



Interpersonal Austerity as a Barrier to the Social Integration of Highly Skilled Immigrants in Norway

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine barriers to the social integration of highly skilled immigrants in Norway, drawing on qualitative interviews. Many participants described significant challenges in forming friendships with Norwegians. Responding to calls to de-migrantize integration research, we shift the analytical focus from the immigrants to the wider society to understand these challenges. Building on anthropological work—particularly Gullestad’s notion of invisible fences—we argue that distinct cultural norms in Norway foster a sense of *interpersonal austerity*, in which social energy is treated as a scarce resource. Interpersonal austerity may help explain the integration paradox, i.e., that highly skilled immigrants tend to feel more detached from the host country than other immigrants. The combination of frequent interaction with the majority population and limited opportunities to form deeper relationships may heighten feelings of social exclusion. Moreover, immigrants with a cosmopolitan orientation may rely more on personal connections than on place-based belonging to feel anchored. While traditional migration theories emphasize economic austerity as a key motivator, our data suggest that interpersonal austerity can play a comparable role for some immigrants. Overall, our findings indicate that integration outcomes cannot be understood without critically examining the norms and gatekeeping practices of the majority population.

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The number one thing I wish I could understand about Norwegians is:
 Why won't you let me in? (Judy).

Many highly skilled immigrants can find a job and settle almost anywhere in the world because they have sought-after expertise. States compete to attract them—and they have an interest in retaining them (Constant 2021). However, we know quite little about the latter—what factors entice highly skilled immigrants to stay in a place instead of looking for greener pastures elsewhere? For example, a country like Norway is presumably attractive due to its wealth; political stability; and position as a well-functioning, universal welfare state. There are, however, other dimensions that may play an equally important role in the well-being and long-term investment of immigrants in a country. One such factor is social life. Indeed, in a survey that assesses the quality of life among 'expats' in 53 countries, Norway scores particularly low on local friendliness, which measures people's satisfaction with social life and the ease of making friends with locals (InterNations 2024). This finding echoes the sentiments of one of the interviewees in the current study, quoted above: Why won't you let me in?

This article is based on interviews with 16 highly skilled immigrants to Norway. We ask the following questions: What barriers do highly skilled immigrants face in the social integration process in Norway—and how can these barriers be explained? How can our findings shed light on the understanding of 'integration' and migration decisions?

Making friends with locals is a common indicator of 'social integration.' In integration research, there is an implicit tendency to focus on certain groups of immigrants, while other groups, such as the highly skilled, have received less attention (Diehl & Trittler 2024). Indeed, highly skilled immigrants are often not referred to as 'immigrants' at all but are instead described as 'expats' or 'globetrotters' or, simply, for example, as 'American in country X' (Leinonen 2012). Who becomes labeled an immigrant in need of *integration* is thus closely intertwined with ethnicity and class.

One clear exception to the omission of the highly skilled in integration research is the burgeoning literature on the 'integration paradox' (e.g., Van Doorn et al. 2013; Verkuyten 2016). The paradox lays in the fact that, while highly skilled immigrants tend to be well-integrated structurally—for example, through participation in the labor market—they often feel more disconnected from the host country. Research on the integration paradox is mainly quantitative and has focused mostly on exposure to discrimination due to structural integration, coupled with increasing (unmet) expectations. So far, there is limited research on socio-cultural explanations that explicitly explores the role of friendships with natives.

The article contributes to the field of migration studies in several ways. First, it offers additional information by applying the lens of integration to a group that has often been 'dispensed' from the requirement to integrate. We shed light on a mechanism within the integration paradox—specifically, the role of friendship. Finally, we shed light on discussions about integration by taking seriously one of the main criticisms against the term and its empirical application. Critics argue that integration becomes an individualized responsibility, overlooking the fact that integration is something that concerns society as a whole. So far, this discussion has remained largely theoretical. In this article, we attempt to translate the critique into empirical practice by turning

FROM INTEGRATION TO DE-MIGRANTIZATION

A LINEAR CONCEPTION OF INTEGRATION

The concept of *integration* is often taken for granted in policy debates, yet it remains contested and polysemic (e.g., Favell 2021; Spencer & Charsley 2021). Scholars delineate several dimensions of integration, such as socioeconomic—or structural—integration, which primarily focuses on the labor market, and socio-cultural integration, which is often measured by means of examining, for example, host language acquisition, identification with the host country, and friendships between immigrants and the majority. Despite such multifaceted understandings, policy debates have largely centered on labor market participation. A major reason for this is that one of the main topics in political discourse is the importance of self-sufficiency, largely due to the concern about the sustainability of the welfare state (e.g., Brochmann & Hagelund 2011). Another reason is a predominantly linear conception of integration, which rests on the assumption that, once immigrants participate in the labor market, they will gradually become integrated in other parts of the host society.

