

Differentiated Borders of Belonging and Exclusion: European Migrants in Rural Areas in Iceland

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Submitted: 29 October 2023 **Accepted:** 30 January 2024 **Published:** 14 March 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Migrants’ Inclusion in Rural Communities” edited by Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir (University of Iceland), Pamela Innes (University of Wyoming), and Anna Wojtyńska (University of Iceland), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i411>

Abstract

This article addresses questions of difference, positionality, and belonging from the perspectives of international migrants living and working in rural communities in Iceland. With the recent integration of rural areas into the global economy, small villages and towns have undergone rapid social transformation. The development of new industries and growing tourism in these localities has attracted many international migrants. The share of migrants in the local populations oscillates between 10% to 50%, depending on the town, with the majority coming from Europe. Commonly, they make up the greater part of workers in service jobs and manual labour in rural towns and villages. This article builds on data from ethnographic field research over 15 months in five parts of Iceland located outside of the capital region. Based on the analysis of interviews with migrants, we examine different perceptions of affinity and belonging and explore their experiences of inclusion and exclusion. To what extent do migrants see themselves as part of local communities? How do they narrate their social positions in those places? The discussion highlights how social stratification and hierarchy affect migrants’ experiences of inclusion as commonly displayed in the interviews. Furthermore, we elaborate on how notions of relatedness and otherness reflect inherited ideas of Europe and contemporary divergent geopolitical positions.

Keywords

diversity; exclusion; hierarchy; Iceland; inclusion; European labour migrants; rural areas

1. Introduction

European rural places are commonly imagined as homogeneous and linked to stability and traditionalism in contrast to dynamic, super-diverse, urban cities (Søholt et al., 2018). Yet, both urban and rural areas operate

in the “same globalized international society” (Rye & O’Reilly, 2021, p. 4). The integration of rural areas into the global economy has transformed many sectors in rural villages and towns, creating an increased demand for labourers from abroad in recent decades (Camarero & Oliva, 2016). Thus, rural areas, just like urban areas, are characterized by increased mobility and growing diversity of the population in the contemporary world (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014; Rye & O’Reilly, 2021). The common labour market within the European Economic Area (EEA) has facilitated the flow of people seeking work in other European countries, including Iceland. Following EU enlargement in the early 2000s, migration from Eastern Europe to Western Europe accelerated (Rye & O’Reilly, 2021). Migrants are mostly hired in low-paid, manual labour, often seasonal, typically in food production usually located in the informal sector, and commonly experience discrimination. Their precarious position in the labour market correlates with societal marginality in the local community (McAreavey & Argent, 2018). Furthermore, migrants of specific nationalities tend to dominate certain niches of the labour market, which may contribute to their social isolation and growing segmentation within the local community.

Recently, Vertovec (2021) pointed out that the term diversity may not sufficiently illustrate contemporary dynamics characterized by rising inequality and increasing complexity. Contemporary societies are not only becoming more diverse but also more stratified. The relation between migration status and the labour market position of migrants has been demonstrated (Anderson, 2013; Arnholtz & Leschke, 2023). However, while conducting fieldwork in rural areas in Iceland, we saw that migrants have divergent experiences of inclusion at work and in society, even if they were moving within the common European labour market. This turned our attention to ways that the intersection of multiple factors beyond migrants’ employment affects their sense of social stratification. In this article, we focus on people coming to work in rural Iceland from different parts of Europe to examine the role of geopolitical imagination in the construction of difference. We apply the concept of geographical imagination (Harvey, 1973, 2005) to discuss the role of perceived cultural distance or proximity in migrants’ experience of inclusion and exclusion. We go beyond a simple dichotomy between “us” and “them,” giving attention to degrees of otherness. The process of othering is usually discussed from the perspective of the majority, looking at their attitudes towards different migrant groups. In this article, we examine how ideas of foreignness and affinity are reflected in migrants’ narratives of their experiences and how they affect their sense of belonging and trajectories of integration. We highlight how these differences are contested, negotiated, traversed, and mobilized in daily encounters and how they may change over time.

