Refugee identity and integration in Germany during the European "Migration Crisis": Why local community support matters, and why policy gets it wrong

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Abstract

Although the 2015 "refugee crisis" dominated Europe's policy-making agenda, little research was actually conducted with refugees. Using focus groups, interviews and photovoice, this study explores the identities and integration of 20 refugees, in two German towns, in 2017. While previous scholarship has rightly emphasized the importance of secure legal status for integration, this study highlights the critical role of community support by national citizens in fostering a greater sense of belonging and integration. The study thus calls into question new integration policies, like Germany's, which absolve national citizens of any responsibility for integration.

Keywords*:* refugee crisis, social representations, identity, integration, Germany

Migration and Identity

The question of how best to support and "integrate" people into new societies has never been more pressing. This was particularly true in the face of the so-called European refugee crisis, which saw more than 1.5 million people displaced to Europe between 2015 and 2017 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019).

Research on acculturation suggests that the way in which people integrate into new societies depends on a range of factors, including who people *feel they can be* in their new societies – i.e. their *identities* (e.g. Esses et al., 2017; Kunst et al., 2016), and who they are *permitted to be* – i.e. the *representations* that members of those societies hold of them (e.g. Esses et al., 2010; Florack et al., 2003). In the context of the European refugee crisis, however, there has been considerably more research on the *representation* question than on the *identity* question, with research focusing on how host societies view refugees (e.g. Ahrens, 2017; Nightingale et al., 2017; Küpper et al., 2016) rather than on how refugees view themselves within host societies. We know, for example, that Europeans view refugees as outsiders who threaten the imagined homogeneity of Europe (Holmes & Castaneda, 2016) and represent economic competition (Wike et al., 2016), or a potential drain on social services (Bansak et al., 2016). Conversely, refugees are also viewed as people in need, fleeing war and persecution, who should be helped on humanitarian grounds (Ahrens, 2017; Küpper et al., 2016). Such representations undoubtedly have an effect on acculturation.

Questions of identity, however, are equally important to understanding refugee acculturation. Those who move face a complex task when entering a receiving society. Many are torn between the maintenance of their home country's traditions, values and culture, on the one hand, and adaption and orientation to the new society, on the other (Deaux, 2006). Depending on who refugees feel they *are*, and are *able to become*, they make decisions about their integration (e.g., learning a language and establishing intergroup contact). Society's representations of refugees certainly play a role, as they determine the social and political

climate in which refugees make these decisions. Immigrants who have more positive contact with host-country nationals have been shown to feel more welcomed (Tropp et al., 2018), and intergroup climate has been shown to affect immigrants' acculturation preferences, with higher levels of social prejudice affecting immigrants' desires to maintain cultures of origin (Christ et al., 2013). However, what this reinforces is that representations matter, in part, because of the way that they affect refugee identity.

This paper seeks to build on existing scholarship on refugee identity by exploring further the *refugee perspective*, in the context of the European refugee crisis, and considering its implications for the question of integration. Taking Germany as a case study, it seeks to explore the question: How do refugees understand their identity in the German context, and what are the implications for their integration? To do so, it draws on two theoretical traditions in social psychology: social identity and social representations.

Social Identity and Social Representations

Social Identity Theory argues that part of an individual's self-concept stems from membership in relevant social groups (e.g., Germans, immigrants, local communities), which suggest appropriate ways to be, and to act, in relation to other social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Social Representations Theory posits that societies hold social representations of relevant "objects" (e.g., "refugees"), which comprise a stock of "values, ideas[, beliefs] and practices" that function as systems of meaning making, helping people to orient themselves in the social world and make sense of the unknown (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii, 1961, 1984).

These two theories are complementary, because the social categories available for identification (e.g., German, immigrant, refugee) are also social representations (Augoustinos, 2001; Wagner et al., 1999). The social identity of a group comprises the shared

