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## Stories told: integrational processes as experienced by immigrants with African backgrounds living in Norway

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to address integrational processes experienced by some African immigrants with refugee backgrounds and five to ten years of residence in Norway. We collected data through semi-structured interviews on issues relating to immigration and the integration experiences of eight families. Participants' reflections on the issues highlighted in the interviews made visible their challenges and opportunities upon arrival and during their first years in Norway. We use the concept of situated learning to discuss how their narratives describe movements from initial peripheral sociocultural positions towards fuller participation in different domains of society. The results show that across various domains, interactions at the personal level between individuals in the immigrant and majority population increased participation and cultural awareness.

### Keywords

Migration; integration; immigrant perspectives; situated learning; African migrants; Norway

### Introduction

The integration of immigrants has become a top policy agenda in European countries. In Norway, a white paper on integration highlights both the challenges and possibilities of increased immigration, describing integration as a mosaic of many elements including qualification, education, work, wellbeing, social mobility, participation, sense of community, diversity issues, and loyalty to shared values (Meld. St. 6 2012-2013). The white paper underscores the importance of everyday social arenas such as work places, educational institutions, and neighbourhoods for participation and successful integration.

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Migrating to a new society comes with both challenges and opportunities. Newcomers navigate their way through labyrinths of unfamiliar formal and informal cultural and linguistic practices, and are expected to adhere to official policies enacted to assist their integration. Our aim in this study was to explore how some immigrants from Africa to Norway experienced their transition and their new everyday lives in Norway. While ample research focuses on integration, the voices of immigrants are seldom heard in the research literature (Bucken-Knapp, Fasih, and Spehar 2019). We add to the limited but growing body of studies that explore immigrants' experiences and perspectives.

### *Study context*

Over the last fifty years, Norwegian society has undergone major demographic changes. The population has grown and become older, and immigration has steadily increased. In 2019, 17.7 per cent of the Norwegian population were immigrants or Norwegian-born with immigrant parents. Of these, 2.5 per cent originated from African countries (Statistics Norway). In the 1970s, Norway received around 1,000 migrants from Africa annually, 2,000–3,000 in the 1980s and 1990s, and 3,000–5,000 Africans settled in Norway each year between 2000 and 2010 (Statistics Norway). Immigrants from Africa to Norway come from various countries. They differ in cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as religious beliefs, and they come for different reasons. Some come for family reunification, others are resettlement refugees or asylum seekers, and some come for educational purposes. Members of the immigrant population in Norway are more likely to reside in the Oslo area compared to the general population. Refugees are settled all over Norway because of agreements between the state and local governments. Resettlement refugees are somewhat less likely than others to relocate from rural areas to cities (Henriksen 2012). Norway has around 150 Christian immigrant congregations (Synnes 2019). Furthermore, the unemployment rate of immigrants from Africa was 9,6 per cent in 2019 compared to 5,5 per cent for immigrants overall, and 2,3 per cent for the total population. Midtbøen and Rogstad contextualized the labour market statistics by addressing discrimination against immigrants in companies hiring new employees (Midtbøen and Rogstad 2012). They found that applicants with a foreign name were 25 per cent less likely to be invited to a job interview than those with similar educational backgrounds and Norwegian names. In 2006, Rogstad found that employed non-Western immigrants educated in higher education institutions outside Norway were five times more likely to be overqualified than ethnic Norwegians educated in Norway (Rogstad 2006).

