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# Return Wishes of Refugees in the Netherlands: The Role of Integration, Host National Identification and Perceived Discrimination

Francesca Di Saint Pierre, Borja Martinovic and Thomas De Vroome

*This study examined refugees' wishes to return to their home country. Previous research on return intentions among economic migrants has pointed at the relevance of three aspects of integration: employment and education (structural integration), language proficiency (cultural integration) and contact with natives (social integration) in shaping the wish to stay or return. We examined whether this is also the case among refugees. Furthermore, we extended research on return intentions by considering two social psychological experiences—host country identification and perceived discrimination—as mediators in the associations between the three aspects of integration and return wishes. Using a large survey among refugees from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Somalia in the Netherlands, we found that employment was not related to return wishes. Higher-educated refugees and those proficient in Dutch perceived more discrimination and were therefore more likely to want to return. Simultaneously, language proficiency was also related to a wish to stay via increased host country identification. Contacts with natives were related to less discrimination and more identification, and therefore to a wish to stay. We discuss the importance of social psychological experiences, and the cross pressures they exert on the return wishes of refugees.*

**Keywords:** Return Wishes; Refugees; Integration; Perceived Discrimination; Host National Identification

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## Introduction

In the past few decades, Western European countries have admitted a substantial number of immigrants. Records show that 20–50% of immigrants in Europe leave within 5 years of arrival, either to return home or to move to a third country. In the Netherlands in particular, it was estimated that 28% of the immigrants who entered between 1994 and 1998 returned to their country of origin within a period of 5 years (OECD 2008). While these percentages indicate that most of the migrants stay for at least 5 years and often longer, it is known that many of them keep on wishing to return to their country of origin at some point in time (see e.g. Martinovic, Van Tubergen, and Maas 2014). Studies on migration have been trying to understand the phenomenon of return migration,<sup>1</sup> be it in the form of actual return or return intentions, in order to predict what kinds of migrants are more likely to (want to) go back to their home country. Understanding what fuels return intentions is important not only for the governments who are responsible for adequate integration policies but also for immigrants themselves, for whom a wish to leave the host country and return home could be a result of failed integration (Borjas and Bratsberg 1996) and might reflect dissatisfaction with the host society.

Studies on return migration have mainly focused on economic migrants, such as South European guest workers in Germany (e.g. Constant and Massey 2002, 2003) or Mexicans in the USA (e.g. Van Hook and Zhang 2011). Little is known about return migration of refugees, despite the fact that they have become a large and distinct immigrant group in Western European countries (see Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001; De Vroome and Van Tubergen 2014). These are migrants who fled their country due to war, political oppression or religious persecution, and who arrived in Europe as asylum seekers. Their migration history is very peculiar since many of them might not have planned to migrate but had to leave their country due to *force majeure*. Moreover, many refugees came to Europe from countries with long-lasting conflicts, such as Afghanistan and Somalia, and returning home is not a realistic option for them. This might be the reason why hardly any empirical studies have examined return migration or return intentions of this particular type of migrants. Yet, many refugees might still wish to return to their country of origin someday, even in the absence of an actual possibility to return in the near future. This means that this group of people might not be satisfied with their lives in the receiving country, and yet they do not have the opportunity to leave. It is therefore important to identify the experiences in the receiving country that affect the refugees' desire to re-migrate. Rather than examining firm intentions to go back, which for many refugees are unrealistic, we focus on refugees' *wish* to return.

Three aspects of integration in the host country have been shown in previous research to be indicative of return intentions of migrants (e.g. De Haas and Fokkema 2011; De Vroome and Van Tubergen 2014; Zhao 2002). These are: structural integration, which entails successful participation in the economic life of the host society; cultural integration, referring to the adoption of host society values and

customs; and social integration, involving participation in the social life of the host country. By getting integrated and investing one's time and effort, people accumulate tangible forms of economic, cultural and social capital (e.g. work experience/education, the knowledge of the language and friendships, respectively), and these investments are often considered when making decisions about returning home. The first aim of the current research is to examine whether structural, cultural and social integration also play a role in refugees' wish to return to their home countries.

Our second aim is to extend the existing literature by considering social psychological predictors of the wish to return. Surprisingly, these factors have not been taken into account in previous research on return migration, even though psychological experiences have a strong influence on people's major life choices (Diener 2009), so presumably also on the wish to go back to the country of origin. Specifically, we look at two distinct social psychological experiences in the receiving country that might influence the wish to return to the home country: the level of host national identification and the degree of perceived discrimination. Host national identification refers to a sense of belonging and attachment to the receiving society, whereas perceived discrimination entails experiences of unfair treatment and a lack of acceptance due to one's ethnic origin. We examine whether refugees' lack of identification with the host nation and perceptions of discrimination are related to the wish to return home, over and above the more tangible incentives such as investments in work, language and social ties. Moreover, since perceptions of discrimination and the level of host national identification tend to be triggered by the level of integration in the host country (De Vroome, Verkuyten, and Martinovic 2014; De Vroome, Martinovic, and Verkuyten 2014), we will examine the mediating roles of these social psychological experiences in the relationship between structural, social and cultural integration, on the one hand, and return wishes, on the other hand.

This study aims to answer the following questions: (i) how are structural, cultural and social integration related to return wishes of refugees, (ii) do social psychological experiences of discrimination and host national identification additionally help understand the return wishes of refugees and (iii) do these social psychological experiences explain the relationship between structural, cultural and social integration and return wishes? To answer these questions, we use the Survey Integration New Groups (SING) data-set, which is a large-scale survey collected in the Netherlands in 2009 among recent refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Somalia.

### *The Role of Structural, Cultural and Social Integration in Shaping Return Wishes*

Previous research on return migration among primarily economic migrants has demonstrated that structural, cultural and social aspects of integration in the host society are largely responsible for the decision to stay (Borjas and Bratsberg 1996; Constant and Massey 2002; De Vroome and Van Tubergen 2014; Dustmann and Weiss 2007). In contrast, precarious economic conditions, as well as social and

cultural isolation in the host country, tend to foster return intentions. We propose that integration also matter in refugees' wishes to return.

First, economic incentives are often put forward as one of the main explanations for migrants' settlement decisions (Dustmann and Weiss 2007). Having a job and actively participating in the economic life of the receiving society are relevant incentives to stay. Studies have found that, for instance, owning a business in the country of destination (De Haas and Fokkema 2011) and being employed (Zhao 2002) predict settlement intentions. Yet, findings regarding structural integration are not always conclusive. In their research on settlement intentions of recently arrived immigrants in the Netherlands, De Vroome and Van Tubergen (2014) showed that structural integration, measured as employment status, occupational level and financial security, was not significantly related to settlement intentions. Therefore, we operationalise structural integration in a broader way—focusing on the level of education in addition to employment—and still follow the most common and straightforward expectation that being structurally integrated is negatively related to return wishes (H1). Although refugees are forced migrants, who unlike economic migrants did not arrive in search of a job or a degree, we expect that structural integration also plays a role in their return wishes, with those who are low educated and unemployed being more likely to want to return.

Second, becoming acquainted with the culture of the host society and putting effort into learning about the norms and customs, as well as acquiring the language, are also important investments that could lower immigrants' wish to return home. It is likely that not understanding the customs and having difficulty communicating with the population of the host country will encourage migrants to return. The role of cultural integration has been shown both with respect to the adoption of host country norms and values and with respect to language proficiency. For instance, De Vroome and Van Tubergen (2014) confirmed that adherence to mainstream values was a strong predictor of the intentions to stay in the host country, whereas Constant and Massey (2002) showed that guest workers in Germany who were proficient in German had a lower probability of returning to their home country. We measure cultural integration in terms of language proficiency, and hypothesise that cultural integration is associated with a lower wish to return to the country of origin (H2).

Third, ties in the country of destination represent location-specific social capital that increases the benefits of settlement in the host country, and therefore discourages people from returning (Haug 2008). This is expected to be true also for refugees, since the creation of social networks in the host country may represent an important support for them, after the arduous experiences they had to face before arriving in Europe. Moreover, research on immigrants has shown that having contacts with natives lowers the intention to return home (De Vroome and Van Tubergen 2014). Therefore, we expect a negative association between refugees' social integration and their wish to return (H3).

*The Role of Social Psychological Experiences: Host National Identification and Discrimination*

Next to examining whether the level of integration in the country of destination is related to the refugees' wish to return to the country of origin, we extend previous research by theorising about the role of two social psychological experiences—host national identification and perceptions of discrimination—in defining the wish to return. We argue that these two social psychological factors matter for return wishes in addition to the incentives provided by structural, cultural and social integration. Furthermore, we propose that the social psychological experiences can also partly explain the associations between integration and return wishes. Following the assimilation theory put forward by Gordon (1964) and expanded on by Alba and Nee (1997), immigrants go through several stages of incorporation in the host society. Acculturation and social and economic participation have been argued to take place much earlier in the integration process of immigrants, and host national identification and acceptance by the host society (which is the flipside of discrimination) only arise later, as a consequence of economic, cultural and social participation in society. The three forms of integration can be achieved by investing effort in accumulating the necessary capital, whereas identification with the host nation and the absence of discrimination involve emotional adjustments (also on the part of the native majority population), and therefore need more time to develop. Yet, it is exactly these emotional adjustments that might be more directly related to the wish to return home. Based on this, we argue that the three forms of integration and the two social psychological experiences belong to two consecutive sets of factors that affect the refugees' wish to leave the host country and return home.

First, according to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986), identification with a group is rather consequential for people's feelings, thoughts and behaviour. Migrants who feel a sense of belonging to the host majority are more likely to derive pride from this group membership, feel committed to the host nation and display in-group solidarity. All these positive consequences of belongingness to the majority group are expected to make migrants less inclined to want to go back to the country of origin. Therefore, we hypothesise that host national identification will be negatively related to return wishes (H4).

Moreover, we expect that host national identification mediates the relationship between integration and return wishes. Recent studies have tested the relationship between integration and host national identification (Amit and Bar-Lev 2015; De Vroome et al. 2011; De Vroome, Verkuyten, and Martinovic 2014; Nesdale and Mak 2000), showing that different dimensions of integration foster immigrants' identification with the host society. Economic participation and social capital in the host country tend to have a significant positive effect on host national identification, over and above the effects of length of stay, immigrants' acculturation attitudes towards the host country and social and economic conditions back home. According to Gordon (1964), once immigrants adopt the language, gain employment and build up

social capital in the country, they might also start to identify with the host society. When immigrants are employed in the host country, they feel that they are included in its productive sector and are contributing to its economic growth, which in turn makes them feel part of the society, and makes identification with the society possible. At the same time, language can be seen as an identity marker, since speaking the host language allows immigrants to better understand and learn about the host culture and become completely embedded in the society. Similarly, having many native friends fosters feelings of similarity and emphasises the common in-group identity (De Vroome, Verkuyten, and Martinovic 2014). We hypothesise that refugees who are structurally, culturally and socially integrated in the host society will identify stronger with the host nation, and this will in turn negatively affect their wish to return (H5).

