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Acculturative integration, self and citizenship construction: The experience of *Amal-Andaluza*, a grassroots organization of Moroccan women in Andalusia

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the role of grassroots associations in the acculturative integration process from an approach that stresses the contributions of community and cultural psychologies. Community psychology allows us to understand the acculturative transition as an empowerment process by which immigrants transform both structural conditions and themselves. Cultural psychology explains this empowerment process as a self-construction through which immigrants acquire a new vision of the world and of themselves. From these insights, acculturative integration is understood as an active, multidimensional and ecological process in which immigrants become an accepted part of the new society through the development of critical awareness, gaining capacities and opportunities to influence their environment and involving themselves in activities which transform both their “self” and their environment. The promotion of grassroots organizations, as empowering community settings, is presented as a tool to bridge newcomers and the receiving society. This model is illustrated by the experience of *Amal*, a grassroots organization of Andalusian Moroccan women. Using the personal, organizational and community narratives of *Amal* (activists, recipients, community workers, policymakers and written documents), we describe the influence of citizen participation in the construction of self and citizenship among activists, the bettering of an integrative community, and the promotion of a fair multicultural society. Lessons learned will be summarized in order to pave the way for the implications of the *Amal* experience for acculturative research agendas and social policy and action.

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The multicultural transformation of societies is one of the most important phenomena of our times. Frequently, newcomers confront oppressive conditions in the transition to their new society, increasing the risks of social fragmentation. The development of models and strategies to guarantee the well-being of these new citizens – making it possible that they become an accepted and respected part of their new life settings – is an urgent responsibility confronted by the scientific community. The mainstream perspectives of acculturation psychology define integration as a state of harmony between the acquisition of certain aspects of the new culture and the conservation of primary aspects from the culture of origin (Berry, 2005). Going beyond that, we merge the contributions from community and cultural psychologies to tackle integration as an

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active, multidimensional and ecological process by which immigrants acquire critical awareness, gain capacities and opportunities to influence their environment and involve themselves in activities which transform both their “self” and their environment. In this way, integration is understood as a process of reconstruction of personal and community identity—citizenship (Paloma, García-Ramírez, De la Mata, & El Jebary, 2009).

From our experience conducting community-based research in collaboration with *Amal-Andaluza (Amal)*—an organization of Moroccan women—we propose a framework to explain how grassroots organizations can be useful tools to build bridges between newcomers and the receiving society, their social structures, resources and services. First, we will highlight the oppressive conditions that immigrants have to overcome during their transition and the necessity to see acculturative integration as an empowering process, involving people in the transformation of themselves and their life settings. Second, we state that in this process, grassroots organizations should be considered as empowering community settings (ECS, Maton, 2008), carrying out multilevel ecological changes, i.e., reconstruction of self and citizenship, bettering of integrative communities and promoting a fair multicultural society. We will justify and substantiate this framework using the experience of *Amal*. Before that, we will describe the collaborative nature of the partnership between our team of university researchers and the community activists of *Amal* which has permitted us to carry out this experience, as well as the methodological tools which made our activity possible.

1. Integration of Andalusian Moroccans: political, experiential and theoretical circumstances

This section depicts the social and political conditions, as well as the theoretical landscape, from which our model emerges and in which the *Amal* experience takes place. First, we describe the political discourse represented in Europe and Andalusia. The official position, coming from government documents of a political, legislative and strategic character, is later contrasted with actual immigrant experiences. Next, we synthesize the main challenges that mainstream models have to cope with. Finally, we propose grassroots organizations as a key tool in this pursuit.

1.1. The official and experiential discourses of migrant integration

Multicultural reality is a relatively new phenomenon in the South of Europe, and it has led to an awareness of the necessity for common policies of immigration on a European level. An analysis of the main official European discourses leads to the observation that governments are ready to promote the equality of rights and duties of all citizens. The Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council reaffirmed in 2003 its vision of Europe as “a multinational and multicultural society, where immigrants take part as equal members, on the basis of equality of rights and opportunities in return for equality of obligations, whilst respecting the rules of democracy, cultural diversity and the rule of law” (Parliamentary Assembly, 2003, article 5). This position is reflected in the objectives of the Spanish “Plan Estratégico para la Ciudadanía y la Integración” [Strategic Plan of Citizenship and Integration] (2007/2010): (1) to guarantee the exercise of civic and political rights; (2) to establish a system of fostering new citizens, especially the most vulnerable ones; (3) to guarantee their access to education, employment, housing, social and health care services in equal conditions; (4) to promote the knowledge and respect of the common values of the European Union and the Spanish society among the immigrant population; and (5) to overcome the various signs of discrimination, racism and xenophobia (Consejería de Gobernación, 2007; MTAS, 2007).

However, the official discourse is far from the reality that immigrant populations face. Racism and xenophobia among the Spanish population are gradual and advance with the growth of Spain as a receiver country (Cea D’Ancona & Valles, 2008). This is an expression of social paradox, “a normative awareness based on non-discrimination, democratic feelings and favor for immigrants to have access to equal rights and social opportunities, and a tendency for insiders to exclude outsiders” (Oliveri, 2008, p. 27); highlighting the necessity for further efforts to make what is legally in place reflect real life situations. This is the reality in Andalusia, where for more than a decade our team observed the integration processes of Moroccan immigrants, the most numerous immigrant group, with 11,962 registered Moroccans, although the high number of unregistered Andalusian Moroccans makes it very difficult to establish an accurate estimate (INE, 2007).

