Relational integration among status holders and students in a communal housing project in the Netherlands

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List of Acronyms

COA	Centraal Orgaan voor opvang Asielzoekers
IND	Integratie en Naturalisatie Dienst
VWN	Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland
IISS	International Institute of Social Studies
SJP	Social Justice Perspectives
RP	Research Paper

Abstract

The research explores the effect of communal housing on relational integration among status holders (recognized refugees) and Dutch students in Amsterdam's mixed-housing project "De Woondiversiteit". The researcher engages with the community in a participatory manner, while deriving knowledge from his lived experiences as a resident in the project as well. Participatory workshops and interviews with the community members delivered valuable insights into daily interactions, conflict resolution and the challenges of relational integration. The study reveals that curiosity, initiative, and acceptance are vital attitudes for building connections, while shared spaces, such as kitchens, play a critical role in connecting residents. However, the study also highlights obstacles, including mental health issues, non-involvement of roommates and a lack of (intercultural) guidance. This research, through the story of a mixed housing project involving students and status holders, contributes to understanding integration as a relational process.

Relevance to Development Studies

The Netherlands is facing a severe housing crisis and the least well-off suffer most from it. Anno 2024, the country is ruled by an extremely right wing parlement, which has gained popularity with an anti-migrant rhetoric. In the meantime, mixed housing is making an impressive advance, offering a solution for cheap housing and connecting tenants from different social backgrounds. Research on communal housing for status holders and students is valuable for development studies, as it explores a promising model for fostering connections between Dutch citizens and newcomers. Additionally, relational integration (Klarenbeek, 2021; 2024), which is used as the theoretical framework of this paper, offers new insights into the social boundaries between societal "insiders" and "outsiders". This research, therefore, supports a shift in understanding integration as a relational process, instead of a migrant focused process.

Keywords

Relational integration, relational equality, status holders, refugees, students, young adults, Participatory Action Research, communal living, mixed housing

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Picture 1: the roommates, from unit 'Flamingo', in 2021. From upper left to lower right: me, Kassem, Abdulrahman, Basel, Bas and Max (Kramer, 2021)

الدار قبل الجار

e jar gabl e dar

“choose your neighbour before you choose your house”

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In this paper, I intend to inform you on the research I have conducted with my flatmates in Amsterdam, where, for the past five years, status holders (refugees with a residence permit) and students have been living together in a mixed housing project. I reflect on both the residents' as my own experience with communal housing. In the meantime, I describe the choices I made in the process, in order to give you a transparent and complete impression of the research project. I perceive this paper to be a story about connection. Its initiation stems from a deep admiration for the community which I'm part of. Enjoy reading.

1.1 Research objective and research question

In November 2022, a man-made fire burned down 75 container apartments leaving tenants of 'Startblok Riekerhaven' roofless (Vugts & Vlaanderen, 2022). An incident which traumatized the community, existing of status holders and students, and shocked the city of Amsterdam. All residents managed to leave the complex in time, except for six cats and a bearded dragon (Vugts & Vlaanderen, 2022). This horrific situation in which residents found themselves, stood in stark contrast with the optimism around the project's initiation. Startblok Riekerhaven was the first mixed housing project in the Netherlands to accommodate status holders and students in a communal setting (Czischke and Huisman, 2018). After this pioneer, Amsterdam was enriched with 20 similar mixed housing projects (Wagemakers, 2024). Despite positive sounds from some, the majority of the projects have been critiqued for its lack of (intercultural) guidance, poor facilities and non-communal architectural design, failing to contribute to social cohesion between residents (Ramdjan & Herter, 2022; Tinnemans, Daverlaar, Majdoubi & Yohannes, 2020). Most of the projects, for instance, were found to be too large-scale to succeed, accommodating up to 560 tenants (Ramdjan & Herter, 2022).

Generally speaking, mixed housing projects are gaining popularity in the Netherlands (Davelaar, Gruppen & Knevel, 2018). Davelaar, Gruppen and Knevel (2018, p.7) define mixed housing as *"projects where different groups of people deliberately live together, maintain contact, and engage in joint activities*". The central aim of this concept is to stimulate social inclusion and cohesion by connecting residents through their daily practices (Tinnemans, Fermin and Davelaar, 2019 2018). Vulnerable individuals can rely on a social network at home stimulating their integration in society. The diversity of the residents can enhance a reciprocal

learning environment (Davelaar, Gruppen and Knevel, 2018). Mixed housing can take on various forms, for instance: regular tenants who live with mentally vulnerable residents or ex-homeless people, starters who live with needy elderly, or students that live with refugees.

In this research paper, I focus on a mixed housing project called 'De Woondiversiteit', which accommodates status holders, students and starters (Gemeente Amsterdam, n.d.). Most projects with these target groups are developed on empty plots of land or in vacant real estate, offering a solution to the lack of social housing in the Netherlands (Tinnemans, Davelaar, Majdoubi and Yohannes, 2020). De Woondiversiteit is located in an old office building in Amsterdam East and is managed by a vacant real estate company called 'Gapph'.

As a resident of this communal project myself, I have been intrigued by the different experiences with the mixed housing concept. My own living experience has been extremely positive and enriching. In the meantime, acquaintances told me shocking stories of the circumstances in other mixed housing projects. Moreover, my experiences didn't seem to align with some of the experiences in my own project either. These different stories motivated me to do research with the community I have been part of for the past five years. How did it come that I heard such different stories about the mixed housing concept?

Two academic papers describe similar housing projects in Belgium and the Netherlands (Mahieu and Van Caudenberg, 2020; Czischke and Huisman, 2019). Both evaluated the impact of communal housing on the integration of status holders and thereby take the migrant as the central unit of analysis. For this research, I draw inspiration from Klarenbeek (2021; 2024) who proposes to describe integration as a relational process. In her eyes, integration is a process which takes place between those who are constructed as 'oustiders' and those who are constructed as 'insiders' of a society (Klarenbeek, 2021; 2024). This conceptualisation of integration provides opportunities to analyse the relationships and social boundaries between status holders and students in De Woondiversiteit.

Therefore, the research question that guides this project is: *how does communal living affect relational integration among status holders and Dutch students in a mixed housing project in Amsterdam (the Netherlands)?*

In addition, I have outlined the following sub-questions:

- What are the experienced obstacles for relational integration in De Woondiversiteit?
- Is relational integration a suitable conceptualisation to investigate and analyse the connections between the community members of De Woondiversiteit?

- How can we measure relational integration?

1.2 Positionality

In march 2020, just when COVID started, I was invited for an interview with Villex, the former property management company of De Woondiversiteit. Later, I got invited and accepted by unit 'Flamingo' (every unit/hallway is named after an animal). We shared a kitchen, living room and bath rooms. At the Flamingo's, we lived with seven guys, of whom three were Syrian and four were Dutch. We spent many nights locked inside our homes due to the COVID curfew, which formed the foundation of a strong bond. In the years that followed, we developed a family between the Flamingo's and the Grasshoppers, who lived opposite to us on the third floor. We ate together, danced on our dining table, fasted during Ramadan, partied in and outside our house, travelled to the country of Jordan, debated about fundamental life questions, played around in the hallways like little kids, had conflicts, resolved them, made music and learned languages together. The memories are countless. Unfortunately, for most of us, this period was coming to an end. We were all bound to a five year contract which confronted us last winter with the realization that the precious community we had built, would soon change. It was time to create space for a new generation of residents.

Somewhere in spring 2024 in front of our house, I encountered Lena, one of the flatmates from the Peacocks. After some small talk, she told me that her roommates were about to move out, since their contract was ending. All status holders are offered an apartment by the municipality after five years in our project. This meant that she would soon have several new roommates who most certainly just left the asylum centre. Lena expressed that she and her roommates wanted to gather with other long-term residents to share experiences and reflect together on what they had learned from communal living.

At that moment, I was following a course on Participatory Action Research at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. This approach to research was unfamiliar to me beforehand, but I was immediately inspired by its grassroots and bottom-up principles. Not having decided yet on my research topic, this daily conversation on the sidewalk with Lena was a personal breakthrough in my research process. It made me realize what I wished to write about and how I wanted to approach the topic. In the following subchapters, I will elaborate on the methodology and the choices I made in the research process.

1.3 Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) emerged as a methodology in the Global South during the 1970s when scholars recognized that local and global challenges could not be adequately addressed within traditional educational systems (Fals Borda, 2006). As a response to the lack of radical change through scientific research, they decided to step away from academia, shifting their focus to grassroots movements (Fals Borda, 2006). PAR aims to engage participants in reflective learning processes, creating a 'collective critical consciousness' (Freire, 1970). The awareness of social and political forces shaping their lives, enables participants to pursue social justice and community-led action.

Since each community member is an expert on their own lived experiences, there is less of a distinction between 'the researcher' and 'the researched'. During participatory workshops, the researcher, therefore, rather takes on the role of a facilitator (Chambers, 2002). They are there to guide the group conversations, ask questions, listen and perhaps distribute the attention while the community decides where to head (Chambers, 2002).

My connections with the community could have several effects on the research process. The relationships I have with co-residents enabled me in the first place to organize these group conversations. They knew me in the context of the community and they felt safe enough to step into this project with me. At the same time, I needed to consider how the intersection of being a white, Dutch, cis-gender, and male may have influenced the way in which people perceive me and therefore, the way in which they interact with me. In addition, co-residents might also adapt their opinion in the discussion, because they are already aware of mine. De Oliveira argues in a similar vein:

> *"A possible advantage is that the researcher might be part of that community, calling on their lived experiences as the source from which to investigate a particular social issue. It is this advantage that also entails a limitation as, by subscribing to a particular community, the research can be biased in its conclusions."* – De Oliveira (2023, p.290)

Balancing the demands of writing my research paper, facilitating participatory workshops and being an active community member required careful consideration. I needed to recognize that the workshops may head in a direction that didn't align with my focus. Therefore, I had to separate my roles as the workshop facilitator, a member of the community and

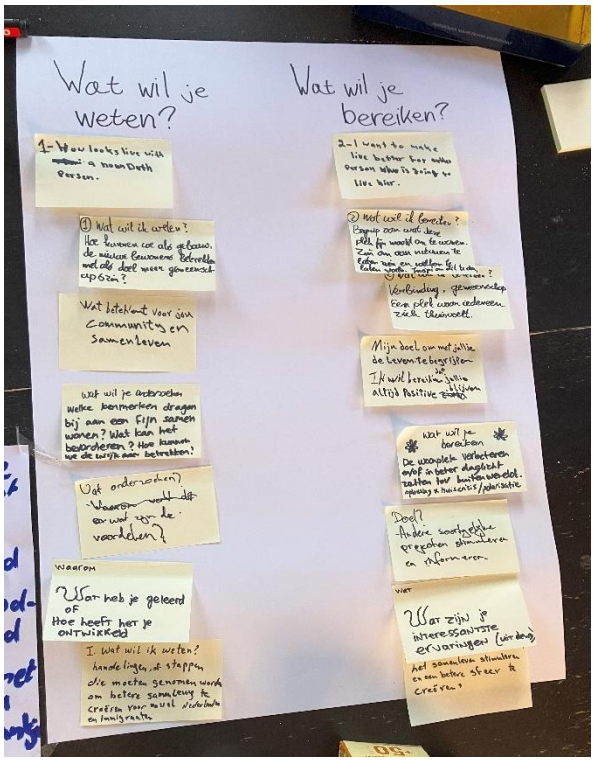
a student with deadlines, while maintaining respect for both the community and the workshop participants.

