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A Promise of Inclusion: On the Social Imaginary of Organised Encounters between Locals and Refugees

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ABSTRACT

The present study contributes an empirical analysis that makes explicit a central social imaginary underpinning organised cultural encounters between 'locals' and immigrants: that contact between individuals who would not otherwise meet can lead to long-term inclusion of immigrants. While research on why local populations fear or exclude newcomers is important, our study draws on interviews with locals involved in community initiatives in Norway in the wake of the refugee influx in 2015 to enquire into ideas that guide locals' practices seeking to *include*. We find that a 'promise of inclusion' forms part of a social imaginary underpinning the organised encounters studied here, featuring ideals of meeting as equals and reciprocity in social relationships while also unveiling how practices of inequality operating within the encounters are common. Emphasising the extent to which it is possible to manage the risk of power inequalities, the study adds to the ongoing academic conversation on organised encounters by distinguishing between power inequalities operating *within* organised encounters and inequalities operating *within the imaginary* of the encounter itself. Whereas the research participants are often aware of this paradox, their motivations and approaches are still informed by the social imaginary and guided by the promise of inclusion.

Introduction

When an increasing number of asylum seekers started reaching European societies during 2015, efforts to mobilise and attend to intergroup relations increased quickly. Since then, scholarly attention has been devoted to important subjects such as negative shifts in public mood and increases in exclusionary attitudes towards immigration (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi 2017). Research on local community responses in Northern European societies during this time shows that the intense public mood and mobilisation efforts diminished relatively quickly as the everyday challenges of living together in diversity replaced the crisis rhetoric (Bygnes 2020, Zill et al. 2020). Many of those seeking asylum in 2015 have settled into their receiving societies, and the question of how to manage their long-term inclusion is high on the agenda across Europe. While it is important to

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document and understand mechanisms of exclusion and the sense of threat present in receiving communities, we shift our attention to what is guiding those local community members with an explicit aim to *include*. Therefore, the present study makes explicit locals' social imaginaries and the inherent power relations underlying their efforts to organise encounters. We do this by drawing inspiration from recent work linking geographies of encounter with social imaginaries (Raco 2018).

Research on urban public and semi-public spaces has dominated scholarship on social interaction with and across differences during the past two decades (Amin 2002, Koefoed and Simonsen 2011, Wilson and Darling 2016). Opportunities for face-to-face encounters between unacquainted people in urban public spaces have been celebrated for their potential for spontaneous and serendipitous contact yet criticised for being fleeting and generating little change in intergroup relations (Valentine 2008, Matejskova and Leitner 2011). For this reason, the possibility of engineering contact through organised encounters have gained currency and is a common practice to facilitate interaction between individuals who presumably would otherwise not meet (Wilson 2013, 2017a, Mayblin et al. 2016, Christiansen et al. 2017, Lapina 2017, Simonsen et al. 2017, Førde 2019). In the present study, we investigate organised cultural encounters between permanent local residents (hereafter 'locals') and the newcomers.

Belief in the transformative potential of sitting down together during an encounter organised to improve relations and intercultural understanding is part of a social imaginary that resonates far beyond the scholarly realm. The idea of a modern social imaginary is defined by Taylor (2002: 106) as the way in which 'ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings', constituting the 'common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy'. This shared understanding comes to the fore in social practices and norms but is also 'carried in images, stories and legends' (Taylor 2002: 106). A social imaginary is something more than the information we need to make sense of and understand practices but represents 'a wider grasp of our whole predicament, how we stand in relationship to each other, how we got where we are and how we relate to other groups' (Taylor 2002: 107). Taylor identifies our commitment to the idea of *equality* as one of the defining features of this modern social imaginary.

We argue that a mindset closely aligned with the modern social imaginary outlined by Taylor underpin the organised encounters studied here. The imaginary underpinning the encounters in this study is that contact between individuals who would not otherwise meet, can lead to long-term inclusion of immigrants. *The promise* refers to the ideal version of how such encounters ought to go and is based on equitability between those involved. The mindset underpinning such encounters thus is not the promise itself but is instead considered a prerequisite to achieving the promise.

As part of a more extensive study exploring imaginaries and experiences of the 'refugee crisis', this article is based on 24 interviews with research participants involved in organising language cafés and intercultural meeting venues for newcomers through a variety of stakeholder positions: as private individuals, volunteers and/or representatives of NGOs, and of local public administrators of three localities in Norway. Our analysis centres around the social imaginaries underlying locals' efforts to organise encounters as a vehicle for long-term inclusion. We ask: *What does the social imaginary underpinning organised encounters entail, and what are their promises? What happens between the promises and practices of organised encounters in local communities?*

Below, we elaborate on our conceptual framework linking encounters and power relations before describing the context and methods of our study. Next, we address the two research questions in turn. First, we present three cases to illustrate empirically what the promise(s) of the organised encounters entail and reflect on the social imaginaries underpinning them. Second, we investigate what happens between the promises and practices of organised encounters. In the final part, we reflect on the significance of the promise of inclusion for contemporary local communities in – and beyond – Norway.