Diverse studies reveal that the Andalusian population often associates immigration with an increase in crime, a worsening of the labor market, an unwillingness to accept immigrants’ choice to live according to their traditions, and the overall view that there are too many of them (OPAM, 2008). In addition, immigrants from Magreb—the area of North Africa the Moroccan population comes from—frequently appear in Spanish opinion surveys as the group of immigrants with the worst image and the strongest negative stereotypes (Navas, Rojas, García, & Pumares, 2007). An ecological perspective permits us to examine the acculturative experience of Moroccans in Andalusia, as determined by unfair and oppressive social conditions.

Oppressive conditions for immigrants at the community level are exemplified by the kind of jobs they occupy, the neighborhoods they live in and the scarcity of effective community services (Penninx, Berger, & Kraal, 2006; Reinsch, 2001). They often work in very unsafe conditions and live without access to basic standards of housing, such as water, sewers or electricity (Hernández-Plaza, Pozo, & Alonso-Morillejo, 2004; Martínez, García-Ramírez, Maya-Jariego, Rodríguez, & Checa, 1996). Fear of their “illegal” status and the lack of information about their rights cause Moroccans to make very little use of public services, resulting in poor health care and welfare (Hernández-Plaza et al., 2004). Oppressive settlements become a breeding ground for psychosocial profiles among immigrants that often provoke fear and xenophobic attitudes among the host population. Conflictive intercultural contact increases the perceived threat among members of the dominant group,

while newcomers reduce their opportunities to make contact with the host because they expect to experience prejudice (Pettigrew, 2008). The fragmentation of intergroup relations prevents the development of personal interethnic networks, which leads to negative effects in both the short and long term (e.g., acquisition of language skills, insertion into a wider labor market) (García-Ramírez, Martínez, & Albar, 2002). Immigrants who regularly experience contextual oppression may develop a psychological dynamic of submissiveness which leads to the loss of control and personal power, accentuating attitudes of conformity, fear, and tolerance of indiscriminate violence (Martín-Baró, 1994; Moane, 2003). These circumstances are common among Moroccans in Andalusia, where we have observed high levels of depression, low professional self-esteem and difficulties with social interaction (García-Ramírez et al., 2005).

Nevertheless, though the experience of oppression is debilitating, it can also be strengthening because every human group has the capacity to resist and repel the asymmetries of power (Watts & Serrano-García, 2003). The Moroccan immigrant population usually derives strength from its religion, culture and traditions as instruments of psychological protection, helping to cope with the difficulties engendered by oppressive contexts (López-García & Del Olmo, 1995). This enables social development and contact with community organizations, such as mosques, grassroots associations, or faith-based congregations, which play a prominent role in confronting situations of injustice. This paper pays special attention to the role of grassroots organizations in resisting and overcoming these conditions. Promotion of citizen participation and strengthening the associative fabric among immigrants are two faces of the same coin, representing one of the most powerful strategies, giving immigrants their own voice in all settings (Oliveri, 2008). Recently, Vassiliadou (2008) has proposed that: (a) migrants should be in a position to speak for themselves, rather than others on their behalf, (b) capacity-building of migrants' grassroots organizations should be reinforced, and (c) migrant NGO networking at national, international and transnational levels should be developed and strengthened. Nevertheless, more efforts are necessary to know how to increase the role of these associations in the social arena, how to promote leadership among immigrants, and how to build collaborative capacity between these organizations, their members and institutions, policymakers, and researchers.

1.2. Theoretical discourses on acculturative integration

The phenomenon of acculturation became a subject of study by American anthropologists at the end of the 19th century. In Psychology, John Berry defines it as “the double process of cultural and psychological changes as a result of the contact of two or more cultural groups and their members” (Berry, 2005, p. 698). The cultural and psychological dimensions are differentiated, with the psychological aspect focusing on the main cognitive, emotional and behavioral changes as consequence of this experience (Ward, 2001).

In his highly influential model, Berry (Sam & Berry, 2006) proposes strategies of acculturation adopted by cultural groups in contact with one other, and defined by two dimensions: (1) orientation towards their group-preference to conserve their cultural heritage and their group identity; and (2) orientation towards other group-preferences to maintain contact with the receiving society. From the newcomer perspective, as a non-dominant group, integration is the strategy adopted by individuals who have interest in conserving their culture and at the same time in establishing contacts with other groups. The other three options are: assimilation (when individuals do not wish to conserve their own cultural identity, preferring interaction with other cultural groups); separation (when individuals wish to conserve their own culture and avoid interaction); and marginalization (which leads to non-contact) (Berry, 2006). The final result does not exclusively depend on the preferences or desires of the non-dominant group. It is largely determined by the expectation of acculturation of the native population, as the dominant group. Multiculturalism relates to integration, melting pot to assimilation, segregation to separation, and exclusion to marginalization (Berry, 2005, 2006). Although the results of the investigation tend to present integration as the most successful strategy and the one preferred by newcomers, a logical assumption of this model is that it can only be chosen freely and successfully when the receiving society is ideologically and explicitly multicultural (Rudmin, 2006). For example, Andalusian Moroccans live in conditions which are typically very difficult and highly stressful, impeding integration and increasing the risk of social exclusion. This means integration “can only be tackled when it is explicitly acknowledged that groups differ in their respective cultural identities [and] that they have a right to maintain their idiosyncratic features” (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001, p. 30).

To explain these situations, acculturative frameworks should be more sensitive to the following points: (1) the consideration of marginalization as an optional strategy of acculturation, because common sense suggests that nobody wishes or prefers to be marginalized (Rudmin, 2006); (2) the link between biculturalism and well-being, as an equal preference of participation in the new society and the adoption of the new culture (Sam, 2006); (3) the lack of proposals to gain well-being in ideological non-multicultural contexts (Prilleltensky, 2008); and (4) the equating of identity with culture, ignoring contextual and historical influences (Tseng & Yoshikawa, 2008). Questions like “What does integration really mean, and how is it achieved? Why do people assimilate or separate? How does marginalization occur? Does it arise from constraints and deficits or is it a genuine option?” (Ward, 2007, p. 107), raise issues which should be addressed.

