



## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Local responses to hostility to new asylum seeker centres in Norway

Mette Strømsø  | Susanne Bygnes 

Department of Sociology, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

**Correspondence**

Mette Strømsø, Department of Sociology, University of Bergen, PO Box 7800, Bergen 5020, Norway.  
Email: mettestr@gmail.com

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**Abstract**

This article investigates disagreement over how to respond to the establishment of asylum seeker centres in local communities. Building on interviews with individuals in one rural and one urban community in Norway, we analyse experiences and outcomes of the neighbourhood information meetings organized by the Directorate of Immigration before opening the new centres. We demonstrate that such meetings hold a broader social function, and they become arenas to raise concerns and manage disagreement among neighbours. When anti-immigrant opinions expressed at the meetings are published in the media, community members counter the negative place representations that are not aligned with their own self-identification. We identify three strategies of contestation deployed to counter negative media coverage: foreseeing conflict, claiming exceptionalism and mobilization to volunteer. Broader implications involve immigration authorities' management of conflict when establishing such centres; their scope should not be limited to host-guest relations but should include horizontal contestation within the community.

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## INTRODUCTION

"I believe that everybody agrees that West Village<sup>1</sup> is good at receiving refugees. It was like all of West Village contributed." Thus concluded Stine's reflections upon the local community response to establishing an asylum seeker centre in Norway at the height of the so-called "refugee crisis" in 2015. She claimed a hospitable place identity for West Village was legitimized by the massive volunteering efforts by members of her local community. Nevertheless, this woman in her 30s, interviewed in 2018, pondered: "Perhaps even more so because of the resistance ... then more people felt the need to show explicitly that this is not the opinion of the people of West Village." By revealing that local community responses to the arrival of the asylum seekers in West Village were not as uniform and hospitable as first indicated, Stine's observation echoes insights from local community responses reported elsewhere in Europe, that is, responses that were polarized in terms of both attitudes and practices between hostility and hospitality towards the arriving asylum seekers (see, e.g. Rea et al., 2019: 22). Scholarly attention to these responses is commonly directed towards the host communities and their (non-)relationship with their guests; their immediate reactions (see, e.g. Bygnes, 2017, 2020; Gusciute et al., 2021; Jumbert, 2020; Sætrang, 2016) and subsequent settlement and integration (see, e.g. Bygnes & Strømsø, forthcoming; Greenspan et al., 2018; Bakker et al., 2016).

The present study builds on qualitative data from a larger project investigating how the increase in asylum arrivals in 2015 has been imagined and experienced in local communities across Norway, where temporary asylum seeker centres were established. Data for this article were drawn from 35 interviews conducted in 2016 and 2018 in one semi-rural locality, hereafter West Village, and one urban centre: Big Town. We use our interlocutors' reports of the information meetings organized for the neighbours before the asylum seeker centre opened in West Village as an analytical lens. We define the meeting as an "important," but not critical event, positioning ourselves vis-à-vis the study of critical events in social movement studies where such events are understood to challenge frames of interpretation (Das, 1995; Espeland & Rogstad, 2011). Our main argument is that although events reveal conflict and may involve rupture, importantly, they also provide an opportunity to study consensus and continuity. This article thus shifts attention away from "our" relationship with "them" towards how these responses affect the notion of "us." Responses to new asylum arrivals also define and establish who "we" are, and it is this issue that we wish to pursue.

In this paper, we focus on local community relations. The identity of a place—or what we discuss here, the notion of who "we" are—is not necessarily collectively shared (Edensor et al., 2020). While often treated as irrelevant by individuals for their self-identification, the identity of a place as an identity marker sometimes emerges as important, for example, during events where something is believed to be at stake (Pierce et al., 2011). As we discuss here, such events may even enable individual and collective responses (Häkli & Kallio, 2014, 2018; Martin, 2003; Snow & Benford, 1992). As Marit, a neighbour to one such centre in her 20s interviewed in 2016 exclaimed about the neighbourhood information meeting in West Village: "Everybody spoke of that meeting afterwards." This observation reflects the general sentiment in our data. The official reason for holding neighbourhood information meetings prior to establishing asylum seeker centres is that centre operators are expected by national authorities to establish good collaboration and dialogue with local public health, school and similar services, as well as neighbours living in the vicinity of the centre. To achieve the latter goal, the information meetings are arranged with representatives of the new centre, the municipality and sometimes the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) present. While the neighbours are invited to receive information and to ask questions, they have no power to deny permission for the centre.

With the information meetings as the point of departure for our analysis, we ask two questions: 1) What is the function of these events, and why are they considered important by our interlocutors? 2) How do the research participants respond to the meetings, and why do their responses matter? Thus, we draw on the meetings and their aftermath to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of horizontal community relations when new asylum seeker centres are established.

The article proceeds by first elaborating on the conceptual framework linking conflict and disagreement over how to respond to new asylum arrivals with literature on social imaginaries and place identities. We continue by

briefly outlining the context of our study and the methods and data employed. The analysis starts by investigating the key functions of the neighbourhood information meetings and why these events are considered important; we then move on to research participants' responses to the media framing of their community after the meetings. We conclude by reflecting on what participants seek to obtain by their responses, elucidating the importance of widely shared notions of self and the community as decent towards newcomers.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Notwithstanding individuals' diverse and conflicting views on immigration (Blinder, 2013; Gusciute et al., 2021), and initial hostile reactions to new asylum seeker centres (Bygnes, 2020), we bear in mind that scholars on public opinion on immigration have also stressed the prevalent social norm against prejudice in contemporary Western Europe (Blinder et al., 2013). For example, through their survey studies in Britain and Germany, Blinder et al. (2013) have demonstrated that many respondents internalize a motivation to control prejudice to comply with this wide-ranging social norm of anti-racism in Western Europe. Relatedly, in a Dutch study of local reactions to new asylum seeker centres, Zorlu (2016) indicates a striking willingness to accept such centres among the respondents who live close to the centres.

We draw on this research on attitudes towards immigration to argue that a social norm against prejudiced attitudes and behaviours can be linked to a modern social imaginary (Taylor, 2002), a deep-rooted cultural tendency that goes beyond political preferences or opinions. The modern social imaginary is defined by Taylor as how people imagine their social world, constituting a "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (2002: 107). We have argued elsewhere that a wider social imaginary of equality guides welcoming and integration efforts at the local level (Bygnes & Strømsø, forthcoming). In the current study, we link the notions of common understandings and their widely shared sense of legitimacy (Taylor, 2002) to important events.

It is typically in the wake of critical (Das, 1995) or important events that challenge or threaten our sense of who "we" are that such deep-rooted understandings of the community come most prominently to the fore. In the Norwegian case, the racist terror attack in Oslo and on Utøya in 2011 is one of the most obvious cases of an event activating strong imaginaries of who the national "we" represents (Rafoss, 2015). Another central aspect of these events for our analysis is how they become important and may trigger individual and collective responses as a partial result of large-scale mass media exposure (Das, 1995), or "going viral" on online platforms. Espeland and Rogstad's (2011: 125) study of police violence against a dark-skinned man in Norway is an example of a critical event facilitating "collective consciousness articulated in ways that challenge existing frames of interpretation." A more recent example from the United States is the filming and mass distribution of police officers suffocating George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matters protests, which quickly reached a global scale. The information meetings used as analytical lens in this paper were far less dramatic. Yet, as we will show, they often became important events on a local scale.

We show this by focussing on individuals' self-identification with their local communities. To do so, we draw on the literature on place, which is often associated with—albeit not limited to—the local scale (see, e.g. Edensor et al., 2020). This involves processes of identification and recognition "where people receive and consider the claims and attributions of others as well as claiming and attributing identity themselves" (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015: 922). These processes are what Yuval-Davis (2006) refers to as the politics of belonging. However, the identity of a place—as a sense of who "we" are—is not necessarily collectively shared, and others' claims and attributions are not necessarily in line with one's self-identification. A similar study, conducted by Guma et al. (2019), investigates three local community initiatives in Wales and the UK intended to contest hostile discourses on the national and international scales. By initiating asylum seeker centres in their communities, they managed representations of their local communities and claimed the identity of hospitable places. While their study primarily engages with

*vertical* contestations between civic and state actors, our study investigates *horizontal* contestations between inhabitants of a local community.

