‘We always open our doors for visitors’—Hospitality as homemaking strategy for refugee women in Istanbul

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Abstract

This article examines social relations for Syrian women in Istanbul by focusing on micro-level lived relationships of hospitality. Through an ethnographic, qualitative approach to key sites of encounter, the article explores how migrants navigate a public milieu in which hospitality has partially been taken away from the local community’s moral oversight in a context of a national political discourse on hospitality. We also analyze ‘hosting’ and ‘guesting’ as mutually negotiated and contested practices. This study highlights the agency and resistance strategies of Syrian women to their ‘differential inclusion’ into Turkish society. It examines how they navigate (in) hospitality and also unpacks the use of virtuous dimensions of hospitality (1) to reverse discriminatory ethnic and class discourses and renegotiate subjectivities that are imposed upon them as ‘guests’; (2) to bring forward perceived cultural similarities between Syria and Turkey; and (3) to revalorize their roles and status in their families. The contribution of this study is to focus on hospitality as a means of theorizing how women navigate complex and conflicting, familiar and yet also new, social ecologies as they make themselves at home.

Keywords: hospitality, social integration, gender, refugee, social class, agency

1. Introduction

Hospitality is an important source of pride for Manal, a 45-year-old mother of four with a high school education. After I (Author 1) finished the generous slice of marbled chocolate cake she had made, her daughter brought me a plate of sugar cookies topped with dates and nuts. Her gentle smile meant that it was impossible to refuse them or the several glasses of tea that she poured. After tea, she suggested coffee and more cookies, seemingly unaware that hours had passed. A visit with Manal includes a welcoming greeting at the
door, comfortable places to sit, delicious food, polite conversation, and, most important-
ly, giving the feeling that the visit could go on indefinitely. As she says, ‘I love having visi-
tors. My house is always open’. Syrian hosts like Manal want to create delight with the
amount and variety of food offered and to create comfort with their attentiveness to a
guests’ needs, for example, by re-filling plates or teacups before being asked. Guests also
have obligations: to praise the food and surroundings, to maintain cheerfulness and polite
conversation and to not overstay their welcome.

Throughout our research with Syrian migrants in Istanbul, almost every woman with
whom we spoke described difficulty participating in hospitality with their Turkish neigh-
bors. When describing their difficulties, our interlocutors were often emotional. Some,
like Manal, even cried. In contrast, a few described how they felt at ease when they visited
community centers and attended Quranic recitation or language courses. These varying
accounts reveal the significance of hospitality practices among migrant and Turkish com-
communities for women’s homemaking. Hospitality generally refers to the giving of time and
space to others to create and strengthen social bonds between family members, neighbors
and even strangers (Andrikopoulos 2017). It is a major value and source of identity in
many cultures (Candea and da Col 2012; Herzfeld 1987; Rozakou 2012) and broadly
refers to the activities related to hosting guests in a manner that makes them feel cared for
and comfortable.

This article highlights the significance of hospitality in the social lives of Syrian women
in Turkey as they attempt to craft relationships with their Syrian and Turkish counter-
parts and to make themselves at home in a new social environment. It is well established
that hospitality is endowed with psychological, social, and political meanings, making its
practices 'symbolic medium[s] par excellence' (Morse 1994). Yet, most literature on hos-
pitality and migration focuses on hospitality toward migrants on the part of locals (Indra
1993; Ticktin 2011; Moulin 2012), whereas we are concerned with the other side of the
coin: what hospitality practices represent for the migrants themselves. We illustrate how
hospitality is a resource of agency and turns into a site of contention, whereby wider soci-
opolitical subjectivities are renegotiated (Vandevoordt 2017).

This research contributes to the literature in the following ways: First, it is one of the
few studies on migrant integration in a non-Euro/American society with differentiated
cultural understandings of integration. Most studies about refugees who resettled in
Western countries report that refugees experience ethnic discrimination and racism
(Portes and Rumbaut 2006), whereby appearance and distinctive speech appear as
markers that emphasize difference between immigrants and locals. Few studies have
looked at the question of integration in the context of neighboring countries, in which
those involved believe that cultural and religious similarities abound (Chatty 2017; Kaya
2017; Dagtas 2018; Rottmann and Kaya 2020). As such, this study offers a valuable com-
parative case.

Second, this article calls for more attention to the role of hospitality in the supposed
‘integration’ of migrants. While social integration is at the center of political and academ-
ic debates, there is no standard definition (Castles 2010). Research on integration gener-
ally focuses on identifying its determinants or on evaluating which types of social
networks—whether the ones within the ethnic community, ‘bonding’, or across com-
munities, ‘bridging’ (Ager and Strang 2008)—are more efficient. This strand of research
also measures degrees of integration and differentiates integration by gender or ethnic group (Ersanilli and Koopmans 2011). Indeed, women’s integration receives special attention, though usually in a paternalistic fashion (Yurdakul and Korteweg 2013). Here, we join critiques of integration (especially migrant women’s integration) as a racialized discourse of nonbelonging (Korteweg 2017; Schinkel 2018) by showing how practices of hospitality have multifaceted ‘integration’ effects and mutually negotiated meanings. This article offers nuanced insights about migrants’ strategies and lived experiences and focuses on the symbolic significance of hospitality practices for refugees’ integration.

