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EDITORIAL

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Migrants' Inclusion in Rural Communities

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Abstract

This thematic issue examines migrants' inclusion in rural communities, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex realities informing migrant experiences and processes of inclusion and exclusion in rural localities. The studies presented apply different theoretical approaches, all using various qualitative methods, to shed light on daily life experiences and views in rural locations. This editorial discusses the questions raised in the studies and outlines the main arguments of the different contributions assembled in this thematic issue.

Keywords

exclusion; inclusion; migration; rural areas; social encounters

1. Introduction

Commonly, rural areas have been associated with low population density, limited public services, relatively homogeneous economic activities, and close-knit relations among inhabitants, creating a particular context for incoming populations (de Lima, 2012; Woods, 2007). Therefore, the incorporation of migrants in rural areas may differ from urban areas (de Lima, 2012). Like urban areas, many sectors of rural locations have been transformed by their gradual integration into the global economy and neoliberal restructuring (Rye & O'Reilly, 2021). The growing body of research in rural areas has illustrated how migrants have commonly replaced out-migrating local populations and helped maintain necessary services and local economic activities (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014; McAreavey & Argent, 2018). The participation of different kinds of internal and international migrants, such as those arriving as workers, refugees, and lifestyle migrants, is causing rural areas to become increasingly diverse and heterogeneous places inhabited by transnational populations.

The studies in this thematic issue contribute to understanding the complex realities informing migrant experiences and processes of inclusion and exclusion in rural localities affected by contemporary migration of transnational populations. They go beyond many former studies that focus on specific migrant groups or inclusion in the labor market by giving more attention to social encounters in daily life. Because of the multi-sited embeddedness of migrants, they have social obligations in more than one place, which may affect their participation in the rural villages.

The articles cover geographical areas in seven countries in various parts of Europe and one from Canada. The authors use various qualitative methods and theoretical perspectives to elucidate complex and multifaceted processes of integration and belonging in their research locations. Most of the studies focus on the point of view of the in-migrating populations, though the perspectives of long-term local populations are included in some. By presenting a range of views, the authors attend to the agency of multiple actors while also shedding light on local, national, and transnational structural constraints. Although various theoretical perspectives are applied, an important theme running through this collection is integration or inclusion and processes of exclusion. This emerges from the contributors' close examination of various aspects of social life, such as work, participation in leisure and voluntary activity, homemaking, and being seen. In this way, the articles shed light on important questions regarding the integration of newcomers, as well as the social positioning of rural populations more generally.

2. Contributions to the Thematic Issue

In her article, Pietka-Nykaza (2024) examines how different types of social relations do or do not develop among rural residents of various immigrant backgrounds and the locals of the Scottish Highlands, where family and being "local" play an important role in inclusion. The article highlights that although migrant participants experienced convivial relationships with "local" residents, closer relationships were not easily developed. Instead, social integration was facilitated through instrumental and intimate relations with people of other in-migrating groups.

Social relations and the role they play in social inclusion also are a focus of Hayfield's (2024) article, in which the concept of citizenship is applied to examine "everyday relational and spatial experiences at various levels of society." Her interviews with international migrants in the Faroe Islands shed light on the structural and social hindrances they encounter when trying to gain access to and recognition from social networks. As in the Scottish Highlands, being "local" and having family ties plays an important role in this. A lack of access to social ties contributes to the hindrance that leaves migrants on the margins of the labor market and society in general.

Sætermo et al. (2024) apply the concept of "being seen" to get a more nuanced understanding of immigrants' experiences with settling in and finding their place in rural areas. Based on interviews with immigrants living in a rural, coastal community in Norway, they explore their perceptions of rural integration and experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the local community. They show how "being seen," on the one hand, points to more personalized relations and support, while on the other, it points to concerns by immigrants that locals see them as "others." Thus, this is a complex process that they navigate daily.

Applying a similar concept, Giannetto and van der Maarel (2024) present a study of the everyday experiences of labor migrants from Romania and West Africa in a small, rural town in Sardinia. Their article focuses on divergent meanings of integration and inclusion between migrants and residents. White, Romanian migrants who settle and take part in public activities are considered, and consider themselves, to be integrating. Non-white migrants from West Africa are never truly included and remain invisible to residents until they are thought to cause problems. Thus, they feel neither included nor integrated, despite the fact their employer and town administrators praised their participation in the labor force.

Also focusing on the position of labor migrants, the article by Skaptadóttir et al. (2024) sheds light on their different positionality and belonging to rural communities. The article highlights the importance of considering how social stratification and hierarchy affect migrants' experiences of inclusion. The results demonstrate that migrants' and locals' conceptualizations of relatedness and otherness both reflect inherited ideas of Europe and contemporary divergent geopolitical positions and are used to rationalize differentiations between and across migrant groups.

Examination of the effects of legislatively divergent social positions forms the basis of the research presented by George et al. (2024). Despite having only temporary contracts, migrant agricultural workers' migration is often cyclical. Although they are important for the local economy and spend a long time in these communities, they do not have access to services provided for other newcomers. Being excluded from entitlements like labor mobility reinforces the precarity, subordination, and exclusion of migrant agricultural workers.

Lynnebakke (2024) explores how locals and migrants view leisure practices as methods and markers of inclusion. Variation in what kinds of practices were central to local identity in the localities indicates the importance of considering "the local" in studies of migrants' inclusion processes. For some Norwegian interviewees, local leisure activity involvement was foregrounded, with national discourses about civic engagement only offered as being of secondary importance, placing local participation ahead of national constructs. A comparison of the two locations also demonstrated that "inclusion processes in one locality should not by default be seen as representative of what is transpiring in a nation-state." This supports the argument that theories and methods used to examine internal and international migration may benefit from greater congruity.

Weidinger et al. (2024) move beyond the common model of migrants as recipients of volunteered services. Their examination of how and why migrants are volunteering reveals the importance of opportunity structures and social networks that allow them to fill this role. Their article examines several of the reasons and ways that migrants volunteer in their communities, revealing a range of internal and external motivations. They find that the act of volunteering provides migrants with a means of demonstrating their connection and dedication to their community as agentive actors.

Applying Bourdieu's theoretical perspective of social capital in their study of urban better-off Hungarians to rural Hungary, Tomay and Berger (2024) show a different side of inclusion into rural areas. Their exploration of the different spatial habituses of long-term locals and recent incomers demonstrates that the gentrifiers' spatial habitus retains markers of middle-class distinction that create a novel "ruralising disposition." This facilitates middle-class rural gentrifiers' defiance of the idea that incomers are required to integrate and work to become included in their new community of residence.

Unlike most of the other articles that focus on migration into one or a few rural locations, Solimene (2024) examines how Bosnian Roma refugees maintain transnational connections with their lost homeland. Though they currently occupy a shanty on the outskirts of Rome, many invest in and maintain houses in rural villages of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Solimene examines narratives about these houses and the practices of his Roma interlocutors to illuminate and unravel complex issues embedded within the transnational trajectories of the Bosnian Roma.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ARTICLE

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Social Relations Among Diverse Rural Residents in the Scottish Highlands

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Abstract

This article focuses on the development and the limitations of convivial, instrumental, and intimate family relations among diverse rural residents in the Inner Moray Firth area of the Scottish Highlands. Drawing on 22 semi-structured interviews with international migrants (EU nationals), internal migrants (UK nationals), and participants who were born there and never left, this article identifies and critically discusses how different types of social relations develop, or not, within and between these groups of rural residents. This article indicates that while all participants experienced convivial relations, these encounters did not always transfer into close, meaningful relations. The instrumental and meaningful relations, however, were more ambivalent in practice and related to internal divisions within rural communities defined along the lines of who is perceived to be "local" or "not local." The instrumental ties were developed among participants with common interests, similar life stages, and experiences and varied in terms of ethnic and national composition. Similarly, while family ties were crucial for a sense of belonging, their ethnic and national composition differed. By illustrating the complex composition of convivial, instrumental, and family ties in rural Highlands, this article highlights that meaningful social relations supporting social integration should not be understood via social encounters with "local" residents only, but also intimate and instrumental social relations within and between migrant populations.

Keywords

conviviality; migration; rural settlement; social integration; social relations

1. Introduction

The growing labour migration, transnational "lifestyle" migration, return migration, and the resettlement of humanitarian refugees have reshaped the ethnic and national composition of rural communities (Jentsch &

Simard, 2009). Some rural regions, including the Scottish Highlands, have particularly benefited from the post-2004 EU enlargement migration, with the increasing number of migrants from the 2004 accession states, mainly from Poland, finding employment in the agriculture, food processing, and hospitality sectors (de Lima & Wright, 2009). The rurality that is often associated with, but not limited to, geographically peripheral locations, more dispersed populations, limited access to public services, more homogeneous labour markets, as well as close-knit community relations and a high degree of self-organisation in associations or volunteering, however, creates a distinctive context for the reception of migrant communities (Bell & Osti, 2010; Woods, 2007). This article will contribute to the debate on the impact of migration on rural communities by focusing on the development of social relations among newcomers (internal and international migrants) and established rural residents in the Inner Moray Firth area of the Scottish Highlands.

The literature about migration to rural places has already highlighted that rural communities are being increasingly shaped by international and intra-mobility (Bell & Osti, 2010). Changes to social relations within rural communities as a result of international migration have been investigated alongside the idea of rural cosmopolitanism (Woods, 2018, 2022), conviviality (Neal & Walters, 2008), and multicultural relations (Wise & Velayutham, 2009). These concepts are useful in capturing diverse social encounters between international migrants and established residents in rural places, with empirical studies already exploring the reception of international migrants in rural communities as well as migrants' efforts to develop social networks with local residents (Rye & O'Reilly, 2021; Stachowski, 2020; Wilding & Nunn, 2018). While the existing studies explore diverse social encounters of international migrants in rural places, to date, there is little discussion about other types of mobilities, including internal migrants and their experiences of settling in rural regions. Furthermore, little is known about social relations between international and internal migrants in the rural context. This article will address these gaps by exploring the experiences of both internal and international migrants, as well as those rural residents who were born and never left the rural region. Such an approach is important to provide a more nuanced understanding of how social relations develop, or not, between and within a migrant population and the population who never left. By focusing on social relations among diverse rural stayers, this article addresses the question of how diverse social relations emerge, or not, in rural contexts, and how these relations vary in terms of ethnic and national composition. Such investigation moves away from a sole focus on international migrants to unpack complexities of social encounters within rural communities that also include internal migrants and local stayers.

2. Social Relations and Migration in a Rural Context

The increase in migration to and from rural areas contributed to the emergence of "new immigration destinations" in rural regions in many parts of the Global North (McAreavey & Argent, 2018). While rural regions had been perceived as largely homogenous and white communities, the increase in ethnic and national diversities as a result of migration reshaped the ethnic and national composition of the rural communities (Jentsch & Simard, 2009). As a result, important work has been initiated to focus on the transformative impact of international migration on rural communities in the UK (Moore, 2021; Neal & Agyeman, 2006), Australia (Radford, 2016; Wilding & Nunn, 2018), Canada (Perry, 2012), Europe (Stachowski, 2020; Whyte et al., 2019) and the Global North more generally (Stead et al., 2023). In so doing, existing studies have begun to draw on the concepts of rural cosmopolitanism (Woods, 2018, 2022), "everyday multiculturalism" (Wise & Velayutham, 2009), and conviviality (Neal & Walters, 2008) to analyse social

encounters between newcomers and established rural residents. This study will contribute to these debates by broadening the understanding of the incoming population and including both experiences of internal and international migrants, as well as rural residents who were born in and never left the Scottish Highlands.

Much scholarship on the social aspect of multicultural relations tends to refer to the concept of social integration (Grzymała-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2017) or embedding (Ryan, 2018) to explain how migrants establish social relations after they arrive in a new country. While integration is defined as a two-way process (Ager & Strang, 2008), the focus of empirical studies is predominately placed on migrants and their actions and experiences upon arrival in a new country of residence. The social relations that migrants develop over time have been widely described as bridging social capital (Ager & Strang, 2008), that is, social relations formed with members of the majority society (Casey, 2016). However, the concept of bridging social capital has been criticised by scholars emphasising that multicultural, social interactions include different kinds of social encounters that are of different degrees of depth and importance (Wessendorf, 2013). In response to such critique, Wessendorf and Phillimore (2019) suggest three different typologies for capturing multicultural, social encounters including fleeting encounters, crucial acquaintances, and enduring, intimate ties that are important in the process of migrant settling. While fleeting encounters refer to convivial relations in public spaces, crucial acquaintances relate to meaningful, instrumental ties that are crucial for migrant settlement, and finally, intimate ties describe close relations and friendships. As these categories help identify important social relations that are instrumental for migrant social integration, this article will build upon Wessendorf and Phillimore's (2019) work to discuss how convivial, instrumental, and intimate family relations develop or not between and within diverse rural residents in the rural context.

The reception of migrants in the rural communities in the Global North has been described as "welcoming" and "friendly" (Wilding & Nunn, 2018). While discourses and perceptions of the rural community as "welcoming" contribute to the positive image of intercultural relations, these however may be more ambivalent in practice. Wilding and Nunn (2018) illustrate how the cross-cultural practices in rural regions in Australia are asymmetrical, with incomers being positioned as beneficiaries of various forms of support with little agency in deciding on the type of support being provided. Similarly, Moore (2021) indicates that despite convivial relations between Eastern European migrants and local residents in a rural English village, the imaginary of an English rural village as a "working village" serves to mask ambivalent attitudes towards migrants and an unequal power relationship between these two groups. The study by Glorius et al. (2020) also illustrates that while refugees experience convivial relations with rural communities in Germany, direct social encounters between local residents with refugees are rare. Similarly, Wilding and Nunn (2018) indicate that while convivial relations with newcomers were evidenced in public realms in rural Australia, these are very limited in private spaces. By exploring convivial, instrumental, and intimate social relations among diverse rural stayers in the Inner Moray Firth area of the Scottish Highlands, this article will explore the ethnic and national composition of these relations as well as their role in supporting the development of social integration and sense of belonging.

3. Methodologies

The study took place in the Inner Moray Firth area of the Scottish Highlands which is a triangular-shaped inlet on the north-east mainland coast of Scotland. Many places in the area have a rich agricultural heritage with the Black Isle, a peninsula between the Moray and Cromarty Firths, renowned for its fertile farming land.

In contrast, in the North of the area, in Invergordon and Alness, the steel industry and latterly oil industry dominate the local labour market. The area, however, is the most densely populated part of the Scottish Highlands containing some of the largest settlements including market towns of Dingwall, Invergordon, Alness, Fortrose, and Avoch where the study took place.

The article takes the lived experience of diverse rural residents as a starting point to outline and critically discuss how participants engaged in diverse forms of social interactions in the rural communities they live in. This article defines diverse rural residents, as individuals who lived in the Inner Moray Firth area of the Scottish Highlands for at least five years and made their home there. This research takes a more holistic approach and includes both internal and international migrants as well as those participants who were born in the region and never left. As such, this project not only moves away from the continual reconstruction of the "otherness of migrants" and the duality of the "migrant–citizen" (Garland & Chakraborti, 2006) to include multiple types of mobility to rural areas (e.g., international and internal) to unpack the different layers of diversities within rural communities.

The data collection included 22 online, semi-structured interviews with eight EU nationals (mainly from Poland), five internal migrants, four local stayers, and five service providers who work in education, local government or are engaged with either migrant or local community work in the Inner Moray Firth area. This study only engaged with EU nationals as they represent a majority of the international migrant population in the Scottish Highlands (Highland Council, 2018). The profiles of the participants with their pseudonyms are provided in Table 1.

Due to restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online. While the online interviews had their limitations due to the lack of presence that impacts opportunities for observation and thus nuanced understanding of the interview situation, the widespread usage of online communicators during the Covid-19 pandemic and accessing an interview in the home environment provided the participants with a sense of familiarity and comfort. Online interviews also allow access to participants that would otherwise be hard to reach due to geographical distance.

Multiple sources of recruiting participants were applied including community organizations, public bodies, social media, and local media news to mitigate selection bias, ensure the maximum diversity within sampling (i.e., according to age, gender, class, and household composition and place of living), and thus increase the rigour of the project. The interviews focused on exploring individuals' experiences and routines in workplace, household, and leisure activities in rural to provide a better understanding of how participants engage in the social, economic, and political life of the rural community, but also how these spaces provide the context for diverse social encounters between diverse rural residents. The interviews with service providers also focused on community relations to provide a greater understanding of community rural life and complement data about individuals' experiences of rural context.

The purpose of the data analysis was to identify how participants engage in the social life of the rural place. This study utilised thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to identify diverse forms of social encounters that our participants experienced on a daily basis and perceived as meaningful for their social integration and sense of belonging. The thematic data analysis also identified how social encounters developed, or not, in the workplace, household, and their social and leisure activities. The following sections discuss these in detail.

Table 1. Participants profile.

ID	Household composition	Nation of birth	Participant category
Kate	Single parent	Switzerland	International migrant
Audrey	Partner & children	France	International migrant
Ewelina	Widow	Poland	International migrant
Marta	Partner & children	Poland	International migrant
Kinga	Partner & children	Poland	International migrant
Magda	Partner & children	Poland	International migrant
Karol	Single	Poland	International migrant
Darek	Partner & children	Poland	International migrant
Linda	Partner	Highlands	Local stayer
Claire	Partner	Highlands	Local stayer
Freya	Partner	Highlands	Local stayer
Dorothy	Widow	Highlands	Local stayer
Niamh	Partner & children	Ireland	Internal migrant
Sheila	Partner & children	England	Internal migrant
Kirsty	Single	Scotland	Internal migrant
Robert	Partner & children	Scotland	Internal migrant
Jane	Partner & children	England	Internal migrant
Debbie	Partner & children	Scotland	Service provider, education service
Agatha	Partner	England	Service provider, migrant community
Charlotte	Partner	England	Service provider, migrant community
Stephen	Partner	England	Service provider, rural community
Iain	Partner & Children	Scotland	Service provider, local government

4. Rural Communities Within the Inner Moray Firth Area

The total population of the Inner Moray Firth area was 157,934 in 2018 (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2019), which is around 60% of the total population in the Scottish Highlands. Service providers outlined diverse forms of mobility to and from the area, including arrivals of international migration after European world wars, the increase in migrants from Eastern Europe (mainly Poles) since 2004, post the UK's exit from the European Union return migration and the resettlement of Syrian families as part of the UNHRC resettlement scheme since 2015, as well as the internal migration of individuals and families from England and Central belt Scotland or out-migration of young people. These multiple migration patterns resulted in a greater presentence of rural residents of diverse migration backgrounds. Claire, who was born and raised in the Inner Moray Firth area described her neighbourhood as follows:

> My next-door neighbour is not local, she's from England…the guy across the road, he's from Dingwall, so very local, then the people opposite us again, their mum lives round the corner…[they're] local in the respect that they are from Invergordon….Dingwall has a mix of people….There are a lot of Polish people in Dingwall and very recently Syrians. (Claire, local stayer)

As explained by Claire, there is a clear differentiation between those rural residents who were born and raised in the Inner Moray Firth area and thus categorised as "local" and others, the incoming population who are seen as "not local." Such perception refers not only to international migrants, including Poles or Syrians but also to internal migrants from Central Scotland or England. The perception and understanding of "not being local" implies some degree of otherness of "not local" residents who are different from "local" residents who have strong local roots and attachments. Kirsty explained how the general perception of being "local" and subsequently "not local" resonates with diverse patterns of hierarchies within rural communities:

> There are proper local people and these are people who live through generationally in the area. There is a middle category, which is people who are Scottish but move to the area for different reasons, for example job or marriage. And they are the others who moved to the area from different parts of the UK. And then there are other people coming from different countries: Poles, Chinese, French, or Syrian. (Kirsty, internal migrant)

According to Kirsty, the boundaries between "local" and "not local" residents are defined through the extent to which individuals could express different levels of local roots and attachment. These, however, range from people born locally to families who have expressed generational attachments to their place of living, to a more recent incoming population from Central Scotland, England, and overseas. The perception and understanding of local roots and attachment also resonate with patterns of hierarchies, with Scottish internal migrants being described as the "middle category" and the remaining as the "button category," including both internal migrants from England and international migrants. While existing studies on multicultural relations in rural places explored cross-ethnic and race divisions in rural contexts (Radford, 2016; Whyte et al., 2019), this study shows that categories and hierarchies of otherness can also relate to the perceptions of being "local" that is defined via place-based attachment, rather than via nationality or ethnicity.

Regardless of internal divisions, all participants in this study described the Inner Moray Firth area as a friendly place, referring to positive and convivial everyday social encounters between diverse rural stayers in their neighbourhoods and public spaces. However, a general perception of the Inner Moray Firth area as being friendly does not always correspond with the development of stronger, social connections that go beyond superficial interactions. The following sections will focus on three types of social relations—weak, convivial ties, instrumental social relations, and intimate relations—to critically discuss the development and limitations of diverse forms of social relations that created a complex mosaic of community relations in the Inner Moray Firth area.

5. Conviviality: Prospects and Limits in Rural Context

Perception of the Inner Moray Firth area in Highlands as a friendly, smaller, quieter, and safer place to live was shared by all participants in this study. This was supported by friendly, social encounters including simple acts of kindness from other residents such as smiles in the street, and greetings of "hello" that offered opportunities to engage in fleeting relations with other people living locally. The convivial, every day and routine social encounters provided opportunities for unreflective social interactions that form the grounds for emergent positive relations. Rural places are often characterised as having a limited number of public spaces including schools, parks, playgrounds, high street shops, or community halls which means that all residents use the same public spaces on a regular basis. Such characteristics of rural places however enable a high number of direct

contacts between incoming and established rural residents living locally. For example, Jane explained how regular meetings with other carers at primary school premises facilitate social interactions between different community members:

> You walk to the school, it's like four minutes away, and then you pick your kids up and you walk to the park…you see the same people every day, over seven years of primary school, so you know them. (Jane, internal migrant)

By creating opportunities for engagement in conversations and activities, school premises can be recognised as "micro spaces of conviviality" (Neal et al., 2019) that mediate and support social encounters between diverse rural residences including local stayers, internal, and international migrants. As well as the school premises, local parks, high street shops, and supermarkets were identified by Magda as local places where you meet other residents living locally on a daily basis:

> We have one Tesco and one Lidl and you would always see the same people, either local residents or tourists or sometimes newcomers. Since you see the same faces all the time, you recognise them and say "halo." (Magda, international migrant)

Public places including schools, parks, local streets, and shops were identified as key sites in which convivial social encounters were practiced by all participants of this study. Conviviality in rural places may be therefore encouraged not because of common diversity within the public places, as described in an urban context (Wessendorf, 2013), but may follow from the necessity of sharing limited public spaces that introduce regular and frequent social encounters. Conviviality as a common norm in public spaces in rural contexts can also be encouraged and maintained by social control related to close-knit community relations, as Sheila described it: "Everybody knows everything about you and what you do."

A general perception of the Inner Moray Firth area as being friendly does not always result in the development of stronger social connections nor go beyond superficial interactions, as further described by Hania:

> They accept us since we are here, but sometimes I feel there is a distance between us. "OK—you are here but we will not be best friends." You can feel this. (Hania, international migrant)

As explained by Hania, the importance of civility as an element of conviviality should not be underplayed and such encounters, although fleeting, have an important role in developing social connections however, they did not always result in developing stronger ties within local communities. The following section will focus on discussing the development of instrumental relations between diverse rural residents in the Inner Moray Firth area.

6. Instrumental Social Relations: Development and Limitations

Social connections, meaning people's relationships with individuals, organisations, and statutory bodies are proven to have a critical role in supporting social integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). Rural communities have been described as the ones with a high degree of self-organization in associations and volunteering, which can present opportunities for greater social participation of diverse rural residents living locally

(Arora-Jonsson, 2017). Participants in this study provided several examples of community involvement in the form of diverse activities including simple food-sharing, sports club activities, art classes, social clubs, shared transport initiatives, mother and toddler groups, or ethnic community groups including the Polish Saturday School. Those organised, interest-focused community groups played multiple roles in the community living in the rural Highlands. These groups not only allowed our participants to gather around particular interests like art classes, woodworking, and outdoor activities but also responded to their immediate needs like childcare, social isolation, or leisure. They also played an important social function in connecting people of similar interests or life circumstances and experiences. Those participants, like Marta, who moved to the Inner Moray Firth area explained how she developed her friendships via participation in local, mother and toddler groups:

> I think what helped was a mother and toddler group to which I went regularly. I met a lot of mums there, which didn't make me feel lonely anymore. Each mother was facing the same issues, so that was something that reunited us….They organised different activities for young mums there and it was good, but the best was the fact I was able to meet many people….I also learned that the girls were not from here, some had husbands from France, and others were from Germany, and Argentina. Of course, there are some English and Scottish people as well. We are all different but also there are many connections between us. (Marta, international migrant)

Participation in the mother and toddler group provided Marta with an opportunity to develop networks with other women living locally, with whom she shared similar life circumstances. Such regular contact and shared live experiences around motherhood have contributed to the development of stronger, intimate social connections between Marta and her local friends who were both internal and international migrants. This corresponds with Wessendorf and Phillimore's (2019) argument that meaningful and bridging social relations should not be defined through social relations with only the white, British population, but should also include different ethnicities and nationalities.

Female participants with young children like Marta emphasised the importance of the mother and toddler groups in building up confidence around motherhood and social isolation, others whose children were of school age like Jane, explained how mothers who live locally support each other with organising after-school childcare:

> After-school childcare is organised by mums in the area in the local community hall. (Jane, internal migrant)

Jane's and Marta's experiences emphasise the important role of gender and life course stages, like having children, in creating common life experiences around motherhood that facilitate the creation of intimate and close relations with other women living locally. Thus, having children of similar age helped to develop stronger relations with other rural residents living locally. This was either via meeting other, local mums at organised activities at a community hall, or meeting other parents at children's play time as explained by Audrey:

> We met a lot of people living locally through our children, these are often parents of friends of our children….Children play while we have a meal. (Audrey, international migrant)

Those participants who moved to the area but did not have children tend to indicate that having a hobby or particular interest was a good way to engage with the local community in a more meaningful way. Kate described how having a horse helped her to develop important local social connections:

> I probably had the benefit, when I came, of having a horse and getting to know local people through that then being informed about events and things going on. (Kate, international migrant)

Participation in diverse community group activities not only facilitates but also maintains "meaningful contact" between incoming and local population that translates beyond the specifics of the individual moment into more general positive respect for others (Valentine, 2008, p. 325). Similar to those participants who moved to the Inner Moray Firth area, Linda who has lived in Highlands her whole life, also pointed out that her friendships have developed mostly around interest community groups, for example, outdoor community groups:

> I've got friends who are Dutch, friends who have come up for work and stayed in the Highlands, [they] come up from England and a mix of Eastern European, quite varied…and a small network of friends who grew up here and have come back and settled here. I met them mostly through the outdoors, you meet one person and then someone else, there's quite a small outdoor community, and everybody gets to know each other. (Linda, local stayer)

It could be argued that organised community groups in rural contexts play the important role of "transversal enablers" (Wise & Velayutham, 2009) that facilitate meaningful social interactions between different rural residents living locally. As described by Marta, Kate, and Linda, social relations established via community interest groups went beyond fleeting relations and played an important role in fulfilling their social and emotional needs. While instrumental social connections were an important source of support for all participants, the development of these networks across diverse rural residents in the Inner Moray Firth area was more ambivalent in practice. According to Jane, some of the constraints in developing instrumental relations related to internal divisions within the community that refer to who is perceived to be "local" and subsequently "not local":

> I'm aware that I'm not from the community. I'm one of them English, which I know isn't always appreciated here as such in the Highlands. But I also feel like I've made lots of friends, like people see me as me, maybe not as where I'm from. And I think having a small child helps because you meet lots of mums in the schoolyards and toddlers, and that's why you make a lot of friends. And then if you've got these mum friends, you feel part of the community quite well with that. And, you know, actually, quite a lot of people you meet here now aren't from here. (Jane, internal migrant)

While Jane was very much connected with other rural residents living locally, these connections were primarily with the incoming population rather than perceived "local," rural stayers. Jane perceived her experiences of little meaningful social relations with "local," rural stayers to be related to her English nationality and stereotypical perceptions of English people in rural Scotland that are often defined as arrogant and unfriendly (Lindsay, 1997). Following McIntosh et al. (2004), it could be argued that the stereotypical assumptions about English in the rural Scottish context are also reminders of Jane's otherness understood as not being "local." While these stereotypical assumptions, did not convert into personal

hostility, they did however have an impact on Jane's sense of belonging. While all participants perceived the community in which they live as friendly and safe, some participants who migrated to the area from Poland referred to diverse experiences of verbal abuse, prejudice, or general distance from established local residences. These experiences included, for example, name-calling such as "being a f….Pole," as indicated by Hania, or being seen as "taking our jobs," as experienced by Karol. As these experiences juxtaposition the perception of rural communities as "welcoming" and "friendly," they were downplayed by both Karol and Hania, as being related to people who "had too much to drink." The positive perception of the rural community as being friendly, while important, can idealise its cooperative nature and thus overlook internal power relations. The experiences of Karol, Hania, and Jane also show a different position of power between the "local" and "not local" population. While in the context of this study, all participants were white, the experiences of Karol, Hania, and Jane could also illustrate different power relations attached to white Poles, white English, or white Europeans, who were commonly recognised as different from a rural, white "local," rural resident in Scotland.

In addition to internal division within the rural community, participants talked about being unable to develop co-ethnic relations with residents living locally due to the language barrier. For Kinga, who lacked English language skills, setting up more meaningful networks with residents living locally was difficult:

> I'm annoyed that I can only go to the shop and say "good morning, how are you? Nice or bad weather that is it." It is annoying. I don't have that much contact with the language and people here and I want to return to Poland. (Kinga, international migrant)

Little language proficiency, but also limited availabilities of classes for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in rural areas and thus an opportunity to develop language skills undermined Kinga's well-being and thus contributed to her desire to return to Poland. Whilst the access to formally organised migrant associations and activities in the study area was limited, the daily lives of migrants from Poland were involved in quite extensive networks and interactions with their co-nationals through Polish Saturday School, businesses like hairdressing, Polish shops, or the Catholic Church. While co-ethnic social relations were important for our participants to maintain the cultural practices and language, or find initial employment, this is not to say that these relations were universally positive. Such experience was outlined by Ewelina:

> When my husband arrived, he went to the high street and heard a Polish voice, so he came to those people and explained that he was looking for a job. They helped him….In the next two days, he had work. Also when I arrived they asked me if I wanted to have a job and I said, yes sure, and I found work in a food processing company….But, I also tried to help other Poles when they arrived but I had a bad experience so I stopped. You will give them one finger and they would like to grab the whole hand. I hate this demanding attitude. (Ewelina, international migrant)

As explained by Ewelina, co-ethnic relations can be instrumental for finding employment, but in low-skilled occupations with high co-ethnic concentration. A high concentration of Polish migrants in particular segments of the labour market may, however, foster conditions as Stachowski (2020) argues, promoting primarily social exposure of the migrants to their co-ethnic groups, isolating them from the wider local community. Co-ethnic relations, as outlined by Ewelina, are rather complex and can be based on obligations that could lead to over-reliance on co-ethnic assistance and result in broken expectations. Finally,

employment in low-skilled occupations was often linked with long working hours that leave little time for social interactions beyond work as explained by Ewelina:

> I work as a food quality officer in Scotland. I work primarily with other Poles….You stay in the production line for 8–9 hours in the 9-degree room, and the working conditions are not easy….When I return from work I don't have the energy to go for a coffee and chat, I need peace and quiet to rest. (Ewelina, international migrant)

Not only employment in low-paid sectors of the rural economy but also geographical distance to work created obstacles to developing and maintaining social relations locally. Such experience was shared by Kirsty who, after 30 years of living in the Inner Moray Firth area, migrated to Inverness:

> I came here from Glasgow and I worked as a teacher outside of the community after many years of traveling to work fewer and fewer of the locals knew anything about me because I just left early in the morning….And I only knew some people around my house, but there were people at the end of the street that I've never seen I didn't know who they were. Hmm. And I think over the years that's been a pattern generally.., it becomes just a place I lived. (Kirsty, internal migrant)

Constraints of limited employment opportunities as described by Kirsty had a knock-on effect on the development of stronger ties with local neighbours or engagement with community initiatives and a sense of belonging.

7. Intimate Family Relations

All of our participants indicated that home is a place of close and intimate relations with family and friends. Family relations were defined through blood relations, marriage, or partnership, and tend to express a high sense of obligation toward each other. As described by Kate, our participants had a clear distinction between close, intimate relations and instrumental or convivial ones:

> I work and I have my private life….I've met loads of people, wouldn't call them friends but you get along, and have a good time but I wouldn't call them close friends. (Linda, local stayer)

The close intimate relations were more segregated and often reserved for family members. Those participants who were born and raised in the Inner Moray Firth area, tend to refer to generation of family members living in the local area:

> My parents are still here…and my brother is still here….I suppose it's nice to have family around you, you can feel that you're in touch with them more, my parents live in the same village, my brother lives in Conon Bridge so not too far away, I see him fairly often. My family lives here and this is my place too. (Lindsay, local stayer)

The composition of those family relations predominately includes local, rural residents who were born and lived in the region through generations. Others like Jane, Magda, or Kinga moved to the area with their family relatives from abroad or other places in Scotland or the UK. As a result, these relations were not developed locally, but they were transferred from their home country or region and then acquired upon arrival:

> We came here because we wanted our family to live in a small, rural community….We like this place and the community, and because we have children, we are not planning to move. (Jane, internal migrant)

As explained by Jane, having close family members was an important factor contributing to the desire to settle in the rural place. Despite these close intimate relations were not developed locally, raising family in rural places was often the reason why participants moved to rural places in the first place and wanted to settle in the area. Intimate family relations, in particular having children were important factors contributing to our participants' desire to settle and their sense of belonging. Marta, who was married to a local stayer, indicated that raising children made her feel part of the local community:

> My husband is local and I'm always introduced as his wife…and local people know me that way. They are his friends, not mine. My friends call me Marta, and this is different. I know many of my husband's friends, but they are his friends, not mine. Most of my friends are not local but we share a lot together….I don't sound like a Highlander, I have my eastern European accent, but my children grow up here, so I'm also from here. I don't feel much different here, this is my home. (Marta, an international migrant)

Marta differentiated her husband's friends from the close, friendship relations that she had developed with other residents living locally. While most of Marta's friendship relations were with other-than-"local" residents, these relations provided an important source of social and emotional support. For Marta, raising children was the pivotal moment that contributed to her feeling of belonging to the local community despite her perceived otherness from the local population. In contrast with Lindsay's, Jane's, and Marta's experiences, Kirsty, who lived in the area for more than 30 years, explained that because she didn't have close family members living locally, she felt less connected to the community she was living in:

> And then other friends of mine who came up, married into the local community. They married for example a local farmer or somebody who lived here all their lives. So they in a sense became more a part of the community. And because I didn't have family and they had, then they belonged more because then they got into contact with others who went to the primary school or if their children went to nursery, that kind of thing. Whereas I didn't have those links, so I was out of this place. (Kirsty, an internal migrant)

As explained by Kirsty, having close family members made other residents "belong more" than her and, as a result, she felt uprooted and "out of this place." Thus, while the ethnic or national composition of family relations could vary as illustrated in Lindsay's, Jane's, and Marta's examples, they provided important contributions to a sense of belonging and desire to settle in a local, rural community.

8. Conclusion

This study was conducted in the Inner Moray Firth area of the Scottish Highlands. While migration to and from the Scottish Highlands is not a new phenomenon (Jentsch & Simard, 2009), internal and international migration to rural places can contribute to internal divisions within rural communities that are defined through the perception of being "local" and "not local." Defining the meaning of "being local" in the region where the study took place related less to (in)tolerance of ethnic or national diversities, and more to the extent to

which individuals could express their rootedness to place and locality defined through generational family ties and attachments to the rural area. Unpacking the perceptions of what it means to be "local" within rural communities may therefore provide a more nuanced understanding of social and cultural divisions along with internal power dynamics within the rural communities than more general categories of ethnicity or nationality.

This article shows that characteristics of rural places can both encourage or limit positive social relations between the incoming population and established rural stayers. The necessity of sharing limited public spaces on a daily basis, along with social control related to close-knit community relations, and a high degree of self-organization in associations and volunteering, create particular dispositions within rural communities that can positively encourage the development of convivial as well as positive, meaningful social relations among diverse rural residents. On the other hand, as illustrated in participants' narratives, limited employment opportunities in the local labour market and thus the necessity to travel long distances to work, along with segregation in the rural labour market, can hinder the development of social relations between the incoming and "local" rural residents.

This article critically analyses three types of social relations including convivial relations, instrumental ties, and intimate family relations to explore how these relations develop, or not, among diverse rural residents including internal and international migrants, and rural stayers. While rural communities have been described as friendly and welcoming (Neal & Walters, 2008; Woods, 2018, 2022), this study illustrates that such relations may be further encouraged by particularities of rural places such as the necessity of sharing limited public spaces that enable frequent and regular contact, and social control related to close-knit community relations. While the importance of conviviality should not be underestimated, the development of close social relations between incoming and "local" rural residents may be more ambivalent in practice. The barriers to developing bridging networks between the incoming and "local" residents included the stereotypical perception of English or Polish migrants that contributed to the otherness of the incoming population and the duality of "local" and "non local" residences. This could suggest that the perception of a rural community as "welcoming" can also idealise the cooperative nature of these communities and thus overlook internal power relations. While all participants in this study were white, their experiences illustrate different power attached to white identities, including white Poles, white English, or white Europeans, who were commonly recognised as different from rural, white "local" residents. Further research is therefore needed to explore the concept of whiteness in multicultural rural communities.

The instrumental relations between internal and international migrants and rural stayers were more complex and ranged from friendship and intimate relations to distance and resistance. This article outlines the important roles of community-led organisations in providing an opportunity for incoming and "local" rural residents with common interests, needs, and life circumstances to meet and socialise. Participants' experiences illustrated in this study show how gender and motherhood, shared live experiences, and interests or hobbies have contributed to the development of stronger, intimate social connections between diverse rural residences and thus contributed to their social integration. While the majority of participants felt socially connected to the community they lived in, these meaningful social relations were not only limited to social relations with "local" rural residents. This means that bridging networks supporting social integration in rural contexts should not be understood solely through the social relations between incoming (both internal and international migrants) and "local" residents, but also should include instrumental relations between diverse incoming populations. Similar to Wessendorf and Phillimore (2019), this study illustrates

that the composition of important instrumental relations that support social integration varies in terms of ethnic and national composition. This study also illustrates that instrumental co-ethnic relations were not always the source of positive support. For example, while Polish participants' co-ethnic networks may be a source of employment, they also lead to ethnic clustering. Further, co-ethnic support may also be based on obligation, rather than mutual exchange, and thus lead to broken expectations and tensions.

Finally, intimate relations were reserved for family relations and had an important role in developing a sense of belonging and attachment to the rural community. This study illustrates the diverse composition and development of intimate relations in rural places. While local stayers referred to generations of family relatives living locally, other participants developed their family ties through marriage with local residents or transferred them from abroad or other places in Scotland or the UK. While family intimate relations vary in terms of ethnic and national composition, not having close, intimate relations locally had a negative impact on a sense of belonging to the rural community.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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"There's No Connection Plugging Me Into This System": Citizenship as Non-Participation and Voicelessness

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Abstract

The small and remote island community, the Faroe Islands, has experienced a vast increase in immigration recently. In the space of a decade, immigration has risen from 1.5% of the population to 5.5%. The island community, previously ethnically and culturally homogenous, is now facing growing diversity. The Faroese context is characterised by its small size and a micro-administration that is ill-equipped for the complexities of immigration. Previous research has found that underlying the Faroese language and identity is a pervasive ideology of who is considered to "authentically belong." Furthermore, the small population is strongly connected through multiple relations, and navigating formal and informal life depends on social/family networks. In this small island community context, this article examines immigrant citizenship experiences, drawing on qualitative data collated between 2016 and 2023. Citizenship is here understood as everyday relational and spatial experiences at various levels of society. From the analysis, two central values of citizenship emerged as key to entangled citizenship experiences: (non)participation and (mis)recognition. The analysis finds that Faroese society, both formally and informally, is highly inaccessible to immigrants, rendering them voiceless and marginalised. Furthermore, immigrants experience misrecognition for the resources they bring and find themselves on the margins of the labour market and society in general.

Keywords

citizenship; immigration; island community; participation; recognition

1. Introduction

In the small island community of the Faroe Islands, the population of 54,000 people has remained ethnically and culturally homogenous, with limited immigration, until the very recent past. In only a decade,

immigration has dramatically increased. In 2010, there were 1.5% non-Nordic residents in the Faroe Islands. In 2023, the number had grown substantially, bringing it to 5.5% of the population (Statistics Faroe Islands, 2024b). Consequently, the Faroe Islands are waking up to a new reality of being an increasingly diverse community.

Located in the high North Atlantic Ocean, the Faroe Islands are characterised by remoteness, smallness, and boundedness. The social configuration of island life revolves around familiarity, people knowing each other, and close social/family networks (Gaini, 2013; Hayfield, 2022). Much of the Faroe Islands can be described as rural, and even in towns, social relations are tightly knit and anonymity impossible (Hayfield, 2017). Furthermore, geographical proximity and a well-developed infrastructure ensure that mobility within and between villages/towns is uncomplicated.

On a societal level, integration has received scarce political attention. Integration governance in the Faroe Islands, I suggest, is characterised by non-policies. There are no legal frameworks governing integration and no overarching policy for hearing, recognising, or supporting immigrants. Coupled with the sharp increase in immigration and the lack of societal and social readiness for the diverse needs of newcomers, is the issue of second language acquisition of the national language, Faroese. Although the quality and availability of Faroese language courses have improved somewhat in recent years, learning experiences in this insular language community impact power relations between native Faroese speakers and new speakers (Hoffmann & Holm, 2022). This is evident in the labour market specifically, and society generally, as immigrants experience exclusion and deskilling (Holm et al., 2019). Similarly, in her study of marriage migrants to the Faroe Islands, Ísfeld (2019, p. 239) found that the "system and structures are creating a wedge and a class distinction between locals and migrants, resulting in a situation of A and B citizens." Therefore, linguistic and cultural "otherness" may be a very poignant reality for immigrants who do not fit with the ideals of Faroeseness or the ideal citizen (Ehrkamp & Leitner, 2006; Hayfield & Schug, 2019).

From the above, there are indications that immigration in the Faroe Islands is fraught with tension. I argue that close social/family networks, power inequalities associated with language, insufficient societal support, and a lack of societal and social readiness to welcome new citizens, significantly shape citizenship experiences. In a previous article, we applied an inductive approach to explore immigrant experiences which were framed using the concept of place-belongingness (Hayfield & Schug, 2019). However, following later fieldwork, including the work of other scholars (as referenced above), I suggest that place-belongingness, whilst helpful, does not fully capture the entanglement of immigrant experiences of the Faroe Islands.

I revisit previous and recent empirical material to examine how citizenship is experienced and practised in a small island community like the Faroe Islands. In doing so, I understand citizenship as a relational and spatial concept. Relational in the sense that citizenship is "constituted at the intersection with others" (Wood & Black, 2018, p. 168), be it in social/family networks, systems or structures, informal and formal. Spatial, in the sense of the regional boundedness of island community contexts whilst still acknowledging islanders' interaction with global networks (Grydehøj et al., 2020). Citizenship, furthermore, is spatially practised in different locales and different positions. Concretely, I ask: What are immigrants' experiences of citizenship in the Faroe Islands?

To address the entangled nature of immigrant experiences this article is positioned in the intersection of cultural geography and sociology, but also takes inspiration from linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics.