1.4 The Research Process

The PAR course made me recall a lecture I attended from Anila Noor at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS). As a former refugee and ISS academic she noticed how refugees were often excluded from self-representation at conferences and institutions (Noor, 2024). With her company, The Global Refugee Led Network, she fights to get refugees a seat on the decision making table. Her motto, and this phrase will always stick with me, is: *"Never about us, without us"* (Noor, 2024).

Although I felt so passionate about the project I lived in and I have longer felt the urge to write about our experiences, I was never comfortable with the idea of doing research *'about'* my flatmates. PAR for me proposed a way to do research *'with'* my flatmates. It gave me the chance to reflect with the community on our shared experiences of living together. For me, the only research process that made sense for our context was a collective one.

I decided to bring together a group of enthusiastic residents who were interested in partaking in the experiment. With four status holders and four Dutch residents we held a first explorative session. I brought a big pan of Syrian style lentil soup, which my roommate taught me how to make, and the participants all brought an object which symbolized De Woondiversiteit for them. In this first session, I posed the following questions to the group: "*what do you want to research/investigate?*" And: "*what would you like to achieve?*". This gave me insights on their personal interests and goals, revealing a common thread in their answers. Most participants wanted to reflect on the community, acknowledging both its positive and negative



Picture 2: Post-its from participatory workshop 1 (see *Table 1* in the *Annex* for a digitalized version of the answers).

aspects. The primary goal for the workshop participants was to inform and inspire others. These 'others' could be the new generation of residents, for instance, or even people outside the building.

After this exciting first session, I knew what the goals and interests of the participants were. I decided to complement my research with (semi-structured) qualitative interviewing, which would allow me to delve a bit deeper into personal stories and experiences. The people I interviewed all didn't participate in the workshops, except for Ali whose experiences I wanted to understand better. I did my best to reflect the composition of the community in terms of gender and nationality, including participants from Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan, China and the Netherlands. In addition, I interviewed the property management and a researcher who's specialized in mixed housing.

After structuring my findings, we held the fifth and last session with the workshop group to discuss what the results implied for the community and what potential actions could follow from it (participatory workshop 4, 2024).

Chapter 2 - Context

In this chapter, I will elaborate on the social and political context in which mixed housing emerged. In addition, I will touch upon several reports which describe similar mixed housing projects in the Netherlands. Lastly, I will give a detailed description of the specificities of De Woondiversiteit.

2.1 The housing crisis, the asylum system and the emergence of mixed housing

First of all, in this paper, I am structurally referring to *status holders* and not to refugees or asylum seekers. An asylum seeker, in the Netherlands, becomes a 'status holder' when their asylum application is approved. After five years, provided they have completed the integration requirements of the government, status holders can apply for naturalization to become Dutch citizens (Wettenbank Overheid, 2024). The governmental organ that is responsible for the assessment of asylum applications is called the IND, which stands for Immigrations and Naturalisation Service. COA, the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, is responsible for housing, nutrition and personal guidance of asylum seekers during their asylum procedures (COA, n.d.).

Once an asylum seeker has received their residence permit and thus becomes 'status holder', COA couples them to a municipality in the Netherlands (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). Every six months, the central government assigns each municipality a quota of status holders, based on its population size, that the municipality must accommodate (Czischke & Huisman, 2018, p.157). Due to the housing crisis in the Netherlands, which is most pervasive in Amsterdam, the municipality of Amsterdam struggles to comply with these expectations (Tinnemans, Fermin & Davelaar, 2019).

Politically speaking, asylum seekers and the scarcity of affordable housing are a constant topic of debate in the Netherlands (Bocxmeer, 2023). In many municipalities, status holders are given priority in the social housing system and this leads to anger among some Dutch citizens (Pointer, 2023). Especially, since particular politicians blame refugees for the housing crisis, while in reality only 10% of the social housing goes to status holders (Bocxmeer, 2023). The actual culprit has been the Dutch government who is responsible for a

decrease in the share of regulated rent in the housing market from 58% in 1985 to 34% in 2015 (Czischke and Huisman, 2018, p. 158).

The so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015 caused a twofold increase (compared to the year before) in the amount of asylum applications in the Netherlands (CBS, 2016). The resulting peak of status holders entering the (social) housing market required creative responses from municipalities (Czischke and Huisman, 2018). In this period, mixed housing emerged as a solution for the lack of social housing, both for young Dutch adults and young status holders (Tinnemans, Fermin & Davelaar, 2019, p.8).

Startblok Riekerhaven was the first project in the Netherlands where status holders and students/starters lived together (Czischke and Huisman, 2018, p.157). Today, the city of Amsterdam counts twenty projects with a similar aim, but differing in size (from 16 up to 560 residents), spatial planning, project design, and organizational structures (Wagemakers, 2024). The set-up of Startblok Riekerhaven, accommodating 560 residents, consists of container-like houses, which are 'prefab' and 'moveable'. This project design has been more or less copied to other projects in Amsterdam such as Stek Oost and Startblok Elzenhagen, with 250 and 540 residents respectively (Ramdjan & Herter, 2022). Smaller projects, such as De Woondiversiteit, are mainly located in vacant real estate.

Tinnemans, Fermin and Davelaar (2019) collected data on twelve projects around the country, differing in size and set-up. They evaluated the impact of mixed housing on the integration and participation of status holders in Dutch society. In addition, their report provided an inventory of the projects' diverse goals, approaches, and designs (Tinnemans, Fermin and Davelaar, 2019). They abstained from including residents' experiences in the report, solely interviewing the initiators and the implementers of the projects.

In another comprehensive report, Tinnemans, Davelaar, Yohannes, and Majdoubi (2020) investigated the three "Stek" projects in Amsterdam, incorporating the voices of residents through interviews and several group conversations. Both reports provide very relevant insights and recommendations for policy makers about the successes and obstacles encountered by residents and project leaders. It was noted that, for example, with an increase in scale, connection between community members seems to decrease. Moreover, Tinnemans et al. (2020) advised to adapt the balance of status holders and Dutch residents, from a 50/50 ratio to a ratio where Dutch residents make up the majority of the community's population. This is because, relatively, status holders face more mental health problems and daily struggles than the Dutch residents. Dutch residents, they argue, should function as a stable factor

in the community, being able to support those who need assistance. Lastly, the Stek projects lacked guidance in intercultural communication. Residents are expected to build social relations, but aren't assisted in building bridges between the different ethnic communities (Tinnemans, Davelaar, Yohannes & Majdoubi, 2020).

Besides the reports, journalists Herter and Ramdjan from Dutch newspaper *Het Parool* have written several critical articles about the mixed housing projects in Amsterdam. Their main focus was the lack of guidance and supervision by the housing corporations (Verhoeven, 2024). Their findings on structural unsafety and (violent) incidents in many of the projects have triggered multiple discussions in the city council (Wagemakers, 2024). Politicians from right-wing parties JA-21, VVD and CDA pledged for a removal of the large housing projects such as Riekerhaven and Stek Oost (Wagemakers, 2024). Still, the majority of the city council was in favour of the projects, arguing not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

2.2 De Woondiversiteit

With a detailed description of the projects building, the management and its residents, I aim to introduce the reader into our daily context.

The Building

In August 2019, three years after the pioneering Startblok Riekerhaven project launched, 'De Woondiversiteit' opened in Amsterdam's Center-East. Before, the building functioned as an old office and laboratory of the *Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority* (Gemeente Amsterdam, n.d.). After several years of vacancy, real estate management *Villex* and contractor *Koers* turned it into thirteen liveable units with 116 rooms (Gemeente Amsterdam, n.d.). Per living unit, residents share bathrooms and a kitchen. In this aspect, De Woondiversiteit differs from the larger and more famous Startblok Riekerhaven, Stek Oost and Elzenhagen where residents have their own kitchen and bathroom. De Woondiversiteit consists of four floors, a common room on the ground floor and a backyard with vegetable garden and a bike shed. The common room is used for events, activities and meetings. The building is located on the Hoogte Kadijk, a beautiful long street which connects the centre to the East of Amsterdam. It lies next to a 24/7 petrol station on the east side, an old power

station on the south, apartment complexes on the west and a canal with houseboats on the North. Generally speaking this neighbourhood is a dynamic residential area full of life.

Picture 3: on the right De Woondiversiteit, on the left the canal and in the back iconic windmill 'De Gooyer' (Kuit, 2024)

Management and organisation

Initially, the project was managed by *Villex Vastgoedbescherming* which is a vacancy management company. The company facilitated anti-squatting housing which is known for its cheap rent and insecurity: a resident can be told to move out any time. This applies differently for the residents of De Woondiversiteit. They all have a "youth contract", a temporary agreement of up to five years intended for residents aged 18 to 28 (Woonbond, n.d.). Villex generally had two employees working on site at De Woondiversiteit: an administrator/property manager and a janitor. Due to COVID, they were only present when the government's policies allowed them to. The building sometimes felt like a recreational park for adults during the pandemic, because when the cat's away the mice will play. In January 2022, *Gapph Vastgoedbeheer* took over the baton from *Villex Vastgoedbescherming* (Gapph, 2022). Gapph, which nobody knows how to pronounce correctly (not even their own employees), has had a similar workforce as Villex: a property manager and a janitor. Other organizations besides Gapph and Villex have never been structurally active in the building.

In each unit, one tenant functions as the 'captain'. They mainly discuss practical issues with Gapph in a monthly meeting. Although Villex initially envisioned broader

responsibilities for these captains, social activities are largely organized by the community itself through a garden and event commission.

The residents

De Woondiversiteit accommodates students (in tertiary education), starters and status holders. A student becomes a 'starter' as soon as they finish their education and enter the job market. I find it irrelevant to differentiate between them, because students and starters concern more or less the same group. Therefore, I will structurally refer to *students* when I speak of Dutch residents.

The building is divided into thirteen units of which four are female units and nine are male units. The residents from De Woondiversiteit are between the ages of 18 and 27 when they move in. This can lead to big differences in age among roommates. At one point I lived with an 18 year old who just moved in and a 32 year old who was about to move out. The building represents a great variety of cultures. For me personally, walking into the different units and seeing peoples rooms has felt like looking into little viewing boxes. Each room has a different vibe, since many express their culture through their household.

With this comprehensive understanding of the projects everyday context, I will, hereafter, proceed to the theoretical chapter.

Chapter 3 - Theoretical Framework

Mixed housing projects are a well investigated topic in the Netherlands, but research remains mostly limited to journalism and evaluation reports. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the existing academic literature. The literature review will flow into an explanation of the concept *relational integration* which originates from a *relational egalitarian* discourse. Relational integration, as a theoretical framework, will form the backbone of my research paper.

3.1 Literature review

Although there is a lot of literature on the links between the housing market, integration and refugee well-being (for instance, see: Willems et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2024; Wyckaert et al., 2020; Philips, 2004), research about mixed housing with status holders and students/starters remains limited to two academic papers (Mahieu and Van Caudenberg, 2020; Czischke and Huisman; 2019). Mahieu and Van Caudenberg (2020) reflected on a housing and buddy-project in the city of Antwerp (Belgium). While most mixed housing focuses on adults, this project accommodates unaccompanied minors with a refugee status and young Belgian adults. All unaccompanied minors are coupled to a Belgian resident who assists them with all sorts of (practical) needs. The projects target group therefore differs from De Woondiversiteit, which includes only adults aged 18 to 32. Moreover, De Woondiversiteit doesn't rely on a buddy system for the stimulation of connections. Still, this research delivers valuable insights on mixed housing (Mahieu & Van Caudenberg, 2020, p.16), such as that: "*intercultural communal living has the ability to address some of the basic needs of young refugees in terms of learning and support"*. They add:

> "*Future research needs to focus on the factors feeding or hindering social interaction among housemates in a setting of mixed cohousing"*. – Mahieu & Van Caudenberg (2020, p.16)

It is precisely this gap in the literature which I intend to address with this paper.

Czischke and Huisman (2018) conducted an investigation at Startblok Riekerhaven (Amsterdam) about the self-organizing structure of the project and the impact of communal living on the integration of status holders. This research resembles more with the context of De Woondiversiteit, in terms of target groups and project set-up. In order to analyse the integration of status holders, Czischke and Huisman applied the conceptual framework of Ager and Strang (2008; see *figure 1* in *Annex*).

Ager and Strang (2008) challenged the assumption that employment, housing, education and health are adequate indicators for integration 'success'. According to Ager and Strang (2008), they are rather means to, than markers of integration. Social connections, they argue, might be less tangible or measurable, but are more crucial for accessing the above mentioned domains of employment, housing, education and health (Ager and Strang, 2008, p.177). They distinguish three types of social connections: social bridges, social bonds and social links. 'Social bridges' are those relations that connect migrants with the local population. 'Social bonds', proximity to family and ethnic community members, help migrants to feel 'settled' and 'supported' in a new society. Lastly, 'social links' describe the connectedness of migrants with state institutions on a local and national level (Ager and Strang, 2008).

Czischke and Huisman (2018, p.157) analyse "*the impact of collaborative housing on the integration of status refugees*" by applying the 'social connection' domains form Ager and Strang (2008). They concluded the mix of status holders and students fostered connections between status holders and the local population, but simultaneously allowed status holders to feel close to their ethnic group members. In this piece, integration is briefly described as a two-way process *"whereby the receiving society and the migrant mutually adapt to each other*" (Czischke and Huiman, 2018, p.158). Thus, integration of refugees doesn't only depend on the efforts and willingness of the migrant, but for an equal part on the openness of a 'host' society (Czischke and Huisman, 2018). Meanwhile, in the research itself it remains unclear what role specifically the other residents (existing of Dutch students and starters) have in this process of integration. Therefore, in my eyes, they fail to analyse and critically assess the relationships and social boundaries between status holders and Dutch residents.

3.2 Relational Integration

The conventional understanding of integration as 'migrants becoming part of something' has been critiqued extensively in migration studies (for instance, see: Klarenbeek, 2024; Lucassen, 2005; Ager and Strang, 2008; Philimore, 2012). Klarenbeek (2021) argues that the prescriptive character of the concept creates problematic and normative assumptions on what integration entails, who is supposed to integrate and who doesn't. Integration as a concept has evolved from a one-way understanding, which disproportionately burdened the 'outsider' with the responsibility to integrate, to a two-way understanding which describes both the 'insider' and the 'outsider' as being part of the integration process (Klarenbeek, 2021). Still, Klarenbeek (2021, p.901) argued that within migration studies, clarity on what this two-way conception

of migration entails is missing. Therefore, scholars base their arguments on internal contradictions, unintentionally strengthening the one-way discourse of integration. For instance, often scholars fail to acknowledge the active participation of 'insiders' in the integration process leading the 'outsiders' to be the only ones observed in research. Where some have proposed to reject the term 'integration' altogether, in order to prevent it from imposing normative assumptions on people, Klarenbeek (2021; 2024) proposes to reconceptualize integration as a *relational* process. She says:

> *"Instead, integration is to be located in the power relations between insiders and outsiders, who are both intrinsically part of the process. Consequently, a relational understanding of integration cannot be used as a descriptive term for an individual. 'Integration' provides information about the relationships between people, not about (categories of) individuals*." – Klarenbeek (2021, p.914)

From this point of view, integration is a process which takes place in the relationships between people in a particular society or community. She defines an ideal-type integrated society *"as a society without any social boundaries between legitimate and non-legitimate members*" (Klarenbeek, 2021, p.904). Integration, thus, is a process in which social boundaries and hierarchies decrease.

Klarenbeek (2021, p.914) describes three crucial shifts to put the relational conceptualisation of integration on the research agenda: an ontological, methodological and vocabular shift. Ontologically, this means adjusting the lens from a migrant focused perspective to a relationship centred view. Integration doesn't provide information about an individual's achievements. It rather reveals the power dynamics and social boundaries between societies insiders and outsiders (Klarenbeek, 2021, p.914). Methodologically, a shift towards a relational approach would incorporate more research on inequalities and the social boundaries which maintain them. This would lead to different research questions and objectives taking the relationships as the main unit of analysis. Lastly, a shift in vocabulary: scholars often write about 'the integration of migrants', unintentionally promoting the one-way discourse. In order to move away from the latter, Klarenbeek (2021, p. 914) proposes to speak of 'the integration *between* migrants and non-migrants' instead.

Since Klarenbeek's (2021; 2024) work is mainly a *proposal* for a reconceptualization of intergation, she abstains from giving a detailed explanation how to measure relational integration. Meanwhile Klarenbeek (2024, p.234) perceives integration between migrants and

non-migrants to be a *"subset of relational inequality, pertaining to inegalitarian relations amongst people which constitute social closure, social hierarchies, and generate and justify inequalities in the distribution of freedoms, resources and welfare*". Therefore, expanding the analysis with a relational (in)equality perspective provides a solid foundation for examining the relationships and social boundaries among community members in De Woondiversiteit.

3.3 Relational Equality

Relational egalitarianism is a theory of justice within political philosophy which defines equality as a fundamentally relational concept (Klarenbeek, 2024, p.234). This approach, often referred to as 'relational equality', encompasses various theories which state that people are equal when "*regarding and treating each other as equals*" (Voigt, 2020, p.1). Relational egalitarians developed these ideas in response to 'luck egalitarians', who primarily understand justice and equality in terms of the fair distribution of goods and opportunities (Voigt, 2020, p.2). According to Anderson (1999, p.312), relational inequality emerges when inegalitarian relations lead to hierarchies of social standing, reinforcing beliefs of superiority and inferiority. Such perceptions have historically been used to justify "*inegalitarian ideologies of racism, sexism, nationalism, caste, class, and eugenics*" (Anderson, 1999, p. 312).

Distributive perspectives on equality suggest a redistribution of resources to those who suffer from 'bad luck', for instance: people who were born disabled, who lost their parents as children, the poor, etcetera (Anderson, 1999, p.288). Luck egalitarians thus rather take inequality as the incentive for redistribution and not the assumption that everybody is equal. According to Anderson (1999), this interpretation of inequality existing of people who are 'lucky' and 'unlucky' will never contribute to the alleviation of social boundaries.

An understanding of relational integration as a '*subset of relational equality'* provides opportunities for analysing relations between status holders and Dutch students in De Woondiversiteit. Simultaneously, it raises more questions, such as: what does it mean to be relationally equal? And: what does *'regarding and treating each other as equals'* entail?

Baker (2015) proposes to depict relational equality as three dimensions: *"respect and recognition; power; and love, care and solidarity"*. He believes that:

> *"We relate to each other as equals only if we engage with each other in a spirit of equal respect; if we relate to each other in appropriately loving, careful, and solidary ways; and if we replace the exercise of power over one another by relationships of genuine cooperation"* – Baker (2015, p.66)

In this paper, I examine the integration of status holders and students through a relational framework. My analysis is informed by relational equality theory and Klarenbeek's (2021; 2024) reconceptualization of integration. I will substantiate my perspective on relational integration by using Baker's (2015) dimensions of "respect and recognition; love, care and solidarity; and power," which I will discuss further in the analysis section. These dimensions serve as a basis for assessing the extent to which residents *regard and treat each other as equals*.

Picture 4: A cozy living room on the third floor (Kuit, 2024)

Picture 5: the backyard with a community led vegetable garden (Kuit, 2024)

Picture 6: the building's hallways give an empty hospital like feeling, but often functions as a creative space (Kuit, 2024)

Chapter 4 - Findings

In this chapter, I will present the results in a flowing manner. The data has been derived from both the workshops and the interviews, which centred on the following questions: "*how did the residents experience living together in a communal context? What lessons did they learn? And what challenges did they encounter?".*

I have divided the chapter into several themes which kept returning throughout the research. 'Moving in' describes how residents enter the project. The subchapters 'curiosity', 'acceptance' and 'initiative' reflect on attitudes and values which were emphasized by the residents as essential components for thriving relationships. The subsequent chapters 'non-involved roommates' and 'long lasting conflicts' describe some of the obstacles which residents encounter when connecting with their roommates. The last subchapter is dedicated to 'the kitchen', which takes a special place in the projects set-up.

4.1 Moving in

For most status holders, De Woondiversiteit serves as their first official place of residence after they have received their residence permit. The preceding period in the asylum centres is for many an intense and for some even a traumatic experience. While asylum seekers (often) have to cope with trauma, they are transferred from one asylum centre to the other, which inhibits them from truly settling in the Netherlands (CBS, 2019). Asylum centres often lack any form of privacy (COA, 2022). Therefore, some status holders have had to share their bedroom, kitchen and sanitary facilities for several years with other asylum seekers.

Many residents expressed that when they finally received their residence permit, they were yearning for an apartment with privacy. At least, they hoped to have their own kitchen and bathroom (participatory workshop 2.1, 2024). When seeing their apartment in De Woondiversiteit for the first time, many status holders were disappointed. Especially since the COA and the municipality insufficiently prepared them for the type of apartment they would get. Nineteen year old Oussama from Eritrea told me why he was shocked when he first saw his room:

"I lived in a room for almost two years, with others. I moved a lot, from here to there. Sometimes I saw that I was being transferred to another camp. And there, I saw all the crazy guys. No cleaning, smoking in the hallway, throwing things, making everything dirty, arguing, a lot of noise... And then, when I got a house, I said I've had enough of that room. I want to clean for myself, do things on my own" - Oussama (interview, 2024).