On Encounters and Power Relations

In Human Geography, contact with and across differences over the past two decades has increasingly been investigated through the concept of 'encounter'. Whereas encounters have often been celebrated for their openness, relational character, and potential for multiple outcomes, their ambivalent character as promising but also potentially harmful has also been noted (Valentine 2008, Askins and Pain 2011, Wilson and Darling 2016), such as on spaces of encounter (Leitner 2012), debates over meaningful encounters (Valentine 2008, Matejskova and Leitner 2011, Mayblin et al. 2016), and on bad encounters (Ruez 2017). These efforts have contributed to making encounters a central feature in the study of difference and conceptualised by Wilson (2017a, 2017b) as a particular genre of contact. An integral part of this discussion on encounters and difference is how encounters are understood to be conditioned by the historical and spatial power relations in which they are situated. These conditionalities guide the social relations between locals and newcomers in and through encounters (Cockayne et al. 2019, see also Pratt 1991, Wilson 2017b).

Consider, for instance, how issues of gender equality have drastically changed over the past century, in some parts of the world that is from women being considered unequal to men and not eligible to vote, to take up the position as prime minister in countries like Norway, Finland, and New Zealand. On the issue of long-term inclusion of immigrants, however, power relations associated with the nation prevail. Internalised imaginaries of what a national ought to look like – or not – is different in Norway (Gullestad 2002) than in Italy (Antonsich 2018) or in Syria, the country of origin for many of the refugees who came to Norway in 2015. Even so, the significance of such imaginaries on implicit associations and first impressions formed if you encounter someone while walking down the street is great. For whether you perceive them as similar or different from yourself may impact your own or other's sense of belonging and feelings of inclusion (see Erdal and Strømsø 2021). Regardless, the main takeaway for our study from these discussions is that what and who is considered to make a difference in and through the encounter is not pre-defined but is rather relationally produced (Ahmed 2000, Nagel 2009, Wilson and Darling 2016).

Owing to the lack of spontaneity in social relations between locals and newcomers in public spaces, organised encounters are held by a variety of agents in both public and civil society to achieve more-than-fleeting contact between individuals they presume would not otherwise meet (Askins and Pain 2011, Mayblin et al. 2016, Christiansen et al. 2017). This practice is largely inspired by the tradition of social psychology and the seminal work of Allport (1954) on the contact hypothesis. Allport suggests that under

certain conditions: equal status, common goals, co-operation, and support from authorities, social contact between individuals can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. Allport (1954: 272) suggested that to achieve such positive outcomes, residential contact in inter-ethnic milieus 'creates a condition where friendly contact and accurate social perceptions can occur'. However, he warned against assuming that 'merely by assembling people […] we can thereby destroy stereotypes and develop friendly attitudes' (Allport 1954: 261).

Thus, a critical question in the growing academic conversation on organised encounters is how people can meet as equals – one of Allport's preconditions for the contact hypothesis – when such encounters are structured around the differences and power inequalities they aim to address, such as prejudices, lack of integration, or cultural differences (Wilson 2017a). By way of responding to this paradox, recent studies of organised cultural encounters, such as by Mayblin et al. (2016) in the UK, investigate the effectiveness of intentionally bringing two different groups of youth together in an interfaith cricket project. And in Denmark, Christiansen et al. (2017) study projects associated with the inclusion of immigrants with an emphasis on that which happens after the encounter, taking into consideration the transformation of or among the participants.

The present study investigates instead the social imaginary underpinning these encounters and their promises of long-term inclusion of immigrants rather than their outcome. For this reason, and heeding Wilson's (2017a) pertinent call to pay close attention to the power relations in the organised encounter, we pay particular emphasis on the extent to which it is possible to *manage* the inherent risk of power inequalities (see also Mayblin et al. 2016, Christiansen et al. 2017, Lapina 2017, Simonsen et al. 2017). Adding to this conversation, we contend that, on the one hand, there is a need to distinguish between the power inequalities operating *within* organised encounters and their various conditioning effects. On the other, the power relationships and inequalities operating *within the imaginary* of the encounter itself, in which organised encounters as practices *and* as imaginaries are themselves implicated. If we reason in this vein, encounters may be organised around specific imaginaries of an assumed problem: a lack of contact between locals and newcomers is assumed to hamper the long-term inclusion of immigrants. These identified power inequalities are managed to achieve the potential – the promise – they aim to overcome. However, these efforts may distract attention from other potential inequalities and differences, because as mentioned above, they are relationally produced in and through an encounter (Ahmed 2000, Nagel 2009, Wilson and Darling 2016, Wilson 2017b).

