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Türkiye Göç Araştırmaları Merkezi
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Conceptual Analysis: Integration

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INTEGRATION CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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Introduction

The concept of integration has been a cornerstone in sociological and migration studies, evolving over time to encompass diverse and dynamic interpretations. Migration studies increasingly characterize integration as a complex, nonlinear process spanning social, economic, cultural, and political dimensions. Definitions offered by influential scholars and organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR highlight its reciprocal nature, emphasizing active social participation, respect for cultural diversity, and a shared commitment to common values. Despite this emerging consensus, the absence of a universally accepted definition continues to spark debates among researchers and policymakers, reflecting the multifaceted challenges and varied experiences inherent in the process of integration.

The Historical Evolution and the Definition of the Integration Concept

In sociology, the concept of integration finds its roots in Emile Durkheim's theories on societal cohesion and harmonious functioning. Building on these ideas, Talcott Parsons conceptualized integration as the interaction of interconnected components within a system, emphasizing the need for these parts to collaborate harmoniously while avoiding conflict. Parsons further argued that integration also entails the preservation of the distinct identities and roles of the system's components. (Kulman, 1991). Thus, integration in sociology refers to a societal structure in which diverse groups collaborate effectively to ensure harmony and functionality. Simultaneously, it respects the preservation of group identities, fostering a balance between unity and diversity within the system.

The concept of integration became popular in migration literature in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as migration became a prominent phenomenon due to industrialization, colonization, and economic opportunity. (Hamberger, 2009). In the early 20th century, the Chicago School significantly influenced its understanding of integration, often equating it with assimilation. These two concepts were treated as synonymous in the immigration policies of the era. During this period, immigration policies largely reflected assimilationist ideals, emphasizing the full adoption of the host society's culture by immigrants, with limited attention to the reciprocal aspects of integration. However, over time, the distinction between the two concepts has become clearer. Assimilation implies a unidirectional process in which immigrants conform entirely to the host culture, whereas integration is more reciprocal, allowing for the preservation of cultural diversity alongside social cohesion. Robert Park of the Chicago School coined the concept of integration and described it as the gradual adoption of the host society's culture by migrants, i.e. he viewed the process as a monolithic one on the part of migrants towards the host society (Spencer, 2022).

In the 1980s, the German sociologist Hartmut laid the theoretical foundations for the concept of integration by utilizing the theoretical approaches of American sociologists, such as Milton Gordon. Esser's theory of integration then became the basis for an entire school of thought and gained increasing influence in the political sphere, especially

after 2000 (Laubenthal, 2023, p. 84). Migration studies and policies have begun to view integration as a complex, nonlinear process that includes economic participation, cultural exchange, political engagement, and social cohesion.

There is a great deal of disagreement about the definition of the concept of integration due to its association with other concepts used in the same context of the integration process and is frequently used in migration literature. This wide variation in the understanding of integration has led researchers to describe it as “chaotic” (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 167). Some have viewed it as a one-way process in which migrants adapt to the host society, while others view it as a two-way process in which not only migrants should adapt but host society should also adapt with migrants.

Harrell-Bond’s definition of integration important definitions, he defined it as “a situation in which host and refugee communities are able to co-exist, sharing the same resources - both economic and social with no greater mutual conflict than that which exists within the host community” (as cited in Kulman, 1991, p. 3).

Bernard defines integration as follows: “integration is achieved when migrants become a working part of their adopted society, take on many of its attitudes and behavior patterns and participate freely in its activities, but at the same time retain a measure of their original cultural identity and ethnicity.” (as cited in Kulman, 1991, p. 5).

De Coninck & Solano (2023) also defined integration as process of migrants settling into a new society and engaging with the local community because of migration is a dynamic, two-way process involving both migrants and the receiving society in which they reside (De Coninck & Solano, 2023, p. 19).

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defined integration as “the process of mutual adaptation between the host and migrant communities. The process involves a sense of commitment and respect for a core set of values that binds migrants and their host communities with a common purpose.”

