

# Age, life cycle, and length of stay: temporal perspectives on integration

*Insights from the project 'Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration'*

In debates about integration in Norway, it is assumed that the extent to which immigrants feel like they 'belong' to Norwegian society depends more on their country of origin than any other factor, such as education, gender, or aspects related to time. Here we discuss how time-related factors – age at immigration, length of residence in Norway, and life-cycle stage – affect feelings of belonging across national backgrounds. We argue that a temporal perspective adds an important nuance in understanding integration processes.

## Brief Points

- Age at immigration, length of residence, and life-cycle stages affect immigrants' sense of belonging to Norway, which thus affects integration.
- Time-related factors are important regardless of country of origin or migration category.
- For all immigrants, their sense of belonging to their country of origin, in this case Norway, and possibly a third country, changes over time. This is not necessarily a linear development, but rather an individual process.
- The terminology used to describe persons with an immigrant background has an important signal effect. Precision and definition are therefore important.

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### Belonging in a temporal perspective

Country of origin is often the focal point when the media, government, or researchers describe integration, in Norway as well as elsewhere in Europe. This means that a surgeon and an illiterate person can end up in the same category because both were born in the same country, and sends the message that country of origin is decisive in the integration process. National background is thus foregrounded in analyses of integration even when other factors, such as education, gender, and age are also taken into account.

Integration is a process that is about mutual adaptation, where the experience of belonging is crucial. 'Belonging' is about the sum total of how the individual experiences in the Norwegian society, including speaking Norwegian, supporting him- or herself economically, and becoming a part of the local community as well as the wider society.

Through interviews and focus groups, we spoke to 67 people with backgrounds from for example Australia, Brazil, Iran, Pakistan, Poland, Sri Lanka, Germany, and Vietnam. All were adults who had come to Norway

recently (within the last seven years), had immigrated before their 14th birthday, or were born in Norway. Despite the wide range of backgrounds, they shared many similar thoughts about belonging. In this brief we discuss the impact that age at time of arrival, length of residence, and different phases in the life-cycle have on the sense of belonging – and thus integration.

### Length of residence and changing reflections

All participants described how they experienced Norway upon arrival and how this changed over time. Those born in Norway of immigrant parents also talked about their parents' experiences as far back as the 1970s. Their reflections included both personal and social changes, and how they began to feel more at home as they learned Norwegian, only then to notice that they would never be considered 'completely Norwegian'. They talked about experiences with racism and discrimination during difficult economic times, but also about various local and national programs designed to prevent discrimination.

The degree to which they feel a sense of belonging in Norway may be affected by events in their country of origin, which also change over time. These events might be related to structural and social changes, but also to the birth or death of family members, or the migration of family members to a different country. When an immigrant has family and friends in their country of origin or other countries, they have a sense of belonging to persons and places outside Norway's borders.

The passage of time affects migrants' belonging both to the country they have moved to and to the country they have moved from. The feeling of belonging is thus in constant flux. One of our informants described a feeling of 'coming home' when she vacationed in the village she left as a child. Yet, after only a week or two she felt that it was not there but rather Norway where she felt at home. Many immigrants feel a sense of belonging to several places at once, and the balance between these can fluctuate. The same applies to their thoughts about moving back to their country of origin. Their life situations, personal experiences, and environmental factors all affect these considerations.



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*'When I was 14, I wanted to go back to my country. When I was 18, I realized I could never live there again.'*

#### Age at arrival

The example in the previous paragraph underscores the importance of age at the time of migration: Had this woman left the village where she was born when she was even younger, she would not have remembered the places and the neighbors that made her feel at home when she went there for her holiday. If she had been an adult when she left her home country and had recently arrived in Norway, she would perhaps not have felt that Norway was 'home' yet.

Age at arrival plays an important role in experiences that give a sense of belonging. A school-aged child will grow up in Norwegian society with peers in the Norwegian school system, and have childhood memories from Norway. The older the person is at arrival, the more these bonds have been forged in other countries and with people in other places around the world.

*'You are affected by where you grow up. All the important and big things in my life have taken place in Norway.'*

In addition to network building, age at arrival also affects the initial encounter with the new country. One participant, who had arrived in Norway as a young child with his parents and grandmother, illustrates this point. He was enrolled in primary school in Norway, and his parents entered the labor market. His grandmother, who had already reached retirement age, never had the opportunity to participate in the Norwegian labor market. At her age it was also very difficult to learn a new language. Thus the three generations of this family had very different experiences of their first years in Norway, which had a further impact on their subsequent experiences.

#### Important signal effect

In a Norwegian context, all three generations in the family described above are labeled 'immigrants'. It is common to distinguish between 'first generation immigrants', 'second-generation immigrants' – those who are born in Norway with two immigrant parents –

and following generations. The examples above, however, illustrate that the picture is more complex.