In summary, this article shifts attention from guest–host relations and “our” relationship with “them” to horizontal disagreements within local communities on how to respond to the new asylum arrivals. Through processes of identification and recognition, we reveal strategies of contestation whereby the research participants draw on the concepts of hostility and hospitality. While a discussion of these concepts is beyond the scope of this article (see, e.g. Derrida, 2000), their relevance for our analysis is how they are deployed by the research participants’ strategies to renegotiate their self-identification by claiming a place identity that draws on a deep-rooted social imaginary of “being decent” (Guma et al., 2019; Hagelund, 2003; McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015; Taylor, 2002). We find this imaginary of being decent to be at stake and to trigger a response.

## CONTEXT

In 2015, there was an increase in the number of individuals seeking asylum in Norway. In response, the UDI established more than 200 asylum seeker centres in local communities across the country. These facilities were in addition to the permanent asylum seeker centres already in place. In Norway, the spatial dispersal of mostly small-to medium-scale asylum seeker centres in both urban and rural areas is a long-established asylum policy. The majority of the asylum seekers and residents of neighbourhood centres studied here came from Syria. More men than women or children inhabited the centres, and most were in their 20s or early 30s. Previous research shows that public reactions to immigration vary according to the perceived skill level and ethnic and religious origins of the immigrants imagined by survey respondents (Blinder, 2013). The European public is particularly critical of immigrants from Muslim countries (Gusciute et al., 2021) and asylum seekers (Blinder, 2013). However, a tendency to perceive Syrians as more deserving than other asylum seekers has been recorded since 2015 (Kyriakidou, 2021). It remains unresolved whether Syrians arriving in Europe in 2015 were met with a different attitude than to more racialized asylum seekers or whether this effect was nullified by other marginalized aspects of their identities.

The Norwegian government at the time, a conservative-led coalition that included the populist Progress Party and the Liberal Party, reflected the current international trend of emphasizing border control with an explicit aim of reducing immigration flows. At the time, threat and conflict frames were prevalent in the Norwegian national media, but less so in local news outlets (Hognestad & Lamark, 2017; Hovden et al., 2018).

Although hostile responses across Norway did ensue (Bygnes, 2020; Nordø & Ivarsløten, 2021), a third of the total population of 5.3 million was found to contribute in one way or another to the reception of asylum seekers (Fladmoe et al., 2016). While an individual’s motivation for volunteering is often understood to be a dichotomy between altruism and self-interest, Fleischer (2011) argues that there is more to volunteering than this limiting dichotomy suggests. Thus, to understand the “negotiated, locally specific and contingent nature” of volunteering, it needs to be explored in its “local and temporal contexts” (Fleischer, 2011: 302, 321). Across Europe, scholars have identified a variety of locally articulated meanings related to individuals’ motivations to volunteer and to welcome refugees during the “refugee crisis.” For example, consider references by several scholars (e.g. Rea et al., 2019) to the events during 2015 as a refugee “reception” crisis owing to unpreparedness and lack of responsiveness not only by state actors but also by established humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross to receive and help the asylum seekers (Bygnes, 2017; Bygnes & Karlsen, 2017; Jumbert, 2020). It is exactly this lack of action by formal actors that was cited as the major motivation for the massive mobilization of civil society witnessed during this period, even among individuals with no prior history of volunteering (Karakayali & Kleist, 2015). Other scholars have identified individual motivations related to anti-racist work (Schmid, 2020), solidarity, responsibility and care (Kemp, 2019; Vandevort & Verschraegen, 2017).

In the current study, we link the notion of modern social imaginaries (Taylor, 2002) to what Hagelund (2003: 49) has referred to as a consensus on “being decent” that lingers underneath the highly conflict-ridden field of

immigration politics in Norway: “a set of understandings, principles and philosophies that are shared across the party-political dividing lines.”