THE INTEGRATION PARADOX

The burgeoning research literature on the *integration paradox* suggests otherwise. Contrary to most other integration research, scholars here focus explicitly on highly educated immigrants. The paradox shows that, while these immigrants are well-integrated, structurally speaking, they tend to feel *more detached* from their host society and less positively attuned with the majority population (e.g., De Vroome et al. 2014; Diehl & Trittler 2024; Verkuyten 2016). Not only does this go against the linear integration assumption; it is also surprising because natives tend to prefer highly skilled immigrants to other immigrant groups (Diehl & Trittler 2024: 1780). As such, one would expect the highly skilled to feel particularly welcome in their host society.

Researchers have explored various mechanisms that may explain the paradox (see Schaeffer & Kas 2024 for a review and meta-analysis). Highly educated immigrants interact with and compare themselves more with the majority population and expect to be treated on par with them. When their expectations are not met, they may experience relative deprivation (Teije et al. 2013). Indeed, compared to other immigrants, the highly educated report more discrimination and feel that the majority show less acceptance for minorities, which can be attributed to more exposure to public discourse, increased interaction with the majority, and heightened awareness of discrimination (Schaeffer & Kas 2024). This, in turn, is associated with more negative attitudes toward the majority population (De Vroome et al. 2014). On the other hand, research demonstrates that increased interaction with members of the majority is associated with more *positive* attitudes toward them. In this sense, immigrant-majority interaction may also serve as a buffer against negative experiences such as discrimination (Teije et al. 2013).

These findings hint at the potential importance of the relationship with the majority population for understanding the integration paradox, but there is a need for more research that can explore the meaning of friendships—or lack thereof—more

explicitly. In particular, there is little qualitative research that could provide a more in-depth understanding of this mechanism. One exception is the study by [Geurts et al. \(2021\)](#), which indicates that unmet expectations and experiences of exclusion in social life can be one of several factors that underpin the paradox. Adding to that, other research shows that there is an association between the share of friends who are from the host country and identification with that country (e.g., [Becker 2022](#); [Schulz & Leszczensky 2016](#))¹—the latter being the kind of outcome that is measured in research on the integration paradox. The current article may shed additional light on the potential role of friendships in the paradox.

INTEGRATION—FOR WHOM?

Apart from studies on the integration paradox, there is limited research on highly skilled immigrants through the lens of integration. In line with the linear understanding of integration, one reason for this may be that these individuals are assumed to be already ‘integrated’ due to their employment and educational credentials ([Kotavaara & Prokkola 2023](#)). Another reason may be that highly skilled migrants, particularly those from the Global North, are not expected to integrate in the first place. This notion connects with a broader critique of integration as a concept and research practice ([Favell 2019](#); [Klarenbeek 2024](#); [Schinkel 2017](#); [Schinkel 2018](#); [Spencer & Charsley 2021](#)). The critique suggests that integration becomes the responsibility of specific immigrant groups, positioning them as problematic outsiders. Others, such as white immigrants from the United States and Canada, or labor migrants within the European Union, are left out of research on integration because they do not belong to ‘problematic groups’ in the eyes of the state and integration researchers ([Anthias, 2014: 15](#); [Schinkel 2018: 4](#)). Arguably, the same situation applies to many highly skilled immigrants, particularly when ethnicity (whiteness) and class (higher education) align. Similarly, members of the majority population receive *dispensation* from integration. The discourse on integration frames it as a matter of individual responsibility rather than a challenge that encompasses society, including the majority population ([Schinkel 2018](#)). Thus, the significant difference is not, according to Schinkel, between people who are well-integrated versus people who are not, but ‘between those for whom integration is not an issue at all and those for whom it is’ ([Schinkel 2017: 3](#)). According to critics of the integration paradigm, this view can contribute to cementing differences between groups, for example by connecting social problems to a lack of integration rather than seeing them as a matter of social inequality ([Anthias 2014](#)).

The concept of integration has been criticized for being not only descriptive but also normative, often implying a predetermined ideal outcome ([Klarenbeek 2024](#)). Apart from labor market participation, integration outcomes are measured by looking at factors such as immigrants’ share of friends among the majority population, their religiosity, how many children they have, their upward mobility, etc. These are not descriptive but also proscriptive variables, as their value tells us something about the success or failure of integration. We want to emphasize that when we, in this article, focus on friendships with native Norwegians, it is not due to an a priori assumption that such friendships are inherently desirable or more valuable than other kinds of friendships. Rather, our focus reflects the importance our interviewees themselves placed on these relationships.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT ‘INTEGRATION’?

