



UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU

# Identity and Belonging Reconstruction of Globally Mobile Individuals

**A Dialectical Perspective**

**Dan Ha Le**

danha.d.le@utu.fi

Turku School of Economics, Finland

# Prevailing Narratives

## Global Mobility

- circulation of global talent, knowledge, and capital across borders (*Tung, 2016; Hajro et al., 2023, etc.*)

- disruptive life event for globally mobile individuals (GMIs)
- demanding continual “reconfiguration of self, others and belonging” (*Schiller & Irving, 2015, p. 14; Harrison et al., 2019*)

## Migrant Entrepreneurs

- proactive, self-reliant heroes capable of creating change and even disrupting structural constraints (*Suseno et al., 2025*)

- embedded in power inequalities which shape their entrepreneurial opportunities and trajectories (*Terstriep et al., 2025*)

***either/ or***

**vs.**

***both/ and***

# Research Question

**“ How are identity and belonging constructed by/ through GMI’s lived mobility experiences, and, what implication does this have for migrant entrepreneurship (ME) research?**

# A Dialectical Perspective

## Dialectical (adj):

- discovering what is true by considering opposite theories (Cambridge Dictionary)
- two opposing things being true at once

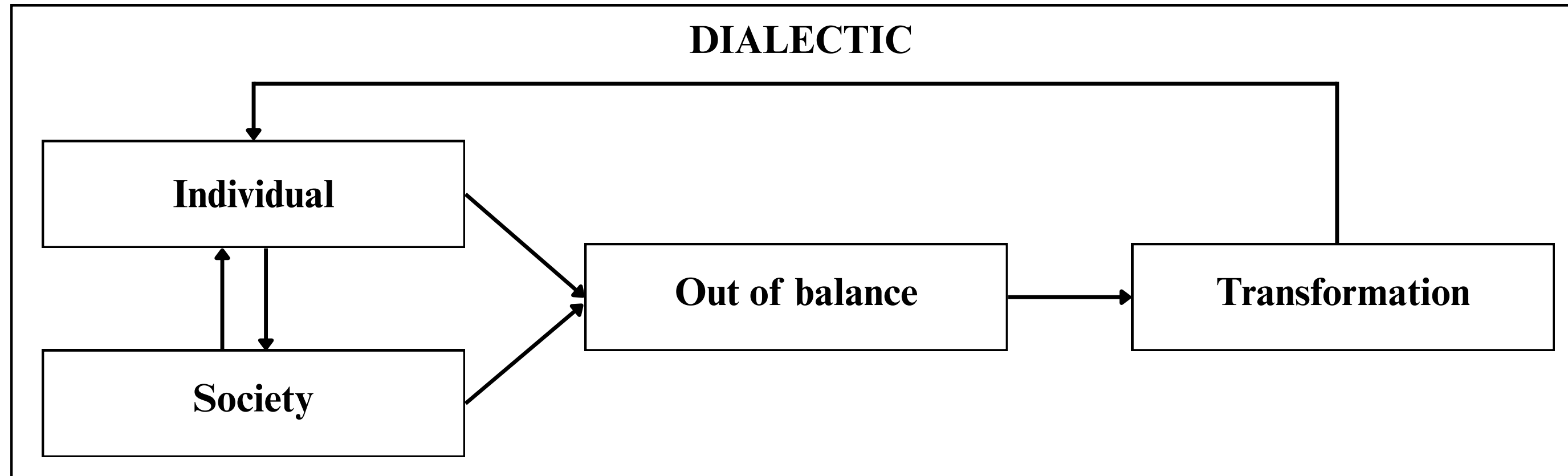
## WHAT?

- the ongoing, dynamic interplay of opposite poles/ forces
- constant push-pull between contradictory elements
- unity and the ways that opposites mutually define each other
- philosophically, thesis > anti-thesis > synthesis  
*(Riegel, 1976; Benson 1977; Putnam et al., 2016)*

## WHY?

- entailing pluralism, conflicts, contradictions, (de)construction, inherent in social worlds  
*(Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Benson, 1977; Van de Ven, 1992)*
- capturing the instability and fluidity inherent in mobile lives (De Haas, 2009, 2010; Ram et al., 2017), where ambivalences, tensions, contradictions are not anomalies but constitutive elements of everyday lived experience *(Benson 1977, Hinde, 2014; Putnam et al., 2016)*.
- accounting for change and development *(Mihalits & Valsiner, 2022)*, renewal and change *(Farjoun & Fiss, 2022)*
- offering powerful lens to conceptualize that identity and belonging as “a state of becoming,” shaped by the interplay between agency and structure

