Vicious circles of disempowerment

The social dynamics of contemporary German refugee shelters

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Introduction

In Germany, refugees seeking protection are often obliged to live under highly controlled and disempowering conditions – not for a short time, but for years. This is particularly evident in their housing.

After applying for asylum, all refugees in Germany are first required to live in one of several central reception centres. Resettlement in an assigned municipality usually follows, but in some cases, the initial reception centre or another large camp may remain the only legal place of residence.

As long as an asylum case is pending, the assigned municipality decides where the asylum-seeking person is allowed to reside. Only a minority of municipalities in Germany offers private apartments for asylum-seekers prior to their recognition. Most of the others provide shared, supervised accommodation in smaller or larger refugee shelters for most of their assigned refugees. Legal changes in 2019 have meant that municipalities now have the power to keep a large number of refugees in these shelters for far longer than was previously the case. Thus far, there has not been a comprehensive survey of refugees' accommodation. Nevertheless, there are statistical indications that the number of asylum-seekers in shelters has grown disproportionately compared to that in private housing since 2008.[1]

Concisely, many refugees in Germany are forced to live in some form of centralised refugee shelter for many years. While living there, they experience a lack of privacy and restricted opportunities to live an independent life.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on how the organisation of refugee shelters affects the self-determination of people who are seeking protection. This will

1 Kay Wendel, Unterbringung von Flüchtlingen in Deutschland: Regelungen und Praxis der Bundesländer im Vergleich (Frankfurt a. M.: Pro Asyl, 2014), 70ff.

provide clues as to how the logic of refugee shelters contributes to the incapacitation and disempowerment. The focus is on Brandenburg, a federal state in the east of Germany.

Empirical approach

The thoughts and investigations presented here comprise the first findings of an ongoing content-analytical evaluation of documents, semi-structured expert interviews, participatory observation, and unstructured expert conversations in Brandenburg and elsewhere. The evaluated documents include those pertaining to the municipal implementation of the Admission Act in Brandenburg, published transcripts of political debates, publications by refugee organisations and supporting networks, newspaper articles and scientific studies that discuss the situation in Brandenburg's refugee shelters and elsewhere. Expert conversations and interviews have been conducted with former and current residents of refugee shelters, representatives of refugee organisations and supporting networks, trained social workers, semi-skilled workers in the field and other employees who are involved in the organisation and administration of Brandenburg's refugee shelters. All but one of the expert interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with due consideration paid to maintaining the contributors' anonymity and adhering to data protection legislation. The expert conversations were summarised in bullet points. Thus far, this research has elicited statements from thirty-two people.

In addition to her core activity as a university lecturer, the author has been working on this study since 2019, with some help for the interviews from her team. The data collection and analysis remain incomplete at the time of writing. Analysis of the material that has been collected began with defining deductive and inductive categories according to the concept of qualitative content analysis.[2] In addition, the author has utilised some grounded theory methodologies.[3] She is currently exploring the notions of minimum and maximum comparisons as well as axial coding. Informed by her concept of inequality-reflecting social research,[4] the author will discuss her findings in various communities in Brandenburg. However, as mentioned, the processes of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and discussion

2 Philipp Mayring, Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken, 12th ed. (Weinheim: Beltz, 2015).

3 Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser, The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1967).

4 Birgit Behrensen, "Umrisse einer ungleichheitsreflektierenden Sozialforschung," in Fluchtmigrationsforschung im Aufbruch: Methodologische und Methodische Reflexionen, edited by Birgit Behrensen and Manuela Westphal (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019), 51–63.

were still ongoing at the time of writing. Therefore, the following thoughts and findings should be considered as preliminary and interim results.

Overall structures of refugee shelters in Germany

The lives of refugees during the asylum-seeking process in Germany are characterised by financial constraints, limited freedom of movement, and restricted access to all forms of economic and social participation. Assignment to a refugee shelter adds cramped housing, a lack of privacy and living in an involuntary community with people of different origins and languages to this already disempowering situation.[5] Moreover, compared to those living in private apartments, asylum-seekers in shelters have to contend with far less security and higher noise levels.[6]

Nearly all of Germany's refugee shelters have entry-control systems managed by private companies. Residents frequently report that their presence within and their time away from the shelter are monitored. Many shelters ban overnight visits. More often than not, communal spaces, such as libraries, leisure areas and computer rooms, have restricted opening hours. Refugees usually have to share sanitary facilities. Some shelters are situated in remote areas with limited public transport, such as industrial zones or former military bases. Others offer only limited or fee-based access to Wi-Fi. Sometimes, there are no opportunities for private cooking, but only canteen food is available three times a day.