In light of the critique of integration outlined above, would it not be best to abandon the concept of integration altogether? There are alternative approaches that can remedy the shortcomings of the concept. For example, scholars have developed terms such as *anchoring* and *embedding* to challenge ‘linear and simplistic notions of migrant integration’ (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Ryan 2022: 1). Anchoring directs attention to the importance of sources of safety and stability in immigrants’ lives (Grzymala-Kazłowska 2016). Embedding focuses particularly on the social, political, and institutional contexts that immigrants navigate in their efforts to form attachments, both in the host country and transnationally (Ryan 2018). Both concepts are less influenced by policy concerns. For example, anchoring is distinctly less normative than a measure such as ‘identification with the host country’ or even the concept of belonging, which, in the context of integration research, is often explicitly concerned about identifying whether immigrants develop an increasingly strong sense of belonging to the host country. Both concepts also point to the possibility of dis-embedding or of anchors becoming less secure. This may, in turn, explain, for example, return or onward migration.

While we acknowledge the strength of other approaches and we find the critique of integration thought-provoking, we will not abandon integration as a concept in this article—though we will briefly return to the usefulness of anchoring and embedding in the discussion. In line with scholars such as Spencer and Charsley (2021), we believe it may be fruitful to use the term ‘integration’ while addressing some of the criticism that has been raised against it. First, we apply the concept in the context of a group that is usually not included in integration research—the highly skilled—and, by using the integration concept, we can also engage with the integration paradox literature. Second, we believe it is useful to use ‘integration’ in line with the critique that has been raised against it. Schinkel writes that the individualization of integration makes it a ‘decidedly un-social and non-relational concept’ (Schinkel 2018: 3). Similarly, Heckman wrote two decades ago that integration research should not only be about immigrants but also about natives (Heckmann 2005: 13). His point of view resonates with the call in recent years for ‘de-migrantization’ of integration research. One way of doing this is to re-orient research ‘away from “migrant populations” towards “overall populations”’ (Dahinden 2016: 2208). So far, however, this discussion has been largely theoretical, with few scholars actively approaching *empirical* analyses in this way. In this article, we attempt to explicitly apply de-migrantization to our empirical material by directing our attention toward the *majority* population and the cultural norms that shape social life in Norway. In the empirical analysis, we will, therefore, draw on anthropological research on Norwegian culture to shed light on our findings. By doing this, we hope to be better able to explain the barriers that our interviewees face.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHOD

The empirical material for this article was collected as part of the *Exit Norway* project, funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The study has been evaluated regarding research ethics and data confidentiality by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. We conducted interviews with immigrants from diverse backgrounds who had either left Norway or were still living there but were considering leaving. This article draws on 16 of these interviews, all with highly skilled immigrants. We define *highly skilled immigrants* as individuals who had obtained at least a master’s degree before coming to Norway, which was the case for all

interviewees except one; however, this individual was included in the sample due to his sought-after skills in IT programming.

Ten interviewees held degrees in engineering, several of them combined with an MBA. The remaining participants had educational backgrounds in fields such as management and marketing, art, communication, computer science, and social sciences. A majority (11) were engaged in STEM-related occupations—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—representing one of the key groups of highly skilled immigrants that nation-states actively seek to attract (Constant 2021: 133).

Participants originated from South Asia (4), East Asia (1), North America (5), Europe (5), and Latin America (1). All names used in the article are pseudonyms. The sample included seven men and nine women. Nine of the 16 participants had a partner or spouse, with only 1 partner being Norwegian, and 5 participants had children—in other words, most participants did not have children, and nearly half were single. These demographic factors may influence social integration, as having a partner—particularly a Norwegian one—and children may facilitate social connections.

Participants had lived in Norway for between 1.5 and 14 years, with a median stay of five years. Age-wise, two were in their 20s, five were in their 30s, seven were in their 40s, and two were in their 50s. At the time of the interviews, 10 participants were still living in Norway, while 6 had left—two had returned to their home countries, and four had moved to a third country. Participants were primarily recruited through the researchers' network or social media, including a paid Facebook advertisement that targeted individuals who had previously lived in Norway. Additionally, some participants reached out after reading about the project on the university's website. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo (Lumivero, Denver, CO, USA).

Notably, none of the interviewees came to Norway primarily for improved economic prospects; on the contrary, several reported taking a significant pay cut. Their motivations often included a desire for adventure, trying something new or 'exotic,' and an interest in nature and hiking. For two interviewees, close Norwegian friends whom they had met abroad were the key motivation for moving to Norway, highlighting how friendship, in these cases, served as a pull factor.

