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Integration and how we facilitate it: a comparative study of settlement experiences of refugees in Italy and the Netherlands¹

by

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Abstract

The paper examines, in a comparative way, the situation of refugees settled in Italy and the Netherlands. It examines how refugees themselves perceive their social condition in the two contrasting 'models' of integration in Italy and the Netherlands, how they define integration success and develop strategies to achieve their goals. Narratives of refugees explored in this paper document that integration, as it is perceived and desired by the refugees themselves, is about both its functional aspects and social participation in the wider community. These aspects of integration consist of sets of overlapping processes that take place differently in various spheres of the receiving society and have various outcomes. It is argued that policy should recognise this complexity and acknowledge refugees as social actors rather than turning them into policy objects in order to facilitate integration in each of these sub-sectors.

Key words: Europe, experiences, integration, policies, refugees

Introduction

This article is based upon comparative research examining the situation of refugees settled in Italy and the Netherlands and exploring their experiences of inclusion in community and the receiving society.² It aims to stimulate a debate on interventions useful for the promotion of integration which is understood as a two-way process. This process affects both the established community and the newly arrived, requiring their mutual adjustment and participation.

In the past decades, countries of the industrialised world have been struggling with the question how to facilitate settlement of the growing number of refugees and how to enhance their participation in new societies. Even the terms absorb, assimilate, incorporate or integrate refugees, used to describe this process suggest complexity,

ambiguity, and contention surrounding the issue. As Robinson points out (1998, pp. 118), integration is a vague and 'chaotic' term. In the context of the refugee studies literature, integration is mainly understood in terms of its practical or functional aspects. This approach stems from the fact that refugee status implies the right to protection. This right involves, among other things, provision and access to social services to facilitate settlement of refugees. In the context of the race relations or minorities literature, integration is used to describe the process of change that occurs when two cultures are forced to co-exist within one society. Within this framework, authors examine processes such as assimilation and acculturation and are concerned with issues of identity, belonging, recognition and self-respect. The problem of how to approach the settlement issues is not only conceptual but also practical. It is not only that researchers in the field define 'integration' differently, but also those who define and develop policies relating to refugee settlement approach the issue in different ways.

The reception and integration policies of European states vary widely, from the highly centralised state-sponsored programmes of the north European countries to the minimal social assistance provided by the countries of the southern Europe. The reception policies of a growing number of European states put emphasis on the establishment of specialised reception centres for the newly arrived as a way of meeting their immediate and pressing needs and facilitating the determination process (European Commission, 2001). Measures of integration commonly employed by governments of receiving societies include access to re-training and education to enhance employment opportunities, health and other social services, and support of community building. These measures in some cases also include the ability to participate in local decision-making processes. The level and character of these forms

of assistance and provision depend on the character of welfare systems of receiving societies, which tend to influence policies of integration. Welfare states, such as Scandinavian or Dutch, provide welfare system of assistance to refugees. The south European countries, such as Italy, which have relatively underdeveloped welfare systems, tend to have underdeveloped and often *ad hoc* measures of assistance for individuals granted asylum.

Empirical studies about problems of refugee settlement have tended to adopt a 'top-down' approach to the concept of 'integration' and, therefore, to focus on structural and organisational aspects of the integration 'system', commonly in a single country. The lack of empirical research and specifically of comparative research that focuses on the 'voices' of refugees themselves, rather than solely on structural and organisational aspects of integration, inspired my research. Conceptual problems relating to 'integration', mentioned earlier, go beyond theoretical issues and extend to the question who is defining the term. If integration is to be understood as a two-way process, rather than a kind of medication that refugees take in order to 'fit in', then they should contribute to the processes in which integration is defined, facilitated and assessed.

Given the focus on refugee voices, the approach of this study is compatible with the Chicago school tradition in so far as it is committed to the methods of ethnographic research and case study. My research also shares with this tradition the endeavour to reconstruct the context in which the inter-group relations, based upon opportunities and choice, exist and in which their self-identity is negotiated. In other words, the actor's point of view is critical as are the variety of situations that he/she encounters in his/her everyday life.

