**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 are at extreme levels [1]. Urgent and immediate efforts are required from governments and society to address the United Nations’ universal call to action to end poverty and reduce inequality by 2030 [2]. A possible way to mitigate these issues is to increase the likelihood of integration between people with different socio-economic status (SES), reducing inequality and increasing the economic development of marginalized communities [3]. Recent work has shown that upward mobility, a movement 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 much more likely to happen for low-SES individuals that have friends of higher SES [4] and that 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 established society and its assistance, often belong to a marginalized community in order to access the benefits necessary to live in the conditions that relative resource deprivation imposes [4]. Among these benefits, belonging to a community increases resilience in stressful situations [16] and reduces feelings of learned helplessness [19]. Even though these benefits are crucial for low-SES individuals, belonging brings costs that may become barriers to integration into established 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 parts of the established society [6], the integration process for people with low SES is complex, risky, demanding, and difficult. Although there is evidence that proper integration between different levels of SES has enormous benefits, for example, 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 group 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.

The research questions that arise from this timely topic are:

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) increase 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 increase the choice of integration and support low-SES individuals throughout this process?

**Theoretical Background**

According to the World Inequality Report (2022), levels of income and wealth inequality are at extreme levels, leading to 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%. 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 pathway to reducing poverty and economic inequality is to broaden the understanding of the 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 friendships from Facebook, the share of friends of high-SES 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 to enable 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 run in select Favelas in Brazil (slum areas of extreme poverty) 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 to issues such as depression, teen pregnancy, and lack of employment [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 make a hard break from observing social norms to exclusively pursue their own interests [21]. Aspirations may be limited when it comes to low-SES individuals. In order to be able to survive, resource-deprived people may adjust their desires and expectations to aspirations 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, there is also a difficult choice that must be made: the choice to sacrifice the individual’s existing social ties to attempt 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 intends to be part of. To make the situation 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 evidence that integration between groups of different SES levels could mitigate extreme income inequality and economic development gaps. However, the integration process is still poorly understood from the viewpoint of low-SES individuals. This is especially true of the influence of belonging and its costs and benefits.

This research has theoretical and practical implications because:

* Previous research has shown the benefits of belonging to a community, especially for low-SES individuals, but few studies have looked into 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 going through this process must be mapped and considered in its 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 prime scientific transparency and use state-of-the-art methods, such as power simulation for determining sample sizes. Below, I outline three preliminary study designs developed to answer the research questions outlined above.

**Study 1**

A systematic review and meta-analytical study to synthesize the current state-of-the-art 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 the slums (Favelas) in Brazil[[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 the slums (Favelas) in Brazil[[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 give participants the choice to integrate with groups higher in SES, 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**

Inequality and poverty are at extreme levels in the world today. Integration between different SES groups is an efficient way to improve this situation. 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 established 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 allow 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.

This research is practically relevant because:

* 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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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)