2. National Boundaries, Diversification, and Hierarchies

The unprecedented heterogenization of contemporary societies is commonly referred to by using Vertovec’s (2007) concept of “superdiversity.” In a critical review of the use of this concept, Vertovec (2019, p. 130) notes that studies applying it when discussing increased ethnic diversity often do not consider “the multidimensional nature of categories, shifting configurations, and new social structure that these entail.” He proposes that we should focus on the process of diversification to better grasp the dynamism and complexity of mobility in the modern world. Significantly, he advocates attending to not only horizontal differences, but also hierarchical ordering, emphasising that ongoing social construction of differences is integral to economic inequality and stratification of society (Vertovec, 2021, p. 1275).

In this article, we focus on the spatial organization of cultural diversity and the role of geographical imagination in the unequal positioning of migrants in rural Iceland. Harvey (2005) introduces the concept of

geographical imagination to emphasise mutual conditioning between social structures and space. We evoke it to give attention to how the perception of geographical space is historically rooted and socially constructed, as well as how geographical imagination manifests in the notion of social distance/proximity, prejudice, and ethnic stereotyping. Geographical knowledges—internalized and commonsensical—contribute to the affective and hierarchical valuation of space (Harvey, 2005), reflected, for instance, in contemporary migration regimes. Divergent conceptualizations of migration flows (labour migration, lifestyle migration, etc.) echo hierarchical orderings of space. Labelling individuals either as labour migrants or expats is often influenced by assumptions about the character of their mobility based on an evaluation of the economic status of the states from which they come. In the case of those identified as refugees or asylum seekers, the site from which the individuals come is recognized as a site of political instability or danger. Significantly, the different categories of migrants (refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers, expats) become ordered into hierarchies of citizens with unequal positions in the labour market and access to welfare (Anderson, 2013; Anthias, 2016; Arnholtz & Leschke, 2023; McAreavey & Argent, 2018).

While their position in the labour market plays an important role in the stratification and differentiation of migrants, it intersects with other factors, including the perceived social distance between locals and people from different countries of origin (Harvey, 2005, p. 221; Karakayali, 2009, p. 538). As territorial borders correlate with assumed cultural differences and social boundaries (Barth, 1969), they tend to be epitomized in the idea of the Other and reproduced through attitudes towards migrants (Fassin, 2011). Such divisions often mirror geopolitical imaginations of Europe's internal boundaries, such as East and West or North and South, in which East Europe is sometimes portrayed as not fully belonging to the European community of values and as economically backward (Dzenovska, 2018).

Studies from various parts of the world have shed light on the construction of the institutionalized maintenance of ethnic and racial hierarchies between migrant groups (Anderson, 2013; Consterdine, 2023). Ethnic hierarchies are, as Ford (2011) pointed out, commonly based on ideas about the closeness or cultural similarity of a given migrant group to the dominant group. His study showed that attitudes towards different migrant groups in the UK were expressed in hierarchical terms, with respondents being less opposed to the ethnic groups deemed to be culturally more like them. Commonly, such divisions are reflected in the labour market and underpinned by ideas of “labouring bodies” (Consterdine, 2023). In the examination of othering and racialization in Europe, the focus has often been on those arriving from countries outside of Europe. Recent literature on the differentiation and othering of East European migrants in Western Europe has demonstrated that they are subject to similar processes (Andersson & Rye, 2023; Krivonos, 2023).

As Consterdine (2023, p. 3837) points out, many studies of ethnic hierarchies lack migrants' perspectives. In her study of two different groups in the UK, she examines labour migrants' lived experiences and how they “understand, mediate and legitimise their position in the immigration hierarchy.” In this article, we examine such hierarchies by focusing on the experiences of migrants who arrived in Iceland primarily to work and who are active in the labour market in rural areas. Their migration can thus be characterized as labour migration, although a closer look generally reveals more complex reasons for their migration trajectories, such as being with family members or searching for tranquillity or remoteness (Wojtynska et al., 2023). Although labour market participation is typically seen as an important part of integration, studies have shown that it may not be sufficient to be included in local social networks. This is because of exclusionary processes, social contexts, and relational issues that go beyond individual resources (Aure et al., 2018; Enbuska et al., 2021;

Søholt et al., 2018). Our goal is to illuminate existing hierarchies of difference regarding belonging and access to local society displayed through differentiated processes of inclusion and marginalization narrated by the participants of our study from various parts of Europe. Our attention is on their experiences and how they talk about their position and their inclusion and exclusion in the labour market and the local community.

