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Researching 'liquid integration': breaking new ground for processual and contingent methodology

Kurzfassung: Obwohl es in den letzten Jahrzehnten eine breite und kontroverse Debatte über den Integrationsbegriff in den Sozialwissenschaften gibt, steckt die methodologische Debatte darüber, wie die prozessuale, kontingente Seite von Integration gemessen werden kann, noch in den Kinderschuhen. Dies ist insbesondere vor dem Hintergrund neu eingeführter prozessorientierter theoretischer Perspektiven auf Integration relevanter denn je. Vor diesem Hintergrund möchte der Beitrag die methodischen Implikationen einer Liquid-Integration-Perspektive kritisch reflektieren. Wir plädieren für eine Praxisforschungsperspektive in Bezug auf emische und etische idiosynkratische Wahrnehmungen und Verständnisse von Integration, um die prozessuale und kontingente Seite zeitlich eingebetteter Integrationsprozesse und -erfahrungen besser zu erforschen und damit kritische Reflexionen über methodische Fragen in der Integrationsforschung anzuregen.

Abstract: Although there has been a broad and controversial debate on the concept of integration in social science over the last couple of decades, the methodological debate on *how to measure* the *processual, contingent* side of integration is still in its infancy. This has become especially relevant against the background of newly introduced more dynamic and more contingent theoretical perspectives on integration. Against this backdrop, the paper sets out to critically reflect on the methodological implications of the liquid integration perspective. We argue for a practice research perspective regarding emic and etic idiosyncratic perceptions and understandings of integration in order to better research the processing and contingent side of temporally embedded integration processes and experiences and to invigorate critical reflection on methodological issues in researching integration.

1. Introduction

It can hardly be ignored that many current debates, both public and private, still apply static frameworks of integration, where the boundaries and pillars of integration are seen as somehow clear, set and hardly negotiable in historical, present and future perspectives. In particular, as many will tell us, participation in existing education, employment, housing, health, politics, culture and social networks creates widely accepted domains of integration, which, however, imply that integration is a clear and conflict-free concept (Ager & Strang, 2008). This framing implies that 'if you can't participate in those different parts of society, you are at risk of falling off the edge'. But what does it mean 'to participate' or 'not to participate' in these domains, in the view of everyday and scientific theory? What is meant by the idea of being integrated in work, to share a culture or to participate in social networks? Is this a static framework of thinking, or is it rather a question of the open, contingent, situated, of something that also includes temporally changing meanings and practices? What lies beyond these so-called 'domains', beyond the routines and projections of aspects of integration dynamics which have already happened, or are currently happening? And who defines all this?

One can hardly resist the impression that integration is still gaining popularity as a conceptual means for dealing with past, contemporary and upcoming challenges in the future, such as instability, insecurity, uncertainty and fear (Abbott, 1988, 1997, 2016; Buchholz et al., 2009; Adam, 1994; Urry, 2000; Bauman, 1998; Bauman, 2000, 2002). The concept seems to embrace the promise – based on actions and practices that have already happened – that order is still being worked on, and that where it seems under threat it can be (re)established, (re)configured and (re)enforced through purposive action projected into the future, while it is still based on past and present practices. With Adam (1994: 139), it could be said that integration "reaches into the future as a kind of space-time container which provides protection for a period to come" and thus keeps the promise of protecting us from anxiety, uncertainty and bleak futures. Therewith, integration appears to be absolute, a total social fact encompassing the present, one which colonizes not only the present but likewise the future (Adam, 1994: 138).¹ By this, integration (still) retains the central premise that after a certain point in time different actors (individuals, groups or even nations) will somehow resemble one another and become, across the linear course of exchange, integrated in a common, more or less stable social body (van Reekum, Duyvendak & Bertossi, 2012; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002).² It is exactly this linear 'problem-of-order' approach (Abbott, 2016: 201), which has been at the core of normative understanding in the contemporary integration debate (Skrobanek et al., 2021).

¹ Adam refers here to Haegerstand (1985) as the originator of that idea.

² Often called a 'group', 'nation', 'society' or 'global network' (van Reekum, Duyvendak & Bertossi, 2012; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002).

