

# Beyond Indicators: Emotional Labour and the Lived Dynamics of Refugee Integration in Germany

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**Abstract** Integration in Germany is commonly assessed through visible indicators such as language acquisition, labour-market participation, and compliance with institutional expectations. Drawing on qualitative interviews, participant observation, and informal conversations with 18 Syrian refugees, this article argues that such indicators capture only part of refugees' lived experience. Integration also involves emotional labour: managing frustration, performing motivation and gratitude, controlling visibility, and sustaining self-worth under continuous evaluation and conditional recognition. These dynamics appear in language courses, job-centre meetings, workplace encounters, and everyday social interactions. Participants often fulfilled formal expectations while still experiencing downward mobility, fragile recognition, and emotional exhaustion. By linking integration research with scholarship on emotional labour and recognition, the article shifts attention from refugees' supposed deficits to the emotional work produced by integration regimes and unequal opportunity structures. Integration, it argues, is not only measurable participation, but a lived process shaped by evaluation, conditional recognition, and unequal social relations.

## INTRODUCTION

*"I thought the cold would be the hardest challenge for me here; I always hated cold. I bought the best winter jacket, gloves, a hat, and everything my friends recommended. But I still felt cold. Then I understood that the cold is not only outside. It is also how you feel inside a place that is very different from your home." (Adam)*

Adam is a Syrian refugee participant who learned German, found employment as a nurse, and supports his family in Germany. His reflection captures the central argument of this article. Integration is often described as a process of adapting to a new society: learning the language, finding work, following institutional rules, and becoming self-sufficient. Yet, as Adam suggests, adaptation is not only external. One may acquire the visible "clothes" of integration and still

experience an inner coldness produced by distance, evaluation, uncertainty, and non-recognition. His words point to a gap between what integration looks like from the outside and how it is felt and sustained from the inside.

In Germany, refugee integration has been a central concern of public and policy debates since 2015. Integration is commonly discussed through language acquisition, labour-market participation, orientation courses, training, and economic self-sufficiency. This emphasis is also part of a broader civic integration turn in Western European integration policies, where participation is tied to expectations of language learning, self-responsibility, and visible adaptation. The principle of *'Fördern und Fordern'*, or supporting and demanding, frames integration as a process in which state support is connected to expectations of participation, motivation, and measurable progress. These requirements are formal because they are embedded in institutional pathways such as integration courses, job-centre procedures, language certification, training schemes, and labour-market activation. They also become social expectations, because refugees are frequently assessed through visible signs of effort, gratitude, resilience, and willingness to adapt.<sup>1</sup>

Critical integration scholarship has challenged linear and individualising models of integration, arguing that integration is relational and shaped by opportunity structures, institutions, and receiving contexts rather than by migrants alone. This article contributes to these debates by foregrounding the emotional labour generated when refugees fulfil formal expectations while still encountering

downward mobility, institutional uncertainty, and conditional recognition. It does not claim that emotions have been absent from integration research. Rather, building on emerging work on emotions and migration, it shows how emotional labour is produced through specific practices of evaluation and recognition in the German integration context.<sup>2</sup>

The article asks: How do Syrian refugees in Germany experience the emotional labour of integration? Where do processes of evaluation and recognition appear in their narratives? How do refugees manage the gap between visible integration indicators and inner experiences of loss, uncertainty, and non-recognition? The argument is that emotional labour becomes necessary when refugees are not simply participating, but are also being assessed as deserving, motivated, grateful, or useful subjects of integration.

## **INTEGRATION, EMOTIONAL LABOUR, RECOGNITION, AND EVALUATION**

Integration is often measured through indicators such as employment, education, language competence, and access to services. These indicators are important because they show whether people can enter key social institutions. However, they can obscure the emotional work required to navigate the contexts in which such indicators are produced. A refugee may be employed, enrolled in training, or attending a language course and still experience recognition as fragile, partial, or conditional.<sup>3</sup>

Hochschild's concept of emotional labour is useful for analysing this gap. Although originally developed to examine paid service work, the concept illuminates situations in which individuals must manage feelings and expressions in unequal encounters. In migration contexts, emotional labour includes the regulation of gratitude, patience, resilience, shame, and frustration in order to appear cooperative, deserving, and adaptable. For refugees, this work is intensified by dependence on institutions, uncertain futures, unequal access to

employment, and the need to avoid being read as difficult, demanding, or ungrateful.<sup>4</sup>