3. The Context of the Study

While rapid diversification has mostly been attributed to global cities and big metropolises, researchers are depicting similar transformations in rural areas, which, just like urban spaces, are facing extensive inflows of people from abroad (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014; Rye & O'Reilly, 2021). This also can be observed in Iceland. Until the 1990s, international migration to Iceland remained moderate, consisting primarily of people from other Nordic countries (Skaptadóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2020). From 1952, the Nordic Passport Union ensured citizens of the region free movement and unlimited residence and, since 1954, with the formation of the common labour market, unrestricted access to work. Following free market reforms in the early 1990s, there was an increase in international migration, largely driven by the fish processing industry and thus directed mostly to the rural coastal areas (Júlíusdóttir et al., 2013). At that time, many migrants were coming from Poland (Wojtyńska, 2011). In 2006, Iceland as an EEA country opened the labour market to citizens of the new EU member states, resulting in increased arrival of workers from these countries (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). More citizens from Bulgaria and Romania have entered since 2013, when restrictions were lifted. Currently, immigrants are 18% of the population and about 22% of the active workforce in the country. About 80% of all migrants come from EEA countries. Most come from Eastern Europe, with people from Poland being by far the most numerous at about 35% of all migrants, followed by people from Lithuania and Romania. Germans are the most numerous of those coming from Western Europe, followed by people from Spain and Portugal (Statistics Iceland, n.d.).

The number of migrants in rural areas has increased greatly, with foreign nationals accounting for about 10% to over 50% of the total population, depending on place. Some of the locations in our study have a history of people coming to work in the fisheries since the 1990s, whereas the others can be seen as new immigration destinations (McAreevey & Argent, 2018). Entanglement in global processes, either through production for a global market or through rapidly expanding tourism in the last 10 years, created a growing demand for labourers from abroad. In two of the areas, heavy industries, largely relying on foreign workers, were introduced in the mid-2000s as a solution to depopulation after a decrease in the importance of once-central fisheries. As elsewhere in Iceland, Poles and people from other East European countries outnumber other nationalities.

Despite these changes in the composition of rural populations, municipal governments have put little or no effort into facilitating the integration of new inhabitants. This may reflect a dominant discourse in Iceland of migrants generally being portrayed as temporary, disposable workers, although there is an easy pathway for residency and eventual citizenship for those coming from the EEA, and many do settle (Skaptadóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2020). Loftsdóttir (2017) examined how such discourses underpin the racialization of Lithuanians and Poles, based on ideas of Eastern Europeans as not fully “European.” Similarly, people from East European countries such as Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania have been represented as culturally different. The term *innflytjandi* (immigrant) is generally used to refer to them and a lesser extent to those migrating from Western European countries. There is an especially strong sense of cultural proximity with the Nordic

countries reflected in the use of kinship terms to describe relations with people from there. Guðjónsdóttir (2014), in her study of Icelanders seeking work in Norway after the economic crash of 2008, showed how Icelandic migrants felt accepted and explained this by referring to shared culture and kinship with Norwegians. Here, we investigate how this general ordering of different nationalities is experienced and narrated by migrants in rural areas.

4. Methods

The discussion in this article is based on analysis of data from 15 months of ethnographic field research conducted in small villages and towns in five districts of Iceland outside of the capital region. The towns and villages in each location varied in size, ranging from 200 to 2500 inhabitants. We spent three months in each location, where we did participant observation, talked informally with inhabitants, and conducted 330 semi-structured interviews. The participants in the study were of various national origins; two-thirds of the interviews took place with international migrants and about one-third were with Icelanders who had either moved from other parts of Iceland or were long-term residents. Of all interviews with international migrants considered here, 74 were with people from West European countries and 90 with individuals from East Europe. The remainder were held with people coming from locations outside of Europe and are not included in our analysis. Interviewees had lived in Iceland for various lengths of time, from one to 30 years. Participants were found using random sampling and the snowball method. Independent of their country of origin, many had arrived in Iceland to work temporarily or seasonally in a rural area, often not with a clear timeframe in mind, and had then extended their stay. In the interviews, we asked them about their experiences of moving into a small, rural location and their experiences of working and living in the village where they resided. The participants were asked about their daily lives, such as their participation in community life, at work, and in learning the Icelandic language.

In this article, we present results based on analysis of interviews with participants from various European countries who indicated that work had been the primary reason for their migration to Iceland. Most of them came to work in jobs where migrants are the majority, such as those related to tourism, care work, fish processing, and agricultural labour. Although of various ages, the majority of interviewees were 20 to 45 years old. While the focus of this article is primarily on this group, the interviews conducted with other participants, especially with local Icelanders, and our fieldwork observations give important insight into the local contexts and inform this analysis as well.