In the participatory workshops, we concluded that being placed in a shared housing facility, initially, is received as bad news by status holders. After living with others in dehumanizing conditions in the asylum centres, status holders want to enjoy some privacy and rest. Sultan, who just moved in a few months ago, reflected on his first encounter with De Woondiversiteit, his future home:

"Before I lived here, I passed by on my own for a bit. I already saw the mess and the filth, and I was really shocked. There was trash everywhere. The wardrobe was a mess, bikes everywhere. I saw the toilets, and they were really disgusting. I said to myself, come on, I'm not going to accept this. Living here is really not normal, but I couldn't refuse the offer, so I thought I have to make the best of it." - Sultan (interview, 2024)

Sultan points out an important issue here. Although status holders are given priority on the housing market, they only get one offer. This means that if they refuse the offer, they will have to find a house themselves, which is nearly impossible on the Dutch housing market, particularly in Amsterdam. This leaves them with no choice where to live, nor with whom to live. The participants from the workshops (2.1 and 2.2, 2024) as well as property manager Thomas (interview, 2024) from Gapph, argued that status holders should be better prepared by the COA and the municipality on the apartment type they will receive. A lack of expectation management leaves status holders in shock upon arrival, some even refuse to sign the contract. Eventually, most people sign, after they have been explained by the municipality that their options are: "*this or the street"* (Thomas, interview, 2024). Thomas from Gapph referred to resident whose story showcases that mental preparation is of great importance:

"Do you know G.B.? He had refused, because he had different expectations of what he would receive. And I believe that if he had known where he would end up, he would have liked it, because now he

is a guy who walks around here, is having a great time, always laughs, is involved with the unit, and is always cheerful" - Thomas (interview, 2024)

So, informing status holders better before they come and check out their new apartment could potentially reduce the stress which they experience in a very chaotic period of their lives. Students and starters enter the project through a different selection process. Later in the findings and analysis section, I will elaborate more on this.

4.2 Curiosity

Most status holders whom I talked to argued that after the initial shock of having to share an apartment, a feeling of disappointment was replaced by enthusiasm due to the positive interactions with roommates. This, of course, depends on the reception of the roommates who already live in the unit. At the second participatory workshop, we discussed two of the questions that were posed by the participants in the first session: "*what have you learned?"* And: *"what were the challenges?"*.

By living together, residents of De Woondiversiteit have engaged in a process of learning about divergent characters and cultures (participatory workshop, 2.1, 2024). They learned about themselves and about their own perception of "the other". The cultural diversity of the community confronted residents with their own prejudices.

To what extent the resident takes part in this process of learning, depends on their own attitude. Some are more interested in their roommates than others. Throughout the workshops and the interviews '*curiosity'* was a frequently emphasized and appreciated attitude. Xi from the Frogs reflected on the period he arrived at De Woondiversiteit and how, for him, meaningful interactions started with curiosity:

"I think the most important thing is people's curiosity. Also as a status holder you can feel when people are interested. The thing is. You just come from somewhere else. And you don't know what to expect. If the local people will accept you in a way and then you also kind of doubt should you tell your story or not" - Xi (interview, 2024).

Kassem from the Flamingo's explained, on a similar note, that a lack of interest can be sensed directly. When he moved to De Woondiversiteit, he first came to live with

roommates who didn't take the effort to become acquainted with each other. His efforts to initiate contact with them were mainly in vain:

> *"Some people just have no interest in getting to know people from a different culture. You see it. You feel it. There are also some who come to introduce themselves, like "Hey, where are you from? How long have you been here?" But some people say nothing, just "Good morning" or "Hello"."*
> - Kassem (interview, 2024).

So, *curiosity* was perceived as an essential building block for fostering relationships, especially for the status holders who just arrived in this new environment. Feeling that your roommate is interested in who you are and where you come from, seems to play a vital role in settling in the community.

4.3 Initiative

According to Kassem and Xi who were living in the project from the start, those who weren't interested in their neighbours soon moved out. With the energy of new and motivated people in the unit, the atmosphere and the connectivity between roommates ameliorated.

The project existed for about half a year when COVID started. That's when I moved in, march 2020. We were lucky. In fact, we were privileged. While many peers were stuck in their studio rooms, we lived in a playground with four floors, thirteen units and several common rooms. Due to the curfew we spent many nights eating together, chilling and dancing in our living room, or we walked through the building visiting the other units. All the residents I spoke with, who were there at the time, argued that the connection between people in the building was the strongest during COVID. In this period, by unforeseen circumstances, we had loads of time and we were sort of forced to spend it together.

Later on, as bars and clubs were opened again and people continued their life going to study and work, the connection (or 'relational integration') between the different units slightly decreased. After the dip in connectivity between the units, workshop participants noticed that the new generation, moving in during the summer of 2024, bring a fresh and vibrant energy into the community. Residents are, for instance, once again taking the initiative to organize social activities and gatherings.

Initiative was emphasized as an important value or attitude during the workshops. Participants argued that each unit needs residents that take initiative. Ali referred to his roommates who took him to 'De Efteling', an attraction park in the South of the Netherlands, as a gift for his birthday. He said: "*Someone initiated: let's go see what is the Netherlands. It's very simple. You need someone who cares. You need someone to show the others what's going on"* (participatory workshop 2.2, 2024). Initiative can come from any member of the group. Ali took a lot of initiative himself to connect with his roommates. At the same time, he argues, it's significantly more important that Dutch residents show initiative:

> *"It doesn't need to be Dutch, I am also the captain of my unit. I can be initiative. But why the Dutch? You have more experience in Amsterdam. You moved from one place in Amsterdam to another place in Amsterdam. You need someone who knows Amsterdam or the Netherlands to take you to these places."* - Ali (participatory workshop 2.2, 2024)

Xi explained that when his roommates showed initiative, in the first phase of the project, he experienced it as a reassurance: "*You need to still process things right, and then you come from the AZC and you don't know what to expect. It's nice if people show initiative, it makes you feel comfortable I guess."*

Kassem was one of the status holders who initially refused to sign the contract. He gradually settled in De Woondiversiteit and eventually felt like his unit was like a family. When I asked him if he had advice for people who just arrived, he stated the following: *"Do activities together. That helps you get to know people. Go outside together. For example, for newcomers, show them the city. Take a walk, ride bikes through the city*" - Kassem (interview, 2024).

So, in order to build connections within the unit, you need some residents who take the lead. In similar communal housing projects with students and status holders, like Stek Oost and Startblok Riekerhaven, residents are assigned as "community builders" (Tinnemans, Davelaar, Majdoubi & Yohannes, 2020). They are responsible for organizing activities and supporting people where needed. Residents of these container like projects all have their own kitchen and bathroom. Therefore, organized activities are more necessary than in De Woondiversiteit where people encounter each other more spontaneously. In De Woondiversiteit, we do have 'unit captains', but their main responsibility is meeting with Gapph for practical purposes.

4.4 Acceptance

'Gezellig' is a hard to translate Dutch word which describes some kind of coziness. In the Dutch-English dictionary it is translated as a 'homely or convivial feeling' (Van Dale, n.d.). I would describe the atmosphere in our unit mainly as 'gezellig', but we have also known periods that were a little 'ongezellig', not so cozy.

When living in a household with different characters and cultures, conflict is almost inevitable. In my unit, there were several quarrels, which mostly weren't related to culture. I agree with Sarafina from the Canaries (interview, 2024), who stated: *"You just have people you click with and people you don't click with. It doesn't matter where you come from"*.

However, workshop participants did observe culturally related differences in communication and conflict resolution. Dutch people, for instance, are known to be very direct. Some of the status holders had to get used to this form of communication (participatory workshop, 2.1, 2024). Moreover, while some might communicate their concerns non-verbally, others do this out loud. Sarafina (interview, 2024) from the Canaries explained how she could have intense disagreements with her Eritrean roommates: "*And then we were literally nose to nose. And it was like: You this, and you that! Just an argument, but the great thing was, the next day it was like: Sarafina, come, I've got coffee for you*". This approach to conflict resolution was new for her. She noticed how it was different from the way in which she was taught to solve conflicts:

> "*But in the Netherlands, it's still like, we really need to talk things through in a nuanced and proper way, and we have to get to the core of the issue. I find that very fitting in Dutch culture. Like, 'Yeah, but you said this, and you said that.' Whereas there, it's much more about the feeling, like 'I didn't feel good about this, but it's okay now, and we'll just leave it and not talk about it anymore"*
> - Sarafina (interview, 2024).

During our conversation, Kassem reflected on the disagreements he had with his roommates. He argued that by living together he learned how others have different ways of knowing and doing. According to him, this is a process which takes time:

"*You also learn how to deal with certain people. Not everyone thinks the same as you. Not everyone does things the way you want … A bond between people doesn't come from just one conversation. It takes time. We've lived here for five years. I was here when I was 21, and now I'm almost 27"*

- Kassem (interview, 2024)

Yet, there will always remain aspects of life on which we fundamentally disagree, whether with family, neighbours, colleagues or roommates. *Acceptance,* therefore, was emphasized as one of the core values of our multicultural community (participatory workshop, 2.1; 2.2, 2024). Workshop participants argued that, by living together, they learned how to accept others who have fundamentally different conceptions of life. They learned how to have fun and enjoy time together, while at the same time having disagreements with that person. They learned how to feel at home in diversity, in an environment where people cook, pray and love differently (participatory workshop 2.1, 2024).

Marije from the Kingfishers has lived for several years with Marwa from Afghanistan who also took part in the participatory workshops. She warm heartedly told me about their bond:

"*We live here with two completely different cultures side by side. She was also wearing a headscarf when she came in. She's Muslim and doesn't drink alcohol. She has very different values when it comes to family and marriage, yet we completely respected each other in that. We were partying, drinking, and dating. We had a lot of different people coming over, and Marwa found it interesting to see. She didn't judge us for it. And in turn, we didn't judge her. We just talked about it and simply accepted that we were totally different, and that was fine*" - Marije (interview, 2024).

Besides curiosity, initiative and respect, the community appreciated attitudes of 'respect, willingness and reciprocity' (participatory workshop 2.1 & 2.2, 2024). The explanations for respect and acceptance were more or less similar, regarding an attitude of *"letting people be"* and *"not judging others for their (cultural) habits"*. Participants also argued that residents should have a certain willingness. For instance, residents need to be willing to do things for the other, willing to solve conflicts and willing to spend which each other, which in turn very much corresponds with the value of reciprocity. Although these three values were described as important, they weren't as much emphasized as curiosity, initiative and acceptance. Perhaps, in

a different setting with different participants, these terms could have taken a more central role in the discussion.

4.5 Non-involved roommates

I organised the second workshop twice, so those who couldn't attend earlier still had the chance to join and I had the chance to be informed on their experiences. We discussed what lessons they learned and what challenges they encountered when living in De Woondiversiteit. While workshop 2.1 had a fairly positive tone, participants from workshop 2.2 were slightly more pessimistic, critiquing the project and its residents.

We sat down in a café around the corner with a big sheet of paper, pencils, some post-its and drinks. After I explained what we would discuss that evening, Mohammad, from the Seahorses, immediately made me face the facts. He said: *"I'm going to be honest with you, Paco, in the past years I have learned literally nothing from these people*" (participatory workshop 2.2, 2024). Ali from the Ladybugs agreed with him and they both argued their Dutch roommates were never really interested in them. *"They just live here because it's cheap and a nice location"*, Mohammad told us (participatory workshop 2.2, 2024). During the time he lived at De Woondiversiteit he only ate once or twice with all of his roommates.

For me, this session was sort of a wake-up call. I knew I was biased. The unit I lived in for five years felt like a family and I was quite in love with the project. Meanwhile, I have always been aware that this wasn't the case for everyone in all the units, but where I tend to emphasize the positive I might have underestimated some of the negative sides of the project.

After that session, Mohammad and Ali apologized for having such a negative tone during the conversation. Apologies were unnecessary. Their input was pivotal for a complete understanding of the project, because there is no uniform experience of De Woondiversiteit. Moreover, the experience of living together seems to depend heavily on the unit in which somebody is living. This doesn't mean all the individuals living in a unit lack capabilities to socialize, but integration happens between people. You can't create a positive relationship by yourself, you need the other for it as well.

So, residents experienced that their roommates weren't part of the project for social purposes. How is this possible if people consciously apply for a communal housing project? And how are non-status holders selected?

When I found this project on the internet, I had to apply online, submitting a motivation letter where I stated why I fitted the project. Later, I was invited for an interview with Villex, the former property management. This how most people entered before Villex merged with Gapph in 2022.

Thomas, the administrator, and Hans, the janitor, worked for Gapph and they intended to work differently than Villex. They noticed that *"With all due respect to Villex, but they were not a well-liked party when we came here. So yes, we thought we'd take matters into our own hands"* (Thomas, interview, 2024). Villex was unpopular for their strict rules in the building, their lack of involvement in the community's issues and their unfulfilled promises about communal facilities (Sarafina, interview, 2024; Thomas, interview, 2024).

During the workshops, participants were critiqued both Villex and Gapph. After noting that there are many non-involved residents, they argued that Gapph should be more strict in the admissions process (participatory workshop 3, 2024). Or at least, Gapph should inform new residents better and make them aware of the social set-up of the project. When I asked Thomas from Gapph about this selection process, he responded that it is the responsibility of the residents themselves to choose someone that they think fits the project. He argued: *"if the group has collectively chosen a new member, why would we refrain them from doing so?"* (Thomas, interview, 2024).

So, the system of admission has changed since Villex has transferred the project to Gapph. New residents don't come in through the waiting list, unless residents don't find a new roommate themselves. Basically, units can collectively choose their new roommate. What often happens is that residents invite their own friends or they find candidates through social media. Generally speaking, Dutch residents have a larger network in the Netherlands, so they are often the ones who introduce potential roommates to the group. The participants didn't have a uniform vision on the impact of friend favouritism on the group's dynamic. Some status holders have felt excluded because of a friend group in their unit, while others argued it improved the atmosphere as a whole.

Although Gapph has transferred the responsibility to find new roommates to the community, it is clear that Gapph doesn't inform new residents much on the social aspects of the project. Moreover, participants questioned Gapph's capabilities for giving new residents an adequate introduction. Therefore, participants sparked the idea to create a community oriented introduction for new tenants (participatory workshop 4, 2024).

4.6 Long Lasting Conflicts

Sometimes, people move in while having mental health issues, or they may develop them over time. Depending on the severity of their problem, they can significantly impact the atmosphere in a unit, even to an extent at which any sense of community and comfort is lost. Several residents have reported a constant feeling of unsafety and alertness due to a roommate who was facing mental health issues or who was engaging in destructive behaviour. Some residents have been subjected to physical abuse or (sexual) intimidation. Various residents expressed they were avoiding home, while often, they found themselves sleepless when they were home. Cases of (sexual) intimidation, physical abuse, structural nuisance and the involvement of police and other external institutions have rarely been sufficient reason to remove somebody from their apartment. Most often, roommates move out instead of the individual who's causing the trouble.

Robbe's roommate developed severe mental health issues during his stay at De Woondiversiteit. He witnessed how the situation slowly deteriorated:

> "*I was pretty worried about him too, man. When you live with someone and think, "Dude, eat an apple or something; you're going to collapse." Then at 8 in the morning, while you're happily heading off to work or school, you see him sitting in his room like some kind of ghost*". – Robbe (interview, 2024)

During the day, Robbes roommate would often explode angrily when there was noise in the kitchen, because this was the only moment he could fall asleep. Robbe and another roommate spend a lot of energy on contacting Gapph and the municipality in an attempt to help their roommate find a place where he would experience less stress. The situation deteriorated for about a year, but most of the effort was in vain. It had to come to a physical confrontation and the involvement of the police to be taken seriously. Shortly after the incident, the municipality arranged a studio for the roommate and he moved out.

Unfortunately, this is a recurring pattern. A resident is misbehaving, often suffering from mental health issues and a lack of supervision. This person doesn't want to receive help or help is not available, which deprives the living circumstances for the others. But for something to be arranged the situation needs to escalate. Ali, who lived with an aggressive and racist roommate, had to build up a dossier himself for about a year. He continued pushing

Villex and the municipality to do something and eventually Villex offered the trouble maker a space elsewhere. Ali called it "the failure of the system" and argued that both Villex and the municipality lacked the capabilities to de-escalate the situation. Ali said:

> "*So, they allowed him to intimidate us and keep his negative energy, without them doing any actual actions. They said, aah, it's between two students, they're fighting, let's do mediation*". – Ali (interview, 2024).

Hans, the janitor, a very tall man with a calm voice that was loved by most of the residents, explained how Thomas and he found a mess when they took over the project from Villex: *"There was very little of a plan. The plan was simply: Here's the key, good luck with it. We had to figure everything out ourselves"* (Thomas, interview, 2024). A few months passed by and unit captains slowly approached them with a wide scale of problems that were unresolved by Villex.

In their attempt contacting external authorities, Hans was confronted with *"a total labyrinth at the municipality with endless departments and no one actually taking charge, so it wasn't progressing at all"* (Hans, interview, 2024). For Thomas and Hans, it remains unclear when the municipality takes action. Both expressed it sometimes even feels as if they have to work against the municipality instead of collaborating with them. When I asked Thomas what has worked during the past years, he responded the following:

> *"We haven't succeeded once. Waiting until it's too late. That's kind of the situation. It really has to go too far. In this case, sexual harassment wasn't enough. He will actually have to physically... well, when do you draw the line? There was a boy here who just punched a girl in the face, and we still couldn't get him out. So tell me, when should it work? When he sticks a knife between her ribs? When he rapes her?"* (Thomas, 2024).

The lack of anticipation and involvement on the municipality's side wasn't new to me. From other mixed housing projects, I heard similar stories that were even more poignant. These stories have also been reported by journalists Ramdjan & Herter (2022). Robbe, who has put a lot of effort in conversations with the municipality was eventually told to stop calling them. He summarizes the issue in the following way:

> *"Of course, things on a larger scale will always bring problems. But it's not about something going wrong once, it's about how you solve it, and that solution hasn't even been thought of"* - Robbe (interview, 2024)

Only once Gapph was able to remove a resident from his apartment, the sole reason was that he was behind on his rent.

Although I would have loved to delve further into the role of the municipality, it was impossible within the time frame of my research project. Moreover, it would require me to approach external institutions. I did an attempt to contact the housing department of status holders from the municipality, but I received a reply that they were *"too busy and understaffed"*.

4.7 The kitchen

"Sharing food means sharing life", said Basel from Syria during one of the workshops (PAR session 2.1, 2024). Food and the kitchen are a common thread in our research project. Food can function as the first rapprochement in a social relation, especially when there is a language barrier. In a way, food can be a language in itself, a language we can all understand. I remember the day I moved in, I got offered some home-made Syrian cake from one of my roommates. While we were communicating with hands and feet still, this was the first step in a five year long friendship. Robbe reflects similarly on the importance of food in social relations, while living with a Syrian roommate in particular:

> *"That's the first thing you do to show affection or make contact. I really noticed that. That someone offered me something. And then I said: 'no, I have something specific that I eat right now, because there are just things I want to eat in my day'. And then I got a really disappointed look when I refused something. So then I said: 'okay, screw it, let's just eat together' "* – Robbe (interview, 2024).

The month of Ramadan was always special. I knew that every night, my roommates would be home and we could be eating together. Several years we held a big *iftar* (breaking of the fasting) in the common room downstairs with everyone from the building. We invited people from outside to share these intimate moments which were centred around food.

Another important observation is that not only sharing food is essential for building social relations, but sharing a kitchen as well. This is the place where people meet on a daily basis. This is where you can casually continue a conversation that you had yesterday. This is where you can speak about emotional topics while cutting onions: *"I'm not crying, it's the onions!"*.

Bo and Marwa expressed that their relationship started in the kitchen where they could be in each other's presence, spontaneously engaging in conversations (participatory workshop 2.1, 2024). Unless you have a fridge and a hob in your bedroom, you have to pass the kitchen because a human needs to eat and drink. Xi who just moved from De Woondiversiteit to Stek Oost, of which the project design resembles more with the other large scale projects Startblok Riekerhaven and Elzenhagen. In our interview, he reflected on the set-up of both projects:

> *"There* (Stek Oost) *it is a bit different. You have your own kitchen and toilet. You basically live alone. And people there you have less interaction with. Here* (De Woondiversiteit) *you share a kitchen together. After you have worked or studied a day you go sit in the living room. You kind of have to sit there. Because you have no place. And then you see these people. Have a talk. What happened today? you know. But there it's just like after a long day you feel tired right and you don't feel like talking to people"* - Xi (interview, 2024).

I have often wondered: what would this community have looked like if we didn't share the kitchen? Would our friendship be as strong as it is now? One thing is sure: residents would encounter each other a lot less. Maarten Davelaar who did research on several mixed housing projects argued:

> *"You also need to rely on small interactions, like just having a bit of small talk over your coffee in the morning. Because if you only organize big activities, that's not enough. It creates a high barrier for people. It starts with those small interactions. And that's harder to achieve with a studio setup like this".* – Davelaar (interview, 2024)

In this findings chapter, I reflected on several themes from the workshops and the interviews. Residents noted how attitudes of curiosity, initiative and acceptancy contribute to connectivity between residents. Furthermore, several obstacles for a thriving community were

identified, such as long-lasting conflicts and non-involved roommates. In the following analysis chapter, I will place these observations in a theoretical framework.