The choice of methods of research in this study is centrally related to its objectives defined as a critique of a ‘top-down’ approach to integration. The refugee situation is generally framed, in Indra’s words (1993, pp. 763), by an asymmetry of power and voice between the state, on the one hand, and the refugees on the other. Qualitative interviewing is an important way of learning from refugees because it permits fuller expression of refugee experiences in their own terms. Further, as Robinson (1998, pp. 122) argues, “since integration is individualised, contested and contextual it requires qualitative methodologies which allow the voices of respondents to be heard in an unadulterated form.” Finally, in-depth interviewing is essential in revealing subjective aspects of integration. This is important because, as Montgomery’s (1996) research of components of refugee adaptation shows, how refugees feel about their experiences is as important an indicator as are objective indicators of adaptation such as employment, income, and socio-economic mobility.

Hence, the research strategies to reveal the subjective world of the actor’s experience are considered more appropriate for gaining knowledge about problems of refugee settlement than social mapping of numerical data and statistical methods favoured by governments in evaluating the success of their policies. Social surveys tend to generate structural models, as Wallman (1986) suggests, based upon ‘categorical markers’ or ‘a once-for-all typology of people’. Such models, as she points out, present a ‘tidier than life’ account of social reality in which the question of ‘whether, when and how far the actor identifies with those who share the same categorical status’ is never proposed (Wallman, 1986, pp. 233-234).

My research examined how refugees from a single country of origin, that is former Yugoslavia, responded to different policy contexts and how they themselves define ‘successful integration’. It was considered that refugees from former

Yugoslavia bring to the receiving societies similar ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1984). They are of a similar background in terms of their social upbringing embedded in the shared socio-economic system of their country of origin, educational system, system of values, and some elements of shared traditions and culture. The ways in which this accumulated set of conditions of life position the refugee in a particular relation to others depend to the large extent on the policy and country contexts of the receiving societies. Because of the use of qualitative methods in this research, the number of refugees contacted, observed and interviewed for this study was not large. Thus, narratives of 60 refugees in exile in Italy and the Netherlands collected in this study do not claim to be representative of the situation of all refugees in the two countries.³ They, however, are *demonstrative* of the complexity of the process of integration and of the problems of how to facilitate it.

Accounts of refugees I interviewed in Amsterdam and Rome call for re-affirmation of Knudsen’s (1991) sound critique of the assistance programmes developed for refugees which tend to treat them as having “immature social identities” and who thus have to be re-educated in order to be integrated. He argues that settlement programmes are often “founded upon unequal power and authority rather than on integration and equal worth” (Knudsen, 1991, pp. 31). Furthermore, examination of the social conditions experienced by refugees in Italy and the Netherlands will demonstrate that integration is not a singular, stage-sequential process. Acknowledging that the receiving society is not a monolithic entity, Castles and associates point out (Castles *et al.*, 2001) that integration consists of sets of overlapping processes that take place differently in various sub-sectors and spheres of receiving societies and have various outcomes. In this article I argue that not only these complexities should be recognised in policy terms in order to facilitate social

inclusion of refugees in different spheres of society, but they should also provide strategies for wider social inclusion and integration or for building ‘bridging social capital’, to use Putnam’s (2000) term. Putnam (2000) introduced the concept of ‘bridging social capital’ to emphasise its potential to generate broader identities and reciprocity as opposed to ‘bonding social capital’ which ‘bolsters our narrower selves’ (2000, pp. 22-23). He points out that ‘bonding and bridging are not “either-or” categories’ (Putnam, 2000, pp. 23). Rather, ‘many groups simultaneously bond along some social dimensions and bridge across others’ (Putnam 2000, pp. 23). The core of his argument lies in social capital theory and its emphases on value of social networks for the wider community and society. My analysis in this article reveals the importance of ‘bridging social capital’ in how refugees perceive their ‘integration success’. Finally, I argue in this article that policy interventions should recognise refugees as social actors with differentiated needs, rather than ascribing them a common identity without any acknowledgement of differences caused by age, gender, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of refugee populations.

Refugee responses to two ‘models’ of integration

The Dutch model of reception and integration of refugees is based on a number of measures and interventions by the state intended to meet the immediate needs of refugees, and to facilitate gradually their further structural and institutional integration in Dutch society. Those seeking asylum in the country usually experience a two-stage admission and reception procedure involving an up to 48 hour-stay in an investigation centre (OC), and a several month-long stay in an asylum centre (AZC). For some, in cases when a provisional permit to stay (‘F’ status) is granted, the reception procedure involves a third stage. This stage usually lasts up to three years and involves provision of housing and a modest allowance, but no provision directed

at integration into Dutch society, such as compulsory professional language training, the right to re-train and work.

