



WORKING PAPER SERIES NO. 109

# **A critical approach to the production of academic knowledge on refugee integration in the global north**

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May 2015

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# Working Paper Series

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# 1 Introduction

The escalation of migration from the Global South to the increasingly multi-ethnic countries of the Global North has driven recent academic and political discourse on nationhood, citizenship, and belonging (Mestheneos and Ioannidi 2002; Strang and Ager 2010). This discourse touches upon all aspects of social life, as debates over who belongs in a given society and who does not necessarily broach questions of rights and identity. Consequently, academic and policy literature on migration encompass a wide array of topics, including issues of migrant mental health (Cislo *et al.* 2010), migrants' participation in recreational activities (Spaaij 2012), and their experiences of neoliberal economic policies (Smith 2012), as well as a sizable body of literature on the benefits and drawbacks of immigration for the receiving country.

There is a common thread running through these otherwise disparate studies concerned with how belonging shapes social outcomes. Most demonstrative of this common thread is the prevalence of the term 'integration', which has come to represent the normative framework for discussing nationhood, citizenship, and belonging in the context of immigration. As South-North migration accelerated in the 1980s, academic and policy researchers employed a number of terms to frame discussions of its effects on both migrants and receiving countries. These terms include 'social cohesion' (Castles *et al.* 2002), 'acculturation' (Van Acker and Vanbeselaere 2011), 'assimilation' (Manning and Roy 2010), and 'multiculturalism' (McGhee 2008), with the latter two occurring most frequently.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, however, 'integration' has gained currency as the preferred "synonym for successful settlement" (McPherson 2010: 547), as it lacks the imperialist and occasionally eugenicist connotations of 'assimilation' (McPherson 2010: 551), as well as multiculturalism's frequent associations with segregated ethnic enclaves and clandestine terrorist activity (McGhee 2008). While the term 'integration' is further removed from the "racialisation of immigration in the post-war period" (Griffiths *et al.* 2006: 886) than both 'assimilation' and 'multiculturalism', discussions of immigration that use the comparatively anodyne language of integration still assume the binary nature of belonging: one is either a member or an outsider. Particularly in a post-9/11 context, the literature on integration continues to raise questions related to, *inter alia*, the welfare state (Franz 2003) and national security (Taylor 2013) – questions which are heavily imbued with the assumption that individuals, by dint of their birthplace, are either entitled to or excluded from certain rights.

While the term 'integration' is used in reference to all types of migration, there exists a narrower body of literature on *refugee* integration that primarily addresses the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees – those who have either found local solutions or settled in third countries via resettlement schemes.<sup>2</sup> Predominant in this literature are ethnographic case studies that rely upon in-depth interviews with refugees to relay their experiences in, for instance, trying to access social services, find employment, and develop social networks (for illustrative examples, see Banki 2006,

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<sup>1</sup> While all of these terms refer to slightly different things, the point here is that they have all served as ways of discussing receiving societies' concerns with immigration. However, as 'integration' has become the preferred term in recent years and has consequently come to define the body of refugee-specific literature at issue in this paper, 'integration' will from now on be used as the term connoting the relevant discussions of belonging.

<sup>2</sup> Although acknowledging that the refugee integration literature, including the case studies selected below, includes asylum seekers, this paper will from now on refer only to refugees for the sake of simplicity. However, while recognizing that there may well be substantive differences between the resettlement experiences of asylum seekers and refugees, this paper maintains that these differences are not germane to the topic at hand, which is instead concerned with drawing attention to some of the problems with how these issues are framed.

Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny 2011, and Worland and Darlington 2010). Some of this work focuses on the demographic features of the receiving society – for example, its ethnic and religious makeup – in predicting state and public responses to the arrival of refugees (Kunz 1981), while more recent studies explore the “institutional environment” – for example, welfare services and legal frameworks – in which refugees develop their capacities to cope with resettlement challenges (Smyth *et al.* 2010: 411). However, in its efforts to understand the challenges that refugees experience, and possibly create, upon resettlement, much of the academic literature is beset by three interrelated problems.

First, many studies rely on the premise that legal protection status constitutes the primary force molding a refugee’s resettlement experiences, particularly his or her access to resources and the quality of those resources. Underlying this premise is the ontological assumption of a clear distinction between those who belong and those who do not. However, this “imposition of a false choice between two or more territorially rooted homes” (Taylor 2013: 131) fails to appreciate that, in any given group, each individual belongs in some ways and fails to do so in others; even within ethnically homogeneous refugee cohorts, there is diversity in the extent to which, and the ways in which, individuals feel marginalized (Kunz 1981). Furthermore, this assumption hinges on the notion that the community into which a refugee settles is distinct and cohesive, thereby overlooking the possibility that those whose national or local affiliations remain unchanged may not actually fit in according to the standards set forth by commonly identified integration criteria (Strang and Ager 2010). Finally, accompanying this ontological assumption is the normative assumption that belonging is a desirable outcome for both the refugee and the members of the receiving society, neglecting to appreciate that this may, in certain contexts, entail more loss than gain for either the refugee, elements of the receiving society, or both.

The second problem recurring in the literature is that, having already assumed the binary nature of the subject at hand, many studies proceed to either use inchoate definitions of integration and one of its two constituent terms – ‘host community’ – or simply neglect to define them at all. While much of the theoretical literature on the topic attempts to devise frameworks for measuring integration and using the proposed criteria for doing so to explain social and economic outcomes for resettled refugees, either in theory (see Ager and Strang 2004) or in particular country contexts (see Valtonen 2004), these studies seldom propose clear definitions for the term they attempt to measure. Likewise, much of the empirical literature involving fieldwork neglects to conceptualize the terms it seeks to understand through primary data. The conceptual ambiguity attending these terms is borne out in the wealth of variables examined by both theoretical and empirical studies.

Finally, the third problem appearing in much of the relevant literature is that, as a result of this conceptual ambiguity, many studies make weak claims about the nature of refugee integration. Collectively, these claims suggest that integration is shaped by all features of the individual and society and, in turn, shapes a wide range of features of the individual and society. As a result, this literature, which sets out to understand the challenges that refugees both encounter and possibly create upon their resettlement, actually falls short of its objective because it explores these challenges through the subjectively selected and relatively narrow lens of legal protection status. Much of the literature puts forth an assortment of abstruse or bromidic claims about the nature of these problems that, rather than providing greater clarity about the phenomenon they endeavor to understand, serves more distinctly to create an impression of impregnable complexity.

Given these problems, this paper explores the role that academic literature on refugee integration in the Global North plays. Accordingly, it seeks to understand why refugee integration is considered to be a valuable domain of academic research and why so much of this research privileges refugee status over other markers of identity as the lens through which to understand the

resettlement challenges faced by refugees. Finally, it explores some of the consequences of privileging refugee status in explaining these challenges.

It is important to ask what role this literature plays for several reasons. First, because substantial resources are allocated to policy and academic research on refugee integration and integration more broadly, it is critical to first clarify the meaning, use, and purpose of these terms. Particularly because much of the relevant literature draws prohibitively ambiguous and impenetrable conclusions, it is important to identify why resources should be allocated to research that appears to draw so few causal links. Furthermore, because integration is frequently used as the rationale for development endeavors such as housing and settlement schemes involving migrants pursuing both local integration<sup>3</sup> and third-country resettlement, it is important to question this rationale because these schemes can often actually undermine their long-term purported objectives by further embedding the resettled refugee in a position of marginalization (Zetter 1991).<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, this topic is important because, while third-country resettlement is one of the three durable solutions pursued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the refugee regime complex, it is a marginal solution. Third-country resettlement was traditionally the preferred durable solution during the Cold War era, as Western actors led by the United States used resettlement as a tactic for illustrating public preferences for Western-style democracy over communism. However, recent resettlement programs only serve approximately five percent of refugees worldwide (Toft 2007). While there are many possible explanations for the marginality of third-country resettlement, such as the heavy costs that large-scale resettlement would inflict on even the wealthiest Global North countries such as the United States, it is also possible that resettlement countries are wary of “undermining the political, social, and economic order within their country” (Toft 2007: 153) by offering long-term or permanent residence to large numbers of foreigners. Therefore, an exploration of the role of the refugee integration literature may shed light on why third-country resettlement has remained so nugatory a solution and how it could be refashioned into a more reasonable alternative for the nearly two-thirds of today’s refugee population who live in protracted refugee situations that, due to local political impasses, rely almost exclusively on third-country solutions (Loescher and Milner 2009). As Global North countries play a prominent role in determining which durable solutions are pursued by the refugee regime (Chimni 1999), a critical look at the concept of integration in Global North countries offers a logical starting point for exploring the marginality of third-country resettlement.

