia</i>	Mauritania	Master's degree in sociology (Senegal); Master's in sociology (France); Master's in solidarity based economy (France)	Consultant for NGOs	Waitress
<i>Anemone</i>	Azerbaijan (Soviet Union)	Master's in Law and International Relations (Azerbaijan)	Advisor to prosecutor	Maternity leave
<i>Cliantha</i>	Senegal	Bachelor's in sociology (Senegal); Bachelor's in sociology (France)	Waitress	Chambermaid
<i>Aster</i>	Ukraine (Soviet Union)	Phd in sociology (Germany)	Language teacher; project manager	Consultant for international organisations
<i>Cassia</i>	Senegal	Bachelor's in management and IT (Senegal)	Salesperson; administrative assistant	Unemployed
<i>Azami</i>	Turkey	Master's degree in Economics (Turkey)	Bank manager	Unemployed
Veneto (Italy)				
<i>Rosella</i>	Democratic Republic of Congo	Master's in Medicine (Italy); Public competition for Physicians (Italy)		Domestic worker; baby-sitter; physician
<i>Winika</i>	Ukraine (Soviet Union)	Bachelor's in music teaching (Ukraine)	Music teacher; Accountant	In-home carer; waitress; pizza maker
<i>Zinnia</i>	Albania	Bachelor's in foreign languages (Italy)		Hostess; check-in assistant; call-center; call-center; sales assistant;
<i>Rosalie</i>	Democratic Republic of Congo	Diploma in laboratory technics (DRC); Vocational training as care assistant (Italy)	Laboratory assistant	Blue-collar; care assistant
<i>Violet</i>	Russia (Soviet Union)	Bachelor's in German/English languages (Russia); Training as a sommelier and sales manager (Italy)	Language teacher, business assistant in corporations	Business assistant; export manager
<i>Yasmin</i>	Ukraine (Soviet Union)	Bachelor's in forestry and intern. relations (Ukraine); Bachelor's in foreign languages and cultures (Italy)	Assistant to professors; translator	Cultural mediator; translator; tutor for professional training; hostess; business manager

<i>Veronica</i>	Ukraine (Soviet Union)	Master's in business (Ukraine); Phd in economy and management (Italy)	Administrative assistant	English teacher; translator; project manager; business manager; coach (gym)
<i>Rosamel</i>	Cameroon	Bachelor's in physiotherapy (Italy); Diploma in osteopathy (Italy)		Physiotherapist
<i>Rada</i>	Congo	Bachelor's in communication sciences (Italy)	Salesperson	Cleaning operative; university caretaker; cook assistant
<i>Rose</i>	Cameroon	Bachelor's in tri-lingual literature (Cameroon); Master's in political sciences and human rights (Italy)		Cleaning operative; cultural mediator; social support assistant
<i>Rosanna</i>	Cameroon	Bachelor's in Economics (Italy); Vocational training as care assistant (Italy)		Shelf-stacker; cleaning operative; inventory assistant; in-home carer; care assistant
<i>Varda</i>	Albania	Bachelor's in Statistics (Italy)		Ice-cream parlour; waitress
<i>Raisa</i>	Cameroon	Master's in Economics (Cameroon); Master's in communication sciences and marketing (Italy)		Cultural mediator
<i>Viola</i>	Russia (Soviet Union)	Master's in English philology (Russia); Diploma of Russian as a foreign language (Russia)	Tutor; translator; financial officer; editor; university lecturer	Russian teacher in private schools
<i>Verbena</i>	Albania	Bachelor's in Albanian language and literature and Master's in humanities (Albania)	Teacher	Maternity leave

Tab. 1: Details on participants: migrant women with tertiary education

5. Findings

My fieldwork made it possible to identify a series of strategies aimed at coping, resisting and eventually challenging essentialism, which are analysed in this section. As mentioned, these strategies are interlocked, as migrant women with tertiary education do not follow a single path, but they might implement different strategies throughout their lives.

5.1. Distancing and reproducing stereotypes

The literature that focuses on coping strategies highlights that stigmatised persons may turn to others who share their stigma and are thus sympathetic. According to Goffman (1990), disadvantage can be used as a basis for creating community. Conversely, stigma might also stimulate practices of internal social differentiation and distancing from the stigmatised group (Wacquant 2008). In this regard, Moroşanu and Fox (2013, 440) find that migrants might “internalise” stereotypical representations of the dominant group. As a result, they might reproduce the prevailing negative discourses and stereotypes, and react by differentiating and distancing themselves from co-nationals.