This phased, state led settlement process may last for years. A majority of refugees I interviewed in Amsterdam stayed in asylum centres for several months, sometimes over a year. This was almost unanimously described as a waste of time, because of the limited rights of access to professional language training, education or re-training, and work, or simply as the experience of isolation from the ‘outside world’, which was often described as a humiliating one. It took a 35-year-old Bosnian doctor, for example, seven years in total to obtain refugee status (approximately two years), learn the language and recognise his diploma (approximately five years) in order to continue with his profession. Meanwhile, he also obtained Dutch citizenship, because of the relaxed naturalisation policies. He gave the following account of the first phase of his integration:

I think that our adjustment would have been much easier if we’d been given a chance to learn the language properly immediately after our arrival. But we were ‘taught’ [at the asylum centre] how to turn on the light and use the lavatory, instead of being given a good language course appropriate to our skills and needs. That caused a certain level of resistance to this country, our homeland now.

Many refugees I interviewed, including the elderly, less-educated, or those with small children, who felt that their *initial* pressing needs have been met reasonably well during first stages of the admission and reception procedure, shared the account of the Bosnian doctor.

Furthermore, the refugees experienced this state controlled settlement process, as a pressure to ‘integrate’ in the way many did not consider desirable. A 37-year-old

Bosnian man who arrived in 1992 and who at the time of interview, in 2001, was at the final stages of the studies for his diploma recognition, explained:

The problem is in the constant, 24-hour, adjustment required from all refugees here. Each and every one of us has to adjust the way they see fit, that is, you have to accept their standards, regardless of whether you like them or not. It's a kind of indirect pressure to adjust, but it's all-embracing, it's present at the professional and personal level. That's an enormous pressure.

Those older or less-educated, like a 48-year-old Bosnian nurse in the Netherlands since 1995, sometimes responded to such a perceived pressure by reducing their life aspirations and effectively excluding themselves from the wider society. The Bosnian nurse explained her view:

I find it too difficult to integrate here. I think I am too old now to adjust the way it is required in order to participate fully in this society or to find work, for example. I have years of work experience and I would have to work here as if I don't have any. Besides, I don't want to work for a minimal wage what I would have to in order to work here. So, I consider my life here as an early retirement. My two sons are here and I socialise with a few people who are also refugees and whose situation is similar to mine.

Dutch policies and resources are targeted at the instrumental level and essentially approach integration as a one way assisted process, which considers refugees as policy objects, rather than as a vital resource in the integration process. As the result, many remain unemployable and dependent on social funds or stay unemployed because they are not motivated to enter the labour market and earn income that hardly exceeds the social benefit they are otherwise entitled to. Many more are not able to continue with their professions, not because their skills are not

needed on the Dutch labour market, but because of the many structural barriers that prevent them to do so. The scope of the problem concerning the barriers to integrating into the labour market becomes apparent when we note that the unemployment rate among Dutch population of working age in 2000 was as low as 3 percent, while unemployment rate among refugees was as high as 35 percent.⁴ Moreover, those who succeeded in overcoming the obstacles to functional integration via the labour market, like the Bosnian doctor mentioned at the beginning of this article, encounter other mechanisms of social exclusion. The Bosnian doctor explained his experience of integration in the following way:

I am employed in a Dutch medical firm, I speak Dutch language well, my child goes to a Dutch school and soon he'll speak Dutch better than his mother tongue, but we live here a parallel existence, because we don't have real contact with Dutch society. We are neither accepted nor rejected. I have a flat in Amsterdam, I live here, but I don't have any ties with Dutch people. I do what I am told to do, and everything is going according to 'integration' rules that we 'refugees' have to follow. We didn't have to integrate really, you see, we just had to do what we were told.

