



**Háskólinn  
á Akureyri**  
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# **The evolution of social interaction between host country and migrant groups in 21<sup>st</sup> century Iceland**

Impact of migration on social interaction

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## **Abstract**

Iceland's interaction with foreigners has evolved steadily since the beginning of the century as the country became more accessible and popular for both tourists and migrants and welcomed the optimistic enhancement of its self-image to the world and the economic benefits it afforded. Iceland's process of social integration between native Icelanders and migrants is an interesting focus of research as it goes through the changes in social order in the society. The main purpose of this thesis is to explore the evolution of social interaction and how significant social and economic events play a role in changing the social dynamic of a society. The thesis will discuss the importance of self-image in Icelandic society and will include the different perspectives of research on the importance of social status for equality. It will also discuss the evolution of the migrant in Iceland as migration increases in the West. The thesis will analyse two theories that will help in the understanding of ingroup and outgroup interaction in a society and examine previous local research on intergroup interactions in Iceland. There will be a discussion of the findings in the local research that gives an insight on the reality of intergroup interactions in Iceland. The conclusion of the thesis will show that interaction between native Icelanders and migrants has evolved quite significantly, and native Icelanders respond positively to the presence of immigrants in society and direct social contact with immigrants is generally good. However, the results indicate a presence of increased prejudice and threat in the economic welfare for both native Icelanders and immigrants in relation to access to resources and that the 2008 economic crisis played a major part in changing the social interaction between Icelanders and immigrants.

Keywords: immigrant, assimilation, group threat, self-image

## Ágrip

Samskipti Íslands við útlendinga hafa þróast jafnt og þétt frá upphafi aldarinnar eftir því sem landið varð aðgengilegra og vinsælara fyrir bæði ferðamenn og innflytjendur og fagnaði jákvæðari sjálfsmynd í heiminum og þeim efnahagslega ávinningi sem það hafði í för með sér. Félagsleg samþættingarferli milli Íslendinga og nýbúa á Íslandi er áhugavert í rannsóknum þar sem það fer í gegnum breytingar á samfélagsskipan í samfélaginu. Megin tilgangur þessarar ritgerðar er að kanna þróun félagslegra samskipta og hvernig mikilvægir félagslegir og efnahagslegir atburðir gegna hlutverki í að breyta félagslegu gangverki samfélags. Í ritgerðinni verður fjallað um mikilvægi sjálfsmyndar í íslensku samfélagi og um mismunandi sjónarhorn rannsókna á mikilvægi félagslegrar afstöðu til jafnréttis. Einnig verður fjallað um þróun innflytjendur á Íslandi eftir því sem fólksflutningar aukast á Vesturlöndum. Í ritgerðinni verða greindar tvær kenningar sem munu hjálpa til við skilning á samskiptum innri og ytri hópa í samfélagi og skoða fyrri íslenskar rannsóknir á samskiptum milli hópa á Íslandi. Fjallað verður um niðurstöður fyrri íslensku rannsóknarinnar sem gefur innsýn í raunveruleika samskipta milli hópa á Íslandi. Niðurstöður ritgerðarinnar mun sýna að samskipti innfæddra Íslendinga og innflytjenda hafa þróast nokkuð verulega og bregðast Íslendingar jákvætt við veru innflytjenda í samfélaginu og bein félagsleg samskipti við innflytjendur eru almennt góð. Niðurstöðurnar benda þó til aukinna fordóma og ógnar í efnahagslegri velferð bæði Íslendinga og innflytjenda í tengslum við aðgang að auðlindum og að efnahagskreppan 2008 hafi átt stóran þátt í að breyta félagslegu samspili Íslendinga og innflytjenda.

Lykilörð: innflytjendur, aðlögunarstefna, hópógn, sjálfsmynd



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# **The evolution of social interaction between host country and migrant groups in 21<sup>st</sup> century Iceland**

## **Introduction**

The migration of people within and between continents has increased social interaction between groups as new immigrants interact with the natives of its new host country. Iceland's interaction with foreigners has evolved steadily since the beginning of the century as the country became more accessible with its participation in European single market and bilateral agreements that allowed the free movement of persons, capital, goods, and services (Barnard, n.d). As a previous homogenous nation with little interaction with foreigners, Iceland positively engaged in its new reality as a host country for both tourists and migrants and welcomed the optimistic enhancement of its self-image to the world and the economic benefits it afforded. However, the 2008 global economic crisis brought difficult social and economic change that has impacted its social interaction and attitudes towards migrant groups.

Iceland's process of social integration between Icelanders and new residents is of interest for many local sociologists as it goes through changes in social order in the society. This process of social integration between migrants cannot exist without social cohesion which is defined as the 'glue' or 'bonds' that keeps societies integrated (Larsen, 2014). As social beings, social cohesion is a key component of our interaction with one another. We long to belong to the society and more importantly to a social group we desire. However, there is a mist of perceived threat among Icelanders as migrants increase in the country and change in society is felt. The study of social interaction between individuals and groups can help us understand how societies deal with rapid economic and social cultural change when members of a previously unacquainted group enter a society. There is a lot of research focused on the social and economic well-being of both host and migrant in Iceland. The main purpose of this thesis is to explore the evolution of social interaction and how significant events play a role in



changing the social dynamic of a society. My research question is, how does Iceland, as a previous homogenous nation, interact with migrants as a new group in its society, and how did a major economic and political event impact this interaction? To answer this question, I will use two theories - social identity theory to be able to understand the role that self-image plays in social interaction, and group threat theory to explore characteristics of group interactions between native inhabitants and migrants before and after a defining moment of socioeconomic change in the Icelandic society. I will also examine themes in Icelandic society that describe the various aspects of interaction between the Icelander and the migrant and include results from local research on natives and migrant interactions. This thesis will be divided into five chapters. The first chapter will discuss the importance of social identity and self-image in Icelandic society and a brief history of Iceland. It will also discuss the evolution of the migrant in Iceland as migration increases in the West. The second chapter will review the two theories chosen for this thesis for the understanding of ingroup and outgroup interaction in a society. The third chapter will detail findings in local research on intergroup interaction in Iceland. A local perspective on social and economic interactions between the natives and migrants in the nation and how Iceland as a whole, is tackling its new reality. The last chapter will be a discussion of the findings and include limitations in the literature in understanding intergroup interactions in Iceland and what further research will be useful and helpful in understanding the coexistence of social groups with different social and cultural beliefs, norms, and values. The fifth chapter will be a conclusion on the research of native and migrant interaction in Iceland according to the theoretical research and discussion topics that have been put forth.

# 1. The Host Country and the Immigrant

## 1.1 A dignified nation with little diversity

Ask any Icelander of their country's history and they may happily inform you of their proud status of having the oldest parliament in the world that still exists today. The *Althingi* parliamentary court was formed in year 930 and was historically located in one of the most visited modern tourist sites in the country today, Þingvellir National Park. As a European country that has never engaged in war, the Icelander builds its national worth on a myth of being descendants of the strongest of the Vikings, that escaped and survived the oppressive regime of King Harald of Norway in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and persisted through Scandinavia's harsh landscape and climate to emerge as a powerful small nation that is as equally influential in the international arena as its other European counterparts (Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, 2001). But as many countries in Europe were mainly known for being powerful, modern, and more enlightened than other continents, Iceland as a colony was one of the poorest and less modern nations in Europe since its inception. Anthropologist Kristín Loftsdóttir (2010) explained in a journal article that Icelanders were not considered primitive, but neither were they considered civilised, but rather were labelled as uncultured and unsophisticated. Icelanders fought for their national self-image and pride with a strong spirit and the struggle was fought vigorously using vocal and legal persuasion rather than with violence. For Iceland, a nation built on its strong belief of sovereignty, the fight for its independence from Danish rule had to be done by using rhetoric rather than force (Eirikur Bergman, 2017). As an independent nation, Iceland has enjoyed decades of increased prosperity since its independence. Emerging from the economic hardship of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that was characterized by the island's marginalization compared to other European countries, natural disasters, and poverty (Kristín Loftsdóttir, 2012; Oslund, 2002). As Iceland grew in popularity that enhanced its positive self-image, Icelanders enjoyed the financial benefits of a

seemingly stable and growing economy as ethnocentric narratives increased, that Iceland was destined for greatness in the new global economy (Eirikur Bergman, 2017). Unfortunately, Iceland's economic boom was short-lived as it was severely hit by the 2008 global economic crisis leading to a depletion in the standard of living for many working-class citizens and migrants. The economic crisis was a defining collective memory for Icelanders and studies on its aftermath are characterized as a loss of innocence and mistrust of the workings of a government that was previously upheld by its citizens (Kristín Loftsdóttir, 2010). In one study on the aftermath of Iceland's economic crisis, Berglind Hólm Ragnarsdóttir et al. (2012) examined how this recent collective memory affected cognitive processes and social welfare of the Icelandic community. The abrupt shift in the economic welfare of the country resulted in anger and negative attitudes towards other social groups in Icelandic society as the standard of living was impacted (p. 770).

Seventy-eight years after gaining independence from Denmark who were themselves under Nazi occupation at the time of Iceland's independence, Iceland still holds tight to its sovereignty and chooses to remain economically independent and are generally defiant against the notion of being a full member of the European Union and adopting the Euro currency despite its fragile economy (Eirikur Bergman, 2017). Iceland continues to maintain its autonomy in its foreign relations with the world and is sometimes stuck in between the dilemma of participating in European matters as a European member state or isolating from international relations (p. 109). Waves of nationalist politics have also made a mark in Iceland's democratic atmosphere. Populist politics have emerged through the years with minor impact thus far. Movements rallying against multiculturalism and miscegenation have sprung up from time to time in the last decades with the most recent one, the now defunct Liberal Party or *Frjálslyndi flokkurinn*, using anti-immigrant rhetoric in a 2006 article in the local paper in hopes of getting increased support for re-election and avoiding potential loss of

seats in parliament (Guðjón A. Kristjánsson, 2006). The party's leader opposed the last decade's decision by parliament for Iceland to open its borders for citizens from new European Economic Area (EEA) member states, who were mainly from Eastern European countries and who would potentially migrate as labour workers. He and his supporters argued that opening the labour market to foreigners would lead to mass migration of foreign workers that would compete with Icelanders for jobs, that the foreign workers could potentially harbour harmful diseases such as tuberculosis and predicted that there would be negative challenges in the country pertaining to the education of foreign children (Guðjón A. Kristjánsson, 2007). The party's rhetoric won over supporters and by spring 2007, the party had secured three seats in the national parliamentary elections (Eirikur Bergman, 2008).

Iceland's national identity is heavily rooted in its past as a purist isolated nation. Ernst Renan defined a nation as an entity, based on individuals who form a collective identity (Renan, 1882). His definition characterized the nation as one that possesses a substantial number of historical memories that leads to the willingness of its members to live together. Iceland's longevity as a nation with its own language, culture and centuries' old heritage and literature is an identity very few, if any, former colonies have. Iceland has strived to separate itself from the harsh side of its history and prefers to romanticize its independence struggle as that of courage and strength to rise rather than its political condition being the result of its historical relationship with its neighbouring countries (Eirikur Bergman, 2017).

## **1.2 Immigrants in a new society**

Before the turn of the century, the immigrant population consisted of only 2% of the total Icelandic population with many immigrants primarily coming from neighbouring Nordic countries or North America. The European union (EU) enlargement of membership countries in 2004 and 2007 led to what is now known as the post-accession migration within Europe as the continent encountered the largest mobility of labour and services ever recorded in recent

history (Eldring et al., 2011). Nordic countries, primarily Denmark and Norway received many labour migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and issued more than 200,000 work permits to CEE citizens in 2009 (Border and Immigration Agency, 2009). Labour migrants within the European Union and European Economic Area have mainly been construction workers, a common phenomenon in the history of migration in Europe. Migration in Iceland is also primarily of labour migrants. Iceland has been going through a massive economic expansion in the last decades. One characteristic of modern capitalist economies is that economic expansion often leads to the polarization of the market where some jobs that are considered of a lower status with low wages become less attractive to native inhabitants and demand for prestigious and better paying jobs increase (Wojtynska, 2012). Iceland's large Polish migrant group, among others, comprise of workers that filled the gap for these lower status, lower wage jobs although demand for labour in other sectors such as the financial and technological industries were also partially filled by migrant workers. Focusing on migration in the European Union (EU), non-EU migrant citizens have significantly increased as well, although the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic has slowed down the process substantially. As of 2020, 8.6 million non-EU citizens were employed in the EU labour market according to statistics from the European Commission (European Commission, n.d.)

Another source of immigrants in Iceland are refugees and asylum seekers. Statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], (2021) reported that 85% of the world's refugees are hosted in developing countries, with Turkey hosting the largest percentage of the world's refugees, with more than 3.7 million refugees in 2021. Iceland is a member state of the United Nations Refugee Convention and is thus a host country for refugees. Iceland's quota of refugees is far less than the quota of refugees received in most refugee hosting countries, due in part to the challenge of accessibility as an island.

As time has progressed, it is apparent that immigrants in Iceland are here to stay, and Iceland is no longer a homogenous nation. As of the end of year 2021, immigrants in Iceland made up 14% of the total population in Iceland with an annual increase of foreign citizens averaging at 1,3% (Hagstofa Íslands, n.d.). Iceland is also in the midst of rearing second generation immigrants as the number of immigrant children slowly increase in society. In 2007, the Icelandic government introduced a policy on multiculturalism and integration in response to the increase of migrants. The objective of the policy was to ensure that all residents living in Iceland would have access to equal social and economic opportunities in society (Guðný Björk Eydal & Guðbjörg Ottósdóttir 2009). Education policies were also introduced to aid immigrant children in adapting the Icelandic language in school and society to continue the preservation of the Icelandic language. As Icelandic society continues its transformation as a multicultural society, discourses do exist in its response to its new inhabitants. Examining the attitudes of Icelanders through the years is an important aspect that can help in the understanding of its interactions with immigrants.

## **2. Intergroup Theories**

The foundation of social interaction between individuals and group lies in the development of cognitive processes and social communication and exchange that an individual gathers over a period of time (Nelson, 2009). We develop these cognitive representations of ourselves and others from an early age, as we learn about social categories and stereotypes and how to fit in, in a society (Stangor & Ruble, 1989). Theories on social interactions matter as they help us understand how individuals consciously and unconsciously judge and behave with each other, how stereotypes are created, and how prejudice can sometimes be a product of illusory beliefs (Hamilton, 1981; Mullen & Johnson, 1990). For this thesis, two theories will be used to analyse intergroup relations in Icelandic society. One theory will illustrate the importance

of self-image and historical memory in shaping a group's social identity whilst the other chosen theory will assist in understanding the consequences of maintaining social identity.

## 2.1 Social Identity Theory

As social beings, we have an innate need to identify ourselves based on our membership to a certain social group in society that has beliefs, values, and norms that we identify with and can relate the most to. Our lives are often signified by the small groups that we belong to (Gencer, 2019) beginning with our family and friendship circles who have an influence in our behaviour and identity creation to peers, work colleagues and friends. The sometimes-unconscious behaviour of seeking membership to a group begins at an early age. As children grow and begin to socialize with other children their age, they learn to include desirable peers whilst excluding undesirable peers and creating conditions where access to resources is limited (Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010). At the same time, they develop an awareness of how groups work and interact with each other and learn to morally judge and rectify social inequalities (Killen, Elenbaas, & Rutland, 2015). As they grow to adults, group membership and interactions with other groups evolve as desired resources change, and behaviour is motivated by cognitive processes that are shared by members of a group with common objectives whilst avoiding membership in another group less desirable, eventually creating a distinct collective blueprint for a particular group. Social identity theory was developed to explain this form of attachment to a desired group of people. The theory is defined as the process in which we identify and categorise ourselves and modify our individual behaviour to fit in to a desired social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social Identity Theory was originally conceived by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and 1980s. The theory helps us understand that social identities are paramount in determining people's attitudes towards their desired social group. Tajfel

and Turner described this need for affiliation to a group as a helpful tool in developing an individual's self-esteem and self-image in relation to the individual's strong emotional ties to a desired social group. When an individual adheres to membership in a particular group, his or her personal identity, which is made from the unique individual characteristics that define our identity, is considered just as important as social identity. Personal identity is the psychological semblance to social identity and researchers on identity development among adolescents, showed the importance of aligning psychological thought in understanding social group membership (Campbell, 2011). By combining the two concepts, personal identity as an individual and social identity as a member of a group, self-categorization theory was conceived by John Turner and his colleagues to complement social identity theory (Turner & Reynolds, 2012). Self-categorization explains how and when people define themselves as individuals and as a group member. Social and personal identity are interchangeable as an individual may behave differently when interacting with a group of colleagues or peers, or with a close friend or family (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2000). Thus, individuals tend to have different behaviours when interacting not only with their close relations but also with their close social groups as opposed to strangers and distant social groups.

Individuals that identify themselves as being in the same social group are theorised to do so by exhibiting patterns of similar thought and behaviour. Social groups are formed from different social settings that include memberships in sports clubs, social groups in school, or in workplace settings. These settings create an environment of people with similar beliefs and norms identifying with one another and creating an ingroup awareness. An ingroup is a social group whose members share a common need for positive social identity whilst comparing themselves with the 'other' group, a group that they can only partially relate to or not at all. The 'other' group known as an outgroup motivates an ingroup's behaviour that



promotes, protects, and maintains the social identity of its group which could sometimes lead to discriminatory behaviour and bias towards the outgroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Studies on intergroup relations between ingroups and outgroups characterize the labelling of an outgroup by an ingroup, as perceived differences, that are dictated by a range of factors which could include a threatening group size of the outgroup, conflict in power dominance between the groups, perceived or real cultural differences of the outgroup, and negative stereotyping based on a certain narrative. When one social group perceives positive information about their own group compared to another group within the same society, they consider the 'other' group as a less desirable group, while other members attracted to positive information about a group, prefer the positively identified group (Nelson, 2009) . Once a certain group is identified as an outgroup, their members also experience a negative image of themselves in relation to the social group that labels them. Cultural stereotypes are a good example of labelling of an outgroup (e.g., fat people are lazy) that is based on their perceived abilities. People categorized in such groups tend to be aware of the stereotype whether they adhere to the reputation or not (Devine, 1989). Other studies of intergroup behaviour also noted that negative attitudes towards outgroups most always leads to overestimation/overconfidence bias where the outgroup's discrepancies and size is exaggerated to fit a negative depiction of its undesirability (Stephan et al., 2009). Stephan and his colleagues added that once an outgroup has been depicted in a particular negative image by a dominant, more powerful ingroup, it is exceedingly difficult to reverse the narrative to a positive one.

Collective memory from previous history is another psychological approach to social identity that can also be examined to explain interactions between groups. Collective memory is defined as the memory of a society who share historical events that impacted their wellbeing. According to a 1997 study on social processes and collective memory (Páez

et al., 1997) researchers of the study stated that the collective memory of past events in a society had an impact in the society's present social attitudes and needs. They explained that collective historical events were passed on through generations and the frequency of certain events in a society provided an emotional climate that was most often remembered, especially if it is negative (p. 4). Drawing from Halbwach's theory on collective memory (Halbwachs, 1950, 1968), Páez and his colleagues also explain that people remember experiences through social interactions with one another. Gatherings such as traditional ceremonies, religious holidays like Christmas, Diwali, Eid, and national social events make memory formation a social one. Another approach suggested that social sharing is crucial in the assimilation of an emotional experience with other groups. As members of a group share their memorable events with another group, the other group may adopt the emotional experience for themselves (Rime et al., 1992).

## 2.2 Group threat theory

When many social groups are formed in a particular society, they form their own identity and use social categories to interact with one another. Social categorisation as previously introduced in this paper is a psychological process that helps people make social interactions predictable (Shkurko, 2014). A component of social categorization in the ingroup and outgroup dynamic often leads to social inequality as boundaries are reinforced. Categories are inclined to be associated with ethnicity, citizenship, religious or political affiliation or cultural differences in a society which encourages the categorization of people. People that are considered members of a less dominant group, tend to experience forms of exclusion from the more dominant group and as behaviour akin to ingroup favouritism persists, intergroup discrimination becomes a consequence (Tajfel et al., 1971). The act of categorization and subsequent tension in ingroup/outgroup relations are also known to be a form of a cognitive process that can result in prejudice behaviour and can cause social

conflict between groups in a society. As members of an ingroup identify with one another sharing common beliefs, norms and values, an increase of distinctiveness from others occurs (Turner et al., 1987). This can result in hostility towards other groups as the ingroup favours its own group and a feeling of threat, perceived, or otherwise is felt towards an outgroup (Newman et al., 2012).

Group threat is a significant factor of bias and behaviour between groups and is often difficult to dissolve once it is prominent in a society. As a sociological theory, it proposes that an ingroup that perceives a threat on its own interests results in the negative attitudes toward an outgroup. As social groups shape their identity and sense of belonging, intergroup antagonism is inevitable and a critical component of the survival of the group (Corenblum & Stephan, 2001). Consequently, any act that is outside the adopted norms of the ingroup is considered detrimental to the group and must be eradicated. Philosopher Barbara Ward described this well by stating that groups are tribal in nature (Ward, 1959). As a tribe, members share common traditions, customs, and common language. Consequently, other groups or tribes are seen as undesirable.

