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Forced migration to Germany: Bordering practices and lived experiences. Introduction to the special issue

Abstract

The rapidly increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe since 2014 have given the topic of refugee migration heightened public and scholarly attention. Starting from the observation that the legal status and rights of refugees from Ukraine differ markedly from those from Syria and other Middle Eastern and North African countries, this special issue inquires about external and internal bordering processes, as well as the lived experiences of these different groups of refugees regarding processes of arriving and settling. While states have an obligation to grant asylum to persecuted persons, they have also engaged in more wide-reaching bordering practices, affecting external borders, exemplified through debates about NGO rescue missions at sea, as well as internal borders, as they appear, e.g., in the field of refugee accommodation. The lived experiences of arriving and settling are influenced by the legal status and rights accorded, but also by the gender composition of the refugee population. Ukrainian refugees are predominantly female, which impacts on transnational family arrangements and intentions to settle or to return. Lastly, this special issue seeks to contribute to the "affective turn" in the social sciences, highlighting how forced migration can be understood through the lens of emotions.

Keywords: Forced migration, refugees, Germany, borders, accommodation, emotions

Acknowledgement

This special Issue is the result of a joint conference of the sections "Sociology of European integration" and "Migration and ethnic minorities" in the DGS (German Sociological Association, which also provided funding for the conference), titled "Comparing Recent and Older Refugee Migration in and to Europe – Sociological Perspectives". It was held in March 2023 at the University of Bamberg. We thank all participants for their constructive discussions and all anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on the submissions to this special issue.

1. Introduction

While refugee migration has always been a relevant form of immigration to European countries, the issue has gained a lot of public, political and scholarly attention in recent years, given the rapidly increasing numbers of asylum seekers since 2014. Both in 2015 and in 2016, about 1.2 million persons mostly from Syria and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) applied for asylum in the

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 DOI: 10.5771/2566-7742-2023-2-153

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European Union (EU), following conflicts and civil war in the region (Eurostat 2023a). Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, by the end of the year 2022 about 3.8 million Ukrainians have sought temporary protection in the EU (Eurostat 2023b). These two large refugee movements reaching the EU have put the topic of refugee or forced migration on the agenda of migration researchers and scholars of related disciplines. Before, refugee migration was viewed as a temporary phenomenon, hence there was no institutionalised research on forced or refugee migration; rather, the topic has been addressed in a reactive, situated way. As Scherr and Scherschel (2019, 22) observe, "This has only changed with the so-called refugee crisis after 2014" and increasing societal fears about continuing high levels of refugee migration. Given this fear, the discourse on refugee migration has turned more negative in the past years: "Increasingly dominant in the countries of the global North is a view of uncontrolled immigration as a threat, not least as a threat to prosperity and security" (Scherr & Scherschel, 2019, 11).

It is no surprise, then, that the effects of refugee migration, as well as the question of how to govern (and prevent) it have been central for national and European policy makers for ten years now. Since 2014, EU member states have heatedly debated about how to achieve a fair distribution of asylum seekers across EU countries, how to govern or police external borders and how to prevent the migration of refugees by externalising EU borders into third countries (see, for example, the special issue edited by Niemann & Zaun, 2018). Some authors have argued that the lack of a common immigration policy, vastly differing opinions and practices towards refugees, and lacking agreement on asylum procedures have led to a "Schengen crisis", or to a structural and political crisis of European integration (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022; Niemann & Zaun, 2018; Schimmelfennig, 2018).

On the national level, how to deal with the increasing numbers of asylum seekers was no less contentious, manifested in fierce negotiations (between different political parties, but also different territorial levels such as, in the case of Germany, municipalities, *Länder* and the federal government) about how to deal with the rising numbers of asylum seekers, how to best accommodate them, how to distribute them across the national territory, or how to integrate them into the labour market or into education (El-Mafaalani, 2021; Emmerich et al., 2017; Scharrer et al., 2023; Vey & Gunsch, 2021).

