

COMMENTARY

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Instead of 'writing against' and discarding 'immigrants' integration, why not reconceptualize integration as a wicked concept?

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Abstract

Over the years, some scholars have not only written against the concept of immigrant integration but have called for its rejection and abandonment. Critics argue that the concept is normative, objectifies others, mirrors outmoded imaginary of society, orients towards methodological nationalism, and a narrow emphasis on immigrants in the forces defining integration progression. Nonetheless, the concept continues to receive academic and policy attention. Against the backdrop of this polarized view, this paper raises an important question relating to the benefit or otherwise of writing against the concept of integration in the field of integration studies. Specifically, the paper asks: Is it appropriate to write against and reject the concept of integration? The paper responds to this question from a provocative conceptual perspective. Here, the paper argues that when the concept is purged of its inherent criticisms and rather reconceptualized as a wicked concept, it still offers a unique analytical spectrum with which scholars can approach several substantive critical questions regarding immigrants' integration.

Keywords: Immigrant, Integration, Methodological nationalism, Transnationalism, Wicked concept

Introduction

This paper focuses on 'immigrant integration' as used in scientific and academic circles rather than as a political statement. Immigrant integration—the scientific study of the practices and processes of newcomers' settlement in receiving countries has a long history (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). Integration has received a great deal of scholarly and public attention as both a policy goal and a conceptual framework. However, its prominence in academia and policy circles is without contestation (Fawadleh, 2021; Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). The highly contested nature of integration among scholars borders on the concept's normative nature and othering of 'others'; thus, focusing on what ought to be or the desired end goals and highlighting a sense of difference between immigrants and the host populations,

respectively (see Spencer & Charsley, 2021; Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). “The major point of criticism is the fact that it continues to assume—as did the old conception of assimilation—that immigrants must conform to the norms and values of the dominant majority in order to be accepted,” write Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016: 12). As a result, there is a resemblance between integration and the tenets embedded in assimilation.

There is a rich body of scholarship on the empirical and conceptual dimensions of immigrants’ integration across different geographic scales and contexts. Empirically, Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) posit three main literature strands. The first literature strand focuses primarily on the newcomers and modifications in their behaviours and ideas, while other scholars emphasize on host societies’ reactions to immigrants (see Costello & Hodson, 2011; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2006). The second literature strand examines the aspects of immigrants’ settlement process; with some scholars focusing on the cultural-religious dimensions (see Goñda et al., 2021; Fokkema & de Haas, 2015; Ersanilli & Koopmans, 2010); socio-economic component (see Carlson & Bell, 2021; Bakker et al., 2014; Godin, 2008; Offer, 2004) and other researchers studying the political and legal components of becoming an integral part of receiving countries (see Dollmann, 2021; Chaudhary, 2018; Tillie, 2004). The third literature strand goes beyond the individual immigrants, collective groups of immigrants, and civil society analysis to the institutional level. Critical questions are raised here, such as “whether immigrant collectives have established their own institutions in the new society and, conversely, to what extent and how have institutions of the receiving society reacted to newcomers” (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016: 12). Notable scholarly works include the establishment of immigrant settlement organizations (see Veronis, 2019; Moya, 2005; Schrover & Vermeulen, 2005).

Various conceptual frameworks have been developed as heuristic models for analyzing immigrants’ integration. Some of these integration models include Heckmann’s (2006) framework on social integration, Ager and Strang’s (2008) conceptual framework, Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas’ (2016) framework on integration processes, Skrobanek and Jobst’s (2019) approach of ‘liquid integration’, and Spencer and Charsley’s (2021) revised framework on integration processes and effectors. These models primarily seek to elucidate what constitutes integration and its inherent processes in one way or another by building upon fundamental limitations of each other’s works to comprehend integration’s complexities.

Notwithstanding the contributions to the field, both conceptually and empirically, there is still a lack of consensus on the concept’s theoretical and methodological understanding—resulting in some scholars calling for its total rejection. While this paper acknowledges the various efforts by scholars to reach a common consensus on the definition and model of integration (see Spencer & Charsley, 2021 for the most recent attempt), sociologist, Willem Schinkel (2018) and anthropologist, Mikkel Rytter (2019), suggest that social scientists should write entirely against the concept of integration.

