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## Identification Without Communication?

A Qualitative Study on the Identification Process of Syrian Refugees with the Dutch society



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## Abstract

This thesis further develops Berry's conceptual acculturation model (2001) by examining which factors affect the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society. On the basis of a qualitative interpretive methodological approach, this study has examined the individual intrasubjective experiences of Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands. The study revealed that the attitudes of members of the Dutch society and the Syrian newcomers play an important role in the identification process. However, contrary to Berry's argumentation, this study argues that these two factors alone are not sufficient to explain the identification process. Other factors, such as psychological difficulties and differences in communication customs, play an important role as well and should be taken into account. A lack of interpersonal communication often prevents the development of meaningful relationships and hinders the identification process of Syrians and the Dutch society. This study's findings support the integration paradox theory which states that newcomers who are more exposed to the Dutch society generally experience more discrimination and rejection and are more likely to distance themselves from the Dutch society in return.

**Keywords:** identification, acculturation, refugees, attitudes, Othering, integration paradox

## Preface

This master thesis is the final product of my Human Geography specialisation - Conflicts, Territories & Identities - at the Radboud University in Nijmegen. Although it sometimes was a long and difficult process, in the end I am proud of my final product and I hope you will enjoy reading it.

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## List of abbreviations

UNHCR:	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UDHR:	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
IND:	Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service
EM:	Ethnic Minorities Policy
CBS:	Dutch Centre for Statistics
SCP:	Dutch Institute for Social Research
VVD:	People's party for Freedom and Democracy
PVV:	Party for Freedom
LPF:	List Pim Fortuyn

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

We live in the age of the refugee, the age of the exile ~ Ariel Dorfman

## 1.1 Introduction

The world is on the run. In 2017, the global number of forcibly displaced people recorded its highest peak since the end of the Second World War. In total, 68,5 million people fled for the atrocities of conflicts and other sorts of violence (UNHCR, 2018). Each minute, over 20 people are forced to leave their home in a desperate attempt to reach a safe haven. Most of these people never make it across their national borders and are known as internally displaced persons. The people that do manage to cross their national border, the group of people that we know as refugees, often strand in rapidly set up refugee camps. In the end, only a lucky 'few' are in a position where they can ask for asylum in a safe third country. This group of asylum seekers consisted of 3,1 million people in 2017, just over 4 percent of the total number of forcibly displaced people.

Syria is the only country in the world where the majority (650 out of 1000) of its people are forcibly displaced (UNHCR, 2017). The conflict in Syria began in 2012 and has been the biggest cause of the exponential growth of forcibly displaced people in the last seven years. Most Syrian refugees have fled to neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Nevertheless, a large number of Syrian refugees has also tried to find shelter in further-away Europe. The desperate attempts of refugees that tried to flee to Europe via the Balkan route or by boats crossing the Mediterranean Sea, only to find newly-built fences or patrolling coast guards on their way, were broadcasted to us on a daily basis (e.g. BBC, 2016).

When refugees do make it into Europe, they can apply for asylum. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), set up in 1948 and ratified by almost all the countries in the world, states in Article 14: "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution" (UDHR, 1948, art 14). Refugees who have gained an asylum status start with the difficult process of settling down into their new host societies. This process of settling down in a society both physically and mentally can be problematic and can have serious consequences for a person's self-esteem, his or her sense of identity and sense of belonging (Koser Akcapar, 2006). Refugees have to find a way to adjust their personal or internal beliefs with regard to religion, norms and ethnic and cultural traditions to those of their new host society. This process can be difficult because of cultural differences and because many refugees experience psychological difficulties due to horrors they may have witnessed

in their countries of origin (Bhugra and Becker, 2005). The identification process with a new sociocultural environment is not only affected by refugees' internal feelings as described before, but also by external factors such as forced migrant policies, resettlement practices, and the political, social and economic conditions and the cultural traditions of their new host society (Hein, 1993). These external factors are of influence in a particular sociopolitical environment and shape the reception refugees may experience when settling down.

With the growing number of forcibly displaced people worldwide, intense political and societal debates in countries such as Australia, the United States and Canada emerged about the way if and how those countries should take in refugees. In most European countries, these discussions were even more dramatic because of the geological proximity to Syria. Syrian refugees came to Europe, and their arrival sparked a discussion that has been going on for approximately two decades on how to deal with refugees. This debate was centred around the question how newcomers should be incorporated in their new host societies. Even though this discussion has been held in many European countries, the outcome of these debates was rather dramatic in the Netherlands, which underwent a severe shift in its policy with regard to immigrants (Vasta, 2007). The Netherlands has a long liberal tradition of multiculturalism, but this approach has been restrained and toughened over the last two decades. Changes in the Dutch political and societal climate have led to a diminishing focus on multiculturalism and to a stronger push for an assimilationist approach by the government (Entzinger, 2006). In other words, a policy that aimed to promote cultural diversity increasingly lost ground for a policy that promotes cultural homogeneity. The assumption is that cultural homogeneity promotes the feeling of belonging together (Joppke, 2004). However, there is a discussion amongst scholars whether such an approach actually stimulates the mutual identification process. Numerous scholars argue that an assimilationist approach towards newcomers does not necessarily promote feelings of belonging to a new host society. As was stated by Dutch professor of migration and integration, Han Entzinger: "Forcing 'them' to become like 'us' in the old-fashioned assimilative way is not only counterproductive, but it may also provoke a reethnicisation (...)" (Entzinger, 2006, p143).

In debates about integration, populist politicians and the media often portray immigrants as a threat to the societal cohesion and national security. These fears are part of a bigger discourse where immigrants, and their culture, are described as a danger to the national identity of a country (Vasta, 2007). However, newcomers themselves are generally not involved in these debates; they are often talked about, but not talked with. Newcomers are regularly portrayed as a static and homogenous group in the media, thereby neglecting the enormous variety of individual stories and ideas (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017). Their variety is however interesting and important to take into account,

because individuals can respond very differently to the same phenomena, as was also argued by Entzinger.

Debates on how immigrants settle down in a new society are not exclusively held by politicians and the general public, but are also held amongst scholars. The academic field of acculturation research aims to provide a better scientific understanding on what factors have an influence on the process of settling down and the development of a sense of identification between individuals of different ethnic and/or cultural groups. Gaining a better understanding of how these processes are affected is important; it can serve as input for politicians and other stakeholders in order to enhance its policy. Acculturation research has revealed that immigrants may undergo different processes of identification within their new host societies. Identifying with a certain group involves a sense of belonging to this group and feelings of membership (Verkuyten and Martinovic, 2012).

One of the most important scholars in the field of acculturation studies is the psychology professor John Berry. He developed a conceptual model that has become the leading framework within this academic field. Berry (1997) set up a conceptual framework in which the acculturation outcomes of migrants were divided into four main categories, based on the orientation of the migrants. The first type, assimilation, occurs when someone rejects his or her own minority culture and adopts the dominant culture (-M, +D). The second type, separation, occurs when someone rejects the dominant culture and strengthens his or her own (+M, -D). The third mode is integration and occurs when someone adopts the cultural norms of the host culture while maintaining his or her own culture (+M, +D). The last type is marginalisation and is characterised by rejection of one's own culture and the dominant culture (-M, -D). Berry (2001) later further developed his model by including four potential strategies that can be adopted by the host society, when confronted with the migrants. Berry argued that the attitudes of both the dominant and the minority group affect the acculturation process of migrants. The attitude of the dominant cultural group sets the framework in which migrants have to settle down, and therefore it affects the level of agency of newcomers in their acculturation and identification process.

Although several different conceptual models have been developed within the field of acculturation research, Berry's model remains leading within this field of study. Academic criticism has however grown in the last two decades. Several scholars have argued that Berry's model overemphasised rationality in the acculturation process and that non-rational sentiments should be better taken into account. Moreover, there has been discussion whether acculturation is considered to be a mutually exclusive process, which means that someone can only adopt one singular acculturation strategy, or a multilineal process. This means that someone can adopt different acculturation strategies depending on the situation he or she is in. Verkuyten (2016) argued that

acculturation does not develop logically or in a straight line, but can be interrupted and even reversed. Verkuyten described a phenomenon that he titled as 'the integration paradox'. According to him, newcomers who are more adjusted to the Dutch culture and customs and who are more exposed to the Dutch society, generally experience more discrimination and rejection and are therefore inclined to distance themselves from the Dutch society in return. A potential explanation for the integration paradox can be found in Taylor's personal/group discrepancy theory (1990). Taylor argues that newcomers generally perceive more discrimination directed towards their group as a whole than towards them personally. Newcomers who are more exposed to their new host society may be better aware of structural forms of discrimination in policy, the media and society.

Another critique that has been raised questions whether Berry's model is usable in order to describe the acculturation processes of a specific sub-type of immigrants: refugees. When Berry speaks of *migrants* in his theory, he uses the term in the broadest sense of the word; all categories of newcomers are included. Refugees are however a distinct sub-group within the broader category of migrants. Refugees generally have their own specific motives, experiences, needs and desires when they move to another country (e.g. Bhugra and Becker, 2005). Moreover, refugees are generally portrayed differently in the media than other categories of migrants (Bos et al., 2016).

The majority of newcomers adopts a strategy of integration or assimilation into their new host societies (e.g. Van Oudenhoven and Eisses, 1998; Van Oudenhoven et al., 1998). In other words, most migrants want to develop a sense of identification with their new social environment. Nevertheless, many newcomers do not want to fully give up their own identity and cultural values. In the Netherlands, where assimilation is increasingly stimulated by the government, this may cause conflict. Refugees have a level of agency in their process of settling down, but this agency can be severely restricted by external factors such as the attitude of the host society. The existence of choice does not indicate that there are no restrictions on choice. "(...) Choices are always made within the limits of what are seen as feasible. The feasibilities in the case of identities will depend on individual characteristics and circumstances that determine the alternative possibilities open to us" (Sen, 2007, p5). Discrimination and rejection may limit the level of agency of newcomers.

The choice of someone to identify him or herself with another person or group depends on his or her own personality as well as on the environment in which that person lives. In a country where the government increasingly stimulates assimilation over integration, conflicts may occur, since newcomers can feel pressured to give up their own culture and identity.

The Syrian refugees that came to the Netherlands will most likely stay in the Netherlands since Syria is still not considered as safe enough to return to. Therefore, it is important that these Syrian newcomers

will acculturate in a way that is beneficial for both the Syrian newcomers and members of the Dutch society. These newcomers will most likely be in the Netherlands for a longer term. Gaining better insight into how the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society is affected by certain factors is important because this will provide crucial insights into how this process may be enhanced. Enhancing the identification process will stimulate the inclusiveness in the Dutch society and hence strengthen the societal cohesion in the Netherlands. In academic research, many scholars do not fully take immigrants' own perceptions and understandings of phenomena, such as integration, into account. In fact, academic criticism on these sorts of approaches has grown these past decades (e.g. Eastmond, 1998; Ehrkamp, 2006). It is important to examine these perceptions and understandings because these immigrants are human beings with agency and are not simply a subject of discussion.

It is important that both the Dutch society and the Syrian newcomers have similar expectations on how newcomers should acculturate in the Netherlands. Although the political and the societal debates in the Netherlands provide important insights into the views of the Dutch society on this matter, the views of Syrian newcomers themselves are barely reflected within these discussions. This thesis will examine this topic from the point of view of Syrian refugees. It will examine what factors affect the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society. Special attention will be given to the influence of perceived attitudes of members of the Dutch society towards Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands. The reason for this approach is that attitudes in the Dutch society have an important effect on the level of agency of newcomers to adopt certain acculturation strategies. The focus will be on *perceived* attitudes due to the limited scope and means of this research. The researcher has chosen to focus exclusively on the experiences of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands and how they perceive the attitudes towards them. The research does not focus on the experiences of members of the Dutch society who have come in contact with the Syrian newcomers. The aim of this study is to examine how factors such as perceived attitudes and others may facilitate or restrict the individual identification processes of Syrian refugees with their new sociocultural environment. The dynamic interplay between the agency of refugees and the external influence of the Dutch society will be an underlying theme in this research.

This study further develops Berry's model by examining if and how it can be used to describe the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society. In line with Berry's theory, this study examines how the attitudes of members of the Dutch society and of Syrian refugees affect the identification process of these newcomers. Moreover, this study reflects on the validity of Berry's theory by examining whether other factors should be taken into account as well. During this study,

several other important theories will be taken into account, as well. This study examined if and how Verkuyten's so-called integration paradox (2016) has an effect on the identification process of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. Analysing this theory in the context of Syrian refugees provides important insight into potential different levels of acceptance that Syrian newcomers experience and whether the identification process has certain limits. Moreover, Taylor's personal/group discrepancy theory (1990) will be examined, because it can provide further important insights into the level and type of discrimination and rejection that newcomers receive in the Netherlands.

It is crucial to make a distinction between the identification process of Syrian newcomers with the Netherlands and the identification process with the Dutch society. These are two different processes that can go hand in hand, but do not necessarily have to. People can feel at home in the Netherlands where they, for example, have a residence permit, a house and a job. However, this does not mean that this person also feels him- or herself to be a member of the Dutch society. You can live in the Netherlands, but live isolated or separated.

## **1.2 Aim and research questions**

The aim of this research is to provide in-depth knowledge on the factors that affect the identification processes of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society. The research was conducted on a micro level and focused on the perceptions of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. The main reason that the focus of this research is on Syrian refugees explicitly, is because Syrian refugees are the biggest group of newcomers in the Netherlands these recent years. As the largest group of newcomers, their acculturation processes will most likely have the biggest impact on the Dutch society of all the groups of newcomers in the coming years. In 2016, 31,452 refugees applied for asylum in the Netherlands. Over half of this group (52%) were refugees from Syria (IND, 2016).

The main research question of this thesis is as follows: "What are the main factors that affect the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society?"

In order to adequately answer the main question, three sub-questions have been formulated. The first question focuses on the political and societal macro context wherein refugees have to find their place in order to settle down. As was mentioned in the introduction, the sociopolitical setting has been quite sensitive in the past recent years and more generally in the recent decades. It is crucial to explore the macro sociopolitical context in which Syrian refugees have to settle down, because this context sets the framework for the acculturation process of newly-arrived refugees in the Netherlands and it affects the level of agency of newcomers. The first sub-question will be: "How has the political and societal debate regarding immigration and integration in the Netherlands developed since 1960?"

The second sub-question moves away from the broader contextual societal framework and shifts its focus explicitly to the perceptions of refugees themselves. The second question is as follows: “How do Syrian refugees perceive the attitudes by members of the Dutch society directed towards themselves, and how do these affect the identification process with the Dutch society?”

This sub-question examines the individual perceptions and understandings of refugees with regard to the attitudes they encounter from the host society. These perceptions are examined on two different levels; both their macro and micro perceptions with regard to the attitudes they encounter were examined. Micro perceptions refer to the attitudes that refugees encounter in their direct social environment on a daily basis, while macro perceptions refer to the attitudes that refugees encounter on a macro level in the media and politics. It is important to make this distinction, because there often is a personal/group discrepancy where individuals experience more group discrimination than personal discrimination (Taylor et al., 1990).

Even though the (perceived) attitudes of members of the Dutch society towards Syrian newcomers are likely to have an important effect on the identification process of Syrian refugees, there are more factors that are important to take into account. The third sub-question explores what these factors are: “Which other factors have an influence on the attitude of Syrian refugees themselves, and how do these affect the identification process with the Dutch society?”

This sub-question explores what factors have an effect on the attitude of Syrian newcomers themselves and how these affect their identification process with the Dutch society. Moreover, this sub-question explores which specific sort of difficulties refugees experience when settling down into a new society. As was said before, refugees are a specific sub-category of immigrants and can have different challenges and motives. This chapter takes a look at these differences and reflects on how they have an impact on the identification process.

### **1.3 Scientific and societal relevance**

Academic research should contribute to filling a knowledge gap. Such a contribution can support the improvement of a societal problem and also further stimulates academic discussions. This paragraph will reflect on the scientific and societal relevance of this study.

#### **1.3.1 Scientific relevance**

“Acculturation has become a well-recognized and important area of study” (Schwartz et al., 2010, p237). Berry’s acculturation framework (1997; 2001) acted as a catalyst and sparked an intense scientific debate about the usefulness of such a framework. Explicit criticism was given on the apparent

mutually exclusive scales and the idea that by adopting one acculturation strategy, someone could not simultaneously adopt other ones too. Moreover, they argued that Berry overestimated the rationality of people while adopting an acculturation strategy. Non-rational motives such as emotions are often involved in such processes. These criticisms are valid to a certain extent, but they do not reject the usefulness of Berry's theory in its totality. They rather criticise certain aspects of the research and they are partly the result of Berry's ontology and chosen methodology and scope.

This study is aligned with a new trend in acculturation research where acculturation is increasingly examined as a process that is unique and context-dependent and can only be understood within its particular time and place. This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach and examines the identification processes of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands as a process that can only be understood from within the Dutch context, in specific. Therefore, this study has more sensitivity for the particular challenges and factors that affect Syrian newcomers in their acculturation processes in the Netherlands. This study further develops Berry's acculturation theory by taking into account certain scholarly critiques raised; these are integrated into this research. This research adds a new case study to academic literature in the field of acculturation research. Moreover, this research explores how Berry's model that focuses on migrants in the broadest sense of the word can be used to examine and to describe the experiences of one of Berry's sub-categories of migrants: refugees. Hence, by conducting a case study on the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society, this study further develops Berry's acculturation framework by examining its validity and completeness with regard to refugees specifically,

This study examined whether Verkuyten's integration paradox theory had an effect on the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society. Gaining knowledge on the potential effects of the integration paradox provides important insight in the potential different levels of acceptance that Syrian refugees experience and the effects that this has on their identification process. In this light, also Taylor's personal/group discrepancy theory will be taken into account since this theory can shed light on more structural levels of discrimination that may or may not be present within Dutch media and society.

### **1.3.2 Societal relevance**

In recent years, the refugee crisis and the arrival of tens of thousands of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands has been one of the most heavily debated themes in the media, society and politics. Anti-immigration political parties grew in size, pro- and anti-immigration demonstrations were regularly held, and the newspapers covered the topic on a daily basis (e.g. Algemeen Dagblad, 2015; NRC, 2015). An important point of debate was how these newcomers should be included in Dutch society and whether they posed a threat to the social cohesion within the Netherlands or not. Dutch policy has

become more restrictive in recent decades and increasingly promotes assimilation over integration. The idea is that such an approach improves the sense of identification of newcomers and therefore strengthens the societal cohesion in the Netherlands. However, forced assimilation is often not favoured by newcomers themselves and it may even provoke feelings of reethnicisation.

This study provided crucial insights into the factors that affect the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society, and provided recommendations on how this process can be enhanced. Strengthening the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society can improve newcomers' feelings of being included within the Dutch society and can then positively contribute to the societal cohesion in the Netherlands. This research can give politicians, as well as Dutch citizens and organisations that are in contact with refugees, important insights into how the successful incorporation of refugees within the Dutch society is affected by external factors and how this process can be improved.