The common broad categorization by 'generation' homogenizes what in reality are highly heterogeneous groups – with blurred boundaries between them. A child who arrives in Norway at the age of 6 will start school alongside one who is born in Norway. It is difficult to see why the first would be counted as 'first generation' while the second as 'second generation'. This approach also raises the question of how long one should continue dividing into 'generations'. When does an immigrant stop being an 'xx'-generation immigrant and instead start being a first generation Norwegian? Moving away from categorization by generation has an important signal effect and can increase the sense of belonging in Norway.

#### Different life-cycle phases, different degrees of belonging

The relevance of time-related factors for a sense of belonging is connected to the life-cycle phase an immigrant is in. While an unmarried man might feel he has many op-

tions to choose from in where to settle, a father with young children might feel his choices are more restricted. Regardless of national background, being a parent of a school-aged child will affect the degree of belonging and integration in the Norwegian society. When children grow older their choices will also affect their parents; for example, having children of their own can increase their parents' sense of belonging through their role as grandparents.

*'If I had been single, I think I would have moved around more.'*

Although life-cycle phases have a considerable impact on how people experience the world, they are seldom the focal point of studies on belonging and integration. However, some public services are provided to people based on their life-cycle phase, regardless of national origin, through health care, childcare, and schools. In these arenas, where there are natural points of reference beyond country of origin, ethnicity, religion, and language, there is potential to build common bonds to Norwegian society. However, the public sector cannot build this kind of a bond without conscious effort.

Life-cycle phases are not only relevant early in life, and belonging may be experienced differently for the elderly. Towards the end of their lives, elderly people may find that memories of childhood in their country of origin become more prominent. The question of burial and funeral services also become a concrete concern, where family members in Norway and abroad make the final decision. For surviving family members, the symbolic aspects of belonging – to family, to the country of origin, and to Norway – that are raised when a death occurs can be challenging and highlight the ambivalence that many associate with belonging.

### The importance of time

Age at the time of immigration, length of residence in Norway, and different life-cycle stages are important dimensions of belonging. Looking at belonging and integration in a temporal perspective reveals the many similarities that exist regardless of where immigrants are born or what their background is.

The older a person is when he or she moves to a new country, the more difficult it can be to learn the language and the social codes, as well as to establish new networks. At the same time, the longer a person resides in that country, the greater these opportunities become. Immigrants are more likely to feel connected to their country of settlement if they have school-aged children. Many of the project participants pointed out that a good environment in which to raise their children was one of the things they appreciated most about Norway.

Regardless of age at the time of migration, length of residence, and life-cycle phase, the way immigrants feel connected to Norway is in constant flux. This is true for all immigrants. Some factors are related to specific national background, such as experiences of war or economic difficulties. Nonetheless, a temporal perspective shows that a national background is not necessarily the most decisive factor when it comes to a sense of belonging. Similarly, parallel approaches seek to understand belonging across dividing lines in neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup>

Highlighting dimensions other than country of origin is an important step for moving forward in our understanding of integration. The media and government, as well as researchers, still commonly focus on ethnicity, nationality, and religion. While ethnic or national background is an important aspect of

the picture, there is good reason to reflect over why it is often assumed to have more explanatory power than, for example, level of education, socioeconomic factors, or life-cycle stages.

Integration of immigrants depends on their sense of belonging. And a sense of belonging does not just depend on the migrants themselves, but also on how they are accepted by the community. Social acceptance – which can be signaled by what kind of terminology is used – has a strong effect on immigrants' development of belonging over time and in different life-cycle phases. Increased awareness about categorization and language is thus an important step in integration work. ■

### Further reading

- Dzamarija, M.T. (2008). Definisjoner og betegnelser i innvandrerstatisikken: Hva skal 'innvandreren' hete? Samfunnspeilet 4/2008, Oslo: Statistisk Sentralbyrå.
- Erdal, M.B. og Ezzati, R. (2014). 'Where are you from' or 'when did you come'? Temporal dimensions in migrants' reflections about settlement and return. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2014.971041.
- Erdal, M.B. (2014). 'This is my home': Pakistani and Polish Migrants' Return Considerations as Articulations About 'Home'. *Comparative Migration Studies* 2(3): 361-384.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the Alna project: <http://www.sv.uio.no/sai/english/research/projects/alna/>

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### THE PROJECT

This Policy Brief is part of the project 'Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration' (PREMIG), a large-scale research project that explores return migration from Norway and the United Kingdom. The project is led by Research Professor Jørgen Carling. For more information, see [www.prio.org/premig](http://www.prio.org/premig)

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