In what follows, I address the Faroese immigration context and subsequently, the theoretical framing of the article. I then present the methods, followed by the analysis, which is structured around two overarching values of citizenship: participation and recognition. The closing section of the article, the discussion and conclusion, is subsequently presented.

2. The Faroe Islands Immigration Context

The Faroe Islands are eighteen islands located between Iceland and Shetland. They represent a self-governing jurisdiction of Denmark with their own parliament and flag. The welfare model of the Faroe Islands bears much resemblance to the Nordic model with underlying values of universalism and egalitarianism (Hayfield, 2020). Over the past seventy years, autonomy has gradually increased in different realms of society, and the islands now enjoy extensive self-government, especially in domestic affairs. However, historical and current relations with Denmark remain sites of tension, and islanders have a strong sense of Faroese identity, intensified by being geographically remote from Denmark. This is manifested in important claims for independence in the Faroe Islands, in contrast to many other non-sovereign island territories (Ferdinand et al., 2020).

Faroese is the first language of the overwhelming majority of inhabitants (Holm, 2023). It is a distinct West-Nordic Germanic language, although most Faroe Islanders understand and speak Danish as well. The islands can thus be characterised as a bilingual community. Danish remains a secondary official language used to a limited extent, e.g., by the judiciary. There are strong efforts to develop and maintain Faroese in all realms of society, e.g., through Faroese print, electronic, and digital media, in Faroese literature, and educational material. However, Danish texts/literature, and now increasingly English, remain relatively common in the secondary and tertiary educational system, making (re)education difficult for many immigrants.

One exception to Faroese self-governance is in matters of immigration/citizenship. Nevertheless, integration is the responsibility of the Faroese Parliament and presently, there is no overarching legislation governing integration (although an integration bill is presently being debated in parliament). The main modes of entry for immigrants are through family reunification and work permits, both of which have grown substantially. However, due to low unemployment coupled with an economic boom, immigration for work purposes has increased vastly of late. Furthermore, since the war in Ukraine began, the Faroe Islands have, for the first time, received refugees and now host around 175 Ukrainian refugees (Statistics Faroe Islands, 2024b). Although immigrants come from all over the world, many are from Eastern Europe (mostly Romania and Poland), and South-East Asia (mostly the Philippines and Thailand; Statistics Faroe Islands, 2024b). Many immigrants work as unskilled labourers, especially in fish processing, construction, hospitality, and cleaning (Statistics Faroe Islands, 2024a).

Broadly speaking, and with certain conditions, immigrants who have entered through family reunification can apply for permanent residency after three years, whilst those on work permits can do so after having worked consecutively for seven years. Gaining legal citizenship is lengthy and processed by Danish immigration authorities. Part of this process involves a police-led interview to assess if applicants can, "without the use of rewriting or other languages, and with the accent, which is natural…easily participate in a conversation in Faroese" (Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2021; translated from Danish by the author).

3. Citizenship: Relations and Language

In this section, I examine citizenship and how it can be applied using a small island community perspective. I commence with defining citizenship and then discuss relational citizenship in the Faroe Islands, and subsequently the intimate connection between citizenship, the Faroese language, and identity.

Understanding citizenship as a relational practice pushes the concept beyond its more traditional approach, which concerns the static, formal, and legal relations between individuals and the state (Delanty, 2007). For this article, therefore, citizenship encompasses "processual, performative and everyday relations between spaces, objects, citizens and non-citizens" (Spinney et al., 2015, p. 325). As such, citizenship is played out in everyday life, through performances and social relations. In this sense, scale and context matter in the construction of citizenship, as structural positions make their way into micro dynamics (Lister, 2007; McAreavey, 2017).

Citizenship provides a lens to explore its inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms (Lawy & Biesta, 2006), which relegate some societal groups (e.g., gender-based, religious, disabled, or immigrants), to "the status of lesser citizens or of non-citizen" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 1). Implicated in the relational dimension of citizenship is a value, or asset, of citizenship, and the terms of access to that asset. This means that some people/groups have enhanced substantive citizenship, and greater access to it than others. In this sense, the relationship between citizenship and exclusion concerns "exclusion from having full access to citizenship rights and being able to fully live the role of a citizen" (Reiter, 2012, p. 4).

Implicated in the politics of belonging are struggles of determination over which identities are legitimately recognised, and how they may participate, or be included as citizens (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Previous research on exclusionary citizenship has drawn attention to marginalised groups and their struggles to expand and redefine ideas of rights, duties, and citizenship (Kabeer, 2005). Furthermore, to expand and redefine societal boundaries towards more inclusive citizenship requires understanding the meanings of inclusive citizenship from the standpoint of excluded. Central meanings, according to Kabeer (2005), include values of justice, recognition, self-determination, and solidarity. However, citizenship is also highly relational and involves feelings of being important, meaningful, and valued within a community (Furuhaug, 2020) and in a small island context, such feelings emerge in community life.

3.1. Interconnectedness in Island Life

Notwithstanding globalisation and complex non-territorial ties, the boundedness of islands suggests that still today, relations in remote small island communities are intimately connected to island identity, and I argue, also citizenship (Leonard, 2020; Stratford, 2003). Therefore, citizenship as being relational is a pertinent perspective in contexts, where relational interconnectedness is a key characteristic of navigating and accessing social and formal life (Hayfield, 2022). Interconnectedness in this sense, refers to the multiple and interdependent relationships that people have with one another. People who are related may work together, attend the same church, have children at school together, and meet in social/family settings. Furthermore, formal or political decisions that implicate the lives of others may hinge on connections going back to childhood (Veenendaal, 2020a).

Thus, people are connected through dense and overlapping networks in which they hold multiple roles—kinship networks being the most important markers of identity (Gaini, 2013). In such contexts there may emerge a climate of familiarity, intimacy, and care as an ethical readiness (Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2018; Hamington, 2017), and in the Faroese context social cohesion (Leonard, 2020). However, such social cohesion is not necessarily reserved for everyone. Immigrants, who do not belong to social/family networks are understood as bodies out-of-place, unplaceable, and not part of the Faroese "cognitive map of [family] relations" (Hayfield & Schug, 2019). Smallness in this relational sense entails that those without family are constructed as those without attachment to place (Gaffin, 1996; Gaini, 2013).

The potential impact on everyday citizenship in small island communities is perhaps best conceptualised through the blurring of boundaries between formal and informal life (Anckar, 2006; Veenendaal, 2020b; Warrington & Milne, 2020). This means that people do not necessarily pay explicit attention to the roles they inhabit, leading to the conflation of social and professional acts. Rather authority and politics may be personalised and vice versa (Veenendaal, 2020a). The particularity and size of island communities entail that formal roles are more likely to be characterised by role diffusion and role enlargement (Baldacchino, 2012). This means that, in formal roles, people are likely more autonomous and less supervised, and policies are less formal and stringent, all of which can implicate citizenship.

3.2. Faroese Language, Identity, and Ideology

In the late 19th century, the Faroese language movement emerged to sustain and reclaim language rights. The illegitimacy of the Faroese language was especially manifested in Faroese being excluded from public domains including schools, the church, and public administration. These struggles were inextricably woven into Faroese-Danish (colonial) relations and later emerged in the form of political and national separatism (Sølvará, 2016). Consequently, the Faroese have become "evangelical about their language…and nearly all discussions of independence, nationalism and identity in the Faroe Islands come back to language in some way" (Leonard, 2016, p. 60). In other words, embedded in the Faroese language are ideologies as power mechanisms (Holm, 2023).

Language ideologies concern the multitude of ways in which language is woven into systems of power (Cavanaugh, 2020). This includes how language is significant in rights to being heard and providing cultural proficiencies to exercise citizenship (Valentine & Skelton, 2007). Underlying the Faroese language, Hoffmann and Holm (2022, p. 261) argue, is an ideology of linguistic authenticity and concerns "the idea of a language belonging to a specific group." An ideology of linguistic authenticity is contrasted with linguistic anonymity, such as English, which does not belong to any one group.

Central to linguistic authenticity are the values and relationships of a language to a specific community. This means that "a speech variety must be very much 'from somewhere' in speakers' consciousness, making its meaning profoundly local" (O'Rourke, 2015, p. 64). Therefore, an ideology of linguistic authenticity involves contestations over language ownership, what constitutes a legitimate speaker, and how to correctly speak the language. The sustainability of Faroese as a minoritised language goes to the core of linguistic authenticity, which has profound implications for legitimacy, participation, and recognition in Faroese society (Hayfield & Schug, 2019; Holm et al., 2019; Vijayavarathan, 2023). As a result, language in the Faroe Islands is fraught with tension for immigrants who take up residency (Hayfield & Schug, 2019).

Connecting ideology to language might, on a surface level, concern the sacredness of one language over other (e.g., foreign) languages. However, ideologies of language can also disguise other agendas of (non)participation and (mis)recognition, such as those concerning politics, economics, communities, or identities (Zaidi, 2012). A critical perspective aimed at uncovering such agendas may thus be necessary to alert societal consciousness concerning immigration and inclusive citizenship.

4. Methods

This study draws on critical theory as a guide to understanding societal inequalities and challenging social realities (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018). In this sense, critical theory is a strategy for exploring and enquiring about immigrant experiences, rather than an approach that determines how the world is seen (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Importantly though, the emancipatory facet of critical theory entails research that "attempts to explore the forces that prevent individuals and groups from shaping the decisions that crucially affect their lives" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011, p. 288). It thus concerns justice, power, participation, and self-determination.

The empirical material for this article is drawn mainly from semi-structured transcribed interviews, conducted in 2016, 2018, and 2023, in addition to parliamentary debates, official documents, and informal conversations with immigrants and officials. Interviews were conducted in English, except one, which was translated to/from Thai. Interviews with professional actors include municipalities, government workers, welfare professionals, and private sector managers, whose official capacity involves immigrants and integration. For this article, however, I focus only on interviews with immigrants. These comprise 49 interviews with 58 people (three groups, 46 individuals). Individual interviews lasted from 28 minutes to 1 hour and 27 minutes, and group interviews from 1 hour and 18 minutes to 2 hours. Interviews are a useful approach to explore experiences, and questions were designed to elucidate the words, meanings, and actions of immigrants (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Participants came from all over the world, representing thirty countries and all continents, except Australia. They were aged mid-20s to late 50s, and resided all over the Faroe Islands, with a slight overrepresentation of women. The inclusion criterion was limited to participants having lived in the Faroe Islands for at least one year, thus avoiding short-term workers with limited exposure to Faroese society. Recruitment was through networks, organisations, and snowballing (Parker et al., 2019). The sample is diverse and tying the sample together are experiences of being immigrants in a small island community.

In the first set of interviews, from 2016, the reasoning was inductive to connect and generate ideas, whilst the analysis for later interviews was abductive in nature (Reichertz, 2014). Using Nvivo to manage the data, the stages of analysis involved close reading of texts, creating categories, finding overlaps in coding and, subsequently, creating a system of interrelated categories (Thomas, 2006). Following the 2016 and 2018 interviews and many informal conversations, I realised there remained more to be uncovered regarding immigrant experiences. Therefore, further interviews were conducted in 2023, applying an interpretive approach to the data, which is both "suspicious" and "empathic." Suspicious in the sense of using theoretical concepts to unveil that which is not immediately apparent, and empathic as interpretation, which aims to understand from within (Willig, 2014). Using the concept of citizenship, I reanalysed codes in which citizenship issues had originally emerged, including belonging, language as access and learning, cultural capital, Faroese networks, social navigation, labour market access, and identity. This second analysis took as

the point of departure concepts of inclusive citizenship from the literature and involved the same stages as the first analysis.

Being a Faroe Islander, my situatedness includes multiple privileges. I am an educated, fluent Faroese speaker, immersed in social/family networks, which may blind me to the social positioning of immigrants. Therefore, taking an immigrant standpoint and utilising their epistemic privilege can shed light on immigrant citizenship experiences (Sweet, 2020). This aligns with Kabeer (2005, p. 1), who argues that debates of citizenship are abstracted from the citizen voices, and tend to take place in an "empirical void." Ethically all formal requirements were met, including ongoing informed consent, data storage, and confidentiality issues. However, my ethical concerns are more pertaining to the social, psychological, and legal vulnerability of immigrants in society—especially those that are not yet "full" citizens in legal terms. Interviewing took inspiration from (critical) feminist interviewing, which is relational, and empathic, but at the same time aimed at uncovering experiences for social change (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Furthermore, being a vulnerable group, immigrants are easily an object of critique in a small island society (Hayfield, 2022). Immigrants are ill-represented in the Faroe Islands, and the public hearing of immigrant voices is rare. Therefore, a (relational) care ethics approach assisted the researcher in staying "ethically alert" and mindful of the representation of immigrant voices (Hayfield, 2022).

5. Analysis

The key finding from the analysis goes beyond how language, smallness and familiarity function as exclusionary mechanisms and non-belonging. Rather, the very entanglement of these factors in Faroese society profoundly shapes citizenship experiences. Furthermore, such experiences intensify when ideology camouflages the different realities of Faroese natives and immigrants. From the analysis, I found this especially manifested in citizenship values of participation and recognition. Whilst these values overlap and conflate, they are addressed separately for analytic purposes. For many of the immigrants in this study, barriers to participation and misrecognition become manifested in anguish, stress, and loss of identity, as well as experiences of low solidarity in formal and informal society. For some, this impacted mental health; for most, their wellbeing. In the next two sections, immigrant citizenship experiences are represented.

5.1. Seen But Not Heard: Participation and Voice

The growth in immigration constitutes a highly visible social change in the everyday landscape of the Faroe Islands. By the account of different (ethnic and behavioural) appearances, many immigrants become conspicuous in public spaces. My participants emphasised that whilst they are visibly different, they are effectively voiceless citizens in many public spaces. To navigate institutions and communities, my participants express what can only be described as an anguished relationship with Faroese as a second language. On the one hand, they are acutely aware of the fundamentality of Faroese for accessing information in formal and informal spaces of citizenship. On the other, there are complex difficulties in their language experiences. Thus, even accessing basic services and understanding their rights and entitlements can be highly challenging. In other words, the inability to understand/speak Faroese is central to citizenship experiences. Yet, fully comprehending how pivotal language is to Faroese belief systems involves a process that, for most participants, unfolds over time. This process, I found, includes two central citizenship dynamics: *transitioning from visitor to citizen* and *the false promise*. I address these below.

5.1.1. Transitioning From Visitor to Citizen

When immigrants arrive in the Faroe Islands, they have what might be referred to as a "grace" or "honeymoon" period. During this time, it is widely tolerated that newcomers are unable to understand or speak Faroese. However, following an initial period, immigrants experience what they express as unrealistic pressure from Faroe Islanders to speak the language, as two participants explain:

> It is *very* difficult in the Faroe Islands. But again, when you are just settling, they start with caution, that you are a visitor, and they will treat you as a visitor. But as months go by, then they are like: "You need to learn the language!" It becomes irritating. Because there are many things that you are struggling with besides the language. (group interview 2, male, <3 years in the Faroe Islands, 2018)

> When you come in [somewhere] and somebody will just say hi and the next statement is: "You must learn the language!" I mean not everything depends on this language thing. (interview 11, female, <3 years in the Faroe Islands, 2017)

These quotes represent the experiences of almost all participants and, for many, involve intense emotions of pressure or stress. Transitioning from visitor to citizen becomes a self-directed effort with limited, if any, assistance from formal institutions, and limited tolerance from the community. Consistent with the experiences of most participants, the expectation is that immigrants are highly active language-learning citizens, and through their success or failure in doing so, their given value is determined. Authenticity and recognition are, therefore, integrated into speaking Faroese. Not doing so is likely interpreted as a sign of unwillingness, or even undeservedness, to participate. Underlying this is an ideology of the individual hardworking new citizen, who must earn participation rights. Thus, access to society is controlled through power mechanisms, which justify a lower position for immigrants. This becomes further apparent when confronted with the reality that many Faroese will not speak English in social settings, except in one-on-one situations with immigrants—something almost all my participants point out. Consequently, in most (Faroese-led) settings, my participants resort to silence and withdrawal. However, my participants' understanding of the Faroese people is not that they are intentionally intolerant or unkind in their discipline surrounding the Faroese language. Rather, an ideology of authenticity has become so naturalised and commonsensical that its ideological status is rendered invisible to native Faroese (Darvin & Norton, 2016).

5.1.2. The False Promise

The second dynamic is the false promise of language. As immigrants struggle to find employment of relevance for their skills and qualifications, they are persistently faced with demands to improve their Faroese language skills. An often-unavoidable consequence of spending (many) years improving language skills, is that previous qualifications and knowledge devalue over time and become outdated. Yet, as my participants continue on their language-learning journey, continuously improving their language skills, their hope of better employment is replaced by another reality. This is the false promise associated with learning Faroese.

Firstly, the false promise involves the realisation that for most (highly) skilled jobs, immigrants' language skills (oral and written) will likely never be perceived as adequate or authentic enough. Secondly, many come to recognise that mastering Faroese is insufficient. Being a bilingual society, Danish is frequently a condition to

navigate employment or undertake further education. One immigrant explained that she had struggled for years to learn Faroese. When finally securing educationally relevant employment, she found all manuals were in Danish. Her only option was to resign as she was unable to carry out key tasks. However, for some, the most anguishing aspect of the false promise is that language authenticity goes beyond the actual command of language. Rather, everyday citizenship is intimately connected to social/family networks and boundaries, which are constructed through a politics of belonging:

> There are *so* many promises attached to learning the language and it is like: "If you learn the language then doors will open." But it is not true…my main point is that there is so much attached to learning the language, which I think might be false. (group interview 2, male, <3 years in the Faroe Islands, 2018)

> I wanted to be here and become part of Faroese society and I even had political ambitions when I was younger. But to be a politician you must have local family, so I had to drop those ambitions….If none of your parents are from here, it's very difficult [to become Faroese]. Even though you speak the language, you can change your name, and still they call you—like in my particular case—they will always call me "the Romanian." (interview 37, male, 15+ years in the Faroe Islands, 2017)

The former quote draws attention to a perceived false promise, which is bought into by immigrants and native Faroese alike. The falsity is that the "solution" is to learn the language. The promise is complex and affirms that immigrants can learn Faroese. However, full participation and voice are primarily reserved for "authentic Faroese." The latter quote points to this false promise, exemplifying that, beyond legal citizenship, political participation is unachievable without family on the islands. This participant explained that he once had longed to *be* Faroese. Yet he learnt, even as a fluent speaker, that his positioning and relation to society would always be as "The Romanian." For this immigrant, exclusionary citizenship led him to, in his own words, "create a little Romanian land," around him, with fellow Romanians. As with several other participants, he "lost interest" in societal issues, withdrew, and disengaged with Faroese public life, essentially internalising his existence of being an inauthentic citizen. However, in another agentic sense, he is actively resisting exclusion, by navigating transnational citizenship as a Romanian, outside of Romania. In this sense, his resistance and creating new spaces of solidarity can also be construed as an act of citizenship.

5.2. Getting "Plugged Into This System": Recognition and Familiarity

In the Faroe Islands, recognition goes beyond status and subjectivity and is quite literally physical and embodied. In other words, bodies in societal spaces are (mis)recognised as those that are unfamiliar and unplaceable. Participants overwhelmingly referred to intense, closed social/family networks, to smallness, and to everyone knowing each other. As a consequence, immigrants are faced with a society that they experience as inaccessible—on a macro level, on a community level, and on a social level. These levels, however, cannot be separated, but mutually constitute each other, as we shall see.

Many of my participants work in fish factories, in cleaning, or in unskilled jobs that do not require language skills. Highly skilled immigrants find it almost impossible to obtain employment even moderately corresponding to their skills/qualifications. According to one participant, fish factory work is "integration 101," referring to the many immigrants who commence employment in Faroese fish factories. However,

moving beyond cleaning or the fish factory is an exhausting struggle. One highly skilled participant shared with immigrant colleagues her plans to have her qualifications assessed and recognised by the official Career Guidance Centre, only for her colleagues to scorn her, and point out that she would likely never progress and would remain "stuck at the fish factory." Participants' stories of employment paths in the Faroe Islands are fraught with tension and my findings indicate feelings of low self-worth and loss of identity as a result. Some participants even suggested that depression amongst immigrants in the Faroe Islands is comparatively widespread. This failure of Faroese society to recognise, value, and utilise human capital, therefore, impacts autonomy and self-determination.

In their dealings with organisations, immigrants soon realise they are not merely navigating formal systems. Rather, they are navigating individuals and social/family networks within formal systems. Most participants find themselves outside the realm of familiarity in the small island community leading to social closure, even in formal settings. One highly qualified participant explained that she had applied for almost two hundred jobs upon arrival. She received two responses, one for an interview, in which the first question was, to whom she was married. In her own words:

> If someone cannot recommend you, if you cannot get in the circle of cousins and religious community and whatever, then it doesn't matter what qualifications you have, or work experience, it's all about who you know….I had this impression that it's not because I was lame. It was just because there was no connection that would, you know, plug me into this system. (interview 1, female, 4–7 years in Faroe Islands, 2017)

In being confronted with their status as lesser citizens, immigrants become vulnerable to a system, which severely impacts their self-determination. In small island communities like the Faroe Islands, formal and informal citizenship cannot be separated, as the public and private conflate through multiple relations. This means that recognition hinges on networks, and it is oftentimes individual actors, rather than systems, who practice (mis)recognition. Importantly though, recognition is intimately connected to network investment, as one participant explained:

> There's a familiarity with people here in the Faroe Islands that allows them to be forgiving in a work environment, if they know a person or if they know what they're invested in, if they know the social connections with people. If they don't know those social connections, if they're not part of that social network, they're not invested in the individual and they don't have the incentive to support or to encourage. (interview 24, male, 4–7 years in Faroe Islands, 2017)

Yet, the same particularity can also be enabling, as some participants pointed out. Sometimes through luck, they meet the "right" person, who can expand the formal or cultural boundaries. Such persons effectively provide my participants with a chance. The particularity and size of island communities entail that (formal) roles are more likely to be characterised by "role diffusion" and "role enlargement," compared to larger contexts (Baldacchino, 2012). This means that when carrying out formal roles, people are more autonomous and less supervised, and policies are less formal and stringent. Furthermore, people are, according to Baldacchino (2012), more likely to be innovative and make decisions beyond formal boundaries. In other words, individuals in such contexts can, despite systems, enable immigrants.

Faroese people navigate social relations, aware that missteps can have long-term social consequences (Hayfield, 2017). However, for immigrants, struggling for recognition, socially and professionally, the smallest of missteps can result in exclusion. My participants point to gossip as potentially devastating, creating a climate of social pressure. Unlawful dismissals or changes to employment conditions were among the experiences my participants chose not to pursue for fear of ramifications. Even participants who describe themselves as having "made it" in the Faroe Islands are aware that immigrant recognition is fragile and can at any moment be renegotiated.

Throughout the data, it was evident that when immigrants voice societal criticism, the Faroese tend to withdraw or become defensive, directly or indirectly suggesting that they leave if dissatisfied. In other words, rights afforded to Faroese, to resist or challenge societal systems and norms, are not extended to immigrants. Being acutely aware of their lesser citizenship, my participants create spaces of solidarity in which they can discuss concerns, voice distress and build social capital. However, as several participants pointed out, such spaces of solidarity can simultaneously be spaces of social control. Immigrants who publicly voice their criticism of Faroese society are promptly rebuked by other immigrants who fear being punished as a group through association. In other words, immigrants cannot legitimately voice their criticism because the climate surrounding them can turn hostile.

This, however, might be changing. Very recently, an immigrant in the Faroe Islands protested against a cost-cutting measure by Kringvarpið (Faroese public broadcasting association), which involved the cessation of news pieces in English on the Kringvarpið website. On the 5th of February 2024, a headline read: "Protest over scrapping of news in English" (author's translation). The news piece accompanied a short radio bulletin. The bulletin explained how an immigrant was collecting signatures, protesting the decision to cease news in English. In the radio extracts below, the protest initiator (first extract) is interviewed, and then a language teacher (second extract; Jensen, 2024):

> Protest initiator: The news in English is a connection between the place-based community and us immigrants and it is *really* important that it continues…[otherwise] we become dependent on other Faroese to translate, because you cannot use Google translate [to translate into Faroese].
>
> Teacher: Many [immigrants] come from cultures where it is not common to protest, so I think if they are reacting, then it *really* shows that it is of immense importance to them to get this service.

Whilst immigration is sometimes discussed in Faroese politics and media, immigrants are generally those who are spoken *about* by Faroese rather than speaking *for* themselves. However, in the excerpt above, an immigrant is speaking out and engaging in a political act of using voice. He, along with those who have signed the petition, are making claims, trying to redefine and expand citizenship to include their basic right to information.

Some immigrants have opportunities, resources, or skills to acquire Faroese over a relatively short period. This provides some degree of recognition by society. Publicly (e.g., in the media) or socially, they are held up as ideal immigrants. In other words, if *this* immigrant can work hard to learn Faroese, so can others. Consequently, the responsibility, to a large degree, is transferred from society to individual, as the following quote illustrates:

> Often immigrants who have learnt the language are held up in display: "Look, he did it!" That has a divisive effect amongst immigrants. And often the immigrant who is held up as the example says: "I did not want to be used this way." Everyone feels the pressure that one person is being used against me [the immigrant], even though the Faroese may be intending it as encouragement….The discourse is that the Faroe Islands is a good country for everyone, an equal country. We [Faroese] treat our people and immigrants well. But the reality that immigrants experience is completely different. And when one constructs a different reality in discourse, immigrants cannot describe their experiences in terms that Faroese know. What Faroese know from discourse is one [reality] and when I tell them about my reality, well then it cannot be hooked into any reality that they have. There is no bridge as such. All they [immigrants] are asking for is the right to be valued the same as others. (interview 44, female, partner of immigrant, <3 years in Faroe Islands, 2023)

The well-intended promotion of the successful idealised immigrant, as pointed out in the quote, can cause friction and division amongst immigrants. Furthermore, the construction of a discourse of equality and fairness for all in the Faroe Islands renders immigrant experiences illegitimate and uninterpretable. Their realities are camouflaged as they do not fit with the internal image Faroese have of their own society. Thus, immigrants become culturally and structurally misrecognised, leaving no "bridge" to connect and voice their experiences. As a survival mechanism, some participants reported presenting what they refer to as one "culturally accepted" version of themselves, of their identity, to Faroese society and another in the safe space of immigrants. The culturally accepted immigrant does not complain, is not too loud in public spaces, and works hard to learn the language and Faroese culture. This means that when navigating public (Faroese) space, they internalise their misrecognised position, their lesser value, and status as lesser citizens. Yet, creating solidarity in immigrant-friendly spaces is a form of resistance implying that immigrants are not passive victims of the dominant ideology. Instead, they are working at redefining and expanding ideas of inclusive citizenship.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis has highlighted the much-entangled nature of immigrant citizenship experiences in the Faroe Islands. As immigrants struggle for societal recognition and to practice participation rights, the tension between inclusionary and exclusionary dimensions of citizenship becomes visible and articulated (Lister, 2007). For immigrants, misrecognition is especially manifested in their feelings of being undervalued, most notably in the underutilisation of the talent and resources they bring to the Faroe Islands. The sentiment of the vast majority of my participants is that their preconceived expectations, that lacking language skills *would* be a natural limitation, was one they envisaged could be overcome through time. However, their reality is one in which Faroese is experienced by many as insurmountable. Insurmountable in the sense that the ideology of authenticity constructs an image of ideal citizens, which even long-term immigrants likely never can become. The ideal citizen, from this perspective, is a conflation of commanding Faroese perfectly, being immersed in social/family networks, having a history in the Faroe Islands, and navigating the fluidities of formal and informal life. As a result, immigrants have little chance to realise their potential, a position that impacts their self-determination. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2017, p. 841) argue that "the fundamental purpose of citizenship is to ensure that all members of the community have a chance to realise their understanding of their subjective good, to exercise meaningful forms of control in their lives, and to participate in shaping the social norms by which they are governed." Given my analysis above, this argument

exposes Faroese society as failing to provide immigrants with fair and accessible chances for participation and recognition. Said differently, the concept of what constitutes a recognised and ideal citizen must be redefined and expanded.

Importantly, the characteristics of the Faroe Islands, i.e., interconnected relations, the conflation of formal and informal life, and the centrality of language for identity, might not be the principal issues for advancing a more inclusive form of citizenship. Rather, the lack of insight into the different worlds of immigrants, I argue, is a fundamental barrier that emerged from the analysis. The Faroe Islands are characterised by a family-based individualism (Gaini, 2013) in which the family acts as security, a vital social network, and a safe haven—and, in many ways, frames everyday citizenship. It is conceivable that an ontology of the individually autonomous self-responsible agent, as in Western theory (Hamington, 2017), may be camouflaging the struggle of immigrants, who do not have the same access and participatory rights. Therefore, epistemological tools are necessary to provide insight into the struggles of immigrants as a minority group.

Having been highly homogenous as a society until recently, the Faroe Islands are not prepared for the complexities of being increasingly diverse. To advance societal and social readiness towards immigration, Hamington (2017) argues for a relational approach to care. This study has shown that a relational approach is central to understanding the small island community of the Faroe Islands. However, there is a need to expand relational practices in the Faroe Islands by building bridges between ontological realities. This involves societal relations of care in which openness, listening, and responsiveness promote empathy and solidarity. Societal relations of care require that formal institutions have policies and practices that are sensitive to the diverse needs and situations of immigrants. At the same time, societal care encompasses also caring relations at community and social levels to unmask diverse realities and promote understanding between different groups. Shifting the focus to duties of citizenship, rather than focusing (almost) exclusively on citizenship rights, a duty of solidarity requires attending to the well-being of immigrants (Reiter, 2012). This is arguably one of the most important steps towards societal and social readiness.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

Data Availability

Data can be made available by contacting the author.

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ARTICLE

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Immigrants' Experiences of Settling in a Rural Community in Norway: Inclusion and Exclusion Through "Being Seen"

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Abstract

This article sets out from two dominant and contradictive narratives about immigrant integration in rural areas in Norway. The first holds that rural areas are "better at integration" as relations in these communities are more tight-knit and personal. The other holds that integration in rural areas is more difficult due to the homogeneity and closed-mindedness of rural communities. Based on ethnographic in-depth interviews with individuals with different immigration backgrounds living in a rural coastal community, the article explores their perceptions of rural integration and their experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the local community. By using the notion of "being seen" as an analytical lens, the article shows that both narratives of rural integration are engaged and that experiences of inclusion and exclusion are interwoven and complex. On the one hand, "being seen" points to more personalised relations and support; on the other, it points to concerns by immigrants that they are seen by locals as "others." The lens of visibility and "being seen" allows for a more nuanced understanding of immigrants' experiences with settling in and finding their place in rural areas, and strengthens the argument for studying rural areas as a particular context for inclusion.

Keywords

hypervisibility; inclusion; integration; Norway; rurality; visibility

1. Introduction

In recent decades, concurring socio-economic and demographic developments have contributed to making populations in Norwegian rural areas increasingly diverse (Stachowski & Rasmussen, 2023). First, many municipalities have embraced refugee resettlement as a strategy to counter depopulation, and there are now refugees living in all of Norway's over 350 municipalities. Secondly, labour-intensive industries such as those

of the so-called "blue economy" (fisheries and fish farming industries), which are typically located in rural-coastal areas, largely fill their labour needs with labour migrants from Eastern Europe (Henriksen, 2020). Since the EU expansions in 2004 and 2007, there has also been a great increase in Eastern European seasonal workers, both in agriculture and in the fish industry. Many rural communities can therefore be described as "new immigrant destinations," a term proposed by McAreavey and Argent (2018) to describe rural and regional communities with little prior experience of international migration.

Many rural communities in Norway embrace their (new) identity as "diverse" and describe this as positive and enriching, at least publicly and politically (Gullikstad & Kristensen, 2020; Kristensen & Sætermo, 2021). Such presentations of rural place identity should be understood in relation to local political and economic strategies that aim to attract new inhabitants and breathe new life into communities threatened by decline. For rural areas, which are often suffering from depopulation, immigration contributes to so-called demographic refill (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014) and economic growth (Aure et al., 2018; Søholt & Aasland, 2019; Steen & Røed, 2018). Immigration is understood as vital in the effort to ensure "a healthy demographic, economic and socio-cultural profile" of rural areas (Kampevoll & Martinussen, 2018, p. 91). Heterogeneity also plays a role when it comes to attracting further newcomers (Aure et al., 2018; Lysgård & Cruickshank, 2016), and interweaves with ideas of inclusion and the possibility of developing belonging, which is often upheld as better in smaller, rural communities than in urban areas. A central element in this idea is that smaller communities both enable and necessitate more contact between the original population and the newcomers. Moreover, the engagement of support services is also believed to be more informal, personalised, and flexible in rural communities (Patuzzi et al., 2020).

The narrative of "everyone knows everyone" in a rural town or village, however, bears a contrasting effect, whereby the tight-knit social fabric of rural communities is understood as potentially making it more difficult for migrants to build social ties, and thus generating a higher degree of social exclusion (Kristensen & Gullikstad, 2021). Also, due to practical reasons including resources and personnel, it can be harder for smaller communities to provide tailored integration services (Patuzzi et al., 2020).

In this article, we explore experiences of inclusion and exclusion for immigrants who, for various reasons, have settled in a rural coastal community in Mid-Norway. Drawing on qualitative interviews, we ask: How do they experience inclusion and exclusion in the community? How does the social visibility of living in a small place shape their experiences in terms of creating belonging? The article proceeds through the following sections. First, we introduce the notion of social visibility in rural areas and insights from research on this topic. Thereafter we present the theoretical perspectives on visibility and "being seen" that have inspired the analysis, before providing an overview of and reflections upon the methods used. The presentation of the empirical material is followed by a concluding part in which the findings and their implications are discussed.

2. Rural Communities, Visibility, and Inclusion

The idea of the Norwegian countryside as diverse aligns with research from other European countries (see, for example, Sampedro & Camarero, 2020). In the field of rural studies, notions such as "rural cosmopolitanism" and "translocalism" (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014; Kristensen & Gullikstad, 2021; Schech, 2014) have emerged to describe sociocultural changes related to the increased diversity. However, according to Sampedro and Camarero (2020), the development towards increased diversity can also be an

ambivalent process for rural communities, representing not only opportunities to secure economic and social sustainability, but also worries related to preserving traditional local identities and, as such, is a potential source of conflict, exclusion, and racism. It is still the case that many immigrants find living in small, rural communities difficult. For example, Woods (2018) claims that immigrants remain vulnerable in several aspects of rural communities and that the use of positively laden concepts to describe culturally diverse conviviality (such as "rural cosmopolitanism") overshadows this. In contrast to studies that find rural areas to be better at integrating, others find that rural areas may be more likely to foster xenophobia and scepticism towards foreigners (Penner, 2020; Valenta, 2007).

The social transparency and "close-knittedness" of rural areas are associated with both benefits and constraints for those who live there. On the one hand, residents in rural areas are commonly perceived to have stronger feelings of community (Rye, 2006) and look out for each other (Garland & Chakraborti, 2007). This can represent a positive force for the inclusion of newcomers. For example, Søholt et al. (2018) found that many immigrants in rural areas reported a feeling of "being seen," which they connected with feelings of social recognition and inclusion. However, small places where "everyone knows everyone" can also generate pressures towards conformity and a higher degree of social control and exclusion (Valenta, 2007). Mechanisms of social control can be particularly strong in smaller places, where there is little room to escape the eyes of others. Haugen and Villa (2006), for example, describe how gossip "controls and constrains" rural individuals who might not conform to local normativity. At the same time, the emphasis on the notion of the tight-knit community can contribute to obscure processes of exclusion that marginalise particular groups of rural "others" (Garland & Chakraborti, 2007).

The social visibility of rural places can therefore represent both a factor of inclusion and exclusion. This has been studied concerning various groups, such as rural youth and their decisions to leave or stay (see, for example, Rye, 2006; Stockdale et al., 2018), adult newcomers' experiences of settling in small places (see, for example, Munkejord, 2009), and groups that are particularly vulnerable for marginalisation, such as gay people (Preston & d'Augelli, 2013) and racialised minorities (Stead et al., 2023). About immigrants in rural areas, de Lima (2012) holds that their integration processes may be different than those in urban areas, precisely because their visibility is greater. In settings where homogeneity is seen as the norm, diversity becomes potentially disturbing—coming from without and associated with "others" (Søholt et al., 2018). According to Moris (2021), the symbolic construction of an idealised rurality largely defines who and what belongs to the rural or not. Representations of Western European rural areas are often as "white spaces," which also contributes to the positioning of many immigrants as "others" who are at odds with "nativeness" and authenticity (Søholt et al., 2018). Non-whiteness can therefore represent a marker of difference and of being "out of place" in representations of the rural place (Moris, 2021).

With these insights in mind, the article examines how rurality, visibility, and belonging/inclusion interrelate in the narrated experiences of immigrants in a rural area.

3. Theoretical Perspectives and Analytical Tools

To explore our empirical material, we draw on theoretical perspectives on social visibility and the notion of hypervisibility. This decision derives in part from insights from the existing research in rural areas referred to above, which shows that social visibility is a central dimension of social life in rural areas, and is thus relevant

for studying processes of social inclusion. The decision also derives from the interview material in our study, in which being visible and seen was a recurrent theme and one that seemed to hold different meanings. The analysis employs perspectives that link social visibility to both inclusion and exclusion, and that take on board the connection between social visibility and identity.

According to Brighteni (2010), social visibility—or *seeing and being seen*—is fundamental to human experience and can be understood as the "beginning of society" (Brighteni, 2010, p. 9). Beyond simply "looking at someone who looks back at you," she argues that visibility is complex, ambiguous, and contextual, and that it "unleashes social forces" (Brighteni, 2010, p. 13). Social visibility therefore shapes our experience of being in the world. The visibility can be both positive and negative. It can be empowering and advantageous when it entails recognition and a sense of esteem. Being seen by others therefore represents a validation of us as human beings. Indeed, it is argued that we fundamentally depend on feedback from others and recognition to develop our identity and sense of self-worth (Honneth, 1995). Social visibility can thus represent an enabling resource, that can produce and strengthen belonging and inclusion.

Conversely, seeing and being seen can also represent social control, constraint, and oppression, as well as pressure towards conformism, which tends to target those who are perceived as being different more strongly (Giddens, 1991). Moreover, being seen can harm one's self-esteem when the gaze is deprecating, which is often the case for marginalised groups. The gaze can also become internalised, and become part of a "double consciousness" (du Bois, 1903/2018), where one's own self-understanding cohabits with the experience of always looking at oneself through the (deprecating) eyes of others. Social visibility can thus be understood as a "double-edged sword," swinging between an empowering pole (recognition) and a disempowering pole (control; Brighteni, 2010, p. 39).

The relationship between seeing and being seen is associated with power. For example, contrary to mutual recognition, it can also mean a *denial* of recognition, in that someone is rendered "invisible" by "not being seen." Social visibility is always asymmetric as some groups have more power to render others visible, invisible, or hypervisible (Buchanan & Settles, 2019). Hypervisibility is a result of individuals being recognised for their "otherness" or perceived difference. Moreover, it is associated with them being scrutinised more strongly for possible errors and instances of deviation from norms. Hypervisibility can therefore be understood as linked to invisibility, in the sense that both are a contrast to visibility, both represent subjugation and devaluation, and both are linked to stereotyping (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008). Social visibility is also closely linked to the physical appearance of somebody—or some *body* (Ahmed, 2000). In predominantly white spaces, racialised differences produce both hypervisibility and invisibility (Newton, 2023; see also Ahmed, 2000). The notions of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility are particularly relevant for studying processes of inclusion and exclusion in rural places, where social transparency is higher. Drawing on Foucault (1977), social visibility in rural places has been conceptualised as a *rural* panopticon, with "its watchfulness, gossip, and self-discipline" as tools of social control (Philo et al., 2017, p. 231). This control is felt more strongly by the "rural others," whose identities are "silenced or problematized within traditional notions of rurality" (Moris, 2021, p. 475).

We will draw on these perspectives, both explicitly and implicitly, in the analysis of our empirical material. The following section presents how this empirical material has been produced.

4. Data and Methods

The article draws on in-depth interviews with around 35 immigrants living in a rural coastal community in Norway, which, to ensure anonymity, we have called Seaside. The interviews are part of a broader data collection in a project that explored how "integration" is understood by differently situated individuals in a selection of small local communities in Norway.

Seaside is a small town in a municipality with 5,000 inhabitants. The municipality is rather typical for Norwegian rurality, with dispersed settlements around a few towns, and with strong historical ties between the places and the people living there. Although the municipality has always included national minorities, international immigration is a rather new phenomenon. The municipality is home to industries that are extensively related to both farming and fish farming, which creates many employment opportunities as well as expectations of continued growth in economic activity and population size. In the period between 2010—when Seaside first welcomed refugees—and 2018, 290 refugees have been settled, of whom more than 75% were still living there when our study started. In recent decades, quite a few labour migrants have also settled in Seaside. Due to the employment opportunities and the expectations of continued economic and demographic growth, staying is more of a real choice for residents here than in many other rural communities, where the lack of employment possibilities is a significant push factor.

Seaside was chosen as a research site due to the municipality's reputation for success when it comes to immigrant integration. This understanding was known to us through local and regional news, where Seaside was described as being exemplary in its integration work. The stories about successful integration were typically explained by the proportion of refugees who were part of the labour market, which at that time was high compared to other municipalities.

The 35 immigrants we interviewed for this study come from both European and non-European countries and have lived in Seaside for one up to twelve years. Approximately one-third of the informants were women and their ages spanned between 20 and 50 years at the time of interviews. Some informants had come as refugees, some were labour migrants, and some were what is often referred to as lifestyle migrants. Refugees living in Seaside have been settled there in line with Norway's policy of geographically steered refugee settlement, whereby municipalities all over the country are asked to accept a certain number of refugees suggested by national authorities.

The informants were in different life situations. Some were living on their own or with friends, and some were living together with partners and/or children. As for their occupational situation, most of the labour migrants and lifestyle migrants, as well as some of the refugees, were employed in either the private or the public sector, whereas the most recently settled refugees were participating in the Introduction Programme for refugees. The Introduction Programme is a full-time training programme that is intended to prepare refugees and their families for participation in Norwegian working life. Refugees and their families who have been granted a residence permit in Norway have the right and an obligation to complete the programme.

The 35 informants were recruited through active networking and snowball sampling during fieldwork periods in 2018 when two researchers were staying in Seaside for periods of varying length (three weeks to three months). The fieldwork periods included participant and non-participant observation at a variety of

sites and activities, which enabled the researchers to establish contact with potential informants. The interviews included in this article were conducted individually, with couples and in groups, and each lasted for between 45 minutes and two hours. The interviews were mostly conducted in Norwegian and English, and some in German, depending on the informants' preferences and language skills. For most of the informants, this means that the interviews were not conducted in their mother tongue, but rather in a language of which they had rather basic knowledge. To ensure that the informants were able to express their experiences and opinions, the interviews were conducted in a relaxed manner, allowing time for longer explanations and, in some instances, also with some assistance from family or friends, as well as language mixing, which was in line with how the informants usually communicated with teachers, neighbours, colleagues, etc. As translators were not available during our fieldwork, a certain level of language proficiency was also included as a recruitment criterion. The interviews were conducted in various places, including the informants' homes, workplaces, classrooms, and local cafés. The questions addressed the informants' experiences of living in the community, how they experienced the initial period after arrival, and whether and how the situation had changed over time. Integration, in a general sense, was an overarching topic but was explored in different ways depending on the informants' specific life situations and interests. The interviews were thus rather open and explorative, oriented towards providing space for individual experiences and (biographical) storytelling.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researchers themselves or a transcriber. When analysing the interviews, we found inspiration in Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, in the sense that we focused on identifying thematic commonalities across the interviews. This "bottom-up" way of working on the data material made room for an empirically-led focus. The topic of visibility was not something that we explicitly set out to explore in our research. The complex issue of "being seen," however, was expressed by several of our participants and soon emerged as important.

