



Social Integration and Identity Transformation of Migrant Workers in the Informal Sector: A Phenomenological Approach

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ABSTRACT

The integration of migrant workers, particularly in the informal sector, has become a critical area of study in migration research. While existing literature often addresses macro-level factors such as economic contributions and legal frameworks, the subjective experiences of migrants remain underexplored. There is a gap in understanding how migrant workers experience social integration, particularly through their interaction with community support networks and the impact of bureaucratic barriers. This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of migrant workers in the informal sector, aiming to answer how community support and legal challenges shape their social integration. In-depth interviews with 15 migrant workers revealed that community networks played a pivotal role in overcoming social isolation while bureaucratic barriers significantly hindered their integration process. Additionally, the participants' identity transformation and adaptation to new cultural contexts were key themes that emerged. These findings have significant implications for the field by emphasizing the critical role of social networks and personal identity in the migration process, which are often overlooked in policy discussions. The study contributes to the field by offering actionable insights for policymakers, suggesting that creating more inclusive systems that recognize the value of community support and address bureaucratic challenges can enhance the social integration of migrant workers.



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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of social integration among migrant workers, particularly in the informal sector, has become an increasingly important area of study as globalization continues to foster migration patterns worldwide. Migrant workers in the informal sector often face unique challenges, including limited access to formal rights, social isolation, and a lack of support from official institutions (García-Rojas dkk., 2023). This demographic, often marginalized and excluded from mainstream societal structures, navigates complex dynamics as they seek to adapt to new cultural and social environments. The integration process is shaped by a variety of factors, such as legal frameworks, economic opportunities, social networks, and cultural perceptions, all of which influence migrant workers' lived experiences and their sense of belonging in a new society.

Understanding this phenomenon is crucial not only for enhancing the well-being of migrant workers but also for addressing broader social and policy challenges in the context of multicultural societies. The experiences of migrant workers in the informal sector are deeply embedded within their interactions with the host society, their coping mechanisms, and their sense of belonging. These workers contribute significantly to the economy and society, yet their integration often remains underexplored in terms of their personal, subjective experiences. Social integration, therefore, is not merely about the outward conformity to societal norms; it involves the internal process of adapting, negotiating identities, and forging relationships within a new cultural context.

Phenomenology offers a unique lens through which to explore the lived experiences of migrant workers, emphasizing the need for a deep understanding of the subjective nature of their

integration. While quantitative studies have explored migration patterns and social inclusion at a macro level, there is a pressing need for research that captures the nuanced, personal experiences of migrants as they navigate the complexities of adaptation (Kräft dkk., 2024). The phenomenological approach allows for an exploration of how these individuals make sense of their challenges, form connections, and perceive their place in the host society. It is this deeper understanding of their lived reality that the current study aims to uncover, contributing to a richer, more holistic view of the social integration process.

Research on the subjective experiences of individuals within the context of social integration has emerged as a critical area of inquiry in migration studies. The experiences of migrant workers, particularly in the informal sector, offer unique insights into the complex processes of adaptation and identity transformation. While much of the existing literature has examined the macro-level impacts of migration, including economic contributions and legal challenges, the subjective experiences of migrants—how they perceive their social integration, negotiate their identities, and interact with the host society—remain underexplored. Understanding these experiences is essential to capturing the full complexity of migration, and phenomenology provides a robust framework for delving into these lived experiences.

One of the primary challenges in exploring these experiences is the limitation of quantitative methods, which often reduce the complexity of human experiences to measurable variables. While surveys and statistical analyses can capture broad patterns, they are unable to convey the depth of meaning or the personal significance behind the experiences of migrants (Tabatabaei dkk., 2024). For example, quantitative studies may identify that migrant workers face challenges in accessing social services, but they do not explore how these challenges are perceived by migrants themselves, or how these perceptions shape their sense of belonging and integration into society. This gap in understanding emphasizes the importance of using qualitative methods, specifically phenomenology, which focuses on the lived experiences of individuals and allows for an in-depth exploration of how they interpret and give meaning to their social world.

