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# About but not without: Recently Arrived Refugees' Understanding of and Expectations for Integration within a Local Policy Context in the Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

In discussions on integration, the perspective of newcomers themselves is rarely included. As recently arrived refugees' integration is subject to policy, we investigate their understanding of and expectations for integration within a (local) policy context in the Netherlands. Using focus group data with Syrian and Eritrean refugees recently settled in Rotterdam, results show participants understood integration as not being marked as different and becoming self-reliant (through work, language, social connections, and cultural knowledge). While partly coinciding with policy objectives, participants emphasized mutual effort, especially socio-culturally. Policy implementation was particularly criticized, pointing toward the need for extensive, practical, and person-oriented support.



## KEYWORDS


integration;  
refugees;  
bottom-up;  
local policy;  
recent arrivals;  
acceptance;  
self-reliance;  
socio-cultural

## Introduction

Over the last three decades, immigrant integration has become a salient policy aim in most European countries (Entzinger & Scholten, 2015). However, integration remains a contested concept, meaning different things to different actors. Most scholars understand integration as a dynamic, multi-dimensional, and multi-directional process (Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore, 2011), shaped within time, place, and context (Berry, 1997; Bornstein, 2017). In contrast, within policy, integration is mainly understood as a process of newcomers adapting to (the dominant group within) the host society (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2003; Vasta, 2007). What is largely lacking in this debate, is the perspective of newcomers themselves.

From a democratic perspective, it is undesirable to exclude newcomers from the integration debate, especially as they are the subject (Badran & Mustafa, 2019). If the target group in question feels unheard or misunderstood, this can result in a lack of motivation to participate, mutual misunderstanding, resistance, or rejecting integration as an ideal (Omlo, 2011). Ultimately, imposed meanings of integration could lead to ineffective policy and limitations in representation (Badran & Mustafa, 2019; Ponzoni et al., 2020). To prevent such occurrences, newcomers should be able to 'contribute to the processes in which integration is defined, facilitated and assessed' (Korac, 2003, p. 4).

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In the current research, we explore whether there are commonalities in how newcomers reflect on integration. Herein, we utilize the specificity principle of Bornstein (2017), who argued: ‘understanding often depends on what is studied where, in whom, how, and when’ (p. 4). By recognizing this, we study integration taking in particular context (local policy), person (refugees), and time (recent arrivals) into account. We do so since newcomers generally do not have the freedom to choose how they want to acculturate; instead, policy constrains their choices (Berry, 1997; Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2018; Silka, 2018). This is especially the case for recently arrived refugees in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, who are the focus of our research. ‘Recent arrivals’ are newcomers still in the phase of a temporary residence permit. When leave to remain is granted in the Netherlands, refugees first receive a temporary permit valid for 5 years. This permit makes their residence in the Netherlands lawful and as a result, refugees have the same rights and obligations as other Dutch residents, with an additional obligation to meet integration requirements to obtain a permanent permit. We use the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘refugees’ as abbreviations for ‘people from a refugee background’ throughout this article. While their refugee background is one of our main selection criteria, we wish to emphasize that we do not intend to reduce the complexity of their identity to the single component of their refugee experience.

As the Netherlands is a strongly regulated country (van Liempt & Staring, 2020) in which integration policy has largely been decentralized (Leerkes & Scholten, 2016), recently arrived refugees are highly subject to (local) integration policy. Moreover, they might need government support ‘unique to their experience’ (Khoo, 2012, p. 13) due to various hardships. Compared to settled migrants and refugees, recently arrived refugees (see also: Ager & Strang, 2008) might thus have a different understanding of and expectations for integration, as they are in the middle of their integration process. While early experiences are considered crucial for the evolvement of refugees’ lives in the receiving society (Ghorashi, 2005; Lomba, 2010), they are generally understudied (Diehl et al., 2016). So, focusing on this timeframe, group and context can assist us in better understanding integration from the bottom-up, thereby expanding our knowledge on this debated concept.