Following Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), we identified themes emerging from interviews in which people discussed their experiences of inclusion and exclusion. In several of these, they also spoke about the positionality of other migrants in the community. Icelanders' sense of how familiar or foreign people were, along with factors like the individual's desire to be included, quickly arose as recurrent and pervasive themes. Our review of the data also brought to light migrants' own use of these concepts to arrange their and others' groups in the social world of their community. Once these themes were identified, we triangulated them with fieldnotes, media references, and interviews with Icelanders to determine whether they were attested in these sources, as well.

5. Results

The participants discussed in this article often had contradictory experiences of inclusion in or exclusion from community life depending on specific migration circumstances, knowledge of Icelandic and English, family networks, and length of stay. These experiences were not fixed and explicit, but often ambiguous and changing through time. However, in migrants' narratives, two elements often came up regarding their position and possibilities for social inclusion: where in Europe they had come from, and what kinds of jobs they held. These factors are interrelated, as employers often follow stereotypical ideas about different nationalities when hiring while, simultaneously, labour migrants' market position often conditions the possibilities for and characters of daily encounters within the local community that may reinforce existing stereotypes. Our participants were aware of and discussed, directly and indirectly, the hierarchy into which they felt they had been placed. This was the case for those who found themselves having difficulties being included in the local community and those who felt more privileged and included. These themes are examined in this section, starting from those who described the most possibilities of inclusion to those who expressed being the most isolated.

5.1. *The Benefits of Imagined Closeness*

Certain rural farming areas in Iceland have a history of population influx from Western European countries, mostly Scandinavia and Germany, to work on farms, particularly with horse husbandry. However, only a few of the participants in our study came to Iceland in this way. While a few of them found positions in their professional fields, most of the contemporary migrants from Western Europe, both south and north, were employed in the rapidly growing tourism sector. Some came annually for five to eight months of the year and returned to their country of origin around mid-winter when tourism was slow in Iceland. Although West Europeans were rarely found in food production such as fish plants, some have been hired in care work or held positions in heavy industry, mostly in mid-management.

Despite these Western European migrants often filling low-income jobs, similar to migrants from Eastern Europe, they have received very little attention, and were rarely talked about as "labour migrants." When asked about migrants in their towns, Icelanders and long-term migrant residents of the study locations generally mentioned inhabitants from Poland or Eastern Europe. Occasionally, inhabitants from Western European countries were mentioned, but rarely those from the Nordic countries.

Regardless of their position in the labour market, participants from Nordic countries commonly talked about their positive reception and expressed that they felt accepted by the local community of Icelanders. Many of them had met an Icelandic spouse and had been settled for a while in the rural villages. Some had found employment where they could apply their education after staying for some years in Iceland. The commonly expressed ideas of a shared sense of affinity were summarized by one participant who said that people from Scandinavia are typically perceived by Icelanders as "a brother from another mother." Reflecting this inclusive view, a woman from Sweden said:

I don't feel that they're, like, you know, making fun of my language or looking at me with some weird look....My feeling is that being Swedish is looked upon with a good eye.

In her experience, her nationality is seen more as an advantage rather than a disadvantage when interacting with Icelanders. Another woman from a Nordic country, who has worked in various jobs generally held by

migrants, such as in elderly care, cleaning, and housekeeping in a hotel, compared her experience to that of her co-workers from other countries:

I think that in the eyes of Icelanders, we [Nordic people] are naturally a bit higher in the pecking order. I hate that this is how it is, but I think they look more up to us. You know, our music and all....And naturally, we are all Vikings [laughs].

People who have come from Nordic countries thus demonstrate awareness that the treatment they receive is often better than that given to migrants coming from elsewhere. The sense of familiarity, both familial and cultural, that Nordic people feel Icelanders express toward them grants them affordance to engage in Icelandic social life more immediately than can migrants entering from countries thought to be more distant from Iceland. The Nordic participants have discerned that they come, in Icelanders' minds, from geographic and imagined spaces closer to Iceland. Being thought of as genealogically, culturally, and linguistically known places them in a discernibly higher position than that directly available to incomers from other parts of Europe.