A complementary approach is required, taking into account the different dimensions and levels involved in acculturation transitions, which implies a contextual self redefinition; in other words, merging personal identity and citizenship. In the next section we present a framework which intends to overcome these deficiencies using the contributions of community and cultural psychologies (see Paloma et al., 2009).

2. Bridging self and citizenship: the role of grassroots associations

Our approach to acculturative integration emphasizes the need to consider the role of power dynamics and historical and contextual circumstances in both research and action with migrant populations (Chirkov, 2009; Prilleltensky, 2008; Rudmin, 2006; Tseng & Yoshikawa, 2008). The ecological psychopolitical perspective of community psychology enables us to incorporate the capacity to transform oppressive settings into empowering contexts while cultural psychology lets us observe integration as a complex process of transformation of the self. In this pursuit, grassroots associations play a crucial role. In this section, first, we will describe our vision of acculturative integration from a cultural–community psychology approach, and after we will propose the view that grassroots associations are empowering community settings.

2.1. A cultural–community approach of acculturative integration

Community psychology allows us to understand the acculturative transition as an empowerment process by which immigrants transform both themselves and their social conditions (Watts & Serrano-García, 2003). This perspective adds two aspects to the models of acculturation: (a) the understanding of immigrant's social exclusion in terms of oppression; and (b) how oppressed immigrants build up niches and develop practices to protect themselves, to resist and overcome oppression according to their values and culture (Fisher & Sonn, 2008). Cultural psychology regards this process as a self-construction by which immigrants acquire a new vision of the world and of themselves (Bruner, 1990, 1997). Self indicators proposed by Bruner (i.e., agency, commitment, resources, social reference, evaluation, reflexivity, coherence, qualia and position) permit us to analyze the self-reconstruction process which takes place during the migrant transition, emphasizing both changes made in themselves and in their settings.

Acculturative integration is understood as the process by which newcomers become an accepted part of the new society through a reflexive and evaluative process, changing their social references and position, rebuilding their social and personal resources, and achieving a new agency in accordance with their new goals. Through this process, they acquire critical thinking in relation to unequal conditions, gain capacities to respond to those inequalities, and take effective actions to confront and change them (Paloma et al., 2009). It is a multilevel and multidimensional process of psychopolitical empowerment, a process of self and citizenship construction. This process is linked to the capacity of human beings to (a) create meaning and sense, and load their actions with intentionality, (b) show reflexivity, or the capacity to think of oneself and society as a whole, and (c) maintain one's culture, which provides a symbolic system necessary to make sense of new encounters (De la Mata & Cubero, 2003). "Citizenship—or community identity—can be defined as the collective that has rights and duties and should be an active part of a State. [...] It is constructed on the basis of belonging to a specific network of relationships. The knowledge and feelings produced by the sense of belonging is expressed both collectively and individually, and leads to fulfill duties and exert and demand rights" (Montero, 2009). This focus allows us to address previous critics:

- (1) The concept of marginalization is defined as a situation in which the minority suffers discrimination from the receiving society (Rudmin & Ahmadzadeh, 2001).
- (2) It establishes a positive relation between multicultural identity—or cultural autonomy—and immigrant well-being (Rudmin, 2006). A multicultural identity is one of an individual with a dynamic vision of the world, constantly open to a large number of stimuli. Meanwhile such an individual conserves the central sense of his/her "self" (reflected in personal decisions), this person is "free to react in whatever manner deemed most productive in a particular situation" (Garza & Gallegos, 1985, p. 377).
- (3) Integration may have to be achieved under oppressive or ideological non-multicultural contexts by a process of empowerment which leads the involved population to transform these contexts into just, multicultural ones. A fair multicultural society would be one which is able "to give everyone the right to live well with his own cultural specificity, within a framework that offers real equality of opportunity, and an underlying democratic culture affording mutual respect, negotiation in the event of conflict and continuous development of the initial cultural models" (Oliveri, 2008, p. 35).

This proposal permits understanding grassroots organizations as powerful tools for newcomers to cope with oppressive conditions. They can be seen as community settings increasing the power of immigrant groups.

2.2. Grassroots organizations as empowering community settings

Grassroots associations—and citizen participation—are a core element of our model. Such organizations make it possible for newcomers to carry out effective actions in order to overcome oppressive conditions, and to create a community setting which facilitates diversity (Kelly, Azelton, Burzette, & Mock, 1994). Participation in these associations promotes community development in the creation of economic, social and physical conditions of change, emphasizing voluntary cooperation and self-help among the people involved (Wandersman & Florin, 2000). It has been related to positive changes in the environment, increasing the sense of control and helping individuals take actions adjusted to their needs and values (Wandersman & Florin, 2000).