The studies collected in this special issue are all set in the German context. Of all EU member states, Germany hosts the largest refugee population. As of 2022, Germany was home to almost 2.1 million refugees and around 260,000 asylum seekers (UNCHR 2023). The largest groups are the around one million Ukrainians fleeing war in their country, followed by 580,000 Syrians fleeing the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad and the civil war that erupted in 2011. In 2014/15 Germany became known for its "culture of welcome" (*Willkommenskultur*). However, over the years, the policies towards asylum seekers and refugees have also become more

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restrictive and public opinion has shifted towards a more opposing view (Drazanova & Geddes, 2023). Right-wing populist parties have gained broader voter support (a tendency that applies to other EU countries as well), among other things by playing on societal fears to lobby against any kind of migration, using, for example, racist stereotypes about Muslim, Black, male asylum seekers from the MENA region. There were also calls by other parties for more restrictive measures towards asylum seekers and refugees, including a cap on the number of asylum seekers that can be accepted, or the expansion of the list of "safe third countries".

Nevertheless, despite the tense climate regarding the reception of refugees and asylum- seekers, the arrival and settlement of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russian invasion was considerably eased. In fact, a remarkable feature of Germany's (and the EU's) response to the recent displacements is the different rights accorded to Ukrainian forced migrants versus those from the MENA region (Costello & Foster, 2022). Access to the German territory is difficult for refugees and asylum seekers from Syria and other countries in the MENA region, who have to go through a complicated asylum procedure, including restrictions on residency, employment, and access to social services. In contrast, Ukrainians already enjoyed visa-free travel to the EU prior to the Russian invasion and were quickly granted "temporary protection" following the activation of the EU's temporary protection directive in March 2022. This status grants them residency rights for a period of up to three years and access to housing, education, employment, and social services (European Council n.d.).

The articles collected in this special issue focus, on the one hand, on various aspects of Germany's and the EU's bordering regime, briefly sketched in conceptual terms in the next section. On the other hand, the contributions foreground the experiences of refugees (i.e. those who move across borders because they flee war or persecution) and asylum seekers (i.e. those who are applying for asylum in a host country) and their inclusion into or exclusion from German society. Together, the articles relate and contribute to three major themes in the literature on forced migration: 1) housing and accommodation, 2) the role of gender in the lived experiences of flight and settlement, and 3) the role of emotions for processes of settlement, integration and return intentions. The authors tackle these themes using a variety of methods and data sources, including in-depth interviews, ethnographic observations, discourse analysis and quantitative survey data, providing multiple insights into the reception of refugees and asylum-seekers in Germany and the EU.

2. The externalisation and internalisation of borders towards refugees and asylum-seekers

The first set of contributions to this special issue deal with Germany's and the EU's border policies towards refugees and asylum seekers. According to international law, states have full authority to control their borders and can decide over the admission

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or exclusion of migrants (Torpey, 1998). However, states are also bound by their obligations under international refugee and human rights law to grant admission to persons fleeing political persecution and war in their home countries. The corresponding basic principles are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. These documents include the right to seek asylum (Article 14(1), UDHR) and such principles as "non-refoulement" (Article 33(1), 1951 Refugee Convention), i.e., not to push back refugees at the border, and "non-discrimination" (Article 3, 1951 Refugee Convention), i.e., not to discriminate between refugees of different backgrounds. Thus, there is a tension between the sovereign prerogative of the state to control its borders and decide whom to admit, and the individual rights of non-nationals to seek asylum (Drewski & Gerhards, 2020). While receiving states may seek to exclude migrants from their territory that they construct as unwanted or undesired, at the same time they have the duty to guarantee the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers that access their territory.

Recent literature has elaborated how liberal democratic states increasingly try to limit their obligations on admitting refugees and asylum-seekers by engaging in ever more restrictive and wide-reaching policies of bordering (see, among others, Mau 2023, Shachar 2020, FitzGerald, 2019). This literature questions the long-dominating view of state borders as clear-cut and static delimitations of state territory at which the admission or rejection of migrants takes place. Instead, various scholars suggest that the construction of borders vis-à-vis people on the move should be understood as a dynamic process of inclusion and exclusion operating both *within* as well as *beyond* state territory.