Second, next to host national identification, immigrants' perceptions of non-acceptance and discrimination on the part of the majority may also play an important role in the wish to return. If migrants feel that the society where they live does not recognise them as equal citizens and treats them unfairly, it is very likely that they will be more willing to leave the country. A substantial body of research (Major, Quinton, and Mc Coy 2002; Mossakowski 2003; Williams, Neighbors, and Jackson 2003) focused on the consequences of discrimination, showing that in general being the target of prejudice and discrimination poses significant threats to people. It has been extensively shown that ethnic minority members who feel discriminated are especially affected in the psychological sphere: feelings of discrimination have a strong negative impact on people's mental health, causing severe problems of depression, low self-esteem and unstable psychological conditions (see Gee et al. 2007; Pascoe and Smart Richman 2009). Liebkind and Jasinskaja-Lahti (2000) also suggest that perceived discrimination is a strong stressor in immigrants' acculturation experience. These negative consequences of perceived discrimination might encourage refugees to return to their country of origin. Going back to the environment where they were born and where they feel accepted might help them regain self-esteem and improve their subjective well-being. We therefore expect that perceived discrimination will be positively related to return wishes (H6).

Further, we examine whether the relationships between integration and return wishes partly run through perceptions of discrimination. Two theoretical frameworks offer contrasting arguments about the direction of these indirect relations. On the one hand, we expect that being integrated in the host society is negatively related to perceived discrimination: familiarity typically breaks down stereotypes and increases perception of acceptance. Host societies typically accept more easily migrants who are well-adjusted, have a stable economic condition and know the host language (Gordon 1964). When these conditions are met, discrimination is expected to be attenuated. Furthermore, and in line with the inter-group contact theory (Allport 1954), the more people are socially integrated, the more positive attitudes they develop towards the host society and the more they feel accepted and recognised. In the same way, having contacts with out-group members is typically associated with less inter-group prejudice



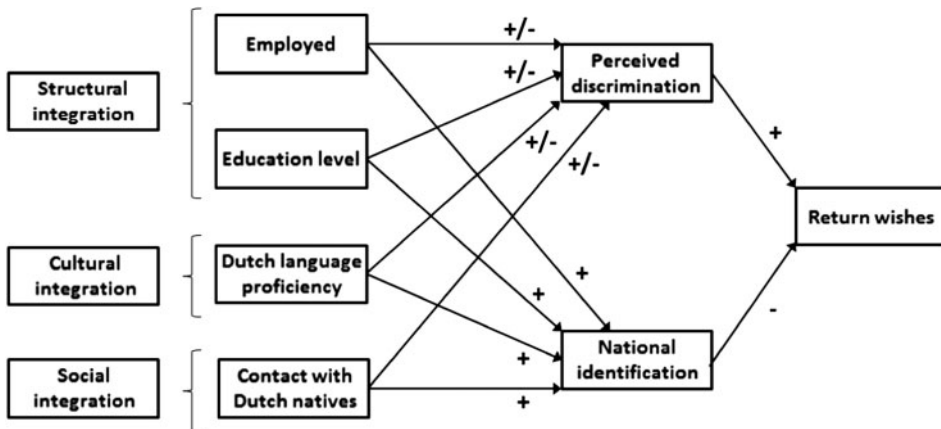
and more positive out-group attitudes (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Following this reasoning, we expect that more structurally, culturally and socially integrated refugees perceive less discrimination by the majority, and are therefore less willing to return (H7a).

On the other hand, previous literature (Buijs, Demant, and Hamdy 2006; De Vroome, Martinovic, and Verkuyten 2014; Ten Teije, Coenders, and Verkuyten 2013; Van Doorn, Scheepers, and Dagevos 2012) suggests that more integrated immigrants perceive less acceptance by the majority population. This contradiction is defined as the *integration paradox* and was first addressed by Buijs, Demant, and Hamdy (2006). It is generally described as the phenomenon whereby immigrants who are higher educated, who have more social contacts in the host society and who want to integrate economically, are also more vulnerable to cultural conflicts and discrimination. There are several explanations of the integration paradox. First, according to the theory of exposure, more integrated immigrants are more embedded in the host society and more surrounded by natives; therefore, they are more exposed to negative reactions from majority members and more aware of the often negative public climate towards minorities. This makes them more aware of discriminatory discourse and more vulnerable to cultural conflicts (Van Doorn, Scheepers, and Dagevos 2012). Second, the theory of rising expectations (Buijs, Demant, and Hamdy 2006) proposes that higher-educated immigrants have high expectations for their life in the host society; when opportunities do not develop at the same time, feelings of relative deprivation and frustration arise, and these higher-educated immigrants become disappointed and turn away from society. Similarly, culturally integrated refugees, who are fluent in the host language, are able to detect discrimination more easily, and because of the investments they had made to learn the language, they might be more sensitive when discrimination occurs. Regarding previous literature, several studies carried out in the Netherlands (De Vroome, Martinovic, and Verkuyten 2014; Gijsberts and Vervoort 2009; Ten Teije, Coenders, and Verkuyten 2013; Van Doorn, Scheepers, and Dagevos 2012) showed that perceptions of discrimination are higher among the higher-educated immigrants. Therefore, and in contrast to H7a, we test whether integration makes people more aware of discrimination, in line with the integration paradox. We expect that more structurally, culturally and socially integrated refugees perceive more discrimination by the host society and are therefore more willing to return (H7b). The hypothesised relationships are represented in Figure 1.

