

‘In a village, everybody knows the stranger’: Constructing local belonging of refugees in rural areas in Germany

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Abstract

This article explores the local belonging of refugees in rural areas in Germany from the perspectives of both migrants and local integration actors. It analyses the development of a personal sense of belonging and the construction of the politics of belonging, with the aim of understanding belonging as a socio-spatial process. The analysis is based on 64 semi-structured and semi-narrative qualitative interviews conducted in eight rural communities and small towns in different regions across Germany. The findings indicate that the sense of belonging to rural localities among refugees is influenced not only by personal and biographical experiences but also by overarching policies and administrative practices. They also reflect the expectations of the receiving communities, which imply imaginaries of rural communities. In addition to convivial everyday experiences, the demarcation of boundaries in everyday life appears to be particularly powerful for a sense of belonging.

KEYWORDS

belonging, local belonging, local migration regimes, politics of belonging, refugee integration, rural areas

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INTRODUCTION: RECEPTION OF REFUGEES IN RURAL PLACES

In recent years, rural communities in Europe have increasingly been recognised as parts of diverse migration societies (McAreavey & Argent, 2018). Even though migration to rural areas is not a new phenomenon, rural regions have long been viewed as forming a contrast with diverse urban communities due to their more homogeneous population structures and low levels of migration. This perspective, however, is no longer supported by migration research, which has in recent years been driven not only by historical but also by more current immigration patterns (Haandrikman et al., 2023; Hedberg & do Carmo, 2012; McAreavey & Argent, 2018; Oliva, 2010). In particular, the reception of refugees since the mid-2010s has significantly impacted rural areas. In some regions of Germany, which is the focus of this article, the proportion of foreigners in the population has more than doubled because of refugee immigration since 2014 (Destatis, 2023).¹

The long-term potential of rural areas as locations for migrant settlement has garnered significant attention in both academic and political debates concerning their ability to support economic and demographic needs, for example, in the sectors of agriculture and manufacturing (Hudson & Sandberg, 2021; Kordel et al., 2023a; Nori & Farinella, 2020). In such discussions of the potential for development, the social processes involved in receiving newcomers to local communities are often overlooked (Glorius et al., 2021). Nonetheless, existing studies identify two distinct attributes of rural communities related to the settlement of refugees: On the one hand, small localities may be conducive to effective integration processes due to their intimate nature and close-knit networks; on the other hand, rural places are often perceived as homogeneously white, inhibiting the social integration of newcomers due to preconceived notions of belonging and limited infrastructure for integration (e.g., Klocker et al., 2021; Schammann et al., 2022).

When we consider the long-term settlement of refugees in rural communities, the question inevitably arises of how immigrants develop a sense of belonging, that is, a sense of 'home'. Looking at the negotiation of belonging in German rural communities is particularly relevant given the high number of refugees settled in such communities since 2015, but further research on social processes in this context is still needed.

Social science research has long discussed migrants' belonging to certain groups but has often overlooked the importance of spatiality (Tomaney, 2015; Youkhana, 2015). This is particularly evident in the 'paradoxical lack of concern with the phenomenon of local belonging' (Tomaney, 2015, p. 508). Recognising the spatial aspects, this article understands belonging as a socio-spatial process that is produced by both the receiving society and the refugees settled within it. The article addresses the shortcomings of previous research by considering the role of rural contexts and the interplay between migrants' perceptions, social boundaries and spatial structures. Therefore, I refer to Antonsich's conceptualisation of belonging, which acknowledges two levels: first, a *personal sense of belonging* to a place and second, the discursively shaped *politics of belonging*, which encompass, for example, the expectations of the receiving community but also a regulated scope for action for refugees. To explore both of these aspects, I draw on qualitative data collected in eight rural localities through interviews with refugees (36 interviews) and local actors (28 interviews). Taking both perspectives into account, this article addresses the following guiding questions:

1. How is the local belonging of refugees perceived from different perspectives? What promotes belonging, and what impedes it?
2. What does it take to belong to the local community and is this conditioned by rural structures?

The article begins with an overview of theories on local belonging and findings from existing research on rural areas. In the third section, I briefly describe the data and methods before presenting the empirical results concerning the perspectives of refugees and local stakeholders. I conclude with a discussion of the construction of local belonging, highlighting three key features: (1) the significance of everyday experiences and othering processes in shaping feelings of (non-)belonging, (2) the related conditionalities and (3) the relevance of spatial narratives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CONCEPTUALISING BELONGING IN RURAL MIGRATION REGIMES

The question of who belongs to a community or group has been at the centre of social sciences for many decades. Among the early and significant contributions to this field is the figurative approach outlined by Elias and Scotson (1994), which draws on local fieldwork carried out in a British town. Their work, *Established and Outsiders*, highlights the significance of everyday interactions and localised power formations in shaping patterns of inequality between long-established residents and newcomers (Elias & Scotson, 1994, p. 194). While Elias and Scotson paid less attention to interethnic processes, in recent decades, with the rise of diversifying patterns of mobility and migration, intercultural processes within communities have received more attention, especially in 'super-diverse' (Vertovec, 2007) contexts, such as urban 'arrival neighbourhoods' (Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020; Wiest, 2018). Increasing globalisation processes, mobile societies and transnational forms of identities remind us that 'insiders and outsiders do not exist as fixed categories' (Savage et al., 2005, p. 31) or define closed social groups and the question of 'who belongs' is constantly being (re)negotiated.