Previous studies including the perspective of settled immigrants and refugees on integration have identified the importance of safety, housing, equal opportunities and rights, education, language learning, work, social relations, and cultural knowledge (Ager & Strang, 2008; Korac, 2003; Mestheneos & Ioannidi, 2002; Shaw et al., 2021). Some, but not all of these terrains central to refugees’ new lives in the host society are also key components of integration policy (Cheung & Phillimore, 2017). Hence, integration is most successfully perused when refugees’ integration goals, as well as the host society’s policy objectives on various terrains, are aligned (Berry, 1997). While policy objectives can give direction, policy implementation can directly impact refugees’ integration process, for example through bureaucratic contacts going the extra mile to assist (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017), the way reception or finding employment is organized so people can participate less quickly as desired (van Heelsum, 2017) or within language education, where people can learn less quickly due to the quality of teachers or the size of the classes (van Liempt & Staring, 2020). Adding to previous studies including the target group’s perspective, the issue of whether the objectives of current integration policies and their local implementation meet recently arrived refugees’ understanding of and expectations for integration is of specific interest in this study (see also: Khoo, 2012; Phillimore, 2011).

In sum, this study thus breaks new ground by examining recently arrived refugees’ integration from the bottom-up within a local policy context. We do so by reporting on qualitative research among recently arrived refugees in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, exploring (1) their understanding of integration, (2) if and how this coincides with current policy objectives, and (3) whether local policy implementation meets their expectations. By utilizing the specificity principle and placing recently arrived refugees’ integration in its policy context, we ambition to bring the

diverging views on integration by different actors closer together, ultimately benefitting scholars, policymakers, and refugees.

### ***Integration and the policy context***

Whereas the concept of integration originates from the assumption that newcomers need adjustment to the receiving society, most scholars understand integration as a multi-dimensional process requiring from immigrants a willingness to adapt, but also from the host society a willingness to facilitate integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; Berry & Sam, 1997; Phillimore, 2011). Moreover, integration is understood not to take place in a social vacuum but to occur within a particular time, place, and context (Berry, 1997; Bornstein, 2017). In policy, integration is often aimed at becoming self-sufficient through learning the language and finding paid work (Steimel, 2017), but attention is also paid to teaching newcomers about the host society's culture. When it comes to the responsibility to achieve those objectives, emphasis is laid on efforts by newcomers (Berry & Sam, 1997; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2003; Vasta, 2007). In this way, policy demands for integration can be easily confused with assimilation, e.g. linear adaption by newcomers (Triadafilopoulos, 2011).

To include the target group's perspective, which is often neglected in discussions on integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; Badran & Mustafa, 2019; Korac, 2003; Ponzoni et al., 2020), earlier studies have examined refugees' understanding of integration. Mestheneos and Ioannidi (2002) indicated refugees shared the common dream of equal opportunities and rights, democratic participation, and acceptance. Korac (2003) compared the settlement experiences of refugees in Italy and the Netherlands, showing: 'integration, as it is perceived and desired by the refugees themselves, is about both its functional aspects, such as education, re-training, and employment, as well as other aspects of social participation in the wider society' (p. 21). Shaw et al. (2021) examined resettlement priorities and perceptions of successful resettlement among refugees resettled at least 5 years prior, showing their prioritization of safety, educational opportunity, financial stability, and social connections.

The study by Ager and Strang (2008), in which they constructed a conceptual framework for integration, is probably the most well-known study including qualitative data on (a. o.) recent arrivals' perspective on integration in the United Kingdom. Based on a mixed-method approach they identified elements central to perceptions of 'successful' integration, consisting of factors regarded as both means and markers of integration (employment, housing, education, and health), social connections (bridges, bonds, and links), facilitators (language and cultural knowledge and safety and stability) and foundation (right and citizenship).

We add to these valuable insights from previous studies by utilizing the specificity principle of Bornstein (2017). According to this principle, 'specific setting conditions of specific people at specific times moderate specific domains in acculturation by specific processes' (p. 3). By recognizing this, integration is studied taking in particular context (policy and receiving society), person (refugees), and time (recent arrivals) factors into account in examining recent arrivals' understanding of and expectations for integration.

Though not their focus specifically, differences between general policy objectives and those identified as important for refugees themselves in previous studies can be identified. There seems to be consensus about the importance of the 'functional aspects' (Korac, 2003, p. 21) of integration in which policy is pursued (such as language learning and work). Yet, attention to all their aspirations and needs (such as mutual acceptance, equal opportunities and rights, social participation, safety, educational opportunity, financial stability, housing, and health) is usually not standardized as part of integration policy or services (Shaw et al., 2021). Studies that did take the policy context into account (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017; van Heelsum, 2017; van Liempit & Staring, 2020) show frustrations can also emerge concerning policy implementation. As recent arrivals might face different challenges, this speaks to the challenge of more explicitly focusing

on discrepancies between their understanding of integration and both policy objectives and implementation.

