

Unpacking immigrant integration: Concepts, mechanisms, and context

Background paper to *World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies*

April 2023

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Abstract

Much opposition to migration centers on worries that migrants are too culturally and socially different from the host population, that they will fail to integrate, or that they will change the demographics and culture of a destination society too dramatically. In both public and academic discourse, there is a tendency to assume that the “problem” of sociocultural integration is one of “cultural distance,” understood as an objective and measurable fact, and hence that the “solution” is to reduce cultural distance. This paper offers an alternative diagnosis and prescription. Whether an immigrant group is perceived as culturally close or culturally distant is not a product of objective differences. Rather, such perceptions arise out of complex boundary-making processes in which certain points of commonality and difference are highlighted while other points of similarity and difference are ignored or denied. These boundary-making processes are historically contingent, institutionally mediated, and politically constructed in ways that open up paths for certain immigrant groups while putting up barriers to others. The paper also argues that insofar as there are cultural differences, they are not always a “problem” for integration; successful integration does not require cultural assimilation or cultural convergence. There are a wide range of models of integration that involve various forms and combinations of cultural maintenance, cultural adaptation, and cultural convergence. The paper concludes by discussing a few strategies for improving migrant integration, including interpersonal interventions aimed at changing the attitudes and beliefs of members of destination societies, recasting national narratives to be more inclusive, and promoting policies or programs to enhance migrant minorities’ ability to exercise political agency and voice.

Keywords: migration, integration, acculturation, boundaries, membership, contact hypothesis, cultural differences, multiculturalism, citizenship

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Introduction

What are the effects of migration on the people migrating and on destination societies? Many economists have underscored the benefits of migration for labor markets, economic productivity, economic growth, and innovation. Michael Clemens (2011, 84) famously equated the negative effect of migration restrictions on global GDP growth as the equivalent of leaving “trillion-dollar bills on the sidewalk.” Other economists are less optimistic about large-scale international migration, contending that the benefits of migration depend on the skills composition of migrants and that the large-scale entry of migrant laborers can hurt some workers in the destination country (Borjas 2014). Yet, overall, the consensus is that migrants tend to complement workers already in the labor market, migrants bring innovation and dynamism to the economy, they produce economic growth through their labor and consumption, and they have a neutral or positive fiscal impact on many destination countries over time (Beerli et al. 2021; Card 2001; Dustmann and Preston 2019; National Academies of Sciences 2017; Peri 2012). For migrants, the benefits of moving across international borders can be life changing. One United Nations analysis estimated that migrants from countries ranked low on the Human Development Index saw, on average “a 15-fold increase in income (to US\$15,000 per annum), a doubling in education enrolment rate (from 47 to 95 percent) and a 16-fold reduction in child mortality (from 112 to 7 deaths per 1,000 live births)” (UNDP 2009, 24).

If migration is, on balance, economically beneficial to migrants and to destination societies—and important for the demographic and labor pool stability of rich countries with low birth rates—why is opposition to migration so politically salient in many places? Here it is important to underscore that, over the last half-century, public opinion about migration has remained stable or has actually become *more* supportive, whether in the United States (Citrin, Levy, and Wright 2023), Canada (Enviroics 2022) or Europe (Kustov, Laaker, and Reller 2021). Furthermore, political discourse about migration has also become more positive on balance (Card et al. 2022). Citizenship laws have become more inclusive (Graeber 2020; Howard and Goodman 2018; Schmid 2021; Vink and de Groot 2010). Conceptions of national identity have become less racially exclusionary (Bloemraad et al. 2019). Immigration laws provide more entry points to more people now than in the twentieth century (Helbling and Kalkum 2018); and, contrary to perceptions of a retreat from multiculturalism, policies to acknowledge and accommodate immigrants’ cultural identities and practices have largely expanded across countries and over time (Banting and Kymlicka 2013). So, the extent to which public opinion is inherently or inevitably closed or hostile to immigration should not be exaggerated.

At the same time, however, debates over immigration have become more polarized in the last quarter century, whether in the context of legislative debates (Card et al. 2022); electoral discourse (Bonikowski, Luo, and Stuhler 2022); the media (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Schmidt-Catran and Czymara 2022); public opinion (Hout and Maggio 2021; Wright and Levy 2020); or contention among civil society groups that range from pro-migrant advocacy organizations to far-right anti-immigrant groups (Heaney 2017). These anti-immigrant groups have also gained electoral support in many wealthy democracies (see, for example, Barone et al. 2016; Hangartner et al. 2019; Otto and Steinhardt 2014).

Analysis of public opinion suggests that this anti-immigrant sentiment is rooted in both economic and cultural factors.¹ On the one hand, ordinary people often express economic fears, such as worries about immigrants taking jobs from locally born citizens or being a burden on the welfare state, and so attitudes toward migration can become harsher in times of higher unemployment, even in countries that are otherwise relatively open to immigration (Banting and Soroka 2020; Palmer 1996). On the other hand, much opposition to migration centers on worries that migrants are too culturally and socially different from the host population, that they will fail to integrate, or that they will change the demographics and culture of a destination society too dramatically (Citrin, Levy, and Wright 2023; Citrin and Sides 2008; Esses, Hodson, and Dovidio 2003; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004; Stephan et

al. 2005). An extreme version of these cultural anxieties is the “great replacement” conspiracy theory, postulating a deliberate attempt to make Whites extinct and replace them with non-Western immigrants (Obaidi et al. 2022).

Of course, economic and cultural anxieties about immigrants are often tied together in people’s minds, and they can be mutually reinforcing. However, it is equally clear that evidence of economic benefits is far from sufficient to generate public support for migration: the cultural and social dimensions must also be addressed (Esses 2021).²

To the extent that political fears stem from noneconomic factors—that is, concerns over social, demographic, and cultural change—we need to understand the sources of these anxieties in order to identify potential remedies. This paper makes a plea to take the sociocultural dimensions of migration seriously. Migration policies that ignore people’s attachments to their society, culture, and politics will be ineffective, or even counterproductive.

However, the paper also argues that we must reframe how these cultural dimensions are debated and discussed. In both public and academic discourse, there is a tendency to assume that the “problem” of sociocultural integration is one of “cultural distance,” understood as an objective and measurable fact, and hence that the “solution” is to reduce cultural distance. More specifically, this view is accompanied by three widely shared assumptions:

1. Cultural differences are an objective fact, as if how culturally close or culturally distant a particular immigrant is from the host society could be easily measured.
2. Cultural distance is a “problem” for successful integration.
3. Therefore, successful integration requires reducing immigrants’ cultural distance, either by excluding those who are culturally distant from arriving or staying in the first place, or through assimilationist or other models of interpersonal “cultural convergence.”

This paper contends that all of these assumptions are misleading. Whether an immigrant group is perceived as culturally close or culturally distant is not a product of objective differences. Rather, such perceptions arise out of complex boundary-making processes in which certain points of commonality and difference are highlighted while other points of similarity and difference are ignored or denied. These boundary-making processes are historically contingent, institutionally mediated, and politically constructed in ways that open up paths for certain immigrant groups while putting up barriers to others. The paper also argues that insofar as there are cultural differences, they are not always a “problem” for integration; successful integration does not require cultural assimilation or cultural convergence. There are a wide range of models of integration that involve various forms and combinations of cultural maintenance, cultural adaptation, and cultural convergence.

An important upshot of these insights is that it opens up a wider menu of options for thinking about integration. It also shifts how to think about the agency of different actors in processes of social inclusion and, especially, the remedies that can be employed to deal with fears about the sociocultural inclusion of migrants. Inclusion and integration encompass the actions, behaviors, and attitudes of migrants, but also, critically, they implicate the policy choices, actions, behaviors, and attitudes of people in the destination society and the institutions of the destination country.