For instance, commenting on the sociology of immigrant integration in the text, ‘*Against ‘immigrant integration’: for an end to neocolonial knowledge production*’, Schinkel (2018: 10) expresses reservations about the concept of integration by stating:

I would say that the sociology of immigrant integration stands a good chance of one day being judged as a theoretical hiccup of a still young discipline, as one of those paths, like social Darwinism, into which researchers once strayed and made careers in meaningless imitations of normal science, a historical oddity that did nothing to further either the complexity with which the discipline grasps the social world or the public knowledge which helps publics and collectives gain insight into themselves.

Embedded in the above quotation is the idea that integration is an inadequate analytical framework that brings little relevance to the discourse of immigrant integration.

With a focus on Denmark, Rytter (2019: 692) also suggests and encourages scholars to write against integration on the basis that:

Integration is solely the vocabulary of power, a prerogative of the nation-state and the indigenous majority population that, intentionally or not, tends to objectify, stigmatise and exclude Muslim immigrants. Integration is not the solution, it is a significant aspect of the problem, and therefore more talking, thinking, and 'writing against integration' is needed.

In fact, Rytter (2019: 680) suggests three strategies of “writing against integration”: namely: first, the need to ask critical questions whenever the notion of integration is deployed in political and public discourse, and more importantly in academic scholarship; second, the need to commence analyzing the social imaginaries and assumptions regarding the connection between the mainstream population, the nation, and the state that the majority populations marshal in their discourse and call for integration; and third, the need to advance a novel or new language for a comprehensive analysis (Rytter, 2019).

Although the concept may be riddled with flaws, this paper is opposed to the idea of outright rejection and writing against; indeed, such suggestion is rather short sighted and premature. This paper sees outright abandoning and writing against the concept as akin to throwing out the baby with the bath water. Hadj Abdou (2019: 1) inspires the current paper, arguing that “rather than abandoning immigrant integration as a field of research, we have to continue to strengthen critical approaches.” One such critical approach is our call for a reconceptualization of the concept of integration as wicked. The paper argues that when the concept of integration is purged of with its apparent critiques and rethink integration as a wicked concept, especially in the scientific discourses where the term is used, it still provides a unique analytical framework through which scholars can approach several substantive critical questions.

Thus, the goal of this paper is twofold. First, we seek to contribute to integration scholarship from a novel conceptual standpoint. Instead of rejecting and writing against integration, we urge scholars to reconsider it as a wicked concept. Second, we hope that our call to rethink integration as a wicked concept would spark intellectual discourse among integration scholars and attract more discussions about this novel approach to integration scholarship.

This paper is organized into five main thematic sections. First, ‘A brief overview of immigrants’ integration’ introduces some key fundamental arguments about integration from different contexts. ‘[Critiques of the concept of integration](#)’, the second section,

centers on the various ways in which the concept has been critiqued—which in the views of some scholars warrant its complete rejection and others calling to write against the concept. ‘[Unwriting against and rethinking integration as a wicked concept](#)’, the third section, makes a case for rethinking integration as a wicked concept using the five propositions outlined by Kutor et al. (2021). The final section, ‘What are the benefits to be gained from rethinking integration as a wicked concept?’ answers the ‘so what question’ of why integration ought to be reconceptualized as a wicked concept. Here, the paper demonstrates that for a rich intellectual cross-fertilization of ideas on integration, the time is ripe to commence thinking of the concept of integration as wicked.

A brief overview of immigrants’ integration

It is neither the intention nor within the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive definition, models, and empirical scholarship on integration; that exercise is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the purpose of this section is to outline some key arguments concerning the concept of integration.

How to conceptualize the ways in which immigrants become embedded or otherwise integrated into host societies has long been a source of contention (Korteweg, 2017), prompting some to label it as conceptually illusory (Sözeri et al., 2022). This debate has resulted in the recognition that the concept of integration is subjective in nature. Scholars generally agree that integration as a concept is subjective, highly contested, complex, and problematic (Ager & Strang, 2008; Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). On the one hand, the concept is hotly debated because its meanings and connotations vary across geographic scales and are thus contingent on the values, perspectives, and interests of scholars and researchers debating it (Ager & Strang, 2008). On the other hand, its complexity stems from the fact that there is no universal agreement on its definition or how it should be measured (Harder et al., 2018). Regardless of definitional ambiguities, scholars argue that one thing remains unchallenged: immigrants’ integration in the receiving countries remains a challenge to policy makers and researchers (Kyeremeh et al., 2021; Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016).

Initially, scholarship on immigrants’ integration was approached from a one-way perspective. Immigrants are assumed to be responsible for their integration in host societies (Wong & Tézli, 2013), implying a linear process (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). This linear or one-way conceptualization of integration denotes that once immigrants arrive in the host society, they are supposed to relinquish their cultural identity. Thus, “the process was measured by how similar migrants had become to ‘natives’ in terms of their attitudes and behaviour, extending for some authors to labour market performance” (Spencer & Charsley, 2021: 7). This perspective is dominant in the United States, where the prevalent used terminology is assimilation, as opposed to the widely used terminology of integration in Canada and Europe.

The linear conceptualization of integration has been vigorously rethought by scholars. Currently, the concept is now understood as a two-way process that requires efforts on the part of both individual immigrants and the host country to provide the requisite societal and institutional support for immigrants (Klarenbeek, 2021; Andrew et al., 2012; Frideres, 2008). In this vein, several scholars have endorsed this position, arguing that the realization of integration is contingent not only on the efforts by immigrants, but

also on the receiving society's openness and structures (see Klarenbeek, 2021; Korteweg, 2017; Waters & Pineau, 2015; Andrew et al., 2012). Worth noting is Klarenbeek's (2021) argument that the two-way integration thinking involves processes in which both insiders and outsiders participate, despite their different roles.

Integration has also been viewed as a multidimensional process. According to Guo and Guo (2016), the multidimensionality of immigrant integration suggests that a single criterion indicator of integration is insufficient to fully comprehend immigrants' lived experiences, implying the need for scholars and researchers to adopt a more comprehensive approach. The multidimensional aspect of integration revolves around social, political, cultural, economic, and identity elements. Owing to these forces in determining the multidimensionality of integration, some scholars, including Phalet (2003) argue that researchers must be circumspect when examining and discussing immigrants' integration because some immigrants are more or less likely to be integrated into certain components than others. Relatedly, receiving countries are likely to overly concentrate on one dimension of integration over others. Guo and Guo (2016), for instance, demonstrate that contemporary immigration policies in Canada have primarily focused on economic integration, with an emphasis on the state's economic interests. However, this policy focus raises an important question: are immigrants truly capable of achieving successful integration?

The literature has addressed successful immigrant integration on both a conceptual and empirical level. Harder et al. (2018) propose the Immigration Policy Lab (IPL) Integration Index at the conceptual level, recognizing that there is no common measure of successful integration. Fundamentally, the IPL Integration Index has two components—the 12-item short form (IPL-12) and the 24-item long form (IPL-24), which encompasses six components of integration: social, political, economic, linguistic, navigational, and psychological. The IPL Integration Index addresses scientific advancement in the immigrant integration which hitherto was hindered by the lack of a common measure of integration that allows for comparison across studies, geographic scales, and time. Kyeremeh et al. (2021) comment on Harder et al.'s index, noting that, despite the significant insights gleaned from their index, it is based on a review of policies which is less likely to incorporate the voices and lived experiences of immigrants.

Other scholars have examined what constitutes successful integration empirically, focussing on the normative component of integration as in a policy domain. For policy makers at all geographic scales, ensuring successful integration of immigrants in the receiving country in all facets of life has been a critical issue. Indeed, successful integration is frequently viewed as being dependent on the immigrants and the host society's characteristics (Saharso, 2019). In examining the perceptions of Muslim immigrants concerning what constitutes successful integration in Germany and the Netherlands, Kortmann (2015) demonstrates that while the Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands have a positive view of multicultural integration policy—hence the right to protect their original identities, their counterparts in Germany consider moderate forms of acculturation such as the formation of 'hybrid' identities in Germany. However, Kortmann's (2015) study fails to account for the voices of different classes of immigrants within these two research contexts. In the context of Hong Kong, Hung and Fung (2016) examine the relationship between socio-economic status, social capital, and successful integration of

Chinese migrant women in comparison with the local population. The findings demonstrate that migrant women have less social capital than the mainstream population and that possessing social capital does not guarantee successful integration. Within the Canadian context, Kyeremeh et al. (2021) interrogate successful integration by drawing on in-depth interviews with African immigrants in London, Ontario, noting that the creation of conducive avenues for personal growth and development in the context where opportunities and options are available to immigrants for their progress is a true indication of successful integration.

The preceding illustration shows how the concept of integration has evolved over time. Therefore, it is critical to continue to reflect upon the concept rather than succumbing to calls in the academic domain to 'write against' it or discard it completely. In the next section, we elucidate on the predominant critiques of integration.

Critiques of the concept of integration

Several shortcomings of the concept—as used in the scientific domain and as a political action—have been highlighted in the existing literature on integration. Spencer and Charlsey (2021: 5–6), for instance, identify five core critiques of the concept: “normativity; objectification of the ‘other’; outdated imaginary of society; methodological nationalism; a narrow focus on immigrants as a force in shaping integration processes.” These criticisms are discussed in the subsequent section.

First, the normative disposition of the concept of integration has been criticized. This criticism is primarily associated with the use of integration in the domain of political actions. According to Spencer and Charlsey (2021), scholars have to address the normativity that has permeated the field of immigrants' integration. They particularly emphasize the need to shift away from prescribing what ought to happen (the ultimate and desired end goal) toward the actual process of integration—what is actually happening (Spencer & Charlsey, 2021). Other scholars have expressed similar sentiment, including Schinkel (2018) who critiques integration by arguing that it neglects the relational components of migration and only focuses on immigrants' position and problems in the host society. Similarly, Li (2003) emphasizes that the normative expectation of immigrants into the host society invariably “projects immigrants' deviations from the majority standard—whether pertaining to economic performances, normative values, or other behavioural benchmarks—as signs of incomplete or poor integration” (316).

Second, the concept has been critiqued for emphasizing objectification of the other. Spencer and Charlsey (2021), contend that the concept highlights a sense of difference, where migrants are assumed to be on one end of the integration process and the mainstream populations on the other. In fact, they posit that “it must contextualise individuals within not beyond society; reorienting the focus of study away from migrant populations towards the population as a whole (whether that be of a neighbourhood or on a larger scale), within which the significance of migration and/or ethnicity can be explored for the issue in question” (Spencer & Charlsey, 2021: 6). Similarly, Meissner and Heil (2021) argue that if a segment of the population is considered unintegrated, it implies that the entire population group, as identified through pointers of difference (their status as poor/non-white), is regarded as lagging on the integration yardstick. This viewpoint echoes the argument that Joppke and Morawska (2003) advanced some decades ago

that an integrated society is utopian, except in some peoples' imagination, particularly political players. In keeping with the objectification of the other, Schinkel (2018) demonstrates that dispensation of integration denotes that white citizens are not investigated regarding integration—culminating into what Meissner and Heil (2021) refer to as the reproduction of power asymmetries. This presupposes that a holistic analysis of immigrants' integration must be seen as a process that encompasses both immigrants and citizens of the host society.

Third, another prominent criticism of the concept of integration is the outdated social imaginary. This imagination, in the words of Schinkel (2018: 7) commences with a “theoretical imagination, or lack of it, that conceives of ‘society’ as an entity with an identity, and as an order with a border, in effect positioning social science into the role of border control”. Buttressing this position further within the Dutch context is Schinkel's (2010) assertion that the idea of society is problematic because it denotes the configurations of a society as a unified social environment and roughly homogenous into which only immigrants are supposed to integrate. Thus, the outdated imaginary society's criticism is based on the notion that society is not a static, imaginary, and homogenous entity, but rather embedded in dynamism where society is characterized by fluidity, diversity, segmentation, and heterogenous boundaries (Spencer & Charlse, 2021). Thus, its heterogeneity is influenced by immigrants and their engagements which transcend the boundaries of the receiving society to encapsulate ‘there’ and ‘elsewhere’. Such engagements involve exchange of ideas and practices which alter the host country's configuration as well as the sending countries' contexts.

The fourth criticism levelled against the application of the concept of integration is its methodological nationalism orientation. Historically, Wimmer and Schiller (2003) coined the term—methodological nationalism to imply that the discussion and analysis of social processes, including migration, is limited to the nation states, and thus encouraged scholars to move beyond such types of analysis. The concern here is that the current conceptualization and deployment of integration in research is limited to the host society, with immigrants' integration viewed in relation to the mainstream populations rather than forces beyond the nation-state. In the words of Spencer and Charlse (2021: 6), there is the:

need to incorporate the global and the transnational into our concept of the processes in which migrants and other residents are engaged. We need to conceptualise integration processes outside of a national paradigm, recognise the ephemerality of the borders of the nation state, and contemporary migration patterns of temporary and circular migration, as well as the transnational connections they maintain: individuals belong to and have a sense of belonging in more than one locality within and across international borders.

Thus, immigrants' integration processes extend beyond the nation-state, or put differently, the host society. In this vein, Firang, (2021) contends that transnational scholars have intellectually liberated the scholarly comprehension of the integration process from the monopoly of methodological nationalism, emphasizing the critical role of transnational engagements.

The fifth criticism directed against the concept of integration is its narrow focus on immigrants in forces defining integration progression. Spencer and Charlsey (2021), for instance, argue that boundary conditions or (in their words—‘effectors’) to immigrants’ integration are not only limited to individual immigrants’ factors, such as skills and educational level, but rather, multiple and systemic forces also work against immigrants’ integration. They also highlight that when scholars recognize that multiple and systemic factors serve as boundary conditions for immigrants’ integration, it exposes the fallacy of attributing blame or responsibility (for successful integration or lack of it) to any one party. Fundamentally, there is a need to reconsider forces beyond individual immigrants’ control in terms of their ability to successfully integrate into the host society.

Commenting on the criticisms levelled against integration, Meissner and Heil (2021) argue that the issue that needs to be addressed is not how immigrant integration is done, measured, or discussed, but rather the notion itself and its application in the European context. Contributing to the debate about why immigrant integration logics cannot be solved through reappropriations and redefinitions of integration, Meissner and Heil (2021: 753) use convivial disintegration as “an attempt to deromanticise, and always consider the superdiverse re/configurations of asymmetrical difference, the instability this entails and the relational modes which prevent total fragmentation.” Thus, convivial disintegration underscores the point that urban, and contexts characterized by profound migration-driven diversifications encompass interaction together with reconfigurations of differentiation (Meissner & Heil, 2021).

Unwriting against and rethinking integration as a wicked concept

In their seminal paper, ‘*Theorizing “Wicked Concept” and Reconceptualizing Wisdom as Wicked*’, Kutor et al. (2021) present a well-timed conceptualization of concepts that are characterized by ambiguities—under the overarching umbrella of a wicked concept. However, Kutor et al.’s (2021) paper is distinctive in that it proposes a wicked concept by drawing insights from wicked problem thinking. They then apply their proposed wicked concept to wisdom as a construct and argue convincingly why the concept of wisdom should be rethought as wicked. Specifically, Kutor et al., (2021: 632) note that:

This article proposes a “wicked concept” by expanding on insights from wicked problem thinking. Using the concept of wisdom as a reference point, we argue that academic knowledge production, most notably as it relates to wisdom, would benefit significantly from being reconceptualized as a wicked concept. We also suggest that reframing, acknowledging, and rethinking the notion of wisdom as wicked would shape the direction of wisdom research across academic disciplines.

Problematizing wisdom as a wicked concept is relevant to critical approaches to inquiry, particularly how being wise is related to being critical. Reflecting on this nexus, Simandan (2011) suggests three alternative ways of thinking about this connection: (1) both stances as mutually exclusive; (2) both stances are complementary; and (3) the critical stance seems nested within a more all-embracing wise stance. Relatedly, rethinking certain concepts as wicked resonates with the scholarship on the geography of personal and social change (see Simandan, 2020 for a detailed discussion).

According to Kutor et al. (2021: 633), a wicked concept is “one that lacks a precise definition, conceptualization, and replicable model of assessment; it is constantly evolving and must be ever refined to achieve a universal applicability” and they suggest five unexhaustive propositions characterizing wicked concepts. These are: (a) wicked concepts are difficult to define and have no universally agreed meaning; (b) the unending quest for a universal definition of wicked concepts; (c) definitions and conceptualizations of wicked concepts are neither true nor false; (e) all wicked concepts’ components are fundamentally unique; and (f) wicked concepts are multidimensional.

Notwithstanding the five dominant criticisms levelled against integration (as discussed in the previous section), this paper suggests that scholars and researchers follow the lead of Kutor et al.’s (2021) conceptualization of a wicked concept and begin to reconsider integration as wicked. In this regard, the paper makes five suggestions based on Kutor et al.’ (2021) coinage of a wicked concept—suggesting integration to be reconceptualized as such.

Immigrants’ integration is difficult to define and has no universally agreed meaning

One of the defining characteristics of a wicked concept is the difficulty to provide a concise definition and the lack of a universally accepted definition. According to Kutor et al. (2021), wicked concepts are inherently embedded with diverse components—so scholars tend to gravitate towards components that serve their research interests. This proposition applies to the concept of integration. In migration and integration literature, for example, there are several definitions of integration. As a result, there is no universally accepted definition of integration. Table 1 summarizes some of the definitions of integration.

Due to the definitional complexities surrounding integration, we contend that immigrants’ integration fits into Kutor et al.’s (2021) conceptualization of a wicked

Table 1 Definitions of immigrants’ integration

Definition of Integration	Author(s)
“Processes of interaction, personal and social change among individuals and institutions across structural, social, cultural and civic spheres and in relation to identity; processes which are multi-directional and have spatial, transnational and temporal dimensions”	Spencer and Charsley (2021: 16)
“Integration refers to the process of settlement of newcomers in a given society, to the interaction of these newcomers with the host society, and to the social change that follows immigration”	Penninx (2019: 5)
“The processes that take place after an immigrant has moved to a new country... a two-way process, requiring accommodation by both the native and the immigrant populations”	Givens (2007: 72)
“The process of becoming an accepted part of society”	Penninx and Garcés-Mascreñas (2016: 14)
“A generations lasting process of inclusion and acceptance of migrants in the core institutions, relations and statuses of the receiving society”	Heckmann (2006: 18)
“The inclusion of new populations into existing social structures of the immigration country”	Heckmann and Schnapper’s (2003: 10)

concept. Thus, a definition adopted by researchers is intended to serve the researcher's epistemological orientation. Overall, it is these multiple definitions that enrich the scholarship on integration.

The unending quest for a universal definition of immigrants' integration

As argued somewhere (see Kutor et al., 2021: 634), "for a study phenomenon to be considered a wicked concept, there should be a persistent and evolving attempt to find common meaning." Thus, the critical question is, are there endless attempts for a common denominator, conceptualization, definition, or model of integration? The answer is yes. First, the various definitions and models associated with integration support this assertion (Table 1). Essentially, each subsequent definitions and models seek for a standardization. Kutor et al. (2021) emphasize that standardization is an elusive mission to accomplish. Second, Spencer and Charsley (2021) have recently attempted to continue this mission of never-ending quest for a universal definition and model for integration research. They specifically state that their heuristic model of integration processes has the greatest potential to confer rigour to integration research and analysis (Spencer & Charsley, 2021). Implicit in this assertion is the fact that their heuristic model and definition have superior explanatory prowess to alternative models and definitions—hence the need for their model and definition to become the denominator for integration research. In this direction, the authors defined integration as "processes of interaction, personal and social change among individuals and institutions across structural, social, cultural and civic spheres and in relation to identity; processes which are multi-directional and have spatial, transnational and temporal dimensions" (Spencer & Charsley, 2021: 16). From the foregoing, scholars will always strive to refine, retune, rethink, and reconceptualize integration for clarity and rigour purposes. This rethinking effort is the hallmark of the current paper.

Definitions and conceptualizations of immigrants' integration are neither true nor false

According to Kutor et al. (2021), conceptualization and operationalization of a wicked concept are neither true nor false. Fundamentally, this proposition suggests that there are no true or false answers to how researchers conceptualize and assess components of a concept deemed as wicked. When compared to integration research, it is evident that there are various models and definitions of immigrants' integration. Even if each model and definition have some limitations, this does not render them true or false. To mention a few of the integration models: Heckmann's (2006) framework on social integration, Ager and Strang's (2008) conceptual framework, Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas' (2016) framework on integration processes, Skrobanek and Jobst's (2019) approach of 'liquid integration', and Spencer and Charsley's (2021) revised framework on integration processes and effectors. These various integration assessment models reaffirms the assertion that, nonetheless the fact that many actors and parties are interested in judging a conceptualization, none has the authority to set formal decision rubrics to assess correctness (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Thus, emphasizing the point that definitions and conceptualizations of integration models are neither true nor false, because whatever

definition and model that researchers choose to apply in their study is invariably contingent on their philosophical and paradigm dispositions. Indeed, whatever limitations are associated with integration models and definitions deployed in scholarly works do not render them false either.