However, there is no formal definition of integration in the main legal instruments governing UNHCR policies such as the 1951 Convention, the 1967 Protocol, and the UNHCR Statute (Kulman, 1991, p.2). But, integration of refugees has been defined in several documents and policy guidelines (UNHCR, 2002; UNHCR, 2003; UNHCR, 2014). For example, an International Handbook to Guide Reception and Integration defined it as a mutual, dynamic, multifaceted and ongoing process. From a refugee perspective, integration requires a preparedness to adapt to the lifestyle of the host society without having to lose one’s own cultural identity. From the point of view of the host society, it requires willingness for communities to be welcoming and responsive to refugees and for public institutions to meet the needs of a diverse population (UNHCR, 2002, p. 12).

This definition emphasizes that integration is an interactive process between refugees and host communities. According to UNHCR, integration involves multiple dimensions: economic, social, cultural, civic, and political. Not only does it allow refugees to become citizens of a new society and enjoy full and equal participation in resettlement communities, but also offers them a chance to reunite with their families. It is a multidimensional, holistic, and cohesive approach involving families, communities, and others, who can help refugees regain hope and rebuild their lives (UNHCR, 2012, p. 2).

Concepts Associated with Integration

As mentioned earlier, the Integration of migrants is a complex social process that contains many social, political, and economic dimensions, so that there are other concepts that are closely related to the process of social integration, which are as follows: acculturation, adaptation, and assimilation.