In short, the way forward on tackling challenges of migration and social inclusion is not to focus just on economic growth, wages, and jobs. Understanding what promotes positive integration and inclusion goes beyond economics. Migrants are not just workers, but also fellow human beings with rich social and cultural lives, and members of families who are embedded in communities. Similarly, worry over migration among

nonmigrants is rooted not just in a rational calculation of migrants' economic utility but also, substantially, in noneconomic fears.

It is thus important to pay attention to the boundary-making work of people and institutions in the destination society, and how this “boundary work” affects the opportunities and barriers that different immigrant groups face. It is also important to mitigate negative “us” versus “them” distinctions and celebrate the positive aspects of people's distinctive, multiple sociocultural identities, which can be a source of pride and solidarity with others. Positive outcomes can be promoted through interpersonal and intergroup interventions that form the basis of daily or regular social interactions. But such interventions must also involve institutional and more systemic changes—changes that may entail claims-making by migrants and their allies to alter the nature of membership attributions in a society, to change policies and institutions, and to build more inclusive notions of membership in the society and country.³

This paper is organized into four sections. The second section discusses why standard talk of “cultural distance” as an objective “problem” for integration is analytically misleading, given that the notion of cultural distance is historically variable and politically constructed. The third section assesses prevalent concepts and measures of integration, noting their benefits and weaknesses. The fourth section offers an alternative framework that rethinks difference and inclusion. Finally, the fifth section explores some of the specific policies and projects that this alternative framework would suggest for addressing the sociocultural dimensions of immigrant integration.

Misdiagnosis: Cultural distance is not a self-evident problem

There is strong evidence that sociocultural anxieties underpin popular opposition to immigration, even when this migration would be economically beneficial (Citrin, Levy, and Wright 2023; Citrin and Sides 2008; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004). But it is equally clear that not all immigrants trigger these cultural anxieties to the same extent. For instance, citizens in Western Europe feel more comfortable with immigrants from other European Union (EU) countries than from non-European countries; more comfortable with Christian immigrants than Muslim immigrants (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2016); more comfortable with White immigrants than Black immigrants; and so on (Esses 2021). How can these differential anxieties be explained?

Erroneous remedies when cultural distance is viewed as objective reality

When citizens themselves explain these attitudes, they typically appeal to some idea of “cultural distance.” Problematically, some academics and many policy makers have also taken on this language, with little reflection. Certain groups are seen as simply more “distant” culturally from the destination society, and this cultural distance is understood to be an obstacle to successful social integration: culturally distant groups are seen as unlikely to “fit in” socially, even if they are economically self-sufficient (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004). Given this definition of the “problem,” four sorts of remedies are regularly articulated:

- *Cultural assimilation.* To reduce cultural distance, governments, institutions (such as schools), and ordinary members of destination societies expect migrants to shed their prior cultural identities and practices and to adopt the destination society's culture so that migrants become like the destination population.
- *Cultural convergence through interpersonal engagement.* Alternatively, perceived cultural distance can be reduced through interaction and inter-group contact, by both migrants and those in the destination society, in order to build greater interpersonal tolerance and understanding and, over time, to produce two-way integration through cultural convergence.

- *Cultural separation.* When perceptions of cultural distance are seen as being unbridgeable, destination societies—sometimes in partnership with migrant-sending states—set up parallel institutions, separately, for migrants and long-standing members of society, such as separate schools, distinct residential enclaves, and so forth, perpetuating cultural separation. There is no effort to reduce perceived cultural distance.
- *Physical exclusion/expulsion.* Insofar as groups are seen as unable or unwilling to assimilate, and insofar as segregated parallel institutions are seen as undesirable, a final option is simply to prevent culturally distant migrants from entering the country in the first place, or from settling permanently. Only those who are seen as culturally close are eligible to enter or to stay for the long term.

This analytical framework, centered on cultural distance and its associated remedies, is flawed in multiple ways.

“Cultural distance” is historically variable and politically constructed

One of the most basic flaws in this approach is that it takes assertions of “cultural distance” as an objective fact. In reality, whether a migrant group is seen as culturally distant or culturally similar (or whether these differences are seen as a “problem”) is historically variable and politically constructed.

It is important to recognize that there are, in principle, many different criteria on which an immigrant group can be seen as similar or different from the destination society and, depending on which criterion is chosen, the same group can be seen as either very close or very distant.⁴ Consider a range of immigrant groups to the United States. If a group shares a common religion but speaks a different language—say, Protestant immigrants who speak German—are they culturally close or culturally distant? If a group shares neither a common religion nor a common language but are from “the West”—say, Orthodox immigrants from Greece—are they culturally close or culturally distant? If a group is racially distinct from the majority population—say, Black Jamaicans—yet they are English-speaking and Protestant, are they culturally close or culturally distant? It is plausible—indeed, likely—that an immigrant group seen as racially Black may be perceived as more problematic for some Americans than one viewed as White, even if the latter speak a different language and practice a different religion (that is, is more culturally distinct), with divergent reactions becoming even more salient in the second, US-born generation (see, for example, Waters 1999).

Destination societies can and do change which criteria are used to determine cultural distance, and hence they change which groups are seen as close or distant. Consider the changing fate of Catholic immigrants to Britain or to its New World settler-colonial societies (the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand). All of these countries were founded on ideas of Protestant ascendancy, and on claims about the intrinsic link between Protestantism and a commitment to individual freedom. Catholic immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Poland were therefore seen as culturally distant and a cultural threat, and they were often subject to assimilationist, segregationist, or exclusionary policies. Today, the Protestant-Catholic cleavage remains highly salient in Northern Ireland, but elsewhere, Catholic immigrants of Irish, Polish, and Italian origins and their descendants are no longer perceived as a culturally distant “them,” but rather part of the mainstream “us” in the Anglophone settler-colonial countries (Waters 1990).

How did this take place? In the US context, the answer, in part, is that these Catholic groups were all White, and with the Great Migration of Black Americans from the South to the North starting in 1910 and the African-American civil rights movement following the Second World War, White Protestants and White Catholics came together to defend White privilege, for instance, banding together to fight racial desegregation of schools. In Noel Ignatiev’s famous phrase, this is “how the Irish became white” (Ignatiev 1995). What is striking about this case, for purposes of this discussion, is that this emergence of a unified White identity involved a radical redefinition of the criteria of “cultural distance.” Not only did Protestants

need to ignore or set aside religious differences with Catholics—differences that had once seemed insuperable—but they did so in order to block the integration of Black people *who shared their religion*. Empirically, White European immigrants living in northern US cities that received more Black migrants between 1915 and 1930 experienced higher integration along a range of metrics, such as higher naturalization rates and more intermarriage across ethnic lines with US-born spouses, than places with less Black migration (Fouka, Mazmunder, and Tabellini 2022).

One might have thought that having emphasized the foundational importance of Protestantism and the threat of Catholicism—even to the point of creating political parties in the nineteenth century to curtail Catholic migration—White Protestants would have welcomed the arrival of Black Protestants from the American South. In reality, White Protestants entered into coalitions with Catholics precisely to suppress Black Protestants because they felt more comfortable living and working with Whites than with Blacks, irrespective of religion.

This example not only shows the malleability of ideas of “cultural distance,” but also the ways in which this discourse can be used to mask racial antipathy. In the past, many White Americans would have simply declared that Blacks were biologically inferior, and that this is why they opposed racial integration. But as biological racism was discredited after the Second World War, many Whites have adopted instead the language of “cultural distance.” As a recent article by Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan, and Lahav (2015, 1764–65) puts it:

...religion and culture have become the primary focuses of the boundary-work literature, given the fear of being labelled a racist.... Studies suggest that interviewees in surveys often shift the discussion from “old racism,” entailing biological racial differences, to culture and religion, focusing on the incompatibility of lifestyles and traditions, since “culture served as a more socially acceptable rendering of racial difference than biology could alone” (Morning 2009, 1176)—a phenomenon that has been called “racism without races” (Balibar 1991).