representations it holds of itself, which are, in turn, influenced by the social representations others hold of it (Howarth, 2002; Jodelet, 1989; Wagner et al., 2012). Members of a given social group tend to strive for a positive in-group image (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) but do so against a backdrop of social representations. Depending on the distribution of power in a society, certain groups' representations have more weight than others (Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011). When it comes to migrants, host-nationals' perspectives often carry considerable weight, and in turn influence migrant identity. Their perspectives become institutionalized in social policies, which then influence who migrants can be, by influencing, for example, the extent to which migrants can participate in various aspects of public life, such as employment and politics (Andreouli & Howarth, 2013). As such, social representations become world-making assumptions, or self-fulfilling prophecies, creating the "social practices that [simultaneously] sustain them" (Elcheroth et al., 2011, p.743). Although social representations may have negative impacts, theoretically this is not inevitable. Social scaffolding, a concept within Social Representations Theory, describes "actions and structures that support development at the individual and social levels" (Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hernández, 2013, p. 185). This concept emphasises that supportive people and institutions play a key role in fostering the wellbeing of people facing uncertainty, and in fighting marginalisation. Such processes are key to understanding integration.

Integration

In the literature, as in policy and public discourse, the concept of integration has been diffuse and, at times, imprecise (Castles et al., 2002; Spencer & Charsley, 2016). It is often confused with assimilation (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2018; Phillimore, 2012), the relinquishing of an origin-country identity in favor of a monolithic, receiving-country identity (Berry, 1992). Problematically, this understanding ignores the heterogeneous composition of many receiving societies, and describes a one-way process, undertaken only by migrants (Grzymala-

Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018; Spencer & Charsley, 2016). A more widely accepted

definition, among scholars, is that of a two-way process in which members of receiving

societies also adapt (e.g., Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019; Phillimore, 2020; Spencer & Charsley,

2016). Integration is, moreover, a non-linear process of on-going identity negotiation (Bhatia

& Ram, 2009; Castles et al., 2002), which cannot be measured purely via quantifiable

outcomes such as education-level, employment, health or income (Grzymala-Kazlowska &

Phillimore, 2018; Korac, 2003).

Lately, various scholars have reinforced the idea that integration can happen in

different domains (Ager & Strang, 2008; Spencer and Charsley, 2016). Spencer and Charsley

(2016), for example, break these down into structural, social, civic and political, cultural, and

identity-based domains – turning integration into a theoretical framework, as much as it is a

concept to be defined. In their framework, the *structural* domain deals with things such as

employment, education and housing, while the *identity* domain deals with "the processes

through which individuals develop at some level a shared identity and sense of belonging with

the place, nation, communities and people among whom they live" (p. 5). Spencer and

Charsley point out that integration in one domain may or may not translate into integration in

another. Ager and Strang (2008) emphasize rights and citizenship as a foundational domain of

integration, determining the scope of action open to migrants. They urge scholars to make the

legal status of migrants explicit when discussing integration.

In this paper we are primarily concerned with integration in the identity domain. This

is in keeping with the German government's definition of integration, which states that:

"Integration means feeling part of a community and developing a common understanding of

how to live together in society" (German Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building &

Community, 2020). In our analysis, we therefore focus on identity processes, but consider

influences from other domains if brought forward by our participants. Following Ager &

Strang (2008), we further explore how refugees' identity and integration are impacted by their legal status.

The German research context

Germany constitutes a particularly interesting context in which to study the question of refugee identity and integration, because of its relatively liberal migration policies at the beginning of the refugee crisis. Having taken in more refugees than any other EU country, it is arguably confronted more powerfully with the question of how to integrate refugees.

Yet, Germany may also be considered a challenging environment for newcomers, as it still seeks to uphold the idea of a homogenous society (Heinemann, 2018). This is mirrored in the German government's late acknowledgment of the country as a nation of immigrants (Foroutan et al., 2014), the ongoing exclusionary ideas of citizenship based on ethnicity despite legal changes in 2001 (Foroutan, 2017), widespread anti-muslim attitudes (Foroutan, 2016), and attacks on refugees and their shelters (Jäckle & König, 2017). In 2015, Germany therefore made headline news when citizens greeted arriving refugees at train stations and a volunteer movement formed a "Willkommenskultur" (culture of welcome), which sought to support refugees and counterbalance negative images disseminated by the media and right-wing extremist groups (Hamann & Karakayali, 2016; Herrmann, 2020).

When asylum seekers arrived in Germany between 2015-2017, they had to apply for asylum and wait – sometimes for up to a year – for a decision (Deutsche Welle, 2018). If their application was accepted, they were given permission to stay for up to three years, after which they had to renew their status. If their application was rejected, they had to move back to their country of origin, although they could be granted temporary suspension for three months at a time, if, for example, they were unable to travel or had lodged an appeal.