Many debates on immigration and integration are based upon sentiments and fears. It is unwise and undesirable however to counter these critiques exclusively as irrational, xenophobic or racist, because these fears are experienced and expressed by a large number of Dutch citizens and can have a genuine impact on their lives. Instead of ignoring these voices or reducing it to terms as racist, it is better to counter these ideas by facts derived from academic research. This rationale lies underneath this master thesis and the findings of this study are meant to contribute to the societal debate on this topic by providing facts that can replace assumptions and bias. It is important to incorporate the experiences of Syrian refugees in these debates, since they are about them. This study intends to give a voice to a group of refugees in order highlight their experiences and to give some counterbalance to the debate.

## Chapter 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the theoretical debates and the underlying concepts that are fundamental to this thesis. This chapter first presents an overview of the debate regarding acculturation and will explain Berry's acculturation framework. The overview is used to position this research within the overarching theoretical debate in order to contribute to the academic discussion. The next section explores the academic debate that was sparked by Berry's conceptual framework. This sub-paragraph discusses several scholarly critiques that have been raised and reflects on how these critiques have been taken into account during this study. Then, the identification process other main concepts that were used during this research are outlined and operationalised. Hereafter, several important academic works are discussed on the relationship between host society attitudes and acculturation processes.

### 2.2 Berry's theory

This section explores the development of the acculturation debate and discusses some of the most influential academic works. The first section is divided in three sub-sections. The first part explores the acculturation debate up till Berry developed his acculturation model. The second part provides an in-depth analysis of Berry's conceptual framework. Berry's model has become the leading framework within acculturation research and the main point of reference for other theories, and is also used as such for this thesis. In the last part, important critiques on Berry's theoretical model are explored. That responds to the critiques and provides a justification for the use and development of Berry's theory.

#### 2.2.1 *Pre-Berry debate*

The most common-used definition of acculturation, which will also be used during this research, has been developed by Redfield, Linton and Herskovits: "Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (1936, p149). In other words, acculturation is a process that leads to cultural, psychological and social change and occurs when individuals of different ethnic and/or cultural groups come into regular contact with each other. Originally, acculturation was perceived as a unidimensional process, heading from maintaining your own culture to assimilating into another culture. Losing your own culture would imply that someone is assimilating into another (Graves, 1967). However, acculturation research underwent a paradigm shift when Teske and Nelson (1974) stated that there is an important distinction between

acculturation as a collective process, and acculturation as an individual process. They introduced the concept of psychological acculturation. This distinction then became a crucial aspect in further research because it analysed acculturation as a phenomenon that affected multidimensional levels. Acculturation had its effect on the culture of collective groups, but also on the psychology and therefore the behaviour of individuals. Subsequent research mainly focused on the relationship between the different levels of acculturation.

Originally, acculturation research was mostly conducted in behavioural sciences by anthropologists, sociologists and later on by psychologists (Olmedo, 1979). Quantitative studies tried to systematise acculturation processes and to highlight the main factors within these processes. Olmedo (1979) proposed his *full measurement model*, which examines “...relationships between multidimensional sets of quantitatively defined cultural and behavioural variables” (p1069). According to Olmedo, these variables serve as an antecedent for behaviour and can predict the development of certain processes. This line of thinking assumes that acculturation is a continuous process guided by laws. Furthermore, Cortés et al. (1994) set up a conceptual model that enabled them to measure the degree of biculturality<sup>1</sup> for individuals by scaling certain variables. Their model studied acculturation as a bidimensional process where the involvement of immigrants with their own culture and the new host culture were separately assessed and scaled. In the last two decades, anthropologists, sociologists, communication scholars and, to a lesser extent, other social scientists, have become increasingly involved in acculturation research.

### **2.2.2 Berry's model**

Although numerous different theories and models had been developed in acculturation research, one particular model became influential and the main point of reference for future studies in acculturation research. Berry (1997; 2001) outlined a conceptual model in which acculturation and adaptation can be examined. Berry's quantitative approach was in line with the dominant methodology in acculturation research in his time. Similar to Cortés et al., Berry developed a bilinear model that categorised acculturation along two dimensions. However, the strength of Berry's model can be found in its ability to visualise complex acculturation processes and directions. Moreover, it reveals how the acculturation strategies of the larger society sets the framework for the acculturation strategies of newcomers.

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<sup>1</sup> Concept introduced by Gordon (1964) and used by several scholars. Biculturalism refers to an individual who is involved in two cultures simultaneously.

Based on cross-cultural psychological research, Berry states that when immigrants have to settle down in a new society, a complex pattern of change and continuity occurs. Berry examines acculturation on a societal level, which refers to cultural changes on a group level, and acculturation on an individual level, which refers to individual adaptation or identification. In this thesis, the focus will explicitly be on identification at an individual level. Hence, when we speak of identification processes during this research, it is important to realise that identification is an important part of acculturation. However, acculturation is more encompassing and also includes changes on a group level.

The in/compatibility of the two cultural groups' position on factors such as religion, attitudes, values and personality forms the basis of understanding the complex acculturation process, according to Berry. Furthermore, acculturation strategies may be affected by the demographic circumstances of the immigrants coming in. Acculturation as a two-way process does normally affect both groups, but generally it is the non-dominant group that is affected the most. These changes on a group level have their effects on an individual, psychological level. Behavioural individual changes may occur in ways of communicating, dressing, eating or other ways. When these behavioural changes are forced upon and not welcomed by the migrant, this may lead to psychological problems, such as depressions, anxiety and uncertainty. Berry refers to these problems as acculturative stress (Berry et al., 1987).

Acculturation involves a (potential) conflict between cultural maintenance on the one hand and participation with the host society on the other hand. Berry has identified four types of acculturation strategies that immigrants may adopt when settling in a new society. These different strategies are roughly divided on the basis of two indicators. The first indicator is *cultural maintenance*, which refers to what extent someone considers his or her cultural identity and characteristics as important and strives for its maintenance. The second one is *contact and participation*, which refers to what extent someone becomes involved with other cultural groups or remains focused on his or her own group. Berry's model is visualised in figure 1.

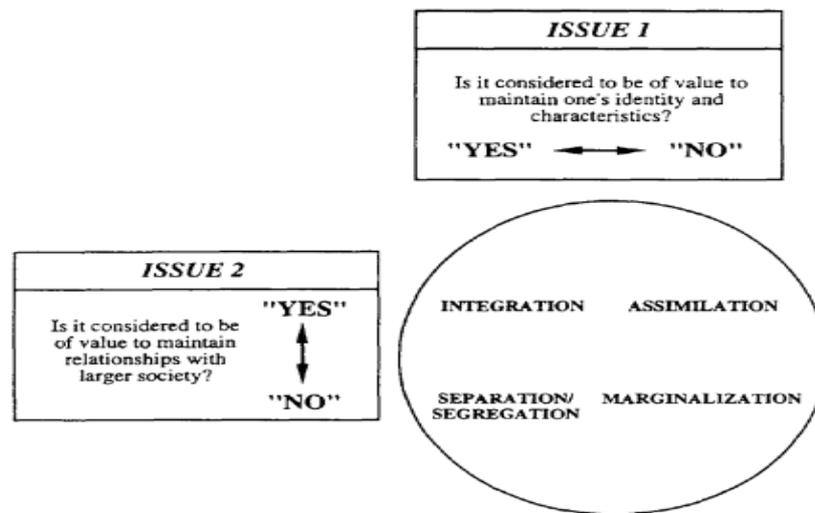
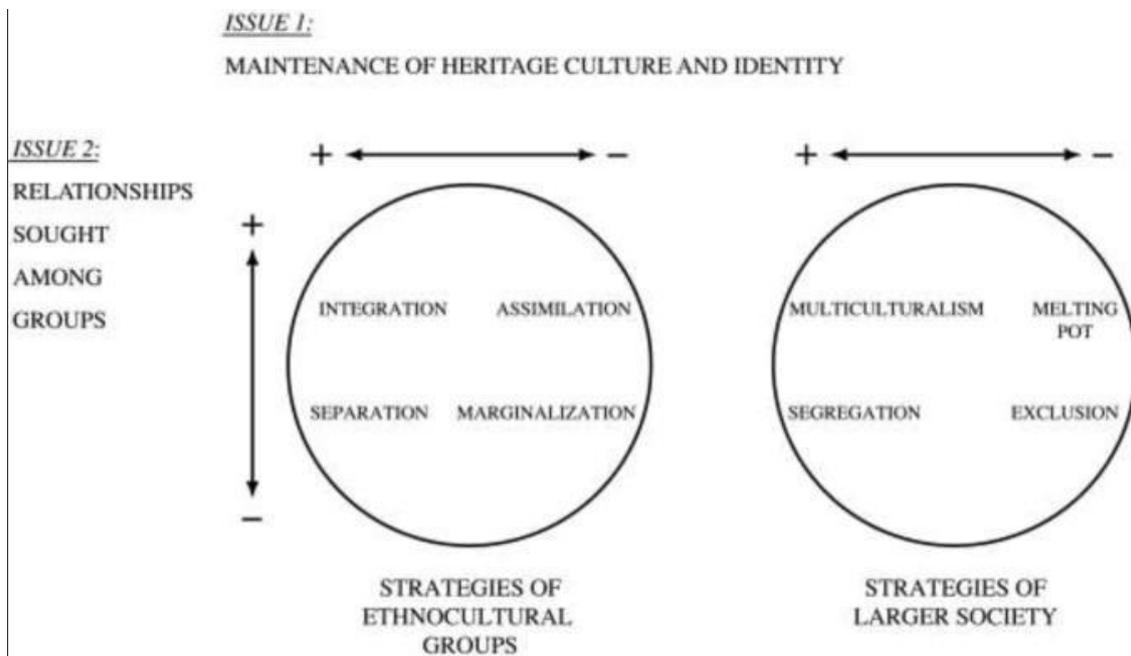


Figure 1. Source: (Berry, 1997; p10)

Roughly, there are four potential strategies, depending on the dis/agreement of someone with the two indicators. The first strategy, integration, is adopted when someone maintains his or her own cultural identity while simultaneously creating and maintaining relationships with the dominant culture. The second strategy, assimilation, develops when someone gives up his or her own culture and totally adopts the dominant culture. The third strategy, separation, involves the maintenance of one's own cultural identity while rejecting relationships with the host society. The fourth strategy, marginalisation, involves a lack of identification with or participation in both one's own culture and the dominant culture.

Berry later further developed his acculturation model by adding acculturation strategies that are adopted by the host society (Berry, 2001). The acculturation strategy that is adopted by the host society has major consequences for the identification processes of immigrants. "When the dominant group enforces certain forms of acculturation, or constrains the choices of non-dominant groups or individuals, then other terms need to be used" (Berry, 1997, p10). As Berry argues, we cannot speak of separation as a strategy for immigrants when it is forced upon them by the dominant culture. In such a situation, we speak of segregation instead of separation. Similarly, Berry speaks of a 'melting pot' when immigrants choose to assimilate, but he speaks of a 'pressure cooker' when people are forced to do so (Berry, 1997, p10). There is no other term for marginalisation required since marginalisation is almost always the combined result of forced assimilation and exclusion, and is therefore automatically instigated by the attitude of the host society. The last strategy, integration, is only possible in an inclusive society where this strategy is being mutually accommodated by both the immigrant and the dominant culture and is hence only possible in an explicitly multicultural society. Multiculturalism refers to the acceptance of cultural diversity, positive mutual feelings between the

cultural groups, low levels of prejudice such as racism and discrimination, and a level of identification of all groups with the society (Berry and Kalin, 1995).



**Figure 2.** Source: (Berry, 2001; p618)

The expanded version of Berry’s model serves as an important starting point for this study. As the main point of reference in acculturation research, this thesis examines how Berry’s theory is applicable in the context of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. An important factor that will be taken into account is how the perceived strategies of the larger, Dutch society affect Syrian refugees in their identification processes. These attitudes of the host society towards newcomers have an important influence on the level of agency of newcomers; it shapes the framework in which newcomers have to find their way in order to settle down. However, Berry’s model received serious critiques and several of these were also taken into account in this study. These debates will be discussed and reflected on in the following sub-paragraph.

### **2.2.3 Critique on Berry’s model**

In response to Berry’s model, different critiques were raised by scholars. In this section, some of the most important critiques and debates are elaborated upon. This section explains several of the most important critiques and reflects on this study’s position towards these critiques and hence on its deviation from Berry’s model.

One of the most profound critiques that has been raised focuses on the apparently mutually exclusive scales of Berry's model. Rudmin (1996) tackles the implicit assumption in Berry's theory that by adopting a certain strategy, someone automatically impedes the other strategies. However, as Rudmin argues, people may adopt different sorts of strategies in different situations. Rudmin strikes an important issue here. Even though Berry acknowledges that his model is not as strict and mutually exclusive in reality as it is presented in his model, the fact remains that Berry does not create nor leave space for alternative acculturation strategies. Furthermore, Berry does not have an explanation for Rudmin's critique that people may adopt different, multilineal strategies in different situations. These shortcomings are partly the result of the adoption of a positivist quantitative approach of much acculturation research, including Berry's. Such a quantitative approach can sometimes be too rigorous and is ill-suited to capture the nuances and differences within the acculturation strategies. In relation to Rudmin's critique, Berry's model assumes that every immigrant necessarily has to acculturate in one of the four given directions. However, such a rationale fails to see the different levels of graduations within an acculturation direction and the multilineal level of acculturation. An interpretive approach is better capable of understanding the nuances and differences within and between these acculturation categories. This study takes Rudmin's critiques into account by adopting an interpretive approach that examines the multilineal levels of acculturation.

Indeed, several scholars have criticised the dominant focus on quantitative positivist methodologies in acculturation research. This critique was mainly raised by anthropologists, sociologists and communication scholars who became more active in this field of study in the last two decades. These scholars criticised the *mode of explanation* that is based on a logical positivism-paradigm and which is used by Berry and others. Scholars within this academic tradition think of acculturation as a process that is guided by certain laws which function, mainly, independent of the particulars of the individuals who are involved herein (Chirkov, 2009). The critics of such a mode of thinking developed acculturation research into a different direction where the main focus shifted to the study of the dynamics of cultural and individual changes. Scholars increasingly started to examine the individual, intrasubjective<sup>2</sup> meanings of immigrants' experiences while settling down into their new host societies (e.g. Bhatia and Ram, 2009; Cresswell, 2009). These scholars adopted a *mode of understanding* which is based on the idea that human actions can only be understood from within their specific sociocultural context. Scholars within this tradition studied acculturation as a process that is context-dependent and unique. "(...) if researchers are looking for a context-bounded understanding of particular events and actions, they have to analyse social, cultural, and historical contexts, take people's perspectives, and through

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<sup>2</sup> Intrasubjectivity refers to all responses and changes that happen within a person.

the reconstruction of their experiences understand these people and their behaviors” (Chirkov, 2009, p97).

The researcher agrees with this school of thought and will from this point onward align with this thinking. Adopting an interpretive approach is important in minimising the risk of examining refugees as a monolithic entity. The specific historical, social, cultural and political context should be taken into consideration during such a study. It is only possible to interpret the specifics of the acculturation process when the macro context is understood.

Bhatia and Ram (2009) have argued that Berry’s theory implicitly assumes that both cultural groups have an equal status and power. They argue that this is often not the case in reality and hence that Berry’s model is based upon a wrong assumption. This critique, however, is partly invalid since Berry explains the consequences of certain attitudes of the dominant culture on the acculturation process of the minority culture (see figure 2). Berry does explicitly acknowledge the potential effects of uneven power relations between the two cultural groups. Nevertheless, it remains important to be aware of possible unequal power relations between individuals of the different cultural groups. Although scholars have different ideas about how far-reaching the consequences of these uneven power relations are, they do agree on the idea that it has an important effect on the acculturation processes.

Berry’s chosen methodology and theory received different sorts of critiques that were explored in this sub-paragraph. Most importantly, Berry’s positivist approach was criticised by scholars who preferred an interpretive approach that is based upon a different ontology. Instead of considering acculturation as an objective process that is guided by laws, the mode of understanding examines acculturation from within its specific context and aims to interpret the meaning of people’s actions. This study adopts a similar approach. Such an approach is less rigorous and is better capable of taking nuances and the specific context into account. This study adopts Rudmin’s critique by examining if and how the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society is multilinear and hence develops differently within the public and private domain. As was mentioned before, the identification process is a part of the acculturation process. In the following paragraph, we explore what the identification process entails and how it fits within acculturation research.

### **2.3 Identification**

Acculturation is a process that develops on different levels. Roughly, a distinction can be made between changes that occur on an individual and group level. At an individual level, the process of acculturation refers to the socialisation or identification process of newcomers where they adopt the language, norms, values, attitudes and behaviours of the dominant group. The identification process

on an individual level can lead to changes in daily behaviour but can also affect the physical well-being and psychological state of mind of newcomers. This research focuses on acculturation on an individual level and hence focuses on the identification process of Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands.

Identification is the psychological process wherein someone defines him- or herself. Identification is strongly dependent on individual characteristics, preferences and needs (Verkuyten, 1999). Identification enables an individual to form social connections with a group and other individuals. When people identify themselves with a group or community, they will start to form emotional connections with other persons who identify themselves in the same way (Verkuyten, 1999). Identifying with a certain group involves a sense of belonging to this group and feelings of membership (Verkuyten and Martinovic, 2012).

Opposed to identification, there can also be a process of disidentification where an individual rejects the expectations or desires that are imposed upon him or her because he or she belongs to a specific group. According to a case study by Arends-Tóth and Van Den Vijver, the majority of the Dutch desired from Turkish-Dutch that they assimilated into the Dutch culture (2004). The Turks are an ethnic minority group in the Dutch society and still preferred to hold on to their Turkish culture. Their study revealed that Turkish-Dutch preferred integration in the public domain, where Dutch was spoken and parts of the culture and customs were adopted, while they preferred separation in the private domain, where they held their Turkish culture, for example by speaking Turkish (Arends-Tóth and Van Den Vijver, 2004). What you can see here is that there is a discrepancy between expectations and desires; both groups have different ideas about how the other should behave or act. These results suggest that majority and minority group members can have substantially different ideas about acculturation. Such a clash of expectations can facilitate individual processes of disidentification from both sides. As was revealed by Arends-Tóth and Van Den Vijver, individuals from both groups developed negative feelings towards the other group because they disagreed with the acculturation expectations of the other. Their study is an example of how different expectations can create divisions and stimulate a process of disidentification.

An important related concept that can affect the process of dis/identification is Othering. The process of identifying yourself with a certain group results in the creation of distinctions between your group and others; this process is known as Othering. By identifying yourself as a member of a group or community, you place yourself at the centre. The Other is placed outside this group and is therefore different. "The term 'Other' serves as both a noun and a verb" (Mountz, 2009, p328). As a noun, a person or a group can be described as Other than the Self. As a verb, Other(ing) describes the process of categorising, labelling, differentiating, placing, naming, identifying and excluding people who do not

fit a certain standard (Mountz, 2009). The power of Othering lies in its constant repetition. When certain characteristics or stereotypes are constantly repeated, the Othering process strengthens itself. It becomes harder to break through the dichotomy that has been created. Othering is a binary process that fails to see the in-between, or the third-space (Soja, 1996). By emphasising differences, people ignore to see those aspects that transcend the opposed dichotomy.

Othering can strengthen feelings of depression, anxiety and uncertainty. Immigrants and refugees are especially sensitive for the consequences of Othering since they are involved in a process of “(...) the loss of cultural norms, religious customs, and social support systems, adjustment to a new culture and changes in identity and concept of self” (Bhugra and Becker, 2005, p18). Refugees are involved in an acculturation process where they have to find a way to balance their own background and culture with that of their new host society. Therefore, the consequences of Othering can be particularly influential since they are in the middle of a process of redefining themselves. The perception of being Othered can stimulate social isolation and the psychological state of mind of people. Moreover, it can negatively affect the physical well-being of people who feel increasingly tired and have low levels of energy (Bhugra and Becker, 2005).

