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Nordic Migration and Integration Scholarship: Perspectives from the Research Field

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Migration and integration are currently highly contentious topics in political, public, and scientific arenas. Their study is instrumental in tackling common migration-related prejudices and inefficiencies in migrant integration, providing a better knowledge-base for decision-makers, and promoting a more informed population at large. In 2016, the authors of this article, in collaboration with Tuomas Martikainen, were commissioned by NordForsk to map the current Nordic integration and migration research landscape, and suggest measures that can improve the policy relevance of research.

The Nordic countries are facing challenges not only because of the recent increase in humanitarian migration but also due to broader societal transformations: population ageing, neoliberalization of the Nordic welfare state, and increasingly polarizing political debates. Tackling these challenges requires further capitalizing on existing Nordic assets – such as excellent census data and the ample avenues for implementing a most similar systems research design. It also calls for experimental mixed-method approaches, developing custom tools for harnessing big data, and more rigorous nesting of qualitative and quantitative analysis.

The mapping was conducted in the fall and winter of 2016–2017. We took an in-depth look at the Nordic field of migration and integration research, elucidating gaps that need

to be examined in the years to come. To reach this goal, we conducted in-depth interviews with 56 experts in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. We also created an online survey¹ directed at Nordic migration and integration scholars, receiving 356 responses. The results of the study (Pyrhönen, Leinonen & Martikainen 2017) are discussed in this article.

Nordic Research Trends

Research on migration can be roughly divided into three thematic areas: studies of movement, settlement, and control. The first line of research focuses on explaining and theorizing about why and how people move, the second on modes of migrant incorporation, and the third on how states attempt to prevent or facilitate movement and set terms of inclusion and exclusion. (Kivisto & Faist 2010.)

Nordic scholarship has focused heavily on questions related to migrant settlement. While questions of integration are common in international research as well, especially in relation to the “1.5” and the second generation, in Nordic scholarship integration is studied predominantly in relation to the labor market and the educational sector (e.g. Söderling 2004; Heikkilä 2005; Hedetoft et al. 2006; Bevelander & Lundh 2007; Innes & Skaptadóttir 2016). In recent years, scholars have applied a more critical lens to the study of labor market ques-

tions in the Nordic countries (e.g. Näre 2016). They have also situated the Nordic labor market in the global scene, on the benefiting side of the global economic inequalities, and examined precarity in the context of globalizing labor markets (e.g. Schierup et al. 2015).

The welfare state, multiculturalism, and citizenship have provided the framework for studying migration and integration in the 2000s (e.g. Banting & Kymlicka 2006; Borchorst & Siim 2008; Brochmann & Hagelund 2012; Kivisto & Wahlbeck 2013). Following the critique against “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002), Nordic scholars have widened their scope to investigate transnationalism and diaspora. One of the leading lines of research in the past ten-twenty years has been transnationalism, particularly in the context of family and gender relations (e.g. Povrzanovic Frykman 2004; Martikainen 2006; Tiilikainen 2007).

With European countries continuously tightening their migration rules, scholarship on migration control is increasingly gaining traction. Nordic scholars are already examining forced migration from the perspective of migration governance, and the recent policy changes will necessitate further research. The study on human geography and spatial analysis of mobility are also emerging as vibrant fields in Nordic research (e.g. Vaattovaara et al. 2010; Larsen 2011; Gressgard & Jensen 2016).

As scholars are questioning the rigid boundaries between different types of migrations (humanitarian, labor, family) – for example, by considering how a research design could help in transcending categories of governance created by nation-states – challenging methodological nationalism remains an important pursuit in Nordic scholarship on migration and integration.

Goals in the Research Field

The scholars participating in this NordForsk study identified several understudied areas in Nordic scholarship on migration and integration, which form seven prominent gaps in the research field.

General research related challenges

“Researchers should be incentivized to develop harmonized mixed-method approaches and learn to use each other’s data more consistently and on a more regular basis.”

Nearly all respondents discussed difficulties and shortcomings in trying to overcome the division between qualitative and quantitative research approaches. Some explicitly stated that it is not enough to have separate

qualitative and quantitative work packages in a research program, but that there is a need to nest these approaches within each other in a more intimate manner.

Theoretical development from a Nordic perspective

“Hard-core empirical work should adopt a more rigorous ‘double critical approach’, based on the development of Nordic and translocal theories and theoretically informed analysis.”

The main reason given for the increased focus on theoretical development was the need to alleviate the definitional struggles that hinder harmonization of key concepts related to migrancy and integration and that also make nesting divergent approaches more difficult. Among the most commonly mentioned areas for theoretical development were methodological nationalism, critical border studies, rethinking of the legislative framework based on international conventions, and the notion of Nordic exceptionalism.

Networks in civil society – from migrants to communities

“We need more research that makes use of literature and media studies, and assesses how different policies shape the migrants’ experience ‘from the inside.’”

Most researchers expressed a need to know more about the everyday lives of migrants for the purpose of better defining the goals of integration policy. Many expressed the need to adopt network embeddedness as a premise for the study of migrant families. This would facilitate studying “the intimate sphere” in conjunction with other relevant dimensions of migrant interaction, both transnationally and vis-à-vis the autochthonous population.

Implementation of integration policies – governance and effects

“The largely uncharted overlaps between different integration authorities [...] is a big problem from the point of view of developing Nordic research on comparative governance and effects-based assessment of best practices.”

Assessing and comparing the impact of various integration measures is commonly regarded as hindered by the lack of research on the increasing complexity of mechanisms through which certain welfare policies might work against integration. Nesting quantitative and qualitative approaches in research on intersecting vulnerabilities among migrants would help in alleviating this challenge. The

reintroduction of social class into these intersectional approaches would also produce more holistic results to guide policy implementation in a manner that is readily applicable to simultaneously address the problems of precarious migrant and non-migrant population alike.

