

Integrating Refugee Children and Youth: A Scoping Review of English and German Literature

PAUL PRITCHARD

Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

DÉBORA B. MAEHLER

GESIS—Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Department of Survey Design and Methodology, Mannheim, Germany debora.maehler@gesis.org

STEFFEN PÖTZSCHKE

GESIS—Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Department of Survey Design and Methodology, Mannheim, Germany

HOWARD RAMOS

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

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The United Nations High Commission for Refugees reports that more than half of the 65 million refugees and displaced people identified worldwide are under the age of 18. For this reason, researchers, practitioners and policymakers need to understand the consequences of forced migration on the integration of refugee children and youth in receiving countries. A first step to do that is to scope out the state of current research on these issues and identify possible gaps. To that end, the article offers a scoping review of peer-reviewed English and German academic articles on refugee children and youth's integration over a 20-year period. The review finds: little consensus on the definitions of 'children' or 'youth'; most studies focus on girls and boys that are between 12 and 19 years old; there is a focus on refugees landing in developed countries; and there is a lack of longitudinal and quantitative studies.

Keywords: Refugee, integration, literature review, children, youth, migration

Introduction: Research on the Integration of Refugees

The number of refugees and displaced people around the world has more than doubled since the late 1990s, impelling the United Nations to host an unprecedented Summit on Refugees and Migrants in 2016. At the time, the

organization's assembly adopted a declaration for countries to work together to create a 'collective, rights-based response to record displacement around the world' (United Nations 2016). Integral to reaching such a goal is targeted research that identifies and finds solutions to the challenges of resettlement.

Statistics offered by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) point to where researchers and policymakers need to focus their attention and where action is most urgent. Just over half of the 65.6 million refugees and forcibly displaced people worldwide are under the age of 18 (UNHCR 2017: 2). Collective strategies for aiding refugees then must address family needs and the particular challenges and vulnerabilities of children and youth. Their young lives have been uniquely impacted through the process of displacement.

There is an urgency for research on the integration of refugees in sites of refuge, given that most refugees may never return to their home countries or will face significant barriers to doing so (see Korntheuer *et al.* 2017). Over the last decade, two countries—Germany and Canada—have gained international attention for their resettlement efforts. Almost 1.1 million asylum seekers entered Germany in 2015 (Mayer 2016), accounting for more than 60 per cent of all cases where protection status was granted in the European Union (Eurostat 2017). Canada also distinguished itself as a global leader in refugee resettlement. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau campaigned on a bold promise to quickly resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees, in addition to the country's other multiyear resettlement commitments, and he was arguably elected because of it. Over 40,000 Syrians eventually made Canada their new home, the majority of whom were under the age of 25 (IRCC 2017). It is thus important to understand the state of research on refugee integration in these two countries and, by proxy, scholarship in German and English, to offer sound evidence-based policy and interventions to help refugee children and youth succeed as newcomers in their host societies.

For this reason, in this article, we conduct a scoping review of peer-reviewed research on the integration of refugee children and youth between 1996 and 2015 in German and English. We offer an assessment of existing research by providing descriptive insight on the character and scope of scholarship on young refugee integration. Our findings help establish the parameters and scope of existing studies—a necessary and crucial first step in the systematic review process. It is a step that is needed before content and quality evaluative analyses can proceed (Grant and Booth 2009) and one that points to where more detailed meta-analysis is warranted. The goal of our article is thus to review existing research to help researchers identify and then address existing gaps in knowledge that need to be filled in order to meet the needs of recent cohorts of refugee children and youth.

Understanding the Integration of Refugee Children and Youth

The term 'integration' is commonly used in immigration research and broadly refers to the dynamic and patterned processes through which immigrants

become members of host societies (Li 2003; Alba and Foner 2014). The term is often used interchangeably with incorporation, assimilation, acculturation and adaptation, yet some maintain they are conceptually and methodologically distinct (DeWind and Kasinitz 1997; Foner 2012). Terminology used to capture such processes varies by academic discipline, outcomes or processes being examined, national contexts, and different immigration and citizenship models, posing challenges to comparative research (see Berry 1997; Joppke 2007; Bertossi and Duyvendak 2012). While recognizing the complexity underlying this diverse set of terms and concepts, we follow others in using the term ‘integration’ to refer to the dynamic and patterned processes through which immigrant newcomers gain inclusion in, and participate in, various aspects of social and political life in the host society (Alba and Foner 2014). Given the large number of refugees who are children and youth, we examine three key domains that affect their integration process: language and learning, social integration and wellbeing.