On the one hand, border controls can be *externalised* beyond state territory, thus limiting people's chances to reach the territory of a particular state and claim the right to seek asylum. The literature highlights several strategies (Shachar, 2020; FitzGerald, 2019), such as the introduction of visa requirements for citizens of certain countries or applying the concept of "safe third countries", which allows receiving states to return asylum-seekers to these countries, because they are considered to provide sufficient protection to refugees. Within the EU, the "Dublin-Regulation" stipulates that asylum-seekers have to lodge their claim in the EU member state where they have first accessed EU territory. Effectively, this means that countries like Germany, which have no relevant external EU border (except Switzerland), can externalize the procession of asylum claims to EU member states with an external border, such as Greece or Italy (a core cause for the so-called "European refugee crisis" of 2015/16 was the break-down of this system due to an overburdening of Greece's and Italy's capacities). To assist in the control of the EU's external borders, the EU has also created a designated border and coast guard agency called "Frontex" (founded in 2004, with an updated mandate since 2014). In this special issue, *Laube* and *Ullrich* focus on how the external border of the EU in the Mediterranean Sea is contested through private search and rescue operations.

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On the other hand, borders can also be *internalised* into state territory, thus limiting asylum-seekers' incorporation into the society of the receiving state, thereby dis-incentivising refugee migration. For example, German asylum law imposes restrictions on the freedom of movement of asylum seekers and requires them to stay in designated reception centres during their asylum process as addressed by *Milman* and *Frederiksen*, and by *Vey* in this special issue. The accommodation of asylum seekers and refugees has been a recurring topic in the forced migration literature, as it is a central field of negotiations about how to deal with the rising numbers of asylum seekers, e.g. whether to house them decentralised or not, different mechanisms of distribution within cities and across regions, the varied effects of different types of accommodation, or the emergence of a new "migrant industry" around housing (Bernt et al., 2022). Housing is a central element of integration policies (see also *Wan* in this special issue). In fact, the governance of migration-induced diversity happens to a large extent through housing policies (Divercities, 2014), including those targeted towards asylum seekers and refugees. Despite the initial effort of many municipalities to house asylum seekers and refugees in a decentralised manner, tight housing markets and increasingly right-leaning, restrictive discourses, have led to the dominance of what Kreichauf (2018) has called the "campisation" of refugee housing. They are often housed in large accommodation centres, with little privacy, in spatially peripheral areas.

In her paper in this special issue, *Vey* argues that accommodation is a prime example of how the effects of capitalist societies are externalised, even within the host country. She views large accommodation centres ("camps") as an externalisation of the refugee "problem". *Milman* and *Frederiksen* also examine two such centres, with a focus on how violence can be prevented, thus building on research on "violence-sensitive" accommodation (Grittmann et al., 2023, 21; see also El-Kayed & Hamann, 2018; Hess & Elle, 2023). In contrast to other research, they highlight the relevant role of security personnel, cleaning staff, but also refugees themselves in preventing violence in large accommodation centres. Lastly, using the concept of social anchoring developed by Grzymala-Kazalowska (2018), *Mozetič et al.* (in this issue) also provide further insight into how housing (among other things) can function both as a social anchor – if people find an apartment on and for their own – as well as a factor strengthening feelings of insecurity, when they do not find an apartment but are stuck in refugee reception centres.

3. The impact of bordering on the experiences of settlement of refugees and asylum-seekers

The second set of papers in this special issue deal with the impact of bordering policies on the settlement experiences of refugees and asylum-seekers in Germany, with a focus on the different experiences of Ukrainian and Syrian refugees. Ukrainian refugees and refugees from Syria and the MENA region face different rights