Postcolonial geographers were the first to introduce the concept of Othering into human geographical research. The concept was originally used to describe how Western colonial powers were Othering places in order to legitimise their dominance and superiority. By enforcing the image of the Self, the Western states and culture were placed at the centre of the power balance. The Other, primarily non-Western states, were described as different and hence inferior. Edward Saïd’s book *Orientalism* (1978) has been the most influential work in this research tradition.

Identification is a particular process within the broader acculturation process. Identification is a process that takes place on an individual basis and involves the development of a sense of belonging, which affects the psychological state of mind and the physical well-being of people. Identification is subjective and can manifest itself via language, dress, attitudes and certain behaviours, among many things. Othering and identification are interrelated because Othering can strengthen the identification process within a group by forming connections with others who are perceived to belong to the same group. To the contrary, it can strengthen divisions and differences with others who are perceived to be different. Therefore, the presence and strength of Othering processes within a society affect the level of dis/identification of members of different cultural groups with each other. “Immigrants and refugees are among those racialized and othered through categorization, differing legal status and public discourses such as news reports that characterize particular groups of immigrants” (Mountz, 2009, p332). Discrimination, xenophobia, racism, prejudice and bias are all part of Othering and can have drastic negative consequences on the level of identification with another cultural group and the

acculturation processes of immigrants. By ascribing certain characteristics or attributes to your group, you distance yourself from non-group members who allegedly do not possess these. This study examines whether Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands perceived such processes of Othering and, if so, how this affected their identification processes with the Dutch society. Othering manifests itself in the contacts and attitudes between the Syrian newcomers and the Dutch host society. In the following paragraph, several important academic works on host attitudes towards newcomers will be discussed.

## 2.4 Host attitudes

As was explained in the previous paragraphs, in the last two decades, social scientists increasingly examined how immigrants developed different acculturation strategies to settle down in their new host society. Such a process does not, however, develop on its own and is also affected by the context and the attitude of members of the host society towards newcomers. This study uses Perloff's definition of attitude: "Attitude is a psychological construct. It is a mental and emotional entity that inheres in, or characterises, the person. It has also been called a "hypothetical construct", a concept that cannot be observed directly but can only be inferred from people's actions" (Perloff, 2010, p87-88). Perloff's definition is different than those that are used by some other scholars. Certain scholars have a broader definition of attitudes and they claim that attitudes can also be psychologically integrated: it does not necessarily have to be expressed via verbal or non-verbal communications. Nevertheless, this study adopts Perloff's vision for practical reasons since the research will focus on the perceived attitudes that refugees encounter. These encounters are purely expressed by verbal and non-verbal behavioural actions.

Host society attitudes shape the context and space for immigrants wherein they have to acculturate. The dominant group within a society has a crucial role in shaping the acculturation strategies of immigrants (Berry, 2003). As was argued by Esses et al., the attitudes of host society members shape societal, immigration and organisational policies that can affect immigrants (2001). Their case study in Canada and the United States revealed that the arrival of immigrants is often perceived as a competition between host society members and the newly-arrived immigrants. This competition plays out in different domains, including the search for jobs, the maintenance of cultural values and traditions, and religion. The competition between the different groups is perceived as a zero-sum game where benefits for one group are instantly seen as a loss for the other. This line of thinking strengthens divisions and enhances stereotypes, exclusion and discrimination. People that did not see immigrants as competitors, were generally more open and tolerant to immigrants. In those cases, immigrants were given more options to integrate or assimilate into the host society (Esses et al., 2001).

The attitude of members of the host society towards immigrants does not merely limit itself to the public sphere, but also to the private domain, as was described by Arends-Tóth and Van Den Vijver (2004). When there is a discrepancy between desires and expectations from both sides towards the Other, mutual negative feelings are developed. Turkish-Dutch felt pressured to give up their own culture, even though they desired to preserve their own culture. These feelings could encourage further feelings of resistance towards Dutch culture. This case study exemplified how forced assimilation can indeed strengthen processes of reethnicisation (Entzinger, 2006). Processes of reethnicisation on their turn strengthen the division between members of different cultural groups and stimulate processes of disidentification.

Discrimination, racism, xenophobia, prejudice and bias are all forms of negative attitudes that newcomers may receive from members of the dominant cultural group. The level and type of such experiences affects the identification process of newcomers. Taylor et al. (1990) found that people generally perceive a higher level of discrimination towards their group as a whole, rather than directed towards them as individual members of a group. This paradoxical phenomenon was titled by the authors as the personal/group discrepancy theory. This phenomenon is believed to have three main causes. First, people often deny or trivialise individual discrimination directed towards themselves personally. People may minimise their personal negative experiences with regard to discrimination in order to protect themselves from getting hurt more. Secondly, contrary to the previous point, people often exaggerate discrimination towards their group as a whole. People may use the claims of discrimination in order to advocate for social change designed to improve their own status and that of their group. Furthermore, exaggerating group discrimination may improve the feelings of satisfaction when someone achieves personal success in spite of the discrimination experienced. Third, people are often biased in their processing of information. This means that people generally have the tendency to preferably process particular news feeds, thereby strengthening their own, already existing ideas as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

One of the most striking examples of how far the effects of host attitudes towards newcomers can go was described by several Dutch scholars. They studied a surprising phenomenon that they titled the integration paradox. "The integration paradox refers to the phenomenon of the more highly educated and structurally integrated immigrants turning away from the host society, rather than becoming more oriented toward it" (Verkuyten, 2016, p583). Verkuyten and others argue that highly educated immigrants often experience more relative deprivation. Relative deprivation refers to the feeling that someone of his or her cultural group is disadvantaged compared to others. The feeling of relative deprivation is amongst others strengthened by the experience of foreign education and diplomas that

are not being recognised by another country, which is often the case in the Netherlands. Verkuyten argues that highly educated immigrants are generally more involved in intergroup comparisons and are therefore more exposed to discrimination and lower acceptance in daily life. The theory of exposure claims that highly educated immigrants experience more prejudice because they are more actively involved in following the national media and politics, are more aware of discrimination and negative attitudes, and are more open for intergroup contact (Van Heerden et al., 2014). The integration paradox reveals that the acculturation process of newcomers who adopt a strategy of assimilation or integration can be obstructed and even reversed when they encounter such negative attitudes towards them. In response to such experiences, they can distance themselves from the dominant culture.

In sum, newcomers have to settle down in a society with its own culture, tradition, customs and policies, and they have to find a way to balance their own background with that of their new host society. An important, influential factor in this process is the attitude of the host society. A recurring theme in academic research is that there often are discrepancies of expectations and desires between newcomers and members of the host society with regard to acculturation and attitudes. Such a clash of expectations enhances the division between the two cultural groups and hence problematises the identification process between individuals of both groups. It may even provoke processes of reethnicisation. The attitude of a host society is place and time dependent and is hence affected by the historical, sociopolitical and cultural context of a society. The integration paradox theory reveals how far-reaching the consequences of host attitudes can be on the identification and acculturation processes of newcomers. Since the attitude of the host society can have such drastic consequences on the identification process of newcomers, it is crucial that these attitudes are taken into account during this study.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The central aim of this theoretical chapter was to provide an actual overview of the development and the status of acculturation research, and to position this study within the field. Acculturation research as a field of study developed in the decades following World War II. The academic discipline was stimulated when Berry developed his conceptual framework (1997; 2001). Berry's model sparked intense debates and criticisms. In response to Berry's positivist quantitative approach, alternative methodological approaches were adopted and this led to the development of acculturation research, which then took a different direction. The dominant *mode of explanation* was increasingly countered by other studies that adopted a *mode of understanding*. Acculturation was considered as a process that was context dependent and could only be understood within its particular setting of time and

place. Academic attention for qualitative interpretive research grew and this led to the study of the meaning of individuals and intrasubjective changes within the acculturation process. This thesis can be positioned within this academic field of research.

As the main point of reference in acculturation research, Berry's model serves as an important starting point for this study. In line with Berry's theory, this study reflects on how attitudes of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands and the perceived attitudes of members of the Dutch society towards them affects the identification process of Syrian newcomers with the Dutch society. There are, though, some important deviations from Berry's theory that have been highlighted in this chapter. This study adopted a micro approach and examined the individual intrasubjective experiences of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. It also included Rudmin's theory (1996) by examining if and how the identification process develops in a different way in the public and private domain. The case study of Arends-Tóth and Van Den Vijver in the Netherlands (2004) suggested that individuals of minority cultural groups indeed can adopt multilineal acculturation strategies, and this study examines whether this is also true for Syrian newcomers and, if so, how this has affected their identification process.

Acculturation as a process develops on different levels. The identification process is a particular sub-process within acculturation and manifests itself in changes on an individual level. Developing a sense of identification between Syrian newcomers and the Dutch society is essential to feel included within the Dutch society, and is also necessary to develop a sense of belonging in the Netherlands. The process of Othering is an important variable within developing a sense of dis/identification with members of another cultural group. Othering creates internal connections and external divisions. Therefore, it affects both the identification process, as well as the disidentification process between individuals. Othering has particular strong effects on immigrants and refugees since they are involved in the complex process of redefining who they are and finding a balance between their own background and the culture of their new host society (Bhugra and Becker, 2005). Othering manifests itself in the contact and attitudes between members of the Dutch society and Syrian newcomers.

Academic research has revealed how far-reaching potential effects of host society attitudes on the identification process of newcomers can be. Differences in expectations with regard to acculturation strategies can provoke mutual feelings of rejection and stimulate processes of disidentification. According to Verkuyten, host attitudes can even lead to a reversion within the identification process of newcomers with the Dutch society. This study examines if and how the integration paradox theory has an effect on the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society. The integration paradox theory suggests that identification is not necessarily a continuous process that improves over



time. Examining whether the integration paradox is present among Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands is interesting because it provides important insights into how long-term identification processes of newcomers can develop. According to Verkuyten, part of the explanation for the integration paradox theory can be found in the fact that newcomers who are more used to Dutch culture and customs are generally more likely to follow Dutch media and they are better aware of discrimination. The personal/group discrepancy theory (Taylor et al., 1990) can provide insights into how Syrian newcomers experience discrimination on a personal and a macro level. Examining this theory will not only provide in-depth knowledge on the type and level of Othering processes that Syrian newcomers may experience, but also on how these different types of discrimination affect their identification processes with the Dutch society.

## Chapter 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

The focus of this research is on Syrian refugees that came to the Netherlands in the last five years because they have fled the war in Syria. More specifically, this study examines what factors affect the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society. This chapter first elaborates on the methodological approach that was adopted during this study and provides a justification for its use. Secondly, it discusses the sampling process of respondents. Then, the different data collection methods that were used are discussed. Fourthly, the coding and data analysis process is described. Finally, the last paragraph reflects on the internal and external validity of this research.

### 3.2 Qualitative interpretive approach

The acculturation process of refugees can be considered as ‘the last chapter’ in a refugee’s journey towards a safe haven. It refers to the situation where refugees have gained asylum in a third country, and are able to start the challenging phase of settling down physically and psychologically in their new society. The sub-questions set up in chapter 1 are designed to provide in-depth knowledge regarding the political and public discourse on immigration and integration in the Netherlands, and the influence of the perceived attitudes and other factors that Syrian refugees encounter in the Netherlands and the effects that this has on their identification processes with the Dutch society.

In the last two decades, several scholars have increasingly started to question the dominant research methodology in acculturation research. The dominant positivist quantitative approach has been criticised for being too rigorous. Positivism in acculturation research assumes that societies operate according to generalised laws. Adopting a positivist approach in acculturation research implicates that researchers should try to establish what these laws are. Based on the collection of numerical data, the dominant quantitative approach aimed to establish models and/or hypotheses that explained how these laws function (Chirkov, 2009). Critics of the approach have argued that a positivist quantitative method was ineffective, when taking nuances and context-specific peculiarities into account. This new school of thinking adopted a *mode of understanding* and was grounded on the idea that human actions can only be understood from within their specific sociocultural context (e.g. Chirkov, 2009; Bhatia and Ram, 2009). Acculturation increasingly became studied as a process that was unique and was dependent on its specific time and place. Qualitative research was based on non-numerical data and was perceived to be better capable of taking these nuances into account, since it sought to understand the underlying reasons, motivations and opinions of people’s actions. Opposed to positivism,

interpretivism assumes that the social world of societies cannot be objectively explained but should rather be understood from within. Interpretivism observes human beings as complex individuals who can have different understandings, experiences, and responses to the same 'reality'. A qualitative interpretive approach was therefore better capable of understanding the peculiarities of acculturation within the context in which it is studied.

This research follows the new academic approach within acculturation research by adopting a qualitative interpretive methodological approach. This study took the form of a case study where the experiences of a specific group of refugees in a specific period of time was examined. One of the most prominent scholars within the case study research defines case studies as follows: "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p18). This study has taken the historical and contextual nature of the present-day Dutch society into account with regard to immigration and integration, and more specifically the arrival of Syrian refugees to the Netherlands. The case study has examined the experiences and perceptions of 21 Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. These personal experiences were used to analyse the complex dynamics of the identification processes of refugees. "The advantage of a case study is that it can 'close in' on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p238). The use of a case study enabled the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge about the studied topic. By giving a voice to a group of Syrian refugees, this study interpreted the difficulties and the challenges that Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands experienced on a day-to-day basis. Interviews, focus groups and participant observations are three of the most adopted methods within case study research (Yin, 2009).

One of the most commonly raised critiques on the use of case studies is that case studies leave space for a potential biased view of the researcher (Cresswell et al., 2007). "The alleged deficiency of the case study and other qualitative methods is that they ostensibly allow more room for the researcher's subjective and arbitrary judgment than other methods: they are often seen as less rigorous than are quantitative, hypothetico-deductive methods" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p237). However, case studies should not be confused with qualitative research per se, because case studies can be based on either or both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Moreover, it is important that the researcher is aware of its own potential bias and errors within a case study. In order to reflect on these potential limitations, the last paragraph of this chapter will reflect on this study's internal and external validity.

### 3.3 Sampling

The focus of this study was on Syrian refugees who came to the Netherlands in the last five years and is therefore limited in its scope and timescale. The group of Syrians who came to the Netherlands in this specific period are refugees. Refugees are forced to leave their homes due to violence in their direct environment and do not voluntarily choose to migrate to another country. Refugees generally experience specific challenges in their process of settling down in a new society (Burnett, 2013). This study has examined what sort of specific challenges they encountered and how this has affected them in their identification process with the Dutch society. Although the extent of this study is limited, there are still important differences between refugees who have been here for five years and those who have recently arrived. These differences were taken into consideration. This thesis was limited to the study of Syrian refugees, in order to limit the sample of potential respondents. As was explained before, the context is crucial in a qualitative interpretive research. The context does not only refer to the Dutch context, but also to the backgrounds of the newcomers. Ethnic and cultural differences play an important role within the acculturation process, and this study therefore studied the experiences of newcomers from a single country instead of multiple ones. Because of the limitation of studying the experiences of a group of newcomers from one country, this study did not have the opportunity of taking into account other factors that had an impact on the identification processes of the respondents. For example, the influence of demographic factors such as age, gender, education, marital status and religion on the identification processes were taken into account.

The rationale behind selecting participants to interview was that the interviewees had to represent as much possible demographic variety, as possible. These demographic differences can affect the identification process and therefore it was interesting to examine whether, and if so how, this was the case. The researcher intended to interview Syrian refugees with different genders, age, education levels, marital status and religions. The participants were selected with the help of several Syrian and Dutch professionals of certain organizations that work with (Syrian) refugees in the Netherlands, including two language schools and the Centre for Youth and Family (Centrum voor Jeugd en Familie). Due to the sensitivity of certain topics that were discussed, it was crucial that the contact between the researcher and a potential participant was established via a trust person of the person or family. The trust persons in this research were generally professional workers who were in frequent contact with Syrian people. This sampling method had the benefit that it provided the researcher with the opportunity to interview a wide sample of Syrian refugees with different backgrounds with regard to age, marital status, religion and educational status. Nevertheless, such an approach had its limitations. Since participants were selected and approached by a trust person, the researcher was dependent on which Syrian newcomers were willing to be interviewed. This limitation did impact the scope of the

study. In general, highly educated and younger Syrian people (20-45 years) tended to be more open for an interview than older and less highly educated Syrians. Furthermore, the majority of the participants were from large cities such as Aleppo and Damascus; cities that are often more liberal than smaller cities and countryside villages. The overrepresentation of a group of young and highly educated Syrians also had advantages. As was explained in the previous chapter, it is well likely that highly educated Syrians in the Netherlands are more exposed to prejudice, xenophobia and discrimination than lower educated Syrians, due to the integration paradox. Moreover, highly educated Syrians are also more likely to follow Dutch media and to be in frequent contact with Dutch citizens. Therefore, the interviews with this group of participants had the benefit that it could adopt an interpretive approach to examine whether the integration paradox and the personal/group discrepancy theory had an effect on the Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands.

In total, the researcher talked to twelve male and nine female Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands. Nine of the 21 respondents were interviewed during the focus groups. Two focus groups were held with respectively five and four participants. In total, six individual interviews were held. In addition to the six individual interviews, one interview was held with a Syrian woman and her husband, and one interview was conducted with a Syrian family consisting of a father, mother and two daughters of ten and fourteen years old. Overall, the age of the participants varied from ten to fifty years old.

A number of respondents were very highly educated. For example, one of the female participants was a dentist in Syria, one man worked as an anaesthetist, two respondents were working for humanitarian agencies in Syria, and one man had a master in Arabic culture and language. Some other respondents owned their own (small) shops in Syria. One of the respondents worked as a truck driver, several respondents had still been studying when they had to leave and some women worked in-house. Two of the women that were interviewed were Christian, several other respondents were Islamic non-believers, and the majority was Islamic but with varying degrees of religiousness.

Syria has enormous internal differences with regard to cultures, religion, and degrees of conservatism and traditionalism. As a man, in one of the interviews it was not possible to interview a Syrian woman individually, because for her it was not allowed to be alone in a room with a man other than her husband or a family member. Therefore, this particular interview was held with the woman and her husband together. For the researcher, it is unclear whether this cultural factor played a role when the participants were selected by the trust persons, however this possibility is likely. In order to operate ethically as a researcher, it was very important to adopt a cultural sensitive approach and to always place the well-being of the participant over the importance of the interview. For example, for some Syrian women it is not allowed to shake hands with a man that she is not related to in any way.

Therefore, as a researcher it was important to be cautious with such greetings and the researcher tried to lay the burden of taking initiative to shake hands on the side of the women, so that she could express whether she was comfortable to shake hands or not. Furthermore, during some interviews participants became emotional, when they talked about past experiences or feelings of discrimination. In such occasions, the researcher gave the participants all the time he or she needed to calm down and to let him or her finish the story if desired.

### **3.4 Data collection**

This study was based on a review of academic literature and, most importantly, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The academic works were mainly used to sketch the macro sociopolitical climate of the Netherlands in the recent years. This macro-scope was crucial in order to position this study's research and its respondents within the broader sociopolitical context. Nevertheless, the primary form of data collection was derived from focus groups and semi-structured interviews that were held with 21 Syrian refugees.