To answer our research questions, we have chosen to present three interviews with four informants: Abel, Caroline and Joseph, and Salim. The reason why we decided to focus on these interviews is that they capture the different ways in which our informants talked about inclusion and exclusion through the notion of visibility and "being seen." This means that the experiences expressed by these four informants were also found in other interviews, but not necessarily expressed as clearly as they were by Abel, Caroline and Joseph, and Salim.

5. Abel's Story: From Being Looked at to Being Seen

Abel was among the first refugees that were settled in Seaside close to ten years ago. Abel comes from Eritrea and, at the time of the interview, was in his mid-thirties, living by himself and working full-time in the public sector. When Abel came to Seaside, he was in his mid-twenties and had lived for three months in a reception centre in another part of Norway. As soon as he came to Seaside, he was enrolled in the Introduction Programme and started to learn Norwegian at the adult education centre. For Abel, this opportunity to learn the language and meet with other people—both immigrants and those working in the adult education and integration services—made settling in Seaside very different from his experiences during his first months in Norway, where no schooling had been offered and he had spent the days on his own doing nothing. Despite this positive change, Abel still found his first months in Seaside rather challenging. The cold climate was an important part of this, as was the lack of social relations:

> The biggest challenge was to get to know people. Seaside is a rather special place. People are not open. It is a closed society. And I can understand that people are somehow sceptical. They did not know me and….So getting to know people took some time.

Establishing a new life in this cold environment was very hard for Abel. He missed his family, he did not speak the language, and he spent many evenings and weekends on his own, feeling lonely and depressed. Moreover, he did not feel included or accepted by the locals living in Seaside. Looking back, Abel can see that the newly established integration office did not really understand that the newcomers needed more than language classes and lectures about Norwegian society and culture to become part of the local community. Also, as in many local communities in rural Norway, there were not really any suitable places to meet and socialise informally, except at the grocery store and the gym. This family-oriented privacy was a new experience for Abel, who was used to hanging out with friends in local cafés in Eritrea.

When the cold winter came to an end, it all changed for the better. First, Abel and the other newly arrived refugees were invited by some locals to become part of the local sports club. Throughout the summer, they met with different people for training sessions and matches, and their number of acquaintances increased substantially. As language was still a barrier to becoming part of the community, Abel also decided to work hard on his Norwegian when classes started up again in the autumn. When his language teachers suggested that he could do part of his language training in a workplace, both his language proficiency and socialisation experience reached a new level. The real game-changer for Abel, however, was when he was approached by some Norwegian men in the local sports club and asked to take on a leading position in the club. After thinking about it for a couple of days, Abel decided to accept the offer. In this way, he got to know a lot of people and he also became a person whom many people in Seaside would know about and relate to:

> When I was in the shop, people would recognise me and "hey," "hey" all the time….I come from a big city [in Eritrea], and if you are to greet someone there it is because you know them. But here, when you go to the grocery store, people would know your face and they would say "hey," "hey."

As we can see in this quote, Abel now feels seen in Seaside, and the visibility that creates this feeling is explained by his extensive network as well as the transparency that comes with a small place. The size and the transparency are also verbalised in another part of the interview, where Abel is sharing some experiences from living in Seaside:

> There are many nice things about Seaside. It is a small town and maybe 70% of the people living here I would know by name. That is special. I would know his name, maybe also the name of his wife, the family, where they are living, and what they are doing. That's special [laughing].

Here we can see that Abel is not only describing himself as seen but also as someone who sees and recognises others. The message conveyed here is that he no longer sees himself as an outsider who is being looked at; he has become one of them.

Abel here describes a transition from experiencing being seen as somewhat objectifying, to being himself the seeing subject, and being seen as a subject. This is also verbalised in another part of the interview, where Abel tells the story of how he got to know his next-door neighbour:

> "In my neighbourhood, there was this lady who was looking at me from behind her curtains. I was parking my car and going for the post in my letter box outside my house. And all the time she was watching me from behind her curtains, following me closely, constantly. This was about three or four years ago. Then I got an invitation to a party. The people living in our street wanted to have a barbeque party where everyone was invited. I got the invitation in my letterbox. I prepared some food for the barbeque, bought some cans of beer, and went to the party. I already knew some of the people at the party and others were new to me. And I got to know my next-door neighbour, who had been watching me from behind her curtains. And now….When I am passing her house and she is on her veranda, she will talk to me and ask me to come over for a coffee. And then I just go there. It is understandable that people are a bit sceptical, but after some time you get used to people and they get to know you and what you are doing and that is…I don't know…I do not really feel that it makes a difference that I am an immigrant.

As we can see from this story, Abel's presence was definitely noticed by his neighbour. But rather than being seen, he was positioned as the hypervisible stranger that his neighbour was looking at from a distance, either out of curiosity or out of fear. But as soon as the curtain was pulled aside and they had the opportunity to meet each other, Abel was seen as a person by someone who also became his friend. And through being seen in this sense, he also felt part of the local community.

6. Joseph and Caroline's Story: Invisible Foreigners

At the time of the interview, Caroline and Joseph had lived in Seaside for about ten years. They came from Germany to Norway hoping for a calm life with less densely populated places and closer proximity to nature. They chose to live in rural Norway to give their children a better life than in urban Germany, where they described their everyday life as rather stressful and hectic. Both Caroline and Joseph were now in their 50s, and their children had grown up and moved to more urban areas in Norway. When asked about their experiences of living in Seaside, the couple made a clear distinction between their private life and their work life:

> Caroline: I always say, get to know people in their spare time or on vacation. There you really get to know people. Otherwise, you are wearing a mask and playing a part to the outside world. But see people in a stressful situation and you get to know their true character….Visiting them, you also get to know people differently. In their own house. Then you experience something together. Experiencing things together is very important.

Later in the interview, Caroline related this to the social transparency of the place:

> New people are maybe something you are scared of or are feeling insecure towards….In such a small community, where everybody thinks they know each other, this is a big issue. If someone appears in the local newspaper, for example, my coworkers discuss heavily who this person is related to and what they do and so on. And I cannot say anything about this. I just observe. And they immediately find a box to put this person in. But we do not have a box they can put us in….We will always be the foreigners here.

Joseph differentiated between what he calls "vocational integration" and "inter-human integration": "Those, for me, do not run parallel, but might even go apart." He explained his understanding of vocational integration as follows:

> We migrated here, but we did not integrate. We have a residence permit, a work permit, and such.…Here it is like that: When Norwegians speak about the German culture, it contains a certain respect. There are stereotypes like *Ordnung muss sein* [there must be order], being on time, being precise and eager. All these stereotypes are present. And if you look at them, they are actually very positive. This is what is being reflected onto us. That means that our status here is a very good one. And yet we experience problems with integration in our private-social life.…People from Syria or Ethiopia who come to Norway, they are not immediately given these positive attributes. Maybe they are even seen as burdens and met with mistrust and fear.

For what Joseph called inter-human integration, he gave an example of meeting a coworker in the town's only supermarket:

> Just when I see her, I see she is turning into another aisle. And I think to myself: She must have seen me. There is no way she has not seen me. Why did she not greet me? The relationship between proximity and distance is confusing here.

Joseph here seemed to describe a sentiment of being denied recognition, by being rendered invisible by his colleague. Convinced she must have seen him, he interpreted this as an active gesture, that for him represented the distinction of being seen ("integrated") in the workplace and "unseen" in a separate sphere. In a setting where these often overlap, this becomes "confusing."

Rural areas are often described as being based on multi-stranded social ties, which tend to bind public and social spheres closer together. Rural residents often meet at the crossing point of each other's work and private life. This is shown in Caroline's example of coworkers talking about a familiar person in the local newspaper. Caroline described their attempts to position this person relationally to one another (e.g., as one's relative, one's former schoolmate, one's neighbour, etc.) as being typical for a "small place like here," where "everybody seems to know one another." Joseph, on the other hand, interpreted his coworker avoiding him as being confusing, even rude—as an active gesture of avoiding seeing one another in the store, in contrast to in the workplace.

Caroline's interpretation speaks to the difficulty of overcoming "foreignness" and of being truly "seen" beyond pre-existing stereotypes. The latter was also important for Joseph. He did not challenge or deny these stereotypes but acknowledged them as an advantage that Germans have in comparison with other migrants in Seaside. It is a complicated manoeuvre to position oneself as neither one (local inhabitant) nor the other (refugee, racialised migrant). So, even though Joseph began by positioning himself as a labour migrant, who was allowed to stay and work but did not feel included in the private-social life of the majority population, he also acknowledged that he was being recognised with advantages and useful qualifications. Nonetheless, the feeling of being an outsider—a "foreigner," in Caroline's terms—persisted.

The couple's experiences reflect the precarity and situatedness of inclusion, even after ten years of living in Seaside. This situatedness becomes clear in their distinction between the work sphere and the private sphere, and it is exemplified in their accounts of situations of being (un)seen. Being seen in their examples was about being truly known and accepted as part of a social group. The impact that these seemingly mundane situations had on Caroline and Joseph, however, shows the precarity of immigrants who are suddenly made aware of their social invisibility.

7. Salim's Story: The Avoided Gaze and Its Reflections

Salim was in his mid-twenties at the time of the interview. He was tall and physically strong, and appeared generally happy in his demeanour. He had come to Norway as a refugee from Syria and had lived in Seaside for roughly two years. He participated regularly in the language café at the volunteer centre—a weekly event in which many Seaside residents participate. During one of those events, he expressed interest in participating in our research. According to Salim, he had not been placed in Seaside involuntarily but had wanted to live there, after he had met a representative from Seaside at an event for refugees, while he was still living in an asylum centre in another part of the country. In the interview, Salim talked about his job in a nearby fish factory, where he worked long shifts—often at night and weekends—to save money, but also to pass time: "What else is there to do here?" He further explained:

> I moved here for the job. Just for the job….It is fine to work here, and I do not have a problem living in a small place, but people here, they are not…[pauses] social. No. I like talking to people, but it is difficult to find a friend here. What shall I do? It is good to work here, but not to meet people. There are nice mountains around too, but it is difficult to find friends you can talk to….I have friends, who are from Syria or Eritrea, but I want to meet Norwegians too; to learn the language, but also to live; for everything, really….For example, just to greet people is difficult. I greet a woman, for example, and we talk a little bit, but later she would not greet me again. I have to greet. I have to start. I do not know what happens. Maybe it is because I am from a different country. I do not know [pause; then, with more conviction:] Yes, maybe it is because I am from another country, and they are afraid of me….Maybe that is it. I do not know, but it is not good.

Themes of isolation and friendship are predominant in Salim's statement. He stated that it is difficult to find people to talk to, and, like Caroline and Joseph, made a clear distinction between work, nature, and meeting people. Work plays a central role, and he said that he "only works," and was "only here for work," which in a sense makes his stay in Seaside independent of making friends and building social belonging. On the other hand, he also expressed frustration over experiences of not being seen and recognised, and said that he would have wanted to have friends.

Salim's statement indicates a heightened sensitivity toward his surroundings and his own position within these surroundings, in a way that that made him feel like a stranger, like a "body out of place" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8).

He had experienced that attempts to connect with the locals, initiated through greetings and conversations, were not reciprocated, and even avoided. Even though he ascribed them a general lack of sociality, Salim suspected that the perceived lack of interaction was not random, but that fear and otherness were being projected on him: "Maybe it is because I am from another country, and they are afraid of me." Salim was reading his own appearance through the assumed eyes of the locals he encountered. In a way, Salim was constructing "locals" and himself in relationship to one another, whereby the former were acknowledging him as a stranger.

Regardless of whether his interpretation of the locals and their reaction to him reflects their true intentions, the insecurity, of not knowing, but feeling as if one is perceived as dangerous in a given moment, speaks to du Bois' (1903/2018) notion of double consciousness. Salim's sense of possibly being perceived

as dangerous can be seen as mirroring the broader local and national narratives of Norwegian local communities as being homogenous.

8. The Rural Ambivalence of Being Seen

This article set out to explore how rurality, visibility, and belonging interrelate in the experiences of immigrants who have settled in rural areas in Norway. A starting point for the study is the existence of two dominant and contradictive narratives about immigrant integration in rural areas (as opposed to urban areas), where the first holds that rural areas are "better at integration" as relations in these communities are more tight-knit and personal, whereas the other holds that inclusion in rural areas is more difficult due to the homogeneity and closed-mindedness of rural communities. Our research findings show that the social transparency of rural areas does not simply render inclusion "easier" or "more difficult," but that it is a feature of rural places that makes inclusion and integration very different, compared to in urban, less transparent, settings. Transparency, or social visibility, holds a particular significance in processes of inclusion and exclusion in rural areas and is therefore a crucial factor in the analysis of such processes. Visibility can be described as omnipresent, and this is clearly reflected in our informants' stories, where it emerges as complex, temporal, and situational. "Being seen" is subjectively interpreted, and relates to belonging, agency, and self-perception—all of which are important dimensions of experiences of inclusion.

The cases of Abel, Joseph and Caroline, and Salim illustrate well that to be seen can mean very different things in a context of rural transparency, and the meaning might also change over time and between contexts. "Being seen" might mean being recognised or "known" as different, as a stranger—potentially dangerous—who does not really belong to the community, yet it might also mean being accepted as someone "known" and familiar, and, as such, a part of the community.

Abel's story somehow illustrates both these dimensions and brings forth the significance of temporality, of being seen in the sense of "being invited in," as well as "making oneself seen" as in actively making efforts. The social transparency of Seaside started as a barrier to inclusion as he became a kind of hypervisible stranger, a "body out of place" (Ahmed, 2000). At the same time, Abel presents transparency as a potential for inclusion, in the sense that people are more likely to become aware of and to get to know each other in small places than they do in big cities. Abel's story also illustrates the experience of becoming "the one who sees"—that is, the seeing subject, who is no longer subjugated to "otherness" but who sees from the position of an insider. Being seen or being "known," then, is part of the imaginary of rural towns like Seaside, setting and maintaining boundaries between who is "outside" and who is "inside."

In Salim's rather different story, the excluding aspects of social visibility are more dominant. In this interview, we see both an intersubjective transformation, where Salim comes to look at himself through the eyes of the Other, and his perceptions of his position in local rural imaginaries of who belongs in the given space. In his case, "being seen" entails a complex mirroring, in which he becomes not only self-aware but also aware of his visibility, or hypervisibility. In reaction, he initiates encounters by greeting people to counteract the perception of him as a stranger. These acts can be interpreted as conscious and active labour in everyday encounters, which are often invisible or taken for granted by those with the privilege of not having to question their position. Salim's story illustrates that one might be visible without "being seen," and Salim's greetings represent negotiations about an "untainted" visibility that would entail recognition and inclusion.

Caroline's and Joseph's statements express yet another form of "being seen," as they experience inclusion/exclusion as embedded in different contexts, and in relation to positive stereotypes, yet with a persistent feeling of remaining "foreigners." Moreover, their experiences can be seen as "unexpected" in some ways, given that they are not subjected to hypervisibility in the same ways that refugees are, and also have other (linguistic, cultural, etc.) advantages. Nevertheless, their stories reflect a sense of perpetual "othering." This is "confusing," according to Joseph, and the experience of being "partly seen" and "partly invisible" is expressed through an example set in a space where different spheres of rural life intersect. It could also be argued that the "confusion" could be related to different groups of immigrants having different expectations of inclusion and that perhaps Joseph and Caroline were only prepared for the positive aspects of rural social transparency.

The three cases we have presented in this article show how "being seen" is used by the informants to talk about their perception of belonging and position in the rural community, speaking to an understanding of rural areas as spaces "where everyone sees each other." Through the prism of "being seen," we are also able to see how their experiences of inclusion and exclusion are informed—both by their own life histories and personal experiences and by their experiences and perceptions of the other residents in the rural community. The notion of "being seen" not only emerged as central in our informants' experiences, but also appears to capture the complexity related to being a newcomer settling in a small, socially transparent rural community. The lens of visibility and "being seen" allows for a more nuanced understanding of immigrants' experiences of settling in and finding their place in rural areas, and strengthens the argument for studying rural areas as a particular context for inclusion.

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Conflict of Interests

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Invisibility and (Dis)Integration: Examining the Meaning of Migrant Inclusion in Everyday Lived Experience in Rural Areas

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Abstract

The settlement of migrants in rural areas that are facing population decline has gained increased attention in recent years as an economic, social, and political issue, as well as an opportunity for development for local communities. Studies have primarily focused on investigating whether and how migrants are integrated and included within these areas. This article adopts a fresh perspective by examining how the meaning of "integration" and "inclusion" is given shape by residents and migrant workers themselves. Our research centres on a small rural town in Sardinia, where individuals from Romania and West Africa have relocated to fill job positions traditionally held by Italians. Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews, we examine the everyday experiences of residents and migrants to develop an understanding of the lived realities of integration and inclusion. In doing so, the article calls into question the perceived value of these processes for the very individuals that are supposed to benefit from them.

Keywords

depopulation; exclusion; inclusion; integration; invisibility; lived experience; migrant workers; refugees; rural and remote areas; small towns

1. Introduction

In rural and depopulating Sardinia, a place many young people choose to leave, there is a growing presence of non-white people; not the amenity migrants or tourists, whom Sardinia is relatively used to, but workers who (try to) settle down. In the last decade, migration from non-European countries has also reached small rural towns, often as a consequence of Italy's asylum and refugee dispersion policies.

The literature on non-EU migrants in rural areas includes an abundance of studies on the so-called "good practices" of integration (e.g., Driel, 2020; European Committee of the Regions, 2020; Moralli et al., 2023). On the other end of the spectrum, and especially in popular media, there is a lot of attention on instances of poor integration management, leading to conflict and politicised opposition (e.g., Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020). In this article, we look at something that has hitherto been overlooked: What happens *where* and *when* the arrival of people from different cultures and with different skin colours do not make noise? What do integration and inclusion mean for both residents and newcomers? Are such concepts even relevant in their everyday encounters? We engage with these questions based on research conducted over nine months in three different villages, with a particular focus on a small town in rural Sardinia, anonymised in this article under the fictitious name of Bellamonti.

Bellamonti is home to a thriving food processing industry with three major brands that produce traditional delicacies known and loved across Sardinia. Despite their importance and the potential economic wealth, these businesses struggle to find enough employees. Once a wealthy town of over 3,000 residents, the population has more than halved since the early 1900s as a consequence of low fertility rates, high levels of out-migration, and an aging population (Istituto nazionale di statistica e informatica, 2021). Few Italians who try the work decide to stay as it involves intensive and repetitive manual labour that is mostly underpaid, and precarious because of its seasonality. To fill the gap in the workforce, Romanians have established themselves over the past years, and more recently Bellamonti has become home to young men from West Africa. Their dark skin colour, foreign languages, and Muslim religion, combined with a tendency for Italians to self-identify Italy as white and Catholic (Levy, 2015), have made the West African men particularly visible as Other. Bellamonti is different from most other rural towns because the arrival of non-EU migrants is not the result of top-down dispersion policies, and their presence is not managed by municipalities or third-sector organisations. Additionally, their work is of vital importance for the economic and cultural survival of a whole community. It is this scenario that gives a clear view of how integration and inclusion are given shape and meaning by residents on one side and migrants on the other, rather than by policies and official actors.

The article is articulated in five sections. After this introduction, the theoretical background discusses how the concept of integration has been developed (and questioned) "in theory" as a policy and research objective, and "in practice" based on research that discusses lived experiences. The subsequent section briefly introduces the methodology and expands on how a mixed-method approach is reflected in this article. In the fourth section, we consider how the political and theoretical understanding of integration is perceived by Sardinian residents in everyday encounters with non-European newcomers. Here the case of the depopulating town of Bellamonti is explored in detail to discuss the changing experiences of three Gambian men who moved there to work. Finally, we consider how the varying everyday experiences of residents and migrants enrich our understanding of the lived realities of integration and inclusion. In doing so, we call into question the perceived value of these processes for the very individuals who are supposed to participate in and benefit from them.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Rural Areas' Specificities

Research on immigrant integration in cities has been well-established and recently an interest in migration into rural areas has increasingly gained attention (e.g., Caponio & Petracchin, 2021; Flamant et al., 2020;

Moralli et al., 2023). The "local turn" has pushed migration scholars to move their focus from the national level to cities and metropolitan areas (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). Whereas the recent "rural turn," mainly triggered by national dispersion policies of humanitarian migrants (i.e., anyone applying, having been granted or denied international protection) has meant that scholars and policymakers now focus on extra-urban areas (European Committee of the Regions, 2020; see also Horizon2020 projects MATILDE, Welcoming Spaces, and Whole-COMM). These studies highlight how a well-managed system of reception and inclusion in rural settings has fostered, under certain conditions, the revitalisation of local communities and local development (see, e.g., Galera et al., 2018; MATILDE, 2021; Patuzzi et al., 2020). Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic underlined the essential role of migrant workers, especially in the primary sector (Kalantaryan et al., 2020). This affirmed once again the demand and opportunity for migrants' settlement in rural areas (Gruber & Zupan, 2022).

In our study, we worked with humanitarian migrants who, after leaving the reception system, moved or remained in rural and remote villages to work. These areas grapple with population decline, aging, reduced services, and a shrinking workforce. Residents are generally not used to seeing non-EU and non-white migrants and are therefore prone to more conservative prejudices and political positions towards migration (Haselbacher, 2019; Huijsmans, 2023). In a 2002 study, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, formerly known as the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, studied and defined "rural racism." The study highlighted that racism can be exacerbated in rural areas because of the isolation of immigrants and cultural minorities and the inadequate infrastructure for their integration. It also evidenced that in Italy racism in rural areas was mostly connected to unemployment and poor working conditions (Blaschke & Torres, 2002). Simultaneously, studies show that small villages might equally favour integration by potentially increasing the number of interactions with long-term residents and local institutions (Flamant et al., 2020). In line with other recent studies on interactions between long-term residents and newcomers in rural areas (Hadj Abdou & Katsiaficas, 2023) we argue that the quality of interactions, rather than their quantity, is essential in ensuring inclusion. Furthermore, the unmediated settlement of newcomers in these areas might result in de facto invisibility and exclusion, even where unemployment is not an issue.

2.2. Integration in Theory vs. Integration in Practice

Integration policies and theories have been adapted to address the challenges posed by migration and governance. In the 1990s the focus shifted from the state to the local level and embraced interculturalism both in theory and practice (Joppke, 2004). Intercultural policies, replacing multicultural approaches, emphasise individual diversity over group differences and promote interaction and dialogue instead of recognition and separation. This approach contrasts with assimilationism, where minorities are expected to adapt to the majority culture (Wood, 2009). Within this framework, diversity is seen as an opportunity that can foster human and social development, cohesion, economic growth, productivity, creativity, and innovation (Council of Europe, 2015).

Integration is defined at the EU level as "a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of EU Member States" (European Commission, 2005; Spencer & Charsley, 2021; Strang & Ager, 2010). At the Italian level, however, there is no definition of integration. A National Integration Plan exists only for the small group of humanitarian migrants with a recognised status, and it does not emphasise a "two-way process." Instead, it encourages newcomers to adapt to Italian values and

norms as well as places the protection of their rights and needs primarily in the hands of (public) service providers. Comparing this to the UN's definition of inclusion as a "whole-of-community" endeavour (Caponio & Petracchin, 2021) makes clear that the Italian approach overlooks the crucial role that Italian citizens could have in the integration process.

The question that we address in this article is whether these approaches to integration (interculturalism, assimilationism, multiculturalism) along with their definitions (two-way process, whole-of-community) have any bearing on residents and officials in their everyday encounters with non-EU migrants. Hence, we do not focus only on migrants' lived experiences, but we address also locals' lived experiences to shed light on how (dis)integration works in practice (Glorius et al., 2020; Phillimore, 2021). We look, for example, at implicit biases that both locals and migrants might have, particularly considering that people might be implicitly biased and explicitly unbiased at the same time (Allport & Kramer, 1946; Holroyd, 2015; Kelly & Roedder, 2008).

Previous studies of lived integration have focused on either the successful implementation of policies and practices of integration or on very contentious situations in which integration is an elusive goal as xenophobia and segregation seem to prevail. Studies on social exclusion, on the other hand, have focused mostly on urban areas where social exclusion is associated primarily with economic exclusion (Glorius et al., 2020; Phillimore & Goodson, 2006). However, there is a less studied and probably more diffused experience of (dis)integration that both migrants and local communities live. This is a silent and seemingly uncomplicated indifference between the two groups (Hadj Abdou & Katsiaficas, 2023), even in the presence of economic inclusion.

A recent strand of literature sheds light on migrants' lived experiences of inclusion/exclusion by focusing on homemaking processes and emplacement (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2013, 2016). Homemaking literature looks at migrants' everyday practices in making a place one's "home" as opposed to trying to negotiate integration in that place. It urges future studies to look at how space is used by both new settlers and long-term residents (Boccagni & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2021). This literature also delves into power dynamics at local and individual levels, underlining the potential for public spaces to become a battleground of everyday claims and aspirations of belonging. These spaces are therefore ideal for observing perceptions of exclusion or inclusion (Fenster, 2005; May, 2011). Following the approach of homemaking literature, in section 4 we focus on the lived experiences of migrants and demonstrate that the meaning of integration is not decided by policies or theories, but shaped and ever-evolving in everyday encounters.

3. Methods

This article draws on collaborative research conducted as part of two different research projects (i.e., the Horizon project Whole-COMM and a PhD project in visual anthropology), with similar objectives and interests, but using different analytical lenses and qualitative research tools. The collaborative data collection took place between March and November 2022. We conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews lasting on average one and a half hours with 12 new residents, 14 long-established residents, five mayors and members of the municipal councils, and five organisation representatives, including business owners employing migrants and managers of refugees' reception centres. The interviewees were spread across three villages in Sardinia, fictiously named Bellamonti, Villaruna, and Santolì in this piece. We returned

to Bellamonti more than 10 times, each time staying either a day or a half day. Here we spent extensive time with three Gambian men, whose names have been concealed through the use of pseudonyms throughout this article. There we conducted participant observation using visual methods and we also organised one focus group with long-term residents of the village.

Bellamonti was selected by combining the criteria for case study selection of the two research projects: a small, depopulating town with low population density and where a small group of non-EU migrants who previously applied for international protection decided to settle. Bellamonti is a unique example in Sardinia of a small and depopulating town with a thriving economy that relies on migrants, including (former) humanitarian migrants from different countries in West Africa. It is also a town that has been hosting foreign workers (mainly from Romania) for many years and in which the political leadership declares support for the arrival of newcomers, even if no policy has been implemented to this end. The choice of engaging repeatedly with the small group of Gambian men who arrived most recently in Bellamonti stems from the need to follow how interactions between long-term residents and newcomers are established and change over time. This allowed us to gain an understanding of integration and inclusion from a lived experience point of view.

After a period of research on-site, recorded interviews were automatically transcribed using Microsoft Office automated transcriptions software, notes on interviews were digitised, and data was anonymised and tagged using Obsidian software. In analysing the data, we specifically looked to compare the views on migration from the perspective of different societal groups. Once we identified specific lines of argument and relevant quotes, we returned to the original recordings for a more accurate transcription where necessary. A wider understanding of the research topic benefits from the authors' separate research work. One of the studies is part of the Whole-COMM project, taking a comparative European perspective on the interactions between, and lived experiences of post-2014 migrants and long-term residents in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas; the other study focuses on conducting extensive ethnographic work on depopulation across Sardinia as part of a PhD in visual anthropology at the University of Manchester. The collaboration has made it possible to explore individual lived experiences in-depth, while placing these in a wider socio-political context. The article reflects this dual approach.

4. Findings

4.1. Integration as Invisibility

Notes from a conversation with a resident of Bellamonti reads:

> Romanian, African, Ukrainian, the important thing is that you behave yourself and you will be one of ours. But don't go in the wrong, because if you make a mistake.
>
> Does this hold also for all people in Bellamonti or only for outsiders?
>
> Everyone, but especially outsiders. For example, when I was living abroad, when you go out, you are not in your home country, so they ought to adapt. Similarly, if someone comes here, at the very least you ought to adapt because this is not their home. This is something the Romanians have understood, they have adapted themselves to our customs. Don't disturb us, don't create problems, don't cause

> trouble [*non rompere le scatole, che non fai problemi, che non crei casini*]. Whether you have money or not, it doesn't matter. What matters is that you are humble and one of us.
>
> You talked about the Romanians, what about the Africans?
>
> Actually, these Africans are more invisible. It seems a contradiction.

The observations made by the resident from Bellamonti are repeated in different ways by residents across the three villages we researched. A group of residents in Villaruna told us: "I believe they are well integrated. Yes, they don't cause problems. They are not often here, they go to other towns." Similarly, a former cultural mediator in Santolì said: "I welcome everything, everyone can come. Of course, you have to respect the local culture; eat our food and don't wear the headscarf." The words are also reiterated by officials like the Mayor of Bellamonti: "Yes, they are well integrated, they have never made themselves heard. Look, it's almost as if they're not there [*cioè, guarda, è come se non ci fossero*]." "I won't say imperceptible, but let's say [their presence] is very quiet," said the Mayor of Villaruna. The language used by residents across the different villages is surprisingly uniform; to be a good foreigner is bordering on being invisible. This invisibility could be either because they "keep themselves to themselves" or, if they do "show themselves," they should do so in an assimilated form where signs of difference are hidden.

The result of this normative invisibility is that the non-white migrants became largely invisible in people's minds. When presenting our research projects and asking locals about interactions with migrants, we were consistently given examples of people who had moved into the village from mainland Italy, France, the Netherlands, Britain, Poland, Romania, and other European countries. Yet, when we asked more directly about people from African countries, residents always knew about their presence, where they worked, lived, and spent their time. As the resident from Bellamonti indicated, it seems a contradiction; to be both so visible in the space, and so invisible in the community. The contradiction stems from the idea that a white body can pass invisibly, while the non-white body in a white space can be made hypervisible (Ahmed, 2007, p. 159). In these villages, dark skin became the single most distinguishing feature based on which people would not "pass," were made hypervisible, or even excluded from public interactions.

This dynamic became especially clear in the case of Villaruna, where the newly opened reception centre for asylum seekers initially did not offer Wi-Fi. As a consequence, asylum seekers would go to the town's main square where there was open internet. Local residents complained because the newcomers were sitting on the benches and walls, and mothers said they were afraid for their children's safety. The mere presence of non-white people created disturbances for the residents. The mayor asked the centre's manager to resolve the situation, which he eventually did by installing Wi-Fi in the reception centre. Similarly, there had been a timetable in place for when the people from the centre were allowed to use the publicly accessible football field so that they and local football players would "not bother each other," despite the fact that the field was largely unused and locals struggled to put a full football team together. In the library of Villaruna, an important place for social interactions, language learning, and cultural exchange (Faggiolani, 2022), the librarian told us that people from the centre rarely visited. They used to come but she stopped lending anything to them because they would borrow DVDs that were then returned scratched. The library made the rule that anyone from the centre cannot take anything out of the library. "How do you know they are from the centre," we ask. "Well, the skin colour," she answers.

In each of these scenarios, it was not migrants' skin colour that initially caused their exclusion, but rather the disturbances that residents experienced in interactions. Nonetheless, because there were no black Italians in the village and all black people were associated with the centre, over time skin colour became the de facto reason for excluding people from social interactions with residents. In other words, through the visibility of their skin colour, a form of invisibility was being imposed.

Racial difference was equally present in Bellamonti, albeit more nuanced. While the integration of white migrants was positively defined (by both locals and Romanian long-term residents) as the presence of mixing with the community, for non-white migrants it was negatively defined as the absence of trouble (see also Ager & Strang, 2004). For example, Bellamonti's residents stressed the idea that Romanians are very well integrated because their kids go to school, they speak Italian well, and a few join for a drink at the bar. Meanwhile, *i neri* (literally "the blacks") are similarly considered integrated but this is connected to not creating problems (for example, by not being drunk in public, picking fights, or simply "hanging around too much"). Skin colour would categorically be rejected by residents as influencing their behaviour towards the newcomers, promising us they did not "see" colour. As the above shows, however, the skin colour made people visible as Other and changed the way they were treated. That said, both groups of foreigners were perceived to "keep to themselves" as they continued to build relationships mainly among their small communities; Romanians in Bellamonti for example married among themselves or brought their spouses over from Romania. Similarly, the West African men who came to work (sometimes only seasonally) spent most of their time in their houses, among themselves, and were largely absent from public spaces and the wider community.

Integration is thus understood by residents as a form of assimilation that seems to have succeeded, in the case of the West African migrants, if they were largely invisible in the community. In the next sub-section, we move on to discuss how the three Gambian men living and working in Bellamonti experienced living in this small and remote town. We describe not only the events that shaped their relations to the local community, but also how they make sense of them, the meaning they ascribe to them, and how it ultimately shaped their interactions and relations to others. It is only by studying these experiences in depth that we can make the distinction between the events and their meaning, as well as how the meaning ascribed to them changed over time.

4.2. Disintegrating Relations

4.2.1. Bellamonti is My Home

During research in the rural villages in Sardinia, gaining access to residents had been an uncomplicated, natural process. Simply sitting at the bar, striking up a conversation at the library, in a shop, or on the streets, would result in informal conversations on people's thoughts on and experiences with depopulation and migration. Meeting non-EU migrants, however, involved a more complex process. Population data told us that non-EU migrants are present in rural Sardinia, and we knew there were several asylum centres on the island and in remote areas. Reports and literature also speak of the presence of significant groups of Senegalese and Moroccan migrants (e.g., Bachis, 2016; Zurru, 2009). Through our network in the region, we managed to arrange interviews with organisations, but we were advised not to get in touch directly with the migrants. Different from other regions in Italy, there were very few news articles, no relevant community initiatives

promoted on social media, and we struggled to find anybody who was in direct contact with non-EU migrants. It was as if, despite clear evidence to the contrary, they did not exist. Non-EU migration in these areas was kept stubbornly invisible, ensuring it made little to no noise.

Eventually, we met someone who supports marginalised groups of people and works with asylum seekers and refugees. She told us that once people receive their asylum they move around a lot, so she usually does not know where they end up living, except for one Gambian man, Sanu, who started working in Bellamonti. Hence, we decided to visit Bellamonti and start our work there, with Sanu.

Sanu's employers were convinced he arrived through an organisation, but Sanu himself tells us it was an unknown Moroccan man at his lawyer's office who simply asked if he was looking for work. As in other rural contexts in Italy, most of the approximately 9,000 West Africans across Sardinia (Istituto nazionale di statistica e informatica, 2021) find work through such informal networks. While in the cities and seaside towns they commonly work in hospitality amongst a culturally diverse group of people, in the rural areas they might be the only or the first black people in an otherwise largely white and culturally homogeneous community—as was the case with Sanu. Residents in Bellamonti would tell us there is little racism, but as a remote village consisting of few inhabitants that have travelled outside of Italy, it is unsurprising that people were apprehensive.

When Sanu arrived in Bellamonti he was initially sent away by the manager of the potential employer, Bore, who told him that although he could offer employment, the problem was finding accommodation. It is a common issue that despite the many empty houses in rural villages, there are rarely any houses advertised for rent. To find accommodation an outsider is mostly dependent on insider contacts. Therefore, the problem was not so much the lack of housing, but the willingness of Bore to help find suitable accommodation which, he himself admits, was in part due to skin colour:

> I regret having sent Sanu back initially, I regret not having hired him earlier, because they [i.e., the Gambians] are really good. Maybe it was also of the skin colour, not because I was scared, but because I had never come close to someone like that. We have had Romanians for years now, but the Gambians are better. The Romanians have already understood how Italy works, they are more *furbi*, more cunning.

Sanu continued to call Bore and after a bad work experience elsewhere, he returned to Bellamonti where he slept on the streets for a few nights, until eventually Bore found him a house. Sanu has been very grateful for the support, and for the work contract that allowed him to apply for a work visa, which then made it possible to book a visit to his home country. In turn, the business gained a good worker that, to paraphrase Bore, unlike Romanians, will not exploit the Italian system. When we met Sanu, it had been three years since he arrived, and he never wants to leave:

> Bellamonti is like my home, like my home country. I have been to Milano, Calabria, but these places are busy, rough, life is hard. I came here and it is the most beautiful place I've seen. People are so open. At the beginning, I was alone. Very lonely. But then the boss told me: "I need one worker, good like you." I brought someone, but the boy don't like this place. The place is too lonely, so he left. The boss was very angry. They are always afraid that I go too. Even when I go somewhere he says: "Don't worry, I'll pick you up or bring you." But I would never leave, he helped me a lot, I can't turn my back on him.

4.2.2. They Have Turned Their Backs on Me

Over nine months we regularly meet Sanu, his closest friends Kingston and Sulayman, and various West African housemates and colleagues working with them in the busy winter season. Sanu's house is opposite two bars, and each visit we sense curious eyes on us. "What do the people at the bar think about us coming here?" we wonder while climbing the stairs of Sanu's place. An unexpected response from Sanu: "No, it's good, let them know that if they abandon us, we have friends. The whole place, nobody is our friend, they see you guys [i.e., us, researchers] coming here, for us that is rare." The response is followed by Kingston telling a story of something that happened in a bar:

> A few days ago, I bought something for €1.30. I only had €1. The man [i.e., bar owner] said: "Take it and return with the 30 cents." The next day I had the money but there were many people standing at the bar, so I didn't feel comfortable entering. The man shouted: "Boy, come and pay my 50 cents." I go in and tell him it wasn't 50, but 30 cents. We get into an argument, and I quickly say: "Never mind the difference, take your money." He continues talking and then pushes me. Outside we find the police on patrol. They ask only us for our documents, not any of the other men at the bar. If someone pushes you, you have the right to defend yourself, but we don't do that, because we know that the black person goes immediately to prison.

The incident changed how the men engaged with the community, as Sulayman explains: "That was my favourite bar. I would go there every morning for coffee on the way to work. I won't go there now. We are working, we come home, eat, and sit on the couch."

Sanu, who had told us Bellamonti was his home, now shares various past experiences. One time a drunk Italian was breaking bottles outside Sanu's house and shouting that he and his housemates do not belong there. There was the time his friend got into a quarrel at the bar on the day his contract did not get renewed. The friend did not normally drink, but he got drunk, spoke in English, a language that locals did not understand, and the people at the bar got upset with him. People in Bellamonti tell us that Sanu is well-integrated particularly because they see him play football, but Sanu now tells us his manager does not allow him to play because it is risky. Sanu decided his work is more important than football and therefore no longer plays.

In conversations with residents and newcomers, it becomes apparent that many of their diverse experiences stem from misunderstandings, fear, and a lack of communication. However, without positive or mediated encounters, these issues remain unresolved and the two groups seem to inhabit separate realities. "I imagine Bellamonti is an exception among other small villages because we are very hospitable and open," tells a council worker. Bore says it is easy to make friends in Bellamonti and believes he does not see the men much in the community because they prefer to be *fra di loro* (amongst themselves). Even if they do know of the incidents that affected Sanu and his friends, they dismiss them as being insignificant. "Oh, yes, the guy still owed me money," said the bar owner about the story on the missing 30 cents. "I did think it was out of character for the guy to drink and 'kick up a fuss,' but it had nothing to do with the termination of his contract," mentioned the employer of Sanu's friend.

Meanwhile, like many other depopulating rural villages, there are few natural meeting places for residents, let alone newcomers. There is a sports field but no lessons or clubs, the school is no longer open, and the

traditional Italian square is crowded with parked cars, rather than people. The only meeting points are the three bars, primarily frequented by groups of older men who consume alcohol, which the Gambian men avoid for religious reasons. Thus, it is not just that there are few places of encounter, but also that their physical settings do not actually encourage encounters between migrants and residents (Spenger et al., 2023). As a consequence, few meaningful exchanges occurred that could resolve or mitigate the misunderstandings and negative encounters.

As time passes, we notice that leaving the house with the Gambian men almost always involves some minor or major negative encounter, from small comments by residents to being stopped for a prolonged period by the *Carabinieri* checking their documents. Other types of encounters do occur too, such as occasionally receiving free groceries from the local supermarket or the mayor publicly criticising the unknown man who had broken bottles outside Sanu's house. However, just as the residents see the negative incidents as insignificant, the Gambian men consider these potentially positive incidents as exceptions to the more frequent experiences of microaggression. They begin to withdraw from interactions with the community. Kingston explains that he is now trying to avoid any form of contact, including greeting someone or making eye contact: "I am scared to say *ciao* because then *ciao* becomes a problem. *Adesso*, right now, me, I just look at my phone when I pass them."

Without a local social network, it had been their employer who acted as their support network. Bore, the manager, tells us they had to help resolve issues like replacing expired healthcare cards, arranging housing, acting as guarantors, or helping to find a doctor. Without an organisation that supports this kind of integration, it is the businesses that have to support such matters. In offering this support, Bore believes he is doing the West African men, as well as the Italian government, a favour. He explains:

> The government should give us money because we are helping them. These men have more difficulty finding work, also because of their skin colour. *Io do lavoro, io li sto integrando in questo mondo* [I give work, I'm integrating them into this world].

For Bore integration thus seems to mean offering the possibility to partake in the formal economy, as well as supporting them with the challenges they face. Meanwhile, however, Bore also heavily relies on Sanu. He admits he would never find enough Sardinians to keep the business afloat. Sanu provides him with a new workforce, trains them as they arrive, familiarises them with the work etiquette expected from them, and provides cultural mediation when needed. This two-way exchange means that some minimum form of integration, as defined earlier in the article, *is* taking place. The value of this is however nullified when Bore reframes the exchange in terms of a one-way relationship, modelled on the stereotypical story where he is the benefactor, and the African men the beneficiaries (Adichie, 2009).

When summer arrives, demand for the food products produced in Bellamonti wavers, and inevitably the work slows down. Contracts do not get renewed and many of the West African men leave again to seek work in other parts of the island. Often this is when issues with payments start to arise. Sanu decides to visit his family in the Gambia and sees his daughter again for the first time in six years. This is overshadowed by worries as Bore did not pay his last salary. Sanu's friends and colleagues continue to work and continue not to be paid for several months. Their Romanian colleague borrows money to pay rent, and Sulayman and Kingston lend money to Sanu while he is in the Gambia. We discover that the men have part-time contracts but often work full-time hours or more, without additional compensation. They do not know when their shifts will finish from

day to day, and regularly work more than five days a week. The men are effectively treated as a workforce constantly on-call without proper remuneration.

Clearly, the employer "as support network" fails when the employer him/herself is the source of the workers' problems. Bore is convinced that he is treating his employees from African countries well, "like I would treat anybody else," and he repeats, in their presence, that "*cavolo, ti sto inserendo nel mondo* [damnit, I am integrating you in the world]." Repeated conflict and hurtful words like these mean that the situation is not just creating financial problems, but also affects how the Gambian men experience their sense of place in the community.

When we first met Sanu, he had told us proudly how he had become a senior employee, appreciated by the manager and a point of reference for newcomers. Sulayman said he was faster and better than anyone, and he had developed skills that even the manager himself was not able to match. Their interactions with the wider community might have been increasingly limited, but in their work they had felt valued. Now, they say, they just feel lonely. Following Sanu's return from his trip to the Gambia, he recalls:

> In Gambia I was treated as a king; people killed a chicken in my name, and for two months my family would cook my favourite dishes every day. I did not miss Bellamonti. It is so lonely here, so, so lonely. You cannot miss a lonely place.

He continues comparing the Gambia and Bellamonti: "In Gambia if someone helps, you cannot turn your back on them." Those were the words with which he had also explained his commitment to Bellamonti at the start of our interactions. Now he says: "Italians, however, they have turned their backs too many times on me."