This account demonstrates that even a tiny minority of the refugees in this research who may be considered successful in reconstructing their lives, remain in many ways excluded from Dutch society. This experience of social isolation, as my research reveals, was not primarily self-imposed because many refugees I interviewed expressed the need to feel more engrained in the society and to become part of the social fabric of life. This need was usually accompanied by a conscious effort on the part of refugees to establish closer ties in their neighbourhoods, at work, and other social settings. A 27-year-old Bosnian man in his final year of studies of Architecture

and an intern in a Dutch firm in Amsterdam revealed the kind of problems refugees experience in their effort to build 'bridging social capital' in the receiving society:

Although many would say that I am well integrated, because I speak the language, I work for a Dutch firm, and I try to socialise with the Dutch as much as possible, it isn't really so. I have a great desire to integrate, to the extent that is possible for someone who isn't Dutch. I want my life to be normal. I want to be accepted by the Dutch, but no matter how much I try, I feel invisible among my colleagues at work, for example. They are perfectly correct work wise, but when it comes to some kind of socialising at work or after working hours, they behave as if I am not there. Then I feel excluded.

Although those who were younger or better educated were more prone to 'building bridges' between themselves and the new society they were not the only ones who were pro-active but who, nevertheless, remained socially isolated. For example, a 51-year-old Bosnian man with a technical school degree, unemployed and a volunteer at the Bosnian Association in Amsterdam, describes his efforts to establish closer contact with his Dutch neighbours:

I did try in my neighbourhood to break the ice and make friendships. The first Christmas after I moved in, in 94, I dropped a card to all my new neighbours. They seemed to like it, because I got cards from them next year, for Christmas. By the third year, they learned that I was a Muslim, and sent me cards for the New Year. They are nice people, I can't say that they are not, but our contacts don't go much further than that.

The experiences of detachment from the receiving society, which first occurred during prolonged stay in asylum centres, have continued to characterise the subsequent settlement phases during which refugees I interviewed were not successful

in establishing closer ties with the Dutch. Instead, their social networks were primarily based on family and kinship ties or established along ethnic lines. The former was due to their legal status, which allowed family reunification, as well as to the socio-economic conditions in the country that were favourable to people fleeing with their families. The establishment of social contacts along ethnic lines was the result of three interrelated factors. First, many of the interviewed came from parts of Bosnia heavily affected by war and were themselves subjected to victimisation because of their ethnic origin. Thus, they were not prone to establishing ties and relationships of trust across ethnic boundaries. Second, they found a refuge in the country with relatively large and well-established immigrant population from former Yugoslavia, which had already been bitterly divided along ethnic lines. Moreover, links with immigrant/ethnic associations are encouraged in Dutch multi-cultural society and funded by the government. These circumstances have become a fruitful ground for maintaining or even deepening divisions and tensions caused by the conflict. As Eastmond points out (1998, pp.178-179), ethnic tension and divisions among refugees tend to intensify when policies of receiving societies “concerned with the consequences of people ‘uprooted’ from their native cultures are reflecting essentialised notions of identity and culture.” She goes on to explain that although immigrant/refugee community organisations usually fulfil the function of orientating newcomers, they also are an important link to the institutions of the home country. As such, Eastmond concludes (1998, pp.164), they “constitute the major arena for the articulation and affirmation of a national identity.” In the case of populations fleeing wars in the post Yugoslav states, however, the issues concerning national identity were intrinsically related to the identity politics of war (Korac, 1999). Third, in the Dutch context, the inter-ethnic coexistence among newly arrived was not necessary

for their survival or successful settlement. The system has been leading them stage-by-stage through the ‘integration’ process, leaving no need for intense networking and search for alternative routes into the system.

The experience of detachment from Dutch society has also contributed to a sense of insecurity among the refugees regarding their legal status and newly acquired citizenship rights. A vast majority of interviewees in Amsterdam had Dutch citizenship. Even so, quite a few of the refugees, now Dutch citizens, expressed a degree of uneasiness or fear of a possibility of their citizenship being revoked if the political situation in the Netherlands was to change and somehow was to turn all non-native Dutch into undesired aliens. Wallman’s (1979) argument that a social boundary has two kinds of meaning, structural or organisational, and subjective – based on the experience of participants, helps explain this seemingly paradoxical situation. Paradoxical because objectively, the difference no longer exists since citizenship guarantees equal rights to all members of society. As Wallman suggests, however, “[b]ecause a social boundary is about the organisation of society no more and no less than it is about the organisation of experience, neither element has more or less reality than the other. Both the difference and the *sense* of difference count” (Wallman, 1979, pp. 7). The lack of closer social ties with the Dutch shaped the perception (or the sense) of a profound difference between native and non-native Dutch, which has been translated into doubts concerning equality of citizenship rights between the two groups. In the context of the Dutch integration ‘model’ which is heavily state controlled through the state-related institutions assisting the reception and integration process, this ‘scenario’ seems even more plausible. The refugees experienced the Dutch system of integration as the state control over their lives by imposing on them demands to conform to various policy measures. For individual refugees, particularly