As such, being decent is not analysed as classed or gendered boundary work, but it captures notions shared by many across political party and other dividing lines. These shared notions remain implicit until they are challenged, as in Hagelund’s (2003) case, by members of the Norwegian right-wing populist party, the Progress Party. According to Hagelund (2003), being decent means discussing immigration in appropriate ways without flirting with the muddy currents of racism and xenophobia. It is this common imaginary of decency on which mainstream actors draw when challenged by members of the populist right expressing xenophobia. Thus, a decent stance can be understood to lie within the “sphere of legitimate controversy” (Hallin, 1986). Although disagreement on immigration politics may be both tolerated and accepted, there is a limit to how far the disagreement can go before those holding such opinions are rejected as “unworthy of being heard” and interpreted as part of the “sphere of deviance” (Hallin, 1986: 117).

Our aim of foregrounding this focus on decency is to highlight the existence of widely agreed ideas concerning who “we” are. People hold divergent political opinions on immigration and immigrants, but as we argue, they also have access to deep-rooted imaginaries that have been studied less than disagreement and conflict.

## METHOD AND DATA

The present study builds on qualitative data from a larger project investigating how the “refugee crisis” has been imagined and experienced in local communities across Norway, where temporary asylum seeker centres were established in late 2015 and early 2016. Data<sup>2</sup> for this article were drawn from 35 interviews conducted by the principal investigator (Bygnes) in 2016 and 2018 in one semi-rural and one urban locality: West Village and Big Town respectively. All 35 interviews were coded and inform the issue we investigate here, but for analytical purposes we focus here on the events in West Village. Extracts from Big Town interviews demonstrate how events can resonate and inform related events in other localities. West Village is a semi-rural community with a range of small hamlets near Big Town. As the two localities are situated in close proximity, many West Village residents commute to Big Town for work. Moreover, West Village has its own local newspaper, but the regional newspaper covers both localities.

Research participants in the 2016 data set were sampled as ordinary individuals living in the vicinity of a temporary asylum seeker centre. By “ordinary,” we refer to individuals of a range of ages (22–74), sexes, ethnic and social backgrounds, and not as representatives of particular a profession or group. Yet in West Village, the immediate surroundings of all the centres were populated mainly by the white majority population, while in Big Town, the population composition was more heterogeneous. The rationale behind this strategy was to access a variety of perspectives on the asylum seeker centre and its inhabitants. Different recruitment channels were used: mailbox invitation, contacts established during fieldwork, social media forums proclaiming hostile or hospitable attitudes towards the centres, and our own network.

In 2018, the asylum seeker centres in both localities had already been closed, and we found the “ordinary” individuals sampled in 2016 less willing to participate in our study as it was no longer considered a relevant topic. For this reason, research participants in the 2018 data set were mostly stakeholders in various positions related to the local response to the “refugee crisis” and the subsequent settlement phase. Some participants were ordinary individuals, while others were volunteers and/or representatives of NGOs or local public administrations. Most of the latter group became involved in volunteering or working with the asylum seekers in 2015/16 but remained active when interviewed in 2018. Participants were thus recruited through their organizations and workplaces, through snowball sampling in the field and through our own network.

Interviews were conducted in Norwegian by Bygnes and fully transcribed (translations in this article are by the authors). Strømsø coded all transcriptions using the NVivo software program and a thematic codebook. Parallel

to this process, Strømsø wrote a reflection note on each transcript using higher-level analytical codes to assist theoretical reinterpretation. The manuscript was developed through close collaboration between the authors.

Our research group was not present at the information meetings held in West Village prior to the establishment of the asylum seeker centre. Nevertheless, while these meetings provided an evident point of departure for the 2016 interviews, most of the research participants in 2018 mentioned these meetings on their own accord, even though they were not always prompted to do so by the interviewer. Below, in our discussion of the research participants' experiences of these information meetings, we underscore that we refer to their oral representations of their experiences. However, a semantic discussion of the distinction between what individuals do and feel as opposed to what they report is beyond the scope of this article (see, e.g. Jerolmack & Khan, 2014; Lamont & Swidler, 2014; Strømsø, 2019).

## NEIGHBOURHOOD INFORMATION MEETINGS AS IMPORTANT EVENTS

As noted, prior to the opening of an asylum seeker centre, operators are expected by national authorities to establish good dialogue with its neighbours. They seek to achieve this by organizing a neighbourhood information meeting. Despite the neighbours' lack of power to prevent the establishment of an asylum seeker centre, a perhaps unsurprising yet key insight from our data is that these information meetings are experienced by the research participants as important events. To further our understanding of their experiences, we start by unveiling key social functions of these meetings discussing how and why they come to matter. In the subsequent section, we elaborate on how the research participants responded.