Claims about cultural distance, therefore, need to be carefully interrogated and not taken at face value. Claims about cultural distance do not simply flow from objective criteria; indeed, what is “objectively” distant is socially constructed and thus which “cultural” markers are selected for scrutiny can change over place, time, and by group, as can the meaning and valence of these markers.

Recognizing the socially constructed nature of “cultural distance” is important for at least three reasons. First, acknowledging the subjectivity of evaluations of difference highlights how the distinctions drawn between migrants and destination societies are not immutable or inherently problematic. Second, it draws attention to the fact that the identification of “cultural distance” as a problem is often a political project; it does not arise organically from “objective” cultural distance. People and groups (such as politicians running for office, leaders of institutions, political parties, or citizens’ groups) can heighten or mitigate the political and psychological salience of boundaries even as the characteristics of migrant groups do not change. Third, there are significant power differentials in how notions of cultural distance are defined. These differentials in the power to define cultural distance often put migrants in vulnerable positions. Critically, changing the meaning and valence of salient cultural markers therefore often requires deliberate political action, whether changing the policies and procedures of institutions and government, or empowering the claims-making of migrant communities.

Unpacking prevalent concepts and measures of immigrant integration

The idea that cultural distance is an objective fact and objective problem is not only analytically misguided, but also distorts our understanding of what "integration" involves. If one assumes that cultural distance is an objective problem, then it seems that successful integration requires the elimination of immigrants' cultural distance—that is, assimilation. Indeed, a version of assimilation—either mainstream conformity or melting pot homogeneity—has perhaps been the dominant perspective on immigrant integration in the last 150 years. This section explores the limits of assimilation as an approach to integration, and how it has been replaced with more complex and multidimensional models of integration, which are often more accommodating of cultural differences.

Older approaches to social inclusion: Assimilation

A long-standing response to fears about immigrants' cultural distance on the part of destination societies is to promote assimilation. Assimilationist frameworks have a long genealogy. In the United States, for example, the term assimilation was often used interchangeably with "Americanization." This frequently meant outright "Anglo-conformity," such that immigrants, but not members of destination societies, were expected to shed their culture, language, and beliefs to become indistinguishable from nonmigrants (Gordon 1964). Today, "Americanization," "Anglo-conformity," or analogous terms in other countries are used much more rarely.

Nevertheless, this sort of one-way change, in which the host society is the metric against which immigrants' assimilatory actions are judged, remains a common evaluatory standard, one that could be called the "gap" approach to evaluating immigrant inclusion. This approach highlights the difference between immigrants (or their descendants) and a mainstream or majority group reference point. The presumption is that differences (or gaps)—in income, political opinion, choice of marriage partners, language ability, and so forth—are problematic.

But this underlying assumption—namely, that eliminating differences is necessary or even desirable for "successful" integration—can be highly problematic, both substantively and normatively. It is not self-evident who should be seen as the appropriate reference group when it comes to identifying an assimilatory benchmark.⁵ Further, immigrants' differences may be a positive resource for themselves and for society (such as speaking a minority language, or practicing healthy living habits).⁶ And, at its extreme, asking or expecting immigrants to curtail or renounce their cultural or religious practices is illiberal, and hence in violation of the fundamental values of liberal democratic destination societies. This is not to say that convergence on certain values or behaviors is not desirable; learning the majority language is certainly beneficial for migrants and the destination society, for example. However, it is important to step back and be more explicit about which kinds of convergence are necessary or desirable, in which contexts. And that in turn requires a more complex and multidimensional conception of integration.

Early scholarship on assimilation also outlined a second type of assimilation: a process of cultural convergence and homogenization. Immigrants and members of the destination society would amalgamate existing and new practices, cultures, and social norms, producing an "American melting pot" (Gordon 1964) in the United States or a "Luso-tropical" culture and racial democracy in Brazil (Freyre 1956). Assessing integration, in this view, is still about measuring whether gaps (in language, income, residence, and so on) are diminishing between long-standing and newcomer populations, but there is no strong expectation that all of the change must be done by immigrants and their descendants.

Some modern variants of this approach—called a “new” assimilation framework by some (Alba and Nee 2003; Brubaker 2001) —prioritize socioeconomic over sociocultural integration, because the former is seen as desirable by both newcomers and long-standing residents, whereas the latter is up for debate. In this version of assimilation, the children and grandchildren of immigrants assimilate into a diversifying sociocultural “mainstream,” possibly retaining some cultural distinctions (such as religion) that carry little consequence for daily life (Alba and Nee 2003). Insofar as this version of “new assimilation” avoids the assumption that all of the burden of cultural change falls on immigrants, it is a step forward. However, it still maintains the implicit or explicit assumption that successful integration primarily requires the reduction of difference.

Social inclusion and integration as process: Intergenerational change

An alternative way to view social inclusion is to see integration as a process over time. This approach displaces the idea of cultural distance somewhat by putting aside the destination population as a comparative metric. Instead, a process approach identifies some goal or endpoint that immigrants are expected to attain over time. For example, refugee resettlement agencies in the United States need to get their clients to economic “self-sufficiency” within a specified timeline to meet federal mandates.

A major challenge with this integration framework is specifying the endpoint and the time scale. Is it appropriate to expect dramatic signs of integration in a migrant’s first year in a new country? This seems an excessively short time horizon for people who need to re-establish their lives. Yet, increasingly, countries appear to expect immediate integration. In the United States, for example, government settlement support for Southeast Asian and other refugee populations in the 1980s lasted 36 months; today, refugees from Sudan, Afghanistan and many other countries are expected to be self-sufficient in only 3 to 12 months.⁷ Immigration policies that give immigrants “points” toward entry for language competency in the language of the destination society, or which require language classes before people can migrate to reunite with family members are, in essence, requiring evidence of integration before people even cross the border. No such requirements existed for the millions of Europeans who moved to the Americas from the 1880s to the 1930s.

Sociological studies of immigrant integration have traditionally evaluated integration over multiple generations, with a particular focus on the “second” generation: that is, the locally born children of foreign-born immigrants. The presumption is that the “first” generation, who came as adults, will always retain markers of their homeland, be it in their accent, the educational opportunities they had, their social relationships, and so forth. In comparison, the “1.5 generation”—those who migrated as children but were largely raised in the new country—should show more markers of integration. By this same logic, the second or third generation— that is, the children and grandchildren of migrants—should be least distinguishable from peers without immigrant ancestors because they are fully immersed in the institutions and social relations of the society from birth onward. Many contemporary judgments about an integration “problem” are arguably premature, requiring longitudinal data to evaluate intergenerational trajectories.

Insofar as process-based conceptions of integration acknowledge that integration occurs over time, and indeed across generations, they are an advance over simplistic models of assimilation. However, in their own way, they still define successful integration as the (long-term, intergenerational) reduction of difference because gaps with the destination society are expected to narrow across generations. As an empirical matter, in the United States, there is strong evidence of intergenerational convergence, especially from the first to second generation, whether in terms of measures of language use and intermarriage or income and place of residence (National Academies of Science 2017). However, some US researchers worry that integration patterns reveal evidence of racialized integration (Jones 2019; Sáenz and Douglas 2015; Sorrel et al. 2019).

What is still missing from process approaches is an account of why the maintenance of immigrants' cultural identities is compatible with integration, and why immigrants' attachment to their ethnic identities and communities can be compatible with attachment to the destination society. To help unpack this, the discussion first turns to the literature in social psychology on "acculturation."

Bidimensional models of acculturation: The individual and group level

Psychologists studying immigrants' social inclusion often talk about acculturation: that is, the process of individual-level and group change that takes place as a result of contact between cultural groups and their members (Berry 2022). Such adaptations can occur in a variety of domains, affecting people's attitudes, values, and behaviors.