unemployed and thus dependent on social benefit, it seems plausible that the logic of control and a strict guidance exercised by the state and its institutions during the reception and integration 'phase' can extend itself to the citizenship 'phase'. Hence, citizenship is perceived as yet another way of state control and not as a guarantee of equality and full participation.

My research in Rome revealed that the refugees I interviewed experienced a different admission and reception systems and encountered different settlement problems. In Italy, there is a lack of an organic legislative framework that corresponds to a global social plan pertaining to reception and integration of refugees. Although a new Immigration Law was enacted in 1998, corresponding legislation concerning asylum and temporary protection status have not yet followed it. The underdeveloped social protection and welfare system in the country have led to a corresponding approach to assistance for asylum seekers and refugees. The assistance is minimal as it is assumed that those in need will be assisted primarily through self-help systems established within refugee and migrant networks, which will encourage them to become self-sufficient in a short period.

The 1998 law states that asylum seekers, who do not have the right to work, are to be accommodated at the government-run reception centres, however, few such centres were established at the time of my research, two years after the law was enacted. Church organisations and NGOs provide different types of assistance, including accommodation, but the assistance they offer is insufficient to meet the needs of a growing number of asylum seekers. Consequently, they are often forced to sleep on the streets of the towns and cities where they wish to settle.

Italy does not judicially recognise humanitarian refugees, but refers solely to the Geneva Convention and, therefore, populations fleeing the general violence and

armed conflicts of the 1990s, for example Albania and former Yugoslavia, were granted temporary resident permits to stay, based on specific government decrees. Based on such a decree, introduced in 1992, 77000 temporary resident permits to stay were granted to persons fleeing former Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1997.⁵ Almost none of the refugees I interviewed had Italian citizenship and almost all had temporary, humanitarian, permit to stay based on this special decree. This temporary status was usually granted without any lengthy determination procedure and included the immediate right to work and study. However, the vast majority has received no assistance to settle in Italy.⁶ Thus, they encountered profound problems in achieving a minimal financial security and their first years in Rome were characterised by a struggle for physical survival. It was particularly difficult for those with small children and the elderly to survive in the city, and most of them left before my research took place. They either moved to other parts of Italy where it was easier to find work or resettled to a third country.

Refugees I interviewed prized the right to work, but also contended that the lack of an *initial* reception system forced them to become self-sufficient at the cost of entering a niche of the labour market from which it is very hard to move up the economic and social ladder. For those with an interrupted education, the cost of the immediate need to find any kind of work was delaying or abandoning the idea of its continuation. A majority of refugees I interviewed had low paying, service sector jobs. Thus, almost none felt that they had succeeded in settling in Italy so as to give them a sense of security in planning their future.

A few who may be considered 'successful' because they succeeded in getting jobs suited to their skills, spent approximately the same number of years struggling to integrate in the labour market in a meaningful way as those few in Amsterdam. A 29-

year-old Bosnian man who had just graduated from a university in Rome when I met him, explained the difficulties he encountered since he fled to Italy in 1992. Almost immediately after his arrival he was granted a temporary permit to stay and study and/or work in the country. His first months in exile were marked with constant struggle to find shelter, to earn enough to sustain himself, and to learn the language. He even had to spend some nights at Termini train station in Rome, because he had no better solution. Between 1992 and 1999 he was working as an assistant in a photo-shop. For years he could not think of continuing his university education interrupted by the war. In the autumn of 1996, however, his economic situation improved and allowed him to continue it, while working part-time. He graduated in 1999 and since then he has been employed in his profession on a short-term contract basis. After eight years in Italy, in 2000 when I met him, he still had a humanitarian residence permit. He explained his situation in Rome in the following way:

I feel at home in Rome. The only time I don't feel at home is prior to the expiry date of my residence permit to stay. Then I really feel a foreigner. Otherwise, I feel at home. My social contacts have always been almost entirely with Italians, except that my partner is also from Bosnia. I feel that I belong here in many ways and Italians accept me as such. But when I am faced with state institutions, I feel humiliated and that is when I feel that I don't belong here.