### ***Integration policy in The Netherlands and Rotterdam***

As mentioned before, the Netherlands is a strongly regulated country, which can also be recognized in its integration policy (van Liempt & Staring, 2020). However, during the past decade, Dutch integration policies have been largely 'mainstreamed'. Meaning there could hardly be specific policy aimed at newcomers' integration (Scholten et al., 2017). Instead, newcomers were subject to a general (participation)policy applying to all Dutch citizens. Yet, in light of the arrival of large numbers of refugees between 2014 and 2016, there was more room for policy measures specifically targeted at newcomers (Dagevos & Odé, 2016). In addition, there was a shift in responsibility; newcomers became increasingly responsible for their integration (Blom et al., 2018). Finally, integration policy became decentralized (Leerkes & Scholten, 2016), meaning refugees' integration process is largely shaped by the local policy context of the municipality they are assigned to after their permit is granted and housing is available.

Concerning national integration policy, refugees' integration obligations commence after temporary leave to remain is granted. The majority of refugees in the Netherlands are then required to comply with the civic integration objectives as specified in the Integration Law of 2013 to be eligible for permanent residence (Rijksoverheid, 2013). This means they have to pass an integration exam consisting of a participation statement, showing Dutch language proficiency in writing, reading, and speaking (minimum A2 level) and knowledge on Dutch society, within three years (Blom et al., 2018; Boot et al., 2020; Rijksoverheid, 2013). To prepare, newcomers have to take courses which they select and pay for themselves. Newcomers can take a student loan to cover the costs, which will be discarded once they pass in time. Sanctions are imposed to punish those who fail, though there are possibilities to apply for dispensation or extra time (Blom et al., 2018; Boot et al., 2020; Rijksoverheid, 2013). At the same time, obligations regarding the participation law apply to all citizens dependent on social assistance benefits, including refugees (Boot et al., 2020). While the focus is often on learning the language first, the aim is for refugees to participate through paid work quickly (Oostveen et al., 2018).

Dutch municipalities are given a target for housing newcomers, determined in proportion to their population. Besides housing them, the municipality has a responsibility in facilitating their integration (Blom et al., 2018). In this study, we focus on refugees in the Municipality of Rotterdam. At the time of this research, Rotterdam opted for an integrated and parallel approach concerning refugee integration (Dagevos & van der Linden, 2021). This approach focused on supporting newcomers with housing, income management, social counseling, career orientation, and civic integration while also aiming for refugees to integrate quickly and to be active in (language)education or (volunteer) work for a minimum of four days a week<sup>1</sup> (Dagevos & Odé, 2016; Municipality of Rotterdam, 2018). If work was available, the newcomer was expected to carry out other integration activities in their spare time. Following national policy objectives, the municipality of Rotterdam makes a strong appeal to the personal responsibility of newcomers (Dagevos & Odé, 2016; Municipality of Rotterdam, 2018) for example regarding finding a language school or taking a loan to pay for education. To facilitate refugee integration within the Rotterdam approach, the municipality works with several social and private organizations (Dagevos & van der Linden, 2021).

### **Materials and methods**

We include this local policy context of Rotterdam to provide a bottom-up understanding of refugee integration. Doing so, we use a phenomenological approach based on qualitative data derived from seven focus groups that took place in May and June of 2018.<sup>2</sup> Participants

for the focus groups were approached based on their participation in the representative Bridge panel survey<sup>3</sup> (wave I in 2017, response rate 84%,  $M_{\text{age}} = 31$ , 54% men and 46% women, 73% born in Syria, 13% born in Eritrea, and 15% born in other countries - largely matching the distribution of people seeking asylum during the peak of asylum applications between 2014–2016 and the time of recruitment (CBS, 2020). Using the Rotterdam Municipal Personal Records Database, the sample was drawn purposively based on the following selection criteria: Syrian or Eritrean origin, at least 15 years of age, received a temporary residence permit in the Netherlands from January 1st, 2016, and living in Rotterdam from June 1st, 2016. Reflective of the ethnic backgrounds of refugees in Rotterdam, we arranged one focus group for men from Eritrea and six focus groups for men and women from Syria. We distinguished the focus groups by gender and educational level because the quality of conversations was expected to be higher in a group of people with corresponding characteristics (Greenwood et al., 2014).