4.2.3. I Will Not Return to Bellamonti

Winter arrives again, and production peaks. We have difficulty meeting with the Gambian men as they work weekdays and weekends, late into the evening, and they never know when they can finish their shift. Additionally, they have been asked by the business owners to find more workers. On one of the rare occasions in which we do manage to meet, Kingston jokes: "they need people? I will bring them one mad boy, one crazy boy. I will tell him, work good for one week, and then cause trouble." The Gambian men are confident that they can find new work in Sardinia, listing work requests to convince us, perhaps as much as to convince themselves.

After the winter season, the Gambian men leave Bellamonti to work in one of Sardinia's coastal regions. What their new work cannot offer however is the minimum level of stability that they had constructed over the years in Bellamonti. It had taken Sanu a long time before he found an apartment in Bellamonti with a rental contract, which is a condition for their visa renewals that are required every couple of years. Similarly, although their work contract in Bellamonti continued to be temporary and they were often paid late, they understood that their manager could not afford to let them go, especially in the busy winter months. It is this minimum level of economic and legal stability that was at stake in their decision to leave. Speaking to Sanu later on the phone he explained his decision to leave and how he managed to navigate the uncertainty associated with it:

> In Bellamonti I couldn't build a future, I didn't leave my country for that. I was being taken for granted, but at my new work people are good. They have no problem with Blacks. The owner says he has never

> seen anyone work so hard, and he never wants us to stop working for him. We get paid, always on time and with contract. They close after the summer, but the boss promised us that he has plenty of work in construction. I will not return to Bellamonti, but we will pay for the house to keep the contract.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

While policymakers continue to emphasise concepts such as integration and inclusion, the theoretical underpinnings of these terms do not necessarily align with the practical significance they hold for migrants and residents. The Gambian men we worked with had the intention to stay and a desire for companionship and community acceptance. This human need for connection is however not interchangeable with the desire or hope to integrate. Their response to experiences of rejection was not to assimilate in a one-way process of integration, or to seek a resolution in a two-way exchange of mutual accommodation. Instead, they avoided further confrontation in order to escape more animosity and racist incidents and reverted to their primary objective of being in Bellamonti; to work and earn money to support their families. Rather than leading to increased *integration*, the social interactions in the village resulted in forms of *disintegration*, where the migrants started to remove themselves physically and socially from village life.

Meanwhile, residents across the three villages, including mayors and community officials, did consider integration important, but saw it as synonymous with migrants not causing any trouble; to remain either physically or socially invisible. For them, the West African men's increased withdrawal from the community and lack of contact—essentially their invisibility—was considered a sign that they were well integrated.

The remote location also meant that many residents had only ever seen a non-white person on the news, while showing little awareness of any biases, let alone of covert racism (Coates, 2011); convinced they were treating the West African men the same as any other neighbour, colleague, or employee. Small villages might be places where there is more social exchange, but we demonstrated that this is not always the case as depopulation causes the closure of public services and meeting points. This allows for very few occasions where residents and newcomers can meet to overcome prejudice or address differences. As a consequence, encounters between migrant and Sardinian residents were few in quantity and remained transactional in quality.

It is peculiar that in the case we studied, neither Sardinian residents nor officials such as the mayors, deemed it necessary to seek contact or create lasting relationships with the migrants, even if the community's economy and cultural heritage are somewhat dependent on them. This finding should give pause to policies and research that assume social exchange is a given in small towns, and that place their hopes on migrants reviving depopulating towns without investing in positive exchanges between residents and newcomers.

In an effort to go beyond preconceived ideas of integration and inclusion, we asked in this article how migrants make sense of their experiences in a rural community in Sardinia, Italy. Based on research in three villages, including an in-depth case in which we followed a group of Gambian men as they worked in the understaffed but important food processing industry, we demonstrated that both residents' and migrants' interests in one another and the ability to identify, navigate, and resolve difference, cannot be assumed. Integration theory and policies that pay little attention to such lived realities, risk being built on false assumptions and falling short from the outset.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Differentiated Borders of Belonging and Exclusion: European Migrants in Rural Areas in Iceland

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Abstract

This article addresses questions of difference, positionality, and belonging from the perspectives of international migrants living and working in rural communities in Iceland. With the recent integration of rural areas into the global economy, small villages and towns have undergone rapid social transformation. The development of new industries and growing tourism in these localities has attracted many international migrants. The share of migrants in the local populations oscillates between 10% to 50%, depending on the town, with the majority coming from Europe. Commonly, they make up the greater part of workers in service jobs and manual labour in rural towns and villages. This article builds on data from ethnographic field research over 15 months in five parts of Iceland located outside of the capital region. Based on the analysis of interviews with migrants, we examine different perceptions of affinity and belonging and explore their experiences of inclusion and exclusion. To what extent do migrants see themselves as part of local communities? How do they narrate their social positions in those places? The discussion highlights how social stratification and hierarchy affect migrants' experiences of inclusion as commonly displayed in the interviews. Furthermore, we elaborate on how notions of relatedness and otherness reflect inherited ideas of Europe and contemporary divergent geopolitical positions.

Keywords

diversity; exclusion; hierarchy; Iceland; inclusion; European labour migrants; rural areas

1. Introduction

European rural places are commonly imagined as homogeneous and linked to stability and traditionalism in contrast to dynamic, super-diverse, urban cities (Søholt et al., 2018). Yet, both urban and rural areas operate

in the "same globalized international society" (Rye & O'Reilly, 2021, p. 4). The integration of rural areas into the global economy has transformed many sectors in rural villages and towns, creating an increased demand for labourers from abroad in recent decades (Camarero & Oliva, 2016). Thus, rural areas, just like urban areas, are characterized by increased mobility and growing diversity of the population in the contemporary world (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014; Rye & O'Reilly, 2021). The common labour market within the European Economic Area (EEA) has facilitated the flow of people seeking work in other European countries, including Iceland. Following EU enlargement in the early 2000s, migration from Eastern Europe to Western Europe accelerated (Rye & O'Reilly, 2021). Migrants are mostly hired in low-paid, manual labour, often seasonal, typically in food production usually located in the informal sector, and commonly experience discrimination. Their precarious position in the labour market correlates with societal marginality in the local community (McAreavey & Argent, 2018). Furthermore, migrants of specific nationalities tend to dominate certain niches of the labour market, which may contribute to their social isolation and growing segmentation within the local community.

Recently, Vertovec (2021) pointed out that the term diversity may not sufficiently illustrate contemporary dynamics characterized by rising inequality and increasing complexity. Contemporary societies are not only becoming more diverse but also more stratified. The relation between migration status and the labour market position of migrants has been demonstrated (Anderson, 2013; Arnholtz & Leschke, 2023). However, while conducting fieldwork in rural areas in Iceland, we saw that migrants have divergent experiences of inclusion at work and in society, even if they were moving within the common European labour market. This turned our attention to ways that the intersection of multiple factors beyond migrants' employment affects their sense of social stratification. In this article, we focus on people coming to work in rural Iceland from different parts of Europe to examine the role of geopolitical imagination in the construction of difference. We apply the concept of geographical imagination (Harvey, 1973, 2005) to discuss the role of perceived cultural distance or proximity in migrants' experience of inclusion and exclusion. We go beyond a simple dichotomy between "us" and "them," giving attention to degrees of otherness. The process of othering is usually discussed from the perspective of the majority, looking at their attitudes towards different migrant groups. In this article, we examine how ideas of foreignness and affinity are reflected in migrants' narratives of their experiences and how they affect their sense of belonging and trajectories of integration. We highlight how these differences are contested, negotiated, traversed, and mobilized in daily encounters and how they may change over time.

2. National Boundaries, Diversification, and Hierarchies

The unprecedented heterogenization of contemporary societies is commonly referred to by using Vertovec's (2007) concept of "superdiversity." In a critical review of the use of this concept, Vertovec (2019, p. 130) notes that studies applying it when discussing increased ethnic diversity often do not consider "the multidimensional nature of categories, shifting configurations, and new social structure that these entail." He proposes that we should focus on the process of diversification to better grasp the dynamism and complexity of mobility in the modern world. Significantly, he advocates attending to not only horizontal differences, but also hierarchical ordering, emphasising that ongoing social construction of differences is integral to economic inequality and stratification of society (Vertovec, 2021, p. 1275).

In this article, we focus on the spatial organization of cultural diversity and the role of geographical imagination in the unequal positioning of migrants in rural Iceland. Harvey (2005) introduces the concept of

geographical imagination to emphasise mutual conditioning between social structures and space. We evoke it to give attention to how the perception of geographical space is historically rooted and socially constructed, as well as how geographical imagination manifests in the notion of social distance/proximity, prejudice, and ethnic stereotyping. Geographical knowledges—internalized and commonsensical—contribute to the affective and hierarchical valuation of space (Harvey, 2005), reflected, for instance, in contemporary migration regimes. Divergent conceptualizations of migration flows (labour migration, lifestyle migration, etc.) echo hierarchical orderings of space. Labelling individuals either as labour migrants or expats is often influenced by assumptions about the character of their mobility based on an evaluation of the economic status of the states from which they come. In the case of those identified as refugees or asylum seekers, the site from which the individuals come is recognized as a site of political instability or danger. Significantly, the different categories of migrants (refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers, expats) become ordered into hierarchies of citizens with unequal positions in the labour market and access to welfare (Anderson, 2013; Anthias, 2016; Arnholtz & Leschke, 2023; McAreavey & Argent, 2018).

While their position in the labour market plays an important role in the stratification and differentiation of migrants, it intersects with other factors, including the perceived social distance between locals and people from different countries of origin (Harvey, 2005, p. 221; Karakayali, 2009, p. 538). As territorial borders correlate with assumed cultural differences and social boundaries (Barth, 1969), they tend to be epitomized in the idea of the Other and reproduced through attitudes towards migrants (Fassin, 2011). Such divisions often mirror geopolitical imaginations of Europe's internal boundaries, such as East and West or North and South, in which East Europe is sometimes portrayed as not fully belonging to the European community of values and as economically backward (Dzenovska, 2018).

Studies from various parts of the world have shed light on the construction of the institutionalized maintenance of ethnic and racial hierarchies between migrant groups (Anderson, 2013; Consterdine, 2023). Ethnic hierarchies are, as Ford (2011) pointed out, commonly based on ideas about the closeness or cultural similarity of a given migrant group to the dominant group. His study showed that attitudes towards different migrant groups in the UK were expressed in hierarchical terms, with respondents being less opposed to the ethnic groups deemed to be culturally more like them. Commonly, such divisions are reflected in the labour market and underpinned by ideas of "labouring bodies" (Consterdine, 2023). In the examination of othering and racialization in Europe, the focus has often been on those arriving from countries outside of Europe. Recent literature on the differentiation and othering of East European migrants in Western Europe has demonstrated that they are subject to similar processes (Andersson & Rye, 2023; Krivonos, 2023).

As Consterdine (2023, p. 3837) points out, many studies of ethnic hierarchies lack migrants' perspectives. In her study of two different groups in the UK, she examines labour migrants' lived experiences and how they "understand, mediate and legitimise their position in the immigration hierarchy." In this article, we examine such hierarchies by focusing on the experiences of migrants who arrived in Iceland primarily to work and who are active in the labour market in rural areas. Their migration can thus be characterized as labour migration, although a closer look generally reveals more complex reasons for their migration trajectories, such as being with family members or searching for tranquillity or remoteness (Wojtynska et al., 2023). Although labour market participation is typically seen as an important part of integration, studies have shown that it may not be sufficient to be included in local social networks. This is because of exclusionary processes, social contexts, and relational issues that go beyond individual resources (Aure et al., 2018; Enbuska et al., 2021;

Søholt et al., 2018). Our goal is to illuminate existing hierarchies of difference regarding belonging and access to local society displayed through differentiated processes of inclusion and marginalization narrated by the participants of our study from various parts of Europe. Our attention is on their experiences and how they talk about their position and their inclusion and exclusion in the labour market and the local community.

3. The Context of the Study

While rapid diversification has mostly been attributed to global cities and big metropolises, researchers are depicting similar transformations in rural areas, which, just like urban spaces, are facing extensive inflows of people from abroad (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014; Rye & O'Reilly, 2021). This also can be observed in Iceland. Until the 1990s, international migration to Iceland remained moderate, consisting primarily of people from other Nordic countries (Skaptadóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2020). From 1952, the Nordic Passport Union ensured citizens of the region free movement and unlimited residence and, since 1954, with the formation of the common labour market, unrestricted access to work. Following free market reforms in the early 1990s, there was an increase in international migration, largely driven by the fish processing industry and thus directed mostly to the rural coastal areas (Júlíusdóttir et al., 2013). At that time, many migrants were coming from Poland (Wojtyńska, 2011). In 2006, Iceland as an EEA country opened the labour market to citizens of the new EU member states, resulting in increased arrival of workers from these countries (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). More citizens from Bulgaria and Romania have entered since 2013, when restrictions were lifted. Currently, immigrants are 18% of the population and about 22% of the active workforce in the country. About 80% of all migrants come from EEA countries. Most come from Eastern Europe, with people from Poland being by far the most numerous at about 35% of all migrants, followed by people from Lithuania and Romania. Germans are the most numerous of those coming from Western Europe, followed by people from Spain and Portugal (Statistics Iceland, n.d.).

The number of migrants in rural areas has increased greatly, with foreign nationals accounting for about 10% to over 50% of the total population, depending on place. Some of the locations in our study have a history of people coming to work in the fisheries since the 1990s, whereas the others can be seen as new immigration destinations (McAreavey & Argent, 2018). Entanglement in global processes, either through production for a global market or through rapidly expanding tourism in the last 10 years, created a growing demand for labourers from abroad. In two of the areas, heavy industries, largely relying on foreign workers, were introduced in the mid-2000s as a solution to depopulation after a decrease in the importance of once-central fisheries. As elsewhere in Iceland, Poles and people from other East European countries outnumber other nationalities.

Despite these changes in the composition of rural populations, municipal governments have put little or no effort into facilitating the integration of new inhabitants. This may reflect a dominant discourse in Iceland of migrants generally being portrayed as temporary, disposable workers, although there is an easy pathway for residency and eventual citizenship for those coming from the EEA, and many do settle (Skaptadóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2020). Loftsdóttir (2017) examined how such discourses underpin the racialization of Lithuanians and Poles, based on ideas of Eastern Europeans as not fully "European." Similarly, people from East European countries such as Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania have been represented as culturally different. The term *innflytjandi* (immigrant) is generally used to refer to them and a lesser extent to those migrating from Western European countries. There is an especially strong sense of cultural proximity with the Nordic

countries reflected in the use of kinship terms to describe relations with people from there. Guðjónsdóttir (2014), in her study of Icelanders seeking work in Norway after the economic crash of 2008, showed how Icelandic migrants felt accepted and explained this by referring to shared culture and kinship with Norwegians. Here, we investigate how this general ordering of different nationalities is experienced and narrated by migrants in rural areas.

4. Methods

The discussion in this article is based on analysis of data from 15 months of ethnographic field research conducted in small villages and towns in five districts of Iceland outside of the capital region. The towns and villages in each location varied in size, ranging from 200 to 2500 inhabitants. We spent three months in each location, where we did participant observation, talked informally with inhabitants, and conducted 330 semi-structured interviews. The participants in the study were of various national origins; two-thirds of the interviews took place with international migrants and about one-third were with Icelanders who had either moved from other parts of Iceland or were long-term residents. Of all interviews with international migrants considered here, 74 were with people from West European countries and 90 with individuals from East Europe. The remainder were held with people coming from locations outside of Europe and are not included in our analysis. Interviewees had lived in Iceland for various lengths of time, from one to 30 years. Participants were found using random sampling and the snowball method. Independent of their country of origin, many had arrived in Iceland to work temporarily or seasonally in a rural area, often not with a clear timeframe in mind, and had then extended their stay. In the interviews, we asked them about their experiences of moving into a small, rural location and their experiences of working and living in the village where they resided. The participants were asked about their daily lives, such as their participation in community life, at work, and in learning the Icelandic language.

In this article, we present results based on analysis of interviews with participants from various European countries who indicated that work had been the primary reason for their migration to Iceland. Most of them came to work in jobs where migrants are the majority, such as those related to tourism, care work, fish processing, and agricultural labour. Although of various ages, the majority of interviewees were 20 to 45 years old. While the focus of this article is primarily on this group, the interviews conducted with other participants, especially with local Icelanders, and our fieldwork observations give important insight into the local contexts and inform this analysis as well.

Following Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), we identified themes emerging from interviews in which people discussed their experiences of inclusion and exclusion. In several of these, they also spoke about the positionality of other migrants in the community. Icelanders' sense of how familiar or foreign people were, along with factors like the individual's desire to be included, quickly arose as recurrent and pervasive themes. Our review of the data also brought to light migrants' own use of these concepts to arrange their and others' groups in the social world of their community. Once these themes were identified, we triangulated them with fieldnotes, media references, and interviews with Icelanders to determine whether they were attested in these sources, as well.

5. Results

The participants discussed in this article often had contradictory experiences of inclusion in or exclusion from community life depending on specific migration circumstances, knowledge of Icelandic and English, family networks, and length of stay. These experiences were not fixed and explicit, but often ambiguous and changing through time. However, in migrants' narratives, two elements often came up regarding their position and possibilities for social inclusion: where in Europe they had come from, and what kinds of jobs they held. These factors are interrelated, as employers often follow stereotypical ideas about different nationalities when hiring while, simultaneously, labour migrants' market position often conditions the possibilities for and characters of daily encounters within the local community that may reinforce existing stereotypes. Our participants were aware of and discussed, directly and indirectly, the hierarchy into which they felt they had been placed. This was the case for those who found themselves having difficulties being included in the local community and those who felt more privileged and included. These themes are examined in this section, starting from those who described the most possibilities of inclusion to those who expressed being the most isolated.

5.1. The Benefits of Imagined Closeness

Certain rural farming areas in Iceland have a history of population influx from Western European countries, mostly Scandinavia and Germany, to work on farms, particularly with horse husbandry. However, only a few of the participants in our study came to Iceland in this way. While a few of them found positions in their professional fields, most of the contemporary migrants from Western Europe, both south and north, were employed in the rapidly growing tourism sector. Some came annually for five to eight months of the year and returned to their country of origin around mid-winter when tourism was slow in Iceland. Although West Europeans were rarely found in food production such as fish plants, some have been hired in care work or held positions in heavy industry, mostly in mid-management.

Despite these Western European migrants often filling low-income jobs, similar to migrants from Eastern Europe, they have received very little attention, and were rarely talked about as "labour migrants." When asked about migrants in their towns, Icelanders and long-term migrant residents of the study locations generally mentioned inhabitants from Poland or Eastern Europe. Occasionally, inhabitants from Western European countries were mentioned, but rarely those from the Nordic countries.

Regardless of their position in the labour market, participants from Nordic countries commonly talked about their positive reception and expressed that they felt accepted by the local community of Icelanders. Many of them had met an Icelandic spouse and had been settled for a while in the rural villages. Some had found employment where they could apply their education after staying for some years in Iceland. The commonly expressed ideas of a shared sense of affinity were summarized by one participant who said that people from Scandinavia are typically perceived by Icelanders as "a brother from another mother." Reflecting this inclusive view, a woman from Sweden said:

> I don't feel that they're, like, you know, making fun of my language or looking at me with some weird look….My feeling is that being Swedish is looked upon with a good eye.

In her experience, her nationality is seen more as an advantage rather than a disadvantage when interacting with Icelanders. Another woman from a Nordic country, who has worked in various jobs generally held by

migrants, such as in elderly care, cleaning, and housekeeping in a hotel, compared her experience to that of her co-workers from other countries:

> I think that in the eyes of Icelanders, we [Nordic people] are naturally a bit higher in the pecking order. I hate that this is how it is, but I think they look more up to us. You know, our music and all….And naturally, we are all Vikings [laughs].

People who have come from Nordic countries thus demonstrate awareness that the treatment they receive is often better than that given to migrants coming from elsewhere. The sense of familiarity, both familial and cultural, that Nordic people feel Icelanders express toward them grants them affordance to engage in Icelandic social life more immediately than can migrants entering from countries thought to be more distant from Iceland. The Nordic participants have discerned that they come, in Icelanders' minds, from geographic and imagined spaces closer to Iceland. Being thought of as genealogically, culturally, and linguistically known places them in a discernibly higher position than that directly available to incomers from other parts of Europe.

Several participants from West European countries described positive experiences as well but theirs differed slightly from those recounted by the migrants from the Nordic countries. A young woman from Germany, who lives in a small town, came along with her partner to work in housekeeping in a small hotel. Currently, she has a service job where she interacts directly with tourists. About their experiences of moving to Iceland, she said:

> Icelanders are just so warm; they are so open. So, it's, we say like, "cold country but warm hearts," you know. And we felt just like warm and welcoming….That was just exactly how it was when we came here as workers. Everybody was, just like, very friendly and nice.

In describing Icelanders as warm and friendly, she reiterates points raised by Nordic interviewees but does not speak of a familial relation or a shared historical cultural relation ("Vikingness") as elements narrowing the distance between Icelanders and people from Germany. Thus, although neither she nor other Western European participants talked about shared historical or cultural relations like the Scandinavians, the welcome that participants from Western European countries described denotes a camaraderie between Icelanders and Western Europeans, but one that retains a sense of geographic and social separation.

Even though Western Europeans rarely talked about being excluded directly from local society or experiencing discrimination based on national origin, they commonly expressed some difficulty in getting access to and being included in the Icelandic community. Problems regarding learning Icelandic and making friendships with Icelanders were issues raised by both those only working with other migrants and those interacting with Icelanders at work. One participant from Western Europe said when talking about her ability to connect to Icelanders:

> I wouldn't say [that] for me it was very difficult to get to know people. I think the more difficult part is to get into deeper friendships….I have a lot of people that I know, like, on the surface and that you say "hi" and "bye" and "how are you?" and stuff like that, but to go deeper, that's more difficult because you realize that most people here have known each other since childhood.

She and others offering similar perspectives were generally employed in jobs with other migrants. Often, the only Icelanders they encountered in their daily lives were their employers or people they met in other public places in the village. However, compared to East Europeans they were more frequently employed in jobs where they were in direct contact with tourists and Icelanders, such as being tour guides, and managers of shops or cafés.

Although describing a feeling of being privileged as migrants in Iceland, West European participants, including those from the Nordic countries, shared problems with other migrants, like having difficulties in improving their job situation, being stuck in so-called "migrant jobs," and not socializing with work colleagues outside of the workplace. Then some of them would point out that after all, they were migrants (*innflytjandi*) or foreigners. For example, one woman talking about her possibilities said: "I mean, like, I am a foreigner in this country I'm living, you know; in that sense, even though I'm trying to be an official part of it, still I am not, you know, born here." In speaking of "being born here" as a marker of who is and is not a foreigner, this participant directly addresses geographic determinism as a factor she views as important for demarcating "natives" from foreigners. Her expectation, shared with several other interviewees, both migrants and Icelanders, was that while cultural closeness like that shared with others from Nordic and North European countries bred greater acceptance and inclusion, there were still barriers to overcome.

5.2. The Familiarized Others

As already mentioned, people born in Poland are by far the largest group of immigrants in Iceland and they are the largest migrant group in each study location. They have been coming to Iceland since the beginning of the 1990s and are now the symbolic embodiment of foreign workers in Iceland. They have come to represent the "cultural other" in Icelandic discourse. This was reflected in informal conversations with Icelanders and other migrants in the study locations. Poles are commonly the point of reference when other migrant participants evaluate their status in Icelandic society. Participants from other European countries commonly talked about being in either a better or worse position in the labour market or society than Polish people. When a woman from a Nordic country, who described a positive reception in the town, was asked if people of other nationalities are viewed similarly in the village where lives, she said:

> I don't have any experience myself like that but for example, people from Poland maybe are not….My feeling is that Icelanders can be more, maybe, racist against them than a person from one of the Nordic countries….That's just my perception. And it's good for me, of course, because their attitude towards me, the locals, or Icelanders, in general, is often very positive.

Occasionally, the stereotypical image of Eastern European migrants was mobilized to rationalize an interviewee's own higher position. For instance, when discussing issues of inclusion/exclusion in the local community, one of our participants from Western Europe indicated that the "problem" with some not integrating should be attributed to migrants themselves. She said:

> If somebody, but it's also, it's not good to forbid it for people who want to become a part, like for me it was quite easy to come here, legally….But to be here, to get easy money and to have an easy-going life [exhales], that is something that is the problem today.

Here, this speaker recalled migrants who apparently wished to stay only for a short term to earn sufficient money to purchase a house or live a comfortable life upon return to their home country, content to draw more from the state and social system than they give back. While the speaker seemed to support the rights of people to move freely across borders, she reproduced the simplified image of temporary foreign workers as socially marginalized because they do not put sufficient effort into becoming part of the community. In contrast, as she elaborated later in the interview, she was quick to learn Icelandic and has been actively engaged in the local community. Such representations were typically made about Eastern Europeans or Poles, but never about migrants coming from Nordic or West European countries, who were more often portrayed as contributors to the social system and desiring to engage with Icelandic society.

Many of the more recent migrants from Poland worked alongside migrants from Western European countries in tourism, construction, or other service jobs. Being the group that had the longest presence in most of the locations of this study, the positions and the jobs participants from Poland held varied to some extent. Yet, they often struggled with the essentializing categorizations of Poles as low-skilled labourers, and many claimed that it was difficult for them to find jobs in their field of specialization. This was the case for a couple who moved to a small tourist town in Iceland with a high rate of workers from all over Europe. In this place, they felt excluded and discriminated against, saying that they had been primarily classified as low-skilled labourers. One of them said about their experience:

> We thought that we would be working [in our field of expertise], as was the case in Poland. But we faced a wall…because it appeared that being Polish here is being on [the] margin [of] society….Because wherever we went and whoever saw a Polish surname told us that they were not looking for a cleaner….We didn't expect—that we would fall to the very bottom of the social ladder.

This participant critically analyses the existing hierarchy in Iceland, highlighting that there is a limited range of positionalities available to migrants and that being Polish automatically places them on the lowest rung of the "social ladder." Economic exclusion, for this couple, was related to social exclusion and this eventually convinced them to move somewhere else in Iceland. Even though they only found employment in low-paid care work in the new town—so were still not employed in accordance with their education—it gave more opportunities for daily interactions with Icelanders. Consequently, they felt more valued at their job and accepted and visible in the village. Moreover, as they were now working in shift work, they could take on some projects related to their education. About the experience after moving to the latter village, one of them said: "Also, I like the small community like here…because you are no longer an anonymous Pole migrant who hardly speaks English. Here we are humans. And this, not being anonymous, broke the bar of being Polish." Working side by side with Icelanders, allowed her and her partner to break with the sense of anonymity and be perceived as individuals, rather than simply being reduced to being representatives of the country from which they come.

Many of those who had been for some time in Iceland had experienced isolation and exclusion after they first arrived and were working in the fish plants. Another Polish woman described her daily routine thusly: "Because there, in the fishing plant, if you sit locked up, it's just work, home, work, home." After getting jobs that they found more acceptable and where they had a chance to interact more with long-term residents, they felt more included in the local community. The woman whom we just quoted was hired later by her municipality, a step that she states has allowed her to start "getting to know more Icelanders." We also found people from

Poland who were in mid-management in establishments that only had migrant workers and some who had started businesses. In all five locations, we were repeatedly told by Icelandic inhabitants about one or two local "exemplary migrants," with whom we were encouraged to hold interviews. These "exemplary migrants" were all from Poland and had lived for several years in the area, had learned Icelandic, and were either active in social life or politics or were seen as having managed to get out of "migrant jobs." Often, they assumed the role of mediators between migrants and locals, with several having been employed by public institutions, like labour unions or municipalities, to assist migrants and/or inform them about their rights.

5.3. The Predicaments of the "Ultimate Other"

Most jobs in food processing in rural villages, such as in fish processing and slaughterhouses, are currently held by migrants who generally only work with other migrants except for the managers, who are more often of Icelandic background. People employed in these jobs come, for the most part, from East and Central Europe, primarily Poland, but recently also from Romania and Bulgaria. The participants from Romania and Bulgaria talked more often than other participants about being discriminated against based on their national background and being isolated from the rest of village life.

Icelanders in our study would sometimes begin by mentioning Romanian and Bulgarian fish plant workers when giving us information about migrants in their towns. However, they generally claimed that they knew little about them and often assumed their nationality was Polish. They also would point to them as an example of people who kept to themselves and were not interested in integrating into the community. This was, for instance, reflected in an interview with an Icelandic man who had been working with many migrants for almost two decades in fish processing. When comparing people from Romania to Poles at his workplace he said:

> The Romanians are so different from us. They take much longer to integrate and even do not integrate, only their children [do]. The Poles are just like us, the same fools as we are, just very similar people. The Romanians do not socialize, there are some families here and they just hang out with their relatives. They are very fine people, I do not want to talk negatively about them, but they are just so different from us….They have some incorrect conceptions of us as well; they think that we do not like them, whereas with the Poles we can joke around.

In this, we see that because Poles have been present for so long in Iceland, despite their stereotypical image as low-skilled workers, they have become the "familiar other." While some cultural proximity is recognized in the case of migrants from Poland, this is still elusive for other Eastern European migrants deemed to be more culturally distant. Such social boundaries can become emotionally draining.

One day, when the three of us were shopping in the local store, we ran into two women from Bulgaria, whom we had interviewed a few days earlier. They worked in a fish plant and claimed that they had very few social connections outside of their small national group and a few other co-workers. One of them wanted to leave Iceland but kept extending her stay as she was relatively content with the work and the wages in Iceland as compared to Bulgaria. Before we could say anything to her, she walked towards us and said calmly: "I hate it here." Her disappointment was mostly related to the impossibility of connecting with the longtime residents. Two of the people in this group also talked about having experienced discrimination in the housing market. They claimed that it had taken them a long time to find a flat and that they had not been trusted as renters

because of their nationality. One of them characterized his experiences of Icelanders as follows: "The first thing to see when you see an Icelander is that they have a cold face….They are more open towards Poles than us." This speaker perceives that Icelanders have an entrenched hierarchy of migrants and that Bulgarians rank below Poles. Awareness of such a ranking was found throughout the interviews with people who had come from Bulgaria and Romania.

Still, some Poles have or have had similar experiences as the Bulgarian woman quoted above, working in comparable circumstances in food production or other monotonous, low-income jobs and feeling isolated from the local community. Although they commonly have a larger community of other Poles to connect with than, for example, more recent migrants from Bulgaria or Romania, some wished to interact more with Icelandic residents in the village but found it difficult. In an account from a Polish mother living in Iceland with her Polish partner and two children, she pointed out that the native Icelanders in the village do not seem to be bothered "that there are too many Poles." In the fish plant where she works, almost all her co-workers also come from Poland. She described how, outside of work, her time is spent mostly with Polish friends and relatives. She claimed that her contact with Icelanders was very limited. When further explaining how Polish society is separate from the Icelandic population in the town, she worried about how this might affect her children as they also spent most of their time outside of school with Polish children. She said: "Well, the children don't see Icelanders, they are not familiar with them, and they are not accustomed to them. Maybe if Icelanders came to us more often, the children would be more used to them." Despite this, she describes a feeling of belonging in the village as this is now her home and she would not want to move away. Thus, she feels part of the place, and being part of the Polish community plays an important role here. We commonly found that having a community of Poles and a network of Poles in various positions in society seemed to break the sense of isolation, compensating for social marginalization.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Our results from field research in rural Iceland highlight existing hierarchies of differentiation regarding migrants' sense of belonging and access to local society. This is displayed in divergent processes of inclusion and exclusion of the various migrant groups to the local labour market and society. Many new jobs have been established in rural Iceland and, with depopulation, new migrant workers from various parts of Europe have taken these jobs. These rural towns and villages have experienced rapid diversification in population similar to many urban areas (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014; Rye & O'Reilly, 2021). A person's national background and position in the labour market are significant, but not the only, factors determining social inclusion in these places (Vertovec, 2023). Although participating in the labour market is an important way to get some access to the local society, it does not necessarily give access to social networks and community life.

The study demonstrates that the participants' employment status and possibilities often reflect prior social hierarchies and geopolitical imaginaries. Our analysis shows that dominant conceptions of groups as less "familiar" and less "foreign," entrenched in conceptions of Europe and cultural proximity, affect migrants' experiences and opportunities. As a rule, those entering Iceland from Western European countries considered "familiar" to Icelanders have an easier time making connections with Icelandic inhabitants in their communities. The Western European participant who seems to be aware of their privileged position as a migrant, and at the same time views "migrants" as other inhabitants in the village, expresses an awareness of

hierarchical relations. Rather than being classed as "other," migrants to rural Iceland from Western Europe, particularly the Nordic countries, are often incorporated into local communities through marriage, establishing businesses, and participation in community organizations. Even when hired in "migrant jobs" in tourism, they do not talk about being discriminated against based on their nationality and they believe they have more opportunities than people from Eastern Europe to move up in the labour market. They know that they are often talked about as one of the locals. As a result, they feel that they must explain to us that in some situations they are "immigrants after all."

In contrast, those coming from Eastern European countries are perceived as more "foreign" and feel themselves to remain more marginal to the local social networks. This social and economic stratification is reflected by migrants like the Polish participant who claimed that people assumed she was looking for a cleaning job when they saw her Polish name. Similarly, the narrative of the Bulgarian person who spoke about their difficulties finding housing and positioned the Poles as treated more favourably than they were indicates they are aware of a distinct social hierarchy in which Bulgarians are positioned near the bottom. Even though both speakers referenced here are active in the labour market, are raising families in their village, and desire to be included in social life, they remain excluded to an extent that migrants from Nordic and Western European countries are not.

Despite these general patterns, we observed that individual experiences can be more nuanced, as numerous factors come into play and positionalities can be ambiguous and changing. Some of the participants from Poland have, for example, expressed success in being incorporated into the local community. However, our observations and interviews also showed that even the Polish participants who are active in community events or politics are still likely to be categorized as "one of the migrants," although in some cases being seen as successful migrants by other inhabitants. The construction of an "exemplary migrant" position, recognized both by Icelanders and incomers, points to the emergence of yet another mechanism through which hierarchical relations are maintained in rural communities. The exemplary migrant continues to remain a migrant in the Icelander's view and has not become "one of us."

Migrants entering Iceland from different European areas recognize that there is an existing social hierarchy in their village or region and then hierarchically order their own and others' groups. Being aware of the hierarchy, some use it at times to justify differential access, as when the Western European speaker criticized Eastern Europeans in Iceland for desiring only "an easy-going life." Our Bulgarian participants also refer to it to explain their exclusion from social activities and common social goods, like housing. Our data, then, expand on Consterdine's (2023) findings that migrants' experiences of the labour market are affected by social hierarchies in that we examine other aspects of social belonging and inclusion. Information from interviews also demonstrates that the hierarchies are internalized by migrants, so are maintained not only by institutional forces (Andersson & Rye, 2023).

We show, as well, that geographical imagination (Harvey, 1973, 2005) is foundational to the hierarchical constructions entered by migrants to Iceland. The migrant status of an individual from a Nordic country is, at times, entirely erased in Icelanders' and the individual's own identity. When deemed necessary, however, both migrants and Icelanders recognize and speak of it. The erasure (Gal & Irvine, 2019) occurs because Icelanders espouse a belief in a close cultural and social bond with others from the Nordic region. In contrast, those from Eastern European countries are considered to be more "foreign," as has been found elsewhere in

Europe (Andersson & Rye, 2023; Krivonos, 2023). But migrants from Eastern Europe are not considered to be a homogeneous group, as differentiation and distinctions are drawn between the better known, "less foreign" Poles and people from the new origin locations, in Icelandic history that is, of Bulgaria and Romania, who are "more foreign." Greater degrees of foreignness operate to distinguish the social positioning of various groups of labour migrants. While different categories of immigrants and migrants correlate with geopolitical imaginings of their points of origin (i.e., refugees and asylum seekers come from unstable or unsafe locations) and encounter unequal positions in the social hierarchies of the states they enter (Anderson, 2013; McAreavey & Argent, 2018), members of the single category of labour migrant are subject to this same process of ordering. Thus, our findings suggest further attention to differentiation within single categories of migrants can shed light on ways such individuals acknowledge and respond to existing social hierarchies. The agency of migrants to accept and utilize or resist and contest social hierarchies, along with reasons why they pursue these activities is worthy of further investigation.

The Icelandic case demonstrates that heterogeneity and diversity exist within global rural areas just as in urban areas. Our analysis of data collected during 15 months of field research shows the importance of challenging the images of homogeneous rural communities, as well as the importance of digging deeper; to include different groups of labour migrants of different European nationalities in the analysis and illuminate the role of geographical imagination (Harvey, 2005). Doing so allows us to avoid a simple presentation of migrants' experiences in rural areas and examine the process of diversification and ongoing segmentation and stratification. At the same time, it sheds light onto the existing class- and ethnicity-based hierarchies experienced by migrants in rural communities that help explain why labour market participation is not necessarily the only key to inclusion.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Migrant Agricultural Workers' Experiences of Support in Three Migrant-Intensive Communities in Canada

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Abstract

Canada has intensified its reliance on temporary foreign workers, including migrant agricultural workers (MAWs) who have contributed to its agriculture sector, rural economies, and food security for decades. These workers live and work in rural communities across Canada for up to two years. Thousands of MAWs engage in recurring cyclical migration, often returning to the same rural communities in Canada for decades, while others are undocumented. Yet MAWs do not have access to the supports and services provided for immigrant newcomers and pathways for permanent residence. The exclusion of these workers from such entitlements, including labour mobility, reinforces their precarity, inhibits their sense of belonging, and reflects the stratification built into Canada's migration regime. This article draws on interviews with 98 MAWs in three migrant-intensive regions in southwestern Ontario to examine how workers construct and describe support in relation to co-workers, employers, residents, and community organizations. Drawing on conceptualizations of support as an important vehicle for social connection and inclusion that comprises social and citizenship belonging, we document how the strategies MAWs employ to forge connections are enabled or undermined by Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program, community dynamics, and the broader forces of racialization, gender, and exclusion. This article contributes to the limited scholarship on the support landscape for MAWs, whose experiences foreground the contested nature of belonging and inclusion among migrant populations across smaller cities and rural areas.

Keywords

belonging; Canada; migrant agricultural workers; Ontario; rural communities; support

1. Introduction

Migrant agricultural workers (MAWs) have long supported Canada's agricultural industry, their temporary status as non-citizens cemented through cyclical migration (Basok, 2002; Tucker, 2012; Weiler et al., 2017). MAWs in Canada are most often hired under one of three streams of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP): the longstanding Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), the low-wage stream, and the agricultural stream. Seasonal workers from the English-speaking Caribbean and Mexico are recruited through bilateral agreements under the SAWP to work for up to eight months per year. Under the agricultural and the low-wage streams of the TFWP, workers from Mexico, Jamaica, Honduras, Guatemala, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines can work up to two years in Canada.

Every year, thousands of MAWs, those in the SAWP program engaged in cyclical migration, return to the same rural communities in Canada for decades. While seasonal workers are entitled to certain benefits and labour protections, they are excluded from labour mobility, family reunification, and pathways for permanent residence (Faraday, 2012; Nakache, 2013, 2018). All MAWs experience exclusion from the social fabric of rural communities (Basok & George, 2021; Beckford, 2016; George & Borrelli, 2023; Hjalmarson, 2022) and are largely excluded from access to the services and supports enjoyed by rural residents, including immigrant newcomers (Basok & George, 2021; Caxaj & Cohen, 2021a; Caxaj et al., 2022; George & Borrelli, 2023). Efforts by local voluntary organizations and service providers to support workers are inhibited by poor coordination, minimal resources, piecemeal programming, and the employer-centred structure of the TFWP.

The result is a complex arrangement of inclusions and exclusions that renders MAWs both invisible and visible in the rural communities where they work and live (George & Borrelli, 2023). As a result, workers convey a sense of non-belonging, loneliness, and a limited sense of attachment to these rural communities (Basok & George, 2021; Caxaj & Diaz, 2018; Mayell, 2024).

Belonging is anchored in the different ways individuals and groups forge social and emotional attachments (May, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006), an intersectionally-situated process that may include and exclude them from social, cultural, economic, and political life (Esses et al., 2010; May, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The transnational and increasingly stratified nature of migration (Menke & Rumpel, 2022; Scheibelhofer, 2022) generates hierarchies of belonging that lead us to ask not only who, but also how and to what degree specific migrants are included. The relationship between formal belonging and its everyday character articulates with everyday boundaries, gender, and racialized norms to inhibit belonging, including access to resources and services (Mattes & Lang, 2021; Menke & Rumpel, 2022; Ottonelli & Torresi, 2019; Speed et al., 2021).

The stratification of (im)migration necessitates a complex and multi-layered approach to belonging that attends to inequalities, the dynamic of exclusions and inclusions, and the situatedness of migrant workers (Menke & Rumpel, 2022; Scheibelhofer, 2022; Speed et al., 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Support may form an important aspect of social inclusion, which may in turn create belonging. A sense of belonging not only shapes identity-making and well-being (May, 2013; Soto Saavedra et al., 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2006) but also how and whether MAWs access the benefits, relationships, and activities to which they are entitled (Caxaj & Diaz, 2018; Mattes & Lang, 2021; Menke & Rumpel, 2022; Soto Saavedra et al., 2023; Speed et al., 2021). MAWs require a range of supports to forge their inclusion and belonging; however,

the architecture of Canada's temporary migration schemes differentiates workers and their access to these entitlements.

This article examines how MAWs describe, understand, and construct support in rural communities to identify how rural communities can foster workers' sense of inclusion and belonging. In migration scholarship, support refers to different forms of help that arise from relationships with peers, family, friends, coworkers, staff at voluntary organizations and NGOs, and professionals, and that provides knowledge, self-worth, emotional and everyday assistance, and/or comfort to migrants (Baig & Chang, 2020; Hanley et al., 2018). By focusing on support, we explore how the differentiation of MAWs shapes their social inclusion in rural communities so that efforts to enhance their belonging are responsive to workers' needs. This person-centred focus (Basok & George, 2021) is important to provide direction for improving workers' inclusion given the paucity of systematic support for MAWs in rural locales where they work and live in Canada.

Drawing on interviews with 98 workers in three migrant-concentrated regions in southwestern Ontario, we examine how MAWs understand and construct "support" concerning co-workers, residents, and community organizations. We argue that support is an important component of belonging, of which certain needs are prerequisites, such as language translation, transportation, and healthcare services. We document how the strategies MAWs employ to create connections and navigate their social identities are enabled or undermined by specific community dynamics and the broader forces of racialization, gender, and exclusion. This article contributes to the limited scholarship on the support landscape for MAWs, whose experiences foreground the contested nature of belonging and inclusion among migrant populations in smaller cities and rural areas.

2. Migrant Belonging in Migrant-Intensive Rural Communities

Rural communities pose specific challenges to the facilitation of belonging for MAWs. The rural communities within which MAWs live and work are dominated by the "agri-food" sector. Within Canada, farming and agriculture have long been imagined (and regulated) as exceptional spaces that operate at or beyond the edges of legal systems (Weiler & Grez, 2022). As programs intended to provide agricultural employers with "reliable" labour (Reid-Musson, 2014), Canada's TFWPs exemplify exceptionalism through the provision of tied work permits for MAWs in the interests of *national* food security. The labour of these MAWs operates within *provincial* legislation that excludes agricultural workers from many employment standards in place in other sectors, such as minimum wage, overtime pay, and the capacity to unionize (Vosko & Spring, 2022; Weiler et al., 2017). MAWs in Canada live and work across the patchwork management of employer compliance by federal, provincial, and municipal administrations, an uncoordinated arrangement that exacerbates their exclusion.

