

Active and Passive Integration in Two Norwegian Cities, Mapping Syrian Refugees' Access to Socio-Spatiality

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Abstract: This exploratory study seeks to contribute to the literature on integration by utilizing space as a vector of social analysis to categorize the interactions between Syrian refugees, Norwegian locals, Non-Profit Organizations (NGOs), universities and Norwegian Institutions (NIs) in two Norwegian cities. The study design is comprised of three components, 1) in depth interviews/focus group and 2) field work and 3) socio-spatial analysis. In-dept interviews and a focus group in two cities and field work in four cities in Norway from 2015 to 2016. Activities centered around dugnad (community service) created inclusive spaces for meaningful interaction between locals and refugees despite linguistic, cultural and religious differences. Study findings indicate an active and passive behavioral pattern along with five dependent factors affecting the trajectory of integration efforts. Additionally, the use of social media, particularly Facebook, acted as a conduit for self-integration by connecting refugees with locals, information and resources, thus producing digital kommunars (communities) and jama'iya (networks). However, it was real world interaction between locals, refugees, NGOs and Norwegian Institutions (NI) that provided opportunities for upward mobility by expanding refugee socio-spatiality to promote integration through the establishment of networks outside of immigrant communities.

Keywords: Integration, Norway, Dugnad, Syria, Social Media

Introduction

This study examines the mechanisms utilized in two Norwegian cities by locals, Syrians, NGOs and NIs in integrating Syrian refugees from December 2015 to August 2016, and provides a model of social inclusion and integration initiated

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at a local level. It is imperative to seek out models of integration that function effectively at the municipality level as Europe and Norway face the challenge of integrating a large number of asylum seekers who are primarily Syrian and Muslim. The outcome of this endeavor will hold significant social and political implications for European countries for decades to come.

The demographic change resulting from the large refugee influx produced anxiety among Europeans who chose to elect anti-immigrant administrations in reaction to a Muslim population totaling 4.9% (Pew Research Center 2017). Despite low numbers of Muslims in Europe, Islamophobia is on the rise. A study on Islamophobia in Europe conducted at the University of Leeds reveals that Muslims face “hostility in everyday life” (Benoist 2018). Recently a member of the European Union Parliament to comment at a recent conference on refugees, it is “poisoning our societies... “and placing,” barriers between our communities” (Ibid. 2018).

Norway also elected conservative government that favors anti-immigrant policies and a shift away from refugee-centered policies, local initiatives led by Norwegians, refugees, local chapters of the Røde Kors, Norsk Folkehjelp, Syrian-Norwegian Association of Asker, universities and mental health care professionals, created spaces of inclusiveness for refugees.

The rapid change experienced by both Norwegian locals and Syrian refugees is profound, and when not channeled effectively it may lead to conditions of disempowerment, voicelessness and frustration that can serve as a flash point for conflict and tension. As one Norwegian man noted, a lack of public dialogue about the “very real problems with,” immigration, “this leads many... to flock to far-right parties because they feel their own culture is under gradual assault” (Kragset 2017)². Healthy democracies necessitate processes that promote inclusiveness to reduce conflict that threaten democratic practices that alienate and marginalize minority or majority groups. This study offers a view of how two Norwegian towns are laying the foundation of democratic practices through the use of programs that promote social inclusion of Syrian refugees and grant them access to socio-spatiality outside of immigrant communities.

² The problem however, is that you and so many others, are well meaning an obviously nice people. But in my opinion too many people who wax on lyrically about the cultural enriching of immigration are not prepared to talk about the very real problems with it. This leads many, especially those with low education, to flock to far right parties because they feel their own culture is under gradual assault. And it is a natural yet sad reaction. But natural even so. [Facebook comment] – 12.06.2017, Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/anisaabeytia/>.

Method

The study design was comprised of, 1) interviews/focus group, 2) field work and, 3) socio-spatial analysis. Interviews and focus groups were analyzed and coded utilizing grounded theory, while Edward Soja's (1999) theory of Thirdspace was the vector of social-spatial analysis.

Participants in Mandal were recruited during the filming of a documentary that served as the catalyst for this research. In Asker Hussam was recruited after the Academic *Dugnad* and all other participants were recruited via snowball method. One focus group with Syrian women was conducted in Asker in June 2016.

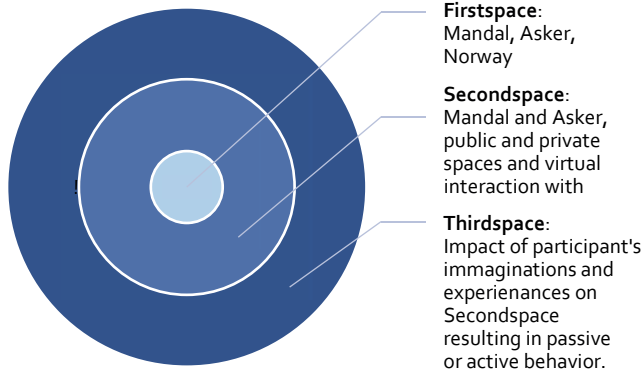
In-dept interviews and fieldwork were conducted with Syrian refugees and locals in Arabic, English and Norwegian in December 2015, June–July 2016, March and October 2018. Interviews conducted in Mandal in 2015 and 2016 were filmed and transcribed. The 2016 interviews in Asker were conducted in person. Written correspondence in English was the mode of communication for the 2018 interview in Asker. Additionally, interviews were conducted with officials from the Directorate of Integration and Diversity, the Directorate of Integration in December 2015 and mental health professionals in Kristiansand in July 2016 and with administrators at Oslo University in December 2015 and Agder University in October 2018. Fieldwork was conducted in 2015 and 2016.

Figure 1. Participant Demographic Data

| | Male | Female | Total | |
|-----------|------|--------|-------|--------|
| Norwegian | 2 | 5 | 7 | Mandal |
| Syrian | 7 | 0 | 7 | |
| Norwegian | 0 | 1 | 1 | Asker |
| Syrian | 3 | 9 | 12 | |

The research observed interaction between three groups, 1) Syrian refugees, 2) Norwegian locals, and 3) NGOs/NIs Norsk Folkehjelp, Syrian-Norwegian Association of Asker, Oslo University, the University of Agder and Røde Kors). Three distinct socio-spatial categories were defined for the study, Firstspace, situated in the geographic locations of Mandal, Asker (Figure 1). Secondspace corresponded to areas where social interaction occurred. Thirdspace served as the site of integration where socio-spatiality was expanded or contracted. Mapping was based on participants' interviews and fieldwork (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Layers of Thirdspace in Mandal and Asker as Experienced by Syrian Refugees



Source: Author.

Figure 3. Utilization of Secondspace in Mandal, Norway



Seven sites in Mandal and two in Kristiansand comprised the utilization of socio-spatiality by five key actors (NI included the Men in Health program and language courses offered by the municipality). All sites are coded green to demarcate them as active. The sites where activity intersected between multiple actors (Academic Practice, Mandal Public Library and Men in Health) provided the greatest opportunities to expand social networks. Language training received by Syrians in private Norwegian homes was pivotal in gaining entrance to the Academic Practice Program. The map depicts the intertwined nature of a functional integration model that is rooted in social inclusion at the local level with access to multiple socio-spatialities.

The seven locations mapped in Mandal were labeled utilizing four codes, 1) local initiative 2) refugee initiative, and 3) NGO initiative. Mix-initiative is implied by the presents of all three actors. The code active or passive was used to describe each site. Local, refugee or NGO initiative and involvement would be

coded as active, while non-initiation on the part of one actor would be coded as passive (Figure 1, 2 and 3). Participation by all three actors were required to be identified as active. Although private homes are not sites of NGO/NI activity, refugees benefited from the mentorship of locals and participated in the Academic Practice and Men in Health programs.