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and legal barriers to arriving and settling in Germany and the EU. On the one hand, Ukrainian refugees can travel to the EU without a visa (since 2017) and enjoy temporary protection status, which grants them access to housing, education, employment and social services (though it should be noted that this protection status is limited in time). In contrast to asylum-seekers from other countries, they are not obliged to reside in accommodation centres and do not face restrictions on their freedom of movement. On the other hand, citizens from Syria and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa are subject to heightened border controls, both internally and externally. They require visas, which often forces them to enter the EU via dangerous sea routes, and once on German territory, they face restrictions on their freedom of movement, employment, and housing. These differing legal statuses, which apply in other EU countries as well, can be read as an expression of boundaries as "sorting machines" (Mau, 2023) that make it easier for some to cross borders than for others, which also affect the rights of refugees in their (temporary) host country. For example, comparing the papers by *Mozetič et al.* and *Wan* in this issue, we can see how the different legal situations of Ukrainian and Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Germany impact on their lived experiences and well-being.

However, it is not only the different bordering practices and visa policies that make it easier for some bodies to move across borders and to find a new home in another country, but also who moves and how this impacts on "how migration is experienced in relation to home and belonging, and how home and belonging are formed in relationship to individual and collective migration" (Ahmed et al., 2003, 1). A major difference between the refugees from Syria and other Middle Eastern and African countries, and those from Ukraine is the gendered distribution of those fleeing war and seeking asylum. While about three quarters of Syrian asylum seekers in Germany were male, around 80 % of adult Ukrainian refugees in Germany were female (Brücker et al., 2018; Brücker et al., 2023). This gender imbalance is a result of differential practices towards emigration in the respective war contexts; in Ukraine, for example, most men were not allowed to leave their country. Two articles in this special issue (*Mozetič et al.; Milewski et al.*) build on this gender imbalance, asking how the gendered flow of migration from Ukraine impacts on the lived experience of Ukrainian refugees in the settling process and on their return intentions. The authors thus approach refugees as "part of migrant family constellations" (Lutz & Amelina, 2021, 57), which are considerably changed through forced migration.

In theoretical terms, the articles in this special issue particularly foreground the role of emotions in the settlement process. Following the social sciences' "turn to affect" in recent years (Slaby & von Scheve, 2019, 1), migration scholars have increasingly used the lens of emotions to study how migration and the affective are related. After all, moving across borders and finding a (temporary) home elsewhere is always connected to questions of home and belonging (Ahmed et al., 2003), and

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hence to emotions. Several articles in this special issue pay attention to the "softer" dimension of the processes of arriving and settling, through a focus on emotions as they arise from the experience of war and forced migration, and new (transnational) family arrangements. This focus on emotions is an "important corrective and critique of the predominant 'economic rationalist' approaches to migration of the past" (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015, 2). Transnational migration, including forced migration, presents a "privileged window" (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015, 2) through which to study emotions, how they are influenced by the cultural codes of the country of origin and the host society.

The theme of emotions also connects to gender. As Hochschild (1979) has already argued more than forty years ago, people act according to "feeling rules" that are inherently connected to culturally prescribed gender roles and expectations, which influence how emotions are dealt with, which ones are openly displayed or suppressed. To illustrate, in the context of (forced) migration, guilt has been shown to be a gendered emotion, expressed particularly by women who felt they were no longer able to fulfill the care work that was expected of them (Baldassar, 2015; Vermot, 2015). This can then influence processes of settlement, and intentions of family reunifications or intentions to return. The essay of *Mozetič et al*. in this special issue builds on theories of emotions, in relation to gender, and expands on existing literature concerning how emotions influence the subjective process of settling, by following a group of refugees over time. The paper by *Milewski et al*. (in this special issue) explores intentions for family reunification of Ukrainians in Germany and finds many of these women expressing ambiguity and uncertainty regarding their stay.

Thus, the articles on gender and on emotions (most address both topics) have a strong focus on transnational family arrangements that emerge through flight and how they influence women's well-being and future orientations regarding settlement or return.