Differences in the organisation of refugee shelters both across Germany and within Brandenburg broadly reflect the specific legal requirements of the federal province or municipality that houses each institution and the standards of the public or private organisation that runs it. However, individual managers and employees may implement these heterogeneous requirements and standards in very different ways. As a result, opportunities for participation and thus the well-being of residents can vary considerably from one shelter to another.

Institutionally determined structures of disempowerment

One might say that all the essential aspects of life are covered within Germany's large reception centres. Indeed, an employee of one such reception centre in Brandenburg

5 Birgit Behrensen, Was bedeutet Fluchtmigration? Soziologische Erkundungen für die psychosoziale Praxis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 68f.

6 Andreea Baier and Manuel Siegert, Die Wohnsituation Geflüchteter: BAMF-Kurzanalyse (Nürnberg: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF) Forschungszentrum Migration, Integration und Asyl (FZ), 2018).

linked life within the shelter to an all-inclusive holiday. However, this interpretation neglects to consider that involuntary all-around service can incapacitate people if the service goals are set by the facility rather than framed by the needs of the residents. For example, one such resident, a single mother, reported that she would like the centre's crèche to look after her children for a few hours each afternoon as that would allow her to rest. She explained that she fled from her home country with her children, took a dangerous route to Germany and is now exhausted. However, the childcare workers in the crèche expect her and the other mothers to always remain with their children. One of those childcare workers suggested that the mothers should learn how to play and do handicrafts with their children as they currently lack parenting and educational skills. The single mother we interviewed dismissed these accusations as nonsense and reiterated her need for at least a short time away from the children each day. However, the childcare workers rejected her request and continued to adhere to the crèche's strict rules regarding mothers' attendance.

Another former resident recalled the following incident at the reception centre: "We were outside and we had to wait in line for our names to be called. […] We then got [a number of items]. For example, we got – how do you say? – pyjamas."[7] The administrative character of mass accommodation is obvious in this memory of waiting in line for something to happen. This is just one of several characteristics that Germany's reception centres share with other "total institutions,"[8] including:

- restrictions on and control of external contacts;
- interlinking sleeping, working and leisure in one place under the same authorities;
- involuntary participation;
- constant structuring of the daily routine by the authorities in accordance with established rules; and
- ensuring all activities conform to a common plan with goals determined by the institution rather than the residents.

The longer people remain at the mercy of a total institution's employees, the more their way of life is impaired by institutional control. This is especially true if inhabitants of institutions are exhausted. For them, there is a risk that they will become ever more dependent on the care and services the institution provides. For example, if a member of staff calls himself a social worker, residents may come to rely on his support and network, even if the employee is only semi-skilled, which is quite often

7 Interview with former resident of refugee shelter, slightly amended for sense and translated by the author.

8 Erving Goffman, Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates (New York: Anchor Books, 1961).

the case in Brandenburg. Likewise, if a particular doctor works closely with the management team of the institution, residents often have to go to considerable lengths to enforce their right to a second opinion, even if the doctor in the institution does not speak their language or has little experience of trauma. Similarly, if the shelter provides schooling, it can be extremely difficult for parents to negotiate a transfer to an alternative school, even if the on-site education fails to meet their children's requirements. In addition, it requires a lot of effort to secure free, objective advice about asylum applications if this is not provided by the shelter itself. Finally, the remote locations of many shelters exacerbate the refugees' dependency.

The residents of German shelters may be viewed as relatively fortunate, especially when compared with other refugees around the world. The problem is, however, that their incapacitation impedes their integration within German society. One remedy would be to house them in private accommodation, with support provided by the decentralised social work system. This would be far cheaper than maintaining the existing refugee shelters, each with its own complex organisation, and would have the added benefit of mitigating the long-term costs of incapacitation. In the meantime, however, the shelters' residents seem destined to remain excluded from German society and all aspects of the country's social life. They are simply kept waiting,[9] often for many years.

The vicious circle of incapacitation

For an earlier study, the author identified some of the problems associated with centralised refugee shelters.[10] More than ten years later, three of these issues remain all too prevalent in many of Brandenburg's shelters:

- Inadequate advice provided by poorly educated staff on how to manage the multi-dimensional and complex problems associated with seeking asylum and integrating within German society exacerbates the refugees' sense of insecurity.
- Social workers within the shelters often lack well-defined roles. Where the staff take care of supply, control and sanctions at the same time, refugees are often forced into the position of powerless victims.
- This opaque system in which members of staff have ambiguous, multiple responsibilities often seems arbitrary to the residents.

9 Jan-Paul Brekke, While We Are Waiting: Uncertainty and Empowerment among Asylum-Seekers in Sweden (Oslo: Institute for Social Research, 2004).

10 Birgit Behrensen and Verena Groß, Auf dem Weg in ein "Normales Leben"? Eine Analyse der Gesundheitlichen Situation von Asylsuchenden in der Region Osnabrück (Osnabrück: Self-published, 2004).

As a result of these issues, many refugees experience a great deal of disempowerment and a lack of self-determination. Their living conditions in the shelters are a stark contrast to how they imagined a life would be in such democratic state as Germany. Moreover, they are very different from what the majority of German citizens perceive to be normal.

Most refugees arrive in Germany with all the attributes they need to take care of their own well-being.[11] However, these skills tend to wither in conditions of incapacitation. Exhausted refugees, in particular, are likely to lose their sense of coherence,[12] which makes them more susceptible to falling ill.[13] In consequence, the incapacitation that the refugee shelter system engenders increases the need for support. This need cannot be adequately met by a few employees who are expected to undertake both social and administrative tasks. The following outcome is that the residents' ever-greater dependency creates even more stress for the employees. This can be illustrated as a vicious circle of incapacitation (see Figure 1).

When looking at the internal dynamics of refugee shelters, it could be said that many refugees are at the mercy of the institutions' assistance and structures. Quite a lot of employees seem to make subjective decisions about how and whom they will support. Similar to the earlier study, the collected data reveals that a small number of residents receive a great deal of support, even to the point of rather inappropriate care, while the vast majority are given little more than minimal administrative advice. Employees are much more inclined to help refugees whom they perceive as humble, quiet, and unobtrusive, rather than those they consider active, loud, and demanding. However, given that members of the former group tend to be reluctant to ask for assistance, it may be the case that no refugees receive the help they need.[14]

Additionally, the residents in most shelters have few self-determined opportunities to shape their own lives, regardless of whether they receive a great deal of attention or very little support. To put it bluntly, it could be said that centralisation erodes autonomy because the residents' lives are determined by the shelters' institutional logic.

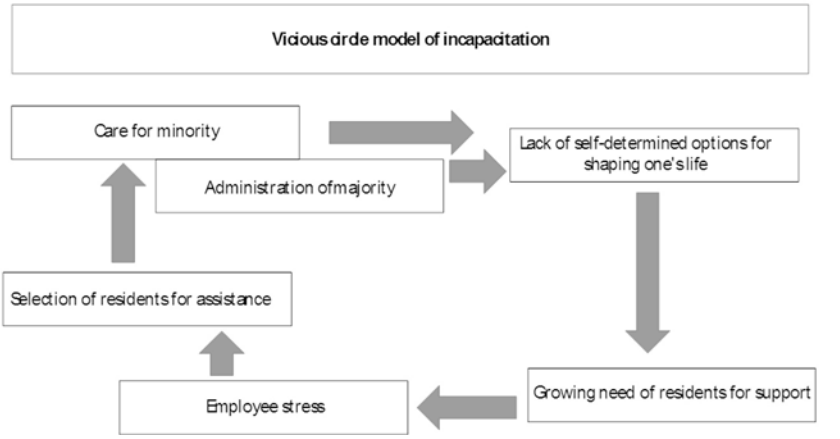
11 Louis H. Seukwa, Der Habitus der Überlebenskunst: Zum Verhältnis von Kompetenz und Migration im Spiegel von Flüchtlingsbiographien (Münster: Waxmann, 2006).

12 Aaron Antonovsky, Unraveling the Mystery of Health: How People Manage Stress and Stay Well (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988).

13 Behrensen and Groß, Auf dem Weg in ein "Normales Leben"? Eine Analyse der Gesundheitlichen Situation von Asylsuchenden in der Region Osnabrück (Osnabrück: Self-published, 2004).

14 Ibid.

Figure 1: Vicious circle of incapacitation



Data collected for the ongoing research project confirms these findings from the earlier study. Again, during both formal interviews and casual conversations, employees routinely differentiate between allegedly "good" and allegedly "bad" refugees. Some members of staff openly disparage the latter (much larger) group's demands, yet also raise concerns about a handful of supposedly outstanding but helpless residents. In addition, little has been done to empower refugees. For example, they have strictly limited prospects in terms of education, work, societal participation and indeed any kind of meaningfulness due to a lack networking opportunities. Finally, the ongoing study has revealed quite a lot about the logic of control within several refugee shelters.

Instrumentalising social work in refugee shelters to establish cultures of control

The issue of control is a long-discussed challenge in social work as it forms half of the profession's "double mandate"[15] along with providing help to those in need. On the one hand, the core of the profession is to enhance clients' autonomy and self-determination. On the other, it is sometimes necessary for social workers to exercise control. This is especially true in the context of protecting against violence and in

15 Lothar Böhnisch and Hans Lösch, "Das Handlungsverständnis des Sozialarbeiters und seine institutionelle Determination," in Gesellschaftliche Perspektiven der Sozialarbeit, edited by Hans-Uwe Otto and Siegfried Schneider, 3rd ed. (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1979), 27.

child welfare. Therefore, the development of a professional attitude requires social workers to remain aware of – and sometimes endure – the dilemma of helping while simultaneously exercising control.

The control side of the double mandate is rather different in the field of refugee immigration, however. In this context, it largely relates to monitoring the regulations established by immigration law, which form the internal political part of the logic of the border regime. The data collected and analysed so far highlights how the logic of the border regime influences the work of some employees in refugee shelters. It should be emphasised that these are far from typical individual cases. Nevertheless, they demonstrate how the logic of the border regime can be incorporated through power asymmetry.

In one interview, a semi-skilled social worker in a refugee shelter explained that she wished to inform the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) about rule violations committed by individual residents. She suggested that these should be taken into consideration whenever BAMF considers applications for asylum. Specifically, she mentioned petty criminal offences and absence from German classes. In general, she expressed a desire to report "whether a client is behaving well" as she believed that such a control function would encourage more refugees to obey the shelter's rules. It should be emphasised that she had never attempted to put these ideas into practice. Rather, they comprised a power fantasy that unfolded during the course of the interview.

In another interview, a fully trained social worker recalled noticing different dates of birth on a young refugee's birth certificate and school certificate, which obliged him to conduct a further investigation. However, in retrospect, he was exasperated that he had been forced to take on this control task simply because an administrative authority had failed to properly fulfil its responsibility. This was not control for the purpose of protecting against violence, but merely to fulfil the logic of Germany's border regime. As Scherr has pointed out,[16] it could be said that such activities help to perpetuate global inequality.

Locked doors

The Covid-19 pandemic turned refugee shelters into highly dangerous places. People were living in close proximity so the virus could spread easily, especially as the shelters' hygiene regimes consisted of little more than routine disinfection. Consequently, a number of collective quarantines were enforced in response to Covid-19 outbreaks, including in Brandenburg. It is still too early to assess the full impact

16 Albert Scherr, "Rassismus, Post-Rassismus und Nationalismus: Erfordernisse einer differenzierten Kritik," PERIPHERIE 37 (2017) 2: 232–49.

of these quarantines, but Bozorgmehr *et al*. published some preliminary findings in May 2020.[17] They reported that the inhabitants of refugee shelters have a heightened risk of contracting Covid-19 from fellow residents due to the limited living space and inadequate infection-protection procedures within the facilities. However, they felt that the widespread use of quarantine was unwarranted for two important reasons. First, there was no evidence of an increased risk to the general population if the usual protective measures were observed. Second, people who are confined in collective quarantine often suffer severe psycho-social consequences.

Conclusion

When refugee immigration to Germany started to increase in 2015, there was an urgent need to find accommodation for tens of thousands of people throughout the country, including in Brandenburg. After a short period of chaos, it was decided to house the majority of refugees in large shelters while their applications for asylum were processed. Unfortunately, this decision has meant that most refugees have been forced to live in restrictive and controlling environments, often for many years. Moreover, it has been needlessly expensive as private housing would have been much cheaper, and would have provided far more opportunities for integration and participation in wider German society.

The refugees' outsider status was reinforced with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, as many shelters were put into quarantine. This isolation of entire communities – supposedly as a protective measure, but in some cases without any attempt to separate infected from uninfected residents – demonstrates the deep roots of Germany's border regime logic. Transferring the refugees to decentralised, private accommodation would have provided much better protection from the pandemic.

17 Kayvan Bozorgmehr et al., SARS-CoV-2 in Aufnahmeeinrichtungen und Gemeinschaftsunterkünften für Geflüchtete: Epidemiologische und normativ-rechtliche Aspekte (Bielefeld: Kompetenznetz Public Health COVID-19, 2020).