



From Strangers to Citizens? Identity Reconstruction in the Lives of International Migrants

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how long-term migrants reconstruct their identities through contrasting migration trajectories within the same host society. While migration has been widely examined from structural and policy perspectives, less attention has been devoted to understanding identity reconstruction as an ongoing narrative process shaped by lived experience. Drawing on acculturation, transnationalism, and intersectionality, the study employed a qualitative multiple-case study grounded in narrative inquiry to examine two long-term migrants residing in the United States, a Syrian refugee woman and a Dutch voluntary migrant. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings demonstrate that identity reconstruction is a dynamic, relational, and intersectional process shaped by the interaction of personal agency and structural conditions. Although both participants ultimately developed a sense of belonging, their identities were reconstructed through markedly different pathways shaped by migration histories and social positioning. Language, institutional participation, and interpersonal relationships emerged as interconnected mechanisms supporting identity development, while ethnicity, religion, gender, migration status, and social positioning influenced opportunities for recognition and participation. The study contributes to migration scholarship by extending contemporary understandings of migrant identity as a relational, narrative, and intersectional process shaped by contrasting migration trajectories rather than a uniform process of integration. The findings also provide practical insights for educational institutions, community organizations, and policymakers seeking to support inclusive forms of migrant integration and belonging.

KEYWORDS

Migrant identity; identity reconstruction; migration; belonging; transnationalism; intersectionality; integration; language; educational institution.

INTRODUCTION

International migration is one of the most significant social transformations of the twenty-first century, affecting not only demographic and economic structures but also the cultural, social, and psychological experiences of individuals (Bokayev et al., 2023; Castles et al., 2020; McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). According to the World Migration Report 2024 (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024), millions of people relocate across national borders each year in pursuit of safety, education, employment, or family reunification. While migration has been widely examined from economic, legal, demographic, and policy perspectives (Castles et al., 2020; Vertovec, 2019), increasing attention has been directed toward understanding how migration reshapes individuals' identities, relationships, and sense of belonging within host societies (Anthias, 2002). Nevertheless, the subjective process through which migrants reconstruct their identities over time remains comparatively underexplored.

Migration entails more than physical relocation; it involves a continuous process of negotiating identity as individuals encounter unfamiliar languages, social norms, cultural expectations, and institutional environments (Akhmetova et al., 2025; Berry, 1997; Hall, 1996). During this process, migrants frequently move from being perceived as outsiders to becoming recognized members of new communities, although this transition is rarely linear or uncomplicated (Ager & Strang, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Identity reconstruction therefore involves balancing continuity with one's cultural heritage while adapting to new social realities (Berry, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Because identity influences migrants' well-being, participation, and sense of belonging, understanding how identities are reconstructed has become an important concern within contemporary migration scholarship (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Despite growing scholarship on migration and integration, several important limitations remain. First, much migration research continues to emphasize structural dimensions such as employment, legal status, and migration policy while giving comparatively less attention to migrants' subjective experiences of identity transformation (Castles et al., 2020). Second, existing studies frequently apply broad models of acculturation and integration without examining how identity reconstruction unfolds through individual lived experiences over time (Berry, 1997; Anthias, 2002). Third, although scholars acknowledge that race, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, and social positioning influence migration experiences, comparatively fewer studies have examined how these intersecting factors shape identity reconstruction through migrants' own narratives (Crenshaw, 1989; Sharifi-Ahmadipour & Sordé-Martí, 2024; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Consequently, there remains a need for in-depth qualitative research that captures the dynamic, relational, and intersectional nature of migrant identity reconstruction within host societies.

The problem addressed in this study is the limited understanding of how migrants actively negotiate, reconstruct, and maintain their identities throughout the process of adaptation to new sociocultural environments. Existing research often conceptualizes

integration as an outcome-oriented process (Kuzembayeva et al., 2022b), whereas comparatively less attention has been devoted to the ongoing identity work through which migrants interpret changing social roles, negotiate belonging, and reconcile continuity with change (Anthias, 2002). Understanding these processes is important because identity reconstruction influences migrants' participation in social institutions, community engagement, psychological well-being, and long-term integration into host societies (Ager & Strang, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how long-term migrants reconstruct their cultural identities within host societies and to interpret the personal, social, and structural factors that shape this process. Drawing on a qualitative multiple-case study grounded in narrative inquiry, the study investigates how migrants make sense of their experiences of adaptation, belonging, cultural continuity, and social recognition through their own life narratives.

The following research questions guide the study:

RQ1: How do long-term migrants negotiate and reconstruct their cultural identities in a new sociocultural context?