Third, using recent ethnographic research, the article demonstrates the importance of micro-level analysis in migrants’ trajectories and reveals the significance of several key sites of encounter (public spaces, community centers and homes), with multiple ambiguities. This perspective is important not only as complementary to macro-level approaches; it also contributes to a reflexive assessment of hegemonic understandings of integration that are often based on quantitative data.

In the next section, we present a framework for conceptualizing understandings of migrant social relations through attention to hospitality. Then, after describing the methodology, we show how refugees navigate the (in) hospitable context in Turkey. We then look at hospitality practices as a technique to overcome adversity as women establish homes in Istanbul. We argue that hospitality serves to (1) reverse discriminatory ethnic and class discourses by subverting the power relation between hosting and being hosted; (2) bring forward the perceived cultural similarities between Syria and Turkey; and (3) revalorize their roles and status in their families. Thus, studying hospitality enables us to show how Syrian women navigate their (partial) inclusion into Turkish society and struggle with regard to gender, social class and migrant status.

2. Reclaiming hospitality as an analytical tool beyond ‘integration’

This research uses a focus on hospitality to address scholarship concerned with conceptualizing inter-group interaction or, what is commonly called ‘integration’ (Ager and Strang 2008; Açıkalın et al. 2020). Integration in the modern world is governed by states who decide who will have rights to belong to the orderly structure of society (Rajaram 2018). Thus, integration is more aptly described as ‘differential inclusion’ or the ‘filtering, selecting and channeling’ of migrants as part of migration regimes (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 165). While most studies of integration have moved from focusing on immigrants’ (in)ability to integrate to focusing on structures of power and inequality in society, key questions about the extent to which the concept of integration is useful for analysis remain unanswered. Regardless of which variation of the term integration is used (whether it is called ‘inclusion’, ‘incorporation’ or another term), it almost always implies a discursive labeling of immigrants as ‘others’ who are inserted into a certain nation. This move legitimizes the imaginary of a socially constructed and well-defined nation, reinforcing ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). It also shifts our gaze away from the many ways that migrants participate as full members of societies...
The study of hospitality as part of women’s homemaking allows us to shift the focus of research toward what happens when people move across social ecologies, and to go beyond replacing one term (i.e. integration) with another one (i.e. inclusion) (Schinkel 2018). Such an approach puts the artificially delimited field of migration into the broader sociological study of society. We can also attend to the political and social troubles of the so-called host societies, which are commonly overlooked in studies of integration (Korteweg 2017).

Viewing integration through hospitality experiences highlights processes and degrees of inclusion and exclusion rather than a uniform determination of in-/exclusion (Ilcan, Rygiel and Baban 2018). While acknowledging that hospitality is fragile and arbitrary (Rosello 2002), we follow others who have argued that its basic components of ‘sovereignty, exchange and inequality—are clearer than key notions in the integration/assimilation paradigm, such as society, culture and adaptation’ (Andrikopoulos 2017: 289).

The study of hospitality is directly linked to feminists’ theories of home (Young 2005). In these approaches, home is not only a haven, but also a place of tension and conflict, cultivated by women as part of their ‘women’s work’. Hospitality is a labor that women (primarily) take on in their homes along with maintaining the home itself. It is widely valued by both Turkish and Syrian communities and is an important social performance for women (Dagtaş 2018; Rottmann 2019). In Middle Eastern societies, including Syria and Turkey, there is a ‘social and sometimes religious duty to provide hospitality/generosity to the stranger’ (Chatty 2017: 178).

Our work specifically addresses the growing study of homemaking practices for forced migrants (Boccagni 2017; Brun and Fåbös 2015), which has shown that home consists of day-to-day practices of homemaking and is embedded in values, traditions, memories, feelings, and in broader political and historical contexts (Brun and Fåbös 2015). Hospitality operates on each of these levels of home: it is a daily practice; it is a concrete representation of values, tradition and memory, which is particularly relevant for people who may have lost their homes, like refugees, and it is embedded in national contexts. Like home, hospitality is a concept that scales to different levels of identity, including from a specific dwelling to a community, an ethnic group, a region and, finally, to the nation (Candea 2012). This scaling quality has been called hospitality’s ‘scalar elasticity’ (Shryock 2012) or ‘metaphorical extension’ (Herzfeld 1987) and means that the hosts’ reputation and host–guest relation can be made to stand for that of the entire family, ethnic group or nation.