Since 1964, Norwegian welfare has been directed towards work activation and reducing dependency on welfare state benefits (Gubrium and Fernandes 2014). When studies from the 1990s showed that large groups of immigrants were highly dependent on social welfare, debates emerged as to whether the benefits provided for this group supported their efforts to become self-sustained (Djuve 2011). In the same period, discussions on integration shifted from a broad focus on social, political, and civic rights to exclusion from the labour market (Fangen, Johansson, and Hammaren 2012). In 2002, the Norwegian government passed the introduction law (Norwegian Government 2003), which included a mandatory introduction programme for groups of newly arrived immigrants to secure their participation in work and social life. Immigrants from Western countries were not included (Gubrium and Fernandes 2014). Participants in the programme are entitled to an individualized educational plan and each is assigned a programme advisor. For all participants, the programme includes mandatory Norwegian language training and social studies (Djuve 2011). On one hand, the programme adopts an individualized approach to the problem of and solutions to worklessness, and on the other, assumes the need for a broad group of people to learn about Norwegian social and cultural issues. Gubrium and Fernandes point out that this combination ethnicizes worklessness (Gubrium and Fernandes 2014). The Norwegian system for the approval of foreign education is described as complicated and as having shortcomings (Lunde and Rogstad 2016). The approval system impacts the development of individual qualification plans in the introduction programme. A recent evaluation of the programme based on reports from participants questions whether quick employment or integration from a long-term perspective is the main target. Apart from following Norwegian language and social studies, many participants perceived their individualized qualification tracks to be low in educational ambition and high in expectations of wage earning (Lillevik and Tyldum 2018).

### *Theoretical framework*

Some researchers consider the concept of integration dubious. Mikkel Rytter points out that the concept reinforces the idea that nation states need to protect their sense of community and that immigrants can be a threat in this regard. To escape this line of thinking and avoid upholding the inherent asymmetry between immigrants and the majority population, Rytter suggests that researchers “write against integration” by critically examining how the concept is used or by choosing other concepts in academic works (Rytter 2018). Although we acknowledge Rytter’s point, we have chosen to use the concept. Our strategy is to challenge asymmetric imaginaries by adopting a perspective on integration as a systemic

process of learning. To guide our analysis, we adapted Bosswick and Heckman's dimensions of structural, cultural, interactive, and identificational integration (Bosswick and Heckmann 2007) and framed these within the concept of situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Bosswick and Heckman's structural integration refers to increasing immigrants' access to educational systems, work and housing, and politics. Cultural integration refers to changing perceptions and actions at the individual level. Ideally, such changes lead to emerging cultural competencies. Interactive integration refers to immigrants' participation in primary relationships and social networks within the majority society. Finally, identificational integration is indicated by feelings of belonging and identification.

Situated learning is a learning process understood as changing patterns of participation in generative social practices (Lave and Wenger 1991), which are dynamic and open-ended with the potential for change. They are "communities of practice" organized around common memberships and shared knowledge (Wenger 1998). Examples of communities of practice include family constellations, work groups, congregations, neighbourhoods, and municipalities. In a situated learning framework, participation can be described as on-going negotiations of how to interpret and contribute to shared understanding. Newcomers are apprentices in peripheral positions from where they gradually assemble general ideas of what constitutes the practice at hand and move centripetally towards fuller participation. As part of this movement, they contribute to the processes of interpretation and recycling of meaning. From this perspective, peripheral participation is a legitimate and qualifying position leading to full participation. However, peripheral participation can also function as a disqualifying position if newcomers are systematically kept from accessing information, resources, or opportunities (Lave and Wenger 1991). In the context of integration, immigrants upon arrival aspire to become members of Norwegian society. In the terminology of situated learning, they are apprentices in legitimate peripheral positions setting out to learn about and contribute to Norwegian practices and values.

In this study, we use "community of practice" to refer to Norwegian society as a whole and to the overlapping practices of formal and informal institutions. We apply the concepts of structural, cultural, interactive, and identificational integration to aid our reading of our study participants' chronological narratives. We identify some relations between persons and activities over time, and discuss their relation to movements from peripheral to full participation.

## Method

### *Participants*

We interviewed members of eight families with East and West African backgrounds on their immigration history and everyday lives in Norway. The families constitute a relatively homogeneous sample considering the variety of African immigrants to Norway. All lived in the mid part of Norway and at least one of the adult family members had spent at least five years in the country. Concerning their family composition at the time of the interview, one family held six children, three families had five, one family had four, and three families each had three children. The children's age ranged from zero to eighteen years, and the majority were aged less than twelve years. Among the adults, six couples were married, one couple was divorced, and one was a single mother. Five families arrived as resettlement refugees, one parent with children came as asylum seekers, and the adults of two families came for educational purposes. On arrival, all the adults were literate. Some had basic education. Some had their higher education interrupted when they had to escape, and some had completed higher education. All except one family came from a middle-class background in their home countries. One family came from a low socioeconomic condition. All considered themselves active believers in the Christian faith. At the time of the interview, four of the women were working in geriatric institutions, one was finishing her mandatory education in Norwegian language, one was finishing her bachelor's degree, and two were finishing their post-bachelor's studies. Of the men, four had full-time jobs, two were working in the field of commerce, one was employed in transportation, and one was working as an engineer. For those in part-time jobs, one was a cleaner and newspaper deliverer (in addition to performing his post-bachelor's studies), and one was working in a public institution. One man was unemployed.