Language and Learning

For refugee children and youth, integration into a new receiving society largely occurs in the educational institutions they attend (Hyndman 2011) and a new educational context can present a number of challenges (Schroeder and Seukwa 2017; VanderPlaat 2017). Often, children and youth have gaps in their education due to pre-migration experiences of conflict and/or time spent in refugee camps (Kanu 2009). Institutions in receiving countries often lack adequate assessment tools for grade placement and families may not be able to provide documentation of educational histories (Beyon *et al.* 2005). These factors, coupled with limited language competency, mean it is common practice for refugee children and youth to be placed in grades below normal levels for their age groups (Wilkinson 2002). Consequently, school can be a site of marginalization and differentiation, affecting identity formation, sense of belonging and, in turn, educational outcomes (Suárez-Orozco 2018). Moreover, inadequate professional development and training for educators and administrators, who may not be familiar with the specific needs of refugee students, can significantly affect their potential for educational success (Fantino and Colak 2001).

Having to adapt to a new system of education and curriculum, learning a new language, building new friendships and forming new cultural identities compound the normal transitions that come with adolescence, and can even contribute to cultural conflict and potential harassment. Unfortunately, studies find that refugee children and youth often perceive racial discrimination and experience bullying in schools from peers and teachers (see Kanu 2009; Ramos *et al.* 2018). These factors impact refugee students’ already fragile confidence and self-worth, and negatively affect educational outcomes and trajectories, including dropping out of school (see Wilkinson 2002; Kanu 2009; Fereded 2010; Graham *et al.* 2016).

For primary-school-aged children, a supportive educational environment, such as having smaller class sizes or specialized counselling support, and early development of language and literacy skills are protective factors in resettlement (Cranitch 2010). Youth who arrive at a later age face greater risk of negative educational outcomes, including lower educational aspirations and lower rates of enrolment in higher education (Wilkinson 2002; Shakya *et al.* 2010). School can thus be important for both positive socialization and facilitating the learning of language and social skills.

Social Integration as an Indicator for General Adaptation to the Receiving Country

Interestingly, although social concerns are often linked to the integration of immigrants and refugees in general (Wong and Tézli 2013), they are seldom a primary focus of research on refugee children and youth (Hyndman 2011). This dimension of analysis is often mixed with research on education and learning that looks at friendship networks and other issues related to peer relationships at school. Even so, some research shows that cultural bereavement is an important factor in a refugee child's adjustment and that acculturation can negatively affect children's ability to complete their grieving process and claim their cultural identity (McBrien 2005). Research also shows that it is important to investigate young people's pre-migration history and experiences. In doing so, culturally and age-appropriate measures of adjustment should be used (Beiser 2006; Maehler *et al.* 2018) when considering child and youth integration into receiving societies.

Wellbeing in the Context of High Vulnerability

Refugee children and their families are at particular risk for social and psychological problems as a result of the challenges they experience prior to migration and during the resettlement process in a new destination country (Denov and Bryan 2014). Prior exposure to violence or trauma, whether individually experienced, witnessed or feared, can lead to later emotional distress. The economic circumstances children live in as well as family cohesion, social networks and support, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion are key factors affecting children and youth's emotional and behavioural functioning (Fazel *et al.* 2012), mental and physical wellbeing and social integration (Weine *et al.* 2014; Lincoln *et al.* 2016).

Overall, scholarship shows that, in order to understand the integration and settlement experiences of refugee children and youth, researchers must consider the impacts of language and learning, social integration and wellbeing. As a result, in the remainder of this article, these dimensions will be examined through a bibliometric scoping review of literature.