To sharpen the analytical line, this article links emotional labour to two related processes: evaluation and recognition. Evaluation refers to moments in which refugees are assessed according to institutional or social expectations: whether they attend a course, search for work, accept available jobs, speak German well enough, or display the right attitude. Recognition refers to whether their personhood, past achievements, skills, suffering, and present efforts are acknowledged as socially meaningful. Emotions are therefore treated not only as private reactions, but also as effects of social relations in which value, belonging, and exclusion are produced and circulated. These two processes are connected but not identical. Evaluation can lead to recognition when effort, skill, and dignity are acknowledged. Yet evaluation can also produce non-recognition when refugees are reduced to deficits, administrative categories, or future productivity. The empirical analysis therefore asks not only whether participants participate, but how participation exposes them to judgement and how they emotionally manage the possibility that their worth will not be recognised.<sup>5</sup>

This article uses emotional labour as an analytical lens, not as a general synonym for suffering. The focus is on three linked dynamics. First, refugees must perform worthiness by presenting motivation, gratitude, and resilience. Second, they must manage downward mobility and the non-recognition of previous professional and social identities. Third, they must regulate expression in everyday environments, where complaint, fatigue, or disappointment may be interpreted as failure to integrate. These dynamics show where recognition and evaluation enter the argument: they are the relational conditions that make emotional labour necessary.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This article draws on qualitative data collected between 2019 and 2023 with 18 Syrian refugees in Germany who had received protection status or

were in the process of settlement. Participants included ten men and eight women, aged 24 to 45, with varied educational and professional backgrounds. Some had held professional or skilled positions before displacement, including law, engineering, music teaching, business ownership, goldsmithing, and higher education; others had more fragmented educational trajectories.

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and informal conversations in Bonn and surrounding areas. Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and explored education, employment, language learning, institutional encounters, family responsibilities, and experiences of recognition and exclusion. Participant observation and informal conversations were used to contextualise interview narratives, particularly in relation to everyday interactions with institutions, workplaces, and social networks.

The material was analysed thematically, combining inductive coding with deductive attention to integration, emotional labour, recognition, and evaluation. During analysis, passages were first coded for formal integration domains, such as language, employment, training, and institutional contact. They were then recoded for emotional practices, such as suppressing frustration, performing gratitude, avoiding complaint, justifying oneself, or protecting dignity. A further analytical step examined how these emotional practices were linked to moments of evaluation and recognition. This procedure made it possible to distinguish between general hardship and emotional labour produced by unequal encounters. Ethical procedures included informed consent, anonymisation, and attention to emotional safety. The study does not claim statistical generalisability, but offers contextually grounded insight into how integration is lived and emotionally negotiated by the interviewed Syrian refugees in Germany.<sup>6</sup>

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### *Integration as Pressure to Perform Worthiness*

For many participants, integration was not experienced as a neutral process of settlement, but as a continuous pressure to prove worthiness. They described a need to show motivation, resilience, and gratitude even when facing exhaustion or disappointment. This is emotional labour because it requires the active management of feeling and expression in order to appear as a legitimate and cooperative subject of integration. Evaluation enters here through the perceived expectation that refugees must make their effort visible. Recognition remains conditional because participants felt that belonging depended on repeatedly demonstrating that they deserved support, work, or acceptance.

Saleh, a former lawyer, described job applications as exercises in emotional discipline:

*"Every rejection feels personal, even when it isn't. You smile, you explain, you justify, but inside, you're constantly reminding yourself to appear confident. Otherwise, they think you are weak, or worse, that you do not deserve to be here."*

Saleh's account shows how formal labour-market integration produces an emotional demand to remain confident and composed. The problem is not only rejection, but the fear that visible disappointment will be evaluated as weakness or lack of deservingness. His emotional labour consists of regulating how disappointment appears to others. He must transform frustration into confidence because recognition in the labour market is experienced as dependent on the correct emotional presentation.

Rania described a similar pressure in relation to language learning. Even when ill, she attended her language course because absence might be interpreted as lack of seriousness:

*"Even when I was sick, I went to the language course. I was afraid that if I stayed home, they would think I am not serious. No matter what I do, they only see what we can't do, not what we really want to do."*

Language acquisition is a central integration indicator, but Rania's account shows that it is also a site of evaluation. Attendance becomes more than participation; it becomes evidence of commitment. The emotional labour lies in suppressing vulnerability and presenting effort even when her body demands rest. Her final sentence shows the recognition problem clearly: she feels seen through deficiency rather than through intention, effort, or constraint. What is evaluated is what she lacks; what remains unrecognised is the labour she already invests.

Rima, a former business owner in Syria who later entered low-paid work in Germany, similarly described integration as conditional recognition:

*"I always feel like I'm allowed to stay only if I perform well. Even now that I work and earn my own money, it feels like a favour given to me, and I must constantly prove I deserve it. Whatever I do, it never feels like enough."*

Rima's narrative shows that employment does not automatically end emotional labour. Although she fulfils a central integration indicator, she continues to experience her position as conditional. The evaluative logic of integration continues after employment: work becomes proof that must be renewed rather than a stable basis for recognition. Her statement therefore clarifies the article's wider argument: integration indicators can be achieved without producing secure belonging.

### *Downward Mobility and the Management of Non-Recognition*

A second form of emotional labour emerges through downward social mobility and the non-recognition of previous professional identities. Participants who had been lawyers, teachers, engineers, business owners, or skilled workers in Syria often felt that their past lives became invisible in Germany. The issue is not only de-skilling or blocked labour-market entry. It is also the emotional work required to narrate oneself to institutions and employers while anticipating that

one's earlier status, knowledge, and dignity may not be recognised.

Ahmad, a former goldsmith from Aleppo who had inherited the craft from his family, described this loss as a collapse of social value:

*"I feel insignificant everywhere, like I have fallen below zero. I stopped explaining myself to people or telling them what I used to do before coming here. None of these matters now. I am nothing here; they will never be able to see that."*

Ahmad's emotional labour lies in the decision to stop explaining. Silence is not absence of feeling; it is a strategy for avoiding repeated disappointment. His experience is a form of symbolic downward mobility: the person remains skilled, but the social recognition attached to that skill disappears. The phrase "they will never be able to see that" is central. It shows that the pain of downward mobility is not only economic, but also relational: his previous self is not visible within the categories through which he is now evaluated.

Saleh described institutional encounters in similar terms. In job-centre meetings with his case worker, he felt that his past education and professional experience were reduced to administrative categories:

*"I was explaining my experience, my studies, my work. The woman was polite, but it felt like none of it mattered. In the end, she talked to me as if I had never worked before. For her, I was just like any other refugee. I had to start again from zero."*

This quote does not simply express dissatisfaction with bureaucracy. It shows how institutional evaluation can produce non-recognition. Saleh is invited to present his biography, but the encounter translates that biography into a limited administrative frame. His emotional labour consists of remaining polite and patient while experiencing a loss of dignity. The case worker's politeness does not remove the unequal structure of the encounter. Recognition fails not because Saleh is ignored

completely, but because the terms on which he is heard reduce him to a refugee category rather than acknowledging his professional history.

Such experiences were not limited to state institutions. They also occurred in workplaces, streets, and informal social settings. Khaled, a former music teacher, described the shame of being unemployed during the day:

*"I even feel ashamed to walk in the street during the day, or to go shopping. I feel everyone is staring at me. Everyone else is at work, except me. Sometimes I want to stop them in the street and explain my story and tell them that I am not useless."*

Khaled's emotional labour is anticipatory. He imagines how others may evaluate him and feels compelled to justify himself even without being directly questioned. This shows that integration expectations operate not only through formal institutions, but also through everyday social imaginaries about productivity and usefulness. The need to explain that he is "not useless" reveals how recognition is tied to work, visibility, and perceived contribution. Unemployment becomes emotionally burdensome not only because of lost income, but because it exposes him to imagined judgement.