When it comes to fieldwork, two main strategies of distancing were identified. The first one corresponds to a process of boundary “contraction” (Ivi, 448). Rada, who was born in Congo and graduated from university in Italy, felt black African women tended to be associated with the sex work industry. The eroticisation of migrant women, especially of black migrant women, as well as their exposure to symbolic and verbal violence, has been highlighted in the literature and is connected to the colonial imaginary that used to portray colonised black women as “hyper-sexualised prey” (Petrovich Njegosh and Scacchi 2012, 44). This process is also embedded in gender, racial, and class relations and connects to stereotypes regarding country of birth, physical appearance, and “projections” of different “femininity models compared to the alleged Italian ‘standard’” (Toffanin 2015, 99). In order to respond to essentialism, Rada transferred the stigma to Nigerian women. In doing so, she reproduced a negative, essentialist discourse and dissociated from a group still defined in a national, ethnic or racialised way.

Because for Westerners, the majority of women come for prostitution. Because Nigerians... it's Nigerians who do that. I am Congolese. Well, as it is difficult for them to distinguish... nationalities, Congolese, Nigerians, Ivorians. For them, we are Africans, so maybe I'm here to look for money... (Rada, Italy).

Another strategy consists of differentiating by arguing closeness to the dominant majority. This response was used by Amaryllis, who was born and attended university in Armenia and worked as a tutor in France. Amaryllis had internalised a negative dis-

course with regard to migrants and excluded them from her representation of the “local population”. Although she did not explicitly refer to ethnicity or racialisation, she defined locals as legitimate according to their bloodline.

This phenomenon of migration... I call it... I say to my husband, who is of French origin, I say, I think... I always found that it's uncontrolled. [...] Frankly, the population suffers. The people who have lived here for centuries, we will say like that. Nobody talks about it. And I allow myself to talk about it because precisely I am not from here. Well, I have the nationality. So I can take a bit the defense of the population... who says that “this country belongs to me”, “used to belong to me”. [...] Of course, I feel French, because since I have my children, who are French, since I have French nationality, after 16 years and... [...] It is my vocation to give evidence. To tell how it's going, and why not also say things more honestly than people... how to say, who welcome [migrants]. The people who welcome [migrants] are the French who have always lived here (Amaryllis, France).

Although Amaryllis partly identified with the migrant group, she also distanced herself from it by putting forward arguments based on her administrative status, ties, and living experience in France. Amaryllis presented herself as being in the middle between “hosts” and “guests” and, from her perspective, this position gave her the legitimacy to give a negative (and essentialised) description of migrants.

5.2. *Surfing essentialism*

As mentioned, gender, racial, and class ideologies play a significant role in “naturalising” capacities, which influence the access migrant women have to the labour market (Wolkowitz 2006). Migrant women might strategically use these essentialist processes to their advantage when accessing employment. This strategy has been observed in the Portuguese context, where Brazilian women entrepreneurs of the beauty sector mobilise prejudices regarding the sensuality of Creole women, transforming it into an added value associated with an “aesthetic” Brazilian body culture (Malheiros and Padilla 2015).

When it comes to my fieldwork, interviewees both in France and Italy referred to the stereotype that associates Eastern European migrants with work ethic and commitment,

which is appreciated by employers. Their observation echoed the findings of MacKenzie and Forde (2009) regarding managers' celebration of the "good worker", based on the stereotyping of the perceived attributes of migrants in the UK. Interviewees that referred to this form of essentialism estimate that stereotyping partly influenced their access to specific jobs. For instance, Abelia, who was born in Russia (former Soviet Union) and worked in France, estimated that the "good reputation" of Eastern Europeans had a positive impact on her access to a position as a shop assistant.

Similarly, Veronica, who was born in Ukraine (former Soviet Union) and had recently accessed a position as a business manager in Italy, felt that her employer hired her and two other Ukrainian women because he had a positive stereotype of Ukrainian women. Interestingly, Veronica perceived that the stereotyping intersected nationality and gender and she contrasted it with the negative perception her employer had of Italian workers. Although Veronica estimated that the stereotyping contributed to her being retained for the position, she still had to face the violence of being inserted into a racialised and gendered labour market, in which essentialism is made explicit.

[The manager] said: "I appreciate the girls from the East because I feel they have a great sense of responsibility, of working". He often sees Italians talking, drinking coffee, talking, drinking coffee, and going out of the workplace (Veronica, Italy).