Belonging to local communities

Although the term 'belonging' has gained popularity in different fields of social science and encompasses several meanings, it is generally agreed that it describes a feeling or attribution of a person or group to a place or social structure (Allen et al., 2021; Antonsich, 2010; Gilmartin, 2008; Mee & Wright, 2009; Savage et al., 2005; Wessendorf, 2019; Youkhana, 2015). Therefore, the concept of belonging provides a useful lens for migration researchers, as it can offer an analytical approach to processes of inclusion and exclusion from a place-based perspective (Menke & Rumpel, 2022). Belonging is often equated with identity. However, whereas "identity" highlights homogeneity of any given collective unit (...) "belonging" stresses commonness, but not necessarily sameness' (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020, p. 118), thus becoming an analytical notion that recognises the dynamics of and temporal changes in social relations. Belonging should, therefore, be understood as a process of 'continuous negotiations between individuals and collectivities' (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020, p. 114). Such negotiations of belonging can be found at different scaling levels, including the transnational, national, regional and local (Amelina et al., 2021, p. 5) but are not limited to one level and can revolve around questions of membership and citizenship.

Since geographers began to emphasise the importance of place several decades ago (Tuan, 2001 [1977]), the literature on belonging as a spatially anchored phenomenon has progressively expanded (Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018; Savage et al., 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006), but 'explorations of local attachment and belonging remain comparatively rare' (Tomaney, 2015, p. 508). However, examining belonging at the local level, specifically in a given locality, is particularly interesting

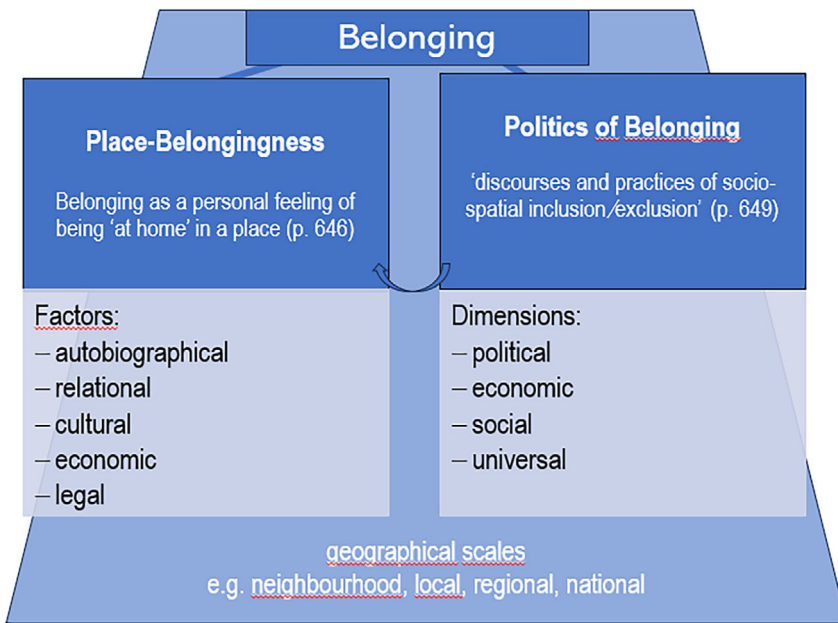


FIGURE 1 Conceptualising belonging (created by the author based on Antonsich, 2010).

because it reveals the practical and physical involvement of people in their everyday lives (Herslund, 2021). Such involvement is manifested in everyday practices and experiences. This highlights the crucial recognition that being 'at home in a place is not just a personal matter, but also a social one' (Antonsich, 2010, p. 649). Pfaff-Czarnecka (2020) summarises these aspects under the term 'regimes of belonging' (p. 119), as inclusionary and exclusionary processes underlie both structuring rules, such as those determined politically, and expectations held by collective units, such as local commonalities.

To capture these factors, I follow the conceptualisation of belonging by Antonsich (2010), who proposes recognising two layers: place-belongingness and the politics of belonging (see Figure 1).

He further highlights two sides of these politics, with one claiming belonging and the other holding the power of 'granting belonging', which, in acts, leads to a process of negotiating belonging (Antonsich, 2010) in a 'political arena' (Youkhana, 2015, p. 13). *Place-belongingness* refers to the personal feeling 'of being "at home" in a place', encompassing aspects such as 'familiarity, comfort, security' (Antonsich, 2010, p. 652). Place-belongingness may include multiple geographical scales and materialities, such as the individual dwelling, the neighbourhood, the locality and the wider regional or national space. Based on existing research, Antonsich identifies five factors that can determine place-belongingness: (1) autobiographical (e.g., experiences in the past concerning personal relations or experiences with places), (2) relational (e.g., experiences with personal and social ties in a certain place; strong and weak ties), (3) cultural (e.g., through language, creating a feeling of home by sharing familiar cultural codes or habits), (4) economic (concerning the financial and material situation) and (5) legal (such as citizenship or residence or work permits). These factors of belonging closely resemble those aspects identified in empirical research on migration and integration as key elements for the integration of migrants (Ager & Strang, 2008). While integration theory emphasises the broader socio-political processes that facilitate migrants' inclusion, the concept of belonging is concerned with the individual's personal and emotional

sense of place, rootedness and connection to a specific locality. Therefore, the aspect of place-belongingness is important for understanding how migrants develop a sense of what factors favour their staying in or leaving a location and develop place-attachment (Garbutt, 2009; Glorius et al., 2020) or, from a long-term perspective, for the process of anchoring or embedding (Grzymała-Kazłowska & Ryan, 2022) in a particular context over time. Moreover, it is also relevant to explore the *politics of belonging* to comprehend the social contexts in which a sense of place-belonging can emerge. Antonsich refers to Yuval-Davis' concept of the 'politics of belonging' (Yuval-Davis, 2006) to recognise that belonging is not just an individual feeling but a social issue. The term *politics of belonging*, introduced by Crowley (1999), describes 'the very real effects discourse may have' (p. 6), resulting in socio-spatial practices of in- and exclusion (Antonsich, 2010, p. 649). Yuval-Davis also refers to the politics of belonging as 'the boundaries that separate the world population into "us" and "them"' (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 204). In practical terms, such practices could manifest in the everyday interactions of the long-established population with newcomers but also in overarching policies that influence the drawing of social boundaries (e.g., access to the labour market, access to permanent residence permit, citizenship). This also includes 'struggles around the determination of what is involved in belonging, in being a member of a community, and of what roles specific social locations and specific narratives of identity play in this' (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 205). Hence, the process of belonging is to be understood as conditioned by power relations in the receiving communities (Antonsich, 2010, pp. 653–654). Antonsich identifies four dimensions of how the politics of belonging emerge (see Figure 1): (1) political belonging (e.g., through citizenship or residence permits), (2) belonging to the economy of the place, (3) social belonging (e.g., being part of everyday interactions in the social life of a place) and (4) universal belonging (e.g., equal access to human rights). These dimensions of the politics of belonging naturally determine personal place-belonging.

