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Accommodation centres for asylum seekers as sites of conflict and collaboration: Strategies for the prevention of violence

Abstract

The political use of mass accommodation for governing asylum seekers is growing in frequency, despite its documented disadvantages for asylum seekers' wellbeing and protection. So long as mass accommodation of asylum seekers is used by states, it is necessary to ask how violence is handled and prevented in these institutions. Using interview data from 80 residents and employees in two German accommodation centres, our findings illustrate the central role of low-level employees and residents in protection against violence. We analyse the interlinked strategies that both of these populations employ, highlighting residents' agency and the previously overlooked cosmopolitan imaginations of low-level employees. We conclude the paper by contextualising our findings and recommending future actions.

Keywords: Asylum, protection against violence, Germany, refugees, accommodation centres, refugee camps

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1. Introduction

Since 2015, the practice of housing asylum seekers in institutional accommodation centres has seen significant growth across Europe and the world, largely as a response to the substantial influx of refugees (Kreichauf, 2018). This political decision brings with it many repercussions for the wellbeing of asylum seekers, particularly concerning the heightened risk of exposure to violence in the accommodation centres, which jeopardises residents' physical safety and wellbeing. Even in the better operating centres, the combination of a hyper-diverse population of residents, who are forced to cohabitate in close proximity and with little privacy,

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coupled with stressors caused by the harsh, often unpredictable and exclusionary asylum process, create a serious risk for conflicts to erupt that can escalate and become violent (Al Ajlan, 2022; Böhme & Schmitt, 2022; Nilsson & Badran, 2021; Scherr, 2022). Such violent conflicts ultimately threaten the safety of all residents of accommodation centres, employees, volunteers, and service providers alike.

In recent years, growing political and scholarly attention has been paid to the issue of conflict and violence in asylum seekers' accommodation centres (Christ et al., 2017; van Eggermont Arwidson et al., 2022; Lorenz et al., 2023). The literature predominantly focuses on violent acts in the centres involving accommodation residents and staff, leading to descriptions of centres as dangerous sites of conflict and violence. While we concur that accommodation centres hold great potential for violence and conflict, our research question focuses on the strategies that accommodation residents and employees use for conflict and violence prevention. As we shift our gaze to this question, our study sheds light on the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) of residents and staff in the centres, referring to the regulation or management of emotional expressions, particularly as a component of one's professional role. The study also conceptualises low-level employees as ordinary cosmopolitans (Lamont & Aksartova, 2002), whose complex and nuanced analysis of violence in the centres guide their actions, leading them to employ more dialogical and less punitive strategies for violence prevention. We use "ordinary cosmopolitanism" to refer to less well-educated and lower-ranked employees as well as residents, who construct a worldview that transcends simplified "us" and "them" dichotomies and extends beyond strict national or racial boundaries to form a humanist, cosmopolitan understanding of difference.

Centrally, we highlight the potential for collaboration between residents and staff within these centres. It is important to emphasise that the conditions in the centres are harsh; the staff are often insufficiently trained and compensated and have to rely on their own personal skills. These limitations notwithstanding, the centres we studied stand out for their ability to effectively handle conflict and violent situations. Our case study illustrates anti-violence strategies and agency under severe conditions, and points to the possibility of more effective approaches to violence prevention within accommodation centres.

This article thus aims to fill an empirical and conceptual gap, and contribute to the growing literature on violence prevention in accommodation centres. To do so, we ask what strategies of conflict prevention and protection against violence staff and residents in accommodation centres employ. Indeed, the literature is clear that mass accommodations are intrinsically an inferior option for ensuring asylum seekers' wellbeing (Baier & Siegert, 2018). Despite such centres' formal mandate to protect asylum seekers, these are sites of inherent violence and instability (Scherr, 2022). However, with the "campization" (Kreichauf, 2018) of the reception of

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forced migrants and the spread of this method of governmentality across the world, it is imperative to understand how to best prevent violence and ensure residents' safety in the difficult conditions of mass accommodations.

To answer this question, we triangulated data obtained by semi-structured qualitative interviews that were conducted with 60 asylum seekers, speaking seven different languages, and 20 employees. All respondents either resided or worked in one of two accommodation centres located in the south of Germany. The article's findings are twofold: (1) The article highlights the central – and previously unrecognised – contribution of low-level and low-paid employees, such as security guards and janitors, who play an outsized role – going beyond their formal job description – in protecting residents in accommodations. (2) Our analysis shows that asylum seekers themselves are active actors in violence prevention and conflict de-escalation, and that they employ two types of strategies in doing so: a. strategies of intentional withdrawal, isolation and avoidance; and b. proactively alarming staff about tension and potential conflicts to de-escalate conflicts. Highlighting the active role of residents in conflict prevention is a central finding, as it emphasises asylum seekers' agency and resilience, a topic often studied with a binary view of refugees as either vulnerable victims or perpetrators abusing the system (Böhme & Schmitz, 2022b). Furthermore, we demonstrate the interconnection and mutual reliance between the violence prevention efforts undertaken by employees and residents. In order for residents to approach staff for violence prevention, especially at the early stages of conflicts before violence fully erupts, they must trust employees to be fair and attentive overall to their concerns, needs and challenges. At the same time, for employees to effectively intervene and prevent violent incidents, they often depend on the collaboration of residents who alert them to volatile situations in the camps. The paper concludes with recommendations for best practices for preventing violence in asylum centres.

