



BRIDGES OF BELONGING

MODULE 5

FOR PRACTITIONERS WORKING WITH PEOPLE WITH FLIGHT EXPERIENCE

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Authors

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BRIDGES OF BELONGING



This module explores social integration as a dynamic and evolving process of building Social Capital. It focuses on supporting people with refugee experience in moving from the safety of “cultural bubbles” towards the creation of meaningful, functional and emotional connections with the host society. By understanding how social networks operate, practitioners can guide individuals in navigating cultural encounters, overcoming barriers and accessing new opportunities. The module also highlights the importance of balancing familiarity and openness, helping people with refugee experience develop diverse relationships that foster participation, inclusion and a genuine sense of belonging in their new environment.

This module builds on *Robert Putnam's Social Capital Theory*, which provides a powerful framework for understanding how social networks influence integration processes. In the context of forced migration, integration is not only a matter of access to services or employment, but fundamentally a question of relationships, trust, and belonging.

Social capital refers to the value embedded in social connections, and it plays a crucial role in determining how individuals navigate new environments, access opportunities, and rebuild their lives.

Putnam distinguishes between two main types of social capital: **bonding capital** and **bridging capital**, both of which are essential but serve different functions.



UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

This module builds on *Robert Putnam's Social Capital Theory*, which provides a powerful framework for understanding how social networks influence integration processes. In the context of forced migration, integration is not only a matter of access to services or employment, but fundamentally a question of **relationships, trust, and belonging**. *Social capital* refers to the value embedded in social connections, and it plays a crucial role in determining how individuals navigate new environments, access opportunities, and rebuild their lives.

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BONDING CAPITAL AS THE FOUNDATION

Bonding capital refers to strong, close ties within a homogeneous group, such as family members, friends from the same country of origin, or members of a shared cultural or linguistic community. These ties are “inward-looking” and provide a **safety net**. For people with refugee experience, bonding capital is often the first and most immediate resource upon arrival. It offers emotional support, a sense of identity continuity, shared language, and practical help in navigating unfamiliar systems. In situations of uncertainty and vulnerability, these networks are not only beneficial but necessary for psychological stability and survival.



However, bonding capital also has limitations. When individuals rely exclusively on these close networks, they may become confined within what are often referred to as “**cultural bubbles**”. While these spaces provide comfort and protection, they can also unintentionally limit exposure to new opportunities, information, and relationships. Over time, excessive reliance on bonding capital can lead to **social isolation from the host society**, reducing access to employment, education, and civic participation.

THE POWER IN BRIDGING CAPITAL

This is where **bridging capital** becomes essential. Bridging capital refers to weaker, more diverse connections that link individuals to people outside their immediate social group—particularly members of the host community. These ties are “outward-looking” and function as a **ladder for social mobility**. Through bridging connections, people with refugee experience can access new information, job opportunities, language practice, and a deeper understanding of social norms and institutions.

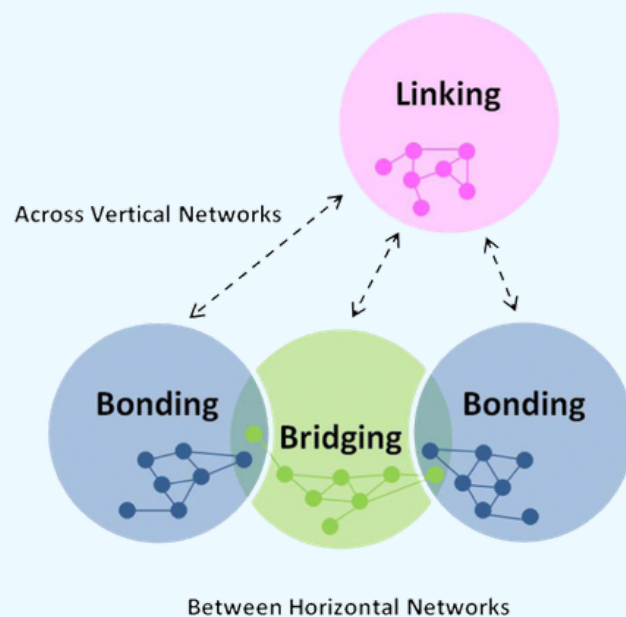
Unlike bonding ties, which are based on trust and familiarity, bridging ties often begin as “**weak ties**”—casual or low-intensity interactions with neighbours, colleagues, shopkeepers, or community members. Despite their apparent fragility, these weak ties are extremely powerful. Sociological research shows that they are often more effective than strong ties in providing access to new opportunities, precisely because they connect individuals to different social circles and resources.

