

A collective sigh of relief: Local reactions to the establishment of new asylum centers in Norway

Acta Sociologica

1–13

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DOI: 10.1177/0001699319833143

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Abstract

This article investigates a mood change in local communities where new asylum seeker facilities were established in the wake of the “refugee crisis” in 2015. Whereas opinions in flux are often studied using quantitative data, this analysis takes advantage of in-depth qualitative interviews with inhabitants in selected Norwegian local communities after new temporary asylum reception centers were established. Qualitative data collected at this particular time provide the opportunity to gain insight into *social processes* occurring in the wake of a sudden influx of immigrants. A key feature of the material is statements reflecting fear or nervous anticipation in relation to the period before the newcomers arrived, followed by descriptions of diminishing concern afterwards. Several studies have engaged with the issue of changes in public mood during this particular period, but few have analyzed changes at the local level. The study concludes that while the backdrop of impactful events that led to shifts in public mood at the national and regional levels played a role in informants’ *imagined encounters* with the newcomers, *experiencing* the presence of the newcomers resulted in a subtle mood change of increased acceptance.

Keywords

Asylum reception, local communities, mood change, neighborhood diversity, proximity, refugee crisis

Introduction

The 2015 “refugee crisis” once again raised questions about coexistence and alienation in European societies and went to the top of the political agenda. Like most other Western European countries, Norway experienced a sharp increase in asylum arrivals during the latter half of 2015. In response, amid unprecedented political and media attention on the movement of people through Europe, the Norwegian

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Directorate of Immigration (UDI) commissioned emergency facilities for asylum seekers from private companies or nongovernmental organizations that could provide satisfactory living conditions quickly and cheaply. As a result, for people living in and around 259 local communities in Norway, the increase in the number of people seeking asylum in Europe went from a mainly theoretical issue in the media and political rhetoric to a practical one. Nervous enthusiasm about the establishment of new refugee facilities in their areas and resistance to them relatively quickly turned into a temporary but real increase in neighborhood diversity.

Analyses of residents' reactions to increased asylum seeker arrivals and immigration are subjects that frequently require the use of quantitative data (Hjerm, 2009; Hooghe and de Vroome, 2015; Lubbers, Coender and Scheepers, 2006; Sniderman, Hagendoorn and Prior, 2014; Zorlu, 2016). Among the central findings of these studies is that sudden increases in numbers of asylum seeker arrivals combined with increased media and political attention can heighten public resistance to immigration and immigrants (Hopkins, 2010; Weber, 2015). The 2015 "refugee crisis" in Europe was undoubtedly such a situation. It spurred mass mobilization, policy changes, and fluctuations in public opinion about migration and refugees (Benček and Strasheim, 2016; Fladmoe, Sætrang, Eimhjellen, Steen-Johnsen and Enjoras, 2016; Koca, 2016; Marx and Naumann, 2018). For example, recent research has demonstrated that a range of prominent media events such as the picture of Aylan Kurdi and the attacks in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015 led to shifts in public mood, or *stimmungswechsel*, in European populations (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017; Cabot, 2017; Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). Together, these mood-changing events at the European and national levels form the backdrop against which new asylum reception centers (i.e., asylum seekers centers, ASCs) were established across Europe in this period. Previous studies of reactions to the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees have found widespread opposition and hostile reactions before the newcomers arrive (e.g., Ferwerda, Flynn and Horiuchi, 2017; Lubbers et al., 2006). However, some have noted that initial resistance tends to disappear or decrease after new ASCs have been established (Lubbers et al., 2006; Zorlu, 2016). The current study takes a qualitative and local community approach to examining this issue, allowing a glimpse into the *social processes* whereby opinions about newcomers develop.

Social processes concerning groups' relationships with newcomers have been at the heart of social science enquiry for well over a century. In his essay on *The Stranger*, Georg Simmel (1950[1908]) commented on the interrelation between social distance and geographic distance in producing strangeness, and suggested that social or metaphoric proximity requires spatial or geometric proximity (Ethington, 1997). Nearly half a century later and in a similar vein, social psychologist Gordon Allport (1954: 266) suggested in *The Nature of Prejudice* that contact and knowledge of the other has the potential to decrease fear and feelings of "social distance" from outgroup members.

