

**BRIDGES** A **toolkit** for **diversifying knowledge** and **tackling discrimination** through **civil society participation** in universities.

# IDENTITY

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## DEFINITION

**T**here are many ways of understanding identity. In one of them we could start by imagining it has two sides, like a coin, or that it works like dialogue or a game, shifting between two poles. On the one hand, identity is **something that is given to us**. We are constantly **positioned** in certain labels that are also in a hierarchical relation to others. Identity cannot exist without hierarchies, we are crossed by power systems that set certain limits for us. Going outside these **limits** is frequently penalized: it implies going through some sort of pain or, at least, an extra management. Positioning yourself might mean losing something, for example, what you were in the past. You lose that image associated with what was once important to you. However, it can also involve a benefit, since identity can be a comfortable place, a place from which you can claim, for example, political demands. This leads us to **the other side of identity**: there are times when one may choose to adopt an identity, either because it gives us a vision of ourselves that we like, or because it allows us to make certain things at a collective level (i.e. with the categories of "woman", "domestic and care worker", or "migrant"). So in identity there also **is also agency and a capacity to transform**. Identity is thus situated between these two poles: the one that is given to us, and the one that we choose to take; the one that limits us, and the one that gives us the possibility of doing certain things. And in this sense it is never static, but is **something that is constantly becoming** and that is built in the everyday, through certain ways of feeling and being in the world.

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## E L A B O R A T I O N

You can learn more on how we decided to work on the notion of identity in the Process section, in which we briefly review the collective reflection that led to this Tool. In the following text we bring the stories, personal experiences and reflections of Sindillar's domestic and care workers union<sup>1</sup>, in conversation with other voices. Rather than aiming at "defining identity", we seek to give an account of how in the course of our workshops in Barcelona, the idea of identity emerged through a variety of themes that cross our lives and that are important to us. These are then to be read as collective situated reflections that in no case intend to be universal truths.

### **Problematizing Identity**

When we started to discuss what notions like problematization or reflexivity meant to us, one of the first issues that came to mind was the notion of identity. Our collective experiences highlight the importance of questioning and investigating the ways in which we understand belonging or recognition. That is, what effect does it have on us that there is a need to identify with a certain nation-state and its supposed culture? How does this relation link to other areas of our lives? What happens when these elements become compromised, for example, by a migration process? Migrating may mean that some important layers of the way we understand ourselves are buried by the loss of rights that inevitably happens when we arrive in Europe. Problematizing identity has to do, then, with delocalizing the frustration and indignity that is placed in the bodies of people who carry out domestica and care work to focus on the context that generates them. These are some of the questions we may ask ourselves: is it normal that, in a house that you consider both your working space and your home - such as the case of live-in domestic and care workers - you are questioned every time you take more than 15 minutes to shower? Is it normal to be denied a glass of water? What kinds of rights are being violated, what kinds of inequalities are we experiencing?

### **The powers that cross us, being "neither from here, nor from there"**

In 2013, Sindihogar held a series of workshops that combined training with creative activities. One of the several sessions involved a performance with the artist Denys Blacker. We called it **The wallet and its content**. After a first moment of warming up and building group confidence, the performance proposed that we emptied our wallets from everything that we had inside and

*1. Here we will refer to the union indistinctly by Sindillar (in Catalan) and Sindihogar (in Spanish).*

exhibited to the rest of the group that was sitting in a circle. It was a diverse group: some of us were migrants from outside the European Union (EU), some others had European passports, either Spanish or others. We then proceeded to explain what we had inside. The exercise had a powerful visual impact on us; we could see right before us the structural inequalities that occur in relation to our citizen status. On the one hand, we saw the privilege of people who could have valid identification within the EU, such as a DNI<sup>1</sup>, as well as various bank cards. On the other hand we had people "without papers" (**sin papeles**) who paradoxically carried a bunch of small folded papers such as **padrón** (proof of residence), a library card... an endless list of items to justify their stay in the country in case one day they are stopped by the police. We were able to observe that these personal items play an important stake in our identity and refer to different structures that determine it. This short story, in addition to inspiring us to create the activity "The game of identity with objects", led us to reflect on the different power systems that determine our identities, structuring them in a hierarchical way with respect to others.