Finally, this topic is important because integration, which remains by and large ill-defined in the relevant literature, is nevertheless a powerful concept in shaping the self-understandings of both refugees and members of their new communities, as well as the self-understandings of those who undergo alternative forms of migration. Literature in refugee studies testifies to the importance of labels in framing the academic exploration of social issues (Malkki 1995) and in molding refugees’ understandings of themselves as well as their material conditions, as illustrated through Zetter’s

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Local integration’ refers to one of the three durable solutions to displacement as outlined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) whereby refugees settle in the country to which they fled. However, in this instance, ‘integration’ does not refer to the broader concept at hand in this paper but rather, as previously explained, to issues of belonging as they relate to immigration. This is important to bear in mind because this paper explores the conceptual idea of integration only in situations of third-country resettlement and not in situations of local integration.

<sup>4</sup> Although Zetter’s (1991) paper talks about local integration as much as third-country resettlement, this idea still applies. For instance, resettlement programs in Western countries still use integration as a rationale for various employment and self-sufficiency schemes, such as the Matching Grant Program in the United States.



exploration of the policy implications of labeling (1991).<sup>5</sup> The very concept of refugee integration presupposes the existence of universal refugee experiences, namely that an individual's identity as a refugee overrides alternative identities, such as those more closely linked to gender, employment, or interpersonal relationships. This assumption is important to interrogate because it bears on resettled refugees' understandings of themselves and their ties to their new social worlds, as well as for the academic work on the nature of migration, citizenship, and belonging more broadly.

Underlying these epistemological implications is the notion that inhering in knowledge about a topic is a set of power relations. As such, the research questions and findings of this paper are loosely informed by Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, which is a theory neither of power nor of knowledge but rather a method for approaching these concepts as co-constitutive. Interrogating subjects that are commonly taken for granted, such as the institution of the prison and the concept of sexuality, power/knowledge explores the historical contingency of disciplines and their performances in society. It argues that bodies of knowledge about particular concepts are entwined with societal power structures and that power, in turn, works through collectively accepted forms of knowledge such that those who possess knowledge possess power and, conversely, those who possess power possess knowledge. By identifying a person, phenomenon, or institution as an object of knowledge, one exercises a form of control over this domain by asserting knowledge of others, as individuals gradually begin to recognize norms and thereby seek to conform to them.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing that power rests in many different realms of life through "subtle and meticulous control of bodies rather than the influence of ethical and judicial ideas and institutions" (Gutting 2005: 20), Foucault argues that techniques and institutions which were developed for miscellaneous purposes converge to generate a system of disciplinary power (Foucault 1977).

Accordingly, power/knowledge is an appropriate body of theory to apply to this research because it offers an ontological approach in line with the constructionist perspective from which the questions driving this paper emerge. Power/knowledge asserts that there is no absolute truth existing beyond the realm of human creation and instead argues that discussions of social phenomena ought to revolve around how humans determine what is true and false, and how the power to determine what is true functions in society. Having recognized the assumptions underpinning the literature on refugee integration and the state-centric biases that yield them, this paper is inclined toward power/knowledge's constructionist approach to knowledge and its concern with the role of power in dictating the terms on which knowledge is created, which is particularly germane to discussions of academic literature.

In order to assess refugee integration's role as a realm of academic knowledge, this paper draws upon eight case studies on refugee integration in Global North resettlement countries, all of which appear in the 2010 *Journal of Refugee Studies* special issue on integration.<sup>7</sup> All the case studies were selected from this issue, and every case study within the issue was selected because of the reasons

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<sup>5</sup> While one could use Zetter's argument to make the case that the importance of labels such as 'refugee' actually underscores the importance of empirical studies on integration for a group that is the object of this label, the point here is that the very use of this term in the academic literature reinforces its existence as a label to inform policy and self-understanding and must therefore be questioned beforehand.

<sup>6</sup> This, however, is not to say that those who create knowledge purposefully manipulate it to their own ends, as one cannot assume that individuals know how to wield the power of knowledge that they do not even realize they possess. As Hacking aptly points out, "One ought to begin an analysis of power from the ground up, at the level of tiny local events where battles are unwittingly enacted by players who don't know what they are doing" (1981: 28).

<sup>7</sup> *Journal of Refugee Studies: Special Issue: Critical Reflections on Refugee Integration: Lessons from International Perspectives* 23(4), December 2010.

outlined in the issue's introduction<sup>8</sup>: the cases were chosen from Global North<sup>9</sup> countries which are socioeconomically similar and have implemented specific policies for dealing with asylum and resettlement so as to reduce the number of variables between studies (Smyth *et al.* 2010). Furthermore, rather than making an independent selection of case studies, this paper chooses to take advantage of the opportunity to review the literature on refugee integration on its own terms, which is most effectively done by exploring a set of studies that were purposefully compiled to represent a snapshot of the field at a given moment. Recognizing that such a small sample of studies cannot be considered representative of the field, this paper intends only to use these studies to suggest that a better heuristic be adopted for exploring this topic. Examining these case studies with the occasional guidance of Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, this paper underscores how the production of knowledge on refugee integration could actually contribute to the very problems it seeks to address.

This paper is structured around the three problems identified above in the refugee integration literature. The following two chapters set up the situation in the literature: Chapter 2 considers the arbitrary manner in which the selected case studies privilege refugee status as the lens through which to understand resettlement problems experienced by refugees, while Chapter 3 addresses the failure of the selected case studies to offer coherent definitions of integration and host community. This recurring problem yields the situation addressed in Chapter 4, which is the prohibitive complexity of the set of claims, and indeed some of the individual claims themselves, made by the selected case studies. Finally, the conclusion lays out how and why this complexity can have implications for refugees, their receiving societies, and the academic community focusing on this topic.

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<sup>8</sup> The selected case studies include the following: Da Lomba 2010; Lewis 2010; McKeary and Newbold 2010; McPherson 2010; Mulvey 2010; Smyth and Kum 2010; Valenta and Bunar 2010; and Vrečer 2010. The only article excluded from this study, aside from the introduction (Smyth *et al.* 2010), is Strang and Ager 2010, which is not a case study but rather a set of concluding remarks for the issue.

<sup>9</sup> This paper relies upon the use of the term Global North by the *Journal of Refugee Studies* in selecting its articles. Although this issue does not offer a precise definition of the term, the countries explored in its selected studies include the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, Slovenia, Canada, and Australia. While recognizing that the Global North is a vague term and that a more precise definition may have benefited this issue of the journal, this paper maintains that, for its own purposes, a precise definition is not necessary, as the objective of this paper is to explore how discussions of this topic are framed rather than the substance of these discussions.



## 2 Choosing the subject

This chapter addresses the first and primary problem recurring in the refugee integration literature, which is the failure of many studies to justify why legal status is the appropriate lens through which to examine the challenges many refugees face upon resettlement. Put another way, it interrogates the premise that the challenges refugees face are peculiar to them in either nature or cause and thus different from the problems faced by those who are not refugees. This chapter proceeds by first presenting two ways in which the selected case studies rationalize their privileging of refugee status and then explaining the flaws in this reasoning. In doing so, it establishes the foundation for the next two chapters, which respectively address the problems in the literature with defining integration and with making social scientific claims about it.