Based on this twofold analytical understanding, belonging to a locality can be seen as a process negotiated through both everyday activities (Herslund, 2021, p. 239) and the overarching discourses and policies that determine the receptivity of places (Glorius et al., 2021). Refugees are particularly affected by this, as they are subject to special hurdles due to political, administrative, social and racial demarcations. There is an increasing perception in research of the importance of the social wellbeing of migrants in their places of settlement, as characterised by these dimensions, in their then developing a long-term place-attachment (Glorius et al., 2020; Lynnebakke & Aasland, 2022); therefore, I understand belonging as an integral part of developing this place-attachment. In this article, I focus on the migrant group of refugees who have only been living in their respective places for a few years. I therefore assume that legal and political demarcations are particularly important. Furthermore, it is known from empirical research that narratives and discourses about refugees can play a particularly important role in drawing social boundaries (Doomernik & Glorius, 2016).

Belonging of migrants to rural communities

Although rural regions have traditionally been overlooked in migration research, there is now a growing interest in rural places as 'New Immigrant Destinations' (McAreavey & Argent, 2018). This can be attributed to the frequent discussion in public discourse of the rise in international migration in connection with rural development issues amidst demographic changes (Arora-Jonsson, 2017; Urso, 2021). In the context of the arrival of migrants, rural areas are often presented as 'rural idylls' in contrast with densely populated cities, most of which are experiencing major

capacity problems with regard to the housing market (Klocker et al., 2021). Rural communities are frequently considered to have social potential thanks to their close social networks, even though well-established migrant arrival structures are often lacking. In Germany, the significant increase in refugee migration since 2015 means that more and more small municipalities have been confronted with refugee migration due to dispersal policies (Mehl et al., 2023; Rösch et al., 2020). Accordingly, research on Germany and beyond is often conducted with an interest in the factors that encourage migrants to stay in rural areas, mostly focussing on integration governance (Rösch et al., 2020) but rarely addressing the role of the receiving communities (Glorius et al., 2021).

The related discussion about the permanent settlement of refugees in rural areas in terms of rural development raises questions as to whether rural communities can be viewed as offering a unique environment that fosters a sense of belonging: for example, how residents perceive and define their environment, who is considered a part of the community and whether locally held ideas of living together include diversity (Shucksmith, 2018). In relation to rural areas, research also identifies rural imaginaries, which are based on ideas of how rural communities are or should be (Hudson & Sandberg, 2021). Drawing on international studies that have explored migrant belonging in rural areas in recent years (Erel, 2011; Herslund, 2021; Mathisen & Cele, 2020; Spiliopoulos et al., 2021; Yarker, 2014), I suggest that structural factors, social constellations and rural imaginaries influence the possibility of migrant belonging. The following key findings from previous research can be summarised: belonging in rural places is a complex process that is determined, for example, by one's region of origin (Herslund, 2021, p. 240). Social networks, for instance through volunteer supporters, are important and can compensate for the lack or inaccessibility of integration structures but do not always create a sense of 'home' and closeness, especially as power inequalities between 'helpers' and 'recipients' come into play. For refugees, belonging is not necessarily determined by close-knit contact networks with long-term residents but can rely on a self-determined life with everyday contacts. Last, empirical research also identifies othering processes (Erel, 2011) as a challenge in the everyday experience of migrants, a phenomenon described in the literature as 'rural racism' (Chakraborti, 2004). Even if these othering processes can be found in all spatial contexts, the question remains as to whether the notion of rural communities as homogeneous communities can play a role here. Radford (2016) suggests the notion of 'everyday otherness' to describe the process of negotiating difference and diversity in a rural context. For this article, it is also important to emphasise the special nature of refugees' locational choice: In German municipalities, as in many other countries, refugees are not free to choose their place of residence, at least for a certain period following their arrival.² This means that they only have a limited opportunity to develop an 'elective belonging' (Savage et al., 2010).

DATA AND METHODS

This study uses qualitative interview data to shed light on perspectives on refugees' belonging in rural localities. The data were collected as part of a larger collaborative research project, 'The Future for Refugees in Rural Regions of Germany', carried out from 2018 to 2021 across 40 German municipalities in eight rural counties across different regions of the country (see Mehl et al., 2023). Among the collection of other data,³ qualitative interviews were conducted with refugees and local stakeholders from politics, administration and civil society.⁴ For this analysis, I have selected the most rural localities, based on the Thünen Index of Rurality (Küpper, 2016), from each of the eight counties. In total, this includes 64 interviews conducted in four rural municipalities and four small towns situated across four federal states in Germany. The objective of the analysis

TABLE 1 Overview of interview sample ($N = 64$) used for the analysis.