Picture 7: the strange boat-like windows give the building a special character (Kuit, 2024)

Picture 8: a wall full of memories, stories, self-made art and language (Kuit, 2024)

Picture 9: unfortunately, cleaning is also part of living together (Kuit, 2024)

Chapter 5 - Analysis

Let's start by emphasizing a very obvious, but important observation: there is no uniform experience of De Woondiversiteit. Some residents intensely enjoyed their time in this communal housing project, like William from Syria, who expressed: "*I think: later, I will look back on this period as the best time of my life"* (participatory workshop 1, 2024). Meanwhile, other residents never felt at their place. Mohammad, for instance, expressed that during the past year he has been counting down for the day on which the municipality would offer him a new house (participatory workshop 2.2, 2024). Each experience with communal living in De Woondiversiteit is unique. In order to analyse what influences these lived experiences, I will place the findings in a relational equality and relational integration framework. For that, I would like to state the main research question again: *how does communal living affect relational integration among status holders and students in a mixed housing project in the Netherlands?*

5.1 Relational equality in a mixed housing context

The experience with communal living depends for a large share on the unit in which somebody is living. Some units have formed strong social bonds, while others have remained disconnected throughout the years. Logically, if there's no connection between the roommates, the communal aspect of the project won't add much to the living experience. Similarly, Heath, Davies, Edwards and Sicluna (2018, p. 130) observed that, in a shared housing context for young adults, it is ultimately *"the nature and quality of the relationships between sharers that matter most"*.

The common space of the unit functions for some as a place of sharing food and making memories, while for others, it was just a space they had to enter if they wanted to eat, drink or use the toilet. Each unit seemed to have its very own culture and social structure. For example, some units had the habit of eating together and inviting their roommates for a plate of food when they were cooking, while in other units, residents always had dinner in their rooms (participatory workshop 2.2, 2024). In a shared housing context, Heath, Davies, Edwards and Sicluna (2018) describe this contrast as the difference between '*getting on'* and '*getting through'*. The first refers to building meaningful relationships and spending time together, while the latter refers to the minimisation of domestic socialisation. I would like to

state that these differences in connectivity should be perceived as differences in relational equality.

The criteria for relational equality are a debated topic among relational egalitarians (Voigt, 2020, p.4). Klarenbeek (2024) argues there is not just one conceptualisation or understanding of what a "perfectly integrated" relationship, community or society looks like. Therefore, in her proposal for a reconceptualization of integration, she claims that: "*instead of theorising what we should strive for, I theorise what we should move away from"* (Klarenbeek, 2024, p.237). Thereby, she emphasizes the problematic features of hierarchies and social boundaries, rather than outlining an ideal type relationship. Meanwhile, Voigt (2020, p.6) argues that it is important to conceptualize the positive aspects of social relations as well, because, she argues: *"someone can treat another person as an equal without regarding that person as an equal, and someone can regard another person as an equal but fail to treat them as equal"* (Voigt, 2022, p.6).

When reflecting on relational integration myself, I was slightly confused. I was contemplating some of the relations around me, friendships or romantic relationships. These relations form strong bonds of love between individuals, but the individuals in those relations do not necessarily regard each other as equals, in terms of gender roles for instance. At the same time, there are roommates at De Woondiversiteit who regard each other as equals, but don't take the effort to become acquainted with each other (participatory workshop 2.2, 2024). Mohammad, for instance, spoke about his roommates in the following manner:

> *"They were nice, but we are not friends. I'm telling you, after moving out from this place I might never see them again. We never built a relationship. The unit was very individualistic, so how can I build a relationship?"* – Mohammad (participatory workshop 2.2, 2024)

How do we perceive this? Is letting each other be 'enough' to speak of an integrated relationship? What does it mean to relate and treat each other as equals? Therefore, in my opinion, it is valuable to conceptualize the positive elements of integrated relations, instead of focusing solely on the problematic aspects of disintegrated relations.

Throughout the workshops and the interviews, research participants have come up with several attitudes which they assessed pivotal for a healthy and thriving community. It was argued that residents should be expected to behave conform with these values, especially the Dutch residents who consciously choose to live in a communal project (participatory workshop 3, 2024).

These attitudes can be weaved with Baker's (2015, p.85) relational equality dimensions of: "*respect and recognition; love, care and solidarity; and power*". For purposes of flow, I will first touch upon respect, after that I will discuss power and I will end with the aspect of love, care and solidarity.

5.2 Respect and Recognition

Baker (2015) notes that unequal *recognition,* as a term which describes unequal standing, has gained support in egalitarian discourse. Since *respect* is a more generic term than recognition, he structurally refers to respect in his work. In my eyes, both respect and recognition correspond with the aspect of *acceptance* which was emphasized as an important attitude by the residents.

Baker (2015) identifies two forms of respect: 'basic respect' and 'appraisal respect' or 'esteem'. 'Basic respect' reflects the idea that everyone is of equal worth and deserves to be treated with dignity, regardless of their actions or attributes (Baker, 2015). This concept emphasizes that no one should be marginalized or excluded based on characteristics such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or gender. Respect was mentioned as an important value by the residents, but there was a greater focus on 'acceptance'. Baker's description of respect closely aligns with how residents expressed their understanding acceptance.

According to them, acceptance is a necessary component of healthy relationships among roommates (participatory workshop 2.1 and 2.2, 2024). Marije from the Netherlands spoke in a loving way about her relationship with roommate Marwa from Afghanistan, while she argued that acceptance lays the foundation for friendship: "*She didn't judge us, and we didn't judge her either. We just talked about it, and we simply accepted that we were completely different, and that was just fine"* (Marije, interview, 2024).

On the other hand, Mohammad explained how he had a hard time accepting his roommates, due to their behaviour in the common space: "*The challenge is to first accept those people in your life and then enjoy your house, but if you don't accept the neighbour who is next to you? How can you enjoy your house?* (participatory workshop 2.2, 2024). Loes, on the other hand, expressed that by living in a multicultural context she learned that she could *"enjoy being friends with people whom she disagreed with on fundamental aspects of life"* (participatory workshop 2.1, 2024). So, due to the project, she learned how to accept differences in ways of being and doing within her close circle.

'Appraisal respect' or 'esteem', which Baker perceives to be different from 'basic respect', refer to recognition of an individual based on achievements or merits. Baker (2015) argues that from a radical egalitarian point of view, opposed to 'liberal egalitarianism', appraisal respect should be minimized in order to reduce relational inequalities. The collected data of this research doesn't provide any solid foundation to test this part of Baker's theory. Therefore, I find it irrelevant to elaborate on it any further.

It is clear though that Baker's (2015) concept of "basic respect" resonates with the experiences of the residents, who emphasize acceptance as foundational to harmonious communal living. For them, valuing individuals regardless of their backgrounds or differences, enables relationships to thrive in a multicultural setting.

5.3 Power

At the foundation of mixed housing projects with status holders and students/starters lies a very unequal division in agency, which is: status holders (almost) don't have a choice but to accept the first housing offer that is provided to them by the municipality. Meanwhile, students and starters can freely and deliberately choose to come and go. This difference in the agency to choose one's own house affects the living experience and the social relations of residents along their stay at De Woondiversiteit. Before delving deeper into this issue, I would like to emphasize the broader societal context from which this inequality emerges.

There is a housing crisis in the Netherlands which students, starters, young families, homeless and other 'vulnerable' groups, such as status holders, suffer most from (Hielkema, 2022). It is predicted that by 2030, Amsterdam will have a shortage of 10.000 to 15.000 houses for its citizens (Hielkema, 2022). Meanwhile, by law, municipalities are obliged to provide (social) housing for status holders (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). They are thus given priority on the (social) housing market (Pointer, 2023). This is to prevent the asylum system from getting stuck (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, 2022).

In fact, during the past years, the Netherlands has structurally failed to provide adequate and humane shelter for asylum seekers, because status holders unwillingly had to stay longer in asylum centres while they were waiting for allocation in a municipality (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, 2022). This 'reception crisis' reached a summit when in the summer of 2022 hundreds of asylum seekers were sleeping out in the open in front of the asylum reception centre in Ter Apel, resulting in the first domestic mission from Doctors without Borders in the Netherlands (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022). These crises are created by a

lack of cooperation from municipalities with the COA, national legislation and the hampered entrance of status holders on the (social) housing market (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, 2022).

Taking into consideration the housing crisis and the pressure on the asylum system, it is understandable that status holders get a one-time offer. Adjusting to everyone's preferences is unfeasible. By noting this political context, I don't intend to neglect or trivialize the experienced lack of agency by status holders when they are offered a room they don't want to live in, with people they don't want to live with. The lack of information and guidance in the process of moving from the asylum centre to De Woondiversiteit seems to be another poignant issue here.

After five years, status holders are offered a new apartment in social or youth housing However, if they leave the project before their contract ends, they will forfeit this offer, because the municipality argues they can search for a house independently (participatory workshops 2.2, 2024). This implies that status holders remain in their assigned rooms for the full term. Besides that, differences in social and financial resources create inequality to enter the housing market. The result is a stark contrast: students and starters come and go when they want, while status holders need to sit it out, so to say. Ali observed how some status holders don't enjoy living together: "*They're just waiting. It's a waiting phase, they want to make money and send it to their parents. A lot of refugees actually don't care about the project right. But you need to take this for granted"* (participatory workshop 2.2, 2024).

Moreover, most status holders haven't established a large network in the city or in the Netherlands yet, making it harder for them to leave the house when they don't feel comfortable due to dirtiness or conflicts. A general coping mechanism for young adults in shared housing, in case of unresolved conflicts, is to move out rather than to solve the conflict (Clark, Tuffin, Bowker and Frewin, 2018). For status holders in De Woondiversiteit, this isn't possible. Moreover, Sultan noticed that:

> *"For the status holders, this is their only place. The Dutch still have family. If things are difficult at home for you, you can simply leave. You have an option to escape. We cannot leave"*. – Sultan (interview, 2024)

Do these inequalities in (social) resources implicate anything about the power dynamics within social relations? It's not simple for a Dutch person either to find a room in

Amsterdam, but their (social) resources would at least enable them to find residence on a short term.

During the first participatory workshop, Dennis expressed: *"I don't like to speak of status holders and Dutch people. We are all people. I sometimes have more in common with some of my roommates who are status holders than with my Dutch roommates"* (participatory workshop 1, 2024).

I agree with Dennis. The emphasis on the distinction between status holders and Dutch people, in a personal context, doesn't fully reflect our everyday interactions. Nevertheless, I chose to focus on the relation between status holders and students as the central unit of analysis, emphasizing a distinction which is based on legal status.

Most students and starters in De Woondiversiteit have a Dutch passport, while status holders possess a temporary residence permit of five years (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). A person entering this project as a status holder is often seen through the categorical label of 'status holder' or 'refugee' before being recognized as an individual with a unique story. Such labels structurally come with forms of discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes (Achiume, 2013). A narrow perception of De Woondiversiteit as only existing of 'status holders' and 'Dutch residents' strips the community from its actual diversity, but in an attempt to better understand the relations between people I think it is important to acknowledge that these social boundaries exist in our society, and therefore, within De Woondiversiteit as well. They impact how we construct ourselves and 'the other' and how we regard and treat 'the other' (Klarenbeek, 2019, p.904).

