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## 'We do things together': exploring a household perspective on early integration processes of recent refugees

Jolien Klok<sup>a\*</sup> and Jaco Dagevos<sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands; <sup>b</sup>Program for Representation and Trust, Netherlands Institute for Social Research, The Hague, Netherlands

### ABSTRACT

People are not isolated, but embedded in ongoing social networks of which the household is a crucial one. Yet, integration trajectories and outcomes are often measured and evaluated on the individual level. To nuance previous research' preoccupation with a somewhat disconnected individual, we explore a household perspective to better understand early integration trajectories. We depart from the idea that refugees regard their direct families extremely important in early settlement times and employ the notion of embeddedness and the Family Investment Model to guide this investigation. Based on qualitative work among recent Syrian refugees to the Netherlands, we showcase four particular stories that reveal that individual integration trajectories are (also) the product of the households in which these are embedded as individuals exchange integration goals among each other and view integration as a joint venture of all household members. A household perspective succeeds to uncover important mechanisms in integration processes, most notably the fact that the expectations and ambitions that refugees set for themselves *and* their families is an important driver of individual integration trajectories. We conclude that the integration of individuals needs to be considered more often in the context of households in order to better understand and support them.

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## Introduction

The integration of refugees is a topic of interest and concern for governments, policy makers and professionals. The years of 2015 and 2016 witnessed an increase in refugees from Syria, and more recently Afghan and Ukrainian people have crossed borders in search of safety, thereby increasing the urgency of the topic. Over the past decades, researchers have aimed to shed light on integration practices and tried to get hold of how they unfold. More or less directly inspired by the concept of human capital, many of these studies have focused on individual refugees' integration outcomes, for instance language acquisition (Van Tubergen 2010; Gordon 2011), labour market

**CONTACT** Jolien Klok  jolien.klok@WUR.nl

\*Current address: Rural Sociology, Social Sciences Group, Wageningen University & Research, Wageningen, Netherlands.

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participation (Phillimore and Goodson 2006; Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen 2017) and social involvements (Huizinga and Van Hoven 2018; Damen, Huijnk, and Dagevos 2022a). However, we know that individuals are embedded in a web of relations that impact behaviour (Granovetter 1985). For instance, Williams (2006) notes that refugee informants had trouble describing their lives without referring to their family and group relationships. Especially during the highly dynamic early settlement process, close family members are important (Bergeron and Potter 2006; Diehl et al. 2016; Sundvall et al. 2021). In order to nuance previous research' preoccupation with a somewhat disconnected individual, we, in this paper, explore a household perspective to better understand the complexity underlying early integration trajectories on the individual level (Ryan et al. 2009). We aim to answer the question: how do recent refugees navigate their integration in conjunction with the needs, wishes and resources of the household?

Household strategies are not uncommon in the scholarly field of migration. They have been researched with regard to the actual decision to migrate and remittances (Carling 2008; Cohen 2011) but also to transnational caregiving (Zickgraf 2017) and mothering (Fresnoza-Flot 2009), and pendulum and return migration (De Haas and Fokkema 2010). Household strategies concerning integration processes have largely been neglected in the literature (Creese, Dyck, and McLaren 2008). Scholars that *have* researched household strategies in integration have often studied labour market participation and departed from the Family Investment Model, which considers the division of labour between men and women in immigrant families (Duleep and Sanders 1993). We dive into FIM a bit deeper in the next section, but for now it suffices to say that we extend FIM's argument beyond the labour market.

Integration has theoretically been described as a multidimensional concept (Ager and Strang 2008). Moreover, research shows that refugees also regard it as such themselves: they do not necessarily focus on one dimension of integration only (Damen et al. 2022b). Thus, staying close to the lived experience of refugees we consider a broader notion of integration, looking at employment but also at socialising and building a new social network, as well as learning the language and feeling at home (Ager and Strang 2008).

So, the household has only rarely been taken into account when investigating integration trajectories, even though refugees themselves deem them highly important, especially in these early years (Bergeron and Potter 2006; Williams 2006). Moreover, scholars have argued that newcomers' own perspectives on integration are not yet heard well enough and that pre-established notions of what integration entails often dominate scholarly and public debate (Goodson and Phillimore 2008; Omlo 2011; Van Heelsum 2017; Damen et al. 2022b). Yet, it is the refugees *themselves* who prioritise integration goals and make choices accordingly, in – as we will show – interaction with partner- and household characteristics. By taking the household as the unit of analysis, and examining 'what goes on' there in terms of integration, we stay close to refugees' own interpretation of integration and their ways of shaping and giving substance to it.