Numerous studies explore the integration of migrant women (Açikalin et al. 2020; Owino and Weber 2020), yet their hospitality practices are often overlooked. Rozakou (2012) is a notable exception. She shows that humanitarian biopolitical power is based on refusing to allow refugees to become hosts, and she describes the ways in which volunteers assisting refugees aim to reverse this. Indeed, socializing and sharing food with neighbors are important social and cultural roles for many refugees, ways of performing social class, and means of facilitating business and familial relationships (Chatty 2017; Dagtaş 2018). Literature on migration and hospitality usually refers to one-way hospitality toward migrants on the part of ‘hosts’ or the hosting state. Openness of the migrant-receiving community to being a ‘host’ is seen as leading to better chances of integration for migrants (Mason 2011; Rozakou 2012; Bulley 2015).
The history of hospitality toward migrants shows that, progressively, the management of hospitality has moved away from society to become the responsibility of the state (Agier 2018). As the state has taken over the responsibility, refugees are progressively governed through humanitarian care regimes (Fassin 2011; Ticktin 2011) and are expected by the host state to be grateful, modest, and compliant (Indra 1993; Moulin 2012). Eventually, hospitality was largely supplanted by the rights of asylum and the politics of control of borders. As Baker (2013) remarks, the result is that ‘ours is perhaps the most inhospitable time there has ever been’ (3–4). Political discourses in Turkey and social practices in Istanbul show us that hospitality is at stake and that the politics of integration should be seen as interrelated with the politics of hospitality, with the micro-level both reflecting and shaping the macro-level.

Further, studies rarely look at what hospitality practices represent for the migrants themselves and how it can turn into a site of contention whereby reciprocal honor (Pitt-Rivers 1968) and wider sociopolitical subjectivities are renegotiated (Vandevoordt 2017). In this study, we adopt this perspective to shed light on the way in which differently positioned individuals struggle to reclaim hospitality back from the state, and thereby to reclaim their agency (McNevin and Missback 2018). We examine how agency is exerted as ‘guests transform into hosts in different settings, with different ideologies of hospitality’ (Andrikopoulos 2017: 289). Some scholars describe hospitality as competitive (Salamandra 2004) and have seen reciprocity as a form of symbolic violence (White 2004). In contrast, others see hospitality as the basis of neighborly care and a symbol of feminine virtue (McNulty 2007; Hoy-Petersen, Woodward and Skrbis 2016). We link those two approaches together by examining key sites of encounter and the ambiguities they contain. Examining the different ways in which Syrian women engage in hospitality relations with both Turks and also their fellow Syrians shows that ‘hosting’ and ‘guesting’ are mutually negotiated practices embodied and enacted ‘in particular spatio-temporal contexts’ of homemaking (Berg and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018: 3).

By focusing on migrant hospitality, we particularly want to explore the agency of migrant women as they ‘reflect on their position, devise strategies and act to achieve their desires’ (Bakewell 2010). For our purposes, agency is a relational property, whereby an agent is able to exert control over his or her social relations, which in turn implies the ability to transform social relations to some degree. To understand the way in which social relations evolve, we examine the content and the meanings of relations that are attributed by actors. Different kinds of social relations may require different strategies and identity negotiations (Valenta 2008). An exploration of how women actually experience (in)hospitality in everyday life points at their agency in weaving social integration.

3. Methodology

This research is based on ethnographic research on the experiences of Syrian women through participant observation and in-depth interviews. It also draws on interviews with state and nonstate actors to explore institutional arrangements with regard to integration. All research was conducted in Istanbul, home to the largest number of Syrian refugees in Turkey between June 2018 and June 2019. We conducted participant observation in the
homes and workplaces of 20 refugees and in 6 different language and community centers, as well as in social gatherings. We also conducted 44 in-depth interviews with refugees. Interviews were audio recorded (with permission) and later transcribed. We aimed to achieve representativeness in terms of gender, educational level, and marital status in the sample of refugees. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and lasted between one to two hours. Interviews explored the biographies of participants, namely their lives in Syria and current experiences in Turkey, including relations with neighbors. Interviews were analyzed using the thematic method of content analysis, detecting and isolating the most recurrent themes in interviews and comparing with other interviews using NVIVO. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The article focuses on a specific group of adult women (age 21–45 years), who are relatively lacking in formal education, typically said to be the least well-integrated because they are not often in the public sphere, nor working. They are rarely the focus of research studies, despite being the largest group of women, because they are harder to reach. Thus, their homemaking strategies and integration experiences are often overlooked.

