



**Universiteit  
Utrecht**

### **The importance of connection**

Improving the well-being and mental health of the undocumented refugees through social ties formed by participating in courses and activities: a study of The PAO (Project Activities for Undocumented Persons) Organization in The Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

From a sociological standpoint, the objective of this thesis was to investigate how participation in courses and activities enhances the well-being and mental health of undocumented refugees through social bonds formed through participation. I argue that stable mental health and well-being is essential for the beginning of (successful) social integration. This study investigates concepts such as social isolation, social participation, social networks, and social capital to examine how they can improve one's well-being and aid in societal integration. Non-profit organisations such as PAO are critical in this area, not only because they directly assist them by providing them with opportunities to learn new skills and develop their personal development, but also because they indirectly assist them by providing a safe space where they can interact with others and form ties with locals and other organisations that may be of assistance to them in the future. As a result, the indirect support is the primary focus of this study; two qualitative methodologies are used in addition to theoretical applications: participant observation and 15 semi-structured interviews. It is clear that making new bonding and bridging ties and increasing one's social network is not only necessary but critical for one's well-being, especially for this group of people who had none of the mentioned ties upon arriving in a new country.

*Key terms: refugees, mental health, social integration, social participation, social capital.*

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Ethical REVIEW Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural sciences at Utrecht University (FERB) has approved this research and it is registered under the reference number 22-1269.

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## INTRODUCTION

Considering a human being is a social being, creating new connections and maintaining healthy relationships with other people is essential to his existence. The goal of this study is to determine whether involvement in courses and activities provided by ASKV's PAO (Project Activity for the Undocumented Persons) has a beneficial impact on undocumented refugees in the Netherlands. This study is focused on the indirect effect that participation can have on one's mental health and overall well-being by allowing them to make new connections and therefore expand their social network. I argue that because people are social beings that require each other in some way, socialisation should be viewed as a form of social support. Once this support is established, not only does it improve their (mental) well-being, but it also has a favourable impact on their (social) integration process. As Granovetter noted friendships are 'indispensable to individuals' opportunities and to their integration into communities' (Granovetter 1973, p. 1378). Many studies have showed how social contact has positive impact on mental health, including the study of Saeri et al. (2017) that showed a reciprocal association between the two, and social connectedness being especially significant in enhancing mental health over time. ASKV is one of the NGOs in the Netherlands that provides legal and social support to undocumented immigrants. Aside from that, they offer medical assistance to those who are suffering from severe mental disorders. As stated in their report, PAOs courses and activities allow the undocumented to preserve a sense of 'normalcy' in their otherwise unstable lives (Ubani and Bekker, 2022).

Migration is a reality for many people who are seeking a better life and / or security and protection outside their home country. Human rights, social integration, governmental policy, collective and individual identity, and other issues are all addressed through the concept of migration. But the concept of integration has been in the forefront of discussions over refugee rights the last decade or two, specifically for the refugees from the global south migrating to the 'west' or/and global north. The process of assimilating immigrants into their new environment, is referred to as integration. This study will specifically concentrate on social integration, which is believed to be a complex notion comprising cognitive and behavioural components, with the latter being emphasized (Brissette et al, 2000). The first relates to a person's active participation in a range of social activities and relationships, whilst the cognitive aspect refers to how attached an individual feels to their society and how well they can identify with the social roles that they play (Brissette et al., 2000). Thus, this research is focused on the

mental health and well-being of the undocumented refugees (which is how they are going to be referred throughout this text, also just ‘the undocumented’) from a sociological perspective, since I believe that mental stability is essential for successful integration. It is significant to mention that the purpose of this study is not to examine and explain how and in what manner these individuals are experiencing and coping with their (poor) mental health from a psychological or biological perspective, but rather to examine how participation and the formation of new social networks can improve their mental health. According to Mossakowski (2012), the sociological approach to mental illness emphasises the influence of society through social situations, connections, roles, and statuses, which will be discussed in this study - with a focus on the function/purpose of connection.

Previous research has been made, investigating the mental health and well-being of the refugees, but not many of them that specifically targeted the undocumented refugees. There also seems to be very little research made on refugee social connection trends or the linkages connecting social connection trends and mental health. And there has been little research made on how non-government organisations can (directly and indirectly) improve the mental health and well-being of the undocumented refugees.

Due to the fact that refugees frequently arrive in a new country without social ties or a stable social network, they may face feelings of isolation, worry, stress, depression, etc. which can be detrimental to their mental health. As a result, I believe that (re)establishing a new social network is particularly vital for this group. Many governmental and non-governmental organizations offer a variety of services, but I will focus at how PAO's efforts can (in)directly improve the mental health and well-being of refugees. Their participants improved self-confidence, experienced less stress, and were able to think more clearly about their future, according to PAO's report (Ubani and Bekker, 2022). As stated in their report, social contact is a valuable advantage that arises with being a part of the organization. This study focuses on the social relationships and networks (friendships, acquaintances) that participants form as a result of the participation in activities and courses and how that has a positive impact on their mental health and overall well-being. Organizations like PAO strive to provide the undocumented refugees a sense of self-direction and improvement of their mental health directly through their courses and activities. But also, indirectly effecting their well-being by giving them the opportunity to engage and interact with other participants. According to PAO's report, the benefits of participation often plateau after the course (Ubani and Bekker, 2022). Because of that, it is equally critical to investigate the social links formed among participants,

as these could form a new and stable social network, possibly improving their mental health in the long run.

How does the involvement and participation in activities provided by The PAO (Project Activities for Undocumented Persons) improve the mental health and overall wellbeing of refugees in The Netherlands?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The sociological theories that will be able to provide us with answers on how social interactions positively affect individuals will be examined in this section of the research. To begin, the theory of social isolation, which is derived from mass society theory and linked to social participation theory, is explored. Second, the concept of social capital is studied, along with social network theory, in order to see if there is a link between a higher level of social capital and larger social network with a better mental health. With that in consideration, I will attempt to explain how mental health and well-being of refugees is connected and improved by forming connections through participation in courses and activities, in this case provided by Dutch organisation ASKV/PAO.

Migrant flows will continue to have an impact on policy structures in Europe, in addition to political, economic, and ecological challenges and social inequities around the world. The worldwide displacement crisis hit a nadir, and the refugee crisis became one of the world's most pressing issues (UNHCR, 2022). In the Netherlands there is currently an estimate number of between 23,000 and 58,000 undocumented people (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2020). Multiple studies had reported the poor mental health of this vulnerable group. Many immigrants, according to Turini et al. (2017), suffer from mental health illnesses such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, and so on. These occur because of factors that occur prior to migration, such as exposure to violence, torture, and other traumatic events, as well as factors that occur during and after migration and resettlement, such as life-threatening situations while travelling, uncertainty about asylum applications, and diminished social integration. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has established standards for the minimum resources the Netherlands should give for refugees' mental health care. The country has created a program to ensure that refugees receive the mental healthcare they require based on these criteria. Refugees with a temporary residence visa in the Netherlands have access to the same health-care services as Dutch citizens (UNHCR, 2018). As a result, refugees are entitled to a set number of counselling sessions with a psychologist. However, the situation for undocumented immigrants is not quite the same. Their possibilities of getting the medical help they need are not as for other immigrants, but there are also other obstacles they face. In their research Hintjens et al. (2020) explain that almost all of the undocumented individuals state their health is bad, but they do not go to the doctor because they do not have health insurance, are afraid of being identified, cannot afford it, or are unaware of their legal healthcare rights. Even when



they are aware of their rights, they are hesitant to exercise them for fear of being exposed, but also the stigmatisation of not just mental health in general, but the stigma and prejudice towards refugees, which further discourages them from seeking medical help (Satinsky et al., 2019).

This study looks into how local governments, civil society organisations, and non-governmental organisations (NGO's) such as PAO/ASKV have stepped in to (in)directly assist with mental health and integration of this vulnerable group. It examines the possibilities for marginalised individuals to interact with others and build social bonds, including with members of the host community, through these activities and courses. Furthermore, they also create a great opportunity for these individuals to connect with other services (legal, medical, etc.) that can aid in their general well-being and with that an even better overall integration. Since previously stated, I believe that good mental health is essential for not just social integration but also integration on all levels. If an undocumented person's mental health does not improve to some degree after settling into their new environment, they become less motivated and even more isolated. As a direct consequence of this, integration is either insufficient or inadequate.

## 1. Social integration

The International Organization for Migration (2006, p. 37) defines integration as "the process by which immigrants are accepted into society, either as individuals or as a group. The requirements of the recipient society vary from country to country, and responsibility for integration lies group, but depends on different actors: immigrants themselves, host country governments, institutions, and communities". Therefore, in other words, integration could be described as a two-way process of adaptation and dialogue between migrants and the host society. Furthermore, the two-way process underpins the three particular elements that UNHCR highlights as part of the refugee integration process: legal, economic and social / cultural process. As before noted, I will be concentrating on social integration since I believe it is the most crucial element of our research (UNHCR, 2022).

By definition social integration is the degree to which individuals participate in a wide range of social roles and relationships (Brissette et al., 2000). Integration has emerged as a crucial governmental goal in the resettlement of refugees and other immigrants, as well as a topic of substantial public debate. However, both coherent policy formation and fruitful public discourse are jeopardised by the fact that the word of integration is employed with vastly

disparate interpretations and its notion is difficult to grasp because of its complexity and scope. In the context of globalisation, immigrants who seek to participate in it are required to adapt to a new world in order to do so. The length of time spent in the host country, the immigrant's level of competence in the language of the host country, and the culture of the immigrant's home country are all factors that influence the degree to which they are able to adapt to life in the new country. Therefore, the term "social integration" refers to the voluntary informal social contacts that an individual cultivates within the new societies into which they are attempting to integrate (Iov, 2012). Social integration comprises engagement in civic society as well as interpersonal, informal networks. In Putnam's believe (2009), membership in such groups is an essential component of social capital. Civil society is essential for social cohesion and integration because it provides opportunities for meeting, (intercultural) learning, the construction and growth of social networks, discourse, and civic involvement. Bakker et al. (2016) use the concepts of 'social integration' and 'health' as two different dimensions in order to get a better understanding of how integration works on an individual level. They consider "mental health" to be particularly important because a lack of social integration can lead to societal alienation, indifference, and even depression. They define "social integration" as the amount to which migrants or refugees participate in social networks. Many more prior studies had demonstrated that lack of social integration can contribute to higher stress and poor psychological well-being for migrants who experience a variety of social and economic adversities and problems. Chen's et al. (2018) study has shown that greater social integration stressors and loneliness have negative consequences for both physical and mental health. Their findings highlight the critical need of inclusion techniques to address social integration stresses and loneliness in treatments to enhance their health. This can indicate that integration and stable mental health go hand in hand and that before the process of integration can even begin for this vulnerable group of people, their mental health should at least be improved if not stable.

## 2. Social isolation and social participation

When a person has experienced something emotionally and psychologically draining, such as migrating, it might be challenging for them to form new relationships in their new country. In addition to difficulties communicating due to language barriers and cultural differences, they must also battle with feelings of insecurity (UNHCR, 2016). Because of these differences this group of people become excluded from their 'new' society. The notion of "social exclusion" is

a complex, relational process of social disengagement that occurs over time and has interconnected bad consequences for an individual's quality of life and well-being (Bohnke & Silver, 2014). As Giddens (1998, p. 104) puts it "Exclusion is not about graduations of inequality, but about mechanisms that act to detach groups of people from the social mainstream". It is a process of getting disconnected from a community's moral, social, and political order and makes it difficult to maintain a sense of social worth and to identify with others in society (Gallie and Paugam, 2000). This can have a significant impact on their mental health, as they may experience negative emotions due to the lack of emotional support and difficulties accessing the mental health services they require. Because of that the notion of social isolation and how that can affect the mental stability and overall well-being of this particular group, will be examined.