Method and Context

Inspired by ideas of the Enlightenment period and incorporated into the Norwegian Constitution of 1814, perceptions of a Norwegian society built on principles of equality and egalitarianism – as in other Nordic countries – prevails (Bendixsen et al. 2017). From a welfare state perspective, this position implies that immigrants do not only have equal rights to services from state institutions as any other citizen but are also met with expectations to contribute to the labour market (Bendixsen et al. 2017, Karlsen 2017). Even so, the notion of equality is, by many, conflated with sameness. As argued by Gullestad (1997, 2002) two decades ago, ideas of sameness are often interpreted as ethnocultural

homogeneity. Hence, there is an entanglement of equality and homogeneity to which cultural diversity as caused by migration is considered problematic to obtain long-term inclusion of newcomers to Norway. It is within these conflicting historical and spatial power relations guiding the social relations – or lack thereof – between locals and newcomers that this article investigates the social imaginaries underpinning the locals' efforts to organise encounters aiming to include.

We build on data from a more extensive study exploring how the 'refugee crisis' has been imagined and experienced in local communities where temporary asylum seeker facilities were established in late 2015. In December that year, our research group started attending public meetings and interviewed people in three such communities (see Bygnes 2017, 2020). To secure anonymity, we have dubbed the local communities *Big Town* (urban), *East Village*, and *West Village* (both semi-rural). The immediate neighbourhood around the asylum seeker centre in Big Town is dominated by white middle-class residents but is surrounded by a more diverse area in terms of both class and ethnicity. It is possible to reach the city centre on foot, and public transport is readily available. The East Village neighbourhood is located a few hours' drive from the Norwegian capital, in an area previously dominated by agricultural production. It is now more densely populated and semi-rural. East Village is populated by a mix of working- and middle-class residents. West village is a semi-rural community with close ties to the fishing industry, which is currently part of the commuter area of a larger town. Apart from the recent refugee arrivals, West Village has a relatively homogenous profile in terms of ethnic backgrounds. As Bygnes (2020) has previously demonstrated, the areas featured similar collective reactions to the establishment of new asylum seekers centres. Both protest and large-scale welcoming efforts were prevalent (Bygnes 2017).

The present study draws on 24 interviews[1] and observations conducted when we returned to the three communities in 2018. Because protest had dissipated quickly and the asylum seeker facilities had been closed, we focused on the organisers of activities for newcomers in a variety of stakeholder capacities: private individuals, volunteers and/or representatives of NGOs, and local public administrators. Most of the 2018 research participants got involved in volunteering or working with newcomers in the wake of the local asylum establishment but remained active when we interviewed them in 2018. At this point, refugees were settled in the three localities.

During 2018, a research assistant and the principal investigator of the project[2] conducted 1–2-hour open-ended interviews with individuals about their experiences during the crisis period and their motivations to continue working on issues of settlement and integration after the wave of welcoming efforts had calmed down. They described their past and present efforts and their experiences. To ensure their anonymity, pseudonyms are used for research participants.

All interviews were conducted in Norwegian and were recorded and transcribed (translations in this article are by the authors). The transcriptions were coded and recoded using the NVivo software programme. The transcripts were first carefully read and coded section by section. Parallel to this process, a reflection note for each transcript was written using higher-level analytical codes, which helped with theoretical reinterpretation. All transcripts were then recoded using a thematic codebook to develop our insights into organised encounters.

Fieldnotes from participant observations of organised encounters in the three local communities add context to our study. While the coming analysis foregrounds the perspective of the locals, our fieldwork also provided information about the newcomers attending the organised encounters. We present an excerpt from the fieldnotes here to include reference to their motivations for participating in the organised encounters:

> We start talking about why he [a young man who came to East Village as a refugee] attends the language café, and he responds: 'I go to Norwegian [language] classes, but there are too many attendees. It is school, and we listen a lot, but we do not get a lot of practice speaking Norwegian. Here we get to speak Norwegian, and they correct the mistakes we make, and that is something we learn a lot from. In the language café, we also get to meet more Norwegians'. […] We continue to speak about the volunteers, and he says his impression of them is very positive. He appreciates their patience and that they share their time. He tells me that the difference between school and the language cafe is that you get acquainted with Norwegians. He continues: 'I go to the language café to understand more about the society in which I live. I learn more from Norwegians and about Norwegians. I do not know many people, so here I can get to know some people. One of them are here every time and we talk about politics and so on. I know him. But it is a shame that there are only older people and not many people my own age. (Field notes, Language café, East Village, April 2018)

Newcomers frequently cited immediate and practical motivations for attending, such as learning the language faster. As suggested in this field note excerpt, newcomers' reflections include perspectives on both the mindset and the ambivalences underpinning the organised encounters. They are understood as a potential arena to get acquainted with Norwegians, but forming relations is often compromised by status differences such as oftentimes significant age differences between newcomers and volunteers, which we return to below. While we do not analyse the motivations of the newcomers in the present article, we acknowledge that different social imaginaries may guide their participation in the events.

The Social Imaginary Underpinning Organised Encounters and Their Promises

'In the movies, you often see people bringing cake to welcome new neighbours into their neighbourhood', Henrik explained. While upholding the spontaneity of encounters in everyday life as an ideal way to deal with the long-term inclusion of newcomers, Henrik, who represented a public community outreach initiative in East Village, acknowledged that movies do not reflect everyday practices in real life. Thus, to facilitate contact between Norwegians and newcomers in the local community, he encouraged local families to invite newcomers (here settled refugees) for dinner at their houses. However, at the end of the tale, he revealed that only some of the families wanted to continue with the contact.

Regardless of the ambivalence towards the potential outcome that Henrik's example reveals, one of the strongest insights from our data is the importance placed by the research participants on organised encounters to achieve contact between locals and newcomers. Thus, while a lack of contact is imagined to be the problem to overcome to attain long-term inclusion of immigrants, organised encounters form part of a

social imaginary and established practice in terms of solutions (Allport 1954, Taylor 2002).

To further our understanding of organised encounters and their underlying social imaginary from the perspective of the locals, our analysis centres around three cases in different meeting venues to represent the overall insights from the 24 interviews. In this section, the cases highlight what the promise(s) of the organised encounters entails, by which we imply the ideal version of how these encounters ought to go. In turn, this helps elicit power inequalities operating *within the imaginary* of the encounter. In the following section, the three cases will serve to unveil what lies between the promise (s) and practices of organised encounters.

Case 1: Language cafés

Organising language cafés is a common integration practice and found in all three local communities in this study: some were organised by public libraries and others by local NGOs. The facilitators had different opinions on the aim and purpose of these cafés; several pointed to language learning as their primary purpose but most emphasised their potential for establishing contact and social networks. The language cafés were all structured around a language host (a local) and the participants (newcomers), and they sit together around a table and either play a game, discuss a topic for the day, or have informal conversations. The conversation is to be held in Norwegian as much as possible.

When describing an ideal version of the social interaction taking place at this venue, what we coin as 'the promise', Malik, a facilitator in Big Town, insisted that: 'It is an equitable encounter … where people learn from each other, in a way'. The promise of the language cafés – the ideal of the equitable encounter – was further elaborated by Kristoffer, another facilitator in Big Town:

> A language café is an activity of exchange. It is not simply *them* learning from *us*. We do not give them anything for free. They learn Norwegian, and we, first of all, partake in a pleasant activity. Nobody thinks it is dull to be there. And secondly, you get the exchange of cultural information, of values, and of stories. It is important to me that this is recognised, meaning that they [newcomers] have something to offer in this encounter. This is a value; it is not a one-sided relation – the language café – at least I try to emphasise it all the time (…).

The promise of the equitable encounter at the language cafés entails, according to the facilitators, how the positionalities of the locals and newcomers, and the reciprocity between them, are to be valued as equals despite their differences. While underscoring how the locals and participants (newcomers) have different things to bring into this encounter, they simultaneously structure these encounters through fixed roles between the locals and newcomers.

Case 2: The Intercultural Triad

The intercultural triad is situated in Big Town, and the project's aim is to provide necessary tools for newcomers to decode social norms and practices in Norway and learn how to engage with others in everyday life. This aim was inspired by recent immigrants' experiences of being newcomers in Norway, one of whom had said to Catherine, a

facilitator: 'If someone had told us about those little things … but rather important things, really … then our first encounter with Norway would have been much easier'. Those 'little things' were how to greet people, how to make sense of why people sit alone on the bus, and not to feel rejected when someone suggested meeting next week rather than today.