### *Data collection and analysis*

We collected data in 2012 and 2013. During the individual and family interviews, we asked participants open-ended questions about their experiences of migrating to and establishing their lives in Norway, and follow-up questions regarding their everyday life experiences. Given the choice between Norwegian and English, three families preferred to be interviewed in Norwegian and five preferred English. Those who preferred Norwegian originated from French-speaking countries. The interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, and were recorded using a Dictaphone. We transcribed all interviews verbatim. Based on the transcripts, we developed chronological narratives for each family. Through a narrative analysis, we developed plots and storylines for each family. Narrative organization

and narrative analysis of the data were the starting points for the present analysis. Here, we considered how the adult participants described their access to formal and informal interactional structures over time, including how they gained increasing knowledge about living conditions, bureaucratic routines, social organization, and cultural values.

## Results

### *Arrival*

The two student families and one asylum-seeking family in this study explicitly wanted Norway as their destination country. The other families, all resettlement refugees, ended up in Norway by chance. Some came on short notice because of dramatic events and had very little pre-knowledge about Norwegian society. Others obtained some information in their transitory refugee camps. For all, the weather conditions were unfamiliar. One man, who arrived in Norway alone and ahead of his family, recalls how he looked down from the landing airplane at the tiny cars and the snow on the ground while wondering, “*How will life be here, man alone, family far away in Africa?*” Apart from this man, the others arrived as family groups. The largest group was that of a matriarch with her husband and seven children. They were met at the airport by a social worker from their designated municipality. The woman who met them shook their hands and said, “*Welcome home*”. The matriarch noted that she did it without introducing herself or asking the names of the family members. On arrival, refugee families were taken to a house or apartment in their community of settlement. Those who needed health care were attended to, and families arriving in the winter got help to equip themselves for the cold weather. The student families had access to student housing and foreign student services upon arrival.

The impression conveyed in the interviews concerning Norwegian support on arrival was that the social workers meant well, but were somewhat lacking in their knowledge and understanding of the newcomers. For instance, refugee families were happy to find rice as part of the food supplies, but in several cases, the amount was small and not enough for the whole family. This may reflect the Norwegian way of eating rice as a side dish and never more than once a day. One family brought a child sick with malaria. In the hospital, the nurses and doctors refused to accept the diagnosis presented by the parents before they had worked it out themselves three days later. The initial housing offered was of differing standards. Some families found functional apartments, while others considered the standard low. Common for all were that the apartments were meant as temporary homes. Over the first few years, all

except one family relocated several times for various reasons until finding more permanent homes.

Life in Norway involved many unfamiliar everyday challenges. One family mentioned the total confusion when the power went out and they were left in the dark without electricity a few days after arriving. They had to contact a neighbour, and eventually learned that if they used too many electric devices at the same time, it could blow a fuse. The construction of the buildings was also unfamiliar, and families expressed surprise about how well sounds travel in Norwegian wooden houses. In one case, a family had problems with the neighbour below, who felt disturbed by their children's sounds. Several of the adults mentioned that they had to adapt to new ways of handling money. In their home countries, they only used cash and did not trust the bank. In contrast, in Norway, it was not possible to pay the monthly rent with cash and they needed a bank account and credit card. Another new experience mentioned was that busses left on schedule whether they were full or not.

Depending on their arrival dates in Norway, the children had to wait a while to start school or kindergarten, and the parents had to wait to start the introduction programme. After the children started school, they made friends and learned the Norwegian language without much trouble. For the adults in refugee families, the introduction programme served as a main point of access to Norwegian society. For the student families, their university was an important gateway.