4. Turkish state (in)hospitality: from guest to return discourses

When Syrians began arriving in Turkey in 2011, leaders welcomed them, perceiving the arrival of refugees as a humanitarian issue, an opportunity to display Turkish hospitality and a foundation for good relations between countries in the long run, after Syrians returned home. In 2013–4, the official discourse designated Syrians as ‘guests’ and ‘brothers’, represented the hosting community as ‘ansar’ (members of a Muslim community who showed hospitality to Prophet Mohammed) and stressed that Turkey will not close its doors to Syrians (Içduygu and Nimer 2020). This discourse was openly welcoming but premised on an idea of temporariness. Most migrants were given Temporary Protection legal status, which could be revoked at any time. As noted, hospitality is scalable: Micro-encounters in a house relate to politics and practices of hospitality in larger units, such as the nation-state, and, similarly, national discourses give guidance for appropriate actions on the micro-level. In Turkish political discourses where Syrians are said to be ‘guests’, they are thus not positioned as actual members of Turkey itself, but as close and similar (sharing the religion of Islam) neighbors who should be shown hospitality.

Yet, as of 2015, Turkish leaders seemed to have accepted the likelihood of a longer-term stay and eventually started using the term ‘uyum’ for integration, which is usually translated as ‘harmonization’. The equivalent word for integration—‘entegrasyon’—was avoided for several reasons, one of which is that it implies long-term legal and practical inclusion. The political discourse underlined the civilizational and moral superiority of the Turkish culture of hospitality vis-a-vis the anti-immigrant West (Yanasmayan, Üstübüci and Kaşlı 2019) as a strategy to criticize and counter the Western model. Additionally, Turkish leaders claimed not to be comfortable with the way the term integration was applied to Turkish migrants in Western Europe to posit the inferiority of Turks due to their supposed failure to adapt. These concerns led directly to the omission of integration
requirements, such as language or cultural knowledge in the newest migration law passed in 2014 in the wake of the Syrian migrant arrival (Acıkgöz and Ariner 2014).

Over time, the state continuously developed strategies to integrate refugees, giving them access to education, work permits, health services, and even citizenship (for skilled migrants). Yet, this was never accompanied by a strong integration discourse (Utku, Unutulmaz and Sirkeci 2017), which could have had the potential to ease societal tensions. The function of hospitality in both discourse and practice appears to have been solely under the purview of the state. Initial state-directed hospitality was progressively diluted and replaced by the securitization of borders and a discursive shift toward a discourse of return to Syria. The changing political discourse is linked to growing discontent within host communities and rising xenophobic tendencies (International Crisis Group [ICG] 2018). The public perceived Syrians as competing for the same resources, which was further exacerbated as an economic crisis hit Turkish markets and turned refugees into scapegoats during the summer of 2019.

While political and economic realities are certainly to blame for inter-ethnic conflict, hospitality norms are also involved. Many locals with whom we spoke explained that they cannot understand why the state seems to be doing so much for Syrians on a long-term basis. We heard repeatedly from our stakeholder interviews that local communities are ‘tired of hosting’ or that it is time for refugees to ‘become self-sufficient’. Such discourses are embedded in a conception of the locals (as the literal ‘host’ of guests) being deserving of gratefulness from migrants. Further, our interlocutors seem to feel that they should not have to indefinitely assume the financial and social strain that accommodating newcomers may bring. At the same time, the positioning of migrants as temporary guests also discursively constructs them as dependents who thus cannot become hosts.

Women are particularly affected by the rising intolerant climate toward migrants because their appearance (especially a differently wrapped headscarf) may mark them as ‘other’ in public. Some try to limit their movements and even avoid close contact with members of the host community (Gönül 2020). A recent UN Women (2018) report found that only half of Syrian women interviewed socialized with Turks at all. Syrian women leave their homes less frequently than men, as they are mostly not employed (Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services 2017). Hospitality practices can be seen as a tool to navigate post-migration (in)hospitality-ness, renegotiate subjectivities that are imposed upon them as ‘guests’, and to exert agency and resistance to ‘differential inclusion’ into society.

5. Reversing discriminatory ethnic discourses

When a woman migrates, her previous social networks in the home country are usually severed, quite literally, and need to be re-established post-migration. Syrian women can often establish relationships with other Syrians but most lament a lack of communication with Turkish neighbors, even in their building hallways, which meant that even hospitality practices of greeting and being greeted could not be taken for granted. In part, this is related to Syrians not being seen as equal status or as future citizens of Turkey. They are treated as ‘culturally’ different and can be subject to significant ethnic discrimination.
While some would argue that Syrians are not ‘integrated’ (Akar and Erdoğan 2019; Açikalin et al. 2020), a close look at hospitality shows how political discourses of temporariness and discrimination in daily life come together to construct their supposed lack of integration.

As Manal related over tea at her house,

We do not communicate too much with the Turkish people because they don’t let us; my neighbors, even when they are right in front of me, they don’t communicate. I tried to smile at one of them, but she turned her face away. They don’t want us. They refuse us. It is painful for me, imagine that they are my neighbors, and I cannot communicate with them!

