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When Integration Is Not Enough

Experiences of Discrimination Among Highly Educated Young Adults
with an Immigrant Background





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On average, immigrants have lower levels of education and weaker labour market attachment than the rest of the population. Many of their children have nonetheless done well in education and working life and are establishing themselves in the Norwegian middle class. For many, the process of integration has therefore also been a journey of upward social mobility. But unlike the upwardly mobile of the post-war era who came from modest Norwegian backgrounds, the children of immigrant taxi drivers and cleaners make this journey in a society where they also, to a far greater degree, encounter racism and discrimination based on ethnicity, religion and skin colour.

The backdrop to this report is an empirical pattern from Fafo's quantitative studies of everyday life and integration among people with an immigrant background. Contrary to what many expect, it is those usually regarded as the most successfully integrated - those who are born in Norway, who have higher education, or who find themselves in high-status jobs - who report the most discrimination (Midtbøen & Kitterød, 2019; Dalen et al., 2024; Friberg et al., 2026). In academic literature, this pattern is referred to as an "integration paradox". We know that this pattern exists, but we know less about how those it concerns themselves make sense of their experiences. This is what this report examines, through three questions: how racism and discrimination are experienced, how they are navigated and managed, and what implications these experiences have for the sense of belonging in Norwegian society.

The report was commissioned by IMDi as a qualitative supplement to Fafo's quantitative studies of everyday life and integration. The analysis draws on semi-structured interviews with 19 young adults of ethnic minority background, born in Norway or having arrived in the country as children, all of whom have succeeded in higher education and working life. They thus represent precisely the group that reports the most discrimination in the surveys. The interviews were analysed thematically, drawing on Ann Swidler's concept of culture as a "tool kit" and on sociological theories of identity and boundary-making as central analytical resources.

We highlight three types of narrative that recurred in the material and that together show how social mobility both constrains the participants and expands their room to manoeuvre. The first concerns an internalised ideal of equal worth: education and upbringing in Norway have instilled an expectation of being treated as an equal, and the encounter with racism becomes all the more distressing when reality fails to match this ideal. This stands in contrast to the parental generation, who are described as more "grateful" and resigned. The second type of narrative concerns a sense that there is "no room to put a foot wrong" once one has gained entry to middle-class positions, where one is often the only person — or one of very few — with a minority background. Participants describe a double awareness, in which they must both protect themselves against group stereotypes and avoid confirming them on behalf of others. The third type of narrative concerns how this mobility has at the same time provided access to new resources - knowledge of the law and of "the system", the middle class's "tribal language", networks, time and material goods - which participants use to understand, prevent and resist differential treatment.

A key point is that these mechanisms operate simultaneously, and within the same individuals. The ideal of equal worth and the tools of the middle class have a mobilising effect, while the sense of having no room for error fosters risk aversion and withdrawal. Rather than different people being mobilised and demobilised, the same individuals alternate between these responses depending on what is at stake in a given situation.

The findings shed light on why reported discrimination increases with education and generation. On the one hand, social mobility changes how racism is perceived and interpreted. Education and increased formal status raise expectations and expand the repertoire for recognising subtle and structural forms of differential treatment. On the other hand, the experience of exposure changes, as entry into majority-dominated areas increases the vulnerability of feeling and being read as a representative of a group rather than as an individual.

In closing, we discuss what experiences of racism and discrimination do to this group's sense of belonging and identity. A central point is that a relatively secure position in the middle class means that one is less at the mercy of others' definitions of oneself, and is to a greater extent in a position to insist on defining one's own identity.

That the successful second generation reports more discrimination should be read neither as a sign that integration has failed nor as an expression of oversensitivity. Rather, it appears as an expected feature of the integration process itself. When social mobility raises expectations of equal treatment and gives people a language for recognising differential treatment, more of the racism that actually exists will be seen, experienced as injustice, and put into words. At the same time, social mobility provides access to cultural resources that can in turn be used to challenge racialised boundary-making.

The findings rest on a limited number of interviews and can neither be generalised to all those with a similar background nor be regarded as exhaustive. Future research should prioritise more extensive comparative analyses across class background, ethnic and religious affiliation, gender, sector and geography.

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