A note on potential biases in our sample is warranted. All but one of the interviewees were living in Oslo or its surrounding areas at the time of the interview. It is possible that Oslo may have distinct social norms around friendship compared to smaller towns or rural areas; moreover, there are more immigrants in Oslo, which may provide opportunities to make friends with others in a similar situation. Those who chose to participate may have been particularly motivated to share negative experiences. Some participants appeared to value the opportunity to express frustration—especially in contrast to the perceived expectation that immigrants should be almost uncritically grateful for what Norway offers. Others expressed a desire to better understand 'what is going on' with Norwegians in an effort to overcome the social challenges they encountered. These factors may have influenced the tone of the interviews, skewing them somewhat toward critical reflection.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSES

A common thread in many of the interviews was the difficulty of forging friendships with Norwegians. Some of the obstacles interviewees described are almost universally part of the experience of being new in a country. Research demonstrates

that it is common for immigrants to struggle to get a foothold in social life among locals, regardless of the host country (e.g., Kennedy 2004; Kotavaara & Prokkola 2023; Plöger & Becker 2015). Similarly, one of the interviewees, Dana, noted that it is always a challenge to get into social life in a new country. Having lived in 10 countries, in addition to Norway, she spoke from experience. However, Dana added, 'it is particularly difficult in Norway because of the culture.' In the following empirical section, we will explore why social integration may be a more substantial challenge in Norway than in some other countries.

FACING INVISIBLE FENCES

Many interviewees said that their friends belonged to what one of them described as the 'expat bubble,' a social circle that is quite separate from Norwegians. For those working in international companies, their friends were mostly other immigrants. While international friend groups could provide fun and comfort, several participants yearned for deeper, more lasting connections with Norwegians. However, across several interviews, participants described their struggles with making Norwegian friends using phrases like 'it's difficult to penetrate society' or 'I hit a lot of walls.' These expressions mirror the concept of *invisible fences*, a term developed by Marianne Gullestad to describe how Norwegians regulate proximity and distance in social life (Gullestad 1986; Gullestad 2002). Much communication in Norway is implicit and indirect (Rygg 2012: 37). Indeed, it can be difficult to understand what is happening when you stumble across invisible fences.

Judy is particularly articulate about these challenges. She describes her relief when she had overcome all the practical hurdles in the beginning, such as getting a bank account, an approved driver's license, and an ID number. But then a bigger hurdle appeared:

Yeah, I am set! And then Norwegian society is like: 'Great—we're not going to be your friend though! Like, you're a stranger, stranger danger, we don't talk to you.' And that is the number one problem I have. And it's certainly the number one problem of every single expat I have spoken to (Judy).

Judy thinks Norwegians are perfectly nice if you get the chance to talk to them, but they seem relieved when the conversation ends, 'when they can get back to their day and stop talking to a stranger.' She finds this silent resistance bewildering:

Like guys, is there something I could be doing? Should I talk more quietly, should I buy you more beer? I genuinely wish that I understood that. And, my God, would I love to poke at the general psychology behind Norwegians and their unfailing avoidance of acquiring new friends, because it's just bizarre to me (Judy).

On the surface, Norwegians appear polite and welcoming, but when Judy attempts to deepen the connection, they withdraw. As a result, social life with Norwegians remains barren. She summarizes:

Ultimately, even though Norwegians themselves are not unfriendly people, it feels like you're not welcome; that is the pervading effect: you're fine, we'll be nice to you, but you never get allowed in, you never get that closeness (Judy).

Her experiences resonate with the notion of invisible fences—they materialize through what Gullestad terms ‘distancing strategies,’ which involve the polite rejection of social contact (Gullestad 1986). Moreover, it can be difficult to overcome initial social barriers with Norwegians, as it is considered impolite in Norway to disturb others unnecessarily. This ‘distance rule of politeness’ centers on respecting people’s autonomy and personal space. Engaging with strangers only for social purposes is not that common in Norway, as ‘it is considered impolite to excessively impose on other people without having something proper (truthful, informative) to say’ (Rygg 2017: 10).

For some interviewees, the challenges they face in social life were part of their migration decision-making. For example, Phillip had already applied for a work visa in another country. When asked about the major reasons for moving from Norway, he replies: ‘Probably the social aspect; it’s really taking a huge toll on me.’ Similarly, Angela explains that, if she were to leave Norway, it would be for social reasons:

I like traveling and experiencing new places, but at some point, I think it’s important to settle down, at least for a period of time. I’m hesitant to do that here, if I just don’t feel like I have a real sense of community. And I don’t want it to just be friends from work, because they might leave.

Judy knows a lot of Americans who have been in Norway for years who still lack a Norwegian network. Seeing how they continue to struggle after many years, she feels discouraged about her own prospects: ‘In a few years’ time, if I feel like I really can’t [...] get some semblance of involved personal life over here, at that point, I have to ask myself: Why am I staying?’

‘MY ONE NORWEGIAN FRIEND’ AND ONE-NIGHT FRIENDSHIPS

Invisible fences appear to be widespread across life domains. Some interviewees explained that spaces where they typically forge friendships do not function the same way with Norwegians. For example, Angela used to make friends through yoga in the United States, but in Norway, people in yoga classes are quiet and leave right away when the class has finished. Similarly, two other interviewees, Phillip and Thomas, said that their weekly sports activities did not lead to friendships with locals. Phillip remarks, ‘even if you cut off both my hands, you could still count how many friends I managed to make [through various sports activities].’