Interviewers from a research agency contacted the selected participants by telephone in Syrian Arabic or Tigrinya. In total, a random selection of 53 refugees of Syrian and Eritrean origin participated in seven focus groups. Of these, 23 participants were women, 30 were men. Participants' age ranged from 16 to 57 and their level of education from no education to master's level. Almost everyone who was invited agreed to participate (non-response of  $n=3$  without provision of a reason). Each focus group consisted of a minimum of six to a maximum of eight participants to provide sufficient diversity in opinions while the group size remained manageable. The focus groups were conducted by a bilingual discussion leader and assistant provided by the same research agency, they were familiar with the target group's culture, matched the gender of the respondents, and were trained in conversation techniques used in qualitative research. After welcoming participants and putting them at ease at the location<sup>4</sup>, the postdoctoral researcher present explained the research goal, thanked respondents for their presence, and informed consent forms were signed, after which the researcher left so the discussion leader and assistant were alone with the respondents. A pre-prepared topic list gave direction to the focus groups, but also left room for unforeseen topics. The topic list was drawn up based on a broad interest in the perspective and experiences of the target group and is available as Online [Appendix 1, Supplementary Material](#).

The focus group duration was on average 1 hour and 50 minutes. The research assistant made notes on non-verbal behavior. The audio was recorded and these files were anonymized, transcribed, and translated by the moderators and assistants from Syrian-Arabic or Tigrinya into Dutch before analysis using Atlas.ti. One transcript was analyzed by two researchers to establish the set of codes, which were largely similar to the thematic topics as discussed in the focus groups (see also: Berg & Lune, 2004). Eventually, all transcripts were analyzed by two researchers, and their coding was discussed to ensure intercoder reliability (Boeije, 2005).<sup>5</sup> Trends were identified and relevant comments were explored in greater detail. In addition to the coding, notes were made per transcript about the most important themes. Subsequently, based on the coded transcripts and notes per theme, findings are reported. To illustrate our findings, quotes were translated to English and displayed in the next section. Whose quote is displayed is distinguished by gender, respondent number (Rs1, Rs2, etc.), and focus group number.

## Results

Based on the focus group discussions we provide insight into how recently arrived refugees understand integration and to what extent their understanding and expectations compete or converge with policy objectives and (local) policy implementation. For each subsection, we do so based on the major themes presented in the findings, e.g. those consistent across various individuals and focus groups. At the same time, we sometimes highlight the particular understanding of a subgroup where deemed relevant.



## How refugees themselves understand integration

Most focus group participants had fairly clear associations about what integration means and what it takes to integrate when asked about their understanding of integration. In general, participants in this study understood integration as the absence of differences between newcomers and Dutch citizens (without a migration background). In other words, the essence of integration according to these participants is to no longer be regarded as a refugee but being accepted as equals, which can also be understood as a desire for not being marked as different:

*Integration is when there is no difference between refugees and Dutch people. All are equal and agree with each other. [...] Integration is that we feel like Dutch and not like foreigners. (Syrian man, Rs2, focus group 6).*

For the benefit of integration, according to the majority of the participants, you must learn how to do things yourself. In this regard, some women indicate they do not want to rely on their children, for example when it comes to translating. Others reflect on this by stating that only when you have a problem and can independently look for solutions, you become part of society. In other words, integration is also understood as being self-reliant:

*We really have to learn everything all over again here, and get to know it well. That's what you need for integration. (Syrian man, Rs4, focus group 4).*

Another central theme highlighted in the focus group discussions refers to learning the Dutch language, almost as a pre-condition for integration. According to many of the participants, language is key to integration. The reasoning behind this is that once you speak Dutch, you can make Dutch friends, learn Dutch customs, work, and will be able to do everything independently. Language proficiency is therefore extremely important for recently arrived refugees:

*I definitely want to do it [i.e. learning the Dutch language] for work at first, but then certainly also for communicating with the Dutch, because this is the biggest obstacle between us and them: the language. (Syrian woman, Rs3, focus group 3).*