One of these power structures is citizenship, understood as a system that regulates relations between people living in a given territory and the state with which it corresponds (see, in this regard, the Elaboration of the concept of **Structural Racism**). Although it is important to problematize how our identities are formed, some of us, when arriving at a new "nation-state", we have to worry about building another identity so that we are allowed to circulate freely.

Some of us, as migrants, climb up a ladder made of obstacles to get all the necessary "papers" which, in any case, are no guarantee of a full 'first-class' citizenship. These papers represent an "identity" that many of us will never be able to achieve. In this sense, when we talk about identity, we ask ourselves: What happens when we live here and we do not have access to the identity that is linked to citizenship? What happens when we are constrained by language, by the inability to work with the same rights as anyone else, by the impossibility of participating in the social and political life of the place in which we live? This situation leaves the identity of migrants in a very complicated place. We are neither from here nor from there. We are part of an underworld that leaves us out of the rights associated with citizenship. And this is a contradiction that we experience every day: they ask us for integration, but there is no place to really integrate, often feeling like we are nothing more than **cheap labor**.

*1. Documento Nacional de Identidad (National Identity Document). Identity Card that certifies that a person is a citizen of the Spanish State.*

## **Empowerment, recognition, agency**

Perhaps we could also regard identity as a game - albeit a serious one. On the one hand, our starting point in this game is a series of labels that are put upon, such as gender, race, or the nation state; to this we are added the values in our family and the role we occupy there; then education... and the list could continue. On the other hand, we know that we cannot put all the responsibilities in an "outside" of which we have no control. It is because of this that we know that we also have agency when we are part of a process of singular and collective transformation. It is through this that we transform what has been given to us, even questioning the very rules of the game in order to act, to think, narrate ourselves in a different way. Reflexivity is then an adequate tool that allows us to understand the way we think of ourselves in this social context and the things we can do to transform it.

Identity, as a collective process, starts from mutual recognition. To recognize ourselves, we need at least one more person. As in that theater exercise, we need to know that if we back down there will be someone there to hold us. We go through processes in which we recognize ourselves in a certain political position, and that act of recognizing ourselves generates a change in those people around us. Recognition points to the fact that identity is not only about thinking about ourselves, but rather to do so in relation to others.

In a second way, recognition points to the relationship of collective identity with the social context in which we live. In the case of household and care work, neither the kind of work itself nor the people who carry it out are socially, economically or politically valued. The fact that society doesn't recognise the work of women, of migrants, at home, implies, on the one hand, that we are not able to grasp the struggles of a majority of the world population that are not waged workers. And on the other hand, that we remain ignorant of the fact the capital of the Global North has been built and continues to be built in relation to an often enslaving and precariously waged work, growing and growing thanks to a shadow economy fed by millions of people working in precarised agriculture, in kitchens, or trapped in prisons (Federici, 2013).

It is important to make it clear that carrying out jobs such as caring for a family, bending over, in order to clean toilets, the grease in the kitchen, and so on, does not make us any less of a person. We are workers and they are paying us for that, even if the task is not professionalized. This is one of our main struggles. This work is not unworthy. When we arrive in a new country and see ourselves cleaning, sometimes we feel ashamed and we don't want to discuss it with our families back home. But we can also empower ourselves in that specific job and claim the importance of care work, in a broad way, as well as that of mutual care, which we practice in our way of organizing ourselves. Acknowledging a context in which we are valued and claiming our identity as domestic and care workers gives us a certain security. It allows us to empower ourselves. This implies, for

example, that we do not want to be seen "as the migrants who always have to be recipients of aid, as those who cannot have a say in our own issues." It implies that thanks to certain experiences of other colleagues, we are gaining the confidence to give our opinion, participate and recognize ourselves as valid interlocutors from the construction of a new position from which to speak, as political subjects and part of a group.

### **Trajectories and stories, subjectivity and ways of feeling and being in the world**

In narrating these discussions, we realize that we might be portraying a static image of identity. Are we necessarily caught in that game between subjectivation and agency? Precisely, the beginning of this journey, the idea of problematization, invites us to denature the identities that we inhabit as something static and immovable and to begin to ask ourselves about the processes that make us adopt them, the ways and the trajectories that lead us to inhabit them, as well as the ways in which we challenge and make them malleable.