In migrant-intensive regions, farms and greenhouses radiate from small towns that form "hubs" (Basok & George, 2021; Preibisch, 2004) where grocery stores, shops, banking, health care, municipal government, and social facilities are located. Canada's 70,365 MAWs (Statistics Canada, 2022, Table 32-10-0218-01) rely on advocacy organizations, grassroots organizations, churches, and community agencies to provide support for their social, language, legal, and health-related needs (Basok & George, 2021; Caxaj & Cohen, 2021a; George & Borrelli, 2023; Mayell, 2016). Yet, studies show that support in rural communities is ad hoc and limited; it is also uneven across the country (Basok & George, 2021; Caxaj & Cohen, 2021b; George & Borrelli, 2023).

Within rural communities, MAWs often work long hours and are geographically isolated from these hubs. Many are reliant upon their employers to provide transportation for basic needs. The physical geography of the regions facilitates or limits workers' ability to move autonomously to town centres or other spaces in which they can information and support themselves. The distance between MAWs and hubs shapes and circumscribes how, when, and under what conditions workers can access services, engage with residents, make friendships, and mingle with other workers.

Circular migration further complicates the possibility of developing and offering support. In Canada, concern for belonging and support among newcomers is overwhelmingly directed toward those who are settling permanently (George & Borrelli, 2023; Roberts, 2020; Sethi, 2013). Studies that identify supports and services that foster migrants' social inclusion are anchored in settlement (Nolas et al., 2020; Ottonelli & Torresi, 2019). Yet in rural communities, MAWs are a permanently temporary workforce (Preibisch, 2004). As a result, MAWs' sense of belonging as both identity and access to entitlements is often considered relevant only within their home countries.

These compounding systems of exclusion in rural communities assign MAWs the burden of asserting their rights in everyday ways (Perry, 2020), claiming their own spaces in communities (Reid-Musson, 2018), supporting themselves and forging fledgling social ties with coworkers and community residents (Basok & George, 2021; Horgan & Liinamaa, 2016) or wider social networks (Perry, 2020), or marrying Canadian residents (Horgan & Liinamaa, 2016).

To alleviate this burden by identifying improvements in the support landscape for MAWs in rural communities, we share workers' experiences of support in the context of the TFWP and cyclical migration. This study focuses on the experiences of MAWs in three migrant-intensive regions in southwestern Ontario that have elements of support for this population. To provide meaningful feedback to communities and as a way of thinking critically about the limits and possibilities of inclusion in these rural communities, we asked workers how they seek support to address their social, economic, and interpersonal needs. In the absence of a systematic apparatus of formal support and services, MAWs seek support in ways that are shaped by the TFWP, the character of rural communities, and how such places advance their inclusion.

3. Context of Research and Methodology

We draw on interviews from a community-based research partnership (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) that seeks to identify the inclusion of MAWs, with particular attention to the support and service landscape for workers in three migrant-intensive regions in southwestern Ontario: Essex County, Niagara, and Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant. These regions are similar in their high density of MAWs, with approximately 9,000 workers in Essex County, 3,000 in Niagara, and 6,000 in Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant. Each region operates under Ontario provincial laws, protections, and health services. Yet, they have distinct characteristics which reflect a range of crop production, farming practices, acreage, and ownership, from greenhouse vegetable and fruit production in Essex County to emerging greenhouse production alongside vineyards and tender fruit orchards in Niagara, to field vegetables and berries, orchards, nurseries, peanuts, sod, ginseng, and tobacco in Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant.

While they are all depicted as idyllic rural spaces, exemplified through their tourist and popular narratives (Basok & George, 2021; Lozanski & Baumgartner, 2022), each has distinct settlement, migration, and colonization histories. Outside of the hyper-touristic Niagara Falls, the Niagara region highlights its significant role in colonial history as the first capital of Upper Canada (now Ontario) from 1792–1796 and as an important battleground during the War of 1812 against the United States. This historical prominence is woven into its broader contemporary identity as a bourgeois gastro-tourism destination, in which "local" foods and wines are featured at upscale restaurants for discerning clientele (Lozanski & Baumgartner, 2022). By contrast, Essex County struggles to project a gentrified sensibility given an industrial past fueled by corporate tomato production in Leamington (Basok, 2002). Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant was purchased from the Six Nations by treaty and opened for general settlement in 1832; the area has always been focused on agricultural production and has very few local services (Mayell, 2024; Preibisch, 2004). Leamington forms a central hub for greenhouses in Essex County; Niagara farms radiate from several small towns, creating a series of smaller hubs, which are nested between the larger hubs (small cities) of Niagara Falls and St Catharines. Farms in Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant, the largest geographical region, have been historically serviced predominantly by one small town (Simcoe), although advances have been made to offer support in the town of Brantford. Workers' access to rural hubs was also distinct across (and sometimes within) regions. While the proximity of Essex County's greenhouses to Leamington and the relatively small farm sizes in Niagara might make it easier for MAWs to access rural hubs using bicycles, workers in Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant were generally more isolated and reliant on taxis and cars.

Interviews were undertaken between July 2022 and October 2022 and, following the principles of participatory research (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) were accompanied by consultations with regional community partners and outreach activities with MAWs from June 2023 to October 2023. In addition to interviews, our research team members attended various MAW events, including health fairs, annual festivals, and recreational activities alongside visits to bunkhouses and migrant-centered voluntary organizations. To capture a person-centred understanding of support, we employed a constructivist approach by conducting open-ended semi-structured interviews with MAWs (Basok & George, 2021; May, 2013). MAWs were recruited through existing networks. MAWs were asked to identify their needs, to indicate the support and services they used, to describe their experience of support in the community, to identify barriers they faced, and to make recommendations that would provide greater support for them.

Studies show that MAWs are reliant on, and gain most support from, grassroots, community-based organizations, churches, and agencies that rely on short-term funding and volunteer labour to provide support by, for example, organizing events, soccer games, hosting dinners, and providing language classes or legal support (Basok & George, 2021; Caxaj et al., 2020; George & Borrelli, 2023; Mayell, 2016). These organizations are often situated in small town hubs which also house shoe-string services for residents and MAWs (e.g., community healthcare and legal services). In rural communities, many local legal and healthcare service providers have limited knowledge of MAWs (Cohen & Caxaj, 2023; George & Borrelli, 2023).

We employed a narrative approach (Esin et al., 2014) to reflexive thematic analysis of interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to identify key actors, social relationships, omissions, tensions, and connections that workers described as they discussed support. Data was analyzed through a system of primary and secondary coding by two team members. We collated smaller codes and patterns into broader themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which were mapped during in-person research meetings. The team-based approach was valuable in providing varied

expertise to our analysis, as team members include nursing and social science researchers, individuals with different national backgrounds (e.g., Guatemalan, St. Lucian, Canadian), and experience across not-for-profit, public health, advocacy, and community-based initiatives alongside former MAW experience. The study was approved by the University of Windsor and Western University Research Ethics Boards.

3.1. Profile of Participants

We interviewed 98 MAWs across the three regions in Ontario: 45 from Niagara, 43 from Essex, and 10 from Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant (see also Table 1). Our participants represented various countries of origin, representing Mexico (most dominantly), but also, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. We included both MAWs in the SAWP as well as those from the agricultural stream of the TFWP. While men made up 77% of our sample, we were able to recruit a sizable group of women participants in Niagara and Essex.

Table 1. Participant MAWs by region, gender, country of origin, and status in Canada.

	Total	Gender		Country of Origin		Status	
Niagara	45	Male	32	Mexico	26	SAWP	44
		Female	13	Jamaica	15	PR	1
				Trinidad & Tobago	4		
Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant	10	Male	10	Mexico	8	SAWP	7
		Female	0	Jamaica	2	TFW	2
						Unknown	1
Essex Country	43	Male	33	Mexico	37	SAWP	24
		Female	10	St. Lucia	4	TFW	5
				Other	2	Tourist	3
						Undoc.	9
						Unknown	1

4. Findings

When asked to identify their needs and the forms of support they had accessed, workers describe how they sought help for legal and health-related information, language support/translation, emotional and social connections, and assistance for securing food, basic needs, and health-related care. In terms of sources of support, workers identified the people and places they encountered, including friends, coworkers, employers, residents, formal service providers, and local businesses. We have organized their accounts as workers described them, arising in specific locales within rural spaces and encounters in "hubs."

4.1. Coworkers and Employers

While some MAWs live independently from their worksites, most workers reside in congregate housing on or near farms and greenhouses (Basok et al., 2022). Given the difficulty of mobility in rural communities, MAWs often rely on co-workers and "friends" (often fellow workers, including those at different farms) who provide information, introduce workers to key service providers, and show co-workers how and where to access services such as grocery stores or health clinics. These relations of support, however, are mediated by social, racial, and nation-based hierarchies between workers, alongside conflicts created by congregate living and status hierarchies between co-workers.

Workers necessarily turn to employers to meet basic needs including access to grocery stores, banking, and health care. Employers are contractually responsible for providing this transportation for workers. This contractual obligation is double-edged: Although some workers identify employers as important—and supportive—mediators of access to health care, many workers are reluctant to draw on employers due to fear of repatriation should they be viewed as ill or troublesome (Orkin et al., 2014).

Due to the structure of TFWPs, workers often rely upon peers for assistance but do so within a programmatic context in which MAWs often feel they compete with one another. The precarious nature of their employment is exacerbated by workers' reliance upon employers to facilitate access (transportation) to health care, an entitled benefit but one that could put them at risk of repatriation or non-return if they are perceived as unhealthy or injured by their employer.

4.2. Community Connections

Participants describe varied experiences in the way they engage with community life in the three regions. In Leamington, Jennifer describes how days off can be spent with friends "from her country," "fishing, swimming, celebrating birthdays with the Mexicans and Jamaicans along with visits to Point Pelee." Yet in Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a longstanding impact on the possibility of such social gatherings. Andre explained: "We used to go to Caribbean night, but since the pandemic none of that happened again….So we stay on the farm and play pool, or you go and cook, and that's just about it."

Access to potential social spaces is unequal across the three regions due to the relative geographical isolation. While workers in Essex County are concentrated in and around greenhouses with relatively straightforward access to Leamington and other spaces, Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant's larger farms and distances limit the capacity for workers to seek interactions with other workers and residents. This participant describes how he has no capacity for social engagement because the only opportunity to move outside of the farm space happens every two weeks and there are too many tasks to be done to spend time socially:

> We have no social life. We come here and it's like we are in jail, they have you there and the only day you are happy is on the 15th day because they pay you and you send that to your family, you cover your expenses in Mexico and because you are out, you may come to town to eat a burger, and that's all we have access to and only every 15 days. (Mateas and Jose, HNB)

Even though the MAWs in Essex County have access to community spaces, they do not necessarily feel welcome in these spaces. According to Paolo (Essex), "they did tell us that Canadians feel that they can't enjoy their restaurants quietly because they are very quiet. And in the streets, they can no longer walk so calmly." Yet several restaurants and grocers provide a sense of inclusion to Spanish speakers, as store clerks try to speak Spanish, help direct workers, and carry Latinx specialty items.

While connections with local community members are important, workers' interactions with residents can be fraught and uncertain. Some workers identify racist interactions and feel a sense of exclusion that they attribute to racism. Andre describes his community: "Out of 100 (in Simcoe), 80% are racist….Being there so long, you just know how to live around them. But, it's racist." Andre elaborated that locals are "unfriendly," they

"walk fast past you, people, you know you are coming, and they try to like move out of the way…they try to distance themself from you." Other workers describe similar experiences, including people avoiding them or not responding to them or, more seriously, driving dangerously when workers travel by bicycle: "I don't know if it is out of disrespect, racism, or whatever" (Joe, Essex County).

Despite this sense of isolation, MAWs who have connections to individual community members feel strongly supported by these individuals who know how to effectively navigate systems in Canada and have the necessary resources, such as transportation, to help workers do so. Beyond facilitating access to organized support, "good neighbours" help build a sense of belonging for workers who are grateful that residents recognize the work they are doing:

> Just good neighbours. Sometimes we are in the field, and they would stop by and say, "hey, guys, you should take a break. Here are some bottles of water. Take them, have a drink. It's boiling hot out here." You have to give thanks for those people because they are looking out for us while we are working. (Willy, Niagara)

The geographical isolation of rural communities makes it difficult for MAWs to access community spaces, within which they can build connections with other workers and with residents. These relationships are an important means of sharing knowledge about supports and services available to workers. Connections with residents are especially important because residents often know of supports or how to identify and access them. In this way, access to community spaces—as both physical and interpersonal spaces—are critical to establishing MAWs' sense of belonging as both an identity and as a mechanism to access support.

4.3. Community Organizations

Our interviews show that most MAWs are unaware of the limited support and services that are available. In instances in which MAWs are aware of services, many have difficulty accessing services and are reluctant to do so given concerns that employers could be alerted. MAWs are hired on employer-specific work permits; they can be repatriated with no appeal process, and they must be named by their employer to return in subsequent seasons. Consequently, many MAWs see interactions with health and legal supports as risky. One worker, concerned about being sent to work in fields recently sprayed with chemicals, states that contacting the local legal clinic for support is not an option: "It's not that some of us can't contact someone else, but 95% of us don't want to contact someone else, because we are worrying about coming back next year" (Winston, Niagara).

Despite these considerations, there are community supports that workers identify as helpful including grassroots organizations such as The Hub, a free store and community space for workers in Niagara. In Leamington, the Migrant Worker Community Program provides translation, language training, and transportation, as well as leisure activities including cultural celebrations, dinners, and outings.

Churches were also noted as valuable sites of support for Spanish-speaking workers in Leamington and Caribbean workers in Niagara. Henrique described how Saint Michael's Church in Leamington offered translation services, English classes, and social gatherings:

> Yes, they make an effort to [make you] feel comfortable and it's like a family. Because you go and listen to mass and after that, they invite you to take their English classes. Not every eight days, but maybe every three weeks or every 15 days, there's a gathering on the first floor to have, I don't know, coffee, cookies or something, and there's a lot of information about abuse and all. So, they support [us] in that way.

In Niagara, Caribbean workers identified church outreach programming in one hub as creating spaces in which they interacted with locals. This church matches families to farms, which creates interpersonal yet structured connections for Caribbean workers. Delroy (Jamaica) describes how the pastor organizes Caribbean nights where they "keep service, sing, and them [share a] meal. They cook, we cook, we Jamaicans, we cook, cook rice and peas and jerk chicken and dessert. We have service there." In addition, this church organizes trips to Niagara Falls, bowling nights, dinners, and cricket games and has taken workers to health clinics. Churches however were not vested as sources of support for everyone as some workers found them to be unwelcoming, proselytizing, or offering services that were inconvenient.

For organized community support to effectively meet the needs of MAWs, the availability of these supports must first be communicated to workers. Key barriers for these services to overcome include limited transportation and the perceived and real concerns of workers that accessing health or legal services will put their employment status at risk, either immediately or in subsequent seasons. Those organizations that were able to effectively provide MAWs with support were those—often churches—that successfully overcame transportation barriers and provided services that fostered relationships but did not call into question workers' specific living and working conditions. That is, organizations that provided social spaces or basic supplies for MAWs did not encounter the same worker reluctance and were typically perceived as less risky (in terms of job status) versus those that provided health and legal supports.

4.4. Interpersonal Connections and Resilience: "They say 'take care,' but no one will take care of you, you have to take care of yourself"

Given the difficulties MAWs experience in accessing both informal and formal support, many describe how they address their own needs or find support in Canada by relying on family members in their home countries:

> It depends on what kind of loneliness you are experiencing, for instance, certain things, you don't want to discuss with your friends right here, I just call my wife or my kids, you know, and discuss certain things like that. (Marlin, Niagara)

Despite this support, many also emphasize the importance of self-reliance. Workers emphasize how their resilience provides an anchor that derives from their work, their life plans and expectations, and their role as supporters of family members at home. Taking care of yourself and family and friends at home is described as an ethic, a disposition often attributed to their national identity, their role as fathers or caregivers, and as an expectation inscribed in the TFWP. When asked who he supports, Eddy (Niagara) explains: "Just family members and friends. You take back rice, you take back oil. Whatever you take back, you can just share. Always giving to people." This sharing took place as further as possible throughout the community.

This emphasis on self-support and caretaking for one's family is mediated by the countervailing sense of dependence and captivity workers described. Workers describe the precarious and fraught character of their engagement and interactions with different community actors, including employers, that made them feel like "children, prisoners," or outsiders. This precarity was reinforced by many participants in all regions who felt devalued, essentialized as workers, and yet unrecognized for their contribution to local economies and food security (Perry, 2018; Weiler et al., 2017).

While many MAWs describe their own resilience, several workers discuss how their personal strategies emerged in response to limitations in the TFWP. To feel supported, workers seek straightforward, intelligible ways to access their pensions, complete taxes, ensure fair remuneration, understand their contracts, and minimize pressures and fears of repatriation. Efforts to coordinate these issues reveal the extent to which MAWs find little support from governmental representatives. Those workers participating in the SAWP specifically have designated representatives in Canada (Mexican consular officials and Caribbean liaison officers) to ensure the smooth functioning of the program. When workers were asked to identify sources of support, many Mexican workers in Essex identified the consulate in Leamington. However, when they tried to access support from the consulate, they were frustrated and found consular officers unhelpful. Jamaican workers in all regions argue that their liaison officers convey that their job is to placate employers, including the repatriation of "trouble-making" workers. Despite the programmatic supports built into the SAWP which help to distinguish it from the other streams of the TFWP, interactions with the designated support—consular representatives or liaison officers—reinforce workers' detachment within rural communities. For all MAWs, the inability to access the social provisions afforded to Canadians (such as employment insurance when in their home countries) and long-term uncertainty about whether they will be able to continue their employment in subsequent seasons undermines workers' sense of control. Andrew (Essex County) describes this experience of insecurity:

> You come to Canada, you don't know if you will return. You are in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Salvador, and you don't know if you are going to return to Canada. So, we are like [hanging by] a thread because we don't know what to do or what can happen. I think and feel it would be fair for the Canadian government to reimburse us, not totally, but possibly it could help us when we go back to Mexico unemployed, for the period that we are going to Mexico.

In Essex County, Guillermo articulates MAWs' frustrations regarding payroll deductions, pointing out that they contribute in terms of taxes and employment insurance but do not have access to all benefits:

> When we were coming to work here, they said: "You have the same rights as a Canadian." But that's not true because we are limited. There are so many limits, and we pay taxes as a Canadians, but we don't have the same benefits.

The exclusion of MAWs from state support such as employment insurance reflects their lack of belonging in Canada. This material social exclusion is exacerbated by the withholding of symbolic support. For Andre (Haldimond-Norfolk-Brant), belonging and social inclusion is about "recognition":

> I don't think there is anybody that you can talk to about employment insurance. We have been paying employment insurance for over 20 years. Which is not benefitting us, we have to pay it, but it is not a

> benefit to us….Employment insurance is work insurance and that's if you are not working, am I clear? If you are not working, then you can file and get some money, but that doesn't benefit us, see, if you're on the farm and don't work for three weeks, you don't get any pay and we don't know who to turn to and say we'd like some money. We don't know who to turn to, but every week, every week employment insurance is taken out of our pay.

Many MAWs rely primarily upon themselves and their family members abroad to navigate the difficult separation from home and the challenging living and working conditions that they face in Canada. In this context, however, these workers are aware of how this "self-support" reflects broader failures within the TFWP. Workers' lack of confidence in support from their designated government officials, the uncertainty of continuing participation in the program, the lack of access to Canadian social benefits, and the withholding of recognition result in their sense that they are the only reliable source of support.

5. Discussion

MAWs' accounts spoke to both the routine and everyday forms of exclusion, but also their hopes and yearnings for a more inclusionary experience in Canadian society. Key to this sense of belonging was a deep desire for recognition and valuing of their presence and contributions. Indicators of such a valuing could include both interpersonal acts of kindness and accommodation in a storefront or parish community, but equally (if not more so) were evident in their absence in various practical and programmatic ways. For instance, paying taxes without a meaningful and reliable way to access benefits, a lack of security in accessing health care services due to its potential to raise alarms with employers, or a lack of transportation to move freely, or inaccessible services sent a message to MAWs about their position in Canadian society. MAWs thus focused on their value as both workers and breadwinners to their families, while being aware of the deep vulnerability entrenched in their status as temporary workers that largely mitigated their sense of support and belonging.

By focusing on MAWs' experiences of support, we foreground how the temporariness associated with workers' cyclical migration shapes their understanding of, and ability to gain, support as well as how access (or lack thereof) to such support shapes their experiences and sense of belonging within rural communities. Support is an important aspect of belonging which illuminates workers' vulnerabilities because it foregrounds their reliance on help and assistance from others. In the absence of systematic formal supports, our participants create and find support through everyday interactions, despite limited social ties, the social and geographic segregation of migrant workers and residents, and the precarity structured by Canada's TFWP. MAWs make do in this liminal space where community-based supports and services are poorly resourced, ambivalent, and struggling to meet workers' daily health care and social and legal needs.

Despite regional distinctions, MAWs across all three regions share similar experiences of support and barriers to accessing support. Barriers are related to working and living conditions and resulting health and social challenges encountered in these environments. While some of these barriers are well documented, the navigational strategies and standpoints that migrant workers utilize to address these service gaps are less documented. Our findings indicate that MAWs rely on their identities as resilient providers (often within the narrative of a specific national identity) to tolerate a lack of support while also experiencing various dependencies (e.g., as temporary workers and on closed work permits) that keep them captive and marginal. Likewise, participants must assess services available both in terms of accessibility and in terms of the real

and perceived risk it poses should their access to such support be known to their employer. Such common reports speak to the need to explore safe and confidential pathways for legal and healthcare support for his population (Hennebry et al., 2016; Mayell & McLaughlin, 2016). The need for unmediated access to services and support for this population has been well documented (Caxaj & Cohen, 2023; Caxaj et al., 2020; George & Borrelli, 2023).

Previous studies show that MAWs have a very limited sense of belonging due to their status as non-citizens, their permanent temporariness, and the absence of connections and social ties with family, friends, and community who largely reside in their home countries (Basok & George, 2021; Caxaj & Diaz, 2018; Mayell, 2016). Our study suggests that non-belonging is further reinforced by geographical barriers, patchwork programming, and difficulties in sharing information with workers in the context of employer-centric programs. Despite the value of migrant farmworkers for rural communities, MAWs experience a distinct sense of not belonging. Within such spaces, workers make do with whatever supports they find, navigating connections that are thin and truncated, even though many workers have been returning to the same community for years.

6. Conclusion

It is difficult to provide support through sustainable services to enhance MAWs' belonging to these places without attending to the governance of the TFWP and the government's role in the resourcing and distribution of services. While MAWs were disproportionately and negatively impacted by Covid-19, the pandemic did increase public knowledge nationally and in these rural communities regarding workers' experiences and their essential role in our food security and agriculture industry. In response to pressure, the federal government launched a Temporary Worker Support Program in 2021 to increase services for MAWs across Canada (Government of Canada, 2022). Through this federal funding, these three regions have expanded their support and services for farmworkers in multiple ways, including providing additional legal support, language translation, English language training, community health clinics, and transportation services. Service providers have also been able to increase their outreach initiatives and enhance spaces in hubs where workers can meet each other and service providers.

Such investments have the potential to enable service providers to establish more widely accessible supports for MAWs, towards the goal of enhancing workers' belonging within Canada. Yet the provision of funding to expand programming by service providers does not address many of the key barriers to support identified by MAWs. These barriers include employer-centric governmental representatives, the risk of being repatriated or not called back in subsequent seasons, and the sense of racism within the communities in which they live and work. These limitations reveal the multi-pronged character of meaningful support. Support cannot be downloaded onto service providers through funding to enhance, for instance, outreach. Support must also come through greater oversight of employers' role as mitigators or gatekeepers in service provision and from investment in initiatives that strengthen the capacity of rural communities to meet the needs of this group, which contributes substantively to the region. Support must be embedded into the very structure of Canada's TFWP such that language learning, health care, legal aid, and tax and pension information and processing are integrated meaningfully into these programs, and migrant workers must have sufficient belonging that they can actualize these elements of social inclusion. Rural communities seeking to create belonging for MAWs must address issues that affect all residents, namely geographical isolation, and

those specific to MAWs, such as circular migration. However, until the architecture of the TFWP is changed, it is unlikely that migrant-intensive rural communities will be able to overcome the structural precarity of the TFWPs to enhance the social inclusion of MAWs.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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ARTICLE

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The Role of Leisure Practices and Local Identity in Migrants' Inclusion in Two Rural Norwegian Municipalities

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Abstract

This article discusses the role of local identity and local leisure practices in migrants' inclusion processes in two rural Norwegian localities. The discussed study was conducted in municipalities that had experienced increased international migration following the EU expansion in 2004 and had a long history of internal in-migration. In the study, individuals' social inclusion and belonging processes are treated as inseparable from a locality's dominant local narratives, practices, and norms—drawing on theories on inclusion/exclusion processes in places. Based on findings from semi-structured interviews with local natives, internal migrants, and international migrants, the study found that different leisure practices were central to local identity in the two localities, which had implications for what was expected of migrants in order for them to be accepted locally. These findings align with what is commonly conceived as outdated community study research findings. The findings indicate the continued relevance of the local for people's identification and migrants' inclusion processes and support a need for closer theoretical and methodological integration of internal and international migration research. Another central finding was that in one of the localities, national narratives about civic engagement were evoked by some majority Norwegians as additional arguments for the importance of migrants' involvement in local leisure activities. These interviewees' main concern appeared to be ensuring local—rather than national—cultural continuity and cohesion. Finally, the different inclusion grammars in the two localities illustrate that inclusion processes in one locality should not by default be seen as representative of what is transpiring in a nation-state.

Keywords

community studies; domestic migration; inclusion; international migration; local identity; national identity; place theories; social spatialisation

1. Introduction

In the decade following the EU's enlargement in 2004, international migration to rural areas in Europe increased (Rye, 2018), including in Norway, which is part of the European Economic Area. Increased international labour migration to rural areas, together with the presence of other international migrants, such as refugees and lifestyle migrants, has stimulated a steadily growing body of research (for more information on this subject see de Lima et al., 2022; Hedberg & do Carmo, 2012; Jentsch & Simard, 2009; Kordel et al., 2018; McAreavey, 2017; McAreavey & Argent, 2018; Rye & O'Reilly, 2020). Some central issues addressed in this research are the role of increased international migration for rural regeneration, policy issues, and the views and experiences of local development actors and migrants. Concerning international labour migrants' inclusion processes, more research has focused on their workplaces and position in the local labour market than on everyday encounters with longstanding residents in other local arenas (Stachowski, 2020; Stachowski & Rasmussen, 2021, p. 157). Moreover, in rural areas and beyond, there is a need for more attention to the role of local reception atmospheres for international migrants' incorporation processes (Glorius et al., 2021). In rural areas, the topic has mainly been addressed in research about local development actors. It has been found that these actors often welcome increased international labour migration, as it can be economically beneficial and reverse population decline (cf. Rye, 2018, p. 3). Less research has addressed the views and experiences of other longstanding locals on immigration locally and how such views may shape newcomers' inclusion trajectories (some exceptions include Kasimis & Papadopoulos, 2005; Moore, 2021).

In this article, I scrutinise the reception atmospheres of two Norwegian rural places that had experienced increased international in-migration in the decade preceding the research. The discussed findings are drawn from 112 interviews with natives, internal/domestic migrants, and international migrants conducted in 2013. The municipalities had a diverse international migrant population and a long history of internal in-migration. Within this context of past and present migrant mobility, the study aimed to investigate the processes by which new residents could become part of the local communities. In this study, social local inclusion processes are conceptualised as processes related to becoming part of local social informal networks and socially accepted in the localities. A central question that guided the research was: What are the criteria for being seen as a local insider in the locality? I sought to identify the "entrance tickets" (drawing on Eriksen, 2007) for becoming part of the local community, and whether the entrance ticket was attainable for migrants of different backgrounds.

The article's analysis draws on insights from two research traditions that are not usually applied in studies on international migrants' inclusion processes in rural localities. First, I put the findings into dialogue with theories of inclusion/exclusion processes in places. Second, the article draws on insights from community study research about social dynamics between internal migrants and native locals.

The research design and chosen theoretical approaches were motivated by an aim of avoiding methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002). I endeavoured to do this, first, by putting places at the heart of the interview guide and analysis. The intention was to understand inclusion/exclusion mechanisms for local residents in general and to inductively explore through open questions which categories of people were deemed "in place" and "out of place" (Cresswell, 1996), staying open to whether this was related to country background or not. Second, I sought to avoid methodological nationalism by including natives, and internal and international migrants in the sample. Whilst all these were broad

categories, the aim was to empirically disentangle the potential relevance of local and national origin for residents' experiences of the places in question and their perceptions of what was crucial for local acceptance. Third, the study aimed to avoid methodological nationalism by "trying on" knowledge from internal migration research that seemed highly relevant also for international migrants' inclusion processes—i.e., community study research on migrant-native relations. Whilst international migration has increased to rural areas, social dynamics between migrants and local natives in small (rural) places is not a new research topic but has been investigated in-depth in that research tradition (see, e.g., Crow et al., 2001). The absence of references to this research within international migration research more generally reflects a habitual separation between internal and international migration research, with little empirical and theoretical cross-fertilisation between the fields (cf. King & Skeldon, 2010; Nestorowicz & Anacka, 2015). This article aims to "bring in the old" from community studies in the quest to understand contemporary social post-migration processes in small rural places. As such many insights generated from community studies are valuable. Additionally, they can contribute to considering with fresh eyes international migrants' inclusion processes in such localities and not presuming that national and ethnic backgrounds are the sole defining characteristics in these boundary processes. A fourth potential contribution against methodological nationalism is the article's analysis of inclusion processes in two localities in Norway. As Fitzgerald (2012) underlines, multi-sited qualitative research can be a way of avoiding methodological nationalism even though there is a risk of sacrificing in-depth knowledge when including several cases. This article's findings show that within the same nation-state, several local inclusion grammars are possible, and indeed transpire.

In what follows, I first detail the study's theoretical framework. Following this, I describe the method and methodological approach before presenting the empirical findings. In the discussion, I summarise the article's key points and address the implications of the study.

2. Local Inclusion/Exclusion Processes

2.1. Inclusion and Exclusion in Places

In this study, places are conceived as a "combination of materiality, meaning, and practice" (Cresswell, 2009, p. 1). Places are not seen as static containers for social action (Berg et al., 2013). Rather, the study treats individuals' social inclusion and belonging processes in small places as inseparable from dominant local narratives, practices, and norms, informed by theories of inclusion and exclusion in places. Dominant place narratives such as local identity shape the social realities in the places we live in because the narratives shape people's actions and patterns of living (Bieger & Maruo-Schröder, 2016, p. 5). As Junnilainen (2020, p. 46) states, narratives about places "inform understandings of what kind of a place this is, what kind of people are living here and how people like 'us' live." Hence, norms are inherent in place narratives and the narratives produce norms about acceptable practices. Cresswell (1996) and Shields (1991) emphasise that what is deemed suitable in a place is shaped by the groups in power in the place. Shields (1991) uses the term social spatialisation to analyse the power of dominant spatial norms and perceptions that govern what should be done, when, and where. Social spatialisation coordinates people's perceptions to create a "common sense" where social tensions become interpreted in a certain way. Dominant place meanings and norms are usually contested to various degrees but can be a starting point for understanding which practices are welcomed or trigger negative reactions in a certain context at a given time. As Shields (1991, p. 263) states, while community identities "may not be consensual, they are normative and…have empirically

specifiable effects." Moreover, Cresswell (1996) has shown that by examining transgressions—i.e., actions and categories of people that are seen as out of place by groups in power—one can gain insights into dominant practices and dominant meanings about a place.

Importantly, analysing dominant local meanings does not negate awareness of a locality's interconnections to other scales. I follow Massey's (1997, p. 323) understanding that a place's uniqueness is conceived as the result of a particular "mix of current and historical social relations on different scales." However, in the discussion of the findings, I analytically separate the local and national levels. Previous migration research suggests that some practices can concurrently evoke reactions about what is inappropriate in a locality and a nation-state (e.g., Larsen, 2011), but research has also found that when immigrants are conceived as "others" this can be informed by local characteristics of a place and by local symbolic meanings about a place (Sohoni & Mendez Bickham, 2012). Moreover, research finds that certain aspects of national identity can be deemed as typical for a locality and region (Gullikstad & Kristensen, 2021, p. 51), whilst other research suggests that nationalism can be evoked by local conditions and does not necessarily play out in equal ways in all localities within a nation-state (Jones & Desforges, 2003). It is important to scrutinise the local level to understand the mechanisms involved in international migrants' inclusion processes.

2.2. Natives and In-Migrants in Community Studies

King and Skeldon (2010, p. 1636) highlight that both internal and international migrants potentially experience hostile environments. They are particularly referring to countries with large regional differences in terms of religion, ethnicity, and language. However, numerous community studies and gentrification research have shown that in countries with lower levels of regional diversity, tensions can also exist between longstanding and new residents—sometimes even if in-migrants come from the neighbouring village (Nadel, 1984).

Scepticism towards in-migrants can have symbolic or material causes, which can intersect (Crow & Allan, 1994). In this article, I analyse symbolic tensions, as migrants were seen as welcome contributions to local work life in the localities and did not otherwise appear to be perceived as material threats (Søholt et al., 2018). Community studies document local variations concerning the extent to which communities are open to new members. For example, studies find local differences in the emphasis placed on kinship and local ancestry as markers of local "insideness" (Crow et al., 2001). Regardless of the local reception atmosphere, a recurring topic in this community study research is that natives often want to maintain the local definition of power and "moral ownership" over the place and that in-migrants are expected to follow dominant local norms and "know their place" (e.g., Crow et al., 2001; Phillips, 1986). Many studies find that new residents must prove themselves through participating in highly valorised practices in the locality, at a level of involvement that aligns with local norms of "how things are done" and according to dominant views on migrants' position locally. In many of the studies, leisure practices appear decisive for being accepted locally (e.g., Crow et al., 2001; Phillips, 1986), which also emerged as a finding in the present study. The role of leisure practices for local acceptance aligns with a general tendency that people's leisure activities are perceived as signalling whether they are good citizens or not (Rojek, 2010).

Community studies have been heavily critiqued, for example, for traditionally treating local communities as closed social units and overlooking people's mobility (for an overview of common critiques see Crow, 2018). However, recent findings from other research traditions indicate that identification with local places remains

important for less mobile and more mobile individuals alike (e.g., Gieling et al., 2017; Gielis, 2009). Berg et al. (2016) point out that whilst small local communities are heterogeneous, one should not ignore that locals have *the place* in common, which may be especially relevant in small places. Moreover, Berg et al. (2016, p. 37, translation by the author) highlight that "when there are not so many 'to choose from,' one has to relate to those who are there."

3. Method and Methodology

3.1. The Cases

The two studied municipalities are in Western and Northern Norway and predefined in a larger research project (The Multiethnic Community: Inclusion or Exclusion of Immigrants?) about international migrants' inclusion and exclusion processes in three rural Norwegian municipalities that experienced increased immigration between 2002 and 2012. In 2012, international migrants (hereafter interchangeably referred to as "immigrants") comprised more than 10% of the registered local population in these municipalities, and the municipalities also had a substantial number of temporary international labour migrants. The origins and migration histories of international migrants in the localities were diverse. In both municipalities, there was a substantial number of Eastern European labour migrants. Both municipalities have settled refugees for several decades and have many family reunification migrants (to labour migrants and refugees, as well as marriage). In the Northern case, there were also many Scandinavian labour migrants and Russian-origin residents who had come through work permits or marriage. In the Western case, there were also a substantial number of Southeast Asian marriage migrants who were married to native locals.

In both municipalities, the population expanded from the turn of the 20th century onwards, as the establishment of local industries was followed by a high level of domestic in-migration. Internal in-migration has continued at high levels. After the 2004 EU expansion, a continued local need for labour was increasingly met by international migration.

The municipalities differed in their local labour markets and business structures, except for some shared industries such as local public administration, educational institutions, and service jobs. In the Western case, a high proportion of locals worked in the local shipyards and some smaller industries, while the industries in the Northern case were more diversified and included mining, trade, national public administration, health, tourism, farming, and fishing.

Both municipal centres had under 4,000 inhabitants, a number that is intentionally stated vaguely to preserve case anonymity. Whilst the Northern centre is a small town, the Western centre is a type of small rural place that in Norway is referred to as a *bygd*.

Both municipalities had a variety of local leisure organisations for children. They also had local leisure activities for adults but to a greater extent in the Northern case. The Western municipality borders on another municipality with a large town that has further leisure options, whilst the Northern municipality has a more peripheral localisation in Norway. Both municipal centres had a few small cafés, a library, sites for cultural events, and local gyms. The Northern case also has a large, modern swimming pool. There were a few hotels in the Northern case and one hotel in the Western case. The Northern case also had pubs that

were open in the evening. Both places had a relatively high level of social visibility. For example, when I rented an apartment for the research stay in the Northern municipality centre, I was later told that "everyone" would wonder who I was.

3.2. The Research Stays and Interviews

In the Western case, most of the interviewees lived in the municipal centre and a small place nearby a few minutes' drive away. I will refer to this joint area as Skipsviken. In the Northern case, most of the interviewees lived in the municipal centre, which I call Minetown, and within its closest vicinity, 5–10 minutes car drive away.

I stayed in Skipsviken for five weeks and in Minetown for four weeks. I conducted 58 semi-structured interviews in the Western case (8 natives, 14 internal migrants, and 36 international migrants), and 54 interviews in the Northern case (15 natives, 9 internal migrants, and 30 international migrants). International migrant interviewees had diverse backgrounds in terms of migration reasons and country backgrounds. Each of the three main interviewee categories had approximately the same number of men and women. Interviewees' ages were diverse, ranging from young adults in their early 20s to 86-year-olds. Most interviewees were between 25 and 60 years old. The interviewees were in different family life situations (single/partner/married and with or without children). Interviewees were recruited primarily by contacting people directly in various workplaces, with additional recruitment through a few initial local contacts and snowballing. When the article's analysis draws on international migrants' accounts, this is primarily based on interviews with white, European migrants. Most refugees I recruited—especially in the Northern case—had short residence times and these interviews were marked by not having a shared fluent language. Hence these interviews were less in-depth than the other ones. In the Western case, I also talked to some refugees from Europe, Asia, and Africa who had longer residency and these interviews have been used in the analysis. Their elaborated accounts about local "entrance tickets" and local identity followed the same pattern as in other interviews in the Western case.

As stated, a central overarching question that guided the research was: What are the "entrance tickets" for becoming part of the local community (informed by Eriksen, 2007), and is the entrance ticket attainable for migrants of different backgrounds? As both nationalism research (e.g., Eriksen, 2007) and community studies (Crow et al., 2001) show, some groups' entrance tickets emphasise participating in certain practices and adhering to certain values, whilst other groups' entrance tickets emphasise being part of certain human categories (for example, local, regional and national origin; ethnicity; phenotype). Therefore, it was not a given that newcomers' practices alone guaranteed local acceptance.

The interview guide was developed to learn about dominant local practices, norms, and narratives. The aim was to identify which practices and types of people were commonly deemed as "in place" and "out of place" (Cresswell, 1996), and the implications for migrants' inclusion processes.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Norwegian, except for a few interviews where we spoke English, depending on the interviewees' preference. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and two hours (depending on interviewees' availability) and were conducted in cafés, homes, and, mostly, at interviewees' workplaces in private meeting rooms. The interview guide was mainly used as a checklist. During the longer interviews, I aimed to cover all the main themes but to make the interviews as close to an everyday

conversation as possible. I brought up the guide's themes when I deemed it natural in the conversation. Sometimes interviewees raised the themes themselves and I followed up. In the shorter interviews, I took a more active role in structuring the conversations and focused on sub-topics in the interview guide which the interviewees seemed to have considerable information on and/or engagement with. As the data accumulated, I added a few questions about central emerging themes that I asked new interviewees about.

In addition to the interviews, I participated in local events and had informal conversations with locals during my stay, which I used as supplementary material. I do not detail this method as the ensuing analysis mainly relies on the interview data.

3.3. Analysis

The analysis of dominant place narratives, norms, and practices is based on interviews with all three interviewee categories, whilst the presentation about expectations of migrants is primarily based on natives' and internal migrants' views. The analysis combined abductive reasoning with grounded theory methods. Abductive reasoning entails moving back and forwards between theory and general knowledge and empirical findings (cf. Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The grounded theory methods I used were coding, memo writing, and scrutiny of contradictory cases (especially informed by Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978). The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and coded in NVivo. I defined some codes during transcription, and others while working in NVivo. The codes went through several cycles of reorganising and relabelling (Saldaña, 2009, p. 8), which enabled thematic narrowing and theoretical development. After coding, I wrote summaries of the most central codes (following Bazeley, 2013, pp. 228–229). During and after coding, I wrote theoretical and empirical memos that became early foundations for the developing article.

3.4. The Local as the Main Unit of Analysis

Whilst the main unit of analysis is the local level, the study was designed with the intention of allowing empirical openness about the relevance of both the national and local levels for international migrants' inclusion processes. In practice, this means, first, that the interview guide focused on the local level but also included open questions about migrants' inclusion processes which made it possible for interviewees to bring up the national scale if they deemed it relevant. This was also enabled by the conversational interview style. Second, the migrant sample included both internal and international migrants as a means of learning about the relevance of local, regional, and national boundaries for local inclusion processes. Of course, the international migrant sample was a highly diverse category. The strengths and weaknesses of this approach will not be discussed here for reasons of space limitation and focus. Third, the sensitising concepts, which shaped the research proposal, interview guide, and research attention, drew on theories and findings from studies on local identity and local inclusion/exclusion processes as well as national identity and inclusion/exclusion processes in nations. The aim was to scrutinise local inclusion processes whilst retaining an open mind and empirical curiosity towards if, when, and in what ways the national was relevant in international migrants' inclusion processes.

4. Empirical Findings

Analysis of local development actor interviews and local media outlets in other work packages in the larger research project found that longstanding locals expressed appreciation for international migrants' local contributions to work and civil society (Berg-Nordlie, 2018; Søholt et al., 2018). My findings from the interviews with locals in the general population point to local variations concerning *which kinds* of leisure practices seemed conducive to international migrants' acceptance. In Section 4.1, I go most in-depth into the inclusion logics of the Western case, which will be contrasted to central relevant findings from the Northern case in Section, 4.2 (for supplementary findings on the Northern case see Lynnebakke, 2021).

4.1. Skipsviken

4.1.1. Dominant Meanings About "the Local We"

In dominant local narratives about what characterised Skipsviken and its local inhabitants, civic engagement and contributing to the local community were central. Local written historical material echoed in interviewee accounts, presented Skipsviken today and historically as having many locals with a high level of engagement for the local community, displayed through practical efforts inside and outside of work. Here, interviewees especially emphasised organisational involvement as typical. The centrality of organisations was a theme that ran through interviewees' elaborate accounts on a range of topics. Moreover, internal migrants seemed to be an intrinsic part of the dominant narrative about local engagement and were portrayed as important contributors to developing the locality in the past and the present.

To gain knowledge about local identity, the interview guide included the question: "What is a typical local inhabitant like?" The purpose was to gain knowledge about dominant local representations, and not to search for an essentialised image of locals. A recurring description of a "typical local" was someone who was patriotic, active, outgoing, and friendly, who contributed to the local community—for example, through local organisations—and someone who enjoyed outdoor activities and sports. Some interviewees exemplified a typical local with certain immigrants and explained this by highlighting these residents' work contributions and strong participation in local organisations.

