



## Summary

# FOCUS Living Well Together Forum #3

## Challenges in integration research

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Discussion with FOCUS Researchers

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The FOCUS Living Well Together Forum ‘Challenges of integration research’ took place on 26 January 2022. Between 2019 and 2021, FOCUS carried out extensive quantitative and qualitative research to explore acceptance and reality in relation to two-way dynamic integration in Jordan, Croatia, Germany and Sweden. In this Forum, FOCUS researchers discussed the challenges and methodological dilemmas of such an ambitious study.

## Introduction: Methodology

**Jana Kiralj:** We began with a theoretical basis of the **Indicators of Integration framework**<sup>1</sup>, followed by a literature review. We then designed the methodology by taking the theory and the current knowledge base to conceptualise the qualitative, quantitative, and secondary data collection. What constructs or phenomena have proven relevant in previous findings? What sample methods have proven useful? We also wanted to see how to make the findings compatible between countries. What adaptations of instruments and procedures are necessary to ensure that we can compare our results later?

In a **piloting procedure**, we implemented our questionnaire in our focus group guide and all other materials. We asked the piloting participants, who later were not included in the main study: Is this feasible, is it clear? We also discussed the ethics dimension of our research, in particular data protection.

<sup>1</sup> UK Home Office Indicators of Integration framework, 2019. Find full report [here](#).



**Nahikari Irastorza:** We conducted **focus group interviews** and a **survey** in the four study countries, plus some secondary data analysis in Germany and Sweden. (We could not do this in Croatia and Jordan because we do not have comparable data.)

We conducted six focus groups, three of them among the arriving community.

By arriving community, we mean refugees from Syria who arrived four years prior to 2019. The receiving community was defined as people who have been born or living in in the study countries for more than seven years.

We conducted these focus groups in the three main cities in each country that received the largest amount of refugees from Syria in the last few years. They had a duration of 2h maximum and 4-8 participants each. Most of them were conducted in real life, except for Sweden where they were done online because of COVID.

The focus groups among the arriving community were conducted in Arabic (except for Croatia, where a translator was used) and those among the receiving community in the local language.

The opening questions for both focus groups were slightly different. For the arriving community we asked: “How integrated do you feel in the city or the country where you live?” For the receiving community we asked: “For you personally, how did the integration of the post-war and refugee community from Syria in your city and your country evolve?”

We conducted two surveys, one among the receiving community, and one among the arriving community. The target sample size for the receiving and arriving community was 600 in each country, except for the arriving community in Croatia, where we aimed for 200 completed questionnaires because of the smaller size of this group. We conducted the surveys in the same cities as the focus groups. The data collection method was a random walk technique in all countries, except for Sweden where we selected a random sample from the population register, sent a postal survey, and the respondents could respond via mail or online.

#### Focus group opening questions

... for the arriving community: **How integrated do you feel in the city or the country where you live?**

... for the receiving community: **For you personally, how did the integration of the post-war and refugee community from Syria in your city and your country evolve?**

We asked about 60 questions on the socioeconomic situation of the arriving community and related factors: the receiving community’s perception of the arriving community’s socioeconomic situation and its impact on the recipient countries, the intergroup relations between the arriving and receiving communities and the characteristics of both groups facilitating or hindering integration. We looked for country differences in all those topics, but especially for the sociopsychological factors of integration.

**Jana Kiralj:** Once we collected our data, we did the **preparation for data analysis**. For the quantitative part, the survey, that meant cleaning up the data, doing preliminary analysis. For the qualitative part, the focus groups, we did preliminary recordings. We sat together and discussed whether we saw the codes, the material in the same way, to align our interpretations of the work in front of us.

Then came the **data analysis** with descriptive statistics, with the coding and recording of qualitative data and with secondary data comparisons between Sweden and Germany. We first looked at the data for each country individually. Once we had analysed those findings, we moved on to the advanced cross-site analysis where we looked at what is happening across the countries, what are similarities and differences and what are the potential reasons for them.

We have one more step ahead of us: the **triangulation of collective data** where we will try to merge and compare all the data that we have collected from different sources and see how it fits together and what else it can tell us about integration.

## Selected findings on socioeconomic integration

**Nahikari Irastorza:** In relation to the socioeconomic dimension of integration, we found that, as expected, **differences in employment** remained a few years after migration. The employment gap between the arriving and receiving community was larger among women than among men.

The number of arriving community respondents who applied for recognition of their **qualifications** was relatively low: half in Sweden, one third in Germany and even lower in Jordan and Croatia. The number of overqualified workers was higher among the arriving community than among the receiving community.

We also asked a few questions about **housing** and found that the share of arriving community members who lived in overcrowded dwellings and who said they were overburdened with the price of the rent was high in all countries.

Receiving community members in all four countries were not fully aware of the situation of the arriving community in terms of employment and the number of those receiving welfare assistance. In general, the

**receiving community's perception** of the socioeconomic impacts of the arriving community members was positive in Germany and Sweden, neutral in Croatia and neutral to negative in Jordan. Explaining factors for this could be differences in labour market competition and economic growth.

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## Selected findings on sociopsychological integration

The sociopsychological dimension of integration is a combination of different indicators of how the two groups, arriving and receiving community, “live well together” – as in the title of our Forum.

It is mainly about intergroup relations: The sociopsychological dimension of integration shows whether these intergroup relations are constructive and exist. What is the nature of the intergroup contact? How frequent is it? Do the receiving and the arriving community have members of the other group in their social networks? What are the levels of perception of intergroup threats? What about intergroup attitudes: are they positive, neutral or negative? And what can be done about this?

**Jana Kiralj:** The first key finding was the **difference in intergroup attitudes**. We found that the arriving community across all four countries showed positive attitudes towards the receiving communities, but the receiving community had neutral to moderately positive attitudes. The arriving community perceived the receiving community more positive than vice versa.

When asked about their sense of the arriving community being a part of the society in which they live, the arriving community did have this sense of **society membership**. They did feel that they are part of the society they now live in. But the receiving community had a neutral sense. They perceived the arriving community as part of the community, but not a great part. This also depended on the country.

Regarding the **perception of intergroup threat**, the arriving community perceived a threat to their social and economic wellbeing, more than that a threat to their culture or way of life, or norms. The trend was opposite in the receiving community, who perceived a threat to their culture norms and way of life. It is important to note though that these results are somewhere around the middle of the scale, so they are quite neutral. But trends are observable.

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**Intergroup contact** is a factor which impacts all other aspects of social psychological integration. We found that the arriving community often has contact with receiving community, which is to be expected due to the different sizes of the two groups. But the receiving community rarely has contact with the arriving community. When we take into consideration what we know about the impact and the strength of intergroup contact in facilitating social bonds, bridges and links, we must conclude that we should strive for more intergroup contact between these two groups.

We also asked the arriving community about their experiences with **discrimination**, and we asked the receiving community whether they believe that the arriving community experiences discrimination. The arriving community reported some experience of discrimination, but seemed to downplay the frequency of such experiences, which is concerning.

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The receiving community did recognize that such events occur regularly. Enabling the arriving community to talk openly therefore is very important.

From the qualitative research we can take that there are **polarised attitudes** of the receiving community towards the arriving community. This is very prominent: on one side, we have the image of vulnerable and traumatised refugees. And on the other side, we have the image of parasitical, potentially criminal refugees. These two views mix, but neither of them is one that we would like to encourage. Interestingly, refugees from Syria were perceived as “better refugees” than other migrants and refugees from the Middle East and surrounding countries.

**Socioeconomic hardships**, particularly in Croatia and Jordan, were seen as very influential to intergroup relations. I remember one of the participants in Croatia saying: ‘The relations can’t be good as we are competing for the same jobs.’ There is quite some perception of threat around socioeconomic benefits.

**Generational and family aspects can be important facilitators to integration. Integration experience may change depending on whether families or school aged children are involved.**

**Jana Kiralj:** From our qualitative study I recall that the receiving community believed that younger people were more prone to being integrated, that they were more open to the arriving community because of globalisation and communication technology. And I very vividly recall one of the arriving community members, a girl who was in high school, saying: ‘I help my mum. She doesn’t speak Croatian and doesn’t speak English very well. So, when she needs to take care of some administrative and bureaucratic business, I go with her and translate and communicate for her.’