But are integration and related processes really reproducing order, linearity, and keeping the world around us static? What if integration discourse only 'pretends' stability and linearity, doing so *as if* integration has a commonsense meaning and predictable reproduction of order outcome regarding our daily life practices under existing institutional frameworks? What if people only think this way because they want to make social existence predictable, easy-to-cope-with, reasonable, smooth, controllable and understandable by somehow intentionally ignoring the chaotic, diverse autonomous practices of integration which continually raise questions about taken-for-granted concepts of integration. What if it is all about stabilizing the present to preserve it in the future, projecting the past and the present into the future for the sake of reproducing the existing order, materialized in the capital and power distribution, as well as taken-for-granted processes of cultural recognition, hence for preserving the existing means-ends-order? What if integration is, not for us but as a thing in itself, a non-static, non-absolute, relative, negotiable, changeable and liquid entity? What if we only have – for the sake of ignoring its emergent, contingent and chaotic character – a patchy or even false consciousness of integration in general and its processes and processual linearity in particular? And what if integration is opaque, unpredictable, chaotic, non-linear and, in its extreme form, even undefinable?

Against this background, we begin our discussion with a reflection on the complexities of the temporal interlacement of social practices, outlining the idea of liquid integration to concentrate on issues such as process, contingency, and emergence in integration processes. Our argument is manifold, since it takes into consideration individual and collective adjustment under given institutional constraints in temporality, as well as institutional counter-adjustments in response to these individual and collective actions. Thus, just as societal structures affect the lives of people in temporality, in turn peoples' idiosyncratic action patterns likewise inform these societal structures, both cross-sectionally and in a longitudinal perspective (Mills, 1959). Considering this, we argue that the process of integration (as well as its dialectical counterpart of disintegration) can only be understood as a temporal, contingent, open and relational process based on the contingent temporal interlacement of structure and agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Emirbayer 1997; Skrobanek et al., 2021: 18). With its temporal emphasis, the proposed perspective not only brings into focus the interlacement of agency and structure, but also acknowledges the multiplicity of different times of integration.³ Thus, the contingent character of the social, cultural and structural realm, the corresponding adjustments on the individual level, the feedback effects of agency on the environment and vice versa form the matrix and existence of liquid integration (Skrobanek et al., 2021: 18).

Applying such a complex theoretical perspective in empirical work poses a range of challenges to researchers who wish to explore (liquid) integration empirically. If modes of social and system integration impact actors' practices, and if vice versa actors intentionally or unintentionally impact these existing modes in temporality, then empirical research can only capture this fundamental interconnectedness from a processual, open-ended and relational perspective. To make things even more complicated, empirical research itself is forced to make permanent adjustments during observation, maximally reducing assumptions and hypotheses which rely on already accepted knowledge. Hence, there is no ground zero of observation, no foundational basis which enables scientists to objectively determine without measurement error what integration was, is and will be. Therewith, all observation in the context of liquid integration becomes somehow radically situational, and can only be understood from a perspective of temporal relational embeddedness, as a contingent interplay of stasis and flux. Hence, the critical researcher "cannot stand aside, neutral and indifferent, from the struggles in which the future of the world is at stake..." (Bourdieu, 2003: 11).

2. Theoretical point of departure

2.1 Multi-level complexities

We start from the idea of liquid integration, elsewhere developed in the context of the theoretical debate and growing empirical insights regarding the existing body of research on integration dynamics (Skrobanek & Jobst, 2018, 2019; Skrobanek et al., 2021; Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018; Spencer & Charsley, 2021). A liquid integration perspective, as we understand it, focuses on all too often overlooked or ignored subsequent dynamics of interlacement, flow, contingency and change in integration processes at both the individual and structural levels in the context of risks and uncertainties, structural, institutional and individual adjustments in contemporary societal contexts (Skrobanek et al., 2021). It takes seriously the fact that all our projections or imaginations of integration moving into the future are based solely on evidence from already completed practice. It warns us not to base our imagination and practice of future integration processes on past or present concepts of integration understandings and practices, not to conceive the vectors of future integration processes by automatically

³ Here we refer to Cwerners' (2001) reflections on different 'times of migration'. Likewise, just as migration occurs at different times, integration also varies in its timing.

activating and projecting past or present scripts, frames or concepts into the emptiness of a still indeterminate future.

A focus on the processual side of integration is by no means new. It rather owes its intellectual heritage to a range of arguments introduced over the last century (Gordon, 1964; Park & Burgess, 1921: 769-770; Park, 1928: 890; Boas, 1896: 10; Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936: 149; Eisenstadt, 1952: 225ff.; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927). Although these insights have been a central part of our scientific heritage, unwillingness to accept the idea of integration as a contingent, somehow unpredictable and open transformative process has been a hallmark of the discourse of reproduction, stability and stasis in the context of migration-integration dynamics in the public, political and scientific fields (Jobst & Skrobanek, 2020: 24; Schwartz et al., 2010: 238; Bourhis et al., 1997: 373-375; Ryan, 2018: 248; Skrobanek, 2015b; Jobst & Skrobanek, 2014). This is even more of a surprise, since social and system dynamics, malfunctioning and risks have intensified in recent decades (Hagestad, 1991; Blossfeld et al., 2005; Buchholz et al., 2009; Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2015; Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018), often interweaving with contingent integration practices of mobile as well as non-mobile people (Ryan, 2018; Bradby et al., 2019; Huijsmans, 2012; Menjívar & Perreira, 2019; Skrobanek & Jobst, 2010; Titzmann & Lee, 2018).