Project Design and Methods

The objective of our article is to provide a broad overview of existing peer-reviewed research in the area of refugee children and youth integration. This is accomplished through a scoping review of peer-reviewed research published in academic journals in German and English over a 20-year period. Drawing on Grant and Booth's (2009) typology of literature reviews, a 'scoping review' is a "preliminary assessment of potential size and scope of available research literature" (p. 95). Its central objective is to characterize the quantity of literature by key features of research, such as research designs, location of studies and commonly included variables (Pettigrew and Roberts 2006). Scoping reviews are thus similar to systematic reviews in that they employ a "systematic, transparent and replicable" methodology, yet are distinct in that they do not typically evaluate the content and quality of studies (Grant and Booth 2009: 101). A scoping review is often a first and important step in determining the efficacy of a full systematic review and is useful to researchers in establishing an overview of the scope and parameters of existing research in a given area.

Our scoping review followed a three-stage process: (i) scanning existing reviews, (ii) search and data gathering and (iii) coding articles for analysis. We began by conducting a preliminary scan of existing literature reviews in the area of children and youth integration in three integration dimensions of settlement and integration: language and learning, social integration and well-being (e.g. McBrien 2005; Ferded 2010; Hyndman 2011; Fazel *et al.* 2012; Graham *et al.* 2016). This helped us to identify common databases for published academic journal articles and key search terms. Pressing calls for targeted research emerged from the preliminary scan, such as on the role of demographic characteristics on integration (age, gender or country of origin) and on the interplay between various variables and the contexts in which integration processes take place.

In the second stage, we searched three journal databases corresponding to key dimensions of refugee integration in English, including: *language and learning* searched on the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC); *social integration* searched on Social Science Abstracts (SSA); and *wellbeing* searched on PsychINFO. These databases are international and multidisciplinary in scope and are widely considered primary sources for peer-reviewed scholarship in their respective research fields. These searches were replicated in three German databases, including: FIS (German Education Index [Fachinformationssystem Bildung]), SOWIPORT (Portal for the social sciences [Portal für die Sozialwissenschaften]) and Pubpsych. Notably, when we limit our analysis to German peer-reviewed articles, we lose 86 per cent of the material harvested in our initial search (excluding duplicates). For this reason, the German analysis also includes peer-reviewed book chapters. The present research suggests that much of the German literature is being published outside of academic journals.

Each search was based on three levels of search terms. Levels one and two were used in all searches. The first level is the term ‘refugee’ and the second level included terms identifying children and youth (child, youth, teen, minor, adolescen*). The terms from both levels are combined with those from the third level, which contained keywords relevant to the specific dimension of integration, including: *language and learning* (language, learning, literacy, school, education), *social integration* (social, integration, incorporation, settlement, radicalization, acculturation, adaptation, belonging, discrimination) and *wellbeing* (health, mental, wellbeing, trauma). We used corresponding German terms for the respective search.

The English-language search was conducted on 21 June 2016 and the German search was conducted on 26 October 2016 (articles) and 9 December 2016 (books and chapters). Only documents containing at least one keyword from each of the three levels were kept. The selection and coding procedure followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) model (Moher *et al.* 2009).

This produced a working sample of 398 English-language articles and 31 German documents. We limited articles and German book chapters to those published during a 20-year period: 1996 to 2015. In the final stage, all publications were coded on a wide array of variables. However, in this article, we will concentrate on the following nine elements:

- location of study (country);
- age;
- gender;
- ethno-cultural group;
- religion;
- country of origin;
- research design;
- research methods;
- key integration dimensions.

A caveat worth noting is that the findings and conclusions from our scoping review of literature is that it is limited to English peer-reviewed academic publications and German-language publications indexed in the databases searched, while grey literature or government documents are not included in the analysis. In the following section, we present findings from the scoping review of literature. The data on which this article is based is available in an online appendix at <http://perceptionsofchange.ca/refugeechildandyouthscan.html>.

Findings from the Scoping Review of Literature on Refugee Children and Youth Integration

To better understand refugee children and youth integration, we first examine national study sites that were most commonly used across German and

English publications. We then report on demographics of children and youth, research designs and methods, and the dimensions of integration included in the analysis of refugee child and youth integration.