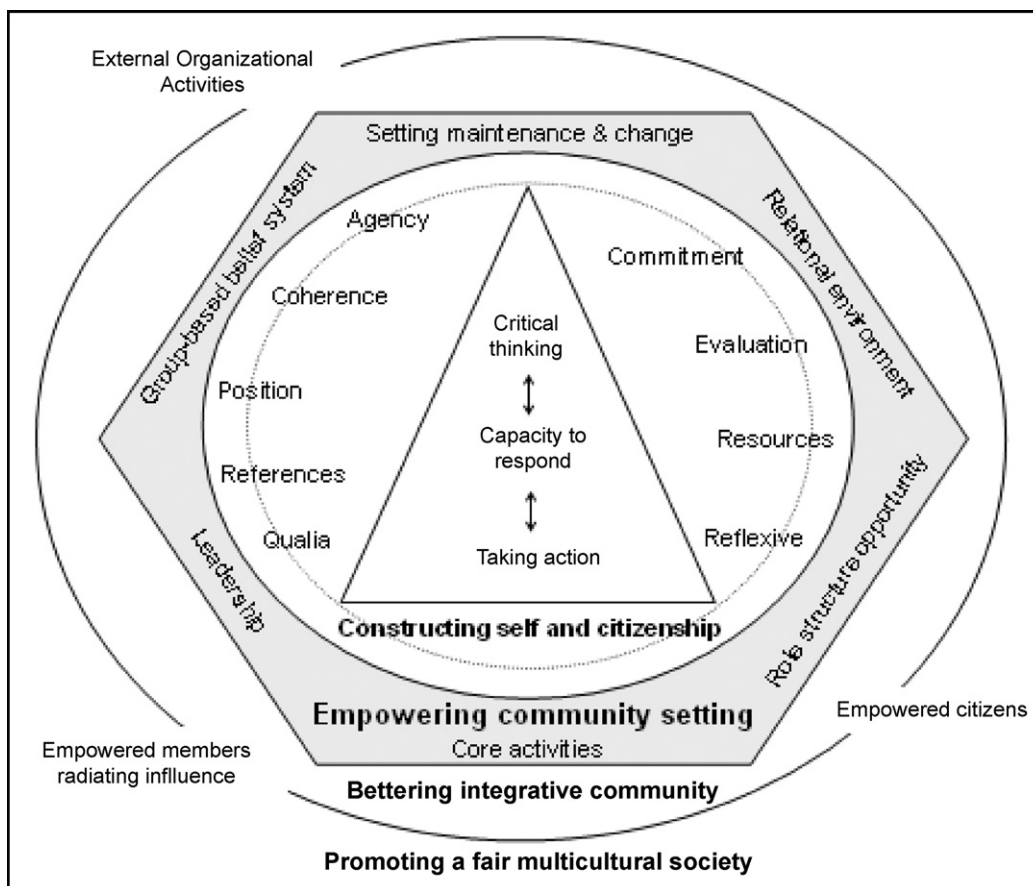


Fig. 1. Immigrant grassroots associations as empowering community settings in the acculturative integration process.

Maton (2008) has developed a model of ECS, understood as a community-based structure which facilitates development of the members, community betterment and positive social change. He systemizes six organizational characteristics favoring such changes: (1) a common belief system; (2) planned activities to achieve goals; (3) relational environment; (4) a clear role structure; (5) core individuals or leaders; and (6) organizational mechanisms assuring the maintenance and the adoption of changes required by the contextual situation. In Fig. 1 we depict our vision of this framework as applied to the acculturative integration process. We can see how grassroots organizations enable (a) the reconstruction of self and citizenship among activists, (b) the bettering of integrative communities, and (c) the building of a fair multicultural society. In the following sections, we will describe the experience of *Amal*, and then the elements of our proposed model, illustrating it with outcomes from *Amal*.

3. The *Amal* experience: community-based research

In this section we will deal with the context, methods and procedure used to create this study. First, we will describe and justify the context in which *Amal* and university researchers worked together. Afterward we will describe the specific role of community activists; and finally we will identify the sources and tools used to produce the information.

This paper is a result of the collaborative relationship of our university research team with *Amal*, a grassroots organization created by and composed of Andalusian Moroccan women, whose main mission is to empower and facilitate the integration of immigrant women. As a result of a collaborative university-community process, *Amal* has become a member of CESPYPD [Coalition for the Study of Health, Power and Diversity]. This coalition is composed of researchers, community activists and health and community workers who are carrying out community-oriented research whose mission is to understand, denounce and transform situations of social injustice for immigrants living in oppressive conditions. This kind of coalition has achieved positive outcomes by tackling community problems and challenges exhaustively (see <http://ctb.ku.edu> for examples). It permits the building of individual members' capacity by helping them develop skills and knowledge and creates relational capacity by extending relationships to other coalitions and settings. Moreover, these structures encourage building organizational capacity by fostering effective communication, procedures, and resources. They also promote the development of innovative programmatic capacity by establishing useful and

realistic goals driven by community needs and culturally competent designs (García-Ramírez, Paloma, Suarez-Balcazar, & Balcazar, 2009).

Amal activists were interested—after having worked together for 10 years—in analyzing their history and accumulated experiences, in order to learn about themselves and take stock for future planning. University researchers were interested in systematizing their work in order to harvest the lessons learned. Once the bases of the coalition were settled, we developed a collaborative schedule, this paper being one of the outcomes.

Activists of *Amal* played a decisive role in all stages. They dedicated time and effort to narrate their own experience, facilitate access and analyze documents produced by the organization (e.g., brochures, posters, reports, and letters of complaint). They also facilitated contact with recipients, community workers, and policymakers to extend information about the social “rooting” of their organization. Furthermore, they acted as interpreters and validated the content of this paper through a community dynamic of discussion and reflection. A qualitative methodology was chosen as the most suitable for our goals. This decision was made to give priority to the construction of significant knowledge in a particular time and context (Chirkov, 2009). For that purpose, we conducted five life-story interviews and one focus-group with activists and the *Amal* leader, seven interviews with recipients, two interviews with community workers and two more with policymakers. An analysis of different materials and written documents from the association complemented the information collected.

The life-stories permitted us to observe the transition experienced by these Moroccan women, who became community activists after their migration. Their life-stories were transcribed and thematically analyzed, using Bruner's (1997) indicators of selfhood. Consideration of these indicators of selfhood provided us with conceptual tools to account for the changes experienced by the activists during the migrant transition and the self-reconstruction process through their participation in *Amal*. A focus-group was carried out with these women, to analyze organizational ECS characteristics proposed by Maton (2008). Key questions were: What is the ideology that keeps you united? What is the distribution of the organizational functions among members? What do your relationships in the association bring to your lives?