Similarly, a young woman’s below statement indicates that she would be very keen to host Turkish neighbors and has attempted to do so, to no avail. She explained during an interview in her house, ‘Nobody visits me, and when I try to invite them, they don’t accept. . . . When I say hello to them, they don’t answer. . . . Sometimes I invite them to my house, but they say, ‘we are not available.’ They find excuses, so I don’t repeat my invitations’.

Another woman also related,

‘They speak to me in the street, but no one visits me in my house. I wish they would come to visit me. I tried to invite them, especially the wife of the man who manages the market beside our home. More than once, I told my daughter to invite her for tea or coffee. But they didn’t accept’.

According to our informants, members of the local community overwhelmingly and explicitly reject Syrians overtures of friendliness and hospitality, showing that they do not wish to engage in a reciprocal relationship. At the same time, both cultures also recognize the possibility of overstaying one’s welcome or taking advantage of someone’s hospitality, and thus, Syrians also find themselves in the uncomfortable position of only receiving and thus experiencing one-sided hospitality.

Some migrants experience direct and violent confrontation in public. An example of such discrimination was related by Manal; one day, she came into her Turkish class in tears. When we interviewed her a few weeks later, she explained that a Turkish woman on a bus had spit on her on her way to the class. She was not sure how the woman knew that she was Syrian, although she felt sure that her being Syrian was the reason for the action. Her level of Turkish was too basic to understand what had been said by the woman.

A common strategy that women employed to overcome this rejection was to change their appearance, and thereby avoid being noticed as ‘Syrian’. Manal explained,

‘I have to wear my headscarf like Turkish people in order for them to not recognize me as a Syrian and treat me badly. However, they recognize us even though we dress differently, but we will change more in order not to make them know us’.

This was a source of extreme frustration for her. By contrast, Rawan, who had adopted the same strategy as Manal of ‘blending in’, seemed proud that she had solved this difficulty and could pass as Turkish. At an interview in a childcare center, she explained,

When I first came, I did not think about clothing at all, but then I found that people deal with me as a Syrian, and they know I am Syrian from the way I wear
the Hijab [headscarf]... so I started to change. I started one year ago and took three years to make this decision. It wasn’t easy for me to change my clothing type, but I changed.

Clothing and especially their headscarf plays an important symbolic role in helping Syrian women to pass as Turkish. Contrary to possible preconceptions or external observations, the headscarf is an issue related to migrant integration in Turkey too and is not just particular to a Western perspective. While the distinguishing point in the West (and among some factions in Turkey) is whether a woman wears the headscarf or not, in Turkey, it is related to the way in which the headscarf is folded. What can be perceived as cultural similarity from the outside may in fact be constructed as a difference from within by the two groups. It is clear from the quotes of Syrian women that their decision to change the way they wear their headscarf relates to experiences of discrimination. Clothing investments can be interpreted as acts of resistance to social classification (Skeggs 1997). Indeed, by changing the way they wear their headscarf, migrants avoid being identified as Syrian during encounters with strangers.

The process of changing one’s appearance to fit in is not an easy one. As Rawan expressed, it took her three years to come to terms with this decision. Additionally, any changes made may not always be sufficient to mask the person’s identification, as per Manal’s experience, above. Either way, it is a choice that women make when navigating public space that has been shaped by national political discourses of their guesthood: to try to pass or to continue to reflect an identity that can bring the stigma of a guest who has overstayed. By changing their appearance, they hope to break the barriers to greeting and being greeted, show their cultural similarity and avoid direct discrimination. Clothing investments can be interpreted as acts of resistance to social classification (Skeggs 1997). Indeed, by changing the way they wear their headscarf, migrants avoid being identified as Syrian during encounters with strangers.

While there is clearly a rejection of Syrians on the part of some Turkish women, there can also be some reservations about participating in hospitality with Turks from the Syrian side, which manifests in shyness or fear in making the first step of reaching out to Turkish neighbors or maintaining contacts. Aseel, who is 46 years old and has three children, explained ‘when my children go to school I stay alone in the house. I feel afraid to let anyone in. We are here in a foreign country. We do not know the people enough’. The sentiments of migrants like Aseel show us the extent to which inclusion is two ways, involving both practical actions, but also willingness from both parties to be host, then guest.

Hospitality is also used as a tool to advance traits and characteristics of Syrians’ home culture, an important topic within this reflection. For instance, Aseel asserted that Syrians are more hospitable than Turks as she compared Syrians’ response to the arrival of refugees from Lebanon and Hama (a Syrian city that was under attack by the Syrian state in 1982).