Early assimilation models expected a common, unidirectional acculturation trajectory: over time immigrants and their children would, by and large, adopt (that is, assimilate to) the norms of the destination society and abandon those of their country of origin. Because the measurement of acculturation was thus presumed to only require a unidimensional scale, classic approaches often limited early acculturation research to a focus on assimilation (fully adopting the culture of the destination society) or separation (fully retaining one's heritage culture). In many cases, these older unidimensional models also presumed that assimilatory acculturation was positive for individuals' sociocultural inclusion.

In contrast, today it is much more common to view acculturation as a bidimensional process. Bidimensional models propose that immigrants' retention of their heritage culture and their adoption of a new culture are orthogonal. That is, immigrants' participation in the new culture is not assumed to necessitate the loss of their heritage culture. Such a bidimensional model of acculturation can also incorporate the idea of some degree of cultural change for both immigrants and destination societies, with integration as a two-way street built on interactions between immigrants and members of a destination society (see, for example, Celeste et al. 2014; European Commission 2004).

The acculturation framework advanced by John Berry (1980, 2022) is one of the most well-known bidimensional models. According to this framework, the intersection between the desire to retain one's heritage culture and identity, on the one hand, and the desire for contact with members of the destination community and participation in the larger society, on the other, result in four distinct acculturation attitudes. In line with traditional approaches, *assimilation* involves a low desire to retain heritage culture and a high desire to have contact with members of the destination community, while *separation* involves a high desire to retain heritage culture and low desire to have contact with members of the destination community. In addition, however, *integration* reflects a high desire to both retain heritage culture and to have contact with members of the destination community, while *marginalization* reflects a low desire to either retain a heritage culture or to have contact with members of the destination community. Overall, research indicates that the most positive psychological adaptation and outcomes are associated with bidimensional integration and the most negative are associated with marginalization; assimilation and separation fall in between (Schmitz and Schmitz 2022).

Several critiques and extensions of Berry's acculturation framework have been proposed. Some researchers have suggested that acculturation attitudes are likely to differ across public domains (such as work) and private domains (such as family) (see, for example, Arends-Tóth and van de Vijver 2007; Van de Vijver, Berry, and Celenk 2016). Other researchers consider acculturation a multifaceted construct that may occur differently in different domains such as language and communication, politics, work, daily living habits, family relations, social life, religion, and ways of thinking (Miller et al. 2013; Navas et al. 2005). In addition, there have been a number of methodological and measurement critiques of the Berry framework. Nonetheless, most current models of immigrants' acculturation confirm its bidimensional nature (Huynh, Howell, and Benet-Martinez 2009; Ryder, Alden, and Paulhus 2000).

Importantly, immigrants are not making choices or experiencing acculturation in a vacuum. Immigrants' perceptions of destination countries' expectations for their acculturation may be associated with immigrants' own acculturation attitudes (Ben-Shalom and Horenczyk 2003). Indeed, Yijälä and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2010) found that even before they migrate, potential migrants' acculturation attitudes were associated with their perceptions of the destination society's acculturation preferences. Orienting one's acculturation attitudes to the expectations of the destination society may be an adaptive strategy—one that (at least in the short term) may help to foster intergroup harmony. Research has shown that, to the extent that the attitudes about acculturation of both migrants and members of the destination community are concordant, intergroup conflict is less likely (Matera, Stefanile, and Brown 2015; Navas-Luque, Rojas Tejada, and Gracia Fernandez 2011). The Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM) (Bourhis et al. 2010) and the Concordance Model of Acculturation (CMA) (Piontkowski, Rohmann, and Florack 2002) both take into account the interactive nature of relations between immigrants and members of a destination community. They frame the discussion of acculturation in terms of the match between the acculturation orientations of migrants and the acculturation orientations preferred by members of the destination society (within the context of state integration policies). Concordance occurs when these acculturation orientations coincide, and results in positive relations between migrants and members of the destination community. Discordance occurs when these acculturation orientations match very little or not at all, leading to either problematic or conflictual relations.

The destination society's perception of immigrants' "value" further influences the destination society's preferences for the acculturation of these newcomers. Highly "valued" immigrants tend to be those with greater similarity in attitudes, values, and ethnicity to members of the destination community. Research has shown that the more "valued" the immigrant group is, the more likely it is for the destination community to support bidimensional integration. In contrast, destination community members expect greater segregation or assimilation from devalued groups (Montreuil and Bourhis 2004; Safdar et al. 2008). Moreover, preference for the assimilation of devalued groups may increase when making judgments about second (compared to first) generation immigrants (Kunst and Sam 2013). The context of reception thus plays an important role in social inclusion.

Destination societies: Civic integration and multicultural policies

The social psychology literature on acculturation suggests that the best outcomes for immigrants are associated not with assimilation but with bidimensional integration: that is, combining a strong attachment to one's ethnocultural or heritage identity with a strong attachment to the destination society. However, this literature also suggests that bidimensional integration works best when there is some degree of "concordance" between the expectations of immigrants and members of the destination society: that is, members of the destination society need to signal to immigrants that they do not expect or require immigrants to shed their heritage in order to become committed members of the destination society. This raises the question: How do destination societies signal their expectations about acculturation to immigrants?

A crucial factor here is government policies, particularly policies regarding settlement, residency, naturalization, and cultural and religious accommodations. Such policies can be passed by any level of government, from the municipal or regional to the national or federal, although national policy has received the most attention by researchers. As noted earlier, in the period after the Second World War, there was a general trend toward policies that are more welcoming of immigrants and migrant diversity in citizenship laws (Graeber 2020; Schmid 2021; Howard and Goodman 2018; Vink and de Groot 2010); immigration laws (Helbling and Kalkum 2018); and multicultural policies (Banting and Kymlicka 2013). At the same time, this liberalizing trend appears to have stalled over the last decade, and it has been somewhat counterbalanced by new "civic integration" policies that are widely seen as more assimilationist in intent.

Such “civic integration” policies include the rise of language and civic knowledge tests for citizenship; mandatory integration classes for recently arrived migrants that teach language and/or societal norms (from how people celebrate birthdays to properly dividing one’s trash); and, in a few cases, mandatory training or exams even before immigrants arrive in their destination country (Goodman 2014, 2022).

The coexistence of multicultural and civic integration policies in many countries complicates the signals sent to immigrants about the destination society’s expectations of acculturation. Multicultural policies can be seen as complementary to bidimensional integration in the Berry acculturation framework, valuing the recognition and accommodation of diverse cultural norms, practices, and identities. Social inclusion, for immigrants and members of the destination society, is presumed to work better when people are enabled in leading bicultural or multicultural lives. This may be done through a formal government affirmation of multiculturalism; the development of multicultural school curriculum; multiethnic inclusion in public media and licensing; religious and cultural exemptions in public laws; the funding of heritage cultural organizations; and similar initiatives.

Civic integration policies are more ambiguous in their goals. Some can be read as attempting to help immigrants adapt to the new country (such as providing publicly financed language classes), whereas others may be interpreted as promoting traditional, unidirectional assimilation goals (such as banning public officials from wearing religious dress). There is some evidence that over the last decade, civic integration policies have taken on a more assimilatory purpose, at least in Europe. Whereas in 2000, there was no statistically significant relationship between a sample of high-income democracies’ embrace of multicultural and civic integration policies, by 2010 there was a strong, negative correlation: countries shifting to more demanding civic integration policies had less expansive or more limited multicultural policies (Bloemraad and Wright 2014).

