

Who are the Experts on Immigration?

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Recently, I attended a podium discussion on the topic of so-called “illegal” immigrants who live in Nürnberg. The invited speakers included a German academic who has studied this issue, has important information to share, and has personal contact with and compassion for “illegal” immigrants.

He told us about being in Köln on a podium with an “illegal” immigrant who took the risk of speaking publicly about his experience in Germany. “What he had to say was more important than what I had to say, and he had a bigger impact on the audience.”

On the night I attended this discussion and heard this comment, there were other people sharing the podium with him: local Germans who try to provide support to “illegal” immigrants, and “legal” immigrants who have friendships with “illegal” immigrants. The academic was given the most opportunities to share his thoughts, and the local immigrants had the least opportunities. In fact, their voices were rarely heard that evening.

As a member of the audience, I was glad that immigrants were at least on the podium. Too often, I have attended events about immigration and integration and the people on the podium don't have an immigration background. The invited “experts” are often academics or politicians, sometimes bureaucrats responsible for immigration, sometimes professional “helpers.” Typically, the academics and bureaucrats are men, the helpers women, and politicians about equally divided. But very few, if any, are immigrants, and seldom is an immigrant invited as an “expert” to share their own experiences as an immigrant.

When I first noticed this, those immigrants were not invited to speak about the topic of immigration, I was shocked. But as I continued to attend talks, I became angry, and began to ask the question, why are Germans considered the only experts on immigration? Why aren't immigrants also considered experts? I am an immigrant, and I know many other immigrants, and we all have a lot to say about this issue.

We know from personal experience which policies and projects actually help us become successful as immigrants and which policies and projects hinder us. Some of us have lived in societies and communities where diverse groups of people live and work together successfully, where we know each other as friends and communicate freely with each other, and where we support each other and learn from each other. In our home countries, some of us worked in agencies responsible for integration, and some of us studied in Universities.

As a result, we have our own theories and models of how to create a society where we can all live together. And we have experience with what works and what doesn't work. But because our work and degrees and experiences are not recognized in Germany, we are not recognized as experts in our fields.

At a seminar on integration, I met a young German man who works in a state office that handles issues of discrimination. He was supportive of immigrants and friendly with me, so I told him what I had noticed about who is considered an expert. He smiled, and with an ironic tone of voice told me, “The problem is, you can’t be an expert, because you’re not objective. Being an expert in Germany means that you study the topic. If you have personal experience, they you are too subjective.” We talked further, and agreed that, at least when it comes to integration, it is not possible to be objective, because we are all personally, in some way, impacted by immigration.

After a year or two of going to talks and presentations where the experts were people without an immigration background, I attended a program where some immigrants talked about their personal experiences coming to Germany, learning German, finding work, and trying to live here. I was thrilled. The “experts” were talking *to* me, not *about* me.

At the end of program, a German man approached me. He works in a program that helps immigrants. We had met before, and he knew that I was critical of events where immigrants were not on the podium. He asked me my opinion about this event.

“I am so glad that I am here tonight, and that I had the opportunity to hear these immigrants talk about their lives,” I told him. “I see myself in their stories. And in my experience, most Germans don’t know about the lives of immigrants. They only hear information from so-called experts who don’t know what it is like to be an immigrant. And so it is so important for all of us to hear directly from immigrants.”

He listened and then responded, “One must be careful about sharing personal experiences, because one might make generalizations about a group based on what one person in the group has said, and it might not be accurate.”

As I listened to him, I thought, he is right – one person doesn’t represent the whole group – and at the same time I thought, he is underestimating, or doesn’t understand, the value of personal experience as a way to understand a situation. And the style he used to share his opinion was a problem for me.

Although I didn’t want to, I responded to him with some anger in my voice. “The way that you are speaking, using the pronoun ‘one,’ is a problem for me. That makes it sound like you are objective. If you told me that you were sharing your personal opinion, then I could more easily hear what you are saying. But when you use ‘one,’ then it sounds like you think you are the expert. And that my opinion has no value for you.”

What I didn’t say to him is that I trust people more when they share their own thoughts and feelings. If someone tries to tell me “the facts” and believes that they are objective, then I don’t trust what they are telling me. If they tell me what they personally believe, then I trust them. Then I know a little bit about them. Personal contact is important to me. And how he was expressing his opinion using the pronoun “one” was not personal.

But he listened to me, and thanked me for my criticism. We talked for a few more minutes, and when we said goodbye, he told me that he would think about what I had said and looked forward to more conversations with me.

This is a small example of the dialogue that needs to occur between people with immigration experience and people without immigration experience. This kind of dialogue is an ongoing process, one that will take time and effort, and where the information we share will be constantly changing because we as individuals are constantly changing. This is not a debate where one person is right and the other wrong, but where each person shares their perspective and is interested in learning from the other. It is not easy to have this kind of dialogue, but it is possible.

There is an area where I believe it is important for Germans to become experts. I wish that they would study their own thoughts and feelings about immigration, and then develop policies and projects for themselves so that they can accept us as equal partners in this society. We can help with this, but I believe that this is primarily the work of people without an immigration background.

Of course we need to continue to listen to, and learn from, Germans who study immigration in the University, and Germans who develop Integration policy and work in agencies responsible for implementing those policies. We need their input as experts.

But we also need to hear from another kind of expert: immigrants. We need to hear from a broad range of immigrants and learn about their perspective as members of this society. We need their knowledge and expertise. Without it, we won't be able to create a society that works for all of us. Working together and sharing what they each know, immigrants and Germans can develop policies and programs that benefit all of us. Only if we work together, as equals, will we learn how to live together, successfully.