1.1 Mass accommodations for migrants

With the growing number of states which turn to mass accommodations as their preferred choice of housing for forced migrants (Kreichauf, 2018), we witness a global proliferation of camps, taking different shapes and serving different official purposes. Some camps or mass accommodations operate as reception and processing centres, others operate as refugee camps, while still others operate as detention centres for refugees who face deportation. These different types of accommodations vary in their purported function, and vary vastly in the quality of life they can offer residents. This holds true when comparing them both across and within different countries. Notwithstanding these differences, the various sites of mass accommodations in which asylum seekers are forced to reside function in a similar way as a political instrument of control of the flow of immigrants into Europe (Kreichauf, 2018). They operate simultaneously as sites of racialisation and political control (Bosworth, 2019), biopolitics (Turner, 2015; Katz, 2022; Foucault, 2009),

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and as central sites of *crimigration* – the political acts that criminalise migration and border crossing (Aas, 2011). While the stated purpose of each accommodation type differs, with some more explicitly punitive (e.g., detention centres), and others purporting to protect immigrants (e.g., accommodation centres for vulnerable populations), they can all be located within a continuum of *crimigration* and political control. As Kreichauf (2017) demonstrates for Germany, Denmark and Greece, the *campization* of refugee accommodation blurs the lines among its various functions of reception, accommodation and detention by condensing different functions into one spatial arrangement. Following the same *crimigrative* logic, the management and operation of many of these sites directly borrow from and rely on the operation of prisons, with formal ties and exchange of workforce and practices between these institutions (Lindberg, 2022). As a result, many reception camps, some of the purportedly least punitive sites [in terms of function], produce prison-like conditions (Jakobsen, 2022; Whyte et al., 2021). It is safe to argue that these institutions are not politically neutral and not exclusively concerned with care for asylum seekers. At their heart, these various sites for migrant accommodations – whether defined as for refugees whose claims are still being processed, for those who could not find housing after their asylum has been approved, or for those whose asylum requests have been rejected – are inherently sites of state power and control, alongside their function of providing varying levels of care (Kreichauf, 2018).

As sites whose function and purpose are ambivalent at best, mass accommodations' design and operation often make them into sites where violence is relatively likely to erupt. Crowded spaces, lack of privacy and poor hygiene are major factors that contribute to violence in the centres (Judge and Loughnan, 2022; Whyte et al., 2020). Similarly, material deprivation and resource scarcity are drivers of conflict and violence (Christ et al., 2017; Scott, 2017; Kreichauf, 2018). Additionally, many camps offer no, or very little, social activities for residents. This particular phenomenon can be seen in various national contexts. For example, residents in a Danish reception camp complained of a chronic shortage of activities coupled with a lack of opportunities to work in or out of the camps, get education, or pursue "normal life" (Jakobsen, 2022). Similarly, Australian offshore camps for asylum seekers deliberately deprive residents of meaningful activities (Judge and Loughnan, 2022), and asylum seekers in an Israeli detention centre were prohibited from learning Hebrew (Amit & Lindberg, 2020), and operating their own improvised market (Katz, 2022), despite being offered minimal or no sanctioned meaningful activities. Consequently, a general sense of stuckedness (Turner and Whyte, 2022; Jakobsen, 2022) and an experience of seemingly endless waiting and immobility (Jakobsen, 2022; Hartman, 2017; Kreichauf, 2017) characterise the lives of those who reside in the camps. Adding to the sense of stuckedness is often a spatially induced inability to leave the camps and socialise with the local population, even for those living in "open camps." Located mostly in rural or distant areas, residents

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in mass accommodations are often "stuck" inside the camps, lacking financial resources to travel to the city (Münch, 2021; Christ et al., 2017).

The combination of de facto forced isolation due to restricted – or inhibited – mobility outside the camps, crowded spaces, and a chronic lack of social activities inside the camps, leads to boredom, desperation and heightened tension, as well as deteriorated physical and mental health (Bosworth, 2016; Filges et al., 2016). Additionally, with previous traumatising experiences in home countries and during flight, mental illness is rampant, and state agencies are often too overwhelmed and understaffed to treat it effectively. Finally, accommodations often house together migrants from diverse national, social, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. It is not uncommon for migrants coming from countries or ethnic groups that are in conflict to be housed together, and all too often residents do not have a language in common that would enable effective communication and conflict resolution (Scherr, 2022; Böhme & Schmitt, 2022). Moreover, administrative choices often favor placing large groups of residents from the same ethnic background together, making it even harder for residents who do not share the dominant ethnic and linguistic background, or whose set of values or gender identity differ from the majority (Kreichauf, 2017; Wimark, 2020; Träbert & Dörr, 2020). These conditions lead to pressures that can quickly deteriorate into conflicts and violence (Al Ajlan, 2022; Jakobsen, 2022; Katz, 2022).

1.2 Violence prevention in accommodation centres

We define violence as the threat or actual use of physical coercion and painful actions. It encompasses both the infliction of physical injuries and serious violations of psychological integrity, which can be linked to physical violent actions but can also stem from communicative violence. Violence can serve as a means to assert power, pursue individual interests, and address conflicts within society. It encompasses not only actions deemed legally and morally impermissible but also instances of legally sanctioned violence, recognising the intricate relationship between legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence in the context of societal power dynamics (Scherr, 2022; Popitz, 1992; Luhmann, 2003).