# Agency - Structure Dialectics

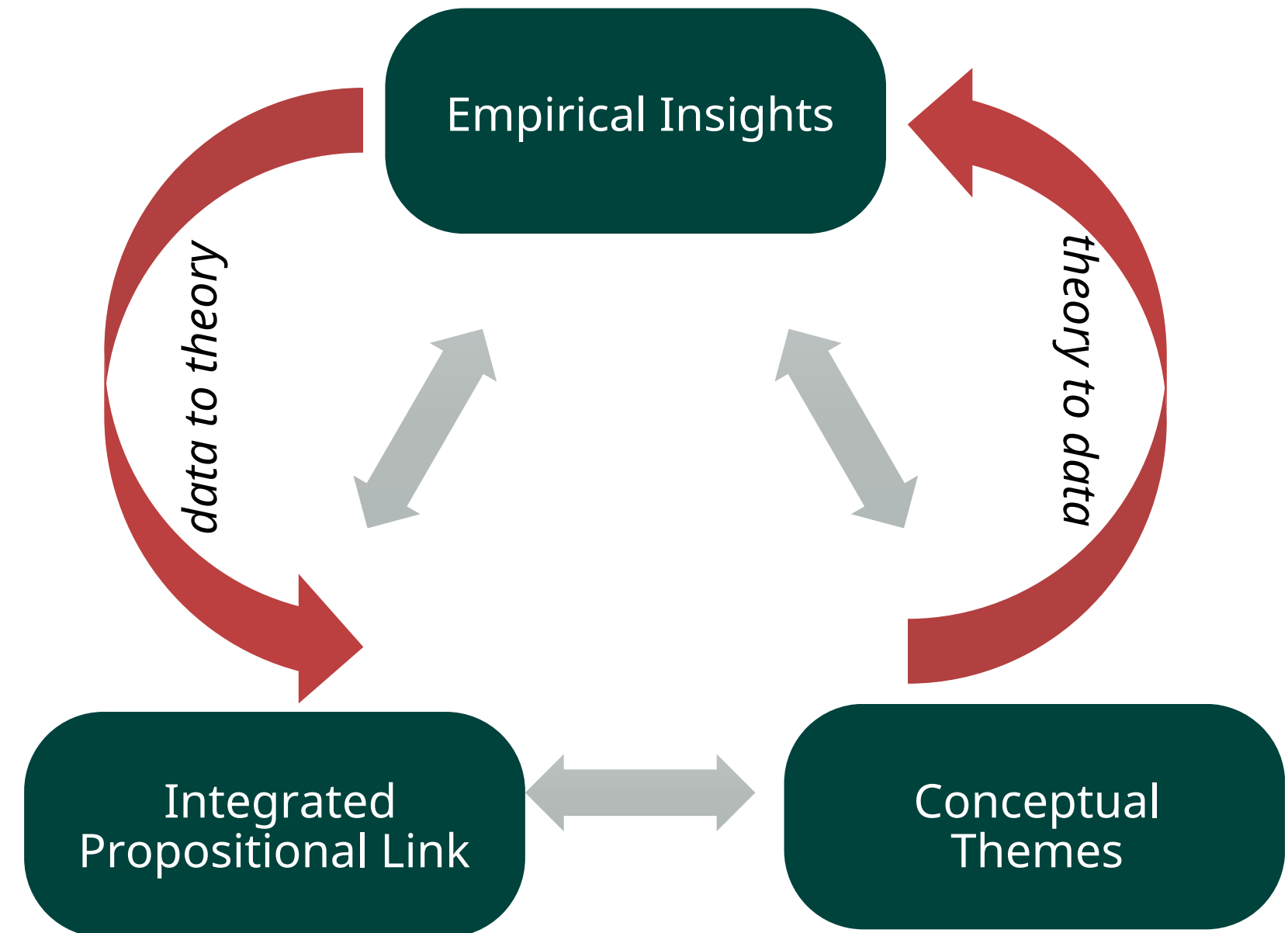


*The Agency - Structure Dialectic (adapted from Van De Ven & Poole, 1995, p. 520)*