Through the interviews of recipients, we obtained information about the role that participation in the association plays in their lives. Three questions were asked: (1) How has *Amal* influenced your way of thinking, behaving and feeling?; (2) With your participation in *Amal*, have your relationships with Moroccan, Spaniards and people from other nationalities changed – in number, new contacts, closeness, etc.?; and (3) How has *Amal* influenced the life situation of the Moroccan population in Andalusia?

Furthermore, two community workers and two policymakers with a significant relation to Moroccan immigrants were interviewed. The objective of these interviews was to get to know the outside perception of the social impact achieved by *Amal*. The same three questions were asked in both cases: How do you think *Amal* influences the life of Moroccans who live in Andalusia—in their way of thinking, behaving and feeling?; Do you think the existence of associations like *Amal* improves the relations between Spaniards and Moroccans?; How do you think associations like *Amal* contribute to the living situation of Moroccans in Andalusia?

The materials and written documents gathered by *Amal* during its 10 years of existence were used to provide first-hand information about the evolution of the community action programs, the organizational network created with other organizations and institutions, and the progress of the economic assets and the sources for them.

4. Building acculturative integration by empowering grassroots organizations

In this section we will describe each level of the proposed framework, illustrating them with the information and experiences provided by *Amal*. First we will describe the individual level, explaining the influence of empowering characteristics of organization in the process of self-construction and citizenship of the members. Secondly, we will describe the role of grassroots organizations and community activists in bettering integrative communities; and finally we will tackle their contribution to promote a fair multicultural society.

4.1. Constructing self and citizenship through activism

One of the core domains of ECS is individual development and wellness, empowering people to overcome personal difficulties, helping them to change and grow (Maton, 2008). As applied to the acculturative process, ECS's promote the integration of immigrant activists, having a positive influence in the self-reconstruction process while they build welcoming and fair multicultural settings. In the following, we describe the characteristics that an ECS should have in pursuit of this goal.

4.1.1. Ideology or group-based believe system

These empowering settings represent a belief system that inspires changes based on strengthening the community, and is focused far beyond the members as individuals. The members, once in contact with the belief system in these settings, become conscious of their unjust situation and feel motivated by the possibility of change, establishing new *social references* as an extension of a new vision of themselves. This process is completed by the acquisition of a rebuilt *agency*, referring to the motivation to pursue the new challenges. Activist women of *Amal* share a belief system composed of three principles: (1) to disseminate the Moroccan culture: “When we founded *Amal*, our purpose was that Moroccan culture should be well-known

[...] because there was a total ignorance about it" (activist); (2) to struggle for women's rights: "To defend my rights like a woman, like a Moroccan, like an immigrant; to defend my rights here and there" (leader); and (3) to support and help immigrant women in a vulnerable position: "I am here to help myself and to help the rest of immigrant women" (activist). One of the core values of this association is its hopefulness; *Amal* means hope in Arabic.

This ideological system is inspiring changes (interest in increasing the knowledge among native neighbors, establishing the rights of newcomers, and modifying oppressive situations), based on the strengths (vision of the women as active, with a transforming capacity), and focused beyond only the self (interest in accessing and helping Moroccan immigrants as a whole). Such associative contact leads the immigrant women to *evaluate* their oppressive situation as socially unjust, analyzing their reality in a critical way:

I have been in this neighbourhood for 10 years, but I have no right to decide or to vote [...] so, where is the integration? (leader)

The confirmation of power imbalances within their community motivates them to modify the traditional status quo:

Because I attended *Amal*, I saw the situation of women that do not speak, in very complicated situations. This gives strength to help the immigrant. As I am an immigrant I want to help my people (leader; agency)

Finding a new *social reference* in the association leads to more efficient forms of action in their daily lives:

Since I came here as a foreigner I didn't know the rights and duties here in Spain. At the beginning I didn't know anything. When I got to *Amal*, here we have an advantage, we have legal advice. I know what I have to do and what my rights are (activist)

4.1.2. Core activities

ECs also share the characteristic of having a plan of activities related to concrete goals (see Table 1), and therefore they contribute to intense activities and to the *commitment* and involvement of the members, developing new abilities and competences. By participating in these activities members *evaluate* their new *personal resources* as positive and potentially useful to change things. These capacities to respond permit them to gain control over their own lives, achieving well-being on both the relational level, through new *social resources*, and the personal level, increasing their positive feelings (*qualia*).

Table 1
Objectives and activities of *Amal-Andaluz*.

<i>Increase the individual empowerment of the Moroccan women</i>
Emotional support
Spanish language courses
Workshops on social skills
Workshop on dressmaking, cooking and handicraft
<i>Promote the creation of associations and activism among the immigrant population</i>
Meeting with other associations
Sessions on living together, discussions, informational assemblies.
Celebration of the day of the woman
Courses promoting the creation of immigrant associations
<i>Increase the intergroup contact among Moroccan and native women</i>
Intercultural celebrations
Common trips to Morocco
Invitation of natives to cultural celebrations
<i>Increase the sense of community and identity</i>
Common celebration of Ramadán y Achoura
Expositions of Moroccan photos and handicraft
Cultural visits
Discussions to get to know the Moroccan women in other countries
Courses on Arabic
<i>Strengthen the defense of civil rights of the immigrant population</i>
Information about rights and obligations
Discussions about the defense of the Moroccan women in order to gain full equal treatment
<i>Establish mechanisms of organizational maintenance</i>
Establishing networks of social institutions
Hiring of staff
Enrollment of volunteers
<i>Facilitating the access to community assets and services</i>
Employment exchange
Housing exchange
Workshops on self-employment
Educational mediation

These activities are focused on fostering the community integration of immigrants in all ecological levels. With this purpose, *Amal* tries to increase the basic skills among newcomers to facilitate their incorporation in the new society, and to facilitate the access to community resources. Likewise, they encourage developing a sense of community and identity in which their heritage and new culture can find common ground, based on democratic values. An important part of their activities is related to the struggle for civil rights, and the corresponding role of Moroccan women in the political arena.