We have argued in the light of a processual standpoint (Abbott, 2016) that any integration must be conceptualized as a never-ending open and relational process of contingent change and adjustment in structures, institutions, social fields and actors (corporate agents as well as natural persons) (Skrobanek & Jobst, 2019: 312-313). "Since everything is changing, everything is contingent" (Abbott, 2016: 33). Integration – as well as its counterpart of disintegration – must be understood as non-static, fragile, always temporary, processual and in principle open-ended (Skrobanek & Jobst, 2019: 313). At the micro-level, people contribute to shaping society, the "course of its history", even as they are "made by society and by its historical push and shove" (Mills, 1959: 6). At the macro-level, society and its living institutions contribute to shaping peoples' practices and their personal histories, even as institutions are constructed through the individual and/or collective practices of people, their historical interactions (Skrobanek & Ardic, 2016; Emirbayer, 1997; Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Abbott, 1988, 1997; Collins, 1992; Giddens, 1984; Heinz, 1991, 2009b, a; Wingens et al., 2011: 6). In this perspective, neither people nor their environments are in equilibrium (Abbott, 2016: 204), but rather are caught up in a continuous temporal "flux of order and disorder" (Baker 1993: 135), marked by contingent adjustment and counter-adjustment (Skrobanek et al., 2021: 17).

The proposed LI standpoint regarding complexity, dynamics and contingency becomes even more striking, if one combines its assumptions with the latest reflections in the life course debate, addressing the complex interdependency of agency and structure in the context of the life-course cube discussion and the open state-space system perspectives (Bernardi, Huinink & Settersten, 2019: 1). Likewise, the LI concept of the life-course cube highlights "time-domain-level interdependencies and their multiple interactions" (Bernardi, Huinink & Settersten, 2019: 1) which are of central importance for understanding the interrelation of people's agency and structural evolution in the context of time and social change (Schoon, 2019). Hence, process, interrelatedness and temporality are central factors in regard to time-related interdependence, interdependence among life domains⁴, and multi-level interdependence, interlacing individual behavior with institutional frameworks, broader societal opportunity structures and macro-processes (Bernardi, Huinink & Settersten, 2019; Skrobanek & Jobst, 2017; Skrobanek et al., 2021).⁵

2.2 Power and liquid integration

Although taking into consideration the processual contingent and temporal interrelatedness of structure and agency, the LI concept is not meant to be naïve, so to speak assuming that an actor's agency and structures have equal power to change outcomes. As Coleman reminds us, when it comes to individual actors and institutional agents or institutions, power – in most cases – is unequally distributed (Coleman, 1982). This 'inequality matrix' poses fundamental challenges for exchanges among individual and corporate actors (Coleman, 1982: 19-25; Skrobanek, 2015a: 58). The 'two players are unequal in terms of power and resources' (Spencer, 2011: 203; Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2013). Institutions, as well as their corporate actors, grant or deny access, distribute or redistribute resources on the basis of unequal or – in the words of Coleman – asymmetrical power distributions (Coleman, 1982: 19). Thus, they usually establish degrees of freedom for natural peoples' practices, and not the other way around (Skrobanek et al., 2021: 12).⁶ Hence, recognizing the unequal distribution of determination, and the likelihood of mobilizing power to change outcomes, differentials in power distributions and

⁴ Qualification and work, commitment, consumption and participation, as for example assumed in youth transition theory (Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2013).

⁵ Bernardi et al. (2019) conceptualize this as the interlacement of first, second and third order interdependencies.

⁶ Despite revolutionary practice and resistance which can, if a critical mass is reached, empower mobilization to change the game.

opportunities for power mobilization should be taken into consideration, if integration processes are to be properly understood and researched.

Adopting the power perspective and applying it to the LI concept makes it crystal clear that temporal integration dynamics shape outcomes, not only due to emergent interdependencies regarding micro-, meso- and macro-level dynamics, but also due to omnipresent and unequal distributions of capital-based power differentials between individuals, groups of individuals, social institutions and broader sub- and supra-national social, economic and cultural structures. A static framework of integration is power preserving in itself (stabilization of order). This aspect becomes especially relevant when we think about the openness of the future regarding liquid integration. As we maintained above, most contemporary understandings of integration want to fill the empty character of the future with past or existing concepts of integration and thus strive for a reduction of openness, contingencies and unpredictability. The future is – likewise the past and the present – symbolically contested, and in this regard, it becomes clear that power differentials play a central role regarding which concepts and understandings of integration become dominant in discourse to fill the 'emptiness' of future integration.