In this paper, I bring such classical understandings of proximity and distance into the current context to examine *local narratives when a new and relatively large group of newcomers suddenly enters the community*. I investigate how *experiences at the local level help us understand processes of coexistence and alienation in the wake of sudden immigration influxes*. I approach these questions by analyzing local informants' narratives about their own and their local communities' reactions to the establishment of new centers for asylum seekers in their community. To this end, I draw on qualitative data collected shortly after the establishment of refugee centers in local Norwegian communities in the wake of Europe's 2015 "refugee crisis." The article begins by reporting on informants' post-facto narratives about reactions in the local communities before the newcomers arrived. I then turn to look into how people describe their own and local reactions after their arrival. Many informants describe the arrival of the newcomers as calming initial skepticism about their presence in the local community. Although ambivalent opinions (Bygnes, 2013) about the newcomers prevail, many of those interviewed here refer to a certain *change* either in their own perceptions or in those of the neighborhood about having an ASC nearby. The conclusion indicates that the increased physical proximity originally highlighted by Simmel (1950[1908]) and more recently in work on the effects of the exposure to newcomers' presence

(Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner and Christ, 2011) exert a particularly strong influence on the narratives of relief analyzed here.

Changing discourses: The influence of media and local events

The literature on the effect of neighborhood diversity on attitudinal indicators such as prejudice dates back more than half a century (Allport, 1954; Blumer, 1958). While “contact theory,” pioneered by Allport (1954), states that social contact between groups is likely to reduce prejudice and stereotypes, several “conflict theories” pioneered by Herbert Blumer (1958) and others argue that living with ethnic diversity will increase threat perceptions between groups because of competing status hierarchies and competition for scarce resources. Since then, a large body of evidence has emerged that more migration and increased ethnic diversity in neighborhoods drives prejudice and fosters more restrictive immigrant attitudes (e.g., Enos, 2015; Hopkins, 2010). However, other studies have found just the reverse; that contact substantially reduces threat perceptions and interethnic prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Research has found that whereas “negative intergroup contact” is likely to foster prejudice, “positive contact” tends to be more prevalent and therefore is likely to result in net improvements in outgroup attitudes (Graf, Paolini and Rubin, 2014).

However, more than ever before, the multifaceted role of the media and national rhetoric on immigration and ethnic relations certainly have the potential to challenge the eventual effects of interpersonal residential contact on relations and attitudes. The establishment of the centers studied here occurred during a period of enormous media attention; the European and Norwegian public could follow the movements of individuals almost minute by minute as they moved across borders on their northward journey. Research has found that when media frames politicize immigration and inflows increase, perceptions of newcomers tend to become more hostile at the local level (Ferwerda et al., 2017; Hopkins, 2008). Others have suggested that local experiences of diversity are important influences on people’s opinions of immigration and diversity in their local area, whereas media frames are more important for opinions and perceptions of immigration at the national level (Wong, Bowers, Williams and Simmons, 2012).

Analyzing European media coverage during 2015, Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017) noted a shift in coverage from humanitarian aspects to security implications after the terror attack in Paris in November 2015. A recent analysis of media coverage in Scandinavian countries during the same period noted a similar shift, with humanitarian aspects becoming less prominent over time (Hovden, Mjelde and Gripsrud, 2018). However, national and European-level coverage is not necessarily consistent with the tone set by *local* reporting. For example, an analysis of Norwegian *local media* in 2015 found that perspectives of help rather than threat were most prominent during the same period (Hognestad and Lamark, 2017).

Analyses of national-level discourses in Germany during 2015 suggested that such critical media events also resulted in mood changes that shifted public perceptions in this period (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi (2017) have conceptualized such changes in public mood reflected in/by changing media frames as *stimmungswechsel*, a concept that explores the link between individual and collective mood shifts through important events (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017: 108). As Heath Cabot (2017: 144) suggested, such mood shifts in themselves are probably insufficient to produce social change, but that the public mood has the potential to “set the stage” for new modes of relations between Europeans and newcomers. The *shifts* recorded in media coverage, policies, and public opinion noted in the literature are mainly informed by events that become central on the national or European stage (Benček and Strasheim, 2016; Koca, 2016; Marx and Naumann, 2018). However, less scholarly attention has been devoted to changes in mood resulting from events at the local level in the wake of the “refugee crisis.”