We are not like them. We open our doors for visitors. I remember when there was a war in Lebanon, and Lebanese people came to Syria. We opened our doors for them. Also, when there was a war in Hama, we opened our doors for those people too. We let whole families stay in our houses.
In this way, she reclaims the honor that comes from being able to host others and to show kindness and charity. Such sentiments might be interpreted as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1989), whereby the host gains prestige and honor over the guest (White 2004). However, they also represent an assertion of value and virtue that is especially important for women (Hoy-Petersen, Woodward and Skrbis 2016). These practices are subversive as women refute subjectivities that were imposed upon them: namely the status of ‘guest’, with its accompanying sociollegal position, and the expectations of temporariness and subservience that come with this status (Vandevoordt 2017).

6. Bringing forward perceived cultural similarities

Hospitality, like all cultural exchange practices, is negotiated by actors in concrete situations according to shared, but also contested norms of care and honor. There could not be a single definition or description of hospitality that would apply to all Turkish citizens, much less to Turkish and Syrian citizens, but we can identify broad similarities between Turkish and Syrian norms and make some general comments about how each is likely to understand hospitality. The direct translation of hospitality in Turkish is *misafir perverlik*, an Arabic-Persian word, which literally translates as ‘loving, nurturing and protecting guests’ and is widely remarked upon by locals themselves and international visitors as a major cultural value. Similarly, *husn al diyafa* (حسن الضيافة), literally translated as ‘fine guest hosting’, is its Arabic equivalent. Hospitality is one of the tropes that defines cultures in Arabic speaking populations, said to be part of the survival rituals that helped to sustain a nomadic people in a harsh desert environment (Torstrick and Faier 2009). Similarly, reciprocal relations and hospitality are also highly valued in Turkey and have been linked to family ties maintained by women, whereby treating a guest well brings honor to the household and particularly to the wife or mother (White 2004). One function of hospitality in both cultures is to break down barriers between people and to remove the fear attached to the stranger as a threat. It involves multifaceted exchange of material and symbolic possessions between the host and guest. Hospitality is performed partly out of generosity, but also for monetary gain at the commercial level and for status gain at the personal level. Hospitable relations lay the groundwork for larger exchanges including business dealings and even exchange of children in marriage (Dagtaş, 2019).

In both Turkey and Syria, women tend to use hospitality to revalorize their neighborly roles and status in their families. In this way, focusing on the mechanisms through which negotiations of ‘host’ and ‘guest’ status happen reveals a sphere of agency and resistance for women. In taking on the host role, they bring out the characteristics of Syrian hospitality and implicitly highlight what they think are the similarities between the communities. Importantly, claims about cultural similarity and dissimilarity are social constructions that are themselves tied into discourses of power.

Community spaces, such as those run by municipalities or NGOs, are places where women are able to express their hospitality. They contrast sharply with the street, a space where Syrian women feel too visible and frequently excluded. For example, Hiba expressed her feelings about a local community center as follows: ‘We have come to Turkey only recently. You left your country and are under pressure. You are missing a lot, but you
would go to the center and forget all your worries. Your friends are all there. You let go of some steam. You own the whole world'. Her sentiments express the sense of respect and equality felt in such places, conferring a sense of ownership and being at home-ness. Through such spaces, migrants can develop close-knit relationships with co-nationals, with whom they frequently visit and socialize outside of the centers also. For instance, Author 2 shared tea and cookies with four women from Aleppo after a language class in one of the women’s homes. There was a feeling of brightness and warmth evident in shared jokes, as all of the women had been attending the language class together for several months. Conversation topics often turned to discussion of the similarities and differences between Syrian and Turkish cultural practices. These interactions (and many others we observed) illustrate the importance of social bonds and hospitality practices with other members of the Syrian community. They also inform us about perceptions among Syrian women, as we see that when they get together, they often discuss cultural values and reflect upon their (lack of) interactions with Turks.

However, these same local bonding spaces are also places in which Syrians and Turks may engage, even forming warm friendships. For example, many women told us that they felt happy at Qur’anic courses during which they would help Turkish women with their pronunciation of Arabic letters. Similarly, language classes can be a place where barriers are crossed between the two groups. For example, during a language class observed by Author 2 in a public school, the adult women organized meals and invited Turkish people working in the school, including the cook, the cleaners and the teachers to eat with them. One interviewee related, ‘Sometimes they come and talk to us. They ask us questions, for example the cook that works in the canteen came once...but of course not all of them... It depends on their disposition’. As her sentence shows, this is a tenuous connection, not guaranteed to happen and not always happening.

We found that food sharing is significant. There is a politics of food whereby wider sociopolitical subjectivities can be renegotiated (Vandevoordt 2017). Some migrants are able to cross social barriers with Turks in everyday settings, such as at their children’s schools, by joining meetings, making food and sharing. For example, Rawan generally describes these experiences favorably. ‘In my daughter's school, they sometimes organize meetings, and I join them and communicate with the parents. Once, there was a meeting in a restaurant for teachers’ day. I prepared Syrian food and went there—actually the people in the school were good to me’. However, she shared some difficulties that she faced.