In response to the growing number of asylum seekers Germany introduced, in 2016, a new Integration Act (Integrationsgesetz [Integration Act], 2016), which requires those who have been granted permission to stay to demonstrate that they have made efforts to integrate into German society. They must attend "integration classes," German language classes, and job training. Moreover, they must now wait five years, rather than three, to apply for permanent residence, and they must demonstrate language skills and a basic income. German citizens themselves have "*keinen zusätzlichen Erfüllungsaufwand*," or "no further obligations" under the new German Integration Act (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2016, p.4). How did refugees understand their identity in Germany within this context, and what were the implications for their integration? These are the questions this paper seeks to address.

With our study, we contribute to a growing literature on "new" refugees and their transition experiences (Long et al., 2014; Phillimore et al., 2017; Strang et al., 2018), foregrounding the experiences of refugees in Germany during the European refugee crisis. While previous integration scholarship has convincingly argued for the importance of secure legal status for integration (Ager & Strang, 2008), this study finds, surprisingly, that people without secure legal status can feel a greater sense of belonging and integration (in the identity domain) than those with secure legal status, when scaffolded and supported by German citizens. This highlights the critical role of community support in integration. Furthermore, it calls into question integration policies, like Germany's, which explicitly absolve national citizens of any obligations under the law, rather than recognizing the role that German communities play in integration.

Method

Research Sites

The study was conducted in two mid-sized towns (here called town N and town E) in West Germany – selected because of the first author's links to local refugee initiatives in these towns. Town N had a population of 42,000, and had accepted around 420 refugees by 2017, while town E had a population of 44,500 residents, and had accepted around 525 refugees. Most lived in reception centers or municipal housing. In town N, a volunteer initiative of local citizens organized language classes and community events, and individual volunteers approached refugees and their families to offer help with bureaucratic issues, under the slogan: "For one another, with one another". In town E, a local agency contracted by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) offered integration classes, and volunteers organized help under the slogan: "Welcome to [E]".

Data

The data comprised four focus groups, 14 interviews and 25 photographs, collected over the course of four weeks in April 2017, with 20 research participants – 14 male and 6 female. Participants were recruited via snowball sample through contacts at local refugee initiatives. The first author met all participants prior to the study to explain the project, establish trust and rapport, and check their eligibility.

Participants could be from any origin country but were only deemed eligible to participate if they had arrived in Germany since 2015, in order to situate their experience within the context of the refugee crisis. All participants self-identified as refugees (*Flüchtlinge*) irrespective of their actual legal status. We therefore adopted this term in our analysis. Participants further had to be able to communicate in either English or German. The decision to forgo a translator was deliberate. Prior to the project, some volunteers had suggested that refugees might associate the idea of a translator-facilitated interview with official interviews that determine their leave to remain, and therefore be hesitant to

participate. Moreover, conducting focus groups in German or English allowed us to bring together participants from diverse backgrounds, who knew and trusted each other (often because they lived in the same facilities or attended the same integration classes) and who shared the experience of arriving in Germany in the midst of a crisis. Remaining language barriers, although present, were mitigated by more fluent participants providing translations or clarifications in Arabic or Slavic languages. (All quotations spoken in German in this paper have been translated into English). We reflect on the potential limitations of this decision in the discussion.

Finally, efforts were made to ensure that participants represented a variety of origin countries and legal statuses, with eleven participants having permission to stay, and nine lacking such permission (see Table 1). This subset was purposely chosen (Barbour, 2001) because it allowed us to explore identity and integration experiences among those with different legal statuses.

Table 1
Sample

| | Sample | |
	Permission to stay (residence permit)	No permission to stay (no permit)
Number	11	9
Origin	Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Albania, Somalia	Afghanistan, Albania, Armenia, Iran, Azerbaijan
Gender	8 male, 3 female	6 male, 3 female
Age range	20- 36 years	16- 43 years
Place of residence	8 Town E, 3 Town N	2 Town E, 7 Town N

To provide study participants with multiple modes of expression, a multi-method study design combining focus groups, photovoice, and interviews was chosen.