Social isolation, as defined by Rankin and Quane (2000), is a lack of contact or consistent interaction with individuals and groups that represent mainstream society, which can result in unhappiness, insecurity, and frustration. As previously stated, many newcomers have no or few social ties in their new host country. So (re)building their social network is crucial for wellbeing of this specific group. This lack of social contact can lead to so called social loneliness which stems from the absence of a broader group of contacts, or an engaging social network (de Jong-Gierveld et al., 2006). On top of that low income has also been linked to a lack of sense of belonging (which often affects the illegalised when they move to a new country), which affects the perceptions and experiences of stigmatization and isolation (Stewart et al., 2009). As a result of this, it is important to point out that some of the research that Crittenden and Cohen (2014) cited indicated that it is not increases in social integration that contribute to greater health; rather, social isolation (low levels of social integration) leads to poor health. This is something that should be worth mentioning and further researched. In this context, social isolation is considered to be a stressful factor because it is associated with large increases in negative affect (such as deterioration in mental health) as well as deficits in control and self-esteem (Crittenden and Cohen, 2014).

Social participation is one approach to alleviate both the perception of (social) loneliness and the emotional loneliness. This could be described as "a person's engagement in activities that provide interaction with others in society or the community" by definition (Levasseur et al., 2010, p. 2148). In several prior studies, social participation has been linked to better/improved mental health (Broer et al., 2011) and general well-being (McPhedran, 2011). Regardless of the fact that neither of the mentioned research had examined social participation in connection

to refugees, they both studied vulnerable groups and how social participation can- in the first case- reduce loneliness (improvement of mental health), and in the second research; enhance overall wellbeing of a vulnerable group via participation in some types of social and communal activity.

Wendelborg and Tssebro (2011) found in their research that there is a significant connection between one's level of social participation and their perspectives on whether or not they feel included in their social group. When material deprivation and a lack of opportunity to participate in the social, political, and economic arenas that are generally available to residents of a given country are defined as social exclusion, and when social inclusion is defined as the inverse of social exclusion, it becomes apparent that there is a connection between the two concepts (Wendelborg and Tssebro in McPhedran, 2011). As a result, marginalized individuals and groups who are subjected to discrimination and social exclusion will have less possibilities to participate in society. It is critical to note that social engagement necessitates more than physical inclusion (being physically present in a community) (Schormans, 2014). With that in mind I could argue that organizations like PAO are undeniably important when it comes to providing a place and opportunity for one of the most marginalized groups of all, i.e. undocumented refugees, to engage in the social arena and, as stated in their report, to give the illegalized a sense of meaning and belonging. From this I expect the following;

*Undocumented refugees participating in activities and courses provided by PAO, become less isolated and less lonely, which results in overall better mental health*

*Since the undocumented refugees began to participate in PAO's courses and activities, they have noticed an improvement in their general well-being.*

### 3. Social networks and social capital theory

As discussed in the previous chapter, social participation is necessary for the formation of new social bonds/ties. In this chapter, I will look at how those newly formed ties are linked to social networks and how it affects one's social capital. I believe that this concept is significant for one's overall well-being as well as (in our case) for integrating into a new society. This is a relatively new concept that is related to human capital and has been described and studied by many. This research will only focus on three of the most prevalent theories on the concept of social capital, because they complement and build one another and are considered the most important when introducing the concept, with the most recent being the most significant to this research, defining bonding and bridging connections.

Bourdieu (1986) described social capital as a multidisciplinary idea that ties sociology, economics, and politics together. It can be defined as the real or potential resources that accrue to an individual or a group as a result of a long-term network of more or less institutionalised ties. According to Bourdieu, a fundamental component of social capital is the density and durability of links that a person can mobilise, and because of that is crucial to examine how much social capital each member of the network possesses. As a result, membership in a group helps to support jointly owned capital. Maybe the most important note the author makes is the fact that social capital is something one earns rather than something one is born with- and as a consequence inequality is sustained as a result of unequal access to social capital. As defined by Coleman (1988), social entities are different social entities that have particular features of social structure and allow for specific actor activities. Certain goals and initiatives necessitate a cooperative and supportive atmosphere, and when an individual or a group is able to obtain this, we are talking about a high degree of social capital. Only on a practical level, through material and/or symbolic exchanges, can these relationships exist. They can also be presented socially and in some ways assured due to the usage of a common name (such as family name, class, eminent university, etc.). Social capital theorists claim that generalised social trust is a critical component of the complex circle of social ties, behaviour, and institutions that serve as the bedrock of a stable and functional democratic government (Coleman, 1988). Lastly, I look into Putnam's description of social capital; his perspective is similar to Coleman's, with the exception that he places a higher value on so called 'weak links/ weak ties' (Putnam, 1995). It prioritises the achievement of common objectives. By raising the cost of leaving, supporting reciprocity rules, and facilitating the flow of information, social capital contributes to collective

action. He defines social capital as “characteristics of social life - networks, norms and trust - that enable effective participation in achieving common goals” (Putnam 1995, 56). He also compares and contrasts bonding and bridging social capital. The first is concerned with group ties and relationships, which create a high level of coherence, identity, and control within groups, whereas bridging social capital is associated with the relationships and ties formed by members of a group with individuals outside the group. According to Karlan et al. (2009), these capitals permit several forms of transfers: linking social capital allows for a significant flow of information within the group, whereas bridging social capital allows for wider access to individual social resources and information. Because the concept of social capital is difficult to grasp in the first place, and there are several definitions, determining whether and to what extent social capital helps mental health is even more complex. This was also emphasised in the literature review study made by Moore and Bassett (2013) that showed psychosocial components of social capital may be associated with symptoms of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and psychological distress. Network components on the other hand have been shown associated with depressive symptoms in some instances but not in relation to other forms of mental illness. Enhancing social capital of communities is thought to contribute to improved mental, and potentially physical, well-being of populations across the globe. Social capital, they conclude, might be a viable technique for strengthening mental health and avoiding mental disease.