In the beginning they were afraid to have contact with me, but then they felt that I am a good person, and they dealt with me in a good way. They did not try any piece of my food. I think they did not have the courage to try something new, not because it is Syrian. I assume they did not know who had brought it. They ate from everything on the table but did not try mine. After I saw that, I took the dish around and asked them to try it. Some of them tried, others didn’t, but other than that, they generally treat me well.

These examples show the symbolic importance of food sharing in potentially facilitating boundary crossing for women. Sharing meals is a primary way in which women bond with one another, a way of relating that both Syrians and Turks can understand. The school represented a space that Rawan was able to navigate through sharing food and by
persisting in getting people to taste it. This situation is more the exception than the rule as many other women describe shyness and exclusion at school events.

Despite the importance of community spaces, home is the central locus of hospitality relations. It represents a space where outsiders are welcomed into a family’s private life. We came across a few cases in which there were home visits among Syrian and Turkish neighbors. These cases do not represent the majority but allow us insight on the complexity and challenges of the hospitality process. For example, at an interview in her living room, Aseel recounted an instance when her Turkish neighbor came to her house:

Once my landlord’s husband entered our house to fix the heater. I felt that he is a religious man, and he saw us also as a religious family, so he went to his wife and told her to visit us. He said, ‘they are a very good family. Try to visit the wife’ meaning me. So she came to visit us, and later there were some visits between us. But, in the beginning, they were afraid of us.

Perceived religious similarity becomes a basis for extending the relationship of home-based hospitality and overcoming fear. This example shows how tenuous extending the bounds of hospitality may be: some common ground must be sought. The gap between the two communities in terms of cultural practices is more limited than in other cases, such as for Muslim migrants in Germany (Statham and Tillie 2016). Home visits among women are a comfortable and expected practice for many people from Turkey and Syria. Yet, even when there are strong cultural similarities, we also observed that increasing the appearance of similarity (as by asserting shared religiosity) can be mobilized to combat discriminatory discourses.

Author 2 observed another instance in which a Turkish family and a Syrian family crossed boundaries to interact with each other. The friendship between a Syrian man, from Aleppo, and a Turkish man, from the Black Sea region, owner of a shop in the same street, led to the marriage of their children and frequent visits between the wives. Nur, a Syrian woman, the mother of the bride, related that she and her daughter did not have much interaction with Turkish individuals before that. Yet, her daughter expressed enthusiasm about learning Turkish, as she would be marrying a Turkish man and would need it to communicate with him and his family. She also learned Black Sea dances. Now, the mother-in-law began visiting the bride’s mother to discuss the wedding.

The drive to learn Turkish language and to learn more about ‘Turkish culture’ (e.g. the dances and traditions regarding weddings) from the Syrian family’s side reflects that it is only after a longer friendship and plans of marriage, that Syrians may be able access cultural sharing. It is unclear from these exchanges to what extent the other side (Turkish community members) is also learning about ‘Syrian culture’, and therefore, it is unclear to what extent these exchanges are carried out on an equal footing. As demonstrated here, shared spaces represent an opportunity for interaction and crossing boundaries. Food and hospitality practices (Vandevoordt 2017) then constitute important strategies for negotiations in which refugees struggle to take on hosting roles themselves and thereby overcome social hostility.

Close relations between Turks and Syrians are rather rare. Yet, when relationships are established, perceptions of shared religiosity, food sharing and greeting and visiting in homes among women play important roles in bringing the two groups together.
7. Revalorizing family roles and social status

Hospitality is a social performance and means of establishing relations that has a variety of additional meanings besides the direct network that it establishes. Research suggests that being a neighbor is a particularly important social role for Syrian women who want to gain prestige for themselves and their families through hosting (Salamandra 2004). We found that it can be an avenue for expressing and contesting class position and a means of displaying honor and cultural values, which is an important family role for women. Hospitality is a concept that scales, such that a hosts’ reputation and the host–guest relation can be made to stand in for that of the entire family, group or nation. The class profile of our participants ranged widely from upper middle to lower middle, with a few cases of families belonging to the lower class. Yet, the common point between all was that the family had undergone a de-classing due to migration. Husbands who had long-term stable positions in Syria usually had precarious positions in Turkey with no work permit and irregular pay. Women typically did not work in Syria, or in Turkey, or at most worked only part time (UN Women 2018). Syrian families in Turkey are now living on a lower, more uncertain income, distant from sources of family support (Kaya 2020). In addition, it was brought up in many cases in the interviews, including by Aseel below, that families went from owning a house, inherited from and often shared with family, to having to pay a high monthly rent in a city in which renting a house as a Syrian has proven progressively more difficult (Kaya 2020). As such, in this section, we show how hospitality can be an avenue for expressing their family roles and contesting class positions as they confront a new social ecology.