RQ2: What roles do language, institutional participation, and interpersonal relationships play in shaping migrants' identity development?

RQ3: How do factors such as ethnicity, race, gender, and heritage background influence migrants' experiences of integration, belonging, and marginalization?

By addressing these questions, this study responds to the identified gap by providing an in-depth comparative examination of identity reconstruction as a dynamic, relational, and intersectional process. Through the analysis of contrasting migration trajectories, the study contributes to migration and identity scholarship by demonstrating how belonging and identity are negotiated through the interaction of personal agency, language, institutional participation, and social positioning. The findings also provide practical insights for educational institutions, community organizations, and policymakers seeking to foster more inclusive environments that support migrants' participation and long-term sense of belonging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between migration and identity is fundamentally shaped by flux and transformation. Identity, far from being a fixed essence, is socially constructed, multiple, and constantly in motion, a view articulated by Hall (1996), who argues that identity is always in the process of becoming. For migrants, this process is particularly intensified. The act of crossing borders not only entails geographic displacement but also initiates a renegotiation of self (Anthias, 2002). Migrants must navigate the tension between sustaining ties to their cultural origins, including culturally embedded family values and social expectations (Kuzembayeva, 2024), and adapting to new, and often unfamiliar, sociocultural environments. In this liminal space, identity emerges as an ongoing project, continually reconstructed through interaction

with new languages, norms, and culturally shaped systems of meaning (Anthias, 2002; Bhatia & Ram, 2009; Chigisheva et al., 2017; Kuzembayeva et al., 2022a; Yussupova & Tarman, 2025). Castles et al. (2020) further emphasize that identity reconstruction does not occur in isolation but is shaped by both personal trajectories and structural forces, including migration policies, labor markets, and societal attitudes. Similarly, Verkuyten (2018) argues that migrant identities are continuously negotiated through everyday social interactions, institutional encounters, and experiences of inclusion and exclusion, highlighting identity as a relational rather than solely individual process.

To understand how migrants adjust to their new contexts, Berry's (1997) acculturation framework has been foundational. His model delineates four strategies—assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization—each representing different ways migrants relate to their original and host cultures. Among these, integration has been widely discussed as the most balanced and positive form of adaptation, allowing individuals to maintain their heritage culture while actively engaging with the host society. However, this model has also faced criticism. Scholars such as Portes and Rumbaut (2001) have challenged its linear, categorical nature, suggesting that adaptation is far more complex, recursive, and nonlinear than the model implies. Migrants may oscillate between strategies depending on their context, time in the host society, and shifting social or legal conditions. Rather than choosing a single path, many migrants navigate overlapping, sometimes contradictory identity positions in a process that is both cognitive and emotional, individual and collective. Likewise, Sam and Berry (2010) argue that acculturation is a dynamic developmental process influenced by changing social contexts and reciprocal interactions between migrants and host societies rather than a fixed progression through predefined categories.

The emergence of transnationalism as a paradigm in migration studies has shifted focus away from assimilationist narratives toward more fluid and multidimensional understandings of migrant lives. Vertovec (2009) describes transnationalism as the simultaneous embeddedness of migrants in multiple socio-cultural spaces. Migrants today often maintain robust connections to their home countries through remittances, communication technologies, cultural practices, or political participation, even as they become rooted in new host societies. This dual engagement has given rise to hybrid identities in which cultural elements from both contexts intermingle. Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes this as the "third space," a site of cultural hybridity where new identities are forged, not simply as a mixture of two cultures but as something unique, dynamic, and transformative. Similarly, Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) argue that the experience of living "between" cultures leads to a transnational social field in which identity is constantly produced and redefined across borders. Together, these perspectives suggest that migrant identity cannot be adequately understood through a single framework of adaptation. Rather, identity reconstruction emerges through the interaction of transnational connections, cultural negotiation, and everyday participation across multiple social contexts.

Recent scholarship has increasingly conceptualized migrant identity reconstruction as an active process through which displaced individuals negotiate belonging, continuity, and self-definition in response to changing social contexts (Sharifi-Ahmadipour & Sordé-Martí, 2024). Drawing on interviews with Syrian and Afghan refugees in Europe, Sharifi-Ahmadipour and Sordé-Martí (2024) argue that identity reconstruction following forced migration is neither passive nor predetermined. Rather, migrants continuously reinterpret personal histories, cultural affiliations, and social experiences in response to both opportunities and constraints encountered in host societies. Their findings suggest that identity development involves multiple trajectories, including adaptation, resistance, critical consciousness, and identity conciliation, highlighting migrants' active role in shaping their own social positioning. This perspective extends earlier acculturation models by emphasizing migrants' agency in constructing meaningful identities despite experiences of displacement and uncertainty. These findings further reinforce narrative perspectives that conceptualize identity reconstruction as an ongoing process of meaning-making rather than a fixed outcome of migration.