**Jeremy Leonard, Australian Red Cross:** Something we found is that in schools that have a higher proportion of newly arrived students, it is the children of the receiving community that are advocates of change with their parents. That is interesting in terms of changing their attitudes because parents are obviously interested in what they do in school, who their friends are. We have found that to be a really positive instrument of change.

## Challenge 1: The concept of integration as a “dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation”

**The idea of two-way dynamic integration conceives integration as a “two-way process of mutual accommodation” between the arriving and receiving communities (EC Common Agenda for Integration, COM(2005) 389 final). A complex and controversial concept not easy to integrate in research design.**

**Nahikari Irastorza:** Indeed, integration is a very much contested concept. We did not challenge it theoretically but tried to test the definition of integration as a two-way dynamic process empirically. To our knowledge, this is quite a novel attempt.

The initial idea was to ask the same questions to both groups. And most of the questions asked in the survey and the focus groups were actually similar for both groups, but some of them were not. One reason for this was that the receiving community did not understand our question when we asked them to talk about their own integration. For practical reasons related to the length of the survey, we also decided not to ask certain questions to the receiving community. We are now aware that by doing this, we put more weight on the arriving community’s experiences and therefore, to some extent, jeopardized the empirical exploration of the idea of integration as a two-way process of mutual adaptation.

“The receiving community did not understand our question when we asked them to talk about their own integration.”

Migrant integration can be measured in different ways. One is by taking the means of the indicators for their respective receiving community as a reference. This is, for example, common practice in labour market studies and closer to the idea of assimilation. Another one is to measure integration by taking the means of the indicators of the arriving community in their countries of origin as a reference. A third one would be to ask respondents about their own goals in different domains of integration, and then to compare their achievements or experiences to their goals.

In FOCUS, we followed the first approach: we took the means of the indicators for the receiving community as a reference and compared the means for the arriving community against this.

This raises another question: Who forms the receiving community? In order to avoid an assimilationist approach we included foreign-born people who have been living in the country for more than seven years into the receiving community, instead of only including the native-born population. By doing this, we changed the composition of the reference group and tried to make our research design more dynamic.

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## Challenge 2: Accounting for power asymmetries

**Research that integrates arriving and receiving communities, with their very different mindsets and perspectives, requires awareness for power asymmetries and an open design that does not impose predefined concepts.**

**Steffen Schödwell:** We tried to define a very open focus group guideline that allows for space, for participants from both communities to bring up their views and experiences with minimum interference by our preconceptions.

Our first challenge concerned the composition of the focus groups: we had to decide whether to hold separate or mixed groups. If we separate, we may better succeed in offering a safe space to open on sensitive topics, especially those regarding power dynamics like the manifestations of racism and discrimination. On the other hand, we lose the chance to observe and discuss integration issues in a dialogue between the two communities, which the concept of a dynamic integration would request us to do. We chose the first reasoning and opted for separate groups.

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This decision being made, there was a next challenge: Should we ask the same questions? The dynamic concept of integration would require us to do so. But the pilot tests revealed that the receiving community respondents went into a totally different direction in their answers. This would have required quite strong intervention from the moderator and thus again imposing concepts of integration on the participants which we did not want to. Therefore we decided to have different opening questions.

This became more apparent in the results: even though the receiving community hypothetically refers to a concept of dynamic integration, they struggle to translate this into their personal living context and responsibility.

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**Dana Abdel Fattah:** We also had the challenge of language: Should the session be in English to somehow offer equality? That would exclude many people. On the other hand, if we work with translators the power dynamic is indirectly reflected because for example, when speaking Arabic the arriving community would feel as not being understood by the receiving community, and the other way around.

### Challenge 3: Accounting for racism & discrimination

**Recent integration research has shown that racism and discrimination are major barriers to integration.**

**Dana Abdel Fattah:** We found that it is extremely difficult to talk about racism, especially among the arriving community because of the power asymmetries. We felt that, especially in the qualitative research, whenever racism was brought up, there was a strong urgency to take it back immediately. In the focus groups in Hamburg, for example, one participant actually mentioned racism and was countered by other participants: ‘Why would you use this term? You’re being ungrateful...’ It is very difficult. How can we explore this phenomenon better, how do we offer the space?