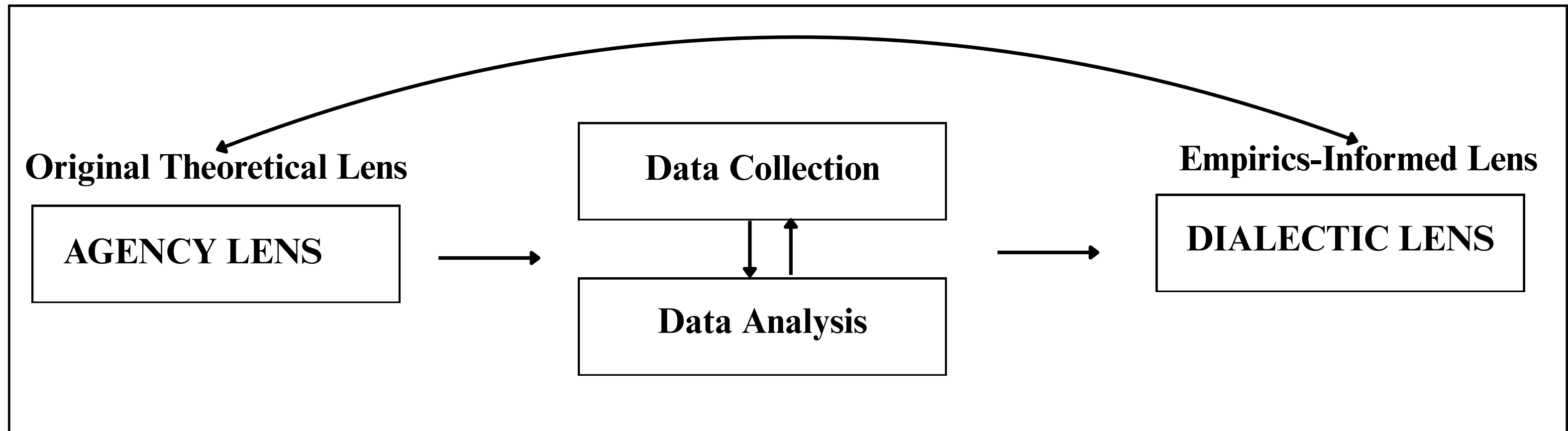
Individuals and society: **mutually constitutive** poles that dynamically interact and shape one another, **producing changes** over time. Neither individual nor society is fixed or stable but **evolving**.

# Interpretive, Qualitative Study

- Data collected via semi-structured interviews with 35 GMIs in Finland (25 from Global South and 10 from Global North)
  - Reflexive Thematic Analysis (*Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2023*)
  - Abductive reasoning (*Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021*)
- Epistemic alignment logic**
- Iterative back-and-forth movement between data and theory
    - to identify emergent themes
    - to develop new empirically-grounded conceptual understanding
  - Not descriptive: Data drives theorizing, not illustration.