Furthermore, traditional research methodologies that emphasize external observations or focus on broad generalizations fall short of capturing the rich, subjective experiences of migrant workers. The inability to address the nuanced dimensions of social integration from the perspective of the migrants themselves makes many of these methods insufficient for comprehensively understanding the phenomenon. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on bracketing preconceptions and focusing solely on the participants' lived experiences, is better suited for uncovering the essence of these experiences (Machado dkk., 2024). By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study aims to fill the gap in existing research by providing a detailed, first-hand account of how migrant workers experience and navigate the challenges of social integration in the informal sector.

While existing research on the integration of migrant workers primarily focuses on practical, macro-level issues such as legal frameworks, economic contributions, and policy impacts, these approaches often overlook the subjective, lived experiences of migrants. Traditional methods, including quantitative surveys and statistical analyses, have provided valuable insights into broad patterns of migration and integration. However, these methods fail to capture the nuanced and deeply personal aspects of migrant workers' experiences—how they navigate their daily lives, interact with their communities, and form identities in response to the challenges they face. These limitations create a gap in understanding the true nature of social integration, as the lived experience—the way migrants perceive, interpret, and make sense of their new social world—is often omitted or oversimplified.

The inadequacy of these conventional methods is particularly evident when exploring complex phenomena such as identity transformation, social support networks, and the psychological impact of social exclusion or discrimination (Pearce dkk., 2024). While practical, these approaches do not provide a rich, detailed account of how migrants subjectively experience these issues or the meanings they attach to their experiences. As a result, the current understanding of social integration remains incomplete, leaving significant gaps in knowledge regarding the personal and emotional dimensions of migrant workers' lives.

To address these shortcomings, the adoption of a phenomenological approach presents a promising solution. Phenomenology, with its focus on the lived experience and its emphasis on uncovering the essence of a phenomenon as perceived by the individuals involved, offers a more holistic and in-depth exploration of social integration. This methodology allows researchers to delve into the subjective experiences of migrant workers, capturing the complexities of adaptation, belonging, and identity transformation. By focusing on how migrants interpret their integration experiences, phenomenology provides a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities they face, which is essential for creating more effective policies and support systems. The current study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by applying a phenomenological lens to uncover the rich, personal narratives of migrant workers' social integration processes.

Research on the social integration of migrant workers has grown in recent years, with numerous studies focusing on economic, legal, and policy perspectives. However, few studies have addressed the subjective experiences of migrants as they navigate the integration process. Existing literature often emphasizes quantifiable data on migration patterns, employment rates, and policy impacts but overlooks the deeper, personal experiences of migrants (Padua dkk., 2021). Theories such as social integration theory and the contact hypothesis provide useful frameworks for understanding general patterns of inclusion or exclusion. However, these frameworks often fail to account for the personal narratives and meanings that migrant workers attach to their integration experiences, highlighting the need for more in-depth qualitative research.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a phenomenological approach, which allows for a detailed exploration of the lived experiences of migrant workers. Phenomenology is particularly well-suited for understanding the meaning and essence of social integration from the perspective of the individuals involved. By focusing on the subjective perceptions of migrants, this study aims to uncover the complex emotional, social, and psychological factors that influence their integration. The phenomenological method enables a deeper exploration of how migrant workers experience the challenges of adaptation, identity formation, and social exclusion, providing insights that quantitative studies cannot capture. In doing so, this research answers the call for a more nuanced understanding of social integration.

This article is structured to provide a clear and comprehensive analysis of the research findings. The introduction sets the context for the study, explaining the relevance of investigating the lived experiences of migrant workers (Khanam & Parihar, 2024). The methodology section describes the phenomenological approach used to explore these experiences, detailing the data collection and analysis processes. The findings are then discussed, focusing on the themes that emerged from the data, followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key insights gained from the study and their relevance to both theory and practice in the field of migration studies.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employs a phenomenological approach, which is designed to explore and understand the lived experiences of migrant workers in the informal sector regarding their social integration. Phenomenology, as a research methodology, focuses on capturing the essence of human experiences and aims to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of their realities (Olitsky dkk., 2020). This approach is particularly well-suited to answering the research questions, as it allows for a deep exploration of the subjective experiences of migrants, specifically focusing on how they navigate integration in a new social and cultural context.