Scholarly attention to spatial and rhetorical dimensions in the sociology of ethnic relations is traceable at least as far back as Georg Simmel’s (1950/1908) original work on *The Stranger*. In an in-depth

analysis of social distance in this essay, Philip Ethington (1997: 12) argued that Simmel “clearly stresses the sociologic primacy of objective geometry over subjective semiotics.” Physical proximity *is* the structure of everyday life that makes familiarity with others possible (Ethington, 1997: 12, 55). People’s feelings and even attitudes about the other have an important impact on social processes, and physical proximity itself can lessen social distance (Ethington, 1997; Marotta 2012: 679). A similar emphasis on the role of geographic and social proximity can also be found in Allport’s (1954) book *The Nature of Prejudice*. Of particular interest to the present study, Allport (1954: 272–273) noted that “impending or threatened residential contact ordinarily elicits more protest than does actual contact.” The social ties created between people when they reside next to each other are likely to make protests “subside in time and amicable results follow” (Allport 1954: 273). For Allport (1954: 264), intergroup friendship is what calms protests and prejudice, not increased proximity per se. Allport (1954: 269) considered shifts in public mood resulting from increased physical proximity, but put to the fore individual shifts in attitude after interethnic residential *contact*. Other scholars exploring the effects of contact have found that even the mere presence of or *exposure to* outgroup members can reduce prejudice among individuals (Pettigrew et al., 2011; Zajonc, 1968).

Context

During the 2015 “refugee crisis,” spurred by enduring conflicts in the Middle East and worsening conditions in neighboring countries, Europe experienced a sharp rise in asylum seeker numbers. Of more than 1,000,000 people reaching Europe during 2015, about 31,000 made their way to its northern periphery and crossed the border into Norway. As a result, an urgent need to provide shelter for the newcomers arose and the UDI commissioned 259 (mainly) temporary shelters for the newcomers and allocated them across the country between April 2015 and March 2016. Several centers were run by inexperienced managers who, for profit, offered buildings normally used for other purposes, including hostels for workers and hotels. The sizes of the establishments and local communities varied across Norway, and the centers studied here offered temporary accommodation for 100–200 asylum seekers in the rural areas studied and 600 asylum seekers in the urban community, respectively. To secure anonymity, the three locations for the qualitative study have been anonymized and dubbed *Big Town* and *East Village*, and the rural communities on the West coast of Norway, which are relatively close together, *West Village*. The immediate local areas around all the centers were populated mainly by white, Norwegian individuals of the majority ethnicity, but the wider areas around the center of both *Big Town* and *East Village* were more ethnically heterogeneous than the areas around the centers of *West Village*. There were more single men than women and children in all centers.

In Norway, as in the rest of Europe, the political discourse was strongly polarized, and in December 2015, the Progress Party Minister of Immigration and Integration, Sylvi Listhaug, presented a list of policy suggestions to make Norwegian immigration and integration policies much stricter. During the same period, many citizens of Norway mobilized to welcome the refugees and a number of disorganized acts of resistance took place. Importantly, relatively close to these ASCs, a building that was planned to serve as an emergency refugee facility was burnt to the ground in an act of protest. In other local communities around the country, the neighborhood vigilante group *Soldiers of Odin* patrolled the streets to protect inhabitants from the newcomers. During the same period, one in three Norwegians reported having aided refugees by acts such as donating money or volunteering (Fladmoe et al., 2016).

Norway thus illustrates important trends in the European political landscape, with its increasingly restrictive asylum policies, a populist right wing party (the *Progress Party*) in government, and a political and media discourse deeply influenced by the voice of the Minister of Integration from that party during the “refugee crisis.” Thus, the element of perceived cultural threat that scholars believe to be the key indicator of anti-immigrant attitudes is particularly prevalent in the economically prosperous parts of Europe (Ivarsflaten, 2005; Sniderman et al., 2014). However, in some respects, the Norwegian context is exceptional. Norway is a very prosperous country with low unemployment rates, and

compared with other European countries, there is less social division and a slightly more positive attitude toward receiving immigrants (Heath and Richards, 2016). Therefore, compared with other European countries, Norwegians are somewhat less likely to perceive asylum seekers as an economic threat than those in environments with higher unemployment rates and levels of economic inequality.

Data

The analysis presented here is part of the *Imagining and Experiencing the Refugee Crisis* project investigating how majority–minority relations developed in the wake of the so-called “refugee crisis.” The 25 interviewees recruited for this part of the study were selected because they lived in relative proximity to a recently established refugee center when several hundred thousand local inhabitants in Norway were experiencing a similar phenomenon: extremely intense media attention on the arrival of international migrants in Europe, which had suddenly become a reality in their local communities. Some lived in the immediate vicinity of the centers, while others were aware of the location of the closest center(s), but did not live in its immediate vicinity.