According to Field (2008), the concept of social capital is based on network membership and shared values. The concepts of social capital and social networks are intricately intertwined; social networks are the sole source of social capital. The size and density of networks, as well as the strength and diversity of social links, are the most typically mentioned structural features of networks. Social networks, in addition to providing emotional support, also give practical aid and contribute to the construction of individual beliefs and viewpoints. Networks, according to Portes, are also significant in terms of accessing finance and information that allows an individual to access resources (Portes, 1998). Density, according to Brissette et al (2000), is linked to greater social integration. Migrants who are part of denser networks are less depressed, according to Kuo and Tsai (in Brissette et al, 2000). Previously this research noted that upon their arrival into the host country the undocumented have possibly the least number of social ties and with that the least amount of social capital. On top of that they might experience feelings of discrimination, and because of that they tend to isolate or form connections to closed off ethnical groups. This results in a very little amount of bridging social

capital, which is extremely important for a good integration to their new environment. In the case of this study, it may reveal that when they begin engaging with others (who may be in the same group as them- undocumented immigrants, but not in a closed off and same ethnic group) as well as locals during activities and classes, they could create new and productive social ties. As the PAO report also states, one of the functions of their embassy is also to facilitate meetings between the locals and the undocumented, by organizing joint activities and events with the intention for the undocumented to expand their social and professional network (Ubani and Bekker, 2022). I can thus expect to find the following:

*Undocumented refugees participating in activities and courses provided by PAO, gain new bonding and bridging social ties.*

*Undocumented refugees participating in activities and courses provided by PAO, improve their overall well-being and mental health through newly formed social ties.*

*Undocumented refugees participating in activities and courses provided by PAO, built a bigger social network which gives them new opportunities outside the organisation.*

# METHODOLOGY

## 1. Methods

Two qualitative research methods have been utilized in this research: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The two are frequently utilized together since it enhances the research's overall reliability (Bryman et al, 2021). The participation observation method will be used first. This will offer me the necessary knowledge into individual behaviour in a social situation, specifically in PAO/ASKV courses and activities. Most importantly I will observe how the participant interact with each other, not only during the activities and courses, but also between breaks, at the start and end of the course or activity. I will be observing and tracking three of the organization's courses: Bike repair course, Vlogging course and Hairdressing course. Each course lasts between 2 and 4 hours. During their breaks, the participants also eat lunch together or drink coffee or tea. I will conduct a passive participant observation, which means there will be no interaction, with the participants, because I will not participate in the activities with the researched group. My entire objective is to examine and observe people's behaviour and interactions with one another. As previously said, I will not be communicating with the people involved during the course itself; nonetheless, they will be aware of my presence and the purpose for it. In addition to the above method, I will conduct 15 semi-structured interviews with some of the participants to gain a better understanding of their motivation to participate in the activities and their relationship with others. Semi-structured interviews are a useful technique to maintain control over the direction of the interview while also allowing participants to express themselves (Bernard, 2017). These methods are used in the research because I believe they will provide me with the opportunity to more clearly understand and comprehend the ways in which involvement can influence one's well-being through the formation of connections with other people. I believe that even though interviews would provide me with a great deal of information regarding this subject, the participants might not yet feel the results of this participation, or they might not even realise how they are connecting with each other and helping one another, and how, as a result, they are creating a secure environment for everyone. It's also feasible that they don't perceive the interactions they have with locals, educators, workers, and so on as contributing to the formation of their new social network and growing social capital. As an outside observer I am able to see the small interactions, that may not even be important or viewed as 'help' or 'kindness' or possible future opportunities by participants. As a result of both methods, I will have a greater understanding



of how participation in these activities might affect and improve their overall well-being, particularly their mental health.

## 2. Ethical considerations

Prior to the interview, participants were asked to sign a consent form (See Consent Form in appendix). This document also stated a summary of the purpose of this study. Since I was working with a very vulnerable group of people, it was crucial for me to be completely honest and to maintain security and secrecy when it comes to the privacy and protection of the participants. The consent form stated explicitly that all responses would be kept anonymous and that they may terminate the interview at any time without having to give a reason. It was assured to them that the information gathered during these interviews would be kept secure and handled with care. They also gave me permission to record the interviews, knowing that the recordings would be deleted immediately after transcribing. The research was approved by Utrecht University's FERB (see Ethical Approval in appendix).

## 3. Sample

Because the participant observation (of the three courses at PAO) was one of the methodologies employed in this research, some of the participants who participated and were observed during these courses were also requested to complete interviews. I chose the respondents based on the courses they had taken and their level of proficiency in English because several of the questions required a strong understanding of the language in order to provide satisfactory answers. With this I was able to get an even deeper understanding of their behaviour and interactions with one another. The interviews consisted of 12 men and 3 women which in the end was combined of 14 interviews. The participants were between 20 and 60 years old and all from African countries, with the exception of two participants that were from the eastern Asian countries. Two of them were highly educated (high education, university degree), six of them with a high school/practical school education and six without education. I did not and will not share their personal details to protect their identity, and I will refer to them as 'interviewee'. Anonymity was crucial for the research, but much more so for the participants, because it is dealing with a very vulnerable group and debating a sensitive and difficult matter.

#### 4. The interview's setup and analysis

As stated, the study used the semi-structured interview technique in this research. The interviews were left open-ended so that participants may react in any way they wanted, and I could investigate further with follow-up questions (J. Macionis and Plummer, 2008). The interviewees were either invited to the office via a phone call or were asked to do the interview after or before the start of one of the courses. The interviews were done face-to-face in a private room and lasted from 20 to 50 minutes. The purpose of this study was explained to participants prior to the start of the interview, and they were requested to sign a consent form (see Ethical approval). I'd want to hereby emphasise once more that the entire study, which examined the concepts of well-being and mental health, was not conducted from a psychological or biological/medical standpoint. The participants were not directly questioned about their issues with poor mental health, and none of the questions went into great length concerning their mental health. The inquiries were limited to seeing a difference in their well-being before and after getting involved with courses provided by PAO, how (and if) engagement, as well as the development of new connections and, as a result, new social networks, benefited their well-being, particularly mental health, and how well-being is linked to social integration. The importance of integrations was questioned via sub-questions that referred to their 'connectedness' to Amsterdam, new culture, language, people surrounding them (particularly locals), knowledge about their rights, prospects, etc. I was able to determine whether and how their personal impression of well-being had changed by encouraging them to reflect on it before and after the participation, as well as how they related that to participating in courses. Several of the participants started to go into great detail about their mental health struggles because the interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. These responses are not included in the study's results section, not only to protect the participants, but also because they are outside of our area of expertise and do not correspond to the subject of the research. Following the transcription of the interviews, the data collected was put through NVivo so that it could be coded and analysed. This was done by combining the concepts presented in the different theories with the refugee's point of view on the various subjects (deductive and inductive approach).