Because of this, the game of identity tries to capture a tension existing between those two poles. On the one hand, this tension refers to the times when we feel hailed by different discourses and practices that position us (Davies & Harre, 1990), thus imposing certain identities and enclosed spaces in which we may act. On the other, it points to how our identities, understood as our personal awareness of who we are, is also the result of emerging processes in which we constitute ourselves together with other people (Stephenson & Papadopoulos, 2006). It is this tension that builds our experience of being in the world, an idea we can relate to the notion of subjectivity (Blackman, Cromby, Hook, Papadopoulos and Walkerdine, 2008).

Our experience of being in the world cannot be separated from the ways we feel. Feeling is the fundamental matrix through which we weave our identity in relation to the world (Cromby and Willis, 2016). In this way, a person who lives in an irregular administrative situation (see the Tool Structural Racism) will live in fear of being deported. If this person is a domestic worker and lives in the same place where they work, is isolated and also goes through violations of labour rights, that fear will make them think twice before stepping up and reporting their employer. The room for action is reduced. We normalize the violence we go through. On the contrary, building bonds of solidarity with other colleagues who are going through the same situation can break that fear of that situation. Thanks to hope, we envision a different scenario. What previously seemed impossible is now a reality that opens possibilities for action in our day to day life. Feeling hope opens up our experience to other ways of being in the world.

## **How can we not universalize our experience and account for the constellation of identities that constitute us?**

A possible answer is found in the process of collective organizing of Sindillar. This process comprises the ways in which we come to use an identity to feel welcomed, and the fact of being able to recognise ourselves in this identity allows us to have a certain "control" over our lives and conceive ourselves as political subjects. In our experience, we have been often criticised by white feminisms because of the fact of wanting to speak of distinct identities. We are pointed to the problems of essentializing identities. Sometimes it gives us the feeling that we cannot afford to engage in these discussions, since as racialized and migrant women it is vital for us to generate a collective identity that gives us status of citizenship, that allows us to be able to simply exist, freely move and live. For this reason, we often find ourselves between these dichotomy of resisting identities and, on the other hand, having to appropriate them.

However, the fact that an identity such as "migrant" is a place of encounter for us, it does not mean that all of us have come to it in the same conditions. We have different experiences, different stories and trajectories that have made us reach it. Patricia Hill-Collins referred to this with the idea of identity as the place of a "heterogeneous community" (2003: 221). And it is this heterogeneity that, for Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), makes identities a fruitful terrain on which to establish political coalitions.

This means that neither do we have the same interests, nor come from the same places, social contexts, nor have the same knowledge. For this reason, in the case of Sindillar, we question the idea of a vision of a unitary subject with regards to participating in an union. This is so because movements solely based on class have built a supposedly uniform political subject (white, working class, left) that does not match the various identities that compose Sindihogar. Gloria Anzaldúa and Levins Morales (1997/2004) propose in this sense that the history of identities built and rebuilt in the diaspora, that is, in multilocal displacements and experiences or multiple belongings, as it happens in Sindihogar, refers to to a history of multiracial relationships that do not respond solely to binary relations. Such would be the cases of "black and white women inside feminism", or "white men and white women within unionism". Rather, Anzaldúa and Morales point to the importance of conflicts and solidarity that are crossed by origin, race, class and gender.

In the history and experience of Sindihogar, there were many reflections around the issue of our internal diversity and how to manage it in practice. Diversity is for us a source of inspiration and a laboratory for learning from one another. And yet, in the context of Barcelona, it is presented as a neoliberal brand. As such, the fact that we hear slogans such as "Barcelona, a diverse city", or "Barcelona, a multicultural city", force us to reconsider the place from where we find use of this word and how we resignify it within the collective. For this reason, we speak of diversity as a way

of pointing to the different axes of inequality that play a role in collective action. This does not mean that we embrace a sense of a depoliticized aseptic morality, that we use diversity as a way to allude to the plurality of citizenship. Neither are we referring to an essentialist identity of struggles that omit inequalities. This could imply a weakening in the construction of an "Us" as subjects and political actresses, and therefore a weakening of the possibility of any type of transformation. On the contrary, we take the word diversity as a way of recognizing "the creative function of difference within our lives" (Lorde, 1984, 111), with the need to emphasize that not all of us are crossed by the same inequalities and differences. In spite of this, we recognize ourselves in these differences that compose us as heterogeneous, with a multiplicity of trajectories and baggage.

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