The project commenced with observations in community meetings in the wake of the establishment of the centers in December 2015. Subsequently, between January and April 2016, I interviewed 14 individuals who lived in relative proximity to the ASCs and three individuals involved in managing these facilities on the west coast of Norway. Finally, from June to December 2016, a student assistant collected data in a rural local community on the east coast of Norway, including qualitative interviews with eight inhabitants. The informants were recruited in several ways: by written invitation in mailboxes in the areas around the centers, through contacts made during fieldwork, forums on social media either supporting or opposing the centers, and via personal contacts. People of different ages (22–74 years), sex, and social background were recruited.

We intentionally targeted people assumed to have different opinions on questions regarding migration and the establishment of the centers, and recruited several informants through social media platforms that voiced support or opposition. However, the analytical strategy in this paper was not to group people into categories of those for and against migration or asylum centers to study the differences between them. As argued by Bygnes (2013), tapping into the *ambivalent* character of people’s perspectives on diversity is important for understanding how opinions on diversity can tack between more inclusionary and more exclusionary modes depending on context and frame of reference (see also Cabot, 2017). My point of departure here is a tendency that appeared in several narratives about reactions to a new asylum center in the local community, namely that the negative voices and resistance in the community before the arrival of the asylum seekers calmed down after their arrival.

The interview guide featured open-ended questions focusing on how informants had imagined and experienced the rise in numbers of asylum seekers in Europe in 2015 and their recollection of events and the community mood following the decision to establish an asylum center in their local area. At this stage of the interview, some informants spontaneously started comparing their own feelings or the community mood *before* the local asylum center was established with their impression after the asylum seekers arrived. This comparison of the before and after, either in their own perceptions or in the mood of the local community, spurred the in-depth analysis of what I have characterized here as a “collective sigh of relief” in the communities studied.

In such research contexts, it is important to consider issues of positionality and social desirability. Can the changes in public mood analyzed here be understood as attempts to comply with a prominent societal norm of antiracism? Some informants explicitly refer to their own or others’ fear of appearing racist or displaying opinions that are politically incorrect. For example, Arild (age 63) felt that people held back during the public meeting: “I have nothing against it [the center], but I suppose I feel that some of those who were negative did not dare to [voice their opinions].”

Other aspects may involve attempting to please the supposedly immigrant-friendly sociologists interviewing them by displaying more positive views of the newcomers than they really held. For

example, when Erling walked into the university department building where I interviewed him and saw the press coverage displayed on the walls, he pointed in the direction of an article urging people to help refugees and said, “It is pretty clear what you people think about these issues.” However, as in several other examples, such reflections did not seem to hinder relatively outspoken negative descriptions of Muslims or immigrants. The interview material suggests that people are highly aware of this issue, but seem to moderate their opinions to please the interviewer to a relatively limited degree. For example, when talking about the planned refugee center that had been burned down, 70-year-old Erling was very frank, stating that “I should probably be careful about saying this [. . .] but I told myself ‘to hell with them, let them burn’.”

Anticipating the arrival of newcomers

In each of the communities studied here, public “information meetings” were hosted by the UDI to inform inhabitants of local communities about the refugee facility to be established. The meetings became important venues for public expressions of enthusiasm, anger, fear, and frustration about the planned centers. In one community on the west coast of Norway, a planned facility was burned to the ground; in Big Town and East Village, “refugees not welcome” stickers appeared on lamp posts around the neighborhood, and in West Village the manager of the planned facility received threats of violence. During the same period, unprecedented mobilization to welcome the refugees to the local communities took place (Bygnes, 2017).

A number of the individuals interviewed for this study held mainly positive and welcoming attitudes and were involved in volunteer work. However, in all three communities, the majority of inhabitants interviewed expressed at least *some* worry about the hazards that the newcomers could pose to the safety of the permanent inhabitants. Even people like Linda (age 31), with a pronounced positive attitude and an impression that most people at the information meeting were also optimistic, reported ambivalence in her anticipation of a new asylum center in the neighborhood: “Even though people were positive, they were also worried, right? ‘What will happen?’ ‘What will it be like?’ and so on” (Linda, age 31: Big Town). As indicated in previous research, opinions about societal diversity can be characterized by an ambivalence that is not either/or (Bygnes, 2013). Nadia, another Big Town resident, also recalled her own and others’ concerns about safety, crime, and possible harassment before the newcomers arrived: “Actually, I was a bit worried that a lot would change . . . a lot. Through the media, we have seen descriptions . . . of single young men. I was worried about the situation at night, coming back from work” (Nadia, age 38: Big Town).