The 'triad' in the project name refers to how the encounter between the participants – both locals and newcomers – is structured around three individuals who constitute one group: one Norwegian, one established newcomer to Norway, and one recently settled newcomer. The latter role may change over time as these individuals become more established in Norway. Each group of three meets once a week at someone's home or on more neutral ground. They cook together, go to a café, or choose another activity they prefer. While set-up around shifting roles, a consequence of this project's aim of cultural interpretation, nonetheless, is how it structures the encounter and the power relations between the participants, with the Norwegian participant as the teacher and the recently settled newcomer as the recipient.

Another aim of the project, however, is to make the participants – both locals and newcomers – appreciate a larger 'we' and simultaneously value each other's uniqueness in this 'we'. In this vein, the promise of the organised encounter, as in case 1, came to the fore by explaining the ideal version of how the social interaction at this venue ought to go, yet emphasising the importance of acknowledging the different positionalities of the participants, as Catherine (facilitator) reported:

> I am very concerned that when we meet people in all sorts of encounters, that we meet each other with: 'what can I learn from you?' and not just: 'what can I teach you?' There is a significant difference, and we talk a lot about it in this course because I am very concerned about equitable encounters. Yes, a Norwegian person knows most about Norway, but there are also a lot of topics where this is not the case. I think that everybody should learn from everybody. If one does not enter it [the encounter] in this manner, you very quickly end up in some sort of helping role that I aim to avoid.

Again, the promise of an equitable encounter is emphasised. We find the notion of equitability in this excerpt entails a mindset of reciprocity and an opportunity for participants to learn from each other when entering the encounter. Albeit the mindset is not the promise itself but considered a prerequisite to achieving the promise. Yet, the facilitator also hints at ambivalences, and potential power inequalities between the participants should such a mindset not be their point of departure.

Case 3: The Befriending Scheme

The befriending scheme forms part of a larger organisation that includes operating asylum seeker centres in its portfolio. Thus, the aim and purpose of this project was initially to keep the asylum seekers active in one such centre. However, most asylum seeker facilities established in Norway in response to the refugee influx of 2015 were closed after only a year, and many asylum seekers were granted residence. In response, the facilitators shifted the geographical scope of the project to where these settled refugees were located – the city of Big Town. Its aim shifted similarly, to facilitate contact and social interaction between locals and newcomers.

'The befriending scheme', like the 'the intercultural triad', is structured around three roles. Although in this project those roles include a facilitator, local volunteers, and settled refugees as participants, there are no fixed groups of three that meet regularly, as in case 2. Instead, the permanent role is the facilitator, while volunteers and participants may join when they wish, sometimes resulting in a large group, at other times not. They do activities together in the city, such as playing pool, bowling, and hiking in the nearby mountains. These are activities through which they are all '(…) supposed to meet as equals, hanging out and creating a space for … yes, being social, having a nice time and speaking Norwegian' as Katja, one of the facilitators, explained.

Historically linked to a solidarity movement in Norway in the period after the Second World War, the promises of the larger organisation are those of equality, reflected in the quote by Katja, and of solidarity with refugees. The former goal – equality – is by this organisation interpreted as treating everyone the same way.

To reiterate, we find that the social imaginary underpinning these encounters, and the motivation for organising them, is that a lack of contact between locals and newcomers hampers long-term inclusion of immigrants. And the three cases illustrate how – from the perspective of the facilitators – the promise of these encounters entails equal and equitable contact between locals and newcomers. In addition, albeit to a lesser extent, there is a promise of standing in solidarity with refugees, to which we return in the next section.

Arguing that the Nordic focus on equality and sameness is 'a culturally specific way of resolving tensions between the individual and the community', Gullestad's work (1997, 2002: 46, 58–59) sheds more specific contextual light on the promise of meeting as equals and the ideal of equitable contact as conditioning factors of social interaction. She shows that power inequalities and hierarchical relations tend to be toned down in everyday social interaction, albeit the strong affinity for sameness indirectly involves a 'passion for boundaries' wherein a 'demand for sameness' decreases the scope for difference. To counterweight these power inequalities is what inspires the promise of the organised encounters studied here. Taken together, however, they are all structured around the undifferentiated positionalities of locals and newcomers with a risk of upholding the power inequalities operating within the imaginary of the organised encounter.

Between the Promises and Practices of Organised Encounters

Central to our analysis is that social imaginaries are both normative and factual, which means that the idea of how things ought to go – the promise – is entangled with a sense of how they usually go (Taylor 2002). For, as Taylor (2002: 98) suggests, while 'social imaginaries only become real in and through practices', they can be 'profoundly out of sync' with how things actually work. Thus, we now shift our gaze from the imaginaries underpinning the organised encounters to those between promises and practices. By practices, we here refer to the oral representation of how the facilitators manage the encounters and work to implement their promises. Yet, as ideals tend to fail, the practices studied here help unveil power inequalities operating in the organised encounter and the effects that they can have.