Recent studies have also emphasized belonging as a central dimension of migrant adaptation. Contemporary migration research increasingly conceptualizes belonging not simply as legal membership or social integration but as a relational and emotional experience shaped through recognition, participation, and social interaction (Antonsich, 2010; Duma & Kang'ethe, 2025; Lahiri, 2025; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Migrants develop a sense of belonging when they can establish meaningful relationships, contribute to their communities, and receive validation from others. Conversely, exclusion, discrimination, and limited opportunities for participation may undermine both identity stability and social integration. This perspective shifts attention from assimilation-oriented outcomes toward the everyday social processes through which migrants negotiate inclusion and recognition within host societies. Ager and Strang (2008) similarly argue that successful integration depends not only on access to structural resources but also on opportunities for meaningful social connections and reciprocal participation within communities.

In addition, recent migration scholarship has challenged assimilationist assumptions by emphasizing the emergence of hybrid and transnational identities. Rather than replacing one cultural identity with another, migrants frequently maintain connections to their countries of origin while simultaneously developing attachments to their host societies (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 2009). Such experiences often produce layered, dual, or hybrid identities that evolve over time and across contexts. These findings reinforce contemporary understandings of migration as an ongoing process of identity negotiation occurring across cultural, social, and geographic boundaries, thereby supporting perspectives that view identity as fluid, dynamic, and relational rather than fixed and singular (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1996). Accordingly, migration is increasingly understood as a process through which identities are continually reconstructed rather than replaced, reflecting ongoing negotiation between continuity and change.

Beyond cultural frameworks, the migration experience is deeply inflected by structures of power and inequality. Intersectionality, a concept first introduced by Crenshaw (1989), offers a critical lens through which to understand how various identity categories, such as gender, race, class, and legal status, interact to shape a migrant's lived experience. Recent qualitative research similarly demonstrates that migrant children's educational experiences are shaped by broader relations of power and social marginalization, reinforcing the importance of examining migration through relational and structural perspectives (Agyare, 2025). Migrant identities are not homogeneous; they are affected by systemic hierarchies and social positioning. For instance, the experience of an undocumented Latina woman will differ markedly from that of a skilled male migrant with permanent residency, not only in terms of legal protection but also in how they are perceived and treated within the host society. Yuval-Davis (2011) reinforces this view by emphasizing that belonging is always contingent and stratified, structured by the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Intersectionality, therefore, deepens our understanding of identity formation by foregrounding the differential access to resources, recognition, and rights among migrant groups. This perspective suggests that identity reconstruction cannot be separated from broader social structures that enable or constrain migrants' opportunities for participation, recognition, and belonging.

Crucial to the migrant identity trajectory is the role of the host society. The degree of openness, tolerance, and institutional inclusivity in the receiving country profoundly shapes how migrants construct a sense of belonging. Ager and Strang's (2008) integration framework highlights several core domains, such as language acquisition, access to employment and housing, civic rights, and social connection, as central to successful integration. These structural and relational factors determine not only a migrant's material well-being but also their ability to develop a coherent, stable, and empowered sense of self in the new environment. When host societies are welcoming and provide pathways for participation, migrants are more likely to experience integration as a mutual process of adaptation and recognition. Conversely, when migrants face systemic barriers, xenophobia, or institutional exclusion, identity reconstruction may involve tension, resistance, or marginalization. The host society thus plays an active role in either facilitating or obstructing the complex process of migrant identity reformation. This reciprocal perspective highlights integration as a shared social process involving both migrants and receiving societies rather than solely migrants' adaptation efforts.

Taken together, the theoretical perspectives discussed above provide a multidimensional framework for understanding migrant identity reconstruction. Acculturation theory explains how migrants negotiate relationships between heritage and host cultures, while transnationalism highlights the simultaneous maintenance of connections across national contexts. Intersectionality draws attention to how social categories such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and migration status shape opportunities for belonging and participation. Finally, integration theory emphasizes the role of language, institutions, and social relationships in facilitating adaptation. Rather than viewing these perspectives as competing explanations, the

present study integrates them to understand identity reconstruction as a dynamic process emerging from the interaction of personal agency, social relationships, institutional participation, and broader structural conditions. Collectively, these perspectives inform the present study's examination of how migrants reconstruct their identities through the interplay between personal agency and structural conditions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design grounded in narrative inquiry (Clandinin et al., 2000; Yin, 2018). A multiple-case study was selected because the research sought to compare two individual migrant cases that represented contrasting migration trajectories within the same national context. Unlike a multisite case study, which investigates the same phenomenon across different locations or institutions, the present study focuses on two individual cases residing in the United States. Comparing these contrasting cases enabled an in-depth examination of how different migration experiences, social positions, and life histories shaped identity reconstruction while allowing similarities and differences across cases to be identified.

