Previous research suggests that the settlement of refugees and asylum seekers in the country of asylum will depend on four key factors. First, are the policies of the country of asylum including the legal system, citizenship rights conferred on individuals through their immigration status in the country of asylum (Cohen, 1994; Robinson, 1986) and strategies of migrant incorporation such as differential exclusion and multiculturalism (Castles, 1995). Second, the presence or absence of social networks affects settlement (Robinson, 1993a). Third are the characteristics of individual migrants including language skills, education and employment. Economic participation is one of the key indicators of settlement. Fourth are the circumstances of the migration itself and linked to this are attitudes and aspirations about the migration (Al-Rasheed, 1994; Kunz, 1981). This chapter explores the factors that affect migrant settlement.

Theories of migrant settlement

Early research and theoretical developments in the area of migrant settlement originated with the work of the Chicago School in North America. Park (1950) was concerned with the process of assimilation that he argued would be the eventual outcome of the ‘race-relations cycle’ of host society member and migrant interaction. However, Park’s work did not dissect the concept of assimilation and this was not done until the work of Gordon (1964) (Alba and Nee, 1997).

Gordon (1964) presented seven dimensions or stages in the assimilation process: cultural, structural, marital, identificational, attitude receptional (absence of prejudice), behavioural receptional (absence of
discrimination) and civil (absence of power or value conflict). Gordon (1964) maintained that the adoption of the cultural pattern of the host society, or acculturation, comes first though it does not necessarily mean progression to the second stage of the assimilation process. However, once a migrant has achieved structural assimilation then the other stages in the process would necessarily follow. Structural assimilation is defined by Gordon (1964, p, 80) as ‘entrance of the minority group into the social cliques, clubs, and institutions of the core society’.

Gordon’s work is criticized because it assumes a two-group framework of American society and fails to account for the diversity in society and the relationships between different ethnic minorities (Alba and Nee, 1997). Theories of assimilation have been criticized because they fail to recognize the way in which minority cultures influence ‘mainstream’ Anglo-American life and the way in which different groups interact and adopt traits of each other. Such influence in most obvious in the areas of food and music though Alba and Nee (1997) allude to the way in which Irish and Italian family relations and responsibilities have become part of the dominant culture.

Moreover, this linear model of assimilation has been criticized because it assumes that the shared goal of both the society and the individual migrant was assimilation. When assimilation did not occur, it was assumed that this happened because migrants were unable to assimilate, were reluctant to give up their traditional values or because the host community was unable to accept them due to their differences (Portes and Manning, 1986).

Later work such as that carried out by Glazer and Moynihan (1970) highlighted the importance of the aspirations of the migrants themselves in the settlement process. There was no longer the assumption that the aim of migrants was to assimilate, as in earlier work, but instead the recognition that some migrant groups did not assimilate out of choice.

Berry (1980), who devised a model of migrant adaptation, uses the term adaptation generically to refer to the process and outcome of acculturation. What distinguishes assimilation from acculturation is that the former is unidirectional while the later can be a two way process involving a cultural exchange. Berry (1988) maintains that alongside adaptation there are different ways in which an individual and/or groups may acculturate in a plural society. Using Berry’s (1988) model, there are four possible acculturation outcomes: assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization.