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CONSTRUCTIONS OF BELONGING FROM A REFUGEE PERSPECTIVE IN THE CONTEXT OF NEIGHBOURHOOD IN EAST GERMANY

Abstract

Belonging, neighbourhood, and RefugeeMigration¹ are directly connected. Who belongs or is allowed to belong, or whose belonging is granted, enabled (in solidarity), or denied (violently), manifests itself in the context of neighbourhood. Belonging is a central element in the topic of RefugeeMigration. To date, no empirical study has examined the generation of belonging from the perspective of refugees in the context of neighbourhoods in East Germany.

This article addresses this research gap. The data were collected using walking interviews and analysed using grounded theory. I explore how belonging from a refugee perspective is constructed in and through neighbourhoods. This article aims to present both the conditions under which refugees develop their own understandings of belonging and the concepts of belonging held by refugees.

Keywords: Belonging, Refugee, Neighbourhood, East Germany

Introduction

Belonging, neighbourhood, and RefugeeMigration are directly connected. RefugeeMigration describes flight as a special form of migration based on coercion (Fischer *et al.*, 2018). In the context of critical migration and border regime research, research into RefugeeMigration emerged, “which deliberately subsumes refugee migration under migration in order to question state attributions and emphasise the legitimacy of border crossings regardless of categorisation” (Thränhardt, 2023, p. 48). Who belongs or is allowed to belong, or whose belonging is granted, enabled (in solidarity), or denied (violently), manifests itself in the context of neighbourhood. Between 1990 and 2008, the rejection of Muslim neighbours increased (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2023). The neighbourhood of

¹ The spelling “RefugeeMigration” is intended to focus on a specific form of migration.

asylum seekers is rejected more frequently than that of immigrants from other EU countries (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2023). This attitude is rooted in the perception of refugees as Muslim (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2023). Racism serves as the perceptual pattern. Hostile climates against those perceived as other and those treated as strangers are reinforced, among other things, by neighbourhood protests when it comes to the opening of shared accommodations for refugees (Lechner, Huber, 2017, p. 105). Belongings become regimes of belonging when they are linked to racist and nationalist ideology (Scharathow, 2014, p. 45). The essentialist and hegemonic concepts of belonging refer to a homogenous, white German “we” and to deviantly constructed ethnic risk groups (Demirović, 2008, p. 243), which are stylised as deficient and questionable “others” (Bücken, 2021). In “belonging management”, some are identified as belonging and others as outsiders. In doing so, those in the majority secure the privilege of living within the norm and defining their normality as binding for others” (Rommelspacher, 2011, p. 32). Culturalised identities are not fixed but rather hover in transition between different positions (Hall, 1994, p. 218). The topic of belonging from a refugee perspective addresses one of the central questions of diversity-affirming and democratic societies: “Who is granted the right to live in *community* with others?” (Hark, 2021, 37, emphasis in original).

Regarding developments in the context of Refugee Migration, post-socialist countries differ from Western European countries, and these developments cannot be understood without considering the hegemonic relationship between East and West (Glorius, 2020). Against this background, the study of East Germany as a post-socialist society is of research interest in order to highlight the specific nature of constructions of belonging. To date, no empirical study has examined the generation of belonging from the perspective of refugees in the context of neighbourhoods in East Germany. This article addresses this research gap. In my article, I explore *how* belonging from a refugee perspective is constructed in and through neighbourhoods. This research question leads to further questions: What constitutes a neighbourhood for refugees? How do they establish relationships with their local social environment? Who or which practices are the gatekeepers who enable them to enter into and develop relationships with their neighbours? To what extent are their experiences shaped by racism, exclusion, or solidarity? However, the concept of experience does not demonstrate a focus on the inner world of the individual and the dimension of personal experience, but rather addresses the seemingly subjective in its relationship to processes of knowledge and power that define experience (Lemke, 1997, p. 261).² This article aims to present both the conditions under which refugees develop their own understandings of belonging and the concepts of belonging held by refugees.

² In his discussion of experience, Thomas Lemke refers to Michel Foucault (1989).

The refugees are becoming co-constructors of the new order of belonging, which makes it all the more interesting to work out their perspective on belonging.

First, I introduce Bieblach-Ost as an example of a neighbourhood context in Eastern Germany. Next, I discuss belonging and neighbourhood as theoretical concepts. I then present the methodological framework of the qualitative empirical study. In the next step, I identify three conditions for refugees' understandings of belonging and their concepts of belonging. Finally, I discuss the question of the extent to which refugees can enter into a neighbourly community.

Bieblach-Ost as a neighbourhood context in East Germany

Bieblach-Ost, a district in Gera, was built in the mid-1980s as a prefabricated housing estate (Pilz, Lehmann, 2006). The prefabricated housing estate was created to provide housing for workers of Wismut AG/SDAG Wismut. However, the population structure in Bieblach-Ost has changed significantly over the past ten years (Stadt Gera, 2021, p. 12). Nowadays, it is primarily refugees who are moving into the district. According to Steffen Mau (2019), who studied East German transformation society, in addition to established and long-resident older people, the majority of residents living in a prefabricated housing estate are socially disadvantaged, average East German households, and migrants (Mau, 2019, p. 242). These milieus also characterise the population structure in Bieblach-Ost (Stadt Gera, 2021, pp. 27–37). A characteristic of Bieblach-Ost is that it now exhibits the characteristics of a so-called “transitory quarter” (Stadt Gera, 2021, p. 37). This implies that the development of a sense of belonging is only possible to a limited extent due to the high fluctuation of residents. Only the established and long-standing older residents have been able to develop a traditional sense of belonging. Since its creation, the district has evolved over time into a disadvantaged neighbourhood with little to no socio-structural services such as medical care or shops for daily needs. Against this background, Bieblach-Ost serves as an exemplary example to discuss a new order of belonging in East Germany.

Theoretical perspectives: Belonging and Neighbourhood

Belonging is a central element in the topic of RefugeeMigration (Mijić, 2022; Pries, 2022; Kleinschmidt, 2021; Geisen, 2019; Tietze, 2012; Skrbia, Baldassar, Poynting, 2007), and therefore, “a precise understanding of the conditions under which those feelings that determine belonging are generated is essential in order to make a positive contribution to a liberal and open society” (Kubelka, 2021, p. 236). These approaches emphasise belonging as a construction and a process that is initiated through discourses, practices, and decision-making processes. Belonging is not a neutral concept (Thomas-Olalde, 2013, p. 238), but is linked to social values

(Fuchs, von Scheve, 2022) and entangled in the negotiation processes surrounding these values.

Belonging encompasses both the subject level (questions of identity and well-being) (Chiapparini, Abraham, 2023; Mecheril, (2003, 2023); Appiah, 2019) and the structural level (questions of framework conditions, social inequality, and structural discrimination) (Meißner, 2019; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2012). Belonging is a fundamental need of human existence (Scheff, 2018; Maslow, 1970). The fulfilment of this specific basic need is tied to social structures (Kubelka 2021: 3). Kerstin Meißner (2019, p. 97) identifies five central relationships of belonging: biographical, spatial, emotional, temporal, and political. “These relations refer to both intimate and hegemonic world relations that significantly determine negotiations about participation, recognition, the distribution of resources and conditions for mobility” (Meißner, 2019, pp. 97–98). For Rubia Salgado (2010), questioning orders of belonging constitutes the conception and implementation of radically democratic political education. For the neighbourhood workers, this questioning means entering into “a confrontation with their privileges and their own hegemonically structured listening [...], as well as the ability [to promote] [...] dissidence and antagonism” (Salgado, 2010, p. 11-5). Joanna McIntyre (2024, p. 254) works out the following key characteristics of belonging: temporal, placemaking, powerful, connecting, not integrating, and painful. The question of belonging is discussed in conjunction with the question of identity (Anthias, 2003; Loader, 2006; Mecheril, (2003, 2023); Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011). Belonging is “a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state” (Probyn, 1996, p. 19). Paul Mecheril (2003, 2023) speaks of multiple belonging in this context. Nira Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 197) emphasises that the concept of political belonging, in contrast to the concept of belonging, allows for the decoding of nationalisms and racisms within the order of belonging.

Neighbourhood can be understood as a special form of relationship that makes “the reciprocal connection between the social and spatial organisation of society so concrete, so elementary, and so directly tangible” (Hamm, 1998, p. 172). Ferdinand Tönnies (1903, 1912), p. 17) conceived of neighbourhood, alongside kinship and friendship, as one of the three original forms of community. In urban development, however, neighbourhood is also exposed as a “sentimental concept” (Jacobs, 2011 (1961), p. 146), with which the imagination of controlling social life creeps in. Since its beginnings, neighbourhood research has dealt with the social differentiation and segregation of population groups (Althaus, 2018, p. 52). Segregation can be understood as “the concentration of certain social groups in certain sub-areas of a city or urban region” (Häußermann, Siebel, 2004, p. 140). Age structure, ethnicity, income, education, and unemployment are characteristics that affect various categories of segregation (Häußermann, Siebel, 2004, p. 144).

Neighbourhoods are attributed a special role in the development of a sense of belonging and social integration (Riegel, Geisen, 2007) when migrants cannot achieve belonging at the nation-state level (Visser, 2017). A good neighbourhood is an important dimension in developing a sense of belonging and familiarity with the local/new environment (Reuber, 1993, p. 116). Social relationships contribute to the development of this sense of belonging (Lechner, Huber, 2017, p. 105). Neighbourhood links the spatial and communal aspects. The Amadeu Antonio Foundation and PRO ASYL (2015) have published a brochure with initiatives and recommendations for action on how refugees can become long-term neighbours. One goal is to reduce prejudices and fears, as these threaten safety and order in the neighbourhood (Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, PRO ASYL e.V., 2015, p. 13). Length of residence and use of neighbourhood infrastructure have a varying and relatively small influence on the sense of belonging depending on the location (Blokland, 2019). Neighbourhood provides a framework for developing relationships with the world in which belonging is negotiated.

From the theoretical perspectives this paper draws therefore on three core elements: (1) the role of racism in creating a sense of belonging in the neighbourhood context, (2) the access to neighbourhood infrastructure for refugees, (3) the interactions between neighbours as moments of negotiation of belonging. For the qualitative study, these three elements serve as a theoretical framework for interpretation.

Methodological framework of the qualitative empirical study

The empirical study is a qualitative investigation. Qualitative methods enable the understanding of latent structures of meaning and patterns of interpretation (Helfferich, 2011, p. 21). The ‘individual statements’ that occur, for example, in interviews are expressions of the underlying pattern (Helfferich, 2011, p. 22). Research designs that include qualitative elements have more circular elements than quantitative designs and are reconstructive in nature (Przyborski, Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014, p. 118).

The methodological approach consists of three steps, some of which overlap and build on one another. One of the key challenges in research practice is field access. For this reason, the first step involved establishing contact with an organisation based in Bieblach-Ost. Sampling was conducted using three sampling techniques: gatekeeper sampling, self-activation sampling, and snowball sampling (Reinders, 2005, pp. 139–142; Merkens, 1997, pp. 101–102). Two social workers from this organization, who had been working in Bieblach-Ost for four years, acted as gatekeepers. To expand the circle of individuals to be surveyed and avoid selective selection by the gatekeepers, additional notices and information were published in the neighbourhood magazine, and the participants in the study were asked for further possible interview partners. However, no one responded to the notices or through

the interview partners for an interview. During the data collection phase, I spent time in the neighbourhood and approached people on the street to ask if they were willing to be interviewed. Interviews resulted also this way.

In the second step, interviews were conducted with the residents of Bieblach-Ost. The walking interview method (Stals, Smyth, Ijsselsteijn, 2014; Clark, Emmel, 2009) was used as the data collection method. This research method is used to understand the meaning of spaces and neighbourhoods (Clark, Emmel, 2009). The neighbourhood becomes a walkable area with life stories (Odzakovic *et al.*, 2018, p. 28). The research project focuses on stories of belonging. This research method is well suited for gathering comprehensive, contextualised, and familiar data in an urban environment (Stals, Smyth, Ijsselsteijn, 2014, p. 745) and for exploring subjective experiences of the world (Barlett *et al.*, 2023, p. 12). A characteristic feature of the walking interview is the participation of groups of people who have difficulty expressing themselves in interviews, such as individuals with autism spectrum disorders (Marcotte *et al.*, 2022, p. 3) or, in the case of my study, individuals with refugee experiences or with mental disabilities. The interviewees' narratives about belonging and neighbourhood can be specified through the spatial reference and illustrated with concrete examples. The walking interview method is particularly well suited to practice-theoretical research approaches in order to understand "the different implicit self-conceptions according to which people practically appropriate 'their' spaces and internalise them as given" (Kühl, 2015, p. 46). A total of 25 walking interviews were conducted with the residents of Bieblach-Ost. The shortest interview lasted 15 minutes, and the longest almost three hours. Since the weather during the interviews was predominantly sunny and dry, breaks were taken during the walking sessions. The locations for the breaks were chosen by the interviewees and given meaning. The interviews were conducted in German and English. Google Translate was sometimes used to ensure that the question or answer was understood correctly or to provide their answers in their first language. The interviews were conducted between April and June 2024.

A guideline was developed for the walking interview. A list of questions was compiled that served as a framework for me as the interviewer, but neither the wording nor the order of the questions was binding (Gläser, Laudel, 2004, p. 39). The guided interview is preferable among the group of semi-standardised interviews because it ensures, through a list of questions, that the interviewee provides information on all relevant aspects (Gläser, Laudel, 2004, p. 140).

Research ethics principles were established for conducting the interviews. The principles of May East (2024; 2022) and Barlett *et al.* (2023, pp. 2–3) served as a guideline for these determinations. The research ethics principles were:

- The interviewers choose the route and determine the time and duration of the walking interview.

- I chose the entrance to a counselling centre as the meeting point.
- The walking interviews exclude people who are not mobile. To still reach these people, interviews were also conducted while sitting in the counselling centre's premises. For this purpose, photos of Bieblach-Ost were taken in advance and then used as visual material for the "seated walking interview". In this way, an attempt was made to recreate a "walk" through the neighbourhood using photographs.
- Emotions are given space during the interview.
- Empathy is a fundamental attitude in the interview.
- Degrading statements are not left unanswered but addressed in the interview.
- The interview can be terminated by either party at any time.

The principles of research ethics were repeatedly reflected upon. Racist remarks were made during the interviews, which I addressed in follow-up questions.

In the third step, the walking interviews were analysed using grounded theory according to Kathy Charmaz (2006). Grounded theory is particularly well suited to identifying the mechanisms and processes of belonging construction. The methodological steps of the data analysis are based on the suggestions of Kathy Charmaz (2006, pp. 42–70). In the first phase of "initial coding" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47), the codes were developed. In the second coding phase of "focused coding" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57), the data were selected and compared with the categories. The guiding analytical question was: What do people do or refrain from doing when they refer to belonging in the context of their neighbourhood? The categories were then further conceptualised in the form of memos, and the relationships between the categories were elaborated. The following discussion provides insight into the theorisation of belonging in and through neighbourhood in East Germany and does not represent a theory of belonging. The qualitative data analysis is supported by the use of the software MAXQDA (Rädiker, Kuckartz, 2019).

The conditionality of belonging from the perspective of refugees

The concepts of belonging from the refugees' perspective are determined by their experiences. From the walking interviews with the refugees, I was able to reconstruct three patterns of experience: the experience of war, the experience of a completely new beginning, and the experience of racism. The experience of war relates to the country from which the individuals fled. The experience of a completely new beginning and racism stems from the experiences in Germany.

The war experience

The war experience is a pattern of experiences that can be reconstructed from the data. The refugees speak of terrorism (WI 14) and torture in prison (WI 3). They address the associated feelings of fear, insecurity, loss, but also mistrust of others. Life

in Germany is overshadowed by this war experience. Although the experiences lie in the past, it is expressed that they continue to shape everyday life and emotional state. Mahdi³, a refugee from Iran, speaks about it as follows:

“People are coming from the war. These people can’t just live with other people. [...] Everything that has happened to us weighs on our minds. People can go to school and learn that there is no war here. That means you have to be friendly here, that you can live with other people here. I am Arab. That means I don’t just have to live with Arab people. I also have to live with other people. Over time, I’ve managed that. Now I live with other people. [...] Here you have to live and work and simply live without problems. You have to try to live with new people. In my house, I, an Arab, live with a woman from Ukraine and Germans. And that’s good.” (WI 1, 46-50)

Mahdi talks about how, due to his experience of war, he “can’t just live with other people.” He sees attending school (more of an integration course, the author assumes) as an opportunity to learn that there is no war here and to gain new experiences. This experience also includes living with “other people”. From his perspective, those who are not Arab like him are among the Others. By saying “I’ve managed that,” he expresses that while it is an achievement to learn to live “friendly” with others—as Mahdi describes it—it is also doable in the sense that it can be learnt. Living with others without problems represents a value for him. At the end of his statement, he emphasises that this is a good thing, as he now has neighbours from Ukraine and Germany.

In summary, it can be said that the experience of war is not an aspect of the past that refugees leave behind in their country of origin or while fleeing. This experience determines their emotional world, their subjectivity, and their values. What characterises this experience is its fragility. Gathering new experiences is a process that is initiated in a collective, institutionalised context such as school, but also in and through the neighbourhood.