## Data and Method

The analyses of the current research are based on the SING survey, collected in the Netherlands in 2009 by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research. Most of the immigrant origin minorities in the Netherlands come from Turkey, Morocco or former Dutch colonies (Suriname and the Antilles), and they are usually the focus of the studies on immigrant integration (Nicolaas, Wobma, and Ooijevaar 2010). The





**Figure 1.** Conceptual model with hypothesised relationships. Direct Effects are not shown.

value of the SING survey is that it was carried out among relatively new groups of immigrants, and that it contains a large sample of participants of Afghani, Iranian, Iraqi and Somalian origin, most of whom are refugees. For our analyses, we made a selection of those who indicated ‘political reasons’, ‘war’ or ‘religious persecution’ as the reason for migration (approximately 80% of the participants). This has resulted in a sample of 2923 refugees from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Somalia, and respondents were roughly equally divided among the different ethnic groups (754 Afghans, 696 Iraqis, 527 Iranians and 737 Somalis).<sup>2</sup>

The SING survey covered a wide range of topics relating to the experience of immigrants in the Netherlands, focusing on their socio-economic position and socio-cultural integration. The survey was designed to obtain a representative sample that geographically covers most of the Netherlands. The four largest cities—Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht were targeted, in addition to a random selection of middle-sized and small towns. Within these municipalities, participants from each ethnic group were randomly selected from the municipal registers. The response rates were 44% for Iranians, 48% for Iraqis, 49% for Afghans and 38% for Somalis. These rather low response rates are similar to the response rate for native Dutch (46%), and are quite common for the Netherlands (Stoop 2005). Interviews took place at participants’ homes, and they lasted on average 56 minutes. The method used was Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing, meaning that the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the responses were recorded on a computer. For the participants who had been living in the Netherlands for less than 5 years, bilingual interviewers were arranged, and the interviews were conducted in the native language of the participant.

### *Dependent Variable*

*Return wishes* were measured by the following question: 'Would you want to go and live in your country of origin forever?' Note that this question does not ask about firm intentions but only about a wish to return to the country of origin. The participants were instructed to ignore the actual possibility to return and focus only on their wish. Answer options were 'Yes', 'No' or 'I don't know'. For our analyses, we decided to treat those who answered 'I don't know' (7%) as missing, because we wanted to compare participants who clearly wanted to return with those who clearly did not want to return.

### *Mediators*

*National identification* was measured by two questions: 'How strongly do you feel Dutch?' and 'How proud are you of being Dutch?' (both coded 1 = 'Not at all', 5 = 'Very strongly'). Fifty participants did not answer these questions and were treated as missing in the later analyses.<sup>3</sup> The correlation between the items was positive and significant (Pearson's  $r = .497$ ); therefore, a variable with a mean score was constructed, and the scale was recoded to 0–4.

*Perceived discrimination* was measured by one general question and by four specific sub-questions. The general question asked 'Did you ever experience discrimination? How often did this happen?' with answer categories 1 = 'Never', 5 = 'Very often'. There were 72 participants who did not know or did not want to answer this question. Just as for national identification, these values were treated as missing in the later analysis. The other questions asked whether participants ever suffered discrimination in each of the following four domains: at work, in the street, in institutional offices and when looking for a job. A count variable was made, with respondents scoring 0 if they never experienced discrimination in any of the domains, and 4 if they experienced discrimination in all four domains. The general experience of discrimination was recoded into a 0–4 scale to match the count variable of discrimination. The correlation between the general question and the count variable was quite high (Pearson's  $r = .723$ ), and a variable with a mean score was constructed.

### *Predictors*

*Structural integration* was measured in terms of employment status and level of education. Employment status was a dichotomous variable taking the value of 1 if respondents were working as employees or were self-employed, and 0 if respondents were unemployed. Education was measured in terms of highest completed degree by distinguishing between four categories, namely primary school, lower secondary school, higher secondary school and tertiary education,<sup>4</sup> and was treated as a continuous variable in further analyses, ranging from 0 to 3.

*Cultural integration* was measured by respondents' proficiency in the Dutch language. Three questions assessed the extent to which respondents experienced difficulties in speaking, reading and writing Dutch, respectively. Answer categories

were 1 = 'I often experience difficulties in speaking/reading/writing Dutch', 2 = 'I sometimes experience difficulties', 3 = 'I never experience difficulties'. We used a mean score for language proficiency in further analyses (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .865$ ).<sup>5</sup>

*Social integration* was measured by the frequency of contacts with Dutch natives. We constructed a mean variable of the following two questions: 'How often do you have contacts with autochthonous friends and acquaintances?' and 'How often do you have contacts with autochthonous neighbours?' (1 = 'Less than once a year', 5 = 'Every day'). Respondents who answered 'not applicable' were treated as having no contact with natives. The correlation between the items was positive (Pearson's  $r = .449$ ).

*Control variables* included were ethnicity, gender (0 = female, 1 = male) and age (divided in three categories: 15–25 years, 25–45 years, 45 or older). To take into account, some characteristics related to the country of origin, we controlled for children left behind and for ethnic identification. Two dummy variables distinguished between respondents with children who all live in the Netherlands (1), and children living in the origin country or a third country (which could be all of their children or some, with the others living in the Netherlands) (2), while respondents having no children (0) were treated as the reference category. Ethnic identification was measured with items that parallel the measure of national identification. The correlation between the items on feeling strongly part of the ethnic group and being proud of the ethnic group was positive and significant (Pearson's  $r = .528$ ). Therefore, a variable with a mean score was constructed. Furthermore, we also controlled for the length of stay in the Netherlands (divided in four categories: 0–5 years, 5–10 years, 10–15 years, more than 15 years), as it has been shown that intentions to return to the country of origin are especially strong among recent arrivals (Constant and Massey 2002).<sup>6</sup>

### *Analyses*

Our models were fitted in Mplus 7, using weighted least squares estimator with adjusted means and variances, since the dependent variable was dichotomous. Missing values on the predictors amounted to about 5% and were automatically excluded from the analyses in Mplus. Our final sample consists of 2775 respondents.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive Findings*

The descriptive statistics for the dependent variable, predictors, mediators and the control variables are presented in Table 1. Only about 29% of the respondents in our sample wished to go back to their country of origin. Refugees from Somalia stood out with 42.6% of the respondents indicating that they would like to go back to their country of origin, while the other groups expressed a lower wish to return: 24.8% of the Afghans, 21.8% of the Iraqis and 24.4% of the Iranians would like to return. The

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of all the variables included in the analyses ( $N = 2775$ ).