4. Contributions to this special issue

The special issue starts with an essay by *Lena Laube* and *Maria Ullrich*, which focuses on the external border of the EU in the Mediterranean Sea. The authors point out the role of private search and rescue operations (SARS) such as "Sea Watch", which rescue migrants in distress at sea and bring them to an EU port, in contesting the EU's border regime. The authors suggest that these NGOs not only contribute to saving lives but can also be interpreted as agents that enforce the right to seek asylum and contribute to the political inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers. Based on an analysis of different actors' positions, including those of politicians, media, civil society and churches, the authors argue that the dissenting views on the SARS NGOs' mission not only give insights into how actors

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position themselves towards migration and bordering, but that they ultimately reveal different conceptions of European democracy.

In turn, *Judith Vey* focuses on internalised borders for asylum-seekers in Germany, namely their obligation to reside in designated accommodation centres during the asylum process. Adopting a Marxist perspective and applying Lessenich's mechanisms of externalisation, she describes Western capitalist societies as externalisation societies and asks how such societies "respond when the consequences of their way of life return to them, as for example in the context of forced migration" (p. 184). For the author, the way Germany (similar to other European countries) deals with refugee accommodation, which she describes as "exclaves", is an example of a re-externalisation, within the bounds of the nation and host state. Based on her own qualitative research mixing interviews and participatory observation, on literature review and institutional analysis, *Vey* shows that the accommodation, provision and care systems for refugees in Germany tend to externalise refugees thus reproducing borders within German society. In analysing the intended, unintended, and failed bordering processes in the context of refugee accommodation, the author contributes to Critical Border Studies and adds to the concept of externalisation societies through the focus on internal processes of drawing boundaries.

Noa Milman and *Sifka Frederiksen* also address the topic of accommodation of asylum seekers and refugees. Starting from the widely documented disadvantages of mass accommodation centres for the well-being of refugees and asylum seekers, including through exposure to violence, the authors highlight the unexpected role of low-level employees (e.g., security guards or janitors) in mitigating the outbreak of violent conflicts. Based on interviews with 80 residents and employees in two German accommodation centres, the authors foreground the relevance of refugees' own agency, e.g., through actively seeking to prevent conflict by confiding in staff, as well as the "cosmopolitan imaginations of low-level employees" (p. 204). While the authors do not negate that accommodation centres are sites of potential conflict, they add a much needed perspective to the research on violence-sensitive accommodation for refugees, by showing how violent conflict can be prevented. They thereby underline the importance of trust between residents and employees, thus also adding to the literature on emotions and emotional labour.

In her research note, *Liyun Wan* reports first findings from an ongoing ethnographic project that follows 20 Syrian families in Germany and France over several years. She documents their experiences with each countries' incorporation regime, focusing particularly on housing, language learning and employment. Among other findings, she reports on Syrian refugees' feelings of exclusion stemming from restrictions on freedom of movement and barriers to accessing the labour market. *Wan's* research contributes to our understanding of how different refugee integration policies impact on refugees' lived experiences in their arrival countries.

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In contrast, *Katarina Mozetič, Karolina Lebek* and *Nora Ratzmann* highlight how the legal privileges attached to the temporary protection status for Ukrainians compared to other asylum-seekers may contribute to their feelings of "being anchored" in Germany. The authors focus specifically on female migrants, thus adopting an intersectional perspective on the experiences of refugees in Germany. The contribution is based on repeated interviews with four female refugees from Ukraine, who lived in Berlin with their children, over a period of six months. The longitudinal design allows the authors to uncover processes of social anchoring (Grzymala-Kazalowska, 2018), thus highlighting which "integration opportunity structures" (p. 238), e.g., policies or social networks (particular to family and friends) on various spatial levels, shape the respondents' settlement processes and how this may change over time. Approaching settlement processes or anchoring through the lens of emotions allows to examine how refugees "position themselves towards and respond to the integration opportunity structures" (p. 241). As the authors show, the search for "emotional security" is of particular relevance for understanding these positionings. The authors also help to advance the concept of social anchoring, by highlighting how processes of social anchoring go to together with processes of *un*-anchoring.