## Theoretical reflections

### *Embeddedness in the household*

Employed by Granovetter (1985) to better understand economic behaviour, the notion of embeddedness was to provide an intermediate position between an all-encompassing

social world determining individual action on the one hand, and individual behaviour as purely autonomous and outside of the social context on the other. Granovetter adds (1985, 487): '[People's] attempts at purposive action are [...] embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations'. With embeddedness we can thus refer to those personal ties that foster a sense of rootedness, thereby framing and sometimes even directing behaviour. Picked up by various disciplines, the concept has also reached migration studies (Korinek, Entwisle, and Jampaklay 2005; Rusinovic 2008; Palmberger 2017; Wessendorf and Phillimore 2019; Ryan et al. 2021) and has been used to account for the process in which migrants negotiate different social spheres (Ryan and Mulholland 2015). Louise Ryan has extensively employed and further conceptualised embeddedness (Ryan and Mulholland 2015; Ryan 2018; Ryan et al. 2021). She (Ryan 2011, 2018) and others (Korinek, Entwisle, and Jampaklay 2005) indicate that embedding is differentiated, so migrants may be embedded at some levels, such as in the labour market, but not at others, such as in the neighbourhood. With regards to this, the household was identified as a domain in which 'emotionally close, reciprocally supportive and enduring familial networks' exist (Ryan and Mulholland 2015, 5).

Exactly because of the strong family base and generally rather solid relationships underlying household embeddings, it may be unsurprising that empirically in integration scholarship, relatively more attention has been paid to how newcomers become embedded in social networks *beyond* the household, as compared to how they are embedded *in* the household. However, as these relationships are important sources of care and support, particularly during newcomers' immediate settlement when geographically near social networks are close to absent (Bergeron and Potter 2006; Sundvall et al. 2021), losing sight of this primary unit of embeddedness is to underestimate a pivotal aspect of refugees' early integration.

Scholars of social relationships have argued that relations are often based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960): people prefer relationships in which they give and receive a more or less equal amount of support. However, in emotionally close relationships, for instance with spouses or children, people feel responsible for each other's wellbeing and the balance in terms of reciprocity is much less considered than in more distant relationships (Klein Ikkink and Van Tilburg 1999). For instance, if one has a long-term illness, a close relationship will continue to care, even though support may not be granted back. Moreover, Antonucci and Jackson (1990) introduced the notion of reciprocity history. They argued that in close relationships support is not always expected back immediately, but can be 'exchanged', so to say, later in life when circumstances demand it.

Ryan and Mulholland (2015) reason that embedding is dynamic, with which they mean that relationships formed are not static and perpetual, but may engage in different levels of connectedness at different times. They note:

To capture this dynamism and variegation we suggest that [...] it is useful to think about embedding as a verb to explain a process that occurs over time, in specific contexts, and to varying degrees, as a result of on-going commitments and opportunities (150)

Though embedding in the household can thus generally be understood as consisting of strong and mutually supportive relationships (Antonucci and Jackson 1990), against the background of migration, Ryan and Mulholland (2015) also turn our eye to context, determining commitments and opportunities. Refugees are a case in point. They have

often endured personal trauma's in origin countries and on their journey to safer places. Furthermore, their flight was unprepared, leaving them disadvantaged in terms of language proficiency and administration of required documents (Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen 2017; Van Heelsum 2017). Upon arrival, their social networks are dramatically reduced as compared to what they were like in the origin country (Sundvall et al. 2021). Moreover, these first years are compelling and demanding, in which many decisions have to be made, for example about language education, employment and/or (general) educational pathways (Diehl et al. 2016). Refugees' flight-, arrival- and settlement experiences are thus significant life events, that form the background to which household embedding dynamics unfold.

These refugee-inherent circumstances obviously also take their toll on family life, as, among others, scholars of family studies and family therapy have shown (Panos and Panos 2007; McMichael, Gifford, and Correa-Velez 2011; Nickerson et al. 2011; Gangamma 2018). Grief, loss, trauma's and the confrontation with an entirely new social and institutional context can change family-relationships – between partners, between partners and children and between siblings – depending on migratory background and family-resources (Gangamma 2018). In line with others however, we also want to emphasise the resilience of refugee family relationships (Panos and Panos 2007; Gangamma 2018), as research shows that close relationships are able to withstand stressful times because they are less based on reciprocity norms than other relationships (Klein Ikkink and Van Tilburg 1999) and in this paper highlight the creativity of households in engaging in integration trajectories. In migration and integration literature, where the focus on the individual is still widespread, awareness is needed for the embeddedness of individuals in households and the resourcefulness of these households in integration processes. It may be that especially in the vulnerable conditions in which (some) refugee households find themselves that a household perspective is most significant.

### ***Family investment model***

Yet, fairly little is known about how embedding in a household is used strategically to navigate various dimensions of integration. Some investigations focus on how specific persons in the household are crucial in the integration process. For example men as the main provider in the household, thereby integrating in the labour market (Humpage et al. 2020), and wives and/or mothers as gatekeepers to social life (Ryan and Mulholland 2014). Hence, these studies uncover the interdependencies that exist in families when navigating a new country. However, a household perspective as we employ it takes a broader look at integration – not merely because we are interested in different domains, but because the reality in families is that different integration domains are simultaneously juggled and different integration goals are assigned to different members. It is the household perspective, in contrast to focusing on one person in the household only – like the role of women or men – that lays bare these integration dynamics.

Building on human capital theory (Bourdieu 1986), a household perspective is somewhat more common in studies on labour market integration, especially when it regards entrepreneurship (Sanders and Nee 1996; Kibria 2014; Zehra and Usmani 2021). To the realm of labour market investigations also the Family Investment Model (FIM) belongs

(Duleep 1998). FIM proposes that immigrants' employment is a product of resources and deliberations on the household level (Duleep and Sanders 1993). Men often precede their wives in migration to a new country and labour divisions in the origin country are often gendered. Therefore, to invest in their husbands' economic capital, with which 'host country skills' are optimised, it was hypothesised that women in the early years after migration work longer hours but forego their own investment in economic capital by initially taking better paying, but dead-end jobs. By the time husband's fulfilled their labour market potential, women would reduce their efforts on the labour market (Duleep 1998). Empirical tests of the hypothesis found mixed results (Cobb-Clark, Connolly, and Worswick 2005; Van Tubergen 2008; Basilio, Bauer, and Sinning 2009) and scholars have argued that other factors are also important to consider, such as heterogeneity in preferences for traditional gender roles and the presence of social networks (Cobb-Clark and Crossley 2004; Phan et al. 2015).

Though labour migrants have a vastly different experience coming to a new country than refugees do – as we have discussed above – we find that FIM is useful in understanding the early integration trajectories of refugee households. Its merit lies in the idea that resources and interests in the household are assessed and employed in a household strategy to accomplish a certain goal. We want to extend this argument in two ways.

First, as we mention above, we do not apply the household strategy solely to labour market integration but also consider other dimensions of integration like language acquisition, entering new social networks and feeling at home (Ager and Strang 2008). These manifestations of integration – as labour market participation – require the investment of human capital too. For instance, learning a language necessitates (among others) cognitive abilities (Chiswick and Miller 2001) and engaging in contact with new people requires social skills (Phillimore 2011). These different forms of human capital are not always equally available to every member of the household. Therefore, as they move along in their integration process, refugees may share and divide the responsibility for integration according to the resources and capabilities of the household participants.

Second, FIM only focusses on resources and interests of *partners* in the household, based on human capital – which is understandable when looking at employment potential only. However, when other integration indicators are taken into account, other members of the household and their interests become important too. To illuminate, research shows that people often migrate for the sake of their children; in search for socioeconomic betterments and improved educational opportunities (Chee 2003). Though refugees' migration was forced, their concern for the success and happiness of their children also form important incentives to leave home and take refuge in reception countries (Jabbar and Zaza 2016; Gangamma 2018). The safeguarding of children's futures and their wellbeing in the new country may thus be an important goal to achieve for refugee parents, foregrounding their own integration efforts. A household perspective on integration should therefore, in our view, also take into account children's needs and interests.

Below we briefly summarise our methods and analytical frame, after which the findings of our study are presented based on four different narratives. They all show, in varying ways and with regard to different integration outcomes, how embedding in the household unfolds and how it is employed and shapes individual integration trajectories.

## Methods

### *Background and informants*

The data for this paper come from the EUR Bridge project, which examines the role of local integration policies in Rotterdam in the acculturation of recently arrived refugees.<sup>1</sup> As a part of this project, a qualitative study was set up based on 20 in-depth interviews, that ambitioned to understand the opinions, struggles and experiences of refugees in Rotterdam regarding their own integration process. It aimed to map how refugees experience the contribution of policy to their integration process, by exposing the mechanisms through which they say to integrate in Rotterdam. Various mechanisms other than policies were mentioned – with (members of) the household being assigned an important role – which formed the starting point of the current paper. With a ‘household’, we mean a (nuclear) family: partners with or without children who share a house (this is partly the legacy of the EUR Bridge project, that targeted in-tact nuclear families – at least at the time of entry into the Netherlands).

Informants were approached based on their participation in the representative Bridge panel survey wave II (the quantitative part of the EUR Bridge project) that used the following selection criteria: (a) refugees of 15 years or older; who (b) had received a temporary asylum residence permit in the Netherlands no earlier than 1 January 2016; and (c) had settled in Rotterdam since 1 June 2016. The recruitment of 20 Syrian participants for the qualitative study took place in July and August of 2020. In order to collect as many different perspectives as possible, a random selection from the survey was made according to demographic characteristics, namely gender, age and education level. Respondents were asked to participate an in-depth interview by telephone, in Arabic. As compensation for participation, a voucher of twenty euros was offered. In total, 17 men were approached, ten of whom agreed, and 21 women, ten of whom also agreed. [Table 1](#) shows that the sample was slightly skewed towards older and higher educated people. Most of them had been in Rotterdam for three years at the time of the interview.

**Table 1.** Informant characteristics

Total number of informants	20
Educational level	
At most primary education	6
Secondary education	4
Higher education	10
Age	
15–24 years	1
25–34 years	5
35–44 years	7
≥ 45 years	7
Sex	
Male	10
Female	10
Household characteristics	
Several dependent minors	13
Average number of people	4.2
Settlement in Rotterdam	
2016	2
2017	16
2018	4

With the exception of two divorced women, all households were based around a heterosexual couple. Thirteen households included dependent minors; mostly two or three, two men lived themselves still with their parents, others either had grown up children (not living with them, no one lived alone. Previous occupations varied from conductor to truck driver for male respondents, and from English teachers to housewives for females. Reflecting the circumstances of war and flees,<sup>2</sup> the relatively younger people often had no work experience matching their education.

### *Interviews and analysis*

We were inspired by the Outcome harvesting method, which is used in qualitative evaluation research (Wilson-Grau and Britt 2013; Abboud and Claussen 2016; Blundo-Canto et al. 2017). Outcome harvesting maps changes in behaviour, relationships or activities and from there examines how a particular intervention has contributed to this change. During the interviews refugees' current integration 'position' in Rotterdam was discussed (regarding language acquisition, labour market, social networks, feeling at home, etc.), after which we aimed to generate insight into how the informant had come to the point where (s)he is now, by looking back and discussing the informants' integration trajectory so far. Thereby Outcome harvesting laid bare how refugees indicated how they had achieved a certain outcome – and which mechanisms in these trajectories they deemed important for where they were now. This was the phase in which the ideas for the current paper first developed, as the researcher noted that some informants' integration routes were quite strongly articulated as the product of their household characteristics.

The interviews took place in participants' homes, shortly after recruitment, i.e. also in July and August 2020. Prior to the interview, respondents were informed in Arabic about the purpose of the research and the confidential treatment of the data. They were also asked if the interviews could be recorded. Bilingual (Arabic and Dutch) informed consents were signed. Interviews lasted an average of two hours. The researcher (the first author) conducted interviews with the help of two Dutch- and Arabic-speaking interpreters. Difficult to translate concepts (such as feeling at home and integration) were discussed and a translation agreed upon. Although the interpreters sometimes asked for clarification from the informant without translating, the researcher was in charge during the conversations. Interpretation during the interviews was done consecutively and generally went smoothly. Although the interviewer's position as a researcher at a university could potentially create a power imbalance during the interviews, using her ignorance of what (administrative) steps need to be taken in early integration processes in the Netherlands helped to encourage the interviewees to regard themselves as key informants of their own experiences.

Transcripts of the interviews were prepared by the interpreters and translated verbatim into Dutch. Transcripts were analysed with Atlas.ti. In a first phase, open or initial coding was used to explore the content and nuances of the data, hence themes emerged inductively. Cases in which a household strategy surfaced dominantly were scrutinised further, forming a second phase in the analysis, marked by structural coding (see for more on these coding techniques Saldana 2013) and more deductively re-examining the data. Combining the notion of embedding – in the household – and FIM we examined first, how refugees are embedded in their families; second, how these embeddings are subject to the contexts in which they operate and; third, how



these embeddings and the resources and ambitions they muster are used strategically to navigate integration goals. Reflexivity vis-a-vis the data was stimulated by using the memo function of Atlas.ti and by involving another member of the EUR Bridge project team in analysing the data, with whom interpretations and reflections were shared and discussed. Moreover, in the project additional qualitative and quantitative data were collected between 2017 and 2020. Even though these were not specifically analysed with regard to household integration, some general patterns about integration outcomes and how people handled and juggled these were recognisable. During the writing process, the researcher often returned to the (raw) data to fully comprehend how what was said and analysed related to the wider context of the conversation. Below we rely on four different stories to begin to explore a household perspective in integration research. These were selected because their integration strategies most clearly revealed a household strategy, in a way these can thus be typified as ‘ideal cases’. In the discussion of results we indicate how certain experiences and strategies played a role among other participants in the study.

## Results

### Amir

Raising children takes up time and energy, and is often considered most important in parents’ lives. Within this context Amir, who used to be a construction worker back in Syria, tells us about his experiences in learning Dutch. Like several other informants reported, it is challenging to find the time, energy and cognitive space to effectively study a language in such a context. Amir says he has a severely disabled son, as well as two other young children. Because the apartment allocated to them is not optimal for their situation, he and his wife spend a lot of time taking care of their handicapped son. They also had to arrange professional support for their son, which involved a lot of administrative and bureaucratic requirements. In addition, Amir stated that he was struggling with psychological problems, something rather common among newly arrived refugees (Uiters and Wijga 2018), and also reported more often across informants. This led some to even postpone their entire integration trajectory, because they just did not find the mental capacity required. Amir claims to be ‘psychologically very tired’. He started with the language lessons, but what he learned did not last. His head was too full and he felt exhausted. He then says:

I said to my wife: "I will not succeed with studying". My wife has enjoyed studying since she was little. I said to her: "the man or the woman should get their language right and try to learn it". I told her: "you should focus on studying, more than me. I try to fulfil the other things, in the house for example, the kids and stuff". (Amir, male, aged 52)

Having a small chat with Amir’s wife confirms that indeed she is doing very well in learning the language, and enjoying it. Amir’s narrative shows that his household is his primary concern. He considers it his responsibility to invest in their new life in the Netherlands, on top of the demanding family life at home. He therefore, in consultation with his wife, makes a balanced decision: *as a household* he thinks it is important to ‘get their language right’. He is not so much occupied with his own future and integration, he just finds that at least *someone* in the household should learn to speak Dutch, while he will

engage in the full-time task of taking care of the children and doing household chores. They chose to invest – by means of language lessons – in the person with the most potential to make it a success, which sounds a lot like the FIM model.

Ryan and Mulholland (2015) consider dynamism an important characteristic of embedding. In line with their observations, we also see its dynamic character in this story. The members of this household have strong relationships, which make it possible to rely on each other for an extended period of time (Antonucci, Ajrouch, and Birditt 2013). Amir's human capital is slightly defective, because he's been through so much as a refugee. Yet, his wife is able and willing to support him (and the rest of the household) by taking language lessons on behalf of them. Perhaps in the future, when he feels better, he may also be able to provide for his family by taking language lessons and 'return the favour'. It shows that household dynamics in processes of integration are not only subject to resources in the household, but also to specific circumstances – mental health in this case – that may change as time progresses and situations change.

Amir's narrative also reveals that an individual approach to integration fails to acknowledge aspects of the integration experience that are paramount to Amir. Amir's Dutch language proficiency is perhaps not very well, but this was a *deliberate* consideration, that was made in the context of his household. Even more so, the goal he had been setting – that his wife would learn Dutch – is getting accomplished. In the context of the household Amir not speaking Dutch makes sense, though it may not when only looking at his individual process. Amir may not think of his own Dutch proficiency as a failure, because he made the choice not to focus on it. It shows that it is important not only to consider the household in individual integration trajectories, but to depart from the standpoint of the one who is being researched (Omlo 2011; Van Heelsum 2017; Damen et al. 2022b).

### Leyla

Another example is the case of Leyla, 31 years old, married and with three young children. She says that she tried to learn Dutch at CEFR B1 level but that this was difficult as her husband was working and she was responsible for taking care of three children. This comment intrigued the researcher, after which she digs deeper into how priorities and tasks are divided between her and her husband. Leyla explains:

I'm number one [winks]! Because he is a craftsman and has already had a job as a baker at a bakery. That is why he says: "go and enrol in some education program." Obviously, because my position is more complicated without education and work experience. [...] It was a joke when I said I'm number one, but we do things together. We applied for jobs together and took language lessons together. In the beginning he found a job and I went to school. That was okay! Then I went to school and he stayed at home with the kids. (Leyla, female, aged 31)

From this excerpt, the strong embedding of Leyla in her household is telling – 'we do things together'. Although both the husband and the wife are trying to achieve the same integration goals (learning the language, employment), and so an individual perspective seems appropriate at first glance, one needs to take into account the context of this family to properly understand their situation. It is striking that the focus is not necessarily on the person having the most potential (the husband), such as advocated

by FIM. Though the wider sample of twenty narratives revealed embeddedness along ‘traditional’ gender expectations, these more progressive gender attitudes were also quite common. Investments are made in the human capital of Leyla, who, because of the war and becoming a mother had only finished high school in Syria, so that the playing ground between them levels. This may cost him time to become more active on the labour market, but the various tasks they have together, i.e. raising their young children, acquiring an income and individual development, is a joint effort in this family. This takes time, and, as this case illustrates, sometimes requires a ‘standstill’ in terms of individual development for the one, to make room for the other. It reveals that resources, but also ambitions and future potentials of individuals are being employed for the benefit of the household.

