

Book review of Gullikstad, Berit, Kristensen, Guro Korsnes and Sætermo, Turid Fånes (eds.) 2021. *Fortellinger om integrering i norske lokalsamfunn* [Narratives of Integration in Norwegian Local Communities]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget. 292 pp.



BOOK REVIEW

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Studying integration at the local level, *Fortellinger om integrering i norske lokalsamfunn* provides various perspectives that contextualize, challenge, and nuance national narratives of immigrant integration in Norway. The volume is edited by Professor Berit Gullikstad, Professor Guro Korsnes Kristensen, and postdoc and senior researcher Turid Fånes Sætermo, all of whom are based at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). Contributions are the result of five research projects at three Norwegian institutions.¹ Each contribution addresses integration, narratives as a methodological term, and local communities and societal formations. In the introductory chapter, the editors position the book within international research on integration and specifically the local turn in integration research (Meissner & Heil 2021). The contributions are based on data collection from smaller cities and towns in rural and coastal municipalities or what is often called ‘District Norway’ (p. 14), which carries a connotation of sparsely populated, rural areas located some distance from the largest cities in Norway: in particular, Oslo (SNL 2019).

One of the overarching arguments of the book—according to Sætermo, Gullikstad, and Kristensen—is that integration has become a cultural value in Norwegian society (p. 33) where in principle, Skotnes and Ringrose suggest, most agree integration is something desirable and important to achieve (p. 66). This is associated both with ‘being a good citizen’ and ‘a good local community’ (p. 12). Rather than attempting to evaluate integration as politics, the book explores how integration is understood, negotiated, and experienced by different local actors (p. 14). The volume consists of 12 chapters, which the editors group into three approaches to integration: national integration discourses and local interpretations; integration as local practices; and integration as encounters and relationships. The wide perspective on what constitutes ‘local’ and ‘integration’ in the book result in a range of sources of investigation: from

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¹ Exploring integration as emplaced practice (UiA), Global Labour in Rural Societies (NTNU), LIM: Language, Integration, Media (NTNU), Living Integration: At the Crossroads between Official Policy, Public Discourses and Everyday Practices (NTNU), and Sustainable diverse cities: Innovation in integration (UiT).

Sætermo's investigation of an Internet-based discussion forum for integration workers (Chapter 9) to Aure, Al-Mahamid, and Seljevold's analysis of monthly embroidery nights (Chapter 10) and Førde and Magnussen's chapter on art-based performances (Chapter 11).

As a whole, the book addresses integration beyond the understanding of paid labor that dominates Nordic migration research (Pyrhönen et al. 2017) and emphasizes relationships to people, nature, and societal structures (see Dyrliid, Chapter 12; Haaland et al., Chapter 8). Still, Stachowski and Rasmussen highlight that finding employment is addressed as important for providing stability (p. 174). A lack of local employment opportunities—as illustrated by Kristensen and Sætermo (Chapter 5)—may impact a migrant's decision to remain in the municipality or to relocate. Opportunities for employment also play a role in local integration narratives. In one community where Kristensen and Sætermo (Chapter 5) conduct their research, conditions allowed for quick entry into the paid workforce and there was a subsequent collective narrative of being 'successful' at integration; however, in another community where there was a lack of employment opportunities for nonmigrants and migrants alike, integration was described rather as close relationships and enjoyment of place. Yet the national directives incentivize the understanding of integration as paid labor, which overshadows broader understandings shaped by local, place-based circumstances. Examining the local also highlights divergent goals between the nation state and local municipalities, where municipalities are interested in attracting people to live in their jurisdiction, opportunities for economic growth, and maintaining the competency that local refugee services developed after 2015 (see Gullikstad & Kristensen, Chapter 2; Sætermo, Chapter 9). Stachowski and Rasmussen (Chapter 7) attribute this in part to an interest in the demographic revitalization of local communities that risk or experience depopulation and out-migration (p. 168).

Significantly, the volume highlights how integration is not only about migrants, but also the local communities where migrants settle (see Kristensen & Sætermo, p. 116) and Norwegian society at large (see Haaland, Magnussen & Wallevik, p. 105; Penner, p. 138). In addition, many of the chapters stress the importance of the initiative of the local community in processes of integration—in addition to individual initiative of the migrant (see Stachowski & Rasmussen, p. 168)—which may stand in contrast to suggestion of integration operating as a one-way process or expectation in practice. However, Gullikstad and Kristensen argue the responsibility for integration continues to be largely placed on migrants (p. 44).

Further, the contributions from Haaland et al. (Chapter 8) argue that factors such as a migrant's background and experiences in the country of origin—such as socioeconomic background—largely affect integration as a process, whereas Stachowski and Rasmussen (Chapter 7) highlight that factors such as nationality or ethnicity may be exaggerated in our understanding of integration and belonging. These are also elements that impact the role other migrants may play in the integration process, an often ignored point taken up by Haaland, Magnussen, Wallevik, and Frykman (Chapter 8). While Haaland et al. (Chapter 8) highlight the roles other migrants may have in the integration process, Stachowski and Rasmussen (Chapter 7) demonstrate how translocal ties and integration does not only involve migrants, exemplified by Norwegian-born friend joining a Polish neighbor on a visit to their hometown in Poland.

As highlighted by Sætermo, Gullikstad, and Kristensen (pp. 12–13), Danish anthropologist Mikkel Rytter (2019: 690) calls integration researchers to question who the concept is directed at. When applying this question to the volume as a

whole, integration appears to primarily be used in reference to refugees (or racialized migrants) (see Chapters 2–6, 8, 9, 11); this is not to say the contributions are uncritical of the dominant focus on refugees. For example, Penner (Chapter 6) describes her participants equating ‘immigrant’ with ‘refugee’ in a way that is subtle, yet meaningful (p. 149). Skotnes and Ringrose (Chapter 3) suggest that the word ‘immigrant’ in a Norwegian context is often connected to someone who ‘looks foreign’ and ‘seems threatening’ (p. 67). However, the volume does have two chapters that focus on the experiences of labor migrants from Poland—Stachowski and Rasmussen (Chapter 7) and Dyrliid (Chapter 12)—which is significant considering labor migrants from the EU are often ignored in integration research. Another exception to the focus on forced migrants is the contribution from Aure, Al-Mahamid, and Seljevold (Chapter 10) where embroidery workshops that are the site of investigation were not only for refugees or labor migrants. Rather, embroidery workshops were a place for encounters for Norwegian-born and people with diverse migration pathways alike, where ethnicity is only one difference among many (p. 243).

That many of the contributions highlight expectations for and challenges faced by forced migrants may, in part, be due to official integration policy and institutional structures funded to foster integration are primarily directed toward refugees. Penner (Chapter 6) also highlights elements of structural racism and racialization which may contribute to the equating of immigrant with refugee. Yet, it would have been interesting to have some contributions focusing on migrants whose voices are less heard in the dominant narratives of immigrant integration research in Norway, such as migrants who come via family reunification with Norwegian family members. These are individuals who are explicit targets of official integration policy, but who remain absent from much of the scholarly literature on integration. That being said, the volume provides a span of perspectives that cover varying experiences of mayors in towns with international in-migration, local newspapers, integration workers and volunteers, forced migrants, Polish labor migrants, and their meetings with processes of integration in the ‘districts’. The methodological choice of using narratives gives room for a range of experiences making this essential reading for individuals interested in processes of integration, place-making, and belonging.

Fortellinger om integrering i norske lokalsamfunn makes a salient contribution to the field of migration studies by highlighting understandings, experiences, and negotiations of integration processes in local, more sparsely populated areas. The chapters contextualize, challenge, and nuance national narratives, demonstrating the importance of the local and of place. The volume is interesting for migration and rurality scholars; politicians; public, private, and civil society actors providing services to migrants; advocates for migrant rights; art initiatives targeting migrants; and anyone who may be interested in learning more about migration, integration, diversity, and belonging at the local level.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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