Refugee accommodations are control and coercion structures in which power asymmetries and the potential for conflict are inscribed. Scherr (2022) defines several factors that can lead to conflicts in accommodation centres: 1) conflicts between the personnel, who are responsible for enforcing the institutional order, and the residents; 2) disputes over scarce resources among residents; 3) attempts to establish relationships of dominance and subordination over vulnerable groups in the camps – either by personnel or by groups of residents; and 4) imposed deprivation under the harsh conditions of the camp system. These factors play a critical role in contributing to the potential for violence. Additionally, certain conditions can exacerbate the escalation of conflicts, such as insufficient control over the exercise

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of power by staff, and densely packed involuntary cohabitation of diverse groups with limited opportunities for communication and restricted privacy. However, it is important to note that these conditions do not automatically result in physical or verbal violence. They are more likely to lead to violence in cases when efforts to enforce rules or reach mutual agreements on acceptable coexistence fail, thus leading to situational escalation dynamics (Scherr, 2022).

The literature on violence in accommodations for asylum seekers includes relatively few studies that interrogate strategies and dynamics of violence prevention in mass accommodations. Christ et al. (2017) stress the importance of institutional responses to violence prevention. They point to the importance of employees' accreditation and training and to the proper exchange of information within and across agencies. The role of staff in processes of violence prevention (or lack thereof), and specifically their emotional labour, has been a particular focus in the literature. Multiple studies have shown that staff construct residents as racialised "others," leading staff to emotionally distance themselves from residents, and to devalue residents' experiences of hardship. Other staff members prescribe to nationalist discourses, believing that residents deserve the difficult conditions in the centres, or legitimating harsh conditions by arguing that they are still better than what migrants would experience in their home countries (Judge and Loughnan, 2022; Bosworth, 2019; Lindberg, 2022; Whyte et al., 2020). These emotional dynamics lead to staff's apathy, emotional and physical neglect, overreaction in conflict situations, and even to the perpetration of violence by staff (e.g., Judge and Loughnan, 2022; Whyte et al., 2020). While the cost to residents is severe and well documented, these emotional strategies also come with a cost for staff members themselves. Realising that staff are critical actors in violence prevention in any type of total institution, Lindow et al. (2022) urge institutions to address staff's wellbeing and health needs. They recommend ensuring support and good working conditions for staff, ongoing training, and issuing clear guidelines. Emphasising the role of leadership, they also discuss leadership strategies that minimise violent conflicts in residential accommodations, such as positive modelling by management and an open-door policy.

Treating migrants with respect, predictability and equality is another way in which staff and management in accommodation centres can contribute to creating a safer environment. Christ et al. (2017) emphasise the importance of clear and respectful communication towards residents in preventing violence. Additionally, they stress the importance of consistent and equal application of rules and sanctions in refugee accommodation centres. Similarly, Trammell et al. (2018) argue that respectful communication and the fair application of rules improve social relationships in total institutions, and lead to a decrease in the number of violent instances. Indeed, Münch (2021) found that arbitrary conduct of staff in accommodation centres in Germany contributed to a sense of insecurity for residents and led in turn to more tension and conflicts. In an attempt to alleviate these issues, some scholars call for

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an independent multilingual grievance mechanism (Christ et al., 2017; Böhme & Schmitz, 2022a).

In line with this literature, our findings highlight the central role that staff play in violence prevention, discussing and evaluating the bottom-up strategies of violence prevention that staff, as well as residents, employ. But before we turn to our analysis of the data, we describe below our methodology and the particular context of our case study in Germany.

2. Methodology

The findings presented in this paper were gathered as part of a larger examination of two refugee accommodation centres in southern Germany. The study consists of a qualitative design with multiple sources (Yin, 2003, 97), and builds on in-depth interviews with a total of 80 interviewees, conducted inside the accommodations, and carried out in October 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews with residents (N=60) were triangulated with interviews with employees, service providers and external project associates (N=20) in two differently organised accommodations, in order to include diverse perspectives on violence prevention and minimise biased findings (Schwarz-Shea, 2006). The selection of accommodations was dependent on their willingness to grant us access. This most likely introduced a selection bias that impacted our findings, potentially showcasing the more successful instances of violence prevention. Therefore, we do not treat our data as representative, but rather as a case study with the potential to teach us about effective strategies for the protection against violence.

The interviews with employees and service providers were conducted in German, while the interviews with residents were conducted in seven different languages by an interviewer team of nine persons. The interviews were carried out in common areas on site, but were not accompanied by structured observations. However, our varied data points – including interviews with residents from different backgrounds and employees in various roles and ranks – enabled us to uncover discrepancies and differences in interpretations of complex situations, thus contributing to high reliability of the data.

Our informants – both residents and employees – varied in their nationality, ethnicity, gender, age, family status, language and educational level. Residents also varied in their asylum status and length of stay in Germany. However, when discussing the data, we use the term asylum seekers to include all people who seek refuge, regardless of their formal legal status. Additionally, employees varied in their rank, role and work experience (Maxwell, 2002). See tables 1 and 2 for more details on the interviewees' backgrounds.

We formed a multilingual interviewer team based on the camps' most spoken languages. The interviewers varied in terms of their gender and immigration back-

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ground. While we aimed for maximum diversity in our research population, it is necessary to acknowledge that our outreach was constrained by COVID-19 restrictions, which increased our reliance on staff members to connect with residents. This fact might have skewed the selection of interviewees, and might have led to a greater tendency toward social desirability among the interviewed residents.

When selecting interviewees, we recorded gender, language, and country background, prioritising diversity and including particularly vulnerable residents (see BMFSFJ & UNICEF, 2021). Additionally, although we were a team of 13 interviewers, proficient in seven languages, it is inevitable that we under-sampled residents speaking languages beyond our expertise, potentially missing insights from individuals who may have had a more marginalised or precarious experience at the camps.

Table 1: Overview of residents interviewed

Characteristics of residents	In total (persons)
Region	Middle East and North Africa (MENA): 30 Southern and Eastern Europe: 13 East and Central Asia: 9 Africa (excl. MENA): 5 Caribbean: 2 Not specified: 1
Gender	42 men (70 %) and 18 (30 %) women. In accommodation A: 28 men, 8 women In accommodation B: 14 men, 10 women
Age	Age 12–17: 9 persons (together with an adult guardian) Age 18–30: 20 Age 31–40: 21 Age 41–60: 8 Older than 60: 2
Language used (first – and second if applicable)	Arabic: 22 Russian: 11 Persian (including different specific dialects): 8 Turkish: 5 French, Kurdish, Romani, Somalian, Spanish: 1–2 persons per language
Length of stay in the accommodation	Less than a month: 23 1–3 months: 22 3–6 months: 9 6–9 months: 1 9–24 months: 1 Not specified: 4
Stage in the asylum procedure	Awaiting response: 36 Eligible for asylum: 8 Not eligible for asylum: 2 Not specified: 14

Source: Own elaboration.

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Table 2: Overview of employees and service providers interviewed

Characteristics of employees	In total (persons)
Position	Management position: 3 Violence protection coordination: 1 Security service: 5 Social work: 6 Janitor service and administration: 3 Medical service: 1 Central Admission: 1
Accommodation	In accommodation A: 15 In accommodation B: 5
Gender	10 women and 10 men

Source: Own elaboration.

We assured informants that the interviews were voluntary, anonymised and had no consequences for residents' asylum processes (Ryen, 2002). It is worth noting that despite this, we cannot definitively ascertain whether the residents could distinguish between us as researchers and staff or volunteers in the accommodations. Nevertheless, given the reduced presence of volunteers and other staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the distinct size of our team, it is possible that we stood out to some extent; we made every effort possible to distinguish ourselves as external researchers. We emphasised that the interviewees could at any point refrain from answering questions, or ask to terminate the interview. We communicated this information in the residents' own languages both orally and in writing. All the interviews were transcribed in their original language, and when needed were later translated (Maxwell, 2002). The residents were initially asked about their daily experiences and the atmosphere in the accommodations. Subsequently, the conversation turned to their interactions with staff, also asking about their preferred support contacts in the accommodation. We asked about problems or conflicts they had encountered or observed, and how they were resolved, and finally, we asked about their general suggestions for improvements. As for the staff, they were asked about their interactions with residents, collaborations with colleagues and service providers; their methods for identifying vulnerable groups, handling potentially conflictual situations, and working with external partners; and their main challenges in ensuring protection in the accommodations.

The data was analysed through a multi-step process of 1) initial coding based mainly on the interview guide, 2) additional interpretive coding based on discussions among the interviewers and on the initial coding, and 3) analysis of the data through an abductive interaction between theory and the empirical material (Gusfield, 2003; Järvinen, 2005). While we acknowledge that the findings remain context-specific, we also rely on the idea of transferability among refugee accommodation centres of similar embeddedness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the following section, we will therefore further elaborate on the context of the asylum system

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in Germany, and specifically on the two accommodations in which the interviews were conducted.

3. German case study

Asylum seekers who arrive in Germany are required to stay in accommodation centres for six months, unless their asylum has been approved earlier. As a general rule, they are required to stay in a reception facility for six weeks, and are then moved to a follow-up accommodation. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, asylum seekers from Ukraine are legally exempt from this rule, due to the Temporary Protection Directive, and are allowed to find private housing upon arrival. However, if unable to arrange private housing due to challenges in the housing market, such as limited availability, high rental costs, and housing market discrimination, they can choose to be housed in an accommodation centre.

The accommodation of asylum seekers in Germany is organised differently from state to state. All 16 federal states in Germany are required to offer reception centres and provide housing for a certain number of asylum seekers based on the Königstein Key, a quota system that distributes asylum seekers among the different states based on a calculation of population size and tax revenue (Schmitt, 2020; Münch, 2021). During their initial six months of residency, asylum seekers are prohibited from leaving their assigned state. Since the responsibility for the reception system is relegated to each state (Münch, 2021), the governance of forced migration is highly fragmented and uneven across regions in Germany (Wendel, 2014). Moreover, the system has undergone repeated legal reforms over the years, leading to more fragmentation and constant change.

In Germany, a Federal Initiative for the Protection of Women and Children in Refugee Accommodation was initiated in 2016 in a collaborative effort by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) and UNICEF. This initiative allocated funding for violence protection coordinators, who are responsible for developing and implementing violence protection concepts in collaboration with management in refugee accommodations. They serve as a point of contact for youth, social and employment offices, and collaborate with local police. Additionally, the coordinators are supposed to educate residents about their rights and available support services, while also training and closely collaborating with staff in the accommodations. Not all accommodation centres appoint violence protection coordinators, but the accommodations in this study did so.