Participation in these activities leads the women to acquire new *resources* in order to make progress in their personal situations, as well as making a *commitment* to work as equals. The activities turn out to be a source for the creation of new values, *evaluated* as useful and as a means to improve the quality of services *Amal* offers.

When I found *Amal*, it helped me to learn Spanish, to study computers, and in the end I was hired at my job. And since that point I am helping my people [...] It was an important point to change my mind, to change my situation, and the vision came (activist; resources, commitment).

That's what you learn in the association, that you cannot get angry or upset for something, because everyone has her opinion. You may not like somebody, but you have to respect her. This is the mutual respect that the association gives you, this is tolerance (activist; evaluation).

Through the association you could get much continuous training, to improve more, to improve our services, to improve our work (leader; resources, evaluation)

4.1.3. Relational environment

ECs create an environment of *social references* characterized by positive intergroup and interpersonal relationships, which act as a support system providing a sense of community. The following excerpt shows the relational nature of *Amal* as a fundamental community support system

[We are] different, but we have a profile, some characteristics: we are women, alone. The problem of language, that was an important barrier for us, being Arabic women [...] we are all friends, we are like a family (leader)

These positive interpersonal relations have a very important impact on the ability to successfully overcome the difficulties these women have to confront in everyday life, triggering positive emotions (*qualia*) relative to their own problems, as they compare them to those of other *social referents*, because it leads to a positive *evaluation* of the *personal resources* available, favoring the process of integration into the Spanish environment:

I see that there are problems more serious than mine. And it helps me, too, because I see that I'm not the most unfortunate person in the world. I listen a lot to people, everyone has his/her problems, some bigger, others smaller (activist; social reference, *qualia*).

The truth is that *Amal* helped me to have more relations with both immigrant and Spanish women (leader; evaluation, resources).

Before, I only worked with Moroccans, more than Spaniards; but when I came here, [to *Amal*] I opened very much, with Spaniards and so on. This is integration, step by step, but you can see it (activist; evaluation)

4.1.4. Role structure opportunity

These settings are also reconcilable with the existence of an efficient structure—highly accessible and multifunctional—which offers opportunities for participation and learning to a wide range of individuals. Having responsibilities for different tasks, activists adopt *social positions* as citizens, involving themselves in collective actions. They can be required to assume different *commitments* in order to assure effective outcomes for their group, necessitating *coherence* and cooperation with peers.

Amal has a system of roles based on the functions developed by the members (president, secretary, treasurer, intercultural mediator, labor mediator, housing mediator, translator, Spanish teacher). The distribution of the roles is carried out according to the preferences and abilities of the women, in relation to the necessities of the association, giving the women an opportunity to participate and learn (*agency*), for all immigrant women wishing to collaborate (*commitment*), independent of their level of education or availability of time:

Before, I had a lot of free time. I didn't know what to do, I had no friends. But now, with *Amal* the days are too short, I have so many activities in the association, as well as participating in conferences, to accompany *Amal* representatives, and to organize conferences, many fairs... I don't know, so many activities. I have no time with *Amal* (activist)

4.1.5. Leadership

It refers to key responsible individuals with empowering influence and the capacity to motivate those around them. Thus, ECs are characterized by the existence of inspiring, talented, and committed leaders (Maton, 2008). *Amal* relies on the clear leadership by one of the involved women, recognized both formally and informally. Members perceive their leader as somebody who is absolutely *committed*, possessing many qualities which contribute to the improvement of their community, and consequently she functions as a *social referent* for them

I met Touria, the president of *Amal*. Now, you know, she started to see the problems [...] she wanted to do something, she always wanted to do something (activist)

Nevertheless, the existence of a leader does not necessarily have to create a hierarchy but quite the contrary, such as the women express: “She is the leader, whether she wanted to be or not, but our style of interacting is not as if there were bosses and followers” (activist); “I feel like the leader when there are problems and I am the one who has to look for a solution. But we are fellows and are all equal” (leader).

This shared concept of leadership influences the sense of self for the women involved, creating an ethos of responsibility and *commitment*:

You feel responsible when you go to carry out an activity, because it is not your face, it is *Amal's* face (activist)

4.1.6. *Setting maintenance and change*

The existence of organizational mechanisms assures maintenance and adaptability for dealing with challenges (Maton, 2008). *Amal* was founded in 1996, and its trajectory has shown a capacity to sustain itself, grow and adapt to emerging circumstances and obstacles. Regarding physical space, *Amal* began in just one city, with a single office shared by the *Taracea Institute of the Woman* [a governmental program to coordinate gender-based activities]. Currently *Amal* is represented in three different provinces, with six available community sites. Management of the maintenance for the association influences the members' self-perception, continually challenging them with emerging problems. The following excerpt expresses how *evaluation* of those difficulties sometimes shakes the women's feelings of *coherence* and *commitment*, having to battle oppressive systems which are strongly rooted in the structure of mainstream society. Nevertheless, *positive emotions* resulting from the real fruits of their efforts push them to a shared system of beliefs:

Work has moments that are a bit hard, and there are moments in which something is impossible to fix [...] But the day in which a women shows up here and tells you, ‘look, do you remember the time I came here and had nothing, with so many problems, crying?’...and now she could naturalize her situation, she brought her husband, her children, she's got a steady job, she's got her apartment, she is not sharing the apartment anymore [...] This fulfils you, recharges you to work and to go on, because the truth is that sometimes we feel really bad because of many things. But the law is one thing, and the reality is different. And things like this, contradictory things, you don't find solutions, or it seems impossible to you [...] So this work also fulfils you, is better than a salary. You feel the association is fruitful (leader; evaluation, commitment)

4.2. *Bettering integrative communities*

The promotion of individual empowerment also influences changes for improvement in the community. Results are obtained directly by activities and indirectly by the number of empowered citizens who radiate community influence (Maton, 2008). Regarding immigrant integration, community betterment requires increased access to standard housing and work opportunities, the prevention of racism, improving intercultural relationships, promoting community diversity as a value, and sharing common space in a cooperative way.