## 5. Participant observation setup

I observed three courses and activities provided by the PAO. The bike repair course, the vlogging course and lastly the hairdressing course. The participants were aware of my presence and the reasoning behind it. The purpose of the observation was to get a better insight of their behaviour and how (if) they interacted with one another. This gave me a unique opportunity to research if PAO's trajectories were also indirectly beneficial to the participants. With that I mean; if the courses provided more than just practical and/or theoretical knowledge for the participants, but also a safe space for them to form new connections, interact with others with a similar background, interact with the lecturers and teachers of the above-mentioned courses, etc. I would attend 2 to 3 courses each week on average for around 3 months. Although I did not actively engage in the classes, I did interact with the participants prior to, during, and after the courses. Those conversations were largely not about the course or this research, but rather 'small talks'. Throughout the classes, I took notes on what I saw and believed would be significant to emphasise in the results section. Working as an intern at PAO for several months gave me insight into the benefits and drawbacks of this method. The fact that the participants trusted me and knew me from previous contexts, not only as a researcher conducting the study, was the biggest advantage. This made them feel more at ease, and they were able to act and converse with one another in a more casual manner, providing me with a unique opportunity to study their interactions and connections throughout classes. The disadvantage of knowing the participant was my own perception of them, which made it difficult to be completely objective, resulting in bias. But I was aware that objectivity was not the end goal of this study neither a realistic expectation. I knew that my presence and the fact the participants know me, will affect their behaviour and affect my perspective. Non the less I tried to be as transparent as possible in the result section of this study.

## RESULTS

### 1. Participants' reflection on well-being and mental health

The participants began their course each morning with coffee and pleasant discussion while they waited for the other participants. I could sense the excitement to accomplish something worthwhile and productive, albeit some people seemed more eager than others. They had 'small talks' with the teacher and each other. They were curious as to what they might learn that day. I noticed individuals' passion to learn as well as their desire to support and help one another during class. You could sense how extremely open and at ease they were in that setting, with these people, especially during lunch or coffee breaks. Talking about their experiences, exchanging amusing stories, teaching one another about their home countries, and genuinely enjoying themselves. I usually left the course feeling quite fortunate to having had the chance to not just learn from these people but also subsequently think on my own privileged status in this world, which I sometimes forget about. The environment was never tense or negative; it was always extremely light-hearted. They consistently ended their discussions on a positive note, even when talking about very sensitive topics like their anxiety and legal issues regarding their stay. To get a better understanding of how (if) participation in courses provided by PAO positively affects participants, I have asked two questions related to the topic. Firstly, I asked about their feeling upon first arriving in the country. One of the last questions posed was to reflect and see if forming new connections thought participation also helped their overall well-being and mental health. The results were clear set, since all respondents stated that participation in PAO courses helped their overall well-being and mental health. To the first questions almost all (apart from one) answered they struggled and are still struggling with their mental health and well-being, one interviewee commented reflecting on migration process itself and coming to a new country: *'It is so hard. Can't explain it. You can't believe what is happening. I had to leave everything behind, my friends and family. I was sad and alone. I don't even remember the road. I was suddenly here and I still have to fight. When does it stop?'*. This conclusion did not come as a surprise, since it is evidently clear from the theoretical framework that the vast majority of refugees battle with a variety of mental health conditions such as anxiety, stress, depression, PTSD, referring to the difficult process of settling into a new country as well as the actual migration itself. The results of the research corresponded with previous studies. One interviewee reflected on the change on his well-being and mental health with stating: *'I was having problems. Having problems. I was seeing a therapist for*

*trauma and stuff. It was very difficult for me to cope. Because talking about me seems horrible. I had a very hard time. I couldn't sleep. Had nightmares. When I started the program, it gives me a structure, but I also give me a challenge to see life differently. So, I don't focus that much on the past, the trauma, the troubles... it gives me the opportunity to start looking for something new. With those also new connections, people that understand you. People that can help you'*

Other said: *'It is a feeling of 'being in the same boat'. We are all here, undocumented. It makes me in a way less stressed, because I have this people going thought the same things. I feel much more secure'* and *'I was struggling to get out of bed, because of my personal trauma. And that helped me. To wake up, to improve myself. To be less depressed. I feel better about myself, more motivation. Structure. It helps me with my stress in so many ways. I can share my struggles with people just like me. They understand.'*

This is in line with previous research that has been done on how social participation can, in the first case, lessen feelings of isolation (which is beneficial to one's mental health), and in the second case, improve the overall wellbeing of a vulnerable group through participation in certain types of social and communal activities. This also completely corresponds with the belief that organisations such as PAO support the undocumented in both a direct and an indirect way by providing them with structure and security via the creation of courses and activities (giving them a safe space to connect and spend time with individuals alike).

## 2. The importance of connection

Theory on social connections, social networks and with that building social capital, helped with understanding the importance of connection and how it can positively affect one's general well-being. Firstly, when interviewees were questioned if they had any connections in the Netherlands before arriving, there was a remarkable disparity between those who came without knowing anyone and those who had at least one link. Those who had at least one relationship were significantly more likely to have a positive experience. The difference was evident in connection to the sub-question which asked about the help provided by that connection(s) and their feelings upon arriving to the new country. Those who had a connection reported feeling less worried and less isolated, and they also acquired useful information regarding their rights, the system, and other relevant topics. During the course of my observations, I saw evidence of this not only in their behaviours but also in how they interacted with other people (including myself, the teachers, my colleagues). An interviewee stated: *'Yes, I had a connection. A friend*

*from my country. He helped me with shelter, I lived with him. The first two years. And he let me meet some other friends. From my country and from the Netherlands.*’ and later commented on his well-being upon arrival: *‘I was optimistic when I arrived here. New opportunities. I didn’t feel scared. I think always positive. I don’t stress.’* On the other side a person without prior connection stated: *‘No, and that creates some sort of uncertainty, when you don’t belong anywhere. And of course, you are not certain about anything. You struggle. That’s all I can say.’*