Views on entrance tickets to local acceptance partially overlapped with views on the typical inhabitant, namely work/working hard, Norwegian language knowledge, personal style (being open and somewhat outgoing), and contributing locally in their spare time. When I asked interviewees what was important for migrants' and other locals' acceptance, majority Norwegian interviewees often said that one should "show that you wanted to be part of the local community" and that it was important to "show your presence," which usually entailed being involved in local organisations. When I asked majority Norwegians what would make it difficult to be accepted locally, a recurring answer was "staying inside" and not taking the initiative, which interviewees again implicitly or explicitly connected to organisational involvement. For example, one longstanding resident—Linda—thought that a barrier to being part of the local community "could be if you don't seek out anything, if you want to keep to yourself," before immediately adding, "but if you are interested in clubs and organisations, it is easier because that is what the local community is built around." Volunteering was important for local acceptance. Here, interviewees particularly referred to the importance of participating in what in Norway is called *dugnad*. *Dugnads* involve a time-limited collective effort for the

common good. The practice has long historical roots and has been conducted in various settings—from former collective efforts in farming communities to contemporary efforts in leisure organisations and housing associations (Lorentzen & Dugstad, 2011). Whilst similar practices exist in many other countries, *dugnad* is important in Norwegian national identity and has strong normative connotations, to which I will return.

Several internal and international migrants had experienced organised activities and *dugnads* as important arenas for getting to know locals, and some said it was more difficult to become part of the local community if you didn't have children. Whilst several international migrants said they had experienced *dugnads* as sociable and enjoyable, they—like other international migrants—shared that they missed out on more informal local meeting points such as cafés and neighbours visiting each other.

4.1.2. The Social and Normative Roles of Children's Organised Leisure Activities

Adults' involvement in children's leisure organisations came up when interviewees talked about dominant place images, dominant local practices, local social cohesion, and in-migrants' local integration. The most common children's leisure activities were, as in many small Norwegian places, sports clubs and the local brass band. In Norway, running both types of activities typically depends on parental involvement by participating in for example fund-raising activities, *dugnads* at local tournaments, and transporting children to the activities (with parents often taking turns). Many majority Norwegians (both local natives and internal migrants) depicted children's organised leisure activities as crucial for local social cohesion. For example, Eirik said that locally, children's football, the brass band, and handball "tie us together." There were no similar statements about adult leisure organisations, although some described these as local meeting points. The emphasis on the social role of children's leisure activities fits into a broader picture where many interviewees—from all three interviewee categories—described the locality as centred around the nuclear family and its activities. This was also supported by views and experiences about who was considered to be more on the margins locally, such as elderly residents, couples with grown-up children, and single adults without children.

Some interviewees thought there had been a decline in other local social meeting points, such as volunteering for shared local facilities. The stronger prevalence of children's organised leisure activities in recent years has been a general trend in Norway (Nordbakke, 2019), as is the tendency for these activities to be common social meeting points for adults (Frønes, 1997; see also Stefansen et al., 2016)—a feature that has also been found in rural Norway (Stachowski, 2020). However, this trend does not necessarily mean that such activities signify local social cohesion in all Norwegian localities, as will be clear when I later present findings from the Northern case.

There seemed to be a general worry that there were not enough people involved in children's leisure activities and that their continued existence was vulnerable. For example, a few adults played in a local children's brass band to make up a full band. Moreover, interviewees pointed out that all parents had to contribute by volunteering so as to not negatively affect other parents' workload. In addition, involvement had strong normative aspects that related to views on what it meant to be a good local.

As stated in Section 2.1., dominant norms, narratives, and practices shape the ways certain actions are interpreted (Cresswell, 1996; Shields, 1991). When I asked majority Norwegians open questions about local

inclusion and what they thought their route to local acceptance was, participating in children's organised leisure or other organisations was sometimes the first issue that sprung to mind. Moreover, when I asked whether locals tended to view temporary international labour migrants as part of the local community, the unanimous answer among majority Norwegians was "no," which was explained by these migrants' non-participation in organisations and local events. An interviewee said with disapproval that temporary international labour migrants would play football only among themselves. Relatedly, a native local sports club representative commented that he would like to incorporate bocce in the local sports club because a group of longstanding settled immigrants occasionally played this sport in the town centre. His aspiration could have been motivated by a desire for local meeting places but also could be read as a local (and national) default of structuring leisure activities into organised forms.

Majority Norwegians differed in their views of immigrants' levels of local volunteerism; some thought it was high or satisfactory, whilst others were concerned that it was not high enough. For example, the native local Else shared her fears that increased immigration could be followed by a weakened sense of local responsibility:

> Else: If there will be too many of them [immigrants], I fear that our own will erode a bit.
>
> Interviewer: What do you think can erode?
>
> Else: Doing your share. The *dugnad*. Responsibility for the community.

I will not discuss the possible reasons for variations in majority Norwegians' views on immigrants' participation levels. What matters for the discussion is the way immigrants' participation was conceived, regardless of the actual participation levels. In some of the interviews with majority Norwegians, not only local social spatialisation but also national social spatialisation was evoked when they talked about immigrants' involvement in organisations and volunteering. A few of these interviewees expressed a sense of urgency about increasing immigrants' participation in certain volunteer practices, a concern that is also seen in some public discourse and policy documents in Norway (e.g., NOU 2011:14; see Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2011). Moreover, some statements echoed the role of volunteerism (*dugnad*) and civic engagement in Norwegian national identity (cf. Rugkåsa, 2010). For example, a teacher in the local upper secondary school said it was important that immigrant pupils in vocational educational tracks passed social science classes before going on to placements in local industries because: "We see that if our local communities are to function, we…need to teach [pupils] a bit about Norwegian *dugnad* culture [and] Norwegian work culture." In such statements, immigrants' spare time activities seemed to be interpreted as a reflection of their cultural integration in Norway and not as a matter of individual and family preference. This contrasted with how natives' and internal migrants' degree of participation was portrayed by majority Norwegians. For example, when interviewees talked about local majority Norwegians' (non-)participation in *dugnads*, this was framed solely about whether they took local responsibility or not, whilst no comments connected this to being a good national citizen.

To understand the normative connotations of such statements about immigrants' participation it is necessary to highlight common social meanings of organisations and volunteerism in Norway. As in other Nordic countries, there are a high number of voluntary organisations in Norway. Organisations have played an

important historical and contemporary role and led to widespread social practices of egalitarianism, which is an important value in Norway (Bendixsen et al., 2018). Associations are often regarded as arenas for learning democratic processes and for creating a sense of community in Norway (Hagelund & Loga, 2009). In national policy documents, maintaining a high level of organisational involvement is deemed important for sustaining a democratic society by promoting tolerance, trust, and social interaction between different groups of people (e.g., Arbeids- og Inkluderingsdepartementet, 2007; Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2011). From the 1980s onwards, sports association memberships increased in parallel with a decline in the memberships of political parties, unions, and labour organisations (Folkestad et al., 2015). Contributions to leisure organisations, as to many other local organisations, are often conceived as civic action that can benefit not only one's children but also other children, supporting the vitality of the local community as a whole (Carlsson & Haaland, 2006) and even promoting national cohesion (cf. Horst et al., 2020). The historical and contemporary centrality of organisational engagement in Norway can lead to these forms of civic action being highly valorised, whilst other forms of contributions to the common good more rarely lead to recognition of being a good citizen (Horst et al., 2020; Jdid, 2021).

Whilst the criteria for being seen as a good local appeared to apply to all locals, an immigrant origin seemed to filter some longstanding majority Norwegians' interpretation of immigrants' actions and practices. The narratives that contrast majority Norwegians' participation levels with immigrants' participation levels in local volunteering seemed readily available, reflecting the role of volunteerism in Norwegian national identity and the often-strong valorisation of civil society organisations in Norway. However, despite these interviewees' references to how leisure activities are "done" in Norway, they did not express a concern for national cohesion and national cultural continuity as such. Rather, their references to the "Norwegian way of doing things" appeared as additional arguments for sustaining valorised local practices. Their main concerns seemed to be about how to sustain local meeting places and practices that were experienced as vulnerable, thereby ensuring local cultural continuity and local cohesion.

4.2. Minetown

4.2.1. Local Narratives on Diversity and Mobility

Despite Minetown's long history of internal in-migration, this was—in contrast to Skipsviken—not part of dominant narratives on "the local we." One likely reason is centre–periphery tensions. Minetown is located far from the capital where national policy decisions are made. Historically, there has been North–South antagonism; and in the early stages of the municipality's population growth, many in-migrants from Southern Norway had local power roles. In the interviews, North–South antagonism seemed to prevail for some locals, though expressed in a playful, tongue-in-cheek manner (cf. Eidheim, 1993). When mobility and diversity were part of narratives about the place, references were made to the local Norwegian, Sámi and Kven populations, and the long history of cross-border mobility to and from Russia.

4.2.2. Wilderness Practices and Local Identity

As in Skipsviken, leisure practices were a central topic in the Minetown interviews when people talked about local identity and local "entrance tickets." However, compared to Skipsviken, interviewees expressed a different inclusion logic and emphasised different practices. Interviews with different categories of

Minetown locals pointed to wilderness leisure activities being common local practices and that they were central in dominant narratives about "the local we." Many interviewees described a "typical local" as someone who liked outdoor life (e.g., going to one's cottage, going hunting, berry-picking, or fishing). The number of cottages in the municipality is high, and many of these are owned by people who live in the same municipality. From early Friday afternoon throughout the weekend, there were notably fewer people in the town centre compared to weekdays. Most local natives expressed that they identified with local nature and wilderness activities. Wilderness enjoyment almost appeared to be a local norm. A local native, Stella, told me that she was not personally interested in wilderness activities (which seemed to be a matter of degree, as she enjoyed both kayaking and spending time in her cottage) and laughingly noted that when others shared long, detailed accounts of wilderness activities such as hunting, she would become quiet, trying not to reveal her boredom. Relatedly, some internal and international labour migrants had experienced that their acceptance by longstanding locals had been facilitated by sharing that they themselves enjoyed and participated in wilderness activities.

Although Minetown had many leisure organisations for adults and children, this was not depicted as part of local identity. By extension, migrants' participation in such activities did not evoke similar normative statements about being a good local as in Skipsviken. Moreover, there were no similar statements about the vulnerability of sustaining these activities. This could reflect the larger population in Minetown but seemed more to reflect that locals did not define themselves by these activities. By extension, local cultural continuity and local cohesion were not portrayed as threatened by whether newcomers participated or not in local organisations and volunteerism. As in Skipsviken, some interviewees thought there had been a decline in local informal meeting places in recent years but in Minetown such comments did not concern a decline in volunteer events for the whole local community. Instead, interviewees talked about a drop in spontaneous neighbour visits and that people spent more time online and watching TV. Some also said that today, nuclear families and close friends spent more time together in cottages and other wilderness activities than before, which one interviewee in his 60s explained by the fact that today, there were better roads and that families often had more than one car.

4.2.3. Migrant Inclusion and Dominant Local Practices and Norms

Some Minetown natives thought that new residents' local social integration could be a challenge because many longstanding locals spent a lot of their spare time in their cottages or with other wilderness activities with their closest social circles. Similar sentiments were expressed among local development actors interviewed by my colleague Susanne Søholt in another work package in the larger research project.

Other natives, however, thought that new residents could easily build their local networks by joining (outdoor) leisure organisations for adults. Such statements sounded more like recommendations for promoting migrants' well-being than marked by the sense of urgency some Skipsviken interviewees expressed about immigrants' civic engagement. This did, however, not mean that all statements about migrants' leisure practices were devoid of norms. A recurring statement was that new residents should make the most of their opportunities locally and not complain about a lack of options. A local native, Arne, expressed this view:

> Interviewer: How do you think one becomes part of this local community?

> Arne: There is a very good story about a Swede who came to work here as a builder. He came on a Tuesday. On Wednesday, he had gotten in touch with the local diving club; on Thursday he went diving with the club. Only your own interest decides whether you get accepted. I don't think anyone refuses you to join if you turn up and ask. If you don't want to have contact with locals, don't want to have anything to do with them, you won't have contact with them either.

Arne's statement points to a localised frame for how immigrants could act "in place" (cf. Cresswell, 1996). His seemingly indifferent statement about in-migrants' leisure practices was normative in a different way than in normative comments in Skipsviken. His statement suggested that if newcomers did not seek out hobbies, they could only blame themselves if they did not become socially integrated locally and indicated that Arne had a take-it-or-leave-it attitude about what the place had to offer. Implicitly, one should not bother with or complain about established locals, who were busy with their own lives and social circles.

The findings also suggested that the climate and dark season in the Northern case contributed to the different local reception atmospheres. Minetown interviewees sometimes talked about "frantic" outdoor activities during the lighter and warmer months and a more withdrawn lifestyle during the winter, which in both cases could entail little time to include newcomers. Again using statements by Arne, he thought a consequence of the local climate and dark season was the need to have hobbies, stating: "We don't live here because of the weather, and not because of the sunlight either, right? Because when we crawl out in November, it is pitch dark until February….That is when you should have hobbies." He noted that dark winters meant that spring through autumn could be exceptionally intense outdoor time periods, with berry picking, hunting, and fishing, as well as maintenance of gardens and houses. He said that it was smart for migrants to join leisure organisations, as settled locals were absorbed in their own hectic seasonal activities.

Whilst narratives in Skipsviken about immigrants' organisational involvement sometimes drew on national meanings about such activities, this was not the case in Minetown interviews concerning wilderness activities. This is despite that nature and closeness to nature is an important part of Norwegian national identity (e.g., Gullestad, 1992) and outdoor leisure is a national policy area. Instead, interviewees' descriptions of wilderness activities as typical for the municipality were sometimes contrasted with the capital, again pointing to centre–periphery tensions playing into local and regional identity. There were no statements among majority Norwegians that immigrants should be active in outdoor leisure activities for the sake of their integration in Norway. Moreover, international migrants who had experienced wilderness appreciation as a route to local acceptance explained this through local, and not national, practices and place meanings.

5. Discussion

The findings show how social spatialisation informs locals' views on how migrants should best adjust in order to be locally accepted. Dominant narratives about localities and nation-states are symbolic resources that can be picked up by individuals in given situations (cf. Gullestad, 2002). The aim has not been to give an essentialised picture of Minetown and Skipsviken and their locals, but to demonstrate how individual stances drew on a shared repertoire of dominant local—and sometimes national—meanings which shaped the ways migrants' practices were interpreted and valorised.

In the findings, the centrality of local identity for inclusion processes shows the continued relevance of place-based communities also in a time of high mobility and interconnectedness. Interviews with a wide variety of locals suggested that all residents could face similar normative expectations to be involved in certain leisure practices. Additionally, the findings from Minetown show how a locality's social and geographical position within a nation-state can influence local norms about what is expected of internal and international migrants.

It is important to avoid making presumptions prior to research as well as concluding prematurely during the analysis that findings from one local context are representative of what transpires within a nation-state (cf. Fitzgerald, 2012, p. 1737). The findings show that there can be distinct inclusion/exclusion dynamics in different localities within the same nation-state and they support the importance of research designs that make it possible to disentangle and remain empirically open to the relevance of both national and local influences for international migrants' inclusion processes.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that even though certain national narratives about expectations of immigrants are available, the use of these narratives can depend on their relevance in the local context. The findings suggest that whether national narratives about what characterises a good national citizen are used locally depends on whether they concur with dominant local narratives about what characterises a good local citizen. In Skipsviken, expectations of immigrants' participation in organisations sometimes drew on national narratives about the importance of organisational involvement for immigrants' integration as nationals. However, this appeared as additional arguments for maintaining local social cohesion rather than expressing concern for national social cohesion and immigrants' integration in Norway as such. Some nationalism researchers depict national identification as something that pervades everything, including people's self-identification, everyday consciousness, and material surroundings (e.g., Billig, 1995; Kapferer, 1988). By contrast, the findings suggest that interviewees first and foremost identified as locals, were concerned about local cultural continuity, and did not appear primarily concerned about national cultural continuity.

The findings also point to the contemporary relevance of what are commonly regarded as outdated community studies. The findings echo studies from decades ago about different local inclusion logics in different local communities and the relevance of leisure practices for new residents' acceptance. Hence, there is no need for analysis of international migrants' local reception atmospheres in small rural places to start "from scratch" and to solely build on international migration research and theory from urban settings. The processes can also be discussed in the light of valuable insights garnered through internal migration research. Drawing on this research tradition about migrant-native relations can also contribute to understanding when norms and practices at different scales become relevant in migrants' inclusion processes and how such meanings may interact. By extension, the findings support that it is beneficial with a closer methodological and theoretical integration of research on international and internal migration. Both research fields have garnered insights that can increase and nuance understandings in the other research tradition.

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Becoming Active Agents Through Practices of Volunteering: Immigrants' Experiences in Rural Germany

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Abstract

Volunteering is an important way to include immigrants at a local scale, especially in small towns and municipalities with limited arrival infrastructure. With the recent increase in immigrants, including in rural areas, volunteering practices for this target group have been much discussed, albeit with an emphasis on immigrants as vulnerable beneficiaries. There are few studies that focus on immigrants' volunteering practices, or their function for the individual and receiving community, while empirical evidence for rural areas is explicitly lacking. In this article, we address immigrants as active agents with recourse to the concept of agency and unravel, firstly, the meanings they attribute to volunteering and reasons for their mobilisation; secondly, their access to volunteering in the German countryside; and thirdly their reflecting, practising, and sharing of agency through volunteering with an impact on themselves and their rural communities. Drawing on a qualitative, biographical-narrative study of 72 immigrants in rural Germany, we show how cultures of volunteering—or how it is practised in different contexts—inform immigrants' current activities, ranging from leisure practices to neighbourly help and supporting the inclusion of new arrivals. We illustrate the importance of opportunity structures and social networks for accessing volunteering and reveal individual and altruistic reasons for doing it, such as facilitating language acquisition and enhancing one's participation, showing solidarity with immigrants, or gratitude towards the receiving society, often coinciding with expected outcomes. Volunteering allows immigrants to "perform agency" and fosters both belonging and responsibility taking for the dwelling place.

Keywords

civic engagement; cultures of volunteering; Germany; migration; rural areas; solidarity

1. Introduction

Upon arrival at a new place of residence abroad, immigrants in general and refugees in particular, often receive support from various actors, including administrative professionals, third-sector organisations, and volunteers, who provide assistance with local orientation and negotiating administrative processes. Later, they are key in the acquisition of private housing or employment. Especially in rural areas and small towns that have limited arrival infrastructure (Meeus, 2017), such as counselling or education offers, the engagement of civic volunteers is considered an important way to help immigrants feel included on a local scale. For a long time, however, neither politicians nor the receiving society saw immigrants themselves as potential volunteers. Instead, they were and often still are understood in terms either of their "[performance] in the labour market or in the education system" (Schammann, 2017, p. 741), or else considered as "users" and "receivers of services" (Ambrosini & Artero, 2023). The latter is particularly true for refugees, who may face paternalism and be characterised as passive and vulnerable (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Nyers, 2006). In contrast, though, understanding volunteering as an important route to the social inclusion of immigrants has recently become a part of integration policy-making, as shown by Stein and Fedreheim (2022) in the case of Norway.

So far, few studies have focused on immigrants' perspectives on volunteering. This is particularly true concerning the functions of volunteering for individuals and their receiving communities. To date, investigations have often been conducted in cities (Gele & Harsløf, 2012; Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Hans, 2023; Yin Yap et al., 2011) using quantitative surveys (Ambrosini & Artero, 2023; Greenspan et al., 2018) or by picking out specific areas of engagement or groups of immigrants. There is currently very little empirical evidence on immigrants' volunteering practices in rural areas and, with a few exceptions, holistic, qualitative studies are explicitly lacking. The exceptions are Schwingel et al. (2016), who focused on the volunteering of a specific group of Latina women in non-metropolitan Illinois, US; Tandberg and Loga (2023), who analysed a specific volunteering project of female immigrants in rural Norway; and Wood et al. (2019), who explored the impact of volunteering on health and wellbeing of refugees in regional Australia.

In contrast to the aforementioned perspective, which understands immigrants as people in need, this article aims to address them as active agents in interaction with the rural societies where they live, using the concept of agency suggested by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and taking into account a biographical-narrative and relational approach. Based on this, we discuss different aspects of immigrants' volunteering, including civic engagement and unpaid work in the context of rural Germany, where more inhabitants volunteer compared to urban centres (Kleiner & Kühn, 2023) and where a variety of immigration processes have taken place in the last couple of years (Kordel & Weidinger, 2018). The article focuses on how cultures of volunteering (that is, the way volunteering is practised in different socio-spatial contexts) inform immigrants' current volunteering practices. Drawing on existing knowledge of the impacts of volunteering on the individual, such as greater satisfaction and trust in others, wider social networks, and possession of greater social capital (Wood et al., 2019), we intend to show how immigrants use their agency to volunteer and how volunteering in turn results in agency. In this way, values such as gratitude, solidarity, and responsibility come into play, to help us better understand the motivations for, and impact of, volunteering not just on individual belonging but also on rural communities.

The study tackled three research questions: What meanings do immigrants attribute to volunteering and why do they want to engage in it? How do they gain access to volunteering in the rural places where they live? What sort of voluntary practices can be identified, and how do they affect both immigrants themselves and their rural communities?

The article proceeds as follows: In Section 2, we discuss the recent literature on immigrant volunteering, elaborating on reasons to volunteer from a biographical perspective, on immigrants' actual practices of volunteering, and its impact. Then, in Section 3, we present conceptual presuppositions and an overview of the methods used and describe the interview sample used in our empirical research. Afterwards, in Section 4, we present our results focusing on the meanings and mobilisation of volunteering, access to volunteering, and performance of agency through volunteering. This section closes with a reflection on the implications of volunteering for immigrants themselves as well as their receiving communities. We conclude, in Section 5, with a discussion of the immigrants' feelings of belonging and taking responsibility for their place of residence and provide an outlook on volunteering and rural citizenship.

2. Recent Literature on Immigrant Volunteering

2.1. Reasons to Volunteer From a Biographical Perspective

Motivations for volunteering are diverse and overlapping and change over the life course. Experience of volunteering stems from one's socialisation, including role models in the family or cultures of volunteering at home. Especially concerning immigrants, Stein (2023) states that previous experience of volunteering in their country of origin shapes the way immigrants construct and take part in volunteering in their new place of residence. A wide-ranging understanding of what is meant by volunteering also considers what kind of practices are involved—such as helping family or neighbours, being a paying member of, or taking formal positions in, associations (Schwingel et al., 2016; Stein, 2023)—as well as those that are not. Thus, the motivation to volunteer often stems from one's biography, while humanist or religious values are often positive for volunteering (Kahraman & Songur, 2018). Discussing Syrian refugees in their countries of origin, for instance, Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Freiwilligenagenturen (2018) identifies practices in the realms of sport, youth, religion, or helping refugees in Jordan, while Ragab and Antara (2018) highlight previous political engagement, such as protesting or demonstrating against the governing regimes, for individuals who fled Afghanistan or Syria.

In providing an overview of motivation, we draw on Schührer (2018), who developed a list based on a qualitative study of female immigrants in Germany. Her list includes (a) volunteering for self-fulfilment, such as a change from everyday life or personal fulfilment; (b) volunteering as a form of acknowledgement, to show appreciation or acknowledge success; (c) volunteering as compensation, in the form of pragmatic assistance for community members or as a substitute for absent family or employment; (d) volunteering as a means to develop competencies; (e) altruistic volunteering; and (f) migration-specific volunteering. Migration-specific motives can be further broken down into those that are preserving, such as sharing one's own culture, and those that are self-integrating such as language acquisition, network building, and efforts to belong (Schührer, 2018). Regarding preserving motives, Kahraman and Songur (2018) stress the reciprocity of such practices, that is, increasing the visibility of one's culture while simultaneously entering into a dialogue with the receiving society. In doing so, ethnic-cultural capital gains importance, and

volunteering creates common spaces of action (Linnert & Berg, 2016). Concerning the latter (self-integration), volunteering helps to better structure everyday life in the new place of residence and is considered a meaningful activity (Linnert & Berg, 2016). In a quantitative study of immigrants in Italy, Ambrosini and Artero (2023) point to utilitarianism as part of motivation, since immigrants aim to enhance their employment opportunities or showcase their skills. In a similar vein, Cattacin and Domenig (2013) identify instrumental motivation among immigrants in Switzerland, including volunteering as a means to obtain material advantages or improve their legal situation. In addition to this, especially young immigrants are inclined to volunteer to counteract exclusion and the perception of discrimination (Flarer et al., 2020). Recent literature also highlights the role of gratitude and "informal reciprocity" (Phillimore et al., 2018), that is, giving something back to the community in general, or to a new immigrant in particular, having themselves received support upon arrival (see Schwingel et al., 2016). Recently, regarding the latter, Hans (2023) also points to the concept of solidarity when analysing the volunteering of established immigrants (and their descendants) on behalf of newcomers from various backgrounds in German urban arrival neighbourhoods. Participants referred to their similar situations and the difficulties that fostered connections based on collective migration histories, everyday experiences, and practices, which led to the creation of "infrastructures of solidarity" (Meeus, 2017).

2.2. Accessing and Practising Volunteering

From a biographical perspective, immigrants tend to practise civic engagement less in the first months or years after arrival, since their activities focus on language acquisition and employment (Gele & Harsløf, 2012; Sachverständigenrat für Integration und Migration, 2020; Tandberg & Loga, 2023). The continuity and commitment often required for civic engagement are frequently not part of the life situation of refugees, which is characterised by general stress (Han-Broich, 2019) and volatile housing biographies (Weidinger & Kordel, 2023). In addition, willingness to volunteer is overridden by concerns about their legal residence status (Han-Broich, 2019; Ragab & Antara, 2018). Frequent reallocations and relocations and a lack of language skills, as well as unpredictability and a lack of continuity in their interactions with other, obligatory activities, such as language courses or employment, reduce opportunities to volunteer. Furthermore, immigrants are often perceived as passive actors who are not expected to engage. As Tietje (2021) has shown in a discussion of refugees in Germany, relationships of dependency and powerlessness can become entrenched: Fear and insecurity, often rooted in limited language skills, are major barriers to interaction in general and volunteering in particular (Han-Broich, 2019; Khvorostianov & Remmennick, 2017). Weak social networks can also result in reduced civic engagement as one may not be asked to volunteer (Ambrosini & Artero, 2023; Tandberg & Loga, 2023; Uslucan, 2015). Finally, a lack of information about opportunities in general, and about clubs and associations where they live in particular, prevents immigrants from volunteering (Gele & Harsløf, 2012). Transnational experiences, like growing up in authoritarian states where participation is unwanted, also inhibit engagement, especially at the beginning of a stay in a host country (Han-Broich, 2019). Later on, as Tandberg and Loga (2023) report, biographical contexts continue to play a role, since full-time workers or commuters may lack time to volunteer, for instance, while health conditions may prevent older people from participating (see also Wollebaek et al., 2015).

In the German Survey on Volunteering, people are regularly asked about their willingness to volunteer. Among individuals from a migration background, like people born abroad or whose parents were born abroad, the aspiration to volunteer is higher than among natives (13.6% compared to 10.8%). However, the

proportion of individuals who can translate their willingness into action is comparatively lower among this group, a pattern that persists over time (Simonson et al., 2022). Similarly, the "integration barometer" of the German Expert Council on Integration and Migration shows that about one-quarter of immigrant respondents (26.8% compared to 55.5% among natives) are members of an association, while one in five is informally engaged (19.6% compared to 39.6%; Sachverständigenrat für Integration und Migration, 2020). In general, demographic characteristics point towards young adults and middle-aged immigrants (Khvorostianov & Remmennick, 2017), while individuals with high levels of education and financial resources predominate (Ambrosini & Artero, 2023; Han-Broich, 2019).

Preconditions for volunteering are, first and foremost, opportunity-driven, which can be limited by the absence of meeting places or prejudice, lack of interest, and negative attitudes towards immigrants (Tandberg & Loga, 2023; Wernesjö, 2015). One rural peculiarity that prevents encounters and inhibits volunteering stems from mobility constraints, for example, due to high costs or long travelling times (Mehl et al., 2023). In terms of the evolution of migrant-led organisations, Gluns et al. (2021) confirm low population density as a further obstacle. Besides, existing organisations and associations may be characterised by static, hierarchical structures and conservative attitudes among officials and thus fail to reflect a diverse society. Despite their relevance in rural societies, organisations and associations often do not anticipate immigration, according to Ohliger and Veyhl (2019), which can result in a lack of openness, for example as a result of stereotyping (Ragab & Antara, 2018) or non-acceptance of women wearing headscarves (Munsch & Kewes, 2019). Thus, constellations of local communities affect access to voluntary participation (Tandberg & Loga, 2023) and structural preconditions that facilitate civic engagement vary according to organisation and place of residence. In places where voluntary work is very formalised and follows a membership model, such as in associations in Germany, or in Nordic countries (Henriksen et al., 2019), there are greater obstacles to volunteering, due to things like the cost of membership.

2.3. Impact of Volunteering on Immigrants and Communities

Civic engagement can initiate reflection on one's own acquired strengths and weaknesses, while the deployment and transmission of knowledge and competences can strengthen awareness of one's human and social capital and increase agency (Flarer et al., 2020; Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Sveen et al., 2023; Yin Yap et al., 2011). Based on the engagement of refugees from African countries, the study of Wood et al. (2019) showed that volunteering promotes the establishment of new social contacts, has a positive effect on physical and mental health, and supports a sense of belonging. The identity-forming function of engagement has also been highlighted in a study by Müller et al. (2014), which pointed out that volunteering has positive effects on life satisfaction and self-image. This is particularly important for immigrants who are in an ongoing trans-local negotiation process and can be affected by feelings of loneliness (Flarer et al., 2020). Apart from an impact on well-being and social networks, volunteering can also enhance immigrants' access to employment (Röder, 2020).

Finally, for Germany, Uslucan (2015) considers the engagement of immigrants as unrecognised potential for social participation and emphasises its democracy-building and democracy-promoting function. More recently, immigrants' voluntary activities have been considered important by Norwegian politics (Stein & Fedreheim, 2022) and are, finally, seen as a prerequisite for (Yin Yap et al., 2011), or a form of, active citizenship (Ambrosini & Artero, 2023). In terms of the latter, volunteering results in a more positive attitude,

increased trust, and better social inclusion in the local community (Tandberg & Loga, 2023). Sveen et al. (2023) contend that it also helps develop meaningfulness, belonging, and capacity-building in the new community. Apart from the above-mentioned creation of "arrival infrastructures" or "infrastructures of solidarity" (Meeus, 2017), the impact of immigrants' volunteering on communities remains uninvestigated.

2.4. Conceptual Presuppositions for Data Analysis

In order to discuss immigrants' volunteering practices as a means of becoming active agents in rural societies, we deployed a subject-centred perspective, recognising immigrants as experts in their own life-worlds. The aim was to understand from an emic perspective what meanings individuals ascribe to certain situations, events, or places concerning volunteering. Such social constructions of reality are determined by individuals' selective experiences and interpretations of reality. As guiding concepts, we rely explicitly on a relational perspective and agency.

A relational perspective helps to incorporate spatial and temporal dynamics. It is helpful, firstly, to know how civic engagement is practised in the previous countries of residence. This is often related to the negotiation of roles between the state and civil society. While in some countries—such as Japan—the government has not seen the need for civic engagement for a long time, or else—as in the former Soviet Union—abused it for political purposes, in others, civic engagement is considered an important pillar of local provision or livelihood, as in various African States or Cuba (Anheier & Salamon, 1999). In Germany, civic engagement traditionally complements public services (Anheier & Salamon, 1999), and is simultaneously a manifestation of a democratic society. But it is also vital to incorporate a local as well as transnational perspective into the discussion. Based on the assumption that configurations of individual engagement are strongly determined by local conditions and structures, a deeper understanding is necessary (for example of locally specific challenges for immigrant volunteering and the attitudes and actions of local stakeholders). Finally, by means of addressing immigrants' biographies and taking a retrospective viewpoint, we consider a temporal relational perspective.

Individuals' embeddedness in social constellations and local structures results in specific enablers and limitations of agency, which is used here as a second conceptual realm (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Agency is defined as:

> The temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970)

The accumulation of agency over time and in particular places is determined by, for instance, language acquisition and the appropriation of local knowledge, but can also be constrained in the face of certain experiences of exclusion. The question of (re)acquiring agency requires an analytical approach that understands immigrants as active actors who are able to (co)create their own living environment. During the presentation of empirical data, we intend to capture the characteristics of agency in three dimensions as operationalized by Spenger and Kordel (2023) especially, taking into consideration immigrant experiences of (a) becoming aware of one's agency and reflecting on it, (b) implementing and realising agency in practices of volunteering, and (c) passing on to other people local knowledge and the local shaping of practices.

3. Setting the Scene

Empirical data were gathered in four rural districts in four German federal states for two reasons. First, we wanted to cover a variety of composition of migrant groups in German rural areas: While (seasonal) labour migrants, former contract workers, or (late) repatriates from former Soviet countries predominate in some rural districts, others are characterised by intra-EU migrants, international students, and refugees who have arrived since 2014. Thus, countries of origin and therefore immigrants' biographies and experiences of volunteering abroad may be different. Secondly, we aimed to address variation between rural areas in terms of their socio-economic situations, which may have an influence, e.g., on structural funding in volunteering. The study regions Bernkastel-Wittlich (BKW), Dithmarschen (DIT), Garmisch-Partenkirchen (GAP), and Salzlandkreis (SLK) cover two very rural and two fairly rural districts (Küpper, 2016; see also Figure 1)—three rural districts with a worse socio-economic situation and one with a good one. The districts are home to between 90,000 (GAP) and 190,000 inhabitants (SLK), of which between 5.6% (SLK) and 16.0% are foreigners (GAP).

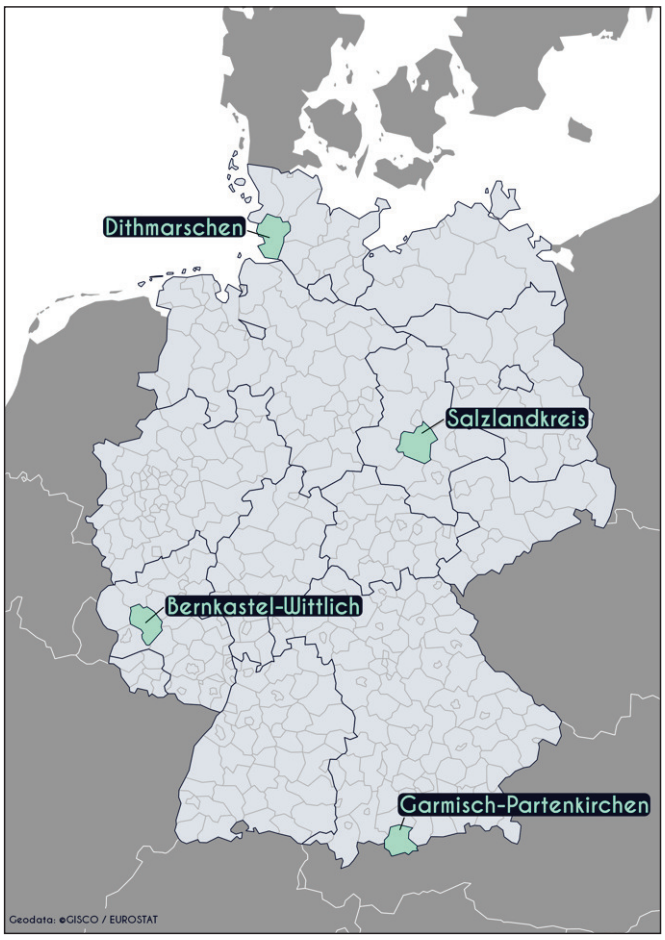

Figure 1. Location of the study regions in Germany. Source: Schorner (2021).

When conducting qualitative interviews with immigrant volunteers, a biographical-narrative research approach enabled a time-related classification of engagement from initial activity, including former places of residence, to the development and (possible) termination of activity. In conversations with immigrant

volunteers, the following themes were addressed: (a) experiences and cultures of volunteering in the contexts of origin, (b) beginning to get involved in their new rural area (motivations and practices), (c) skills and abilities brought in and acquired, (d) activities over time, difficult situations, and how to deal with them, (e) specificities of volunteering in rural areas, and (f) possible future engagement. In addition, interviewees were asked to estimate the amount of time they currently spend volunteering. Information about their social characteristics and length of stay in Germany were also collected.

Between March 2022 and July 2023, we conducted 69 interviews with 72 individuals, lasting between 22 and 102 minutes (average length 52 minutes). The average age of participants was 44, ranging from 20 to 77 years, most of whom were men (42 of 72 individuals). Two-thirds of the interviewees were married, and four out of five also had children. The interviewees were quite well qualified, with nearly two-thirds having at least secondary education, the equivalent to the German (Fach)Abitur. At the time of investigation, most were self-employed, employed, or in vocational training, predominantly in education, handicraft, industry, transport and logistics, the hospitality industry, and the health sector. Those who were not economically active comprised retired individuals or housewives, students, and job-seekers, as well as one participant banned from working. The participants originated from 29 different countries (of which the top three were Syria, Ukraine, and Turkey) and had lived in Germany for a length of time ranging from one up to 71 years at the time of investigation (median 17 years). In the rural district and current place of residence, they had lived for between less than a year and 45 years (median 11 years). Of all the interviewees, 26 were now also German citizens.

Regarding the treatment of data, interviews were transcribed verbatim, based on simple transcription rules. Afterwards, the material was coded using the programme ATLAS.ti and using a deductive-inductive approach with both descriptive and analytical codes. A thematic analysis was carried out as part of a narrative analysis, as suggested by Riessman (2008). The quotes presented in Section 4 were translated into English by the authors. To protect the personal data of our participants, only vital data are displayed here. For reasons of transparency, however, all the quotes cited are tagged with a token that includes the rural district and interview number.

4. Empirical Findings

In this section, we draw on our empirical findings in response to the research questions set out in Section 1. Simultaneously, to allow for a relational reflection on time and space, we consider participants' biographies.

4.1. Meanings of and Mobilisation for Volunteering in Rural Germany

When immigrants reflected on their understanding of voluntary work, they compared the situation relationally in time and space. In particular, those interviewees who left their country of origin when they were older showed a higher reflective capacity and contrasted their experience of volunteering in Germany with the socio-political conditions of volunteering in their previous countries of residence, religious-cultural influences, and individual biographical constellations. During the interviews, the participants mentioned three, interconnected aspects that they felt were characteristic of volunteering, which are exemplified by the next quotes. First, it is done voluntarily; second, it means providing time and resources to help others or to contribute to a better society. Finally, it is not directly compensated:

> For me, volunteering means that one does not get remunerated for the time you spend doing it. And then, it is not a hobby at all, it is something you really want to do for other people. (DIT24, female, 50–60 years old)

> For me, volunteering means that despite the fact that I am not remunerated, I still provide assistance. (BKW25, female, 40–50 years old)

The culture of volunteering as practised in Germany, which participants associated with a certain degree of organisation in independent associations and clubs serving as places of encounter, characterised by structural government support, was either not known by immigrants from their context of origin or was organised in a different way there. Regarding the latter, interviewees from former communist countries, for instance, referred to a politically determined "duty" to help and a ban on any non-governmental form of bottom-up organisation, so that they only became acquainted with "voluntary" engagement upon arrival in Germany. Others reported that in rural regions of origin, formalised volunteering was non-existent, while mutual help predominated. According to the participants, parents mostly set their children an example of helpfulness, while engagement in their countries of origin had often focused on their own social network and vicinity, including family, friends and classmates, neighbours and religious communities, and less on strangers, as happened in Germany:

> We also helped each other, but everyone helped, for example, within one's family or among one's acquaintances. Helping people one does not know…is a bit new to me. Like it is here, it is new, yes. (BKW22, female, 30–40 years old)

> There is help on a religious basis. There is help on a family basis, on a neighbourhood basis or something like that. It always takes place, even without having any term for it. (SLK24, female, 40–50 years old)

However, volunteering for strangers took forms like donating or collecting donations for the poor, orphans, or disabled people, as well as participating in disaster relief either independently or as part of national and international NGOs, which is related to the reception of refugees or disruptions in the supply situation due to civil unrest or war. Thus, altruistic motives, in particular, can be confirmed (Schührer, 2018). The targets of volunteering comprised far more than the people commonly mentioned, such as those outside one's core family, since concepts of core family differ between contexts (Lück & Castrén, 2018).

While at least 35 of the 72 participants had already engaged in volunteering in their previous countries of residence in some way in the past, there are many reasons why immigrants initially get involved in volunteering in their rural place of residence in Germany, and these confirm the current state of research (e.g., Schührer, 2018). Following the thematic analysis, they can be grouped into five realms, ranging from individual to altruistic: Firstly, volunteering is a means for interviewees to improve the well-being and inclusion of themselves and their family members in rural areas. This comprises consent, i.e., having disposable time and getting something for oneself, maintaining and promoting physical and mental health, especially through sports activities, enhancing German language skills, preventing isolation, finding friends, or improving their access to local housing or the labour market. Secondly, for participants, volunteering is a way to show gratitude for the support of the receiving German society in general, and the rural communities in particular. For one young Syrian, who arrived in Germany in 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic provided a good opportunity to return the favour:

> Germany has helped us and we must, must give something back to this country, to these people. Do you know what I mean? Because when we were new in the rural municipality, we met nice people and many people also helped us. And we also have to give something back. (DIT21, male, 20–30 years old)

Thirdly, through volunteering, participants also aimed to show solidarity with recently arrived immigrants or other groups, like women. Many interviewees stressed that they could empathise with the feelings of newcomers and women as they reminded them of the difficulties they had experienced on arrival in the countryside, or that they still have. Some, like a middle-aged woman from Turkey who was raised in the nearest city and moved to the countryside with her kids, also highlighted a lack of support (infra)structures in rural areas in the past, which the interviewees aimed to fill with their engagement:

> I grew up in a big city, where there were simply so many opportunities, even back then, and even more so today, for migrants, who have to somehow manage outside their own country. Also, this effort to ensure that certain structures are put in place in the countryside. (DIT4, 40–50 years old)

Fourthly, but connected to the previous theme, immigrants feel they have a responsibility or duty towards people or places, which manifests itself in volunteering. This may be derived from professional ethics as a doctor, from an attachment to the country of origin or to the current place of residence, or from a perceived "obligation" to integrate as a rural newcomer:

> If I had been in Turkey, I would never have been able to work like this with voluntary work. Why should I take care of mosque matters, when there are experts…? Why should I make any kind of integrative effort when I am in Turkey, where there is no desire for it? That's why the situation here on the ground actually required us to become what we have become, because we have a duty to contribute. (BKW19, male, 50–60 years old)

Finally, volunteering was considered "a matter of course" (DIT26), "a matter of the heart" (DIT21), or "a service to god" (DIT29) among many participants, referring to an embodied, intrinsic helpfulness based on humanitarian or religious principles.

4.2. Access to Volunteering in Rural Germany

Overall, it should be noted that immigrants' volunteering is often triggered by global and local events, such as the genocide of the Yazidi or the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine, the local arrival of refugees and other immigrants respectively, the 100-year flood, or the planned construction of a coal-fired power plant or cell tower. Interviewees also referred to situations and coincidental encounters that led to involvement later on; for example, the absence of an interpreter and resulting communication problems, a presentation on local associations at their language class, or an exhibition by a drumming group in the market square during a local festival, which appealed to a music lover. In their explanations, participants reported different ways in which they actually accessed voluntary engagement and turned their aspirations to volunteer into practice, ranging from self-initiative to being approached by others. One important route was by means of a self-initiated search, whether via the internet, mail enquiries, phone calls, or personal approaches, or by responding to calls for participation in the local newspaper. Due to a lack of feedback from established clubs or a feeling of alienation in existing ones as well as the unmet needs of immigrants, participants had also founded their own associations.