Federal state	Locality	Number of interviews	
		Refugees	Local actors
A (Lower Saxony)	Small town A1 (pop. 9600)	5	4
	Rural municipality A2 (pop. 7300)	3	5
B (Hesse)	Small town B1 (pop. 5200)	4	4
	Small town B2 (pop. 7800)	8	3
C (Bavaria)	Rural municipality C1 (pop. 2700)	5	4
	Small town C2 (pop. 4600)	5	4
D (Saxony)	Rural municipality D1 (pop. 6700)	4	3
	Rural municipality D2 (pop. 3600)	2	1
		36	28

TABLE 2 Profiles of interviewees.

Refugees 38 interviews with 49 refugees	Local Stakeholders 28 interviews with 34 interviewees ^a
■ Nationality: 32 Syria, 4 Eritrea, 4 stateless/Palestine, 3 Afghanistan, 2 Iraq, 2 Libya, 1 Iran, 1 Lebanon ■ Age: mean 34 years, range 18–60 years ■ Gender: 31 male; 18 female ■ Family status (per interview): 4 married, 22 married with children, 9 single, 3 other/unknown. ■ Number of interviewees: 12 interviews were conducted with two family members, 25 interviews with one person ■ Legal status: 37 residence permit (refugee status), 6 ‘exceptional leave to remain’ (<i>Duldung</i>), 6 not stated	■ Administration (7 interviews): local officials, social welfare officials ■ Civil society (11 interviews): volunteers, sports clubs, social workers, churches, other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) ■ Education (2 interviews) ■ Political actors (8 interviews)

^aThis classification does not include dual roles of interviewees (e.g., political actor and volunteer). The interviewees were always assigned to one category.

is not to draw comparisons between the various localities but rather to identify common overarching structures and experiences of belonging to rural communities across all regions studied, particularly in the most rural of these. The corpus for this analysis includes 36 interviews with 47 refugees and 28 interviews with 31 interviewees drawn from local actors in politics, administration and civil society (see Table 1).

The qualitative interviews with refugees were carried out as semi-structured interviews using a participatory approach including mobility and residential biography mapping (see Kordel et al., 2023b); the interviews discussed their everyday life in their rural places of residence and their reflections on integration either for the individual interviewee or, if the interview was conducted with two family members, for both of them. Most of the interviewed refugees were already recognised as refugees in Germany (see Table 2). Therefore, it can be assumed that they had already lived in their places of residence for a certain period, allowing them to reflect on how they would like to lead their social lives there. Some refugees in the sample only have a tolerated status, which can provide insights into how formal barriers affect questions of belonging here.

The interviews were conducted in 2019 and lasted between 68 and 225 min, providing ample time for the interviewees to reflect on life in the area. Interpreters for the native language were present if necessary. The sample was selected based on the composition of the refugee population in the regions studied, leading to a predominance of Syrian refugees, alongside other nationals.

Alongside the interviews with migrants, interviews with local stakeholders were conducted between February 2019 and March 2020 (before the introduction of COVID-19 measures): While migrant interviews were semi-structured and covered dimensions of local integration, those with local stakeholders were conducted either using a semi-structured or semi-narrative approach reflecting on local communities and the processes of integration. Whereas the refugees' data provide insights into their personal senses of belonging but also their perceptions of the politics of belonging, those gathered from the local actors reflect their view on expectations of the population and how these relate to migrants' belonging. This perspective is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it reflects the factors of belonging on the basis of the stakeholders' work with migrants. Second, it situates these findings within the context of the community in rural municipalities, which are part of inclusionary and exclusionary practices of the politics of belonging. However, the interviews with the local stakeholders represent mostly the perspectives of the receiving society, as they are predominantly white and non-migrant.

Moreover, especially when discussing belonging, it is important to reflect on my own role in the research context. Our research teams were predominantly mixed gender and, except for the translators, comprised white individuals from the majority society. To reduce the barriers and power differences that might otherwise impede the process, for example, preliminary meetings were held with the refugees, sensitivity training was provided and the native translators were trained for the method.⁵ In addition to the relationship with refugee respondents, it is also important to recognise that our role as urban-based researchers may have had an impact on the overall research process, potentially creating a certain distance between ourselves and the researched rural communities. Building long-term contact and trust was therefore important to us during the 3-year project.

For further analysis, the locations and names or exact ages of the respondents are not disclosed to protect anonymity. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The analysis followed the approach to systematic qualitative content analysis developed by Kuckartz (2019), including inductive exploration of the interview data. Based on this method, the interviews were analysed using MAXQDA software, with three rounds of inductive and deductive coding (1044 codings in total) and writing memos. The findings were then applied to the operationalised concept of belonging (see Figure 1). For this article, all quotations were translated from German to English.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The following section presents the results of the empirical analysis based on two conceptual strands: personal place-belonging and the politics of belonging. As migrants' belonging is subject to multi-layered and complex conditions, I focus particularly on those aspects that concern local communities in their rural context.

Reflections of refugees on local belonging

Analysis of the interviews conducted with refugees demonstrates that their sense of belonging to their respective places of residence and related local communities depended on various factors.

All aspects of the place-belongingness described by Antonsich proved to be influential for the interviewees, although individual emphasis varied considerably. The politics of belonging were reflected as limiting or enabling factors. *Autobiographical factors*, in particular the individual's region of origin (e.g., rural context or large city), were frequently taken as reference points for explaining one's own ability (or desire) to fit in with the current place of residence. This exposure to an environment that either corresponds or contradicts one's own experiences in housing is of particular importance for the group of refugees, as they are—unlike many other migration or population groups—subject to distribution policies to certain areas and thus often fall under prescribed residence requirements ('Wohnsitzauflage'). One woman from Syria reflected about this: *'I'm not used to living in a village. I hate nature. (...) I'm totally the big city type'* (46–50 years old, rural municipality, Interview 028). In contrast, another interviewee described a profound personal affinity with rural living, stating, *'I grew up in a village too, I prefer it quiet'* (male, 41–45 years old, from Syria, rural municipality, Interview 027). Such personal preferences were explained by either biographical experiences or functionalities of the location that suited the individual's own lifestyle or situation.