#### **3.4.1 Literature review**

Academics have been deeply involved in the study of immigration and integration in the Netherlands and in other countries. Their academic works shed an important light on the Dutch developments in policy and its popular discourse towards immigration and integration. The strength of an interpretive, qualitative study partly lies in its ability to specify the context in which the study was undertaken. In this study, the academic works enhanced the contextualisation of the societal and political climate in which Syrian refugees have to settle down.

The review of academic literature was supplemented with several media articles. The media functions as a mouthpiece for sentiments that play within a society, but the media is also an influencer in itself since it is a powerful tool that can frame topics in certain ways. As the primary source of information for most citizens, the scope and attitude of the media has an important effect on the level and sort of knowledge that many citizens gain. It is important to note that this study did not provide a systematic analysis of the attitude of the media towards refugees. Media articles were rather used as a supporting tool, which supplemented the academic literature with more concrete examples of the sociopolitical context in the Netherlands.

#### **3.4.2 Semi-structured interviews**

The primary data for this research was derived from semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. The choice for semi-structured interviews provided some important advantages. Interviews allow respondents to answer in their own words and elaborate upon things they want to

talk about instead of simply answering 'yes' or 'no'. Semi-structured interviews provide interviewees the opportunity to further express their experiences and opinions on certain topics. The interviewer can ask questions in response to interesting statements made by the interviewee. "(...) semi-structured interviews unfold in a conversational manner offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important" (Clifford et al., 2016, p143). Semi-structured interviews leave enough space for the interviewer to respond to answers given by the participant, but it remains important that the interview does have some questions and themes set up beforehand. Especially at the beginning of the interview, some easier and more neutral questions were asked to gain demographic and background information from the participant, as well as to provide the participant with some comfortableness for the rest of the interview.

Prior to an interview, the respondents were briefed on the standard protocols that go with such interviews. The respondents were briefed on the purpose of the interview. Permission was asked to record the interview and to use the data for the research, and the interviewees were informed that they would be kept anonymous if desired in order to protect their privacy and to take away possible hesitation to talk openly about a topic.

The length of the interviews varied from 39 minutes to one hour and 21 minutes. The interview that took 39 minutes was a difficult one; the participant felt excluded from the Dutch society; he did not have Dutch friends and did not follow Dutch media. Moreover, he experienced painful moments of discrimination, xenophobia, racism and islamophobia. At one point, as a researcher, you have to ask yourself whether you want more examples of certain negative experiences, since it was already clear that the participant had difficulty talking about those negative experiences. In order to protect and to respect the well-being of the participant, this interview was ended considerably faster than the others. On average, the interviews were held for one hour and the focus groups took slightly longer.

### **3.4.3 Focus groups**

In addition to the semi structured interviews, two focus groups consisting of five and four people were interviewed during the research. The focus groups were quite similar in its approach and setting compared to the interviews, however with the exception that it was done on a group basis. Focus groups provide participants with the opportunity to respond to each other's arguments. Focus groups therefore create a different dynamic than one-on-one interviews. Focus groups may have the limitation that it can be more difficult for individuals to speak out on personal issues because the threshold can be higher when more people are listening. Talking about experiences of discrimination can therefore be more challenging. Nevertheless, focus groups have, paradoxically, the advantage that they can also lower the threshold to talk about such topics. As an interviewer, you are unknown to the

participant and he or she may be more anxious to talk to you about personal issues. In a group however, the participants can feel more comfortable to talk openly. The interactive effects of focus groups ensure that participants can give comments on the arguments of others. The researcher had the genuine impression that the focus groups had a positive and calming effect on the state of mind of certain participants, especially for some younger persons and for some women.

### 3.5 Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and permission was asked beforehand. During the first interviews, written confirmation was asked from the participants. However, asking written confirmation created a tense sphere and had a negative impact on the interview; it scared the participants in the beginning and they became more hesitant to talk openly. Hereafter, the researcher made the decision that written confirmation was no longer requested. The participants were asked for an oral confirmation and they received a document where the objective of the research, their rights as a participant and the contact details of the researcher and his thesis supervisor were stated, in case they were unhappy with the interview, had second doubts or wanted to ask further questions. No participant made use of this option.

The interviews were transcribed via an online programme: Otransscribe. After each interview, the researcher regularly read through the transcripts and tried to find patterns of similarities and also discrepancies in the answers of the respondents. Hereafter, the researcher tried to understand how these findings should be interpreted. With regard to the discrepancies, he tried to understand where these came from. The researcher developed some assumptions that he then examined during the following interviews. By regularly using the data that was already collected, the researcher tried to respond to the information that was provided to him during the previous interviews. During the data analysis process, the transcripts were coded via Atlas TI in order to divide the common themes and mutual experiences that were expressed. These themes were used to bring structure to the (sub-)paragraphs and chapters of the thesis. Nevertheless, since the transcripts were already reviewed and re-read on a regular basis in order to find discrepancies, similarities and patterns, coding was primarily used as a tool to organise the relevant information and quotes in clear themes. The coding process mostly confirmed the ideas that the researcher already had developed during the review-process of the transcripts. In other words, the data was primarily manually analysed during the transcript review-sessions and was confirmed by the coding process. For more information on the coding and data analysis process, see the appendix at the end of this thesis.

### **3.6 Validity**

It is important to be aware of your own potential limitations in a research. This paragraph therefore reflects on the internal and external validity of this research and hence on this study's reliability.

#### **3.6.1 Internal validity**

The internal validity of a study depends on the extent to which the conclusion of a research is causally related to the case that was studied. Internal validity is determined by the degree to which bias and errors are minimised. The internal validity of this study can be considered as high. This research studied a specific case within its specific context. Context-dependent variables were therefore taken into account in this study and their effects were studied. Demographic variety was an important condition in the sampling process of respondents. Including as much demographic variety as possible was necessary in order to enhance the representativeness of the study and to study if and how these demographic differences have an effect on the experiences of people. Even though the demographic variety could still be improved, in general there was quite a diverse group of respondents that was interviewed. Moreover, this study's research questions provided space for the inclusion of different, unexpected factors that had an effect on the identification process of Syrian refugees. These different factors could be expressed during the semi-structured interviews in which respondents had the opportunity to describe themselves and mention what they considered to be important. These precautions ensured that a potential biased view of the researcher was limited as much as possible, which in its turn positively affected the internal validity of the research.

#### **3.6.2 External validity**

External validity pertains to the question whether the results of a specific study are generalisable or translatable to other, similar situations. In other words, can the results be understood in a different context of a different group of newcomers in a different society and time? One of the core foundations of interpretive research is that it is context-dependent. The results of this study should therefore be understood from within the specific present-day Dutch context. Therefore, the results cannot be easily transferred to another case since that context will most likely be different. The external validity of this research is hence limited compared to the internal validity. However, Syrian refugees are not the only group of newcomers that has arrived in the Netherlands in the recent years. The specific context of this study is therefore quite similar to that of other groups of newcomers in the Netherlands. Future research could provide important insights into how the identification process for individuals of other groups of newcomers in the Dutch society is affected by certain factors and can reflect whether these findings are comparable to those of this study. In other words, this study provides a stepping stone for

further research that can examine to what degree these findings are comparable to those of similar case studies in the Netherlands.

## Chapter 4. The Dutch context

### 4.1 Introduction

It is difficult, if not impossible, to gain full understanding of the relationship between the Netherlands and immigration without taking into account its historical development. For the sake of relevance and readability, this thesis looks at the immigration and integration patterns from the 1960s up to our present times. Based on academic literature, we explore how Dutch policy and the media have an effect on the public discourse on immigration and integration. More specifically, the focus of this chapter is on the political and societal discourse with regard to refugees and the way they should be incorporated in the Dutch society. This chapter answers the first sub-question: How has the political and societal debate regarding immigration and integration in the Netherlands developed since 1960?

This chapter starts with a paragraph on the relationship between immigration and the Netherlands since the 1960s and the Dutch policy that was adopted. We will see how in some cases immigration was the direct result of Dutch policy, while in other cases policies needed to be adapted to the new reality of immigration. Travelling through time, there was a change to be witnessed with regard to the public and political discourse on immigration and integration. These changes were often catalysed by real life events that fundamentally impacted the discourse on immigration and integration.

In the next paragraph, this research takes a closer look at the relationship between the media and public discourse. In democratic societies where the freedom of press is the norm, the mass media is often recognised as the Fourth Estate (fourth power), which is derived from Montesquieu's influential book about the separation of the three powers; legislative, executive and judiciary (Schulz, 1998). The mass media does not have the power to change government policy directly, such as the three other powers have, but mass media does have a tremendous influence on the general public. By informing the public, the media can also shape the perceptions and minds of people and hence affect the discourse of the general public. Via these people, the mass media can indirectly affect government policies. This paragraph takes a look on how immigration and integration have been framed in the media. "When focusing on the media, frames can be understood as distinct and recognizable patterns of news coverage that highlight certain aspects of an issue over others." (Bos et al., 2016, p98). In other words, framing does not alter the facts, but it can emphasise or highlight certain aspects over others which can affect the perception of the actual facts. Framing by the media can affect the minds of people and hence influence the popular discourse with regard to immigration and integration in the Netherlands.

## **4.2 Political climate**

This paragraph is divided into several time periods, based on specific policy that was adopted in the Netherlands in that period. A short overview of the different types of immigration and policy are discussed. Once we come closer to the present time, a more thorough elaboration of immigration patterns and the Dutch policy is presented.

### **4.2.1 Segregation policy**

The Netherlands experienced an economic revival in the 1960s after the difficult post-Second World War years. The Dutch industry was booming and manpower was needed. To overcome the shortage of workers, large companies in the Netherlands, in collaboration with the Dutch government, started to invite so-called 'guest workers' to the Netherlands. The guest worker policy focused on inviting workers from mainly Mediterranean countries, such as Spain, Turkey and Morocco, to temporarily work in Dutch factories. The temporariness of this social contract was assumed by both the Dutch government and the guest workers. An inviting policy was adopted, facilitating the easy settlement of guest workers and simplifying the family reunification process (Entzinger, 2006). Since the guest workers were only supposed to work and live in the Netherlands temporarily, no integration policy was adopted by the Dutch government. On the contrary, the Dutch government encouraged the immigrants to preserve their own cultural identity and helped the immigrants to set up ethnic associations and institutions (Entzinger, 2006). Immigrants were encouraged to live together and to preserve their own culture to the fullest. A striking example of this is the introduction of 'mother tongue' teaching for immigrants' children at primary schools (Entzinger, 2014). The underlying rationale was that such measures would smoothen the return and the resettlement of the guest workers, once they would return to their countries of origin. Foreign recruitment activities quite drastically came to an end in 1973 when the first oil crisis led to an economic recession in the Netherlands and other countries. Contrary to other Western-European countries, the Netherlands neither stimulated nor encouraged the guest workers to return to their respective countries of origin. The generally adopted return bonus for guest workers who would remigrate to their mother countries was rejected in the Netherlands (Bruquetas Callejo et al., 2007).

### **4.2.2 Ethnic Minorities Policy**

In the 1970s, a large inflow of people from former colonies such as Suriname came to the Netherlands. With the arrival of this group of immigrants, it became more and more clear that these immigrants were here to stay. Furthermore, it also became evident in the 70s that many guest workers and their families intended to stay in the Netherlands and were not planning to go back to their countries of origin. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of immigrants to the Netherlands was at first not perceived

as an event that would seriously influence the long-term demographic balance in the Netherlands. However, this perception started to shift in the 70s and this resulted in political discussions about a new policy that should be adopted in response (Penninx, 2005; Entzinger, 2006).

In 1976, the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work set up an independent think tank that would advise the government on its policy with regard to immigration and integration. The newly founded Advisory Committee on Research related to Minorities marked the beginning of a more serious and long-term government vision on the immigration patterns in the Netherlands and its impact on social welfare, housing, labour and education (Penninx, 2005). For the first time it became clear that immigration and integration were not temporary phenomena and policies were adjusted in order to enhance the long-term sustainable integration of newcomers. The discrepancy between the assumed temporariness of the presence of immigrants and the long-term practice resulted in political fears on how these immigrants would end up in the Dutch society. The Dutch government was particularly afraid that immigrants would experience structural socioeconomic inequalities and that these ethnic groups would remain to live together in certain neighbourhoods, while not having regular contact with other ethnic groups (Penninx, 2005). There was a growing fear within the political elites that specific ethnic groups in the Dutch society, who had a low socioeconomic status combined with the perception of being culturally and/or ethnically different, would end up being marginalised groups within the Netherlands (Bruquetas Callejo et al., 2007).

The new Ethnic Minorities (EM) policy was adopted in 1983 and focused on three domains particularly – the socioeconomic, cultural and legal-political domain (Vasta, 2005). First, the new policy aimed to support and to empower the different ethnic communities in the Netherlands by tackling the social and economic deprivation of immigrants. Secondly, the policy tried to stimulate the cultural integration of immigrants by providing free Dutch language education classes and vocational programmes. Nevertheless, the EM policy did not promote assimilation and even stimulated cultural diversity. The Dutch language classes were optional and not obligatory. The Dutch EM policy is generally described as multicultural (Vasta, 2005). In the legal-political area, the process and criteria for naturalisation were simplified and non-discrimination measures were adopted in order to strengthen the inclusiveness of the legal system. The support for the EM policy was originally shared by a broad political consensus covering all political parties and spectres (Penninx, 2005).

#### **4.2.3 Integration Policy**

After the Cold War, immigration flows to Europe and the Netherlands became much more diverse, which led to a wider variety of types of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers who tried to find shelter in the Netherlands. A growing number of refugees from the former Yugoslavia and from several African countries came to the Netherlands (Vasta, 2005). As a response to the rapidly growing inflow

of asylum seekers to the Netherlands, the Dutch government, similarly to other European countries, introduced procedures to expedite the rejection of so-called unfounded applications (Bruquetas Callejo et al., 2007). Unfounded applications are asylum requests made by people who fled from countries that became titled as 'safe countries of origin' and/or people who fled through safe transit countries where they could have applied for asylum (Bruquetas Callejo et al., 2007).

In the early 1990s, the advocacy against the so-called cultural relativism-policy that lied underneath the EM policy was growing. Public and popular discourse started to shift and criticism grew on the collectivistic character of the EM Policy which focused on entire ethnic groups, who were labelled as vulnerable, and their emancipation (Bruquetas Callejo et al., 2007). Frits Bolkestein, the political leader of the right wing Liberal Party (VVD), triggered a societal debate in the Netherlands by speaking out on the International Liberal Congress in Switzerland on the presumed incompatible differences between the Western culture and the Islamic values (Bolkestein, 1991). The influence of Bolkestein's speech should not be underestimated and was described by sociologist Ellie Vasta as follows: "This was the beginning of a public and policy discourse on the non-integrating immigrant" (Vasta, 2005, p717). The perceived incompatibility between certain cultures was brought further under international attention by Samuel Huntington in his influential book *Clash of Civilizations* that hypothesised how cultural and religious identities would act as the main cause of conflicts in the coming era (Huntington, 1997).

In the Netherlands, several influential politicians, journalists and writers were beginning to speak out on the flaws of the EM Policy. Critical questions were raised if this policy indeed contributed to integration or that it rather led to the segregation of certain cultural groups from the mainstream culture (Vasta, 2005). From 1994 onwards, a shift in immigration and integration policy was taking place. The former policy, which aimed to promote and strengthen ethnic institutions in order to stimulate independency and to promote multiculturalism, was criticised for creating parallel societies within the Netherlands. The new Integration Policy that has gradually been adopted from 1994 onwards, shifted its focus away from strengthening cultural diversity to the promotion of social participation of ethnic groups with mainstream culture (Entzinger, 2006). The new policy stressed "(...) more than ever before, individuals' citizenship responsibilities in integration processes" (Bruquetas Callejo et al., 2007, p12). This new mainstreaming policy towards immigrants and integration was most clearly visualised by the introduction of so-called 'civic integration courses' (inburgeringscursus). The idea behind these courses was that familiarising immigrants with the Dutch society and culture would positively affect the acculturation processes of immigrants in the Netherlands. This course was obligatory for all immigrants who arrived from outside the European Union. All EU-immigrants did not have to participate in these courses as they were considered adequately aware of and familiarised with the Dutch society and culture (Entzinger, 2006). The introduction of the Integration Policy led to a shift

away from a group-oriented approach to an individual approach. While the former approach focused on strengthening successful socioeconomic integration of ethnic groups in the Dutch society and stimulated the preservation of own cultural identity, the newly adopted approach focused on familiarising immigrants with the Dutch culture and society in order to stimulate individual senses of identification with the Netherlands and to prepare them for the labour market (Bruquetas Callejo et al., 2007).

The 1990s and the early 2000s marked not only an important shift in Dutch policy towards immigration and integration, but also, perhaps even more importantly, a paradigm shift with regard to the popular discourse of immigration and integration that was used in the political arena. During the EM policy of the 1980s, policy measures were primarily discussed within the government; parliamentary debates on immigration and integration hardly took place. There was a strong consensus between the political elites to solve immigration and integration issues via technocratic compromises, rather than using immigration as a means to make an argument (Bruquetas Callejo et al., 2007). In the 1990s, and even more clearly in the 2000s, there was no longer a political consensus and immigration became one of the top political priorities of certain political parties (Bruquetas Callejo et al., 2007). The politicisation of immigration and integration issues was further stimulated by the foundation of populist anti-immigration parties in the 2000s such as the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF), which was headed by former political professor Pim Fortuyn, and the Party for Freedom (PVV), which was founded by former Liberal Party (VVD) parliamentarian Geert Wilders.

#### **4.2.4 Integration policy 'New Style'**

Certain developments that already started in the early 1990s further developed in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It developed into the full-fledged politicisation of the debates and policy around immigration and integration. Social scientist Paul Scheffer wrote his article 'The Multicultural Tragedy' (het multiculturele drama) wherein he argued that the lower educated group of immigrants in the Netherlands did not sufficiently identify themselves with the Dutch society and culture. Scheffer voiced the concerns of many Dutch citizens who were afraid for the effects of failed integration, immigration, cultural differentiation and the growing influence of the Islam in the Netherlands (Scheffer, 2000). In this time, anti-immigration political parties grew in popularity and size and open criticism on the flaws of the (former) Dutch policy towards immigration and integration was no longer a taboo. Critics such as Scheffer argued that integration had failed to such a degree that the social cohesion of the Dutch society was being endangered (Vasta, 2005). These sentiments were further sparked by real-life events such as the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and the murder of politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002. Fortuyn was well known for his public expressions against immigration, multiculturalism and the Islam. After his murder in 2002, Fortuyn's political party LPF became the second biggest political party in the

national elections, which marked the beginning of a shift in the Dutch traditional political landscape. With the growth of conservative, right-wing political and populist parties, the idea of what a successful society looked like started to take on different forms. The once popular idea of a multicultural society where there is space for all cultures was no longer self-evident. The call for cultural assimilation grew in order to maintain, or even to restore, the idea of a homogenous Dutch nation (Vasta, 2005). Cultural differences were increasingly observed as factors that could only impede the integration process of immigrants. The 'culturalisation' of integration resulted in a redefinition of culture where it became considered as a factor that obstructs integration (Penninx, 2016). Integration used to be understood as a process where two different cultures came together and enriched the society. However, this alleged enrichment was increasingly observed as a disruptive factor that divided society. The culturalisation of the integration debate was the continuation of a process that started in the 1990s when sentiments on the perceived incompatibility between the Western and the Islamic culture started to develop. The most outspoken characteristic of the culturalisation of integration is the perception that the Islam and its culture are the main threat and cause for the integration difficulties of many immigrants (Entzinger, 2014).