Several participants from West European countries described positive experiences as well but theirs differed slightly from those recounted by the migrants from the Nordic countries. A young woman from Germany, who lives in a small town, came along with her partner to work in housekeeping in a small hotel. Currently, she has a service job where she interacts directly with tourists. About their experiences of moving to Iceland, she said:

Icelanders are just so warm; they are so open. So, it's, we say like, "cold country but warm hearts," you know. And we felt just like warm and welcoming....That was just exactly how it was when we came here as workers. Everybody was, just like, very friendly and nice.

In describing Icelanders as warm and friendly, she reiterates points raised by Nordic interviewees but does not speak of a familial relation or a shared historical cultural relation ("Vikingness") as elements narrowing the distance between Icelanders and people from Germany. Thus, although neither she nor other Western European participants talked about shared historical or cultural relations like the Scandinavians, the welcome that participants from Western European countries described denotes a camaraderie between Icelanders and Western Europeans, but one that retains a sense of geographic and social separation.

Even though Western Europeans rarely talked about being excluded directly from local society or experiencing discrimination based on national origin, they commonly expressed some difficulty in getting access to and being included in the Icelandic community. Problems regarding learning Icelandic and making friendships with Icelanders were issues raised by both those only working with other migrants and those interacting with Icelanders at work. One participant from Western Europe said when talking about her ability to connect to Icelanders:

I wouldn't say [that] for me it was very difficult to get to know people. I think the more difficult part is to get into deeper friendships....I have a lot of people that I know, like, on the surface and that you say "hi" and "bye" and "how are you?" and stuff like that, but to go deeper, that's more difficult because you realize that most people here have known each other since childhood.

She and others offering similar perspectives were generally employed in jobs with other migrants. Often, the only Icelanders they encountered in their daily lives were their employers or people they met in other public places in the village. However, compared to East Europeans they were more frequently employed in jobs where they were in direct contact with tourists and Icelanders, such as being tour guides, and managers of shops or cafés.

Although describing a feeling of being privileged as migrants in Iceland, West European participants, including those from the Nordic countries, shared problems with other migrants, like having difficulties in improving their job situation, being stuck in so-called “migrant jobs,” and not socializing with work colleagues outside of the workplace. Then some of them would point out that after all, they were migrants (*innflytjandi*) or foreigners. For example, one woman talking about her possibilities said: “I mean, like, I am a foreigner in this country I’m living, you know; in that sense, even though I’m trying to be an official part of it, still I am not, you know, born here.” In speaking of “being born here” as a marker of who is and is not a foreigner, this participant directly addresses geographic determinism as a factor she views as important for demarcating “natives” from foreigners. Her expectation, shared with several other interviewees, both migrants and Icelanders, was that while cultural closeness like that shared with others from Nordic and North European countries bred greater acceptance and inclusion, there were still barriers to overcome.

5.2. The Familiarized Others

As already mentioned, people born in Poland are by far the largest group of immigrants in Iceland and they are the largest migrant group in each study location. They have been coming to Iceland since the beginning of the 1990s and are now the symbolic embodiment of foreign workers in Iceland. They have come to represent the “cultural other” in Icelandic discourse. This was reflected in informal conversations with Icelanders and other migrants in the study locations. Poles are commonly the point of reference when other migrant participants evaluate their status in Icelandic society. Participants from other European countries commonly talked about being in either a better or worse position in the labour market or society than Polish people. When a woman from a Nordic country, who described a positive reception in the town, was asked if people of other nationalities are viewed similarly in the village where lives, she said:

I don’t have any experience myself like that but for example, people from Poland maybe are not....My feeling is that Icelanders can be more, maybe, racist against them than a person from one of the Nordic countries....That’s just my perception. And it’s good for me, of course, because their attitude towards me, the locals, or Icelanders, in general, is often very positive.

Occasionally, the stereotypical image of Eastern European migrants was mobilized to rationalize an interviewee’s own higher position. For instance, when discussing issues of inclusion/exclusion in the local community, one of our participants from Western Europe indicated that the “problem” with some not integrating should be attributed to migrants themselves. She said:

If somebody, but it’s also, it’s not good to forbid it for people who want to become a part, like for me it was quite easy to come here, legally....But to be here, to get easy money and to have an easy-going life [exhales], that is something that is the problem today.

Here, this speaker recalled migrants who apparently wished to stay only for a short term to earn sufficient money to purchase a house or live a comfortable life upon return to their home country, content to draw more from the state and social system than they give back. While the speaker seemed to support the rights of people to move freely across borders, she reproduced the simplified image of temporary foreign workers as socially marginalized because they do not put sufficient effort into becoming part of the community. In contrast, as she elaborated later in the interview, she was quick to learn Icelandic and has been actively engaged in the local community. Such representations were typically made about Eastern Europeans or Poles, but never about migrants coming from Nordic or West European countries, who were more often portrayed as contributors to the social system and desiring to engage with Icelandic society.

Many of the more recent migrants from Poland worked alongside migrants from Western European countries in tourism, construction, or other service jobs. Being the group that had the longest presence in most of the locations of this study, the positions and the jobs participants from Poland held varied to some extent. Yet, they often struggled with the essentializing categorizations of Poles as low-skilled labourers, and many claimed that it was difficult for them to find jobs in their field of specialization. This was the case for a couple who moved to a small tourist town in Iceland with a high rate of workers from all over Europe. In this place, they felt excluded and discriminated against, saying that they had been primarily classified as low-skilled labourers. One of them said about their experience:

We thought that we would be working [in our field of expertise], as was the case in Poland. But we faced a wall...because it appeared that being Polish here is being on [the] margin [of] society....Because wherever we went and whoever saw a Polish surname told us that they were not looking for a cleaner....We didn't expect—that we would fall to the very bottom of the social ladder.

This participant critically analyses the existing hierarchy in Iceland, highlighting that there is a limited range of positionalities available to migrants and that being Polish automatically places them on the lowest rung of the “social ladder.” Economic exclusion, for this couple, was related to social exclusion and this eventually convinced them to move somewhere else in Iceland. Even though they only found employment in low-paid care work in the new town—so were still not employed in accordance with their education—it gave more opportunities for daily interactions with Icelanders. Consequently, they felt more valued at their job and accepted and visible in the village. Moreover, as they were now working in shift work, they could take on some projects related to their education. About the experience after moving to the latter village, one of them said: “Also, I like the small community like here...because you are no longer an anonymous Pole migrant who hardly speaks English. Here we are humans. And this, not being anonymous, broke the bar of being Polish.” Working side by side with Icelanders, allowed her and her partner to break with the sense of anonymity and be perceived as individuals, rather than simply being reduced to being representatives of the country from which they come.

Many of those who had been for some time in Iceland had experienced isolation and exclusion after they first arrived and were working in the fish plants. Another Polish woman described her daily routine thusly: “Because there, in the fishing plant, if you sit locked up, it's just work, home, work, home.” After getting jobs that they found more acceptable and where they had a chance to interact more with long-term residents, they felt more included in the local community. The woman whom we just quoted was hired later by her municipality, a step that she states has allowed her to start “getting to know more Icelanders.” We also found people from

Poland who were in mid-management in establishments that only had migrant workers and some who had started businesses. In all five locations, we were repeatedly told by Icelandic inhabitants about one or two local “exemplary migrants,” with whom we were encouraged to hold interviews. These “exemplary migrants” were all from Poland and had lived for several years in the area, had learned Icelandic, and were either active in social life or politics or were seen as having managed to get out of “migrant jobs.” Often, they assumed the role of mediators between migrants and locals, with several having been employed by public institutions, like labour unions or municipalities, to assist migrants and/or inform them about their rights.

5.3. The Predicaments of the “Ultimate Other”

Most jobs in food processing in rural villages, such as in fish processing and slaughterhouses, are currently held by migrants who generally only work with other migrants except for the managers, who are more often of Icelandic background. People employed in these jobs come, for the most part, from East and Central Europe, primarily Poland, but recently also from Romania and Bulgaria. The participants from Romania and Bulgaria talked more often than other participants about being discriminated against based on their national background and being isolated from the rest of village life.

Icelanders in our study would sometimes begin by mentioning Romanian and Bulgarian fish plant workers when giving us information about migrants in their towns. However, they generally claimed that they knew little about them and often assumed their nationality was Polish. They also would point to them as an example of people who kept to themselves and were not interested in integrating into the community. This was, for instance, reflected in an interview with an Icelandic man who had been working with many migrants for almost two decades in fish processing. When comparing people from Romania to Poles at his workplace he said:

The Romanians are so different from us. They take much longer to integrate and even do not integrate, only their children [do]. The Poles are just like us, the same fools as we are, just very similar people. The Romanians do not socialize, there are some families here and they just hang out with their relatives. They are very fine people, I do not want to talk negatively about them, but they are just so different from us....They have some incorrect conceptions of us as well; they think that we do not like them, whereas with the Poles we can joke around.

In this, we see that because Poles have been present for so long in Iceland, despite their stereotypical image as low-skilled workers, they have become the “familiar other.” While some cultural proximity is recognized in the case of migrants from Poland, this is still elusive for other Eastern European migrants deemed to be more culturally distant. Such social boundaries can become emotionally draining.

One day, when the three of us were shopping in the local store, we ran into two women from Bulgaria, whom we had interviewed a few days earlier. They worked in a fish plant and claimed that they had very few social connections outside of their small national group and a few other co-workers. One of them wanted to leave Iceland but kept extending her stay as she was relatively content with the work and the wages in Iceland as compared to Bulgaria. Before we could say anything to her, she walked towards us and said calmly: “I hate it here.” Her disappointment was mostly related to the impossibility of connecting with the longtime residents. Two of the people in this group also talked about having experienced discrimination in the housing market. They claimed that it had taken them a long time to find a flat and that they had not been trusted as renters

because of their nationality. One of them characterized his experiences of Icelanders as follows: “The first thing to see when you see an Icelandic person is that they have a cold face....They are more open towards Poles than us.” This speaker perceives that Icelanders have an entrenched hierarchy of migrants and that Bulgarians rank below Poles. Awareness of such a ranking was found throughout the interviews with people who had come from Bulgaria and Romania.

Still, some Poles have or have had similar experiences as the Bulgarian woman quoted above, working in comparable circumstances in food production or other monotonous, low-income jobs and feeling isolated from the local community. Although they commonly have a larger community of other Poles to connect with than, for example, more recent migrants from Bulgaria or Romania, some wished to interact more with Icelandic residents in the village but found it difficult. In an account from a Polish mother living in Iceland with her Polish partner and two children, she pointed out that the native Icelanders in the village do not seem to be bothered “that there are too many Poles.” In the fish plant where she works, almost all her co-workers also come from Poland. She described how, outside of work, her time is spent mostly with Polish friends and relatives. She claimed that her contact with Icelanders was very limited. When further explaining how Polish society is separate from the Icelandic population in the town, she worried about how this might affect her children as they also spent most of their time outside of school with Polish children. She said: “Well, the children don’t see Icelanders, they are not familiar with them, and they are not accustomed to them. Maybe if Icelanders came to us more often, the children would be more used to them.” Despite this, she describes a feeling of belonging in the village as this is now her home and she would not want to move away. Thus, she feels part of the place, and being part of the Polish community plays an important role here. We commonly found that having a community of Poles and a network of Poles in various positions in society seemed to break the sense of isolation, compensating for social marginalization.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Our results from field research in rural Iceland highlight existing hierarchies of differentiation regarding migrants’ sense of belonging and access to local society. This is displayed in divergent processes of inclusion and exclusion of the various migrant groups to the local labour market and society. Many new jobs have been established in rural Iceland and, with depopulation, new migrant workers from various parts of Europe have taken these jobs. These rural towns and villages have experienced rapid diversification in population similar to many urban areas (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014; Rye & O’Reilly, 2021). A person’s national background and position in the labour market are significant, but not the only, factors determining social inclusion in these places (Vertovec, 2023). Although participating in the labour market is an important way to get some access to the local society, it does not necessarily give access to social networks and community life.

The study demonstrates that the participants’ employment status and possibilities often reflect prior social hierarchies and geopolitical imaginaries. Our analysis shows that dominant conceptions of groups as less “familiar” and less “foreign,” entrenched in conceptions of Europe and cultural proximity, affect migrants’ experiences and opportunities. As a rule, those entering Iceland from Western European countries considered “familiar” to Icelanders have an easier time making connections with Icelandic inhabitants in their communities. The Western European participant who seems to be aware of their privileged position as a migrant, and at the same time views “migrants” as other inhabitants in the village, expresses an awareness of

hierarchical relations. Rather than being classed as “other,” migrants to rural Iceland from Western Europe, particularly the Nordic countries, are often incorporated into local communities through marriage, establishing businesses, and participation in community organizations. Even when hired in “migrant jobs” in tourism, they do not talk about being discriminated against based on their nationality and they believe they have more opportunities than people from Eastern Europe to move up in the labour market. They know that they are often talked about as one of the locals. As a result, they feel that they must explain to us that in some situations they are “immigrants after all.”

In contrast, those coming from Eastern European countries are perceived as more “foreign” and feel themselves to remain more marginal to the local social networks. This social and economic stratification is reflected by migrants like the Polish participant who claimed that people assumed she was looking for a cleaning job when they saw her Polish name. Similarly, the narrative of the Bulgarian person who spoke about their difficulties finding housing and positioned the Poles as treated more favourably than they were indicates they are aware of a distinct social hierarchy in which Bulgarians are positioned near the bottom. Even though both speakers referenced here are active in the labour market, are raising families in their village, and desire to be included in social life, they remain excluded to an extent that migrants from Nordic and Western European countries are not.

Despite these general patterns, we observed that individual experiences can be more nuanced, as numerous factors come into play and positionalities can be ambiguous and changing. Some of the participants from Poland have, for example, expressed success in being incorporated into the local community. However, our observations and interviews also showed that even the Polish participants who are active in community events or politics are still likely to be categorized as “one of the migrants,” although in some cases being seen as successful migrants by other inhabitants. The construction of an “exemplary migrant” position, recognized both by Icelanders and incomers, points to the emergence of yet another mechanism through which hierarchical relations are maintained in rural communities. The exemplary migrant continues to remain a migrant in the Icelandic view and has not become “one of us.”

Migrants entering Iceland from different European areas recognize that there is an existing social hierarchy in their village or region and then hierarchically order their own and others’ groups. Being aware of the hierarchy, some use it at times to justify differential access, as when the Western European speaker criticized Eastern Europeans in Iceland for desiring only “an easy-going life.” Our Bulgarian participants also refer to it to explain their exclusion from social activities and common social goods, like housing. Our data, then, expand on Consterdine’s (2023) findings that migrants’ experiences of the labour market are affected by social hierarchies in that we examine other aspects of social belonging and inclusion. Information from interviews also demonstrates that the hierarchies are internalized by migrants, so are maintained not only by institutional forces (Andersson & Rye, 2023).

We show, as well, that geographical imagination (Harvey, 1973, 2005) is foundational to the hierarchical constructions entered by migrants to Iceland. The migrant status of an individual from a Nordic country is, at times, entirely erased in Icelanders’ and the individual’s own identity. When deemed necessary, however, both migrants and Icelanders recognize and speak of it. The erasure (Gal & Irvine, 2019) occurs because Icelanders espouse a belief in a close cultural and social bond with others from the Nordic region. In contrast, those from Eastern European countries are considered to be more “foreign,” as has been found elsewhere in

Europe (Andersson & Rye, 2023; Krivonos, 2023). But migrants from Eastern Europe are not considered to be a homogeneous group, as differentiation and distinctions are drawn between the better known, “less foreign” Poles and people from the new origin locations, in Icelandic history that is, of Bulgaria and Romania, who are “more foreign.” Greater degrees of foreignness operate to distinguish the social positioning of various groups of labour migrants. While different categories of immigrants and migrants correlate with geopolitical imaginings of their points of origin (i.e., refugees and asylum seekers come from unstable or unsafe locations) and encounter unequal positions in the social hierarchies of the states they enter (Anderson, 2013; McAreavey & Argent, 2018), members of the single category of labour migrant are subject to this same process of ordering. Thus, our findings suggest further attention to differentiation within single categories of migrants can shed light on ways such individuals acknowledge and respond to existing social hierarchies. The agency of migrants to accept and utilize or resist and contest social hierarchies, along with reasons why they pursue these activities is worthy of further investigation.

The Icelandic case demonstrates that heterogeneity and diversity exist within global rural areas just as in urban areas. Our analysis of data collected during 15 months of field research shows the importance of challenging the images of homogeneous rural communities, as well as the importance of digging deeper; to include different groups of labour migrants of different European nationalities in the analysis and illuminate the role of geographical imagination (Harvey, 2005). Doing so allows us to avoid a simple presentation of migrants’ experiences in rural areas and examine the process of diversification and ongoing segmentation and stratification. At the same time, it sheds light onto the existing class- and ethnicity-based hierarchies experienced by migrants in rural communities that help explain why labour market participation is not necessarily the only key to inclusion.

Acknowledgments

We thank the participants for giving us time to share their experiences with us and the reviewers of this article for their valuable comments.

Funding

This work was supported by grant OPP-1932664 from the National Science Foundation, USA.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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