This included, for example, the accessibility of religious institutions or important hobbies, such as whether there was a suitable gym nearby or a club matching an individual's interests. For many refugees, religious affiliation plays a major role in questions of *cultural belonging*, the affirmation of which, in the case of Muslims, is often more likely to be found in larger cities: *'There is a mosque in [next large city]. But we don't actually go. It is too far away'* (female, 51–55 years old, from Lebanon, rural municipality, Interview 005).

These observations illustrate the contribution of infrastructural elements to the social functionality of a place, as highlighted by Savage et al. (2005), and especially the issue of accessibility by public transport. As infrastructural factors are recognised as crucial for everyday life and mainly involve practical and financial considerations, they also have an impact on the formation of emotional connections and a 'sense of home' and create opportunities for belonging to social groups, as this example of a mother and her adult son illustrates:

I prayed the whole time that I wouldn't end up in a village like that. (...) Everyone is nice. But village life is not good. For example, my son (...) who is 24 years old and has nothing to do here. He's interested in sports, he wants to go to the gym, but here in [small town nearby] it costs 50 euros a month, but he only gets 260 euros a month from the state. Then, he wanted to register in [next large city], where it's cheaper. But he needs 130 euros a month for a monthly bus ticket (...) When he meets up with his mates and they play together in [other small town], he leaves the game early so he can get the bus home. (Female, 46–50 years old, from Syria, rural municipality, Interview 028)

This narrative illustrates how spatial and economic conditions for refugees are closely intertwined and can affect refugees' social ties, for example, if there is no access to a car as is the case for most young adults in this region. The *legal dimension* is also of significant importance in this context, as the family is residing in a tolerated status, which makes it challenging for them to obtain a relocation permit.

Besides the spatial structure, the sense of belonging, as cultural codes and the feeling of 'fitting in' were also described as important (*cultural belonging*). Such reflections referred in particular to everyday encounters, for example in the neighbourhood, in public spaces or when going shopping.

The feelings of being a stranger, feeling uncomfortable or feeling at ease were often linked to the everyday reactions that migrants' own presence evoked.

We simply felt like a stranger. It wasn't just that we didn't understand the language, we didn't understand how people treated us, or how to behave, or what to do when you go to the doctor or the supermarket. These were all things we didn't know. (Female, 26–30 years old, from Afghanistan, small town, Interview 085)

But when I go shopping, for example, I talk to the people and I no longer feel like a stranger, no longer like a refugee in another country. (Female, 36–40 years old, from Syria, small town, Interview 034)

Concerning the *relational* and *social factors* of belonging, the small-scale social nature often attributed to rural areas and the fact that people knew one another was a relevant factor for people who described a great sense of home or belonging. As described in the quote from the Syrian woman above, these everyday interactions, for example, with neighbours or in public spaces such as the marketplace or when shopping, could be seen as very valuable. This young man from Syria reflected positively on everyday life in his small town:

[I like] that this is a small town and the people (...) I don't know many people, but, for example, when I go out on the street tomorrow when I go to school, I always meet my neighbour from [incomprehensible] here. (...) When I go to the bus stop, I speak to the people there. They also say 'hello' back, with a smile, like that. I find that very nice. And I don't find that at all in the city. I've never experienced that in a city before. That's why I like [name of the small town]. (18–20 years old, small town, Interview 030)

As this quote shows, even where close contacts with the long-established population were limited, positive everyday experiences of loose contacts in the neighbourhood could have a significant impact on an individual's perception of well-being and, consequently, their sense of belonging. However, most refugees who described a deep feeling of being 'at home' in their town or neighbourhood also reported close friendships, like this young Iranian man: '*Here in the village, we live like a family. They all know us, I have a best friend who lives right here, on the same floor*' (21–25 years old, rural municipality, Interview 006). Moreover, what seemed to impact social wellbeing was also the sense of reciprocity of interest, or when migrants felt, they could effectively contribute to local initiatives:

The locals always celebrate Eid with us. (...) they looked on the Internet to see how Muslims celebrate Eid and then they prepared everything so that people wouldn't feel like strangers. (Male, 41–45 years old, from Syria, small town, Interview 034)

Moreover, knowing the German language played a crucial role in the interviewees' feeling close to their local communities to develop a place-based *cultural belonging*. Unfortunately, there remain barriers to doing so, such as the limited accessibility of language courses, some of which are only offered at distant locations, as well as legal obstacles faced by those with residence permits that do not allow participation:

My eldest son. He really wants to learn the language [...], wanted to enrol and do the language courses. Then he got a letter saying he was rejected. That's just because of the papers and residence permit. (Female, 46–50 years old, from Syria, rural municipality, Interview 028)

Other language courses, for example, organised by civil society, for people without residence status are not always available nearby. The ability to speak German is perceived as a gateway to a multitude of benefits, for example, the access to employment opportunities or the overall feeling of possibilities to belong: '*If you can speak [German], you can do everything and people won't laugh at you*' (male, 41–45 years old, from Syria, small town, Interview 077).

The interviewees primarily linked *economic belonging* to the issue of having a job, not only to achieve financial independence from social benefits but also to contribute to society and find a long-term place to stay. When they looked for work, however, the feeling of social exclusion comes into play, for example, due to a lack of work permits, as this Syrian man explains: '*Because I don't have a residence permit yet and that's why I don't feel that I have the right*' (male, 36–40 years old, from Syria, small town, Interview 090).

Other limitations for finding a workplace are lack of mobility in comparison to the rest of the local population and also cultural reservations (e.g., a lack of acceptance of wearing a headscarf). As the choice of work opportunities in the neighbourhood was limited, this presented a particular challenge:

There was once the incident, about 3 or 4 months ago, that I wanted to do an internship here in a hairdressing salon, it's next door here, hairdresser (...) they told me that I couldn't do an internship here because of my headscarf, because that would put off their customers (...) And also my friends who wear a headscarf, they all didn't get an internship either. (Female, 26–30 years old, from Afghanistan, small town, Interview 085)

Being 'visible' as a Muslim woman can also pose a challenge to developing a sense of *social and cultural belonging*: Wearing a headscarf as a religious symbol is perceived as a deviation from the predominantly Christian and white majority communities (Joshi, 2016). It is not always seen as an integral part of the rural community. Although refugees also described positive experiences of social reception in their local communities, processes of othering (Erel, 2011), especially in places where diversity is less visible, occur in everyday life and influence the possibility of feeling truly at home or even foster isolation. It is worth noting that extreme events, such as racist attacks or insults, can significantly impact respondents' sense of belonging. However, implicit encounters in everyday life can also have a significant impact, for example, being looked at in a particular way:

When we see those people on the street, we look at their faces or see what they think about us. We greet them, but they don't greet us at all, but at school, kindergarten, when shopping, we haven't had any bad behaviour. (Male, 31–35 years old, from Syria, small town, Interview 100)

The demographic composition of rural areas can also create social barriers. Younger refugees in particular reported feeling disconnected from older people living in their neighbourhoods:

But sometimes there are a few old people who are over 60 years old and they all tell me, 'You can get to know these people [neighbours]'. (...), but I don't want to have any more contact with them. (Female, 36–40 years old, from Syria, small town, Interview 098)

Like refugees living alone, these young individuals wanted more local contacts. However, the small-town environment limited the number of people who shared similar interests or were of the same age.

Local integration actors' perspective on refugee belonging

For many interviewees involved in local integration work, civil society and politics, the focus of their interview responses was primarily on structural dimensions creating prerequisites to belonging. These dimensions mainly defined the *politics of belonging*, such as expectations for language acquisition by refugees and their participation in the community: Employment was seen as a particularly important means of creating opportunities for belonging. Legal aspects were discussed somewhat prominently, for example, the dependence on the official granting of asylum. However, the interviewees frequently also reflected on the social negotiation of local communities and their expectations, which grasped belonging as a social process (Antonsich, 2010; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020).

Knowledge of the German language was considered essential for *cultural belonging*, but limited accessibility or availability of language classes in small communities can make it difficult to achieve advanced language proficiency. Almost all interviewees emphasised the importance of the knowledge of German for belonging to the local community, particularly in everyday interactions. As they observed, however, there are regional differences, for example, in regions with little experience of migration, such as eastern Germany, or regions where a particular dialect is expected: '*Language is and remains important (...), of course the East Germans have a bit of a problem with English*' (mayor, rural municipality, Interview 167).

To consider the rural context more specifically, local actors often compared their places to larger cities. They assumed faster language learning in rural surroundings due to a lack of migrant networks and, therefore, a greater need to speak German:

I always told them, 'Stay here, learn German'. And then they go to the city to Arab communities but don't learn German. (...) They also run good language courses [here]. They teach them German or Bavarian [dialect] relatively well. [Name of refugee] speaks perfect Bavarian. (Volunteer, rural village, Interview 196)

Some interviewees also saw the participation of newcomers in local associations and community festivals as potentially helpful in creating a sense of belonging to the community. However, this did not play as large a role in their answers as the importance of everyday encounters. Interviewees emphasised adherence to the social rules of their neighbourhood and small gestures in everyday life but also compliance with implicit rules:

Because here in the village, it is expected to greet each other. (Civil society/sports club, small town, Interview 318)

Already at the beginning, I told them, 'You have to say hello on the street. You don't necessarily have to say "Grüß Gott" [regional phrase for 'hello'], it's enough to say "Guten Tag"'. (...) These are the door openers. (Volunteer, rural village, Interview 196)

Several interviewees reported that a significant proportion of refugees had long-term aspirations of settling in large cities or metropolitan areas. Most of them saw the reasons for this in structural factors, but some also reflected on the personal experiences and preferences of refugees. For many interviewees, this desire to move away hindered the long-term development of a sense of belonging, even if residency regulations did not allow relocation.

In addition to this, rural place narratives (Hudson & Sandberg, 2021) could be found in the interviewees' remarks when speaking about social life: It was often stressed that, in addition to language skills, there were certain social expectations in villages or small towns that migrants should adapt to in order to be perceived as part of the community. This particularly concerned neighbourly habits and routines in villages and small towns (e.g., saying hello in the street or properly separating waste). Beyond these points, interviewees also attributed the ability to fit in to personal biographical experiences' influencing whether an individual liked rural life:

You have to like it [to live in a rural place]. It is not necessarily everyone's cup of tea, but here in the small towns, I don't think you have much of a chance to disappear in that kind of anonymity (...) everyone knows everyone. (Civil society actor, small town, Interview 317)

Well, there are a few celebrations, but they don't necessarily appeal to refugees. For example, the fire brigade festival. I don't know... there's a shooting festival, the clubs do it or something like that. (...) So it's very difficult to integrate into our festivities. Unless someone personally takes refugees or refugee families with them. (Mayor, small town, Interview 256)

Alongside the *autobiographical factors* determining place-belonging, some interviewees highlighted not only the social dimensions created by the communities but also the processual character of belonging and its development through social wellbeing as one mayor of a rural municipality reflected:

We must look from a community perspective: As soon as refugees who have come to us have felt at home for 3 years and see a future here, they have no reason to go anywhere else. They feel comfortable here, they feel understood here. It is very important to send children to kindergarten and school. Enormously important. So if they feel comfortable in the community, then they stay here. (Mayor, rural municipality, Interview 281)