The project started with four focus groups, with an average of five participants. Focus groups are useful to study how people "construct and re-construct their stories" in a social environment (Barbour, 2007, p.42). As the study context was unfamiliar to most participants, this further provided "security in numbers" (Farquhar & Das, 1999) and a more natural setting than interviews. The groups lasted between 53 and 64 minutes, and were moderated by the first author. Participants discussed questions about themselves, such as: "How would you describe your life in Germany?", "Do you feel part of Germany?" and, "What do you imagine your future to look like?" They also answered questions about German society, such as, "What do you think Germans think and feel about refugees?" Based on their answers, emerging themes for each group were agreed with them (e.g., asylum applications, friendships).

Participants were then invited to take photographs related to the themes, and to their life in Germany generally, over the course of the following two weeks, as per photovoice methodology, which asks participants to capture and communicate their social reality through photography (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice is a participatory action research method that seeks to empower members of marginalized groups to bring forward their perspectives, critically reflect on their experiences and point out challenges to policy makers and the general public. In photovoice projects, participants become "co-researchers" as they can influence the focus of the study (e.g., which topics are talked about) as well as control the analysis of their photographs (Palibroda et al., 2009), which can help to mitigate hierarchies between researcher and participants. Fourteen participants decided to take part in the photovoice part of the study.

Participants described their photographs and gave them titles during follow-up interviews that lasted between 25 and 97 minutes. Although photovoice suggests discussing photos in groups, interviews were conducted instead to enable participants to talk openly about private and difficult topics they may not have felt comfortable raising in the group

setting, and to offset the disadvantages of groups, such as dominating voices or group pressure (Barbour, 2007).[1] During the interviews, the first author asked participants to tell the story behind each photograph, and to share anything further that could not be expressed in a photograph.

All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and field notes were used to record additional details. The study was reviewed and approved by the authors' Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Analysis

Data were analyzed inductively as per commonly used methods of qualitative thematic analysis. Following Attride-Stirling (2001), the transcripts were read and then coded in three iterative stages. In the first stage, initial descriptive codes (basic codes) were developed, which were subsequently summarized into organizing themes, and then global themes. The three global themes were informed, theoretically, by the research question, and focused on *identity* (how refugees perceive themselves), *representations* (how refugees feel they are perceived) and *experience* (what refugees encounter during integration). This partly theory-driven analysis is in line with Attride-Stirling's (2001) method, which acknowledges the possibility to use "a set of theoretical constructs that are to be explored systematically" (p.391). The first author coded the basic themes, and then organized them into higher-order themes with the second author. In line with the rationale for photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), independent visual analysis of the photographs did not take place, as participants were considered to be the interpreters of their photographs.

Reflexivity

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[1] In two cases, interviews were held in pairs instead of individually to bridge language barriers. Both pairs were people in trusting relationships.

It is important to note that both authors do not identify as refugees and did not share participants' transition experiences. The first author, a German who had worked in a local volunteer initiative with refugees prior to data collection, conducted the study as part of her Master's degree. As a member of the receiving society, her research was thus informed by an outsider perspective. We considered that her German identity may influence participants' openness and criticality, and reproduce a power imbalance that is often present between nationals and migrants in transition contexts. She therefore met all participants prior to data collection to discuss confidentiality and the motivation behind the study, and to acknowledge participants' role as insiders. The second author, a Canadian scholar living in the UK, whose research expertise lies in the field of migration and identity, also contributed to the research from an outsider perspective. It is important to consider that the interpretation of the data and theoretical framing of the study are shaped by these positionalities. As an outsider, there is always a danger of misunderstanding or misrepresenting the voices of a community (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015), a risk that we attempted to mitigate by employing a participatory research approach.

Findings

Identity processes

Participants in this study agreed that the core of their identity was primarily determined by their culture of origin, which influenced their social perceptions and internalized values. Despite the influence of the German context on their habits and practices, they considered themselves closer to their home countries. Sabir[2] expressed this in the following words:

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[2] All names are pseudonyms. To preserve anonymity, we have not identified participants by country of origin when quoting them directly.

Well... I meant only habit I have changed. But culture, religion... of course that stays with you. That doesn't change […] Culture or religion and respect and so on—it's only natural; it stays forever, where you grew up and where you were born. (Sabir, 25, town N)

Participants also often experienced a mismatch between their origin-country identity, and the standards in their receiving society. One participant stated, "Yes we are new here, Germany, but we come from Syria and Iraq. What I think and what I do is [considered] strange [here]" (Akim, 23, town E).

