

THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS ON THE INTEGRATION EXPERIENCE OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN THE NETHERLANDS

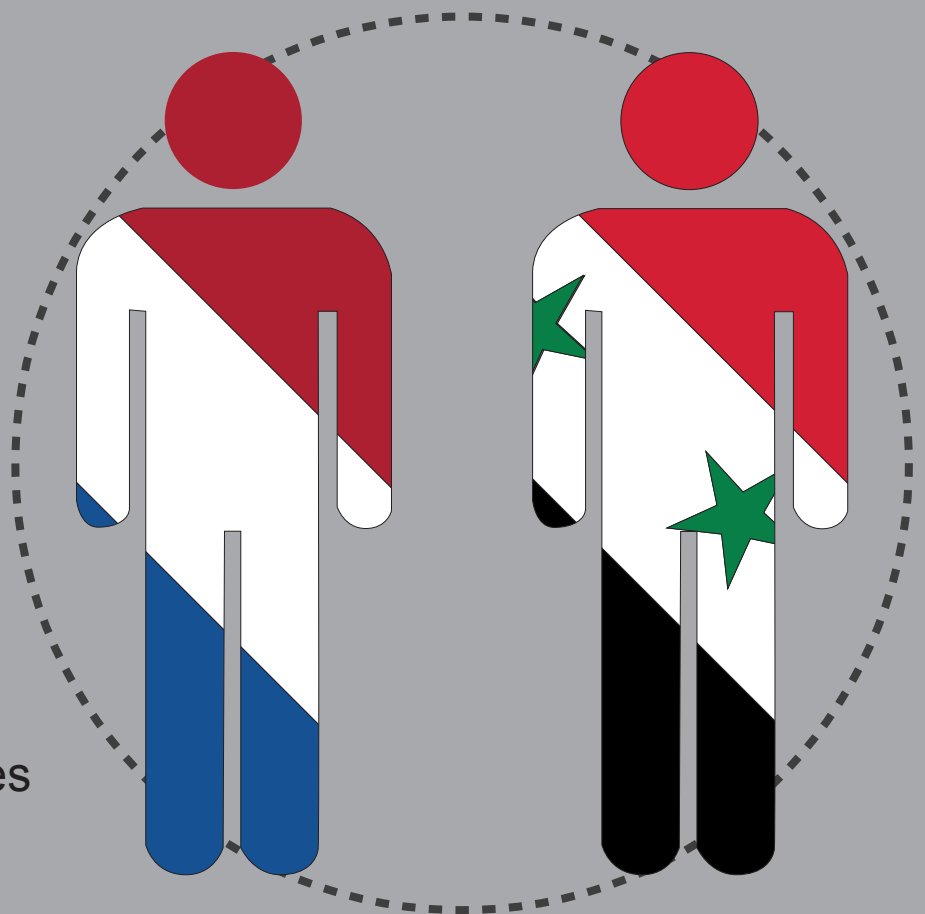
MASTER THESIS POPULATION STUDIES

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Abstract

Little is known about the social connections of Syrian refugees, who currently comprise the largest group of refugees in the Netherlands. This study has therefore explored the integration experiences of refugees in terms of the social connections they make in the Netherlands. Personality characteristics were expected to have an important influence on the ability to establish social connections and were therefore taken into account. Thirteen in depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with Syrian refugees in the province of Groningen, a questionnaire was used to measure personality characteristics. The main result of this study is that the social connections of Syrian refugees are a major influence in integration experiences; social connections were what made them feel at home in the Netherlands and helped them with building a life. Asylum centres were experienced as the main place to establish social connections, in particular for Dutch connections. Speaking English or Dutch was experienced as a key factor when it came to establishing Dutch social connections. Some participants seemed to have more difficulty with establishing social connections with people due to their personality characteristics. It can be concluded that social connections play an important role in the integration experiences of refugees and Dutch policies should try to focus more on this part of integration.

Keywords

Integration, refugees, social connections, personality characteristics, experience

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1. Introduction

Having social connections with people is important for almost everyone; it makes people feel happy and increases well-being and life satisfaction (Derose & Varda, 2009). Previous studies have found that the positive effect of social connections is greater for migrants and refugees than for native-born persons (Puyat, 2012; Samek, Laporte, Nauenberg, Shen & Coyte, 2012). These connections are especially vital to refugees as forced migration puts them at risk for social exclusion and stigmatization, which results in separation or even marginalization (Njororai & Lee, 2017). Despite the knowledge that social connections are particularly important to avoid the marginalization of refugees, little is known about the social connections of Syrian refugees, who currently comprise the largest group of refugees in the Netherlands.

1.1. *Refugees in the Netherlands*

The Netherlands has a long-established history of accepting refugees. Due to the civil war that began in their country in 2011, Syrians are presently the largest group of refugees in the Netherlands. Since 2011, there have been approximately 70,000 asylum applications, which are granted in most cases (CBS, 2017; Eurostat; 2017). When an asylum request is granted, the approval means that the refugee obtains a permit to stay in the Netherlands for at least five years and that he or she becomes a 'status holder'. The goal of the Dutch government is for refugees to integrate, which is beneficial for the refugees as integration increases their well-being and chances of building a life. Integration is also beneficial for the government because refugees who integrate are less likely to rely on social welfare from the Dutch government.

Integration of refugees can be considered difficult in the Netherlands based on the results of refugees who arrived between 2003 and 2010; only 46% of the refugees had a paid job in 2013, while the rest was dependent on social welfare (Visser, 2015). Focussing on the social connections of refugees could provide an increased understanding of integration processes and the barriers to their incorporation as social connections are considered to be the key factor in the integration of refugees (Cheung & Philimore, 2013). Social connections provide essential support in the areas of financial, employment, personal and health problems (Cheong; Edwards, Gouldbourne & Solomons, 2007; Lamba & Krahn, 2003).

1.2. *Personality characteristics*

To gather new insights and to understand the integration experiences of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, combining different perspectives from particular disciplines is an interesting and useful approach (Tait & Lyall, 2007). In this study, a psychological perspective is included by looking at the personality characteristics of Syrian refugees. These characteristics are a set of individual differences in patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving. Differences in these characteristics result in variation when it comes to establishing connections; people that are for example more outgoing establish connections easier (Reis & Rusbelt, 2004). This study will focus on three characteristics and the differences in these characteristics between the participants. The first one is to what extent the participants in the research are extravert, which is in other words outgoing. The second characteristic is to what extent they are neurotic, which means they are more likely to be moody and experience feelings of anxiety, worry, and loneliness. The third characteristic is locus of control, which is the degree to which people believe they are able to influence and control their life. For example, to what extent they feel

that they can influence their integration by working hard (Smith, Fischer, Vignoles & Bond, 2013).

1.3. Objectives and research questions

This study will give more clarity about the role of social connections and personality characteristics within integration; it will give new insights by combining different perspectives and adds to the subject's existing knowledge. Furthermore, this study can contribute to current integration policies in the Netherlands and can lead to better integration of refugees in the future. These objectives have led to the following research question:

- How do Syrian refugees experience integration into Dutch society in terms of the social connections they make in the new host country?

The research question is divided into the following three sub-questions:

- 1) To what extent and with whom do Syrian refugees establish social connections?
- 2) What do Syrian refugees experience as important domains when establishing social connections?
 - a) How do Syrians experience the roles of housing, school and the workplace when establishing connections?
 - b) How do Syrians experience the roles of language and safety when establishing social connections?
- 3) What are the roles of locus of control, extraversion and neuroticism on a Syrian refugee's ability to establish social connections?

Although different studies have concluded that social connections are vital to facilitating integration (Platts-Fowler & Robinson, 2015; Phillimore, 2011) studies about integration often ignore refugee integration experiences. These experiences are essential for understanding why the integration of refugees is difficult and provide better comprehension regarding what refugees need to integrate (Phillimore, 2011).

Studies about the influence of personality characteristics on refugee integration are scarce. There are some studies that found that personality characteristics influence the way refugees deal with stress and problems and to what extent they adapt (Ghazinour, Richter, Eisemann, 2003; Ahadi & Peunte-Diaz, 2011; Chen, Benet-Martinez & Bond, 2008) but little is known about the extent of how personality characteristics influence the ability for refugees to establish social connections and influence their integration experiences. Exploring if Syrian refugees differ in their locus of control, extraversion and neuroticism is therefore useful, as it offers new insights into the process of integration.