I felt that observing participants before, during, and after the courses would be a useful approach to study if they interacted with one another. Either assisting each other with chores or conversing about topics unrelated to the courses. Furthermore, I wanted to see if they communicate with the course's lecturers on topics not related to the course itself. I was looking to determine if they were actively looking for new possibilities or contacts outside of the course. While using the participant observation approach, I discovered three key findings. To begin, I saw that all the participants were constantly striving to help one another with various tasks. At the bike repair course, for example, if a person couldn't fix something or did not know how to solve an issue, at least one other participant would step in to help him right away. From the beginning, the participants' reciprocity was apparent. The same was true for the vlogging class, where they not only assisted one another with strictly technical difficulties, but also offered advice on what music to use in their video, which photographs to use, and so on. Their acts of service, as well as their discussions and exchanges of information, recommendations, and so on, made it evident that they are willing and able to help one another. As mentioned by interviewee: *‘We always help each other. I am very good with practical stuff and some struggle. I am quicker with it (referring to repairing the bike), so when I’m done i just start helping other. I don’t go home early.’* Second, I wanted to see if participants shared personal experiences or issues with other participants. Most of the interactions took place before and after the course, as well as during lunch breaks, when everyone sat down, ate together, drank coffee or other beverages, and spoke about things that were not necessarily connected to the course. Even while I assumed that my presence would deter them from openly conversing with one another as they might if we were not there, this was not the case. Most of the participants were really candid and open with one another. They even translated what has been said, to people that did not speak English and/or Dutch. They told each other stories from their pasts, which were generally light-hearted and entertaining. They also discussed their culture, religion, or the country's system, as well as the political situation. It became evident very quickly that

the classes not only allowed participants to build skills and learn, but also provided a secure environment for them to engage with one another; share their stories, assist one another with information, etc. The final observation I made was about their interactions with educators, volunteers, workers at PAO, and other members of the organisation. So, I wondered if they would utilise their time to connect with others, to form new relationships that might aid in the formation of bridge bonds. I found that most of them interacted with teachers and other employees. They did not just ask about things connected to the course or for practical assistance; they also asked about their options after the program or sought additional information from them. Those who knew how to 'market' themselves and their abilities asked the teachers for further knowledge, as well as contacts with other individuals or organisations which may help them advance in their careers. This was mostly applicable to individuals who were either highly educated or perceived their overall well-being as 'good', as we observed they were also the ones who posed the most questions and offered to help with their other skills (interpretation and legal advice). All the foregoing revealed that the majority of the participants seek interactions, connections with other participants, as well as their professors, mentors, PAO employees, and others, in a direct and indirect manner. I cannot say whether these relationships will assist them in the long run due to a lack of time for this research, but we can say that they definitely help them build a routine, establish a secure environment for them, and allow them to engage with people from similar backgrounds. My observations were further confirmed with one-on-one interviews with the participants. Many of them stated that creating a (new) social network was significant for them: *'I had a family back home and my community. The whole village, we all knew each other. ... so yes, it is important for me to feel like at home you know. This place (referring to Amsterdam) is my new home now and these (referring to other participants) are family now.'* Not only for the sake of their future opportunities, but also because of their own well-being. All the participants gave a positive response when they were asked whether or not they had created new relationships as a result of their participation in the courses that PAO offered. Interviewee stated: *'These are my friends. My brothers. When we don't see each other --- that is the sense of belonging I am trying to talk about, you start to see life differently; you are not alone, there are many of us. And we started challenging each other as well. If somebody doesn't show up, we are asking them why? We know something is not okay. We check on each other.'* Another stated: *'I have new friends. With the people from the courses. We talk, we help each other. We also talk. I like talking to people. And helping them. When im here I feel nice and not stressed. I always try to make new connections, wherever I go. For me I don't need no new friend, but I see people who are lonely and struggle with their*

*mind, so I try to help them a bit.*’ Some of the participants also shared that even though they have developed connections, they would not consider them as friends per se, stating they do not know them that well and vice versa. Or they were unable to form connections due to their poor mental health, as one of the interviewees stated: *‘I find it difficult to connect with other people. I still have some days I wake up and my past is there, hunting me. So, connecting with people is hard. But I met a lot of beautiful people and had a lot of talks with them.’* It is apparent that these individuals suffer from poor mental health and isolate themselves as a result. It is tough for people to form new relationships as it is, but it is far more difficult when they are coping with their own challenges, which might stem either from their lives before they migrated or from the experience of migration itself. This is the perfect example of why it is vital for one's well-being (and subsequently successful integration) to not just participate, but also to make ties with individuals alike and have a secure space to do so. So even if they do not immediately connect with others or regard them as friends, they are breaking their pattern of solitude, which may prove beneficial in the future.

Expectations have therefore been supported, but I am also aware of the limitations of our study, which means that I can only speculate that the connections they developed outside their group (i.e., undocumented migrants) during course participation constitute bridging social bonds. If there were no time constraints for this study, I could delve more into the participants' bridging ties and how these helped them enlarge their social network. It was evident via interviews made, that some of the participants did make contacts that led to new opportunities outside of the organization. The restriction, though, remains the same. It's tough to tell how these possibilities, network expansion, and other factors will affect or help the undocumented in the long run. If I was not limited by time, it would be fascinating to keep in touch with the interviewees for a longer period of time to evaluate how their progress affects their general well-being. Apart from that, all respondents believe that creating new social connections (either with other participants or with people affiliated with the course or the organisation) improved their general well-being and mental health, noting that they regard each other as brothers, 'being in the same boat,'...