When migrant women access positions that are feminised and ethnicised, such as those in the domestic and care sector (Wolkowitz 2006; Scrinzi 2013), the effort can be perceived as reproducing existing essentialism and stratifications in the labour market. However, it might also correspond to strategies implemented for accessing employment and a more rewarding position.

One of the paths to employment identified by Liversage (2009, 132) concerns the issue of "gaining work based on the immigrant identity". I propose enlarging Liversage's (2009) definition of jobs based on migrant identity to include all the positions in which migrant women can argue that they are more qualified than locals, based on the actual or alleged skills they have acquired in their country of birth or through their experience as migrants. These are positions for which recruiters might look for specific linguistic

capacities or presumed cultural proximity with users or partners. For instance, De Rudder and Vourc'h (2006, 182) have stressed that in France, there has been an “ethnicisation” of social work, connected to the assumption that there is an “ethno-cultural closeness” with the audience which is targeted by social policies, in particular migrants and their descendants.

Accessing positions connected to the migrant identity can be part of a broader strategy to access graduate employment. Being employed as a cultural mediator, for instance, may function as a gateway to enter a company or a sector. An example is that of Rose, who was born in Cameroon, started working as a cultural mediator in Veneto and ended up working as a social support assistant. Although her job still involved interacting with migrants, Rose’s responsibilities at work had increased, and her tasks were not limited anymore to linguistic and cultural mediation.

I was called from time to time to mediate here [at the NGO], or at the hospital, or *Questura* [police headquarters], so I was still active. It's true, I did not have a fixed job, but I was active in one way or another. And so, after there was... the [NGO] opened a new project [...]. And so, they needed staff and they called me. And that's when I had the first contract with them (Rose, Italy).

5.3. Proving one's worth

A way to take action in response to essentialism involves fostering human capital skills to prove one’s worth in the face of stigma (Eijberts and Roggeband 2016; Miller and Kaiser 2001; Shih 2004). The strategy includes the need to perfect language skills, “even if [migrant women] are already fluent” (Eijberts and Roggeband 2016, 143). Compensating by learning the local language accurately has a double implication. On the one hand, one accepts the call to “perfectly speak” the local language. In this regard, Azalea, who studied in Russia and worked as an administrative assistant in France, found that “unless you speak perfect French, I think there can be some prejudice about you”. On the other hand, learning the language accurately challenges essentialism as migrant women might be able to give evidence that their knowledge of the language can

be better than that of locals. In these cases, migrant women with tertiary education mobilise cultural capital to cope with essentialism.

A striking example is that of Acacia, who was born in Moldova, where she had also studied and worked before moving to Alsace. As a leader at a community centre in France, Acacia had to face colleagues who had doubts about her language skills in French. However, she managed to change their minds by proving that she was more accurate than them in French grammar and spelling. Acacia referred to a specific episode with her colleagues. They were struggling with a grammar issue, and she gave the solution.

A foreign woman that tells you how to write, they did not believe me, I said: “Check it [up]”. And they checked, and after that, each time, they are always asking me (Acacia, France).

Another strategy consists of re-enrolling in education to prove one’s capacities. Here also, the strategy has a double implication. On the one hand, women accept that their degree obtained abroad is not worth its value in the local labour market. On the other hand, the strategy stops the tongue-wagging of blamers who doubt migrant women’s skills, while enabling these women to regain confidence in their capacities.

These were Callaia’s objectives when she enrolled in training once again, after migrating to France. Callaia had attended a midwife school in Niger. After a long process, she was informed that her Nigerien degree would not enable her to work as a midwife in France but as a nursing assistant in maternity. She started working at a hospital, but she felt harassed by her manager, who was continually doubtful of her skills.

Whenever there was something, she... humiliated me by showing that I was not good in what I was doing. Until I started to doubt... to doubt about myself. And, uh... it was terrible because I... really felt harassed. I went to work... reluctantly and all. And one day she... passed like this and then she swayed me like that, and said: “There is the competitive nursing exam that... to do it”. I said, “No, I do not want to be a nurse”. Then finally, I took... I looked, and I said: “Well...” I think she wanted to tell me that I’m not able to be a midwife here [in France]. Maybe a

nurse is... That's how... it was a challenge. I took it like that. Well, I registered, I did the competition, and I succeeded (Callaia, France).

Succeeding at the competitive exam was a personal victory for Callaia, which enabled her to regain confidence in her skills. Moreover, through her degree, Callaia's cultural capital was institutionally recognised in the French context (Bourdieu 1986, 21). She was able to use it to access graduate positions and silence blamers who would doubt her capacities.