Theoretically, this study has chosen to build on the integration framework of Ager & Strang (2004). This framework has been developed to assess the integration of refugees and has defined ten domains that are important when it comes to integration experiences. The framework provides insight into which domains could influence integration experiences. The original Ager & Strang framework did not identify relationships between the domains, but literature about the Ager & Strang framework mentions that the framework should define relationships between the domains as this is helpful when it comes to understanding integration (Phillimore & Goodsen, 2008; Coussey, 2002). This study will therefore also explore relationships between the domains.

This study focuses on recent Syrian refugees, meaning that they arrived in the Netherlands within the last 5 years. The research questions are developed by using the domains from the Ager & Strang framework and by using concepts from a psychological perspective. The research questions will be answered through in depth semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugees as well as a personality questionnaire to measure neuroticism and extraversion, filled in by the same Syrian participants. The personality characteristics locus of control will be assessed by the in depth interview.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter discusses the body of literature in which this study is positioned. Relevant theories and concepts are introduced and analysed.

2.1. *Ager & Strang integration framework*

This study focusses on the experiences of Syrian refugees as they settle into Dutch society; therefore, the concept of integration is an important component of the study. Integration is a complex and difficult concept and that does not suit itself well to definitions; mostly because every person understands and experiences the process of integration differently (Council of Europe, 1997; UNHCR, 2013). An example is that some people define integration as a process in which refugees totally have to adapt to the host society, while others see it as more of a two-way process where the host society also has to make some adaptations (Berry, 2006; Da Lomba, 2010). Defining integration through a broader perspective, by means of identifying domains that are related to integration, is therefore preferable. This approach provides a better understanding about what integration is for refugees and shows the differences in perception about integration between refugees but also between refugee and government (La Lomba, 2010; UNHCR, 2013). Ager & Strang (2004) have explored integration through this broader perspective and defined 10 domains that are considered to be important when it comes to the integration of refugees. They brought the domains together in a framework, but did not identify any relation or order between the domains. Their framework is especially designed to evaluate the integration of refugees, and the domains help clarify what constitutes the integration experience. It is important to use a framework that is designed especially for refugees as their integration differs from other migrants such as economic migrants. This difference is mostly due to refugees leaving involuntarily their country while other migrants in general choose to leave (Bernard, 1976). Figure 1 shows the framework from Ager & Strang. The framework consists of four headings, and each heading is divided into different domains.



Figure 1. Ager & Strang framework (2004)

The meaning of the headings and domains can be briefly explained as follows.

1. Markers and means: The four domains in markers and means are considered particularly significant factors regarding integration. Achieving success in these domains is an indication of positive integration outcomes.

2. **Social connections:** The three domains in social connections deal with the relationships that refugees build in their new society. This part of the framework stresses the importance of relationships in understanding the integration process. Each of the domains requires further elaboration. Social bonds are the connections with other Syrians. Social bridges are the connections with people from the host society, which would be the Dutch in this study. Social links are the connections made with institutions (e.g., local and governmental services).
3. **Facilitators:** The two domains in facilitators are considered key factors for integration and are regarded as necessary for people to integrate effectively into the host society.
4. **Foundation:** Foundation consist of rights and citizenship. This domain represents the basis upon which integration is established as people require some measure of rights and citizenship to be able to remain in the host country to stay.

2.2. Applying the Ager & Strang framework

The Ager & Strang framework is positively evaluated and considered especially useful for exploring the integration experiences of refugees; therefore, it will be used in this study (Platts-Fowler & Robinson, 2015; Phillimore & Goodsen, 2008). The current study focusses on the social connections that Syrian refugees establish in the Netherlands, which means that this part of the Ager & Strang framework is central in this study. Most of the domains from the Ager & Strang framework are used in this study, though in a slightly different way. Figure 2 shows the conceptual model of this study.

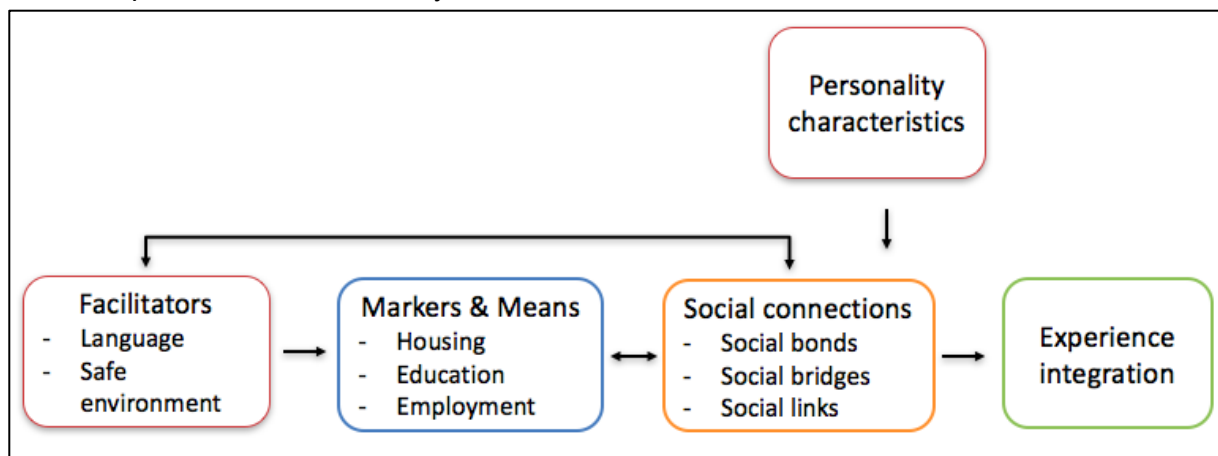


Figure 2. Conceptual model experience integration

- Based on the Ager & Strang framework (2004)

Understanding the conceptual model for Figure 2 and its differences from the original Ager & Strang framework seen in Figure 1 is a vital component of this study. The specifics of Figure 2's conceptual model and the relevant literature will now be discussed. First, the original Ager & Strang framework did not identify relationships between the domains, but the authors did not exclude the possibility that connections might exist. Relationships between integration domains are considered essential as they are particularly useful when it comes to understanding the experiences of refugees (Phillimore & Goodsen, 2008). This study will take relationships between the domains into account. The model in Figure 2 is explained from right to left, while personality characteristics are discussed last.

This study explores how Syrians experience integration in the Netherlands by examining the social connections that refugees establish. Social connections are considered to be the key factor in the integration experiences of refugees (Cheung & Phillimore, 2013).

The social connections of refugees have a positive effect on quality of life and have the ability to make someone feel at home, both of which influence integration experiences (Cheung & Phillimore, 2013). It also plays a critical role in refugee resettlement and integration, as social connections provide support in the areas of financial, employment, personal and health problems (Cheong; Edwards, Gouldbourne & Solomons, 2007; Lamba & Krahn, 2003).

The conceptual model shows that social connections consist of three domains, which means there are three different types of connections. Refugees having a variety of social connections is important as the contribution of each connection to integration is different (Aguilera, 2003; Lamba & Krahn, 2003). The connections between Syrians, or social bonds, are especially significant for fostering a sense of 'feeling at home' and feeling 'settled' (Cheung & Phillimore, 2011; Ager & Strang, 2008). They provide a chance of maintaining own costumes', celebrate traditions, talk in their own language and exchange news from the home country (Duke, Sales & Gregory, 1999). The connections between Syrians and the Dutch, or social bridges, are also vital; these connections bring harmony and motivates Syrians to participate at greater levels in society (Ager & Strang, 2008). The connections Syrian refugees have with Dutch institutions, such as the municipality are called social links; they contribute to the integration because they provide relevant services that help facilitate integration, for example: educational loans (Ager & Strang, 2008).