On balance, immigrants living in countries with more extensive multicultural policies express both strong ethnic identities and strong identification with their new nations, in line with integrative acculturation, and this is associated with a range of positive social psychological benefits (Berry 2005; Bloemraad and Wright 2014; Nguyen and Benet-Martinez 2013). Considering the acquisition of citizenship in a destination country’s citizenship—one measure of national attachment—there is evidence that immigrant naturalization is higher in countries with more robust multicultural policies (Wright and Bloemraad 2012). Some argue for a causal relationship, such that multicultural policies contribute to citizenship by providing material and symbolic resources that foster immigrants’ political incorporation (Bloemraad 2006a)—although it is possible that other factors can drive both policy and civic-political inclusion.

Conversely, the evidence on the effects of explicitly assimilatory policies is mixed. Presumably, due to coercion or incentive structures, assimilatory initiatives should encourage immigrant assimilation. But this does not always seem to be the case. Historically, residents of German origin who lived in US states that officially barred German language from public schools following World War I were less likely to volunteer to serve in World War II, more likely to marry within their ethnic group, and more likely to choose German names for their offspring (Fouka 2020). Similarly, immigrants living in US states with more citizenship restrictions on licensing and professions in the early twentieth century had, counterintuitively, lower naturalization levels than states with less restrictive provisions opening opportunities to noncitizens (Bloemraad 2006b). More recently, an assessment of the 2004 headscarf ban in France found that instead of encouraging assimilation into a secular mainstream, the law strengthened religious identities and reduced the educational attainment of Muslim girls, with long-term effects on their labor market trajectory (Abdelgadir and Fouka 2020).

Indeed, when thinking about successful integration, three broad domains have been delineated—economic, sociocultural, and civic-political (Ravanera, Esses, and Fernando 2013)—and these domains can be mutually reinforcing. Evaluating social inclusion is thus complicated, conceptually and empirically.

Sociocultural integration may facilitate successful economic integration, and economic integration may provide opportunities for sociocultural integration. They may also lead to vicious rather than virtuous integration dynamics. For example, if the law provides no work authorization to asylum-seekers when an applicant is eager and ready to work, then they will appear as dependent on social benefits, which in turn might lead to negative views of asylum-seekers among the general population. Asylum-seekers may then be discriminated against in the housing market, creating residential segregation and channeling migrants' children to certain neighborhoods and schools. Such a dynamic of increasing separation (rather than integration) might be, erroneously, linked to a group's "culture" when in reality the process was set off by a lack of legal inclusion.

Rethinking difference and inclusion

So far, this paper has argued that "cultural distance" should not be seen as an objective fact or problem, and that "assimilation" is not required for successful integration. On the contrary, a sizeable literature suggests that immigrants do best when they are able to combine a commitment to their heritage with a commitment to the destination society, especially when the destination society signals that this sort of bidirectional integration is acceptable.

But this optimistic story naturally raises the question: If cultural distance is not an objective fact or problem, and if nonassimilationist models of integration are possible, why is there so much anti-immigrant sentiment? Why is there so much anxiety around the sociocultural dimensions of migration? This paper proposes an alternative conceptual framework to understand these dynamics, one focused on (1) "boundary-making", and (2) notions of gradient membership. This allows a movement away from problematic assumptions about objective cultural distance, helps develop better empirical strategies to identify and measure perceptions of difference, and opens up space for a wider menu of responses to the challenges of migrant inclusion.

Outsiders, insiders, and boundary-making projects

Boundary-drawing is a metaphor for analyzing membership categorization. Anthropologist Frederik Barth (1969) argued that ethnic groups are not defined or determined by objective traits, but rather by subjective boundaries that people draw to distinguish "us" from "them." At about the same time, minimal group experiments by social psychologist Henri Tajfel and colleagues showed that random assignment to groups based on even innocuous characteristics produces in-group favoritism and out-group prejudice (Tajfel et al. 1971). Group memberships are thus social constructions *and* meaningful for people's behavior and cognition. When boundary-making processes persist over time and involve hierarchies and power differentials, group membership becomes highly consequential (Wimmer 2013). Symbolic boundaries, created by cultural schema, can reinforce social (material) boundaries, normalizing who is within or outside a group through legitimation or stigmatization (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015).

Leveraging these ideas, migration scholars have sought to identify characteristics determining immigrants' categorization as "outsiders" or "insiders." Zolberg and Woon (1999) point to boundaries of language and religion in the United States and Europe, to which Alba (2005) adds citizenship and race. Immigrants may be "in," for example, when they speak the majority language, but "out" if they do not hold citizenship where they live. Other researchers examine cultural boundaries, evaluating immigrants' acculturation into mainstream society, their retention of immigrant cultures, and the possible advantages of cultural bricolage (see, for example, Kasinitz et al. 2008). In countries like the United States, Americanness has been long associated with the Protestant work ethic, property ownership, and the ability to control one's labor; thus, a few studies highlight material consumption or economic markers as part of being American (Bloemraad 2013; Park 2005; Warikoo and Bloemraad 2018). Even in contexts in which migrants largely share the

same racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds as the majority destination society, political elites can emphasize differences in order to exclude, such as the case of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia being labeled as a growing “leftist threat” (Holland, Peters, and Zhou 2023). In short, prior research identifies diverse boundaries that immigrants and their children face—boundaries that can be drawn by language, religion, citizenship, race, culture, economic condition, political ideology, or other markers of difference.

Boundary-drawing metaphors direct useful attention to categorization processes. Integration, in this view, involves blurring those boundaries, erasing them, or moving them so that those of immigrant-origin are considered part of the “in-group” (Zolberg and Woon 1999). Boundary permeability can determine the extent to which immigrants will engage in collective action to improve their outcomes in a destination society (Tajfel and Turner 1979). When boundaries are seen as permeable, immigrants appear more likely to utilize individual mobility strategies. Conversely, when boundaries are seen as relatively impermeable, collective action strategies are more likely, which may be more effective in producing long-term change (Mähönen and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2015; Ramos et al. 2016).

In focusing on boundaries, however, this conceptualization can naturalize a dichotomizing, either-or logic: one is either “in” or “out” of the group. Researchers’ analytical focus may consequently consider a boundary such as language, race, religion, citizenship, and so forth as if it were a line to be crossed, rather than an ambiguous social terrain. Another aspect of this categorization is problematic. There is an implicit notion of equality within the boundary: once you cross the line (such as speak English), you belong as a full member.

Gradient membership

An alternative that builds on the boundary-making metaphor considers membership as multiple, gradient, and relational. That is, rather than simple “in/out” dichotomies, people’s membership can be closer to or further from ideal-typical characteristics, multiple characteristics combine to constitute membership, and evaluations of membership are often in relation to other people or groups (Bloemraad 2018, 2022). The importance of multiplicity is evident in the numerous types of boundaries that researchers identify in the study of immigrants’ sociocultural inclusion. These include ascriptive markers that are not easily changed (signaled by race, ancestry, religious background, and so on), value or attitudinal indicators (such as a person’s views about rule of law, democracy, and politically salient social issues), and behavioral markers (such as speaking a language, having paid employment, and so on). Researchers can then examine when, for whom, and in what contexts possible markers of difference stack up to reinforce one another. This may depend on how boundary markers vary in their formalization (such as citizenship law), their simplicity or complexity in application (such as judging language fluency), and the consensus (or lack thereof) over their meaning (such as embracing “American” or “French” culture).

Depending on formalization, complexity, and consensus, some membership markers are more malleable and open to change or reinterpretation. This provides spaces for inclusion. For example, vignette-based survey experiments show that when residents in California or Canada evaluate whether to provide government help to a woman who does not have enough to eat or who is facing serious medical complications from diabetes, respondents prefer to help someone identified as a citizen over an undocumented immigrant, even when the two people are otherwise described exactly the same and face the same hardships (Bloemraad, Harell, and Fraser 2022; Voss, Silva, and Bloemraad 2020). Legalization programs with a path to citizenship would be one way to reduce social boundaries between “us” and “them.”