In 2003, Minister of Justice and Integration, Rita Verdonk, introduced a new approach with regard to integration that became known as the integration policy 'New Style'. This new approach stressed the importance of shared citizenship: all Dutch people and immigrants should, at minimum, possess the same core Dutch values and norms, for example with regard to gender relationships, homosexuality and freedom of speech (Penninx, 2016). The cultural adaptation of immigrants to the Dutch values and norms, became one of the main targets of the new policy. The civic integration courses that were introduced at an earlier moment became the primary tool to educate immigrants on values that were considered to be foundational principles in the Netherlands. The integration policies up till 2002 were characterised by stimulating efforts to encourage immigrants to adjust themselves to the Dutch way of living and to make use of the chances that were available in the Netherlands. With the introduction of the New Style policy, civic integration courses became obligatory, enforced and had to be paid by immigrants. The attitude in the Dutch policy towards acculturation fundamentally transformed. Scholars described these events as an assimilationist turn where the adoption of Dutch norms, values and culture no longer was an option that was being encouraged by the government, but rather an obligatory condition needed to retain benefits such as social welfare and even a residence permit (Entzinger, 2014). Immigrants needed to deserve a place within the Dutch society by proving that they sufficiently invested in their civic integration in the Netherlands. Important to note is that such an assimilationist turn was not only observed in the Netherlands, but also in many other European

countries. Nevertheless, the assimilationist turn may be more prevalent and strong in the Netherlands because it caused a more significant break with former policies compared to other countries.

In 2005, parliamentarian Geert Wilders split off from the Liberal Party and formed his anti-immigration and anti-Islam party, the Party for Freedom. In 2010, Wilders' PVV supported the coalition to help them gaining a majority in Parliament. The result of this was an even tougher approach towards immigration and integration. Amongst others, plans were made to reduce the number of asylum seekers by adding preconditions for family reunification procedures. Even though the cabinet that was supported by the PVV fell in 2012, the government's approach towards immigration and integration kept its strict line in the years hereafter. During the last elections in 2017, the PVV became the second biggest political party in the Netherlands and gained 20 out of 150 seats in Parliament. Approximately 1,4 million people (13,3%) voted for the PVV.

The recent five years of flows of immigration to the Netherlands were characterised by a large influx of Syrian refugees to the Netherlands. The sudden growth of asylum requests by Syrian refugees sparked intense debates in the Netherlands, but they did not cause a significant transformation in Dutch policy. The arrival of a large number of Syrian refugees resulted in the continuation of Dutch policy with stricter immigration criteria and more civic integration obligations. The arrival of Syrian refugees to the Netherlands peaked in 2014 and 2015 and declined in the years after. Only a limited number of first asylum requests are nowadays made in the Netherlands by Syrian refugees, most Syrians who currently arrive in the Netherlands have been invited via family reunification.

#### **4.2.5 Conclusion**

Dutch policy towards immigration and integration has undergone significant changes during the recent decades. These changes were sometimes paradoxical in the sense that new policies tried to change phenomena that they, at least partly, created themselves. The Dutch policy in the 1960s, or better said the lack of policy in this time, created parallel systems of different ethnic groups within the Dutch society that often lived segregated from each other. When it became clear that these migrants intended to stay in the Netherlands, the Dutch policy aimed to improve the socioeconomic conditions of ethnic groups. In the 1990s, explicit criticism on integration grew and many argued that integration in the Netherlands had failed. Promoting the social participation of members of non-dominant cultural groups with the Dutch dominant culture became the rationale behind the new Integration Policy. This significant shift in policy can be described as remarkable since the strengthening of ethnic institutions and associations was a priority in former policies. The dual responsibility for integration was abandoned in favour of a sole responsibility to integrate for the immigrant. Multiple political parties started to discuss immigration and integration as one of its main themes, and the politicisation of these

debates became a fact. The culturalisation of integration in the recent two decades marks another shift where cultural differences started to be perceived as impeding factors within the integration process of immigrants; they were not considered to enrich the society. The assimilationist turn within the Netherlands obliged immigrants to successfully complete their civic integration courses in order to get acquainted with Dutch norms, values and culture. Stimulating assimilation was believed to be needed in order to prevent the endangerment of the social cohesion within the Dutch society that was increasingly being considered as fragile.

Many critics believe that the social cohesion in the Netherlands is eroding due to a lack of common understanding of the Dutch core values and norms. Accordingly, they feel that newcomers lack enough sense of identification with the Dutch society and culture, and that this is jeopardising the Dutch identity and way of living. In response to these sentiments, we witnessed an assimilationist turn in Dutch integration policy, which is supposed to make immigrants adequately acquainted with Dutch culture. Nevertheless, as was described earlier, enforcing assimilation does not necessarily lead to assimilation, but may also provoke reethnicisation. A top-down approach is adopted by the Dutch government to develop the identification process of newcomers, including Syrian refugees, with the Dutch society.

### **4.3 Media climate**

Many West-European countries, including the Netherlands, experienced an intense debate on immigration and integration in the last two decades. The debate in mass media transformed significantly in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century after several real-life international and national events such as the 9/11 attacks, terrorist attacks in Madrid and London, and the murders of Pim Fortuyn and Dutch moviemaker Theo van Gogh by a radical Dutch Muslim (Bos et al., 2016). This paragraph is based on academic literature and first explores how framing plays a role within the media. Then, it is discussed how the arrival of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands has been framed.

Several scholars have examined how the framing of immigration and integration in the media has transformed in the last decades. Framing a debate in a certain way can stimulate or provoke psychological and behavioural responses. In principle, all media frames have in their own way a certain evaluation of an issue, they may highlight for example certain positive or negative aspects.

When it comes to immigration and integration, four distinct frames in the media have been identified by Roggeband and Vliegthart (2007). The 'Islam-as-a-threat' frame presents the Islam and its culture as a threat to the Dutch and Western way of life and therewith its civilisation. This frame gained significantly more ground in the last two decades. Paul Scheffer's 'The Multicultural Tragedy' is

a classic example of this type of framing. Scheffer described the Islamic culture as fundamentally different than the Western and posed it as a threat to the Western way of life. Muslims are portrayed as ‘the Other’ in the Islam-as-a-threat frame. From this point of view, the Islamic culture is solely considered as an obstacle within the acculturation processes of Islamic newcomers. Secondly, the ‘victimization’ frame portrays how certain people within immigrant groups, most notably women, are being oppressed and experience gender inequality and are therefore hindered from establishing contacts with the Dutch society. The victimization frame has often been linked with the Islam-as-a-threat frame when it comes to alleged unequal gender relationships within Islamic communities. A combination of these two frames assumes and highlights how women are inferior within the Islamic culture. This inferiority is allegedly expressed by a lack of civil rights for women, arranged marriages, wearing a burqa or niqab, and a lack of educational possibilities for girls and women (Entzinger, 2014). Thirdly, the ‘multicultural’ frame assumes that the quality of a society is being strengthened by the promotion of cultural diversity and inclusiveness. In recent years, the multicultural frame has lost ground within political and societal debates (Bos et al., 2016). There are however still numerous news articles where success stories of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands are described. These news articles intend to show the obstacles that Syrian newcomers have overcome and how they are making a contribution to the Netherlands (e.g. AD, 2018). Finally, the ‘emancipation frame’ assumes that a lack of emancipation prevents the integration process of immigrants within the Netherlands. This lack of emancipation is partly assumed to be the result of immigrants’ acculturation orientation, but the frame also criticises government policies with regard to integration and hence stresses the dual responsibility for integration.

Although different types of frames exist, with each a different evaluation on topics such as immigration and integration, this does not mean that these frames are equally present within mass media news coverage. Scholars have argued that mass media coverage on immigration and integration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be considered as predominantly negative (e.g. Roggeband and Vliegthart, 2007). Muslim extremism, fear for terrorism, sexual abuse, the poor level of integration and criminal offences are some of the themes covered in this respect. These themes have also been used to describe the arrival of many Syrian refugees in 2014 and 2015, when primarily young Syrian men arrived in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, “(...) the Dutch policy, political, and media debate on immigration is not only characterised by its negativity, it is also typified by its dynamic use of frames” (Bos et al., 2016, p105).

In the beginning of 2018, the Centre for Statistics (CBS) in the Netherlands conducted a large-scale research and came up with some remarkable conclusions. Other than might be expected from the

political debate and media coverage, 77 % of the Dutch people was in favour of providing asylum to (Syrian) refugees, 15 % was neutral and only 8 % of the people objected (CBS, 2018). One of the most interesting findings of this research was that less than a quarter of the Dutch (23,9%) was in favour of taking in economic migrants from non-EU countries. The rest of the people either objected or was neutral. If we compare these numbers, we see that 8% of the Dutch people opposed the arrival of refugees while approximately 50% of the Dutch opposed the arrival of migrants. This statistic exemplifies that there is a tremendous difference in the societal attitude towards providing asylum for migrants and refugees, in favour for refugees. However, according to academic literature, this support is inadequately presented within Dutch media.

Remarkable to see in academic literature is that almost all scholars focus predominantly on the role of mass media. These recent ten years have witnessed an exponential growth of social media as a tool for gathering information. People are turning away from mass media to social media (Bakshy et al., 2015). Communication scholars are increasingly focused on the effects of social media, but this field of study is rarely used with regard to the study of immigration and integration. Moreover, social media is not only a gathering tool of information, but also an opinion sharing tool. Social media provides people with the opportunity to respond, comment and to discuss articles. What you can see is that the bridge for people to speak out on certain topics has decreased significantly. Objectivity is not an aim of many social media users when they respond to an article, they rather highlight their own subjective opinions (Bakshy et al., 2015). This shift in the use and the role of the media has serious consequences on the portrayal of immigration and integration. Scholars have examined how negative framing generally has a stronger effect on psychological and behavioural changes than positive framing (Bos et al., 2016). Therefore, with the growing role of social media and the increased opportunities to share subjective perceptions, it is likely that social media as a tool polarises the immigration-integration debates even further. It is well recommended that future academic research takes the effects of social media on the framing of immigration and integration better into account.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This chapter was centred around the first sub-question of this research: How has the political and societal debate regarding immigration and integration in the Netherlands developed since 1960? The Netherlands experienced some fundamental shifts in its policy with regard to immigration and integration. However, political and societal debates that were part of it underwent even more significant changes. Until the late 1980s, the elites of political parties had reached a consensus and they discussed amongst themselves which technocratic political compromises had to be made in order to adjust Dutch policy with regard to immigration and integration. A real societal debate was also

lacking due to a taboo that rested on these topics. However, from the 1990s onwards the taboo was breached and immigration and integration became some of the most debated themes within politics and media. Several national and international events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the murder on Pim Fortuyn sparked the debate even further. Anti-immigration political parties grew in size and the politicisation and polarisation of these debates became a fact. The political debates harshened and the assimilationist turn stimulated a top-down assimilationist approach by the Dutch government towards newcomers. The emancipation frame, which criticised both the governments' approach towards integration and the integration efforts of newcomers, grew in popularity and immigrants and refugees were increasingly considered as people who were unwilling to integrate. A lack of identification between newcomers and Dutch society was considered to be a threat to the social cohesion in the Netherlands. An assimilationist approach obliged newcomers to adjust to Dutch values, norms and the culture. Cultural diversity became increasingly observed as an obstacle within the identification process of newcomers. The once dominant multicultural frame lost ground while other frames became more prevalent. The Islam-as-a-threat and the victimisation frame strengthened the processes of Othering in the media. Immigrants and refugees were increasingly perceived as the Other. The Western and Islamic culture were portrayed as fundamentally different and this strengthened the divisions between members of both cultural groups.

Even though scholars have argued that the Dutch media coverage on immigration and integration is predominantly negative, this does not mean that these negative attitudes are also dominant within the society. A research from the CBS showed that the attitude of the Dutch society towards refugees is not as negative as it is often portrayed. The polarisation of the debate has in fact created a dichotomy between the arguments of the proponents and opponents. This polarisation is likely to be further stimulated by the growth of social media as a tool through which opinions are shared. Contrary to most journalists, social media users do not try to describe their observations objectively, but they rather give their subjective opinions. In principle, every Dutch person now has the opportunity to share his opinion with regard to immigration and integration on a large scale. If we compare this to the situation up until the 1980s, we see that the debate has widened exponentially from just the political elites to all layers of the Dutch society. Immigration and integration have become heavily debated and sensitive themes within the Dutch society. In the next chapter, we explore how this context affects the perceived attitude of members of the Dutch society towards Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands.

## Chapter 5. Host attitudes

### 5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter offered an overview of the macro sociopolitical context in the Netherlands. This chapter contrasts the previous framework with a micro approach where the focus lies on the individual intrasubjective experiences of Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands. Based on collected data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups, this chapter provides an answer to the second sub-question: How do Syrian refugees perceive the attitudes by members of the Dutch society directed towards themselves, and how do these affect the identification process with the Dutch society?

The chapter is divided into three paragraphs based on three main perceived attitudes that Syrian refugees experienced from members of the Dutch society directed towards them. The headings of the paragraphs symbolise the type of attitudes that newcomers perceived. The first paragraph explores how Syrian refugees have experienced positive responses in their social environment and how this has affected them in their daily lives. The following paragraph takes a look at a phenomenon that came up during several interviews. It can be described as quite fundamental for the perceived attitudes from members of the Dutch society towards Syrian refugees. This attitude is instigated by cultural differences and ignorance, and may best be described in the sentence: who are they? The third paragraph takes a look at Othering and experienced feelings of exclusion, discrimination, xenophobia and rejection. The conclusion provides an analysis on how these attitudes of the host society has affected the process of identification of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society.

### 5.2 'Be Syrian, and become Dutch'

If you read the newspapers and certain academic articles about the Netherlands, its policy and its society, it is easy to get the impression that the Dutch society is increasingly becoming hostile and that refugees are not welcome. As was explained in the previous chapter, these images are strengthened by certain frames in the media. This image has been visualised by large scale protests against reception centres for refugees, such as in Geldermalsen (NOS, 2015). Nevertheless, as was also shown by the CBS-research discussed in the previous chapter, the majority of the Dutch people are in favour of helping refugees settle down in the Netherlands.

“Luckily for me, I only met the kindest people ever. They always considered me as one of their own. (...) The Netherlands is known for its tolerance and multiculturalism. Its acceptance for everyone who is not from here. And I think that is what makes this country a nice country” (R2).

The vast majority of the respondents described the Dutch people as friendly and welcoming. Many Syrians experienced the Dutch as calm and polite people who were often very interested to learn more about the Syrian culture. One Syrian man told about his first day in his new house:

“The first time I came to my house, my neighbours approached me: ‘We want to know about Syria. What happened in Syria?’ Sometimes we ate together. Sometimes they visited us and we drank coffee or tea” (R16 - translated from Dutch by the author).

“At least those around me are always interested to learn more. They have questions, always seek clarification” (R19).

The respondents who experienced positive attitudes in their environment felt more comfortable and were encouraged to express themselves outdoors. They were encouraged to meet other people and they had the possibility to learn the Dutch language better, and to learn more about Dutch values, customs and way of life. As may be expected, the sense of belonging and identification of people was strengthened when they were in good contact with Dutch people in their direct social environment.

Almost all respondents made genuine efforts to learn the language and to get used to the Dutch way of life. This process is partly facilitated by time and demographic factors such as age. It was generally easier for young people to learn the language, to establish contacts and to make friends. A Syrian man in his thirties described the difficulties in his process of getting used to the Dutch customs and society as follows:

“I need to ask other people how to act or to behave in certain situations. (...) In Aleppo I grew up unconsciously. Here I grow up consciously. I have to think of everything, culturally, socially, (...)” (R13).

Arends-Tóth and Van Den Vijver (2004) explored how the majority of Dutch citizens expected from Turkish-Dutch individuals that they would adopt the Dutch values and customs both indoors and outdoors. Such a clash of expectations and desires sometimes led to a confrontation or to processes of separation. Numerous respondents mentioned that the people in their environment were interested in and open towards Syria and their culture, but Dutch people often expected that Syrian newcomers would adjust to Dutch customs to a certain extent. In this research, almost all respondents felt that they were given space to preserve their Syrian culture, especially indoors. In the public domain this was however generally different. Several respondents expressed that they did not feel comfortable to talk Arabic or to wear a headscarf in public. These experiences will be elaborated upon in paragraph

5.4. In response to the perceived desire that Syrian newcomers would adopt Dutch customs in public, several respondents talked about how they adopted different attitudes or mindsets in their daily life depending on whether they were in the public or private domain. The following quote is a good illustration of this:

“Personally, I am flexible with both cultures. For example, at home with my parents I am like really Syrian, but like outside I am a bit of both. I mean it depends on the situation. When I am in a bar or with people, I am more Dutch than Syrian. When I am with old people or with my parents, of course I am Syrian” (R2).

On basis of the collected data it can be concluded that the Syrian respondents perceive different expectations from members of the Dutch society when it comes to acculturation indoors and outdoors. In the private domain, almost all respondents feel completely comfortable to preserve their Syrian culture. They do not experience the meddling from members of the Dutch society to alter their culture. Nevertheless, for some respondents this was different in the public domain. In public, it was generally perceived as less acceptable when Syrian newcomers did not conform themselves to the Dutch habits with regard to language and dressing, amongst others. The findings of this study are therefore partly different than those of Arends-Tóth and Van Den Vijver. Syrian newcomers did not feel pressured to assimilate and even felt that they were given space to preserve their Syrian culture. Important to note is that this study focused exclusively on the perceived attitudes of the Dutch society and did not take the expectations of members of Dutch society into account. Therefore, the perceived attitudes do not necessarily reflect the expectations or desires of the Dutch society with regard to acculturation.

### 5.3 ‘Who are they?’

Many Syrians experienced that Dutch people in their social environment often were hesitant or anxious to make contact and approach them. The heading of this paragraph reflects this attitude; an attitude that is characterised by feelings of suspicion and anxiety. This paragraph examines how Syrian newcomers perceive such attitudes and how this develops over time. Moreover, it reflects on how such attitudes affect the identification process of Syrian newcomers with the Dutch society.

In the case of Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands, the CBS-research revealed that the overwhelming majority of the Dutch is positive or neutral towards hosting refugees in the Netherlands. In this light, it can also be expected that the overwhelming majority of Syrian newcomers experienced such an attitude towards them. This was however not always the case. During the interviews, numerous Syrians expressed how many Dutch people are friendly towards them, but distant. Interpersonal contact between Syrians and Dutch people often remained superficial and may not be more than simply saying ‘hi’ when passing a familiar face. This attitude against newcomers in the

Netherlands has been identified by scholars as well. Dutch sociologist Koopmans has written a critical article where he describes the Dutch tolerance as “(...) only skin deep. Below the surface there is often indifference and, in some cases, racism” (Koopmans, 2003, p165). During a focus group one of the participants mentioned the following:

“I think that some Dutch people are afraid of the Syrians. (...) Maybe not afraid, but hesitant. When you live in Syria, you instantly help someone. I see you with 2 suitcases but I do not know you, I help you. I will take one and carry it. That is my culture. Dutch people do not really like helping each other, only when they know each other. If you do not know your neighbour, you cannot help her, but I do. The first time people think it is bad. The second time it is already much better” (R16 – translated from Dutch by the author).