The conceptual model shows that there is a relationship between social connections and markers and means. Markers and means consist of employment, housing and education. These domains are individually important for integration, but in this study's model, the focus is on the relationship with social connections. This means that it is expected that employment, housing and education provide opportunities for Syrian refugees to meet people and establish connections with them. By having a job or volunteering, Syrians can meet other individuals. When the people Syrians meet are Dutch, the opportunity arises to establish social bridges. The same scenario can occur when Syrian refugees pursue an education; schools are experienced as the most important place for contact with people from the host society (Hickman, Crowley & Mai, 2008). Depending on the neighbourhood and its residents, housing can also create opportunities for the Dutch and Syrians to meet. Platts-Fowler & Robinson (2015) have mentioned that refugees who are located around people from the host society have better experiences with integration. Social connections can also influence markers and means; social connections can help refugees secure employment (Lamba & Krahn, 2013). The markers and means in this model are expected to influence the extent of the social connections that are established, which will consequently affect integration experiences.

The next component of the conceptual model is the heading of facilitators (see figure 2), which consists of language and safety. Like the domains under markers and means, the domains of language and safety are individually important. However, this study's model will focus on the relationship with social connections, as well as the relationship with markers and means. Meaning that if a refugee does not speak Dutch or English, there is a considerable barrier when interacting with Dutch people; this means that starting work, pursuing an education or establishing social connections with the Dutch is extremely difficult (Home office, 2006).

The same conclusions can be drawn regarding safety; if refugees do not feel safe, they are less likely to go school or work and make social connections (Phillimore & Goodsen, 2008). Besides facilitators influencing social connections, social connections can also influence the facilitators; social connections can improve feelings of safety and connections with Dutch individuals can improve language (Reis & Rusbelt, 2004). The facilitators in this model are

expected to influence the extent of the social connections that are established, which will consequently affect integration experiences.

2.3. *Personality characteristics*

Elder (1998) believes that people construct their own lives through the exercise of human agency and because of human diversity the life and life courses of people differ. In other words: people are different which means that their life is different. One aspect people can differ on is personality; personality characteristics influence everyday decisions and actions that lead to changes in life (Dewberry, Juanchich, Narendran, 2013). The diversity in personality characteristics is perhaps why integration experiences differ among refugees, because according to Mestheneos & Ioannid (2002) personality characteristics can affect the extent to which refugees are able to establish social connections which is as mentioned before very important when it comes to integration experiences (Cheung & Phillimore, 2013). This is why this study includes a psychological perspective and explores the roles of the personality characteristic: extraversion, neuroticism and locus of control. The three concepts are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Some individuals can easily make contact with people, while others struggle with this activity. In general, extraverted people are outgoing, which has a positive influence on making social connections; in contrast, neurotic people are anxious which makes it more difficult to establish social connections (Harris & Vazire, 2016). Few studies on refugees have explored the role of neuroticism and extraversion, but there are some studies that found that extraversion was related to positive psychological adjustment, while neuroticism was related to negative psychological adjustment (Chen, Benet- Martínez & Bond, 2008; Ahadi & Peunte-Diaz, 2011). This study expects that extraversion and neuroticism will influence the extent of social connections that are established, which will in turn affect integration experiences.

People can have an internal or an external locus of control. An internal locus of control means that individuals feel that they can influence their lives and their life courses, which means that they feel that they are responsible for the successes and failures in their lives. The opposite is an external locus of control; people with an external locus of control feel that they are not able to influence their life and their life course. Their successes and failures are due to external factors such as injustice, luck and fate but also because of other people (Smith et al., 2013). Few studies on refugees have considered locus of control, but some studies have found that an internal locus of control helps with sociocultural adaption (Moghaddam, 1990; Kennedy & Ward, 1992).

Locus of control differs among cultures and regions, people from Syria are considered to have a more external locus of control in comparison with people from the Netherlands and other western countries (Smith et al., 2013). Having more of an external locus of control could lead to problems when it comes to establish social connections, especially with Dutch people. This is because people with a more external locus of control are, in comparison with people with more of an internal locus of control, less open to new experiences and less willing to communicate with people that are not in their normal group, such as people from other ethnicities (Lam & Mizerski, 2005; Mühlig-Versen, Bowen & Staudinger, 2012). This could lead to experiencing integration more negatively since they have greater difficulties establishing social connections. It is expected that participants with a more external locus of control will have less social connections, which will negatively affect integration experiences.

3. Method

3.1. *Type of research*

This study has explored how Syrians in the Netherlands experience integration and the role of social connections in their integration experiences. The research has used an emic perspective and is cross-sectional.

3.2. *Methods of data collection*

Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used in this study. Thorough semi-structured interviews were employed to explore the in depth integration experiences of Syrian refugees, as well as to evaluate their locus of control. In depth interviews are a qualitative method of gathering data and are used to obtain the participants' perspectives regarding their beliefs and opinions. In depth Interviews also uncover the meaning that people give to their experiences; such as the amount of control that they can exert over their circumstances (Hennink, Hutter, Bailey, 2011). The goals of the interviews were as follows: to explore the perspective of refugees regarding integration and to develop new insights into the integration experiences, including differences seen among refugees. In addition to the interviews, the quantitative method of a short questionnaire was used to score the participants on the personality characteristics neuroticism and extraversion.

3.2.1. *In depth Interviews*

A semi-structured interview guide was developed, which can be found in appendix I. The participants were asked if they would like the interview to be held in Dutch or English. This resulted in one of the interviews being conducted in Dutch and the rest of the interviews in English. The interview guide was developed by operationalizing the concepts mentioned in the theoretical framework; the following questions are examples which demonstrate that process:

- To determine the places that the participants experience as important places to make contact, they were asked where they met their friends and contacts.
- To determine if the participants had an internal or an external locus of control, they were asked if they think they can improve their integration and what they would need for this. Participants who believe that they are responsible in this kind of situation, for example by going to social events, are considered to have a more internal locus of control; participants who lay the responsibility in external hands, for example other people, the government or fate, are considered to have a more external locus of control

Locus of control could also be assessed by using a questionnaire. The researcher has chosen not to do this because of a few reasons. First, measuring locus of control through a questionnaire would have meant that the participants had to fill in two questionnaires about their personality which could lead to feelings of irritation. Second, locus of control is a personality characteristic that shows itself in a lot of behaviour and comes clearly forward in a conversation (Smith et al., 2013). This gives the opportunity, through an in depth interview, to show directly the influence of locus of control on integration experiences. For example, a participant mentioning that she has worked hard to learn the Dutch language and now has many Dutch connections shows the relation between locus of control (working hard), language and making social connections. This approach provides interesting and useful information.

The interviews were generally conducted in the participants' homes. This is a familiar environment which makes people feel more comfortable and open (Hämäläinen & Rautio, 2015). One interview was conducted in a cafe due to the participant's personal preference.

The interviews varied between 35 minutes and 1 hour and 5 minutes.

3.2.2. Questionnaire

To measure extraversion and neuroticism, a shorter version of the big five personality traits test was used. The big five test measures five personality characteristics, but this study will focus on extraversion and neuroticism. The test and these personality dimensions are seen as culturally universal, meaning that these five dimensions exist in every person regardless of cultural background (McCrea, Terracciano, 2005; Schmitt et al., 2007). The original big five test consists of 44 items, which could have been time consuming for the participants to respond to and potentially led to feelings of irritation. A shorter version of the big five test was used instead and included only 10 items; the shorter version is considered a validated and reliable substitute for the original test (Gosling, Rentfrow, Swann, 2003). The questionnaire can be found in appendix II.

3.3. Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited in the province of Groningen via the personal network of the researcher, through snowball sampling and with the help of an organisation that is committed to helping refugees. To participate in this study, participants had to be status holders, which meant that they had received a permit to stay in the Netherlands for at least five years. This requirement means that they have the right to obtain a house and the obligation to start with learning the Dutch language (Rijksoverheid, 2017). Housing and learning the Dutch language was expected to give more opportunities to establish social contacts with other individuals, such as their neighbours. Although speaking Dutch or English was not a requirement for the participants, all of the participants did spoke one of the two languages; an interpreter was therefore not used. A total of 13 Syrians participated in this study. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants. To guarantee the anonymity of the participants, they are referred to with fictitious names.