#### Introduction programme

Adult members from six families attended the introduction programme.

As part of the personalized nature of the introduction programme, participants had their academic and work-related competencies assessed. Most who had completed high school in their home countries did not have competencies equivalent to those obtained in a Norwegian high school. For those with diplomas, their previous education was assessed as not being on par with the Norwegian system. For example, nurses were assessed as nursing assistants. Those who had higher education were advised to retake courses and exams to obtain Norwegian documentation or to change their professions. Some participants felt let down in terms of not having their qualifications recognized as being at the same level as before. Some experienced a change in status from being a competent professional in their country of origin to a job seeker with unrecognized skills in Norway. To others, it was a new



thought to make career plans in a stage of life when some of their children were already close to adulthood. One family father said:

*I remember the first time I had the interview with the language school principal. He said, "What do you really want to do?" I said, "Now I want to make sure my children learn this language well and have the opportunity for higher education". He asked me, "What about you?" I said, "For me, I want to work". He said "You are still young, you have a long way ahead of you, you are just forty so you have at least twenty-seven years ahead. You may use seven years to go to school and then you work for twenty years". It was interesting actually.*

This man was baffled by the idea of starting a new career at the age of forty and later told us that he had expected his children to care for him as he grew older, as this was the custom in their home country. He did, however, take the opportunity to follow up on his professional interests. Several of our participants continued their education. Some completed higher education, while most took low-grade professional courses. In their narratives, the assessment of competences was linked to family issues such as the economic situation with a breadwinner back in school or practical challenges related to commuting and childcare.

One main aspect of the introduction programme is teaching the Norwegian language. The level and progression of this teaching has been found wanting in terms of adjustment to existing individual competencies (Lillevik and Tyldum 2018). Although the study participants did see the value of learning Norwegian, their motivation, opportunity, and ability to do so varied. Some learned the language quickly, while others found the process slow and time consuming when they most needed to find a job and continue with their lives. Some had problems with pronunciation or with understanding local Norwegian dialects when they departed from the Norwegian textbook.

In addition to receiving classroom teaching, the participants were supposed to practice real-life communication during periods of work practice. One obstacle to language learning was the difficulty of engaging Norwegians in conversation. One of the men who did his language training in a supermarket found that people looking for something in the shop very rarely asked him to assist. When he tried to be proactive and offered his help, they tended not to want it:

*When we started, the people hardly talked to you, so I am only there, and I am working, people come. Even if they are looking for something in the shop, they will not ask you.*

*They will go around, ten, fifteen times and when you ask them, they will say, “No, I will find my way, I will find my way”.*

A woman who did her language practice in a home for old people narrated how she approached an old man who did not want to communicate:

*I was working with this old man the whole day. He did not want to talk to anybody. So, when I came in, he did not want to talk to myself too, so I said, “But we are friends ooh”. He said, “I do not want to talk”. So, I took off my hair (wig) and set it on him and he was laughing. And the whole day, he started laughing.*

As part of social studies, teachers informed the participants about available community services and volunteer work in their area. They also took the participants on sightseeing tours to visit local industries, cultural events, and natural resources, and invited them on hiking tours. Hiking is a favourite Norwegian cultural practice. Participants’ interest in and appreciation of some of these activities varied, for example, in the hiking tours. Some participated wholeheartedly, while others felt it was a waste of time.

In the introduction programme, participants meet individual advisors and course teachers (Lillevik and Tyldum 2018). In our data, the participants refer to both advisors and teachers as teachers. Interactions with teachers provided the first opportunities for social networking in Norway. One couple was assigned Red Cross refugee guides by their introduction programme teacher. Later, the guides became close friends. One woman was introduced to volunteer work by her programme teacher. At the volunteer centre, she met the leader of a cleaning service who later gave her a cleaning contract. One male participant was invited to political meetings by his teacher. Later, he engaged politically and became a member of the local municipal assembly. One man puts it this way:

*First, networking started from the introduction programme. The first people we knew were our teachers. When we had problems, the first people we called were our teachers. They gave us advice and told us where to go, you know. So, the teachers actually helped us to get our network.*