Furthermore this story nicely captures the household dynamism that is part of these early integration efforts – they are involved in (thinking about) language lessons, education and jobs. The household they are in provides the strong foundation on which all these decisions and investments can be made, but vice versa, their integration trajectories also affect their household dynamics: when the one is working towards some integration goal, it means the other is at home with their children. They are juggling the different interests of their household amongst each other.

We want to emphasise that the strategy that this household employs is a deliberate one. They choose how to go about their integration, and make the decision to ‘do things together’, meaning resources and investments are shared. To understand and evaluate the individual integration trajectories of the members of this family, it is paramount to know their point of departure and their approach.

### *Rana*

Rana, a former English teacher, is a very sociable and enthusiastic woman, well-established in the local community in Rotterdam. She indicates that her father used to be a man of prestige in the village where she originates from, and that he supported whomever came to him for help. And so, she says, she learned how to get things done already at an early age, attributing her enterprising nature to him. About how that helps her to find her ways in the Netherlands, she says:

If you need something, you have to dare to take action. My husband, for example, does not do that, even if it is necessary. He does not dare and says to me: “go and ask”, or: “go and deal with this”. [...] Right from the start I had to do everything on my own and go to appointments, for example. My husband said: “You speak English, you can get by”.  
(Rana, female, aged 48)

She goes on to say that via her social contacts in the neighbourhood, her daughter (aged 11) participated in an exhibition of a museum about refugees in Rotterdam. Rana invited almost her entire social network to the opening of the exhibition and made it a real happening, with a get-together at her place, inviting the people from the museum as well. Through these contacts, her husband got volunteer work at the museum, before officially starting to work there part-time. She summarises:

I need to network and my husband takes advantage of that!

The social skills of Rana are used for the benefit of the social and societal participation of her daughter. She (daughter) got to invest in her own human capital by means of this collaboration with the museum; she presented herself, met other (professional) people and her story got exposure, as she also featured on the cover of a leaflet of the exhibition. Secondly, Rana employed her social skills to open the way for her husband to gain some (though unpaid) experience on the Dutch labour market by means of his position at the museum. What is more, this experience has resulted in him entering a paid job at the museum. Though at the time of the interview it was still unsure whether his temporary contract would be converted to a permanent contract, Rana's husband was working for the time being, ultimately contributing to the wellbeing and the future of his family.

Like Amir (above), Rana's husband 'lacks' some human capital: the social skills to 'go and ask' or to 'go and deal with this'. We see this more often in the broader sample of twenty refugees. As mentioned above, some have psychological problems, but there are also a few with physical problems (sometimes as a result of the war) or, such as in this case, because social skills are not optimal. In the context of a household, this often puts pressure on the other members: he depends on his wife, who *has* the social skills, to arrange things. We suggest that in the context of early settlement in the Netherlands, his deficient (social and cultural) human capital are likely to weigh more heavily on his wife than in a context where everything is familiar and he feels comfortable. This underlines that household relationships and how they are employed in the context of integration are impacted by specific circumstances – showing again that embedding in the household is a dynamic venture.

While Rana's story may not testify to a very conscious household strategy, it does reveal how the human capital of Rana is invested in the opportunities of her child and her husband, while *she* is actually not formally employed – though she engaged in various unpaid activities. Only looking at *her* progress on the labour market fails to acknowledge the primary unit in which she is embedded, her household, in which people *are* actually taking steps to participate in Dutch society. And that is due to *her* engagement in the community and *her* determination to make something out of the opportunities that come their way. Hence, a household perspective would be much more fitting to assess the contribution of Rana to Dutch society.

## Zayn

As we have discussed in the theoretical reflections, children are an important reason to migrate (Gangamma 2018). It is therefore no surprise that their success and wellbeing in the immigration country is of major concern to newcomer parents. What is potentially more surprising though, is that parents project their children's feelings of belonging to the resident country, onto their own feelings of belonging.