Table 1. Participants overview

| PARTICIPANT | GENDER | AGE | TIME IN THE NETHERLANDS | CITY OF RESIDENCE |
|--------------------|---------------|------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| AVA | Female | 18 | 2 years | Groningen |
| MEGAN | Female | 19 | 5 years | Groningen |
| SOPHIA | Female | 24 | 5 years | Groningen |
| EMILY | Female | 30 | 1.5 years | Groningen |
| SARA | Female | 22 | 2 years | Groningen |
| OLIVIA | Female | 24 | 2 years | Appingedam |
| JENNA | Female | 25 | 1 year | Delfzijl |
| WILLIAM | Male | 35 | 1.5 years | Delfzijl |
| ETHAN | Male | 21 | 2 years | Groningen |
| GEORGE | Male | 19 | 1,5 years | Groningen |
| LIAM | Male | 27 | 2 years | Groningen |
| FINN | Male | 24 | 2 years | Groningen |
| JAMES | Male | 22 | 2.5 years | Groningen |

This study focussed on both males and females. Females have had less representation in recent research on refugees and integration (Huizinga, 2016). This lack of representation has created a gap of knowledge, which is particularly relevant as more Syrian women than men applied for asylum in 2016 and early 2017. The recent flow of both family reunion and

more Syrian woman coming independently to the Netherlands results in the fact that Syrian women are highly present in the Syrian population in the Netherlands (CBS, 2017).

This study primarily concentrated on young people; the average age of the participants was 24. This was similar to the demographics of the overall Syrian population in the Netherlands, where 63% are under 30 years of age (CBS, 2017). Although the goal of qualitative research is not to represent the actual population (Flick, 2015), it is useful to know that the participants in this study are demographic similar to most of the Syrians living in the Netherlands.

3.4. Ethical considerations

When conducting qualitative research, informing participants about the research is necessary because it helps minimizing harm and risk for the participants (Hennink et al., 2011). The participants were therefore carefully informed about the research and their right to stop at any moment. It was also explained that their statements were confidential and anonymous. When asking for permission to record an interview, participants were told that the conversation's transcripts would be protected and viewed only by the researcher and the supervisor. In one case, the interviewee did not agree with being recorded, so notes were taken during the interview and subsequently approved by the participant. This study did not use a written informed consent letter due to the fear that it would make the participants nervous and would not beneficially influence the research. Instead, the informed consent was explained verbally.

In this study, the real names of the participants are not used; it is also unlikely that available information such as the participants' ages could identify the interviewees. Quotes that contained certain personal details, such as the name of a street, were changed to ensure anonymity. Thinking about the impact that the interview and questions could have had on the participants was also important. The participants have fled from war and discussing personal experiences could have caused them to become emotional (Hennink et al., 2011). Attempts were made to ask questions that focussed on the refugees' lives in the Netherlands and avoid discussion about Syria. This approach resulted in the researchers' opinion, that the participants felt comfortable during the interviews and were not at any point emotional or disturbed.

3.5. Positionality of the researcher

When conducting interviews, the researcher has an influence on both data collection and data analysing. Therefore, reflecting on the role of the researcher in this study is necessary (Hennink et al, 2011). First, because I am Dutch, the participants might have felt that they could not open up about problems that they have experienced with other Dutch people. They might have also felt the need to emphasize that they had a large number of Dutch contacts. I encountered this in my interviews when participants did not mention their Syrian friends. I tried to solve this issue by casually mentioning that having Syrian friends is normal; which in my opinion contributed to the participants being more open about their Syrian friends.

Being Dutch also meant that my participants and I are from different cultures. This could have led to problems with different manners and habits, which might have resulted in uncomfortable feelings on both sides. Before starting the interviews, I did some research about certain daily habits and Syrian norms and values. My efforts were apparently not sufficient as I encountered a problem in my first interview. I attempted to shake the male participant's hand, but the greeting went unanswered; this was slightly uncomfortable for me and probably for him as well. I learned from this experience and subsequently let male participants initiate the shaking of hands or not.

Being female could have also influenced the research in a positive manner, because being female provided me the chance to interview Syrian women; this would have been difficult for a male because of religion. In contrast, being female could have made interviews with Syrian males more challenging, because relationships between men and women are different and occasionally more unequal in certain parts of Syria. That dynamic could have influenced the interviews because males might not have seen me as a worthy researcher and therefore did not open up to me. I found that concept to be an extreme idea prior to beginning my research, but I did encounter some problems with this. Two male participants held fast to a perfect image about themselves and their lives and did not share any struggles. Such reactions were difficult, because I noticed I did not get their complete experiences. Their attitudes were related to their culture; Syrian men are not comfortable sharing their weaknesses and feel as though they have to be successful (Hofstede, 2001). After the interviews with these two males, I decided to interview Syrian women first to get more comfortable and experienced with my interview guide and with Syrian people.

Besides switching to Syrian women I also made several adaptations to my interview style to create an environment where people felt they could open up. For example, I mentioned that I struggled while learning Spanish to show that there is no shame in having problems. These changes in strategy worked and made me confident enough to interview males again; I did not encounter any considerable problems in subsequent meetings. Interviewing and getting to know the participants was a particularly interesting and educational experience, and I look back on it with positive thoughts and feelings.

3.6. *Data analyses*

The interviews were literally transcribed by the researcher and upload in ATLAS.TI, which is a computer programme that is used to analyse qualitative data. This programme was used to code and categorise the transcribed interviews. Coding means giving labels to the text, based on what is theoretically relevant (Mortelmans, 2007). Coding was done by using the content and thematic analysis, which means that the starting point is the theory and therefore the coding is slightly more deductive than inductive. In this study, the coding was done in two steps, in the first step the coding was done more openly without identifying any relationships between codes. For this step, the code tree was used, which can be found in appendix III. The code tree was developed by identifying the concepts that are important in the theoretical framework. For example, it was expected that the participants would talk about their neighbours and therefore neighbour is one of the concepts in the code tree. After this first step the data is divided in small pieces and the next step is connecting codes and defining categories. For example, Dutch neighbours and Dutch classmates can be integrated to social bridges. The final step is to analyse and explore if there are relationships between categories, for example another category could be well-being and the next step is to explore if social bridges and well-being are related to each other. In addition to the interviews the notes of one of the interviews were also coded and analysed in ATLAS.TI.

When it comes to the personality questionnaire, the researcher scored all of the participants on neuroticism and extraversion and added a label to the transcribed interviews in ATLAS.TI. For example, if a participant was considered extravert and neurotic the particularly transcribed interviews got the label extravert and neurotic. In this way, it was easily visible what kind of personality characteristics the participant had.

4. Results

In this chapter, the main results from the analysis of the interviews are discussed. By interviewing the participants and analysing their responses, different aspects have been defined that have an important role regarding integration experiences. In this chapter, the different elements that were raised in the semi structured interviews are discussed in light of the research questions. Section 4.1. describes the value of social connections, which are expected to be particularly important when it comes to integration experiences. Section 4.2. discusses the role of language and how this variable influences the establishment of social relations with Dutch individuals. Section 4.3. explains the role of the asylum centre in the formation of social connections. Finally, Section 4.4. presents how the role of personality is related to establishing social connections and experiences.

4.1. *The value of social connections*

The social connections that Syrian refugees have built were expected to be crucial to developing a deeper understanding of their integration experiences. Furthermore, these social connections could help define the extent to which refugees feel and are actually integrated. The theoretical expectations emerged during the interviews; social connections were considered especially valuable and helpful when building a life and attempting to integrate:

Sara: The first months for me in Holland it was so difficult because I lost almost all my life. I lost my study. I lost everything. I only sit in my room. I had nothing to do. I said to myself don't think about what you were, think about what you are now. I had to say I am now this and this, so I start volunteer work, and know many people and I have Dutch contacts. So that is why I cannot leave people (Female, 22 years old living in Groningen, in the Netherlands for 2 years).

Interviewer: Because?

Sara: Because it makes you feel that you are in your country, because you know if you read about the Middle East, all people are living together. So, if I sit here in my home, lonely, doing nothing. I will feel like that I am not in my country, I am feeling now Groningen the same as I was born here because I have really good contact. [...] I am happy, I really work hard to all the things, but I have had a good result. I know so much people. I have nice contact as they are my second family (Female, 22 years old living in Groningen, in the Netherlands for 2 years).

Sara's experiences were representative of the participants in this study; all of them mentioned that they found their social connections highly important and that the connections helped them feel at home in the Netherlands. In general, the feeling emerged from the participants that their social connections were related to their well-being as they also talked about how social connections made them feel happy; they got a smile on their face when discussing their social connections.

James: Yeah, with this point I think you need people to feel integrated a little bit, because if you are isolated from people I don't know, I think it is different per person. For me at least, if I am isolated, I am not feeling home, because home I think is a place where your heart is and I think people can be that for you (Male, 22 years old living in Emmen, in the Netherlands for 2.5 years).

James explained that he felt at home when there were people that he liked and with whom he has contact, he said that this was related to feelings of being integrated. The way James experienced it was similar to most of the other participants; they felt that their connections were related to feeling at home, which resulted in feeling integrated.

4.1.1. Differences between the value of social bonds and social bridges

The value of three kinds of social connections are explored in this study: social bonds, social bridges and social links. Social links were not experienced as important; the value of having social links did not come forward in the interviews and many of the participants did not have any contact with government institutions. The value of social links and social bonds did come forward and in line with the literature, social bonds and social bridges influenced integration in different ways. Social bonds were experienced as important when it came to having a connection with Syria, as the following participant explained:

Olivia: I miss my country. I miss my family. I miss my friends, but if I see someone from my country, then that is nice (Woman, 24 years old living in Appingedam, in the Netherlands for 2 years).

Sara: Syrian friends it's the same as you are in Syria (Woman, 22 years old living in Groningen, in the Netherlands for 2 years).

Ava: Well, there are two types of Syrian people. There is the good one of them and the bad one. [...] I stay with the good part, so the good part yeah, actually they like make me really feel like the old days, how we use to go out and everything (Woman, 18 years old living in Groningen, in the Netherlands for 2 years).

The social network of the participants consists mostly of other Syrians and were considered to be very valuable. All of the participants described how the connections with other Syrians reminded them of Syria and their lives in Syria, this resulted in feelings of being home because they could share experiences, habits and talk in their own language. It seems that the connections between Syrians were especially important for well-being; the participants talked about these connections with great pleasure and energy. In many cases, talking about these bonds brought a smile to their faces.

Most of the participants had established connections with Dutch people (social bridges). These connections were valued by the participants, though in a different way than their connections with Syrian people. All participants who had Dutch connections discussed these as a source of help; the interviewees spoke about their connections with Dutch individuals indirectly or directly when it came to helping with their integration. Sara's experiences showed this as she explained how her Dutch friends assisted her with gaining information and understanding certain rules in the Netherlands.

Sara: For example, when I will go to an appointment, I will wear my jacket. They [Dutch friends] told me first thing: if you meet someone, you have to take your jacket off because it is not respectful. And what else? For example, to be on time, this is the most important for Dutch people. For us Syrian people, half of them they have an appointment they will be late, really. We don't care. And here, you really have to be on time. If you will be late, you have to tell them: sorry I am late

Sara: They learn/teach me these things: if you always be late, it is not nice for you, not nice for

you cv. They teach me to organize my paper. It is the most important thing here: afspraken, papieren (Woman, 22 years old living in Groningen, in the Netherlands for 2 years).

Sara's experiences showed that Dutch connections can contribute positively to building a life and integration. Sara learned that taking your jacket off and being on time is highly appreciated, and that knowing this fact could help her find and keep a job. A job is important for integration, so friends that assist with explaining rules such as punctuality would be particularly useful. Understanding these types of unwritten rules was something that most participants discussed. Some participants also experienced that Dutch connections helped regarding written rules and legal regulations:

Sophia: What else, I just bought a car, a year ago. I used to do some stuff wrong. I don't know how I should say it. When someone sits in the back, I don't think they need to put the...

Interviewer: Seatbelt?

Sophia: Seatbelt on. It is apparently. You can get a fine. I did not know that until a Dutch person sat with me and said why are you not putting it on, and I was like should I? (Woman, 24 years old living in Groningen, in the Netherlands for 5 years)

Knowing these kinds of rules can save refugees from unexpected problems. Both Sophie's and Sara's experiences showed how Dutch connections helped with understanding Dutch norms and values; this understanding could contribute to integration as it can help with activities such as finding a job.

A few participants also experienced that their Dutch connections helped while the interviewees were searching for a job or house.

James: I was desperately looking for a place and because of a contact [.....]. The priest in the church has as wife, which is weird, but that's how the protestants do it. And that wife, we are in good contact with her, and she told me about this place and luckily it was available. So because of that connection, I heard that there is a place for me. So that's when connections come in really handy (Male, 22 years old living in Emmen, in the Netherlands for 2.5 years).

Some participants also expected that their Dutch connections would help them in the future with tasks such as finding a job:

Ethan: That is why I do it (going to events) because it helps like my plans in the end. If I know for example, all Groningen, then if I need anything, I just can find it. It is easier for me to complete my life, even to help me with find a job for example. That is my plan every time. Just do something, meet people. Right now, I am not working. I am just studying, sleeping, eating, doing sports and meet people, events. The only thing I can do is meet more people and more like international students (Male, 21 years old living in Groningen, living in the Netherlands for 2 years).

Ethan explained how he expected that if he invested in Dutch connections and built a large social network, those connections would eventually help him find a job. This idea motivated him to attend events and meet Dutch people.

4.1.2. *Social bonds and social bridges needed for integration*

In the previous paragraph the value of social connections was discussed; in this paragraph, there will be more attention to the participants experiences about having both Syrian and Dutch connections and how these connections are related to their integration. For many participants, the key word in their social connections and in their integration is balance:

George: If I have only Dutch friends I will forgot the Arabian people and traditions. And if I only have Syrian friends it is the other way around and it would feel like I am not living here (Man, 19 years old living in Groningen, living in the Netherlands for 1.5 years).

As George explained he feels that having both social bridges and social bonds are important, which is the way most participants feel. Sara is one of the participants that has many Dutch connections and she mentioned the following:

Sara: We have to learn them (Dutch people) the positive things in our culture but we have to live in in their culture, so for example in our country the lunch will be between 4 and 5 and here this is almost dinner. So if we invite people to dinner, Syrian or Dutch, we invite them at 6 because it is the time for dinner here. We will be the same, it is the culture here and it becomes normal for you because you are living here. [...] Yeah, so for me I learn the positive things here and I learn my Dutch friends the positive things from Syria. For example, when they come to us I tell them it is normal for us to this and when you sit with arab people it is nice to this and this. So it is the same (Woman, 22 years old living in Groningen, in the Netherlands for 2 years).

This shows also that balance is important, Sara and most of the other participants with her feel that it is not necessary to adapt to all Dutch social norms and values to be and feel integrated.

When interviewing one of the participants and asking her about what she would need to feel and be more integrated, she said that she would need more Dutch connections but mentioned that this was difficult because of the following:

Megan: I think while contacting someone, making friends with someone you do need to take a step towards their personality and then they take a step towards yours. I think I have made the step that I came towards the Dutch way of thinking and living but a lot of Dutch people wouldn't wanted to take the steps towards mine, because they do not live in a new society. That is why I struggle (Woman, 19 years old living in Groningen, in the Netherlands for 5 years).

What Megan experiences is that if she wants more Dutch friends she has to take a step towards the Dutch way of thinking, in return she feels that Dutch people have to take a step towards her 'Syrian' way of thinking. The step from Dutch people is not happening because, according to Megan, they don't feel the need to adapt because they are not living in a new society. Megan wants to meet in the middle and create a balance, but her experience is that this is not as easy to get from Dutch people.

In the next paragraphs the focus will be on other aspects that are important when it comes to establish connections with Dutch people.

4.2. *The role of language and safety in establishing social bridges*

In this study, feeling safe and speaking Dutch or English were expected to be of key importance, meaning that without success in these two domains participants would not establish social connections and would experience integration more negatively. The importance of feeling safe did not strongly come forward in this research; this feeling was not

consciously present in the lives and experiences of the participants. Knowledge about the Dutch or English languages was experienced very positively, most participants spoke English and experienced this as a step forward when it came to building a life and establishing contact with Dutch people:

Ethan: Actually, for me I am one of the lucky guys who speaks English, because I never have problems with Dutch people, with speaking (Male, 21 years old living in Groningen, living in the Netherlands for 2 years).