### *Becoming employees*

In several cases where adults in the study were successful in acquiring a job, networking and personal relations played an important role. One man “inherited” a part-time job from a person he met in the introduction course who was moving to another town. One woman got a job after a former employer recommended her. One man was helped by a

teacher who contacted the workplace on his behalf. One of the women identified a geriatric institution at which she wanted to work. She offered to work there on a voluntary basis with the hope of being hired later. Some of her fellow immigrants questioned this strategy:

*You know, my fellow African immigrants were saying, "You are doing free work". I told them, "There is nothing free, because I am learning the language and getting to know people, and this is the work I want to do. I am learning the process". From there I am working fully now.*

Within four years, most families in the study had changed their status from being novices and students dependent on welfare to self-sustained family units with one or two incomes. In the process, most of the adult participants had gone through long periods of apprenticeship where prospects of getting permanent employment had been uncertain. Several had scaled down their educational dreams and plans, and taken on employment below their qualifications and outside their previous professions to be able to manage their expenses. This is aligned with the findings of other studies (Rogstad 2006).

#### *Becoming homeowners*

Within four years, half the families had transitioned from being dependent on the municipalities for accommodation to homeowners. Recent statistics show that close to 77 per cent of people in Norway live in self-owned homes mainly financed by long-term bank loans (Statistics Norway). The government supports home ownership in Norway, because people take good care of areas with self-owned homes and it is an established way in which people invest their money and secure their old age. To support this policy, national and local authorities grant special loans with favourable conditions to people of moderate means. Three of the families were granted such loans. One family obtained information on this possibility when the man contacted the refugee office to ask for assistance in finding a bigger apartment. In line with Norwegian discourse, he pointed out that living in a rented house is expensive in the long run, while buying means securing their old age. Another family heard about a favourable loan from colleagues when they mentioned they wanted to buy a house. One criterion for obtaining a loan is to have a predictable income. At this point, the wife in this family was still qualifying for a permanent job. To secure the loan, she lobbied the institution where she planned to work later and succeeded in getting a guarantee letter to present to the bank. The parent in the third family found out about the favourable loan on her own by browsing the municipality's web pages. She realized she met the criteria, applied for the loan, and got it. A fourth family also learned about the favourable loan and applied, but was denied.

To their frustration, they found out that you do not qualify if you have what is considered a high income, but are poor because of the large size of your family. Moreover, adults who put themselves and their children in this position are considered irresponsible. The family father narrated the episode when he learned that the application was denied as follows:

*So, the guy tells me, "You know, this loan is meant to help you, but the problem is you are too rich". And I say, "How am I too rich if I do not have any money?" And then he is like, "Oh ja, because your income is too high, you do not qualify". I said, "But have you looked at my expenditure? So you are saying that if I ask my wife to quit her job, then we qualify, but then based on the children and everything we have to go through as a family, there is no way it is going to help us. So you are really telling us to not do this". Of course, he was a bit mad and he told me, "Oh, you know, I did not tell you to have those kids".*

With the help of family abroad, this family still managed to raise the money for a regular bank loan and were able to buy a house. Over time, after this and other episodes, the father of this family became politically engaged.

After more than four years in Norway, two families lived in privately rented homes on long-term contracts. One of these families had found a very attractive rental by networking in their congregation. They had not considered buying a home, as they still dreamed about returning to their home country. The other family was also content with their rented home in a quiet neighbourhood where their elementary school-aged children could move around freely and go to school alone. One family still rented the home provided by the municipality on their arrival in Norway. This mother dreamed of buying a house, and like many native Norwegians, felt that paying rent instead of making down payments on a mortgage was like *"throwing money out the window"*. The last family, one of the student families, continuously struggled to find suitable places to live. They stayed in different forms of student housing, but kept looking for privately owned homes for rent. They had sometimes met with house owners, but were turned down as tenants, mainly because they had young children. The other student family (who eventually bought a house) also had a history of continuously looking for suitable places to stay.