	Range	Mean/proportion	SD
<i>Return wishes</i> <sup>a</sup>	0/1	.29	–
Structural integration			
Employed (vs. unemployed)	0/1	.38	–
Education level	0–3	1.57	1.14
<i>Cultural integration</i>	0–2	1.17	.66
<i>Social integration</i>	0–4	2.17	1.23
<i>Perceived discrimination</i> <sup>a</sup>	0–4	.73	.93
<i>National identification</i> <sup>a</sup>	0–4	2.50	.78
Control variables			
Ethnicity			
Somali	0/1	.27	–
Afghan	0/1	.28	–
Iraqi	0/1	.25	–
Iranian	0/1	.20	–
Female	0/1	.44	–
Length of stay in the Netherlands	0–3	2.06	.84
Age	0–2	1.12	.67
Children			
No children	0/1	.36	–
All children in the Netherlands	0/1	.56	–
Children in origin country/third country (and NL)	0/1	.08	–
Ethnic identification	0–4	2.79	.84

<sup>a</sup>Based on a smaller sample due to missing values:  $N = 2596$  for return wishes,  $N = 2699$  for perceived discrimination and  $N = 2743$  for national identification.

percentages are rather low, which might be partly due to the fact that the question about return was formulated in such a way that return was seen as permanent (going back to the country of origin *forever*). In that sense, the percentage of refugees who would wish to return to their country of origin at least temporarily is probably underestimated.<sup>7</sup> Regarding the measures of integration, less than 40% of the participants were employed. Furthermore, we observed that participants' levels of education, Dutch language proficiency and contact with natives were generally average, around the neutral midpoint of the scales. Regarding the mediators, perceived discrimination was quite low while host national identification was on average positive, above the midpoint of the scale. Ethnic identification was slightly higher than host national identification (paired sample  $t$ -test:  $t(2742) = -12.626$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Structural Models

The first multivariate model we tested included measures of structural, social and cultural integration as predictors of return wishes, without the mediators, but including the control variables. We found that education level ( $b = .064$ ,  $SE = .027$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and language proficiency ( $b = -.111$ ,  $SE = .054$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were significantly related to return wishes, meaning that a higher level of education was associated with

a higher wish to return to the origin country, and a higher level of Dutch language proficiency was related to a lower wish to return. Regarding employment ( $b = -.014$ ,  $SE = .063$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and contact with Dutch natives ( $b = -.035$ ,  $SE = .024$ ,  $p > .05$ ), we did not find significant direct relations with return wishes. We can therefore conclude from this first model that we found evidence that structural and cultural integration are related to the wish to return. This confirms H2 regarding language, but not H1 about employment and education (note that the effect of education was in the direction opposite of the expected one), or H3 about social contacts.

Turning to our structural equation model (SEM) that includes the mediators, Table 2 shows the results of the SEM analysis of return wishes, national identification and perceived discrimination, including all the relevant predictors. In the structural

**Table 2.** SEM predicting return wishes, perceived discrimination and national identification ( $N = 2775$ ).

	DV: Perceived discrimination		DV: National identification		DV: Return wishes	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Employed (vs. unemployed)	.055	.037	.015	.032	-.017	.062
Education level	.078***	.018	.018	.015	.060*	.027
Dutch proficiency	.082*	.033	.105***	.027	-.096 <sup>†</sup>	.054
Contacts with Dutch	-.050**	.015	.130***	.012	.002	.024
<i>Mediators</i>						
Perceived discrimination					.116***	.029
National identification					-.236***	.036
<i>Controls</i>						
<i>Ethnicity</i>						
Somali (ref. category)						
Afghan	-.035	.053			-.577***	.077
Iraqi	-.003	.054			-.684***	.082
Iranian	.246***	.055			-.627***	.088
Female	-.178***	.038			-.104 <sup>†</sup>	.062
Length of stay	.126***	.026			.052	.037
Age					.207***	.057
<i>Children</i>						
No children (ref. category)						
All children in the Netherlands					.081	.067
Children in origin/third country					.277*	.115
Ethnic identification					.450***	.036
<i>Model fit</i>						
$\chi^2(13)$		34.241				
CFI		.969				
TLI		.899				
RMSEA		.024				
WRMR		.901				

Notes: Entries are the results of a SEM analysis in Mplus7. Reported are the unstandardised coefficients (*b*) and standard errors (SE). The model also includes the covariance between perceived discrimination and national identification ( $b = -.135$ ,  $SE = .012$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ .

model, the dependent variable return wishes is predicted by employment status, education, Dutch language proficiency, contacts with Dutch, perceived discrimination, national identification and the control variables. The mediators, perceived discrimination and national identification, are predicted by employment status, education, Dutch language proficiency and contacts with Dutch. To achieve a well-fitting model, we also included the most important control variables for perceived discrimination, as suggested by the modification indices. These were ethnicity, gender and length of stay. We also added the covariance between the residuals of the two mediators ( $b = -.135$ ,  $SE = .012$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Respondents from Somalia were the reference category for ethnic groups. The proposed model had a reasonable fit:  $\chi^2(13) = 34.241$ ,  $p < .001$ , comparative fit index (CFI) = .969, Tucker Lewis index (TLI) = .899, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .024 (90% confidence interval = .014, .034), weighted root mean square residual (WRMR) = .901.

