

Expats and Immigrants

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I am German when we win, an immigrant when we lose.” – Mesut Ozil

The immediate inference in his statement above is that an immigrant ranks lower on the scale of societal approval. This led me to wonder about when an ‘immigrant’ becomes a citizen, and when that label ceases. And, if he continues to respect the customs of the land of his birth, is that a bad thing?

Mesut Ozil is a 29-year-old German-born football player, whose family is of Turkish Muslim origin.

He was born in Germany and is a third-generation Turkish-German. In April of 2018, he was photographed with Turkish politician, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was running for the presidency. This caused a war of words with the German Football League who accused him of supporting Erdoğan’s political campaign, leading to his resignation from international football and refusal to be associated with the German National Team.

While, in hindsight, this might not have been the smartest photo op on offer, consider that this is the same chap who helped Germany win the 2014 World Cup in Brasil and donated all his World Cup winnings to hospitals in Brasil, funding surgeries for underprivileged children – in case there was a question around the quality of his character.

What do the words expats, immigrants and migrants mean? Are their meanings really that important?

Basic definitions

Grammarist.com provides these definitions:

“An immigrant is a person who leaves his home and travels to another country in order to become a permanent member of the population, with no plan to return to his country of origin or wish to return to his country of origin.”

“Expatriate refers to someone living outside his native country. Originally, an expatriate was someone exiled from his home country, derived from the mid-1700s French word *expatrier*, meaning banish. The term expatriate carries the connotation that the person in question will one day return to his country of origin, or at least wishes to one day return to his country of origin.”

From these two definitions, I discern that it is the length of time outside of one’s home country that differs. However, the more I delved into this question, the more I was confronted with how very emotionally charged and racially inequitable these two words and concepts are.

You see, the word ‘expat’ is positioned as one that is associated with higher levels of education, elite, privilege and status – and with people generally of European descent.

It is implied that an expatriate is one who has achieved a certain status and education and that they are invited to share their knowledge and expertise with those in other countries, for an agreed period of time.

In other words, contract workers.

But if the definition of such expats is ‘contract worker’, then could that word be used to describe blue-collar workers too? Those who work as maids and helpers in the global hospitality industry or foreign workers seen on building sites or in mines?

Why are they called migrant workers or labourers?

Immigrants are not seen as those seeking a different life experience, or those who'd like to provide an improved life opportunity for their families; they have become the 'unwanted' or 'not allowed' refugees, mostly associated with boat people fleeing from violence and persecution in their home countries.

They are immediately seen as an economic drain on their host country, whereas an expat is seen to share knowledge and to contribute to the economic welfare of their host country.

So, now it is about country of origin and about economics – not just length of time.

Reframing perspectives

History has demonstrated repeatedly how the use of these emotionally charged descriptors provide excellent fodder for fearmongering politicians, and most recently contributed to a Trump presidency and Brexit – where the notion of isolationism is preferable to one of unity.

These words remain part of societal discourse because they serve political rhetoric.

What if there were another way of approaching this issue? What if immigrants were viewed as people who have the potential to add value.

What if the emotional and economic context was reframed?

If immigrants are viewed in terms of the potential that they could add to their host country. They are the people with the courage, drive, determination and motivation to succeed. There is a certain quality of character in wanting a better life for themselves and their families. Are these not the qualities of people who are up entrepreneurs and small business owners, those with ambition, not afraid to work hard to succeed? Are these not qualities most employers seek?

Perhaps this is the next generation of small business owners who create employment and opportunities to grow the economy in developed economies, where a large part of the potential workforce is living on social security and does not have the interest or motivation to contribute economically?

Are they not the tired, poor and huddled masses yearning to be free?

If they were viewed through that lens, would they instead be called expats?

A social perspective

From a social perspective, expats tend not to immerse themselves in the society or culture of their temporary home country. They do not necessarily try to learn the language or traditions. They tend to form their own social communities and clubs and remain there.

There is no intention to become permanent residents – so why would they? It isn't frowned upon when they complain that waiters don't understand them because they're just "here for a short while".

It is in an immigrant's interest to have more enthusiasm and motivation to immerse themselves in the culture of their new home country – not to the exclusion of their own culture – but so that they feel more at home and settling might be easier.

More than semantics

Words always serve an agenda. If we used the term 'civil servants' instead of 'politicians', would our expectation of them change?

If expats were known as contract workers or commercial nomads or professional travellers?

What if immigrants were viewed as those 'looking for something better'?

*For those who like more inclusive labels, the word 'foreigner' can apply to both expats and immigrants. The word 'human' also works well. *medium.com – border-free-lifestyle

In Ozil's case, a different choice of words may have avoided the entire incident.