### 3. The importance of participation

As stated in the theoretical framework, social involvement/participation is vital not only for reducing emotional and social isolation, but also as a means of interacting with others in society. Several participants reported feeling less lonely since they were surrounded by



individuals who shared their history and position. I noted that social involvement is a strategy to counteract social isolation, which is defined as a lack of contact or interactions that can lead to sadness, irritation, and other negative emotions (Rankin and Quane, 2000). All but two of the participants felt isolated when they arrived in the Netherlands. The two individuals who indicated that they did not feel as alienated from society were also the same two who had some ties in the new country prior to arrival. They already had an acquaintance, a friend who assisted them with information, provided shelter, and helped them to interact with others (inside their ethnic group and with the locals as well). When questioned about how forming new connections in PAO, either with other participant or locals involved with the organisations, helped them reduce the feeling of isolation and loneliness, all the participants answered, even ones with already established connections, similarly stating that participation not only helped them directly by giving them a chance to improve their skills and develop new ones, but also indirectly by giving them the chance to form bonds. As an interviewee stated: *'When im here I feel nice and not stressed. I always try to make new connections, wherever I go. It is nice to learn. It is also nice to talk.'* And other one emphasised: *'If this kind of opportunity (referring to PAO courses) would be available to me when I arrived, I would be in a different position right now. In short time it has really transformed me. And not just me, also other people in these programs have spoken about how it made their life better, it is helpful. You have the sense of responsibility, belonging... gives you purpose.'*

Participation in courses also provided them the ability and/or opportunity to participate in other activities, meetings, getting them volunteer jobs outside the organisation by engaging in conversations with their lecturers, teachers and personnel of the organisation they were able to strengthen their network, especially creating bridging ties, which I noted were especially important for increasing social capital. The research also showed that on numerous occasions during courses participants inquired teachers about their possible future opportunities. Teachers were also eager to help them, by referring them to other organisations, giving them additional information to further developed their skill, etc. One participant commented: *'I have made connections, and I'm volunteering at different organisations, helping to intemperate. With that I get new connections, new referrals that will help in the future.'* and another stated: *'They connected me to another organisation where I could further develop my skills. Now I sometimes even assist them. It feels great.'* These participants not only increase their possibilities for future career, but they also grow their social capital by volunteering, seeking additional information, and making new contacts. As stated in the conceptual framework, social

capital not only builds opportunities in the community, but can contribute to one's mental health. Based on these results we can conclude that through participating in classes and activities, the undocumented became less isolated and lonely, resulting in improved mental health. By comparing their mental states before and after participating in PAO's courses, they all agree that their overall well-being improved.

## CONCLUSION

### Towards a healthy (social) integration

The purpose of this study was to examine if and how participation in PAO's courses and activities in the Netherlands enhances the well-being and mental health of undocumented refugees through fostering social connections. I concluded that my predictions were correct, and we are pleased that our findings corroborated previous research, demonstrating that a social perspective on mental health is critical to study, since it is typically researched from a psychological or biological perspective. Previous study has shown that social activity might alter emotions of (social) isolation and loneliness. Participants agreed that involvement in PAO's courses and activities allowed them to overcome their feelings of loneliness, resulting in an overall improvement in their mental health. Secondly it is evident from this research that creating connections and expanding network affects one's overall well-being. I noticed and later validated through interviews that the respondents formed bonding ties, many of which were also bridging. As a result of their involvement, their social network developed, resulting in a growth in their social capital. This is in line with studies that show that increasing social capital could improve one's mental and possibly physical well-being. Though it is unclear if the connections they have created will help them in the future and stabilise their mental health and well-being in the long run, it is clear that they are benefiting greatly right now. Not just through aiding them in improving their wellbeing, but also by presenting them with new opportunities outside of the organisation. It was discovered that all the participants in this study battled with poor mental health in some manner, and they all came to the conclusion that social involvement and forming new connections benefited them in some way with their well-being. It is thus clear how the organization has a positive indirect impact on its 'end-users.' Even though their main purpose is to teach undocumented individuals new skills and provide opportunities for personal development, they have accomplished much more. They gave them the chance to enhance their mental health and well-being simply by giving them a safe place to engage with people and form ties that would benefit them on several levels. I stressed at the beginning that integration (on all levels) is at the centre of discussions on refugee rights. It was previously noted that individuals cannot properly integrate (or even begin to integrate) into their new society if their general well-being and mental health are inadequate, and this opinion has not changed. Integration to a new society is especially hard for undocumented immigrants since they are in an up most vulnerable position. Because they are in the country illegally, they

cannot utilise numerous resources and cannot participate in the labour market, which makes it extremely hard for them to integrate. Despite their precarious and insecure condition, I saw that these individuals are more than willing and driven to integrate into Dutch society. A lot of them already know how to speak the language and the others that do not are actively learning, because they recognise that overcoming the language barrier is an important component of integration. They are actively pursuing relationships with locals and are attempting to connect with individuals outside of their ethnic group. Based on past research, I can argue that a good social integration necessitates both bridging and bonding social ties. Most participants were able to create both of the aforementioned linkages, based on what we observed during classes and learnt through interviews. Organisation PAO has thus provided the undocumented a chance to start their integration process by not only providing them with courses and activities that further their skills and personal development, but an opportunity to make new connections that help improve their overall well-being.

### Limitations to our research

Throughout the article, the research's limitations were emphasised. First and foremost, I believe our greatest restriction to be lack of time, or more precisely, the time I had to fully observe the effects of involvement in relation to long-term social ties. It was discovered that social connections created during courses aided participants in a variety of ways, including improving their mental health, forming new friendships, and allowing them to expand their social network. However, the participants indicated this, while still involved with the organisation and meeting people they had befriended on a weekly basis. Thus, it would be preferable to interview the same respondents again after a year, asking them to reflect on their mental state and if the network they established is still operational. I believe that a comparable study should be conducted over a longer period of time, however I was unable to do so due to time constraints. Second, the data utilised represents a small percentage of undocumented immigrants, and outcomes may differ if the sample is bigger and different not just from country to country, but even from organisation to organisation within the Netherlands. As a result, I propose conducting a broader study that includes and/or compares the effects of other countries or organisations on the undocumented. If the research is broader, it may also dive into how gender, age, language skills, education level and length of stay in a foreign country affect one's social network and with that well-being. Such factors were not included in this study because the

difference between those characteristics- when conducting interviews with the participants - was unclear or did not appear to affect the findings. Third, it's difficult to describe how sociological concepts such as social connection, involvement, capital, and so on are linked and influence one's mental state. Not just regarding immigrants, but throughout society, the concept of social capital should be examined more as a tool for enhancing one's health care.