Unlike refugees in Amsterdam, those in Rome developed considerably strong social ties outside their ethnic groups established through many informal day-to-day contacts in their neighbourhoods, at work, and through many other social encounters with Italians while seeking information or help of some sort. There were also those, unlike in Amsterdam, whose partners or spouses were Italian.

The lack of a state-organised attempt to meet the group needs of refugees in Rome forced them to rely on their personal skills and resources in finding their way into Italian society. During their first years in Rome, they spontaneously formed networks, which served as an alternative self-help reception 'system'.⁷ During this period their contacts were overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, within and across the boundaries of their ethnic groups. As they gained some economic security, these inter-ethnic ties weakened. This provided more space and need for communication outside the group of their compatriots. A 25-year-old Bosnian man explained this process:

During the first years [in Rome] the refugees from ex-Yugoslavia were the circle I used to socialise with. We were pretty united in these years, we stuck together, those who would and could help each other. Later, as people managed to attain some economic security, we started growing apart. So when I met an Italian girl, I definitely parted with most of our people. My present friends are mostly Italians.

The development of contacts and networks outside the ethnic groups was facilitated by three interrelated factors. First, social ties within ethnic communities of nationals from the post Yugoslav states in Rome can be characterised as weak, because they were not based on family or kinship relationships. Second, the lack of established immigrant/refugee community organisations supported by the Italian authorities or the governments of post Yugoslav states created a need for spontaneous self-organising by the newly arrived and for intense networking within, across, and outside ethnic boundaries in order to find way into the society. Third, the lack of any developed system of professional services for refugees to facilitate their settlement caused a need for seeking alternative ways of establishing initial institutional and non-institutional contacts with the receiving society.

Consequently, their contacts with Italians were not mediated through professional social service providers who are in the Dutch context key guides to the society. Rather, the encounters with the new environment were spontaneous and individualised which helped avoid the development of a perception that the differences between Italian and non-Italian identity and behaviour are hierarchical in which the culture of the receiving society is considered superior. The perception that the native and the new culture are not set in opposition strengthened the adaptability of refugees in Rome to the new environment, because it encouraged their openness to differences between the cultures and people. It enabled their openness and willingness to invest in building 'bridging social capital', what requires that we 'transcend our social and political and professional identities to connect with people unlike ourselves' (Putnam, 2000, pp. 411).

Refugees interviewed in Rome repeatedly emphasised in their accounts how their contacts with Italians were characterised by a mutual process of learning and shifting within which both communities can gain. The following account of a 34-year-old Bosnian woman is only one among many similar opinions and attitudes:

We're here and we must learn how to live with Italians. We must find what we have in common with them, although we're different. Many Italians managed to learn a great deal from us too, especially those who work with our people. We are more precise, for example, we're some kind of 'Germans' to Italians. Perhaps we've changed them a bit, too.

This woman, as almost all other women I interviewed, spent several years as a housekeeper before being able to create an opportunity for herself to continue her studies interrupted by the war and subsequent flight. Many, however, were not able, determined or resourceful enough to move out of this type of work. Yet, women as

well as men were well-educated and often with a considerable experience in their professions. When asked to define the losses involved in their flight and exile, women as well as men characterised them as losses of economic welfare or uncertain prospects for their future, but not so much as loss of personal agency or social networks leading to social isolation.

Concluding remarks

This article has set out to outline, in a comparative way, the social conditions experienced by refugees from a single country of origin settled in Italy and the Netherlands. The discussion has revealed that while the Dutch policy interventions address many of the requirements self-identified by refugees as important for integration to begin, they do not in themselves make refugees feel integrated, as they do not provide a strategy for building ‘bridging social capital’ which would in turn provide them with the sense of rootedness and wider social inclusion. These policy interventions are experienced as state measures that often do not correspond to their needs and integration goals, to which refugees, nonetheless, are required to conform because of the lack of power and ‘voice’ in the process of integration.