This man experienced what a majority of participants did, namely that most people in the Netherlands speak English and that knowing English helps making contact with Dutch people. The same participant also said the following:

Ethan: That is why I need the Dutch language, not to get a job. I can just walk in this life more easy. I can understand more like, I will know how the Dutch people talk, accent. I can understand something, also like your face emotions (Male, 21 years old living in Groningen, living in the Netherlands for 2 years).

This could be interpreted as contradictory, as he subsequently said that he needed Dutch to understand Dutch people. It could also be interpreted that knowing English was sufficient for him when communicating on a basic level, but speaking Dutch was necessary to make deeper connections. This possibility emerged during other interviews as well; speaking Dutch was experienced as quite useful in the processes of integration and establishing contacts. The participants mentioned the Dutch language as both an enabler and a barrier regarding social connections.

Emily: I must learn Dutch. I must learn Dutch because it's like I really feel it when I meet Dutch people, and one of my friends talks with them Dutch, they are really happy, haha. They very like it so much, and they have made it easy to communicate with them. Even though they know English, and they talk English very well (Woman, 30 years old living in Groningen, living in the Netherlands for 1.5 years).

This woman experienced that Dutch people do speak English, but speaking Dutch enabled easier contact with Dutch individuals and provided a greater chance of establishing social bonds. Some fluency in Dutch appeared to be sufficient for making contact; however, a high level of Dutch was required to build a deeper connection, as the following example shows:

Interviewer: So, do you hang out with the people from your class?

Sophia: Uhm, not as much. It's, there is a difference. While if there is a group, I don't get what they are talking about. I do ask sometimes what does that mean, what does this mean? What is this? They told me about the street language and about the Groningen language haha [...]. It is really hard to keep up with the conversations and with hanging out with them. So, I always feel like I need a translator by my side. I don't get anything they are saying. I don't really hang out with them (Woman, 24 years old living in Groningen, living in the Netherlands for 5 years).

This woman was attending university, where she was pursuing her education in the Dutch language and had Dutch classmates. She had an opportunity to build social bonds as she was surrounded by Dutch people daily. Although she had school as a facilitator, she experienced

language as a barrier to spending time with her classmates. Her circumstances demonstrate that Dutch language is fundamental for establishing social bonds.

Not only does language contribute to establishing social connections with Dutch people, these connections also work as a motivator when it comes to learning the Dutch language:

Sara: So, I told him (her brother) you have to speak, when you speak Dutch people become very happy because you speak their language. Oh, and they (Dutch people) told me, 'hoe lang ben jij in Nederland'? The first question. I say I am almost anderhalf jaar hier and they: 'Oh it is so fast you learned the language'. I told them: yes, I start to learn from 4 months, they told me: 'We don't believe' (Woman, 22 years old living in Groningen, living in the Netherlands for 2 years).

James: So, I am really feeling safe, and I am really feeling good, and that gives me a little bit of a patriotic feeling, so if I am living here, I want to learn the language. I want to impress people. Okay, he is speaking Dutch, he is really busy here, working hard on himself. (Man, 22 years old living in Groningen, living in the Netherlands for 2.5 years).

The first participant experienced that speaking Dutch made Dutch people happy and that she impressed people with a high level of fluency in the language, which worked as a motivator. The second participant wanted to impress people by speaking Dutch and viewed this as a motivator. James also mentioned that he is feeling safe and

4.3. The role of the asylum centre in establishing social connections

In this study, the roles of housing, school and work have been explored to see to what extent these places function as locations for establishing social connections and also how they influence integration experiences. The role of school and work did not strongly come forward in this research, only a few of the participants experienced these places as important for establishing social connections. This in contrast with asylum centres; this study has found that asylum centres were the main place for establishing connections with both Syrians and Dutch people. Asylum centres can be included in the domain of housing as they are a type of housing facility. Emily was a participant who stayed in different asylum centres, she made the following comment:

Emily: Yeah, the Syrian people, most of them I know from the AZC (asylum centre) (Woman, 30 years old living in Groningen, living in the Netherlands for 2 years).

Emily knew the majority of her Syrian contacts from the asylum centre, which was similar to most of the other participants.

When it came to forming connections with Dutch people, it appeared the asylum centre was of even greater value. Almost all the Dutch bonds established with the participants had a base at an asylum centre. There were activities organized by the asylum centre or the municipality where local Dutch people came to the asylum centre to meet Syrian refugees, as George explained:

George: The AZC (asylum centre) made an integration dinner. Dutch family says we would like to invite you, and we went there and it was good (Man, 19 years old living in Groningen, living in the Netherlands for 1.5 years).

As with the Syrian connections that were formed by refugees, most of the Dutch connections established in the asylum centre are still active.

Participants that did not spend time in an asylum centre because of family reunion had in most cases no Dutch connections.

4.4. *The role of personality in establishing social connections*

This study wanted to explore if personality characteristics influence the extent of social connections that are established. The characteristics neuroticism and extraversion were tested with a questionnaire and it was expected that participants that scored high on extraversion would have more social connections as well as people scoring low on neuroticism. All of the participants scored high on extraversion and low on neuroticism and had many social connections. The personality characteristic locus of control was explored using in depth interviews where the participants were indirectly asked about their locus of control. It seems that for almost all participants, locus of control was related to their social connections and to their integration experiences. Many participants were defined as having a propensity toward an internal locus of control meaning they had a feeling of control over their lives. Which resulted in making a greater number of contacts and learning the Dutch language to facilitate contacts. James explained how he thought he could influence his integration:

James: Sometimes I don't take initiative, and the other person does not either. The relationship just calms down, so I would, in order to be more integrated, take initiative and spend more time contacting people. Instead of waiting for them to contact me (Man, 22 years old living in Groningen, living in the Netherlands for 2.5 years).

For James, having social connections was important for integration, which he believed he could establish if he took more initiative. He made himself responsible for establishing contacts, which could increase the chances of forming social connections. James knew what he needed to influence his integration, but had not yet followed through. Ethan also had a stronger internal locus of control and showed this in his behaviour:

Ethan: Every time I go somewhere for a presentation or an event, I try harder to meet everyone. Not like I met one guy or one girl, but in this event, I met for example 35 students, and I have all of their numbers (Man, 21 years old living in Groningen, living in the Netherlands for 2 years).

Ethan acted in a way so that he could establish as many social connections as possible, which was important for him to facilitate integration. His behaviour was goal oriented and showed that he felt he could influence his integration.

In contrast to an internal locus of control there is an external locus of control; only a few participants showed a propensity for a greater external locus of control. The experiences from Olivia illustrated the difference between the two:

Olivia: In my country, it is different than here. In my country, there is a lot of contact, but here people are at home with closed curtains. They don't go outside (Woman, 24 years old living in Appingedam, living in the Netherlands for 2 years).

Olivia wanted to make contact with Dutch individuals but felt that Dutch people were not really open to contact; therefore, she felt less able to make contact. This showed more of an external locus of control, as she did not see herself being responsible for making contact. Instead, she places some of the blame on the Dutch for staying in their houses and not wanting contact with

her. When discussion about what she needed to make contact with people, she mentioned language and explained:

Olivia: I found B1 (Dutch language level) sometimes difficult. I said if I had someone that helped me with the language I will learn it faster [...]. I want someone to help me with the language (Woman, 24 years old living in Appingedam, living in the Netherlands for 2 years).

Olivia felt that language could help her with making contact but mentioned she needs someone to help her learn Dutch. She was not making herself primarily responsible for learning the Dutch language and placed it into 'external hands'.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

This chapter answers the research questions and its sub-questions based on the previous chapter. With help of the Ager & Strang framework (2004), different domains were identified that were important for integration. These domains have helped improve the understanding of Syrian refugees' integration experiences. The main result of this study is that the social connections refugees establish are a major influence in integration experiences.

5.1. *Discussion of the results*

5.1.1. *The extent of social connections*

This chapter discusses the results by examining each sub question, starting with who and to which extent Syrian refugees established social connections. Most of the participants in this research established connections with both Syrians, social bonds, and Dutch people, social bridges; they valued these connections and it contributed to their integration experiences. The value and contribution to integration of social bonds and social bridges was experienced different, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

First, the social bonds; all the participants in this study established connections with other Syrians; their social network consisted mostly out of other Syrians. For the participants, these connections were experienced to be particularly important; these connections helped with the sense of feeling settled and being at home which influenced their integration experiences in a highly positive manner. This is in line with a research by Cheung & Philimore (2011) where the relationships between refugees were also spotlighted as the key to the integration experiences. These feeling of being home, resulting from social bonds, are according to a study by Nawyn (2006) because other Syrians have the same culture and habits and sharing this results in feelings of being at home. Another explanation for the importance of connections with other Syrians is that many participants in this study arrived to the Netherlands alone; therefore, they want to be around people from the same country as this replaces their missing family. This 'new' family is considered to be very important and contributes to feelings of being at home (Lamba & Krahn, 2003).