Studies in Group threat theory conceived two main types of threat among social groups: realistic threat and symbolic threat (Nelson, 2009, p. 4). Realistic threat refers to threats a group perceives to their resources, group power and welfare. Symbolic threat refers to threats a group perceives towards their belief system, social norms, values, customs, and traditions. Ideology and morality can also be considered symbolic as different ethnic groups living in the same society hold on to their beliefs. Realistic and symbolic threat can also occur on an individual level and has a significant effect on one's self-identity and self-esteem (p. 6). The actions of an outgroup that impacts an ingroup can also be perceived as a direct threat to the group's social status. Other theories have also been formed to complement group threat theory and suggests that perceived threats, real or not can have

real consequences. It also suggests that previous relations between groups can also determine the level to which a group perceives threat. Cultural values of the group, individual differences and events surrounding the interactions between the groups are also factors in perceived threat (p. 6). An example of perceived threat could be rising rates of unemployment in a society which may not necessarily have a causal relationship to the increase of migrants in a society. The theory nevertheless holds perceived threat to more significance than actual threat due to impact it can have on society.

A central point of intergroup threat theory is the role of power between groups. The theory argues that both high and low power groups perceive threat, but it is more likely that the latter group would have a higher degree of perceived threat than the former. Low power groups are dominated by the high-power group as seen in several studies on the interaction between ethnic groups (e.g., Black Americans & European Americans and Native Canadians & Anglo Canadians) (Corenblum & Stephan, 2001). High power groups are more likely to respond more strongly to the feeling of threat, as they perceive that they have a lot more to lose and often have the resources to respond strongly to threats as opposed to low power groups.

Groups susceptible to perceiving group threat are those that have a long history of conflict (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). Similarly, groups that are smaller than the outgroup are prone to feeling threat (Campbell D. E., 2006; Quillian, 1995). Historical cultural differences are an important predictor of perceived threat and cultural values are the backbone of social identity. Cultural differences and threats of loss of culture can create intergroup conflict. This is because groups may feel threatened when it is proposed that they abandon their own culture for another culture that may have different values and norms that are against their own cultural values and norms (Piontkowski et al., 2002).

Karl Marx pointed out that conflict is inevitable in intergroup relations (Marx, 2011). Social groups demand relevance in society as relations between groups go through inevitable social change within an existing social structure, new patterns of social relations could be perceived as a threat to a group's image. Elastic social systems can reduce the intensity of conflict. However, conflict is sometimes bound to happen as groups compare their share of resources with another group and begin to question the other group's legitimacy, leading to group threat behaviour (Coser, 1957).

### **3. Findings**

Interpersonal communication and exchange are a vital part of a society's social value and image. As mentioned previously in this paper, it is important for social groups to share common traditions, norms, and values to maintain their self-image and identity and that cultural beliefs are primary in the creation of status (Ridgeway, 2014). Iceland is proud of its self-image as a resilient society and as it welcomes new social groups with immigration, it strives to maintain its national identity, presumably with little struggle due to its belief in its self-image that has been upheld by the numerous forms of sentimental literature (Gunnar Karlsson 2001; Jón Jónsson Aðils 1903; Middel, 2018; Vigdís Finnbogadóttir 1984). The increase in globalisation has coincided with the rise of multiculturalism as people from different races, ethnicities and tribes mingle with one another and form new social realities. Acculturation studies have shown that sociocultural adaptation is necessary for new members in a society to effectively interact with other members already present in the society. Language fluency, inclusion in education and the labour market, cultural tolerance and acculturation strategies are all principal factors of intergroup relations (Searle & Ward, 1990). Psychologist John W. Berry developed a model of acculturation to explain these strategies. The term acculturation is defined as the assimilation of people to a different, most often, dominant culture (Berry & Sam, 1997). Acculturation strategies explained in

Berry's model include assimilation – the complete adaptation to a new culture, separation – deliberate avoidance of interactions with the new culture and holding on to own culture, integration – combining the new culture and original culture, and marginalisation – leaving the original culture but struggling to integrate to the new culture due to discrimination. This chapter will discuss the attitudes, practices and socialisation characteristics that exists between Iceland's natives and the new immigrant population. The chapter will include a discussion on culture relations and tolerance between Icelanders and migrants, the state of the labour market, examples of social conflict between the two groups and within immigrants, and Icelanders' strategies to maintain their social identity in response to the influx of its new citizens in the country.

### 3.1 The economic interaction before 2008

Iceland has a unique history of isolation from outsiders and has rarely needed to share its culture despite being under Nordic rule for centuries and having British and American military occupations for periods of time in the previous century. It is only with the influx of immigrants, its long-term residents, that Iceland began to feel the change in its society.

Immigrants have steadily increased in Iceland and a 2019 report from Eurostat stated that there are on average 33,5 immigrants for every 1000 inhabitants in Iceland (Ómar Hjalti Sölvason et al., 2021). As Iceland went through a period of major economic expansion in the 2000s, the demand for economic labour increased in certain sectors in the fishing, healthcare, and service industries. This demand was met by labour migrants primarily from Eastern Europe with Polish migrants being the largest percentage of imported labour for Iceland (Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir et al., 2020). This influx of immigrants contributed to Iceland's economy significantly in the 2000s and the privatisation of Iceland's state-owned three banks led to substantial economic growth for the country between the years 2004 and 2008 (Seðlabanki Íslands, 2010).

During this time of exponential economic growth, relations between Icelanders and immigrants who mostly came for work was partially inconsequential. Research on intergroup relations was, for the most part, centred on statistical records of the flow of immigrants to Iceland as well as Iceland's investment on maintaining its culture and social identity, whilst facing social change as the country became more accessible for migrant workers and tourists (Jóhanna Gísladóttir Bissat 2012; Karl Sigurðsson & Valur Arnarson 2011; Magnfríður Júlíusdóttir 2010). Studies on intergroup relations before the 2008 economic crash were centred on studying the level of assimilation of the economic immigrant in the job market and inhabitants' experiences and challenges in the workplace primarily due to communication barriers. In a 2006 study on immigrant workforce in Iceland, a survey was conducted on foreign workers employed in a fish freezing plant in Dalvík managed by Seafood company Samherji hf. A survey was done on foreign workers that made up 36,5% of the plant's workforce that were primarily from four nations: Sweden, Thailand, The Philippines, and Poland (Rúna Kristín Sigurðardóttir, 2006). As Icelanders shied away from service jobs in fish factories across the country, Samherji was having a challenging time getting employees to work and staff turnover was extremely high. Results from the survey showed among others that overall, Icelandic workers, who made up 61,5% of the respondents to the survey felt that communication with fellow migrant workers was good and the same was seen when migrant workers were asked the same question (p. 46). When Icelandic participants in the survey were asked about communication between migrant workers from each country, Icelanders found Swedish and Polish migrant workers to be easier to communicate with than the Thailanders and Filipinos (p. 50). The same study also discussed results from two 2004 national Gallup polls that are significant to mention. One poll asked Icelanders if they felt that foreigners who decide to settle in Iceland should learn the Icelandic language. The results from the poll showed that 90,3% of the respondents felt that foreigners who live in Iceland should learn the

language. The other question in the second poll asked how Icelanders felt about foreigners working in Iceland. 49,2 percent of respondents felt that foreigners residing in Iceland was a positive occurrence, 26% felt that it was negative, and 24,8% had no opinion whatsoever (p. 14). The researcher concluded that a possible explanation for the results in the polls could indicate that working class Icelanders feel that foreigners are taking away their jobs, economic resources and increase competition for job promotions within the company (p. 26), an indication of the presence of a realistic threat. Other studies on foreigners working especially in rural areas yielded comparable results (Eva H. Önnudóttir, 2009; Wojtyńska & Zielińska, 2010).

Before the 2008 economic crisis, research on prejudice against immigrants was relatively low as social mobility within the island was changing. Population in the rural areas was diminishing as Icelanders migrated closer to urban areas and more importantly, attained higher education. These rural areas rely on agriculture, animal husbandry and fishing as a source of income and these industries require workers that do not need a high level of education. Icelanders generally acknowledged the need for labour from external sources and attitudes towards receiving immigrants was positive due to the economic benefit (Friðrik H Jónsson, 2003). Learning the Icelandic language was encouraged for the migrant workers that chose to settle in Iceland whilst prejudice against immigrants increased especially when related to access to resources (Lára Dögg Gustafsdóttir, 2008; Oddný Ösp Gísladóttir et al., 2007). Distrust in the viability of the banking system among other significant factors led to the eventual collapse of Iceland's banking system and the country dived into a recession in October 2008 following a Global crisis (Guðný Björk Eydal & Gubjörg Ottósdóttir, 2009). Employment levels decreased and unemployment rose from 1% in 2008 to 8% in 2009 (Seðlabanki Íslands, 2010). The most affected group in the economic decline were immigrants who lost the jobs that primarily made them choose to move to Iceland in the first



place. Polish citizens made up 60% of the total unemployed residents of foreign origin in 2010 (Wojtyńska & Zielińska, 2010) and this chapter will focus more on the study of this large group to represent and reflect the overall experience of all Icelandic immigrants.

While studies after the Icelandic economic crisis showed that immigrants were leaving the country in significant numbers and predicted that perhaps 50% of immigrants would leave Iceland (Guðný Björk Eydal & Gubjörg Ottósdóttir, 2009), the reality was far different. Statistics Iceland reports that foreign immigrants made up 7,6% of the total population in 2009 when immigrant population was at its highest. By 2011, the proportion was 6,6% (Hagstofa Íslands, n.d.). Most of the immigrants who were working here remained despite the grim economy. After all, they filled the jobs that Icelanders did not want prior to the economic crash (Rúna Kristín Sigurðardóttir, 2006, p. 8). As Icelanders fought their way through the economic crisis, they did so by having large protests against the Icelandic government that led to the famous *Búsahaldabyltingin* - The 'Pots and Pans' Revolution, which is considered one of the most defining historical events in Modern Iceland. Icelanders went through a period of severe economic deprivation. Many lost their jobs, homes, savings and other assets and distrust against the Icelandic government increased (Stefán Gunnar Sveinsson, 2013). Icelanders and immigrants alike experienced increase in inflation, devaluation of the currency and economic instability. Wojtyńska and Zielinska (2010) described in their research on Polish immigrants that the employment experience for immigrants after the crisis was tumultuous. Employers, who were mostly Icelandic, hired immigrants for lower working hours, reduced overtime hours and added more responsibilities in the job (p. 7). They described employers being more demanding and requiring that employees speak Icelandic to get hired, a requirement that was not as asserted before the economic crisis. Economic welfare deteriorated for Polish immigrants and all immigrants in general, as it became difficult to find work in an increasingly volatile economy. Immigrants

also felt uncertain of continuing to stay in Iceland or leave. For many Polish immigrants interviewed in the research, the shift in their economic wellbeing coincided with a negative relationship that immigrants now had with their economic producers.

### 3.2 The economic interaction after the 2008 economic crisis

The fall of Iceland's economy in 2008 is a profoundly poignant part of Iceland's recent history. As Iceland endured devastating economic collapse internally with loss of jobs, homes, and savings for many of its citizens, especially the working class, Iceland was also being vilified by global media (Ólafur G Halldórsson & Gylfi Zoega, 2010). The hard work that Iceland had put in its social identity as a self-reliant nation and self-built former colony had now become known for suffering the largest financial failure suffered by any country in economic history (Pinedo, 2011). The Icesave scandal which was central in Iceland's economic collapse brought a depressing long dispute for Icelanders (Bonsignore, 2010). Altercations between the British and Dutch governments against the Icelandic government over the dispute created frustration and anger for citizens of all three countries and created a negative social memory for Icelanders far more significant than the economic loss it was enduring. The British and Dutch governments reiterated that the Icelandic government was responsible for the investments lost in collapsed Icesave deposit fund owned by the then private Landsbankinn bank and that it should pay up (Kristín Loftsdóttir, 2014). Iceland's nationalism took a hit following the economic crisis that devastatingly affected the way its citizens saw themselves in relation to others (Ginsburg et al., 2002).

Icelanders generally agreed on the sentiment that government corruption caused the economic crisis hence the 'pots and pans' revolution in response to it (Berglind et al., 2012). As the British froze Landsbankinn assets, Icelanders took to the voting polls to ensure that Icesave bills passed in parliament would not be signed into law (Kristín Loftsdóttir, 2014). Iceland's economic reputation was heavily hit and the government was forced to accept

monetary assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in November 2008, a move that was heavily criticised by the public (International Monetary Fund).

The economic crash was a major source of embarrassment and shook the self-image of many Icelanders while a global economic crisis was also occurring. Iceland had to endure mass unemployment, loss of assets and had to face the fact that their social identity may not be as high of value as they thought (Kristín Loftsdóttir, 2012). As Icelanders tried to put the pieces together, the plight of immigrants was left unseen amid the country's disarray. Icelanders who were previously nonchalant about the participation of migrant workers during Iceland's economic expansion until mid-2008 had a shift of attitude towards their economic partners. Unemployment, potential loss of future earnings and increased competition of resources created an uneasy environment against immigrants who were now seen as taking up social and economic space in society. This perceived threat has persisted since the economic crash as anti-immigrant sentiments float around (Þ. Einarsdóttir et al., 2018). A study on relative deprivation by Berglind and her colleagues (2012) describes how a sudden negative shift in economic welfare influences distress and triggers opposition against the social order present when the shift occurs. Feelings of injustice, anger and depression are heightened during an economic crisis and perceived economic loss is blamed not on the individuals themselves but on forces beyond their control, for example, inflation or corruption.

Mobility in Iceland is characterized by two main characters: the tourist and the migrant. After the economic crisis, tourism began to increase as Iceland got another opportunity in the spotlight with the volcanic eruption of Eyjafjallajökull in 2010 (Lund et al., 2017). The eruption led to a disruption in air travel, drawing interest in Iceland's nature, a positive symbol of Iceland's social identity. In a book chapter on mobilities in Iceland, Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir and Kristín Loftsdóttir (2016) draw a distinction in the reception of foreigners after the economic crisis. As tourists began to flock the country, there was a positive change

in the economy which was beneficial for both Icelanders and immigrants. Tourists are a symbol of admiration of one's country which is an advantage to the continued formation of a country's social identity. Economic migrants on the other hand are subject to the economic needs of the country and their contribution is always in a process of change, be it positive when demand for labour is present, or negative, when competition for resources increases due to a crisis. The chapter explains that the sudden interest in Iceland from both tourists and migrants led to a rise in negative narratives against foreigners due to the rapid change in social structure leading to the need of Icelanders to accentuate their national symbols (p. 30). The increase in tourism has coincided with the demand of migrant workers in the tourism industries, making tourism one of the main solutions in Iceland's economic recovery (p. 22). Major marketing campaigns to promote the country were initiated successfully leading to an annual increase in tourists to the country that has been consistent up until the 2020 Covid 19 pandemic (KPMG, 2020). However, working conditions for migrants have been heavily criticised and articles in Icelandic media reported an increase in violations as it pertains to migrant workers in the tourism industry. Other reports in the media in 2015 also stated that tourists were undesirably destroying Iceland's nature as they littered tourist sites and used the natural habitat as toilets (Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir & Kristín Loftsdóttir, 2016). Iceland's nature and language are important symbols of national identity for Icelanders and while the country remains accessible for both migrants and tourists, nationalist attitudes continue to form that emphasize upholding Iceland's unique culture.

### **3.3 Role of Icelandic language in cultural interaction**

Iceland's cultural identity is based on four characteristics: language, folklore, literature, and nature (Eirikur Bergman, 2008). Language and culture were key in helping Icelanders shape their own identity away from their Danish colonisers as its nationalism developed from early 19<sup>th</sup> century until when they gained autonomy from the Danish crown in 1944. As a Danish

colony, Iceland remained steadfast in maintaining its unique culture through the sharing of literature, stories, and poetry. As a nation with no previous history of sovereignty and no recorded participation in wars, the Icelanders were a solitary isolated state (Gunnar Karlsson, 2001). Succumbing to Danish domination in 1380, Iceland was politically occupied and a source of income for Denmark but its relations with the Danes was relatively limited to general governance from the monarchy and Icelanders had some form of autonomy but little control over their economy and defence. Their interaction with foreigners was limited to business merchants and religious affiliations (p. 149). However, the Turkish raid of 1627 is considered the darkest of interactions at that time as pirates connected to the Ottoman empire invaded ports around the island. Four pirate ships attacked and killed citizens and Danish officials and captured over 200 Icelandic men, women, and children, whilst destroying and burning buildings in several regions around the coast of the island. This collective memory was well recorded and there are several written accounts of the experience (p. 143). The struggle to return the captured Icelanders is also well recorded as it took ten years and a fund raising for a ransom for the captors to return them to Iceland, although only a small percentage returned as some of them assimilated and chose to stay in their new habitat. Other calamities in Iceland are also very well recorded with written records kept well through the centuries. Written records of high mortality rates, volcanic eruptions, famine, smallpox outbreak, and poverty have mostly been recorded and have added to the collective memory of Icelanders (Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, 2001).

Literacy and education are a significant feature of early Iceland that can be considered a major contribution to the country's self-image and social identity both in Iceland and globally. After a period of little written literature in mid-15<sup>th</sup> to mid-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, literacy levels increased with the introduction of official regulations that children and adults should be able to read, although the ability to write was not as encouraged (Guðmundur

Hálfðánarson, 2001). The interest in new thought and knowledge made education popular as more Icelanders travelled to Copenhagen for further studies.

The Icelandic language has been continually preserved and its grammatic foundation has gone through slight change since its conception more than a millennia ago. Research studies have shown that Icelanders wish to continue this preservation and expect immigrants to learn the language (Ómar Hjalti Sölvason et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, Iceland has been steadily advocating for multicultural strategies for their new citizens but continues to expect the immigrant group to assimilate to the Icelandic culture in similar sentiments to other European countries with immigrants. However, recent studies on native Icelanders' expectations of immigrants adopting Icelandic customs and values showed mixed results in what Icelanders expect in terms of immigrants assimilating in society.

An interaction of cultures leads to what is known as culture shock for immigrants and natives alike. As both groups encounter each other and strive to adopt to the cultural interchange, individuals develop strategies to counteract the culture shock. Multiculturalism researcher Elke Murdock (2020) did a survey on Icelanders' individual interaction with immigrants and discovered that there is a degree of openness of native Icelanders towards the immigrant population and overall, immigrants have made a positive impact in their municipality. The survey also showed that direct social contact between Icelanders and immigrants was found to be positive. The study also noted that it is considered healthy for people to maintain their own language and customs and biculturalism is encouraged. Nevertheless, positive interaction between a host country and its new residents is challenging.

A study on immigrants' participation and membership in social and civil institutions such as clubs, organisations or associations also found significant results. 79% of immigrants did not have a membership to a club, organisation, or association, 15,5% belonged to one, while

5,3% belonged to two or more associations (Birgir Guðmundsson & Grétar Þór Eyþórsson, 2020). Community trust however was remarkably high among immigrants and had little correlation to participation and membership and the researchers pointed out that previous studies have shown that community trust is a consequence of the civil participation of members of society as well because of acquiring social capital.

### **3.4 The increase of Ethnic diversity**

In describing the characteristics of migration in general, Oded Stark and his colleagues theorized that, increase in specific human capital, in a society, yields higher economic productivity, higher earnings and higher income tax that is collected for the well-being of the native inhabitants (Stark et al., 2015). But migration is not purely rooted in economic objectives, but rather various other factors play a role. Marriage, family reunions, political and humanitarian causes of migration all play a role in migration. For immigrants to decide to migrate to a new country, a key reason is to search for better life chances than what they have in their current domicile. One of the main debates in European migration after the global economic crisis is which type of migrants should be received as refugees and asylum seekers arrive to the West in large numbers compared to economic migrants that have easier access to the West due to mobility agreements within and outside Europe. This global mobility is now viewed as a crisis and national borders and ethnic boundaries are being normalised after a period of celebrated mobility before the global economic crisis (Schiller Glick & Salazar, 2012).

Iceland as a migrant host country has seen an increase in ethnic diversity. Iceland relies heavily on immigrants as a source of labour, and it is important to analyse Icelanders' attitude towards the growing diversity of peoples in the nation. The ideology behind multiculturalism as a concept is that groups from diverse types of cultures should be equally valued and accepted in the society (Murdock, 2020). In reference to the group threat theory previously

discussed in this thesis, it is important to understand how Iceland's native inhabitants and immigrants perceive each other as they share the same socio-economic space.

At the beginning of the century and before the economic crisis of 2008, female immigrants in Iceland outnumbered the males significantly according to a survey done by (Þorgerður Einarsdóttir et al., 2018). As demands in the construction industry increased, the number of male migrant workers steadily climbed. A study on ethnic diversity in Iceland was conducted and data was collected in a survey from 2,200 individuals with Icelandic citizenship with 600 of those individuals classified as immigrants with Lithuanian, Polish and Filipino ethnic backgrounds (p. 137). The survey measured the levels of the respondents perceived political knowledge, perceived self-obligations as naturalized Icelandic citizens, and the respondent's perceived social status in society. Results from the study concluded that there were various levels of perceived integration among the immigrant participants in the survey. Filipino immigrants generally felt more integrated to Icelandic society than Polish and Lithuanian immigrants even though access to Iceland is more difficult for the former than the latter due to free movement agreements between Iceland and the rest of Europe (p. 145). While the answers from Filipino immigrants on all three issues was closer to a native's experience than Polish and Lithuanian immigrants, all three groups felt largely disconnected and did not feel confident in understanding their status as Icelandic citizens with a foreign background in relation to their political, civil, and social roles in society. The study questioned how immigrants from Asia can feel more integrated in society than the geographically closer Polish and Lithuanian immigrants. The study did point out that work environments play a significant role in helping integration of immigrants including access and assistance to learn the culture and language more easily and even more importantly, having the willingness to do so.



The willingness to assimilate and adopt to a new society is an interesting area of study for sociologists and psychologists. The experience of assimilation is two-fold; the immigrant must be open to adapting or adding on the host country's cultural practices and the native inhabitants must be open to the awareness of the new culture in their cultural and social space and to acknowledge and respect it. Additionally, there must be a willingness for interaction between two groups (Berry J. , 2001). In J. W. Berry's article on the Psychology of Immigration, the psychologist states that the process of acculturation between two groups is characterised by the intergroup relations of a dominant group with a non-dominant group and both need equal attention in a society as mutual exchange, positive or negative is a process that is likely to take place (Berry & Sam, 1997).

### **3.5 Icelandic citizenship as an assimilation tool**

Gaining Icelandic citizenship can be viewed as a symbol of acceptance and sociocultural adaptation for an immigrant and can be considered cultural capital as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu theorized in his take on cultural symbols of social status (Bourdieu, 1986) . An immigrant's adoption of the host country's language is a significant step in social inclusion for both immigrant and host and attending language courses aids in achieving that goal (Hoffman et al., 2021). Citizenship laws in Iceland have changed dramatically in the last twenty years and research studies on its impact in the society are few. The law of the right to citizenship was modified from previous citizenship laws and formally adapted by the Icelandic government in 1953 and required that citizenship could only be obtained according to law (Lög um íslenskan ríkisborgararétt nr.100/1952). Modifications to the laws has increased significantly in the last decade and include requirements such as proof of language proficiency, delay, or exclusion to obtaining citizenship due to fines and imprisonment and disclosure of current financial status; requirements that were not present in the decade prior (Útlendingastofnun). Other significant requirements such as the compulsory changing of an

individual's name was removed from law in 1996 despite a public outcry years before, when musician Vladimir Ashkenazy fought against taking an Icelandic name in 1972 to meet the requirement to become a citizen (Sunnefa Völundardóttir, 2016).

Requirements to attain citizenship in Iceland for foreigners is a tedious process and very much tied to the economic contribution of the immigrant over a period of time as per immigration law. A research study done by Sunnefa Völundardóttir (p. 10) on becoming a citizen in Iceland showed that current laws and regulations have been modified with the purpose of restricting the number of new Icelandic citizens in the society. Immigrants within the European Economic Area (EEA), which Iceland is a part of, do not require a residence permit to live and work in Iceland. EEA immigrants only need to register their presence in Iceland with the Iceland Registry upon arrival (Útlendingastofnun). Immigrants from outside the EEA do not have access to Iceland unless they first obtain a Schengen Visa that allows free movement within EU and EEA member countries (Schengen visa info). Non-EEA immigrants go through a rigorous process to obtain a residence permit once they get into Iceland and getting a work permit is even more difficult and there are barriers for these immigrants to enter the labour market. Residence permits are renewed annually for non-EEA immigrants, and it takes four years to obtain permanent residency after an applicant shows proof of taking an Icelandic language course of up to 150 hours (Sunnefa Völundardóttir, 2016, p. 64). Research shows that the language requirement is a great barrier for non-European immigrants and the taking of the test is criticised as a form of a discriminatory practice against immigrants who may find it more difficult to learn the language than others (Innes & Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir, 2017). For example, studies previously showed that immigrants from Asia are the largest group to fail the test, however these occurrences have decreased (Friðgeir Andri Sveinsson et al., 2013). Also, access to Icelandic language lessons for immigrants are sparse in the rural areas compared with the urban areas making it difficult

for immigrants to collect the hours needed in citizenship procurement. Sunnefa Völundardóttir (2016) states in her research, that non-EEA immigrants have a lesser chance to live and work in Iceland for the long term due to the barriers that have been put in place. In the interviews she took with six participants who are non-EEA immigrants who have lived here for ten years or more, she found that some participants experienced coerced working conditions to ensure that they do not ruin their process of obtaining citizenship. Two participants felt that they needed to stay in an undesirable job to ensure that they do not miss out on what they call 'their freedom to work where they please.' Participants also acknowledged feelings of instability in their workplace as they were often offered temporary positions in the company which has been viewed as a modern form of 'serfdom' by professor Eirikur Bergman (2008) as many immigrants experience conditions that bind them to their workplace to keep their residency permits and employers take advantage of that (Sunnefa Völundardóttir, 2016, p. 90). Obtaining an Icelandic citizenship is seen as a way out of the monotonous state of economic uncertainty and immigrants from countries such as India, China, Tanzania, and Venezuela among others that do not allow for dual citizenship, make obtaining Icelandic citizenship a patriotic dilemma for an immigrant living in Iceland.

### **3.6 Assimilation challenges and prejudice**

An interesting psychological approach to intergroup relations can be found in the study of cognitive development in children. Studies show that teaching children at an early age about cultural tolerance aids in positive intergroup relations as adults. A key component in the study of intergroup relations is understanding how prejudice and bias is formed from the affiliations that individuals have within their social group and the subsequent distrust of the outgroup under certain conditions (Killen et al., 2015). In a study on adolescent judgements and reasoning in the context of social exclusion and distribution of resources, Melanie Killen and her colleagues (2015) hypothesised that group membership is strongly correlated to

issues of social inequality and the fair treatment of others. In the study, the researchers described how fairness and autonomy in social groups often conflict with one another as well as help to develop moral judgement that can help increase and correct unfairness in a certain setting. Further research shows that both implicit and explicit prejudice continues after childhood and adolescence and continues to adulthood. Homogenous settings are also especially prone to stereotype behaviour, and it is common that schools that are ethnically congruent are prone to social encounters that are prejudice and use explicit stereotypes (Rutland et al. 2010, p. 280).

As immigrants adjust to life in Iceland and choose to settle for the long term, they automatically seek ways to increase their social and cultural capital as members of society. Pierre Bourdieu illustrated in his theory of capital that an individual's social capital is very much tied to the possession of networks and resources attained through its membership to a social group (Bourdieu, 1986). In Icelandic society, we can identify sources of social capital in education, workplaces, community participation, encouragement of long-term friendships cultivated from childhood to adulthood and the use of *kennitala* or social security number that identifies who is a resident of Iceland and who is not. The process of attaining social capital in Iceland for immigrants has had its challenges. In a study exploring Filipino women's experiences in Iceland, Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir (2019) found that participants in her study experience a loss of cultural capital and social status even though their economic status is efficient. The participants reported that they felt different forms of prejudice in their workplace, a source of social and cultural capital for many Icelanders and an environment that aids in the formation of social identity. The interviewees highlighted that migrant capital which is the social networks between migrants in a community, is more feasible to attain and the women focus more on migrant networks to improve their lives in their new society (p. 217). The professor concluded that significant differences exist when it comes to an

immigrant's social status in Icelandic society and immigrants tend to focus on mobilizing social networks with other immigrants rather than with Icelanders. Another principal factor was that four of the five interviewees have college degrees and only two have been able to transfer this cultural capital to the Icelandic cultural space (p. 217).

Previous research on attitudes towards immigrants was focused on migrant issues that related to economic downsides and opportunity costs on the provision of social welfare and public services. Recent studies, however, are more focused on concerns of loss of host country culture, possible increase of crime and perceived diminishing national security for the host country (Hainmueller & D.J., 2014). Another research study on immigrants in Iceland studied the attitudes native inhabitants have towards refugees and asylum seekers who migrate to Iceland (Margrét Valdimarsdóttir & Guðbjörg Andrea Jónsdóttir, 2020). It stated that previous research has shown that Icelanders have a more favourable and positive attitude towards migrants in their society in comparison with other countries. In the study, the researchers conducted a survey using a random sample of 3,360 individuals asking questions related to people's attitudes on Muslim refugees and immigrants residing in Iceland. The results showed that overall, Icelanders felt that the country is doing fine with its Muslim migrants, and that the country could even take in more refugees (p. 230). However, results from a regression analysis showed that in relation to the respondent's political orientation, there was a perceived link between Muslim immigrants and terrorism. Media attention on migrant issues both locally and internationally does not help in creating positive attitudes towards immigrants from the native citizens of the host country. The global impact of stereotyping Muslim immigrants as being linked to terrorism following a series of terrorist attacks in the West, has led to a decrease in positive attitudes towards all immigrants in general (p.235). However, Iceland as a host country for refugees receives fewer refugees when compared with other European countries and may explain the generally positive

attitude towards a smaller group of immigrants as compared to studies on larger migrant groups like the Polish. This may change as the immigrant group gets bigger and perceived group threat is realized, as is explained in the study that an increase in Muslim immigrants in Iceland may result in increased prejudice, an occurrence that is common in other Western host countries.

#### **4. Discussion**

Iceland is still in the process of evolving as an immigrant host country just like its still-changing landscape. This paper has discussed findings in research studies that reflect the evolution of migration and subsequent impact on Iceland's social and cultural identity. Results show that the migration before 2006 was relatively insignificant with a small percentage of immigrants living permanently in Iceland with minimal narratives of group threat or loss of . The expansion of the single market and free travel within the European Economic Area led to an increase of a much-needed labour force into the country which dramatically changed Iceland's social and cultural space. More importantly, Iceland's popularity in the international sphere led to positive attitudes for Icelanders which in turn led to negative attitudes towards other ethnic social groups in the society as feelings of pride and superiority increase (Coenders, 2001). The studies analysed in this thesis have shown themes of subtle prejudice as immigrants experience push and pull factors when there is a demand or lack thereof of labour in the country. A negative change in economic welfare impacts heavily on immigrants as a vulnerable group as they experience significant loss of resources and marginalisation which could in some cases, turn into conflict between the dominant ingroup and outgroup (Allport, 1954).

The findings also showed that cultural capital is a significant factor in the immigrant experience after the economic crisis. While many economic migrants move to Iceland, they

are subjected to getting jobs that require little use of the Icelandic language or that do not need a prominent level of education. There are differences in the attainment of social and cultural capital between Icelanders and immigrants and the access to learning the Icelandic language is a major reason for the difference. It is easy to presume that immigrants may take years to learn Icelandic and they are subject to work and social environments that are concentrated more with foreigners than Icelanders, for example, in fishing factories or the tourism sector. Other studies also show that there is little support in the education of children of foreigners which can cause an even greater barrier for second generation immigrants (Hermína Gunnþórsdóttir & Markus Meckl 2018, 2020). These barriers may cause minor impact on the social identity of the Icelandic but are of great concern on the continuing social identity of the immigrant. Studies show that barriers to interpersonal communication between immigrants of any nationality and a host country can lead to anti-immigrant sentiments and support for anti-immigration policies. Studies also show that direct contact with unfamiliar cultures can create circumstances where there are tangible cultural threats to an individual directly (Newman et al., 2012, p. 654).

As immigrants experience challenges in assimilating into Icelandic society, they look inward to themselves to form communities. As in the case of the Filipino women in the assimilation and prejudice sub chapter, immigrants create social networks with members they are more familiar with in terms of ethnicity or social status in society. This ingroup formation is a response to immigrants feeling left out in the social space that Icelanders occupy due to low levels of cultural capital among other factors. As Icelanders also looked inward towards themselves after the economic crisis, immigrants became the outgroup, left to deal with the aftermath of unemployment and significant reduction of job opportunities, a situation that can still be felt today. Family reunification became more challenging with strict residence permit requirements for non-EEA citizens and gaining citizenship has become more difficult after

the economic crisis than before that may cause immigrants to feel less connected and less integrated with their adopted society.

## **5. Conclusion**

The main purpose of this thesis was to identify how Iceland, as a previous homogenous nation, interacts with migrants as a new group in its society, and how a major economic and political event impacts this interaction. By examining local research studies on the immigrant experience in economic and social settings in Icelandic society it can be concluded that Icelanders respond positively to the presence of immigrants in society and direct social contact with immigrants is generally good. However, the results indicate a presence of increased prejudice and threat in the economic welfare for both Icelanders and immigrants in relation to access to resources. Results also show barriers in integration have a negative effect on the social interaction between Icelanders and immigrants. The local research obtained for this thesis could not fully answer the research question and a qualitative analysis may have been a more effective method in understanding the experiences that Icelanders and immigrants have as they interact with one another. Nevertheless, the case studies used in the research show that positive social interaction between citizens of a host country and migrant group is significantly dependent on the level of economic contribution perceived by the society. The research in this thesis indicates that a significant economic event led to a change in social interaction between Icelanders and immigrants, but further questions arose on the causal relationship between a temporary decline of social identity due to a crisis in society and the ensuing increase in perceived group threat towards an outgroup. Based on these conclusions, local sociologists may, in the future, focus on the correlation between significant events that occur in society and the subsequent change in social interaction between social groups.



Social identity and group threat theory are important theories in helping us understand intergroup relations in a society. Significant collective events in a society play a crucial role in how intergroup exchange occurs and unifying theories about these exchanges can help us produce relevant subjects of research that can provide amicable solutions beneficial for both Icelanders and immigrants. This research has identified characteristics in society as a collective that impact intergroup relations. As the world continues to globalize, countries all around the world may continue seeing an increase in mobility and migration, some through unconventional means as has been the case in the recent past of migrants travelling across dangerous sea routes. Iceland is also expanding demographically, and social interaction will continue to be redefined. Researching the dynamics of social interaction in a new migrant host country can yield interesting studies of intergroup communication between social groups. And while civil participation of immigrants may be low in Icelandic society now, the positive outcome of community trust could be related to cultural tolerance and the encouragement of immigrants to speak their language and be bi-cultural. This symbiotic relationship between the cultures can yield positive intergroup contact which would be interesting to research in the future.

## 6. References

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