The Use and Function of Space

Secondspace

Secondspace, or the intersection of geography and social interaction, is the nexus of this research and provides the sites of active and passive behavior to be mapped. Secondspace's function is to provide or deny access to socio-spatiality. The significance of access to Secondspace is apparent in Kristiansand-based psychologist Hildegun Selle work with Flexida. In a 2016 workshop with adult refugees she encouraged participants to reconstruct the homes they lost through collage work. As participants reconstructed place and space it allowed them to mourn and embrace a new Firstspace and Secondspace (Elovit and Kahn 1997). Selle's work hints at the importance of Secondspace in providing access to socio-spatiality and the liminal landscape it allows to unfold in Thirdspace.

Social Media: Facebook

The formation of secret, private and closed groups on Facebook or digital *jama'iyat* (pl. *jama'iyat*) by Syrian refugees functioned as support networks to provide privacy, safety and a means to bypass the censorship apparatus of the Syrian government that continues to influence Syrians in Europe (Abeytia 2018, Moss 2018, Wedeen 1999). In Syria *jama'iyat* were common at universities and were utilized for social networking and to avoid the authoritative and repressive social structures implemented by the Syrian government (Theodoropoulou 2012).

The public, digital *kommunars* initially created by Refugees Welcome provided a tool of agency for refugees seeking to navigate within their new home countries. The use of Facebook as a vehicle of self-integration proved to be pivotal in the experience of Syrian refugees and Norwegians as a virtual Secondspace. As networks began to expand, private/secret groups and digital *kommunars* were created that included Norwegians and Syrians.

Selma, a local language instructor in Asker, explains the need for the Facebook group in Asker,

People in Norway might be a bit more reserved and spend more time inside in their homes, so... [it's] difficult for people coming from abroad [to meet people] That's why we initiated the Facebook group so... they could meet other people and take part at social activities. Staying in a foreign country they miss this social network and help from friends and family.

The formation of digital *jama'iyat* emphasize a Syrian inventiveness in creating what Layton (2006) defines as civil society, where social organizations occupy the space between household and the state, adding to the creation of Thirdspace by extending democratic practices of inclusiveness.

Thirdspace

Thirdspace is the main focus of this research and is where geography, imaginations and experience intersect to expand or constrain geographic imaginations. It is the site of integration where Firstspace and Secondspace are remapped, allowing for the utilization of space and the spatial responses to “real and imagined spaces and places,” where multiple actors exert power over space and place (Soja 1996).

Soja's (1996) theory of Thirdspace is interested in the margins of society, an area continually shifting and evolving. The refugee's experience of space is similarly nebulous. The seemingly ephemeral nature of the virtual world of social media and the conditions of their forced migration leaves the concept of space unfixed for refugees (Jakobsen 2015). As Syrian refugees enter the spaces of Norwegian cities and towns, it is an experience that begins on the periphery as they gain access to language skills and local culture and customs. Cities like Mandal, Kristiansand and Asker are being remapped by the refugee experience and the shared socio-spatiality of Syrian culture are being grafted onto these Norwegian cities.

As refugees struggle to integrate into their new home countries, their identities remain a fluid construct, and the way Syrian refugee navigate the spaces of Norwegian society and use social media as a virtual commons, can be viewed as metrics of their evolving identities and ability to integrate (Abeytia 2018, Kivisto and Vecchia-Mikkola 2015, Jakobsen 2015, Berntsen 2006, McCall 2003).