Maria, a mother with refugee experience, relies almost exclusively on her family network for daily support. While this strong bonding capital provides emotional stability, it limits her exposure to the host community. With the support of a practitioner, she joins a local neighbourhood garden. Through shared activities such as planting and maintaining the space, Maria begins to interact with local residents in a natural, low-pressure environment. One of these “weak ties” evolves into a meaningful connection, leading to information about a local job opportunity. This experience demonstrates how even a single bridging connection can significantly change integration pathways.



A key challenge in people with refugee experience integration is therefore achieving **a balance between bonding and bridging capital**. When bonding dominates without sufficient bridging, individuals may feel safe but remain excluded from broader societal participation. Conversely, attempts to build bridging connections without a secure base of bonding can lead to feelings of instability or loss of identity. Effective integration requires both: **a foundation of trust and support, combined with openness to new relationships and environments**.

“**Linking**” represents vertical connections with institutions and systems (such as public services, NGOs, or local authorities). For practitioners, **facilitating these links is key to helping refugees** access rights, services, and structural opportunities beyond their immediate social networks.



Social Capital by Katherine E. Laycock and Carrie Mitchell
from https://www.researchgate.net/figure/How-social-capital-is-organized-The-interaction-between-bonding-bridging-and-linking_fig1_330116488

To facilitate this transition *Gordon Allport's Contact Hypothesis* is incorporated which provides evidence-based conditions under which meaningful interaction between groups can reduce prejudice and foster mutual understanding. According to Allport, contact between different groups is most effective when it occurs under specific conditions:

- **Equal status** between participants
- **Common goals** that require cooperation
- **Institutional support** that legitimises and encourages interaction

In the context of people with refugee experience integration, this means that simply placing people with refugee experience and local populations in the same space is not sufficient. The quality and structure of the interaction are crucial. For example, a shared activity such as a community garden, a sports team, or a language exchange programme can create a setting where individuals collaborate as equals, rather than as “beneficiaries” and “hosts.” This reduces power imbalances and allows genuine relationships to emerge.

Importantly, these interactions should be designed to be **low-pressure and meaningful**, enabling participants to engage without fear of judgment or failure. Over time, repeated positive encounters can challenge stereotypes, build trust, and transform perceptions on both sides.

Another key theoretical concept explored is *Homi Bhabha's* notion of the “**Third Space**”. Traditional models of integration often assume that individuals must choose between preserving their original cultural identity and adopting the culture of the host society. This binary perspective can create internal conflict and feelings of loss or inadequacy.

The concept of the Third Space offers an alternative: a **dynamic, hybrid space where new identities can emerge**. In this space, people with refugee experience are not required to abandon their cultural background, nor to fully assimilate into the host culture. Instead, they can **negotiate and combine elements of both**, creating a flexible and evolving sense of self.

This perspective is particularly important for long-term integration, as it validates the complexity of identity in multicultural contexts. It also **supports intercultural dialogue**, as both people with refugee experience and members of the host community are encouraged to engage in mutual exchange rather than one-sided adaptation. The Third Space becomes a site of creativity, where new meanings, practices, and relationships can develop.

From a practical standpoint, this concept helps practitioners move away from deficit-based approaches and towards **empowerment-oriented strategies**. People with refugee experience are not seen as individuals who need to “fit in,” but as active participants in shaping shared social spaces. This shift fosters agency, confidence, and a stronger sense of belonging.

It is also important to recognise that building bridging capital and navigating cultural encounters can involve **significant emotional and psychological barriers**. Fear of rejection, language difficulties, discrimination, and past experiences of exclusion can all hinder engagement with the host community. Therefore, the process must be gradual and supported, allowing individuals to take small, manageable steps outside their comfort zones.