### Key functions of the meetings and their contradictions

We find that one key function of the information meetings is to provide a space for expressing differences of opinions and attitudes in public. The research participants showed that they were aware of these differences beforehand. For instance, Turid, a neighbour and volunteer in her 60s interviewed in 2018, explained that she had been the first person through the doors of an information meeting in West Village in late 2015 and found herself a seat in the front row. She reported, "I knew what this would entail". Turid's quote was one of several examples in our data suggesting that the ensuing dispute and the differences of opinions and attitudes towards the reception of asylum seekers were not unexpected. It was rather the opposite.

In the meeting, the UDI gave a long presentation, after which the municipality representative opened the floor for questions and comments. The atmosphere in the room was intense, as can be discerned from Turid's description of what followed: "A clamour arose, and an outcry from a different world with horrific claims". We understand Turid's description of an "outcry from a different world" to be an example of what Hallin (1986) refers to as a stance that mainstream actors interpret as part of the "sphere of deviance." Similarly, Marit explained that one person in the audience had been positive towards the asylum seeker centre, yet another had replied: "Well, you won't be saying that when your children are raped." Hence, the claims echoed concerns reported elsewhere of the traumatized young and single male asylum seekers that would enter their neighbourhood (see, e.g. Bygnes, 2020). Several neighbours present at the meeting had expressed anxiety about the shrubbery surrounding the asylum seeker centre, afraid that these young men would use it to hide and assault their daughters. The impression of the information meetings in West Village in our data was that the hostile voices were allowed to dominate. Only Turid and one other person from a volunteer group in the vicinity of the asylum seeker centre stood up and spoke against [the hostile participants], as she explained. We infer from her strategy of arriving early and her claim that she knew what the meeting would entail that the dispute was expected and the claims well known. Marit nonetheless observed that: "I believe they were surprised that there had been *that* many negative [people] and said so

many ... so many things ... how people can say such [things] ..." Even so, Turid had situated herself in the front row, and by speaking up to express positive and hospitable sentiments, she had made an effort to reclaim the voice of the community as decent.

Therefore, we suggest that another key function of the meeting, from the perspective of the UDI and those who position themselves in the front row, is to *manage* the hostile voices and xenophobic attitudes towards the soon-to-arrive asylum seekers. With that in mind, it is worth noting that several of the research participants who in the interviews disclosed hostility to the asylum seeker centre during the interview were left with a sentiment of not having been able to express their "true opinions" during the meeting (see also Bygnes, 2020). One explanation provided by Beate, a neighbour in her 60s interviewed in 2016, was that people were afraid of what their neighbours might think of them as it would be considered politically incorrect to be hostile. Yet, as she explained: "I know that many people deep down are very critical of what is happening (...) Why is it that nobody can ask the critical questions without being considered racists, xenophobic, and even Nazis?" Her interpretation may be understood as a consequence of what we suggest are contradictory functions of these information meetings: to facilitate spaces for expressing differences of opinions and attitudes and to manage and downplay the hostile expressions. Disagreement is accepted and expected, but it should be expressed in ways that the community interprets as within the sphere of legitimate controversy (Hallin, 1986).

A key insight into why these events are so important in the research participants' experiences of the "refugee crisis" in their community is thus how the polarized attitudes of hostility and hospitality are expressed at these meetings trigger discomfort. We found that research participants present at the meeting experienced discomfort at a relational level, as exemplified by several research participants who reported in both 2016 and 2018 embarrassment about the hostile opinions expressed in West Village. However, the discomfort become more generalized as the hostile voices were reported in the media and associated with their place identity. As explained by Stine: "There was a lot written about the negativity in the local community out there (...) There was a lot of negativity, and it was almost like we were embarrassed about being from West Village." She continued:

It didn't look particularly good when the media, on Dagsrevyen [the national television news broadcast], interviewed the people out there [meaning, in the hamlet where the asylum seeker centre was to be located]. It was the darkest of the "dark brown" who came out, and it was... uncomfortable because it [the expressed opinions and attitudes] is associated with your own local community, right. (...) Because it was associated with West Village, and I think that many people in general in West Village found this very discomfoting.

From Stine, we learn that the opinions and attitudes that were given prominence in the media coverage of the event in West Village were negative and hostile towards the soon-to-arrive asylum seekers. For instance, the "dark brown" referred to in the excerpt is used as a reference to the German Nazis and the brown shirts worn by their paramilitary stormtroopers during World War II. Activities by a right-wing extremist group had indeed been recorded by the police in that very hamlet of West Village. Therefore, the research participants found that the polarization of attitudes between hostility and hospitality expressed in the meeting triggered discomfort at a relational level. Simultaneously, they found themselves on the receiving end of a hostile place identity attributed to them simply by virtue of living in the same local community (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015). Magnified by the external gaze of the media and their representation of this information meeting, as indicated by Stine, the research participants found themselves in a situation where claims and attributions by others are not in line with their own self-identification with the identity marker. Consequently, they find their place identities emerging as important and at stake (Häkli & Kallio, 2014, 2018; Pierce et al., 2011).

## Responding to the event: Three strategies of contestation

When the image of the clamour and horrific claims made at that information meeting overnight became *the* image of the community to the outside world in regional and national media outlets, the threshold for tolerance of

disagreement and conflict within West Village was severely challenged. This important turn of events, the externalized gaze on the local community through media attention to particular individuals at that meeting, shifted the importance of the information meetings from internal disagreements on responses to the impending arrival of asylum seekers to contestations over who “we” are, where individuals’ self-identification were at stake (Häkli & Kallio, 2014, 2018). To counter the exclusionary rhetoric beyond the sphere of legitimate controversy attributed to them by the *external gaze* of the media, individual and collective strategies of contestation were deployed, not only to reject opinions and expressions interpreted as deviant but also to reclaim identity (Das, 1995; Hallin, 1986; Martin, 2003; McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015; Snow & Benford, 1992). Thus, driven by divergent opinions and conflict, the community mobilized based on common ground to contest such perceptions. We identify three strategies of contestation in the data to which we now turn: foreseeing conflict, claiming exceptionalism and mobilization to volunteer.

One strategy of contestation in our data is to *foresee conflict*. A short while after the infamous information meeting in West Village, duly covered in the media, another and much larger asylum seeker centre was to be established in a middle-class neighbourhood close to the city centre in Big Town. Helene, a woman in her 40s interviewed in 2018, who was part of a small neighbourhood initiative close to this planned asylum seeker centre, explained how residents prepared for the upcoming information meeting. She spoke of wishing to welcome and include their new neighbours, namely the asylum seekers into their neighbourhood. Therefore, it was considered paramount that a similar outcome as occurred at West Village was prevented. She explained that to manage this, they invited many people in their neighbourhood to a pre-meeting to discuss how they could meet and greet their new neighbours in a hospitable way. Helene reported a large turn-out at this event. The attendance at the actual information meeting was considerable, to the extent that several consecutive meetings had to be hosted. The research participants reported that the general atmosphere in the meetings had been positive; one woman even explained that she had sent her husband to one of these meetings with an explicit mission to express hospitable attitudes and help ensure a decent dialogue. That being said, people had also expressed concern.

Thus, we find the research participants in Big Town drew lessons from West Village and foresaw the potential for conflict through the social function of the meetings for expressing differences of opinions and attitudes. In response, these research participants mobilized their neighbours to instil a hospitable attitude and manage hostile voices proactively at the upcoming information meeting. To some extent, this initiative can be viewed in light of host community engagement with its guests, given their aim to welcome and include. However, it is also a proactive strategy to claim the defining power of the place identity for their local community by insisting on hospitality (Guma et al., 2019; McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015).