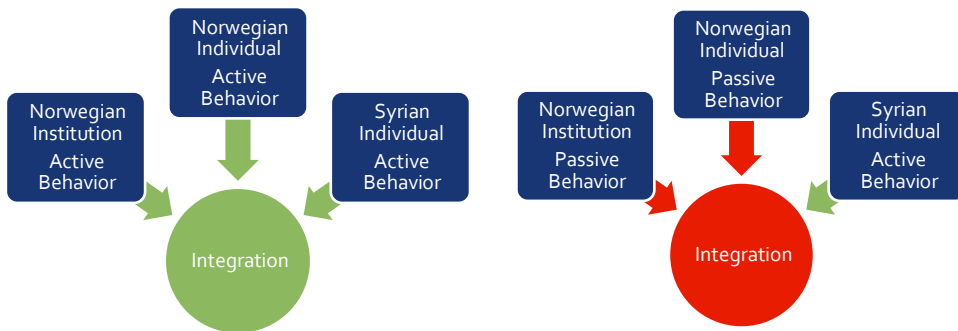
Results

The major themes that emerged from data clusters based on interviews and fieldwork, identified *dugnad* as a dependent variable to effective integration. The concept of *dugnad* became key to the study as a central trope of integration. *Dugnad*, although part of other cultures, is a tradition and value that is thought of as uniquely Norwegian. The term originates from the Old Norse *dugnaðr*, which means help or a good deed (University of Oslo 2017). The word describes a group of people doing voluntary work together for a specific purpose, as an extraordinary effort to create something of lasting value and in Mandal it is this cultural link that is the core of this research (University of Oslo 2017).

The data also identified a paradigm of active/passive behavior (Figure 2, 3 and 4) that may be a useful framework to better understand how individual integration manifests behaviorally. Additionally, five variables were identified as potentially affecting the integration of Syrian refugees and may hold profound implications for integration efforts and warrants further study.

Figure 4. The Active and Passive Paradigm

The Active and Passive Paradigm is measured by the level of participation by Norwegian individuals, institutions and Syrian refugees. The active participation of all three actors contributes to producing inclusive model of integration through active behavior, while a lack of active participation by any of the three actors results in a passive paradigm and limited integration.



Source: Author.

Mental Health Status

Practitioners and researchers identified a worldwide crisis in refugee mental health that may impact integration (Abeytia 2017, personal correspondence Dr. Sverre Varvin 2016, Dr. Patrick Koga 2016, Dr. Brigit Lie 2016, Kirkbride, J.B. and A. C Hollander, 2015 Jefee-Bahloul and Khoshnood 2014, Hollander, Ziegahn et al. 2009). Norway was no exception and when Lina sought mental health care for depression and anxiety after arriving in Norway, she did not receive adequate care due to a lack of medical professionals with Arabic language skills or cultural competency. Other study participants expressed experiencing mental health issues that were not addressed. Mental health screening of asylum seekers is an essential component to understanding their short term and long term needs to formulate effective integration policy.

Negative Social Determinants

Several studies in Western countries suggest an environment of prejudice directed at asylum seekers by the general population inhibiting their ability to thrive (Benoist 2018, Campbell 2012, Valenta and Berg, 2010, Hagelund 2010). Negative social determinants limit refugee's capacity to access Secondspace. Additionally, without access to Secondspace, refugees may forge stronger bonds with friends and family in sending countries and create enclaves of immigrant-only networks, limiting the trajectories of networks within receiving countries. In Mandal, access to Norwegians who served as mentors was essential to language acquisition.

Toxic Nostalgia

Several Syrians who participated in the study viewed themselves as guests with the expectation of returning home (Akhtar 1999, Elovit and Kahn 1997). One participant stated, "your mind and heart are in your home country and your body in another place. What are you going to do?" This produces a spatial paradox for refugees, creating a dysfunction that does not allow for the concept of permanency or the mechanisms of integration to occur (Elovit and Kahn 1997, Akhtar 1999). Akhtar (1999) refers to this phenomenon as "the poisoning of nostalgia." He further links access to space in the new homeland as critical to prevent a "half-hearted

reception in the host country” making “the exile’s assimilation arduous” (Akhar 1999). However, the spatial paradox was mitigated in study participants living in Mandal through the efforts of locals.

Hyper-Transnational Connections

Refugees often speak in nostalgic terms of a longing to return to a lost homeland. This attitude is reinforced by transnational actors (friends and family) who exert a disproportional influence despite lack of spatial proximity (Moss 2018, Logan 2012, Hampton and Wellman 2000). Forging new bonds with locals and others outside their ethnic group may play an important role in integration (Pileburg 2016). Syrian participants reported the importance of the creation of new family bonds with Anette and Hilde in positively impacting their ability to adapt to life in Norway. Anette explains,

We use to say to ourselves (we have) a bigger family with all these nice boys. And we are learning a lot from being together with them, about their culture, about their problems and how to manage to be in a new country.

Agency

Refugees are often placed in the role of passive actors despite efforts by the Norwegian government to eliminate an environment of passivity (Gubrium and Fernandes 2014, Valenta and Berg 2010, Marko and Berit 2010 Valenta 2007). Fernandes (2015) describes introduction programs as a framework that is based on an asymmetrical power relationship between the authorities and asylum seekers. Marko and Berit’s (2010) study further argues that,

‘disqualification, passivity and lack of influence may be reduced through empowerment, participation and involvement of users in their own use of service. Instead of enhancing and enforcing social control, ‘real’ social change should be encouraged’.

Hagelund’s (2010) research asserts that Scandinavian governments postulate that newly arrived refugees are responsible for self-integrating into society, but instead, it is the responsibility of society to integrate new commers. A Norwegian library study shows that integration of refugees becomes much simpler when local residents are involved as this engenders trust among participants, both the locals and refugees (Vårheim 2014).

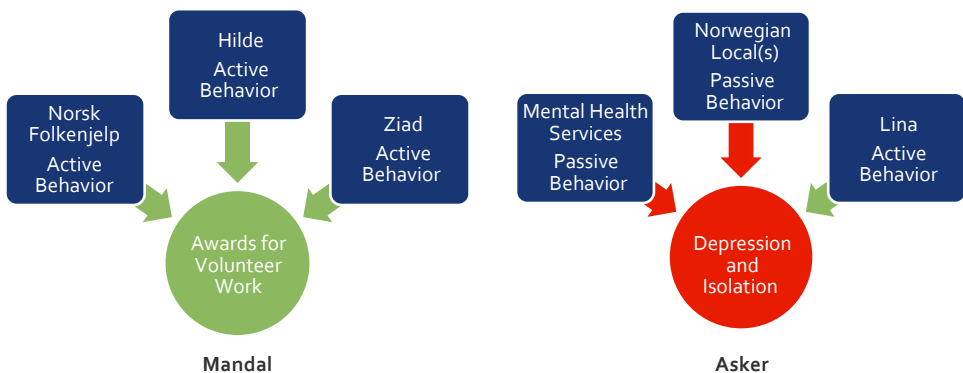
The Active/Passive Paradigm

Observed and self-reported behavior by all actors (NGOs, NIs, Norwegians and Syrians), produced two integration patterns that can be defined by active or passive behavior (Figures 3, 4 and 5) and were connected to access to socio-spatially and *dugnad*. The dimensions of participation in Norwegian society varied according to Syrian actor's ability to access socio-spatiality (Secondspace) in the city (Firstspace) they resided in and directly affected their ability to integrate (Thirdspace).

Active behavior in Secondspace created inclusive spaces where both locals and refugees felt welcomed as part of the communities they live in. Conversely passivity on the part of one actor produced isolation and limited integration efforts (Figure 3 and 4).

Figure 5. The Active and Passive Paradigm in Practice

Outcomes of Passive and Active Paradigms on individual actors in Mandal and Asker.



Source: Author.

Programs developed in Mandal by local chapters of Norsk Folkehjelp and the Røde Kors created an environment that was inclusive of all residents as a means of integration. However, it was earlier initiatives by residences within the first weeks of asylum seekers arriving in Mandal that set the tone and foundation for such programs. Hilde explains the importance was to provide a means “to learn our language is the main key to continue to stay here.”

The original idea was derived from Refugees Welcome Norway’s Facebook page as Anette recalled. The idea evolved into a weekly language café and excursion

groups. They, along with a core group of Mandal residents laid a foundation that was rooted in the tradition of *dugnad* that local NGOs build on to create a Thirdspace for all residences.

Talal and Moaz attended Anette's and Hilde's nature walks and language cafes recounted how the help they received was pivotal to the success of the group and essential to their Norwegian language acquisition. The sentiment was echoed by other participants who expressed that the two women became extended family. When institutions like Norsk Folkehjelp and Røde Kors became involved they served as amplifiers by expanding the scope of what Hilde and Anette began.

Preparing for National Day 2016 Norsk Folkehjelp put out a call for volunteers, which only refugees responded to. Later that day Ole Alexander, Volunteer Coordinator at Norsk Folkehjelp in Mandal was approached by locals who commented that they were impressed by the refugees' strong commitment to *dugnad*. As a result, locals began to volunteer alongside refugees and realized how much both groups had in common.

Ole Alexander cites *dugnad* as the location of emerging relationships between Norwegians and Syrian asylum seekers in Mandal. *Dugnad* activities produced spaces where both groups were active in a situation where Syrians and locals could come together and interact in meaningful ways.

Norsk Folkehjelp and Røde Kors host several regularly scheduled events that included picnics, clothes drives, community clean-ups, ladies' socials, potlucks, language classes, a café, conferences, camping, nature walks and community-safety. NGO activities are shared and documented via Facebook pages and private groups.

These newly forming relationships are rooted in finding likeness that stems from both groups' interest in *dugnad* and created a Thirdspace that promoted a sense of belonging. After living abroad Ole Alexander credited volunteering as a vehicle for him to reintegrate into the fabric of the local community. Selma who works in Asker expressed a similar sentiment after returning from Rome.

The model of integration observed in Mandal also provided refugee women access to Thirdspace. Ole Alexander reported that refugee women successfully voiced their desire to learn to swim, and Norsk Folkehjelp responded by providing the women with private swimming lessons at the local indoor swimming pool that was a popular spot among Syrian refugees. Norsk Folkehjelp not only amplified these women's voices but inviting them to claim public space.

There are a number of successful integration stories emerging from Mandal, however, Ziad's experience is exceptional.

After arriving to Mandal in 2015 Ziad volunteered with local NGOs and attended Hilde's language cafe to facilitate his integration. His volunteer efforts were

recognized, and he received the 2017 *Frivillighetsprisen* award for his volunteer work with Rode Kors and Norsk Folkenjelp, and later he went on to meet Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg. Then he was co-awarded the Bridge Building prize in 2017. The synergy created in Mandal between locals and NGOs, along with the dynamic energy Ziad brought to his volunteer work, were required elements that produced his successful outcome.

In Asker several NGOs offer programs aimed at refugees. *Borgen* provides language cafes, and cooking groups for refugee women, in addition *Voksne for Barn*, a volunteer organization founded by Hilde Elise Eikenes, hosts numerous activities. As in Mandal, the public library in Asker serves as an essential hub.

However, study participants in Asker expressed experiencing isolations, frustration and lack of support. Syrian women in Asker participated in zero regular activities, only one annual religious holiday. The situation is juxtaposed by Syrian woman in Mandal who participated in NGO hosted activities, private events and interacted on a regular basis.

As a response, Syrian refugees in Asker founded their own organization to assist their fellow refugees. The Syrian-Norwegian Association of Asker (SNAA) was created with a vision to invite locals to participate in the integration process and function as a self-help network modeled on *jama'iyah* (social network) found in Syria (Abeytia 2018, Theodoropoulou 2012). They sponsored their first event in 2016 (SNAA 2016).

Study informants did not mention participating in activities outside of SNA during the time of the study (2015-2016). However, the creation of a centralized Facebook group dedicated to connecting refugees to resources in Asker may have acted as a critical link to improving outcomes post-research period.

Selma related via a Facebook Messenger chat that the Facebook group she created became essential in publicizing the various activities available to refugees in Asker and in expanding refugee networks to include locals.

Several factors may have influenced the experiences of Syrian refugees in Mandal and Asker. The early establishment of closed/private Facebook groups in Mandal that included locals may have facilitated earlier network formation for Syrians than in Asker. In Mandal NGOs built upon preexisting local-refugee networks allowing for word-of-mouth dissemination, as well as second tier transfer of information via refugee only Facebook groups. Syrians prefer communicating via private and closed Facebook groups rather than open groups (Abeytia 2018). Closed groups that do not include locals may limit Syrian's ability to use social media as a tool for self-integration (Abeytia 2018).