Ali, who came to the Netherlands as a Syrian refugee, explained how he strongly questioned the way in which integration is approached in the Netherlands:

> *"These people integrate well. They don't. What is integrated right? Is it to live as one whole together? Is it language? Is it culture? Integration is a source of division, because you are othering immigrants. I understand, you do need to learn language, but let people just live however they want. Going to techno parties and doing drugs? Is that integration? Seriously, the word doesn't make any sense. I don't think integration has anything to do with our life here. I don't believe it's something that we should seek for. What I seek is more making relationships, you know caring, friendships, relationships. Maybe I am the wrong person to ask what integration is."* - Ali (interview, 2024)

Ali described here how the general conception of integration and the societal expectations that come with it don't reflect his reality of settling in a new society. While he focuses more on creating relationships than adapting to a culture, Ali argues that the general understanding of integration is rather creating a division between the migrant and the non-migrant.

This is because the prevailing understanding of integration depicts a national society as a unity, with the mainstream culture taking on a 'prescriptive' character. It implies a dominant way of life which the outsider must commit to in order to be recognized as 'integrated' (Klarenbeek 2019, p.907). This notion of legitimacy goes even beyond one's legal status. It is rather an issue of social standing: *"legitimate citizens enjoy higher social standing, which gives them a superior power position within a society*" (Klarenbeek, 2019, 904).

Translating this into the context of De Woondiversiteit, it needs to be recognized that there are residents who are perceived as legitimate members of society and non-legitimate members of society. The residents of the project are at least affected by broader societal ideas of legitimacy and non-legitimacy. Dutch residents are part of the mainstream because they speak the language and have grown up in a Dutch environment. Status holders, when they arrive, go into a process of government imposed integration which forces them to learn the native language and to adopts the values of the mainstream as their own. Whether this positively impacts the lives of status holders is another discussion, but that 'integration' is obligatory is a fact (Wettenbank Overheid, 2024). So, who is a legitimate member of society? And who is a legitimate member of De Woondiversiteit community? And how are these two related?

During the participatory workshops, we spoke repeatedly about prejudice and stereotypes. These go both ways, but mainly the Dutch residents expressed they have been confronted with their own stereotypes about status holders, refugees, Muslims or people from the Global South (participatory workshop 2.1, 2024). Florine, who reflects a lot on power dynamics in her own circle, noticed that in some units Dutch residents tend to dominate decision-making:

> *"How are agreements made within houses? I think it goes well in many places, but not in some. That it's very much like, 'Oh, you're coming into our house, these are the rules, and we're imposing them on you.' That can also carry colonial narratives with it"* – Florine (interview, 2024).

Power dynamics arise when agreements are being made. For instance, how do you come to an agreement on the (cleaning) rules in the house? Some residents might impose rules and expectations upon their roommates without consulting them, laying a foundation for conflicts (Clark, Tuffin, Bowker and Frewin, 2018). And who proposes and chooses the new roommates? The latter is of especial importance since young adults in shared housing tend to choose roommates based on similarity in gender, age and ethnicity (Clark and Tuffin, 2015). In a shared housing context, equality thus requires that everybody is included and recognized in these decision-making processes. Florine (interview, 2024), who lived in two different units, unfortunately, noticed that this is not always the case in De Woondiversiteit. At the same time, she argued that the residents deserve better supervision: *"I really do see a lack in this project regarding support for communication issues, because you need to sit down with a supervisor to discuss what agreements we should make together as a group"* (Florine, interview, 2024).

Most of the time, stereotypes and prejudice stay below the surface of direct expression. A particularly distressing case though was the conflict in Ali's unit, where a Dutch tenant expressed xenophobic and racist remarks towards his Arabic roommates while becoming increasingly aggressive: "*And then he started to become racist, telling Firas, who is also status holder: "fuck you, go back to your own country". It started to become a quarrel. He was telling Firas: "you are a guest here" "*(Ali, interview, 2024).

It illustrates a direct manifestation of an ex-resident's perception on legitimacy and non-legitimacy. Apparently, because of his nationality, the Dutch resident recognized himself as a legitimate member of De Woondiversiteit, while he regarded Ali and the other status holders of the unit as non-legitimate members.

For a unit, or a group of people, to be integrated from a relational perspective, it requires that each member is perceived as a legitimate member of the group (Klarenbeek, 2019, p.904). As long as power dynamics between legitimate members of the community and those who are perceived to be less legitimate remain in place, we can't speak of an integrated community or in this context: an integrated living unit. When I asked Florine what she would like to share with her co-residents, she beautifully put into words the power dynamics which might occur when living together:

> *"Make sure things are done in consultation and educate yourself, because it is not the responsibility of refugees to dispel your stereotypes. Sometimes it feels a bit like, 'we are taking them in,' while it's just as much their home as it is ours."* – Florine (interview, 2024)

In this analysis, I have refrained from using an intersectional lens. I have structurally emphasized the social boundary between status holders and students, but these groups are far from homogenous. Among status holders there are many different nationalities, ethnicities and spiritualities. The Dutch residents come from different cities and cultural backgrounds as well. Even more so, some Dutch members might be constructed as outsiders to the mainstream because of their parents' country of origin, their gender identity or a disability. Undoubtedly, there are different experiences of this project which could be better understood from an intersectional perspective. It is known, for instance, that Eritrean status holders in Stek Oost had a significantly more negative experience living with Dutch people than Syrians did (Tinnemans, Davelaar, Majdoubi and Yohannes, 2020). Furthermore, workshop participants noted that there is a big difference between the dynamic in a women's and a men's unit which might also engender a different living experience (participatory workshop 2.1, 2024). The size of this research as well as the findings made me decide that it was irrelevant to look at the project from an intersectional perspective.

In summary, mixed housing projects with students and status holders reveal significant inequalities in agency and power. While students and starters deliberately chose to live in these projects, status holders barely have a choice but to stay for five years. These initial inequalities seem to be inevitable due to the housing system. So, the challenge rather is how to minimize the effects of this inequality. Improving the support and guidance of status holders during the period they move from the asylum centre to the project could be a step in the right direction. In addition, it needs to be recognized that perceptions of legitimacy and non-legitimacy can harm the connection between residents. For a group of people to be truly integrated, residents should be (made) aware of the power dynamics, even if they perceivably go unnoticed. Participants proposed to organise information sessions or a dialogue about this topic (participatory workshop 4, 2024), something which has been done repeatedly in other projects by the housing corporation or external organisations (Davelaar, interview, 2024).

5.3 Love, care and Solidarity

The final dimension of relational equality, proposed by Baker (2015), is the dimension of love, care and solidarity. He perceives them as a family of concepts, existing of different ranges, and gathers them under "affective relationships" (Baker, 2015, p.74). Baker suggests that love is primarily attributed to intimate relationships. Care concerns a larger circle but

remains among those you know or encounter, while solidarity refers to affective relationships with the people you don't know, who might even live in a different time or place. Following Baker's (2015) understanding of these levels, an affective relationship in the context of a household (with non-family members) would primarily concern relationships of care. In this subchapter, I will extend the analysis of the communities' experiences through the lens of Baker's dimension of love, care and solidarity.

First of all, is it just and practical to impose expectations or to create prescriptions of what it means to love or care for someone? Emotions are often *"beyond our control"* (Baker, 2015, p.75). Moreover, there are a million ways to love and everybody does it in their own way. What is even the purpose of trying to theorize a realm that's so personal? Baker (2015, p.79) argues that a society in which everybody is involved in loving relationships, "*as well as in the caring and solidary relationships that play such an important role in nurturing them, could be characterized as truly egalitarian"*. Therefore, from a relational egalitarian point of view, it is useful to theorize what affective relationships entail and what it requires from people to engage in them.

So, withholding from giving a detailed prescription of how to love or forcing anyone to love, Baker (2015) argues there are certain context-dependent circumstances which require that people interact in a loving or caring way. It can be expected, for instance, that a teacher cares about his students. If they don't, it might be better to fulfil a different position. No one should be forced to love, but Baker's (2015) that relational equality is about:

"It is about how people should act toward others, as appropriate to the different contexts in which they encounter them" - Baker (2015, p.76)

In a similar vein, the residents of De Woondiversiteit argued that, since (Dutch) residents choose to live in a communal housing project, it can be expected that they care for their neighbours (participatory workshop, 2.1; 2.2, 2024). There are no obligations to love and care for your neighbour if you live in a studio by yourself, but a communal housing project requires that residents care for each other, like Kassem (interview, 2024) argued: "*Don't stay in your bubble. This is your new home, your new family"*. So, in De Woondiversiteit, workshop participants expected that residents engage in relationships of care. What might this look like in practice?

As mentioned earlier, emotions are deeply personal and ways to show affection vary among cultures. Robbe (interview, 2024), for instance, noticed his Syrian roommates shared food as a first sign of affection. Especially when there is no language (yet) to communicate in, food seems to be a universal language which we all understand (participatory workshop 2.1, 2024). There are other non-verbal ways of caring, such as Sarafina experienced with her Eritrean roommates:

> *"I wanted to have my hair braided, and that really felt like home. I would be sitting on the floor, and above me, Teresa would be sitting on the couch, and Latifa would be doing her hair again. I think those were little things that contributed to getting to know each other and the atmosphere".* – Sarafina (interview, 2024)

Oussama felt appreciated when his Dutch roommates were showing signs of care by sharing their food and helping him with letters:

> *"They say to me: "Oussama, you can use this, you can use that, you can use anything in the kitchen", their stuff. Tijn also says to me: "if you have a letter, want to read something, need help, or anything like that, you're always welcome". It's really good contact, bro".* – Oussama (interview, 2024)

The examples given above could be categorized as more tangible forms of care. Therefore, I rather associate these expressions with *"caring for",* but there are other less tangible ways in which one can expressively *"care about"* people (Bobinac, Exel, Rutten and Brouwer, 2010). Curiosity, as the intention to better understand your roommate, in my eyes, is an expression of caring about, just as the willingness to solve conflicts with roommates. It shows people aren't indifferent to each other. The skill to view the other from the position of the other is what Maria Lugones (1987) refers to as "World"-Travelling.

Lugones (1987) observed that those who are positioned as outsiders to the 'mainstream', by force, learn to navigate between 'worlds'. A world refers to a particular construction of life, which encompasses a social construction of gender, ethnicity, 'normalcy', and so on. Lugones (1987) describes the capability to travel worlds as an enriching skill which allows one to better understand the 'other' viewing them with a *loving perception*, instead of an *arrogant perception.* The aspects of curiosity and willingness very much embody this loving perception.

I have had intense discussions with one of my Syrian roommates over a conflict in our unit. Sometimes we paused the discussion one day and continued the day after, but the intention to solve the conflict and the attempt to better understand each other always came from a place of love. Marije and Marwa had discussions in their unit as well:

> *"We have always solved it together, we have always sat down and talked it out, and we've always grown closer to each other again. … But because you are just so different and come from such a different culture and have such a different way of communicating, you have to find a way to resolve that together"* – Marije (interview, 2024).

Weaving this conception of "World"-Travelling, with Bakers dimension of care and the community's experiences, I would like to refer back to a dilemma posed at the beginning of the analysis chapter. Residents might regard and treat each other as equals or as 'legitimate' members of the community, but they might not actively engage with each other at the same time. Would this passive acceptancy or "basic respect" be sufficient for relational equality?