To that end, we distinguish between tensions between practices of managing the organised encounters and the promise on the one hand and tensions between those

engaging in these encounters on the other. That is, we distinguish individuals (locals) with their own set of promises and practices from the promise(s) and structures of the organised encounters.

Managing the Risk of Power Inequalities

The organised encounters described in the three cases above are all based on the differences the participants imagine to be the problem: a lack of contact between locals and newcomers as hampering long-term inclusion. By revealing the facilitators' notion of the promise(s) of these organised encounters – equality and reciprocity in social relationships – it becomes clear that they are aware of power inequalities conditioning these encounters (Cockayne et al. 2019). In other words, they are aware that the promise of meeting as equals in and through these encounters is not how things usually go (Taylor 2002, Wilson 2017a).

That said, we contend that in cases 1 and 3 above, the promise may be understood as an intent to *manage* the risk of power inequalities associated with the positionalities of locals and newcomers. At the same time, we show that their organisational structures and practices are not aligned with their promises. For when we distinguish between ideals and practices, the two projects were established around the static roles of locals as volunteers and newcomers as participants with little reflection on how this may contribute to maintaining unequal power relations. Meanwhile, in case 2, the facilitator shows an awareness and acknowledgment of different positionalities and their potential to create power inequalities between the participants. To manage this risk, flexible roles were deployed in the set-up of the organised encounter, not only for the participants but also between the facilitators, who also had different migration backgrounds. Nevertheless, and as emphasised above, the project's aim of cultural interpretation creates a risk of upholding power inequalities between those involved. Accordingly, we find the primary attention of the facilitators to be placed on the assumed difference between locals and newcomers, imagining them as undifferentiated categories when they reflect on the promise of the organised encounters. Their insights into the power inequalities operating within the imaginary of the encounter itself are thus limited.

Even so, many facilitators described the typical volunteer as a retired female teacher. The participants, in contrast, are often young men from refugee backgrounds. Thus, we find the facilitators' *practices* of managing the power inequalities within the encounters are directed towards the positionalities of age, gender, and to some extent, ethnicity, raising the recurring question in academic conversations on encounters of what difference makes a difference (Ahmed 2000, Wilson and Darling 2016). For instance, to recruit younger volunteers (locals), they seek students. To secure increased participation by women (newcomers), they use women-only meeting venues with activities such as cooking and knitting. They also consider their time schedules to accommodate different needs, such as daytime activities for mothers with children and evening activities for those in formal language training as well as male labour migrants. Whereas these examples show that facilitators manage a variety of needs and potential inequalities, they deploy different practices without considering whether they are aligned with their imaginaries.

Furthermore, the facilitators do not only relate to power inequalities between locals and newcomers but also within the assumed homogenous group of 'refugees'. For instance, Turid, a facilitator and volunteer in West Village, related a story of inviting groups of 20–25 from the asylum seeker centre for dinner at her house thinking that 'here it is equal for all … ' However, she noticed that the social interaction between different ethnic groups, in this case between Kurds and Arabs, was hampered by existing power inequalities. The facilitators chose to manage this risk by sorting the participants according to their ethnic group for these encounters.

Heeding Wilson's (2017a) call for the importance of bearing power structures in mind in organised encounters, we find the facilitators work hard to manage the risk of different inequalities. Yet, at the same time, these practices echo Taylor's (2002: 98) view of how things actually work out is 'out of sync' with their social imaginaries as they manage power inequalities in the organised encounter rather than question the imaginary of the encounter itself. Thus, the imaginary and the ideal remain an important guide for the organised encounter.

Tensions between the Promise(s), Structures, and Individual's Practices

We have thus far engaged with the perspectives of the facilitators of the organised encounters, investigating their promises, practices, and tensions therein. Regardless of the facilitators' awareness of and ability to manage power inequalities that condition the organised encounters, they cannot manage what individuals involved in the encounters do. Individuals are not passive recipients of organisational structures; they bring their own set of promises and practices that also condition the organised encounter (Christiansen et al. 2017). Thus, from the individuals' perspective, we identify tensions between the ideal of equal relations on the one hand and ideas of friendship and the opportunity to help on the other.