The eventual visit by Aseel’s Turkish neighbors (described above), represented an opportunity for her to reclaim her lost social status and a tool to confront the discrimination and prejudice of the Turkish people toward Syrians. She was offended that many Turks assumed that she did not have a nice house in Syria. She says:

‘My Turkish neighbor once came to my house here, and when she saw the house, she said, ‘it is very beautiful!’ surprised. I told her, ‘my house in Syria was bigger and more beautiful than this one.’ The Turkish people think that they gave us a palace to live in, and that before we came here, we were living in tents!’

She felt the need to emphasize this idea repeatedly during an interview. ‘In Syria, my house was large. Thirty relatives came to our house after running away from other places. It had five bedrooms, not like this house’. This example clearly shows struggles between Turkish and Syrian neighbors in terms of class conflict as both groups compete for scarce resources in a tough economy (Saraçoğlu 2018). Aseel, as with many migrants we met, is engaged in a power struggle and trying to shift her position vis-à-vis the giver (Vandevoort 2017), in this case Turkish society. By showing symbols of affluence, rather than ‘dependent refugees’, Syrian women, such as Aseel, present themselves as ‘equal’ to the host through hospitality (Vandevoort 2017). Aseel’s experience demonstrates that each interaction between Turks and Syrians contains ambiguities, uncertainties, desire for connection, but also competition.

Homes are a space in which Syrian women typically have a lot of control and may be used to express agency. Indeed, hosts usually exercise their right to offer hospitality within...
the limits of their home (Derrida and Dufournantelle 2000). Aseel’s well-appointed home reflected her family’s honor and her own honor. Aseel was proud that her well-kept house showed-off her own abilities as its keeper. Despite the trials and tribulations of living in a foreign country in a reduced status position, her house was where she could show her value. This interaction with her neighbor shows that this is a mutually understood value between Turks and Syrians: her neighbor judges her based on her home, and she accepts this basis for judgment even if she rejects the final judgment overall.

Through the examples aforesaid, we see that hospitality and social relations that cross into homes are a way to perform social class and regain social status, to promote traits of Syrian cultural practices and express or create new family relations. Hospitality can be a form of symbolic violence and way of asserting higher status, but the absence of hospitality can also be a form of violence, a rejection of warm, inclusive relationships. The result is competition, but also a sense that cultural, familial and gender roles are being fulfilled and honored. For migrants, there is more to hospitality practices than merely a reversal of power relations: at least as important is the creation of an intimate, protective microsphere where everything appears reassuringly normal (Sloterdijk 2011; Vandevoordt 2017).

8. Conclusion

This research contributes to the literature by going beyond the concept of integration, generally presented as static and unitary. It shows that it is in fact uneven and differentiated depends on temporality and spatiality and the accumulation of interactions and modalities in which social bridging and bonding happen. Our interlocutors each use different strategies based on their trajectories and family situations with different outcomes, and they are further confronted with members of their new society who are more or less interested in facilitating their inclusion. This research explores hospitality in a context of perceived cultural and religious similarity (Rottmann and Kaya 2020), and yet shows how the process is still strained. We suggest that the study of integration would benefit from a focus on mutually negotiated hospitality practices, which foreground lived experiences and everyday practices.

The article is focused on issues important to women: their dress, conversation, and traditional tasks (cooking, hosting, and forming neighborly relationships). We stress that ties established among co-ethnic women are significant, because they facilitate an intense structure of feeling, a space of connection, and inclusion that matters. A focus on hospitality places emphasis on integration as a two-way, interactional process. We highlighted the importance of practicing hospitality among Syrian and Turkish women but have tried to show that it is still contingent and that sites of encounter may be ambiguous. Hospitality is certainly centered on the home, but it can also go beyond the home, to acceptance on streets and through bringing home-cooked food into community centers. State discourses, promoting hospitality (in the case of Turkey, the ‘guest’ and ‘brother’ discourses), paradoxically removes hospitality from being an obligation of members of society. The guests can then become stigmatized in the public sphere as uninvited.
interlopers and be refused the role of host. We show that the refusal of hospitality may be just as symbolically violent as the hospitality itself.

This article has also shown the importance of analyzing how hospitality practices are interpreted and mobilized by refugees to negotiate their positions within a hostile context. It thus contributes to the literature on social integration by advocating for a more holistic approach, considering all aspects of the relation and including a description of its textural, temporal and spatial dimensions. More research is needed on how Syrian and Turkish women enact and perceive hospitality, the role of political discourses in shaping their experiences and the broader web of social, gender and labor relations in which hospitality is embedded.

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