While the above-mentioned papers all employ data from qualitative fieldwork, the paper by *Nadja Milewski, Jean Philippe Décieux, Andreas Ette* and *Martin Bujard* exploits a large-scale quantitative survey of refugees from Ukraine in Germany. What we observed in the past years is that very often in the study on forced migration, the research questions asked differ markedly depending on the methods used. Complementing qualitative and quantitative data and methods allows to contextualize and generalize findings from in-depth case studies. In their paper, *Milewski et al.* also draw attention to the disruption of families and couples caused by the sex-selective outmigration policies from Ukraine. They investigate the intentions to family reunion, i.e., to bring the partner and/ or further children to Germany. The authors find a high degree of ambiguity and uncertainty both with respect to their stay in Germany and further family lives.

Lastly, the review of Ulrike Bialas' monograph "Forever 17" by *Emily Frank* introduces another relevant category of differentiation, namely age. Based on a study of unaccompanied minors, Bialas shows how age – a seemingly fixed category – has to be determined in a long bureaucratic process. Whether or not an asylum seeker/refugee is designated as younger or older than 18 has a strong impact on their chance to stay in the country, and the welfare support they get.

Outlook

The papers collected in this special issue adress various facets related to forced migration to Germany. While all papers thus deal with the German context, we argue that the theoretical and empirical contributions are relevant beyond the German context, as they relate to housing and integration, gender patterns and their

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effects on settlement experiences, and the role of emotions in the process of refugee migration – themes that are relevant in processes of migration, across contexts. We highlight two themes in particular that we believe are worth to explored further.

An open question that emerges from this special issue is how to explain Germany's and the EU's unequal bordering policies towards Ukrainian refugees and refugees from Syria and the MENA region. A plausible explanation can be derived from Abdelaaty's (2021) explanatory framework for why states discriminate between refugee groups of different origins. She suggests that states prefer to admit those refugees who are ethnically and culturally close to the host population and who flee rivalling regimes. The politics of mobility, as argued by Ahmed (2007), influence how bodies that are differentially racialised as white or non-white can move across borders with more or less ease, and how they are allowed (or not) to feel at home in different spaces. Mayblin and Turner describe these racialising practices that go together with bordering practices as a "structuring element of mobility" (2020, 62). This fits the current context, as Ukraine is a geographic neighbor of the EU, predominantly (white) Christian, and has been attacked by a state (Russia) that is considered an aggressive power by the EU. While it was not the purpose of this special issue to reflect on the reasons for this unequal bordering, the contributions, taken together, foregrounded Germany's and the EU's bordering policies and their effects on the inclusion and exclusion of different groups of migrants and refugees in Germany.

Given the focus on Germany, and the case studies that primarily focus on one group of refugees, obvious avenues for further research include comparative research that would provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of refugees as recounted in the papers. Particularly the field of "emotions" is still underdeveloped in migration studies in general, hence also within studies that analyse the lived experiences of forced migration and processes of arriving and settling in another country. In line with the general feminisation of migration, the focus on how gender influences individual refugee journeys has been addressed more often, but has definitely gained traction with the latest movement of refugees from Ukraine – which is visibly different compared to refugee migration from the MENA region (and others). The main task of gender-sensitive research on forced migration is to include the experiences of all refugees, e.g., also those of LGBTIQ, and to move beyond a portrayal of women as victims, but to foreground their agency (Christou & Kofman, 2022; Grittmann et al., 2023). Comparative research would allow to analyse, for example, in greater detail the relation between different forms of refugee accommodation (as one field of integration) and subjective emotional experiences, and cultural norms and values impact on transnational family and care arrangements (which also influence individuals' emotional states). Given the observation about the different legal status of Ukrainian versus other refugees, which have a clear impact on experiences of arriving and settling, and the potential explanations of this difference, more research is also needed into how processes of

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racialisation structure refugees' experiences in different local, national or regional (e.g. European) contexts. We thus argue for a more specific intersectional analysis of refugees' lived experiences. Not only do, for example, experiences differ between men and women, but also possibly between white female refugees and refugees racialised as non-white. Processes of racialisation, which are connected to processes of discrimination and exclusion, also have an impact on individuals' emotional experiences.

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