### *The Inner Climate of Integration*

Adam's metaphor of cold weather helps bring these dynamics together. In Germany, the saying 'There is no bad weather, only bad clothes' is often used to emphasise practical adaptation and personal preparedness. Adam first understood integration in a similar way: if he followed the advice of colleagues, neighbours, and institutions, he would eventually feel settled. Yet his experience suggested otherwise. He learned the language, worked as a nurse, and supported his family, but still described a persistent sense of inner coldness.

This metaphor illustrates the limits of indicator-based integration. Refugees may wear the 'right clothes' of integration—language certificates, employment, training, and institutional

compliance—while still experiencing emotional distance, exhaustion, or uncertainty. The point is not that adaptation is impossible or unimportant. Rather, adaptation alone does not remove the emotional effects of displacement, downward mobility, and conditional recognition. Evaluation may confirm that someone is participating, but it does not necessarily produce the feeling of being recognised.

Several participants described this inner climate through the expectation of gratitude. Ahmad, who worked in a factory while continuing language training, explained:

*"Even though I feel exhausted all day, I don't feel allowed to complain. I'm expected to be grateful all the time. When I try to express my feelings, my German friends tell me I should be thankful just to be here. I can't even express my feelings honestly. Sometimes I feel trapped and suffocated."*

Here, gratitude functions as an emotional norm. It limits what can be said about loss, frustration, or exhaustion. Ahmad's emotional labour consists of translating complex experiences into acceptable expressions. Safety and protection are recognised, but the costs of rebuilding life under unequal conditions are pushed out of the conversation. The result is a restricted emotional vocabulary: gratitude is permitted, while complaint risks being evaluated as ingratitude.

Taken together, these accounts show that emotional labour is produced in interaction with formal integration requirements, institutional practices, workplace hierarchies, and everyday expectations. It is not an individual weakness, nor simply an internal psychological burden. It is a social relation: the often-invisible work of sustaining self-worth while being evaluated by systems and people who may recognise only visible outcomes.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings contribute to integration research by showing how emotional labour operates beneath visible indicators of integration. Existing scholarship

has shifted attention from refugees as deficient individuals to opportunity structures and receiving contexts. This article extends that approach by showing that opportunity structures also have emotional effects. Institutions, employers, language courses, and everyday social environments do not only enable or restrict access; they also shape how refugees must feel, speak, justify themselves, and manage recognition.<sup>7</sup>

The argumentative line can be stated clearly: integration indicators create situations of evaluation; these evaluations may or may not produce recognition; when recognition remains conditional, refugees engage in emotional labour to protect dignity, appear deserving, and remain legible as successful subjects of integration. This line connects the empirical material across the article. Saleh manages confidence in the face of rejection and bureaucratic reduction. Rania suppresses illness to demonstrate seriousness. Rima continues to feel that employment does not secure belonging. Ahmad silences his past expertise and performs gratitude. Khaled anticipates public judgement and wants to defend his usefulness. In each case, emotional labour appears where participation is tied to judgement and where recognition remains uncertain.

This argument speaks to both conceptual and policy debates. Conceptually, it challenges approaches that treat integration as a measurable outcome by showing that participation may coexist with emotional exhaustion and non-recognition. Policy-wise, it suggests that language acquisition and employment should not be treated as sufficient signs of integration if they are accompanied by de-skilling, insecurity, and conditional belonging. Integration is therefore not only a question of whether refugees participate, but also of how participation is structured, how people are evaluated, and at what emotional cost recognition is pursued.

The article also clarifies the role of emotional labour in integration. Participants did not passively suffer integration demands. They actively worked to

appear motivated, to remain polite in humiliating encounters, to hide frustration, to perform gratitude, and to protect dignity when previous identities were unrecognised. Their narratives show that emotional labour is not separate from integration; it is one of the ways integration is lived under unequal conditions.

Adam's reflection on cold weather offers a concise way to understand this contribution. Integration is often framed as a matter of acquiring the right tools: language, work, training, and orientation. These tools matter, but they do not fully capture the emotional climate in which refugees rebuild their lives. Even when formal indicators suggest success, the inner labour of belonging, recognition, and self-worth may remain unseen. To understand integration beyond indicators is therefore to recognise not only what refugees achieve, but also the emotional work through which they sustain themselves within unequal social and institutional conditions.

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