### **Weighing different forms of identity**

The authors of the selected studies seldom justify their choices to explore the challenges that refugees face through the lens of legal protection status. While the self-evident rationale for doing so is that research on refugee resettlement would logically identify refugees as its population of concern, the choice to pare down the selection of subjects to refugees ought to be questioned more scrupulously. As the challenges that resettled refugees face – namely finding employment, accessing social services, and establishing social networks – are similarly experienced by many individuals without refugee status, it is important to justify why this status is so frequently privileged as a valuable or even appropriate lens through which to explore resettlement experiences. Given that there are innumerable variables, aside from the politically salient identities linked to immigration status, that may shape social and economic outcomes upon resettlement, academic research ought to entertain the possibility that any of these variables could also play a role, if not a more consequential one, in refugee resettlement.

The question of which criteria to use in selecting one's subjects is critical, as it requires the individual exploring these problems to assign value to different forms of identity. As it pertains to the production of academic knowledge, this decision confers power on the researcher to choose what is important and what is less so in understanding an individual's life. Even if a researcher sets out not to understand a particular type of problem but rather to identify the possible problems that a particular group of individuals may face (for example, see Smyth and Kum 2010), the way in which one delimits the group of interest is determined by the researcher's subjective ideas about which criteria are important. The process by which a researcher makes this decision is mediated by an incalculable range of factors – social, psychological, cultural, and political, among countless others – and is therefore difficult to disaggregate into discrete stages and variables.

Nevertheless, it is important to identify the context in which individuals are inclined to think that a given statement is true – in other words, the variables that make certain explanations seem more plausible than others. Laying out this point, the theory of power/knowledge posits the following: “Discourse is...to be analysed not in terms of who says what but in terms of the conditions under which those sentences will have a definite truth value, and hence are capable of being uttered. Such conditions will lie in the ‘depth’ knowledge of the time” (Hacking 1981: 32).

This ‘depth’ knowledge, which refers to “a postulated set of rules that determine what kinds of sentences are going to count as true or false in a domain” (Hacking 1981: 30), can involve, inter alia, political, cultural, social, and psychological phenomena. Although a thorough exploration of the ‘depth’ knowledge that conditions assumptions about belonging would entail a vast appraisal of social and individual life that lies well beyond the scope of this paper, the following section alternatively reviews two ways in which contingent notions of which variables matter in explaining

different features of social life are reflected in the selected case studies. Decisions regarding how to frame questions and findings about refugee integration hinge on the presumption, which is ubiquitous in the policy literature on refugees and migrants in host societies, that the refugee holds an anomalous status in society that, by virtue of its aberrance, is cardinal in shaping his or her life experiences (Marston 2004). The selected studies tenuously justify this assumption about refugee status in one of two ways: by maintaining the primacy of legal status or, to a lesser extent, by asserting that contesting problematic concepts requires the participation of individuals to whom these concepts are applied.

### **Privileging legal identity: justifications and drawbacks**

First, by presupposing a distinction between a resettled refugee who experiences particular problems and a non-refugee who experiences those same problems, refugee status is assumed to be paramount in shaping a refugee's resettlement problems. Although the reasons for drawing this distinction – made consciously or otherwise – are presumably embedded in 'depth' knowledge and therefore inexorably complex, it can broadly be stated that legal status assumes particular importance in refugee-related research because migration is mediated by a set of legal rights and processes. Furthermore, legal status as it pertains to citizenship constitutes at first glance a compelling method of formally differentiating between those who are wanted and unwanted, or at least those who are more wanted than others. These points, which exemplify the assumptions of belonging mentioned in the previous chapter, bring to the fore the legal identity of the refugee vis-à-vis the citizen.

To this end, a number of the selected case studies do indeed make the point that legal status is a decisive factor in resettlement because it determines one's rights and access to a range of services. For example, Da Lomba (2010) explores refugee resettlement experiences in the context of UK migration law, while Vrecer (2010) premises her work on the observation that refugees in Slovenia face greater difficulties than non-refugees primarily because their legal status prohibits employment. Likewise, McKeary and Newbold preface their case study on refugee health care experiences in Canada by suggesting that "much literature does not address the potentially unique health experiences of refugees" (2010: 523). This professed singularity of refugees' health care experiences refers to the legal frameworks that not only restrict refugees' access to care but also overburden health care providers so heavily that a prospective patient's refugee status makes health care providers less likely to accept this individual into their practices simply because his or her status presents an additional level of complication to providing care.

To the extent that refugee status determines an individual's rights to perform certain activities and access certain services, it seems reasonable to accord particular weight to this status in exploring refugee resettlement challenges. There is, in fact, some empirical literature that asserts the importance of refugee status relative to other variables, including linguistic abilities, in shaping a variety of resettlement outcomes (Bloch 2001). Similarly, albeit with a more theoretical bent, Strang and Ager point out that "there are multiple factors, many of which are structurally embedded in legal frameworks...which exclude refugees, and particularly asylum seekers, from frequenting the same spaces as other neighbours (poverty, no right to work and lack of language skills)..." (2010: 599). Indeed, it is hard to dispute the fact that some of the challenges encountered by refugees can be linked, at least in part, to the absence of certain rights or the presence of certain restrictions. For instance, an individual who is trained as a medical doctor in his country of origin but then resettles in a Global North country, where he is required to undergo another qualification program in order to practice medicine, is hindered from doing something he might otherwise do because of his legal status.

However, these justifications are attenuated by several points. First, the legal status that is identified by the aforementioned studies as primary in shaping refugees' resettlement challenges entails restrictions that similarly encumber many non-refugees with perhaps aberrant legal circumstances or disadvantaged socioeconomic situations. Poverty and barriers to health care afflict significant numbers of non-refugees for a variety of reasons, and even a lack of language skills constrains many migrants, as well as a significant number of native speakers whose substandard education and consequently weak command of language disqualify them from various types of employment. The potential counterargument that the experience of undergoing resettlement, rather than the fact of holding refugee status per se, conditions these problems falters because it does not address why refugees, as opposed to non-refugees who have also moved to a new country, are selected to be studied.

That individuals who are not refugees experience the same problems raises the possibility that broader structural issues, as opposed to legal status, shape the problems encountered by resettled refugees. In partial recognition of this point, McKeary and Newbold acknowledge that one of the barriers to refugees' health care access is the dearth of primary care providers, which similarly affects non-refugees. While the authors maintain that this shortage may incur specific challenges for refugees because of their frequently more complicated health care needs and insurance packages, these needs and drawbacks are also experienced by many non-refugees. Because individuals belonging to majority ethnic or racial groups are often just as likely to be marginalized in certain contexts (McGhee 2008), it is a questionable assumption that refugee status is the best way to encapsulate the disadvantage attending a particular social problem. This acknowledgment underscores the fundamental problem with using refugee status to understand refugees' problems: while a researcher can assume that legal status shapes one's set of legal rights, he or she cannot assume that this set of legal rights shapes one's problems. Establishing the relationship between rights and problems requires a much higher threshold of knowledge and a more seriously considered framework for approaching the topic.

Another point that undermines the rationale for prioritizing refugee status is that there is, in any given community, diversity within the population of refugees that calls into question the significance of their shared legal protection status. For instance, that some resettled refugees do not encounter commonly cited resettlement challenges suggests the existence of alternative variables, such as educational attainment or social connections, that condition refugees' vulnerability to particular challenges. Filtering a study of problems through the variable of refugee status while neglecting to assess the relative importance of other variables prematurely implies not only that other variables recede in importance, but also that refugee status affects individuals in similar ways. This assumption is particularly conspicuous in McKeary and Newbold's suggestion that refugees have a different set of health outcomes than do citizens and even other migrants, stemming from "the refugee experience and the resettlement process" (2010: 523). This generalization neglects the fact that the obsolete notion of "the refugee experience" (Stein 1981) has been by and large discredited in recognition of the breadth of refugees' experiences, shaped by the multiplicity of factors that bear on an individual's displacement and movement (Turton 2003); likewise, resettled refugees presumably undergo the resettlement process in different ways and therefore cannot be assumed to share resettlement experiences. Although McKeary and Newbold do acknowledge that refugees have varying experiences that may yield disparate health outcomes, their study is premised on the idea that these health care outcomes collectively differ from those of the population at large. While this study cites data showing that refugees generally have poorer health outcomes than the broader immigrant population, this comparison is arbitrary; the authors provide no reason to measure refugees' health care outcomes against those of immigrants in general. This sort of unjustified distinction serves only to reveal the 'depth' knowledge at work in

conditioning which variables – in this instance, legal status as a non-citizen – researchers deem to be valuable.