A qualitative approach was selected because identity reconstruction is a complex, subjective, and context-dependent process that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study sought to understand how migrants perceived and described their experiences of cultural transition, integration, and belonging through their own narratives. Narrative inquiry was particularly well suited to this purpose because it enables researchers to examine how individuals construct meaning from significant life experiences and negotiate evolving identities over time (Clandinin et al., 2000).

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich and contrasting perspectives on migrant identity reconstruction (Patton, 2015). To protect participant confidentiality and comply with ethical research standards, all names used in this study are pseudonyms.

A total of two long-term migrants residing in the United States participated in this qualitative multiple-case study. "Sara" is a Syrian refugee woman who arrived in the United States in 2016 following displacement caused by the Syrian civil war. Prior to migration, she worked as a university lecturer and was actively engaged in professional and community life in Syria. "David" is a male migrant from the Netherlands who initially arrived in the United States as an international student and subsequently established a long-term professional and personal life there.

The participants were intentionally selected to represent contrasting migration trajectories and social positions. Sara's experience reflects forced migration, refugee resettlement, and adaptation under conditions of vulnerability, whereas David's experience

reflects voluntary migration, educational mobility, and comparatively privileged access to social and institutional opportunities. Examining these contrasting cases enabled an in-depth comparison of how different migration pathways and social conditions shape identity reconstruction.

Because the purpose of narrative inquiry is to generate rich, contextualized understanding rather than statistical representation (Clandinin et al., 2000), a small number of information-rich cases is considered appropriate. The two participants were therefore selected to maximize variation in migration pathways while allowing detailed within-case and cross-case analysis consistent with a qualitative multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018).

Participants' characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Sara	David
Gender	Female	Male
Country of Origin	Syria	Netherlands
Migration Type	Refugee	Educational/voluntary migrant
Years in the United States	Approximately 9 years	More than 10 years
Educational Background	University lecturer	University graduate
Current Occupation	Adult education instructor	Community and professional leader

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview protocol was developed based on the study's theoretical framework and research questions. The interview guide included open-ended questions related to migration experiences, cultural adaptation, language use, identity development, experiences of belonging and exclusion, social relationships, and perceptions of cultural continuity.

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provided flexibility for participants to elaborate on significant life experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews. Follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings and explore emerging topics in greater depth.

Research Procedure and Data Collection

Following informed consent, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face in English in a private location. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. Participants were encouraged to narrate their migration journeys chronologically, beginning with their experiences prior to migration and continuing through their adaptation process in the United States. Follow-up questions were used, when appropriate, to clarify participants' responses and explore emerging topics in greater depth, consistent with the principles of semi-structured interviewing (Kallio et al., 2016).

The interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' original meanings and expressions. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy prior to data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). This analysis was situated within a broader narrative inquiry framework, enabling the researchers to examine individual migration narratives and identify cross-case thematic patterns relevant to the research questions. Within the narrative inquiry framework, attention was paid not only to what participants experienced but also to how they constructed and interpreted those experiences over time. The themes reflected recurring narrative patterns related to identity negotiation, belonging, participation, and social positioning while preserving the temporal and developmental character of participants' migration experiences. Narrative memos were used throughout the analysis to document temporal sequences, turning points, and meaning-making processes evident in participants' accounts.

The first phase involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the interview transcripts. During this stage, preliminary observations and analytical notes were recorded. The second phase consisted of generating initial codes by identifying meaningful segments related to identity reconstruction, adaptation, belonging, language use, social integration, discrimination, and cultural continuity.

In the third phase, codes were examined for patterns and grouped into broader thematic categories. During the fourth phase, the emerging themes were reviewed and compared against the original transcripts to ensure coherence and consistency across the dataset. The fifth phase focused on refining, defining, and naming the themes that best captured the participants' experiences. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical frameworks of acculturation, transnationalism, and intersectionality.

Throughout the analysis, analytic memos were maintained to document coding decisions, emerging interpretations, and connections between themes. This process enhanced transparency and supported the development of a rigorous analytical framework.