Labor markets

“Without fine-grained and harmonized assessment of how various policies impact specific migrant groups and cohorts, we lack the capacity to compare experiences across the Nordic countries and produce synthesizing reports of how immigrants can be more efficiently and permanently integrated to labor markets.”

Most respondents mentioned that the register data collected in the Nordic countries allows more nuanced approaches for considering the specific problems different types of migrants face. We should, therefore, break away from the tradition of estimating the fiscal impact of “migrant unemployment”. Instead, we need longitudinal studies that focus on the divergent impacts that labor market regulations and integration policies carry for migrants of different backgrounds. We should also rethink the methods for benchmarking what counts as successful labor market integration, since “only benchmarking against the native population, we are bound to write and rewrite a story of never ending failure.”

Urban and regional challenges and possibilities

“There ample sources for providing historical and ethnographic contextualization of why the migrants may not want to stay in the nice enclaves they are assigned to.”

We need to recontextualize the difficulties related to urban segregation with research from outside *Norden*. This allows reassessment of the fears linked to “the creation of parallel societies” with empirical evidence of when certain levels and types of segregation may be necessary or benign.

The public sphere, media, and the attitudinal climate

“The politicization of migrancy-related questions in the public sphere is spreading to academia, as we are witnessing a clash of totally opposite diagnoses on why increasingly radical discourses are proliferating in our midst.”

Research on the media sphere needs to develop more rigorous methods that vest studies with more explanatory potential. This

entails complementing descriptive, contemporary accounts with historical contextualization and sociological analysis. Research should also provide prognostics on the internalization of various discriminatory systems in civil society and assess how the rise of an exclusionary sense of national homogeneity can be challenged, particularly in the media sphere.

Perspectives on Developing Nordic Added Value

When challenged to assess how to justify the focus on the Nordic countries as a fruitful context for researching migration and integration, most respondents referred to “an array of model states” in “a relatively small scale” with “a forerunner position in state-led engineering of social mobility.” As one respondent put it, this is “the only region in the world where integration of migrants is so tightly connected to existing measures of welfare redistribution.” Together with the availability of excellent register data, this makes the Nordic context an ideal laboratory of “most similar systems” for empirically gauging how implementation of various policy tools impacts both migrant and majority populations. The respondents, however, pointed to several types of hurdles to be crossed to properly capitalize on this potential.

Currently, Nordic collaboration relies much on short-lived networks and informal personal contacts. This emphasizes the importance of embedding Nordic networks into international ones, which also allows more reliable assessment of how particular the results and their scale are to the Nordic countries. Joint and comparative research projects would also benefit from further collaborative endeavors to harmonize data between the five countries. As the connections between migration and welfare redistribution are growing increasingly complex, developing policy-relevant research requires more rigorous nesting of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Many suggested that more funding calls should explicitly require the incorporation of qualitative and quantitative approaches in the same work packages.

With the rapid increase in the governmental and sector-based funding for migration and integration research since the “refugee crisis”, many respondents are looking forward to wider opportunities to pursue more independent research, in terms of both theoretical development and experimental research approaches. This also helps revealing how some migration-related complexities that are specific to the Global South and East may be in-

terconnected to the role the Nordic countries play as representatives of the Global North.

Among the most divisive issues within the Nordic research community was the notion of evaluating migrancy as something of a “stress test” for the welfare state. The bone of contention concerns the framing and definitional struggles related to any such evaluation. The politicization and polarization of the public, political, and academic debates makes it challenging to agree on what, exactly, is to be stress tested. Adopting a common theoretical framework, harmonized data sets, commensurable thematic areas between the countries, and fitting extra-Nordic comparisons were commonly suggested as ways of approaching the question of stress testing in a more empirically grounded way.

Yet another pertinent challenge mentioned by the researchers was related to the interpretation of results. Especially the researchers of education and labor markets point out that we need to complement the current focus on educational and employment gaps by developing novel ways for benchmarking migrant integration. As funders often prioritize brief, inexpensive, and “agile” projects, benchmarking migrant integration is impeded by the limited availability of funding for longitudinal and life-course research projects that trace trajectories of both migrant and native population simultaneously.

Finally, the respondents underlined the importance of funding experimental research that develops new methodological approaches, particularly related to technologies that can better facilitate harnessing the vast social media data sets and big data in general. Such endeavors were considered crucial in revealing diffuse processes that contribute to the polarization of the civil society at large.

To sum up, there appear to be two divergent insights emerging from the research community on how to generate further Nordic added value within migration and integration research in the aftermath of the “refugee crisis”. On the one hand, the respondents hope to see open-ended calls that leave researchers with more freedom to devise research goals and design. This is also seen as one way to balance the growing demands for thematically pinpointed “strategic research” calls. On the other hand, there is distinct enthusiasm to participate in calls that incentivize institutionalized Nordic collaboration, require nesting qualitative and quantitative approaches into a single work package, merit incorporation of action research components, stakeholder involvement, and properly resource scientific interventions also through experimental methodological approaches.

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Endnote

- 1 A majority of the respondents were female (68%) and about two-thirds had at least a doctoral degree. The proportion of respondents by country was as follows: Denmark 14%, Finland 32%, Iceland 2%, Norway 16%, Sweden 30%, and other 7%. Our data also included an overview of the thematic foci found in two sources: 1) articles in the multidisciplinary *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* since it was first published in 2011, migration-related keynote speeches and workshops in recent Nordic scholarly conferences, funding decisions made by the major research-funding institutions in the Nordic countries in the 2010s, and 2) an overview of a selection of scholarly works published in the field.

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