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One hypothesis could be that the arriving community refuses to see themselves as victims. We have not observed this, but our research builds on other research, for example qualitative research by Samuel Parker<sup>2</sup> who found that refugees tended to downplay the experiences of racism because of fear, because they doubt being part of the society, being entitled to make such statements.

**Jana Kiralj:** When trying to study discrimination in the quantitative works, we again encountered the issue of asking the same questions which was already raised: We asked the arriving community members on the frequency of their experiences of discrimination in different areas of life, but we couldn’t ask the

<sup>2</sup> See for example Parker, S. (2018). “It’s ok if it’s hidden”: The discursive construction of everyday racism for refugees and asylum seekers in Wales. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, pp. 1-12. Download article [here](#).

receiving community how often they discriminate against the arriving community, or how often they experience discrimination or racist attitudes. There is an issue in studying certain phenomena in cross groups, in intergroup relations: the arriving community cannot discriminate against the receiving community because of the power relations.

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**Nahikari Irastorza:** I do not believe that we could not have asked this question to the receiving community. Because the receiving community as we defined it is not only composed of native-born people but also of previously arrived migrants. And even if it was only the native-born population, there are native born people from different ethnic origins. There is discrimination and racism against the native-born population. We did not ask about this, but we could have.

**Dana Abdel Fattah:** In the surveys we followed the following questions. Please indicate to what extent you experience unequal treatment in comparison to country nationals on a scale from one to five? And then we asked about different areas like when applying for a job, when dealing with the police, when in school and classes, when looking for a place to live, in sports or recreational activities, in hospitals or by health care workers.

**In order to be aware of being treated unequally, arriving community members must be aware of their rights and entitlements.**

**Jana Kiralj:** We did study the knowledge of the arriving community members about the rights they have. The law in all four countries guarantees them certain rights, and we asked in the survey whether they believe they have this right or not. The answer options were: ‘Yes’, ‘No’, or ‘I don’t know’.

What we found is that a very high percentage of the arriving community did know their rights. Some of them were better known to them, some less, but overall they were very much acquainted with their rights. So, the arriving community members do know their rights, it is the receiving community members who, in some areas, are not aware of them. This is a big problem.

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**Nahikari Irastorza:** It is very difficult, at least through a survey, to capture hidden discriminatory practices. It is difficult for any arriving community member to tell whether they have had unequal treatment, even if we ask that directly, because perhaps they don’t have a way to compare. They have not been in the position of a receiving community member who has received the same service. Therefore, sometimes when discrimination is obvious, they might say: Yes, I think I have been discriminated against.

But there are also very subtle ways of doing things differently, like not giving the same kind of information or not giving enough information, or not being as friendly, and this is difficult to capture through a survey.

**It is very difficult to capture hidden discriminatory practices through a survey.**

**Dana Abdel Fattah:** Our finding that many people are hesitant to identify an experience as discrimination is what makes things very complicated. Perceived discrimination is a very commonly used instrument, but it has a lot of limitations. We need a completely different research design to measure institutional racism.

We know, for example, that acknowledging or identifying discrimination is highly correlated with the level of education. That is why there is an urge for more research that measures inequality more rigorously, for example in the health domain, looking into indicators such as waiting hours in emergency rooms.

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**Dana Abdel Fattah** is trained in public policy and is a researcher at the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration research team, affiliated to Humboldt University Berlin. Dana has done research in the field of critical migration and integration studies with a focus on racism.

**Nahikari Irastorza** is a senior researcher at the Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare at Malmö University. Her research interests include international migration and integration, immigrant participation in the labour market and migration policies.

**Jana Kiralj** is a researcher at the Department of Psychology at the University of Zagreb. This department is recognised as a regional leader in psychology research with extensive expertise in areas that are central to the work in FOCUS.

**Steffen Schödwell** is a psychotherapist and researcher at the Department of Psychiatry at the Charité University Hospital Berlin. He works in the field of transcultural psychotherapy and psychosocial support for people with migratory background.

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