2.3 Interrelation and intersection in temporality

The idea of "liquid integration" – like the life-course cube (Bernardi, Huinink & Settersten, 2019) and socialization theory (Skrobanek & Jobst, 2017; Jobst, 2008) – takes into account situational and personal conditions, and their interrelation. This has induced contingent variations over time, and the reciprocal relation/interrelatedness among the individual, institutional and structural levels under the given power distribution in temporality (Giddens, 1984; Urry, 2000; Cresswell, 2006; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Cwerner, 2001; Baas & Yeoh, 2018; Elder, 1994; Ardic, Pavlova & Skrobanek, 2018; Skrobanek & Jobst, 2019). By this, the LI perspective implies simultaneous as well as time-lag dependencies (Skrobanek & Jobst, 2017: 191-192) and thus makes it possible to link information about intra- and inter-individual changes directly with the dynamics of the different system levels and their changes and effects over the course of time (Skrobanek & Jobst, 2017: 192, 194; Bernardi, Huinink & Settersten, 2019).

This temporal understanding of integration implies that there is no single time of integration which holds for all those who enter into the process.⁷ It rather proposes various times of integration and integration practices which co-vary with the qualities of micro-, meso- and macro-contexts. Hence, concrete paces of integration are by no means standardized or uniform for all persons or groups of persons, but vary according to temporal personal and structural conditions and thus can differ in speed and quality. This is by no means a new ground-breaking idea or finding. It has rather been implicitly or explicitly the result of decades of integration research (Lucassen et al., 2006). However, for understanding and measuring integration processes, their different speeds and contents, the 'times of integration' idea underlines the importance of the time-relative dynamics of individual, collective or structural integration processes. This means that chronological as well as social time provide countless possibilities for the timing of integration processes.

Overall, this sequential relational understanding of integration combines four central analytical foci which are of decisive importance for methodological reflections regarding the measurement of liquid integration (Skrobanek & Jobst, 2017: 192; Skrobanek et al., 2021; Skrobanek & Jobst, 2019). The four foci are:

- a) *The contemporary embeddedness effect focus (simultaneous)*, which spotlights how institutional and structural conditions frame actors' practices, and how the practices of actors at any given time again impact institutional and structural conditions,
- b) *The time flow effects focus (longitudinal)*, which studies temporal relationships arising between institutional, systemic factors and actors' practices over the course of time, during the actors' life-course and in the context of 'institutional' as well as 'structural' change,
- c) *The interlacement in temporality focus*, which explores cross-sectional as well as longitudinal stabilities and changes by examining how individual, institutional and system-specific aspects concretely impact each other over the course of time.
- d) *The power focus*, which scrutinizes temporal forms of domination and subordination among 'natural' and 'corporate actors' in the context of liquid integration. Here the focus is explicitly placed on conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion (Merton, 1938), or negotiation, resistance and survival regarding cultural (Skrobanek et al., 2021) goals and institutionalized means for realizing these goals.

In doing so, the LI focus tries to foster a) understandings of actors as active subjects forming the social, cultural and economic environment through practice, to support b) perspectives that ascribe openness and changeability to existing institutions and to encourage c) the understanding that integration is a temporal and permanently changing phenomenon embedded in asymmetric power relations between actors' and institutional (counter-

⁷ We are drawing here on Cwerner's (2001) reflections on 'times of migration'.

)practices, i.e., practices that can be reproductive, or also repressive or constructively changing. Researching LI from a relational perspective can therefore be summarized in a formula as $LI_{(eti)p} = ((a*b*c)*d) = ((\textit{contemporary embeddedness effects} * \textit{time flow effects} * \textit{interlacement in temporality}) * \textit{power relations})$. By this, the LI concept provides a foundation for understanding the situational, temporal and processual character of the relationships among individual practices employed during the integration process, the impact of these practices on existing institutions and vice versa. Postulating that the intertwined processes are both complex and contingent on the individual, structural and temporal levels in a cross-sectional and longitudinal perspective, LI argues for a dynamic multi-level, process-focused, non-linear and non-reductional model of liquid integration, focusing on both individual as well as institutional multi-dimensional processes.