A common trope of several participants in this study – whether a facilitator or a volunteer/participant (local) – was that they entered these organised encounters with a promise of friendship. Fride, a facilitator and volunteer who also had been new in Big Town, once explained that 'Everybody needs a community, and I thought that the least I can offer is to be a friend'. However, this promise is not simply about offering friendship but about receiving it, as reported by Sanna when she described her motivation for volunteering: 'It is fun, and it gives me friendship. It brings me joy'. The idea of friendship is central in the social imaginary underpinning Allport's contact hypothesis (1954) as it entails meeting as equals and reciprocity in social relationships. Friendship is considered the gold standard of his hypothesis, and cross-group friendship is thus frequently highlighted as an essential precondition for achieving positive contact effects between locals and newcomers (Pettigrew et al. 2011). Drawing on these insights, we contend that the individuals' promise of friendship echoes that of the equitable encounter at the organisational level.

With that in mind, we return to the 'befriending scheme' described in case 3 where we find the project's interpretation of the promise of equality to imply treating everyone in the same way. To secure this ideal of equal treatment of all, those involved in the project were expected to distinguish between their roles in the organised encounter – facilitators, volunteers, and participants – and their private life. The rationale behind this

organisational structure was that if someone becomes friends across their different roles, there is potential for unequal treatment of the participants. However, this leaves little scope to negotiate the inherent power inequalities embedded in these roles. This conceptualisation of equality does not allow for reciprocity in social relations, which contrasts with the idea of friendship in Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis as outlined above. There is a contradiction found in the excerpt of Katja's remarks, both a facilitator and volunteer in the 'befriending scheme':

> I don't hang out with the people [participants] outside of the organised encounters. It's always a bit like: 'Oh, it would have been so nice, but I can't'. You really get to know one another, and you're good friends, but then you can't be friends in a traditional way. So, it gets … yes, it is a bit weird. And then it's like he, whom I organise this together with, he also came here as a refugee. But then he joined our organisation and helped run it. So, we are friends as regular friends. Yes, it feels a bit weird because I pretty much have the same relation to many of them [participants] as I have with him, really.

From Katja, we learn that friendship, according to this organisation, is only possible once the refugee steps out of their role of refugee and into that of facilitator. Nevertheless, not all those involved in the 'befriending scheme' found themselves similarly restrained by the organisational structures, such as Trygve, one of the volunteers. When confronted with the set-up of the project, he exclaimed that: 'You can't avoid it [becoming friends]' and continued to explain how you sometimes just get that connection with someone, regardless of age and background. Trygve was a retired man with friends among the newcomers – here settled refugees – much younger than himself.

The other organised encounters in this study were not set up like the 'befriending scheme'. Nonetheless, a similar expectation that participants will uphold the distinction between their formal and public roles and the private sphere can be found in refugee administration, as shown by this excerpt by Julie, who elaborated on a settlement of a refugee for which she had been responsible in Big Town, which generally only involves bringing the refugee to their new living facilities and sharing a meal before taking their leave:

> When we came to that dinner, it was so cosy. It was just impossible not to become friends, right? So, fortunately, I worked in a department where you just send them [the refugees] further in the system. I just let my contract end, and I have met them again. I just remember that dinner. I could never imagine that we would have a settlement like this at work. But it was something about this very flamboyant gay environment and dinner and dancing, and it was just like very [laughing] … I was at work, representing the municipality. I felt that, in a way, I tried to hide myself and be a professional, but after a while, you laugh at an inappropriate joke, something that you're not supposed to do. Then I quit [my job], and I've met them again several times.

Thus, we learn from Julie, formerly employed in refugee administration, that friendship based on reciprocity is only possible if one steps out of the frames of the organised encounter altogether. With the 'befriending scheme' and similar arrangements, we unveil an organised encounter that calls into question the imaginary by providing an alternative conceptualisation of friendship that does not include equality. This is a conceptualisation deployed by the facilitators to manage power inequalities within the organised encounter. Nevertheless, through the examples of Katja, Trygve, and Julie we detect tension, although facilitators cannot determine precisely what individuals do. Thus, individuals'

own sets of promises and practices – which also condition the encounters – must be considered to understand how to keep the promise of equality and reciprocity in social relations (Christiansen et al. 2017).