Existing (passive) participation as a visitor to the youth centre or as a soccer player in the local sports club had also led, in some cases, to an expansion of activities and tasks, for instance when interviewees like the father of a young family from Slovakia was approached by board members: "And at some point, I was suggested to join the board. Since we are a small club anyway, I could not say 'no'" (BKW26). Friends and acquaintances played another important role in placing immigrant volunteers, for instance by inviting them to volunteering activities and accompanying them there. Others, in turn, got involved because of other family members, confirming the important role of social networks in accessing volunteering:

> So, I guess [it was] in the late 90s and it only started with my wife. We lived at that time in a rural municipality, where they had an active AWO [Workers' Welfare Association]. And she helped there and found it, it interested her. It also gave her a certain good feeling to help there. And later she integrated all of us as family members. (BKW20)

4.3. Reflecting, Practising, and Sharing Agency Through Volunteering and Impact on Oneself and Rural Communities

This section discusses the third research question and, following the three-step model of agency proposed in Sub-Section 2.4 (reflecting agency, practising agency, sharing agency), presents our findings on the various skills and abilities people bring in, on manifold practices of engagement, and on the sharing of their acquired knowledge by means of volunteering. The section also introduces the effect of volunteering on participants as well as rural communities.

During the interviews, our participants reflected on their personal skills and abilities that were and are helpful for volunteering, referring to characteristics like empathy, openness, curiosity, and patience as well as things like being an expert on knowing people or a good listener. In addition, they emphasised skills like professionalism and confidentiality, leadership, organisation, and time management as well as skills in (intercultural) communication, particularly concerning mediating interreligious or intercultural differences and being able to understand, speak, and write various languages. Concerning the latter, a young man, who volunteers at a local chapter of a blue light organisation, offered a good example:

> In terms of [German] grammar, I am not as good at active speaking….But if I pull myself together, I can do pretty well, which is why I can write pretty good texts and, yes, send them and ultimately upload them to the website. (BKW14)

Participants also emphasised the usefulness of professional knowledge in IT, marketing, trading, project and event management, medicine and pharmacy, pedagogy and pastoral care, law, and bureaucracy and administrative procedures. The words of a Ukrainian father who supports refugees who have fled from his country of origin are a good example of this: "Well, of course, as a project engineer, or also from my private life, I am familiar with all the bureaucracy here in Germany" (SLK28, 30–40 years old). Ultimately, participants saw their practical abilities in things like sports, music, cooking, or handicrafts, as particularly useful for volunteering, not least the possession of a driving license and having their car to get around in rural areas.

Making use of their various skills and abilities, immigrants were transforming their agency into multifarious volunteering practices, targeting different groups within rural communities like newly arrived refugees and

fellow immigrants, neighbours, elderly locals, or like-minded people, such as those equally interested in sports, for example. In doing so, participants were not only building on established volunteering practices known from their contexts of origin but also picking up new practices according to local needs and ways of volunteering. They were helping others orient themselves in their new rural region, referring people to the "right" service, arranging appointments and accompanying them on visits to the authorities, helping with filling in forms and applications, or dealing with their correspondence. In many cases, this took the form of one-to-one mentoring of individual newcomers or families as well as happening in the course of regular café meetings. Immigrant volunteers were also regularly taken on as interpreters for face-to-face interactions as well as for phone calls—for example, in communication with authorities, at kindergartens and schools, at general practitioners and hospitals, or with lawyers, the courts, and the police. Participants were also offering German and other language lessons, including private lessons for schoolchildren, as well as childcare. Drawing on social networks, immigrants were even helping others to search for kindergartens, schools, jobs, and apartments, including moving house. Some interviewees were running legal, medical, and psychological consultations. For neighbours and elderly locals in particular, volunteers could offer lifts, do the shopping, or mow the lawn. Some offered themselves for sporting activities such as soccer coaching:

> As a goalkeeping coach, you're there twice a week, for an hour and a half, training the goalkeepers. You also talk to them, so I think it's really important to talk to people, because if someone can't perform, it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with an injury. It can also have something to do with the psyche. (DIT32, male, 30–40 years old)

Many also helped out in the background by organising and preparing rooms and local events, or by taking over the cash management or public relations of associations, as shown by the example of the volunteer from Hungary at the beginning of Section 4. A few immigrant volunteers were also helping out with things like food banks, clothing stores, ambulance services, and fire brigades. Others were donating money or blood or collecting donations, both for local organisations and projects like the youth fire brigade or construction of a mosque, and international ones like Save the Children or the 2023 earthquake in Turkey.

Volunteering also has an important impact on immigrants themselves. Apart from enjoyment and fun, as well as improving physical health, it offers fulfilment of the need for things like self-efficacy, self-respect, self-confidence, contentment, and outgoingness. It can also have a direct effect on mental health by acting as a distraction from the stresses of life. One older woman from a former Soviet Republic, who among other things was volunteering at the food bank, told us that it offered a diversion from grieving for a recently deceased relative: "And I felt a real inner happiness that I was needed, that I was doing something good for other people. That's what pulled me out of my state of depression" (DIT18, 60–70 years old).

Participants also reported that they had improved particular skills through volunteering, which had helped them become more aware of their capabilities and limitations, develop more solution-oriented thinking, and gain greater patience and time management. Other positive effects included more confident use of the spoken language, improvement in translation skills and intercultural competencies, and an enhanced understanding of administrative processes. Interviewees also referred to having gained practical skills in event management, first aid, and preparing job applications. Finally, in some cases, women could also emancipate themselves through voluntary engagement, for example by redefining gender roles. Volunteers emphasised that their social network had expanded as a result of their local involvement and that they had

become better acquainted with the culture of volunteering in Germany, while also fostering their attachment to the region:

> [When] I came here to Germany, I hardly had any friends. Well, only one friend here in Germany. And then, over time, I got acquaintances through volunteering and through this Welcome Café here in the past and the Youth Centre in the past. There, I met many people, Germans and Arabs and Afghans and several people, yes. (DIT19, male, 20–30 years old)

> Everyone here knows me. Everywhere I go, the children greet me immediately. When I go shopping or walk down the street, go for a walk somewhere, you can hear "Miss [surname], Miss [surname]" from afar. They wave to me and when they are nearby, they come and hug me. (BKW23, female, 50–60 years old)

> Now, I have settled, so to speak….I have gotten to know how to volunteer. That way, we can learn German. Not the German language, but to get to know people. As a social guide, I learned that it is not that easy. But without it, you cannot integrate yourself. You can only integrate yourself when you start talking to people. It only works through volunteering. (SLK25, male, 50–60 years old)

When they have been in their new rural home for longer, immigrants even take on responsibility for volunteering and sharing their acquired knowledge with others, affecting both their place of residence and the rural community. We found that many had established a variety of new initiatives, action groups, associations, and clubs, which they were often still leading during our study. The foundation of new meeting places and associations provides a solution for the often limited accessibility of, for example, prayer rooms in rural areas, as the following quote underlines:

> Whenever someone needed the church, they had to go to Munich. And it was not so easy….First [because of] the traffic, no parking, and then driving 90/100 kilometres and losing a lot of time. Now, here, it is a bit easier. Yes, okay, we have it here, if something happens or we need something, we have it here, you don't have to drive far. And of course, everybody was happy. (GAP15, male, 40–50 years old)

Taking on board membership of local associations might involve a multitude of tasks. For our participant GAP13, who was the chairman of a sports club in the rural district of GAP, for example, the role encompassed the drafting and supervising of building projects, organising donations, and dividing revenues between the association's branches, communicating with club members, recruiting a secretary, and negotiating with the tenant of the club pub. Some participants also successfully stood for election to the parents' council, the works council, the municipal or district integration council, or the local (advisory) council. The use of intercultural competence and mediation roles also strengthens local social cohesion and promotes awareness of different life contexts, for example, in the school environment. A few immigrants were also giving presentations about their countries of origin and sharing knowledge of their own cultures with administrative staff to reduce prejudices, as well as holding guided tours in the mosque and the region to showcase their new *Heimat*. They were also trying to get others interested in volunteering, while reflecting on different cultures of volunteering, and were engaged in placing them within their own as well as other associations:

> [In] the countries where they have their roots, there is less of this so-called voluntary commitment in those countries….I think we have to tell them about these ideas and give them ideas about what they can do, low-threshold, to become a part of this society. What they can draw from it, namely to belong and to pave the way for others. (DIT4, female, 50–60 years old)

5. Discussion of Results and Concluding Remarks

The answers to the first research question, which asked what meanings immigrants attribute to volunteering and why they do want to become involved in rural Germany, confirmed the findings of existing research, such as that by Schührer (2018). We have illustrated the relational meaning-making of volunteering: Interviewees had experience of volunteering and either engaged in it in their previous countries of residence or received assistance from volunteers at the beginning of their stay in Germany. In the former case, they drew comparisons between volunteering here and there and were motivated to continue, which they justified by referring to its altruism or intrinsic helpfulness. Our participants' own migration experience made them want to show solidarity with recent arrivals, which resulted in them volunteering as so-called "arrival brokers" (Hans, 2023), complementing existing "arrival infrastructures" (Meeus, 2017). Among those who received support, in particular, gratitude could also be seen as a motive. Thus, they exhibited what Phillimore et al. (2018) have termed "informal reciprocity." Immigrants' volunteering practices also emphasise mutual reciprocity and feelings of obligation, or, as Trinka and Trundle (2014) put it, "social contract ideologies."

Access to volunteering in their rural place of residence (second research question) was mostly predetermined by places of encounter as a prerequisite, and particular events or existing social networks as "opportunity structures" (Phillimore, 2021). This could involve family members and other volunteers who serve as role models. A further precondition for volunteering, especially in an institutionalised form, was the availability of material structures on-site, e.g., a room to meet. Thus, the crucial role of "contextual factors" (Greenspan et al., 2018) could be identified. As it has been found, recently, that more people volunteer in rural areas than urban ones, especially under good socio-economic conditions (Kleiner & Kühn, 2023), and that—as Steinführer (2015) suggested—civic engagement in rural areas is embedded in a self-determined responsibility for localities, further research is needed to make use of a place-based approach, as well as comparative research to differentiate between local opportunity structures for volunteering.

Volunteering practices encompass a huge diversity of realms, not only including sports, culture, and religion but also migration-specific activities such as cultural or language mediation. Participants make use of certain pre-existing skills and competencies, from either their (former) professional or private lives. Since a failure to use their skill is commonly seen as a threat to their professional identity (Wehrle et al., 2018), their talents can be brought into use through volunteering. These results have various implications for both individuals and the community (Sveen et al., 2023). In our findings, personal development and the aforementioned processes of acquiring agency and fostering inclusion are highly interrelated with immigrants taking responsibility for themselves, their partners, and families, but most importantly for other newcomers and the rural community in general. In the course of setting up a novel ethics of responsibility, the philosopher Hans Jonas suggests knowledge as a precondition for responsibility (Jonas, 1979). Participants learned to negotiate local (administrative) structures and to orient themselves spatially, as well as learning local needs, and coming to understand routinised practices of volunteering on-site. Immigrant volunteering confirms that individuals gain from acquiring social competencies and skills, while local communities benefit

simultaneously, since volunteering results in social cohesion (Kleiner & Kühn, 2023). "Empowering residents to engage based on their shared space and common issues" (Bischof & Decker, 2023, p. 282) requires a life-world and biographically sensitive approach in the context of migration. Such empowerment can then result in taking responsibility for rural regions (Bischof & Decker, 2023).

Immigrants' involvement as engaged citizens could also be enhanced by measures that diminish legal barriers and simultaneously acknowledge their activities through culturally adapted forms of gratitude. Like measures of urban citizenship, local administrations in rural regions could also, for instance, issue documents that enable immigrants who do not yet have access to it, to participate or provide incentives for volunteering. In this way, identification with a region and symbolic belonging could be strengthened and immigrants could participate in local development in a more sustained way.

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Inclusion or Exclusion? The Spatial Habitus of Rural Gentrifiers

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Abstract

Several rural areas all over the world have experienced the inflow of the urban better-off. This rural gentrification takes various temporary and permanent forms, i.e., lifestyle migration, second-home ownership, or short-term visitors. Scholarly interest in rural gentrification is evidenced by the growing body of literature. Based on 105 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in two rural areas in Hungary, this article aims to explore the perceptions, motivations, preferences, and lived experiences of rural newcomers, their position within the community, as well as processes of inclusion and exclusion. We rely on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus and argue that it includes distinct spatial dispositions forming a "spatial habitus." The interviews show that the middle-class rural gentrifiers' (spatial) habitus is entangled with their cultural capital and represents a mixture of urban and "ruralising" dispositions. Their spatial practices are interpreted as the result of middle-class (spatial) habitus and middle-class symbolic distinction. At the same time, middle-class rural gentrifiers are active local agents who defy common notions of newcomers having to integrate into their communities of choice.

Keywords

Bourdieu; gentrification; Hungary; rural gentrification; spatial dispositions; spatial habitus

1. Introduction

This article aims to contribute to the growing body of publications addressing the experiences of inclusion of newcomers/immigrants in rural areas. Despite the relative abundance of studies on the implications of immigration for rural spaces (McAreavey & Argent, 2018), the lived experience of these immigrants concerning inclusion has so far received less scholarly attention. This article focuses on a narrower and relatively homogenous group, namely metropolitan middle- and upper-middle-class fractions relocating to small rural settlements, through an analysis of 45 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in two

case study areas in the framework of the research project The Role of Gentrification in Rural Development. However, it should be stressed that not all rural areas are affected by the inflow of the urban better-off: In the Hungarian context, the general tendency is that most villages are shrinking and ageing (Jelinek & Virág, 2020), and impoverished and ghettoised (Nagy et al., 2015; Váradi & Virág, 2015; Virág, 2010). Only a few (around 100 to 150 villages) experience the permanent or temporary migration of the urban better-off. Our analysis applies Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus and the Bourdieu-inspired concepts of spatial dispositions and spatial habitus to gain a deeper understanding of the spatial practices of urban middle-class intellectuals. Drawing on Bridge's (2001) reconceptualisation of Bourdieu's habitus theory in the context of metropolitan gentrification, we adapt this modified concept to rural gentrification.

Migration is perceived as a relevant choice for the middle classes, since living in a rural setting affords them "quasi-upper-class" consumption patterns and higher living standards that are inaccessible in an urban environment and exceed their actual financial status. Another potential benefit associated with rural migration is its capacity to secure capital for launching a new activity or a "lifestyle enterprise" (Stone & Stubbs, 2007; Tomay, 2019). Presumably, rural gentrifiers are not exclusively guided by their urban spatial dispositions, as evidenced by the fact that they need to build local communities, as well as preserve and rediscover local values, and by the pre-eminence of dispositions stressing the benefits of rural life (tranquillity, proximity to nature, fewer people). This may influence the extent to which rural migrants see themselves as included members of local communities or strive for inclusion.

The purpose of this article is to examine how new residents with higher status are received in small villages, what characterises their perceptions of the rural milieu and community, and to what extent they are able and willing to integrate into rural society. The main question is how the differences in spatial habitus shape integration efforts and processes of inclusion and exclusion. Will a higher social status and cultural capital instil a sense of superiority and distinction into the habitus of rural gentrifiers (as suggested by Bourdieu)? If so, the result would be exclusion instead of the intended inclusion into the community. To answer these questions, the article will rely on an assessment of rural gentrifiers' perceptions, spatial dispositions, spatial practices, and their relations with "indigenous" inhabitants and other newcomers. It will also investigate whether rural "newcomers" deploy specific strategies of distinction from other (local or non-local) groups, whether consciously or not.

2. Theoretical Horizons

2.1. Gentrification and Rural Gentrification

The concept of gentrification was introduced by Glass (1964) to describe phenomena observed in London's East End. Following most definitions, gentrification denotes the inflow of middle-class people into working-class or lower-status inner-city neighbourhoods, and the resulting transformation of the area's physical, demographic, and social structure through redevelopment (Hamnett, 1991; Nemes & Tomay, 2022; Smith, 1996).

Bridge (2001) notes that during the initial stages of gentrification, the new residents have less economic and more cultural capital, to use the terminology of Bourdieu (1986), which explains the marked differences between the habitus of pioneers moving to (dilapidated) inner-city districts and that of middle-class suburban

residents. As argued by Butler and Robson (2001) in their study of gentrified neighbourhoods in London, besides financial opportunities, lifestyle expression is also critical for shaping residential choice: Gentrifiers generally prefer neighbourhoods populated by like-minded people. The pioneers of gentrification express this distinction consciously through the symbolic dimension of space. The purchase of dilapidated houses (besides their modest price) is a form of self-expression, as they can be rebuilt according to one's taste, which creates a distinctive gentrification aesthetic. In the subsequent phases of "expanding" and "adolescent" gentrification, the financial and public safety risks of moving downtown are reduced (Clay, 1979), making the neighbourhood "trendy" and safe to invest in, and triggering the inflow of predominantly well-educated and higher-income upper-middle-class groups. Finally, "super-gentrification" (Lees, 2003) refers to the phase when people with even higher economic capital enter pre-gentrified communities, resulting in the displacement of both the original population and the first-wave gentrifiers (Tomay & Völgyi, 2022).

It is important to highlight that urban and rural gentrification are not identical phenomena, despite some commonalities in the post-industrial transformation of urban and rural areas (Phillips, 1993). Rural gentrification is understood as the relocation of urban upper- and middle-class groups to settlements appreciated for their favourable social and natural assets, which increases their economic and social valorisation and results in the transformation of local assets (the built and natural environment) in ways that conform to the particular values, styles, and visions of urban consumers (Tomay & Völgyi, 2022). The gentrification of the countryside is closely connected to the "rural turn" in tourism, whereby a settlement with an attractive natural environment is valorised initially as a tourist destination, and second homes then increasingly become the primary residence of their new owners (Nemes & Tomay, 2022). Similar to gentrification in metropolitan areas, rural gentrification, due to its role in shaping rural spaces and restructuring residents' range of possibilities, is not without conflict. Compared to the "indigenous" rural population, the new residents have a relatively higher status, and this renders the question of inclusion and exclusion more complex than in the paradigmatic case, where migrants have no relative status advantage over locals and will therefore strive for inclusion into the community (Schuetz, 1944).

2.2. (Spatial) Habitus and (Spatial) Practices

Bourdieu's theory provides a useful theoretical basis for interpreting the gentrification of rural places by the middle classes, and the emerging processes of distinction, inclusion, and exclusion in rural communities. (Bourdieu, 1984, Chapter 3; see also Bourdieu, 2002). In the following, basic Bourdieusian concepts (social space, habitus, practices, distinction) will be reconstructed, and we argue that the habitus implies a set of spatial dispositions hereby defined as "spatial habitus." Spatial habitus and spatial dispositions generate spatial practices, guide perceptions of and affinities toward spaces, and contribute to socio-spatial inequalities.

Bourdieu's concept of "social space" (Bourdieu, 1984, Chapter 3; see also Bourdieu, 1985, 2002) refers to the totality of objective social relations between social positions. However, since humans are not automatons, objective relations alone cannot account for individual actions; hence the significance of the habitus, representing, on the one hand, a system of inculcated dispositions and, on the other, schemes of perceptions and appreciations generating actors' practices (see also Bourdieu, 2002). Consequently, habitus is not a mere reflection of an individual's class position but also encourages people to make choices or engage in practices that are attuned to their objective chances.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984, Chapter 3) analyses how the habitus as a set of dispositions conditioned by one's position in social space generates various practices (food, sports, clothing, taking care of the body and its presentation, music, literature, preferred types of art, etc.) that form relatively homogenous lifestyles. The habitus, practices, and lifestyles of social classes imply distinction in two ways. Some practices are, on the one hand, examples of "conspicuous consumption," in that there is a conscious effort to create a distance to and establish superiority in relation to other classes, for example, members of the dominant classes tend to see themselves as having "pure" and "sophisticated" taste, as opposed to the "barbarous" and "vulgar" taste of the lower classes (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 30–32). On the other hand, and more importantly, Bourdieu (1984, p. 483) also stresses that people's consumption and practices need not be conscious and conspicuous to be symbolic, since "goods are converted into distinctive signs" through the lens of the habitus—they are relationally perceived as signs not only of (refined or barbarous) taste, but also of (a higher or lower) position in social space. In this way, the various lifestyle practices generate symbolic distances between the dominant and the dominated classes and reinforce social inequalities on a symbolic level, thereby contributing to the reproduction of objective social structures (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 483–484). Regarding middle-class migration to rural areas, this means that the gentrifiers' practices may involve conspicuous and unconscious forms of distinction to groups in their immediate physical proximity (e.g., locals) and others farther away (for instance, urban middle-class fractions).

However, the Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, dispositions, and practices are not only useful in the context of the consumption of goods and services or various other lifestyle-relevant practices but also concerning spatiality. Bourdieu (2018) highlights the mediating role of habitus in the process of inscribing objective social relations into physical space, resulting in a significant (albeit not perfect) overlap between social space and (appropriated) physical space. As Bourdieu (2018, p. 111) puts it: "It is the habitus that makes the habitat." In other words, the habitus enables actors to "inhabit" (to take advantage of and feel at home in) a particular segment of social and physical space (cf. Németh, 2022, 2023, pp. 62–64; Zsinka, 2023). Further advancing Bourdieu, we interpret the specific set of dispositions that guide perceptions and experiences of spaces and generate spatial practices as spatial habitus. As we understand the terms, spatial dispositions and the spatial habitus—just like the general concept of dispositions and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 170–172)—are twofold: They are (systems of) schemes of perception and appreciation and, at the same time, (systems of) schemes generating practices. Therefore, spatial habitus and spatial dispositions inform, on the one hand, how spaces are perceived and appreciated, and what spatial practices are favoured or rejected. On the other hand, spatial habitus also generates specific practices attuned to actors' (spatial) inclinations: the choice of where to live (if affordable), how to decorate one's home, what spatial routes to take and distances to keep, etc. It also should be stressed that spatial habitus, and the spatial practices it generates, may also imply distinction.

Exploring the habitus of middle-class rural gentrifiers is a key focus of our research. Their habitus is likely to reflect the specificities of middle-class fractions in the social space, i.e., they can rise as easily as they can fall (Bourdieu, 1984, Chapter 3; see also Bourdieu, 2002). Thus, these actors are assumed to be (consciously or unconsciously) driven by a need for self-assertion, as testified by their various strategies, including their choice of residence or setting up a business, the seed capital being the value differential gained by moving to the countryside. Regarding their spatial dispositions or spatial habitus, the objective is to examine what spaces and places they have affinity for, and what spatial practices and routines they feel comfortable with. Their spatial habitus and characteristic middle-class aspirations indicate different spatial practices, everyday spatial routines, and spatial action radiuses relative to the indigenous population.

Through the concept of spatiality and the ideas of Bourdieu, it becomes possible to distinguish between urban and rural habitus. Urban habitus is shaped by the metropolitan way of life (Simmel, 1950), i.e., an accelerated pace, high population density, relatively good accessibility of services, and increased spatial mobility connected to everyday urban life and urban spatial routines. Urban habitus is, thus, interpreted as a set of dispositions that generates these typical urban spatial practices and city-dweller's preferences for them, while also representing a form of "modernism" (cf. Bourdieu, 1966). Conceived this way, urban habitus is relatively universal or "cosmopolitan," in that its dispositions apply to a wide array of spatial contexts, not only the city one resides in (Jóvér, 2023, p. 80).

As pointed out by Jóvér (2023, p. 78, 84) in a meta-analysis of studies on rural residents from around the globe, rural habitus is invariably defined in its relation to and fundamental discrepancy from its urban counterpart. Moreover, the two are hierarchically related: Whereas urban habitus is associated with symbolic advantages, rural habitus has a lower prestige and undermines the accumulation of capital (see also Bourdieu, 1966; Bourdieu et al., 1966). Traditionally, a key factor shaping rural habitus, according to Jóvér (2023, pp. 80–81), is agricultural activity and the associated physical labour, with specific rhythms and constraints inscribed in the bodies of actors, distinguishing their physical appearance from that of urban subjects. However, one could object by arguing that this focus on agriculture is not relevant anymore, as processes of modernisation and industrialisation since the second half of the 20th century (Ragadics, 2023, pp. 14–15) have gradually led to a diminishing role of agricultural production in rural settlements in Hungary. In response to this argument, two points can be made. First, if having ties to agriculture is understood not in a narrow sense (as being an independent farmer or agricultural worker), but more broadly (including producing food for self-consumption, owning land, or having professional agricultural training), over 50% of Hungarian society had some ties to agriculture in one way or another in the mid-2000s (Kovách, 2012, pp. 42–45). Secondly and more generally, rural habitus is not only marked by agriculture but also by various other forms of physical work predominant in rural areas. Physical work (whether agricultural or not) inscribes itself in the body, creating a special form of bodily capital suited to the local context (Jóvér, 2023, p. 80). The asymmetrical power relation between urban and rural areas is also manifest in the fact that urban habitus is applicable in a multitude of contexts, while rural habitus is incompatible with urban areas, thereby limiting the ability of rural dwellers to accumulate the various forms of capital in urban areas (Jóvér, 2023, p. 81). Although certain spatial dispositions of the urban habitus are not applicable in rural contexts, this does not entail similarly great disadvantages for the accumulation of capital.

In summary, rural habitus relates to the dispositions of agricultural labour, backyard farming, subsistence work, and other forms of physical labour and practices in rural areas. It is also a form of traditionalism, in contrast to the urban habitus with its preference for "modern" lifestyles. The applicability of rural dispositions and rural habitus is much more limited than that of urban habitus, resulting in a reinforcement of social inequalities (Jóvér, 2023, p. 83). In the following, the urban/rural distinction will be instrumental for understanding the spatial habitus of middle-class rural migrants.

3. Materials and Methods

The present study is based on the analysis of 105 semi-structured in-person interviews conducted in two case study areas covered by the research project The Role of Gentrification in Rural Development. The interviews were conducted in several phases between 2019 and 2022, with a typical duration of 1 to

2.5 hours. Besides rural newcomers, indigenous locals, and entrepreneurs, recreational migrants were also interviewed. However, this article mainly focuses on 45 interviews with rural newcomers to understand and interpret their particular perceptions of the countryside, their spatial habitus and practices, and their experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Using the ATLAS.ti software, we analysed the new residents' gentrification narratives (background, motivations, choice of residence, prior expectations, arrival, experience of, and occupation of the new residence), as well as their perceptions of and relations maintained with native locals, the urban middle-classes, and various fractions of their own group, providing deeper insights into their self-assessment with other groups and its implications for inclusion and exclusion. The results of these analyses will be presented in Section 4.

One of the case study areas, Grapevine, is a small village in southwest Hungary, within the Villány wine region, while the other area, Stone Valley (both pseudonyms), encompasses seven villages, located near Lake Balaton. Although both areas flourish as rural tourism destinations situated in a beautiful natural environment and boast a distinctive architectural heritage, Stone Valley's tourism—in terms of scale and revenue—eclipses that of Grapevine due to the vicinity of Lake Balaton, while Grapevine strategically organises its tourism around events and festivals. The composition of new arrivals exhibits subtle differences as well: Stone Valley is characterised by a higher prevalence of second-home owners, whereas Grapevine experiences a more pervasive trend of permanent immigration. As both fieldwork sites have a long history of gentrification, our interviewees include gentrifiers who have resided in these rural settlements more or less permanently for several decades, as well as newcomers of the last five to 10 years, and even children of original gentrifiers who already grew up there (see Table 2 in the Supplementary File, for a more detailed description of the interviewees). The overwhelming majority of newcomers are domestic migrants originating from the Hungarian capital or regional cities, and akin to Benson's (2010) results, their integration is shaped by several factors, including their expectations and the receptiveness of the host community.

In both case study areas, urban artist-intellectuals acted as pioneers of gentrification, attracted by the idyllic environment, cheap old houses, and the possibility of a rural life, and they were followed by other members of the middle class: Lifestyle migrants seeking to valorise their capital assets through local hospitality and tourism businesses, turning both areas into popular destinations for rural tourism, with wine and gastronomy as the defining elements of their image (for a detailed discussion see Nemes & Tomay, 2022; Tomay & Völgyi, 2022). Pioneer gentrifiers in the selected rural settlements exhibited frictions between high cultural and lower economic capital, and their decision to relocate to a rural area was shaped by a desire to prevent downward social mobility. In line with the classical theories of gentrification in urban contexts (Clay, 1979; Zukin, 1987), members of middle-class fractions rich in cultural capital were the first to arrive. The subsequent wave of gentrification in Stone Valley was dominated by affluent middle-class individuals acquiring second homes. In Grapevine, a similar trajectory unfolded in the 2000s, with lifestyle entrepreneurs from middle-class families establishing small wine and tourism enterprises to complement their urban-derived incomes. While these second-wave gentrifiers still had a high level of cultural capital, they had more economic capital compared to the first-wavers. Several representatives of this second wave sold their higher-priced urban homes, giving them substantial financial capital for setting up various (lifestyle) businesses after purchasing cheaper rural property. Cultural capital is equally significant in the case of lifestyle businesses, as demonstrated by second wavers' confessed preference for establishing guest houses and wineries whose quality and style conform to their standards. The new guest houses and wineries offer their (predominantly urban) clients a pleasant and

peaceful rural atmosphere and a momentary respite from the anxieties of urban life—a certain kind of "rural idyll" that reflects middle-class ideals (Csurgó, 2014).

The third wave of rural gentrification, as reflected in the interviewees' narratives, involved the inflow of "affluent people." The contemporary landscape in both villages is marked by elevated property prices and tourism activities of higher standard that require significant financial capital to initiate. This shift is best explained using the concept of "super-gentrification" (Lees, 2003). Borrowed from urban gentrification theory, this term refers to the final phase of gentrification driven by the upper rather than the middle classes, whose more affluent members push out native residents as well as the early gentrifiers.

4. Results

4.1. Rural Gentrifiers' Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion

The rural migrants among our interviewees reported diverse experiences, which suggests that integration is shaped by the attitudes of both newcomers and the host community. In the following, we identify recurring topics and narratives in our interviews. Some of our interviewees encountered an open and welcoming attitude, typically those who have been permanent residents of their village of choice for a long time, having arrived at a time when few others moved in, which meant that the existing rural context had a decisive influence on their integration:

> Here in the village, people were very open and really helpful, from showing us how to plant carrots or prune them [laughs], really, and doing some dibbling together, they helped a lot with the wine and the vineyard, and surprisingly, it wasn't the younger generation, but the older people who we got along with really well. And they liked the fact that we were a little different. (interview 2)

The majority, however, described the locals as conservative, "uncultured," and "envious." Conservatism manifests in local customs and different life rhythms, as well as negative attitudes towards change and newcomers:

> Well, it is a fact that they [the newcomers] are more easy-going than, say, a villager, who is like: "Ugh, get up, cos' you have to wake up early in the morning, get things done, tidy up, everything, sweep the floor in the morning, if there are two inches of snow, it has to be swept away immediately, because if you don't do that, you're useless." And this is where conflicts arise….The new neighbour will surely be met with hostility. Because they themselves could not live such a life…because it's nice to sleep late and chill out and…and it's not the end of the world if the lawn isn't mown every three days. (interview 3)

> The village isn't welcoming, I can't say that they hurt me or harass me, I get along with everyone, but still….We've tried to do something here, to organise social life in the village, but all our efforts were rejected. They have their own world that no one can enter. That's just the way it is. If you came out to the street with me, everyone would greet me, I would know about everyone's grandchild, I have absolutely nothing against them….They are the ones who don't let me in, and I have given up trying. And I'm perfectly fine with that. (interview 11)

Envy is seen by many as fuelled by income and social disparities. Those who make their living from tourism are accused of "getting rich easily," ignoring the huge amount of investment and work involved:

> Initially, whether one was a native or a new resident was not an issue. But these days, we are experiencing many problems, so obviously indigenous inhabitants cannot stand newcomers and there's…a strong aversion. This has a lot to do with cultural differences, envy, and the huge polarisation of opportunities….This is quite difficult, as these people [the gentrifiers] sustain the whole community, from restaurants and wineries to catering, so those who still live here from the native population make a living from these activities one way or another, directly or indirectly. If it weren't for that, there would be nothing here but dilapidated houses, because there would be no job opportunities at all. (interview 12)

Among the indigenous population, narratives of amicable inclusion and complaints are equally prevalent; the issues and grievances are quite similar on both sides:

> The people who move here appear to be friendly, I have nothing against them. They talk to me. They ask me where to find a shop, where this or that is better….They help me, they fit in like everybody else. It's not like they're bragging about who they are, where they come from, they seek harmony with the village. So, they seem to adapt. (interview 23)

> You don't notice 90% of these people [the newcomers] in the village, they don't attend community events, they make no efforts to integrate into the rural atmosphere, they don't even socialise with the villagers….This angers me…and if they do nothing for the village, they should at least keep a low profile and remain in their little houses. (interview 15)

The ambivalence between inclusion and exclusion and the desirability and non-desirability of integration is also reflected in the nature of the social networks that the new residents create for themselves. Partly due to similarities in their culturally oriented habitus, immigrants from the first two waves socialise more easily among themselves and tend to form strong alliances against both the locals and the "rich" last-wave gentrifiers:

> If we do not help each other and stand by each other, then who will? Nobody. We live in a beautiful area, hopefully our kids are happy to grow up in a beautiful natural environment, but we also need each other. Life can testify to that every day because each new day somebody needs something, and we have a list on our phone of those nine families whom we can call. I cannot request such a thing from a native. It is easier to find a helping hand among each other than among the locals, and I am not saying that we don't trust them, because some people are very helpful and friendly, but they are a minority. (interview 7)

As noted above, distinction primarily emerges in the local context, either from the residents of surrounding villages, the indigenous locals, or the latest wealthy gentrifiers. The following interview excerpts, point to a contradictory relationship with the locals or "natives." On the one hand, several new residents stress their need for some contact with the locals, whom they try not to treat condescendingly, but at the same time, they notice the presence of a social division, maintained on both sides:

> I know only some locals, but I like them, I like them a lot, and they also like me. Apparently, the fact that I come from Budapest and am still normal makes me valuable in their eyes. For them, it means I am someone who doesn't look down on them, who doesn't use a condescending tone or try to appear better just because I have a degree or let's say more money. (interview 4)

The last sentence of this interview excerpt indicates social division, precisely because it implies that a condescending stance toward locals is not uncommon. Not being natives, gentrifiers are convinced that the locals will never fully accept them; in the meantime, they distinguish themselves from the indigenous inhabitants whose tastes do not resemble their own, who show no interest in cultural practices deemed sophisticated according to their middle-class aesthetic standards. Bourdieu (1984, p. 178) characterises this essentialist tendency as a distinction from culturally "barbarous" taste, converting it "into a natural inclination simply by dissociating it from its economic and social *raisons d'être*." This is illustrated by the following excerpts:

> Entering into contact with them? I am contacting them all the time, we even drink *palinka* [fruit brandy] together….I don't feel like [I'm] being isolated from them, but, generally, they show no interest in our activities. (interview 6)

> Let's say you are at [X], having a five-course dinner with a concert for a considerable amount of money. But they consider this not a real dinner, but only fine dining where you are served micro-portions of food….They wouldn't understand what it is or what it's all about. (interview 5)

> We "newcomers" agree that the local cultural level does not meet our expectations. (interview 6)

A common topic in rural gentrifiers' narratives is the discrepancy between their own cultural standards and cultural consumption and those of the locals. On the one hand, they bemoan locals' lack of interest in the cultural events organised by the lifestyle entrepreneurs; on the other hand, rural gentrifiers show clear signs of contempt for the culture preferred and consumed by the locals, scorned as being "terrible," "lamentable," and "of poor quality." Such discourses reflect the essentialist and naturalising distinction of middle-class fractions vis-à-vis the lower classes and their "barbarous" taste. This distinction implies a glorification of their taste, which they think of as naturally sophisticated:

> Village Day?…Terrible! There's a stencil paper for the events, they have been copying the same thing for over ten years, last year they even forgot to change the date….So whoever does it, whoever is responsible for the culture here, I'm not even sure they have a high school degree. (interview 11)

The assessment of cultural programmes (whether organised by newcomers or locals) is characterised by mutual distrust and a lack of understanding of the other's point of view. While gaining new residents drives up property values and turns the sale of houses into a "good deal" for locals, gentrification and the associated tourism activities imply a serious confinement of their community space:

> These [new, more expensive] places are shunned by locals. So, this is sad. And it's also sad that there is nowhere to go. One can gather in front of the local shop, have a quick drink there, but there is no pub, for instance, because it was converted into a restaurant, and the locals have nowhere to assemble and

> organise a forum. That's what everyone truly misses. I can hear and sense that they feel like outcasts in their own village. (interview 14)

A further type of distinction is aimed at the newly arrived investors. Pioneers often feel threatened by the subsequent waves of gentrifiers, in contrast with the natives whom they regard as simply lacking refined taste and sophistication, without seeing them as an existential threat. Seeking authenticity and emphasising "quiet immigration," first-wave artists and intellectuals implicitly distance themselves from later—specifically, the most recent—wave of gentrifiers, "the rich" who prioritise money over aesthetics. Their arrival in the villages, paired with the threat of material displacement (buying up property, rising prices) and a perception that they are destroying local values, is a recurring complaint in earlier gentrifiers' narratives:

> We are embittered by the arrival of these *nouveau riches* destroying everything like a tank. [For them] nothing has any value, and we still fuss over how to scrape off the old bricks so we can reuse them. (interview 1)

> I think we arrived here ten years ago, and ten years ago…it didn't occur to us to change anything here, rather, we were respectful of the built environment and what previous generations sought to preserve, and we tried to adapt, and now it appears as if these rules have vanished, and the visitors who come here have material wealth, but no longer share these feelings. (interview 7)

These statements demonstrate an explicit desire for distinction from third-wave entrepreneurs. The tastes of these wealthy investors are viewed even more negatively than those of locals because they are not simply seen as uneducated, but as representing a whole new level of bad taste with their *nouveau riche* practices and activities perceived as destructive. The *nouveau riche* character of new investors is associated by earlier gentrifiers with ruthlessness, ignorance of perceived local values, and the exclusive prioritisation of crude financial interests—in stark contrast to how they perceive themselves: as being distinguished, sophisticated, and committed to the preservation of local (architectural and natural) values. This showcases the classic Bourdieusian pattern of distinction between the cultural and the economic fractions of the ruling classes in a rural context (Bourdieu, 1984). In rejecting the habitus and practices of the *nouveau riche*, the habitus of earlier gentrifiers is conditioned by and reflective of their objective possibilities and interests.

4.2. The Heterogenous Spatial Habitus of Rural Migrant Gentrifiers

Our interviews indicate the absence of a distinct rural habitus among our interview subjects, whose lifestyle is not centred on agricultural or local physical labour. Instead, their spatial dispositions can be described as a "ruralising" middle-class idealisation (as opposed to the reality) of rural life. These ruralising dispositions include a quest for/reconstruction of a "nostalgic rural past," a (re)invention of local values, a need for local community-building, and others emphasising the benefits of rural life (tranquillity, proximity to nature, few people):

> The people who come here usually feel attached to a tradition floating before our eyes, which we have never personally experienced, which we cannot precisely define, but one we can picture….All of us share the same idea of what this tradition was like. People used to do things together, there was feather-plucking and spinning and cornhusking and so on. The actual locals listened with disbelief. They

> are aware of how the past was and even discuss what it must have been like….The generation that lives here has never experienced what we ourselves have never experienced either but are seeking to find. Unlike them. (interview 6)

Newcomers' ruralising dispositions—fuelling a quest for a nostalgic past that never existed—are thus contradictory to the actual rural habitus of "indigenous" rural inhabitants. What further distinguishes ruralising dispositions from rural habitus is a selective prioritisation of various aspects of agriculture. The rural habitus contains dispositions that render the typically intense and monotonous daily agricultural labour acceptable; by contrast, middle-class gentrifiers like to take things more "easy." This tendency to distance themselves from monotonous work perceived as pointless is a recurring theme, as demonstrated by one of the interview excerpts mentioned. And even if they do engage in agriculture, the preferred activities will be those that conform to middle-class values and are aesthetically "sophisticated," such as wine-making, organic farming, or horticulture. Invariably, this habitus diverges from the (traditional) rural habitus, creating an implicit distinction from locals:

> I make wine, because my neighbour has a vineyard on the hilltop, so he knows how to do it, and then I bought a press and some tools, and it's the third year that we've been buying grapes to make wine…just for our own pleasure. (interview 4)

> I have a garden now, I've started growing herbs and tomatoes, but not much. My garden is more like a sculpture park. It's full of statues. (interview 9)

A further distinctive trait of ruralising dispositions is their more stylised perspective on the rural way of life compared to the natives, whose lives are governed by the rural habitus. As a recurring element, our interviewees mentioned the peacefulness of rural life and its proximity to nature:

> Well, I like being close to nature, the fact that we live just beside the forest. That people are more attentive, more relaxed. It's much more peaceful. (interview 8)

> It's so wholesome here. This morning, for instance, I began working and noticed a large swarm of long-tailed tits in our backyard. Which is awesome. (interview 7)

Our interviewees prefer the distinctive traits of rural life: tranquillity, proximity to nature, an aesthetic physical environment, fewer people, greater freedom, etc. However, as pointed out earlier, these ruralising spatial dispositions are not identical to actual rural dispositions, the latter being less aesthetically oriented and more practical, defined for the most part by the cyclical constraints of crop and livestock farming (wheat, pigs, cattle), which the gentrifiers do not care for because they are at odds with their middle-class dispositions. It is also worth noting that the majority of rural gentrifiers were born in urban areas, a fact which, under "normal" circumstances, would be an indication of the urban habitus and a lower likelihood of seeking a rural life. Thus, the question arises: What led them to live in a rural community? Our interviewees' narratives and reflections on their biography are quite telling. Most of them reported childhood experiences that allowed them to enjoy a greater proximity to nature and to familiarise themselves with various aspects of rural life, as a counterweight to their urban spatial habitus. These include owning an apartment in an upscale residential area on the outskirts of Budapest; summer holidays spent with grandparents at Lake

Balaton; a plot of land in a forest not far from their urban residence. These aspects of non-urban life feed into their ruralising dispositions. Such experiences give rise to the emergence of spatial dispositions with an affinity for rural life. However, these ruralising dispositions arise without the constraints of a rural existence inculcating any actual rural habitus:

> So, the good thing is that I can have rural life here, a sort of "river cottage" lifestyle, relatively close to nature, without being completely isolated from the world. There's such a bustling life here in the summer that if you are a social person, or the type of person who likes to hang out with friends in a pub, there's such a buzz. And still, you don't have to be in Budapest, and what you see here are kind of select people. And there are certain times of the year when it gets very calm….So, how shall I put it, it has a certain cyclicality that I like. (interview 10)

By relying on their ruralising dispositions, newcomers take advantage of the perceived benefits of rural life. However, they also possess urban dispositions prompting them not to completely renounce the services and amenities offered by cities. From schooling to shopping and cultural activities, they continue to rely on urban services perceived as being of higher quality. Furthermore, as several of our interviewees mentioned, they sometimes find village life boring and need to get away, for example to a foreign country: "Well, there are so many advantages to rural life, I mean it's a good thing, but, but I don't know, I think it bores me to death, so anyway…this double life suits me" (interview 4).

Rural gentrifiers' blend of ruralising and urban dispositions also manifests in typical spatial practices. Their spatial action radius generally exceeds that of the indigenous population. Their former lives also testify to this, which they describe as being constantly on the move. This extends into the present since they travel far greater distances than the "natives" on a daily, weekly, monthly, and annual basis (e.g., for work, shopping, children's schooling, or leisure activities). This is both due to various subjectively imposed constraints, as their middle-class habitus prompts them to seek consumer goods and leisure activities that are more accessible in cities, and to their class strategy of investing significantly in their children's education, which determines their choice of urban schools. This underlines the existence of a blended spatial habitus among rural gentrifiers: a mixture of ruralising and urban dispositions, which they seek to reconcile more or less successfully (as suggested by their personal accounts of frictions). Generally speaking, while the rural habitus is more place-bound (Jóvér, 2023, p. 81), this blended spatial habitus makes the gentrifiers' urban dispositions compatible with the rural areas studied, thereby contributing to their accumulation of capital.