It is also important to recognize, in considering migrants’ sociocultural inclusion, that instead of being a full insider or total outsider to a group (including a destination society), people regularly express notions of gradient or positional membership: they can be closer or further from a prototypical (or stereotypical) way of embodying or enacting characteristics associated with full membership. Someone might be nominally a

part of the in-group but also at its margins (such as a racialized citizen) (Beaman 2017; Fox 2012). Alternatively, someone can be an outsider on some but not all membership markers, which produces a degree of conditional inclusion (such as an undocumented migrant who is employed and speaks the majority language) (Bloemraad 2022; Patler 2018). Further, evaluations of inclusion often go beyond “us” and “them” (that is, immigrants versus the destination society) to involve relational judgements across multiple immigrant groups, different communities within the destination society, and even different destination societies around the world (Kim 1999; Maxwell 2012; Shams 2020; Winter 2011).

What does this mean practically? A boundaries approach is relational, considering the nonmigrant population. Attention to boundaries puts the focus on interethnic or intergroup relations rather than simply focusing on the measurement of a gap (such as “cultural distance”). The relational approach can include psychological assessments of solidarity or common membership, as well as measures of out-group discrimination or prejudice (Esses 2021). For example, to what extent does a migrant identify as “French,” and to what extent does a French-born neighbor see that migrant—perhaps someone of a different race, ethnicity, and religion—also as “French”? Compared to the other approaches, attention to boundaries and gradient membership requires more explicit assessment of individuals in the majority group and how they change in the face of migration. In some senses, this approach involves a form of convergence in that integration occurs when the immigrant “out-group” ceases to be “out” and becomes a part of “us.” But if boundaries and memberships are reimagined, for example, to embrace Berry’s conception of bidimensional integration or multicultural national identities, this approach carries the potential for a transformative reimagining of membership and who “we” are.

Strategies and remedies: The way forward

To summarize, not only do cultural assimilation policies and programs unduly put the onus on immigrants to minimize “cultural distance” with members of a destination society, but “cultural distance” itself is a construction with constantly shifting goalposts that fundamentally implicates destination populations. Understanding that sizable numbers of people in destination societies will continue to support antimigrant policies and leadership, no matter how much migrant groups strive to integrate, what are the potential remedies to address antimigrant prejudice?

The discussion considers two broad categories of strategies and remedies. The first focuses on the individual level, aiming at changing the attitudes and beliefs of individual members of the destination society; in particular, these interventions aim to reduce individual prejudice. The second set is more collective and institutional, focused on changing the politics of boundary-drawing. The first is well-known and well-studied, and has an important role to play. However, as this paper has emphasized, the politics of boundary-drawing should be at the heart of integration debates, and so the paper concludes with some suggestions about this second route.

Individual-level interventions

Several large and interdisciplinary sets of studies have examined whether interventions aimed at changing the attitudes and beliefs of members of destination societies can effectively bridge perceived sociocultural distance. The first set of studies aims at educating members of the destination society and correcting their misperceptions, whether about the number or proportion of migrants, the views and behaviors of migrants, or other misinformation. Choi, Poertner, and Sambanis (2022) show through a series of embedded field experiments in Germany that destination society members become less discriminatory toward Muslim immigrants when they realize that those immigrants share their own social and civic norms—in this case, that an immigrant was opposed to public littering. Thus, their work suggests that messaging could be designed to teach destination society members that, contrary to what they might believe, immigrants share

many of their own values and norms, thereby shrinking perceived distance. However, informational messages must be used with caution: they can be effective under some conditions (Abascal, Huang, and Tran 2021; Grigorieff, Roth, and Ubfal 2020), but can also lead to backlash and entrenchment of preexisting attitudes and beliefs (Nyhan and Reifler 2010).

The second set of interventions researchers have studied are considered “light-touch” and are aimed at promoting empathy and perspective-taking. These include brief exercises that ask individuals to imagine themselves in an immigrant’s shoes (Adida, Lo, and Platas 2018), to think about their own family immigrant histories (Williamson et al. 2021), to listen to recordings of immigrants telling their stories (Audette, Horowitz, and Michelitch 2020), or to have a ten-minute personal conversation with an immigrant (Kalla and Broockman 2020). While the personal conversations have been shown to have lasting positive effects, it is unclear how durable the effects of most light-touch interventions are.

A third set of interventions focuses on intergroup contact. Articulated by Allport (1954), contact theory predicts that positive social contact can reduce an individual’s stereotypes and misperceptions toward an out-group if the type of contact meets four optimal conditions: equal status among groups, inter-group cooperation, working toward common goals, and an institutionally supportive context.⁸ Through this type of social contact, destination community members would learn more about immigrants, build trust and friendships, and change their attitudes toward them.

Indeed, based on public opinion surveys, migration research has identified a strong, positive association between greater levels of observational and self-reported contact and more positive attitudes toward migrants (Andersson and Dehdari. 2021; De Coninck, Rodríguez-de-Dios, and d’Haenens 2021; Getmansky, Sinmazdemir, and Zeitzoff 2018; Ghosn, Braithwaite, and Chu 2019; Knappert et al. 2021). Experimental research primarily conducted in the lab has also demonstrated the short-term benefits of intergroup contact for reducing prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), particularly when the contact experience is positive (for example, when it involves cross-group friendship) rather than negative (for example, when it involves threat) (Pettigrew et al. 2011).

This experimental research has been criticized, however, for primarily being lab-based (rather than real-world), employing short-term programs (rather than prolonged contact), and demonstrating short-term effects (see, for example, Paluck, Green, and Green 2019; Paluck et al. 2021). One meta-analysis that focused on the long-term impact of contact interventions outside of the lab finds an enduring positive impact of contact on interethnic relations (Lemmer and Wagner 2015). More recent, large-scale randomized controlled trials that test the consequences of intergroup contact between ethnic and religious groups that are in conflict have demonstrated more mixed effects, depending on context and the nature of the contact: for example, using sports- and classroom-based settings (Ditlmann and Samii 2016; Lowe 2021; Mousa 2020; Scacco and Warren 2018). Zhou and Lyall (2023), for instance, evaluated a program that brought together locals and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in equal numbers for collaborative vocational training classes for up to six months in Afghanistan, and they found no changes in attitudes at the end of the program or eight months later. More experimental studies are needed, but this literature suggests that while intergroup contact can be an effective strategy for reducing prejudice, careful attention needs to be paid to the nature of the contact and the context in which it is occurring.

Institutional and collective remedies

Returning to a key component of this paper’s argument—that institutions and elites construct and perpetuate the idea of “cultural distance” for strategic purposes—solutions must also be sought at a broader structural or institutional level. Ultimately, the problem of perceived cultural distance widens or shrinks considerably based on how elites campaign for votes, governments define ethnic and racial categories (such as in the census), and decision-makers set up institutions and policies.

Indeed, let us reconsider the evidence on intergroup contact theory. Recall that the contextual shift that inspired the original contact hypothesis was racial desegregation in US institutions, such as in public schools, the military, marriage, and the workplace. Research shows that for White majoritized young people, institutionalized contact can have lasting effects. Growing up in desegregated neighborhoods as a child leads to life-long progressive political attitudes (Brown et al. 2021). Having roommates from racial and immigrant minority backgrounds in college or the military leads to more intergroup friendships and even to better outcomes for those from minoritized groups (Corno, La Ferrara, and Burns 2022; Finseraas and Kotsadam 2017). Being treated by Arab doctors reduces Israeli Jewish patients' prejudice toward Arabs in general (Weiss 2021). Inclusive refugee-hosting policies in Uganda, such as allowing refugees to self-settle rather than be segregated into camps, have both increased destination society members' access to public goods and services and generated greater acceptance for migrants (International Rescue Committee 2016; Zhou, Grossman, and Ge 2023). These findings all point to the importance of institutions, public policies, and leadership for tackling migrant social inclusion.