Beliefs about to what extent one should be proficient in Dutch varies among the participants. Several men view language as an asset to find work, which they consider a crucial part of integration. For them, work is how you shape your life and learn what you have to regarding the Dutch language and cultural practices. If you have work then you will integrate is the rationale:

*Integration is work. If you work in a company with Dutch people, you learn all kinds of new things from them. It doesn't matter whether it is practical things or mental things. [...] Work will make your integration easier. (Syrian man, Rs8, focus group 4).*

Refugees in the focus groups also express the need to connect with others as important for integration. By some of the respondents it is seen as a condition for integration to actively get involved in society by engaging in social contacts:

*Integration means that you participate in society. [...] That you make Dutch friends with whom you keep in touch. (Syrian man, Rs8, focus group 2)*

Integration is moreover understood, by several participants, as adapting (to a certain extent) to Dutch society, particularly regarding getting to know and respect Dutch norms, values, and customs. They expect that learning about this and relating to it will help with better understanding and functioning in society. However, while few argue for complete adjustment, the majority assert learning about Dutch culture does not mean one should adopt everything. In other words, most participants stress the importance of becoming part of the receiving society while retaining a sense of their ethnic identity:

*Of course, that does not mean that you distance yourself from your own culture. That is of course not possible. But we have to learn Dutch culture. If you don't learn that, you don't integrate. (Syrian man, SNTR group, Rs4, focus group 4)*

Most participants are aware of cultural differences and it is repeatedly emphasized that it is important to respect the Dutch and their culture. However, it is also indicated during the focus group discussions that it can be expected that the Dutch people will equally show this respect to them. It is therefore about what is expected of you as a newcomer, but also what you can expect from others:

*Integration is respect. I want to learn their habits and they want to learn mine too. But I don't have to adopt it all. It is also important to me that I can give my opinion at the right time and in the right way. This last point is very important. (Syrian man, Rs5, focus group 6)*

While most respondents thus have fairly clear notions of what integration entails, a few respondents found it more difficult to formulate their understanding of integration, especially within such a short period after they arrived in the host society:

*If we want to define the concept of 'integration', it is more complicated than what is now being said. It is that you are part of society. But of course, you can never become part of a society in such a short period of time. Integration in that sense is currently not possible. We now have trouble with the simplest things. (Syrian man, Rs3 focus, group 4)*

Becoming part of society thus takes time and involves many different aspects. According to the participants in this study, integration is about not being marked as different and becoming self-reliant (through language learning, work, social relations, and learning about and respecting cultural values and practices). Interestingly, this endorses the multidimensional nature of integration and aligns with other research identifying the importance of 'becoming part of' society (Alba & Foner, 2015; Maxwell & Lessard-Phillips, 2017; Mestheneos & Ioannidi, 2002).

### **Policy objectives and responsibility**

As for previous studies focusing on newcomers' perspective on integration, the previous section shows that how refugees in Rotterdam understand integration converges with policy objectives concerning the more functional aspects of integration (language and work) as well as cultural knowledge transfer, which is equally deemed important by policy and refugees themselves. However, though seen by many participants as crucial for integration, current policy does not address the social aspect of resettlement, as well as acceptance of refugees as equal citizens. While the relative success or failure of these elements cannot be attributed solely to the character of (local) policy (Korac, 2003, p. 21), their importance should be considered in the broader scope of refugee integration.

During the focus group discussions on refugees' understanding of integration, the question arose of who is responsible for integration. Policy is often designed in such a way that the responsibility for integrating lies with newcomers themselves (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2003; Vasta, 2007). The participants of our focus groups endorse this regarding the more functional aspects, such as learning the language and finding work. Yet, they also stressed that it should not only be about newcomers making adjustments, there is also responsibility for the receiving society to make integration succeed, especially regarding cultural integration and acceptance:

*The pen and the cap: integration is that you put it together and merge. Mixing together. You then get a whole from those two separate units. Something new. But what is required of us during integration is that we become Dutch. (Syrian man, Rs4, focus group 4)*

Refugees' understanding of integration thus both converges and competes with policy objectives. As much as refugees rely on and call for policy to aid in becoming self-reliant, strategies



are also needed regarding wider socio-cultural integration and acceptance by members of the receiving society to secure full participation. However, the importance of mutual effort is emphasized.