A second more subtle strategy that we find the research participants deployed is to *claim exceptionalism* through discursive boundary work. This strategy involves treating the hostile attitudes as an exception, which makes it easier to claim a hospitable place identity and to re-establish West Village as a decent and dignified place (Hagelund, 2003; McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015). For instance, the hamlet in which the asylum seeker centre was located in West Village was often described by the research participants as “out there”, such as in the excerpts from both Stine and Turid above; “out there” is understood as being opposed to “here” and thereby distinctively different from themselves. This discursive boundary work between notions of “them,” that is, the people they consider hostile, being “out there” was even reinforced by its geographical location, as described by Stine: “[It] is a very small and closed-off hamlet, located on an island off the coast of West Village,” adding: “and politically they have many people on the far right.” In doing so, Stine not only discursively removes the hamlet to the periphery, but also simultaneously renders all those with hostile attitudes and right-wing sympathies less relevant.

Place identities and the politics of belonging in that local community involves processes of boundary-making because the “us,” by definition, is different from “them” (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Again, the insights from this study underscore that local community responses to the arrival of new asylum seekers are not simply about the host



communities and their (non-)relationship with their guests; rather, the boundaries produced between “us” and “them” in this example involve horizontal contestations over who “we” are—or ought to be.

In West Village, we find the research participants reacted to the information meeting and ensuing media attention. Thus, the final strategy of contestation—and the most prominent in our data—was witnessed in the strong commitment to support the asylum seeker centre and through *volunteering*. For instance, repeating Stine’s earlier speculation that “perhaps even more so because of the resistance”—by which she indicated the strength of commitment—“then more people felt the need to show explicitly that this is not the opinion of the people of West Village.” Stine was not the only participant in our sample to contemplate volunteering being deployed as a strategy to contest the hostile identity marker attributed to them. Solveig, a neighbour in her 40s interviewed in 2018, reminisced on the mobilization in the period after the information meeting: “Well, yes, those who resisted featured very prominently, but so did the volunteers and those who felt that we should help where we could.” Turid elaborated:

The regional newspaper had a massive piece about the people who were screaming at that information meeting. But we managed to turn it around quickly. What happened was that, out there [meaning the hamlet near the asylum seeker centre], we witnessed a strong commitment by the public as well as the local church, who invited them [the residents at the asylum seeker centre] to join in on all kinds of stuff [i.e. activities]. People brought typical baked goods for Christmas and Christmas decorations. And we managed to get several shops to deliver hampers [with different kinds of goods] during Christmas and on New Year’s Eve. So, I claim that it [the hostile place identity] was turned around very quickly.

From Turid, we learn that the strong commitment to the asylum seeker centre and its inhabitants was not only a strategy to contest hostility and resistance, but also a very efficient strategy for claiming a hospitable place identity, as she insists that “we managed to turn it around quickly.”

In response to Fleischer’s (2011) call to explore the meaning and nature of volunteering in local contexts, the rationale behind our research participants’ commitment in the overall data set echoes insights from across Europe, such as the unpreparedness and lack of responsiveness by state actors and established NGOs in their reception of asylum seekers (Bygnes, 2017; Bygnes & Karlsen, 2017; Jumbert, 2020; Rea et al., 2019), as well as reflecting and solidarity, responsibility and care (Kemp, 2019; Vandevoort & Verschraegen, 2017). Nevertheless, these insights contribute to this conversation by empirically substantiating how volunteering is deployed as a strategy for contesting place representations attributed to local residents that are not aligned with their own self-identification. Hence, individual responses and motivations to volunteer are not simply about “our” relationship with “them”; as outlined in the introduction, they are also about the notion of “us.”

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Situating our study on the battleground of local asylum establishments, we shift our attention away from the actual practices of hostility or hospitality and study *horizontal* contestation between residents of a local community. We show that the research participants draw on the concepts of hospitality and hostility to define who they are (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015), although these claims of hostility and hospitality do not primarily concern the relationship between the host community and its guests. Rather, we interpret these claims and attributions as being deployed to renegotiate their self-identifications associated with place, which and draw on a deep-rooted social imaginary of “being decent” (Hagelund, 2003).

Our main argument is that the conflict and tension arising when asylum seekers arrive can inform us about who the local communities receiving them want to be. Previous research clearly shows that opinions on immigration and asylum seekers are divided and that the field of local asylum policies is conflict-ridden (Blinder, 2013; Bygnes, 2020; Gusciute et al., 2021). However, by shifting attention away from “our” relationship with “them” towards the effect of these responses on the notion of “us,” however, we contribute to the literature a discussion

of how decent behaviour on immigration issues informs this case. By examining at a particular conflict-ridden event, we show that this often-implicit common imaginary comes to the fore in response to xenophobic voices taken to represent the community in several media outlets. Rather than studying the opinions or efforts of local pro- and anti-refugee actors, we zoom in on social processes in the wake of an important event. We show that when the exposure of negative and xenophobic reactions from some community members in the media threaten the identity of many other community members, what is agreed on—not as an opinion but as a more deep-rooted imaginary of the community—comes to the fore. This is also why we label this event as important, but not critical, as it does not to highlight conflict and rupture, but rather agreement or consensus on common principles of how to approach other groups.

The empirical scope of the article was neighbourhood information meetings held prior to the establishment of new asylum seeker centres. Despite the neighbours' lack of power to affect the establishment of such centres, these events were considered important by the research participants, in large part owing to what we show are contradictory functions of the event. For instance, some inhabitants took the opportunity to voice their opposition towards immigration and the establishment of an asylum seeker centre, while others resisted such hostility towards housing the asylum seekers. Yet equally, the meeting provided opportunities to manage and downplay those tainted by the muddy currents of racism (Hagelund, 2003). Hence, these meetings are events where both latent disagreement and conflict as well as latent agreement and consensus among the inhabitants emerged as important (Häkli & Kallio, 2014, 2018). Notwithstanding the discomfort expressed by the participants, it was not until the event was magnified by the external gaze of the media that their threshold for tolerance of disagreement and conflict was severely challenged. The takeaway is that certain events can become particularly important, not only because of their actual severity but also because of images and dialogue being captured and spread through social or conventional media.

As a consequence, the event provoked both individual and collective responses, which highlights an important implication of our analysis. The three strategies of contestation that we reveal—foreseeing conflict, claiming exceptionalism and mobilization to volunteer—add value to debates on policies towards refugees reception and conflict management. For instance, faced with expressions of opinions that many research participants considered deviant and outside the “legitimate sphere of controversy” (Hallin, 1986: 117), one important response is to treat them as exceptional, producing boundaries to distance themselves and the community from such statements. Another is demonstrating *agreement* on common norms and standards. In our case, the agreement concerns what Blinder et al. (2013) describe as a prevalent norm of anti-prejudice that affects policy preferences in Western Europe but is understood here to be a deeper-rooted social imaginary linked to the norm of decency, reported to be an important principle in the Norwegian immigration debate (Hagelund, 2003). Moreover, by actively involving themselves in welcoming practices, the research participants distance the community from hostile opinions and practices.

It should be highlighted that the insistence on rejecting hostility and showing hospitality was reported to make a remarkable difference to the arriving asylum seekers, at least in the short term (Bygnes, 2017). Therefore, we argue that the information meetings used here as the analytical lens are critical events in that they are framed as important by the research participants and because they become magnified through mass media coverage and framing. However, whereas critical events in the social movement literature are understood to be processes where collective consciousness is “articulated in ways that *challenge* existing frames of interpretation” (Espeland & Rogstad, 2011: 125 [our emphasis]), the events studied here evoke a collective consciousness that confirms the important place identity that a community is “decent,” and that “we” are decent people (Hagelund, 2003).

We conclude that the insights provided in this article have implications for the management by national immigration authorities and operators of asylum seeker centres of the potential for future disagreement and conflict in local communities. We highlight that conflict management should not be limited to the local community's relationship with the asylum seeker centre and its inhabitants. It also needs to appreciate the significant role of these meetings for the neighbours of these centres and for their present and future self-identification with their local

community. There are latent conflicts in a local community, and while those who are hostile towards immigrants and the establishment of new centres often receive considerable attention, even in the media, our study shows that many inhabitants are willing to go a long way to be recognized as “decent.”

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## DISCLOSURE

The authors confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is under consideration for publication elsewhere. We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/imig.12952>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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

## ORCID

Mette Strømsø  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4982-6482>

Susanne Bygnes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9338-6763>

## ENDNOTES

1. To secure anonymity, we refer to the two localities and all research participants in this study by pseudonyms.
2. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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