The decision to adopt a descriptive phenomenological approach was guided by the need to uncover the core meanings of migrants' experiences without preconceived notions or biases. Descriptive phenomenology, as proposed by Edmund Husserl, emphasizes bracketing and focusing on participants' lived experiences in their purest form, offering a detailed understanding of how migrant workers perceive and make sense of their social integration. This methodology enables a deeper

insight into the challenges and opportunities they encounter, providing essential contributions to the understanding of migration dynamics.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that they met specific criteria relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The criteria for inclusion were: (1) being migrant workers in the informal sector, (2) having lived and worked in the host country for at least six months, and (3) being over the age of 18. Exclusion criteria included individuals who had no direct experience with social integration processes or who were involved in formal sector employment.

A total of 15 migrant workers participated in the study, with a gender distribution of 9 males and 6 females (Hou & Liu, 2024). The participants' ages ranged from 23 to 45 years, with an average age of 34. These individuals represented diverse national backgrounds, including workers from Southeast Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. The demographic diversity of the participants was intentional to ensure that a wide range of migration experiences and integration challenges were captured. However, it is important to acknowledge that the sample might reflect certain biases due to the focus on the informal sector and the specific regions represented, which could limit the generalizability of the findings to other migrant populations.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting, ensuring a relaxed environment conducive to open and honest discussions. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interview guide was designed to elicit detailed accounts of the participants' experiences related to social integration, community support, challenges faced, and perceptions of local policies.

The interview protocol was informed by previous research on migration and social integration, with modifications to tailor the questions to the context of informal sector workers. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed flexibility to explore themes that emerged during the discussions, providing an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used method in phenomenological research. The analysis process involved several steps: (1) transcribing the interview recordings, (2) reading and re-reading the transcripts to immerse in the data, (3) identifying meaning units and assigning codes, (4) grouping related codes into themes, and (5) synthesizing themes into comprehensive narratives that reflect the essence of the participants' experiences. The analysis was conducted using NVivo software, which aided in organizing and managing the large volume of qualitative data.

Thematic analysis enabled the identification of key themes related to the migrant workers' experiences of social integration, including the role of community support, the challenges of adapting to local policies, and the transformation of their identity. These themes were refined and validated through iterative review, ensuring that they accurately reflected the participants' perspectives.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee, ensuring that all procedures adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview, and they were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence (Potdevin dkk., 2021). Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process by assigning pseudonyms to all data and securely storing the audio recordings and transcripts.

The study adhered to international ethical guidelines for research, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and well-being. Data were handled with the utmost care, and participants were

provided with contact information should they have any concerns or questions following their participation in the study.

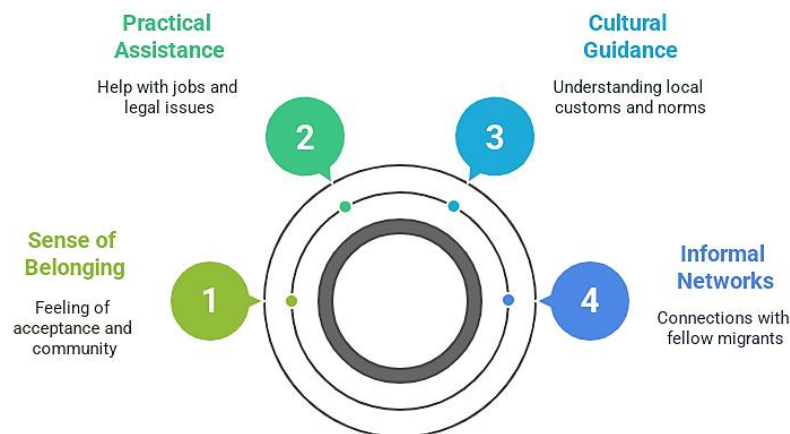
RESULTS

Social Integration and Community Support

The experience of migrant workers in the informal sector regarding social integration is deeply influenced by community support. Many participants expressed that their initial challenges in adjusting to their new environment were mitigated by the support from local communities, particularly through informal networks. This theme was illustrated by the narrative of one migrant worker who shared, "When I first arrived, I felt isolated. But the community helped me settle, connecting me to others from my home country, making me feel less alone." This sentiment was echoed by several others, who highlighted how community ties were vital in overcoming social isolation and navigating the challenges of integration.