Even if some interviewees reflected that a sense of wellbeing in rural contexts was not achievable for all refugees, the (supposed) anonymity experienced in urban contexts was seen as inimical to the development of a sense of belonging:

I say there are many refugees living in the city who are simply anonymous in the city. In the city, there is only this story that the refugees work together. It's different in the countryside. In the city, he certainly meets up with his friends from Syria again and again. (...) this ghetto characteristic doesn't exist in the countryside. (Civil society actor/NGO, small town, Interview 195)

The rural lifestyle and its lack of anonymity carry expectations for individual migrants within the local community, as the small-scale nature of the area means that refugees and long-term residents cannot avoid each other. In addition, factors of cultural belonging are often linked to expectations of economic participation:

Look, these are the rules of the game for us. That we go to work. We have a lot of social life. We also have cultural activities. But you also have to abide by the rules of the game in Germany. (Civil society actor/NGO, small town, Interview 195)

This conditional belonging, however, is also driven by national regulations, such as the work permit system. The following quotation vividly illustrates how the expectation of belonging through work cannot be fulfilled by everyone:

Unfortunately, it is often a very long way to get there, so work permits are still required. (...)if the people who come here have the opportunity to actually go to work and have earned the money they receive themselves, then that is more of an acceptance. (Mayor, rural municipality, Interview 155)

Like this mayor, many interviewees emphasised the challenges posed by exclusionary practices based on legal status (*legal belonging*). These challenges were reflected in practical difficulties and were also perpetuated through racist demarcations.

Yes, there is a two-class refugee society. That's quite clear. Syrians come first, Pakistanis and Afghans have no chance of being accepted here. (...) African people don't have it so easy here, that must be said quite clearly. (...) This young man in [small village] is accommodated in a former monastery, which the municipality has rented. He has a room there. He would like to move into his own flat, but finding a small flat for a person of colour in [village] is a utopia. (Social worker, rural municipality, Interview 282)

Group-specific demarcations are also driven by federal policy decisions, such as the legal prospects of remaining in the country.⁶ However, in rural regions, marginalised groups in particular face challenges due to the limited resources available, such as the scarcity of flats for rent. This particularly affects some groups of refugees who are also visually labelled as 'the Other' and who have little access to infrastructure, including suitable housing.

These social boundaries are also reflected in perceptions of the local community in terms of diversity and conviviality: Is the community seen as homogeneous, or are new arrivals a natural part of it? These views as an expression of policies of belonging can also be conditioned by historical experiences, for example, whether rural communities see themselves as part of the migration society:

I think we always had refugees here. (Social worker, small town, Interview 341)

One new topic for us is the establishment of a foreigners' advisory council due to the large number of foreign citizens in [name of the small town]. This highlights the diversity of our community, which we perceive as a positive process of change for the future. (Volunteer/member of council, small town, Interview 243)

This quote illustrates that providing options for legal participation can function as practices of belonging, enforced, for example, by local policies, and create *legal belonging* despite restrictions enforced by national legislation (e.g. citizenship).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore how refugees develop a sense of belonging to their places of residence and what role the rural context and local community play in this process. The analysis of the interviews with different groups highlights the crucial importance of understanding belonging as a social process that negotiates personal feelings within the framework of the politics of belonging. Moreover, the emphasis on small rural communities underscores the inseparable link between understanding and discussing belonging and spatiality: The feeling of belonging is intricately tied to everyday activities and the scope for action provided by one's place of residence. It is crucial to recognise that the sense of belonging among refugees within local communities is strongly influenced by factors such as socio-spatial preconditions, legal and political aspects and distribution policies. Additionally, refugees often face unique and precarious living conditions and decision-making processes, compared to other migrant groups. The interview data also highlight ethnic distinctions and sometimes even hierarchies among refugees. All of these aspects influence the possibilities for belonging. However, beyond spatial contexts, it is essential not to overlook the agency of migrants, as the analysis reveals the significance of migrants' preferences and biographical experiences as crucial facilitators of elective belonging (Savage et al., 2010).

Navigating between everyday belonging and everyday otherness

The interviews with refugees underscore the pivotal role of repeated and everyday interactions with locals as a crucial foundation for developing a sense of belonging. While many respondents emphasised the importance of close networks or deeper friendships, everyday situations were identified as particularly powerful in influencing the feeling of belonging to a place (Mathisen & Cele, 2020). These emotions can be intensely felt in experiencing either belonging or non-belonging through repeated encounters with exclusionary practices, also known as 'othering' (Erel, 2011), or, as Radford (2016) more specifically describes the process, 'everyday otherness'. This is also driven by practices of the racialisation of religion (Joshi, 2016), which particularly affected the large group of Muslim refugees from the reception period around 2015. It is in these everyday practices that small rural communities and small towns with their specific spatial characteristics come into play: Especially in small localities, long-term residents and migrants cannot easily avoid encountering each other due to a reduced choice of infrastructures and social spaces. Unlike in many metropolitan arrival neighbourhoods (e.g., Ryan et al., 2008) with a high proportion of

migrant residents, refugees in rural areas describe limited access to migrant networks (Weidinger & Kordel, 2020), therefore limited sources of social capital, and have to rely on long-term residents' acting as 'enablers' to overcome the situation and connect to social networks (Radford, 2016, p. 2142).

Moreover, practical issues in everyday life in rural areas contribute to the experience of being 'the Other', encompassing aspects such as limited access to housing and barriers to mobility. In predominantly rural settings, individual mobility is deemed essential for residents to access all of the necessary infrastructures for daily life (Weidinger & Kordel, 2020). For refugees, integrating into the community in such areas requires an extended period due to these practical challenges. The question of mobility thus emphasises the need to recognise the processual nature of belonging, urging long-term research considerations. This study has limitations in this respect, as it was conducted at a single point in time. To explore the processual nature of belonging, longer-term research is recommended to acknowledge temporalities. For example, in the first few years after arrival, many refugees face structural barriers to legal or practical aspects of daily life, such as limited mobility, which is crucial in rural areas. However, by the end of this period, they may have overcome such barriers, for example, by obtaining a driving licence and access to a car. Belonging is thus also associated with a certain level of independence that reduces power inequalities between committed long-term residents ('helpers') and refugees ('recipients'; Erel, 2011).