5. Conclusions

This study undertook an analysis of gentrification processes and the perceptions, patterns of distinction, inclusion, and exclusion of newcomers in selected rural settlements using the Bourdieu-inspired conceptual framework of (spatial) habitus. Spatial habitus was defined as a set of spatial dispositions that guide the perception and appreciation of spaces and generate spatial practices. Using the concept of spatial habitus in empirical investigations sheds light on how exactly actors appropriate physical spaces (Bourdieu, 1996, 1997, 2018; Reed-Danahay, 2020, p. 25).

Our findings suggest that it is not just a question of whether newcomers are welcomed and integrated into the communities by the locals, but also often a matter of rural gentrifiers' willingness to integrate.

The narratives of immigrants with an urban middle-class intellectual background reveal that inclusion and exclusion—besides the openness or closedness of the community—are largely shaped by the habitus-driven anticipations, perceptions, and motivations of migrants about their settlement of choice and its inhabitants. Based on our interviews, rural gentrifiers appear not as passive receivers of local processes of inclusion and exclusion, but as active agents capable and willing to shape their living conditions and spaces. Theirs is a blended spatial habitus, a mixture of ruralising dispositions idealising rural life, and various dispositions of the urban habitus. In terms of taste, members of this group display typically middle-class traits: First-and second-wave gentrifiers, with their supposedly "cultivated" taste, seek to restore the nostalgic past of rural life in an aestheticising manner (ruralising dispositions). Rural newcomers are motivated by a desire to live in a peaceful and aesthetic environment, and to achieve self-fulfilment through their lifestyle; however, by virtue of their urban dispositions, they remain attached to the benefits of urban life (a varied social life, urban services, etc.). In the examined rural settlements, this blended spatial habitus seeks to maximise the advantages of rural and urban life at the same time. Each group of newcomers, informed by their ruralising spatial dispositions (as opposed to the actual traditional rural habitus), imagines rural life as anything but a peasant existence. This is manifested in the absence of livestock farming, or at least in a preference for breeding animals suited to middle-class needs (e.g., ponies), rather than typical rural animals (pigs, cattle, sheep). Besides differences in taste and an implicit distinction from the indigenous inhabitants, this is also due to the burdensome nature of animal husbandry, which would interfere with their need for space and freedom.

Rural migrants—by virtue of their middle-class habitus and conscious or unconscious distinction from the culturally barbarous, as described by Bourdieu (1984, pp. 30–32)—appear less inclined to integrate into the pre-existing local society, seeking instead to transform it into a kind of archaic, nostalgic image of the village and community life (typically out of tune with the modernisation needs of the rural community). This reflects their preconceived notions of a "rural idyll" and the value choices and aesthetic and cultural patterns of their middle-class dispositions. However, the pioneers display notable differences compared to other groups in terms of their need to integrate into rural society because they could not rely on a pre-existing local network of gentrifiers (Tomay & Völgyi, 2022). Further research is needed on the extent of homogeneity in the (spatial) habitus of individuals involved in different waves of rural gentrification, to establish whether the differences between those opting for urban versus rural destinations are more pronounced, or if the attitudes, habits, and lifestyles of pioneers and later gentrifiers are more similar to each other (regardless of their choice of urban or rural area).

Since space is a key factor in constructing identities (Dobai, 2020), the newcomers are actively engaged (for shorter or longer periods) in the construction of an "imagined village," as they attempt to (re)shape the physiognomy, customs, and events of the village in line with their cultural capital and ruralising dispositions, which reflect their middle-class values, tastes, and aesthetic dispositions. However, their efforts are typically not well received. While the locals are (mostly) welcome to join this imagined community, if they are unable or unwilling to do so, inclusion comes to a halt, leading to the mere co-existence of parallel societies.

The (spatial) habitus and practices of gentrifiers create an implicit and explicit distinction vis-à-vis the "indigenous" local population. This is evident, on the one hand, in their recurring self-depictions as embodiments of authenticity and quality, while the preferences of locals are ridiculed for not matching their sophisticated taste. This dichotomy reflects the distinction drawn by members of the dominant classes

between “pure” and “barbarous” taste, as described by Bourdieu (1984, pp. 30–32). The spatial habitus of the gentrifiers turns them into dynamic agents in the transformation of their own space and the rural milieu. These processes are complemented by the relative closeness of the migrant group to indigenous residents in business and social life, providing them scant opportunities to participate in local entrepreneurial activities.

All this suggests that issues of inclusion and exclusion arise differently in the context of rural gentrification. Within migration, inclusion and exclusion are generally associated with the inflow of migrants seeking to become a permanent part of the life of a given community, where inclusion is vitally important (while exclusion indicates the rejection or failure of this aspiration). In this constellation, the host community has the greater agency and power. This, however, is far from evident if the newcomers are of a higher status relative to locals, as is clearly the case in rural gentrification. From the outset, middle-class gentrifiers strive to actively shape rural spaces according to their own tastes and interests, de-emphasising the need for inclusion. Accordingly, the local community does not represent the more powerful entity, demanding integration at all costs. Instead, the initiative shifts to rural gentrifiers who create spaces and conditions according to their spatial habitus, which does not necessarily require their inclusion into the local community. However, describing this as a mere reversal of asymmetrical roles, whereby the locals seek to be included by the newcomers, would be an oversimplification. Inclusion and exclusion are multilayered phenomena: For instance, while there is a clear dominance of newcomers in the local business sector and property market, this is not the case in interpersonal relations, where gentrifiers recognise that their outsider status will never grant them full admission among the locals.

In rural gentrification, both processes of inclusion to the local community and distinction from the locals are present. The (spatial) practices of rural gentrifiers appear to be signs of a “smart” class strategy to increase their space of possibilities. In this way, the blended spatial habitus of ruralising and urban dispositions, and the spatial practices they generate, contribute to the symbolic distinction between locals and urban fractions of the middle classes, whether consciously or unconsciously. All of this follows Bourdieu (1984, p. 483), who stresses the conversion of goods and practices into symbolic ones, thus creating the symbolic (and contributing to the actual) dominance of the ruling over the dominated classes. While our analysis focused on rural gentrifiers, our interviews with natives also allowed us to make some cautious observations about their experiences. From their point of view, urban settlers’ activities do not produce any major benefit, as they necessarily involve the partial displacement of indigenous residents. For instance, native residents frequently note that due to the significant rise in real estate prices, they find it increasingly difficult to purchase property. In addition, there is a growing tendency to sideline indigenous inhabitants’ rural habitus and repress typical rural spatial practices that contradict the gentrifiers’ ruralising spatial dispositions (e.g., banning the free movement of livestock on the streets). For native inhabitants, this arguably amounts to a fundamental experience of displacement. Again, social inequalities are inscribed into physical space and further reinforce them (Bourdieu, 1996, 1997, 2018). However, a radically new and interesting situation arises with the emergence of third-wave gentrifiers, i.e., affluent, upper-middle-class entrepreneurs with a surplus of economic capital. Whether the early gentrifiers will close ranks with the locals against their new common adversary is a question for future research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request. The data is not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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ARTICLE

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The Bosnian House: Trajectories of (Non-)Return Among Bosnian Roma in a Roman Shanty

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Abstract

This article draws on materials collected during ethnographic fieldwork among Bosnian Roma refugees who reconstructed homes in an urban shanty at the periphery of Rome (Italy). In the last two decades, many of these Roma started building or refurbishing houses in villages in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, close to the Serbian Republic (where their former home village is now situated). The construction, refurbishing, and maintenance of these houses played (and still play) a role in the local economy; they also changed the local landscape and became the mark of a new but intermittent presence in post-Dayton Bosnia. The houses and the transnational practices connected to them have become tokens of economic success and aspirations that revolve around both the Bosnian context and the Roman one. They also express nostalgic attachments to a lost homeland radically transformed by war, foreign interventions, and the advent of the market economy and eventually turned into an unfamiliar place. This article builds on the literature on transnational migration and material culture and explores the ambivalence and complexity of transnational trajectories that stretch between an urban context in the EU and a rural one in non-EU and reveals complex scenarios of identity, movements, and unlikely returns.

Keywords

Bosnia and Herzegovina; Bosnian Roma; house-making; nomad camps; refugees; returns; Rome

1. Introduction

I sit on a worn sofa in a self-built veranda in a nomad camp at the periphery of Rome. It is a September afternoon in 2023. Osman (a pseudonym, like all other persons' names in this article, respecting the privacy of my interlocutors) sits next to me, complaining about the pain in his back, a common affliction among the camp's inhabitants, whose livelihoods gravitate around the collection of scrap metal. In my left hand, I hold

a hand-rolled cigarette with Bosnian tobacco, which Muradif (Osman's uncle) brought from a recent trip to Bosnia. The chipped cup in my right hand is, like the sofa, a byproduct of scrap-metal collection: "Good persons" getting rid of metals often give away other stuff. The cup contains sweet, scorching coffee prepared "the Bosnian way." Drinking it while sitting together, alternating conversations and silence, is a symbolically loaded gesture that expresses and produces social and emotional vicinity; it is embedded in the old ways that my hosts, like many diasporic Bosnian Roma—cf. Saletti Salza (2003)—brought from their home country. "What shall I do?" rhetorically asks Osman. He continues:

> I like it here, but it's harsh: Look at the rats, the cockroaches infesting the interstices of the walls, the broken pipes….We spent one month without electricity this winter! Always a problem, and the city authorities don't care. What are we, beasts? You saw how it is in my house in Bosnia! There, everything is clean, tidy, new! Not like this mess.

Osman knows I can judge his words by myself: In 2018, I accompanied him and other Roma of the camp to a village in eastern Bosnia, where he and many of the camp's inhabitants have properties. The few weeks spent there were punctuated by works and renovations: Osman had a bathroom constructed, leaks in the roof fixed, and old window frames replaced by new ones. Osman's brother hired workers to dig a new drainage around the house he recently built on an adjacent plot. Sitting on the sofa, Osman is now proudly evoking the house to draw a stark contrast with the living conditions in the camp. But I also notice a contrast between this assertion and the words he pronounced a few days earlier when he said: "This house has eaten all our savings, all our energy…and what for? It stays there, I live here, my kids want to be here….It's not like before, better to sell and be done with it!"

I often encountered such contrasting statements during my fieldwork; they express a complex and ambivalent situation, which, in this article, I try to unpack. Under attention are transnational practices and imageries of Bosnian Roma refugees whose everyday existence unfolds in an urban ghetto in the Roman peripheries but whose movements and material and emotional investments are also directed to rural villages in the post-Yugoslav space. Research demonstrated that homemaking processes may occur simultaneously in separated yet interconnected spaces (Brun, 2015; Van Hear, 2014) and temporalities (Ballinger, 2012). Multiple, fragmented, and at times conflicting experiences of "home" thus combine, also simultaneously, for instance, when returns to the ancestral land (either to resettle or just for a visit) become a source of migrants' "surprise, confusion and disappointment" (Maruyama et al., 2010, p. 3; see also Wessendorf, 2007; Wojtynska, 2016). The intricacies of return and homemaking are extremely evident in the post-Yugoslav context. In the aftermath of the 1990s conflict, many refugees avoided resettling in their home villages if another ethno-national group controlled these. More often, in the difficult search for a normal life, they ended up in places populated and governed by their ethno-national group, but which they never inhabited before (so-called "majority returns"). Trapped between displacement and emplacement and belonging and non-belonging, refugees remained strategically mobile and dispersed in and out of the post-Yugoslav context. Returns thus proved to be problematic, partial, and temporary, and homemaking turned out to be an incomplete, multi-situated, and continually negotiated process (Čapo, 2015; Jansen, 2007; Skrbiš, 2007; Stefansson, 2006, 2010).

This study explores the complexity of returns in the post-Yugoslav space by examining the intersection of Roma mobility and material culture. Several studies have addressed the making of houses in contexts of

transnational migration. Scholars conceptualized houses as "dynamic material forms" (Dalakoglou, 2010, p. 762) embedded in flows of materials, money, and persons and rising at the intersection of multiple discourses concerning home, nation, race, gender, and generation (see also Basu & Coleman, 2008). Some have explored how houses in the host country contribute to the (albeit partial and incomplete) homemaking processes in contexts of forced displacement and diaspora (Brun, 2015; Miller, 2008). Others focused on the construction or refurbishing of houses in the home country and argued that houses are an economic investment and testimony to a successful migratory trajectory; they may act as a "proxy presence" in their owners' absence (Dalakoglou, 2010) but also mark the distance that at times develops between migrants and their original background (Smith & Mazzucato, 2009).

As per the specifics of Roma migration, research underlined the heterogeneity of migration strategies and reflected on the complex relations that migrant Roma develop with home and host countries (Durst & Nagy, 2018; Matras & Leggio, 2018). Roma returns to the post-Yugoslav space attracted less attention but were nonetheless addressed by works (Krasniqi & Stjepanović, 2015; Sardelić, 2018) that evidenced the impact of poverty and anti-Gypsyism on Roma returnees. Scholars also researched the nexus between Roma migration and the making of houses in the home country (especially from the female perspective); they thus conceptualized houses as processual entities that express both attachment to the place of origin and upward socio-economic mobility (Benarrosh-Orsoni, 2019; Tesar, 2016). These studies, however, focused predominantly on Romanian Roma and thus on situations in which home villages remain reference points of Roma transnational circuits. The intersection of Roma multi-sited house- and homemaking practices in the post-Yugoslav context, instead, remains largely unexplored.

This article addresses this gap of knowledge by drawing on ethnographic materials collected over 20 years of research among a network of Bosnian Roma families who define themselves as *Xoraxané* (that is, Muslim) and more specifically as *Xomá* (a term which, for analytical purposes, I will hereon adopt to distinguish them from other Roma groups and individuals, including other Bosnian *Xoraxané* Roma). Identity and sense of belonging to the restricted *Xomá* community (about 300–400 persons) are based on a thick web of family ties and a history of cohabitation and working collaboration in Bosnia and, later, in Rome. The *Xomá* network is then connected to a larger network of diasporic Yugoslav Roma (predominantly *Xoraxané*) stretching across Italy, the EU, North America, and the post-Yugoslav space, with whom *Xomá* share friendship, family linkages (due to inter-group marriages), and intermittent experiences of cohabitation in Rome's nomad camps. I started following the vicissitudes of *Xomá* families in 2001 when conducting participant observation in Roman shanties inhabited by Yugoslav Roma. After two years of fieldwork, I moved to Iceland but maintained a continuity of research through regular return trips to the *Xomá* settlement in Rome. Although embedded in this long history of relation, this article builds primarily on materials that emerged from research activities conducted in the last six years and combined digital ethnography with traditional forms of multi-sited ethnography in Rome, Bosnia, and the Serbian Republic.

In pre-war Bosnia, *the Xomá* dwelled in houses, practiced seasonal itinerant economic activities (such as scrap metal collection and the sale of vegetables in markets), and lived what they nostalgically recall as "a peaceful and happy life" (Solimene, 2019). Since they arrived in Rome in 1992, instead, they have been facing the xenophobia and anti-Gypsyism that pervade Italian society (cf. Hepworth, 2014; Tosi Cambini & Beluschi Fabeni, 2017). Well documented are episodes of grassroots aversion towards the Roma population in Rome. Renowned are also the institutional repressive and exclusionary practices that revolved around the

so-called "nomad camps' policy" and exposed Roma to discrimination, dehumanization, and ghettoization in urban shanties (Daniele, 2011; Sigona, 2011; Solimene, 2018). At present, most *Xomá* have Bosnian citizenship and a regular permit to stay in Italy (though some still lack a visa); young generations, born in Italy, are acquiring Italian citizenship. However, most live in a state-run nomad camp situated outside the urban area. The camp, fenced and guarded by cameras and police, is a conglomerate of portacabins provided by the city authorities 20 years ago and now battered by time and overcrowding. Self-made constructions and trailers were subsequently added by its inhabitants. Spontaneous readjustments of the dwelling space, formally prohibited but de facto tolerated, enabled the *Xomá* to compensate for the lack of infrastructure and maintenance and to re-appropriate an externally imposed and regimented space and turn it into a home. Homemaking also builds on domesticating the urban territory, which the *Xomá* frequent every day for working activities (mainly scrap-metal collection), everyday chores (buying food, attending schools, going to the doctor), and leisure (going to the gym, cinema, restaurant, or visiting a relative outside the camp). Though rarely recognized, their long-standing rootedness in the city's local economic, social, and cultural fabric disclaims reductive portraits of the *Xomá* as dangerous outsiders segregated in an urban ghetto (Solimene, 2022).

As I will explain in the following pages, in the last two decades, many *Xomá* started building or refurbishing houses located in Bosnian villages that they never inhabited before. Indeed, after the war, their former home village ended up in the Serbian Republic, an entity created by the Dayton agreements (cf. Donais, 2005; Pugh, 2002). Like many other Bosniaks (Muslim Bosnians), most *Xomá* avoid traveling there for fear of discrimination by the Serbian majority. I will argue that the Bosnian houses became the mark of a new but intermittent *Xomá* presence in post-Dayton Bosnia, which played (and still plays) a role in the local economy and contributed to changing the local landscape. Talking about a (majority) return, however, would be an error. Indeed, the intricacies of returns in Bosnia are further complicated by the *Xomá* rootedness in Rome and the impact of intersecting forms of anti-Gypsyism consolidated in both the Roman and the Bosnian contexts. The Bosnian houses will thus be the lens to explore the ambivalences and complexity of transnational practices that connect a Roman shanty to rural villages in eastern Bosnia and thread together nostalgic memories and future aspirations. This article thus unpacks complicated scenarios of identity, inter-ethnic relations, and movements, whose future implications for the *Xomá* remain highly unpredictable.

2. "Going to Bosnia": From Returns to Departures

When in 1992, the Serbian paramilitary troops attacked their home village, the *Xomá* rushed out of their houses and fled; through different adventurous routes, they eventually reunited in an informal shanty in Rome, where some relatives had been dwelling for years. The trajectories of the *Xomá* and the relatives who initially hosted them in Rome crossed on various occasions, reflecting complicated relations where family ties and a sense of common belonging intersected with recurring animosity between the two networks. At the time of the *Xomá* arrival, the exceptional circumstance temporarily set aside old frictions and for some years *Xomá* shared with their relatives in Rome intersecting dimensions of (in)formality: housing (illegal settlements that lacked any kind of infrastructure), juridical (nobody had a visa or the refugee status formally recognized, and many lacked any official document attesting to their identity), and economic (begging, peddling, and scrap-metal collection without authorization). However, the rise of new tensions led the two groups of families toward separate but not completely disconnected paths (for a detailed analysis on regard see Solimene, 2018, 2019).

When I first met them in 2001, the *Xomá* still dwelled in an informal settlement and lacked visas, but had gradually got acquainted with the Eternal City, where they eventually reconstructed a sense of home and normalcy (Solimene, 2022). They were grateful that despite the war and forced displacement, they were still living together (like they once did in their home village) and supported each other against the challenges implied by lack of documents and working and housing informality. However, the sense of loss stirred by the collapse of former Yugoslavia was very tangible. Bits of the lost home filled various aspects of daily life in the camp: food, music, celebrations, daily practices of hospitality, and neighborliness were all expressions of nostalgic attachment. Bosnia was also maintained alive by memories about the good life before the war, "when Tito was alive and the denigrative word *Cigan* [Gypsy] was prohibited by law," when the *Xomá* traveled freely in summer and spent winters in their houses, cultivating the good relations with neighbors (Roma and non-Roma; Solimene, 2019).

For years, the *Xomá* nourished the dream of a return to pre-war normalcy. After the official end of the hostilities, many had ventured into exploratory journeys back to their home village, even if undocumented. In my first years of fieldwork, some kept returning from Bosnia with news, pictures of their houses, and accounts of friendly encounters with old neighbors and with the "good persons" who were "taking care" of the house. The "good persons" were Serbian refugees occupying houses informally; but their presence guaranteed that a house would not be dismantled, vandalized, or ruined. Nonetheless, the lingering shadow of a definitive loss grew stronger at each visit, fueled by the awareness that former Bosniak inhabitants had left and that those "taking care" of a house might eventually occupy it indefinitely—with or without the owner's consent.

The turn of the century, therefore, coincided with the intersection of several processes. On the one hand, realistic resignation replaced nostalgic fantasies of a return to the past. The relational and emotional entity once revolving around, and symbolized by, the material space of the home-village had been completely erased by war, forced displacement, and the demographic earthquake following Dayton's treatise—which substantiated the (ethno)national ideologies that the war had radicalized (Donais, 2005; Harland, 2017; Jansen, 2007). On the other hand, a new chapter of the *Xomá* lives had commenced in Rome, where the first steps were made toward regularizing their position as immigrants, and their housing situation. *Xomá* could now travel abroad and come back without incurring problems with Italian law. By obtaining a registered residence in the state-run camp they inhabit today, they formally accessed the right to health, education, and employment (on the Italian mechanism of registered residence see Gargiulo, 2011). These processes redirected *Xomá* nostalgic aspirations, resources, and trajectories elsewhere. This elsewhere was still Bosnia, but "Bosnia," I came to realize, meant many things: It was the lost home that had existed before the war, the post-war entity created by the Dayton agreements, and the blurring of these two entities and of the temporalities in which they were embedded (cf. Solimene, 2019). Finally, "Bosnia" also referred to a more specific territory, centered around the city of Tuzla, where the *Xomá* had started buying properties.

Tuzla is situated in the north-eastern part of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, near the border with the Serbian Republic. Being among the UN Safe Areas hosting a UNPROFOR contingent during the war (Harland, 2017), its shelling was (relatively) limited; local non-Roma acquaintances of the *Xomá* also emphasized the role of a self-organized militia defending the city (see also Calori, 2015). Tuzla was and still is an important administrative and economic center in the region, renowned for its power plant and the coal mines alimenting it. The *Xomá* also mention the market, which many frequented in the old days. Many assert

(but the issue is debated among *Xomá*) that the first to buy a property in the area were Osman and Fadila, who in 2006, spotted a sign of a house on sale while driving on the road that connects Sarajevo to Tuzla. Tuzla was a familiar place, which both had frequented in pre-war times; besides, Fadila's father had spent his childhood there, and her sister lived (and still lives) in its surroundings, married to a local Rom. The house on sale was in a village mainly inhabited by poor people because, although within the administrative territory of Tuzla, it stands on the surrounding hills and in proximity to the power plant and its venomous fumes (cf. Forti, 2021; Holland & Pranjić, 2013). The owner was a local Rom named Medo (now defunct, whom many describe as a wealthy and well-connected person), who had purchased a plot nearby, where he was building a bigger house.

Osman and Fadila bought Medo's house with the savings from the scrap metal collection and the sale of the house in their home village; Bahrudin, a non-Roma acquaintance of Medo's with connections in the local administration, acted as a broker and helped with the bureaucracy and practicalities related to the purchase. In the arch of a decade, almost all *Xomá* between 40 and 60 years sold their old houses (if they could) and bought plots of lands and/or houses in the same area, preferably near properties owned by close relatives, who often would previously inquire and pledge for them in front of local sellers. Bahrudin became one of the reference points for stipulating contracts, requesting building permits, or obtaining the connection to telephone, electricity, and water. In the arch of a few years, Tuzla became a new landmark in the mental maps of the *Xomá*. "Going to Bosnia" or "to our country" no longer referred to a return trip to the home village but rather to departures to villages near Tuzla, which the *Xomá* had never inhabited before.

Bosnia thus became the destination for short stays, usually in summertime, when the large scrap metal collectors in Rome close. Stays in Tuzla gravitated around the construction/refurbishing of the new houses. *Xomá* who didn't own a house or whose house was still uninhabitable, found hospitality in the houses of a relative they were traveling with or rented a room at a hotel nearby. These sojourns also served other practical issues such as renovating Bosnian documents (for instance, a driving license), getting a tooth fixed at a local dentist (cheaper than in Italy), or exploring the possibilities of buying a property. Studies on emigrants visiting their home country (Skrbiš, 2007; Wojtynska, 2016) showed that the distinction between return visits and tourism may be blurry. This is the case of the *Xomá*, who in the last years have been referring to a trip to Bosnia as a "holiday." Indeed, trips entail exciting travel with the ferry boat across the Adriatic Sea and a stop in a restaurant in Jablanica; a few *Xomá* even spend some days in popular tourist locations, in Croatia or on the shores of Bosnian lakes. The main destination of the "holiday," however, remains Tuzla, and most *Xomá* are content with spending some time away from daily life in Rome, enjoying a place they (or their relatives) legally own, and working on its construction/refurbishing, meeting other *Xomá* or Roma acquaintances, chitchatting with a neighbor, or roasting a lamb. Life in small villages is monotonous, but going downtown is always exciting: *Xomá* relish a walk around the street market in Tuzla, or the fresh summer evenings in the historic center, where they blend with the crowd of locals and tourists, stroll around, peek at shops, buy a child a toy at the store owned by Chinese migrants, eat *čevabi* or *palačinke* at a restaurant, or sit at a table outside to enjoy coffee, the local beer Tuzlanska, narghile and/or live music. These spatial practices contrast with those characterizing daily life in Rome, where *Xomá* keep out of the center. Not only the *Xomá* cannot collect scrap metal in Roman central districts, but they are often identified as the incarnation of a negative stereotype there—the Gypsies/Nomads—and thus experience discrimination and harassment, especially by the police. Therefore, they prefer frequenting peripheries and conurbations where they have established friendly personal relations with the local population and authorities, and thus feel relatively safe.

The break from the everyday routine, which moves especially (but not exclusively) tourists (O'Reilly, 2003), has thus quite profound meanings for the *Xomá*: It means a respite from the biopolitical discourses that treat Roma as dangerous criminals, filthy and miserable Gypsies segregated in the nomad camps. In Tuzla, unlike in Rome, the *Xomá* live in a house and do not have to continually face police harassment or forms of everyday racism. As once asserted while walking in Tuzla's center: "Here people treat us with respect, even when they see that we are *Cigani* because we are different from the local ones…you see how these go around, dirty, dressed in rags…here we don't go working with metals, we always dress clean and tidy." In Tuzla, in other words, the *Xomá* feel like well-off and respectable foreigners coming from a globally renowned city (Rome) and enjoying a holiday. Their nice shiny cars, elegant and clean clothes, and above all (at least in their eyes) their houses (or potential ones) would testify to their economic success but also, somehow, to an alleged socio-cultural superiority over local Roma, whom many (included the *Xomá*) frown upon for their destitute conditions and (alleged) lack of education and culture. While interrupting the routine of scrap-metal collection, life in camps, and Italian racism and anti-Gypsyism, in Bosnia the *Xomá* would also eschew the despite and discrimination that target, instead, local Roma, many of whom (except a relatively prosperous minority) struggle with poverty and are pretty visible while begging or searching for scraps on the roads or the city center. This narrative often emerges when *Xomá* talk about Bosnia, especially when complaining about the discrimination they suffer in Rome. Nonetheless, it only presents one side of the coin; in the following sections of the article, I will address the other side and the complexities and ambiguities that hide behind the *Xomá* experience of Bosnia.

3. Foreigners' Houses

The *Xomá* are not the only diasporic Roma who, in the last decade, bought properties in the post-Yugoslav space. I met and heard of many other Bosnian Roma who now live in Italy and the Western EU and have made similar investments. The *Xomá* intermittent presence in the Tuzla area is thus part of larger transnational flows of diasporic Roma (see Sardelić, 2018), which in turn are embedded in the wider and much debated politico-economic transformations that occurred after the 1990s wars in the name of peace and neoliberal democracy (Donais, 2005; Jansen, 2007; Pugh, 2002; Stefansson, 2010). In Tuzla, the advent of the market economy materialized in the opening of shiny malls ("like in America," the *Xomá* comment) and chains such as Bingo and Konsum, the flourishing of the tourism industry and the arrival of big and small foreign investors—including members of the diaspora based abroad (Forti, 2021; see also Halilovich & Efendić, 2019). However not all former inhabitants returned after the end of the hostilities, and the policy of majority returns and the contemporary flows of transnational migration (Bergesio & Bialasiewicz, 2023) contributed to the area's demographic reshuffling. It is worth also mentioning the impacts of "foreign proselytizing and Islamic activism" (Hesová & Rašidagić, 2020, p. 721) from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Since the 1990s, these countries joined Western ones in the (re)construction of infrastructures (libraries, schools, youth centers); they also introduced forms of Islam that diverge from Bosnian traditional syncretism and are now spread among Bosniaks educated in madrassas (in Bosnia and abroad) and among former foreign fighters (who were granted citizenship in return for their support during the war).

These changes are visible (at least partly) also in the countryside, which is punctuated by building sites and houses under construction (and often inhabited only intermittently). Bahrudin (the broker) told me that most of these construction works are financed with remittances from abroad—especially in Germany. Like in the cases described by Smith and Mazzucato (2009), emigrants' houses often stem out of the surrounding landscape in terms of dimensions, shape, and esthetics. While typical rural houses are relatively modest and

surrounded by orchards, emigrants' houses have a suburban flare: They are large, sumptuous, square-shaped; their façade is filled with large mirror windows and balconies; wrought-iron railings replace fences fabricated with cheap materials; orchards are replaced by spacious garages, gardens, or bare ground where sometimes piles of second-hand merchandise brought from the EU (working and gardening tools, bicycles, scooters, etc.) are displayed for sale. New properties thus communicate social, cultural, and esthetic distance from the rural context surrounding them, a distance which the wealth (mainly) generated by a successful migratory trajectory in Western EU expresses and (re)produces (see also Halilovich & Efendić, 2019). The *Xomá* house-making activities contributed to altering the local architectural landscape. Some *Xomá* built houses anew (often bulldozing old constructions and orchards); others made visible alterations, adding a floor, balconies, or a garage. Nevertheless, contrary to the Romanian case, where Roma emigrants' houses often exhibit specific ethnic esthetic (Benarrosh-Orsoni, 2019; Tesar, 2016), *Xomá* houses look, from the outside, much like those of successful non-Roma emigrants. It is only inside that a specific *Xomá* taste emerges, materialized in sofas that cover the whole perimeter of a living room, ornate tapestries, or walls decorated with logos of Armani, Versace, or Louis Vitton.

The *Xomá* house-making practices rely on building materials, furniture, ornamental objects, and household items that *Xomá* find while collecting scrap metals in Rome and transport to Bosnia with their vans. Many things, however, are bought in loco. I refer mainly to items such as kitchen and bathroom furniture (ironically, often made in Italy and surprisingly expensive) that *Xomá* want brand-new and of design quality. Local stores, therefore, have found in the *Xomá* regular and prodigal customers. The same is true for local companies and workers in the building sector, to whom the *Xomá*—who lack know-how (their carpentry skills are basic and self-learned) and tools (especially heavy machinery) but are continually investing in improvements, enlargement, and refurbishing—are a source of regular income. *Xomá* desires to personally choose materials and control major works further swells the costs because of the high demand for workers in the building sector in summer. Moreover, while *Xomá* can easily judge esthetic results, quality control is more problematic because flaws become evident with the arrival of rains, frost, and snow (when *Xomá* are already gone). This situation forces *Xomá* to trust local workers' skills and integrity, even if, judging from the rate of problems related to leaks and humidity, my impression is that even crucial works (concerning roof, windows, and drainage) are sometimes poorly executed; this, in turn, implies repairs and thus additional costs. The flow of money that the *Xomá* inject into the local economy is thus considerable and not limited to their short summer stays: During the whole year, they send money to trusted local non-Roma who go after unfinished works, repairs, and maintenance.

The works on the house, and the expenses related to them, are a common topic of conversation among *Xomá*, who not rarely boast about them with pride. In the cases described by Tesar (2016) and Benarrosch-Orsoni (2019), the house and the money spent on a house in the home village testify, in front of the local population (Roma and non-Roma), to the owner's economic success and reputation; in some cases, they thus subvert the local power relations that in pre-migration time forced Roma in subaltern position due to their lower socio-economic conditions. In the *Xomá* case, things are similar, but with a slight difference. The care and resources invested in a house communicate to the non-Roma local population a commonality of morality and tastes, which is functional to distinguish *Xomá* from the local *Cigani*, whose poor habitations would be a mark of social discrimination but also of an alleged lack of "culture" and "dignity." Therefore, the house elevates the *Xomá* from the status of subaltern racialized subjects suffered by many local Roma. It also distinguishes the *Xomá* from many poor inhabitants of rural villages, who cannot afford new and bigger houses. However, the local ethno-scape is not the main stage in which houses (and their costs) impact reputation. *Xomá* are aware

that other inhabitants of the camp in Rome, relatives living elsewhere in the city, or in Italy or the EU, and other diasporic Roma who invest(ed) in properties in the Tuzla area (and more generally the post-Yugoslav space) look (in person or on social media) at each other's properties, compare them, exchange comments, praise or criticize location, dimensions, architectural style, quality of the materials, and the related costs. It is this larger, transnational Roma audience, whose presence in villages around Tuzla is intermittent and new (and therefore whose identity is only relatively affected by the local history of unequal interethnic relations), which represents the main target of a carefully tailored self-representation that makes the house (and the money actually or potentially spent for it) a token of one's character, tastes, resourcefulness, and respectability. But the "conspicuous consumption" (Tesar, 2016) linked to the house is a two-edged sword: It may uplift one's reputation as well as undermine it because money should be spent properly. For instance, many *Xomá* look down on Žarko, a distant relative who spent a fortune on his house. The building's glamour, which once reflected his wealth and attracted admiration, now stirs disapproval by those who look at the unfinished (and uninhabitable) house going into ruin while Žarko, as the gossip goes, "after spending all his money, ended up living like a trump in Bosnian villages, his wife away and his children under the care of a poor Bosnian woman who only feeds them potatoes." Another more common (and less dramatic) circumstance in which the expenses on a house may trump one's reputation is when they are considered excessive. Many are, according to the *Xomá*, subterfuges when not scams, which locals intentionally tailor to affluent outsiders to squeeze their money. The same money that elevates the *Xomá* status, therefore, can be also a sign of gullibility, and a mark of aloofness from the local context. This ambivalence between belonging and not belonging, a recurrent trope of conversation about Bosnia, will be discussed in the last section.

4. Strangers at Home

The *Xomá* intermittent presence in the Tuzla area is not devoid of ambiguities: While working on their image of wealthy and respectable urbanites who do not mingle with the local "Gypsies," the *Xomá* also claim a Bosniak identity, which locals, in many circumstances, grant them. *Xomá* are, after all, Muslim refugees forcedly dislocated by the war, whose nostalgic attachment to Yugoslavia—a widespread sentiment in contemporary Bosnia, also among young generations (Jansen, 2007; Stefansson, 2006, 2010)—is symbolized and reproduced by their houses. Nostalgia is an essential element at play during the travels to Bosnia. On the way to Tuzla, nostalgic imagery surfaces when praising the beauty of landscapes, the clarity of waters, and the taste of food. Upon arrival, the idyllic landscape of social interactions and good neighborliness (*komšiluk*), which is the central trope of Yugonostalgia (Stefansson, 2010), is reawakened by casual encounters with persons belonging to the local ethno-scape (such as the owner of a grocery across the road, or the man selling vegetables in the parking lot nearby) and visits of neighbors (Roma and non-Roma, Bosniaks, and Croats), who drop by at the house entrance and welcome the newly arrived, exchange news, comment on the economic or political situation, or disclose gossip. The feeling of homeliness emerges especially in the interactions with the "good persons" taking care of the house in the *Xomá* absence, who are among the first and more assiduous visitors, as they come to exchange reciprocal pleasantries and small talk, but also to report on the work done during the year and discuss the plans for the following weeks.

The horizon of social relations based on "brotherhood and unity" that had once characterized Yugoslavia is not only the fruit of *Xomá* imagination; as Bahrudin once underlined: "We are all the same: no matter if you are Croat, Bosniak, Serb or Gypsy…or Italian…what matters is that you are a good person" (see also Calori, 2015). However, the nostalgia about a shared idealized past, and the interaction during the summer stays,

bring *Xomá* and locals together only up to a certain point. The initial feeling of homeliness, indeed, gradually weakens with the rising impression of aloofness from the local socio-cultural fabric. No *Xomá* grew up in the area where now they have properties nor spent enough time in their new house to consider it their "home" or to consider the village in which the house is located as their village, as it eventually occurred with a shack in a Roman camp. The *Xomá* often feel like wealthy foreigners that locals learned to squeeze in every possible way. For example, the police might be "polite," *Xomá* assert, "but they stop us on the road because they see a foreign plate. So, they invent some problem, and then say they will close one eye if we buy them a coffee" (that is, a small bribe). Complaints regard also the local building companies and workers, who "drain our savings without even guaranteeing a good result." In general, interactions with the local population remain superficial and impersonal: "Yes, they are kind to us…but you never know how much you can trust them…they only mind their own business." Many also talk about a tension beneath a façade of peaceful relations, the fruit of the scars of the war, and the constant preoccupation about its return: "Here everybody is armed, they are ready for war…you always need to be careful…if you say the wrong word or look the wrong way, you can get into trouble." Anti-Gypsy sentiments further complicate interactions with locals. Presenting themselves as wealthy outsiders and avoiding mingling with the local Roma in public spaces do not always preserve *Xomá* from distrustful gazes. Alleged ethnic markers such as the presence of many children, gold jewelry, a scarf to hold a baby, breastfeeding in public, darker skin complexion, or Romani language may trigger the adverse reaction of a street vendor, a waiter, or an administrator.

There are exceptions to this landscape of impersonal relations. For example, Osman and Fadila have built an intimate relationship with the family of Izbet, the non-Roma man who had built their house and worked on its renovations. After Izbet's death, his sons took the legacy and now, together with their mother, take care of the house in Osman's and Fadila's absence and remain in regular contact with them during the winter. "These are reliable people" Osman and Fadila assert, to the point that they are among the few non-Roma regularly invited to sit and drink coffee and keep the keys of the house during winter. The same is true for Bahrudin, the broker, who is "always ready to help" and keeps keys and documents (in case he needs them, but also to keep them safe). Nonetheless, even the genuine attachment these persons demonstrate may be stained, in the eyes of the *Xomá*, by self-interest:

> Yes, they are good people, and you can trust them; if you ask something, they will do it. But they don't lift a finger without asking for money…after all, can you blame them? There's no work in Bosnia.

Finally, ambivalence also characterizes considerations about local Roma, with whom the *Xomá* share the label *Cigani* (which non-Roma locals ascribe them) and a complicated (but undenied) sense of belonging based on a common Roma identity; but with whom interactions are mostly occasional and impersonal. "They are *Xoraxané*, like us, we speak the same language," *Xomá* assert; however, different places of origin, migratory trajectories and family ties, and a lack of regular contact express and produce a distance in social, economic, and cultural terms. Recent developments might indicate a process of familiarization to the local Roma network. For example, some young *Xomá* recently married girls belonging to local Roma families. However, the bride's parents were mainly family friends from pre-war times, who ended up living in the Tuzla area (or owning a house there, which they visit in summer), and only in a few cases were they new acquaintances among the local Roma. The fact, then, that two marriages with local Roma girls did not end well alimented the existing imagery that depicts the local Roma as untrustworthy, if not dangerous. Ordinary misery and uncanny behaviors are, according to the *Xomá*, quite common; there are also rumors of local

Roma being behind the thefts that occurred in some houses; I even heard stories of attempted kidnappings of young *Xomá* girls (for, *Xomá* claim, ransom, forced marriage, or trafficking of organs). This imagery especially targets Roma who, at some times, lived in the EU, and whose return to Bosnia was caused by the failure of the migratory path. These Roma, among whom are even distant relatives or persons who in the 1990s lived in the same Roman camp the *Xomá* dwelled in, are considered persons whose lack of judgment led them to "wrong choices" and no other place to go than a poor Bosnian village, where they either live by begging and collecting bottles and scraps, like the stereotypical poor *Cigani*, or become "small gangsters" doomed to the ill-reputed Bosnian jails.

Therefore, in Bosnia, one may have an acquaintance, an in-law, an old friend, or even a close relative (as Fadila); sometimes, families fragmented by the diaspora reunite in Bosnia: In 2019, Fadila and her sister met their mother and brothers (who now live in the US). However, these ties are weakened by distance in the normalcy of daily life, and their re-compositions in Bosnia are ephemeral and irregular because money, visa (in the last years, the pandemic) dictate the possibility of a sojourn to Bosnia, and its length (which rarely exceeds two or three weeks). Besides, going to Bosnia implies a (temporary) detachment from the family members with whom one shares everyday life in Rome. Indeed, extended families rarely move in blocks from the camp; instead, each domestic unit moves independently from the others and usually leaves someone behind to take care of the shack (or simply because there are not enough seats in a car). Therefore, while Rome is considered "home," a place where, despite all, the *Xomá* feel part of the social, cultural, and economic fabric, and where they live immersed in the communal life of the camp, Bosnia seems instead an unfamiliar place that the *Xomá* are acquainted with, but where they feel "alone" and estranged in their own houses. This is true especially for young *Xomá*, born in and used to Rome, who in summer enjoy the excitement of the travel to Bosnia and of dwelling in a house, but shortly after start longing for the relations and practices they left in Rome, and even for the shacks in the camp, which constitute the stage of their normalcy (Solimene, 2022). In other words, it is in Rome, and not in a house in Bosnia, that the *Xomá* feel at home; because Bosnia is a place full of houses but devoid of the meaningful relations (among Roma and non-Roma) that shape the *Xomá* individual and collective sense of identity and place in the world, and thus that make a place home.

5. Conclusions

This article presented the paradoxical situation of Bosnian Roma refugees who, after reconstructing their "home" in a state-run ghetto in Rome, eventually invested in properties in their alleged homeland, Bosnia, but away from their former home village. The rapidity with which transnational practices related to the houses in Bosnia spread in the *Xomá* community might have suggested that a process of (majority) return—at least at an embryonic stage—was taking place; the fact that the disposition of properties in the Tuzla area tended to translate family linkages in spatial terms might have been interpreted as an attempt to recreate, in Bosnia, the village that the *Xomá* had reconstructed in the camp. Reflecting on that period, some *Xomá* seem to acknowledge this. However, they also acknowledge that the growing awareness of the structural problems scourging post-Dayton Bosnia (unemployment, corruption, nationalism, and anti-Romani sentiments) eventually discouraged the fantasies of resettling that, more or less consciously, had initially accompanied the purchase of houses in Tuzla. The result is that, after many years, going to Bosnia has acquired the form of a departure rather than a return. Stays in Bosnia are a holiday, appreciated because they are a break from everyday life in Rome, the camp, work, police harassment, Italians' xenophobia, and anti-Gypsyism; but they also suspend the normalcy that the *Xomá* have, with time, reconstructed in Rome.

What the houses in Bosnia stand for, therefore, remains drenched in ambiguities and uncertainties. Houses differentiate *Xomá* from "root tourists" (cf. Maruyama et al., 2010; Skrbiš, 2007) but do not make them returnees either; they are vehicles and symbols of the *Xomá* presence in but also absence from Bosnia; they are testimony of their attachment to an ancestral land, but also of the estrangement from post-Dayton Bosnia. Around the houses revolve Yugo-nostalgic memories that (especially among elder *Xomá*) find only fragile materialization in the present, transnational practices and imageries that make life in nomad camps and the Roman peripheries easier to endure and future trajectories that, ironically, might no longer involve Bosnia. Today, the material and emotional investment in the Bosnian houses intertwines with afterthoughts about whether this enterprise was worth it, after all, and whether (as many young *Xomá* assert, contesting their parents' choices) one might be better off, instead, by selling the Bosnian house.

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Conflict of Interests

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