### ***Inadequate implementation? Extensive, practical, and person-oriented support needed***

The focus group discussions highlighted discrepancies between the implementation of local policy and the expectations and needs of refugees themselves. As with the objectives, these partly relate to who is responsible for what and how this should be approached. Implementation regarding learning the Dutch language is an example of this. Both refugees' and policy's aims greatly value language proficiency, but refugees indicate that current policy does not optimally facilitate language learning. Some participants criticized the composition of language classes, such as being in classes with others who speak the same language, which makes it difficult to practice Dutch. In relation, some participants would like to have the opportunity to practice their language skills outside of the classroom. This was especially true for some of the women or Eritrean refugees who indicated they can feel ashamed to speak in class and would rather practice with someone one-on-one. Other women, for whom childcare is an obstacle to going to class, would also prefer this, as well as older people who can't keep up with their classmates. Some (especially men) indicated they preferred to learn the language in the workplace instead of during obliged language classes. Moreover, language schools in the Netherlands are largely privatized and thus commercialized. Policy determines newcomers have the responsibility to find a language school themselves, but this has proved difficult as the quality of language schools varies, there can be fraud, and access to the experiences of others is not readily available:

*There are really many mistakes in the integration policy in the Netherlands. [...] The change from the public to the private sector is not good for quality. As said, it is being lucky to find a good language school and good teachers. (Syrian man, Rs3, focus group 4).*

Moreover, refugees' aspirations and needs compete with local policy implementation when it comes to finding (suitable) employment. Again, both refugees and policy objectives value (paid) employment (for example to secure financial stability and self-sufficiency), but refugees stress the importance of finding work matching their experience. Having to accept work on a lower level can be challenging and according to some respondents the municipality should not only focus on helping refugees to find work but extend their support to also take refugees' professional background into account and build on their potential:

*At the municipality, they give people a plastic bag and a spike to clean the streets. They have to ask people about their experience and background. (Syrian man, Rs5, focus group 6)*

The desire to work is generally strong, but the lack of recognition of certificates obtained in the country of origin can make this more difficult. For women, young children can be an obstacle for both finding employment and focusing on language learning. Those who want to work indicate they often do not have a network to take care of their children, which binds them to the house. Another factor often mentioned as an obstacle for work and language learning is age; being too old to start over, which is related to having to obtain the necessary papers before one can start a job:

*Well, honestly, I absolutely don't want that [i.e. start an education], I studied in Syria for more than six years, I'm quite fed up with it. I went to college for two years and then went to university for another four years, really driving me crazy. But I notice that working without a certificate is really something difficult. (Syrian man, Rs7, focus group 2)*

Participants of the focus groups generally express a wish for more contact with Dutch people (without a migration background, e.g. bridging ties) and a need for knowledge on how to successfully build their social networks. It is often found easier to engage in contact with other

migrants (bonding ties). Once established, the social network (both bridging and bonding ties) can serve as a kind of safety net when authorities fail to adequately support newcomers. This underlines the importance of policy as a facilitator for refugee integration, especially in the first period after arrival:

*That's the main point. [...] If someone already knows people who can help them, there may be a lot of people who know people who can help them. But there are also a few that have no one. You should map out these people and give help. That would be very nice. (Eritrean man, Rs1044, focus group 1).*

In addition, participants indicate that more attention should be paid within policy implementation to transfer knowledge regarding the way of life in the Netherlands. The civic integration course that is part of Dutch integration policy and buddies available through social initiatives are insufficient: several participants do not feel there is a place or person to whom they can turn with their requests for help, especially when it comes to practical matters:

*Yes ... the things you experience in the beginning are not the same for everyone. There are different people, but ... 'a guest is always ignorant', he doesn't know anything. So, when you arrive here, the municipality should inform you where you can buy your things, for example, but this does not happen in Rotterdam. (Eritrean man, Rs817, focus group 1).*

While extensive support is needed for different reasons during the first phase after arrival, this type of support can become a burden after a while. Some of the respondents stress that when newcomers have received 'enough' (practical) support, they will gradually have to be able to stand on their own feet:

*You do not remain a babysitter for someone who comes from behind the sea [translator: so far away]. That way you help him for a number of years without that person developing. Okay, you teach him the first period, but after that you have to become independent. (Syrian man, Rs1, focus group 2)*

In their first years after arrival in the host society, refugees are highly dependent on government support to become, and be accepted as, independent individuals in the future. More extensive, practical, and person-oriented support is thus desired during this early integration phase to guide refugees and help them reach their full potential. However, one must be aware of the fact that what is initially provided as support for integration does not get in the way of refugees' becoming independent.

