**Research Proposal**

**PhD Programme in Management - Open Call 2023**

**Sense of belonging and its effect on the integration process: increasing upward mobility and economic development for individuals with low socioeconomic status**

**Introduction**

Income and wealth inequality have reached extreme levels [1]. Urgent and immediate efforts are needed from governments and society to address the UN’s call to action to end poverty and reduce inequality by 2030 [2]. One way to address these issues is to increase the likelihood of integration between people with different socioeconomic status (SES), reducing inequality, and increasing the economic development of marginalized communities [3]. Recent work has shown that upward mobility from a [lower](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/lower) to a [higher](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/higher) socio-[economic](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/economic) status is far more likely to take place for low-SES individuals who have friends of higher SES [4] and live in integrated residential areas [5]. More examples of integration between different SES people and its outcomes

However, there is more to the integration process than mere exposure to people with different SES. Low-SES individuals, marginalized from the greater society and its assistance, often become part of a marginalized community in order to enjoy the benefits necessary to live in the conditions created by relative resource deprivation [4]. These benefits of belonging to a community include increased resilience in stressful situations [16] and reduced feelings of learned helplessness [19]. Although these benefits are crucial for low-SES individuals, belonging also brings costs that may become barriers to integration into society [5]. For example, a *sense of should*, the tendency of people to behave in the way expected of them, may hinder people from pursuing their own interests if this implies breaking a social norm [21]. Economic aspirations may also be limited by the distribution of income levels among people with whom individuals of low-SES interact [23]. Furthermore, integrating into a new group is cognitively demanding [6], a suppressed resource among low-SES individuals [7].

Considering that access to employment, health, government institutions, civil society, and the state are all associated with mainsteam society [6], the integration process for those with low SES is complex, risky, demanding, and difficult. Despite evidence that effective integration between different levels of SES has great benefits, such as reducing economic inequality and poverty (cite), there is a lack of understanding of the factors that influence integration from the viewpoint of low-SES individuals. The purpose of this PhD project is to study the costs and benefits of being part of a community and their influence on the integration process. I aim to investigate ways to support low-SES individuals during the process of integration into the established society. My current relationship with Duke University’s Center for Advanced Research (see CV) will allow me to run experiments partnering with their team of researchers. In addition, my experience with the Brazilian entrepeneur’s project on slums (see CV) provides me access access to Favelas as well as experience about how to work effectively with their leadership and population.

The research questions:

1. **How do the costs and benefits of belonging influence the integration process for low-SES individuals?**
	1. How does sense of belonging influence economic success, resilience, future thinking, perception of physical safety, learned helplessness, *sense of should*, and economic aspirations among low-SES individuals?
	2. Which of the previously mentioned factors influence the choice to integrate?
2. **What are ways to increase integration?**
	1. What behavioural intervention strategies could be used to 1) encourage the choice to integrate; and 2) reduce the cognitive weight of the integration process?
	2. What can policy-makers and organizations do in terms of choice architecture design to encourage the choice of integration and support low-SES individuals throughout this process?

**Theoretical Background**

According to the World Inequality Report (2022), income and wealth inequality levels are extreme, with detrimental consequences for societies around the world [1]. While the poorest 50% earns 8.5% of global income and owns 2% of global wealth, the richest 10% earns 52% and owns 76%, respectively. The World Bank estimates that between 75 million and 95 million additional people could be living in extreme poverty since the COVID-19 pandemic, for a new total of around 657 million people in 2022 [9].

One way to reduce poverty and economic inequality is expanding the understanding of integration between different SES groups. Recent work has shown that upward (social) mobility is highly correlated with less residential segregation and greater social capital [5]; while high economic inequality increases financial hardship for low-income individuals [12]. In a recent study using 21 billion Facebook friendships, the share of higher-SES friends was among the strongest predictor of upward income mobility for low-SES individuals [4]. According to a follow-up study, while exposure to high-SES individuals was crucial to forming such bonds, friending bias – “the tendency for people with low SES to befriend with high SES” – is also necessary for integration [14]. More studies. However, there are challenges to this process of integration and the tendency to befriend that have not been addressed in the literature.

For low-SES individuals, belonging to a community, “described through behavioural referents such as membership in groups and social networks” [15], has benefits that are crucial in enabling them to face the challenges imposed by poverty. For low-SES individuals, belonging increases resilience in stressful situations [16], promotes meaning in life [17], and improves mental health [18]. It can also reduce the feeling of learned helplessness by promoting a basic sense of control within an “unpredictable and chaotic economic environment” [19]. Belonging also reduces the psychological impact of problems such as stigma and racism, which are often experienced by people living in poverty. A study conducted in select Favelas in Brazil (extremely poor slum areas) found that when residents are in their community, they feel *at home* and protected from the prejudice faced outside [20]. Low levels of sense of belonging in low-SES women are associated with higher vulnerability depression, teen pregnancy, and lack of employment, and more [15].