Despite being perceived as foreign, participants held visions of a positive future in Germany for themselves and for their children. Sara (28, town N) and Liam (30, town N), a married couple, expressed their ambition to overcome initial challenges, and to "build up" a life for their family (see Figure 1 and 2).

Figure 1

Liam explained that with this photo his wife "wants [to represent] her family, and first we build something up. We are like LEGO, block by block." They imagined their children growing up in Germany, with Liam explaining, "my children are new in Germany like those two flowers. I want my children to be allowed to stay in Germany" (Liam,30, town N).

Figure 2

This idea stemmed from a predominantly positive image of Germany. Several participants mentioned that they considered Germany to be a "country of possibilities" with a strong economy, which promised job opportunities and a good standard of living. All of this encouraged refugees to attempt to become part of German society.

In order to become part of German society, participants saw a need to change, and to adjust their lifestyle and customs to the standards and norms of the receiving society. One participant expressed this through a photograph (see Figure 3). In it, the wood stands

metaphorically for the refugee who is made of "the same material" as always, but needs to take a different form now that she is in Germany.

> Dema (28, town E): Here, I think, all refugees, all asylum seekers together on top of each other. All can live but [the wood] is cut off and can't live on like that anymore. Needs to... for example needs to make a fence, needs to make change (…) Maybe a table (…) You need different ideas, different thinking…

Figure 3[3]

That is not to say that change was easy. Many participants experienced a difficult start in Germany, sharing stories about feeling lost and isolated initially, due to the new language, culture, and lack of friends.

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[3] Research participants gave verbal consent for the use of their images, and participated in a public exhibition of their photographs; however, because not all could be reached to provide written consent for the use of their photos in this article, certain photos have been recreated to retain the spirit of the originals.

Representations of refugees

German citizens and the media had a major impact on participants' understanding of what it meant to be a refugee in Germany. Participants were aware that there were negative feelings towards their group in society, which they understood, on one level, and were keen to disassociate themselves from, on another:

> Niza (31)*:* [I]t is true that some refugees do bad things. Attack and so on. [Germans] are right when they are afraid. They have a family and children. If… I think, in our country it would be the same... if a man from a different country comes and does bad attack or something like that: [get] out.
>
> Malik (20): Well, one has to say *one man*. Not...
>
> Niza: Yes, not all [are] the same and bad and so on.
>
> Farid (19): Yes, not everyone is bad.
>
> […]
>
> Niza (31): There are also many good refugees, they… in one year they have learned German and found work and are friendly all the time, there are also those people.
>
> (Focus Group 2, town E)

The media were considered an important resource for Germans to learn about refugees and the message conveyed was considered to be a fairly negative one—especially in light of attacks in Germany attributed to people of foreign origin in 2016 (such as the New Year's Eve incident in Cologne). The negative media coverage was presumed to result in negative feelings towards refugees, and, for many, it was frustrating that the bad behavior of a few was generalized to the group:

The media says refugee did this and that. This is normal [media reporting], in

Germany normal. But if refugee does something good, they should write that, too.

(Megra, 27,town E)

Not all humans [belong to] a group Islamic –Terrorism. But all have dark hair, ya?

[points to his hair] And for example people in Germany think [that] all Islamic people

have dark hair and are terrorist. But I'm not! (Amir, 30,town E)

We can see that participants try to position themselves against the negative social

representations of their group, striving for a positive in-group image. However, as prejudices

and social representations are often attached to visible markers, such as their looks and status

as foreigners, it can be difficult to establish a positive counter-image.

Lived Experiences

The ways in which participants perceive themselves, and are perceived by others, impact their

everyday experiences. While many felt grateful and privileged to be in Germany, they also

described many negative aspects of their lives as refugees.

Negative experiences

One prevailing theme expressed by participants was how dependency dominated their

daily lives. In interviews and focus groups, many participants talked about a lack of activities

and structure in their daily routines. Indeed "waiting" was a pervasive theme throughout the

study: waiting for various kinds of permission to remain, waiting for answers about

employment, waiting to get into better accommodation, and so on. The experience of waiting

was expressed by one participant in the following (digitally edited) photograph (see Photo 4),

which shows a calendar, on which the days are left blank, and the word "unemployment" is

superimposed. Manaf (town N) explained it as "days pass by and nothing happens" (see

Figure 4).

Figure 4

This waiting contributes to experienced dependency, which reaches its climax in the

application process for residence permits and work permits. Sabir (25, town N) explained in

his interview how the steps of learning the language, acquiring new skills and applying for a

work permit can take up to "four, five, six months. First you have to find work, then the

confirmation letter that you are offered a position, then you go to aliens department and they

say they'll think about it, and that takes time, too."

In addition to these processes being lengthy, they are also considered to be non-

transparent. For example, participants without a residence permit often did not understand the

criteria by which others had obtained one:

> I've learned so much, I have learned the language, I have work experience but then I
>
> cannot… I don't have a residence permit. And other people who didn't do all this have
>
> two years permit…. Some people stay in camp and other people have a home (…) one
>
> doesn't know what is expected of a refugee. (Amir, 30, town E)

Indeed, uncertainty was a theme that emerged in all narratives, independent of refugees' legal status. In one focus group, which consisted entirely of people who had permission to stay, participants feared that the German government might change its refugee policies:

Aaden (28): Only for the next years. But then parliament says "No more immigrants." And what happens then? Now it's possible, of course. Family can come. But after a year for example, there is a law, ya, and it says no more immigrants.

Hadya (21): Yes, yes.

Karim (25): For example Tunisia, and another country and Morocco,... you have to go back. Soon war is over... in Syria and Iraq, too. (…)

(Focus Group 2, town E.)

One refugee from Syria expressed his concerns in the following picture (see Figure 5):

Figure 5

Interviewer: And what do we see here?

Manaf: Here is the date of my residence permit, and then it's done. And I don't know what happens after this date. Syria or... (pause).

Interviewer: Okay, on the right we see Syria and straight ahead is Germany?

Manaf: Syria in red color, dangerous. And red… love.

Interviewer: Because you love your country?

Manaf: Yes, that's right. And Germany is white… white.

Interviewer: And what does white stand for?

Manaf: Well, white that means… it's pure.

Interviewer: What else does Germany mean to you?

Manaf: For my future it's better here, better than in Syria.

Manaf (31, town N) conveyed in his photo, a sentiment expressed by a number of the Syrians—namely, love for his home country, and simultaneous fear of being sent back and losing all that had been invested building a life in Germany.

It seems that having official status, and corresponding permission to stay, did not provide the psychological security one would expect. Knowing what their life could look like, based on their image of Germany, and comparing this to their reality appeared to deeply affect participants. Some reported that their lack of ability to control their life circumstances caused stress and loss of dignity:

We don't want to depend on social welfare. We want to work, learn and have a normal life. (…) We don't have our own flat, we are not allowed to learn German, we can't

think and can't find peace, you know? For six months we lived in camp. (Dema, 28,

town E)

Those, whose applications for asylum had been denied were sad and anxious about potentially

having to leave soon, while those remaining were equally anxious about their future, because

although they had permission to remain, they did not know if and when this would become

permanent.

Positive experiences

That is not to say that all experiences of daily life were negative. Participants from one

town in particular—town N—appeared better able to cope with the feelings of uncertainty

they experienced, due to the social support of the local community in which they lived.

Refugees who lived in town N spoke of an engaged community of local volunteers who were

highly supportive. The experience of community and social exchange resulted in a much

greater sense of belonging in Germany, even though the majority of participants in town N

did *not* have a residence permit, in contrast to the majority, in town E, who *did*. Refugees in

town N explained how many locals helped them to do things such as navigate German

bureaucracy, and learn German. Sabir (25, town N) explained, "I know almost 5-6 families

where I always go to eat or who help me with things. They are always very willing to help."

Zeynep (16, town N) added that their German friend "helps us [learning the language] and

asks whether we have any other issues."

Participants particularly commented on the positive exchange between locals and

refugees, with one participant photographing a dinner that united people of different origins

(see Figure 6):

Figure 6

> With this I wanted to say, first very different nationalities. And of course also different
>
> religions, and yet we are in a church and cook dinner together, or same dish and we sit
>
> at one table and eat the same food. And I think that's right… well… how can I say?
>
> […] There is no discrimination of people or of religions or something like that.
>
> Whether you're an immigrant. Whether you're refugee. (Sabir,25, town N)

For many, the volunteers became their friends and two participants said jokingly that

everyone had a "German mother," indicating that the belonging they felt was almost familial.