The discussion next highlights two types of broader collective reforms: taking affirmative steps to rethink and rearticulate national narratives of belonging and membership; and enabling migrants' political agency and ability to make claims so that they, and their allies, can improve the context of reception and have a voice in social inclusion.

Rethinking national narratives

The discussion suggested earlier that perceptions of “cultural distance” are selective and contingent. People are continually revising and adapting which cultural factors they focus on when they draw group boundaries. Differences in race, religion, language, values, clothing, and diet can all be invoked to justify labeling a group as “culturally distant.” Yet these differences can, equally, be ignored if people wish instead to emphasize their sense of “we”-ness or belonging together. It is thus not the case that members of a society feel a sense of belonging together only with or automatically to those who are culturally close in some objective, measurable sense. Rather, residents have some prior sense of “who we are,” and on this basis, they decide to ignore certain cultural differences within the circle of “we,” while exaggerating cultural differences with those who fall outside this circle.

This naturally raises the question: Where does this sense of “who we are” come from? This is obviously a complicated question, but one crucial factor is national identities. The modern world has been organized around the nation-state, each of which has tried (with considerable success) to inculcate a sense of shared national identity, through school systems, national symbols, shared holidays and rituals, military service, political discourse, common inclusion in social benefit schemes, and so forth. As a result, perceptions of immigrants are strongly shaped by the prevailing images and narratives of “the nation,” and whether these images of nationhood allow citizens to see immigrants as potentially “one of us” or whether these images of nationhood categorize immigrants as inherently “other” and a “threat.” This is consistent with work on the common in-group identity model, which proposes that bringing former out-group members into a common superordinate in-group reduces prejudice and discrimination toward them (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000; see also Esses et al. 2001 for experimental work on national inclusive framing and attitudes toward immigrants).

Some commentators argue that all national identities are, by definition, suspicious of immigrants. And indeed, it is true that in most countries, native-born citizens with a strong sense of national identity or national pride tend to be more distrusting of immigrants, who are seen as a threat to their cherished national identity (Sides and Citrin 2007). This is not just correlational but seems, in some cases, to be causal: some experiments show that when nationhood is highlighted or primed, it triggers xenophobia. This is one of the results of what are called “mere mention” experiments. In these experiments, one group of respondents is

asked “Do you believe immigrants deserve X right?”. Another group of people are asked the same question, but with a national prime: they are asked: “You are Dutch: Do you believe immigrants deserve X right?” The “mere mention” of nationhood produces systematically harsher answers in many countries (Sniderman and Hagendorn 2007, 119–21).

However, this does not hold everywhere, and it can depend on how the nation is invoked. In some countries, the images and stories of the nation have been refashioned to explicitly include the legitimacy and value of immigrants. In these countries, the stories that citizens tell themselves about “who they are” include positive recognition of the long history and/or current realities of migration (Smith 2003). And the evidence suggests that in these countries, with more “multicultural” conceptions of nationhood, the strength of national identity is not correlated with anti-immigrant sentiment (see, for example, Johnston et al. 2010; Esses et al. 2006; Esses et al. 2021). Further, in survey experiments in such countries, the “mere mention” of nationhood does not trigger xenophobic reactions (see, for example, Breton 2015) and can even make both conservative and liberal respondents more likely to agree that government action should be taken to alleviate an immigrant’s hardship, even that of an undocumented resident (Voss, Silva, and Bloemraad 2020).

This body of research suggests that a crucial battlefield in struggles around immigration is the content of these national identities, or what Rogers Smith (2003) calls our “stories of peoplehood.” Research demonstrates that definitions of national identity that lean more heavily to ethnic or, conversely, more civic notions of membership can have a significant effect on perceptions of immigrants (Pehrson, Brown, and Zagefka 2009; Verkuyten and Martinovic 2015). This raises a raft of complicated questions about how political actors and public policies can try to reshape national identities, and how to acknowledge past histories of racialized definitions of “who we are.”⁹ Given the centrality of nationhood to modern societies, any approach to migration that does not address the nature and content of national identities is unlikely to succeed.

Enabling migrant political agency and voice

In assimilationist approaches to integration, migrants are expected to change their attitudes and behaviors to fit into and fully participate in the destination society. But, curiously, whereas immigrants are often expected to show rapid language learning, quick labor market integration, and the swift adoption of local cultural practices, their *political* incorporation is viewed more equivocally. So, historically in the United States, Catholic immigrants and radical immigrant labor activists, some of Jewish background, were disparaged, in part, because their political loyalties and democratic skills were suspect in addition to their religious affiliations. Today, some countries impose long residency waiting periods, high fees, and burdensome bureaucratic hurdles on immigrants wishing to acquire citizenship.¹⁰ This is wrong-headed both in the short term, impeding full political and legal inclusion, but also in the medium term, because it could dissuade migrants from integrating and because it undermines immigrants’ ability to have political agency to help refashion institutions and national narratives to promote inclusion.

Citizenship and citizenship policy, which is the focus here, is one important boundary-creating and boundary-maintaining institution.¹¹ Immigrants and their children usually acquire citizenship in one of three ways: through administrative or legal application (naturalization); based on birth on territory (*jus soli*); or via ancestry or “blood” descent, usually from parents (*jus sanguinis*). Analysis of citizenship take-up shows that immigrants are more likely to be citizens in countries with less onerous laws and policies, and that the effect of onerous laws on citizenship take-up are especially stark for people who might be the most vulnerable: immigrants with less education or from developing countries living in advanced economies (Dronkers and Vink 2012; Janoski 2010; Vink, Prokic-Breuer, and Dronkers 2013). Beyond naturalization, automatic birthright citizenship for the children of immigrants is prevalent in the Americas, from Canada through to the Caribbean and Latin America (FitzGerald and Cook-Martin 2014), but it is virtually absent elsewhere. Indeed, immigrants’ ability to acquire citizenship tends to be quite restrictive in Asia or Africa,

and all but impossible in most Middle Eastern countries (Chung 2017; GlobalCitz; Manby 2018). Such barriers extend the legal and political jeopardy of being an immigrant into the second generation, and increase the possibility for children to find themselves stateless. Such legal exclusions are not a good basis for social inclusion.

Ensuring achievable, straightforward pathways to citizenship is thus an essential part of advancing social inclusion. Opening up citizenship necessarily changes the demographic composition of the citizenry, and can over time shift the notion of what national identity means. Of course, acquiring citizenship through naturalization, or via birthplace as a second-generation citizen, does not guarantee belonging or recognition by others. In France, second-generation “visible minority” citizens are much more likely to say that they are not seen as French by others compared to the French-born children of European immigrants or other French nationals (Beaman 2017; Escafre-Dublet and Simon 2014). Such exclusion by others can fly in the face of people’s own self-identifications. In one survey of the United Kingdom, while only 41 percent of “white” immigrants of European or North American origin reported a British identity, 62 percent of foreign-born Bangladeshi and 64 percent of foreign-born Black Caribbeans self-identified as primarily British (Manning and Roy 2010; see also Bartram 2021). A positive association between naturalization and national identification is also found in Germany (Fick 2016) while in Switzerland, those who gained citizenship via a local vote subsequently reported less discrimination and stronger intentions to stay in the country long-term (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono 2017). These inclusion dynamics can snowball: merely living among a greater concentration of naturalized co-ethnics appears linked to stronger identification as “American” (Abascal 2017). In short, inclusion through citizenship can foster belonging.

