Thomas Hinz, Thomas Wöhler and Markus Freitag

Good Neighbours

How does social integration take place away from disadvantaged areas with social problems? A German-Swiss study is examining how migrants and locals in small and medium-sized towns live together.

The locals in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland, just across the border from Konstanz in Germany, have started calling part of their town "Neukölln" – after a multicultural district of Berlin. This area of town is home to many Germans who have migrated to Switzerland over the last ten years. They have a reputation for not wanting to integrate and are also seen as competitors on the job market.

It might seem surprising to look at an example where Germans are the migrants. Yet migration is a well-established phenomenon in both Switzerland and Germany, and Germans emigrate too – many of them to Switzerland. Both countries welcome large numbers of migrants, a situation which is

Illustration: Rike / pixelio.de

likely to continue. But what challenges are associated with this trend? How do migrants integrate, not just in disadvantaged districts like Neukölln in Berlin or Marxloh in Duisburg, which are often the focus of media attention, but in small and medium-sized towns, where the majority of migrants in Germany and Switzerland live? A team of sociologists at the universities of Konstanz and Bern, led by sociologist Thomas Hinz and political scientist Markus Freitag, are seeking to answer these very questions.

Multiculturalism as depicted by a graffiti artist in Schleusingen, Germany, in a picture on a bus shelter.

The project is part of the cluster of excellence "Cultural Foundations of Integration", which has received DFG funding as part of the Excellence Initiative since 2006. This team of around 200 researchers is studying processes of integration and disintegration across epochs and all social levels, from the requirements of family and community life to political issues on a global level. The group links current issues of public debate to fundamental and empirical research, critically evaluates them, and places them on a theoretical footing.

Sociologists agree that immigration produces both opportunities and risks. The arrival of new, skilled workers, for instance, is an opportunity, given its beneficial effects for the labour market and social systems. And the fact that immigrants are generally younger and – at least in the first generation – have more children than the native population helps reduce the burden on pension systems. In addition, various cultural factors are also frequently perceived as beneficial.

But immigration only presents an opportunity if migrants successfully integrate. Successful integration does not mean complete adaptation on the part of the new arrivals. Migrants rarely feel a complete sense of identification with their new home, experiencing a sense of belonging to both their country of origin and their new country of residence. However, integration fails when social inequalities of a structural nature remain between the newly arrived and indigenous communities: in other words when migrants continue to have a poorer education and lower-paid, less secure jobs.

The integration of migrants has four dimensions: first, structural integration in the education system, job market and property market; second, personal contact with people outside the migrant community, for example inter-ethnic marriage or friendship; third, the acquisition of cultural knowledge, for example language skills; and finally, emotional anchoring in the receiving community.

These four dimensions are closely interconnected. For example, the workplace provides a setting for personal interaction that may result in contacts outside the workplace. Relationships may also provide the "social capital" making it easier to find a new job. Language skills are best acquired through interaction with native speakers. But these contacts can only be made in the first place with a basic knowledge of the language. Emotional identification with a new country also cannot take place in the absence of meaningful contact with the indigenous community. But this in its turn is an important prerequisite for the formation of certain relationships.

Just as important as individual social skills and resources are the characteristics of the migrant group the immigrants belong to. This includes the relative sizes of the migrant and majority communities, the concentration of migrants in a particular area, and the extent of ethnic institutions, e.g. Turkish supermarkets in areas with a large Turkish community.

Ultimately, the process of integration largely depends on the extent to which migrants experience discrimination in the education system, on the job market and in the property market.

The research project led by Thomas Hinz and Markus Freitag has been investigating the social integration of migrants since 2010. The work is primarily concerned with neighbourhoods.

In sport, diversity and integration are common and taken for granted.

Illustration: asiseeit / istockphoto.com

Thomas Hinz is particularly interested in social relationships operationalised as personal networks; Markus Freitag in the question of how trust is formed and integration is promoted through clubs and similar groups.

Research assistants Thomas Wöhler and Birte Gundelach produced a unique set of data based on a sample of over 900 inhabitants of Konstanz and Kreuzlingen aged between 18 and 90. This data is supplemented by detailed contextual information on the different residential environments. By design, migrants were overrepresented in the sample, accounting for 520 of the 900 people surveyed. This allows for case studies that focus on particular sub-groups, for example the traditional guest worker (Gastarbeiter) communities who arrived in Germany in the 1960s.

The result of this study is a clear picture of the type of neighbourhood in which an individual lives. Is the neighbourhood home to a large migrant community? Are there places to get acquainted with neighbours, for example parks or pubs? What social status do residents of this area have? The unique characteristic of this study is the way in which it combines detailed contextual information with individual data.

Many of the questions asked in the survey focus on the social relationships of migrants and the impact of these relationships on their lives. Examples of questions are: Do immigrants who live in a neighbourhood with lots of opportunities for contact have bigger/better personal social networks? Where do migrants meet people from their new community?

Illustration: Tatjana Balzer / fotolia.com

Migration is a much-debated and controversial issue in the media.

Where are friendships and partnerships formed? And what effect do these networks have on other dimensions of integration, such as language skills or identification with the community?

The study is also concerned with the willingness to integrate on the part of migrants, a topic that has attracted controversy in the media. There is currently a lot of evidence to suggest that integration is most likely to fail when immigrants have few opportunities to meet people from the majority community and to acquire their language.

In the light of the study, it appears that alarming scenarios of migrants who are unwilling to integrate are far from reality. In fact, most migrants do gradually integrate: language skills improve over time, the number of social relationships increases, and new community members increasingly identify with their new country. For example, in the area being studied, the majority of migrants marry across their ethnic group boundaries. Almost half of an individual's friends and acquaintances belong to other ethnic groups. Both these facts suggest that there is a positive framework in place for contacts and relationships between natives and new arrivals.

The study found a connection between the characteristics of the neighbourhood in which someone lives and the degree of integration. However, the correlation is not simply that integration is less likely to succeed in areas with a large migrant population. Rather, all residents have fewer relationships when they live in neighbourhoods with a high proportion of socially disadvantaged people, for example in communities of densely populated tower blocks on the edges of the urban areas in question. The situation is similar at the other end of the social spectrum: people in affluent neighbourhoods experience equally low integration.

And what about the Germans in Kreuzlingen? At present, this migrant group does indeed appear to be poorly integrated in the Swiss community. Like most Gastarbeiter, many plan to return home soon, so they don't believe it is necessary to send their children to Swiss schools or learn Swiss German. But as time goes by, more of them will put down roots in their new community and their children will make Swiss friends. At the same time the indigenous community will get used to the new arrivals and learn to respect them as fellow citizens.

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