

Three Types of Neighborhood Reactions to Local Immigration and New Refugee Settlements

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INTRODUCTION

Neighborhoods can potentially be mediators of inclusion (but also of exclusion) of immigrants if they host institutions that might foster social encounters across different social groups. This can be realized, for example, by means of community centers, schools, or public libraries, or by allowing everyday social encounters, such as in public spaces. But it is not only in the United States that public discussions on immigration and its impact on local neighborhoods are viewed in many cases negatively and with fear of “the great unknown” (Bauman 2016, p. 106). This is especially true since growing numbers of refugees have reached some industrialized countries in recent years.¹ New refugee accommodation facilities and refugee hostels have been erected in neighborhoods in European cities, but also in rural areas. There is some reason to say that such fears of expected neighborhood transformation are important reasons for the increase in popularity of right-wing parties, for example, in the United States, but also in Europe. This is true, for instance, in Hungary, Poland, Germany, the United Kingdom (particularly with respect to Brexit and a rising share of votes for UKIP), France (with the growing success of the Front National), and Austria (with the FPÖ reaching the second ballot in the presidential election). But, what development is taking place in neighborhoods from a sociological perspective?

Initially, it is necessary to contextualize such fear-charged, right-wing neighborhood protests or politics against immigration in urban communities. This is especially important in order to contradict a prevalent depiction that connects newly established refugee accommodations with neighborhood opposition and protests against such settlements. But, in fact, we can see at least three main different types of neighborhood reactions to the local immigration of refugees. Besides those opposing refugee settlements, to whom I will give my special attention later, we can conversely observe another type of neighborhood that is welcoming and supportive of refugee settlements. A third distinct type of neighborhood may include those who exhibit a blasé attitude toward new refugee settlements and the refugees themselves.

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NEIGHBORHOODS AS WELCOMING AND SUPPORTIVE TOWARD REFUGEE SETTLEMENTS

Volunteers set up emergency shelters for refugees in schools, provide them with translation assistance, teach, donate clothes and food, or help refugees in contact with authorities to improve their claim to support from the welfare state. However, this kind of support by volunteers often goes further by funding and being active in grassroots organizations that aim to establish new refugee settlements in the supporter's own neighborhood. The aim is to build ties between refugees and other inhabitants in the neighborhoods. It is demonstrated that, in neighborhoods where people and grassroots organizations are actively supporting refugees and claiming settlements, the general preferences of the other residents are also more positive toward refugee settlements. This is due to the creation of a more open and publicly discussed planning process, as well as the integration of the refugees in the public life of the neighborhood (Aumüller et al. 2015). More information and more opportunities for everyday-life encounters between refugees and residents are created through public refugee work, such as in a community café or in general with organized public events. This is combined with the widely accepted correlation that more socially diverse regions show greater acceptance toward local diversity. Such an integration of the refugees into public spaces comes together with more everyday encounters (Frers and Meier 2007). It is well known that more diverse neighborhoods and more encounters with difference lead to more intergroup relations and lower prejudice. This is demonstrated with the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954). But proximity alone does not lead automatically to meaningful micro social contacts (Valentine 2008). To sustain social contact it is necessary to enable different social groups to commonly participate in local political and planning processes.

NEIGHBORHOODS WITH A BLASÉ ATTITUDE TOWARD NEW REFUGEE SETTLEMENTS

The usual cases in which neighborhoods do not devote specific attention to the new settlement of refugees are also rarely the subject of sociological research. Georg Simmel (1950) has taught us in his seminal work on "The Metropolis and Mental Life" that urban life is—in contrast to everyday life in premodern villages—characterized by social diversity. Against this backdrop, he argues that such diversity and also the multitude of sensory inputs can be managed only with the reserved, blasé attitude of the urban residents. "This does not mean that the objects are not perceived (...) but rather that the meaning and differing values of things and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial" (Simmel 1950, p. 52). Urban life in general is a life in a land of strangers (Amin 2012) with heterogeneous cultures and populations of people coming from elsewhere and/or residing in transnational networks. Unexpected encounters with others in public spaces are eminent for urbanity. But, it is not necessary that this should be accompanied by positive or negative emotions—or with supportive or oppositional stances toward or against social diversity. Georg Simmel demonstrates that the city provides space for non-conformity and for the toleration of difference. Therefore, we can consider this type of neighborhood as truly urban.

FEARS OF NEIGHBORHOOD TRANSFORMATIONS AND OPPOSITION AGAINST REFUGEE SETTLEMENTS

This type of neighborhood being reserved, oppositional, or racist in relation to new immigrants and refugees is a classic issue in sociology. Generally speaking, a multicultural backlash against diversity in general and against diversity-fostering initiatives could be seen in public and political discourse in Europe (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010), in the United States, and in other countries worldwide. But, more drastically, this can also be seen in attacks against refugees and in armed conflicts in many regions all over the world. Therefore, it is not difficult to identify such neighborhoods that object to refugee settlements or often struggle with racism. This goes along with a general discourse shift in politics as it is represented by the talks of political leaders that drastically overstate risks. This is accompanied by more or less openly xenophobic and racist stereotypes. It is a regime of representation (Hall 1997) that lays the discursive foundation for feelings of fear against those who are considered as culturally different. This is joined by local examples of protests and racist attacks against refugee settlements in the community's "own" neighborhoods. For example, research has shown that Muslims suffer under a variety of ways in experiencing racist violence during everyday life (Britton 2015). In this type of neighborhood, the belief is held that the new refugee settlements will cause the deterioration of the community's "own" neighborhood. But, how can we explain this in contrast to the two other types of neighborhood reactions?

Research has shown that the reasons for such fears of neighborhood transformations are not due to immigration, or to a rise in diversity, ethnicity, or religion. Dwellings are also an issue of local power relations (Meier and Frank 2016) and the main fear about neighborhood transformation is the fear of a projected or experienced loss of the own social position in the local neighborhood. It is a loss of dominance about the norms and rules that structure everyday activities in those neighborhoods. Moreover, it is a fear of losing the ability to enforce specific rules and cultural signs that structure the neighborhood's public space. This can be analyzed with respect to the established and outsider figuration—a social framework of individuals linked by rules and norms—as developed by Elias and Scotson (1965). An adaptation of this concept of the dynamic powerful relationship of different social groups is helpful in analyzing recent conflicts in urban neighborhoods around refugees and transformations. Both groups differ in terms of the period of residence. The established group resides for longer times and can now rely on an established and supportive social network that the outsiders have not developed to such a degree. In this concept, the established group and outsiders are defined by their status and by differences of power between both groups. This type of neighborhood is associated with the nostalgic narrative of an idealized golden era (Meier 2016, Blokland 2017) and socially harmonic past enjoyed by the established group in the neighborhood. It is a nostalgic view of the past that has erased former social conflicts and social differences. Case studies demonstrate that in some of those neighborhoods, former immigrants had to subordinate themselves to the rules of the once dominant group of the established and were therefore invisible to them in former times (Meier 2013). Immigrants place-making (Gill 2010) and expressing the validity of a new community was made impossible. But former established groups might have lost some of their previous power due to socioeconomic transformations. This loss of power can be considered to also be due to a loss of

the ability to set the cultural rules of the neighborhood. The current fears and oppositions against refugee settlements exhibited by this type of neighborhood could be viewed as being due to a projected loss of power within the local figuration.

CONCLUSION

Neighborhoods are dynamic social entities and their dynamic character is evident with immigration. As I have demonstrated in this essay, three types of neighborhood reactions to local immigration and new refugee settlements can be identified. Besides fear-driven protests and oppositional activities against refugees in some neighborhoods, refugee hostels are also welcomed and receive support in other neighborhoods. This also means that a dominant depiction of immigration and refugees, as the issue is discussed today, does not automatically lead to a uniform neighborhood reaction against refugees. If we compare those extreme cases of different neighborhoods' reactions, it seems to be obvious that a key to developing more open and diversity-friendly neighborhoods is to foster the participation of the inhabitants in local planning processes also regarding refugee settlements, to develop public spaces allowing everyday encounters across different social groups and to facilitate diverse place-making strategies of different social groups in the local neighborhood.

Note

¹In 2016, some 63.8 million people worldwide were refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, or stateless persons (UNHCR 2017). By far, the most were from war-torn countries such as 12.13 million people from Syria or 4.5 million from Afghanistan. Compared to other regions (like Lebanon, Turkey, Pakistan, or Iraq), the wealthier countries like the United States (0.62 million) or those of the European Union hosted relatively limited numbers of refugees due to a strict and exclusive border policy. The short-term inflow into the European Union and especially in countries like Germany (1.05 million) and Sweden (0.35 million) in 2015 has ended (UNHCR 2017). Like Australia or the United States, the European Union is also attempting to prevent refugees crossing borders. This is a policy that is associated with an increase in refugees drowning in the Mediterranean Sea.

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