As long as my kids are comfortable in this country, I will be comfortable too. If I hadn't had children, I wouldn't have come to the Netherlands, because I think I don't have a chance here. But the kids are the reason I came here. As long as they feel at home and safe here, I also feel safe and at home. (Zayn, male, aged 43)

For many parents in our sample this mechanism holds. Zayn, being embedded in his direct family – in his household –, emphasises that he came to the Netherlands for the

future of his children. Zayn even states that the opportunity for him to be successful has already passed. In the interview, he explains in detail how he had a successful company in Syria, which traded in specific spices, which he had taken over from his father. He is very disappointed about how it had ended because of the war. Although he is satisfied with and grateful for all that the Netherlands has offered him, his story shows how he feels his 'chances' and opportunities are already behind him – in Syria. Scholars have warned not to neglect refugees' experiences, relationships, skills and possessions in their home countries when they 'start over' in new countries (Van Liempt and Staring 2020). For Zayn this is very true: his life lies in Syria, and despite him being parted from his successful life there, by means of his children he feels at home in the Netherlands. He came to the Netherlands to offer *them* a future. Again, we see the changing nature of embedding in the household against the background of migration and integration. Zayn, feeling disappointed and discouraged, has shifted his own feelings of home and purpose to his children's belongings and aspirations for the future. This shift also reveals how meaningful and enduring the ties in his household are: his children can mitigate the pain and stress of losing a company, living in war and migrating to an unfamiliar country if they become happy and successful.

Zayn's narrative furthermore illustrates that if one aims to understand individual integration processes, refugees' and their families' starting points, ambitions and future goals should be taken into account. At the time of the interview, Zayn did not seem too keen on investing a lot in his own integration, but taking into account his point of departure – the future of his children – his hesitation is coherent with his intentions. The goals were not set for Zayn individually, but for his household – the future of his children.

## Discussion

This investigation departed from the notion of embedding (Ryan and Mulholland 2015) and FIM (Duleep and Sanders 1993) to explore the merits of a household perspective in integration research and posed the question: how do recent refugees navigate their integration in conjunction with the needs, wishes and resources of the household? To answer this question we first shortly sum up what we found above and then turn to the main conclusions.

The findings reveal that individual integration trajectories do not develop in a vacuum but are also the product of the households in which these are embedded. These embeddings were not static but had changed due to migration or after, and were prone to change again. We thereby showed how embedding in the household is a dynamic process, that changes with the development of different contexts, opportunities and commitments (Ryan and Mulholland 2015). Moreover, we disclosed how, within these dynamic embeddings, individual resources, needs and ambitions in the household were weighed and employed to benefit the integration processes of (other members of) the household. Importantly, these strategies and (expected) outcomes aligned with the goals they had set for themselves and their families, were it from the start – as in Zayn's story – or later on in the integration process, adapting to changing circumstances – such as in Amir's story.

Considering individual refugee integration processes in the context of the household reveals that sometimes human capital of individual members are employed for the

benefit of other people in the household or for the entire household. This has some major advantages in comparison to studies that do not take into account this context. First, it allows researchers to stay close to the lived experiences of refugees and the goals they set for themselves and their families, thereby going towards a more realistic and bottom-up notion of what integration really entails for their protagonists. As researchers note, this has so far been insufficiently recognised in integration research (Goodson and Phillimore 2008; Omlo 2011; Van Heelsum 2017; Damen et al. 2022b). Second, building on the previous: it allows for ‘fairer’ judgements of integration trajectories of individuals, i.e.: different circumstances make for different integration routes. While some studies report the impact of having young children on the labour market entry of refugee women (Ruis 2019), these still remain scarce, and we show, firstly, that this is not the only factor of significance in the household and, secondly, that this is not limited to women, but applies to men too. The same can be said for mental health issues, that are quite well documented as a barrier to successful integration of individuals (Beiser et al. 2015), but how these individuals employ other resources in the household to circumvent the negative impact of mental health problems on integration, receives limited attention. Third, a household perspective is potentially particularly useful in early integration processes in which a lot of choices regarding integration trajectories have to be made, and connections, (external) resources and know-how vis-a-vis the new society are still to be developed. In these strenuous times a lot is demanded of refugees and the household seems to provide a ‘pool of resources’, so to say, that can be employed according to changing situations and circumstances.