Besides individual help, the local refugee initiative and the church also organized regular

events and 'Begegnungscafés' (Meeting cafés) where locals and refugees could meet and talk

once per week.

Conceptually, the ways in which refugees were welcomed, and the positive

representations that residents of town N appeared to have of them, seemed to provide them

with social scaffolding. The townspeople's actions and representations enabled refugees to

find positive meaning in their status. This, in turn, enhanced feelings of belonging, and

allowed them to lay claim to a German identity. For example, Sabir (from town N, who did

not have a residence permit) said: "At the beginning I felt like a stranger, but now I have many friends. And also by learning the language, I think... I've become a citizen of Germany. I feel good."

Participants who lived in town E, conversely, seemed to be lacking such scaffolding, and such identification. Their narratives suggested more distance from locals and German life. Few talked about personal relationships with locals; rather, they said that it was difficult to make friends with locals, as Germans were perceived to be "generally private" (Niza, 31). Participants from town E focused more on challenges and fears than on positive community experiences in their discussions. For example, they talked about how negative representations of refugees in the media might be impacting their relationships with German citizens and might ultimately lead to more restrictive government policies. In one focus group, two participants actively approached the moderator during a break requesting to talk about their experiences of xenophobia and racism. The following extract exemplifies how participants living in town E perceived the relationship between locals and refugees:

Rayhan: Yesterday, I sit at train station and a man asks; Why do you look at me? [imitates an angry voice] […]

Rasin: Normally, people think that because I'm a refugee… I think they are stressed.

(Focus Group 2, town E)

A couple from Iran, also living in town E, took a photo of swastika graffiti to represent the racism they had experienced.

This resulted in refugees from town E feeling a disconnect with Germany, and, in at least one case, explicitly disavowing a German identity:

Interviewer: How would you describe Germany?

Amer (23): Germany has many job opportunities, future... but it's not our country.

There thus appeared to be a very different set of experiences, and potential identity implications, for refugees in town E and refugees in town N.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how refugees understood their identities in Germany in the context of the European refugee crisis, and to consider the implications for refugee integration, especially in the identity domain, which is concerned with the development of a shared sense of belonging (Spencer & Charsley, 2016). The research foregrounds the perspectives of refugees in Germany at a time when most research focused on the perspectives of those in European host societies. Many of the findings resonate with existing immigrant identity literature, which describes how newcomers go through a process of identity negotiation, seeking to strike a balance between their existing identities, on the one hand, and new identities that fit with their receiving societies, on the other (Deaux, 2006). They do this aware of negative social representations about them, which they are keen to dissociate from (Griffiths, 2015). Moreover, they struggle with the temporal uncertainty brought about by government policies that require them to wait for various permissions— including permission to remain, permission to work, and permission to remain permanently, leaving them anxious, frustrated, and unable to plan for the future (Back, 2018; Bakker et al., 2014; Bhimji, 2019; Griffiths, 2014). Indeed, their lack of rights and secure legal status appear to hamper their ability to forge a sense of belonging in Germany.

Unexpectedly, however, the research findings also suggest that those without secure legal status can have a greater sense of belonging and integration in the identity domain than those with secure legal status. This appears to be because insecurity permeates everyone's lives—even those with a legal status granting permission to stay (albeit not indefinitely)—and

because social networks and social scaffolding by locals play a vital role in engendering a sense of belonging. In some contexts, social networks, and the social scaffolding they provide, may, indeed, be just as important as rights and secure legal status in fostering integration in the identity domain. This strengthens arguments for the role of bottom-up engagement by locals in the integration process (e.g., Hamann & Karakayali, 2016).

This research, of course, has limitations. As it is a small-scale, qualitative study, not broadly representative of refugees in Germany, we must be cautious in making claims about the relative importance of different factors in the development of integration in the identity domain. Nevertheless, the study points to the possibility that social scaffolding may be just as important as rights and legal status when it comes to fostering a sense of belonging ─ a possibility which could be further investigated in large-scale, quantitative research. Additionally, this study does not track integration in the identity domain over time, which could be important, particularly as the participants in this study were relatively new to Germany, and integration cannot be assumed to be a linear process. Moreover, although roughly half the study participants had permission to remain in Germany (i.e. secure legal status), none had permanent residence yet, as not enough time had elapsed. Permanent residence could enhance feelings of belonging in a way that time-bound permission to remain did not. The gender imbalance in this study must also be acknowledged as a limitation. Only six out of the 20 participants were female. This gender imbalance reflected the gender imbalance of the so-called crisis (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2016); however, male migrant experiences can differ from female migrant experiences (Griffiths, 2015), so future research may wish to balance genders. Finally, a study that was able to engage research participants in the languages in which they were most comfortable would allow participants to discuss their identities and lived realities in more complexity, potentially yielding more in-depth insights. Our methodological approach revealed multiple factors that influence the early transition experiences of refugees (e.g., group representations, the meaning of a local