Study Sites: Countries in Focus of the Last 20 Years

Among articles reporting a specific country as a study site, the majority focused on countries that resettle high numbers of refugees. A total of 64 countries were mentioned in the publications reviewed. Because of the small number of articles identified in the German searches, the full list of country study sites is offered.

Findings presented in Table 1 show that studies published in German focus on Germany, Switzerland, Bosnia Herzegovina, Italy, Kosovo, Namibia, Nepal, India and the United States. For English-language publications, we report the top five. These include the United States, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and Sweden. More than two-thirds of all articles in our English sample look at these five national contexts.

Age: Life Stages Broadly Defined

After reviewing the articles sampled, it is clear that there is no consensus among researchers on what constitutes childhood and youth, nor on the age ranges that defines these life stages. The lack of common measures and definitions has critical implications for research on refugee children and youth, and poses significant challenges to assessing the field. Likewise, it poses constraints on aggregating research findings and generating meta-analysis. In the sample of articles used in this scoping review of literature, for example, there are over 200 different age ranges and life-course/stage categories across the

Table 1

Top Five Country Study Sites					
Rank	German		Rank	English	
	Country	Count		Country	Count
1	Germany	26	1	United States	121
2	Switzerland	3	2	Australia	52
3	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2	3	Canada	46
4	Italy	1	4	United Kingdom	37
4	India	1	5	Sweden	16
4	Kosovo	1			
4	Namibia	1			
4	Nepal	1			
4	United States	1			

347 studies reporting some kind of age-related indicator. Of the studies that examined age, the greatest number looked at adolescents between 12 and 19 years old ($n=262$); the next most examined ages were middle and late childhood between 6 and 11 years old ($n=152$); this was followed by studies looking at early childhood, meaning children of 5 years or less ($n=55$). Further information can be found in online Appendix A1. The lack of consensus on age is evident in both German- and English-language publications. This finding highlights a significant challenge for future research and shows the need to create common metrics for basic concepts. Without them, meaningful comparative analysis and international comparison become very challenging.

Gender: Does It Matter?

Of the studies coded in our analysis, only 26 focused exclusively on girls and young women, and 30 on focused on boys or young men (see Table 2). Although nearly two-thirds of the publications indicated that their findings were derived from mixed samples, most of these articles did not explicitly discuss gender as part of their analysis. More than one-fifth of the texts did not report gender at all.

We believe there is a need for research on changing or shifting gender norms as well as familial roles as part of the refugee-integration experience of children and youth. We also believe there is a need for research on acculturation stress and other settlement challenges as well as educational experiences through a gender lens. Given the differing pressures on girls and boys, gender should be a more prominent element of future research.

Religion: Important Integration Issue, However So Far Misreported in Research

Recently, scholars have come to recognize the significance of religion in migration experiences and this includes studies on refugee children and youth. Faith can be a source of psychological support in a new environment but can

Table 2

Gender Distribution			
	German count ($n=31$)	English count ($n=398$)	Total
Female	0	26	26
Male	7	30	37
Both genders	19	248	267
Not specified	1	93	94

Not applicable $n=5$.

Table 3

Religion Studied	German count ($n=31$)	English count ($n=398$)	Total
Muslim	7	40	47
Christian	7	25	32
Jewish	1	8	9
Buddhist	2	6	8
Other	2	4	6

Missing German count: 19; missing English count: 343.

also negatively impact integration (Güngör *et al.* 2011). For these reasons, we examined whether researchers were capturing it in their analysis. The most analysed religions are presented in Table 3.

Just over 16 per cent of the publications we examined look at religion ($n=67$). When religion is captured, Muslim refugees are disproportionately studied. Christians are the next most studied group followed by Jewish and Buddhist refugees. The trends are less clear for German studies than English ones, largely because of the small number of studies captured. It appears that more research is needed to better understand the increasing significance of religion in refugee populations, as well as the role that religious groups and institutions play in the resettlement process.