3. Implications for measuring 'integration' against the processual, relational background

3.1 Capturing the processual

According to the here proposed understanding, liquid integration has contingent opaque content, time and process related boundaries marked by multiple forms of non-linear transitions; it can emerge in multi-complex social realities, categorizations, definitions and practices (Skrobanek et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2011: 256; Ager & Strang, 2008; Rytter, 2018; Wieviorka, 2014; Grillo, 2011; Spencer & Charsley, 2021).⁸

This perspective poses substantial challenges regarding *how to* properly conceptualize and set criteria for exactly what kinds of social phenomena are to be identified as aspects or cases of liquid integration. It also implies substantial strain and ambiguities for researchers who are interested in empirically exploring processes of liquid integration, since its dynamic and multi-faceted character, informed by interpretations of the past, present and projections into the future, necessitates integrated, interlaced, multifaceted and reflexive methods for studying liquid integration processes – thus practices of defining, redefining, and doing integration – over time. How can we define and operationalize a concept like liquid integration whose contents and practices are undergoing permanent change in temporality? How can a researcher study the processualism of liquid integration when he/she is part of this process (Brubaker, 2004, 2013)? Which methods and data should be gathered for uncovering the multi-complex embeddedness, interlacement and contingency of liquid integration at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels, within and between levels, for identifying the temporal, contingent, reciprocal relationships of structure and agency for doing integration over time (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, Emirbayer, 1997)? To make things even more complicated, time itself is no frozen category, but rather fluid in its understanding and conceptualization and in the ways we use time in concrete daily integration practices (Adam, 1994: 5; Mayer, 2019; Cwerner 2001).

How have contemporary research and contemporary methodological reflections dealt with these challenges so far? A milestone in defining and operationalizing integration was the 1997 Council of Europe publication "Measurement and Indicators of Integration" (Council of Europe, 1997). This paper provides a scientific analytical perspective⁹ on the definition or concept of integration.

"But whatever definition or concept of integration applied, one will agree that the integration of migrants into their respective host societies has at least three basic dimensions concerning the social, economic and cultural role migrants play in their new environment. While these three dimensions will hardly be disputed by anybody as important fields of integration, a fourth dimension, namely the role migrants play in political life, very much depends on whether the host government allows political participation or even grants voting rights." (Europe, 1997: 10).

In accordance with this perspective, Ager and Strand specify central social, economic and cultural domains of integration analysis: education, work, leisure, politics (second), and the micro-, meso- or macro-context in general. As Ager and Strand's analysis underlines, these domains form the core 'analytical categories' of integration discourse and thus are not only broadly used in scientific investigation, but also are very often used in public and political debates for imaging and thinking about the future of integration.

However, as Blumer has already warned, all these domains or basic dimensions are nothing more than containers, filled with temporal content and meaning (Blumer, 1954). Hence an operationalization of these terms can only be done by a) either intentionally or unintentionally reproducing existing temporal understandings (often

⁸ Understandings range from multi-culturalism, two-way or three-way perspectives, to assimilation or becoming identical (Europe, 1997: 9).

⁹ According to Brubaker (2013), scientific reflection and practice provide categories for the *analysis* of integration, while the reflections and practices of common people provide categories for *practices* of integration. As Brubaker underlines, although the distinction is "indispensable, yet the line between the two is often blurred" (Brubaker, 2013). Rytter (2018: 15) would label this perspective 'etic'.

via taken-for-granted representations) by pretending that those existing contents and meanings – somehow beyond temporality and practice – are 'objective' representations of the terms' substance or by b) radical empirical exploration of produced or reproduced temporal understandings in peoples' daily life practices. Further, taking the LI understanding seriously, researching, operationalizing, and measuring integration can only be thought of as 'preliminary', always marked by risks of becoming 'outdated' or lagging 'behind' in factual, conceptual or practical development. Hence, while operationalizing and measuring integration, integration evolves further challenges, not only for the observer and the instruments used for observation, but also due to its own multi-complex, multi-level temporal interlacement nature. Having said this, all operationalizing and all measuring of integration, can – like the concept itself – only be conceptualized as preliminary, as something that is already becoming part of the past at the very moment of its present measurement. Thus, exploring integration – as has been done in quantitative as well as qualitative research over the centuries (Anthias, 2013; Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2015; Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018; Ager & Strang, 2008; Strang & Ager, 2010; Di Bartolomeo, Kalantaryan & Bonfanti, 2015; Spencer & Charsley, 2021; Buhr, 2018: 311; Ryan, 2018: 238; Wogens et al., 2011: 6) – has created, negotiated, sustained or changed integration practices (thus social facts of the past or past perfect), but not things which are arising, potentially to inform future practices (analytically as well as practically) and situations. Of course, we do not neglect the fact that liquid integration can work both ways: maintaining the present and past or interrupting or changing past or present ways of integration in the future. However, due to the temporal character of measurement, we cannot know for certain if our object of investigation is marked by stability or change, since our measurement is doomed to always lag behind the emergent appearance of liquid integration practice. The theory of practice characterizes this fact as "theoretical error" – an error based on "the antimony between the time of science and the time of action", thus "practice takes place in time; theory is removed from time. In this sense, scientific logic is always in danger of demanding more logic (in the scientific sense) from practice, and in doing so it denies that the practice has an own logic" (Bourdieu, 1993: 149). If this holds, it must be radically concluded that all existing operationalizations, measurements, indicators or domains of integration are nothing more than temporal conceptual-categorical containers filled with temporal (historical) meaning. Hence, radically said, those who claim to know what to understand under (liquid) integration and what will come about in the future are no more than protagonists of sectarian convictions (Freire, 1970).