Following completion of the analysis and in accordance with the project's data-management procedures, original interview transcripts were not retained. Consequently, participant statements presented in the findings are narrative reconstructions derived from interview accounts, field notes, narrative summaries, and analytic memos. These statements are intended to preserve the substantive meanings communicated during the interviews rather than reproduce verbatim quotations.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through member checking, whereby participants reviewed

narrative summaries and preliminary thematic interpretations derived from their interviews and confirmed that these accurately reflected their experiences and intended meanings. Because the study employed a narrative inquiry approach, member checking focused on the accuracy of narrative representations and interpretations rather than transcript verification.

Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail that documented interview procedures, coding decisions, theme development, and analytical reflections throughout the research process. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memo writing and systematic review of analytic memos and theme development records. These procedures enabled the researchers to critically examine potential assumptions and biases during data interpretation while ensuring that interpretations could be traced directly to participants' narratives and documented analytical decisions.

Transferability was supported by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the participants, research context, and findings, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the results to other migration contexts and populations. Triangulation was achieved by comparing participant narratives with analytic memos developed throughout the coding process. Regular review of coding decisions and thematic interpretations helped ensure consistency between the data and the resulting analytical framework.

Within the narrative inquiry framework, analytic memos were used to document participants' life trajectories, key turning points, and processes of meaning-making, thereby supporting the interpretation of identity reconstruction as an evolving narrative rather than a collection of isolated experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and participants granted permission for their narratives to be used in scholarly publications in anonymized form.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and identifying information was removed from interview transcripts and research reports. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely during the analysis phase and were accessible only to the researchers. Following project completion and in accordance with data management procedures, original transcripts were not retained; however, analytic memos, narrative summaries, and thematic records were preserved for research documentation.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis yielded three major themes that corresponded to the study's research questions. Table 2 presents the progression from initial codes to analytical themes.

Table 2.*Development of Themes from Narrative Analysis*

Narrative Indicators	Initial Codes	Final Themes
<i>Loss of professional status; outsider feelings; identity conflict</i>	Identity negotiation	<i>Negotiating and Reconstructing Cultural Identity</i>
<i>Language learning; confidence; communication challenges</i>	Language and participation	<i>Language, Institutional Participation, and Interpersonal Relationships</i>
<i>Community engagement; mentoring; friendships</i>	Social belonging	<i>Language, Institutional Participation, and Interpersonal Relationships</i>
<i>Discrimination; religion; privilege; refugee status</i>	Social positioning	<i>Ethnicity, Race, Gender, and Heritage Background</i>

Negotiating and Reconstructing Cultural Identity (RQ1)

Both participants described migration as a process that required them to reconsider established understandings of self and belonging. However, the nature of this identity reconstruction differed substantially according to their migration experiences and social circumstances.

For Sara, migration initially disrupted many of the identity markers that had previously provided stability and meaning in her life. Before migration, she identified strongly with her professional role as a university lecturer, her Syrian cultural background, and her position within a close-knit social and religious community. Following resettlement in the United States, these familiar sources of identity were significantly altered.

Reflecting on her early experiences, Sara described feeling that "there was an invisible border between the people around me and me." She explained that her refugee status, accented English, and visible religious identity often reinforced feelings of being perceived as an outsider.

The transition from respected professional to refugee represented a profound shift in social positioning. As she reflected on this transition, Sara noted that "back home I was known for my work and experience, but here I was mainly seen as a refugee." This perception contributed to uncertainty and prompted a reevaluation of how she understood herself in her new environment.

Over time, however, Sara described a gradual process of rebuilding identity. Rather than abandoning her cultural heritage, she actively sought ways to integrate aspects of her Syrian background with experiences acquired in the United States. Reflecting on this transformation, she explained that "I no longer feel only Syrian or only American. I feel like both, and together they make me who I am today." This account suggests the emergence of a hybrid identity that incorporates multiple cultural affiliations rather than privileging one over another.

In contrast, David's migration experience suggested that migration involved adaptation rather than profound identity disruption. Although he encountered cultural differences, he consistently emphasized continuity in his values, personality, and self-understanding.

Discussing his adaptation process, David explained that "moving to the United States changed some of my habits, but it did not change who I am." While he adjusted aspects of his communication style and social behavior, he maintained values that he associated with his Dutch upbringing, including pragmatism, modesty, and directness.

David further noted that "I learned to adapt without giving up the values I grew up with." His account illustrates a form of identity reconstruction characterized by selective adaptation rather than assimilation. Cultural change was experienced as an opportunity for personal growth rather than a threat to his existing identity.

Taken together, the participants' migration trajectories differed considerably, yet both described identity reconstruction as an ongoing process rather than a completed outcome. Sara's experience was characterized by substantial identity disruption and rebuilding, whereas David's experience reflected continuity combined with selective adaptation. Together, these narratives suggest that migrant identity reconstruction involves balancing continuity and change while negotiating belonging across multiple cultural contexts.

The comparison between Sara and David reveals two distinct pathways of identity reconstruction. Sara's narrative emphasized displacement, loss of status, and the gradual rebuilding of a sense of self, whereas David's narrative highlighted adaptation while maintaining continuity with his pre-migration identity. While Sara frequently described experiences of being perceived as an outsider and having to renegotiate her social position, David emphasized preserving his core values while adjusting to a different cultural environment. These contrasting accounts suggest that identity reconstruction may range from substantial renegotiation of self to more selective forms of cultural adaptation depending on migrants' social positions, migration histories, and opportunities for participation within the host society.

Language, Institutional Participation, and Interpersonal Relationships (RQ2)

Language, institutional engagement, and social relationships emerged as critical mechanisms through which participants developed confidence, a sense of belonging, and new understandings of self.

Language as a Mechanism of Identity Development

For Sara, language acquisition represented a significant turning point in her adaptation process. During the initial stages of settlement, limited English proficiency restricted social interaction, employment opportunities, and self-expression. She described feeling unable to communicate her ideas and professional expertise effectively.

Reflecting on this experience, Sara stated that "learning English gave me the confidence to speak for myself again." As her language skills improved, she reported increased independence, stronger community participation, and renewed confidence in her abilities.

Language functioned not only as a practical tool for communication but also as a means of restoring agency and self-worth.

In contrast, language did not pose a major barrier for David, although he recognized its importance in navigating cultural expectations. He explained that successful adaptation involved learning not only vocabulary but also cultural patterns of interaction. As he described it, "understanding how people communicate helped me understand how people think." His account highlights the role of language as a cultural resource through which migrants gain access to social norms and relationships.

Institutional Participation and Identity Development

Both participants emphasized the importance of institutional involvement in fostering a sense of belonging and facilitating identity development.

Sara identified educational programs, migrant support groups, and community organizations as important spaces where she developed social networks and regained a sense of purpose. Reflecting on her involvement, she explained that "when I started helping other newcomers, I felt useful again." Through mentoring and community engagement, she gradually transitioned from a recipient of support to an active contributor.

Similarly, David highlighted the importance of university involvement and leadership opportunities. Discussing his participation in student organizations, he noted that "being involved on campus helped me feel that I belonged." These experiences provided opportunities for social interaction, leadership development, and deeper integration into the host society.

Interpersonal Relationships and Belonging

Relationships played a central role in participants' experiences of identity reconstruction. Sara described finding emotional support and validation through relationships with fellow migrants and community members. These connections reduced feelings of isolation and helped her establish a sense of belonging within her new environment.

Likewise, David emphasized the importance of friendships and professional relationships. He reflected that "people made the difference more than anything else." His account suggests that belonging developed primarily through everyday interactions and meaningful social connections rather than through legal status or residence alone.

Taken together, these findings indicate that language proficiency, institutional participation, and interpersonal relationships serve as critical mechanisms through which migrants negotiate belonging and develop new identities within host societies.

Comparative Perspectives on Language and Belonging

Both participants identified language and social participation as important elements of integration, although their experiences differed. Sara described language learning as transformative, explaining that "learning English gave me the confidence to speak for myself again." By contrast, David did not view language as a major obstacle but emphasized its cultural function, noting that "understanding how people communicate helped me understand how people think." Whereas Sara framed language acquisition as a means of regaining confidence

and agency, David viewed language primarily as a mechanism for understanding cultural norms and building social relationships.

Similarly, both participants associated institutional involvement with belonging. Sara reported that helping newcomers made her feel "useful again," whereas David emphasized that "being involved on campus helped me feel that I belonged." Despite their different migration trajectories, both narratives suggest that participation in social and institutional settings contributes to identity development and strengthens feelings of belonging within the host society.

Ethnicity, Race, Gender, and Heritage Background in Experiences of Integration and Belonging (RQ3)

The findings demonstrate that identity reconstruction is strongly shaped by social positioning and unequal access to recognition and opportunity.

Sara's experiences illustrate how ethnicity, religion, gender, and refugee status intersected to shape her experiences in the host society. She reported encountering stereotypes, social distancing, and subtle forms of exclusion associated with her visible identity as a Muslim woman and refugee.