## Policy advice

Taking into consideration the findings of this study as well as the theoretical perspective, the following advice is thus given to PAO (and other organisations). Firstly, organisations like ASKV/PAO, should be encouraged to use their capabilities to develop ties to the fullest extent possible; meaning realizing the influence they have on a person's well-being just by providing a space for them to connect. Because most non-profit organisations struggle with funding, this should not prevent them from organising low-cost activities or events, ensuring that these individuals have a safe place to go even after they complete the courses. This might include things like walks, picnics, sporting activities, group visits to museums, galleries, and concerts, among other things. Some museums, galleries and other cultural institutions have already been responsive by providing free entry and workshops within their institution in relation with Ukrainian refugees in the past year. The same could be arranged with institutions alike in Amsterdam for the undocumented within PAO organisation. The second step is to strengthen ties with other local organisations. Other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that work with undocumented people, as well as local retirement homes, organisations for the disabled, local community gardens, and so on. PAO's office space is shared with other non-profits that assist other vulnerable communities. Even if they are already connected to one other to some extent, they may strengthen their relationship even more. That is, having shared activities would provide a venue for individuals to engage with one another and expand their network, including new bridging ties. As pointed out in the study throughout, engagement and connecting with other does not only benefit one's well-being, but also builds their social capital and helps the integration process. Finally, it is critical for a non-profit organisation like PAO to 'advertise' itself as much as possible. Most refugees who are new to the nation are unaware of the services that are accessible to them. That is especially true for NGO-led projects, because they are typically not included in formal government or municipal programmes. As a result, they are frequently promoted only by recommendations from acquaintances, social workers,

etc. or not promoted at all. As a result, we believe that a.) improved coordination between government and non-profit organisations such as PAO is required, and b.) PAO should engage in more active client recruitment. Previous research has found that the emotionally demanding process of migration, along with the sense that one is alone in a new country, can cause people to lose their motivation, which in turn causes them to isolate themselves even further. This is a highly sensitive group of people, and they need to be encouraged even further to participate in classes and activities that will not only assist them in overcoming feelings of isolation but also assist them in developing skills that will be useful to them in the future. This could be accomplished through direct connections to refugee centres and shelters (which the organisation already does to some extent, but could be improved), increased social media promotion, or the placement of posters and flyers in the areas where we know individuals from this specific group are likely to socialise.

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# APPENDIX

## Topic list

1. Information about the demographics
  - a.) Age
  - b.) Gender
  - c.) Country of origin
  - d.) Status in the Netherlands
  - e.) Date of arrival in the Netherlands
2. Organisational participation
  - a.) The duration of the participants' involvement in the activities
  - b.) The number of activities they are participating in.
  - c.) The types of courses and activities in which they are enrolled.
  - d.) The motivation behind participating in the activities.
3. Social networks
  - a.) Expansion of their social ties/network since beginning of participation.
  - b.) The benefits of their newly formed networks.
  - c.) The growth of their recently created connections outside of the activities and courses
  - d.) The significance of these connections
4. Improvement of well-being and mental health
  - a.) The impact of participation in courses on their well-being
  - b.) The effects of their newly established network on their well-being
  - c.) The difference in their well-being prior to involvement versus after participation
  - d.) In your opinion, which component of being a member of the organization benefitted your well-being the most? (For example, forming new relationships, developing a routine, enrolling in future-oriented courses, etc.)

## Consent form

This is the statement of consent regarding the research: Improving the mental health of the refugees through social ties formed by participating in courses and activities: a study of the undocumented at The PAO (Project Activities for Undocumented Persons) Organization in The Netherlands

With signing this consent form, the participant declares the following:

1. I am voluntarily taking part in this study, particularly the interview.
2. I am aware that this interview is being recorded, and I give my permission for it to be done so.
3. I am aware that I have the option to end the interview and withdraw my participation at any time.
4. I am aware that all of the data will be handled with care, will be shared anonymously and in confidence.
5. This study's goal has been explained to me.
6. I've been informed who to contact if I have any questions about the study, including post-interview questions.

Date:

Signature:

Contact person:

Tamina Ogrin

Email: [tamina@askv.nl](mailto:tamina@askv.nl)

## Information letter

In this research we are wondering; how participation in courses provided by the NGO ASKV, specifically PAO, can contribute to the undocumented people improved mental health and overall well-being via establishing new social ties through courses and activities.

The data collected in this study will be used in a master's thesis as well as by the ASKV-PAO organization. Because the thesis would provide a theoretical foundation, the findings could also be implemented in a practical sense by the organization. The answers you give in this interview will help the PAO organization gain a better understanding of their impact and, potentially, the ability to maximize the potential of their services for fostering bonds among the undocumented.

### Expectations from those participating in the interview:

The majority of the questions will focus on your participation, social connections (friendships, acquaintances, and so on), and overall well-being and mental health. Because some of these issues may be hard to discuss, you may end the interview at any time. Participating in it is completely voluntary, and all of the responses you provide- once transcribed, will be anonymous.

The interview will take about an hour, and we are going to do it in a private and quiet space, without any other people.

### Collecting the data:

The interview will be recorded, but once transcribed, it will be deleted. Your name will not be mentioned, and any personal information you disclose with me during the interview will not be kept and stored in any form. As previously said, the transcript of this interview will be anonymized.

If you have any questions about the above, please contact: Tamina Ogrin, [tamina@askv.nl](mailto:tamina@askv.nl)

## Ethical approval

<b>P.O. Box 80140, 3508 TC Utrecht</b>  The Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences Utrecht University P.O. Box 80.140 3508 TC Utrecht		<b>Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences</b>  Faculty Support Office Ethics Committee  <b>Visiting Address</b>  Padualaan 14 3584 CH Utrecht
<b>Our Description</b>	22-1269	
<b>Telephone</b>	030 253 46 33	
<b>E-mail</b>	FETC-fsw@uu.nl	
<b>Date</b>	28 April 2022	
<b>Subject</b>	Ethical approval	

### ETHICAL APPROVAL

Study: Improving the mental health of refugees through participation in courses and activities in their host country: a study of the undocumented at The PAO (Project Activities for Undocumented Persons)  
Organization in The Netherlands

Principal investigator: T. Ogrin

Supervisor: Berfin Yurdakul

The study is approved by the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University. The approval is based on the documents sent by the researchers as requested in the form of the Ethics committee and filed under number 22-1269. The approval is valid through 30 June 2022. The approval of the Ethical Review Board concerns ethical aspects, as well as data management and privacy issues (including the GDPR). It should be noticed that any changes in the research design oblige a renewed review by the Ethical Review Board.

Yours sincerely,

Peter van der Heijden, Ph.D.  
Chair

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