This paper focuses on two accommodation centres located in Southern Germany. Both of them are part of the first reception of asylum seekers. “Accommodation A” is a fairly large reception facility with “mass character” (Wendel, 2014) and capacity for up to 400 people. It is made up of a closed complex with several buildings designated for different target groups, such as for single traveling men, single traveling women (with or without children), families, and couples without children. This

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accommodation acts as a first contact point where people start their asylum process, receive first medical attention, and have their first contact with the German system. Individuals traveling alone or with children share rooms with others. Couples and families have their own room with shared sanitary facilities for up to six rooms. "Accommodation B" is an accommodation centre designated for people with chronic illnesses, disabilities, or severe trauma. In practice, many among this group were families. This accommodation is located in a single building, where residents have their own private rooms with a bathroom and a kitchenette. This accommodation has space for around 150 people. When we conducted the research, 75 people resided in the accommodation.

Table 3: Accommodation characteristics

Structural characteristics	Accommodation A	Accommodation B
Type of accommodation	initial reception facility	initial reception facility
Size	capacity for up to 400 persons	capacity for up to 150 persons
Building	several buildings for different target groups	one building designated for different vulnerable groups
Rooms	single persons (with/without children) share room; families have their own room	Individual rooms
Sanitary facilities and kitchens	shared use	private use

Source: Own elaboration.

Accommodation A is located in the countryside, while accommodation B is located in a rather industrial area on the outskirts of a city. Both accommodations are accessible by public transportation, but with fairly long waiting and travel times. While the first accommodation (A) is located closer to green spaces, the second accommodation (B) provides more privacy and improved physical living conditions for residents. Both accommodation centres are gated and guarded by security personnel, and residents shared that the presence of security personnel on site made them feel safer.

In summary, the accommodation centres we studied varied in size, location, physical conditions and target population. Nonetheless, they faced similar challenges that could potentially lead to violence within them (albeit to varying degrees). In the next section, we analyse the strategies that residents and staff employ to avert violence and conflicts.

4. Findings

Both residents and employees perceived the accommodations in our study as less violent, relative to the past or to other accommodations they'd experienced. To be sure, both residents and employees recounted cases of violence they experienced or witnessed in the accommodations, and some residents expressed not feeling safe.

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But these cases were fewer than what most other studies find, and – according to our interviewees – also relative to other accommodations where they had previously stayed or worked. Therefore, this article focuses on the strategies we identified in these camps which contributed to a safer environment overall. Hence, our findings chapter proceeds by outlining four factors that contribute to the likelihood of violence to erupt in the camps, followed by a discussion of employees' and residents' strategies for the protection against violence.

We identified four factors that are central in their potential to *increase* instances of violence in both accommodations in our study: 1. spatial conditions (lack of privacy, crowded quarters); 2. inadequate communication; 3. difference in the availability of services for residents, dependent on their background; and 4. lack of activities. Relating to the lack of activities, one resident described Accommodation A as a "space where people were passing their time […] a prison" (female resident, age 22–30, Acc. A). Reflecting also on the difficult spatial conditions, a social worker said:

> *"I think that simply creating more employment, more participation, and more privacy is, I would say, one of the most important things to avoid violence. Well, I can also imagine that because of this constant narrow constriction, domestic violence is more likely to happen... Yes, it is very exhausting in the long run." (Social worker, Acc. B)*

Conflicts triggered by the constricted and tense conditions were more likely to escalate and devolve into violence at the men's wing in Accommodation A. This was particularly the case when residents consumed drugs, alcohol, or suffered from severe trauma. Moreover, the linguistic diversity together with a chronic lack of translation services in both accommodation centres led to more conflicts and potentially violent encounters. Lacking professional interpreters, communication depended on individuals' resources and cultural capital. Consequently, some residents whose languages were less commonly spoken by other residents and staff were left in the dark regarding their rights, and lacked the ability to sufficiently communicate their needs. Moreover, this led to an unequal flow of information, distribution of privileges, employment options, and support services. A resident in Accommodation A makes this point when saying: "No one even informed us about our rights. The [nationality X] young men in charge of distributing shower gels give the [nationality A] two pieces but us [ethnicity Y] get only one piece. They give us little, and for themselves a lot. In many things you feel the injustice" (male resident, age 41–60, Acc. A).

The core of our analysis examines the strategies employees and residents use to prevent conflict and protect against violence. By turning our attention to bottom-up approaches, and shifting the focus from violence to prevention of violence, we were able to identify several strategies and approaches to violence prevention that contribute to safer housing conditions in the context of a problematic practice of systemic mass accommodation for refugees. We conceptualise these bottom-up

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strategies as agentic acts of ordinary cosmopolitans (Lamont & Aksartova, 2002), who draw on their own life experiences, cultural repertoires and morality discourses to approach tense situations with complexity and nuance, and ultimately address volatile situations effectively. The central role of low-level employees and residents in protection against violence is a crucial and currently understudied finding that deserves more recognition and institutional support. But it would be a mistake to treat employees' contribution in isolation. As our analysis makes clear, employees' ability to effectively intervene and prevent – or mitigate – violent outbursts is to some extent dependent on accommodation residents' willingness to alert staff to tense situations that might escalate. In turn, residents' willingness to openly engage with staff hinges on their trust in employees. Moreover, we highlight in the conclusion section the critical role that management should play in creating an environment where these strategies can become the norm.

4.1 Employees' violence prevention strategies

Security personnel are the employees who come in the most common and intimate daily contact with residents in mass accommodations. They have the most immediate and frequent access to residents, and they are the most likely to be present when conflicts erupt and violence breaks out. Indeed, the residents we interviewed indicated that guards are the most common first point of contact for all their needs – translating letters and interpreting in meetings, figuring out where to turn for specific needs, and in general orienting residents in their asylum process and daily life at the centres. Often low-paid and with little formal education, these workers are nonetheless critical actors in violence prevention and in the smooth operation of the centres. Moreover, after hours – on weekends and after 16:00 – the only staff present in the accommodations are security personnel. The security staff thus possess a lot of informal power over residents' wellbeing and safety, making them both a valuable source of violence prevention, and powerful actors on whom residents rely heavily. Clashes with security personnel due to communication difficulties or personality differences can have serious implications for residents in the centres. Still, we show in this article that low-level staff do a lot of the necessary work to prevent violence and conflicts in the centres. They frequently approach this task with empathy and prioritise de-escalation through mediation, despite very little – or no – relevant training. The work done by the violence protection coordinator was central in this regard. The coordinator worked closely with the security company's management to create a work environment that promotes such a dialogical approach. The collaboration between the coordinator and the security company was also evident in practice: A member of the security team described how he joined the violence protection coordinator for biweekly tours around Accommodation A, reaching out to new residents, inquiring about their needs and explaining to them about available services. This initiative signaled staff's availability to the residents, and enhanced residents' trust in the security company.

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It also helped security personnel to get to know the residents better, and to view them with empathy.

Contrary to findings elsewhere in Germany (Münch, 2021), we found that employees in our case study mostly prefer to engage in mediation and dialogue when conflicts arise, and emphasise the importance of early intervention and de-escalation. This finding is indicated in interviews with employees and residents alike. As a general rule, they seem to be aware of the downsides of overreaction and the risk of criminalisation that referral to the police can bring about, and strive to resolve conflicts internally through dialogue. As one security employee explained: "[when there is conflict between residents], one wants this, the other one wants that [….], we talk to them so that they find a solution themselves, and if it just doesn't work at all, then we separate them [based on their preferences]" (Security employee, Acc. A). The violence protection coordinator made a similar point when saying:

> *"[W]e also try to look, yes, what accommodations we can make […]. Or just that you look at where the person is. So conversations. I have a lot of conversations there, also with perpetrators. [….] okay, maybe he has problems himself and doesn't want that at all. Then of course we try to get the person, I would say, on the right track." (Violence protection coordinator, Acc. A and B)*

Even in tense situations, employees preferred mediative approaches to violence protection. For example, a nurse recounted a case when an asylum seeker threatened them with a syringe, and described how they reacted to the dangerous situation:

> *"Well, of course you try to take the syringe out of the hand of the asylum seeker, which worked out. And [after the resident calms down, I] simply seek a conversation with the asylum seeker, why he did it, what could have happened, also what could have happened to the asylum seeker himself and not just to us employees. […] a lot of talking helps in such situations, which of course is sometimes difficult because of the language. But as a rule, they already know when you just sit them down and [ask them to calm down], then very, very many understand that. […] And that sometimes takes five, ten, maybe a bit longer, but then it clicks in their heads and then they think, 'oh yes, what did I do.' [So] in that case, he calmed down after a short time and then of course apologized to us a thousand times for the whole thing happening." (Nurse, Acc. A)*

Contrary to findings elsewhere (Bosworth, 2019; Lindberg, 2022; Whyte et al., 2020), employees in our study draw on their cosmopolitan imagination (Lamont & Aksartova, 2002) to develop a sophisticated and empathic analysis of the stressors and challenges that residents face, and that might lead to conflicts and violence. The violence protection coordinator established a consultative group to deliberate on violence prevention measures and requirements within the accommodations. While some employees were part of it and some also received training on violence prevention, the application of training and sensitisation opportunities was unequal, and many employees expressed their wish to get further training (or any whatsoever) on the psycho-social and political aspects of residents' experiences. Lacking sufficient training, they draw on their own life experiences and personal background to respond effectively. For example, when we asked a security employee how he learned to deal with residents who suffer from mental illness and suicidal thoughts,

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he said: "Well, I'm talking about myself. I have that so, my own experience. Yeah, so I didn't attend any course or anything, or learn anything. I just learned that in life. Yes, so my own experience." (Security personnel, Acc. A)

When describing incidents of conflict and violence in the centres, staff often recounted and analysed residents' conditions to explain conflict situations, and this also guided their reactions. Staff referred to residents' traumatic journeys to Europe, hardship in their countries of origin, untreated mental illness, and the stressful life conditions in the accommodation centres. In a typical quote, a social worker explained their thought process when responding to conflicts:

> *"You have to consider where people come from – from a war zone where they couldn't protect themselves normally like here. Where they themselves had to have a certain potential for aggression in order to protect themselves. And many cannot let go of it here right away. Well, they can't switch around so quickly that 'I verbally express my concerns … and don't have to scream'. [they still] take it as far as possible using violence. [often, people try to push their way into something]. This isn't pure violence, but that's also […] a behavior that they bring with them from when they lived under adverse circumstances in Greece […] Until they notice, it's different here than in Greece. It takes a little while for them to understand. […]. And then people can slowly reduce their potential for aggression, and then it works." (Social worker, Acc. A)*

This nuanced reading of conflict situations and understanding of residents' experiences leads employees to respond moderately and dialogically to conflicts, avoid overreaction, and ultimately ensuring a safer environment overall in the centres. This approach also allows staff to remain trusted figures in the accommodation to whom residents can turn for help and protection, an important topic to which we will return below.

We also find that staff are aware of the criminalising potential inherent to these situations and its potential impact on residents' lives, and that they consciously try to avoid contributing to a spiral of *crimigration*. Staff expressed their goal to solve issues inside the centres, and as much as possible avoid contacting the police and risk criminalising residents. They explain this choice by a strong feeling of solidarity and empathy with the residents, an understanding of cultural diversity, and a realisation that referrals to the police could have a detrimental effect on residents' asylum processes. For example, one security employee explained:

> *"Well, we don't call the police directly because we don't want to harm the people either, because when you come to Germany, for example, you're new, maybe they don't know the rules. And that's always the case, that they have different mentalities. And everyone explains their problem in their own way. But let's warn people first. […] we always give a chance. If that happens, for example, a second or third time and doesn't stop, then we call the police. So not directly, because we don't [want to] harm people either, adding even more to the problems they already have here." (Security personnel, Acc. A)*

One key factor that employees mention as critical to violence prevention is a timely response. As a general rule, employees prefer to prevent violence before it occurs, and for that they need to respond to conflict when at its early, and still more manageable, stages. Early intervention allows employees to utilise dialogical

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de-escalation strategies and avoid more punitive measures. To do so, employees need to be present and accessible at the centres, which is one factor that makes low-level employees on the ground so important in protection against violence. Moreover, employees need to be quickly notified by residents of potentially violent conflicts. For example, one violence protection coordinator said: "There were certain uprisings [during corona], which we, I would say, were able to settle by talking, through the flow of information [coming from residents], without a large police presence having to come." (Violence protection coordinator, Acc. A and B). The fact that staff rely on residents alarming them to volatile situations illustrates the ways in which employees' strategies are inherently linked with residents' strategies for violence prevention. In the next section, we discuss residents' strategies for violence prevention.

4.2 Residents' violence prevention strategies

Residents' agency in the accommodation centres was often interactive and relational (Rebughini, 2021) in nature, centering on relations they formed with each other and with staff, particularly with low-ranked employees. These relationships enabled the first, and most common, strategy we observed – alerting employees to conflicts which they feared could escalate and become violent. As we show below, this communicative strategy was not always possible for or equally accessible to all residents. In cases when communication with employees was not perceived as a viable option, residents opted for a second strategy to protect against violence – withdrawal and avoidance.

One central finding of this paper is that security personnel, externally hired by private security companies, are the main contact point between residents and the centres where they live. With some exceptions, most residents expressed trust in the security personnel, and shared that they actively reach out to them when they experience or witness conflict situations: "If there is a conflict, we tell the security. The security forces somehow resolve the conflict. Beyond that, we don't turn anywhere. I know some have had conflict here. The security forces have had talks there and there, and everything was settled peacefully" (female resident, age 31–40, Acc. B).

Yet, it is important to note that this is not always the case. A small number of residents we interviewed said that the security personnel were harsh and punitive, and in one case *the resident* chose to call the police to protect themself against security personnel. This highlights the importance of setting limits and institutional safeguards over staff's ability to exercise their power in the accommodations (Scherr, 2022). Still, for the most part, residents referred to security personnel when they had conflicts with other residents, as well as when they had conflicts with employees in the centres. Since security personnel were often bilingual and from an immigrant background themselves, they were able to interpret, clarify mis-

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understandings, offer solutions such as room reassignment, and mediate between residents and staff, and residents and themselves. In light of the chronic shortage of professional interpreters on site, security personnel's multilingual and culturally diverse skills were particularly important. A resident described such a situation to us: "Once, a cleaning man crossed a red line, so to speak, by entering the room without knocking first and asking for permission. Due to language barriers, I could not communicate to him. Therefore, I asked a security guard [who spoke our language] for help, and he then explained to him that we are a religious family, and you are not allowed to enter the room without permission" (male resident, age 31–40, Acc. A). But not all residents share the same level of access to security personnel. Some, as in the quote below, do not share a common language with the staff, and thus are unable to use their services without an interpreter present. This issue becomes particularly acute after hours, when only security personnel are present:

> *"When I was disturbed a lot by my roommate one night, I wanted to complain about it, but the man [security employee] only spoke Arabic. We didn't understand each other. So, I had to come back again and use a translator. This is really difficult. I think they should balance it better here. It should be kind of easy for everybody to explain their problems and situations. But you're already intimidated because of your situation here. That also scares you because you get the feeling that you're being left behind." (female resident, age 31–40., Acc. A)*

While this particular resident insistently reached out and followed up with an interpreter, other residents chose a strategy of isolation and withdrawal when faced with failed communication. Consequently, they chose to remain in their rooms as much as possible, and kept their distance from other residents and employees. This strategy is perceived by them as the safest option to avoid conflict. In addition to residents who lacked the ability to effectively communicate with others in the centres, there were other groups of particularly vulnerable populations who preferred to engage in withdrawal strategies for their safety. These included parents with small children, pregnant women, and people who suffer from illness or disability. It is important to note that this strategy, while perhaps effective in protecting residents from violence, is nevertheless detrimental to their wellbeing. Isolation, even if self-imposed, is harmful for residents' mental and physical health. Therefore, this strategy should not be seen as an ideal to strive for in other accommodations. Instead, it is indicative of an imperfect system of protection against violence in accommodations for asylum seekers.

The agentic perspective offers an outlook on asylum seekers, viewing them as individuals who are both vulnerable and engaged simultaneously. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that differences among asylum seekers exist and shape their reactions. The differences are a result of migrants' different vulnerabilities, and contingent upon their unique histories of flight and prior experiences in accommodations, as well as their personalities and capacities. While the two strategies of violent protection seem very different, they are both related to the ability to

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communicate with and relate to employees and other residents, which in turn are related to the levels of vulnerability of the residents and their linguistic ability to integrate.

5. Discussion and conclusion

By shifting our attention to the various strategies for the protection against violence, and especially to issues of prevention, resolution and de-escalation, we are able to shed light on a previously neglected perspective in running mass accommodations for asylum seekers. Doing so allows us to see these spaces as more than sites of violence and conflict. Instead, we conceptualise them as sites where staff and residents alike engage in constant and proactive efforts to prevent and resolve conflictual and violent situations. The absence of sufficient training for staff and introductory courses for asylum seekers leaves both populations to draw on their own cosmopolitan imaginations, life experiences and cultural repertoires (Lamont & Aksartova, 2002) to fashion responses that increase safety and protection against violence in the centres. It is important to note, however, that we do not equate the levels of agency that residents and employees possess. There is an inherent power asymmetry – in the degree of choice, resources, and institutionalising support – between residents and employees that is important to acknowledge. And while we emphasise residents' agentic acts, we do not want to gloss over the striking limitations to their agency in the accommodations.

Our analysis shows that employees and residents depend on each other for effective protection against violence. Employees engage empathically with residents, prefer dialogue over more punitive responses, and are aware of the serious impact that criminalisation would have on residents' fate. Therefore, to the extent possible, they prefer containing and resolving conflicts within the accommodations without calling the police. Additionally, our analysis shows that residents possess agency and are engaged in strategic action to protect themselves and others from violence. We identified two primary strategies that asylum seekers utilise in the centres. The first strategy – alerting employees to conflicts that seem volatile – is largely dependent on their relationship of trust towards security personnel and other employees in the centres. We believe this strategy would have been less prevalent were staff not empathetic and deliberative in their interactions with residents. The second strategy – intentional withdrawal and isolation – is used mostly by more vulnerable residents – those who do not speak any of the dominant languages in the centres, families with children and pregnant women, as well as people with disabilities and illness.

However, this strategy has a number of limitations. First, it can only be used by residents whose accommodation allows some privacy. To withdraw into one's room, residents first need a private or semi-private room, an option that is not available to most asylum seekers. It is possible that we find that mainly vulnerable

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populations use this strategy because vulnerable populations tend to be placed in Accommodation B, where residents have private rooms. Moreover, this strategy comes with its own risks. Self-isolation, even if it is voluntary, is harmful to the individual. It has an adverse effect on people's well-being and health, and deprives residents of important opportunities to access support, exchange information and advance their social integration.

The choice to self-isolate in order to protect oneself from violence is also indicative of a broader problem of safety and protection against violence. If in the centres that we studied, arguably some of the better accommodations for asylum seekers in Germany, some residents feel that isolation is their best option for protection against violence, then mass accommodations have a fundamental problem of safety. Moreover, the situation we describe in this paper was unique and ultimately fragile. In a follow-up conversation with an employee of one of the centres in our study, we discovered that a year and a half after completing our fieldwork, a change in management of the private security company employed by the centres had taken place. This change led to deteriorating relationships between staff and residents, resulting in a decline in safety conditions. Prior to this change, there had been productive collaboration between the violence protection coordinator and the security firm's management, fostering an ongoing commitment to a communicative conflict resolution strategy. It became evident that when a part of the management shifted away from this commitment, the situation worsened, highlighting the importance of continuous investment in violence prevention. We propose that such investment needs to be continually sustained, especially given the high employee turnover and demanding nature of the job.

This unique case study shows that improved relationships in accommodation centres are possible, and that some of the most important actors in violent protection are low-level employees, such as security personnel, who engage with residents most frequently and intimately. It also shows that these often overlooked or stigmatised employees have the potential to be empathetic, thoughtful and respectful in their engagement with residents. Their insight and sense of solidarity with residents are valuable resources for their work in the accommodations. We believe that their contribution needs to be encouraged, appropriately compensated, and further cultivated through ongoing training. This point is worth reiterating: It is necessary to give staff the emotional and practical tools they need to effectively prevent violence. Investment in continual training alongside appropriate compensation for staff needs to be a priority to foster the conditions necessary for ensuring safety in mass accommodations.

Moreover, our analysis shows that residents are central and vital actors in violence prevention, and that collaboration with – and empowerment of – residents is critical. However, residents who are members of linguistic, religious, ethnic or national minority groups (in the respective context of each accommodation's population)

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are at a disadvantage when it comes to their ability to draw employees' attention to instances of violence, leading them to choose the inferior option of withdrawal and self-isolation. Therefore, we claim that centres should remove barriers to communication for minority-language speakers through the greater employment of interpreters and a more diverse body of employees in the centres. Our findings also point to the need to improve the conditions of safety for particularly vulnerable populations.

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