The workplace offers another example. Judy explains that some of her closest friends in the United States are colleagues: ‘We hang out outside of work, and we become besties’—but this does not happen in Norway. Conversations typically revolve around the weather, weekend plans, and family, but the relationship seldom deepens beyond this. Peter describes how he has invited colleagues to social events. While they graciously accept, they ultimately fail to show up. He has perhaps not learned yet, in line with subtle distancing strategies, to know when people politely accept invitations, with both parties knowing that they will not show up, or when to politely turn down social invitations because you know they are not sincere.

According to Judy, there is a running joke among fellow Americans in Norway about ‘my one Norwegian friend.’ Laura’s story constitutes an exception to the picture, as she has several Norwegian friends whom she got to know prior to moving to Norway. She relates an anecdote that confirms the idea about the ‘one Norwegian friend.’

During Norwegian language class, the teacher asked people to raise their hand if they had zero, one, or two Norwegian friends:

And she was like ‘Laura, you didn’t raise your hand,’ and I’m like, ‘well, I’ve got five Norwegian friends’ and she’s like, ‘no you don’t’ and I was like ‘yeah,’ and she’s like, ‘no, they are *acquaintances*, not friends’ (Laura).

The teacher was baffled—nobody had ever had more than two Norwegian friends when she had asked this question previously. Laura’s story, while it reflects positive friendship experiences, is one of the exceptions in our material that confirms the rule.

According to the interviewees, there are exceptional circumstances that can lead to a breakthrough with Norwegians, but they tend to be fleeting. One might describe these moments as the friendship-equivalent to a one-night stand, which is often contingent on alcohol. In Norwegian culture, there is a significant emphasis on independence and self-control. However, one of the few contexts in which it is deemed acceptable to lose control is when alcohol is involved (Gullestad 1990: 52). ‘The circle immediately becomes open when you are three drinks down,’ Sam explains. Judy recalls the exhilaration she felt at a work party, when, after a couple of drinks, she and her colleagues were able to engage in more meaningful conversations. The problem, she explains, is that when you meet your colleagues the day after, ‘you go right back to where you were.’ When Norwegians act as though nothing occurred after a night of drunken camaraderie, it may serve as a way for them to restore the self-control that was momentarily abandoned. Thus, like with a one-night stand, one night of intimacy does not always develop into a long-term relationship.

ALONE TIME, HOME-CENTEREDNESS, AND FAMILY NORMS

The experiences we have described above demonstrate that interviewees feel the effects of social distancing and invisible fences in Norwegian social life. But *why* are people placed on the outside of these fences?

According to Gullestad, one reason is to preserve ‘peace and quiet’ (*fred og ro*), which are core values in Norwegian culture and frequently used to ‘justify and legitimate withdrawal from social relations’ (Gullestad 1990). To have peace in a Norwegian context, Gullestad writes, is to be free from disturbances from others: ‘Peace is something which can be destroyed by too much social interaction. Social interaction can lead to bother, anxiety, noise, disturbances, and conflicts, and [they] must, therefore, be limited’ (Gullestad 1990: 43). The notion of peace and quiet comes into expression when Norwegians say that they need their ‘own time’ or ‘alone time’ (*egentid* or *alenetid*). Many Norwegians place great importance on having personal space, believing that others share this need (Rygg 2012: 30). When someone expresses the desire for ‘alone time,’ it is accepted as a legitimate request for temporary social withdrawal. In contrast, other cultures may not prioritize peace and quiet to the same extent (Gullestad 1990: 57). Lorelou Desjardin, a French immigrant living in Norway, reflects on this cultural difference:

[I]t is polite in Norway to ‘give people their space.’ Literally. A space for reflection, a space for calm, giving them the opportunity to avoid unwanted social interaction. But wanting to be alone and silent is considered strange if not rude in many other cultures (Desjardin 2022).²

Similarly, Dana shares that, in Venezuela, it is not socially acceptable to decline an invitation to a party because you prefer staying at home. People there maintain closer connections with family and, as she puts it, 'we have a thousand friends.' In contrast, Norwegians she knows often decline social invitations, citing being 'too busy.' Dana doesn't believe this is necessarily true. Instead, she suggests that Norwegians simply do not prioritize social life as much. According to Dana, when Norwegians say they are 'busy,' it often serves as code for withdrawing into their homes:

What are you busy with? I think people have limited time for the social part of their lives, much more than in Venezuela. It's not that they are busy, but they don't have time for the social. People like sitting at home, watching Netflix (Dana).