Most participants also established social connections with Dutch people, in comparison with Syrian connections these Dutch connections were less present in the lives of the participants but they were also experienced very positively by the participants. These Dutch connections assisted the participants in finding a job or a house and contributed to making participants understand Dutch norms and values. Understanding the norms of values of a country results in harmony within the country (Ager & Strang). It also results in more job opportunities because understanding of the host culture means gaining acceptance and being acknowledged as part of the mainstream society, which means more chance of getting a job (Oppedal, Roysamb & Heyerdahl, 2005) Important to mention is that most of the participants did not feel that they had to adapt to all the Dutch social norms and values; a balance with Syrian norms and values was considered to be ideal. A balance was also considered important when it came to social connections and integration; the participants had a social network consisting of mostly Syrians but integration meant for them having both Syrian and Dutch connections. This vision on integration matches with Berry's (2011) definition of integration; he developed a model and according to this model newcomers are considered to use one out of four strategies when they start living in a new country. One of the strategies is called integration and means having a preference to maintain own culture and identity but also have a relative

preference for contact with and participating in the larger society. This strategy where refugees have found a balance and are having both Syrian and Dutch connections seems to be most efficient and results in experiencing integration more positively. The reason for this can also be tracked back to Granovetter (1973), who classified social networks into two categories: 'weak' and 'strong' ties. Strong ties are connections with people you know well, with similar backgrounds and weak ties are connections with people that you see more as an acquaintance. In this study, social bridges have similarities with weak ties and social bonds with strong ties. Granovetter discussed that a person needs both but especially weak ties are valuable as they help with crucial information that leads for example to a new job. In this study the Dutch people have helped the participants with finding a job or a house; their role is similar as the role of weak ties. The explanation for the value of weak ties is that they are moving in a different social circle which results in new information; they provide a 'bridge' to information and opportunities.

The last social connections in this study are the social links, which are the connections with government institutions. Although most of the participants had some contact with government institutions, such as the local municipality; the participants did not experience government institutions as an important influence in their integration. This contrasts with the original Ager & Strang framework and study (2004;2008), where the role of social links was important because they provided relevant services that help facilitate integration. An explanation for this difference is difficult to give as there is not much literature about the role of social links and integration. A possible explanation might be that the Dutch government plays a different, less important or visible, role in the integration of refugees; in comparison to the government of the United Kingdom, where the Ager & Strang study was conducted.

5.1.2. The role of housing, school and workplace in establishing social connections

In this study it has been found out that asylum centres are experienced as the most important place for establishing connections. The participants established connections with other Syrians; these connections continued to be important after the participants left the asylum centres. This finding is supported by a study from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR); they found that refugees developed social connections with other refugees from the same country in asylum centres which prevents social isolation. In this study, asylum centres were the main place where connections between the participants and Dutch people happened. This is a new finding but does not necessarily relate to housing; rather, connections are established through activities organized by the asylum centre or the local municipality.

These activities provide a solid basis, since most participants who made social connections through the centres still associate with their Dutch connections. For Syrian refugees, the asylum centres seem to be experienced as one of the few places where Dutch people are open to contact and friendship. This experience can be explained as Dutch people that work or come to asylum centres are actively looking for contact with refugees which enables connections between Syrians and Dutch people. This perception is important to discuss, as it implies that establishing social connections with Dutch people outside the asylum centre is very difficult because Dutch people are not open for contact. This is indeed what some participants experienced and is underpinned by the result that participants that didn't spend time in an asylum centre have less or even zero Dutch connections. The Dutch people that come to asylum centres do not represent the native Dutch population; who might not be that interested and willing towards refugees. This is indeed what the Sociaal Cultureel Plan Bureau (SCP) (In English: The Netherlands Institute for Social Research) found in 2015; many Dutch

people worry about refugees coming to the Netherlands. SCP, discovered that Dutch people are afraid of tensions within the society and feel that it is unfair that refugees receive money from the Dutch government. Two-thirds of Dutch natives would like the Dutch government to focus more on home affairs instead of focussing on foreign affairs such as refugees. Besides, only 13% of the native Dutch agrees with the statement that the Netherlands should take up more refugees (SCP, 2015).

Dutch people might also not be interested in contact with refugees because Dutch people and refugees differ in background; they have a different culture and therefore have little in common. The Wetenschappelijke raad voor Regeringsbeleid (WRR) (In English: The Scientific Council for Government Policy), found in 2014 that there is a big polarization in the Netherlands. An example is between people from different educational levels, high and low education people differ from each other in social-cultural aspects such as humour and are living very separate lives. It is assumable to say that Dutch people and Syrian people also differ and therefore having separate lives. A significant difference is ethnicity and Kao & Joyner (2004) concluded in their study that cross-ethnic friendships are more of an expectation than the norm, which is because people tend to be friends with people that look and are similar (Griffon-Smith & Brownwell, 2003).

Both assumptions mentioned above influence to a great extent the ability for refugees to establish connections with Dutch people. It also implies that bridging connections will not happen by itself and especially in the arrival period of refugees' places like asylum centres are needed to facilitate the host people that want contact with refugees. This also shows the relations between the integration domains, as there are places needed to establish social bridges.

In this study the value of both school and work did not strongly come forward, primarily because most of the participants did not work and most of them went only a few hours a week to Dutch language school; in this place they did establish some connections with other Syrians. Work and school can be considered as highly potential places when it comes to establishing social connections with Dutch people; these are places where people spend a lot of time together and where people come together that have equal interest, both are important components when it comes to establish social connections and might help overcome the barriers mentioned before (Van Oudenhoven, 2002). According to Hickman, Crowley & Mai (2008) schools are experienced by refugees as the most important place for contact with people from the host society.

5.1.3. The role of language and safety in establishing social connections

Language was experienced as an important factor; not being able to speak Dutch or English is a barrier when it comes to establishing social connections and achieving integration. The importance of language appears in almost every study on integration and this study is not an exception (Ager & Strang, 2008; Chiswick & Miller, 2002). Remarkable was the differences between English and Dutch, speaking Dutch was experienced as a greater advantage for establishing social connections with Dutch people. The difference between Dutch and English is interesting but unfortunately there are no available studies on countries such as the Netherlands where many people speak two languages. Interesting is also the finding of this study that social connections with Dutch people help with learning the Dutch language as the relationship motivated refugees to learn Dutch. The reason for this can be that having Dutch connections gives the participants a sense of belonging which results that they have more positive attitudes regarding learning the language (Raufelder, Jagenow, Drury & Hoferichter, 2003).

Feeling safe was mentioned in a few interviews but was not experienced as a very important factor in integration experiences. This was probably because all participants felt safe and therefore safety was not something consciously considered in their daily lives.

5.1.4. The role of personality characteristics in establishing social connections

This study has explored the role of three personality characteristics; extraversion, neuroticism and locus of control. All of the participants scored high on extraversion and low on neuroticism, it is therefore difficult to conclude if these two characteristics had any influence when it came to establishing social connections.

Locus of control has showed itself in this study as a very interesting characteristic when it comes to establishing social connections. Participants with a more internal locus of control made themselves responsible for establishing social connections; they were active and goal oriented in establishing social connections which results in more social connections. Participants with a more external locus of control did not take personal responsibility for themselves; they expected that other people or factors influence the establishment of their social connections which resulted in a wait and see attitude which did not benefit their social connections. This is especially the case when it comes to establishing social connections with Dutch people; this study has shown that these connections will not happen very spontaneously and that it asks for initiative. People with a more internal locus of control are therefore at risk of having a social network with only refugees; this will negatively influence their integration as they have, for example less opportunities towards finding a job (Kazemipur, 2006). Most of the participants in this research were having more of an internal locus of control, this is contradicted with the theory as people from Syria have in general more of an external locus of control (Smith et al., 2013). An explanation for this is speculative; it could be that people that want to participate in research are in general having more of an internal locus of control. Having an internal locus of control means that people feel that they are able to make a difference with their information and experiences and therefore participate. It could also be that Syrian refugees in the Netherlands in general have a more internal locus of control, because this a group that fled to Europe and not to neighbouring countries; they saw opportunities in the Netherlands and were active and goal oriented by taking the step.

This study has shown that adding a perspective from another discipline gives interesting and useful results.

5.2. Main conclusion

This study has tried to answer the following research question: How do Syrians experience integration into Dutch society in terms of the connections they make in the new host country?

It can be concluded that the experiences of Syrian refugees regarding integration in the Netherlands is highly dependent on the social connections they establish; social connections make them feel at home in the Netherlands and help them with building a life. Although their network consists of mostly Syrian people, a combination of social bonds and social bridges is considered as most ideal by the participants as both influence integration in different ways.

Asylum centres are the main place to establish social connections, in particular for Dutch connections. Speaking English or Dutch is a key factor when it comes to establishing Dutch social connections. Personality, and in particular locus of control influences whether social connections are established and thus integration experiences.

5.3. *Limitations*

Before ending this chapter with recommendations, examining the limitations of this study is necessary as they could influence the quality of the data. First, the participants were young and spoke English or Dutch. This group could experience their integration more positively in comparison with older refugees or refugees who do not speak English or Dutch. The participants in this study were able to communicate with Dutch people and had many opportunities to build a life, such as pursuing an education. This could make their experiences more positive.

Another limitation is that participants had difficulties with understanding the concepts on the big five personality questionnaire. Concepts as 'extraverted' and 'quarrelsome' were not in the vocabulary of the participants which makes it questionable if the questionnaire was valid as it could not have measured what it was supposed to measure. Firm conclusions about the results of the questionnaire can therefore not be drawn, which makes it impossible to give a complete answer to the sub question about the role of personality characteristics in establishing social connections.

5.4. *Recommendations*

This study has shown how important social connections are in the lives of refugees and that social connections help with integration. Dutch policies should therefore increase their focus on the social connections between refugees and Dutch people by encouraging municipalities to organise more activities where Dutch people and refugees interact. This is important because connections between Dutch people and refugees will not happen by itself as there are many barriers when it comes to connecting Dutch people and refugees, such as differences in background. It is therefore important for the government to stimulate activities and bring people together that are open for contact with people from different backgrounds.

This study has used the Ager & Strang framework (2004) to explore the integration experiences of Syrian refugees. The framework has been a useful way to explore integration experiences and to understand integration. The domains in the framework are in general representative for what influences integration, they do not only assess if someone is integrated but success in these domains also positively influences the integration experience. Primarily the Ager & Strang framework did not identify relationships between the domains, which this study did. This addition to the framework seems to contribute to understanding integration experiences, especially the relation between language and building connections is a strong one. It is therefore recommended to explore relationships between integration domains more. Another recommendation is to explore the value of the domain social links within the framework. Social links, the connections with governmental institutions, were not present in the experiences of the participants and this domain did not seem to influence integration and could be less important than other domains. Further research should explore if this domain is incidental, less important or that it could be that the role of governmental institutions is not that relevant anymore. A final recommendation regarding the framework is to add a domain that covers social activities, this study has found that social activities such as dinners and sport help when it comes to meeting people and also positively influences well-being which is important for integration.

Additional recommendations regarding further research are to further explore the role of personality characteristics in relation to integration experiences. This study has shown that the factor is certainly influential, but more research needs to be done to conclude to what extent it affects integration. A possible research approach is to see if and how personality characteristics influence integration strategies. For example, what kind of personality

characteristics are deterrents of an adapting strategy and does this strategy results in more chances of establishing connections with people from the host society. This study has shown that adding a perspective from another discipline gives interesting and useful results and it is therefore recommended to also explore other domains when it comes to integration.

Another research recommendation is to examine the influences of social connections over an extended period of time; perhaps a study could follow refugees for period of 10 years and note if their social connections change over the years. In addition, it could be observed if certain milestones like finding a job or starting an education influence what kind of social connections refugees establish.

A final recommendation is to explore the opinion and experiences of native Dutch people, to understand why or why not they establish connections with refugees. This kind of research could help with realising more connections between Dutch people and refugees, as it gives better understanding about the barriers regarding social connections with refugees.

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Appendices

I. *Interview guide*

Background information + opening question:

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your life here in the Netherlands?
Probe: age/daily activities/time in NL.

Social Connections

2. What does your social life look like?
Probe: Who? Dutch/Syrian/Other?
3. How do you know this people?
Probe: how long/where/
4. Do you have any contact with Dutch institutions?
Probe: How often/why?

Facilitators for contact:

5. Where do you meet new people?
Probe: why there?/who?/
6. Are there things you learned through your friends?
Probe: What?/ Which friends?/How did it go?

Obstacles:

7. Do you have problems making contact with people?
Probe: with who/what kind of problems?/
8. What would you need to make it easier to make contact with people?
9. Do you feel you have an influence on your mentioned factors?
10. Do you experience problems with the Dutch or English language?
Probe: Hinder/barrier/how?/where?/difference Dutch and English
11. Do you feel you need Dutch or English to make contact with Dutch people?
Probe: difference between Dutch and English
12. Do you feel comfortable in the Netherlands and in your neighbourhood?
Probe: safety feelings/influence on life/how does it show

13. Do you experience that making friends/contact here in the Netherlands is the same as in Syria?
Probe: why (not)?

14. Do you want to have contact with Dutch people?
Probe: why (not)?

Feelings

15. - How do you feel about that you have both Syrian and Dutch friends/connections?
- How do you feel about having mostly Syrian friends/connections?
- How do you feel about having Dutch friends/connections?

16. What is social integration for you?
Probe: why?

17. Where would you put yourself on a scale from 0 till 5, where 0 is not integrated at all and 5 is completely integrated.
Probe: why?/

1. What do you need to go from a .. to a ...?
Probe: why?/how?

2. Do you think you are able to get from a .. to a ...?
Probe: Why (not)?

3. Do you feel you are able to influence getting to a higher number on the scale?
Probe: why (not?)

Closing question:

I. What does your future look like?

II. Personality questionnaire

| Disagree strongly | Disagree moderately | Disagree a little | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree a little | Agree moderately | Agree strongly |
|--|------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| <i>I see myself as:</i> | | | | | | |
| 1. _____ Extraverted, enthusiastic. | | | | | | |
| 2. _____ Critical, quarrelsome. | | | | | | |
| 3. _____ Dependable, self-disciplined. | | | | | | |
| 4. _____ Anxious, easily upset. | | | | | | |
| 5. _____ Open to new experiences, complex. | | | | | | |
| 6. _____ Reserved, quiet. | | | | | | |
| 7. _____ Sympathetic, warm. | | | | | | |
| 8. _____ Disorganized, careless. | | | | | | |
| 9. _____ Calm, emotionally stable. | | | | | | |
| 10. _____ Conventional, uncreative. | | | | | | |
| <p>TIPI scale scoring ("R" denotes reverse-scored items): Extraversion: 1, 6R; Agreeableness: 2R, 7; Conscientiousness; 3, 8R; Emotional Stability: 4R, 9; Openness to Experiences: 5, 10R.</p> | | | | | | |

Figure 3. Personality questionnaire
 - Source: (Gosling, Rentfrow & Swann., 2003).

III. Code tree

Integration experience

| | |
|---|--|
| Social connections | Dutch Syrian Other nationality Friends Family Neighbours Classmates Boyfriend/Girlfriend Colleagues Municipality Humanitas Other Dutch insitutions |
| Where or how people have met | School Work In the street/city Neighbourhood Social activities Asylum centre Online Mutual friends Mosque Church |
| Contribution social connections | Feelings of being at home Feelings of being settled Feelings of happiness Feeling safe Feelings of motivation to participate in the Dutch society Support with getting the relevant services needed |
| Problems with establishing social connections | Not feelings safe Problems with the Dutch language Problems with the English language Culture differences No places to meet people Not wanting contact |
| Locus of control | Internal locus of control External locus of control |