Concerning better access to housing, the *Amal* women “try to connect people seeking and people offering, creating a climate of trust between both” (community worker), turning this task, along with the search for work into one of their main services:

Amal mostly works to find jobs and housing. And if people have no documentation, we look for a way to give them quality of life. It means that *Amal* has an influence on the integration of immigrants into Spanish society (activist).

In addition, these services are accompanied by emotional support:

When a new member comes, she is coming not only to find a job, she is coming with personal problems [...] What we are doing is sitting up with the members and talking to them, at least about why did they come to us (activist).

Spanish classes are also highly valued by recipients, because this activity fosters interaction with native neighbors, enabling their self-integration:

When I came here the association was fine, because there are Spanish classes, and I talk to them. And that's good, because when I went out before, I didn't understand anything, how to buy things from the street markets. I didn't understand anything. I did understand ‘Hello’ and that's all; but now, I know a little bit, yes (recipient)

In relation to preventing racism and improving intercultural relations, many activities are carried out, and are highly valued by different stakeholders:

Amal knew how to combine respect, tolerance and open-mindedness within the association, and in relation to the host society. They got the participation of Spaniards and have organized meetings and travel of Spanish and Moroccan people to Morocco. They have also organized meetings on the European level. They have promoted personal relations between citizens from both countries, since the relations between people are what most promote respect and acceptance of one other (community worker).

Before, when I wasn't in *Amal*, there was racism and that stuff, but coming here to *Amal*, is like a meeting point between Spaniards and Moroccans. So it gave me an opportunity to integrate (recipient).

The strengthening of their own culture is another relevant aspect of *Amal*, as a resource to establish relationships with indigenous neighbors:

We never pass up an opportunity without celebrating. And this is what we do to promote intercultural feeling, because when we do it we also try to invite people from around here, to let them know us through our culture. And that's good because they won't think 'What's that?' [...] and in this way you don't see this immigrant as silent (leader).

These kinds of activity help to develop a sense of belonging to an organization which functions as a relational support system in the immigrant's life:

There are many people that, when they come here, feel very good because they meet other people. They feel very happy, they have more friends than they used to. People come alone, and when they come here they meet people and feel happy (recipient).

Finally, concerning the use of community resources, a community worker confirms "the most outstanding aspects of integration are seen in the capacity [of *Amal*] to utilize the resources of the environment, resources, which can be used and shared with the rest of the community centers, services for women, etc." An example of the bi-directional nature of community resources is offered by the association's leader: "There are things we have got, the confidence of the neighbors, of the Spaniards, who also consider us as another resource in the neighborhood."

4.3. Promoting a fair multicultural society

Women's activism has been recognized as a force for political transformation and a means to challenge the multiple forms of domination (Sudbury, 1998). As an ECS, *Amal* promotes positive social changes. This means the construction of a fair multicultural society, through the impact of their influential members or through external organizational activities. An outstanding aspect emphasized by an interviewed policymaker is that "*Amal* was always clear that its role is to work with the existing structures in the host society, in all respects. It was not easy, and it still is not. But their perseverance and determination have made them a recognized model nowadays".

One highlight is the selection of *Amal* by the Andalusian government to participate in the *Foro Andaluz de la Inmigración* [Andalusian Forum on Immigration] to represent the interests of pro-immigration associations in Andalusia. The forum serves as a consulting institution, on the regional political level, for planning and implementation of initiatives related to immigrant issues. The association's participation confirms the institutional legitimacy of its social mission. Furthermore, *Amal* is a consultant for the Andalusian School of Public Health; it participates on the European Committee for the Defense of the Rights of Moroccan Women (Brussels, Belgium), and maintains relations with the Associations of Moroccan Women (Tetúan, Morocco). It has entered into an agreement with the University of Seville to offer practical training for students, and is a founding member of CESPYPD. Its work in the area of gender and its open and constant fight for equal treatment are particularly valued:

Amal can prove that the Moroccan woman is not a passive woman [...] It can prove that she is an active, hardworking, fighting woman. She knows what she wants, and she greatly influences the economy of her family (leader).

I followed many of their activities, and the things they have done have enormous interest, not only the diffusion of Moroccan or Arabic, or Muslims in Andalusian society; but also because they have developed activities that have to do with fundamental issues for women in Morocco (policymaker).

Policymakers also embrace the role of *Amal* in the development of intercultural and interactive norms between Spaniards and Moroccans, thereby demonstrating that Moroccans really form part of the Spanish society:

They contribute to Moroccan society with what they do in the Spanish Andalusian society. *Amal* has never denied the social and cultural characteristics and circumstances of the Moroccan population. They do not renounce the Muslim way at all, as we could see. But at the same time, they build bridges to modern society. These kinds of associations are very important; otherwise there is not a human way of understanding each other (policymaker).

The foregoing appraisal expresses the powerful impact that grassroots organizations can have in establishing a fair multicultural society: "This is an association that, if it did not exist, we would have to invent it" (policymaker), "It is indispensable to have associations like this, because, if not, the facts alone won't lead us to equality" (policymaker).