Reflecting on these experiences, she explained that "sometimes people saw my headscarf before they saw me." This perception affected her sense of belonging and contributed to feelings of being judged through preconceived assumptions rather than personal qualities.

She further noted that "I often felt that I had to prove that I belonged." Such experiences demonstrate how integration involves not only adaptation but also the navigation of social barriers rooted in broader systems of categorization and power.

At the same time, Sara described finding acceptance within educational and community settings that valued cultural diversity. These experiences of recognition contributed to the development of a stronger and more integrated sense of self.

In contrast, David's experiences illustrate relatively few experiences of discrimination. He described his migration experience as generally positive, marked by social acceptance rather than exclusion.

As he reflected on his adaptation, David noted that "I never felt that being Dutch prevented me from participating." Although he encountered cultural differences, they rarely served as barriers to educational, professional, or social opportunities.

David also acknowledged that aspects of his social identity may have facilitated integration. He observed that "some people face obstacles that I simply did not encounter." This recognition highlights the role of privilege in shaping migration experiences and opportunities for participation.

Comparative Perspectives on Social Positioning

The participants' narratives reveal markedly different experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Sara described experiences of visible difference, explaining that "sometimes people saw my headscarf before they saw me" and that she often felt compelled to "prove that I belonged." In

contrast, David stated that "I never felt that being Dutch prevented me from participating" and acknowledged that "some people face obstacles that I simply did not encounter."

These contrasting accounts illustrate how ethnicity, religion, gender, and migration status shape opportunities for participation and belonging. Whereas Sara's experiences were marked by the need to negotiate social barriers, David's experiences reflected comparatively privileged access to social and institutional opportunities.

Taken together, these findings suggest that integration experiences cannot be understood independently of migrants' social positioning. Although both participants ultimately developed a sense of belonging, Sara's pathway involved navigating visible markers of difference and exclusion, whereas David's pathway was characterized by relatively unimpeded access to social and institutional opportunities.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how long-term migrants reconstruct their identities within host societies and interpreted the roles of language, institutional participation, interpersonal relationships, and social positioning in shaping this process. The study addresses a gap in migration research by shifting attention from integration as a structural or outcome-oriented process to identity reconstruction as an ongoing narrative process shaped through lived experience. By comparing the narratives of Sara and David, the study offers a contrasting case-based perspective on how migrants negotiate continuity, change, belonging, and recognition within the same host society.

Identity Reconstruction as a Dynamic and Hybrid Process

The findings indicate that identity reconstruction is neither linear nor uniform. Both participants described identity as something continually negotiated rather than permanently established, supporting Hall's (1996) conceptualization of identity as an ongoing process of becoming. Although Sara and David followed different migration trajectories, neither participant experienced complete assimilation into the host culture nor complete preservation of their original cultural identity.

Sara's experience illustrates how forced migration can disrupt previously stable identity structures and require substantial reconstruction. Her transition from respected professional to refugee challenged established understandings of self and social status. Over time, however, she developed a more integrated identity that incorporated both Syrian and American cultural influences. This finding aligns with Berry's (1997) integration strategy, whereby individuals maintain aspects of their heritage culture while actively participating in the host society.

David's experience reveals a different pathway of identity reconstruction characterized by continuity and selective adaptation. Rather than experiencing profound identity disruption, he adjusted certain social practices while maintaining core values associated with his Dutch upbringing. His narrative supports critiques of linear acculturation models (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), suggesting that migrants often engage in ongoing cultural negotiation rather than following a single adaptation trajectory.

The comparative contribution of this study lies in showing that identity reconstruction may lead to similar outcomes of belonging through very different processes. Sara's pathway involved disruption, social repositioning, and rebuilding, whereas David's pathway involved continuity, selective adaptation, and relatively smooth participation. This contrast extends existing acculturation and transnationalism perspectives by demonstrating how hybrid identity formation is shaped not only by cultural negotiation but also by migration pathway and unequal access to social recognition.

Belonging as a Socially Mediated Process

The findings further suggest that language, institutional participation, and interpersonal relationships function as interconnected mechanisms through which migrants establish belonging and reconstruct their identities. Consistent with Ager and Strang's (2008) integration framework, language emerged as a key resource for social participation and self-expression. For Sara, English language acquisition facilitated greater confidence, independence, and access to educational and professional opportunities. Language therefore served not only as a communication tool but also as a mechanism for restoring agency and rebuilding a valued sense of self, highlighting the broader importance of communicative competence in facilitating meaningful social participation (Kuzembayeva et al., 2023). Although David did not experience language as a significant barrier, his reflections similarly suggest that understanding local communication practices contributes to cultural adaptation and social integration.