THE POSITION OF THE PRACTITIONER

Practitioners can play a key role in this process by acting as **facilitators of connection**. Their role includes identifying existing networks, highlighting opportunities for interaction, and supporting individuals in developing the confidence and skills needed to engage with new environments. Tools such as social network mapping (ecomapping) can help visualise current relationships and identify gaps where new connections can be built.

Ultimately, this module emphasises that integration is not a one-time event but a **dynamic and ongoing process**. It involves continuous negotiation between familiarity and novelty, safety and opportunity, identity and change. By understanding the dynamics of social capital and cultural encounters, practitioners can better support people with refugee experience in building diverse, meaningful networks that enhance both their wellbeing and their participation in society.

Amina struggles with feeling “in between” cultures, unsure whether to maintain her traditions or adapt to the host society. This creates internal conflict and social withdrawal. Through intercultural storytelling sessions, she begins to share her experiences and listen to others with similar challenges. Gradually, Amina embraces a hybrid identity, combining elements of both cultures. This shift allows her to engage more confidently with diverse groups and build relationships based on mutual understanding.



HYBRID IDENTITIES AND COMBINED CAPITAL

In conclusion, the combination of bonding and bridging capital, supported by structured intercultural contact and the recognition of hybrid identities, provides a comprehensive framework for fostering inclusion. Rather than encouraging assimilation or isolation, this approach promotes **connectedness, reciprocity, and mutual transformation**, laying the foundation for a more cohesive and inclusive society.

ACTIVITY 'I AM PART OF THE ECO MAP'

PURPOSE

01.

The Trust Map (Ecomap) is a practical and visual tool designed to help people analyse existing social networks and identify opportunities to build new connections.

It supports awareness of the balance between bonding and bridging capital, making visible both strengths (support systems) and gaps (missing links to the host community).

Find instructions on ecomapping in the appendix.

This activity focusses on the practitioner's position and how they themselves function as bonding, bridging or linking capital. The power, expectations, and unintended pressures practitioners bring into relationships with clients or refugees will be examined and also how their role may enable, limit, or complicate a refugee's navigation in relations and society.

BACKGROUND

02.

This exercise encourages practitioners to reflect on their current relationships and positions in regards to people with refugee experience.

Practitioners are not neutral helpers—they are active agents in the refugee's social world, often representing both opportunity and control at the same time.

LINKING CAPITAL

03.

As a practitioner you might represent linking capital for the client; you have access to resources, systems, decisions, perhaps in one of these aspects:

- Government systems
- Municipal services
- Caseworkers, social workers
- Schools, healthcare, job centers
- Legal and asylum systems

ACTIVITY

‘I AM PART OF THE ECO MAP’

SELF-MAPPING (NO CLIENT) 04.



- Practitioners create their own ecomap over their professional life; themselves as the center, then their workplace or organization, colleagues or team, policies, laws, or regulations, and wider society—norms, expectations (no clients yet).
- Identify the strength/weakness of each relation and its direction (power from-to or mutual)

IDENTIFY DIFFERENT CAPITAL 05.



Label each connection or relation by the three different capitals:

- Where do you operate as **bonding capital**?
 - Familiarity, shared understanding, emotional safety (e.g., “I feel aligned with my team”)
- Where do you operate as **bridging capital**?
 - Access to systems, opportunities, “the outside world”
- Where do you represent **linking capital**?
 - Authority, gatekeeping, decision-making power

INSERT YOURSELF INTO A REFUGEE’S MAP 06.



Place yourself into an imagined refugee’s/client’s ecomap — not as a person, but as a *function*.

Ask yourself if you are experienced as:

- A door opener?
- A gatekeeper?
- A rule enforcer?
- A translator between worlds?
- A source of pressure?



Draw arrows showing:

- What flows *from* you (information, decisions, expectations)?
- What flows *to* you (compliance, trust, dependency, resistance)?

ACTIVITY

‘I AM PART OF THE ECO MAP’

MIRRORING

07.

This part can be executed alone or preferably together with another practitioner doing the exercise.



1. Describe yourself in your work with the client in a brainstorming way - which responsibilities do you have, what is your area, how do you approach the client, and so on.