All immigrants' integration components are fundamentally unique

Another feature of a wicked concept as propounded by Kutor et al. (2021) is its uniqueness. Uniqueness is used for heuristic utility, where “for any two approaches or conceptualizations of the same concept, at least one (if not more) peculiar property can be established, hence making each of them unique in their terms” (Kutor et al., 2021: 635). Juxtaposing this to integration implies that all definitions and models of immigrants' integration are somewhat unique in their own terms. For example, on the one hand, Spencer and Charsley (2021: 16) define integration as the “processes of interaction, personal and social change among individuals and institutions across structural, social, cultural and civic spheres and in relation to identity; processes which are multi-directional and have spatial, transnational and temporal dimensions.” On the other hand, Givens (2007: 72) defines integration as “the processes that take place after an immigrant has moved to a new country... a two-way process, requiring accommodation by both the native and the immigrant populations.” A critical analysis of these two definitions reveals a degree of similarity as well as a peculiar uniqueness associated with them. For instance, while Spencer and Charsley's definition suggests that the focus is absolutely on process-transcending a two-way process to incorporate the transnational perspective, Givens' definition emphasizes immigrants and the host society, thus, emphasizing a two-way process. It is these distinct differences that are specific to integration components that qualify it as a wicked concept. Indeed, Rittel and Webber (1973: 164) referred to this differentiating factor as having “overriding importance” in distinguishing one component of integration from another.

Immigrants' integration is multidimensional

One of the characteristics of a wicked concept is its multidimensionality. According to Kutor et al. (2021), a wicked concept's multidimensionality is predicated on the assumption that it has multiple dimensions and aspects. A wicked concepts' multifaceted nature includes their complexity, metaphorical meanings and application nuances (Kutor et al., 2021). Integration fits this description because a thorough examination of the concept reveals multiple dimensions. Penninx and Garcés-Mascreñas (2016), for instance, note that the fundamental definition of integration encapsulates three analytically separate components in which people are likely or unlikely to become an accepted members of a society: the cultural religious, the legal-political, and the socio-economic. Similarly, Heckmann and Schnapper's (2003) distinction between structural integration, cultural integration, identificational integration, and interactive integration is another multidimensionality of integration that fits the analytical framework of a wicked concept. As a result of this classification, integration's *diminuendos* and *tempos* (Penninx and Garcés-Mascreñas, 2016) are distinct, emphasising the concept's multidimensionality.

Another important aspect of integration's multidimensionality is that the term-integration is a vocabulary of political call for action and of social sciences (Wieviorka, 2014). This resonates with Kutor et al.'s (2021) claim that concepts deemed as wicked have metaphor connotation—where they are used in two domains: (a) scientific sense; and (b) social sense. The social sciences' use of integration coincided with the scientific sense, while its political discourse corresponded with its usage in the social sense. In a political sense or common usage, it denotes political actions on the part of policy makers to create a conducive environment that allows immigrants to fully integrate into the host society. As a concept in social science—hence its scientific operationalization, integration is used as an analytical framework in interrogating the processes of immigrants' incorporation into the host society.

What are the benefits to be gained from rethinking integration as a wicked concept?

The 'so what question' is critical. What are the benefits of rethinking integration as a wicked concept—owing to the criticisms identified in the earlier section? Essentially, this rethinking endeavour would assist researchers and scholars to move beyond the calls from some sections of scholars to write against the concept of integration or come up with a single working definition of integration. Here, the paper highlights two potential gains when integration is reconceptualized as a wicked concept.