### *Social participation and belonging*

The white paper on the integration of the immigrant population (Meld. St. 6 2012-2013) underscores the importance of work places, educational and welfare institutions, and neighbourhoods as social arenas where ethnic Norwegian and immigrant citizens can meet

and interact. The adult participants interviewed in this study mentioned interacting with ethnic Norwegian teachers, bureaucrats and professionals, colleagues, neighbours, congregational members, and parents of children aged the same as their own. Their general perception was that Norwegians were friendly but reserved and kept a distance. At lunchtime in their workplaces, ethnic Norwegians grouped together, and foreigners often grouped together. One woman working in a geriatric institution referred to groups of ethnic Norwegians who talked mainly with each other, and a group of “others” who also talked with each other—her included. This last group consisted mainly of foreigners, but also of some Norwegians who had relocated to this town from other parts of Norway. When individuals from different groups sometimes interacted, language barriers and a lack of situational context hampered small talk and disrupted personal bonding: “*Yes, they say jokes and you do not understand the jokes so... you feel you do not have real friends*”. Sometimes the feeling of being left out was more explicit, as expressed by another woman: “*When they (Norwegians) want to talk about their secrets, they put you out*”, or this man: “*For example, you see, when they want to talk badly against you and you are there, and they do not want you to understand, they talk in a very fast tone.*”

One man overheard his colleagues saying that their workplace had turned into an asylum camp. At the time, he was the only immigrant working there. Contrary to some of the other men in the study, this man was reluctant to engage politically. He felt that the colour of his skin made him vulnerable and feared he would become a target of racism.

The participants rarely interacted with their ethnic Norwegian colleagues after working hours: “*It is that we come and we work and after that nothing*”. One woman did not attend traditional Norwegian Christmas parties, because as she said: “*It is not mandatory*”. This short comment may hold an implicit reference to alcohol consumption common to such parties, which can function as an identifier of being Norwegian or not (Lynnebakke and Fangen 2011). However, some workplaces tried harder than others to involve employees and their families with each other. One man experienced the following:

*In my current job and where I work now, I find that the community is very social. My kids have gone out and met people I work with, we had skiing weekends, and we have done very many activities that bring the people at work together.*

When the adult study participants talked about their social life outside school or work, interaction with neighbours and fellow parents, involvement in volunteer work, and

involvement in congregational activities stood out. Being a parent opened many social arenas in the neighbourhood and related to the children's education and recreational life. We discuss this in more detail elsewhere (Johannesen and Appoh 2016). Several parents engaged in volunteer work such as fundraising for sports or music bands. In addition, some were members of volunteer centres, NGOs, or political parties, often as a result of contacts made while in the introduction programme. One family in the study befriended a Norwegian family who were members of the same NGO. The families visited each other, and the family with an African background also met their friends' parents. At one point, they discovered that the old father of their Norwegian friend had died. Based on African expectations, they were shocked and annoyed about not being informed or invited to the funeral. Later, they learned that obituaries were published in the local newspaper to inform people about deaths in Norwegian communities. Another example from a different family also illustrates how cultural learning can emerge from micro-level misunderstandings. In this case, the mother, who had befriended an ethnic Norwegian family, addressed the father in the family with an African background and his two young sons as "*the boys in the family*". In Norwegian, this phrasing is endearing, but the African man perceived it as an insult: "*It affected me and I just got mad, and I went to a doctor about it and he said what is wrong. I said I am a bit depressed*". After the doctor explained the misconception, they could all laugh about the matter.

Religion was identified as an important dimension contributing to negotiations of identity (Synnes 2019). All eight families in the study considered themselves Christians. Although some were more actively practicing Christian activities than others, they all considered church an important arena for social life and worship. The congregations played an important role in their lives by providing a sense of belonging, support in practical matters such as finding a place to live, and a network of friends and acquaintances. Similarly, Synnes (Synnes 2012) reported that many members of the Christian congregations in Oslo were asylum seekers who found social belonging and practical help in their church. In this study, some of the families found established immigrant charismatic churches in their area of residence, while others entered the Norwegian Lutheran church. In the Norwegian church, the style of worship was low key and constrained compared with African church practices, as illustrated by one woman:

*One time we went to the state church and when the Pastor said praise the Lord, no one answered. So, I told my husband that "when he says it again, I will answer". He said, "praise the Lord", and I said "Amen!" And everybody was looking at us.*

One couple became members of a gospel choir in a nearby town. Over time, they realized they had a somewhat different perspective on the purpose of the choir than the ethnic Norwegian members. According to the man, the ethnic Norwegian members were only “*singing and singing*”, not praying. He and his wife realized that “*the gospel choir was not really a gospel choir*”, but a social choir. They stopped attending after this.