Migrant workers often reported that these support networks were crucial in helping them understand the local culture, legal frameworks, and job opportunities. One participant noted, "It was the community that showed me where to find work, how to deal with the authorities, and what to do when I faced discrimination." This illustrates the critical role of community support in fostering a sense of belonging and helping migrant workers overcome barriers related to language, culture, and employment in the host country.

Community Support for Migrant Workers



Challenges in Adapting to Local Policies

Despite the importance of community networks, many migrant workers highlighted significant challenges in adapting to the local policies that govern their work and social integration. Several participants emphasized that the bureaucratic hurdles and restrictive regulations often exacerbated their sense of marginalization. One participant shared, "The government policies seem to make it harder for us to live and work legally here. We constantly face paperwork problems and uncertainty about our rights." These challenges were compounded by a lack of clear guidance on how to navigate legal requirements and protect their rights as workers in the informal sector.

Another participant revealed the frustration felt due to the complexity of obtaining work permits, stating, "It took months just to get the right paperwork, and sometimes the authorities don't even understand our situation." This finding suggests that while community support provides some relief, the overarching impact of bureaucratic processes often leaves migrant workers feeling vulnerable and disempowered.

Identity Transformation and Socioeconomic Perception

The theme of identity transformation emerged as a central aspect of the experience of migrant workers. Participants consistently reported changes in how they perceived their social identity, influenced by both the policies they encountered and their interaction with local communities. One

migrant described, "I came here with a strong sense of pride in my culture, but over time, I started to feel like I had to hide parts of who I am to fit in." This suggests a tension between maintaining one's cultural identity and the pressure to conform to the dominant norms of the host society.

Moreover, several participants shared that their socioeconomic status changed drastically due to their migration. Many workers in the informal sector mentioned feeling stigmatized and underappreciated. A participant stated, "In my country, I was respected for my work, but here, I feel invisible, like my contributions don't count." This reflects the economic and social disparities faced by migrant workers, reinforcing their sense of alienation and affecting their ability to integrate fully into the host society.

Perception of Host Society and Integration Efforts

The perceptions of the host society were mixed, with some participants feeling hopeful about their integration prospects, while others expressed skepticism. One migrant worker reflected, "Some people here are welcoming, and I believe I can have a better life. But many don't accept us, and that makes it harder to feel integrated." This highlights the duality in migrant workers' perceptions, where positive experiences are often overshadowed by discriminatory attitudes and practices that hinder their full social and economic integration.

Another participant added, "I try to learn the language, get involved in community events, and contribute as much as I can, but it often feels like I am doing this alone. The society doesn't seem to care much about our efforts." This underscores the gap between the migrants' desire to integrate and the apparent lack of institutional support or recognition of their efforts.

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal the complex interplay between community support, local policies, and the personal transformation of migrant workers in the informal sector. While community networks provide significant help in overcoming social isolation, the challenges posed by restrictive policies and discrimination create barriers to full integration. The experience of identity transformation and the perception of marginalization underscore the need for more inclusive and supportive measures in the host society to improve the overall integration process for migrant workers.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the complex and multifaceted nature of social integration experienced by migrant workers in the informal sector (Bakuri & Amoabeng, 2023). Specifically, community support played a crucial role in alleviating feelings of isolation and facilitating adaptation, while bureaucratic challenges and restrictive policies often hindered integration. The participants' narratives highlighted the interplay between external structural barriers and the internal emotional processes that shape their experiences in the host country. These findings provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of migrants, emphasizing how social and institutional factors influence their ability to integrate successfully.

In response to the central research question regarding the subjective experiences of migrant workers in relation to social integration, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how migrants navigate challenges, form identities, and perceive their place in the host society. The research highlights that community support is a vital resource in mitigating the hardships faced by migrants, while legal and bureaucratic constraints shape their integration journey in profound ways. Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of identity transformation, as migrants adapt to new social and cultural contexts. These contributions challenge the conventional understanding of integration as a one-dimensional process and instead frame it as a dynamic interaction between personal, social, and institutional factors.