### **Letting the subject speak: deconstructing or reinforcing assumptions?**

Indeed, because researchers' biases notably pervade the literature, a number of the selected case studies attempt to deconstruct the assumptions underpinning commonly used categories. This motivation introduces the second rationale used in the examined literature for privileging refugee status in the selection of subjects, which is that choosing refugees as their subjects enables these individuals to speak about their own experiences and identities (McKeary and Newbold 2010; McPherson 2010; Vreecer 2010). Although not explicitly acknowledged in any of the selected case studies, one possible reason underlying this rationale is that it is more effective to select a more circumscribed group of subjects and gather a large amount of data from a small sample rather than to approach the problems at hand by collecting small amounts of data from a prohibitively large sample – including both refugees and non-refugees (Jacobson and Landau 2003). To this point, Vreecer justifies using “the emic perspective” because her objective is to obtain “thick or theoretical description which would enable the understanding of forced migrants” (2010: 487), while McPherson similarly “was looking for deep reflection based on personal experiences” (2010: 556).

However, while the studies employing this rationale are generally those that intend to avoid ascribing meaning to aspects of a subject's life to which that subject does not personally assign value, these studies in fact commit the same error that they lament: even though their research methods rely on an emic approach to collecting ethnographic data, an etic perspective informs their selection of subjects. Put more simply, those studies that purport to interrogate generally un-interrogated categories such as legal status are nevertheless framed around the assumption of a fundamental difference between those with and without refugee status, even though their authors set out to deconstruct this distinction. For instance, in her exploration of the role of events and parties in shaping feelings of community, Lewis joins the critiques of “[s]implistic constructions of bipolar opposition in the idea of being caught ‘between two cultures’” (2010: 574). However, her own paper treats asylum and refugee status in a way that contradicts her critique of the field; while she acknowledges that underprivileged white individuals may be just as likely to experience the same problems faced by many non-white refugees, she overlooks this observation in her selection of subjects, who were chosen only from a pool of resettled refugees. This point does not suggest that resettled refugees do not view their legal status as important, but rather that researchers have decided what is important based on their subjective choices to assign greater importance to legal status than to other variables.

### **Framing the problem around the refugee**

The flaws in these two broad rationales for privileging refugee status illustrate that, by pre-selecting the subjects of their studies, these authors have prematurely answered the question of why a resettled refugee's problem exists: because a refugee exists. Indeed, this is evident in the term “refugee integration itself” – a term denoting a field that is framed around a haphazard distinction. While one may argue that using refugee status as the primary criterion for the selection of subjects merely circumscribes a researcher's findings and curtails the capacity for generalization, the consequences can in fact be more profound. The premature selection of refugee status as the lens through which to explore the problems faced by resettled refugees erroneously frames the discussion of refugees' resettlement challenges around a concern with one element of who someone is – that is, a refugee – rather than why someone is being talked about – that is, because they have a problem. Consequently, in looking at the process identified as “integration” and its two constitutive parts – refugee and host community – the privileging of refugee status in studying resettlement infuses the research on these issues with a bias for problematizing the refugee. As the



next chapter points out, this flawed framework engenders conceptual ambiguity, which in turn yields a range of problems in the selected literature.

### 3 Defining integration

While the previous chapter illustrated how the selected case studies privilege without justification particular frameworks of understanding in their explorations of refugees' resettlement experiences, this chapter now addresses the ensuing conceptual ambiguity recurring in uses of the terms integration and host community. Although some common threads run between the various uses of these terms, there is a substantial amount of confusion about what integration actually refers to and the terms with which it is discussed. This chapter proceeds by first identifying some of the similarities and ambiguities in definitions of both integration and host community, and then pointing out how the overriding conceptual ambiguity lays a poor foundation for making claims about the nature of resettlement challenges.

#### **Diverse conceptualizations of integration**

One of the hallmarks of the refugee integration literature is the breadth of ideas about what integration actually means. Studies that situate themselves within this body of literature generally assume one of three different conceptualizations of integration. First, many studies use the term to refer to a goal to which both refugees and their new communities aspire (Ager and Strang 2008; Da Lomba 2010). Alternatively, some studies use integration to represent a means to achieve a goal, such as legal protection; this use of the term appears, for instance, in a number of studies of asylum seekers in the UK, where integration has come to refer to an informal prerequisite for the acquisition of refugee status (Griffiths *et al.* 2006). Finally, integration is occasionally used to represent a process or a set of experiences, specifically those presenting challenges to an individual's resettlement (Spencer 2006). While conceptual diversity is not intrinsically problematic, the existence of over one hundred identified indicators and proposed definitions of integration (Ager and Strang 2008) testifies to the disjointed nature of the literature and unveils the assumptions that inform how the term integration is defined, how it is used, and why it is used.

The diversity of conceptualizations of integration as either a goal, a means to achieve it or a set of experiences, as well as the existence of dozens of definitions and indicators, exposes the absence of both internal clarity and external consensus; that is, individual case studies by and large neglect to define integration, and the few descriptions that they offer generally differ from one another. As Castles *et al.* point out in their survey of the field, "[m]eanings vary from country to country, change over time, and depend on the interests, values and perspectives of the people concerned" (2002: 112). Indeed, in defending their oft-cited ten-piece conceptualization of integration (Ager and Strang 2004), Strang and Ager argue that conceptual plurality is to be expected because the term integration "reflect[s] prevailing cultural and political sensibilities" which vary across time and space (2010: 592). However, while it is self-evident that different understandings of integration arise from different contexts and ideas of oneself and others, this observation raises the question of what the purpose of an umbrella term for these different interpretations even is if the term can effectively take on whatever meaning one ascribes to it. Moreover, some organizations dispute the notion that the term integration reflects local realities and in fact opt not to use it at all because they view it as a "top-down term" (Castles *et al.* 2002: 114). Given that other authors foresee few prospects for conceptual clarity (Robinson 1998), it is important to assess, before laying out the consequences, the possible causes of these problems.

The primary force driving this conceptual ambiguity is not the variety of contexts in which ideas of belonging are explored but rather the fact that the pre-selected framework for understanding refugees' resettlement problems – their refugee status – has already molded the terms “host” and “refugee” such that they cannot become defined outside of the assumptions in which they are embedded. The perfunctory binary of belonging implied by legal protection status weakens the imperative of conceptual clarity because these subjects become defined primarily in relation to one another rather than by independently identifiable features; in other words, because the concept of fitting in requires both an external actor and a body of which that actor is supposed to become a part, this Manichean relationship becomes the defining element of the terms host and refugee. Consequently, the refugee is conceived of as deviating from the norm; the host community is the antithesis of this deviance; and integration is the process by which the refugee approaches the norm. Moreover, there is little obligation to develop a more nuanced understanding of these terms because they derive credibility merely from their position within a preconceived normative framework that holds fitting in to be desirable.

### **Common assumptions about integration**

Although much of the literature is marked by the obscurity that stems from this framework, it is first important to identify the few common threads running through the selected case studies, as these commonalities expose the assumptions that vitiate many of their findings. First, many studies view integration as a two-way process of “cultural exchange and the emergence of new cultural forms” (Vreecer 2010: 489), eschewing the outmoded assumption that it is incumbent upon outsiders to align their practices and values with those that predominate in the new community (Da Lomba 2010; Smyth and Kum 2010). This recognition of a dialectical cultural process constitutes one aspect of “the contemporary relationship between minority cultures and the dominant culture and society” (Mestheneos and Ioannidi 2002: 305) – a dynamic relationship that, amid the decline of more rigid terms such as assimilation, has come to frame the integration literature.