5.4. Resistance thinking

Migrant women with tertiary education might not always perceive that openly challenging essentialism is a possibility. Speaking out and taking action might represent a risk that varies depending on their subjectivity but also on their labour status, and their economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. When migrant women feel that they have too much to lose if they openly challenge essentialism, they might still oppose the dominant wisdom by refusing labelling and implementing resistance thinking.

Rosanna's experience illustrates the tension between resistance thinking and the impossibility of acting openly. She was born in Cameroon and worked as a care assistant in Italy. Rosanna studied international economics in Italy, and although she was sceptical about the possibility of accessing graduate-level employment, she blamed recruiters for it and did not question her capacities. In parallel to her job, she was enrolled in a Master's programme in economics. Although Rosanna trusted her capabilities, in her daily work as a care assistant, she felt that she could not reply to verbal provocations. Her work ethic, her precarious labour status, the fact that she needed income, and her power position in the *field* (Leander 2010) discouraged her from acting openly.

Now I work as a care assistant, but I don't want to end my days there. No. Because if I'm honest, I did it because I couldn't find a job in my field. Although I like this job so much, let's say, it's very physically demanding. Also psychologically, because there is a different approach when you are a foreigner. So you need to have a lot, a lot, a lot of patience because you get so many bad and bad words. However, it

is the workplace; you always have to smile. And not just from patients, even from colleagues. No. So it's not a place where I want to finish (Rosanna, Italy).

Rosanna described the emotional labour (Hochschild 2012) she implemented, as she had to continue smiling despite the verbal violence to which she was exposed. Rosanna's example illustrates how women's perception of their possibility to act depends on their symbolic and economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). From her perspective, acting out would involve a significant loss, a risk she does not want to take for now.

My fieldwork has brought attention to the fact that resistance thinking might also involve putting the fault on the blamers. Different strategies are used to discredit those who essentialise and racialise, and affirm migrant women's superiority. Although they might have experienced downward social mobility, they reaffirm their class superiority compared to blamers by referring to their higher level of education and to the blamers' lack of cultural capital. For instance, Winika, who was born in Ukraine and lived in Italy, reacted to essentialism by disregarding her colleagues for their low level of education.

At work, but out of the precise context of work... because of this ignorance I was telling you, ignorance connected to [their] poor education, there are people that [are] really... nationalists, racists (Winika, Italy).

Both in France and Italy, migrant women also stressed their superiority compared to blamers by highlighting their knowledge of different contexts. The migratory experience becomes a source of pride and cultural capital. From the interviewees' point of view, they had had the opportunity to travel, to get to know "other things" and open up, while the blamers had always remained in their place of origin and had never seen anything new. This strategy was adopted by Callaia, who was born in Niger and worked as a nurse in France. At work, she had to face stereotyping by colleagues and patients.

If people have this imagination, it is not even by malice. It's just because they have... I say to myself, "I'm lucky, I left my country, I came". So I got to know

something else, they did not... they did not... they did not share anything, they stayed amongst themselves (Callaia, France).

5.5. Taking action individually

As mentioned previously, responding to provocation is not always perceived by migrant women to be an option. However, migrant women might also feel empowered to talk back. In doing so, they challenge blamers and deconstruct stigma. Callaia, who was born in Niger, lived in France and was mentioned previously, stressed that she tended to take a stand in interactions and would reply to negative comments.

I often talk to my children when they come home, and they are unhappy because something happened. I try to tone them down by saying: "Don't let people walk all over you". That's what I've learned. In my first job, the second... until I changed, I came, I said to myself: "It's over!". [...] In the past, I would let it go... now I've learned that it does not work that way (Callaia, France).

Callaia described how her response to essentialism had changed over time. While she used to "let it go", now her practice was that of saying what she thought. Compared to the past, Callaia felt empowered to take a stand and speak.

In her research with childless women in South India, Riessman (2000) also observes how the reaction to stigma might change in women's life. The scholar estimates that age, maturity, and education can provide the tools to see through dominant ideologies and acquire the confidence to confront them (Ivi, 126). Compared to when she arrived in France in the 1990s, when we met, Callaia had not only acquired maturity and age, but she had also passed a competitive nursing exam which re-asserted her capacities. She had also accessed a graduate position and worked with a permanent contract as a nurse in a public hospital. Moreover, she had acquired cultural capital concerning the functioning of the French context and gained economic stability. All these factors had contributed to building self-confidence in order to openly challenge essentialism.