5. Lesson learned and implications

In this paper we have defined acculturative integration in oppressive contexts as a process of self-reconstruction and change by an immigrant population, leading to the achievement of citizenship as a part of the new society. More specifically, we have proposed that grassroots associations and activism should be considered as useful tools in this aim, because they bridge newcomers and the mainstream layers of society, its people, institutions and policies, legitimizing the new cultural group and its members as an accepted part of their new society. The ECS framework proposed by Maton (2008) has proven to be a useful tool in analyzing the role of associations and activism regarding self and citizenship construction. We have

substantiated our proposed model using the experience of a grassroots organization with whom we are carrying out different initiatives focused on overcoming oppression suffered by Andalusian Moroccans. In so doing, we intend to contribute to a better understanding of the links between successful social change, community activism and the personal well-being of individuals involved in acculturative integration processes in asymmetrical conditions. The proposed framework requires future research for its validation and for developing tools to assure its reliability or reproducibility in at least two settings: measurement of the empowering characteristics and development strategies of immigrant grassroots organizations which facilitate participation and integration; and measurement of collaborative capacity-building initiatives that help community organizations become more effective (Paloma et al., 2009; Prilleltensky, 2009).

Nevertheless, this paper highlights the importance in acculturative research of focusing on the study of the meaning assigned by specific groups to their actions in a new country and several lessons can be learned relating to (1) the theoretical challenges of acculturative integration, (2) the role of grassroots organizations in self and citizen construction, (3) the collaboration between university researchers and community stakeholders, and (4) social policy development and implementation.

Concerning theoretical debates on acculturation, the experience of *Amal* shows that it is possible to pursue integration in societies where newcomers encounter asymmetrical power relationships. Citizen participation through ECS's like *Amal* helps immigrants resist oppressive social conditions and become agents of their own self-construction, breaking down the cycle of oppression. At the same time, this gives us an emerging view of culture in the debate about acculturation (Chirkov, 2009). From our perspective, the merging of community and cultural psychologies provides us with conceptual and methodological tools to account for the way in which individuals participating in everyday settings, such as *Amal*, become agents of cultural production and change. Acculturative integration is not seen as something that “happens” to cultural groups and individuals, but something that individuals do in collaboration with others—create, decide, in their everyday practices; looking for, and struggling for well-being and legitimacy. From this perspective, therefore, acculturative integration is viewed as a process of self-in-context transformation. It is of primary importance to consider power relations between individuals, organizations and ethno-cultural groups.

Relating to the specific role of grassroots organization in this process, the analysis of information from different sources permits us to assert that *Amal* fulfils ECS goals. At the societal level the organization has contributed to positive social changes by its participation in regional, national and European contexts and by contributing to changes in both Spanish and Moroccan society. At the community level, the association has developed many activities promoting changes in areas where Moroccans live (bettering integrative community settings). These changes include improving access to jobs and housing, increasing immigrants' knowledge of Spanish, the general prevention of racism and the improvement of intercultural relations. Finally, at the individual level, the association has become a setting for reconstructing an empowered self and building citizenship through active community participation.

In this sense, community psychology offers well-proven models focused on transforming social and community settings ruled by values and norms of homogeneity into settings in which the value and norm is heterogeneity (Kelly et al., 1994). *Amal* has important strengths toward this goal. First, it is a social setting that favors interdependence among its members, and with other cultural groups and institutions. Interdependence does not just describe interpersonal dynamics, but a characteristic of the organizations as such. Secondly, *Amal* enhances formal and informal social interactions across status boundaries. One of the benefits of *Amal* is to provide opportunities “to experience the role of culture in interpreting experience” (Kelly et al., 1994, p. 435). *Amal* permits the integration of diverse experiences, which implies the creation of social norms, encouraging reflection and integration of experiences, “it is an example of a safe place where a person can think out loud and create, in the presence of others, a new framework for organizing their shared experiences” (Kelly et al., 1994, p. 442).

Concerning the collaborative relation between university researchers and activists of *Amal*, we encourage researchers not to concentrate their efforts on obtaining findings or designing frameworks *in the name of others*; but they should force themselves to collaborate *with the others* in the development of those resources necessary to pursue the goals of the community. This paper shows how collaboration between different and ethnically diverse stakeholders—including researchers—can be associated with the building up of a sense of community and a culture of learning among partners. This implies that individual members gain understanding, voice and influence over decisions that affect their lives (Fetterman, 2002). Because multiethnic diversity is an intrinsic feature of our settings, collaborative work is a crucial requirement.

This framework is a call for promoting a primary role for immigrant organizations in receiving societies. It highlights the importance of taking into account the active participation of immigrants in both delivering and receiving services through partnerships, coalitions and others network structures. These strategies foster the identification of immigrants with community institutions and social infrastructures, and serve as foundations for building welfare and the consolidation of social cohesion. These recommendations cannot be carried out without insisting on the necessity to transform unjust social structures. We should not consider the responsibility for integration as exclusively one of the immigrant population. Far from that, we emphasize the necessity for a social transformation, which demands the involvement of all parts of the citizenry. The transformative potential of activism and the social structures that can be developed from it should be considered as powerful tools for integration, enabling social cohesion. But, at the same time, we should not forget that every group has its own unique strengths to resist, and to adapt to oppressive conditions. If we do not promote interdependence among the various ethno-cultural groups and the other social actors, grassroots activism could become an isolating double-edged sword, as recent problems in many European countries suggest. With this focus, our paper represents an attempt to

underscore the potential of collaborative work among researchers, policymakers, community activists and all other stakeholders involved in the creation of a welcoming and just society.

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