Another feature commonly noted in descriptions of integration is a concern with equality of opportunities or restitution of social status in a new community (McKeary and Newbold 2010; Smyth and Kum 2010). In this vein, several studies outline in some detail different forms of discrimination that create impediments to belonging (McKeary and Newbold 2010; Smyth and Kum 2010). For instance, McKeary and Newbold's review of problems in refugee health care in Canada points out barriers that “are counter to the expectation of the equitable delivery of health care” (2010: 534). Adopting this viewpoint with regard to economic variables, Vreecer draws upon Potocky-Tripodi (2000), who understands economic integration as the condition of “hav[ing] the same economic status as the members of any group of people who were born in the receiving country” (2010: 494). Clearly, then, integration is seen to be a process involving the reduction of disparities between the social outcomes of different groups.

One of these groups is, of course, the host community, which is broadly held as the second constitutive element of the integration process. Although a definition of “host community” is rarely alluded to, let alone elucidated, studies generally assume that it refers to the “pre-existing” group of people in a given place (Strang and Ager 2010: 598). Specifically, this “pre-existing” group holds the “dominant cultural norms in the host settlement society” (McPherson 2010: 552) that generally, although not always, bear some relation to an ethnic identity (Lewis 2010). However, these strands of similarity between uses of the term “host community” are thin and contribute minimally to an understanding of how authors of the selected studies conceptualize it, especially given that a number of them neglect to use it at all (McKeary and Newbold 2010; Smyth and Kum 2010) or, when they do, to present a realistic picture of its complexity in the country at hand (Mulvey 2010).



Based on these broad similarities running through the selected case studies, it can be inferred that integration is widely assumed to be a multidimensional process involving some sort of cultural exchange between those who are new to a place and those who are already settled there, with the latter constituting the group holding the dominant cultural values in that particular place. However, this vague definition contains many gaps and raises many questions. For instance, what is the nature of the cultural exchange in this process? If equality is the objective of this process, then how can equality be understood, given that there are generally significant disparities in social outcomes even within Global North communities? Moreover, given that many of these communities are increasingly heterogeneous, how do researchers treat individuals who do not fall neatly into the categories of new and pre-existing? Given that a “sense of belonging...reflects the existence of a permeable boundary between ‘self’ and ‘us’” (Yuval-Davis 2010: 276), it is critical that a study aiming to explore integration address these questions.

### **Challenges to conceptual clarity**

However, these questions not only go unanswered by the selected literature; they are also complicated by attempts to circumvent them. That is, in their efforts to shed light on topics that are already poorly framed, many studies do one of three things: devise subcategories of terms; refer to related terms; or take for granted how other studies use these terms. Discussing each of these strategies and their consequences in turn, it becomes clear that conceptual ambiguity presents a range of problems in making claims about belonging in refugee resettlement.

First, one of the most salient features recurring in the selected case studies is their frequent references to subcategories of integration. For instance, in their comparative study of Swedish and Norwegian refugee integration policies, Valenta and Bunar focus on “economic and residential integration” (2010: 465), even though they note that the topic is typically divided into “sub-processes” of “cultural integration, residential integration, economic integration and social integration” (466). Meanwhile, Vrečer looks at “economic, political and psychological integration” (2010: 484), although acknowledging that “[one] can speak of housing integration, economic integration, political and legal integration, socio-cultural integration (which includes religious integration), educational integration, health integration and psychological integration” (Frechette 1994, in Vrečer 2010: 490). Moreover, some studies tautologically suggest that these subcategories of integration are interrelated; for instance, Vrečer proposes that “[p]sychological integration is an important indicator of the success of integration” (2010: 496). Although one could argue that the disaggregation of integration into subcategories appropriately accounts for the diversity of ways in which individuals experience belonging, the use of subsidiary terms does not obviate the necessity for defining their umbrella term.

In addition to complicating an already ambiguous term by creating ambiguous subcategories, a number of studies attempt to elude a more precise conceptualization of integration by referring to concepts commonly used in its place. For example, McPherson’s study of integration as perceived by a small group of refugee women in Australia lays out some general guidelines for how to conceive of integration. In situating the term between multiculturalism and assimilation, she claims that integration, by contrast, refers to two-way processes, equal opportunities, and social bonds; although more “progressive” a concept than those of assimilation and multiculturalism, integration still retains the conservative roots of the latter two terms because it is “concerned with the adaptation by outsiders to local norms” (McPherson 2010: 547). Likewise, Vrečer uses a related term in her attempt to define integration, noting a point made by Berry (2001) that “[i]ntegration is best realized when the dominant group in a receiving society implements multiculturalism” (2010: 489). The introduction of these associated terms, many of which are themselves ambiguous,

constitutes another way in which some studies attempt to define integration not by what it is but rather by what it is not.

Finally, some studies make no attempt to define the term they discuss but rather take for granted the use of the term in other studies without considering how these studies define it. This strategy is particularly conspicuous in the two studies that review state integration policies (Da Lomba 2010 and Mulvey 2010), as they discuss the policies themselves as opposed to the objectives that these policies purportedly pursue, namely integration. However, the argument that a study seeks merely to discuss the policies designed to address a concept rather than to elucidate the concept itself is weak, as any comprehensive policy discussion entails clarifying the purpose of the policy; if the purpose – in this case, integration – is unclear because the term is poorly conceptualized, this will certainly influence how studies evaluate the success of policy outcomes.

### **The host community and assumptions of belonging**

Just as integration is poorly defined, definitions of the host community are almost categorically absent; the selected case studies not only leave the boundaries of the host community unclarified, but they also fail to identify the features of the host community that distinguish it from refugees. Part of this failure could be attributed to the fact that liberalism does not offer a coherent account of community (Parekh 1992), thereby making it prohibitively complicated to attempt to define. However, given that “[h]uman beings never exist only as individuals but rather as part of the wider socio-cultural environment which affects their personal, cultural and ethnic identities” (Vrečer 2010: 490), it is crucial to consider the influence of this environment on individuals’ senses of self and their relations with others. As identities are fluid not only across but also within communities, an acknowledgement of the diversity within the receiving community – diversity that may, in fact, affect refugees’ resettlement experiences – is particularly important.

Although discussions of the host community seldom appear within the selected case studies, several studies do acknowledge the need to avoid assuming the “monolithic” nature (Vrečer 2010: 491) of the receiving community. To this end, some studies break down integration into the aforementioned subcategories; for instance, instead of offering a coherent definition of host community and integration, Valenta and Bunar choose instead to divide their study “into different domains of the receiving host society” (2010: 464) as a way of acknowledging that individuals can belong in different ways. However, this method for dealing with the conceptual ambiguity of these terms falters; while belonging may affect individuals more acutely in, for instance, financial matters than educational matters, the fundamental distinction about belonging made in these studies still rests along the axis of refugee status such that all individuals without refugee status fall into the sweeping category of host community. Among the consequences of this generalization is the failure to leave open the possibility that certain refugees may actually belong to a community more strongly than do some natural-born citizens. Rather than recognizing the diversity of belonging within the population of both citizens and non-citizens, this acknowledgement only recognizes heterogeneity within the community of citizens and reinforces an arbitrarily rendered distinction of belonging.

### **Consequences of conceptual ambiguity**

Having reviewed the ways in which the terms “integration” and “host community” are used in the literature, it becomes apparent that a sequence of problems emerges from this conceptual ambiguity. First, when a study fails to interrogate and define the terms it uses, the space in which one can question the assumptions that the field takes for granted shrinks because these assumptions become embedded in the findings of the study. As the idea of the refugee constitutes the rationale for the existence of the field of refugee integration, the terms integration and host community become defined in relation to the refugee. Consequently, the assumptions about the

refugee that were explored in the previous chapter become ingrained in the terms integration and host community.