One participant talked about how he hardly receives direct negative attitudes towards him, but how he can sense that people may behave in a different fashion than how they actually think:

“(...) discrimination rarely takes place in your face. The actual discrimination takes place behind the curtains. Where you apply for a job and you are rejected, when you try to get into a specific programme and you are thrown out, when people make jokes behind your back. These things exist” (R19).

A number of respondents whose Dutch language skills were not so well developed explained how they believe that it will become easier to communicate with Dutch people in the future. Their expectation is that communication and hence their process of identification will increase once their language skills increase. They do not have much contact with Dutch citizens now, but this will change once they master the language. To a certain extent this expectation is valid. However, other respondents who were able to clearly express themselves in Dutch explained how it remains difficult to develop meaningful relations. The fact that many Dutch citizens are hesitant to establish contacts with Syrian newcomers does not mean that they reject them or are unwilling to get to know them, as was explained by a 32-year old Syrian woman:

“I know many people, my friends and me or whoever, when we invite Dutch people to our home, they would immediately, after 15 minutes, say: ‘We were shocked. We had this fear of you but now we are looking and you are open. You are okay. We have a funny time, we eat delicious food, it is okay’. So maybe for us we need that extra step, to become close to the Dutch (...)” (R1).

This quote typifies the mismatch that often exists between newcomers and members of the Dutch society. All respondents expressed that they wanted to have (more) contact with Dutch people, no one

wanted to live separated. Nevertheless, it is difficult to approach people in a new environment when you do not speak the language and are not used to the accepted culture and customs. What can be revealed from the interviews and also from academic literature is that many Dutch citizens are also hesitant to initiate contacts between newcomers and themselves (e.g. Van Oudenhoven et al., 1998; Koopmans, 2003). When individuals from both groups expect the other group to make the first move, it becomes difficult to establish contacts and hence to develop a sense of identification between the individuals of both groups. Such difficulties were especially present for Syrians who lived in bigger cities where people generally have less contact with their neighbours.

A lack of communication has strong implications for the level of awareness of Dutch people on Syria and its culture. Numerous respondents described how Dutch people often had wrong ideas about Syria. These ideas often derive from ignorance or misinformation, but sometimes they can be described as discriminatory or simply racist.

“The Dutch people think that Syria is an extreme country that has not developed. No. In Syria, everything is like here. Syria has many different people. Women can choose whether they want to wear a headscarf or not” (R6 – translated from Dutch by the author).

Syria is a very old country which hosts dozens of different groups and cultures within its borders. Different ethnic and religious groups lived together, especially in the bigger cities, as was described by a 26-year old man:

“There is this kind of street in Aleppo where I am from. On one side you have a mosque and, on this side, you have a big church, next to each other. It was really beautiful for me, this harmony. People really loved each other” (R2).

Several Syrian respondents explained how many Dutch people had a perception of Syria as an extremely religious and non-tolerant conservative Islamic country. People were sometimes stunned when they heard that so many Christian people lived in Syria or that women could go to a university. These misconceptions are generally not ill-intended by Dutch people, but they were often experienced as very painful by the Syrians.

“The people here only know Syria from the last 6 years. Only the last 6 years from war and terrorism, but Syria is very old” (R4 – translated from Dutch by the author).

A man who was an anaesthetist in Syria talked about his painful experiences with personnel of COA, the organisation that is responsible for the reception of asylum seekers in the Netherlands:

“A woman in the reception centre said to a friend of me: ‘this is a couch, you can sit on it’. This woman thought we do not know this, they do not have chairs or tables in Syria. In the reception centre there is a picture on the toilet saying: ‘you cannot drink from the toilet’” (R16 – translated from Dutch by the author).

Another man in the focus group responded to this story as follows:

“They think we are animals” (R15 – translated from Dutch by the author).

Regular contact between Syrian newcomers and Dutch citizens helped to erase these misconceptions that often exist. As was said before, the perception of many Syrians was that these misconceptions are not ill-intended, but mostly arise from ignorance. However, even though these misconceptions may not be meant as harmful, they are often experienced as such by Syrian newcomers. During one of the interviews a man talked about an experience that he had in the Netherlands:

“I got a question, in the beginning I thought it was a joke. Somebody asked me: ‘do you still have camels in Syria?’ I was like, we do have camels. Every country in the world has camels, like in a zoo. He was like: ‘no no, does every family still hold a camel?’ And for a couple of seconds I thought, is this still the same joke? No, he had meant it actually. He had first of all misunderstood Syria as part of the Gulf. His geography was not very good. And he also thinks that the Gulf region has a camel by each house. So, in the morning, instead of getting our Mercedes, we get our camel and just drive on the highway. We don’t have traffic lights, we have carrots. At that point I spoke to him. I showed him some pictures of Syria and he was very surprised” (R19).

Interpersonal contact is an essential factor to develop a sense of identification between Syrians and Dutch citizens. Once these contacts are established, contact becomes less superficial and more meaningful. The majority of the Dutch people are open towards Syrian newcomers, but initiating contacts often turn out to be difficult. Ignorance is a non-deliberate attitude that many Syrians experienced. To some degree this ignorance is understood by most Syrians and interpersonal contact often helps to clarify this, but sometimes there is a thin line between ignorance and racism or discrimination. Such attitudes are harmful for some Syrians who feel offended or ashamed. They feel that they have to counter these wrong images by showing that their country and its culture was in fact quite similar to their life in the Netherlands. The feeling of being considered as the Other and inferior can be harmful for someone’s self-perception and has a negative effect on the identification process of Syrians with the Dutch society.

## 5.4 'Go home'

"I am not here for pleasure in this country. I am here because I lost chances in my home country. In my home country I had a decent life to be honest. I never imagined, or wanted, to ask for asylum somewhere outside of my country" (R2).

Not all Dutch are in favour of helping refugees, as was also shown by the CBS-research. The heading of this paragraph reflects the sentiments of this part of the Dutch population. According to them, Syrian refugees should not be in the Netherlands and they should go home to their countries of origin. This paragraph will reflect on how such attitudes affect Syrian newcomers and their identification processes.

Racism, xenophobia, prejudice and discrimination can have serious negative consequences on someone's well-being and the feeling of being included within a society. Othering is a process of differentiation and can influence the process of identification between groups and/or individuals. The respondents were asked if they experienced such attitudes in their daily life. Interestingly, many respondents did not experience such attitudes directed towards themselves. Numerous Syrians did however hear about discriminatory events from other Syrians. Even though most respondents did not experience regular discrimination, there were still several respondents who did experience it on a regular basis. The consequences of such negative encounters on someone's well-being varied from person to person, depending on his or her response to such attitudes. Discrimination was particularly experienced by adolescents and students on a regular basis. This study found considerable ground for the integration paradox theory where people who are more exposed to the Dutch society experience more discrimination and are more inclined to distance themselves from the Dutch society in return (Verkuyten, 2016). The following quote by a man illustrates how a higher level of exposure to Dutch society may provoke experiences of being Othered. This 23-year old man follows a bachelor programme, has a full-time job as a manager, speaks Dutch, does voluntary work at several organisations and, additionally, guides five other Syrians and helps them with their difficulties. On paper, you can describe him as a perfect example of a well-integrated Syrian. However, when asked about his experiences in the Netherlands, he answered as follows:

"I have difficulties because I am a refugee. I am now in this country. I am in a class, but the whole class hates me because I am a refugee. Two months ago, a teacher of us was talking about refugees and the whole class said: 'we love Wilders, refugees have to go home'. I was in the class and I did not do or say anything, but from the inside I was broken" (R8 – translated from Dutch by the author).

When asked how such experiences affect him and his sense of identification with the Dutch society, he answered:

“I am totally fed up. I do not want to talk to anyone, I have decided this. I am here for three years now and it is very difficult. Every day it becomes harder, because I miss my own country as well” (R8 – translated from Dutch by the author).

People who experienced more events of being perceived as the Other had more difficulties to develop a sense of identification with the Dutch society. Several respondents talked about their insecurities when they had to tell other people that they are Syrian. In their daily life, they experienced negative connotations that are often aligned with their ethnicity. As a result of negative media framing and/or negative experienced attitudes, some respondents felt that they were not considered as individual human beings, but that they were being reduced to the label of refugee, or Syrian refugee. Some respondents tried not to attach too much value to such experiences, but often this was very difficult. Being perceived as the Other, and hence inferior, affected some respondents' life in drastic ways. Camouflage was used in order to hide their culture and origin and hence to not show that they are Syrian. For example, a 14-year old girl did not want to wear a headscarf because that would accentuate her foreign origin even more. The painful experience of being perceived as the Other and inferior has serious negative consequences on someone's self-esteem.

“At school we have a class for refugee children who want to learn the Dutch language. One time I heard somebody saying when passing by: ‘iew, it smells here, refugees’. That was really bad. One time I had an argument with other children. They said stuff like: ‘you are a refugee, go home to your own country. I buy you for 5 euros’. It is not nice to hear” (R11 – translated from Dutch by the author).

“Where I live, I rarely speak English. Then I will be, everybody will look at me: ‘ah, the foreigner’. Let alone, it is not about the Muslim, the Syrian or the Middle Eastern, but about the foreigner because there is also a different definition. You have the foreigner and then you have you are Syrian. I would rather use my Dutch and be mistaken to a Moroccan or a Turk than using English and being understood as a foreigner. It does make a difference” (R19).

This quote illustrates the implicit hierarchy of cultures that multiple respondents have experienced. In this hierarchy, the Dutch or Western culture is considered the norm. Below you have other cultures of immigrant groups who have lived in the Netherlands for several generations such as the Moroccans and the Turks. At the bottom, you have the refugees. Such a hierarchy is based upon prejudice and bias. Numerous respondents have described how they heard that Syrians were described as people

with a low level of development, potential terrorists and as people who have come to steal jobs or who wanted to profit from the Dutch social welfare system. For some respondents it was difficult to express themselves to Dutch citizens because they feared rejection if they showed their vulnerability. In response, they sometimes would distance themselves from the Dutch society in order to protect their own feelings.

As was expressed by several respondents, discrimination rarely takes place face-to-face, but is often experienced on different levels. Many respondents talked about the role of the media and how they negatively portray Syria and the Syrians. The Islam-as-a-threat and the victimisation frame in the media were described as highly prevalent and harmful. Several respondents mentioned how crimes committed by Syrians were often framed in a way where the crime was explained from a cultural point of view. One respondent gave an example of the harassment of a woman by a Syrian man. The harassment came via some media channels that did not describe the harassment as an attack of a criminal but as a 'logical' consequence of the arrival of the Syrian Islamic culture in the Netherlands. Accordingly, the man was not to be blamed, but his culture.

The prevalence of perceived group discrimination over personal discrimination can indicate that the personal/group discrepancy has an effect on the experiences of the respondents. As was explained in paragraph 2.4, the personal/group discrepancy theory argues that people often perceive their group but not themselves as a target of discrimination (Taylor et al., 1990). Taylor et al. provide several reasons for this phenomenon. The two most important arguments are that people are inclined to exaggerate group discrimination, and simultaneously to relativise personal discrimination. However, this researcher did not have the impression that the respondents trivialised their own experiences of personal discrimination. In fact, these experiences were considered as extremely painful and harmful. The reason for the perceived prevalence of group discrimination over personal discrimination is more likely to be found in certain attitudes of many Dutch citizens. As was mentioned by several Syrians, they regularly sense that people have certain thoughts that can be described as discriminatory, but these thoughts are seldom outspoken face-to-face. Discrimination is more likely to take place behind closed doors and via distanced channels such as the media. Hence, the idea of a prevalence of group discrimination over personal discrimination seems to be true in the case of most respondents, but Taylor's hypothesised reasons of the personal/group discrepancy theory seem to be different in the Dutch context.

On a personal level, many Syrians can explain their culture to others and they can inform others on the day-to-day practice in Syria. For example, they have the opportunity to explain how a certain frame is

wrong and how women in Syria can study and can choose whether they want to wear a headscarf or not. The level of agency on the personal level is higher and this gives Syrians the opportunity to change the mindsets or wrong ideas of people. However, this is different on the macro level of the media. Some respondents mentioned how certain media channels try to show success stories of Syrians in order to change the negative discourse, but the majority remained negative about the role of the media. The media is thought of as a distant mechanism that is predominantly negative and very difficult to influence. Social media, however, is perceived as different than the mass media. The polarisation of the debates on immigration and integration is clearly visible on social media. For example, some respondents mentioned all the positive remarks that they read on Facebook when there is an event for Syrian refugees. However, other respondents talked about the hideous comments that people wrote about Syria and Syrians on Facebook. For example, they referred to the knifing of three people by a Syrian man in The Hague on May 5 2018:

“People in the Netherlands are writing: ‘Allahu Akbar! All these foreign people are part of Daesh [IS]’” (R20 – translated from Dutch by the author).

An instant connection was made between Syria, the Islam and terrorism. In this particular case it became later clear that the Syrian man was in fact Christian and not Muslim. Multiple respondents described how they find it difficult to defend themselves against such accusations. It is especially painful and emotional because they feel that they are being accused of the things that destroyed their own lives and for which they had to flee their own country.

## 5.5 Conclusion

Based on collected data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups, this chapter aimed to answer the second sub-question: How do Syrian refugees perceive the attitudes by members of the Dutch society directed towards themselves, and how do these affect the identification process with the Dutch society? A division was made based on three main sorts of perceived attitudes that Syrian newcomers experienced towards them.

In general, most respondents experienced the Dutch as welcoming and friendly. Most Syrians felt comfortable to preserve their Syrian culture within the private domain, but some felt uncomfortable to do so in the public domain. In line with Rudmin’s theory (1996), many respondents adopted multilineal acculturation strategies where they behaved differently depending on the situation they were in. In general, Syrians kept closer to their own culture at home and became closer to the Dutch culture in public.

The majority of the interviewed Syrians did not experience personal discrimination, at least not regularly. Even though the respondents often had experienced discrimination or heard about it

from Syrian friends, this did not happen regularly or on such a large scale that it made a significant impact in their daily life. That being said, the idea of integration assumes that members of both cultural groups are in frequent contact with each other and adapt themselves; a system of ‘friendly living apart together’ is not a foundation for durable, successful integration. Many Syrians did not experience serious problems with members of the Dutch society, but they were also not in regular contact with them. Individuals of both groups often lived amongst each other without difficulties, but also without meaningful contact. If you measure the inclusiveness of a society merely by its lack of discrimination, you have a negative perception on integration. What can be concluded from the interviews is that there still is a lack of meaningful and enduring contact between many Syrian newcomers and members of the Dutch society. This lack of contact hinders the identification process of Syrian newcomers with the Dutch society. Integration as a two-way process is dependent on both the attitude of the Syrian newcomers and of the Dutch host society. However, there is often a discrepancy between expectations and desires from both sides. Many Syrians experience the Dutch as hesitant and, sometimes, anxious to establish further contact. A lack of communication possibilities hinders the development of connections and hence a sense of identification between the groups. There are however more reasons for this lack of contact and communication between individuals of both groups, and we will take a closer look at this in the following chapter.

Most respondents felt welcomed in the Netherlands and did not have a negative perception of the Dutch society. Interpersonal contact helped to learn the language, to get used to Dutch culture and its customs, and to develop meaningful relations that positively affected the self-esteem and the level of identification between individuals of both groups. Nevertheless, it turned out to be difficult to establish contacts in the first place. As was explained in paragraph 5.3, a part of this problem can be found in the hesitant attitude of many Dutch citizens as it was perceived by Syrian newcomers. However, many Syrians also find it difficult to expose themselves and to develop new contacts. The fear for rejection is an important factor in this respect. Especially adolescents and students who are in regular contact with Dutch classmates experienced very painful events of discrimination and racism. The experience of being Othered has serious negative consequences on their self-esteem and the acculturation strategy of respondents. When discrimination is regularly experienced, it often outweighs the positive responses that people may receive. In order to protect their own well-being, people may turn away from the Dutch society, which negatively affects the identification process between the individuals of both groups.

This thesis found considerable support for the integration paradox theory where people who speak the language better, follow the Dutch media and are more regularly exposed to Dutch people are more

likely to experience discrimination towards them personally or towards their ethnic group. This group of people was generally better aware of more structural forms of discrimination in Dutch society and the media. Over time, several respondents increasingly became disappointed with the perceived level of tolerance that sometimes was, as was described by Koopmans, 'only skin deep'.

This study came up with similar findings as Taylor et al. (1990) did in their study. In general, people perceived more discrimination directed towards their group as a whole than towards them personally. However, this study does not follow Taylor's hypothesised reason that people trivialise their own personal experiences of discrimination. Personal discrimination was generally considered as extremely painful when it happened on a regular basis. The reason for the prevalence of group discrimination over personal discrimination is more likely to be found in the presence of indirect discrimination. According to some respondents, discrimination is not likely to happen face-to-face but rather indirectly via distant (media) channels or behind closed doors.

## Chapter 6. Personal difficulties

### 6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter we explored what sort of attitudes were perceived by Syrian newcomers and how this affected their identification process with the Dutch society. The identification process is however influenced by other factors as well. This chapter provides an answer to the third sub-question: Which other factors have an influence on the attitude of Syrian refugees themselves, and how do these affect the identification process with the Dutch society?

This chapter is divided into three paragraphs. The first paragraph examines how many Syrians experience difficulties to restart their life in the Netherlands, and how this has an impact on the self-esteem and attitude of the Syrian newcomers. The second paragraph elaborates on how psychological struggles affect the identification process. Many respondents have witnessed traumatising events in Syria, but also in the period hereafter. The third paragraph considers differences in communication customs between Syrians and Dutch. Although differences in communication customs were also briefly discussed in the previous chapter, there is, in fact, an important contrast with this chapter. The previous chapter discussed the attitude of Dutch people towards Syrian refugees, and it was revealed how many Dutch people were hesitant to initiate contact with newcomers. In this chapter, this issue is addressed from the Syrian point of view by examining how Syrian newcomers experience difficulties to adjust themselves to Dutch communication customs, and how this can be mainly explained from a cultural point of view.

### 6.2 Starting from scratch

Refugees who manage to get asylum in another country generally arrive in a society where they end up in the lower socioeconomic domains. They have a backlog when it comes to the language, culture, habits and work, and they have to start a new life in a new environment. They often have to start from scratch. This paragraph provides an analysis on how such a process of restarting a life in a new society has an effect on Syrian newcomers.

“There are routine things I do every day [in Syria], but here it is different because you are coming to a new life, a new way of thinking, new people, new culture, new plans you have to adopt. Even your dreams that you used to have should be adopted or adapted to the new situation” (R13).

“A friend of me was a doctor in Syria, but here it is very difficult to work as a doctor. So, what should he do here? He now follows an IT-study. That is completely different. You study there for 10 years, but here you begin from zero” (R6 – translated from Dutch by the author).

