

Online Magazin IAB-Forum

The idea of integration varies greatly and shapes arrival processes

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There are many different answers to the question of what it means to “be integrated”. Also, not every person has to deal with this question to the same extent. In contrast to most established people, refugees arriving in a country hear this question all the time. An IAB study on refugees in Germany sheds light on what integration means to these people and how this idea influences their future life choices.

Depending on who you ask what integration in Germany means, you will get different answers:

Understanding and being able to use the German language, being on time and tidy, having gainful employment that meets one’s needs, not living in a “ghettoized” environment, accustoming oneself to the local eating and drinking habits, maintaining contacts with Germans, or orienting oneself towards established social models such as gender equality.

The existence of such different interpretations already shows that it is far from obvious what integration actually means. This is a particular problem for those confronted with the request to integrate daily and are called upon to act accordingly.

In the following, using the example of Syrian refugees, I will show which ideas of integration exist and how these influence their future life and arrival in Germany. First, however, it is important to realise where such different ideas of integration stem from. For this purpose, it is worth taking a look at institutional guidelines.

Integration as a duty

In its glossary, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge) describes integration as a "...long-term process. It aims at integrating into society all people living in Germany permanently and legally. Immigrants should be enabled to participate fully and equally in all areas of society. To this end, it is their duty to learn German and to know respect and obey the constitution and the laws."

This choice of words ("duty") exemplifies how those concerned are confronted with a concept of integration as an imperative in common definitions. This "imperative of integration" calls immigrants to action. Still, the path to the proclaimed goal remains indistinct here as in other definitions: At what level may we consider language acquisition successful? What does it mean to know the law? To what extent do you have to express respect for the constitution? Answers to such questions are individual and can be traced back to the respective life path of the people concerned. At the same time, actions resulting from the respective idea shape the future life story.

Based on recurring ideas of integration, we are able to outline how the imperative of integration influences the respective life plan of the persons concerned and which possibilities for action result from this. Interviews with refugees from Syria form the basis of this reconstruction. The interviews took place in the context of the IAB study "Networks for Integration" (for more detailed information on the data and the evaluation method, please see the "Data and methods" information box). The respective ideas of integration shall be considered as ideal types, although the interviews analysed also include mixed forms.

Integration as reciprocity

In each interview, the interviewees expressed gratitude, for example, for being allowed to stay in Germany or for the opportunity to live safely. For some, however, it was about more than gratitude. In these cases, the refugees do not consider the asylum granted in Germany an unconditional

human right but a gift – a gift of charity that requires something in return.

These interviewees understand integration as a principle of reciprocity. They express this again and again in the interviews using sentences like: “Germany has given us so much, I want to give something back.” For example, if someone feels that they can give back through gainful employment, such an idea of integration opens up a course of action in order to be able to comply with the imperative of integration. If they succeed in taking up gainful employment, this can strengthen the feeling of having arrived.

If, in contrast, someone feels that they cannot fulfil the internalised obligation of having to give back, this can affect their self-esteem. This is the case, for example, with an illiterate interviewee. At the time of the interview, he sees “no hope” of taking up employment. Instead, he holds out the prospect of alternative compensation: He would also “work as a clown” or even give his life should “Germany be threatened with harm”. He literally offers everything he has to pay a perceived debt without feeling he can settle it. The inability to act in the face of the imperative of integration leads to feeling excluded and marginalised. At the same time, this results in a devaluation of the self-image.

Integration as an orientation towards fundamental rights

In contrast, you can also consider integration a legal right. In such conversations, people do not primarily express gratitude for being granted asylum, but they see this as an unconditional human right. Subsequently, integration is described as an orientation towards fundamental rights. In this context, they claim the freedoms enshrined in the fundamental rights for themselves. In such cases, the impression of being treated equally under the law strengthens the feeling of integration.

People with this idea of integration feel able to shape their lives according to their own ideas. They are convinced that the German legal system grants them a certain capacity to act. They do not perceive the imperative of integration as pressure to act, because the expressed obligations can be linked to the rights and their own ideas of life in the new society. For example, those leaving their home country because they want to live safely and equally will not render problematic the expressed duty to comply with the constitution. However, no necessary actions derive from this idea, by which those arriving here could increase their sense of being integrated.

Thus, also this idea can counteract the feeling of being integrated. This becomes apparent when someone believes that they cannot claim the established fundamental rights equally because of their own origin. Then, they reject the imperative of integration as unjust – for example, because it is primarily directed at newcomers.

Integration as an administrative act

The idea of integration as an administrative act is similar to the orientation towards fundamental rights described above. Here, too, integration is perceived as a right. However, this right does not appear to be unconditional but comes at the end of an institutionalised process and must therefore be worked out. Within the framework of this process, it is necessary to acquire the language, move into an apartment, and take up gainful employment covering one's needs. Obtaining German citizenship is perceived as the administrative conclusion of this integration process.

In contrast to the idea of integration as an orientation towards fundamental rights, however, such an idea of integration allows the possibility of taking action, since the requirements of the integration process have been clearly identified. Thus, they have accepted the imperative of integration and internalised its goals.

Nevertheless, this can also lead to feelings of disintegration. If they cannot meet the goals pursued, they cannot complete the integration process. Accordingly, some people fail, for example, not only to acquire adequate German language skills or to take up desired gainful employment but also to meet their own integration expectations.

If people have achieved their internalised goals and still feel that they cannot participate in society equally, they will also feel marginalised and excluded. This corresponds to the perceptions of those whose idea of integration as an orientation towards fundamental rights has been disappointed. Alongside this disappointment, further efforts with regard to their integration also seem futile.

Integration as overcoming cultural foreignness

With this idea of integration, the interviewees feel a cultural foreignness that opposes the feeling of being integrated. This feeling of foreignness triggers devaluation processes in those affected. Some devalue themselves because they see their feeling of foreignness as a deficiency. Others devalue the host country's culture and thus project their own sense of foreignness onto the social environment. Still others devalue the internalised culture of their home country. This can intensify the experience of foreignness, since not only do they perceive the new environment as being foreign, but they remember familiar experiences in a different light.

In order to feel integrated, they would have to overcome these experiences. However, everyday experiences of stigmatisation, as well as perceived and actual exclusion, oppose this. This reproduces the internalised feeling of otherness and leaves those people incapable of acting

behind. If, on the other hand, these people are allowed to participate in established lifeworlds, this may help reduce the sense of otherness and revive the feeling of being integrated.

Integration as belonging

Some of the respondents make it clear that they are convinced of being integrated. They describe this as a sense of belonging to certain sections of society. The respondents feel they belong if they feel perceived as equals in an area of life relevant to them, such as at work, among friends, or in a club. In this sense, it is not enough to take up a course of study in order to feel like belonging to the social section of “university”. For this, others must address the person as a student as well – and not, for example, as a “refugee”.

Depending on personal relevance, for example, taking up gainful employment, moving into an apartment, or social participation in established clubs can lead to corresponding feelings of belonging. These feelings of belonging can subsequently transfer to other parts of society and strengthen the feeling of being integrated there as well.

Accordingly, integration is not further rendered problematic in such cases. If the topic is (still) mentioned at all, this is done by addressing experiences of discrimination. This is because such experiences, for example, through exclusionary speech, shake the feeling of belonging to common living environments.

Of course, people with this idea of integration are also aware of the demands associated with the imperative of integration. However, these often conform to their own priorities. The respondents, therefore, do not feel limited in their agency, because not the imperative of integration determines their further activities but their own hopes, wishes, and goals.

Conclusion

The refugees interviewed for this study are confronted with integration as an imperative. It is associated with demands on the new arrivals and obligates them to comply. The interviews also show that the interviewees have different ideas of integration and that this influences their future life and arrival in different ways. This concerns both the perception of their own ability to act and the self-image of the interviewees. The ideas of integration reconstructed in the interviews are not clearly defined. There can also be mixed forms, or the idea of integration can change over time.

Furthermore, it became apparent that indistinct requirements in the integration process force those affected to interpret the inherent implications independently. This gives rise to different ideas of integration, on the basis of which certain actions appear obvious and others impossible to the immigrants.

Policy that sees itself as integrative would therefore have to place the individuals with their individual needs at the centre of attention: Those who see integration as an administrative deed want to complete the institutionalised asylum process quickly. Those who see integration as a legal entitlement do not want to be treated differently than established people. And those who understand integration as reciprocity want to be allowed to use their skills and knowledge in their own interests.

Furthermore, it becomes apparent that, of the reconstructed ideas of integration, only integration as belonging has positive connotations. Other ideas, on the contrary, always lead to a feeling of exclusion. This feeling is primarily based on perceived unequal treatment, which is described as experiences of discrimination in the interviews.

A society that sees itself as integrative should therefore succeed in understanding integration as a task for society as a whole: Those who understand integration as overcoming cultural foreignness must be provided with an understanding that also those who live here are not all alike but yet of equal value. Those who understand integration as belonging must feel that they are participating equally in order to perceive their efforts as being appreciated. This requires an open, unprejudiced, helpful society, and the unshakeable conviction that all people are free and equal in dignity. In this way, the imperative of integration can become what it should be: an invitation.

Data and methods

This article is based on the IAB study “Networks for integration”, in the context of which personal interviews were conducted with 42 predominantly Syrian refugees in 2017 and 2018 about their life in Germany. Repeat interviews were conducted with 15 of these people in 2020. When selecting the interviewees, the variance of socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and formal level of education was considered. In addition, other sampling criteria were used that proved to be important in the course of the study, such as the level of German language skills or psychological stress due to traumatic experiences.

In order to be able to fathom the influence of the respective internalised meanings of integration as well as their effects on the ideas of normality and the resulting way of life, on the one hand, the discourse on integration was analysed under the research paradigm of the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse. On the other hand, the collected life stories were examined interpretatively-reconstructively in the sense of biographical research. In order to work out which discourse positions the life story draws on, I followed the research paradigm of empirical research on subjectivation. A more detailed presentation of the positionings presented here in the field of integration will take place within the framework of the author’s dissertation.

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