As a consequence, a flawed set of terms pervades the body of knowledge created about refugees' resettlement problems. However, the cursory use of these terms is not inconsequential. Applying the theory of power/knowledge to the production of this knowledge, each subsequent instance in which a study on refugees uses the terms integration, host or refugee without interrogating them and justifying their use reinforces the assumptions inherent in them:

*The tactics take shape in piecemeal fashion without anyone's wittingly knowing what they add up to. If we turn to the practice of collecting information about populations, each new classification, and each new counting within that classification, is devised by a person or a committee with a straightforward, limited goal in mind. Then the population itself is increasingly classified, rearranged, and administered by principles each one of which is innocently put forward by this or that technocrat (Hacking 1981: 35).*

Therefore, the collective impact of reiterating ill-conceived terms is the creation of knowledge that is laden with the power imbalances implicit in assumptions of belonging.

A potent illustration of the ramifications of this process can be found in Mulvey's case study on asylum policy and integration in the UK. Mulvey's first use of the term "integration", for which he never offers a definition, occurs in his discussion of "ethnic unrest" in the UK in 2001 and subsequent terrorist attacks in New York and London (2010: 448). By neglecting to define integration and instead presenting it in a context of national security challenges, each subsequent use of the term in his paper implies an association between integration and insecurity. Over the course of a study and across numerous studies, this process generates a body of knowledge about subjects that it seeks to understand – in this case, refugees – by using terms heavily infused with researchers' biases.

Another consequence of conceptual ambiguity, which reflects a methodological problem mentioned in the previous chapter, is that a number of studies attempt to pursue clarity within the flawed framework that generates the conceptual ambiguity in the first place. That is, instead of questioning why the variable of refugee status has been chosen to frame the exploration of resettled refugees' problems, these studies are premised on the assumption that the framework is appropriate and thus instead attempt to elucidate the new terms – for instance, the subcategories of integration – and create a semblance of academic rigor. This process, which reflects a power/knowledge claim, is illustrated in the example of the prison: "We do indeed get individual tactics invented for particular needs. Prison architecture is modified to make it harder for prisoners to hang themselves – but always with a certain model of how a prison is to be built" (Hacking 1981: 35).

As such, while both Mulvey and McPherson point out some of the assumptions of "self" and "other" immanent in discussions of integration – the latter critiquing the idea that "[i]ntegrationism remains concerned with the adaptation by outsiders to local norms" (McPherson 2010: 547) – they nevertheless continue to work within a flawed framework and consequently legitimize that framework. This not only squanders resources by focusing on ancillary topics such as psychological integration or multiculturalism; it also adds another layer of complexity to the literature, which will be addressed in greater detail in the next chapter.

This overview of the conceptual ambiguity recurring in the selected studies illustrates how the ill-conceived framework for approaching refugees' resettlement challenges produces terms that are vaguely defined and, through repeated iterations, reify this flawed framework and the poorly

defined terms that constitute it. Having now presented the problems laying at the foundation of this literature, the following chapter examines the ways in which these problems manifest themselves in the claims made about refugee integration in the context of Global North resettlement.

## 4 Making claims about refugee integration

Having presented the flawed framework and conceptual ambiguity underpinning the refugee integration literature, this paper now explores some of the claims made about the nature of resettlement, which collectively render a set of conclusions that is prohibitively complex. As a consequence, both within and across these studies, research seems to render little of social scientific value. This chapter proceeds by outlining the six main categories of claims appearing in these studies and explaining some of the problems with them both as independent claims and as contributions to the field of refugee integration in Global North resettlement countries.

One of the overarching themes of the selected case studies is the complexity of integration. This complexity has been previously alluded to in citing figures such as the dozens of definitions and indicators of integration and its subcategories, as well as in noting widespread references to related terms such as assimilation and multiculturalism. In light of these qualifications, much of the literature proposes that integration affects, and is affected by, an enormous range of social, economic, political, cultural, and personal variables; phrased more bluntly, it argues that integration affects, and is affected by, everything. To a certain extent, this is a lucid point; integration, insofar as a coherent definition appears in the selected literature, involves a transition from one society to another and is mediated by the unbounded intricacy of human experience. However, for the purpose of understanding integration as a subject of social scientific inquiry, it is important to understand the nature of this complexity because one's ability to glean anything meaningful from the literature depends on the extent to which its findings can be generalized. Although there are areas of substantial overlap, the claims made in the selected case studies can be broken down into six broad types, each of which will be explained in turn.

### Linking integration to other variables

The first category of claims comprises those that casually assert a direct relationship between a variable and integration but still fail to offer a coherent definition of integration. For instance, Smyth and Kum's conclusion that the acquisition of skill-appropriate employment is an indicator of integration falters because the study fails to define what integration is, as evident in the authors' admission that "[t]he article discusses the contested concept of integration but does not attempt to measure it" (2010: 504). Similarly drawing conclusions about undefined terms, Mulvey's policy analysis of the broader resettlement environment concludes that "the atmosphere of political and public hostility inhibited the ability of many migrants to integrate [which] was most pronounced for the least wanted migrants: asylum seekers and refugees" (2010: 457). In the same vein, Valenta and Bunar's comparison of Swedish and Norwegian integration policies advocates that refugee integration policies be adjusted by enlarging their scope and, until doing so, tempering their expectations, while Da Lomba makes the normative claim that a "[c]ommitment to refugee integration...calls for a reassessment of the linkage currently established between legal status and integration" (2010: 432).

Each of these conclusions purports to either draw a link between integration and another variable or to advocate for examining another variable as having potential bearing on integration. However,



as explained in the preceding chapter, these claims merely create a new layer of complexity to disaggregate absent a coherent definition of integration. Instead of providing greater clarity, they primarily serve the notion that there is merely one more component of integration to elucidate before establishing a coherent definition – a notion that gravitates toward contradicting the very existence of the academic topic by implying that integration can only be understood by first understanding everything relevant to it. It should be noted that most of the studies exhibit this tendency to some degree because none of them offer a coherent definition of integration.

### **Exploring integration from all angles**

Building upon the idea that drawing links between variables and integration merely adds to the sense that integration cannot be defined without clarifying these relationships, the second category of conclusions essentially argues that integration must be explored from all angles – that is, from a range of disciplinary perspectives and through multiple stages of the refugee's life. For instance, Vrečer says:

*...a multi-disciplinary approach to integration is not sufficient, and we thus need to take a comprehensive approach towards researching integration, taking into account factors such as time and the various phases of the integration process such as arrival, incorporation, permanent residency and citizenship (2010: 490).*

In addition to looking at different phases of the refugee's experience using various disciplinary approaches, Valenta and Bunar emphasize the importance of understanding the “context of reception” (2010: 466). This context is itself fluid and multifaceted, involving “[i]ndividuals, minority and majority groups, associates and organizations as well as formal structures of the host society such as education, politics and the labour market” (Valenta and Bunar 2010: 466).

However, while this assertion initially seems reasonable in acknowledging the heterogeneity within the host community that goes largely unrecognized in the selected case studies, such claims neither suggest any causal relationships nor even leave open the possibility that causality can ever be meaningfully explored along those axes. Because these studies merely assert that there are a plethora of factors impacting on integration, they effectively exclude the possibility that certain factors can be isolated as having particular importance. In other words, they falter as social scientific claims because they make no actual argument but rather equivocate, essentially concluding that “more research is needed” (Nicholson 2014: 3). Recommending avenues for further research is not, of course, problematic in and of itself; however, making it the crux of an argument, and collectively rendering it the essence of a field of academic knowledge, is. Rather than clarifying the nature of integration in the context of refugee resettlement, these types of claims serve only to obfuscate the literature.