We do not claim to provide insights into the outcome of these organised encounters. Instead, through the three cases described in the previous section, we unveil how the facilitators emphasise the *mindset* of the individuals when *entering* the encounter as a prerequisite for keeping the promise. Thus far we have engaged with this mindset through the concepts of friendship, equality, and reciprocity. Meanwhile, in the particular historical context in which the data for this study were conducted – the aftermath of the refugee influx of 2015 in Norway – the promise of friendship among many of the participants overlapped with an opportunity to help. Sanna, for example, is quoted above as describing how volunteering brings her joy and friendship. She continued: '(…) but it's also a joy to help others'. These overlapping promises and practices add to the complexities of power inequalities operating within the encounter, as the mindset of helping does not entail reciprocity in social relations. Katja, a facilitator in the 'befriending scheme', elaborated on the tension between the two promises as she explained that it had not been challenging to recruit volunteers to the project because it had provided them with an opportunity to help and to stand in solidarity with the refugees. At the same time, many volunteers had not understood how spending time together as equals was a form of helping because, as the volunteers had exclaimed: 'they didn't need me'.

As with Katja, it was repeatedly stressed by the facilitators that the promise of helping conflicted with the promise of equitable encounters. For example, Catherine, in the 'intercultural triad' explicitly aimed to avoid inserting a helping role in the project because the alternative would run counter to the ideal of all learning from each other regardless of positionalities such as locals and newcomers. In addition, Kristoffer, in case 1, kept insisting that participation in the language cafés was not a one-sided relationship. Yet, he was also uncertain as to whether he managed to communicate this message clearly to those involved: the volunteers and participants.

While unveiling the facilitators' continued insistence to the volunteers that helping is inconsistent with the promise of equitability, the facilitators simultaneously rely on the imaginary as a guide for how these encounters ought to go. Thus, and in agreement with Taylor (2002), these insights indicate tensions between promises and practices of organised encounters.

In sum, we identify a promise closely aligned with the modern social imaginary outlined by Taylor (2002), which features ideals of organised encounters based on equality and reciprocity in social relations. While we find a common imaginary framing how to set up and practice organised encounters, our study also unveils tensions when this social imaginary is put into practice. The tensions include different understandings of what constitutes equal relationships on the one hand and of how social relations should and can be practised within the frame conditioned by these organised encounters on the other.

Conclusion

The current study draws attention to the deep-rooted cultural belief that encounters with and across differences have the potential to produce social change (Allport 1954). This

societal aspect of living together in diversity has thus far received less attention than the nature and extent of exclusionary reactions in the wake of the 2015 refugee influx.

By drawing on qualitative data from three local communities in present-day Norway, one of the strongest insights from the analysis is the importance placed by the research participants on organised encounters as a means to achieve contact between locals and newcomers. A lack of contact is imagined to be the 'problem' to be overcome to bring about long-term inclusion of newcomers to Norway. Nevertheless, a lingering question underpinning our analysis concerns how locals and newcomers can meet as equals in encounters organised around the differences and power inequalities they aim to address. And more specifically, how these inequalities can be managed (see Wilson 2017a).

Building on previous work on unequal power relations as a central prerequisite for organised encounters, this study adds to the ongoing academic conversation on these encounters by distinguishing between power inequalities operating *within* organised encounters and inequalities operating *within the imaginary* of the encounter itself. To that end, we have bridged the scholarship on encounters in Human Geography with Charles Taylor's concept of the 'social imaginary' to enquire into this deep-rooted belief to better understand the basic cultural imaginaries that guide the practices of locals involved in integration efforts (Raco 2018). We find that most research participants entering these encounters, regardless of role, are guided by a promise – or a mindset – reflecting ideals of equality and reciprocity in social relations. These ideals are closely aligned with the modern social imaginary outlined by Taylor (2002). Thus, we put forth the idea of *a promise of inclusion* which, we argue, is central in local community efforts to deal with inclusion of newcomers.

However, whereas we find that a promise of inclusion forms part of the imaginary of the encounter itself informed by ideals of meeting as equals, we simultaneously unveil how practices of inequality operating within the encounters are common. What is interesting, however, is how many participants (facilitators) are highly aware of the power inequalities and contradictions inherent in these organised encounters, and in particular tensions between the imaginary of the encounter and the inequalities operating within them. While we find that they address and negotiate these tensions when setting up and participating in local initiatives, deciding on how to achieve this ideal in practice is a topic of disagreement and negotiation within (Wilson 2017a, Cockayne et al. 2019). Our aim here is to highlight the paradox inherent in the social imaginary that underpins the encounter: the tensions between the promise of how things ideally ought to go when locals and newcomers meet and the knowledge that this ideal is often not achievable. We show that although our research participants are often aware of this paradox, their motivations and approaches are still informed by the imaginary and guided by what we coin as a promise of inclusion. In line with Taylor's (2002) thesis, therefore, we contend that the social imaginary that guides such organised encounters maintains a deep-rooted legitimacy about how we should relate to each other.

Notes

1. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

2. All necessary ethics approvals were obtained from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services.

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