First, rethinking integration as a wicked concept would open the door to cross-fertilization of ideas, culminating in dialogue among different disciplines. "Interdisciplinary efforts are critical not only for scientific discovery but also for knowledge production" as critical geographer Kutor et al. (2021: 637) so elegantly remind us in their work '*Theorizing "Wicked Concept" and Reconceptualizing Wisdom as Wicked*'. Studies on immigrants' integration, for example, have been a focus for sociologists (see Favell, 2022; Schinkel, 2018; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2017; Menjívar, 2010), and human geographers (see Kyeremeh et al., 2021; McDaniel et al., 2019; Walker, 2015). However, the extent to which these disciplinary backgrounds dialogue with one another is limited. Phrased differently, the level of multi-relational approach adopted by these academic disciplines are limited. Therefore, crucial to this opening of the terrain by reconceptualizing integration as a wicked concept is that academic disciplines are more likely to draw on each other's unique perspectives to enrich immigrants' integration scholarship. Indeed, this provocative piece to reconceptualize integration as a wicked concept is a way to advance the frontiers of integration research from a conceptual point of view. When scholars recognize the multiple characteristics associated with integration, which makes it fits the label, wicked concept, such a realization is a new strategy for knowledge construction. In essence, the increasing interdisciplinarity benefit of integration as wicked is that it provides the context to "transcend the narrow scope of disciplinary worldviews through an overarching synthesis ... a new mode of knowledge production that fosters a synthetic configuration and re-contextualization of available knowledge" (Klein, 2003: 4). One such all-encompassing synthesis is our rallying call for integration scholars to rethink immigrant integration as a wicked concept. Overall, this endeavour, the paper posits, create the conducive avenue for cross-fertilization of ideas, resulting in dialogue among different academic disciplines vis-à-vis immigrants' integration scholarship.

Lastly, reconsidering integration as a wicked concept would allow researchers to pursue a range of theoretical assumptions and framing around integration research. For emphasis, the predominant academic fields researching immigrant integration, such as sociology, human geography, and gender studies are oriented towards diverse epistemologies, thereby bringing different perspectives, methodological approaches, and theoretical lenses to knowledge production regarding integration. Indeed, pursuing a broad range of epistemological assumptions about integration is required, because as Fajth and Lessard-Phillips (2023) argue, a lack of consensus leads to inconsistency in the conceptualization and measurement of integration. In fact, we believe that developing a more coherent, provocative, and conceptual framework for the study of immigrant integration is one way to overcome this inconsistency—resulting from the concepts' normativity; objectification of the 'other'; outdated imaginary of society; methodological nationalism; narrow focus on migrants as a force in shaping integration progression.

The proposed coherent, provocative, and conceptual framework through wicked concept provides the conducive approach to incorporate other rich scholarships in areas, such as postcolonial studies, critical race studies, Black studies, political economy approach, and urban studies perspective to integration scholarship. Specifically, Hadj Abdou (2019: 4) notes that “immigrant integration research can benefit here from the extremely rich tradition of critical scholarship in urban studies dating back to the works of scholars such as Lefebvre.” Similarly, when the lens of intersectionality is brought to the discourse through gender and sexuality, identity markers, such as sex, race, class, gender, and nationality, it is likely to enrich the discourse on immigrants' integration. Moreso, Hadj Abdou (2019) demonstrates how immigration integration in cities reflects a critical approach to immigrant integration scholarship to overcome methodological nationalism and in the process incorporate race and class into the discussion, rather than overlooking them by focusing on the migrant as the principal analytical category.

Concluding remarks

Academic and policy attention has been focused on immigrant integration in a variety of geographic contexts and disciplines. Despite this allure, the concept of integration is without controversy. Notable criticisms of immigrants' integration coalesce around issues of normativity; objectification of the 'other'; outdated imaginary of society; methodological nationalism; and narrow focus on immigrants as a force in shaping integration progression. Some scholars argued that it was necessary to write against the concept as a result of these criticisms, while others sought a common definitional denominator of integration.

However, this paper posits that the concept of immigrant integration, particularly its scientific application, remains relevant—especially when the criticisms discussed above are purged of and reconceived integration as a wicked concept, it still offers a unique framework through which scholars can approach several substantive critical questions regarding immigrants' integration. The paper achieves this by drawing insights from Kutor et al.'s (2021) wicked concept. Following the tenets or propositions of Kutor et al.'s (2021) wicked concept, the paper argues that immigrants' integration fits the terminology of a wicked concept because: (a) immigrants' integration is difficult to define and has no universally agreed meaning; (b) the unending quest for a universal definition of

immigrants' integration; (c) definitions and conceptualizations of 'immigrants' integration are neither true nor false; (d) all immigrants' integration components are fundamentally unique; and (e) immigrants' integration is multidimensional.

With this in mind, the fundamental question is—so what if integration is reconceptualized as wicked? The paper contends that by reconsidering immigrants' integration as a wicked concept, it allows for: (a) a cross-fertilization of ideas—culminating in dialogue among different disciplines, and (b) researchers to pursue a variety of theoretical assumptions or framings around integration research.

Abbreviation

IPL Immigration Policy Lab

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