

# Attitudes towards asylum seekers in rural areas: disrupting ideas of polarization by including indifference

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## Abstract

Based on ethnographic field research, this paper deals with the attitudes of the local population towards newly arrived asylum seekers in a rural, peripheral town in Austria. The empirical data show that positive and negative attitudes are linked equally to three clusters of arguments: those that invoke the rural context, those that relate to social dynamics within the community and those that highlight the appearance and behavior of asylum seekers. What all of these arguments have in common is that the welcoming refugees is based on some form of condition. However, what remains hidden in this observation is the ‘nonattitude’ of indifference, which is also found among the population and can disrupt polarized images of exclusively negative or positive attitudes towards newcomers.

**Keywords:** attitudes, indifference, asylum seekers, rural areas

## Einstellungen zu Asylbewerber\_innen in ländlichen Gebieten: Gleichgültigkeit als Disruption von Polarisierungsmodellen

### Zusammenfassung

Basierend auf ethnografischer Feldforschung befasst sich dieser Artikel mit den Einstellungen der lokalen Bevölkerung gegenüber neu angekommenen Asylbewerber\_innen in einer ländlichen, peripheren Kleinstadt in Österreich. Die empirischen Daten zeigen, dass sich positive und negative Einstellungen gleichermaßen auf drei Argumentgruppen beziehen: der ländliche Kontext, die soziale Dynamik und das Auftreten und Verhalten der Asylwerber\_innen. Auf jeder Argumentebene beruhen die Einstellungen der lokalen Bevölkerung auf einer Bedingung. Was dabei verborgen bleibt, ist das Fehlen von Einstellungen in Form von Gleichgültigkeit. Letztere kann als Disruption polarisierter Einstellungen gegenüber Neuankömmlingen verstanden werden.

**Keywords:** Einstellungen, Gleichgültigkeit, Asylwerber\_innen, ländliche Regionen

## 1 Introduction

Rural areas are often associated with population decline through out-migration and declining birth rates and, hence, confronted with processes of shrinkage and erosion. Recently, however, international immigration<sup>1</sup> to rural, peripheral areas in high-income countries has been increasing and drawing scholarly interest (Gruber 2014; Hugo/Morén-Alegret 2008; Ma-chold et al. 2013). International immigration frequently provokes strong reactions in the host

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1 In this paper, I use the term ‘international migration’ to describe a spatial movement crossing international borders for the temporary or permanent relocation of a place of residence. Asylum seekers are immigrants in the sense described above, with the difference that they cannot return to their home country at any time.

population, and in many European states extreme-right parties with anti-immigrant campaigns are gaining support.<sup>2</sup> Multiple disciplines have approached the question of how and why human beings tend to be skeptical towards outsiders, newcomers, immigrants or simply ‘the Other’ with both quantitative and qualitative research designs (Brunner et al. 1994; Steele/Abdelaaty 2019). Frequently applied models (e.g., Bennett 2018) suggest that there is a gradient between proponents and opponents, advocates and antagonists. Considering that compared to urban populations, those in rural, peripheral areas are commonly relatively homogeneous in terms of their citizenship, rural ‘newcomers’ are expected to be more exceptional and hence, visible for the local population. Based on ethnographic field research, this paper asks: What attitudes did the local population in a rural, peripheral town in Austria adopt towards newly arrived asylum seekers during ‘the long summer of migration’ in 2015?

After giving a short overview of the state of the art of research on international migration to rural areas and research on attitudes towards ‘the Other’ in section 2, the research design and study context are outlined in section 3. The analysis of the empirical data in section 4 shows how people make sense of, legitimize and explain their positive and negative attitudes towards newly arrived asylum seekers by referring to three clusters of arguments: those that invoke the rural context, those that relate to social dynamics within the community and those that highlight the appearance and behavior of asylum seekers. However, observations from the field reveal that attitudes of disinterest and indifference towards asylum seekers within the local population tend to be difficult to capture by qualitative attitude research. Therefore, in section 5, this article suggests including ‘indifference’ as a ‘nonattitude’ on the gradient between positive and negative attitudes towards asylum seekers. This is intended to constructively disrupt the images of binary models oscillating only between negative and positive attitudes.

## 2 Migration to rural areas and locals’ attitudes

Traditionally, research on migration movements mostly sees rural areas as a source for labor migration to large cities (Nadler et al. 2012). Only lately has international migration to rural areas begun to attract scholarly interest (Golebiowska et al. 2016; Hugo/Morén-Alegret 2008; Jentsch/Simard 2009) which often targets the potential effects of these migrations (e.g., reversing and slowing population decline and aging, counteracting labor shortages and helping to maintain socio-economic sustainability) (Gruber 2014; Guchteneire et al. 2007; Johansson 2016; Machold et al. 2013; Nuissl/Schmiz 2013). However, only few of these studies focus specifically on the situation of refugees in rural areas (Brunner et al. 1994; Pehm 2007; Tomoko 2013). Nonetheless, considering that rural areas often are composed of a relatively homogeneous population compared to metropolises, the visibility of newly arrived persons can seem disproportionately high due to such communities’ lack of experience with immigration (Gruber 2014: 39; Kreichauf 2012). Hence, the newcomer is often marked as ‘the stranger’ and “whatever the real numbers of the latter, there will always appear to be a lot of them” (Ardener 2012: 527).

The question of how and why human beings tend to be skeptical towards newcomers, migrants, ‘the stranger’ or simply ‘the Other’ with respect to a ‘we-group’ is approached from multiple angles and disciplines. From a social network perspective it is argued that

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2 In 2018, the Social Survey Austria for the first time conducted a detailed measurement of attitudes toward Muslims (Bacher et al. 2018) that points to an increase in prejudice and critical viewpoints in almost all milieus in Austria (Aschauer 2020).