2. The other participant (or yourself if you do it alone) goes through your statements categorizing like:

- “You sound like a bridge when...”
- “You sound like a barrier when...”
- “You hold power when...”



3. With this knowledge you reflect on whether your intention matches your impact, like:

- Do you offer true bridging that is useful to the client?
- Do you unintentionally weaken their bonding networks?
- How do you manage your linking capital in order to support the client?

EMBRACE AWARENESS

08.



If you have identified aspects where you see a potential in changing your approach in your work with clients, you might find this compilation of statements useful. Feel free to add your own findings and thoughts:



- **I am bridging capital** — but not neutral. I can open doors but I know the options and I decide which ones matter.
- **I am linking capital** — I represent official institutions and I hold power (housing, education, services, legitimacy, ...), thereby I am also seen as part of “the system,” not just support.
- **I may unintentionally create dilemmas** — “Learn Danish + get a job” vs. “Stay connected to your community” is experienced as a trade off.
- **Good intentions can create pressure** — Encouraging integration can feel like loss of identity, betrayal of community or emotional risk
- **When I feel most certain that I am helping** — what might I be missing in that moment?

ACTIVITY

'THE TRUST MAP'

(ECOMAP) - FOR CLIENTS/REFUGEES

PURPOSE

01.

The Trust Map (Ecomap) is a practical and visual tool designed to help people with refugee experience and practitioners analyse existing social networks and identify opportunities to build new connections. It supports awareness of the balance between bonding and bridging capital, making visible both strengths (support systems) and gaps (missing links to the host community).



Photo Source: **A Practical Guide to Understanding Client Systems** from <https://createely.com/guides/ecomap-social-work/>

BACKGROUND

02.

This exercise encourages people with refugee background to reflect on their current relationships, recognise the value of both strong and weak ties, and take concrete steps towards expanding their social networks in a manageable and intentional way. It is particularly effective in non-formal learning environments where participants feel safe to share and reflect. It also gives practitioners insight in where and how to assist the person to strengthen parts of their social network.

CREATE SAFE SPACE

03.

To map one's social relations is a vulnerable process both to face the aspects which might be troublesome and especially to share the map with a professional person representing formally or informally the host society.

To accommodate the person mapping make sure to communicate confidentiality and ensure a relaxed and supportive environment and safe space.

ACTIVITY

‘THE TRUST MAP’ (ECOMAP) - FOR CLIENTS/REFUGEES

<https://createely.com/guides/ecomap-social-work/> - chapter 5 on Immigrant and Refugee Support



INTRODUCE THE CONCEPT

04.

Begin by explaining the difference between **bonding** and **bridging capital** using simple examples. Emphasise that both are important, and that the goal is not to replace one with the other, but to achieve a healthy balance.



CREATE THE VISUAL MAP

05.

Ask the participant to draw three concentric circles on a sheet of paper. In the centre, they write “Me” or their name. Explain that each circle represents a different level of closeness in their social network.

This tool can serve as inspiration or used as it is:

<https://createely.com/demo-start/?templd=MdLLtqwZLeX>

IDENTIFY BONDING TIES (INNER CIRCLE)

06.

Invite the participant to fill the inner circle with people they trust deeply: family members, close friends, or individuals from their cultural or linguistic community. Encourage them to reflect on the type of support these relationships provide (emotional, practical, linguistic).

IDENTIFY INTERMEDIATE CONNECTIONS (MIDDLE CIRCLE)

07.



In the second circle, participants write the names of acquaintances or people they interact with occasionally, such as neighbours, classmates, or members of local organisations. These ties may already serve as potential bridges.

ACTIVITY

‘THE TRUST MAP’ (ECOMAP) - FOR CLIENTS/REFUGEES

IDENTIFY BRIDGING TIES (OUTER CIRCLE)

08.

In the outer circle, participants list any connections with the host community, such as local shopkeepers, volunteers, teachers, or colleagues.

If this circle is empty or limited, it becomes an important point for reflection.

IDENTIFY GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

10.

Ask participants to identify one specific “gap” in their outer circle. This could be, for example, not knowing anyone in a local community space (library, sports club, neighbourhood association).