Furthermore, the discussion has documented that integration is importantly linked to conditions of immediate settlement. Prolonged stay at asylum centres and how those accommodated are ‘managed’ in the centres may alleviate growing social and political pressures in the receiving society caused by fear of being ‘swamped’ by the newcomers, but they clearly do not facilitate integration of those confined to them. This study has revealed that for the refugees involved in this research the experience of asylum centres has not helped their functional integration. Moreover, it has had a

negative affect on how refugees perceive Dutch society and their later attitude towards their new homeland.

The article has also documented considerable problems of the refugees in Italy, primarily in achieving a minimal financial security and in integrating in the labour market in a meaningful way, which would provide them with a valued social role. The refugees were left without guidance or assistance regarding re-training opportunities and thus it was difficult for them to find employment more suited to their skills. Moreover, legal status of the refugees in Rome was temporary, adding to their sense of insecurity in planning their future. Nonetheless, the level of agency they were allowed in the Italian context, as well as the nature and character of ties they developed with Italians were central to how they assessed their situation in Italy. This ‘bridging social capital’ that they had the opportunity to build tended to compensate, to some extent for their dissatisfaction with the *quality* of their functional integration.

It can be argued that disadvantages involved in the lack of an organised programme of assistance and integration of refugees interviewed in Rome, although profound, also entailed potential advantages because it permitted and enhanced their personal *agency in reconstructing* their lives. This, however, *should not* be understood as an *apologia* for the absence of a strategy for integration. Rather, this is a call to reconsider the structural limitations inherent in the currently prevailing state controlled and phased approaches to assisting and integrating refugees in receiving societies. This call is even more relevant in the EU context characterised by efforts to harmonise not only the entry procedures, but also the system of reception and settlement. It is important, therefore, to examine not only how governments manage large influxes of refugees, but also how these policy instruments or their absence help or hinder the process of social inclusion from the point of view of refugees

themselves. The reasoning behind this emphasis echoes Harrell-Bond's (1999) sound claim that the way in which refugees are 'helped' may itself undermine their personal coping strategies. This may threaten not only their individual life prospects, but also the use of the potential they bring to receiving societies.

Accounts of refugees I interviewed during fieldwork in Amsterdam and Rome document that 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. Narratives of refugees document their need to become part of the receiving societies through establishment of closer ties with the established community, while retaining a sense of their distinct identity. In other words, the refugees prevalently approach integration as the process of building 'bridging social capital' while not abandoning the idea of nourishing ties with native cultures or roots. Their narratives also show their conscious effort to establish such networks, and different levels of success among the studied population in the two contexts in achieving this important goal of integration.

It is important to add, however, that the relative success or failure of the refugees to establish closer ties with native population in the two countries cannot be attributed solely to the character of the policy and reception systems. Nature of cultures and life-styles of both the countries of origin and the receiving societies should be considered as playing a role in the process of wider social integration of refugees I interviewed. Nonetheless, regardless of these characteristics that can be seen as "something that exists on its own and defines itself" (Steen, 1993: 11), this research strongly indicated that personal satisfaction and assessment of integration success goes beyond simple, measurable, indicators, such as individual occupational

mobility and/or economic status. It importantly includes indicators, such as quality and strength of social links with the established community.

Consequently, it is crucial to develop a policy framework that puts emphasis on all these aspects of social inclusion. Policies and interventions facilitating settlement and full participation in the receiving society should address the issues of integration in community by promoting strategies for building ‘bridging social capital’, that is links between the established community and the newcomers. The current policy emphasis on functional aspects of integration and community building addresses only partially the process of ‘nesting’ in a new society, to use Weinfeld’s (1997) term. As much as policy interventions are needed for refugees to become self-sufficient, independent and ‘nested’ in their family, kin and ethnic groups in exile, strategies are also needed at other levels. The boundary process, as Wallman (1979) explains, is happening “in response to several different kinds of variable, and on a number of different levels. The factors affecting it may be macro and micro, a function of structure or perception, of changes in history or of situation” (1979, pp. 5). Policy interventions that would help consolidate their relationships in neighbourhoods and cities where they settled, leading to their inclusion in national society as a whole, are equally important. Without such strategies, refugees will remain socially excluded in some fundamental ways even if integrated in the labour market in a meaningful way and after gaining full citizenship rights.