However, in order to access these benefits, individuals must incur a cost that may become a barrier to integration into the established society. For example, the motivation to “avoid behaviours that deviate from others’ expectations”, a *sense of should*, implies that people rarely dramatically break from observing social norms to exclusively pursue their own interests [21]. Low-SES individuals may have limited aspirations. To survive, resource-deprived people may adjust their desires and expectations to those that they understand as certain [22]. Furthermore, the distribution of income around an individual shapes their economic aspirations [23]. Once the individual decides to initiate the integration process, they face a difficult choice of whether to sacrifice the individual’s existing social ties in order to search for social acceptance into a new group [24]. During this process, the individual no longer has the benefits of the previous group nor the one he/she hopes to join. Even more challenging, the integration process is cognitively demanding, due mainly to social unpredictability and the discrepancy between an individual’s behaviour and others’ expectations [6].

Recent research has shown that integration between groups of different SES levels could mitigate extreme income inequality and economic development gaps. However, the integration process reamins poorly understood from the viewpoint of low-SES individuals. especially regarding the influence of belonging and its costs and benefits.

This research’s theoretical and practical implications:

* Previous research has shown the benefits of belonging to a community, especially for low-SES individuals, but few have examined the barriers that may arise when these individuals attempt to integrate into the established society.
* For policies to be effective, the complexity of integration from the viewpoint of the individual undergoing this process must be mapped and considered in their design.

**Studies and Methodology**

I will begin with a systematic review, then run one laboratory study and two field studies, followed by appropriate surveys. All studies will be pre-registered and follow Open Science practices in order to achieve optimal scientific transparency. They will use state-of-the-art methods, such as power simulation for determining sample sizes. Below, I outline three preliminary study designs to answer the research questions outlined above.

**Study 1**

A systematic review and meta-analytical study to synthesize the current research on the presence and lack of belongingness, in an effort to determine the costs and benefits of it in integration processes [25].

**Study 2**

The goal of this laboratory study is to examine the costs and benefits of a sense of belonging. I will manipulate the sense of belonging using *Minimal Group Paradigm* [26]. I will then measure levels of resilience, learned helplessness, future thinking, physical safety, *sense of should*, economic aspirations, and decision to integrate. Subjective socioeconomic status and social class will be recorded in order to evaluate the relationship between the sense of belonging and the other variables. The questionnaire will also include possible moderators from demographic characteristics.

**Study 3**

In this field study, I aim to test the findings of the previous laboratory study on targeted populations. I will use samples of low-SES individuals from Favelas[[1]](#footnote-1) and low-SES neighbourhoods in Denmark and the US[[2]](#footnote-2) to test the findings of the previous lab experiment. I will measure the sense of belonging alongside demographic characteristics and economic indicators. I will then measure levels of resilience, learned helplessness, future thinking, physical safety, *sense of should*, economic aspirations, and decision to integrate.

**Study 4**

In this field study, using three samples of low-SES individuals from Favelas in[[3]](#footnote-3) and low-SES neighbourhoods in Denmark and in the US,[[4]](#footnote-4) I will explore paths to integration. I will manipulate perceptions of inequality, aspirations, and reduction of social unpredictability before participants engage in integration. To manipulate perceptions of inequality, I will offer participants the choice to integrate with higher-SES groups, but with differing degrees of inequality compared to their current group, Economic aspirations will be influenced by using Episodic Future Thinking techniques [27] to incentivize expectations outside the distribution of income of the current group. *Sense of should* will be influenced by the reduction of social unpredictability, diminishing the cognitive cost of integration into groups with different social norms.

**Implications**

Today’s extreme levels of inequality and poverty can be mitigated by integration between different SES groups. Low-SES individuals, due to their poverty, are dependent on the benefits that the community has to offer. Yet, belonging to a community has costs that may impose a barrier to integration into larger society There is an urgent need to understand this process more deeply from the viewpoint of low-SES individuals, to build effective policies that will increase the likelihood of integration.

The aim of this research is to map the benefits and costs of belonging and understand their implications for the integration process. This will enable policymakers and managers in organizations to understand what challenges low-SES individuals face, and provide the necessary institutional support, increasing the likelihood of integration and the effectiveness of the integration process.

The practical relevance of this research:

* Understanding the integration process from the viewpoint of low-SES individuals will help policymakers improve diversity policies and help organizations improve their practices.
* For government institutions planning to implement policies to increase social mobility, mapping the different factors that influence the likelihood of successful integration may provide a fundamental tool to achieve more successful policy design.

**Project Schedule**

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| 2023 | 2024 | 2025 |
| 1st semester | 2nd semester | 3rd semester | 4th semester | 1st semester | 2nd semester | 3rd semester | 4th semester | 1st semester | 2nd semester | 3rd semester | 4th semester |
| Perfecting the Research Proposal and adding detail to the research plan |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Teaching | Exchange | Teaching |  |  |
| Study 1 and Data Analysis | Write-up | Follow-up and Experimental Studies |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  | Study 2 and Data Analysis | Write-up | Follow-up and Experimental Studies |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  | Study 3 and Data Analysis | Write-up | Follow-up and Experimental Studies |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | Write-up and Dissertation |

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1. Please see my CV where I show the connections I have formed that will enable me to carry out studies in Favelas in Brazil [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Please see my CV where I show the connections I have formed that will enable me to carry out studies in low SES families in the US [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Please see my CV where you can find the connections I have formed that will allow experiments in Favelas in Brazil [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Please see my CV where you can find the connections I have formed that will allow experiments in low SES families in the US [↑](#footnote-ref-4)