This paper engages in two strands of literature: on embeddedness and FIM. We applied the notion of embeddedness and how it has been used in integration literature (Ryan and Mulholland 2015) to an often overlooked unit in integration scholarship: the household. Particularly because of the strong and supportive close relationships that the household provide, a lot can be required and demanded of one and other (Antonucci and Jackson 1990). In the context of migration, the household is confronted with many outside expectations and appeals regarding integration and we show that the relationships in the household are employed to meet those. The dynamic character of embedding as Ryan and Mulholland (2015) argued, is thus also found in the household – despite, or perhaps rather thanks to, their strong and solid base of lasting close relationships. With regards to FIM, our main contribution to the literature is that we extend its argument beyond the labour market to also include other integration outcomes: language proficiency, social networks and belonging. Also in these domains household strategies are designed and used to negotiate challenges and obstacles. Moreover, we show that children, who are important members of the household, are included in these strategies, in contrast to FIM, which only takes into account the division of labour between men and women. We hence encourage scholars to not only engage with the notions of FIM in immigrants’ labour market participation but also in other spheres of integration in which newcomers navigate, because it yields a more comprehensive picture of the integration experience of individuals. Moreover, we showed how the rationale behind FIM also applies to refugees, and not only to labour migrants.

We want to reflect on some other issues. Remarkably, the findings of this paper are quite favourable for the women in the households, while this is not necessarily always

the case in this group of Syrian refugees (Ruis 2019). We point to the fact that we had a rather highly educated sample (as described in the methods section), which seems to go hand in hand with somewhat more progressive values regarding gender equality (Damen and Huijnk 2020). Yet, we also want to attend to another mechanism that might be at work here: some of the narratives presented above demonstrate a form of ‘defective’ or ‘lacking’ human capital, (perhaps) produced by the situations these refugees are in – often in the case of men. This may create space for the women in the household to develop their own integration trajectories. Especially in this sample, where educational levels were high and human capital generally available, a household strategy to integration may be even more salient, and a household perspective in integration research all the more valuable. Though we have in general provided some insights in how household embeddings may function in the context of integration, future research could focus more specifically on when and how household strategies are particularly adopted. For instance, would this be very different for largely lower educated refugee populations, because they would have less human capital to their disposal?

In the cases we staged, there is more and less evidence of a well-considered strategy at the household level. While some clearly state that certain people in the household are ‘taking care’ of some form of integration on behalf of other members of the household, others are more implicitly revealing how they ‘do things together’, and household strategies are less clearly articulated. However, all cases undoubtedly demonstrate that the household is a strong and productive contributor to individual integration strategies, be they deliberate or unconscious decisions.

This paper has argued for a household perspective on integration to acknowledge that individual integration trajectories are not isolated developments, but subject to context. There are many other different contexts that are also crucial to the integration experience that we did not focus on in this paper. For instance, successful integration trajectories are always the product of the efforts of both migrants, as well as receiving societies (Berry 1980). In this case, all informants lived in Rotterdam, a highly diverse and multicultural city in the Netherlands (Crul, Scholten, and Van de Laar 2019). Scholars have argued that such superdiverse contexts make it easier for newcomers to fit in and experience a sense of belonging, as their ‘otherness’ is less noticed (Pemberton and Phillimore 2018; Wessendorf 2019).

To conclude, this paper has explored a household perspective on integration to allow for the acknowledgment of interconnected individuals. We find that it succeeds to uncover important mechanisms in integration trajectories, most notably the exchangeability of integration goals within a dynamic household and the space it provides to consider people’s own perspectives, expectations and ambitions for their integration. Lastly, we would like to discuss what a household perspective could mean for integration policy. First, this paper showed that integration policies and institutions play a demanding role in early settlement processes. Considering the household shows that this not only applies to the individual – finding a language school, a job, getting acquainted with your rights and obligations as a newcomer – but to *all* members of the household with their own needs and wishes. For example, they may need medical or psychological care or regular basic education. These institutions often require a commitment from more than one of the household members – as a parent for instance or partner. Simultaneously though, young children, the processing of traumatic experiences and coping with feelings

of loss also compete for mental capacity during this first period. As a result, perhaps certain integration trajectories are less opportune – e.g. intensive language learning at the very beginning. In these cases, policy should leave space to focus on language acquisition later in the integration process and stimulate it when the time is ripe. In other words, policy could be more aware of household conditions and accompanying household considerations that influence individual choices. Second, policy programmes could aim to target households more than they do individuals, to offer the most optimal support for all members in the household. In light of our findings, this would be more in line with refugee realities, thereby making integration policy more efficient.

## Notes

1. For more information on this project and the survey(s) see Dagevos and Van der Linden (2021).
2. We did not interview our informants about their flight experiences but from the Syrian population in the Netherlands we know that 44% usually slept outside during their flight to the Netherlands; more than half regularly had insufficient food (58%) and only half usually had access to clean drinking water (Maliapaard and Schans 2018).

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