Dana observes that family life in Norway is largely confined to the home. During our interview, which took place in a café, she remarked: 'Look around, there are no children.' She contrasted this with other countries, where children often accompany their parents to cafes, restaurants, and dinner parties. Rather than integrating children into their social lives, Norwegian parents, Dana notes, tend to focus on family life at home. Indeed, [Gullestad \(1991\)](#) describes 'home-centeredness' and 'familism' as key characteristics of Norwegian culture. The strong emphasis on gender equality and the nuclear family in Norway may contribute to this inward focus. While interviewees mention a good work-life balance as one of the perks of life in Norway, Dana argues that this balance doesn't necessarily translate into more time for socializing—particularly for parents with young children. 'Family time' is a prominent ideal in Norway. For parents with young children, this means that both mothers and fathers should dedicate themselves fully to family life after work, spending time together with the children before bedtime ([Pedersen 2014](#)). As a result, the shorter working hours that come with a good work-life balance primarily create more time for family activities, rather than social engagements outside the home.

EQUALITY AS SAMENESS

In Norway, there is a strong focus on social equality as a pillar in the welfare state. This emphasis on equality has significant implications for social life ([Gullestad 1991](#)). Gullestad argues that equality in Norway primarily signifies *sameness*, which is a prerequisite for intimate social relationships. If Norwegians perceive the difference between themselves and another person as too great, they tend to distance themselves politely ([Gullestad 2002](#)). The conflict avoidance that is characteristic of Norwegian culture ([Schramm-Nielsen 2002](#)) is also tied to the notion of sameness, as it serves to prevent and conceal conflict, as well as to uphold the value of peace and quiet.

The emphasis on sameness in Norwegian culture is evident in the conformity seen in surface-level matters, such as appearances. Several interviewees were struck by what they perceived as a lack of individuality among Norwegians. Judy, for instance, was surprised to find that Norwegians seem to drive only four basic types of cars in shades of white, gray, or black; to paint their houses in similar tones; and to share common tastes in home interiors, clothing, and footwear. She contrasts this conformity with the United States, where, as she puts it, 'You want to be different and distinctive, you want uniqueness.' However, the conformity described by the interviewees does not necessarily imply that individualism is not valued in Norway. [Gullestad \(1991\)](#) suggests

that, in Scandinavian culture, there exists a unique form of *egalitarian* individualism, which is paradoxically compatible with conformity. Norwegian individualism is about independence, but it does not manifest in standing out as an individual in ways that would disrupt the ideal of sameness.

Although conformity may seem to concern trivial matters, it holds deeper significance. Some interviewees note that it creates a sense of limited acceptance for diverse ways of living. Moreover, conformity plays a crucial role in social life, as it both fosters and signals sameness—something that, in the Norwegian context, is key to being accepted. Phillip touches on some of these points:

I feel that, in Norway, we have this A4 square life, that everyone has the same and should be the same and act the same and live the same. And if anyone else, God forbid, deviates from this idea, it's an absolute no-go, and you have a silent unspoken resistance that you can feel from people and society immediately (Phillip).

When one does not conform, invisible fences may arise, leading to a subtle form of exclusion. Judy, too, suggests that conformity in Norway extends beyond surface-level matters. The cumulative effect of societal conformity can function as a powerful mechanism of exclusion:

The level of conformity, the level of sameness, is mildly frustrating. Most of the time, it's just funny, but when you take all of these things together into one feeling, it's almost like 'you must be this thing, otherwise you're not one of us' (Judy).

In the face of immigration, there is an intensified demand for 'imagined sameness,' according to Gullestad. While immigrants are expected to conform to this sameness, she suggests that, even if they do, it will not necessarily dismantle the invisible fences: "Immigrants" are asked to "become Norwegian," at the same time as it is tacitly assumed that this is something they can never really achieve' (Gullestad 2002: 59).

SMALL, CLOSED CIRCLES

Several interviewees note that Norwegians tend to stick to small, closed friend circles: 'People are just happy with the friend groups they've had for a long time,' Angela explains. Similarly, Xenia says, 'you have to be born here, go to kindergarten, and attend school in Norway to make any close friends.' As several interviewees point out, this tendency to remain within familiar groups means that new individuals are rarely included. Dana recounts with bewilderment that she heard Norwegians say that they have enough friends or don't have time for more. In her home country, by contrast, there is a sense that more friends are always welcome.

According to several interviewees, one reason why it is difficult to break into Norwegian social circles is that Norwegians often keep friends separate. This practice limits their capacity to socialize with a broader group, as time must be allocated to each friend or group individually. Susanna shares that she was told it is considered rude in Norway to mix friends: 'They would feel it both rude to me and rude to their friends if I were to join an event that they typically have just for themselves.' Phillip contrasts this with the social norms in his home country: 'In my country, we tend to mix people. Like, I'm meeting this guy—do you want to come as well? And then they meet, and they're no longer strangers.'