In Asker, as in Mandal, the creation of various layers of interconnected networks produced the most successful outcomes. Hussam co-founded of SNA, secured entry-level employment through a network of established Arab immigrants but remained concerned that his career opportunities would be limited to entry level positions despite his education level. Vocational opportunities are a paramount concern to the Syrians in the study and the creation of SNA was a means to provide agency to refugees while creating ties and networks within their local community through interaction via activities hosted by SNA. Hussam is currently attending graduate school and sites his academic success to Selma's assistance.

Selma explains why it is important to include Syrians and refugees into local's social circle,

They had become a second child and I heard from some colleagues that they had said that it was kind of sad to experience that they had no one here with whom they could share the joy of the newborn baby... I think this situation is common to very many Syrian refugees.

Academic *Dugnad*

The term Academic *Dugnad* was introduced by Oslo University (OiU 2017) as an effort to welcome refugees and asylum seekers into Norwegian society through an event they hosted December 2015 where the numerous layers required to enter the Norwegian higher education system were explained.

The UiO leveraged social media to advertise the event and it was through Facebook that Hilde learned about the event. She encouraged the Syrians in her circle to attend the Academic *Dugnad*. After returning to Mandla and Asker study participants shared the information and books they gathered with their fellow Syrians. The information the *Dugnad* provided was further disseminated through Facebooks groups, amplifying the impact of the event to included Syrians who were not able to attend the event.

Following the *Dugnad* the Academic Practice program was implemented on a few campuses around Norway including the University of Agder in southern Norway. The proximity of the university to Mandal allowed for study participants to join the program.

Marlene Romme Morch, Project Manager, Division of Student and Academic Affairs, emphasized that Academic Practice program focused on assisting refugees in acquiring English language skills require for university. However, the basic language courses provided through local *kommonars* were not preparing participants

for academic life. The role of Hilde and Anette was pivotal in providing academic level Norwegian to refugees they taught. It is emblematic of the creation of opportunities by expanding potential networks for upward mobility that lead to access to vocational opportunities.

The success of the Academic *Dugnad* included UiO's ability to make it a national priority and to expand the program to other European universities via the Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe (UiO 2017).

Conclusion

The model viewed in Norway presents an opportunity to explore the evolving composition of social relations and social spaces being created throughout Europe. Soja's (1996) theory allows for the "simplicity of perspectives" to emerge with a fuller picture of the roll of space in the integration process. The current refugee crisis provides researchers the opportunity to examine the spatiality of human life, as it is deconstructed and reconstructed and view how the geographic imagination impacts the integration process. Access or lack of access to social spaces, real and digital, played an important role in the lives of Syrian refugees and served as the sites of interaction between Syrians and Norwegians, and as markers for successful integration.

Access to social networks outside of refugee communities was viewed as a pivotal indication of future vocational and integration success when; 1) language skills were supplemented by locals, 2) government programs provided ladders for vocational and academic success, Men in Health and Academic Dugnad, NGOs acted as amplifiers for the engagement of local civil society, and 4) on-line networks, Refugees Welcome pages, were active in disseminating information between locals and refugees.

As Hagelund (2010) asserts, it is the prerogative of receiving countries to provide refugees with opportunities to integrate and community involvement is pivotal in the process. This research found that negative social determinates could be reduced though *dugnad* activities, while toxic nostalgia and hyper-transnational relationships could be mitigated via forming new bonds in Secondspace by providing a sense of belonging and rootedness by locals, NGOS and NIs. Despite the mental health status of participants in the study, those with close ties to locals were able to remain functional despite lack of access to mental health services, although it is a dependent variable that requires adequate screening and intervention.

The models of integration provided by Mandal and Asker highlight the need for active participation on the part of refugees, locals, NGOs, universities and the multiple layers of Norwegian society to expand geographic imaginations in order to create alternative Thirdspace environments for majority and minority, refugee and local actors, to claim cultural citizenship and achieve successful integration outcomes.

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