### **Subsidiary factors affecting integration**

This sort of obfuscation also occurs as a result of the third category of claims, which assert that there are, in addition to relatively standard variables such as employment prospects, social networks, and educational attainment, a range of subsidiary factors that also affect integration. These factors mainly comprise those hinging on the intimate and, to some degree, intangible qualities of the individual. For instance, Lewis concludes the following:

*...spaces, places, and activities...are dynamic, fluid and matters of personal dilemma and wider social contestation among refugees, whose perceptions are likely to change at different stages of settlement, according to social networks, and in different 'community' spaces (2010: 585-6).*

This type of conclusion, which essentially contends that an individual's sense of his experiences varies according to where he is, who he is with, and how he thinks, yields little of social scientific value because the highly personal nature of these variables make them prohibitively difficult to measure and compare. While this paper does not disagree with the argument that refugee resettlement may indeed be better understood using, for instance, a transnational framework that appreciates the complexity of lived experiences (Wahlbeck 2002), it serves little purpose to make academic claims that dwell on the fluidity of personal experiences to the neglect of, for instance, conceptual clarity. Reflecting other integration literature which posits that the personality of a migrant affects integration into the host community (Mestheneos and Ioannidi 2002), as well as the theoretical literature on refugee integration which asserts the importance of friendliness (Ager and Strang 2008), family, and "degree of unwantedness" (Strang and Ager 2010) in shaping resettlement experiences, this category of claims can be classified as banal because it can generally be considered common knowledge that the intimate aspects of an individual's life and character bear on his experiences.

While such truisms have little policy or academic relevance, the complexity that they collectively create can have various implications. For instance, they may have an obfuscatory effect: because each of these banalities, such as degrees of friendliness and "wantedness", hinge on a huge range of other variables, these sorts of conclusions serve merely to suggest that there are innumerable variables to explore, thereby detracting from efforts to elucidate the concept of integration. Additionally, these conclusions may create a void that studies attempt to sidestep by merely positing that integration is a multidimensional concept that cannot be imputed to a single factor. In other words, the literature tautologically implies that its claims about integration are complicated because integration is complicated. Finally, by couching such banalities in the language of social scientific rigor with reference to a marginalized group of individuals, especially when these very facts are taken for granted to be true for the population at large, authors merely reinforce the fundamental distinctions between refugees and non-refugees that were discussed in Chapter 1.

### **Arbitrary factors affecting integration**

Similar to banal claims in their relatively subsidiary status in the literature, the fourth category of claims comprises those that are arbitrary, or "from which general truths and conclusions cannot be drawn (Nicholson 2014: 3). For instance, claims that volunteering helps refugees to integrate (Da Lomba 2010) and that "issues of interpretation/language, cultural competency, health care coverage, availability of services, isolation, poverty, and transportation" (McKeary and Newbold 2010: 529) affect integration do not form the basis for sound social scientific knowledge because of their random or impenetrably complex nature. For instance, suggesting links between volunteering or isolation and integration does not shed light on how to conceptualize integration because these two concepts are mediated by an enormous range of variables that, if explored as primary variables themselves, may in fact prove to be the real force behind the relationship rather than merely mediating factors. As a consequence, these types of conclusions serve the same function as banal claims: they merely complicate the already nebulous concept of integration by introducing a new set of variables to explore.

### **Integration as a prerequisite for other objectives**

Not only do many case studies on refugee integration submit that a wide array of factors contribute to integration, a fifth category of claims asserts that integration is itself a prerequisite for achieving other resettlement objectives. For instance, Vreecer cites research claiming that integration is necessary for mental health: "Integration also appears to be a precondition for successful completion of mourning processes...Integration itself mainly provides the new objects needed – for example, economic integration provides many new objects" (2010: 496).



Likewise, Da Lomba (2010) argues that the relationship between legal status and integration is multidimensional; legal status not only shapes integration outcomes, but integration is itself often a prerequisite for the acquisition of that very legal status, as border authorities look for evidence that individuals will fit into society. Indeed, this category of claims overlaps with a number of others; mourning is an arbitrary variable to cite, while the perhaps dialectical relationship between legal status and integration takes for granted the vaguely defined term “integration”. However, they also serve to complicate the concept of integration by, amid many assertions that integration is a dependent variable, suggesting that it is likewise an independent one.

### **Efforts at a reflexive approach to integration**

Finally, the sixth category of claims exhibited in the selected case studies can be identified as those purporting to suggest a more reflexive approach to the study of refugee resettlement but, in fact, failing to do so because of methodologies that reinforce the assumptions they purport to deconstruct. Indeed, this effort to clarify the terms of the literature has been addressed in the previous two chapters and testifies to the efforts of some studies to approach the topic more reflexively. However, the only selected study that explicitly sets out to problematize the concept of integration still falls prey to the inclination to privilege refugee status as the most appropriate way to understand refugees’ problems and consequently falls short of its objective. Asserting that “integrationism represents migrant policy subjects as problematic against dominant local social and cultural norms” (2010: 564), McPherson suggests that integration is a concept beset by problems; yet in her effort to interrogate the concept of integration, she chooses refugee women as her subjects, thereby situating her work among those that privilege the very term – refugee status – that she suggests constitutes the core problem with migration policy. Consequently, this study likewise reifies the idea of the refugee as the aberrant character, perhaps not as the problem per se in a society but rather the problem to be studied in society. In other words, she fails to pose the real question, which is why she chooses the refugee as her subject in the first place.

Although not as explicitly as McPherson, Lewis also seeks a more nuanced explanation for refugees’ experiences than what is commonly assumed in the literature by setting out to explore how refugees understand their relationships with their old and new communities. She argues that “Rather than presenting ‘ethnic identity’ or ‘refugee community’ as either promoting or countering integration with ‘society’, the ambiguity of events demonstrates that spaces, places, and activities cannot be categorized as either ‘ethnic’ or as part of ‘society’” (2010: 585).

Although recognizing the subtleties of belonging, Lewis still reifies arbitrary distinctions between refugees and non-refugees by her choice of subject: the refugee. Put another way, rather than exploring how all individuals negotiate ideas of belonging at community events, this study looks only at refugees, thereby assuming that they have a distinctive experience of belonging. Therefore, this type of claim yields very little of social scientific value because it still privileges a way of exploring problems that reinforces false distinctions.

Having reviewed six broad categories of claims made in the selected literature, it becomes apparent that the flawed framework and conceptual ambiguity discussed in the first and second chapters yield a set of conclusions that have minimal social scientific value because they essentially assert the impenetrable complexity of the topic of refugee integration. In creating a web of variables to navigate, these studies collectively fail to shed light on the nature of refugee integration in the context of Global North resettlement and instead continue to add layers of complexity through which more rigorous studies will have to sift in order to reframe discussions of this topic. Recognizing the need for an alternative framework for approaching the study of refugee resettlement and attendant issues of nationhood, citizenship, and belonging, the following concluding chapter will outline some of these challenges.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore the role that academic knowledge on refugee integration in the Global North plays in light of the unmitigated influence of assumptions about belonging permeating the case studies on this topic. It is not concerned with why individuals – in this case, academics – would be interested in constructing integration as a body of knowledge or why they so often neglect to interrogate the assumptions underpinning the concept of integration and ancillary terms. Rather, it seeks to understand how the topic of integration is constituted by “relations of power, not relations of meaning” (Foucault 1980, in Hacking 1981: 37) and how an alternative heuristic is necessary in order to produce a body of academic knowledge that renders meaningful claims about refugees’ resettlement challenges. To this end, this paper first identified how the selected case studies of refugee resettlement in the Global North and attendant issues of belonging are viewed almost exclusively through the lens of refugee status. Subsequently, it presented how the terms integration and host community are left ambiguous as a result of having been prematurely placed in a narrow framework of understanding. Having reviewed these conceptual problems, this paper finally presented six categories of claims that collectively render a set of findings that is prohibitively complex and upon which little further research can be based.