Besides talking back, there are different ways in which migrant women might take action to resist and challenge essentialism. One of these paths consists of leaving a setting in which they tackled by essentialism. Leaving a place involves taking action. The

absence of the person transforms the setting and interactions within a *field* (Leander 2010). It is an act of resistance that challenges essentialism and dominant wisdom, through which migrants put into practice their “mobility power” (Alberti 2014).

One striking practice consists in quitting a job. Undertaking this path usually involves significant financial loss, as the worker stops receiving her salary. Quitting a job might have a different impact on migrant women, depending, for instance, on their residence permit, their economic capital (such as savings), their social network (who can financially and emotionally support them), and the possibilities they foresee to find another employment or an alternative source of income.

For instance, Callaia indicated that she had quit a job because of her manager’s attitude. It is worth noting that she did not resign, but rather asked to be transferred to another service within her employer’s organisation. The job security contributed to empowering her in order to leave a setting where she was feeling judged and essentialised. The episode happened when she started working as a nurse, right after finishing nursing school. Following this experience, Callaia was transferred to a unit where she had been working for eleven years at the time of the interview.

I saw that it was never fine until I asked to have an interview with [the manager]. [...] I said “There is something I do not understand”, I said: “You always have something to blame me for, there is always this and that”. And then, I saw that... she said: “Oh, I did not realise this and everything”. Then finally, she said to me that actually... I release a calm that disturbs her. I am unfazed, I smile and... So when she told me that... I thought “Wow”, I was almost 45, I said... Yes, I was 43... Yes, that’s it... she told me that, I thought “But, I cannot change, I’m like that, if that’s how she perceives me and that’s what disturbed her, I cannot change”. “Well”, I said, “Well, in this case, I’m leaving”. And I asked to leave (Callaia, France).

Besides quitting one’s job, another way of leaving a set of circumstances consists of moving to another city or country. For instance, Rosanna, who had studied economics and was working as a care assistant in Italy, was eventually planning to move abroad to find a job in her field, as she felt her skills would be better valued in other national con-

texts. This response to essentialism is a way migrant women have to “vote with their feet”, meaning that it might reveal their “preferences about the desirability of alternative locations” (Faggian *et al.* 2011).

5.6. Acting collectively

In order to cope with essentialism, migrant women might gather in order to create “safe spaces” (Collins 2000) where they form supportive relationships and exchange everyday knowledge regarding how to cope with essentialism. An example was given by Cliantha, who was born in Senegal, where she studied sociology. When we met, she was living in France, where she was studying sociology again and working as a chambermaid. Cliantha indicated that she had found support in the community of Senegalese students that lived in her city. This backing consisted of emotional support when she felt homesick, but also of sharing strategies to access employment in the region. It was thanks to her network that Cliantha had found employment in the hospitality industry.

The second aim of collective gathering that emerged from fieldwork consisted of organising to claim rights and equal access to resources. In my fieldwork, interviewees mentioned that they were involved in groups that aimed to support migrant women’s access to rights. For instance, Yasmin, who was born in Ukraine and had experience as a cultural mediator in Veneto, indicated that she had volunteered in an association that supported Ukrainians in their access to rights and services.

A bit from personal experience because I came to Italy, I had to inform myself, and then as a cultural mediator, we had refresher courses and all the bureaucratic basis. Then I collaborated with a migrant association called [name]. We organised an information desk, and there I gave information to migrant women regarding documents; regarding the residence permit, many asked me how to bring their children here because they wanted to enroll them in university (Yasmin, Italy).

Yasmin used the knowledge of the system that she had accumulated working as a cultural mediator to support co-national women. Her practice also connects to the first type of collective action that was mentioned, namely the fact of sharing knowledge on

how to navigate the system. Although her work consisted in supporting access to rights, she was not directly challenging the framework and dominant wisdom.

The third type of collective gathering in fieldwork is aimed at challenging negative stereotypes by promoting a positive image of the stigmatised group. In this regard, Rosella, who was born in the DRC and worked as a doctor in Italy, explained that it was precisely to challenge the essentialism that she created, together with other African women, an NGO to promote the “beautiful side of Africa”.

We named the association [Flower] precisely... to show the beautiful side of Africa, to make Africa known, that Africa is not just criminality, it is not just... because here [in Italy], at a certain point, African means you're in prostitution, no. African means you are *clandestino*, therefore in crime. So with this association in our own small way, we have tried to do the little we can... [...] We have made Africa known for its art, Africa as well as... Africa is food, Africa is also literature, Africa... In short, a little of African culture, trying to make people know about it (Rosella, Italy).

Initiatives such as that mentioned by Rosella aim to deconstruct negative stereotypes by promoting a positive image of a stigmatised group. This practice does not prevent the emergence of new stereotypes. Although they can be perceived as positive, they can still reify a difference between locals and migrants, based on an alleged culture. That being said, self-organising to promote a counter-image and a counter-narrative of a stigmatised group is a way to speak up and speak out. It empowers the oppressed group, who can challenge the dominant wisdom and conquer a stand in the political arena. From there, it becomes possible to push claims forwards and counterbalance power relationships.

6. Conclusions

Through a detailed analysis of interviews, the paper has identified a series of strategies that migrant women implement to cope with essentialism, especially when it is based on

the intersection between gender and racialisation. The study highlighted that migrant women do not passively suffer essentialism (Rosenthal *et al.* 2020). They actively react to these processes, which stresses their agency and contrasts the representation that sees them as vulnerable victims (Parolari 2019).

The article contributes to the literature on coping strategies by bringing input from the experience of a group of migrants that has been understudied, especially in Italy and France, namely that of migrant women with tertiary education. The focus on this specific group of women makes it possible to complete existing typologies of coping strategies (Miller and Kaiser 2001, Moroşanu and Fox 2013, Eijberts and Roggeband 2016, Rosenthal *et al.* 2020, Hametner *et al.* 2021) by bringing into light how migrant women mobilise their educational background as well as class, including cultural, social, economic and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986) to respond to essentialism.

By analysing concrete experiences, it was possible to stress that migrant women with tertiary education might opt for one strategy rather than another, depending on their labour status and the capital they have at their disposal. It appeared that migrant women might feel more confident to speak out and take action not only after acquiring age, maturity and education (Riessman 2000), but also depending on the extent to which their cultural capital is acknowledged in the immigration society (i.e. having an institutionally recognised university degree); on their cultural capital concerning the functioning of the immigration context; on the stability of their working position (i.e. holding a permanent contract) or the possibilities they foresee to find another employment or alternative sources of income; and on their social capital (i.e. counting on a network that can financially and emotionally support them).

The paper highlighted that coping strategies might resist and challenge essentialism, but they might also consolidate stereotypes. The first set of coping strategies are those that accept essentialist processes. For instance, migrant women might reproduce the labelling by transferring stereotypes to a group from which they keep a distance. The article contributes to the literature by highlighting an additional strategy that reproduces stereotypes: it appears from fieldwork that migrant women might also strategically use essentialist processes to their advantage. In these cases, migrant women do not passively accept stereotypes, but they surf these processes to access jobs and resources.

The second set of coping strategies aims at resisting the essentialist processes. These strategies are not always visible, but they also imply that migrant women do not passively accept the labelling. In this group, we find strategies such as resistance thinking, according to which migrant women oppose the dominant wisdom by refusing to internalise stereotypes. Migrant women might also resist by stressing their educational and class superiority compared to blamers. The paper adds to the literature by emphasising that migrant women might put forward their migration experience as an additional source of cultural capital that puts them in a position of advantage compared to blamers.

The strategy of re-training or gaining cultural capital to prove one's worth stands in between accepting and resisting strategies. On the one hand, it implies that migrant women accept the superiority of local cultural capital, for instance, accepting that local degrees are worth more than those obtained abroad. On the other hand, this strategy might stop the tongue-wagging of blamers, who acknowledge migrant women's capacities.

The third set of strategies are those that visibly challenge essentialism by acting individually or collectively. At the individual level, migrant women might challenge stereotypes by replying to negative comments. In contrast with the existing literature (Eijberts and Roggeband 2016), the paper also includes quitting one's job as a strategy that challenges (and not only circumvents) essentialism. Indeed, by leaving a setting, migrant women also take action, and their absence transforms interactions within the *field* (Leander 2010). At the collective level, migrant women might organise to create "safe spaces" (Collins 2000), provide support in accessing rights and promote a positive image of their group. In this regard, it was stressed that promoting a positive representation might also create new stereotypes that reify a difference between locals or migrants. However, this collective strategy constructs counter-narratives and makes it possible to conquer a stand in the political arena.

Overall, the paper has stressed that responses to essentialism do not need to be public and organised in order to challenge essentialism. Although interviewees were not all activists of movements attempting to change the status quo, it appears that their everyday resistance practices also contribute to de-colonising imaginaries (Vergès 2019) and transforming society.

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