Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjms20

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To cite this article: Aram Hur (2022): Migrant integration and the psychology of national belonging, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2022.2132381

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2132381

Published online: 25 Oct 2022.

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JOURNAL OF ETHNIC AND MIGRATION STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2132381

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Migrant integration and the psychology of national belonging

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ABSTRACT

What aids the successful integration of migrants? Most works focus on the host state's policies and goals, but belonging is an interactive process. I examine how migrant beliefs about national belonging – how they see membership in the host society and their relative place in it – shape their integration trajectories. I focus on North Korean refugees in South Korea, a case of co-ethnic integration that naturally controls for many confounders of successful integration and offers a hard test for whether migrant beliefs matter. By combining refugee personal narratives with survey data on their integration outcomes, I develop a theory of how refugees' own belonging ideals act as a perceptual lens that shapes their psychological receptiveness to the host state's integration efforts. This migrant-centric approach sheds light on why certain kinds of integration programs are effective in some places, but not others, and how the belonging aspirations of migrants – beyond their demographic or origin attributes – matter to integration.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 May 2022
Accepted 30 September 2022

KEYWORDS

Migrant integration; belonging; nation; North Korean refugees

Introduction

As global migration rates continue to increase, how to best integrate newcomers as responsible and contributing members is a central political challenge in host democracies. A growing literature in political science looks at the drivers of successful integration, such as how the timing of naturalization, asylum wait lengths, or different kinds of civic or assimilationist integration regimes shape the economic and political outcomes of migrants (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Lawrence 2016; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Peitrantuono 2017; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Ward 2019). Most such studies focus on the host state's strategies and goals, while migrants are implicitly portrayed as 'simply inheriting these ideas, using them, and adapting to them' (Bertossi 2011, 1562).

Yet migrants are hardly blank slates. Migrants bring a rich set of life experiences that shape how they see the world and their place in it.[1] These pasts inform their present and futures, shaping attitudes and behaviors toward the host society, but also their very motivations to integrate. Depending on the most immediate needs of the migrant, the goal of integration can vary widely, from securing legal status to obtaining economic

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed http://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2132381.

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and political rights. Yet in its fullest form, integration is about becoming part of 'the mainstream of economic, academic, and political life in the country' and seeking membership in a new national community (Kymlicka 1995, 15).

How do migrants understand national belonging in their host societies? What do they deem and desire as 'real' belonging? This study delves into migrant psychology of national belonging as an important variable in successful integration. By psychology of national belonging, I refer to the dynamic process by which migrant understandings of national membership shape their receptiveness to integration. My aim is not only to describe migrant beliefs about belonging, but to trace how they gain causal force by framing migrants' belonging aspirations, perceptions of the host state, and ultimately, their openness to state-led integration efforts.

Better understanding migrant psychology can shed light on what have been inconsistent and at times puzzling effects of integration policies. For instance, mandatory language exams, civic education, and job training – part of a bundle of policies often referred to as 'civic integration' (Joppke 2007) – have yielded mixed results. Some studies find improvement in migrants' economic outcomes, but not their social or political integration, and others find little long-term gains (Wright and Bloemraad 2012; Goodman and Wright 2015; Neureiter 2019).

Yet it is difficult to know what such findings reveal about the effectiveness of integration programs because of what Goodman (2015) calls the principle-implementation gap. Much is known about the host state's goals and intentions in designing integration programs, but much less is known about the other side of the process: how migrants experience such state efforts. A theory about the latter can contribute to 'our understanding of appropriate scope conditions and conceptual contexts of found results' (Goodman 2015, 1908).

Empirically, I focus on the integration of North Korean refugees in South Korea. While North Korean 'refugee' is the popularized terminology, this population occupies an interesting space between refugee and migrant. They are refugees in that they are defectors from the dictatorial regime who cannot return home due to threat of persecution. Yet they also closely resemble migrants as most leave in search of better economic and life opportunities, ultimately choosing to migrate to South Korea. For these reasons, I refer to this specific population as refugee and migrant interchangeably in this study.

The national identity politics of the Korean case offers a strong research design for the study. Because successful integration is typically the compounded result of many different factors, it is difficult to isolate any one variable's effect. For instance, as per Alba (2005)'s work on integration, the same ethnic background of a migrant can yield 'bright' or 'blurred' boundary lines vis-à-vis natives depending on the social context of which ethnic cleavages are salient, imposing difficult or easier barriers to assimilation, respectively. Even within the same host country, integration requirements, support programs, and eligibility for such policies can vary across migrant populations of differing origins.

Most of these variables are naturally controlled for in the Korean case. The two Koreas, despite radically different governments, still mutually uphold the principle of one nation. The South Korean government treats North Korean refugees as co-nationals who are eligible for South Korean citizenship upon entry. While there are noticeable differences in dialect between the two groups, the ethno-cultural barriers to integration

are minimal compared to most cases in the West. The Korean case also offers uniformity across integration program content, eligibility, and exposure. All North Korean refugees are required to complete the same three-month integration program at *Hanawon*, the government's resettlement center, before entering South Korean society. With the typical confounders of successful integration controlled for or greatly minimized, I can better focus on the role that migrant psychology of national belonging plays.

The theory development proceeds in two steps. In the inductive step, I analyze the personal narratives of North Korean refugees to examine how they talk about national belonging and integration in their own words. Most North Koreans in my sample see national belonging in South Korea as layered. Legal belonging, ethnic belonging, and civic belonging – in that order – are seen as distinct thresholds for becoming a 'real' South Korean. A refugee's belonging aspiration – the form of national belonging she most desires and needs – depends on where she places herself in that membership hierarchy. For instance, North Koreans who see their co-ethnic status as uncertain strive to achieve ethno-cultural belonging first and foremost, whereas those who feel secure in their co-ethnic status aspire to the highest layer of civic belonging. Even in a co-ethnic and putatively co-national integration setting, subjective belonging aspirations vary a great deal among North Korean refugees (Hur 2018).

Belonging aspirations serve as a powerful lens that frames the integration experience for North Korean refugees. Integration marks the beginning of a new and uncertain relationship with the host state. As newcomers, refugees try to assess the inclusive intent of the host state based on the limited information they have. Implicitly or explicitly, the integration program signals the belonging ideal that the host state expects of new members. I find that North Korean refugees perceive that intent through the colored lens of their own belonging aspirations. When the belonging ideals of host and refugee are seen as convergent, refugees see the host state as inclusive toward them and are more likely to embrace the content of integration training. In contrast, when belonging ideals are seen as divergent, refugees see the host state as othering and tend to doubt or resist the same training.

In the deductive step, I analyze whether the psychological mechanism identified in the narratives predicts divergent integration trajectories for the two groups. Using individualized survey data on North Korean refugees, I find that refugees who hold divergent belonging ideals from the host state score consistently lower on employability and civic attitudes, the two main integration outcomes targeted by Hanawon. This gap exists despite both groups expressing similar levels of satisfaction with the Hanawon experience and persists even after matching the two groups on demographic and background characteristics.

Incorporating migrant psychology of national belonging into theories of integration makes several contributions. First, this migrant-centric approach illuminates why similar integration policies may be effective in some places and on some groups, but backfire in others. Second, the findings expand prior work on suitcase socialization and acculturation to show how political experiences prior to entry not only shape migrant attitudes and behaviors, but their aspirations for national belonging in the host society. Finally, the study suggests that cases of co-ethnic integration may not be as simple as they seem. At first blush, North Korean refugees in South Korea appear to be a clear success case for civic integration programs since co-ethnic capital

between migrants and natives is exceptionally high. Yet I find that it is precisely in contexts where ethnic conceptions of national belonging are salient among migrants that exclusively civic approaches by the host state are most likely to backfire. Even as civic integration policies have quickly gained popularity in many Western democracies (Joppke 2007), this study casts doubt on the exportable merits of the 'civic turn' for host countries in East Asia and other regions where intra-regional and co-ethnic migration is prevalent.

Negotiating belonging: an iterative approach

Migrant integration takes many different forms, from economic integration by necessity to social assimilation, which can take generations. At its core, integration is about negotiating belonging in a new host nation. Despite the tendency to see belonging as the responsibility of the migrant, national belonging is an interactive process. It depends as much on the newcomers' aspirations to belong as it does on the host's intent to include.

Important prior work on integration examines this interactive nexus. For instance, Crul and Schneider (2010) show that much of the variation in migrant engagement with their local communities can be explained by differences in institutional context. Berry (2005)'s influential work on acculturation models the trade-off that migrants face between the value they place on retaining their native culture versus adopting the host culture, which ultimately dictates their strategy of adaptation. As migrants make these difficult choices based on the social and familial support they have, Portes and Zhou (1993) show that for many second-generation immigrants, assimilation is increasingly segmented, where integration into different areas of society proceed at different speeds and depth. Migrant choices are also heavily affected by the baggage they bring. Suitcase socialization theory posits that pre-migration political experiences significantly shape how migrants develop partisan attachments, engage in politics, and advocate for representation in their host societies (Wals 2011; Ishiyama and Silva 2020). In short, migrants' past experiences and histories interact with their present contexts to shape their futures.

In this study, I focus specifically on migrant beliefs and aspirations for national belonging. There is good reason to suspect that such ideals matter for integration. Prior work finds that the need for belonging drives many kinds of migrant or immigrant behaviors. The desire to belong motivates high levels of political participation by Latino immigrants, beyond what is predicted by conventional socioeconomic factors (Ocampo 2018), and explains secondary migration patterns in the United States as refugees seek to build subnations of their origin within the host nation (Mossaad et al. 2020). A rich ethnographic literature details how migrants creatively achieve their belonging aspirations outside the purviews of the host state when official support or legal protections fall short (Choo 2016; Moran 2019). Belonging aspirations can also explain resistance to host society. Fouka (2020) finds that many German Americans further withdrew from American society as a reaction to the English-only policy implemented in public schools after World War I.

If nations are 'imagined communities' (Anderson 2006), then in the context of integration, it matters to what extent those imaginations are shared between migrant and

host. For migrants, integration is the beginning of a new political partnership with the host state. As migrants try to assess the inclusive intent of the host state, integration policies serve as a powerful heuristic. Implicitly or explicitly, integration policies – in their content and conditions – embody the host state's ideals about national membership and the expectations it holds for newcomers: '[W]e can look at citizenship policies – the rules that make it more or less difficult to acquire citizenship – as reflections of state understandings of membership' (Goodman 2012, 670). Integration policies are designed not only to help migrants belong, but also to define how the host state envisions the boundaries of that belonging.

How do migrant aspirations for national belonging and the host state's ideals interact and to what effect on integration? To answer this question, I take an iterative approach that begins with an inductive qualitative analysis of migrant personal narratives to understand their psychology of national belonging, followed by a deductive quantitative analysis of integration outcomes. This approach offers two advantages. First, combining inductive and deductive methods within the same migrant population builds a strong case for the internal validity of the proposed theory. Second, by sequencing a qualitative analysis of integration experience, as seen through the eyes of migrants themselves, with a quantitative analysis of integration outcomes, I can trace not just whether, but *how* migrants' belonging aspirations come to shape their integration trajectories.

The inductive step begins with personal narrative interviews of North Korean refugees in South Korea. Personal narratives are stories that individuals tell about their own lives. The storytelling agency in these narratives reveals a great deal about how individuals understand cause and effect, good and bad, and how they place themselves in relation to others (Patterson and Monroe 1998; Gone, Miller, and Rappaport 1999). Thus, they are an excellent data source for identifying how migrant beliefs about national belonging form and shape their integration experience (Geurts, Davids, and Spierings 2020).

In brief, two interesting findings emerge from the inductive analysis. First, North Korean refugees tend to see national belonging as layered in South Korea, and where they see themselves in that hierarchy is typically solidified prior to entry, through critical boundary-setting experiences during migration. Second, once in South Korea, such beliefs color how refugees perceive the inclusive intent of the host state and react to its integration efforts. Perceived convergence in belonging ideals between refugee and host opens psychological receptiveness to the host's integration efforts, whereas divergence seeds psychological resistance to the same program.

In the deductive step, I connect this psychological mechanism identified in the narratives to divergent integration outcomes using individualized survey data from the broader refugee population. I show that refugees who hold divergent belonging aspirations from the host state score consistently lower across all the integration outcomes targeted by Hanawon. That difference persists even after matching the two refugee groups on demographics and other background characteristics and despite all North Korean refugees undergoing the same integration program in South Korea.

My claim is that refugees' own belonging aspirations color the way that they see and respond to the host state's integration efforts, with tangible effects on their integration outcomes. The case of North Korean refugees in South Korea offers several advantages for tracing out this theory, to which I turn next.

South Korea's civic integration of North Korean refugees

The two Koreas have radically different governments – the North is a dictatorship while the South is a leading regional democracy – but nevertheless share a special relationship as a singular national community. The notion of national indivisibility traces back to a survival response to Japanese colonialism in the early twentieth century. To preserve the Korean nation despite the loss of political authority, Korean nationalist leaders reimagined and 'racialized' the nation as a singular bloodline (*danilminjok*), placing its continuity in the preservation of the united people, rather than a specific monarchical dynasty (Robinson 1984; Shin 2006). After independence from Japan, rival elite factions emerged along Cold War ideological lines and competed for political power. Yet even as a Soviet-backed Northern faction fought the U.S.-aligned Southern faction in the Korean War, both sides claimed to represent the best interests of the ethnic Korean nation. An armistice eventually split the peninsula into de facto separate states.