Country of Origin: Tendency to Focus on Africa and the Middle East

In our review, we also examined the top five national origins of refugee children and youth. Table 4 shows that German studies covered a wide range of refugees from a number of different countries. Because of this, there are multiple counts for country ranks. Most of the countries covered in German publications are African and Middle Eastern, although some reflect the German sphere of influence such as those from Bosnia, Kosovo or Germany itself. The top five countries of origin examined by English publications included Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sudan, Somalia, Congo and Iran. Again, there is a focus on countries in Africa and the Middle East.

The majority of the studies, however, do not provide any information on participants' country of origin. Furthermore, a number of publications include only unspecific information in this regard, referring to broader regions (e.g. Middle East) or continents (e.g. Africa).

Research Design and Methods

When we examine the most common research designs and methods used in studies (Figure 1), we see that qualitative methods account for almost half of the studies looking at refugee children and youth. About one-third employ

Table 4

Top Five Origins of Refugees					
German			English		
Rank	Country	Count	Rank	Country	Count
1	Kosovo	6	1	Afghanistan	40
2	Afghanistan	5	2	Iraq	36
2	Angola	5	3	Sudan	31
3	Bosnia and Herzegovina	4	4	Somalia	29
3	Turkey	4	5	Bosnia and Herzegovina	19
3	Vietnam	4	5	Congo	19
4	Germany	3	5	Iran	19
4	Iran	3			
5	Cameroon	2			
5	China	2			
5	Congo	2			
5	Eritrea	2			
5	Guinea	2			
5	Lebanon	2			
5	Sierra Leone	2			
5	Sudan	2			
5	Syria	2			

Missing German count: 4; missing English count: 229.

quantitative methods and just under one-fifth used mixed-method approaches. The bias towards qualitative work is much more pronounced for German publications.

The focus on qualitative research correlates with exploratory designs (e.g. ethnographic studies = 35 per cent and case studies = 23 per cent). Qualitative research is important for understanding identity formation, family-dynamic processes, perceived discrimination and the 'process' of integration. Surveys or other designs linked to quantitative methods, moreover, may not be age-appropriate for younger children or children and youth with low literacy or language ability in new host societies. That being noted, the lower proportion of studies using quantitative methods means that insights gleaned from smaller-scale qualitative work may not be generalizable in national or international contexts.

With respect to articles reporting on the collection of original data, the most common design was cross-sectional ($n=106$), which constituted 73 per cent of all quantitative studies. In such designs, children and youth were examined at a particular moment in time. Longitudinal research, tracking children and youth over time, was less common (16 per cent of quantitative studies). Such research allows the analysis of pre-, present and post-settlement

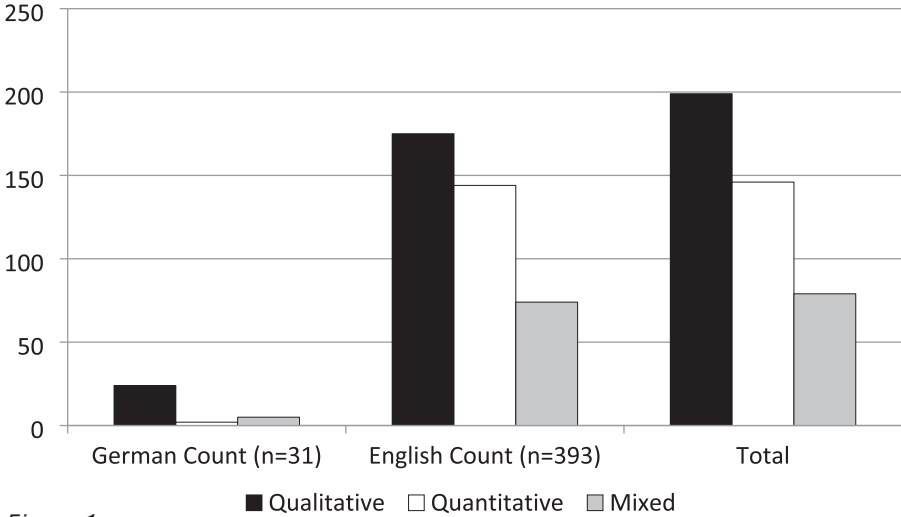


Figure 1
Used Research Methods

as well as youth transitions. Such data provides valuable insight into the resettlement process and is needed for programme evaluation and understanding the efficacy of specific interventions. In order to gain a broad understanding of the integration of refugee children and youth, more quantitative research conducting surveys and using statistics is needed, and longitudinal designs will be especially valuable.

Dimensions of Integration: Focus on Social Factors

Regarding the mentioned dimensions of integration (*language and learning, social integration and wellbeing*), we can attest that social factors were examined in about three-quarters of the studies. Mental and physical wellbeing were a focus in over two-thirds. Language and learning, however, were examined in just over half of the studies in the sample. Given the importance of language for educational outcomes, and the development of human capital and social integration, increased attention on this dimension is warranted. This being said, German studies appear to have a greater balance across these dimensions compared to English-language publications. Even so, in both languages, the greater focus is on social integration, which is surprising given the importance of language and learning to long-term outcomes of children and youth and that socialization in a host society occurs primarily in schools.

Conceptual Challenges and Data Gaps

Although our scoping review identified a large number of English-language articles on child and youth refugees in peer-reviewed journals, very few

German peer-reviewed articles were identified. In our assessment of peer-reviewed English and German literature, we found several conceptual and methodological gaps in the research on refugee children and youth.

Across studies, there was little consensus on how key terms and concepts were operationalized or used. For example, the definitions of who is and who is not a 'child' and 'youth' varied widely. Some studies use categories demarcated by age—although, as noted above, there is no consensus on what age constitutes childhood or youth. Other studies use grade or school-level markers, such as primary, secondary or post-secondary age. Some studies avoid defining by age or grade altogether and instead rely on life-course markers such as childhood, adolescence, youth and young adulthood. This is compounded by the reality that, in many instances, the true age of refugee children and youth is not known due to a lack of documents from conflict and migration.

Our analysis also showed that a meaningful share of studies fail to distinguish between male and female children and youth, and that many studies do not specifically discuss gender or gender roles in their reporting. This has implications on the ability to understand how resettlement affects girls and boys differently as well as changes in family dynamics. Such differences have a strong impact on wellbeing and affect how children, youth and families adjust to potentially changing gender norms and family roles and expectations in the process of integrating to new host societies.

Many of these differences are related to culture and religion. However, the latter is often not considered in research on refugee children and youth. In recent years, churches, mosques, temples and other religious institutions have played central roles in the settlement and integration process. As a result, research is needed to better understand this dynamic and the efficacy of such institutions. Faith can also provide psychological support in a new environment. Our review also showed that there is a need to look beyond Muslim and Christian faiths in the analysis of refugee children and youth.

Our scoping review also shows that the majority of studies focus on refugees who immigrated to highly industrialized countries. Much of the research is on refugees landing in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. A current UNHCR (2017) report, however, shows that developing countries such as Pakistan, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan host the greatest share of the world's refugees. It is crucial that future research considers the experiences of young refugees in the particular contexts of the developing countries that receive them.

A key finding of our literature review is that there are fewer quantitative and longitudinal than qualitative and cross-sectional studies on refugee children and youth. This is likely due to a lack of publicly available datasets that distinguish immigrants by entrance categories and because of the high cost of conducting such studies. Quantitative research has the ability to look at broad trends based on larger samples over greater geographical areas and can effectively analyse successful integration practices and interventions. This

approach is of particular importance to identify risk and protective factors associated with the wellbeing of children and youth and could allow the generalization of findings.

The ability to create such a large-scale analysis, however, will be hampered by a lack of consistency in the datasets and measures used by researchers in the study of refugee children and youth. This makes comparative analysis difficult and meta-analysis next to impossible. There is a need to develop an international research agenda on the integration of refugee children and youth that promotes data sharing, analysis and the development of common research strategies. In short, these conceptual and data challenges must be considered in research or when aggregating research on refugee children and youth, and should be considered in the development and funding of future projects.

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