Throughout the material, gendered aspects of residents’ fears came through very clearly. Sara Ahmed suggested considering which “social relationships (involving both fantasy and materiality)” are concealed in generalized images of “the stranger” (Ahmed, 2000: 5). The fears expressed in these narratives are attached mainly to young, single, potentially violent and traumatized *men* with values and customs related to gender conflicting with those of the local residents. Women, families, and young children were hardly ever mentioned when fears and feelings of uncertainty were expressed. Importantly, as several interviewees mention and Nadia reflected on in the above quote, it is individuals with these characteristics (male, young, single, traumatized, Muslim) who are framed as potential aggressors and terrorists by the media reports that she feels influenced her.

However, Nadia and several others also criticized the role of the media in causing their disquiet, given the unusual intensity of the media coverage of immigration and asylum issues in this period. Nadia’s mention of being startled by media images and narratives reflect the findings reported in the literature that heightened negative media coverage during sudden immigration influxes increases the likelihood of hostile reactions at the local level (Hooghe and de Vroome, 2015; Hopkins, 2010). This also exemplifies how the backdrop of mood-changing events at European and national levels influenced the nervous anticipation before the newcomers arrived. Nonetheless, Nadia and several others also expressed a reflective attitude toward the effects of media coverage on them. Thus, on the one hand, the informants

acknowledged that their concerns may have been disproportionate because of intense negative media attention; on the other, they recalled a definite and real unease, particularly about the ‘young single men’ about to enter their Big Town neighborhood.

In contrast, some Big Town residents voiced their opposition to the center before the newcomers arrived without ambivalence, expressing clear skepticism about the establishment. Such pronounced sceptics also tended to emphasize fear and concerns much more strongly than did other local community members, for instance when reporting on the local information meetings: “Family folks stood up—women with daughters on the training field; how would *they* relate to this when coming home at night? They were very skeptical and afraid” (Erling, age 70: Big Town). Moreover, in West Village, some people voiced their opposition very clearly when a reception center in the community was announced. One of the co-hosts of the information meeting there, an inexperienced facility manager, explained that most unpleasant feedback did not appear during the face-to-face information meeting. After the meeting, they received a number of very aggressive messages via telephone and on various social media: “the police had to pay a visit to certain people in the community to seize their weapons and withdraw their gun licenses because of their violent rhetoric.” A 26-year-old West Village resident, Cecilie, is glad that she did not attend the popular meeting.

When we were told that loads of refugees were coming, the first thing some people said was ‘that is too much for little West Village’. And then they had a meeting, but I wasn’t there. I am actually quite happy I was not. I have heard loads of negative things about it.

In East Village too, informants reported skepticism and fear in the local community, which came to the fore at a public meeting.

I have heard . . . I think people were really worried when they went to the information meeting [. . .] In Norway you are not allowed to be skeptical; you are only allowed to be politically correct. [. . .] I heard that people were worried about their children who had to pass [the center] to get to school. (Laila, age 36: East Village)

While some East Village informants had the impression that “the positive were more prominent than the negative” during the meeting (Thomas, age 49: *East Village*), informants such as Eva (age 31: East Village) maintained that the negative voices came through very clearly, but that the meeting itself may have calmed people’s reactions. The atmosphere was more apprehensive in some local communities than in others, but even in *Big Town*, which most informants depicted as a community with a particularly positive outlook, many reported concerns about whether and how their neighborhood might change when the newcomers arrived.

Stimmungswechsel: A change in local mood

In West Village, Thormod (age 36), who was managing a refugee facility for the first time, described mixed feelings before the asylum seekers arrived because he had no knowledge about what kind of people they would be. After meeting them, his perception changed dramatically; he noted that the newcomers were “nothing to be afraid of; they are perfectly normal people.” Although the role ascribed to him as a facility manager was mainly an administrative one, he soon decided to engage more closely with the new arrivals in West Village, resulting in new personal relationships. During the interview, he reflected on his time as a facility manager, evoking memories that clearly touched him deeply. Thormod described meeting and becoming acquainted with the newcomers as life-changing.

As in Allport’s (1954) account, Thormod described how his previous misconceptions about the newcomers were “corrected” by engaging closely with them. As a result, he felt touched and changed in his general perceptions of refugees coming to Europe and to Norway. Thormod explicitly attributed

his attitudinal change to the power of *contact*: “it is probably like when you meet a woman or something, you get feelings, you get a human connection” (also cited in Bygnes, 2017: 293). In contrast, another informant reported *negative* contact (Graf et al., 2014) with the newcomers. Stina, a 22-year-old East Village resident, had volunteered at the local asylum center; she described negative experiences involving men at the center taking pictures of her without her consent and giving her unwanted sexual attention, saying that her experience at the center shows that people’s fears are justified.

However, among those we interviewed for this project, Thormod and Stina stand out as examples of those who underwent radical changes in personal attitude toward newcomers as a result of close or personal contact. Rather, in the cases studied here there is a less radical *stimmungswechsel* (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017) as newcomers went from being a *potential* presence to becoming a *concrete* presence. In contrast to mood changes in the exclusionary direction informed by media events at the national level in Germany (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016), the present and more subtle change in mood at the local level moved in the accepting direction. Whereas concerns of the local community before the asylum seekers arrived were mainly connected with media narratives and discourses on immigration at the national level, the sigh of relief is attributed to be spurred by a key event at the local level: the physical presence of the asylum seekers.

For example, Olav, the facility manager of the Big Town center, said concerns about safety “seemed to have calmed down” after the newcomers’ arrival because of the lack of more serious incidents. He registered only minor complaints about litter outside the center and about loud voices at night. In East Village, 38-year-old Vibekke explained that she was quite nervous about how her local community would react before the newcomers arrived: “I hoped it would go well, that the negative [residents] would not become more negative [. . .] as a result of cultural differences [. . .] but I have not heard about any incidents.” Another East Village resident, who lived immediately adjacent to the reception center, also reported that the negative events feared beforehand did not become a reality.

As a neighbor, I did not feel it. No noise, no sirens at night, nothing. Many had envisioned beforehand that it would be a nuisance, but there was nothing like that. I know many people felt that they would walk around [on our properties] and we would have to change the locks and so on and so forth, but nothing happened. (Eva, age 31: East Village)

Similarly, the local shop owner Erik (age 45) in West Village also emphasized that the lack of negative events was important for the slight change in community “opinion”:

When the reception center was established, it was . . . people were *very* negative. People are still negative, but I think because there has been no trouble over there [the center], no problems . . . that has led to people changing their opinion [. . .]. (Erik, age 45: West Village)

Erik is also one of the informants who most clearly highlighted the importance of distinguishing between political opinions about border control on the one hand and the importance of treating individuals arriving in the local community with respect on the other. Although both he and his local community may find increasing immigration and asylum arrivals at the border to be a problem, he argues they should be kept aside from the issue of asylum seekers present in the local community:

We may well be against receiving so many refugees. But we cannot . . . we have to behave ourselves towards those who come. [. . .] There is no need to make things bigger than they really are. (Erik, age 45: West Village)

As such, the situation described in these local communities in Norway in 2016 bears some resemblance to Allport’s (1954: 272) observation that “impending or threatened residential contact ordinarily elicits more protest than does actual contact.” In a similar vein, some contemporary qualitative studies

from Scandinavian contexts note that negative reactions are moderated *after* the establishment of an ASC in a local community, highlighting inhabitants' preoccupations with maintaining neighborly relations with people present in the local community (Drangslund and Fuglseth, 2009; Whyte, Larsen and Olwig, 2018).