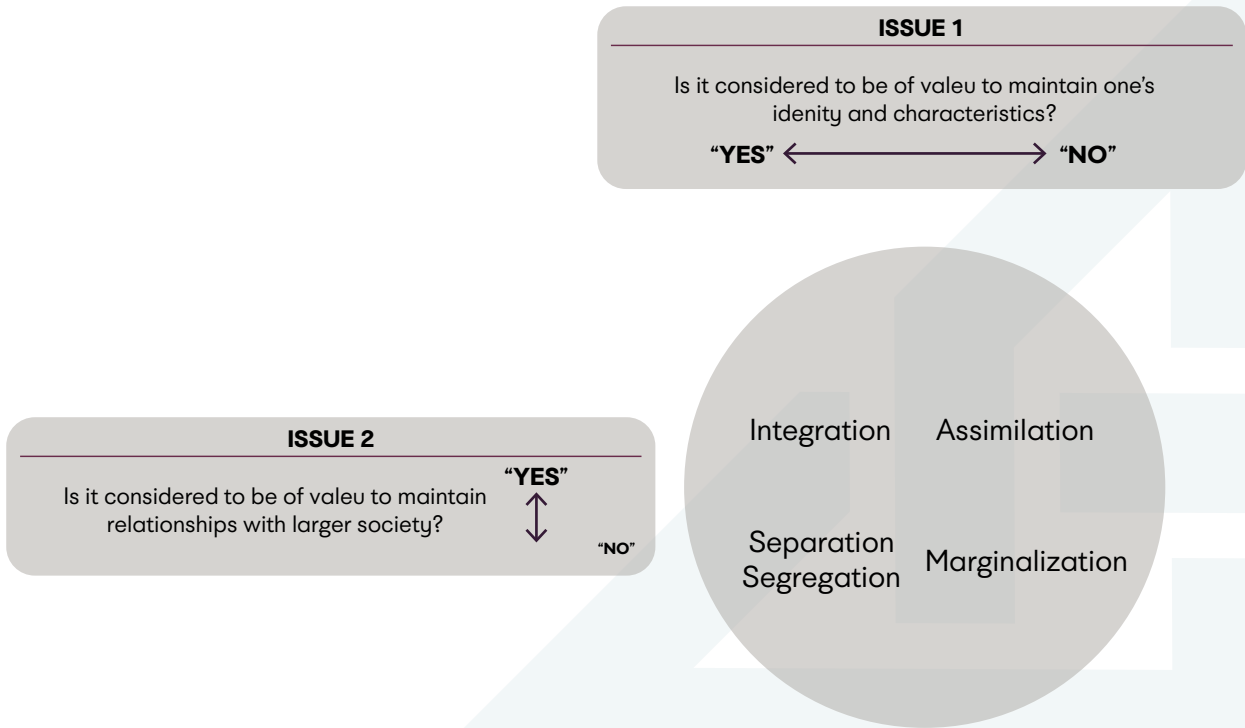
Acculturation

Acculturation refers to changes that occur after contact between individuals or groups from different cultures. It was defined by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits in 1936 as “those phenomena that arise when groups of individuals from different cultures come into direct and continuous contact, with consequent changes in the patterns of the original culture of either or both groups” (as cited in Sam, 2006, p. 11). Based on this definition, acculturation is a neutral process in which the two groups are influenced by each other; however, as Berry (1997) pointed out, in practice, the new group is more influenced than the origin group or the host society group. It is a set of changes that occur in migrants because of their contact with new society.

Berry (1991) introduced four strategies of acculturation. He argues migrants wish to lose their own culture and embrace the new culture; this is called assimilation strategies. Also, when migrants want to conserve their own culture, but not willing to take the new culture of the host society, it is referred as a separation strategy. In addition, when migrants balance both cultures, that is preserving their own and accepting the one of the hosts, it is called as integration. Lastly when the migrants do not want to conserve their own identity and do not adapt to the host’s culture, this is called as marginalization.

The following figure shows the criteria by which Berry 1991 identified acculturation strategies.

Figure 1. Acculturation strategies



Source: Berry (1997)¹

FIG. 1. Acculturation Strategies

Adaptation

Adaptation can be defined as the process through which individuals and groups cope with environmental demands, be it in the short or long term (Berry, 1997, p. 13). It is complex, involving individuals negotiating identities, engaging social systems, and reconstructing cultural practices in new environments in the service of a sense of community and well-being. This process often takes place within specific activity settings, such as migrant social networks, social organizations, and houses of worship. These settings facilitate social interactions that lead to shared meanings and experiences, helping individuals relate to their new cultural contexts (Sonn, 2002).

Assimilation

Assimilation is an intricate concept that has evolved throughout the years, embedding discussions from sociology, economics, and politics. The term describes how migrants conform to the host culture, involving the adoption of certain ways of living deemed immense by them and adjusting it to suit the receiving society.

¹ Berry, W. (1997). *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46 (1). 5-68
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>

Assimilation frequently involves relinquishing original cultural practices and beliefs in favor of fully adopting the dominant culture of the host country (Johnston, 1969, p. 2). As outlined by acculturation theory, assimilation is often viewed as a linear, unidirectional process where migrants are expected to forgo their cultural identity to integrate into the host society (Akter, Hua Tan, & Muslim, 2024, p. 15).

These are influenced by such factors as cultural resistance, language barriers, economic challenges, preserving the culture, limited social networks, and difficulties in adaptation.

Integration, acculturation, adaptation, and assimilation are key terms when discussing migrant positionality in interaction with host societies. Integration enables migrants to retain their cultural identity while participating actively in society. Acculturation involves mutual cultural influence during interactions among groups; the impact on migrants is usually greater. Adaptation is the psychological and sociocultural adjustments that enable migrants to function in their host society. Assimilation involves the complete adoption of the host culture at the expense of one's original cultural identity. Each one of these concepts shows different facets of the migrant experience and the interaction with the host society.

Conclusion

The concept of integration evolved from many early sociological theories to the current dynamic and multi-dimensional framework of migration studies. Framed initially as one of assimilation, integration is now understood as a two-way process between migrants and host societies, putting strong emphasis on mutual adaptation and preservation of cultural diversity. Integration is multivariate, including social, cultural, economic, and political; thus, it emerges uniquely as a framework that strikes a balance between migrants retaining their identity and contributing to cohesion in society, considering its related concepts of acculturation, adaptation, and assimilation. Effective integration fosters inclusion, supports diversity, and promotes the well-being of both migrants and host communities, thereby highlighting its critical role in building harmonious and equitable societies.

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