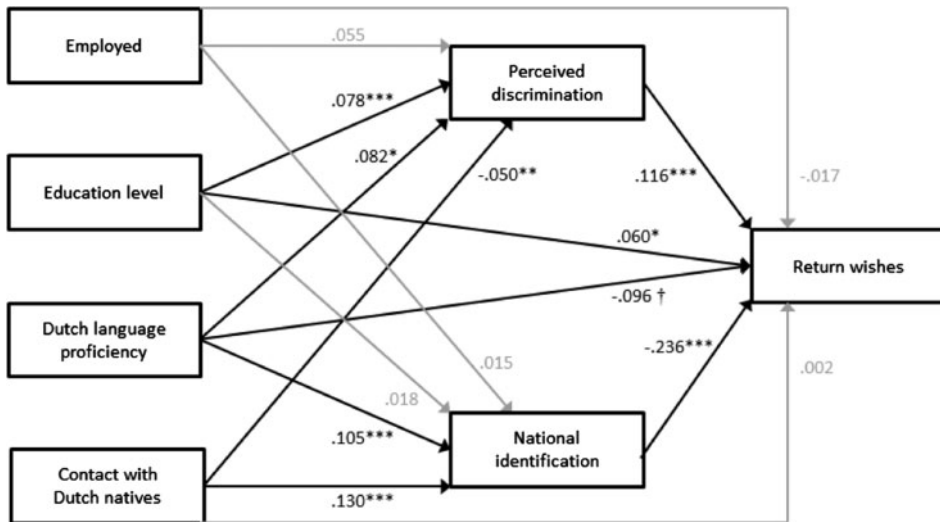
Our remaining hypotheses were generally confirmed by the results. As shown in Table 2, national identification was negatively related to the willingness to go back to the country of origin (H4) while perceived discrimination was positively related (H6). The expected indirect effects from the different measures of integration to return wishes were also generally confirmed, and are shown in Table 3. Note that the total relations presented in Table 3 are equal to the relations in our first model, which did not yet include the mediating variables. Figure 2 summarises the results of the study.

**Table 3.** Specific relations between predictors and return wishes.

Path		<i>b</i>	SE
<i>Structural integration</i>			
Employment →	Return wishes (total)	-.014	.063
Employment →	Return wishes (direct)	-.017	.062
Employment →	Perceived discrimination →	Return wishes	.006
Employment →	National identification →	Return wishes	-.004
Education →	Return wishes (total)	.064**	.027
Education →	Return wishes (direct)	.060**	.027
Education →	Perceived discrimination →	Return wishes	.009**
Education →	National identification →	Return wishes	-.004
<i>Cultural integration</i>			
Dutch proficiency →	Return wishes (total)	-.111*	.054
Dutch proficiency →	Return wishes (direct)	-.096 <sup>†</sup>	.054
Dutch proficiency →	Perceived discrimination →	Return wishes	.009*
Dutch proficiency →	National identification →	Return wishes	-.025**
<i>Social integration</i>			
Contacts with Dutch →	Return wishes (total)	-.035	.024
Contacts with Dutch →	Return wishes (direct)	.002	.024
Contacts with Dutch →	Perceived discrimination →	Return wishes	-.006*
Contacts with Dutch →	National identification →	Return wishes	-.031***

Note: Entries are the results of a SEM analysis in Mplus 7. Reported are the unstandardised coefficients (*b*) and standard errors (SE).

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ .



**Figure 2.** Path diagram of unstandardised direct and indirect effects of structural, cultural and social integration on return wishes.

*Note:* The light grey lines represent non-significant results. Control variables are not presented.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , † $p < .10$ .

Regarding structural integration, we found that employment status was completely unrelated to return wishes, whereas education had a direct positive effect, meaning that higher-educated refugees were more inclined to return to their country of origin. As can be seen in Table 3, we did not find any evidence of an indirect effect via national identification, thereby rejecting H5 for structural integration. However, the indirect path via perceived discrimination was significant, which means that we did find support for the integration paradox: higher-educated refugees tended to perceive more discrimination, and were in turn more likely to want to go back (H7b).

Concerning cultural integration, proficiency in Dutch was marginally directly related to the wish to go back, and we found support for the indirect effects via national identification and perceived discrimination (Table 3). Effectively, the better the level of Dutch, the more respondents identified with the host society, and therefore, the less they were prone to go back. Hence, H5 was confirmed for culturally integrated refugees. The indirect effect via perceived discrimination was also significant, again confirming the integration paradox hypothesis that refugees who are more (culturally) integrated also perceive more discrimination, and are therefore more inclined to consider returning home (H7b).

Lastly, contacts with Dutch people did not have a direct effect on return wishes, but there were significant negative indirect relationships via national identification and via perceived discrimination, as Table 3 shows. Having more contacts with Dutch natives was related to a stronger identification with the Dutch society (H5) and to a



**Table 4.** Goodness-of-fit indices for the final model among each origin group separately.

	Model fit indices						
	$\chi^2$	df	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	WRMR
1. Afghans	10.417	10	.405	.997	.989	.007	.526
2. Iraqi	16.144	10	.096	.957	.858	.030	.671
3. Iranian	16.188	10	.094	.942	.807	.033	.669
4. Somali	9.867	10	.452	1.000	1.003	.000	.509

CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; WRMR = weighted root mean square residual.

lower perception of discrimination (H7a), making people less willing to return. Interestingly, though the total relation between contact with natives and return wishes was not significant, the indirect paths do suggest that contact with natives does have an influence on the wish to return.