## Discussion

In the current research, we utilized Bornstein's specificity principle (2017) and investigated recently arrived refugees' integration from the bottom-up within the local policy context of Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Herewith, we shed light on refugees' understanding of and expectations for integration and whether the objectives and implementation of (local) policy coincide with these. This study contributes to the existing literature in various ways. First, as recently arrived refugees' are the subject of integration, investigating refugee integration from the bottom up among this relatively new target group allows for a more extensive and inclusive understanding of integration, getting us closer to the core of what we should be studying in this field. Second, inviting refugees to be part of ongoing discussions on integration and policy is vital to understand their needs and provide scientific insights reflecting on government actions to establish aligned and effective policy for refugee integration.

Drawing from a diverse sample of Syrian and Eritrean refugees recently resettled in Rotterdam, this study identified important elements of integration from the target groups' perspective. While emphasis varied, not being marked as different, self-reliance, language learning, work, social relations, and learning about and respecting cultural values and practices were emphasized regardless of gender, age and origin. Findings align with other research identifying the importance of 'becoming part of' (Alba & Foner, 2015; Maxwell & Lessard-Phillips, 2017; Mestheneos

& Ioannidi, 2002) as well as employment, social integration, and cultural knowledge transfer (see: Ager & Strang, 2008; van Heelsum, 2017; Korac, 2003; van Liempt & Staring, 2020; Mestheneos & Ioannidi, 2002; den Ridder et al., 2019; Shaw et al., 2021).

Refugees' integration ambitions are partly aligned with policy objectives. While the importance of more functional aspects of integration (language and work) and learning about the cultural norms and values of the host country is identified in both policy aims and by refugees themselves, refugees additionally stress the need for social connections with and acceptance by members from the host society. Moreover, policy is often designed and implemented requiring the most effort from newcomers (see also: Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore, 2011; den Ridder et al., 2019). While there is general agreement that integration is something newcomers have to do, the importance of mutual effort is emphasized by newcomers when it comes to cultural integration and acceptance (see also: den Ridder et al., 2019).

While recent arrivals' understanding of integration and elements identified as important touches those as identified in other groups before, being a recently arrived refugee seems to bring about a greater and more necessary need for support, especially in the first period after arrival. This is reflected in their criticism of local policy implementation. Recently arrived refugees expect more extensive, practical, and person-oriented support than what is provided through local policy, especially during the first phase after arrival (see also: Khoo, 2012). On the one hand, there is a strong need for help during this initial period, going hand in hand with high and sometimes unrealistic expectations of what policy should offer. On the other hand, there is a strong desire not to be marked as different and becoming self-reliant. What is initially provided as support for integration could eventually get in the way of refugees' becoming independent. This tendency between varying needs and provided policy support shows how delicate the implementation of integration policy is and means one has to be careful that what is offered as support for integration does not become an obstruction over time.

Notwithstanding our contributions, there are some limitations to this study. First, while qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of refugee integration experiences and perspectives, it is limited in terms of generalizability. Building on the specificity principle of (Bornstein, 2017) we focused on a specific context, group, and timeframe. While this approach provides us with a more in-depth understanding of refugee integration, our findings likely do not reflect the experiences of all refugees. Refugees who arrived in the Netherlands during 2014–2016 have come across other policy measures than those arriving earlier or later, due to the high influx at that time. These, among other experiences, will have likely influenced their understanding of and expectations for integration. However, what we can establish, is that there was considerable agreement between the participants about the need for and understanding of integration (while emphasis differed), as well as connections to findings from previous research that took newcomers' perspectives into account. This is an indication of saturation and the assumption that this study has explanatory power for a wider group (Boddy, 2016).