Increasing geographic and social proximity

When they discuss their changing impressions about newcomers who have become geographically close, some informants refer to a sense of surprise that the new arrivals were more relatable, more similar, and socially closer than they had initially imagined: "they are normal people, like us; they have lived a normal life, just like us. It's as though we had been bombed. We would have to escape, taking our belongings, phones and money" (Thormod, age 36: West Village). A Big Town resident conveyed a similar view "[...] the Syrians are highly educated, at least those fleeing from the cities; they have the capacity and the money to leave [...] and are hardly distinguishable [from us]" (Cathrine, age 38). West Village inhabitant Arild, a 63-year-old headmaster, also suggested that geographical proximity played a key role in decreasing social distance between newcomer children and the pupils at his school: "They see these kids, the refugees, they can touch them and see that they are normal children. That has done something to our pupils, in my opinion; it has led to very little resistance." As a result, he said the children at his school have been very eager to help, asking "what can we do for them?" (Arild, age 63: West Village). Among some of the residents interviewed in all three communities, the geographical proximity caused by the establishment of the new centers offered a welcome opportunity to contribute. For many residents, the presence of newcomers in the local communities created opportunities to distinguish individuals from the masses depicted in national media (Hovden et al., 2018) and to see faces at school, on the street, and in local news stories (Høgnestad and Lamark, 2017).

Another West Village resident, 62-year-old Beate, felt extremely worried about immigration and spent considerable time on the Internet reading about and discussing it with others. She was not at all pleased to have a refugee facility established in West Village, and against the trend reported in this study, did not describe a sense of relief when I interviewed her shortly after the arrival of the newcomers. However, interestingly, her greatest concern was not people of immigrant background settling in her neighborhood: "I am not first and foremost worried about a few families coming here. What I am most worried about are those who wander uncontrolled over the borders." Although she still feared the "Muslim threat" in her community after the establishment of the local asylum seeker center, throughout the interview she was most interested in conveying her thoughts and feelings about the border and events at the national level, not the young men in flip-flops walking along the rural highways of West Village.

On the other hand, Erling (age 70), who lived right next to the center in Big Town and was very fearful of Muslims, expressed less anxiety about the presence of the asylum seekers in his Big Town neighborhood after the center had been established. The presence of and his casual encounters with the newcomers on the streets and buses relieved his fears about the situation. It seems that this unintended exposure to the newcomers as a result of their geographical proximity had lessened his intense feelings of fear and social distance (Ethington, 1997). Erling remained unhappy about the presence of Muslims in Big Town, but reported his attempts to convince himself that "they have fled the war" and "really need to be here."

I even helped one of them. He was from Afghanistan. He was looking for the way to town, with a map. I asked him where he was from and what it was like to be here. [...] Then I showed him the way to town.

However, Erling's encounters and sense of relief at the local level did not seem to affect his opinions or feelings about Muslim immigrants coming to Norway because "when the Muslims start flowing into the country, they will want to build mosques and all kinds of things that we do not have in our culture" (Erling, age 70: Big Town).

With a few exceptions, informants reported mainly fleeting encounters with the newcomers, if any. While some reported that *seeing* or encountering newcomers in the local community was vital in calming resistance and decreasing social distance, other residents highlighted the importance of their *unnoted* presence when describing their own and their community's sense of relief. For example, for Nadia, meeting the asylum center residents face to face did not seem to be the most important factor in her somewhat altered perception of living next to the facility. Rather, she underlined the importance of the newcomers being less noticeable on the streets, both to her own and her community's relief.

I felt it [the fear] *then* [before the center was established], but now, as I told you, I have not really seen them much at all. [...] The [critical voices in the community] quieted down so quickly. I think people noticed that they [the asylum seekers] kept to themselves, and that made people relax *a bit* (Nadia, age 38: Big Town).

The *stimmungswechsel* described by many informants is not at all such a radical shift as that described by Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi (2017) in their analysis of the changes in the mood of the German public during the same period. Rather, this mood shift is a toned-down version of *stimmungswechsel*; a *sigh of relief* expressed by community members after the feared negative consequences did not materialize when the newcomers were actually present.

Discussion

More than half a century ago, Allport (1954: 272) observed that “impending or threatened residential contact ordinarily elicits more protest than does actual contact.” In this article, I have conceptualized a contemporary version of the tendency described by Allport. Reflecting back on the days and weeks before the arrival of asylum seekers, a group extensively covered and often negatively portrayed by national and international media outlets in the months leading up to their arrival (Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017; Hovden et al., 2018), many residents expressed fear, concern or uncertainty. However, after the arrival of the newcomers in the local communities, many interviewees described reduced anxiety about newcomers in their locality. The main finding is in line with those of Lubbers et al. (2006) and Zorlu (2016), that increased acceptance of asylum seekers occurred in small local communities in the Netherlands after the establishment of such centers, and with Whyte et al.'s (2018) qualitative account of local pragmatics in response to asylum seeker facilities in rural Denmark. Even Ferwerda et al. (2017), who found less support for resettlement of refugees in respondents' own communities than elsewhere in the USA, reported that respondents living in refugee-dense communities are less responsive to threatening media frames and suggested that *proximity* to refugees can reduce the impact of such frames. The question that remains, concerns *why*.