Abiding by the rules: Conditionalities of politics of belonging

The analysis reveals that belonging to a locality is always bound up with social expectations, creating conditionalities. This 'conditional belonging' (Wernesjö, 2014) is first and foremost defined by the legal framework of national and regional policies, but it is also strongly tied to the social expectations of local communities and neighbourhoods. Language proficiency is almost always considered a crucial factor for both cultural and economic belonging. However, barriers such as limited access to language courses and legal restrictions can pose significant challenges. It is still commonly believed that speaking German is a criterion for participating in local life, which can create a precarious situation (Woods, 2018) for those who have limited access to language courses or struggle to meet these expectations. Furthermore, more extreme forms of assimilation (Antonsich, 2010, p. 650), such as speaking a regional dialect, are often seen as particularly desirable. The principle of conditionality, which requires individuals to contribute to the community in order to belong, is highlighted by the expectation to go to work ('paying the taxes'; Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 208). This is reflected in the wishes of refugees and articulated by locals as an expectation in return for acceptance into the community. Although humanitarian standards and refugee protection apply universally without expectations (*universal belonging*), the question of 'what do they contribute to the community' and 'Do I deserve to belong?' (Blachnicka-Ciacek et al., 2021) is often linked to employment and abiding by the law (Yuval-Davis, 2006) rather than social aspects. There is an implicit assumption, especially by local actors, that once these structural requirements have been met, social belonging will automatically follow. Conditionality also applies to the neighbourhoods in which people live together, in which abiding by the rules is seen as fundamental. These results are consistent with a population survey conducted in the context of this research project, where the majority of respondents particularly emphasised their expectations of neighbourly conformity (Schneider et al., 2021). The particularities of living together in rural areas apply particularly strongly to everyday situations, such as meeting and greeting people in public spaces. Involvement in local

associations and initiatives, which are often considered constitutive of rural communities, is not always expected but can be helpful for local recognition. It is important to consider this conditionality when examining the negotiation of belonging, although ethnic boundaries, as well as the concepts of 'Oldness' and 'Newness' (as formulated by Elias and Scotson in 1965), remain significant aspects in migration societies. Belonging is a local process of negotiation, and it is equally important to understand the power relations that determine the criteria for belonging. Even when expectations are met, belonging to a particular group may not be guaranteed.

Meaningful spatial narratives of 'the rural'

The analysis of the interviews reveals that the concept of belonging to a place is closely tied to the narratives associated with that space, which drives expectations for both refugees and long-term residents (see Hudson & Sandberg, 2021). These narratives act as a reference point by which newcomers' desire to belong can be judged and according to which others may strive for an opportunity to belong. However, even if notions of rurality often still imply homogeneous structures or assume significant adaptation by individual newcomers, the analysis also reveals that these notions can change over time and are not fixed. Migrants should also be considered as actors in this ongoing process of producing narratives. Therefore, to further develop Antonsich's concept of belonging, it is recommended that future research pays attention to temporal perspectives and dynamics when investigating processes of belonging.

In discussing spatial narratives, it is also necessary to address a limitation, namely, the role of researchers in this context. When analysing rurality, it is important to recognise that urban-based researchers may bring a biased perspective, particularly in relation to rural living environments as it could lead to the 'ruralisation' of results. To minimise this risk of biases, I suggest using comparative frameworks for local research (Desille et al., 2023).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Before data collection, the data protection officers of all institutions and, where applicable, the respective ethics committees were involved, and their consent was obtained. Compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements was ensured.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹In 2022, a total of 3.1 million persons seeking protection (e.g., recognised refugees, asylum seekers) lived in Germany (31.12.2022, National Registry of Foreign Citizens AZR). According to a calculation by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees based on the Central Register of Foreigners, around half (51.8%) of all recognized refugees in Germany lived in rural regions in 2017 (Rösch et al. 2020, p. 28 ff.).
- ²The settlement of refugees is the consequence of a nationwide distribution system to the federal states (so called 'Königsteiner Schlüssel', quota system for distribution), which have the power to set residence requirements for certain places or districts. In many regions, refugees were obliged to remain in their designated places for a certain period up to 3 years, depending on their residence permit (referred to as the 'Wohnsitzauflage'). This residency requirement can be lifted once refugees find work.
- ³In addition to the data used for this article, the project included various data sources, such as regional statistics, and surveys with local stakeholders and citizens.
- ⁴Before data collection, the data protection officers of all institutions and, where applicable, the respective ethics committees were involved, and their consent was obtained. Compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation requirements was ensured. In addition, the research consortium sought to consider the sensitivity of research with displaced people: All interviewers were trained in interviewing techniques and sensitivity, for example, to avoid re-exposure to traumatic memories; anonymity was maintained with local collaborators; and a preliminary meeting was held with the refugees to explain the methodology.
- ⁵For example, we took measures to ensure that our interpreters checked the transcript for ambiguity after it was completed. Furthermore, to approach the material with a certain degree of openness, I used the method of Kuckartz (2019) to include an inductive approach without pre-determined categories of the project's research questions.
- ⁶The mentioned so-called 'two-class system' of refugees refers to the special position of people with so-called 'low chances of being granted asylum' ('geringe Bleibeperspektive'), for example, from Afghanistan, at the time of the interviews as they were given lower priority for admission to language courses, compared to other groups.

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