Another explanation for the reluctance to mix friends may lie in the Norwegian emphasis on sameness and the aversion to conflict. When people from different walks of life come together, their differences are likely to become more apparent, potentially disrupting what in Norway and Denmark is referred to as *kos* or *hygge*. While these terms are difficult to translate, the linguistic anthropologist Levisen explains *hygge* as a ‘pleasant, attentive, and relaxed mode of “togetherness”’ (Levisen 2013, 80). Although Levisen discusses the term in the Danish context, it originates from Norwegian and carries similar cultural connotations in Norway. *Hygge* is closely tied to conflict-avoidant and consensus-seeking social interactions within small groups of friends who know each other well.

Hygge can also be linked to the norm discussed earlier regarding the reluctance to mix friend groups, a tendency that has also been observed in Denmark. Denmark is often described as a distinctly ‘groupy’ country, where social life revolves around belonging to tight-knit groups, with a preference for keeping these groups separate, as each has its own social dynamics: ‘If mixed, the benefits of the groupy social dynamics can easily be lost, and *hygge* would be harder to achieve’ (Levisen 2013: 102). Inadvertently, this emphasis on ‘pleasant togetherness’ can lead to the exclusion of foreigners (Levisen 2013: 112).

Another factor contributing to social exclusivity in Norway may be the cultural tendency toward *home-centeredness* (Gullestad 1991), as discussed earlier. In many other countries, social life is primarily conducted in public spaces—such as cafés, pubs, or parks—which are open and more inclusive. Norway, by contrast, lacks a strong historical tradition of pub or restaurant culture (Gullestad 2013). Instead, the home has long served as a central venue for social interaction. However, several interviewees note that Norwegians often have a high threshold for inviting others into their homes. As one participant observed: ‘There is a bit of a fear about bringing people into your personal space, which is home.’ For example, it is not as common for Norwegians to invite a new colleague from work into their home, as friendship is generally expected to be well established before such an invitation is extended (Longva 2003). Gullestad similarly notes: ‘For Norwegians, the home is a concrete material manifestation of special relationships’ (Gullestad 1992: 54). It is possible that some of the social norms governing private, home-based interactions extend into public settings, creating subtle boundaries that restrict access to social circles. Just as it would be seen as unusual—even inappropriate—to bring an unfamiliar guest into someone’s home, it may also be frowned upon to introduce an unknown person to a group in public, such as at a café or a pub. If this interpretation holds, it suggests that the logic of small, exclusive social units—rooted in domestic life—shape social interactions outside of the home as well.

THE WELFARE STATE

Finally, the social exclusivity of groups in Norway may be connected to broader features of Norwegian society. The strong welfare state reduces individuals’ dependence on family or social networks for economic or social security (Esping-Andersen 2001). While this strengthens individual autonomy and freedom, it may also entail that relationships become less close and intimate. As such, there may be a trade-off between autonomy and social isolation. Moreover, this environment, which decreases dependency on partners, family, and friends for social and economic security, may be particularly conducive to what Giddens (2013) describes as ‘pure relationships’—bonds maintained not out of necessity or tradition but rather sustained by mutual emotional

engagement, personal disclosure, and intrinsic reward. In Norway, where individual autonomy is emphasized and material needs are largely met by the state, the ideal of pure relationships may apply not only to romantic partnerships, which Giddens writes about, but also to friendships. Such friendships, which prioritize emotional authenticity and mutual understanding, are more likely to thrive in one-on-one contexts or within small groups. This aligns with Gullestad's (1992: 53) account of the ideals underpinning social closeness in Norway: care, authenticity, informality, honesty, equality, and the sense that 'all parties can be whole persons with one another.' In this context, superficial interactions or casual acquaintances—more common in larger group settings—may be seen as less meaningful. Indeed, the cultural tendency to view small-talk as insincere or unnecessary (Longva 2003) likely contributes to the reluctance to facilitate socialization within larger groups. This may help explain the norm against 'mixing friends' in Norwegian social life.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this article, we explore the social integration of highly skilled immigrants in Norway. In the literature about highly skilled immigrants, they are often described as a flexible labor source, detached, always on the move, and 'being rather unconstrained by social and emotional ties to a certain place' (Diehl & Trittler 2024: 1778). While this description may apply to some segments of highly skilled labor immigrants, several of our interviewees expressed a deep-seated wish for deeper social and emotional ties to Norwegians. This article contributes to several discussions in migration studies.