The classic study on this topic by Allport (1954: 269) considered shifts in public mood resulting from increased physical proximity and foregrounded individual shifts in attitude after residential *contact*. Thormod, one of the individuals interviewed for this study, represents an empirical example of the power that close and personal contact *can* have in changing individual opinions. He changed his opinions on the newcomers based on personal contact. Furthermore, Thormod decided to leave the right-wing populist party to which he had belonged before the newcomers arrived and joined a centrist party. However, Thormod's case stands out. It was much more common among the interviewees to report either fleeting encounters with the newcomers, and merely seeing them or knowing that they were there but noticing them less than they had initially feared.

In contrast to Allport, Simmel stressed the effect of the *actual presence* of newcomers and the relevance of geometric proximity for lessening the metaphorical distance between people. According to Ethington's (1997) reading of Simmel, physical proximity *itself* can lessen social distance. Although personal contact and friendships have stronger effects on attitude change, some scholars have found that even the mere presence of or *exposure* to an outgroup can reduce prejudice: “greater exposure to targets, in and of itself, can significantly enhance liking for those targets” (Pettigrew et al., 2011: 275; Zajonc,

1968). As the analysis indicates, for some, *not seeing* the newcomers was important to their sense of relief. This suggests that the lack of negative intergroup contact is part of a positive exposure effect *if* the problems anticipated do not materialize. Thus, widespread negative contact (Graf et al., 2014) or a serious incident in the local communities studied here could have added a layer of experience to the fear and anticipation felt beforehand and created a *negative* exposure effect.

The idea of an exposure effect that improves intergroup relations is consistent with Simmel's idea that increased geographic proximity itself lessens metaphorical distance; the mere and actual presence of the other as opposed to the imagined presence has a small but important impact on the narrative of gaining an asylum center in the local community. Here it is relevant to recall Ethington's (1997: 12) argument that Simmel "clearly stresses the sociologic primacy of objective geometry over subjective semiotics." Although national and European discourses about immigration are conducive for people's perceptions on this issue, the physical presence of immigrant newcomers may be more important for the interpretation of local experiences.

Contrary to research that argues that changes in attitudes resulting from engagement with strangers take the form of individual exceptionality (Matejskova and Leitner, 2011), the cases studied here indicate that a certain generalization at the local level does occur. However, the material contains very few examples of people changing their opinions on a more general scale about immigration into Norway. Media narratives and discourses necessarily inform people about the *imagined* and *potential* presence of newcomers (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). On the other hand, their arrival adds a layer of *experience* of the ASC regardless of whether residents personally encounter the newcomers. In line with Wong et al. (2012), the analysis suggests that media narratives are central for understanding perceptions concerning the national level, but lived experiences are more relevant for interpreting local encounters.

The practical consequences of the local communities' mood changing from fear and apprehension to the return of everyday pragmatism is that the newcomers' presence becomes a part of daily life rather than a threat of disruption. The implication for policymakers is the potential for increased acceptance of newcomers in local communities once information is received based on local reality rather than on national and international rhetoric on immigration. However, this paper is just one additional step toward exploring the possibilities and limitations of this potential. To generate both more accurate knowledge and more exhaustive descriptions of the relationship between the local and national dynamics would require close cooperation between qualitative and quantitative researchers. Such a combination of efforts could provide much needed knowledge about how and why opinions and experiences at the local level converge *or* diverge from the dynamics at the national level.


Acknowledgements

I am grateful to our interlocutors in Big Town, West Village, and East Village, and to master's student Ingalill Herstad, who contributed to the data collection. An early version of this article was presented at the Governance and Local Development Annual Conference 2017 and the 11th Pan-European Conference on International Relations. I thank Elisabeth Ivarsflaten for suggesting the label "collective sigh of relief." I am also indebted to Kristen Kao, Valeria Bello, Helga Eggebø, the anonymous reviewers, and the editorial team at *Acta Sociologica* for insightful comments on earlier versions of the manuscript.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The project *Imagining and Experiencing the Refugee Crisis* is funded by the Research Council of Norway (grant no. 262987). The University of Bergen has generously cofunded an Open Access publication of this article.

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