So, what is to be concluded for the operationalization and measurement of liquid integration? First, we have to accept that all concepts of operationalization and measurement are containers filled with historical meaning and contestable, since they are, regarding knowledge, experience and practice, temporal and thus historically variable! Using Bertaux's (1981: 35) perspective, all knowledge – and here concretely regarding the meaning, content, practices and outcomes of something called 'integration' – that we ascribe to integration is "a historically-given structure of social relations: knowledge of the conditions of social struggles, but not the knowledge of their outcome."

Second, as was already reflected decades ago, "There is no such thing as 'one meter of integration' or 'two kilos of integration' which would make plausible comparison over time" or among different socio-cultural and economic contexts (Europe, 1997: 10). Hence, objectively scaling and quantitatively measuring integration is – since it is situated in space and time – context specific, thus relative and contestable at the moment of its measurement of historical quality.

Third, having said this, methodological approaches are needed which allow radical openness for a) exploring the processes of temporal relational construction and deconstruction of understandings and practices of (liquid) integration, b) scrutinizing the interlacement dynamics between the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels – or better, life-sphere nested – practices of (liquid) integration in temporality, and c) researching the processual combinations of this 'universe' – thus 'linked ecologies' (Abbott, 2016: 33) – of data collection, analysis and interpretation, while doing a and b.

Fourth, as practice theory emphasizes, radically said, research must also be considered a practice which continuously and permanently constructs and deconstructs understandings of integration over the course of time, while referring to the past and present, and projecting into the future. It is a practice that contributes to *how we understand* the concept of 'integration', materialized in the operationalization of the concept for concrete empirical research. However, these operationalizations are not fixed or static, but rather discursively changing during the research activity itself. Hence, we propose a radical situational approach for operationalizing and measuring liquid integration processes, an approach which invites reflections upon the contingent and emergent meaning and conceptualization of integration and the micro-dynamics at individual (young migrant), institutional (corporate agents, institutional constraints) as well as broader exo- and macro-levels in a temporal perspective. This methodological account offers and motivates us to research the mutual construction and counter-construction of understandings and practices of liquid integration in an ecological interlinkage perspective. In doing this, we follow Bourdieu's advice to "escape from the ritual either/or choice between objectivism and subjectivism ... more precisely, that we shall do so only if we subordinate all operations of scientific practice to a theory of practice and of practical knowledge ..." (Bourdieu, 1990: 4).

3.2 Processual operationalization? Merging 'emic' and 'etic' understandings of integration

The outlined perspective for operationalizing and measuring liquid integration addresses not only the individual, but also the institutional as well as broader community levels of society in a time related perspective and thus encourages us to look for interrelations of concept understandings and concept-related practices at different ecological levels in temporality. Thus, when exploring liquid integration dynamics, we need a past, present and future perspective element for critically scrutinizing changes and stabilities in the processes of the social construction and social practice of liquid integration, taking into consideration that tomorrow might be different from today (Abbott, 1988; 2016; Adam, 1994; Baker, 1993; Griffiths et al., 2013; Skrobanek & Jobst, 2019). Only this will allow us to explore common or different forms of understanding and practice, as well as temporal continuities and discontinuities among individual, group, institutional and researcher understandings and practices of liquid integration regarding the different analytical levels.

