What you need to know

Recent waves of non-Western immigrants have challenged ideas of national belonging in the Netherlands. These changes happen alongside changes in the welfare state. As a result, volunteers in the Netherlands are now providing more social services, including immigrant integration. These volunteers teach newcomers the national language and share with them what it means to participate and belong in Dutch communities.

What is this research about?

After the introduction of the Civic Integration of Newcomers Act in 1998, the Dutch language became key to immigrants’ integration in the Netherlands. Speaking Dutch allows immigrants to contribute to Dutch society as they participate in the workforce, study, become engaged parents, and get involved in their local communities.

However, the withdrawal of state funding for social services has placed more responsibility on Dutch citizens to facilitate immigrant integration. To respond to the funding cuts, Dutch citizens developed volunteer-based Dutch language coaching projects. Volunteers now act as front line immigration workers and have become important resources in educating adults about Dutch citizenship.

Dutch language coaches offer a lens through which to examine the behaviours, traits, and practices considered compatible with Dutch citizenship. This research studied the perspective of citizen volunteers on what it means to be Dutch. These views were shown to often be more inclusive than those observed among the general public, Dutch media, and politicians. The different views reveal how race and religion still matter to many Dutch when thinking about who belongs in contemporary Dutch society.

What did the researcher do?

This study is based on 13 months of ethnographic research in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The researcher conducted 28 formal interviews with key informants: volunteers from a variety of community programs and their coordinators. All volunteers interviewed were white Dutch, but represented a range of ages and occupational groups. Participant observation was carried out at the language coaching projects and at public events.

Language coaching programs create social bridges among people of different cultures in Dutch communities.
events in Amsterdam and across the Netherlands. These methods revealed that beliefs about immigrant integration and social participation in Dutch society differ between volunteers and non-volunteer Dutch citizens.

What did the researcher find?

This study found that language learning can create social bridges among people of different cultures in Dutch neighbourhoods. Volunteers reshape ideas about belonging and good citizenship by helping newcomers “learn the way” in Dutch society.

In addition to learning Dutch, language students learn about their language coach’s ideas of what it means to be Dutch. This includes taken-for-granted expectations for social behaviour, norms, and values expressed in public.

Many Dutch, especially the language coaches, consider these social norms as more important than the knowledge that is tested by formal citizenship exams. Language coaches stress that newcomers’ problems with integration are structural, not cultural. These ideas challenge the beliefs of other Dutch who think that non-Western or Muslim immigrants are too “culturally backward” to belong in Dutch society.

How can you use this research?

This research shows the significant role of community and volunteer organizations in immigrant integration. The findings suggest that volunteers and community organizations can provide important insights and feedback for policymakers to design citizenship tests and citizenship study guides. This will ensure that citizenship education and tests are relevant to immigrants’ reality.

Citizenship policy and tests should also introduce immigrants to the behaviours and values that community members consider important. Collaborating on this type of initiative may lead non-profit organizations to new opportunities for funding.

About the researcher

Rhiannon Mosher is a social anthropologist who earned her PhD at York University in Toronto, Canada. Her doctoral work was supported by a Canada Graduate Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Her research interests include immigrant integration and settlement, the lived experience of citizenship, and voluntary initiatives. Her doctoral work focused on these questions in the Netherlands and the European Union. She plans to conduct research on related issues in Canada.

For more information, contact Rhiannon Mosher at rhiannon.mosher@gmail.com.

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