## Discussion

According to Jean Lave, the structuring of communities of practice affects the internal dynamics of learning and identity formation. If the community is a workplace, centripetal movements of participation depend on new members’ access to relevant work-related practices and processes as well as opportunities for learning (Lave 1991). In our case, the ultimate community was Norwegian society. The possibility of more involved participation in Norwegian society rests on access to a broad range of positions and practices in the areas of welfare, education, work, leisure, and housing. For Bosswick and Heckman, such access is nuanced in terms of structural and interactional integration (Bosswick and Heckmann 2007). Descriptions of how access to education, work, and housing developed are replete in our data. By exploring these descriptions of everyday episodes, we captured processes across domains often studied separately.

In terms of situated learning, immigrants to Norway are novices or apprentices. When they arrived in Norway, the migrants in this study had little or no knowledge of Norwegian society. Especially the refugees had no prior knowledge and were lacking in the competences and resources needed to manage without support. Their need for extensive guidance and help was met with established welfare structures. Many of the persons with whom they interacted during this first period in Norway were professionals or volunteers geared toward providing help. Episodes narrated by the families confirm they were initially positioned predominantly as help-seekers. The episode at the airport, where the social worker left out names in the greeting routine, illustrates this point. By neither presenting herself nor asking the names of the family members, the social worker signalled that she perceived the family as people needing help, not as a group of individual persons. Likewise, she positioned herself as a “helper” rather than a person with an individual identity. Such generalized roles of receiver and helper may evoke moral obligations on the part of the receiver comparable to receiving a gift or being a guest, and thus contribute to asymmetric relationships, as noted by Rytter (Rytter 2018).

After settling in, the families started to familiarize themselves with the practical and societal aspects of life in Norway. The introduction programme afforded a mediating structure in this regard, which enabled future participation. Activities in the introduction programme included hiking tours in forests or mountains. Hiking is a much loved activity in Norway and deeply embedded in the Norwegian way of life. Several participants told us that from their perspective, hiking was a waste of time. Others found the Norwegian language course boring or irrelevant, and the assessment of qualifications wanting. By questioning the course content, the participants on one hand transformed their own participation to become more involved. On the other, they actualized their own foreignness and the inherent asymmetry of the receiver and helper positions established upon arrival. As a result, the transformative potential of being a critical and involved participant was diminished by the risk of being perceived as ungrateful.

One main benefit of the introduction programme was opportunities for personal interaction. The participants highlighted the role of the teachers in this regard and described how they met them as individual persons. In their narratives, teachers played vital roles in broadening the range of practices and relations to which they had access, and by creating new opportunities for participation. Such opportunities later led to an extension of social roles in different domains of society. This resonates with a recent evaluation of the introduction programme, which points to the potentially important role of programme advisors as door-openers (Lillevik and Tyldum 2018).

The labour market is considered a key arena for the integration of immigrants in Norway (Brochmann and Hagelund 2011; Meld. St. 30 2015–2016). To smoothen the match between participants and the job market, an assessment of qualifications and educational coaching are performed in the introduction programme. Overall, the study participants' previous educational qualifications were not recognized as equivalent in the Norwegian system. Some reacted very negatively to this and felt rejected by a system that did not recognize them, while others easily accepted that they had to adjust. It has been noted that the Norwegian system for the approval of foreign education is lacking, and that highly educated non-Western immigrants more often than other groups have jobs irrelevant to their educational backgrounds (Lunde and Rogstad 2016). Our participants' narratives confirm the importance of studies on how qualifications are assessed and possible discriminatory practices.