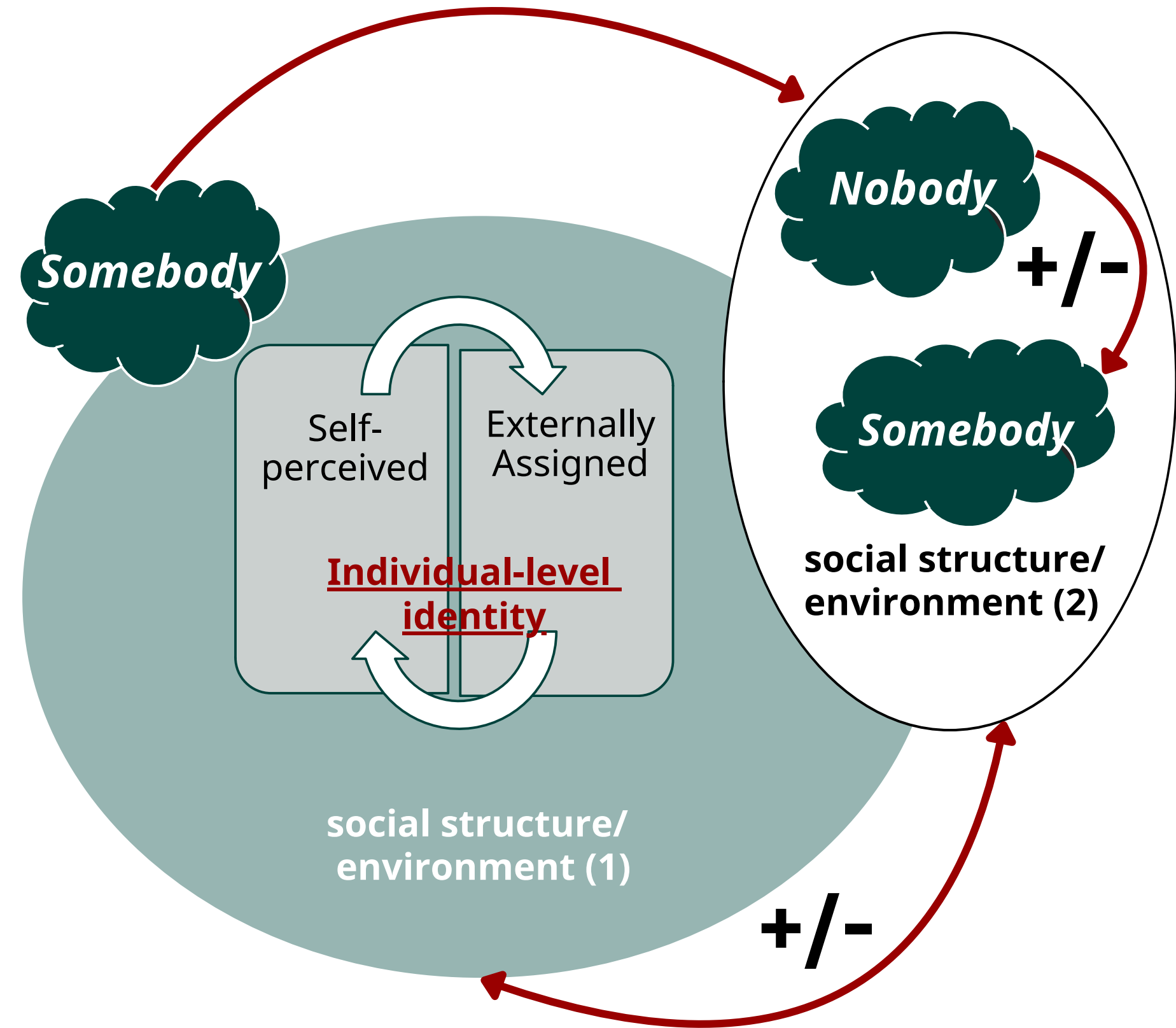
# Theory - Data - Theory Iteration & Alignment



*A lite version of abduction: Theory-Data-Theory Iteration*

# Findings

Sources of dialectical dynamics	<p>enduring tensions between self-perceived identity and socially ascribed identities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• self-perceived: drawn on educational and professional credentials (individual attributes)</li> <li>• externally-ascribed: shaped and constrained by hierarchical, racial, cultural, and linguistic stereotypes</li> </ul>
Enduring global power asymmetries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• process and outcomes of (re)constructing self and status shaped by stereotypes, colonial legacies, and enduring global power asymmetries (GS-origin vs. GN-origin)             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ GS-origin: identities and competencies are frequently questioned and devalued</li> <li>◦ GN-origin: symbolic privileges, such as presumed cultural superiority and the legitimacy attributed to their national and professional identities</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Ongoing processes of (re)construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identity and belonging are interwoven, never stable or never-ending</li> <li>• fluid and continuously constructed via agency and structure dialectics (tensions, contradictions, negotiations, and changes)</li> </ul>



**Fig. 1: Identity - Belonging (Re)construction of GMIs**  
*unequal, evolving, processual, and contextually situated*

# Contributions

## Theoretical

Identity and belonging work in the GM context

- social structures are never neutral, manifested via power asymmetries, institutional hierarchies, and cultural stereotypes that actively shape (enable vs. constraint) lived experiences of GMIs
- efforts that individuals put in to negotiate reconcile such tensions and inequalities remain unequal
- dialectics serve as a catalyst for identity and belonging (re)construction process - an ongoing and unfinished business

Migrant entrepreneurship

- challenging dominant narratives that either treat migrant entrepreneurs through the lens of 'heroic, agentic, and self-reliant' or 'powerless' stereotypes.
- calling for dialectical and processual examination, i.e., both sides of the story (agency and structure)

## Practical

Implications

- not only providing structural support but also recognizing dynamics and dialectics of change/ transformation processes

# Future Research

Areas	Examples
Theoretical integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To combine dialectics with sense-making perspectives to reveal the layers through which GMIs interpret, negotiate, and reconcile conflicting demands and experiences</li></ul>
Different studied contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To examine differences and contributing factors in other national and cultural contexts, e.g., GMIs/ MEs in Global South societies</li></ul>
Longitudinal and multi-level perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To track and examine the complexity and dynamics of identity and belonging work over time (across mobility, life phases)</li></ul>

Thank you.  
Get inspired.



UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU