

A Threat to Homogeneity: Refugees and National Identity in Iceland
Iceland

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Section I

In order to research how Iceland, a notably peaceful country, integrates immigrants and refugees, a current challenge for many countries around the world, we interviewed various immigration professionals and learned about the improvements, current challenges, and differing approaches to integrating non-native Icelanders and creating a peaceful multicultural society. No additional fundraising efforts contributed to this project.

When we envisioned this project many months ago, we were inspired by the idea of studying what is often dubbed one of the most peaceful countries in the world, as opposed to one of the most conflicted, which is often the focus of social science research. However, after arriving in Iceland and fully comprehending just how small the refugee population here is, we expanded our research to focus on the broader category of immigrants in Iceland, partly to respect the privacy of the tiny population of refugees and partly to increase the feasibility of our research.

We continued to focus on our original questions, yet with a wider focus, asking: How do Icelanders understand the homogeneity of their country? Is the presence of immigrants in Iceland commonly known, and how are immigrants received by native Icelanders? Is the environment in which immigrants live in Iceland peaceful, or do they face forms of structural violence in the community? We interviewed various representatives of immigrants' rights groups as well as government officials who work with, advise, and counsel immigrants. While we did not face a language barrier, as almost all Icelanders speak English, many of our interviewees commented that immigrants face a stigma of "otherness" if they do not speak fluent Icelandic. The Icelandic language seems to act as a symbol of pride and history for native Icelanders and is a hard barrier to break through for many immigrants.

One topic that was often brought up during our interviews was the ongoing controversy surrounding the possibility of building Iceland's first mosque. While the decision-making process is currently stalled, the debate of whether this is a welcome addition to Reykjavik has become very heated. Some argue that Muslim values are at odds with Icelandic values such as women's and gay rights. Others argue that opposition is based in Islamophobia and a mosque should be welcomed into the community in order to support the creation of an open and multicultural society. Overall, the controversy has opened up discussion about immigration policies and has forced people to recognize that their homogenous population is becoming increasingly more diverse, for better or for worse.

In light of the contentious discussion surrounding the mosque, we asked many of those we interviewed about their feelings on the future of multiculturalism in Iceland. Although the responses varied, everyone told us that they were optimistic. Even though change was slow, they understood that these sorts of movements take time and when looking at the progress already made, they were sure that the future would bring more promising results. Thus, unlike many countries in which integration and peaceful coexistence seem unattainable, this does not seem to be the case in Iceland, which has already proven to have a peaceful (though not always flawless) model of integration of immigrants into Iceland.

As a lack of information is often cited as a major roadblock for social movements, many of our interviewees were involved in initiatives that sought to increase awareness about immigration and foster an appreciation for diversity. In conjunction with awareness raising, the interviewees also sought to break down the 'us vs. them' mentality that is pervasive within Iceland. The privilege of native Icelanders seeing themselves as the 'us' and non-native Icelanders as 'them' is a common mentality that is often

visible in many movements around the world. For example, in the United States, white privilege allows Caucasians to think of themselves as 'race-less' whereas non-Caucasians are identified by race. This binary separation can be seen in Iceland as immigrants (regardless of the amount of time they have resided in Iceland) are perpetually labeled as an 'other.' Breaking down this type of thinking is a primary objective of many with whom we spoke.

Ultimately our project aimed to study a homogenous peaceful society that is slowly becoming more diverse and see whether or not peace can still be maintained in a multicultural society. Among those we have interviewed, integration of immigrants into Icelandic society seems to be the obvious goal of their governmental and nongovernmental immigrant programs in order to promote peace. However, some have raised the provocative question as to whether separation, rather than integration, is in fact the key to peace. Thus, this begs the question that if everyone working for immigrant rights in Iceland agrees that the key to peaceful success is an effort towards integration, how does that fit in with this research, which proposes isolation and boundaries (the opposite of integration) can bring peace?

Our research has allowed us to illustrate and understand the current landscape for immigrants in Iceland, however eight weeks of interviews does not provide enough information to draw definitive conclusions on the subject of peaceful integration and coexistence. In a world that is increasingly becoming more interconnected and globalized, we need to understand the potential advantages and disadvantages of creating multicultural societies in order to sustain peaceful existences.

We believe that more research is necessary to fully understand immigration into Iceland's homogenous society. Thus, we propose that more time be spent looking at a specific population of immigrants to serve as a case study. Since the Polish community is the largest within Iceland, this may be an ideal community for such a case study. Further research should speak to those who are involved in multicultural initiatives and immigration (like those we spoke to), but should also include a wider range of occupations and life experiences. Furthermore, we believe that special attention should be devoted toward the children of immigrants who were born and raised within Iceland. Looking at how first and second generation children of families who have immigrated to Iceland are accepted (or not) into the larger demographic will shed light on larger systems of structural and symbolic violence.

Throughout our time here, it is clear that Iceland is one of the most peaceful countries either of us has ever visited. However, structural or symbolic violence does exist within Iceland, especially in regards to the immigrant community. These types of violence, although harder to quantify, can be equally damaging to those it affects. Thus, the importance of understanding how to peacefully coexist while embracing diversity is still a topic that needs to be addressed. We hope our research can benefit those facing structural violence in Iceland by identifying problem areas and providing a starting point for future research, analysis, and change.

Section II

After completing this project, our definition of peace has come to focus less on a lack of violence and more on a vision of positive peace, in which a society provides an accepting space for people of all backgrounds. Our project has contributed to understanding how Iceland has made strides in its attempts to achieve a positively peaceful society, and the challenges that have been overcome along the way, as well as the challenges that still exist. In the short-term, our project has provided a window into the current state of multiculturalism in Iceland. In doing so, our project has also identified some present challenges which can be seen as areas for long-term focus and further research.

"This project has provided us with a deeper understanding of peace and multiculturalism. We both agree that it has changed our thinking about how communities approach immigration, integration, and how to support these efforts."

-Sarah Dickson & Michelle Van Veen

Photos