Today, more than seventy years since the division, many younger South Koreans feel less connected to their Northern brethren, with feelings of co-nationality complicated by the security threat posed by the North and the economic burdens of a potential reunification. Nevertheless, co-nationality as a political principle survives in both Koreas, in part because it has proven to be politically useful. Both Koreas have strategically appealed to the co-nationality principle to claim legitimacy over the entirety of the peninsula and to curtail foreign influence over matters related to reunification (Shin, Freda, and Yi 1999).

The co-nationality principle is the foundation for South Korea's integration approach toward North Korean refugees (Son 2016). Nearly 34,000 North Korean refugees reside in South Korea, with an average of 1,000 new entrants annually until a sharp decline since the onset of the COVID pandemic.[2] According to the Ministry of Unification, over 70 percent of North Korean refugees are women, which is largely a function of the ease by which brokers can smuggle or place them in China, the neighboring country through which most North Koreans begin their migration journey. While the overwhelming majority ultimately choose South Korea as their destination, some choose to relocate to countries outside of Asia, such as the United Kingdom or United States (Greitens 2021).

The primary reason for leaving varies by time of exit. During the mass famine period known as the Arduous March in the late 1990s, most refugees defected for reasons of humanitarian survival. In contrast, the more recent wave of refugees beginning in the late 2000s cite reasons such as desire for social mobility and economic freedom, expressing frustration with North Korea's strict caste system known as *songbun* (Collins 2012). Such motivations place recent North Korean refugees, who comprise my sample, much closer to the category of a migrant.

Upon entering South Korea and clearing security checks, all North Korean refugees are eligible for South Korean citizenship. North Koreans also receive financial support from the South Korean government for housing, medical expenses, and education to jumpstart their new lives. This treatment is unique to North Koreans (Chung 2020). South Korea maintains stringent barriers to naturalization and offers minimal support to other migrant groups, including co-ethnic return migrants from China (*joseonjok*),

and approves less than five percent of asylum cases in most years. This exceptionalism toward North Koreans is generally seen as unproblematic by the Korean public, who see cultural threat to an ethnically homogeneous Korean nation as the primary concern with increasing migration (Ha and Jang 2015).

The hallmark of South Korea's integration approach toward North Koreans is *Hanawon*, the government resettlement center where all North Korean refugees are required to complete three-months of integration training before they can join South Korean society. Hanawon, which translates to 'house of unity,' is almost exclusively focused on strengthening the civic skills and employability of North Korean refugees. Table 1 shows the curricular breakdown of the courses that refugees take at Hanawon. Nearly half of the total course hours is devoted to job training, which includes classes on how to prepare for interviews, speak modernized business Korean, and the development of basic technical skills. The next priority is courses on civics education, which include textbook courses on South Korea's civic history and the civic responsibilities of a democratic citizen, but also practicum courses on how to vote in free elections, open a bank account, and understand legal contracts. In all, nearly 70 percent of Hanawon's education is devoted to 'training for social adaptation,' as the Ministry of Unification states.[3]

This 'workfare' approach to integration is predicated on the principle of co-nationality with North Koreans (Park 2016). Upholding that principle preempts the South Korean state from taking any formal efforts toward the ethno-cultural belonging of North Koreans, as doing so would betray co-nationality between all Koreans. The 'supposed homogeneity of Korean bloodline as the *raison d'être* for unification,' which both Koreas have strategically leveraged to claim legitimacy over the entirety of the peninsula, implies that 'no explicit effort is needed to restore mutual trust and homogeneity' with North Koreans (Kim 2016, 192–193). With ethnic belonging taken as a political given, Hanawon's integration program focuses on training North Korean refugees for civic membership.

Despite completing the same integration program at Hanawon, however, North Korean refugees vary widely in their integration outcomes. Some North Koreans become active participants in South Korean politics and society, whereas others become social hermits who struggle to adjust to South Korea's free capitalist society (Lankov 2006). What explains this divergence? The next section turns to refugee personal narratives to identify how their beliefs about national belonging shape their integration experience.

Table 1. Hanawon's civic integration curriculum.

Curriculum	Hours	Percent (%)
Job training	173	43
Civic and social education	103	25
Initial settlement education	57	14
Health education	46	11
Life plan construction	27	7
Total	406	100

From the '2018 Social Adaptation Training Program Outline.' Course materials and texts accessed by personal visit to *Hanawon* in August, 2018.

Theory-building: how belonging ideals shape integration

I conducted 31 personal narrative interviews with North Korean refugees in the summer of 2013.[4] Subjects were snowball-sampled from job training centers in Seoul and Incheon. Vocal consent was obtained before recording. To maximize privacy, I conducted the interviews in locations with no stationary audience, such as open parks, subway platforms, or refugee apartments. Interviews lasted anywhere between two to five hours and subjects were paid about $50 for their time. The narrative sample includes 26 women and 5 men between the ages of 22 and 56. The sample gender ratio reflects the female skew in the broader North Korean refugee population. My sample is comprised of recent entrants who have spent five years or less in South Korea, inclusive of the three months at Hanawon. Because I am interested in how the psychology of national belonging sets refugees on distinct integration trajectories, entrants who are at the beginning stage of their integration make the ideal sample.

Personal narrative interviews are unlike the standard structured interview. The goal is to maximize storytelling agency by the subject with minimal disruptions. I told subjects that I was interested in their life story leading up to the present. I gently guided them to share stories from three distinct phases in their lives: pre-defection life in North Korea, during migration, and post-entry life in South Korea, including their stay at Hanawon. Each personal narrative was schematically coded and converted into a chronologically organized matrix to easily visualize any critical junctures (Miles and Huberman 1994). I apply process tracing, a method typically used in comparative historical analysis to determine cause and effect, to the refugees' personal histories.

I find that North Korean refugees see national membership in South Korea as hierarchically *layered*, in similar fashion to Marshall (1950)'s well-known framework of multidimensional citizenship. As Figure 1 shows, national belonging is seen as fully achieved only when legal, ethno-cultural, and civic forms of belonging – in that order – are sequentially fulfilled.[5] A refugee's belonging aspiration – the form of national belonging

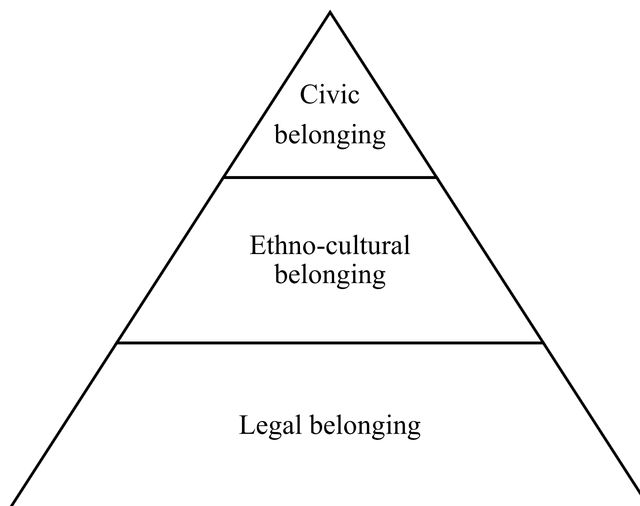

Figure 1. Layered national belonging as seen by North Korean refugees.

she most desires and needs – is shaped by where she currently sees herself in this hierarchy. The narratives show that refugees gain the sense of identity security to aspire for the next layer of belonging only when they feel that the preceding layer has been met.

The base layer is legal belonging, which refugees describe as the right to stay in a country without threat of repatriation. Most North Koreans begin their migration journey through China, which does not recognize their international refugee status and repatriates them upon discovery. The personal narratives from this phase show an intense yearning for legal belonging, likening a person without a country as 'a dog on the streets without a master.' In fact, many refugees identified legal insecurity as the primary reason that they decided to risk everything once more to come to South Korea.

> 'When I first went to China, all I could think about was the fear of being caught. After a while, I heard that a North Korean had died while working and they couldn't bury him anywhere because he doesn't have proper identification in China. It made me feel so empty. At least you deserve a proper burial at the end of your life. That is when I began thinking about coming to South Korea.' (Female, 49 years old, 2 years since entry)

> 'I came to China with the naïve thought that I could live better here. But that was not the case. I got sold to an empty field and didn't speak the language. And I didn't have an identity. Every day I lived like a mouse afraid of being caught by the cat. That is when I thought, I cannot live here either. That is when I thought to come to South Korea.' (Female, 56 years old, 3 years since entry)

It is only after refugees enter South Korea, once legal belonging is secured, that their personal narratives begin to mention aspirations for deeper kinds of national belonging. The immediate desire and expectation that follows legal security is ethno-cultural belonging. This belonging is based on the historicized principle of a singular Korean bloodline, but North Korean refugees vary significantly on whether they have internalized their co-ethnic status vis-à-vis South Koreans. A common assumption is that such variation is backlash to discriminatory experiences in South Korea. In fact, the personal narratives show that for many North Korean refugees in my sample, belief in ethno-cultural belonging with South Koreans is solidified *prior* to entry into South Korea through a surprising critical juncture: the experience of significant and sustained national discrimination during their layover in China.

For most North Korean refugees, prior to defection, travel beyond North Korean borders was strictly prohibited. Post-defection migration is therefore the first time that they experience their national identity as something that is selectable and contested. In this fluid window, whether refugees experience their first significant national 'othering' from the Chinese, a putative national out-group, or from South Koreans, a putative national in-group, serves as a formative moment in their national boundary-setting. Recent applications of social identity theory to immigrant and native relations show that the salience of the criterion used to categorize in-versus out-groups is affected by significant identity events or changes to demography (Fouka and Tabellini 2022; Zhou and Rosenzweig 2021). In the case of North Korean refugees, which group is seen as perpetrating the first national othering subsequently shapes whether they categorize South Koreans as one of 'us' or 'them.'

Refugees who experience significant national discrimination from the Chinese, a putative out-group, develop a strong defensive attachment to a pan-Korean identity. Because

mistreatment by the Chinese is specifically based on their *North* Koreanness and the lack of legal status that comes with that identity, such refugees are more likely to identify with the supra-ordinate Korean identity that includes both North and South Koreans and offers them higher relative status. The following excerpt from a refugee who spent six years in China married to a farming family illustrates this boundary-setting process:

> 'I feel that I am part of the South Korean people. We speak the same language. In China, once people realized I couldn't speak the language, most of them looked down on me. Even though I had a child with my Chinese husband, who was very nice to me, I never felt like he understood me. Here we understand each other with just a glance. We are one by blood, you can feel it.' (Female, 35 years old, 5 years since entry)

North Koreans like this refugee enter South Korea having accepted the co-nationality principle. A firm belief in co-ethnic belonging with South Koreans does not inoculate such refugees from discriminatory experiences in South Korea, but it supplies them with a sense of identity security to discount such actions as those of a few bad apples and aspire to achieve what they see as the final layer of membership: civic belonging. Refugees in this category eagerly share stories about how they are working to become economically self-sufficient and politically engaged members of South Korean society. Below is an excerpt from a refugee who spent four years in China working in various underground industries before saving enough to afford a broker to come to South Korea:

> 'I say thanks to be in South Korea every day. A good citizen is someone who does the best with the kind of life that their country has given them. For South Korea to be strong, economically and politically, we need good leaders, so I believe as a citizen it is my duty to help pick those leaders and pay whatever we owe if the country needs that money. Underneath is the belief that this is my country, my Korea. I wouldn't feel that way if I were in another country.' (Male, 42 years old, 2 years since entry)

In contrast, refugees who evaded significant national discrimination in China – due to shorter migration or sheer luck – experience their first national 'othering' from South Koreans, the putative in-group. Such refugees are more likely to shift away from a pan-Korean identity and see the co-ethnic principle as contested in practice. They are sensitive to any signs of ethnic difference between themselves and South Koreans (Hough 2022). The excerpt below from a refugee who spent only five months passing through China illustrates:

> 'When I first left North Korea, I never thought of coming to South Korea. But when I came to China, the Chinese would say '*hanguoren, hanguoren*,' admiring the lifestyle of South Koreans. The decision to come to South Korea wasn't much about 'my' people or minjok, but about finally moving to an advanced society. But there is so much discrimination from South Koreans. One time, I tried to return a medication sample that did not work, and the company owner got very angry. I said, 'Do you know where I am from? If I could pay for it, I would.' He knew from my accent and said, 'If you are so sick, why didn't you just die in North Korea!' I cried so much that day. Why did I come here only to be so mistreated by South Koreans?' (Female, 56 years old, 3 years since entry)

Given the primacy of an ethnic conception of nationhood between the two Koreas, such refugees remain fixated on their perceived deficit in ethnic belonging. As the excerpt below from another refugee who had a shorter layover in China shows, they tend to see many aspects of their lives in South Korea through the lens of ethnic difference.

Without the sense of identity security that ethnic belonging offers in the Korean context, such refugees express little desire or capacity to aspire toward civic belonging.

> 'We always have to live with the label of *saeteomin*. If we really are South Korean citizens and you gave us citizen identification cards, then why label us differently? We call people from China Chinese immigrants because they are not Korean. It's the same thing. So I cannot fully trust that the government will protect me equally as one of its own.' (Female, 29 years old, 1 year since entry)

The distinct belonging ideals held across North Korean refugees differentially shape their psychological receptiveness to South Korea's civic integration program. Refugees who have already internalized ethnic belonging see Hanawon's emphasis on civic integration to be in line with their belonging aspirations. They are more likely to see Hanawon's civic training as an inclusive gesture and embrace it. In contrast, refugees who see their ethnic belonging as unfulfilled and seek it first and foremost are likely to see Hanawon's singular emphasis on civic training as exclusionary and tone deaf to their belonging needs.

Table 2 shows the framing power of refugees' belonging aspirations through extended excerpts from two contrasting personal narratives. On the left is a 39-year-old woman who entered South Korea in 2010 after enduring several years of abuse from her Chinese mother-in-law. When describing her feelings at entry, she expresses strong belief in ethno-cultural belonging with South Koreans, describing them as 'distant cousins' who are 'still part of the same family.' Security in her ethno-cultural belonging frames both how she defines successful belonging and her attitude toward Hanawon's civic integration program. She cites that 'we came here without being any help to this country and received houses because we are North Korean,' noting specifically that Chinese migrants do not receive the same benefits in South Korea. As a result, she shows internalization of a civic belonging ideal, saying that 'it is our responsibility to figure it out and contribute back.' Her embrace of Hanawon's civic training is evident in the stories she tells about how she applies the lessons to her workplace and political participation, saying that 'we have a duty to show [South Koreans]' and expressing pride in her right to vote by 'using my status [as a Korean], or should I say, citizenship.'

On the right is a very different narrative arc of a 56-year-old woman who also entered South Korea in 2010, but after only several months in China and Laos. She sees ethno-cultural belonging with South Koreans as something to be proven, rather than a given, when she says that 'I don't think South Koreans see us as equals.' Her insecurity and subsequent yearning for ethno-cultural belonging is evident in stories she tells about when she feels 'like a true South Korean.' She shares about the time when church members came to check on her when she was ill or when the apartment patrol said hello to her as he would to any other resident. These are instances where South Koreans treated her as if extended family or fully culturally assimilated. The primacy of her aspiration for ethno-cultural belonging frames Hanawon's emphasis on civic training as exclusionary: 'At *Hanawon*, they emphasize that everything that is provided is through tax money from South Koreans … But I wish they didn't say that so much. I'm here and trying to adapt, and it puts up a wall.'

Narrative analysis illustrates how even among North Korean refugees living under the same integration regime, belonging aspirations differentially shape their integration potential. Such beliefs act as a colored lens through which refugees assess the inclusive

Table 2. How beliefs about national belonging frame integration.

	Female, 39 years old, 3 years since entry Long stay in China	Female, 56 years old, 3 years since entry Short stay in China
Sees ethnic belonging as fulfilled	Yes	No
↓	'In North Korea, because we don't have access to the outside, anyone from outside the country is called a foreigner, whether you are from the U.S., Russia, or somewhere in Europe. Only South Koreans are not called foreigners. Why do you think that is? South Koreans are like distant cousins. We haven't seen each other in a long time, and so it is a little strange, but we are still part of the same family.'	'I don't think South Koreans see us as equals. In my work, sometimes I would blurt out the North Korean word for 'pen,' and my boss would mutter something bad about North Koreans. We are supposed to be the same people, but why do you treat me differently?'
Belonging aspiration	Civic	Ethnic
↓	'We came without being any help to this country and received houses because we are North Korean. A Chinese laborer doesn't get that. Even South Koreans do not get that. So after a while, it is our responsibility to figure it out and contribute back.' 'Are we not already one people? North Korea is where I was born, but South Korea is where I live now. As a citizen here, I do just as much as other citizens. I go to work, I pay taxes, I do all the things that other South Koreans do.'	'Once, when I was very sick, people from church came all the way to my apartment and offered to take me to the hospital. These acts of kindness and love make me feel part of this new community.' 'I feel a little like a real South Korean when the patrol in our apartment complex says hi to me. At first, I didn't know how to react, but him saying hello to me just as he does to any other South Korean makes me feel like I am South Korean, too.'
Receptiveness to Hanawon's civic integration	Receptive	Resistant
	'As I went through *Hanawon*, I realized that there is nothing different in the employment law regarding payment or anything for a North Korean. […] Over time, we have a duty to show them. And if we are going to show them, then we better show them the good side, right?' 'I'm proud to vote because I have the eligibility as a Korean. It is about using my status, or should I say, citizenship.' 'At the moment, you are just grateful to receive anything from the South Korean government. Now I look back and realize it really was not much. But you have to realize, the government is not just helping you. Now that I pay taxes, I know that it is not a small amount. This is my home now, so it is important to do my part to keep the country economically strong.'	'I have been told directly that employers don't want to hire me or that I would not be good because I am North Korean. They didn't even give me a chance. That was a huge disappointment. It is easier to just say I am Chinese.' 'At *Hanawon*, they emphasize that everything that is provided is through tax money from South Korean citizens, and so we have to give back. But I wish they didn't say that so much. I'm here and trying to adapt, and it puts up a wall.' 'South Korea is my country because I live here, but I do not feel it from the heart. There is so much prejudice. My sisters and parents are still in North Korea, so my sense of people is still there. The president must feel very sad if he hears this. South Korea gives us so much money and help and here I am thinking something different.'

intent of the host state, which can aid or stunt their receptiveness to the host's integration efforts. Do refugees who feel a psychological barrier to integration score lower on integration outcomes targeted by Hanawon? The next section turns to rare survey data on North Korean refugees to estimate how consequential belonging aspirations are.

Theory-testing: predicting integration outcomes

I collected face-to-face survey data on North Korean refugees by sampling from job training centers in Seoul and surrounding satellite cities. In consenting centers, the survey was administered to one to three randomly selected classes. The instructor, usually a North Korean refugee him or herself, would introduce me and explain the nature of the survey. Any students who wished not to participate were free to leave at that time. The survey included questions on political and social attitudes, identity and belonging, evaluations of Hanawon, and integration outcomes. I was able to collect individualized data for 228 refugees.

Surveys of North Korean refugees are increasingly common, but they are usually based on convenience samples or administered through activist organizations. Such sampling practices introduce ideological and acquiescence bias and often limit surveys to non-sensitive, apolitical questions (Haggard and Noland 2011). Given that randomized probability sampling is impossible in this refugee context for security reasons, my strategy takes a more systematic approach to sampling.[6] Nevertheless, refugees at job training centers make for a sample that is slightly older, more educated, and more male than the national North Korean population in South Korea.

Based on the psychological mechanism identified in the personal narratives, the empirical prediction is as follows: *North Korean refugees with ethno-cultural belonging aspirations, which diverge from South Korea's civic ideal, should have lower scores on integration outcomes targeted by Hanawon*. High or low scores do not imply 'good' or 'bad' refugees. They simply measure how well refugees responded to and internalized Hanawon's integration training. Since all North Korean refugees are required to complete the same three-month program at Hanawon, there is no variation in length of training, exposure, or content of the integration program, which offers an ideal environment in which to illustrate the power of belonging aspirations.

Given a tendency in the literature to conflate quantitative analysis with causal claims, I should clarify that the aim of this analysis is to describe and predict integration patterns in the greater North Korean refugee population. Empirically, there are clear limitations to causal inference with a cross-sectional survey that asks about identity beliefs and self-reported integration outcomes concurrently. But more importantly, in the iterative research design of this study, causal identification of the theoretical mechanism comes from the inductive step: the qualitative analysis of personal narrative interviews. These narrative data offer a unique handle on causal direction by enabling process-tracing of critical junctures over a person's life history. Such longitudinal and first-person insight is necessary to make causal claims about the perceptual power of identity beliefs – that once solidified, they function as the unmoved mover that frames political experiences thereafter, rather than the other way around. The survey analysis aims to see whether this psychological mechanism identified in the narratives usefully predicts integration patterns in the broader refugee population.

Variables and measurement

The independent variable of interest is the power of refugees' belonging aspirations. The narrative analysis suggests that what matters is the convergence or divergence between

the belonging ideals held by the refugee versus the host state. A binary index was created based on the following question: 'How different do you see South Koreans to be on the belief that we are one people?' North Korean refugees who answered 'not different' see ethno-cultural belonging with South Koreans to be fulfilled and based on this sense of identity security, aspire to the final layer of civic belonging. These refugees are coded as *convergent* (= 0) with the host state's civic ideal. In contrast, refugees who answered 'somewhat different' or 'very different' see their ethno-cultural belonging with South Koreans as uncertain. Achieving ethno-cultural belonging remains their primary belonging aspiration. They are coded as *divergent* (= 1) with the host state. The sample is almost evenly split between 53 percent ($N = 119$) convergent and 47 percent ($N = 104$) divergent.

For integration outcomes, I focus on those specifically and primarily targeted by Hanawon's curriculum: employability and civic responsibility. While these variables correspond to common concepts in integration studies, such as economic or political integration, their operationalization is specific to the North Korean refugee context.[7] They should therefore be taken as context-specific applications of, rather than representative measures for, successful integration. Higher scores on the integration outcomes simply indicate more receptiveness to Hanawon's program, rather than an evaluation of the refugee's potential or worthiness.

As Table 1 showed, Hanawon devotes the majority of course hours to topics such as business language, job training, and interview preparation to maximize the employability of North Korean refugees. Employment status may seem to be the most obvious measure for successful economic integration. But in the immediate years after Hanawon, most North Korean refugees start out by taking 'off the book' jobs or part-time positions where employment status is either unreported or highly volatile. Thus, employment status at the time of the survey is an unreliable measure for long-term employability among the recent entrant sample.

To better tap employability, I focus instead on the *frequency of experienced job discrimination* (never, a few times, sometimes, often/always). Hanawon's program aims to minimize such experiences by training North Korean refugees on South Korean business lingo and etiquette. While some instances of discrimination have more to do with native prejudice than the refugee's degree of economic integration, assuming such instances are randomly distributed, I take refugees who experienced less frequent job discrimination to be more economically integrated by Hanawon's standard. The variable is coded on a four-point scale with refugees who 'never' experienced job discrimination as most economically integrated and those who 'often/always' as least integrated.

The other integration outcome targeted by Hanawon is instilling a sense of civic responsibility toward the roles of a democratic citizen. North Korean refugees are not only new citizens, but new citizens from an authoritarian socialist regime who have never voted in free and fair elections or paid taxes to the government. Hanawon's curriculum on political integration is specifically focused on fostering a sense of civic duty toward these new roles (Hur 2020). In the civics course, for example, refugees learn about South Korea's democratization, democratic citizen norms and why they are important, and practice voting in private booths, opening bank accounts, and filing tax forms. I therefore focus on the civic duty to vote and civic duty to pay taxes as the political integration outcomes targeted by Hanawon.

Civic duty to vote is measured by asking refugees how strongly they see voting as matter of responsibility or personal choice:

> *Different people think differently about voting. Some say that voting is a citizen's responsibility, and you should always try your best to vote. Others say voting is a choice, and it is fine to vote only when you like a candidate or party. For you personally, is voting more of a responsibility or choice? How strongly do you think that way? [Very strongly, somewhat strongly, not very strongly]*

This question wording has been validated in several national election surveys across the world and shown to reduce over-report bias (Blais and Achen 2018), which is likely especially high for North Korean refugees. *Civic duty to pay taxes* is measured by asking refugees how important they believe paying honest taxes is to being a good citizen:

> *Different people have different beliefs about what is important to being a good citizen. For you personally, how important is paying taxes honestly? [Very important, somewhat important, not very important, not important at all]*

Both strength of civic duty to vote and civic duty to pay taxes were coded on a four-point scale ranging from none, weak, moderate, to strong.

Finally, to see whether holding divergent belonging aspirations from the host state is associated with reduced receptiveness to the latter's integration efforts, a baseline measure of receptiveness is needed. I use a question on the level of satisfaction with the Hanawon program. The assumption is that refugees who were more satisfied with their Hanawon training, compared to those who were dissatisfied, are more likely to be receptive to its content. Then all else equal, refugees with greater satisfaction in Hanawon should have higher scores on the integration outcomes targeted by the program.[8]

Results

I begin by describing how North Korean refugees who hold divergent versus convergent belonging aspirations to the host states' civic ideal differ in their integration outcomes. Figure 2 shows the estimated effect of holding a divergent belonging aspiration after controlling for known attitudinal and demographic correlates for each integration outcome. All estimates are from ordinary least squares regressions with clustered standard errors by job training center, the sampling unit. Descriptive statistics for all variables are in Appendix 1.

On average, refugees who hold ethno-cultural belonging aspirations under a civic integration regime fare worse in integration outcomes targeted by the host state. The gap is largest for the civic duty to vote, where holding a divergent belonging aspiration is associated with a 13 percentage-point deficit. Notably, the refugee's belonging ideal is the strongest predictor of the civic duty to vote, even more so than political interest. The identity effect is least consequential for the civic duty to pay taxes, likely because not paying taxes carries punitive consequences. Holding a divergent belonging aspiration from the host state is also associated with more frequent experiences of job discrimination, even after controlling for factors such as education and class status in North Korea.

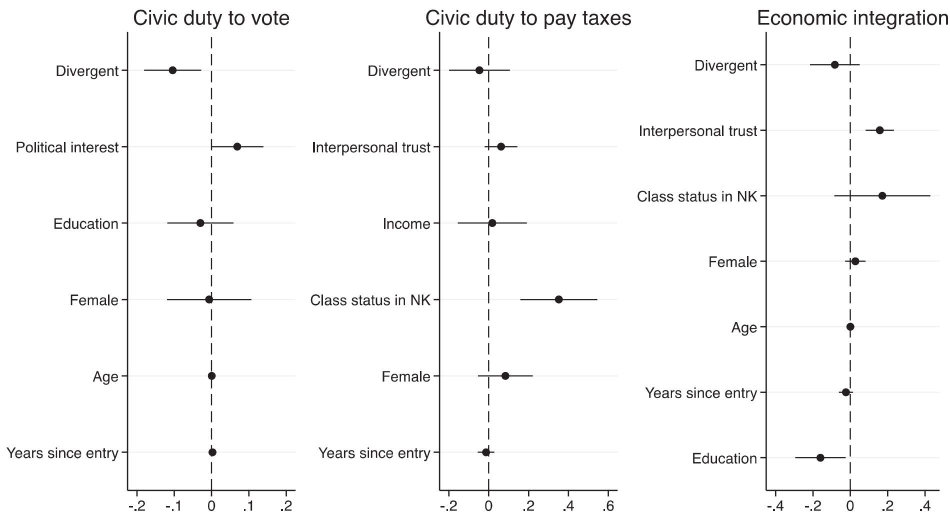

Figure 2. Refugees with divergent belonging aspirations have lower integration scores. 'Divergent' is binary indicator for whether a refugee's belonging aspiration differs from the ideal espoused by the host state. Coefficient plot of OLS estimates with standard errors clustered by refugee job training centers, the sampling unit. Bars mark 95 percent confidence intervals. All variables are rescaled 0–1.

As the initial patterns are consistent with the theory developed from the personal narratives, I look more closely at the mechanism. The refugee narratives showed that holding a divergent belonging aspiration from the host state frames the latter's intent as exclusionary and seeds psychological resistance to its integration program. This moderating effect of the refugee's belonging aspiration can be expressed as in Equation (1), where a refugee's integration outcome is modeled as a function of her satisfaction with the Hanawon program, divergence in belonging aspiration, and their interaction. All else equal, greater satisfaction with Hanawon should be associated with higher scores on the program's targeted integration outcomes ($\beta_1 \geq 0$). But for refugees who hold divergent belonging aspirations from the host state, whose receptiveness to the integration program is reduced, that positive association should be significantly diminished. In the model, this would yield a negative interaction ($\beta_3 \leq 0$). Thus, whether a negative interaction emerges from the data is indicative of the framing power of refugees' belonging aspirations.

$$Integration\ outcome = \beta_0 + \beta_1(program\ satisfaction) + \beta_2(divergent) + \beta_3(program\ satisfaction \times divergent) + \beta_4(controls) + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

Table 3 shows the results. As expected, greater satisfaction with Hanawon is associated with higher scores on the program's targeted integration outcomes. The shaded row with the interaction shows that holding divergent belonging aspirations from the host state consistently weakens this association for all targeted outcomes. When the interactive relationship is plotted out, holding all other covariates at their actual values, divergence in belonging aspirations effectively nullifies any positive effect that satisfaction with Hanawon has on integration outcomes.

Table 3. Belonging aspirations and receptiveness to host state's integration efforts.

	Civic duty to vote	Civic duty to pay taxes	Employability
Satisfaction with integration program	0.32*** (0.05)	0.25*** (0.05)	0.27*** (0.04)
Divergent	0.06 (0.06)	0.003 (0.05)	−0.01 (0.10)
Satisfaction with program × divergent	−0.36** (0.10)	−0.11** (0.04)	−0.13 (0.11)
Political interest	0.07* (0.03)	–	–
Interpersonal trust	–	0.08** (0.03)	0.17*** (0.04)
Income	–	0.05 (0.08)	–
Class status in North Korea	–	0.32*** (0.08)	0.13 (0.10)
Education	0.01 (0.03)	–	−0.12* (0.06)
Female	−0.004 (0.04)	0.08 (0.05)	0.03 (0.02)
Age	0.001 (0.002)	–	0.001 (0.004)
Years since entry	0.01* (0.005)	−0.001 (0.02)	−0.009 (0.01)
Constant	−0.09 (0.08)	0.45*** (0.10)	0.45* (0.21)
N	192	202	197
R-squared	0.09	0.32	0.09

***$p < .01$.
**$p < .05$.
*$p < .10$.
OLS estimates with clustered standard errors by job training center. All variables are rescaled 0–1.

One might argue that refugees who hold different kinds of belonging aspirations are simply different kinds of people whose integration trajectories would have diverged anyway. This argument is unlikely for two reasons. First, empirically, matching the two groups yields very little difference to the estimates. North Korean refugees in my dataset who hold divergent belonging aspirations from the host state's civic ideal tend to be less educated, more female, younger, and more recent entrants than their convergent counterparts. I matched the two groups based on these demographic attributes using propensity-score weighting. I also include class status and party membership in North Korea to account for any unobserved formative experiences.[9] Appendix 2 shows that the re-estimation of Table 3 using matching does not substantively change any of the key coefficients and in fact, sharpens the negative interactions across all models. The dampening effect of holding divergent belonging aspirations on refugees' integration outcomes does not appear to be reducible to demographic or background differences between the two groups.

Second, in a practical sense, it is highly unlikely that there is selection into convergent and divergent refugee groups. The personal narratives show that refugees' belonging ideals are often forged through experiences of sustained national discrimination in China during migration. No North Korean refugee chooses into such a situation. Stories of national discrimination include intense emotional and even physical abuse from Chinese in-laws to labor exploitation by Chinese employers who leverage North Koreans' lack of legal protection in China. Refugees fall into such situations because of betrayal by a broker, blackmail, or in some cases, as a last resort to support struggling families back in North Korea. There is no self-selection into bad fortune.

How significant is the divergence in integration trajectories between refugees who hold divergent versus convergent belonging aspirations to the host state? Based on estimates in Table 3, Figure 3 plots the predicted integration outcomes for the two refugee groups by their level of satisfaction with Hanawon. For a convergent refugee, being very satisfied with Hanawon's civic program predicts a 'moderate' civic duty to vote, whereas a divergent refugee feels no such duty, no matter her satisfaction with Hanawon. The

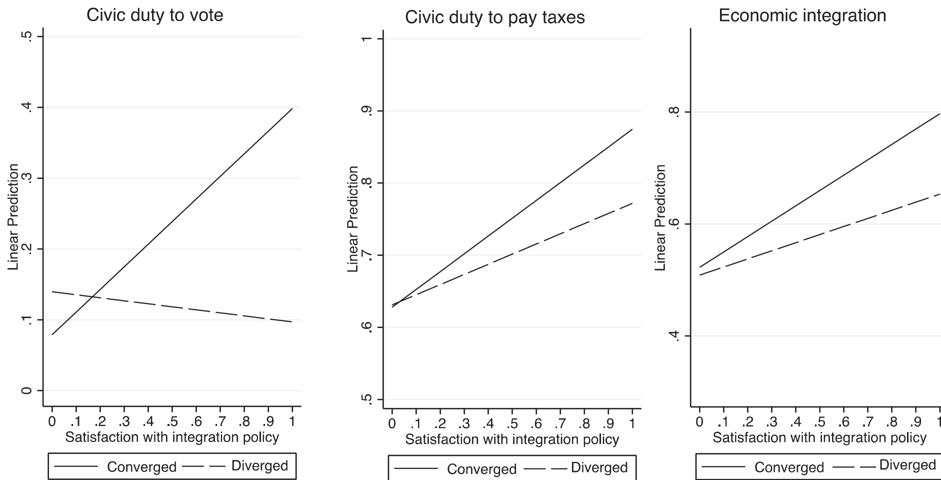

Figure 3. Predicted integration outcomes for divergent versus convergent refugees.
Predictions based on OLS estimates in Table 3 using actual values of covariates, not their means. 95% confidence intervals are omitted for presentation.

predicted gaps are smaller for the other two targeted outcomes, but divergent refugees consistently fare worse by about 10 percentage points, even when they are very satisfied with Hanawon's program. For civic duty to pay taxes, holding a divergent belonging aspiration from the host state is the difference between a refugee who believes paying honest taxes is 'very important' versus 'somewhat important.' For economic integration, the difference is between a refugee who has 'never' experienced job discrimination versus one who has experienced it 'a few times.'

These gaps may seem numerically small. But in the context of integration, their significance lies in how they entrench different patterns of behavior over time. Most refugees in my sample are recent entrants who have been in South Korea for less than five years. As weak civic duty to vote or civic duty to pay taxes gels into habitual nonvoting or tax evasion, and more frequent experiences of job discrimination materialize into unstable employment, small differences in the beginning can snowball into virtuous or vicious cycles that put refugees on divergent integration trajectories.

Discussion

Migrants bear at least half the burden of successful integration. Yet political studies of integration have tended to focus on the host state's policies or natives' attitudes toward newcomers. I find that refugees' beliefs about national belonging – both how they see national membership to be defined in the host community and their desired place in it – serve as a powerful lens that frames their perceptions of the host state's inclusive intent and as a result, shapes their receptiveness to its integration efforts.

North Korean refugees in South Korea offer a case that naturally controls for many other factors related to successful integration so that I can better isolate the power of belonging aspirations. When belonging ideals of the refugee and host state are seen as convergent, refugees are more likely to see the host state as inclusive towards them

and embrace its integration efforts. When belonging ideals are seen as divergent, however, refugees are likely to see the same integration program as exclusionary against them and become resistant to state-led efforts.

Incorporating refugee aspirations into theories of integration can help explain why similar integration programs are successful in some places and among some groups, but not others. Beyond what can be controlled by migrant origin and demographics, I find considerable heterogeneity in belonging aspirations among migrants. Integration efforts from the top interact with this psychology of national belonging from below. Even well-designed integration programs can backfire because the membership ideals they endorse inadvertently alienate and antagonize newcomers who hold different belonging aspirations.

The co-national context of North Korean refugees in South Korea is rare, but when seen as a maximal case of co-ethnic integration, the Korean case is comparatively informative. Intra-regional migration is the dominant form of migration in regions outside of the West, such as in the Middle East and parts of Asia (Ala Alrababa'h et al. 2021). In such contexts, migrants and natives often possess high degree of co-ethnic capital: they look ascriptively similar, are culturally familiar, and sometimes even speak the same language.

Host states where co-ethnic migration is prevalent may see themselves as fertile ground for civic integration or workfare programs that focus on building employability and self-sufficiency, since ethno-cultural belonging is largely seen as a given. This study joins others that challenge the common assumption that integration between co-ethnics is easier than between different ethnic groups (Adida 2011; Kim 2019). Even in South Korea's maximally co-ethnic setting, I find significant variation in refugee beliefs about their ethno-cultural belonging. In fact, it is precisely in places where ethnic conceptions of national membership are historically dominant – where migrant expectations and aspirations for co-ethnic belonging are strong – that civic integration programs are most likely to be seen as exclusionary by newcomers. Even as civic integration programs have gained popularity in the West, the findings therefore cast doubt on the exportability of the 'civic turn' to other regions.

National belonging is a process that depends as much on the newcomer's aspirations to belong as the host's intent to include. By delving into the psychology of how the two forces interact and how it predicts quantifiably different integration trajectories, the study builds the case for more migrant-centric theories of successful integration.

Notes

1. For instance, organizations such as the Migration Observatory regularly publish first-hand reports of migrant experiences of integration (Lessard-Phillips, Fajth, and Fernández-Reino 2020).
2. Ministry of Unification, Data and Statistics, 'Policy on North Korean Defectors.'
3. In 'Settlement Support for North Korean Defectors.' Ministry of Unification. Accessed: https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/whatwedo/support/
4. Original data collected for this study were approved by the Princeton IRB # 6298.
5. The belonging categories and their ordering in Figure 1 are likely specific to North Korean refugees and their co-ethnic integration context in South Korea. Other works have identified up to six separate dimensions of integration (Harder et al. 2018).

6. For North Korean refugees, the typical punishment for defection is sending remaining family members to labor camps or even execution. The South Korean government therefore prohibits public access to personal identifiers or individualized location data for this population.
7. Widely used cross-national integration measures, such as MIPEX or CIVIX, also vary in how they operationalize concepts like political, civic, and economic integration. The variables used here should be seen as applications of such umbrella concepts to Korea's specific context.
8. Level of satisfaction with Hanawon does not correlate (= – 0.04) with whether a refugee holds a convergent or divergent belonging ideal to the host state.
9. For matching, I designated 'divergent' as the treatment group, generated propensity scores based on education, gender, age, years since entry, class, and party membership (*dangwon*) in North Korea, and weighted the sample by the inverse probability of selection. Weights were then standardized to sum up to the total N of the sample. Weights larger than three times the median (= 2.207) were replaced with that value to minimize extreme observations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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