Regarding the control variables, we found that older refugees were generally more likely to want to return. There was no effect of length of stay in the Netherlands on return wishes. Furthermore, we found that women had lower return wishes (marginally significant) and perceived less discrimination, while the perception of discrimination appeared to increase when people spent more years living in the Netherlands. Refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran all had a lower inclination to return than Somalis, and Iranian refugees perceived higher levels of discrimination. Also, respondents who had children in the origin country or a third country had an inclination to return, and we found that ethnic identification was positively related to the wish to return to the country of origin.

In order to check whether the model was robust across groups, we fitted it separately for the four ethnic groups. The results show that the model worked in the same way for Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians and Somalis, with satisfactory model fit in each group (Table 4), and parameter estimates in the same direction in each group, confirming its robustness.<sup>8</sup>

## Discussion

This is one of the first studies that have systematically investigated return wishes of refugees. The focus was on Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians and Somalis who currently reside in the Netherlands, and we examined how different dimensions of integration and two social psychological experiences—identification with the host nation and perceptions of discrimination—relate to the wish to go back to the country of origin. Whereas return wishes of refugees are often thought to be constrained by the conditions in their home country, we show that the conditions in the receiving country also play an important role.

Our research has revealed two contradictory mechanisms explaining return wishes of refugees. On the one hand, a certain level of cultural and social integration makes

refugees identify more with the host society, and therefore renders them less inclined to return to their origin country. On the other hand, being more structurally and culturally integrated also leads refugees to perceive more discrimination, which then translates into a wish to return to the country of origin. These findings reveal some of the contrasting effects that the integration process can have on refugees' lives and their wish to re-migrate. The results suggest that integration policies aiming to promote refugees' long-term residence and well-being in the host country should focus on a complex set of factors, taking into account integration in different domains, as well as feelings of national belonging and attitudes of the native majority.

Starting with structural integration, in contrast to many studies (e.g. De Haas and Fokkema 2011; Zhao 2002), but in line with the findings of De Vroome and Van Tubergen (2014), we did not find a relationship between refugees' economic position and the wish to return. It could be that employment is not a relevant factor for refugees after all, especially in the Netherlands, where they receive welfare benefits. Regarding the role of education, we found that higher-educated people are more prone to return than the lower educated, and this is partially explained by the fact that they experience more discrimination in the host society. The latter finding supports the integration paradox hypothesis that higher-educated people feel more discriminated, and this in turn encourages them to return. It is important to underline that the integration paradox, especially when it results in migrants returning to their home country, can be detrimental for the receiving society, which then 'loses' the better-integrated people. The remaining direct positive relation between education and the wish to return (see also Nekby 2006) suggests that alternative processes might be at work, and future studies should further explore these. For instance, education might represent a valuable asset also in the event of returning to the country of origin, as being more educated might guarantee a better job and more stable economic conditions. The present data do not distinguish between education obtained in the country of origin and education obtained in the host country although this distinction might have important implications. It has been shown in previous research that the integration paradox seems more applicable to migrants who have invested in host country education than to those who were educated abroad (De Vroome, Martinovic, and Verkuyten 2014). Moreover, if education is obtained in the host country, respondents might develop a stronger sense of belonging to the host society and identify more strongly with it, as we hypothesised here but were unable to confirm with our general measure of educational level. Education in the origin country, on the other hand, can represent a strong incentive to return, as research shows that education obtained abroad is often under-valued in the host country and can cause feelings of underemployment (Friedberg 2000).

Regarding the role of cultural integration, proficiency in the language of the host country was found to be related to return wishes both via national identification and perceived discrimination. On the one hand, refugees who are fluent in the host country language identify more with the host society, and this discourages them to go back. On the other hand, language proficiency has the paradoxical effect of making

people feel more discriminated, and therefore more prone to return. Being able to speak, read and write in the host language allows refugees to better recognise and understand discriminatory messages and stances. Also, learning the host language can be seen as an investment made in the host country: refugees who have personally invested in learning the language expect that the host society will be more inclusive and positive towards them, so it becomes more disappointing when discrimination occurs. Although the relationship between language proficiency and return intentions is largely explained by perceived discrimination and national identification, there is still a small negative direct effect of language on return intentions. Future research should explore alternative mechanisms that might help fully understand this relationship, such as higher perceived economic opportunities in the host country.

Unlike education and language proficiency, social integration was not directly related to the wish to return, but it did exert an indirect influence via national identification and discrimination. Importantly, having frequent contacts with natives had a negative effect on return wishes through both mediation paths. This is because more socially integrated people identified more with the Dutch and perceived less discrimination from the host society. This is in line with inter-group contact theory (Allport 1954) and the common in-group identity model (Gaertner et al. 1993), which suggest that more frequent contacts with out-group members help people learn about each other, improve their perceptions of each other and eventually feel part of the same group, resulting in less discrimination and more acceptance.

As our study was based on a large survey specifically focused on refugees, we were able to provide a more complete depiction of the return wishes of this group of immigrants. The findings about the role of cultural and social integration are generally in line with previous studies carried out among other types of immigrants, leading us to conclude that some of the factors shaping return intentions have similar effects for both forced and voluntary migrants. Regarding structural integration, employment seems to be a less relevant incentive for refugees than for economic migrants. The influence of national identification and perceived discrimination on return wishes, that was confirmed in this study among refugees, should be tested in future research also among other types of migrants, in order to see whether these social psychological factors play a similar role. For this, data have to be collected among refugees and economic migrants from the same country of origin. With the data at hand we could not perform such a comparison because only 2% of Afghans, Iranians, Iraqis and Somalians came to the Netherlands for economic reasons.<sup>9</sup>

This study also has some limitations that call for further research. First of all, our aim was to show that the conditions in the country of destination matter in the willingness of refugees to return home. Moreover, we showed this controlling for two relevant origin-related characteristics, ethnic identification and children left behind in the country of origin. Yet, to have a more complete depiction of return wishes among refugees, future research should take into account other conditions in the country of origin, and especially perceived safety and quality of infrastructure (e.g. housing). In

addition, as refugees are a traumatised group, distressing experiences in the home country should also be considered.