Moreover, it is important to note we do not propose there is an all-encompassing understanding or one-size-fits-all approach for integration. Refugees are above all individuals with different experiences, expectations, and needs (Korac, 2003). Hence, we encourage future research to explore how integration trajectories vary for different and possibly intersectional subgroups (regarding for example differences in gender, age, educational level, time of arrival, or cultural perspectives) and how these trajectories are experienced and shaped by (local) policy. Likely, policy aims and integration goals diverge more strongly for certain groups. As our results indicate, higher educated newcomers might need more guidance regarding labor market participation, while older newcomers might benefit from a language buddy. Besides, although we explicitly focus on refugees, our findings emphasize the importance of not reducing the complexity of their identity to their refugee experience alone, as being no longer perceived as a refugee is one of the most important markers of integration according to the respondents.

Whereas we stress the importance of investigating integration among recent arrivals in particular, it could be argued that they will be able to better reflect on their integration process over time

(see also: Ponzoni et al., 2020). Integration is a dynamic process, what refugees consider to be important now might change later on. Hence, longitudinal perspectives are needed to evaluate how refugees reflect on their integration process during their life course or to compare views on integration between newcomers versus those who have been settled for a long time. Moreover, while the current study focused on the local policy context, it may be interesting to map out the contexts in which integration takes place more broadly in future studies. For example, the social context, such as the neighborhood, can be an important context where newcomers navigate their everyday relations and depend on the opportunities for participation present.

To conclude, our theoretical contributions are twofold. First, contrary to common practice, we should not objectify the conceptualization of integration too much. Allowing the target group to take part in discussions on integration can be beneficial from a substantive, normative, and instrumental point of view. In contrast to previous models on integration, our results show that the core of what integration means to our target group is quite compact and largely in line with policy. These commonalities show we are generally aiming for and studying the right things. Yet, it is relevant from both a theoretical and policy point of view to continue to also pay attention to socio-cultural integration. Second, our findings show the specificity principle (Bornstein, 2017) can be a relevant tool in understanding newcomers' resettlement. Including a particular context, group and time provided additional insights on both objectives and implementation. Although respondents indicated they need a lot of support now, this stems from the need to ultimately be self-reliant and no longer regarded as different. This is in line with previous work by Alba and Foner (2015) and shows the phase one is in is of crucial importance. What people see as important for integration, but especially what they need to achieve this, therefore partly depends on where you ask, whom, and when (Bornstein, 2017). Integration theories in a broader sense could benefit from utilizing this principle.

We offer several courses of action for integration policy. First, the shared responsibility or two-sidedness of integration should be acknowledged, starting with government communication, but also active anti-discrimination or opportunities for networking. Such an approach could contribute to the establishment of bridging social ties which are strongly desired but can be challenging for newcomers. Once established, these social networks are likely to aid refugees with further practicing their language skills, learning about Dutch culture, and providing the practical support needed when other, more formal forms of support are lacking. Examples of initiatives experimenting with alternative forms of policy aimed at socio-cultural integration are 'Plan Einstein' in Utrecht (Geuijen et al., 2020) and 'Startblok Riekershaven' in Amsterdam (Cziske & Huisman, 2018), where newcomers and (mostly younger) residents of the city live together. However, further research is needed for the evaluation and eventual large-scale implementation of these types of alternatives. All in all, customization and mutual effort are key to support refugees in becoming self-reliant and equal citizens.

## Notes

1. This requirement changed in 2019 but still applied to the refugees in this study.
2. Formal ethics approval was not obliged at the Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences for non-experimental studies including adults at the start of the Bridge project. However, we have made sure we followed all formalities required to get such approval; discussing the approach of this study thoroughly with and privacy officers of the university. Informed consent forms were prepared, translated by a professional translator in Syrian-Arabic and Tigrinya, and signed by all respondents. Attention was paid to the vulnerability of the group, firstly in overcoming language barriers through the use of professional translations and cultural barriers through consultation and deployment of facilitators with the same cultural background. These interpreters welcomed the respondents and put them at ease after which they explained all their rights and subsequently conducted the focus groups. Respondents' anonymity was assured and they were allowed to stop their participation at any time.
3. The Bridge panel survey is a three-wave survey that forms the basis of the quantitative component of the EUR Bridge project, which examines the role of local integration policy for the acculturation of recently arrived refugees. For more information on this project and the survey(s) see Dagevos and van der Linden (2021).

4. The focus groups were all organized at the same Erasmus University location in the center of Rotterdam.
5. A description of the codebook can be found in Online [Appendix 2, Supplementary Material](#).

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