When compared to previous literature on migration and social integration, the findings of this study resonate with existing theories such as the social capital theory, which emphasizes the importance of social networks in facilitating integration. The role of community support aligns with the work of Bellis dkk (2020) who suggested that migrant communities often rely on social networks

to overcome barriers in the host society. However, the study also provides new insights by showing how bureaucratic barriers and exclusionary policies negatively impact the migrants' sense of belonging, which has been less explored in previous research. The emotional and psychological aspects of integration, particularly the transformation of identity, also complement the work of Kim dkk (2024), who found that the process of identity negotiation is central to the integration experience. Overall, this study extends existing theoretical frameworks by integrating the lived experiences of migrant workers, emphasizing their subjective perceptions, and highlighting the complex relationship between community support and institutional constraints.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have important implications both theoretically and practically. From a theoretical perspective, the research highlights the critical role of social networks in the integration process, emphasizing how community support functions as a buffer against the challenges faced by migrant workers. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on social capital, offering nuanced insights into the role of informal networks in facilitating social inclusion. Furthermore, the study underscores the dynamic interplay between external factors, such as legal and bureaucratic barriers, and the internal emotional experiences of migrants. On a practical level, the results suggest that policies aimed at improving social integration should consider the importance of community-driven support mechanisms. Governments and non-governmental organizations can use these insights to design more effective integration programs that not only address legal and economic factors but also nurture the emotional and social well-being of migrants.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study is not without its limitations. One key limitation is the context-specific nature of the research, which focuses on migrant workers in the informal sector in a specific geographical area. This limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions or populations. Additionally, the sample size of 15 participants, while providing rich insights into individual experiences, may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across different migrant groups or countries of origin (McDermott dkk., 2021). The use of a phenomenological approach also means that the findings are subjective and reflective of the participants' perceptions, which may not be universally applicable. These limitations highlight the need for further studies with larger, more diverse samples, as well as research conducted in different sociocultural and legal contexts to verify the findings and explore how these experiences vary across settings.

Prospective Statements for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. One potential direction is to explore the role of community support networks in the integration of migrants in other sectors, such as the formal labor market, and how these networks operate across different cultural contexts. Additionally, future research could investigate the long-term effects of integration on migrant workers' mental health and identity formation (Purushothaman Nair dkk., 2024). There is also potential for comparative studies that examine the experiences of migrant workers in different countries, allowing for a broader understanding of how legal, social, and cultural contexts influence integration outcomes. Finally, further exploration of the role of policy interventions in shaping migrant integration experiences could offer valuable insights for policymakers seeking to improve support systems for migrants.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the subjective experiences of migrant workers in the informal sector, focusing on their social integration process. The findings revealed that community support networks played a critical role in facilitating integration, while bureaucratic and legal barriers often hindered this process. Migrants' identity transformation and emotional adaptation emerged as key aspects of their integration experience, offering new insights into the complexities of belonging and social adaptation. This research fills a significant gap in the existing literature by highlighting the importance of social networks and the emotional dimensions of integration, areas often overlooked in

previous studies. The findings have important implications for future policy and academic research. Policymakers should prioritize the development of community-driven support programs that enhance the role of social networks in migrant integration. Additionally, reducing bureaucratic and legal barriers to integration should be a key focus, particularly in the informal labor sector, to ensure migrants can navigate legal frameworks more effectively. Academically, this study calls for further exploration of the emotional and identity aspects of migration, which remain underrepresented in migration research. Future studies could investigate the role of different migrant groups and the long-term impacts of integration on their social and psychological well-being. The findings provide practical implications for policymakers and organizations aiming to improve migrant integration strategies. Concrete recommendations include fostering cross-cultural community initiatives and simplifying legal processes for migrants to reduce isolation and improve access to social and economic opportunities. Future research could expand this study by exploring different migrant groups or conducting longitudinal studies to better understand the long-term impacts of integration.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. There were no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the research outcomes.

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