First, our findings shed new light on the integration paradox. We suggest that friendships—or lack thereof—may contribute to producing the paradox. Highly educated immigrants interact *more* with members of the majority compared to other immigrants (Teije et al. 2013). However, if they, at the same time, fail to form deeper relationships with them, it may trigger a stronger sense of social exclusion. Moreover, people may be more important than places for determining whether or not highly skilled feel at home somewhere. As Geurts et al. (2021: 73) point out, some highly educated immigrants have a cosmopolitan outlook—they feel like they can belong anywhere and nowhere. If someone does not feel a strong sense of belonging to a nation, then perhaps they are particularly dependent on friends to feel *anchored* somewhere, to use a term we discussed earlier. In fact, *anchoring* may be better suited than *belonging* to describe what our interviewees were searching for when they tried to make friends with Norwegians. Many of them did have anchors in their international communities, but these were fragile because people came and left frequently. Relationships with native Norwegians could make for more solid anchors, with the potential of facilitating embeddedness in Norwegian culture (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Ryan 2022). Establishing such anchors into the host society can prevent immigrants from drifting onward to another country or back home, and they may perhaps also reduce the integration paradox. Future research should explore whether the paradox is less prominent among highly skilled immigrants who not only interact with natives frequently but also who have a larger share of friends among them.

Second, our findings contribute to research on migration decision-making by highlighting noneconomic factors as drivers of onward and return migration. While traditional theories—such as the neo-classical model—emphasize economic austerity as a primary motivator for migration, our data suggest that *interpersonal austerity* may

play a comparable role³ (we elaborate on this term below). For several participants, limited social integration into Norwegian circles outweighed considerations such as salary or career advancement when reflecting on the benefits and drawbacks of life in Norway. This finding is in line with other research, which shows that income plays a secondary role when highly educated immigrants decide to migrate onward or return to their country of origin (Constant & D'Agosto, 2010; Gibson & McKenzie 2011). Other research examining the relationship between socioeconomic integration and return intentions suggests that socio-cultural integration—including friendships with natives—can significantly increase the likelihood of immigrants remaining in the host country (e.g., Constant & Massey 2002; De Haas et al. 2015). We propose that, for highly skilled immigrants, friendships may be particularly salient in decisions about staying or exiting, as they often have a wide variety of choices as to where they can settle—and even more so for immigrants without a partner or children.

Finally, our research contributes to ongoing debates about integration. Critics of integration research contend that it often places undue emphasis on the attributes of immigrants—such as their human and social capital—as the primary explanation for integration outcomes, thereby framing success or failure as an individual responsibility (Schinkel 2018; Spencer & Charsley 2021). Responding to calls to ‘de-migrantize’ integration research (Dahinden 2016), we have sought to shift the analytical focus from immigrants to the broader society in our empirical analysis. This means turning our attention to the host society to better understand the social-integration challenges experienced by participants. To this end, we draw on Gullestad’s concept of invisible fences and research on cultural norms that shape social life in Norway.

Such fences contribute to what we describe as a sense of *interpersonal austerity*. While ‘austerity’ can refer to strictness in appearance or demeanor, suggesting someone who is stern and inaccessible, that is not the intended meaning here. Although several interviewees describe Norwegians as reserved, they also emphasize that they are polite and friendly. Instead, we draw on the economic sense of austerity, which denotes scarcity. Interpersonal austerity conveys the idea that social capacity is treated as a limited resource in Norway. It is often reserved for a small, established circle, with clear social norms governing who may be included. This form of austerity can foster a perception among immigrants that social boundaries in Norway are difficult to cross, leaving them with a persistent sense of being outsiders.

In policy debates on integration, the white majority population and certain immigrant groups—in particular, those from Western countries—are often excluded from the discussion (Schinkel 2018). With this in mind, we sought to apply the concept of integration to a group typically omitted from such debates—namely, highly skilled immigrants. A finding both in our study and in previous research is that these immigrants tend to stay in the ‘expat bubble’ and socialize mostly with other foreigners. When similar patterns are observed among other migrants, it frequently provokes concern about the emergence of ‘parallel societies.’ But, as we have demonstrated, interviewees did not remain in parallel societies due to a lack of interest in the host society. In line with Gullestad (2002: 52), we recognize that immigrants may keep to themselves not out of choice but because of barriers within the host society. Highly skilled immigrants occupy a privileged position within the immigrant hierarchy and are generally viewed positively by the majority population (Koskela 2014). In theory, their conditions for social integration are, therefore, particularly favorable. When they nonetheless face significant challenges, it speaks volumes about the barriers

that other groups encounter in the process of ‘integrating.’ It also calls into question the common perception that lack of integration stems primarily from immigrants’ unwillingness to become part of the host society (Anthias 2014: 16). Our findings suggest that integration outcomes cannot be understood without critically examining the norms and gatekeeping practices within the majority population.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

NOTES

- 1 Of course, it is possible that the causality is reversed, i.e., that those who identify more with the host country are more prone to making friends with locals.
- 2 Translated from Norwegian.
- 3 Frykman, M. P. and Mozetič, K. 2020. ‘The importance of friends: Social life challenges for foreign physicians in Southern Sweden’. *Community, Work & Family*, 23, pp. 385–400. These authors similarly write about ‘time poverty’ in Sweden.

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