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Appendix

Table 1 Social characteristics and legal status of the interviewees in Rome

Characteristics	N	%
<u>Age</u>		
20 to 30	15	37.5
31-40	17	42.5
over 50	7	17.5
	1	2.5
Total	40	100
<u>Gender</u>		
Female	21	52.5
Male	19	47.5
Total	40	100
<u>Marital status</u>		
Single	19	47.5
Married	10	25.0
To Italians	4	
To their compatriots	6	
Cohabiting	10	25.0
With Italians	2	
With their compatriots	8	
Divorced	1	2.5
From Italians	0	
From their compatriots	1	
Total	40	100
<u>Parental status</u>		
Single with children	0	
Married with children	6	
Cohabiting with children	0	
Divorced with children	1	
Total	7 out of 40	17.5 out of 100
<u>Educational level acquired in the home country</u>		
Elementary level	0	0
High or Secondary level	7	17.5
University degree	16	40.0
Interrupted by war	17	42.5
Education continued or vocational training taken	13	
Did not continue	4	
Total	40	100
<u>Time of arrival</u>		
1991	9	22.5
1992	17	42.5
1993	12	30.0
1994	0	0
1995	2	5.0
Total	40	100

Legal status		
Humanitarian status	22	55.0
Work permit	13	32.5
Italian citizenship or permit to stay for family reasons	5	12.5
Total	40	100
<u>Current labour market status</u>		
Employed	28	70
Work and study	7	17.5
Only study	5	12.5
Unemployed	0	0
Total	40	100

Table 2 Social characteristics and legal status of the interviewees in Amsterdam

Characteristics	N	%
<u>Age</u>		
20 to 30	6	30
31 to 40	6	30
41 to 50	4	20
over 50	4	20
Total	20	100
<u>Gender</u>		
Female	9	45
Male	11	55
Total	20	100
<u>Marital status</u>		
Single	19	47.5
Married	10	25.0
To Dutch	4	
To their compatriots	6	
Cohabiting	0	
Divorced	3	15
From Dutch	0	
From their compatriots	3	
Total	20	100
<u>Parental status</u>		
Single with children	0	
Married with children	11	
Cohabiting with children	0	
Divorced with children	3	
Total	14 out of 20	70 out of 100
<u>Educational level acquired in the home country</u>		
Elementary level	0	0
High or Secondary level	7	35
University degree	7	35
Interrupted by war	6	30
Education continued or		

vocational training taken	6		
Did not continue	0		
Total		20	100
<u>Time of arrival</u>			
1991		1	5
1992		3	10
1993		7	35
1994		3	15
1995		3	15
1996		0	0
1997		3	15
Total		20	100
<u>Legal status</u>			
Convention ('A') status		0	0
Humanitarian ('C') status		2	10
Provisional permit to stay ('F' status)		1	5
Dutch citizenship		17	85
Total		40	100
<u>Current labour market status</u>			
Employed		8	40
Casual contracts		2	10
Study		5	25
Unemployed		5	25
Total		40	100

¹ This article provides a brief outline of the research presented in the report entitled “Dilemmas of Integration: Two policy contexts and refugee strategies for integration”, Refugee Studies Centre, Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, December 2001.

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³ The main characteristics of the group of refugees interviewed in this research are given in the Appendix 1.

⁴ Data provided by *Emplooi*, an organisation assisting refugees in finding employment in the Netherlands.

⁵ Data provided by the Ministry of Interior during exploratory research visit to Rome in September 1999.

⁶ The government established 15 reception centres for those fleeing the region. Their gradual closure began at the end of 1995; at the time of this research, these centres were closed. The centres could accommodate up to 2,000 persons at a time. The exact number of those accommodated at such centres was not available, but there is a well founded indication, based on an International Organisation for Migration research, that the number was not much greater than a couple of thousand.

⁷ For more on the cross-ethnic character of these networks see my article “Cross-Ethnic Networks, Self-Reception System, and Functional Integration of Refugees from the Former Yugoslavia in Rome”, *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, Winter 2001, 2(1): 1-27.