Drawing from the communities experiences and Baker's dimensions, I would argue that *indifference* is not enough to establish true relational equality among residents. Relational equality implies that people interact with each other in appropriate ways conform to the context in which they find themselves (Baker, 2015). In a communal project, this would require roommates to engage in caring relationships, just like a teacher should care for its students. This highlights the difference between *getting on* and *getting through* in shared housing (Heath, Davies, Edwards and Sicluna, 2018).

5.4 Obstacles for relational integration

In the analysis above, I touched upon various obstacles for relational integration: the inequality in agency and opportunities on the housing market, the power dynamics between residents and the lack of involvement among a share of the residents.

The property management also plays a role in these issues. The organization lacks the capacity to provide (intercultural) guidance, and no other organizations are involved to support this need. Additionally, the project appears to lack a clear plan. The management focuses more on building maintenance than on advancing social goals. In the last workshop, participants proposed to organize dialogues themselves, with the aim of inspiring community

members to reflect on topics such as stereotypes and prejudice (participatory workshop 4, 2024). Furthermore, since the group observed that Gapph does not adequately inform new residents, they proposed creating a manifesto outlining the community's expectations for new residents (participatory workshop 4, 2024).

The last unmentioned obstacle for relational integration which was identified by the community, is the issue of residents with severe mental health problems. It's hard to put these cases in a context of relational equality, since peoples personal circumstances might not allow them to regard and treat others as equals. When somebody is in a state of severe depression, has a psychosis or deals with PTSS, they are logically deprived of their capacity to empathise with others. The Bible and the Quran share a similar message: *"Love thy neighbour as yourself"* (Blair, 2009), but what if your mental health doesn't allow you to love yourself in the first place? How does that impact the relationship with your neighbour?

From this research, it can be concluded that severe mental health issues inhibit people from regarding and treating other's as equals. There have been numerous (violent) incidents among roommates, in this project as well as in other mixed housing projects. While one might regard their roommates as equals, they might not be capable of treating them as equals.

In 2023, the municipality of Amsterdam decided to increase the budget for mental health care of status holders (Hielkema, 2023). If this care system is set in motion effectively, it might reduce mental health problems among status holders and subsequently decrease the amount of incidents in mixed housing projects.

The scope of this research remained within the project 'De Woondiversiteit'. Therefore, the perspective of the municipality on the frequent incidents in mixed housing projects has unfortunately not been included. This story only shows the frustration among residents and property managers with the inefficient and bureaucratic housing system of status holders in the municipality of Amsterdam, a system which harms communities and traumatizes individuals. Further research could be conducted on the role and position of the municipality in these often encountered problems in mixed housing projects.

5.5 Connection by force

Lastly, I would like to stress the importance of the kitchen in this project. In a way, the effect of a shared kitchen shows similarities with the effect of the pandemic on the community.

During that period, schools, universities, nightlife and sport clubs were all closed and because of that, residents had to interact with their roommates. The curfew forced us to spent time together. Connectivity in the building peaked at this moment. In other words, the community was strongly relationally integrated during the pandemic.

While nobody wishes for another pandemic to occur, we can acknowledge that some force helps people to start connecting. The forced sharing of facilities has this in common with the pandemic. People have to meet each other in the kitchen. Also Sultan (interview, 2024) noticed that: *"It's really easy to start a conversation with someone. You'll definitely get to know at least ten people. Even if you don't want to. You have to. You live with them".*

Besides the facilitation of this daily contact, the kitchen functions as a place where residents can share their culture with roommates. Food takes an important place in peoples culture and heritage, even more in some migrant diaspora who attempt to maintain their identity and a sense of 'self' (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011; Naidu & Nzuza, 2013). In addition, as we have noted, food is an important common language in a household with different linguistic backgrounds, because food can function as a non-verbal gesture of affection. Hamburg, Finkenauer and Schuengel (2014), who did a research on the relation between food and emotional regulation, found that: *"food offering thus provides a way of coping with distress and empathic concern, as well as an effective means of offering social support, resulting in increased positive affect across interaction partners and an increase in interpersonal closeness".* For those interactions to occur, a communal project needs a shared kitchen or living room where residents can spontaneously encounter each other and share food.

In other mixed housing projects, the lack of common space is complicating the connection and integration between residents. In Stek Oost, tenants solely share one large common space in a facility which accommodates 250 people (Tinnemans, Davelaar, Majdoubi & Yohannes, 2020). Each resident has its own kitchen and bathroom, and therefore the necessity to socialize is totally absent. Contact is mainly facilitated through organized activities. Maarten Davelaar therefore argued:

> *"Easy contact between neighbours. That is really the most important thing: the individual and informal daily contact. If you don't have that, then no matter how many activities you want to organize, the project won't get off the ground"* – Davelaar (interview, 2024)

In contrast to many mixed housing projects, the architectural design of De Woondiversiteit does facilitate this daily contact. In combination with the relatively small size of the project (Tinnemans, Davelaar, Majdoubi & Yohannes, 2020; Ramdjan & Herter, 2022), this seems to have improved the connectivity between community members.

In summary, although some residents might prefer to have their own kitchen, a shared kitchen opens many doors for connection. Without this push for social interaction, residents connect less. Moreover, a kitchen provides the opportunity to share food, which is essential for a project which intends to stimulate bridges between different cultures.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Mixed housing projects have made a rapid advancement in the Netherlands as a solution to the housing crisis and a way to connect newcomers with Dutch citizens. In this research, I analysed the effect of communal housing on the relational integration between status holders and students in a mixed housing project called 'De Woondiversiteit'. As a resident of this project myself, I engaged in a collective research journey with flatmates through participatory workshops, supported with qualitative interviewing. The analysis was based on relational equality theory and Klarenbeek's (2021; 2024) reconceptualization of integration as a relational process.

I conclude that communal housing affects relational integration among status holders and students to varying extents. Experiences with shared housing are deeply personal and depend mainly the connectedness with other community members. By applying a relational integration framework I examined the connections between residents rather than solely assessing the individual experiences or achievements of status holders. From a relational perspective, I argue that some units are well-integrated, while others have remained disintegrated throughout the years. This research has contributed to a shift in the ontological understanding of what integration is and how it can be researched from a methodological point of view. This relational approach to integration could be applied in researches on other communities and societies of a different scale.

Relational integration in communal housing is shaped by both integrative and disintegrative factors. Baker's (2015) dimensions of respect, love and power, supported the experiences of participants, provided insights into the attitudes which influence relationships within the community. First of all, residents identified acceptance as a crucial value for a co-living environment, which very much corresponded with Bakers understanding of basic respect. Second, power dynamics play a role in legitimacy perceptions among residents in the project. The social boundary between status holders, being outsiders to the mainstream, and Dutch residents is not always expressed, but can affect the way in which residents position themselves towards 'the other'. Unfortunately, any guidance on this aspect from the property management or external organisations is missing. Lastly, I conclude that being indifferent to each other is not enough to be relationally integrated. Roommates may recognize each other as legitimate members of the community, they often lack active engagement. As Baker (2015, p.75) suggests, relational equality requires that people relate and treat others as *"appropriate to*

the different contexts in which they encounter them". In this case, the communal housing context, thus, calls for a caring attitude towards fellow residents.

Several obstacles hinder relational integration within De Woondiversiteit, the housing project in which I did my research. These include non-involved roommates, long lasting conflicts, residents with severe mental health problems and a lack of guidance and involvement of the property management 'Gapph'. Residents in other mixed housing projects in Amsterdam encountered similar problems while living together (Tinnemans, Davelaar, Yohannes & Majdoubi, 2020). The role of the municipality in these issues is apparent: they refrain from acting adequately upon incidents. There's often a lack of or even no response to the outcries of residents or Gapph about (misbehaving) residents with severe mention health problems, exacerbating the tensions within the community. Further research could examine the role of the municipality in the successes and challenges within mixed housing projects.

The challenge of this research was to balance the participatory workshops with my own thesis goals. In the end, the participatory workshops feel like a separate project from this paper, but definitely supported it with valuable data and insights. Our final workshop concluded with an engaged discussion on potential measures, completing a cycle of reflection and action.

After five years of living with both status holders and Dutch residents, I have come to view integration as a relational process, rather than a migrant focused process. Denying the Dutch students' active participation in this process would be an unrealistic representation of the community's everyday reality. We have been living with each other, thus we have integrated with each other.

I would like to end by again quoting Ali, who, in his very own words, managed to summarize the general message of this paper better than anyone else:

> *"Going to techno parties and doing drugs? Is that integration? Seriously, the word doesn't make any sense. I don't think integration has anything to do with our life here. I don't believe it's something that we should seek for. What I seek is more making relationships, you know caring, friendships, relationships."* – Ali (interview, 2024)

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Appendix I

List of interviews:

Ali (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 31st of july, Amsterdam.

Florine (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 30th july, Amsterdam.

Hans (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 8th of august, Amsterdam.

Xi (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 5th of august, Amsterdam.

Kassem (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 7th of august, Amsterdam.

Maarten Davelaar (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 9th of October, Utrecht.

Marije (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 6th of august, Amsterdam.

Oussama (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 30th of august, Amsterdam.

Paul (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 30th of august, Amsterdam.

Robbe (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 13th of august, Amsterdam.

Sarafina (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 7th of august, Amsterdam.

Sultan (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 1st of august, Amsterdam.

Thomas (2024). Interviewed by Paco Kuit. 28th of august, Amsterdam.

Participatory Workshops and Participants

Participatory Workshop 1 (2024). Loes, Bo, Basel, William, Marwa, Kirian, Dennis and Tim. *Facilitated by Paco Kuit*. 23rd of May, Amsterdam.

Participatory Workshop 2.1 (2024). Basel, Marwa, Bo, Loes and Sifra. *Facilitated by Paco Kuit*. 16th of June, Amsterdam.

Participatory Workshop 2.2 (2024). Ali, Mohammad and Alan. *Facilitated by Paco Kuit*. 3rd of July, Amsterdam.

Participatory Workshop 3 (2024). Basel, Marwa, Loes and Ali. *Facilitated by Paco Kuit.* 9th of July, Amsterdam.

Participatory Workshop 4 (2024). Loes, Bo, Marwa and William. *Facilitated by Paco Kuit.*

Appendix II

Table 1: interests and goals participatory workshop 1

What do you want to research?	**What do you want to achieve?**
What does life look like with a non-Dutch person from the perspective of a Dutch person?	I want to make live better for another person who is going to live here
How can we, as a building, engage new residents with the goal of creating more community spirit?	An understanding of what makes this place so nice to live. Looking forward to show this to new people and make them feel welcome.
What does community and living together mean to you?	My goal is to understand LIFE with you. I want to achieve that you are always positive.
Which characteristics contribute to a nice co-living experience? What can improve it? How can we involve the neighborhood more?	Connection, community, a space where everybody feels home.
What are the benefits of this housing project?	Improving the project and/or showing a positive impression for the outside world. Considering that this is a solution for the housing crisis.
What have you learned? How did it develop you?	Stimulating and informing similar projects

Actions or steps to be taken to create a better society for both Dutch people as migrants?	Stimulating living together and improving the atmosphere

Appendix III

Figure 1: core domains of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008)