The implications of this account are twofold, since it temporalizes not only practice-based understandings of integration – so to speak the daily life constructions, interpretations and solutions of 'natural persons' – but reminds us at the same time of the temporality or historicity of scientific understandings of integration – so to speak the contingent scientific construction and scientific use of "categories of analysis" regarding integration (Brubaker, 2013: 5; Mahoney, 2021; Rytter, 2018; Blumer, 1954). Hence, taking the liquid integration perspective seriously implies from a theoretical as well as a methodological viewpoint that natural people's understandings of integration (emic) are of the same character as the understandings provided by social scientists (etic). This implies that there cannot be an objective scientific 'outsider' viewpoint as opposed to a subjective 'insider' viewpoint (Fielding & Fielding, 2008: 563), but that both the scientist's and the everyday personal viewpoints can become insider or outsider viewpoints depending on the observer's temporal perspective. Accepting this epistemological standpoint encourages the researcher a) to stop taking for granted both social scientists' as well as natural peoples' categorizations and understandings of integration, and instead to critically reflect on both, and b) to start understanding them both as evolving over the course of time.

This has fundamental consequences for operationalizing and measuring integration, and respectively integration processes. Since our categories – even scientific ones – are temporal, they are of opaque quality, encouraging scientists to employ processual reasoning and transparency-making regarding their implicit and explicit multiple categorizations, meanings and interests when working on categorizations, definitions and meanings in the field of integration and transforming them into measures for integration, the subject and the object of the exploration and investigation of liquid integration processes. Therewith, researchers are encouraged to recognize the uniqueness of the particular stories of people, but likewise to examine the unique stories they have written about integration as a means of finding out more about the temporal and historically contingent conditions and productions of ideas and imaginations of integration (Bourdieu et al., 1999: 395). The operationalization and measurement of integration thus becomes itself a process of lived categorizing and meaning-making by both the researcher and the non-researcher, based on their social existence.

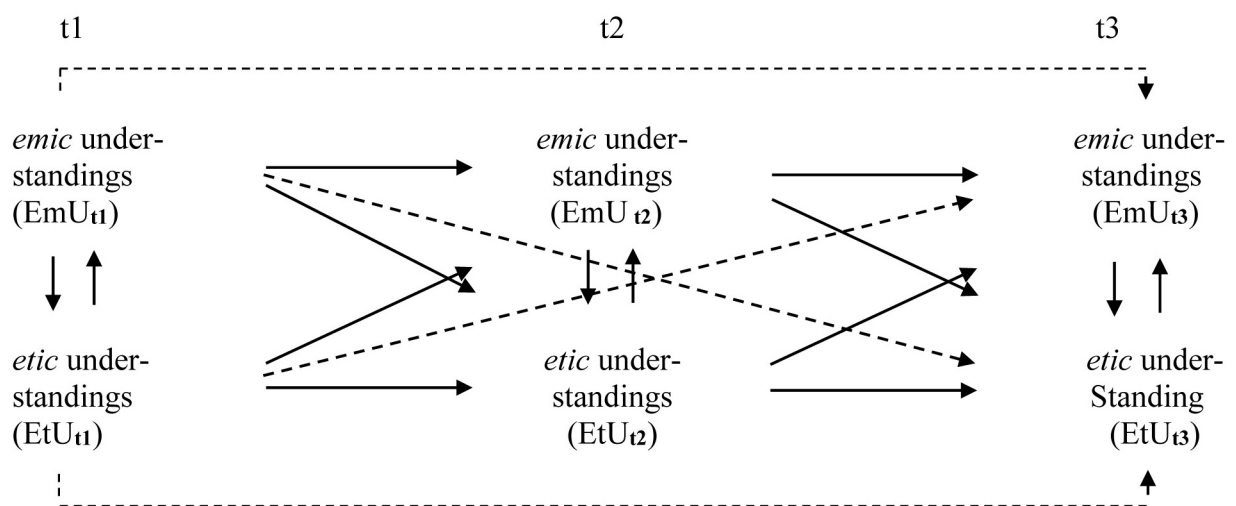


Figure 1: Emic and etic integration understandings in a radical processual liquid integration practice research perspective¹⁰

¹⁰ Arrows represent simultaneous and longitudinal relational, processual and temporal understandings of categories of analysis and categories of practice regarding integration.

Having said this, knowledge of categories of analysis and practices can only be conceptualized as temporally and processually embedded (Fielding & Fielding, 2008; Brubaker, 2013; Rytter, 2018; Anthias, 2013; Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2015; Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018; Ager & Strang, 2008; Strang & Ager, 2010; Di Bartolomeo, Kalantaryan & Bonfanti, 2015; Spencer & Charsley, 2021; Buhr, 2018: 311; Ryan, 2018: 238) and therewith becomes itself an active part of liquid integration processes. Consequently, operationalization and measures based on this knowledge are of a historical quality that always lags behind present processes. Empirical research based on the liquid integration framework no longer pretends there is a shared sense or understanding of integration. Instead, its all-encompassing focus is on the process of constructing and deconstructing temporal understandings of integration. We consequently propose to treat 'liquid integration' as a "sensitizing concept" which "does not enable the user to move directly to the instance and its relevant content". Rather, it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances, a sense of the relativity of people's (themselves included) integration standpoint, and thus leads the researcher toward processual reflexivity regarding his time- and context-specific embeddedness (Blumer, 1954: 7).

Accepting the contingent, processual and chaotic reality of integration processes and the temporal character of understanding and measuring integration forces researchers to employ radical processual measurement practices with regard to a) the evolution of the institutional and structural conditions which frame actors' actions, due to the practices of actors at a given time, b) the relationships arising between institutional, systemic factors and actors' practices over the course of time, during the actors' life-course and in the context of 'institutional' as well as 'structural' changes, c) the cross-sectional, as well as longitudinal stabilities and changes in the understanding of how individual, institutional and system-specific aspects concretely impact each other over the course of time and d) the evolution of temporal forms of domination and subordination between 'natural' and 'corporate actors' in the context of liquid integration.

4. Summary

We started from the observation that, despite broad scientific and political integration debates, it is still assumed that migrants will be integrated into a stable social system after a certain period, according to certain standards. Against this background, we argue that integration (as well as its dialectic counterpart of disintegration) can only be understood as a temporal, contingent, open and relational process based on the contingent temporal interlacement of structure and agency. We have termed this process liquid integration. Liquid integration (LI) refers to the interlacement of four aspects: $LI_{(eti)p} = ((a*b*c)*d) = ((\textit{contemporary embeddedness effects} * \textit{time flow effects} * \textit{interlacement in temporality}) * \textit{power relations})$. In this understanding, the LI concept argues for a dynamic multi-level, process-focused, non-linear and non-reductional model of integration focusing on both individual as well as institutional multi-dimensional processes of change. Taking this theoretical perspective as a starting point, this paper critically reflects on the methodological implications of the liquid integration perspective regarding the best ways to operationalize and measure (liquid) integration in the context of temporal social and system change, dynamics and contingency. In proposing this liquid integration perspective, we encourage everyone interested in thinking about integration in contingent terms to resist theories and practices which reduce the complexities of integration reality, projecting the past onto the future and thus hindering our human capacity and power for imagining and practicing the transformation of 'social matrices, webs of interdependence, and symbolically constructed contexts' (Hagestad, 1991: 41) and thus doing incalculable harm to the future.

It was noted that all operationalizations and all measurements of integration – like the integration term itself – are provisional, more precisely they are always lagging behind the schedules of liquid integration processes which evolve over the course of time. Radically said, all existing operationalizations, measurements, indicators or domains of integration are nothing more than temporal conceptual-categorical containers filled with temporal (historical) meaning, nurtured by projections from the past into the present and the future. Hence, all scaling or measuring of integration is context-specific and time-dependent and thus can only pretend to have an 'objective' quality. Seeing liquid integration as a sensitizing concept, its operationalization and measures also become sensitized.

Having said this, we argue for a theory of practice research perspective which no longer regards emic and etic idiosyncratic perceptions and understandings of integration as either/or forms of exploring integration processes. Non-scientists' understandings of integration (emic) are thus now considered to have the same character and value as the understandings offered by social scientists (etic). This implies that there is no longer an objective 'outsider' and a subjective 'insider' viewpoint (Fielding & Fielding, 2008: 563), but rather that both objective and subjective viewpoints can become insider or outsider viewpoints depending on the observer's temporally embedded perspective. The 'categories of analysis' – thus 'etic' understandings of integration – are analytically as well as practically inseparable from a person's 'categories of practice' – and here the researcher is no exception – practices of operationalization and measurement cannot escape to combine, in a conscious or unconscious manner, emic and etic viewpoints. Taking liquid integration seriously, there is no possibility of moving outside the

processes, of doing a kind of 'objective' operationalization and measurement. All doing, whether that of the researcher or the layman, or of both, is forced into the totality of *practice* within the liquid integration matrix, and according to its parameters. There is no sort of outside, no objective standpoint beyond the phenomenon of liquid integration! This account, as we hope, will help readers to better tackle the challenges implied by using the concept of integration unreflexively and uncritically while operationalizing and measuring integration. It provides a foundation for exploring the fluid, processual, and contingent side of embedded contingent integration processes and experiences, as well as stimulating critical reflection on the covertly normative use of the integration concept, its operationalization and measurement. Having said this, we do not advocate a reconstructive, but rather a constructive social science, in regard to its theories, interpretations and methodologies.

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