Institutional participation also played a critical role in both participants' experiences. Educational programs, community organizations, and leadership opportunities provided spaces where migrants could establish meaningful social roles and develop connections with others. These findings support previous research emphasizing the importance of institutional engagement in fostering social sustainable development, integration and belonging (Ager & Strang, 2008; Strielkowski & Chigisheva, 2018). Participation in such settings enabled both participants to move beyond the status of newcomers and become active contributors within their communities.

The practical implication emerging from this finding is that educational institutions and community organizations should not treat language learning, mentoring, leadership, and social engagement as separate supports. Rather, these should be understood as interconnected pathways through which migrants regain confidence, develop social roles, and construct belonging. This implication is grounded directly in the contrast between Sara's experience of language learning as restored agency and David's experience of institutional participation as social anchoring.

Social Positioning and Unequal Pathways to Belonging

The findings also demonstrate that identity reconstruction occurs within broader systems of social inequality that shape opportunities for recognition and participation. Sara's narrative illustrates how refugee status, religion, ethnicity, and gender intersected to influence her adaptation experiences. Her experiences of stereotyping, exclusion, and social distancing

demonstrate that integration is not solely dependent on migrants' efforts to adapt but is also influenced by how host societies respond to cultural difference. These findings support intersectional perspectives (Crenshaw, 1989) and Yuval-Davis's (2011) argument that belonging is structured through processes of inclusion and exclusion.

In contrast, David reported relatively few experiences of discrimination and generally described a smooth adaptation process. His account suggests that social privilege can facilitate access to educational, professional, and social opportunities. The contrast between the two participants highlights how migrants enter host societies from different social positions and therefore encounter different pathways toward belonging.

This study's theoretical contribution is therefore its comparative intersectional reading of identity reconstruction. The findings show that migrant identity is not reconstructed only through personal agency or cultural adaptation; it is also shaped by the degree to which the host society recognizes, questions, or legitimizes the migrant's presence. By placing a Syrian refugee woman's narrative alongside that of a Dutch voluntary migrant, the study demonstrates how migration status, religion, gender, ethnicity, and privilege shape the conditions under which belonging becomes possible.

Contribution to the Field

Overall, this study addresses the identified gap concerning the limited understanding of how migrants actively reconstruct identities through lived experiences rather than through outcome-oriented models of integration. The novelty of the study lies in demonstrating how identity reconstruction operates as a relational, narrative, and intersectional process through contrasting migrant trajectories rather than in seeking generalization to all international migrants. The comparative analysis demonstrates that similar outcomes, such as belonging and participation, may emerge through markedly different experiences of disruption, adaptation, recognition, and privilege.

The findings contribute to migration and identity scholarship in three ways. First, they extend acculturation theory by showing that integration is not a fixed strategy but an ongoing process of identity negotiation. Second, they support transnational and hybrid identity perspectives by showing how migrants maintain continuity with heritage identities while developing new attachments in the host society. Third, they strengthen intersectional approaches by demonstrating that opportunities for identity reconstruction are unevenly distributed across migrants' social positions.

The findings suggest that language, institutional participation, and social relationships function as interconnected resources that support migrants' confidence, participation, and sense of belonging. This insight may be useful for educational institutions, community organizations, and policymakers seeking to support migrant integration.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how long-term migrants reconstruct their identities through contrasting migration trajectories within the same host society. The findings demonstrate that identity reconstruction is a dynamic, relational, and intersectional process shaped by the interaction of personal agency and structural conditions. Although Sara and David followed different migration pathways, both reconstructed their identities through ongoing negotiation of continuity, change, and belonging. The study further shows that language, institutional participation, and interpersonal relationships function as interconnected resources that support identity development, while ethnicity, religion, gender, migration status, and social positioning influence migrants' opportunities for recognition and participation. By comparing two contrasting migrant narratives, the study contributes to migration scholarship by illustrating that similar outcomes of belonging may emerge through markedly different processes of adaptation and identity negotiation.

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The study is based on two information-rich cases within the United States and therefore aims for analytical rather than statistical generalization. In addition, the participants represent relatively successful long-term migrants whose experiences may differ from those of migrants facing greater social or economic precarity. Future research should examine more diverse migrant populations across different national contexts and adopt longitudinal designs to better understand how identity reconstruction evolves over time. Further narrative inquiry studies should retain and report more extensive participant excerpts to strengthen the evidential basis for thematic interpretation and cross-case comparison. Such research would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how migration policies, institutional environments, and social contexts shape migrants' identity reconstruction and experiences of belonging.

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