There are also more pragmatic benefits of citizenship, which can feed into broader dynamics of social inclusion. At its most basic, citizenship provides access to a state’s territory and protection against deportation. This can provide psychological reassurance and could encourage immigrants to invest further in the country where they live, both in economic terms (such as buying a house, starting a business), and in how they raise their children and interact with the majority population (Avitabile, Clots-Figueras, and Masella 2013, 2014). In various countries, citizenship is required for full access to certain public sector jobs; for licenses in certain occupations including high-paying professional jobs; for eligibility for some social benefits; and for access to educational grants or financial aid (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017). The wage premium of citizenship, holding other personal attributes constant, is estimated at about 1 percent to 5 percent in a range of North American and West European countries (see, for example, Bratsberg, Ragan, and Nasir 2002; Helgertz, Bevelander, and Tegunimataka 2014; Liebig and Von Haaren 2011; Picot and Hou 2011; Steinhardt 2012). Importantly, some, but not all, of this research finds larger citizenship effects for immigrants from developing countries—groups that are more likely to be seen as “culturally distant” in well-off liberal democracies. This underscores the importance of open citizenship policy for social and economic inclusion.

Citizenship is also important for political inclusion. Most countries reserve the most expansive rights and benefits for citizens, especially when it comes to having voice in the political system.¹² Citizenship also often bestows a sense of legitimacy, making it easier to advocate for institutional changes. There is thus a relationship between citizenship and engagement, such that even when noncitizens enjoy local voting rights, acquiring citizenship increases the probability that a person casts a ballot (Bevelander and Pendakur 2011). Citizenship might also increase social movement activism and civic engagement more generally (Just and Anderson 2012) and appears to increase political knowledge and political efficacy (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono 2015).¹³ Destination societies are affected in turn. Countries with a sizable immigrant population and more inclusive citizenship laws appear to find it harder to take a restrictive, anti-immigrant turn with a growing immigrant-origin electorate (Bloemraad 2012; Koopmans, Michalowski, and Waibel 2012).

Further, beyond direct electoral pressure, political and legal inclusion through citizenship carries a moral claim of equality that is powerful, with the potential to increase the legitimacy and standing of immigrant-origin residents in the eyes of others, too. In a field experiment conducted in Germany, Pietrantuono (2016) found that discrimination in interview callbacks for job applicants with Turkish-sounding names was halved when the applicant signaled that they held citizenship. Conversely, respondents in California and Canada were more likely to support civil and social right claims for citizens compared to those without papers, even when people faced identical problems of hunger, illness or illegitimate questioning by police (Bloemraad, Harell, and Fraser 2022; Voss, Silva, and Bloemraad 2020). Some might argue that drawing these sorts of distinctions based on citizenship is wrong and would prefer to recognize everyone's common humanity and human rights. But empirically, citizenship seems to be one mechanism by which immigrant-origin "others" can achieve a modicum of greater inclusion. As Sara Wallace Goodman puts it, acquiring citizenship does not only facilitate political and legal equality, but it also, theoretically, is "a social transformation from a national outsider to insider" (2023, 5.4). Importantly, citizenship is a relatively easy policy lever to pull to advance social and institutional incorporation.

Conclusion

When migrants uproot themselves and move to another society, they know that their lives will change, and that they will need to adapt to new circumstances, and to learn new rules and languages. Some may even relish this opportunity to make a new life for themselves in a new country. But change and adaptation should not be seen as a zero-sum process, as if immigrants can only master a new set of rules or relationships if they hide or disavow their original familial, ethnic, religious, and cultural ties and heritage. At the individual level, immigrants have a wide variety of "acculturation strategies" that involve expanding their cultural repertoires without abandoning older attachments and identities. And at the societal level, destination societies have a wide variety of policy options to support these acculturation strategies, providing routes for immigrants to participate and to belong.

Economists have persuasively argued that migration need not be a zero-sum economic proposition: economic gains to migrants need not come at the expense of the members of the destination society. This paper argues that the same is true about the sociocultural realm: successful social integration is not measured by how much or how quickly immigrants hide or disavow their cultural heritage and distinct identities. Such a positive sum vision of social integration is only possible, however, once the idea that "cultural distance" is an objective fact and inherent obstacle to integration is set aside.

Notes

¹ For a discussion and analysis of the literature on the economic and cultural drivers of opposition to immigration, see Alesina and Tabellini (2022).

² For example, Bloemraad, Silva, and Voss (2016) demonstrate, using survey experiments, that framing migration as an economic issue has no effect on Californians' views of whether to provide legal status to undocumented migrants; in comparison, appealing to family unity makes some respondents more sympathetic to migrants in irregular status.

³ Claims-making is the process of articulating a demand or request through verbal or physical action that bears on others' interests, especially claims on public resources, be they material, legal, symbolic, or cultural (Bloemraad 2018; Lindekilde 2022). The process of articulating such claims often involves an attempt to persuasively define or frame a situation in a particular way and to have that definition become widely accepted (normative) as a basis for ameliorative action.

⁴ It is important to distinguish between debates on statistical strategies for attempting to measure "cultural distance," which might focus on the relative benefits of using averages, distributions, and so forth to create indexes of cultural distance, and the much more fraught and far from self-evident choice of what, precisely, to measure. As De Santis, Maltagliati, and Salvini put it in their discussion of measuring cultural distance across countries, a critical weakness in such calculations is the choice of variables, which sadly "is often guided by data availability more than by anything else" (2016, 1067). This paper is concerned precisely with this issue of variable selection: What counts as cultural distance?

⁵ Often analyses of integration “gaps” use the national population average as a reference point. But this might be misguided. Should refugees with virtually no resources who are overcoming trauma, for example, be compared to the aggregate mean of the settled population? Or, perhaps, should integration be evaluated by the average experience of subgroups in the host society: for example, should working-class immigrants be compared to working-class citizens, or Black immigrants in the United States compared to Black citizens? Of course, if class or racial subgroups are used as reference points, this reifies and perhaps naturalizes the salience of such distinctions.

⁶ The gap approach to integration almost always presumes that the receiving population reference point is preferable. Yet, in the United States, foreign-born residents tend to be healthier, all things equal, than US-born citizens and they are less likely to commit crimes than the US-born population. In these cases, assimilation means that immigrants should change to experience poorer health or commit more crimes. Similarly, knowing multiple languages is arguably beneficial, economically and socially, for anyone in today’s globalizing world. Thus, wanting immigrants to assimilate into a monolingual population, for those countries where most residents speak a single language, seems short-sighted, at best.

⁷ Under the US Refugee Admissions Program, the US State Department provides nonprofit settlement agencies with grants for a refugee’s first 30 to 90 days in the United States (<https://www.state.gov/refugee-admissions/reception-and-placement/>). After the first 3 months, refugees can receive assistance from the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement for 12 months, but because this assistance flows through states and nonprofits, the degree of support can vary (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/programs/refugees/cma>).

⁸ More recently, scholars have relaxed these conditions somewhat, arguing that they facilitate positive effects but are not necessary conditions (Pettigrew et al. 2011).

⁹ For an analysis of how this was undertaken in the Canadian context, see Uberoi 2008.

¹⁰ The Global Nationality Laws Database, housed by the Global Citizenship Observatory, is a treasure-trove of information, covering 177 countries: <https://globalcit.eu/national-citizenship-laws/>.

¹¹ Others would include schools, the media, neighborhoods, workplaces, the military and other institutions that provide a context for interaction, discourses about “us” and “them,” and/or policies that establish rules of action and decision making.

¹² Of course, citizenship and rights are not necessarily tightly linked. Historically, female citizens and religious or racial minority citizens were denied the vote; today, young citizens and, in some places, people who are incarcerated are similarly denied the franchise. Conversely, some social rights, such as unemployment insurance, are regularly extended to long-term residents, even if they are not citizens.

¹³ Research in this area is still quite thin, and fraught with problems of causal inference, so conclusions are tentative. For example, Street (2017) finds no evidence of a naturalization effect on political interest or partisanship in his comparison of immigrants before and after they acquire German citizenship.

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