One reason labour market participation is considered important to integration is the assumption that newcomers will meet members of the host community and learn from them the language and social practices. Research shows that having a job strengthens social interaction and language skills, and prevents the development of parallel communities (Meld. St. 30 2015–2016). Some researchers emphasized that the picture is more complex and that workplaces can be arenas for both exclusion and inclusion (Valenta 2008). Our data indicate that processes of workplace participation are continuously negotiated at the interactional level. Such negotiations can take place between employer and employees, between employees, and between employees and the public, and are related to issues of identity and/or culture.

An example of negotiations between employers and employees is narrated by the woman who started to work on a voluntary basis in the hope of getting a regular position later. On her request, the employer accepted her as a volunteer. When she had familiarized herself with patients and colleagues and acquired the necessary skills, she was accepted as a paid employee. By adopting this strategy, she created a space for herself to access new arenas and take on new roles, as postulated by the theory of situated learning. She did not see herself as exploited or victimized, as some of her friends suggested.

An example of negotiations between employees and the public is the man who experienced that customers refused to respond when he offered his services in the grocery store. By working in a store, he expanded his participation, but the public did not recognize his efforts. By not responding, they denied him this chance to practice the Norwegian language and thus constrained his momentum towards more involved positions. This man noted that Norwegians in general were quiet and kept to themselves. He thus positioned the situation as a cultural issue.

The woman who removed her wig and placed it on the head of a patient who would not talk to her also noted that Norwegians were quiet. The use of wigs is common practice among many African women, but not among ethnic Norwegians. This woman used this cultural difference in aesthetic practice in a humorous way as a resource to inspire the patient to interact with her. In other cases, participants described humour at the workplace as an obstacle that made them withdraw and feel left out. Subtleties of the Norwegian language and unfamiliar communication practices were mentioned as sources of feeling left out, being “other”, or insulted, also outside the work context. Although such episodes were frustrating, if

the issues were resolved, they enhanced participants' interactional repertoires and bicultural competences. This way, misunderstandings at the personal level over time contributed to more participation.

Over time in Norway, all but one family established a permanent home. In this process, they became familiar with Norwegian housing and family policies. They interacted with bureaucrats and professionals, and negotiated conditions for financing. As they learned about financial terms and regulations, several recognized that issues of housing as well as family size and family planning are value-laden and culturally informed. By actualizing alternative views and values, they challenged established and taken for granted Norwegian perspectives. To some participants, such confrontations opened the next level of participation where they set out to make political impact.

In terms of congregational activities, the trajectories of participation took a different turn. Over time, a majority of the study participants moved from the Norwegian Lutheran Church to immigrant churches, where the style of worship was more familiar to them. One family who joined a gospel choir later withdrew their membership when discovering the choir was not a forum where they could pray. Unlike in the introduction programme or labour market, in this case, the families could choose to participate or not on equal terms with majority individuals. Other researchers have pointed out how the theological articulations of identity may work to negotiate ethnic boundaries (Synnes 2019).

According to Bosswick and Heckman, it is possible to participate in the core practices of the majority society without identifying with institutional goals or developing a feeling of belonging (Bosswick and Heckmann 2007). Our study provides examples of how immigrants with jobs may still feel left out, and of how being excluded from welfare benefits to which you feel entitled can engage and spark a deeper involvement. Focusing on stories of how the lives of families played out over time highlights the important role of interaction at the personal level between immigrants and majority individuals in their participation in different domains of Norwegian society. The stories also indicate that bicultural competencies and relational identities as employees, members of political parties, or foreigners and outsiders emerge over time depending on opportunities for interaction. Confrontations on issues of cultural relevance and ambiguous identification can involve setbacks where newcomers are referred to peripheral disqualifying positions, but can also create generative potentials within the practice and enable the growth of bicultural competencies in newcomers and the majority

population. This resonates well with the concept of learning as something that happens when participatory roles and relations change in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991)

Based on the arguments in this paper, our main advice to policy makers is to support opportunities for personal interaction between newcomers and the majority population in all areas of society, and consider such interaction as the main gateway to increasing involvement for immigrants in Norwegian society. Policy makers should also aim to increase awareness of how welfare structures may constrain relational roles.

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