The last quote is an illustration of a type of difficulty that many respondents have experienced. Diplomas from Syria are often not recognised in the Netherlands. Numerous respondents described how they earned a diploma in Syria which became useless in the Netherlands. The Netherlands has a very strict policy when it comes to recognising foreign diplomas. Especially when compared to other European countries such as Sweden and Germany, the Dutch law provides little opportunities to accredit foreign diplomas. Many respondents experienced it as extremely difficult that they were now dependent on social welfare. The Syrians who were interviewed were predominantly well educated and had decent jobs in Syria, but now they cannot work and are dependent on others. Such an experience was often described as painful and even shameful. A 39-year old Syrian doctor shared the following:

“I feel ashamed that I receive social welfare. I need to work. My husband needs to work. I do not want to go to a café with a friend while she works and pays taxes and I do not. You understand? I live from the taxes that she pays. (...) I know that it is not my fault, we came from a country in war, but I cannot do it differently. I would not feel comfortable” (R18 – translated from Dutch by the author).

The quoted woman experienced difficulties to develop meaningful relationships with Dutch people because she felt like she was profiting from their taxes. If she would have a job, she would earn her own money and she would not feel bothered to have social appointments such as going to a café with a friend.

Most Syrians that were interviewed spoke Dutch or English, although in varying degrees of capability. Nevertheless, they were all able to express themselves in a language that is understood by most Dutch people. There are however also many Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands who do not master the English language and have not learnt the Dutch language yet. For them it is even much more difficult to express themselves to people and to develop a sense of identification with the Dutch society. Language is one of the most important factors in the acculturation process of newcomers. Respondents who spoke Dutch generally experienced positive remarks from people in their social environments. Being able to communicate in the dominant language provided them with the opportunity to become closer to the Dutch people and society. However, a lack of communication also hinders the development of the language skills of Syrian newcomers, as was explained by a Syrian man:

“I cannot talk to people. It is not good for the language. Perhaps when I have a job I can learn the language better. Sometimes in 3 or 4 days I only speak Dutch once” (R9 – translated from Dutch by the author).

Speaking the language is a factor that affects every aspect of the public life of Syrian newcomers. Respondents who did not speak Dutch were generally less outgoing and had little contact with Dutch people. As was described by a Syrian student, understanding and speaking the Dutch language has a crucial influence on the feeling of being included within the society:

“There are some cultural things that, if you do not speak the language, will be impossible to explore. (...) Once you know the language, you can read, you can watch movies, kind of go out, sit in the park, even like sitting in the train and listening to people complaining about work, about the weather and all these things. (...) You will be exposed to the daily life” (R13).

Age matters dearly when it comes to learning the language and developing a sense of identification with the Dutch society. It was easier for children and young adults to learn the Dutch language. During a family-interview with a father, mother and their two daughters, the importance of age became particularly evident. While the father and the mother were struggling to learn the language and to form connections with others, the two children spoke Dutch fluently. Even in their own house, the children would speak Dutch when speaking to each other, while the parents communicated in Arabic. The youngest 10-year old girl spoke Dutch very well and had a lot of friends at school. She so strongly felt connected with the Dutch society that she completely forgot about her previous life in Syria, as was explained by her father:

“This is Amena’s country. Amena has forgotten about Syria. She came here and has now been here for almost 4 years. Amena is a Dutch girl” (R9 – translated from Dutch by the author).

Most respondents experienced some forms of difficulties to restart their life’s in the Netherlands. Not being able to speak the language gave people the feeling of being an outsider and hindered the forming of connections between Syrian newcomers and members of the Dutch society. The experience of being dependent on social welfare and other people was generally described as painful. Working does not only contribute to people’s sense of self, it also provides them with the opportunity to meet others and to learn the Dutch language better. Because of the alleged embarrassment of receiving social welfare, some respondents distanced themselves from the Dutch society and kept more to themselves. The process of restarting a life was strongly affected by age. Generally, it was easier for young people to get used to their new life in the Netherlands than it was for older Syrians. Older Syrians often found it difficult to build up a new career since their foreign diplomas were not recognised in the Netherlands and to learn the language.

### 6.3 Psychological struggles

“I am tired [of not being able to meet people] in the Netherlands. I am also tired from what is still happening in Syria, for my family and friends. They are still there. Everyday someone gets killed. I am so tired” (R8 – translated from Dutch by the author).

Most refugees have witnessed tremendous atrocities in Syria. Even though they are safely in the Netherlands now, all respondents still had family and/or friends living in Syria. They were very worried about the situation in Syria and they constantly followed the latest events. As was mentioned by several respondents, their head is in the Netherlands but their heart is in Syria. The cruel events that are still going on in Syria have a strong impact on the mental state of mind of many respondents. As was revealed by a research from the Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 41% of all Syrian refugees in the Netherlands experience psychological problems (SCP, 2018). Trauma's, stress, frustration, uncertainty and grief are some of the psychological difficulties that numerous respondents had to cope with. These mental problems also had their effect on the physical well-being of several respondents who sometimes felt tired and exhausted. These psychological problems are also instigated by certain difficulties that Syrian newcomers experience in the Netherlands. This paragraph takes a look at how these psychological struggles affect the lives of Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands.

In principle, all Syrian refugees have to go back to Syria when their temporary residence permit expires after five years in the Netherlands, unless the situation there is still considered to be too dangerous for them to return. The situation in Syria is currently considered as such, but parliament members of the VVD, the biggest political party in the Netherlands, urge the cabinet to make plans to send Syrian refugees back to certain parts of Syria which, allegedly, should be considered as safe (Telegraaf, 2017). The uncertainty whether they can stay or not withholds some respondents from making progress in their acculturation process. As was explained in the previous paragraph, the 10-year old girl Amena considers herself to be Dutch and has no recollection of her previous life in Syria. Her life is in the Netherlands and she would most likely experience great difficulties to reintegrate in Syria. Moreover, many Syrian students are afraid that they will have to quit their studies halfway without a diploma because they would have to go back. For them, they feel that they would have lost five valuable years in a crucial phase of their life. If they can complete their study in the Netherlands, they have a diploma and better chances to find a job in the Netherlands, or even in Syria.

“If they want me to go back to my own country, I will not be graduated yet. That would be very bad for me. I would have to go back as a 25-year old with no diploma in the Netherlands nor in Syria. I cannot do anything then” (R15 – translated from Dutch by the author).

“(…) will I stay, will I not stay? Will they allow me to stay? Should I actually invest in my Dutch or should I keep working in English?” (R18).

Psychological problems are also caused by other factors such as (fear of) rejection, discrimination and not being able to find a job or the ability to earn a living. When people have a job and earn money themselves, this strengthens their level of agency. They feel that they have more control over their life since they are no longer dependent on social welfare and hence the government. All respondents have either studied or worked in Syria. Numerous respondents explained how difficult it was for them that they were unable to find a job in the Netherlands. Being rejected regularly left many respondents disappointed and frustrated. In this research, many highly educated Syrians were interviewed and for them in particular it was even more frustrating that their study and work in Syria was not recognised in the Netherlands. They felt that they had to start all over again.

Refugees generally experience certain psychological difficulties because they fled a country that is in war. During their time in Syria they often witnessed atrocities, and they still regularly experience horrific events through their relatives and friends with whom they are in contact with. These events often continue to impact the lives of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. For quite a number of respondents, it was difficult to fully devote themselves to their new life in the Netherlands because they were still occupied with the events in Syria. These difficulties were further encouraged by problems that they encountered in the Netherlands. Moreover, the uncertainty whether they can stay or have to leave the Netherlands in only a few years sometimes holds them back. These uncertainties can paralyse their acculturation orientation. Most respondents acknowledge, euphemistically, that they are not in the best position of their life. Therefore, they sometimes have difficulties to shake off their past and to completely focus on their new life in the Netherlands. After all, they do not know whether this “new life” can be considered permanent or will end.

#### 6.4 (Cultural) communication customs

“I am trying to communicate with others, but this is very difficult for me. For example, I ask you a question. You give an answer, that’s it. You do not ask a question in return or speak from yourself. (...) Perhaps it is different than in Syria. How can I make new friends? I just do not know how I should meet and get to know people” (R8 – translated from Dutch by the author).

Without communication it is impossible to develop a sense of identification between members of the Dutch society and Syrian newcomers. As can be derived from the interviews, a lack of communication is exactly one of the biggest difficulties for many Syrians in the Netherlands, perhaps even the biggest. Part of the reason why there is a lack of communication is to be found in cultural differences with regard to communication customs. Nevertheless, communication is also affected by the experiences that the war in Syria had on some respondents.

Even though most of the respondents think of the Dutch as friendly, many respondents also think of them as hesitant or distant, as was explained in paragraph 5.3. Most communication problems arise from differences in habits and expectations between both sides. These expectations are often imbedded in the culture from both the Syrian newcomers and the Dutch. Individuals of both groups are used to different communication systems which on their turn affect the type of communication that people have, and the moments when people have it.

Most respondents did not have a (full-time) job and were therefore quite often at home. Contrary to what they are used to in Syria, the streets in the Netherlands are, at least in their eyes, almost empty during working hours. Syrian newcomers are used to crowded streets where interpersonal contact is easier and more likely. On the street, they can talk to their neighbours, friends and others. However, in the Netherlands, and this was especially the case for the respondents who lived in small villages, this was very different:

“People here are always inside their house. They are not going to walk outside like in Syria. They also do not visit each other much. In Syria people are always visiting each other” (R9 – translated from Dutch by the author).

“People never have time. You have to make an appointment. You even have to make an appointment just to talk. You can come in a week, two weeks or a month” (R10 – translated from Dutch by the author).

Interpersonal contact in the Netherlands is generally less spontaneous and has an arranged character. Especially for the group of Syrian respondents who did not have a job, this turned out to be extremely difficult. Planning a diner or a meeting to talk is not necessarily a bad thing, it is just another way or system than that what is familiar to most Syrian newcomers. Nevertheless, this sort of system is in fact very difficult when you arrive in a new country where you often do not know anyone. The threshold for planning a visit with (almost) strangers is high and this makes it difficult to establish meaningful contacts in the first place.

“[In Syria] it is much easier to approach somebody. It is much easier to make friendships or at least relationships to start a conversation. Here it is a bit more complicated. Everything has to go according to the agenda. (...) I have been to Spain before and, for example, it is much easier to approach a Spanish person to have a conversation or to plan something out of the blue” (R19).

This quote exemplifies how culture plays a role in the way that people communicate. The Spanish and Syrian way of communicating are more common to each other than the Syrian and Dutch. The Mediterranean communication customs are quite different than what the people in Northwest-Europe are generally used to. For Syrian newcomers who do not or barely speak the Dutch language, and who do not have a job or study to pursue, it is extremely hard to find ways to easily get in contact with Dutch people, and from there to build meaningful relationships. As was explained in paragraph 5.4, these difficulties are regularly met with a hesitant attitude from Dutch people towards newcomers. All Syrian respondents wanted to develop meaningful relationships with Dutch people, but it turns out that it is not simply a choice of the will.

For most Syrian newcomers, when they came to the Netherlands they already had a long life in Syria. They had their own friends and people that they knew. Due to the circumstances in Syria, they had to leave these friends behind when they fled the country. Several respondents expressed how difficult it was to make new friends, after all that they had experienced in Syria. A war can change people. Several students explained the difficulties that they had when trying to communicate with their classmates in the Netherlands. The Syrian students were generally a few years older than their classmates because their education was put on hold for several years. More importantly, they are not only older than their classmates, but they also have witnessed a lot during the war in Syria and during their travels to the Netherlands, which caused their psychological age-level to generally be much higher. The following quote is an illustration of this:

“(…) I am 26-year-old and sometimes I feel demotivated because I am sitting with people who are 18 or 19 years old, and they are just really childish and making problems in the class and eating. But, as I said, I always try to keep myself away from these people. I always try to push them away” (R2).

Different communication customs affect the level and the type of interpersonal contact between Syrian newcomers and members of the Dutch society. Communication in the Netherlands is generally less spontaneous than most Syrians are used to. When newcomers do not have a job or study, they often do not have an easily accessible way to communicate with others. These cultural differences in communication customs are especially difficult for newcomers since the mental threshold is high for them to plan a visit or meeting with someone whom they barely know. The communication difficulties are however not only affected by cultural differences, but also by psychological difficulties, since many Syrian refugees have experienced events that Dutch people cannot fully understand. The experience of having to leave your friends behind, or losing them, had a strong impact on the lives of most respondents. For some people it was difficult to form connections because the war in Syria has shaped their mentality which made it hard to be on the same level as Dutch age peers.

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to answer the third, and last, sub-question of this research: Which other factors have an influence on the attitude of Syrian refugees themselves, and how do these affect the identification process with the Dutch society? Based on gathered data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups, three main difficulties were identified that had a strong impact on the attitude of most Syrian respondents.

All Syrian respondents expressed their desire to establish meaningful contacts with Dutch people, and quite a few were, in fact, successful in doing so. These people had Dutch friends and generally felt included in the society. Nevertheless, for the majority of the respondents it turned out to be quite difficult to establish such contacts due to a number of factors. It was very difficult for many respondents to be in a situation where they were dependent on social welfare and did not have much contact with Dutch people, even though they generally had decent jobs and an intensive personal network of friends and relatives back in Syria. Due to the war in Syria, they had to leave their previous life behind and they had to start over in the Netherlands. For many respondents, this process felt like they had to start from scratch. Such feelings were strengthened by the experience of diploma's that were not recognised, not being able to speak the language, not being able to find a job and being dependent from social welfare.

It was challenging for Syrians who neither had a (full-time) job or study to find alternative manners to get in contact with Dutch people. In Syria, they were used to a society where people are generally outdoors and on the street. In such a system it is easier to approach people and to start a conversation. The Dutch society does not have such a culture, people generally work indoors in the morning and afternoon, and in the evening, people are more often at home. Such a mismatch between habits results in a lack of common ground where individuals of both groups have the opportunity to get into contact with each other and hence to develop a sense of identification. These differences in communication customs were partly the result of cultural differences and is dependent on the context. The influence of such cultural differences is only limitedly reflected within Berry's acculturation model (2001). His conceptual model assumes that acculturation is primarily the result of a matter of willing; do both cultural groups want to develop contact and relationships or not? However, this chapter revealed how cultural differences can prevent the establishment of such contacts even when members of both groups are actually in favour of, or at least not opposed to the idea. The difficulties to get to know people were further strengthened by personal struggles, such as psychological difficulties. The war in Syria still makes an impact on the lives of Syrian newcomers. Even though they are now in the Netherlands, they still have friends and relatives living in Syria about whom they are worried. Moreover, most respondents experienced some forms of psychological difficulties resulting from their time in Syria, but also from traveling to the Netherlands and their time in The Netherlands.

This study's findings support the arguments of Bhugra and Becker (2005) who stated that refugees have their own specific experiences and difficulties within their acculturation process. Frustration, grief and uncertainty were three of the most prominent emotions that had a negative effect on the self-esteem of people. These psychological difficulties affected the mental state of mind of people, but also affected their physical well-being. Several respondents expressed how physically exhausted they were from all their experiences in the past and the current difficulties they were dealing with. The presence of such emotions could make respondents more hesitant to be outgoing and to expose themselves. Such an attitude negatively affected the intention to start a conversation and to develop meaningful relations with members of the Dutch society, which on their part prevented the development of mutual identification between individuals of both group

## Chapter 7. Conclusion

### 7.1 Conclusion

In recent years, the Netherlands experienced intense political and societal debates on immigration and integration. The arrival of tens of thousands of Syrian refugees further sparked these discussions. The way that these newcomers should be included in Dutch society has been one of the main themes of discussion. The Dutch policy has become more restrictive in the last two decades and a multicultural policy has increasingly been replaced by an assimilationist one. The rationale is that an assimilationist approach stimulates the sense of identification of newcomers with the Dutch society and would hence strengthen the societal cohesion within the Netherlands. However, academic research has revealed that forced assimilation can in fact be counterproductive and can even strengthen feelings of reethnicisation. Moreover, it can sharpen the divisions between different cultural groups. Gaining a better insight into how the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society is affected by certain factors is important because this will provide crucial insights into how this process can be enhanced. Enhancing the identification process can stimulate the inclusiveness of the Dutch society and strengthen the societal cohesion in the Netherlands. This study therefore examined which factors affected the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society.

As the main point of reference in acculturation research, Berry's model (2001) served as an important starting point for this study. Berry identified four acculturation strategies that were based on the dis/agreement of people with two components. The first component, *cultural maintenance*, refers to the extent someone considers his or her cultural identity and characteristics as important and strives for its maintenance. The second one is *contact and participation* and refers to the extent that someone becomes involved with other cultural groups or remains focused on his or her own group. Berry divided the acculturation orientation in changes on a group level and a personal level. This research explicitly explored changes on a personal level, which can be described as the identification process. According to Berry, the acculturation strategies of migrants were not solely the result of the orientation of migrants but were in fact the combined result of the orientation of migrants and the attitude of the dominant culture. These attitudes shape the framework in which migrants have to settle down and therefore affect the level of agency of migrants.

Berry's model served as an important starting point for this research, but there were some important deviations that were highlighted in the theoretical framework. Berry's study was based on a quantitative positivist approach that adopted a *mode of explanation* in order to reveal how the

acculturation process is guided by certain laws. However, this research methodology has become increasingly criticised in the last two decades. Instead of considering acculturation as an objective process that is guided by laws, scholars adopted a *mode of understanding* that examined acculturation from within its specific context. Contrary to the quantitative positivist tradition, this new school of thinking considered acculturation as a process that is unique and context-dependent. This study was in line with this new school of thinking within acculturation research and examined how the identification process of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands should be understood from within its specific context of time and place. In order to understand how this context is structured and how this has an effect on Syrian newcomers, this study took the form of a case study where the experiences of a specific group of refugees in a specific period of time was examined. One of the core foundations of interpretivism is that human beings are seen as complex individuals who can have different understandings, experiences, and responses to the same 'reality'.

This study took Rudmin's theory (1996) into account who stated that newcomers do not necessarily adopt a singular acculturation strategy, but rather adopt multilineal strategies according to the context they are in. In line with Rudmin's theory, this thesis examined if and how the identification process developed differently in the public and private domain. Two other important theories were taken into account as well. Most notably, this study examined whether the integration paradox theory (Verkuyten, 2016) had an effect on the experiences of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. This theory states that people who are more exposed to the Dutch society averagely experience more discrimination and are therefore more inclined to distance themselves from the Dutch society in return. This study also explored whether Taylor's et al. personal/group discrepancy theory (1990) had an effect on Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands. Taylor's theory states that people, most notably migrants, perceive more discrimination directed against their cultural or ethnic group than to them personally. The interviews with the selected participants provided the researcher with the opportunity to examine both the personal/group discrepancy and the integration paradox.

The used data in this research was derived from a review of academic literature and, most importantly, by conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups with Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands. In total, 21 Syrian respondents were interviewed during the research.

### **7.1.1 Answering research questions**

This thesis uses one main question and three sub-questions. Even though the personal and subjective experiences of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands were central in this research, it was important to first contextualise the arrival of these newcomers in the Netherlands. The first sub-question of this research was: How has the political and societal debate regarding immigration and integration in the Netherlands developed since 1960?

In the 1960s, the Dutch government had the impression that the so-called guest workers would only stay temporarily, and the government actively stimulated the formation and strengthening of ethnic institutions and organisations to smoothen their reintegration process when they returned back to their home countries. However, when it became clear that these migrants intended to stay, the Dutch policy had facilitated the creation of parallel systems of different ethnic groups within the Dutch society that often lived segregated from each other. During this period, there was a strong consensus between the elites of the political parties, which discussed amongst themselves which technocratic adjustments had to be made in order to improve Dutch policy with regard to immigration and integration. There was a lack of parliamentary and societal debate on these issues. However, this changed significantly from the 1990s onwards with the politicisation of the debate. The political taboo was broken and immigration and integration became some of the most debated themes within politics and the media. These discussions were sparked by several events such as the 9/11 attacks and the murder of politician Pim Fortuyn. In the last two decades, anti-immigration political parties rapidly grew in size and the debate became increasingly polarised. The Dutch policy transformed; the focus shifted from stimulating cultural diversity to stimulating civic integration, or better said, assimilation. The assimilationist turn became a fact. The once dominant multicultural frame increasingly lost ground in the media and became replaced by other frames, such as the Islam-as-a-threat and the victimisation frame. Contrary to the multicultural frame, these frames consider the Islamic culture as fundamentally different and potentially harmful to the Western way of life.

The polarisation of the debate on immigration and integration was particularly visible on social media where pro- and opponents made use of the accessible platform to express their thoughts and opinions. When the current situation is compared to that up until the 1980s, it can be seen that political and societal debates have widened exponentially, from merely the political elites to all layers of the Dutch society.

The second sub-question aimed to answer the question: How do Syrian refugees perceive the attitudes by members of the Dutch society directed towards themselves, and how do these affect the identification process with the Dutch society? Contrary to the previous sub-question, this chapter had

a micro approach that focused on the individual experiences of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. A division was made based on three main sorts of attitudes that Syrian newcomers experienced.

First, most respondents described the Dutch people in their social environment as friendly and they felt comfortable to preserve their Syrian culture in the private domain, although some felt more uncomfortable to do so in the public domain, mostly out of fear for rejection. When newcomers experienced positive responses in their social environment, the bridge to initiate contact was low and interpersonal contact was more likely. Such contact smoothed the process of developing meaningful relationships and hence strengthened the identification process.

Second, although most respondents considered the Dutch as friendly, interpersonal contact often remained superficial. Many Syrians experienced the Dutch as hesitant or anxious to initiate meaningful contact. Such a hesitant attitude does not mean that Dutch people did not want to establish contacts with Syrian newcomers, but rather that they found it difficult to initiate these contacts in the first place. This attitude was affected by public ignorance about Syria, Syrians and the Syrian culture. Ignorance is a non-deliberate attitude that many Syrians experienced. Interpersonal contact often helped to clarify these misconceptions, but sometimes there was a thin line between ignorance and racism or discrimination. The experience of being perceived as the Other or inferior was generally described as painful by the respondents and was harmful for the mutual identification process.

Third, although most respondents did have some sort of experience with discrimination, there were a few respondents who experienced this on a regular basis. When discrimination was regularly experienced, it generally outweighed the positive responses that they may have received. In response to such experiences, several respondents turned themselves away from the Dutch society in order to protect their own well-being, which hindered their identification process.

The third sub-question was: Which other factors have an influence on the attitude of Syrian refugees themselves, and how do these affect the identification process with the Dutch society? Based on semi-structured interviews and focus groups, three main factors were identified.

Most respondents experienced difficulties to restart their life in the Netherlands. While most respondents used to have a decent job and life in Syria, they were now suddenly dependent on social welfare. They often had difficulties to find a job since their diplomas were not accredited in the Netherlands. Therefore, the respondents often had the feeling that they had to start all over again. Older Syrians generally had more struggles to learn the Dutch language as well. Not being able to work, study or speak the language gave people the feeling of being an outsider. It was harmful for the self-esteem of the respondents and hindered the forming of connections between Syrians and Dutch.

Refugees fled a country that is in war, and therefore, they often experience certain psychological difficulties. Many respondents found it difficult to completely focus on their new life in the Netherlands since the on-going events in Syria still affected them and since they often had friends and relatives still living in Syria, about whom they were worried. Several respondents also expressed their difficulties in the Netherlands to devote themselves to their new life since they are uncertain whether this life will be permanent, or whether they will have to leave the country in a few years. These psychological struggles can have a paralysing effect on the acculturation orientation of Syrian newcomers and can negatively affect the identification process.

Differences in communication customs affected the attitudes of Syrian newcomers. Contrary to what most respondents were used to, interpersonal contact in the Netherlands, is generally less spontaneous and has an arranged character. For newcomers who did not have a job or study, it was often difficult to find easily approachable ways to communicate with Dutch people. Developing meaningful relationships in the Netherlands required the planning of visits or meetings with Dutch people, but this was experienced as very difficult since they barely knew Dutch people. These differences in communication customs cannot be solely explained from a cultural point of view but are also affected by the psychological difficulties of many Syrians. For several respondents, the war in Syria shaped their mentality and made them more mature. Especially for younger Syrians, it was difficult to form connections with age peers.

The main question of this research was: What are the main factors that affect the identification process of Syrian refugees with the Dutch society? In line with Berry's framework, this study examined this question from the point of view that the identification process is affected by both the attitude of the Dutch society and the Syrian newcomers, and is facilitated by the macro political context. Although Dutch policy has become increasingly restrictive in the last two decades and has witnessed an assimilationist turn, research has revealed that societal attitudes towards refugees in the Netherlands is in fact quite positive (CBS, 2017).

The perceived attitudes of the Dutch society had an important effect on the level of agency of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands and were a crucial factor in the identification process of Syrian newcomers. When Syrians experienced an inclusive attitude in their social environment, they felt more comfortable to express themselves and to initiate contacts. However, this also worked vice versa; newcomers who regularly experienced rejection often distanced themselves from the Dutch society in return. In between these two opposed attitudes, there is a big category of people who are not explicitly positive or negative towards refugees, but who are not in (regular) contact with them. Such a lack of interpersonal contact prevented the establishment of a sense of identification between individuals of both groups, and also hindered Syrian newcomers to develop their language skills and to get used to

the Dutch culture and customs. The attitudes of Syrian newcomers themselves were primarily affected by their language skills, their relative socioeconomic deprivation and psychological difficulties including trauma's, stress, grief and uncertainty. These factors hindered newcomers in their acculturation orientation. Nevertheless, although the attitudes of the Syrian refugees and members of the Dutch society had an important effect on the identification process of the Syrian newcomers, they do not sufficiently explain the lack of interpersonal contact and identification between members of both groups. All Syrian respondents wanted to develop (more) meaningful relationships with members of the Dutch society and also most Dutch people were positive or neutral regarding Syrians. Even though there were certain difficulties that made establishing contact difficult, based solely on these factors, it would be expected that there was more interpersonal contact between individuals of both groups. As was revealed during this research, the reason for this can be found in a difference in communication customs. Differences in communication customs and desires led to a mismatch where individuals of both groups had different ideas about the level and type of contact. Many Syrians struggled to get used to the Dutch way of communicating and found it difficult to find manners to approach people and build up meaningful relationships. This was especially difficult since they often did not speak the language, nor knew the culture, customs and habits. Syrians who did not have a job or study found it difficult to find ways to approach other people, especially since they regularly experienced the Dutch as hesitant or anxious. Without communication there cannot be identification. In sum, a lack of contact and communication prevented the development of meaningful relationships and hindered the advancement of identification between individuals of both groups.

### **7.1.2 Theory development**

By speaking of acculturation 'strategies', Berry's theory assumes a level of rationality that gives a misinformed picture of the actual reality. A strategy gives the idea of an outlined, clear path that someone rationally chooses to pursue. However, it would be better to speak of an acculturation orientation. Of course, rationality plays an important role within the acculturation process since newcomers have a level of agency in deciding how they want to settle down in their new society. Nevertheless, this study revealed how the identification and acculturation process is fragile and is affected by a variety of non-rational factors such as emotional difficulties, cultural differences and the fact that every person can respond differently to the same 'reality'. An acculturation orientation gives a more nuanced image of the acculturation process where the level of agency of migrants is affected by emotional factors as well. These non-rational factors can have severe consequences on the acculturation orientation of newcomers. For example, newcomers who originally wanted to develop meaningful contact with their new society may distance themselves later when they feel rejected. This study showed how discrimination and rejection can facilitate such processes of distancing.

This research explored how Berry's theory provides important insights in how the attitudes of the Dutch society and Syrian newcomers have an effect on the identification process of these newcomers. However, this study also revealed that Berry's model alone is not sufficient to understand these identification processes. As can be concluded from this study, all Syrian newcomers wanted to develop (more) contacts and meaningful relationships with members of the Dutch society, and also the Dutch were generally open for such contacts. According to Berry, this would mean that members of both groups would interact and hence develop a mutual sense of identification. However, this research revealed how this is often not the case for Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. The Dutch context and the background of the Syrian refugees was important to take into account since it had a tremendous effect on the identification process of these newcomers. Differences in (cultural) communication customs were not taken into account by Berry, but they often play an important role and can prevent interaction between individuals of both groups while they are actually both open for it. These different communication customs are not only affected by cultural differences, but also by psychological factors such as grief, frustration and grief.

The study supports Rudmin's (1996) argument that people may adopt multilinear acculturation strategies in different situations. There were numerous examples where Syrians talked, dressed and behaved differently when they were in public and indoors. In public, Syrians were generally more inclined to adopt Dutch customs, while they preferred to preserve their Syrian customs in the private domain. These findings are different than those of Arends-Tóth and Van Den Vijver (2004) which stated that Turkish-Dutch felt pressured to adopt the Dutch culture both in- and outdoors.

This research found considerable ground for the integration paradox theory (Verkuyten, 2016) where Syrian newcomers who are more exposed to Dutch people, such as Syrian students, perceive more discrimination directed towards themselves and are therefore more inclined to distance themselves from the Dutch society. Disappointment over non-recognition of foreign diplomas and the struggles to find a job were important facilitating factors. Moreover, Syrians who spoke Dutch better were often more aware of discrimination and negative framing in the media. In general, more respondents experienced group discrimination than personal discrimination and this phenomenon could indicate that Taylor's personal/group discrepancy (1990) had an effect on the Syrian newcomers. However, contrary to Taylor's argumentation, this study does not support the hypothesis that migrants trivialise their own experiences of personal discrimination. Such experiences were considered as painful and often had a genuine effect on the respondents. The reason for the prevalence of group discrimination over personal discrimination is more likely to be found in the perceived hesitant attitude of many Dutch people, and the fact that discrimination is more likely to happen behind closed doors than face-to-face. Therefore, the idea of a prevalence of group discrimination over personal

discrimination seems to be true in the case of most respondents, but Taylor's hypothesised reasons of the personal/group discrepancy theory for this phenomenon seem to be different in the Dutch context.

## 7.2 Limitations

It is important to be aware of your own position as a researcher during the research and the writing-process. This paragraph reflects on the limitations of this research and discusses how this may have affected the results.

Firstly, during several interviews there were some language barriers that negatively affected the interviews. It was sometimes difficult to go in-depth during an interview because there was a lack of mutual understanding. I do not speak Arabic myself and were therefore dependent on the Dutch or English language skills of the respondents. These language skills were for some respondents quite limited and this made it difficult to ask follow-up questions, which on their turn affected the level of depth of some interviews. Although it could have been helpful to make use of a translator during a few interviews, most respondents were quite hesitant to accept an interview in the first place. The presence of a translator would make respondents even more sceptical to accept an interview.

Secondly, intercultural sensitivity was important during this research. As far as possible, I actively tried to take this into account during the interviews. However, this had some consequences on a few interviews that were conducted. One interview was originally planned with a Syrian woman, but she could not be in a room alone with a man other than her husband or family member. Therefore, a dual interview was held with her and her husband. For some personal questions it would be better if I could have conducted a one-on-one interview. Moreover, during this interview, but also during another family interview, the husband was generally more dominant in the conversation. The women were often less outspoken than the men. Although it is a shame that these women could not be interviewed on a one-on-one basis, without taking these intercultural sensitivities into account it would not be possible to have an interview with these women at all.

Thirdly, the research focused on the experiences and perceptions of Syrian refugees themselves. These perceptions are not necessarily the reality and are only one side of the story. It would be interesting if I could have conducted interviews with Dutch people who are in contact with or live near Syrian newcomers. Such interviews could especially shed more light on the attitude of Dutch people towards refugees.

Fourthly, due to the limited means of this research, 21 people have been interviewed. The experiences of these 21 people do not reflect that of the total Syrian population in the Netherlands. In order to enhance the representativeness of this study, it would be better if I could have conducted more interviews. Representativeness was however never a goal per se of this research. The objective of this study was to provide in-depth knowledge on how the identification processes of Syrian refugees were affected by certain factors, and this study provided an answer to this question.

Fifthly, the sample of respondents was not as representative as desired. There was an overrepresentation of young, well-educated Syrians who used to live in large cities in Syria. All these respondents talked, at least to some extent, English and/or Dutch. It is well likely that a Syrian who does not speak either of these languages has very different experiences in the Netherlands. It would be interesting to have conducted more interviews with people from small villages. It is a shame that the enormous differences in cultures and ethnic and religious groups in Syria were not as much reflected in this research as desired. It is however difficult to take all these differences into account due to the limited means of this research and the enormous variety of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. As much as possible, this study did reflect variety with regard to age, gender, religion, educational status and marital status. These differences were taken into account and did provide important insights into how these demographic factors affected the identification process.

### **7.3 Recommendations for further research**

This section formulates some recommendations for future scientific research. First, as was mentioned in the previous paragraph, the sample of respondents was not as representative as desired. A recommendation for future research would be to interview a larger number of Syrian newcomers in the Netherlands, and to ensure that the respondents better reflect variety in the Syrian population. Most notably, the experiences of elderly, people from the countryside, Syrians from non-dominant ethnic and religious groups, and from Syrian newcomers who do not speak English nor Dutch should be better incorporated within such a new research.

Secondly, this research focused specifically on the experiences of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. It would be very interesting to set up a similar research for a different ethnic group of refugees in the Netherlands. Different societal forms of prejudice, attitudes and frames can exist towards another ethnic or cultural group. Moreover, another group may also experience other psychological difficulties in comparison with other Syrians, and the cultural distance of another ethnic group compared to the Netherlands can be completely different. Dissimilarities in these variables can have different sorts of effects on the identification and the acculturation processes of individuals of other ethnic and/or

cultural groups. For example, a research on the experiences and the identification process of Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands could deliver valuable input for a comparative analysis between the two groups of newcomers.

In a few years, it would be very insightful to re-interview the current respondents of this research in order to examine how their identification process has developed over the years. Most respondents expressed the belief that it would become easier and better over the years, and it would be interesting to examine whether this is indeed the case. There are conflicting theories on this issue and although intuitively you might think that it will probably get better during the years, the integration paradox theory would argue differently.

#### **7.4 Recommendations for praxis**

In addition to the recommendations for future research, this study also has certain recommendations for the praxis on different levels.

The Dutch civic integration courses should include better attention for the way Dutch communication customs are structured and how this affects the level and the type of interaction that people in the Netherlands have. Improving the understanding of the differences in communication systems between the two cultural groups will enhance the level of understanding of the newcomers on how to create and to maintain contact and relationships with Dutch people.

This study recommends the Dutch government to assess its policy with regard to the accreditation of foreign diplomas. Contrary to other countries such as Sweden and Germany, the Netherlands has quite a strict policy which makes it difficult for highly educated newcomers to accredit their diplomas and to work in their professional field. A system where newcomers can make better use of their talents would enhance the identification and acculturation process of newcomers themselves and would also positively stimulate the Dutch economy.

It is recommended that NGOs and civil society organisations that work with newcomers in the Netherlands invest more in raising awareness on the backgrounds and flight motives of newcomers. A lack of understanding and ignorance are important factors that prevent the establishment of contact between members of different cultural groups. Improving awareness will hence lower the bar to establish contacts.



My final recommendation is a general appeal to journalists, writers and other influential spokespersons to remain or become aware of their own role and influence with regard to the framing of Syria, Syrian refugees and societal discussions and problems. Framing in the media does make a difference and therefore it is important that journalists are aware of how framing might affect their stories and messages.

Refugees are going to continue to come, and the only question is what we are going to do to help them ~ Davan Yahya Khalil

## 8. References

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## 9. Appendix

### 1. Interview questions for semi-structured interview

#### 1. Demographic info

- 1.1 Gender: male / female (not a question)
- 1.2 When and where were you born?
- 1.3 What was your profession/study in Syria? Educational background?
- 1.4 How long have you been in the Netherlands?
- 1.5 How and where do you live in the Netherlands? Do you live alone, or with a family?

#### 2. Perceptions on Syrian and Dutch culture

- 2.1 What are the main similarities between the Syrian and Dutch culture?
- 2.2 What are the main differences between the Syrian and Dutch culture?
- 2.3 Do you sometimes experience problems/conflicts between the two different cultures? If so, when, where, how? Examples?
- 2.4 Do you feel hindered to express your own culture in the public sphere (out-doors)? If so, how, why? Examples?
- 2.5 Do you feel hindered to express your own culture in the private sphere? If so, how, why? Examples?

#### 3. Media perceptions

- 3.1 Do you follow the Dutch media (TV, newspaper, internet)?
- 3.2 How are (Syrian) refugees portrayed in the media in your opinion? (positive/negative, stereotypes, 'fake news')
- 3.3 Does it affect you when/if (Syrian) refugees are portrayed negatively in the media? If so, how? On a group level, on a personal level?
- 3.4 How are Syrians in the Netherlands portrayed on social media?

#### 4. Contact with local community

- 4.1 Do you have regular contact with Dutch people? (friends, neighbours, colleagues, etc.)
- 4.2 How do you feel that Dutch people generally see you? Examples?
- 4.3 Have you experienced discrimination against yourself or in your environment? If so, how does this affect you? Examples?

4.4 Do you identify yourself with the Dutch people/society? How do you think this will develop in the future?

4.5 What are the biggest difficulties for you in the Netherlands?

## 2. Coding process and data analysis

1. Every interview was audio recorded. After an interview, a transcript was made via an online programme: Otranscribe.
2. When the transcription was completed, I thoroughly read through the text and I wrote down remarks on quotes/answers/phenomena that caught my attention. More specifically, I tried to understand the meaning of what was said and I tried to interpret how this relates to the academic theories.
3. Prior to a new interview, I regularly re-read my other interviews and I used my remarks on the transcripts to develop assumptions on how these phenomena could be interpreted. In a new interview, I tried to test these assumptions.
4. During the interview- and transcribing process, I started to compare transcripts and I found certain patterns in the interviews. After all the interviews were completed, I re-read all the transcripts in order to refresh the information that I had gathered.
5. I coded my transcripts via Atlas TI. I used certain codes that were derived from my research questions. I also developed several codes that were based on the observations that I made during the reading-process of the transcripts. Finally, I coded all information that could be of any value to my study and that could not be placed under one of already developed codes.
6. The coding process mostly confirmed the ideas that I had already developed during the review-process of the transcripts. My data was hence primarily analysed during the transcript review-sessions.
7. I primarily used coding as a tool to organise the information that I gathered in different themes. These themes served as the framework for the (sub-)paragraphs and chapters of the thesis.

### Codes that were used:

- |                        |                     |                       |                     |
|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| -Media portrayal       | -Positive attitudes | -Misinformation Syria | -Work               |
| -Othering              | -Assimilation       | -Integration          | -Education          |
| -Similarities cultures | -Clash of cultures  | -Position women       | -Other difficulties |
| -Forming connections   | -Communication      | -Demographic factors  |                     |