DEFINE A CONCRETE ACTION

11.

Support participants in setting a small, realistic goal to create a new bridging connection. Examples include:

- Visiting a local café and initiating a simple conversation
- Attending a community event or workshop
- Joining a language exchange group

The action should be low-risk and achievable within a short timeframe.

ANALYSE THE MAP TOGETHER

09.

Guide participants to observe their map:

- Is it heavily focused on bonding ties?
- Are there enough bridging connections?

Which relationships could be strengthened or expanded?

- This step helps reframe isolation as a structural issue rather than a personal failure.

FOLLOW-UP AND REFLECTION

12.

In a later session, revisit the Trust Map.

Ask participants:

- Did you complete your action?
- What was the experience like?
- Did you create a new connection?

Encourage them to update their map and reflect on how their network is evolving.

This reinforces learning and highlights progress over time.

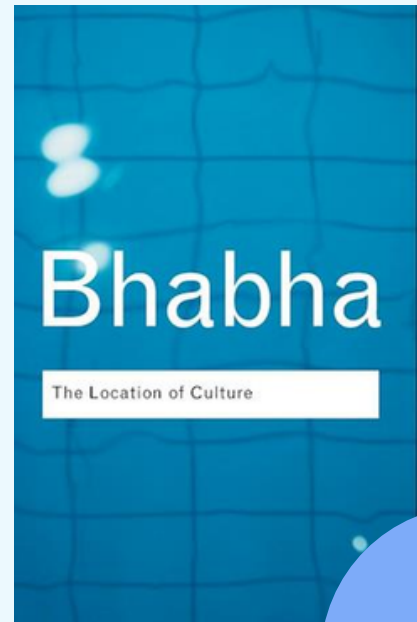
GET INSPIRED



PODCASTS

On Being with Krista Tippett

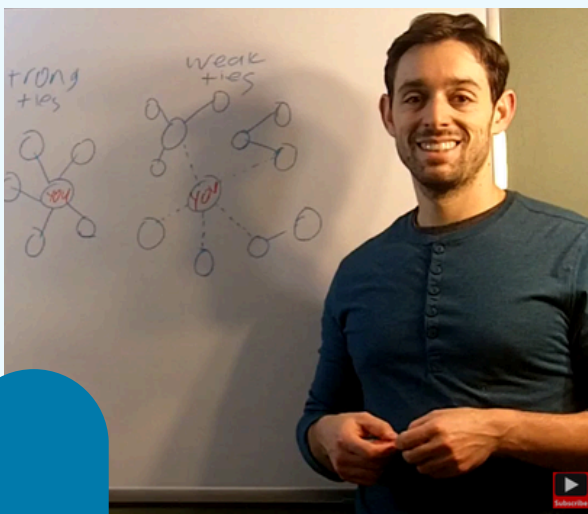
Episodes exploring identity, belonging and intercultural dialogue from diverse perspectives.
<https://onbeing.org/series/podcast/>



BOOK

The Location of Culture - by Bhabha

Introduces the concept of the "Third Space" and hybrid identities in multicultural contexts.



VIDEO: THE IMPORTANCE OF WEAK TIES (NOT STRONG TIES)

Jacob Morgan

A brief discussion on the differences between weak ties and strong ties and why weak ties are actually much more valuable
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7AzRVxhEXA>

CURRICULUM



Links, references and further investigation

“Social Capital and Public Affairs”, by Robert D. Putnam

“Contact Hypothesis”, by Gordon W. Allport

“Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology” – Annual Review of Sociology
<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.1>

A comprehensive overview of social capital theory and its relevance in contemporary societies.

“The Contact Hypothesis Revisited” – Greater Good Science Center

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/does_contact_reduce_prejudice

Explores how structured interaction between groups reduces prejudice and builds trust.

“Ecomap in Social Work: A Practical Guide to Understanding Client Systems”

<https://create.ly.com/guides/ecomap-social-work/> - chapter 5 on Immigrant and Refugee Support + mapping tool

BOOK

A foundational text on social capital, explaining how social networks influence trust, cooperation and community participation.

“Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community”, by *Robert D. Putnam*





RESILIENCE FOR REFUGEES

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