The primary argument of this paper is that the failure to appropriately frame the exploration of a social issue entails the aforementioned sequence of problems. By privileging the politically salient concept of refugee status, these studies reinforce the assumptions about belonging that constitute the framework in which refugee resettlement challenges are discussed. As the principles of power/knowledge point out, the repeated use of a flawed framework and the ill-defined terms that encase these assumptions generate a body of knowledge that not only encapsulates power imbalances but also perpetuates them. This paper has not explicitly sought to explore the power imbalances involved in the creation of knowledge on refugee integration, as an assessment of dynamics of power would entail a broader appraisal of the “depth knowledge” presented in Chapter 2 that lies beyond the scope of this literature review. However, it can be said that state-centric assumptions about belonging entail dynamics of power, and the presence of these assumptions in the claims made about refugee integration present one way in which power generates knowledge and knowledge generates power.

This conclusion suggests that a meaningless claim is not necessarily an innocuous claim. Rather, a body of academic knowledge that contributes few causal claims and yet offers an array of conclusions that essentially assert impenetrable complexity can render a number of undesirable effects. Therefore, it is critical to examine why the inconclusiveness of the literature matters for both its subjects – that is, those categorized as refugees and those categorized as their hosts – and its creators – that is, the researchers and the broader academic community. Accordingly, the remainder of this section outlines some of the consequences for these three broad groups of individuals. It is important to note that, because a more definitive account of the consequences of this literature requires a greater body of data than is offered by this paper, the following section seeks only to raise some potential problems arising from these issues rather than to exhaustively cover them.

First, studies on a topic such as integration can actually contribute to the problems that they endeavor to understand, namely those that refugees encounter during resettlement. As authors privilege refugee status in understanding these problems, they divest refugees of the ability to assert the aspects of their identity that they deem to be most relevant. This subtle act of disempowerment occurs even in studies such as those of McPherson and Lewis, which purport to empower the voices of their “marginalized” subjects but in practice diminish those voices by relying upon arbitrary and parochial distinctions in selecting their subjects. As the theory of power/knowledge asserts, researchers’ gravitation toward refugee status as a primary marker of identity reinforces the idea that refugee status is a valuable tool for understanding refugees’ problems and the disparities in social outcomes between refugees and non-refugees. This idea, however, is constructed, and it reinforces the power of those who construct it. As a consequence, refugees are further embedded in a position of marginalization.

This process of marginalization also occurs through the complexity of the claims made in the selected literature, which reinforces the sense of irreconcilable distance between refugees and non-refugees. By promoting the idea that integration is inherently complex, the literature implies that the relationship between the refugee and the non-refugee is also inherently complex. Introducing so many potential variables that could foster this sense of complexity, these studies serve only to suggest that there is distance along all axes of social and personal life between refugees and non-refugees.

This point suggests a third potential consequence of the inconclusiveness of the literature, which is that the concept of refugee integration effectively creates a problem where one would otherwise not exist. For instance, it is conceivable that it would not occur to individuals unfamiliar with the term integration to think that the resettlement of refugees in their communities could present problems for both the refugees and existing residents; in other words, the mere existence of the term and its different iterations render it a possibility that might not otherwise occur naturally. Indeed, this would be a difficult assertion to prove, and one could probably only go so far as to say that the literature reinforces the suspicion that problems naturally arise when refugees resettle in Global North countries. Nevertheless, this eventuality imbues discussions of the topic with a vague sense of complicity in the problems they address.

However, it should be noted that this paper does, in fact, recognize the difficulty of deconstructing terms without relying too heavily upon them. Given that a limited set of vocabulary exists – both for academics and the public at large – for discussing these issues, it is challenging to attempt to question these terms, as Lewis and McPherson in particular try to do, without allowing their biases and inconsistencies to influence a study’s methodology or findings. This challenge reflects the “double burden” shouldered by feminists who “have to use a language which is not entirely their own, but one dominated by male discourse” (Caplan 1988: 16). Nevertheless, having recognized these obstacles to conceptual clarity, it is important that the assumptions embedded in the terms used to discuss refugee resettlement be consistently interrogated so as to avoid the aforementioned consequences accruing to resettled refugees.

Although refugees arguably stand to suffer more acutely from the assumptions of belonging permeating the literature, those individuals who fall within the category of host community do, in fact, bear the consequences as well. In failing to define the host community, save for its position in contradistinction to the refugee’s outsider status, studies overlook the complexity of wide-ranging problems across Global North communities. This complexity, which manifests itself in a range of socioeconomic, cultural, and political experiences, even within some populations that may be relatively ethnically homogeneous, could be as powerful a factor in generating problems faced by resettled refugees as the process of resettlement itself. Moreover, the fixation on refugees’ problems

draws attention away from the possibility that problems faced by non-refugees in the same area may have the very same causes as those experienced by refugees. This is not to suggest that a researcher must observe all problems with equal interest, but rather that one must consider, when seeking to explore a problem faced by a refugee, the fact that non-refugees may similarly experience the same problem, as this may call into question the value of privileging refugee status as the most relevant variable in explaining the problem at hand. Indeed, the structural problems that create challenges for refugees almost certainly impact on non-refugees as well, particularly those who are predisposed to be vulnerable, in some of the same ways that they impact on refugees.

The second potential consequence for members of what is termed the host community is the intimation of responsibility on the part of individuals purportedly belonging to this community. The very word “host” generally implies either an obligation of hospitality or a parasitic relationship by which the host feeds those dependent upon it. This not only places the refugee in a position of dependency, it also potentially places a burden on those members of the host community who may not be willing or able to shoulder it. Again, this is not to suggest that a community does not have the responsibility to welcome and support new members; rather, it merely suggests that the existence and nature of this duty – whether towards new members or old ones – must be rigorously interrogated rather than haphazardly treated as, for instance, a moral obligation, lest a false debate ensue whereby normative assumptions about responsibilities to others adulterate academic and policy discussions. Privileging particular problems – and privileging particular groups of individuals who have problems – entails a range of consequences for both those who acknowledge these problems and those who experience them and must not be done without due reflection.

Finally, and perhaps most pertinently to the research question at hand, are the consequences that the refugee integration literature’s problems entail for members of the academic community who conduct research on refugees. The true gravity of these consequences does not lie, as may be assumed, in the fact that precious resources are allocated to research that renders very little of social scientific merit, although this indeed ought to be a concern. Rather, the fundamental problem with the literature is that it neglects to explore the topic reflexively. While some studies do in fact acknowledge the “othering” process that characterizes much of the broader refugee literature (Lewis 2010; McPherson 2010), these studies still fail to ask themselves why they are exploring the subject in the first place when, in fact, this question lies at the root of the “othering” process. The result is a body of knowledge that says little about Global North resettlement and more about those who set out to study it. This sets a poor precedent for the production of academic knowledge by making this knowledge function more as a tool to be used at the discretion of those who create it rather than as a tool for investigating social problems.

Having outlined a number of critiques of the existing literature and presented some of its consequences, this paper wishes to reiterate that it does not suggest that valid social scientific claims cannot be made. Indeed, similar to the point made by a critique of non-falsifiable claims in education research, this paper “does not dismiss the possibility of making more limited claims on the basis of empirical investigation” (Hyslop-Margison 2010: 816). Having said that, case studies abound regarding refugees, but frameworks for approaching them remain few and far between (Malkki 1995).

What this paper does recommend, even beyond developing conceptual clarity, is that researchers who explore issues involving refugees – whether those issues involve third-country resettlement or otherwise – ask themselves why they have selected their subject. This is, indeed, a deeply reflexive question; it is also an imperative one. Whether research on refugee resettlement, or for that matter refugees more broadly, is motivated by a “sedentary analytical bias” (Malkki 1995: 508), an

“inchoate idea about witness” (Rieff 2002: 17), or the desire for “a legally administered cosmopolitan society” (Rieff 2002: 18), the motivation must be understood because it shapes the framework for studying their problems. Furthermore, while devising an appropriate framework is “an important first step” (Jacobson and Landau 2003: 3), it is crucial to then ensure that the assumptions sought to be deconstructed do not inform the methodology in ways that compromise a study’s findings. As a final and broader point, it is worth bearing in mind that, when a researcher asserts that “we must engage with migrants and refugees,” (McPherson 2010: 565), the appropriate subject for study is not migrants and refugees but rather, and much more challengingly, *we*.

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