community etc.), however, the depth of our interview data is limited by language barriers and must be interpreted as such.

Despite these limitations, we argue the study nevertheless presents some compelling directions for future research and, equally, suggests some potential implications for refugee integration policy broadly, and Germany's Integration Act in particular.

First, Germany's Integration Act increases from three to five years the period that refugees with residence permits must wait before they can apply for permanent status. This increases, rather than decreases, the amount of waiting they have to do; yet, this study provides psychological evidence that waiting leads refugees to feel anxiety and uncertainty about their futures, which is unlikely to increase feelings of belonging and identification with Germany.

Second, the new Integration Act toughens the requirements for obtaining permanent residence and introduces punitive measures for those who do not comply. Considering Spencer and Charsley's (2016) integration domains and applying them to the Integration Act, it appears the new law concentrates exclusively on the first domain—that is, the *structural* domain—despite the government's stated aim of fostering integration in the *identity* domain, or the domain of belonging. The new law aims to support integration in the areas of employment, education and housing, by means such as job training and language courses; however, integration in one domain (structural) does not necessarily translate into integration in another domain (identity) (Spencer & Charsley, 2016). Indeed, the services provided to refugees by the government come with many conditions, which can limit refugee's sense of belonging, rather than enhance it. For example, the government reduces financial support when refugees fail to attend integration classes. This study has provided psychological evidence that some are bewildered by bureaucratic requirements, and do not feel they are operating in a transparent or meritocratic system. They do not have a sense of confidence that if they meet the government's requirements, they will be allowed to stay. Rather, participants

reported feelings of dependency and loss of dignity that derive from the restrictive

regulations. As such, the results suggest that the government's approach to integration may

not be the best means to its desired end. Indeed, the results provide modest empirical evidence

to support the critiques of human rights organizations and scholars, who have criticized the

new German Integration Act for communicating suspicion rather than trust in refugees

(German Institute for Human Rights, 2016; ProAsyl, 2016; von Harbou, 2016). Others have

also criticized integration classes as "civilizing missions" which are primarily geared towards

imparting a German *leitkultur* ("defining culture") to migrants (Heinemann, 2018).

 As predicted by Social Representations Theory, the social representations of refugees

held by German society appear to be functioning as world-making assumptions (Elcheroth et

al., 2011). That is, negative representations of refugees in public discourse and ideas of a

homogeneous society have been translated into new, more restrictive integration laws

(Hinger, 2019), which, in the end, determine the structures and environment in which refugees

come to an understanding of their place in Germany.

Instead of strengthening refugees' sense of belonging and facilitating a two-way

process of integration—as per academic discourse and some of the current political rhetoric

(de Maiziére, 2016)—it seems that the law follows the idea of assimilation, responding,

perhaps, to the psychological needs of German residents, rather than refugees. Moreover,

Germany is not a unique case. Scholars have argued that many European nations approach

integration through explicit, top-down integration laws and ministries that focus on migrant's

"assimilability" (FitzGerald et al., 2018; Goodman, 2018), rather than on creating a system in

which both immigrants and members of the receiving society contribute to an integration of

cultures.

This integration of cultures is arguably key. The German government itself has

defined integration as "feeling part of a community and developing a common understanding

on how to live together in society" (German Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and

Community, 2020). By explicitly stating in the law, however, that German residents have "no obligation" under the law (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2016, p.4) the government may have absolved German citizens of the very thing that could achieve its stated aim. Indeed, the results of this research suggest that the response of a given community can make all the difference to refugees' feelings of belonging. It appears that integration in the identity domain comes about not by learning a language, or memorizing German values to apply for permanent residence, but by forging connections to Germany's people.

Disclosure statement

The authors have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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