Second, intentions do not always predict behaviour (Ajzen 1991). Moreover, our dependent variable tapped primarily into a wish to return and less so a firm intention. The reason is that Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Somalia are still not seen as safe countries, and return might not be possible for many of the refugees. The implication of using this measure, however, is that the gap between wishing to return and actually returning might be even more distant than the gap between return intentions and return behaviour. Therefore, this study should be interpreted as an investigation into the wish of refugees to go back to their countries of origin, and not as a prediction of their actual departure from the Netherlands. Given our findings, we can conclude that a limited number of these refugees will ever go back permanently, as only 29% express a wish to do so. Future research should examine to what extent refugees who intend to return actually do so. However, understanding what factors in the country of destination contribute to the refugees' wish to leave and return to their homes is very relevant, as identifying such factors could help policy-makers design interventions to increase life satisfaction among refugees in the Netherlands. This is especially important because refugees, more often than other types of migrants, do not have the possibility to return, and might therefore feel trapped in a country where they are not happy. An alternative is to move to a third country, and future research could further examine if onward migration, which might be a more realistic possibility for refugees, results from the same processes in the host country as the wish to re-migrate to the country of origin, while the conditions in the country of origin might be especially relevant for refugees who want to return home.

Third, our findings are based on cross-sectional data, and therefore the direction of causality remains uncertain. For example, it could be that people who strongly want to go back to their country of origin invest less in integration and identify less with the host society. While most of the studies test theories about motivation behind return intentions by focusing on failed economic goals as indicated by unemployment (Constant and Massey 2003; Gundel and Peters 2008; Van Hook and Zhang 2011) or lack of social ties in the host country and presence of strong ties in the country of origin (e.g. Constant and Massey 2003; Haug 2008), there is also some longitudinal evidence among immigrants in Germany, for instance, that people with stronger return intentions engage in less contact with natives (Martinovic, van Tubergen, and Maas 2014). This suggests that the processes might be bidirectional, and more longitudinal data are needed to better address the issue of causality.

Lastly, we relied on data from a single country in Western Europe, and future research should examine the role of discrimination and host national identification for return wishes of refugees located in other receiving countries, in order to see if our findings can generalise to different contexts. This would probably be the case in other European countries that receive refugees and that, just as the Netherlands, have a clear dominant ethnic majority (such as Germany or Sweden). However, the relationships found for our sample in the Netherlands, especially the ones related

to the integration paradox, might be less prominent in receiving societies that were built on immigration, such as the USA or Canada, where immigrants in general might find it easier to develop feelings of belonging and perceptions of acceptance.

Despite these limitations, our study gives new insights into the relationship between the level of integration of refugees in the Netherlands, perceived discrimination and identification with the host society, and the refugees' wish to return to their country of origin. We showed that these relationships are not always straightforward, but that there are contrasting mechanisms at play, that need to be taken into account when studying refugees' integration processes and return wishes.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes

- [1] According to the United Nations Statistics Division for collecting data on international migration, return migrants are defined as 'persons who return to their country of citizenship after having been international migrants (whether short or long term) in another country and who are intending to stay in their own country for at least one year' (UNSD 1998).
- [2] The data-set also contained information on immigrants from Poland and China. As only 4% of them indicated political reasons or persecution as the reason for migrating to the Netherlands, we did not consider them further in our analyses. A great majority of Poles and Chinese arrived either for economic reasons (work and study, 56%) or as family migrants (39%). In contrast, very few Afghanis, Iranians, Iraqis and Somalians were economic migrants (2%) or family migrants (17%).
- [3] Participants with missing values on the dependent variable and mediating constructs need not be list wise deleted as Mplus can deal with these missing by using full information likelihood estimates. This means that the remaining paths in the model that do not involve one of these variables are estimated on the full sample.
- [4] The first category 'primary education' is equal to having completed 8 years of obligatory schooling or less; 'lower secondary education' refers to vocational schooling (additional 4 years, resulting in professions such as electricians or nurses); higher secondary education is more general and demanding (5–6 years) as it is a requirement for later enrolling in a university; tertiary education includes all university degrees (at Bachelor, Master or Ph. D. level).
- [5] We checked whether the items measured language proficiency in the same way for the four ethnic groups. The measure turned out to be strongly invariant across groups, satisfying the requirements for scalar invariance,  $\chi^2(12) = 19.304$ ,  $p = .082$ , CFI = .998, TLI = .998, RMSEA = .029, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = .024.
- [6] We had to use categorical variables for age and length of stay because the more specific information was not made available for privacy reasons. As the categories range from younger to older participants and from shorter to longer length of residence, we treated both variables as continuous. The reason for this is that the structural model in Mplus would otherwise get unnecessarily complex in terms of the number of the paths that need to be estimated. We also ran the analyses with dummies for age and length of stay, but as this did not change the results, we present the findings of the simpler model in which we treat these items as continuous.

- [7] We compared these percentages to Polish and Chinese immigrants in our data, and the differences in return wishes were negligible. Thirty-one per cent of Poles and 22% of Chinese expressed a wish to return. As these are mainly economic and family migrants, this suggests that the wish to return permanently is probably comparable among refugees and other types of migrants (but see footnote 7).
- [8] The results of the robustness checks are available upon request.
- [9] Even though Chinese and Polish economic immigrants were also represented in the data, a comparison between these groups on one hand and the refugees from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Somalia on the other hand, could not deliver any conclusive evidence about the role of migration motive (economic or refuge-seeking). Any differences detected could just as well be attributed to ethnic origin, geographic proximity, cultural similarity, etc.

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