The experience of a total new beginning

I called the second experiential pattern ‘the experience of an absolute new beginning’. Two aspects define the absolute nature of a new beginning. First, the experience of a new beginning involves more or less hidden self-evident truths. They are hidden in the sense that they are not obvious to outsiders. In addition, there is no adequate guidance—and perhaps there can’t be. Ali, who came to Germany as a 17-year-old, describes the experience of an absolute new beginning: “When you go to another country, you have no idea, including about integration and such. You have no idea. That’s why I say, no matter how old you are, you simply grow up like

³ The names of the interviewees were completely anonymized to preserve their anonymity.

a small child who has to learn everything.” (WI 2, 1-2). With the phrase “no idea”, Ali emphasises this lack of knowledge that characterises arriving in another country. Age and the associated experiences are also portrayed as insufficiently helpful. One is thrown back to the role of a toddler. Hakim describes this experience as follows: “We always start from scratch.” (WI 4, 5). Starting from scratch or learning like a toddler signals these self-evident truths, which one must first track down and then decode for oneself.

This completely new beginning has four dimensions. The first dimension concerns material resources. Tarek describes this in the context of his first apartment in Germany: “I had the apartment, but it was empty. I had a blanket and a pillow. I also bought a kettle. I slept like that for two months.” (WI 24, 20). Being in a new country, one cannot rely on a circle of friends and acquaintances who could support one. The second dimension describes knowledge of the institutions, authorities, and their responsibilities in Germany. The following state institutions and organisations were mentioned in the interviews: school, kindergarten, job centre, and immigration office. The interviewees who had a university degree or completed training in their country of origin did not work in their chosen profession. They took on unskilled jobs and pursued further training through various work programmes to at least be able to apply for a qualified position. Knowledge of institutions, authorities, and organisations in Germany implies knowledge of the education, employment, and welfare systems. Before knowledge of these systems can be acquired, the challenge lies in knowing that they exist in the first place. Language barriers also exist. Germany is a monolingual country, and its institutions are only just beginning to establish multilingualism in state institutional structures and cultures. Everyday life constitutes the third dimension. Shopping (WI 5), using public transportation such as taking the tram (WI 5), registering a child at school (WI 6), searching for a kindergarten place (WI 7), finding a doctor (WI 7), and communicating with the school when problems arise or when organizational issues arise such as participation in a school trip (WI 6) require not only language skills to gain access to the necessary information, but also knowledge of these access points. The fourth dimension addresses everyday rituals. Ali mentions greeting someone on the street as one ritual (WI 2, 22). He says that when he walked down the street in his hometown, it took him half an hour to walk 20 metres, because it’s not appropriate to just walk past people and say “hello”. He says one has to ask how they’re doing. Dealing with noise or listening to music are discussed as everyday rules in connection with the midday rest period (WI 2, WI 4). Thus, the new beginning also affects everyday interaction and communication with neighbours.

Three obstacles can be reconstructed from the interviews with the refugees that make a completely new beginning difficult. The first is the lack of language skills – this affects both the refugees and the employees in the institutions or doctor’s

offices. Although, for example, an app is available that can be used for translation, it was reported that the doctors did not always use it (WI 6). Instead, they requested that someone with German language skills accompany them to the doctor's appointment. This sometimes led to internal conflict, as there are topics/illnesses where they do not want a stranger present – even if only to interpret. The second obstacle concerns the role of women. Ikram, who speaks German and English, helps befriend families as an interpreter. She describes her wish regarding the role of women as follows: “Here in Bieblach, women are always at home. It is desirable to be able to see these women outside.” (WI 6, 2). This means that female refugees have difficulty acquiring access to public spaces. A third obstacle is the distribution of refugees within the city of Gera. Since Bieblach-Ost is predominantly home to people from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, or Somalia, the dissemination of information, for example, about the functioning of the school system, is problematic (WI 4).

From the analysis, it can be concluded that the experience of a completely new beginning indicates that the development of belonging is much more comprehensive and complex than the relationships between neighbours.

The experience of racism

The third reconstructed pattern of experience addresses experiences of racism. Two forms of racism can be reconstructed: the denial of access to social spheres and the seemingly unbridgeable, yet fragile, differentiation. Both forms constitute structural racism.

Denial of access to social areas includes, for example, access to the housing market or leisure activities. This denial of access in one area sometimes affects all family members and results in the impossibility of access to other areas. This creates a chain reaction in a sense. Mahdi describes his experience of racism as follows: “I have found many apartments, but the landlords don't want the foreigners. If the German woman spoke to the landlord, then there is no problem. If the landlord writes my name, then he says: ‘I'm sorry. We don't have an apartment.’” (WI 1, 1.10-12). An acquaintance then gave him access to the housing market. But in his experience, this access is denied when his name comes into play as a tenant. Hakim tells a story about his experience visiting a club in Gera: “There's a bar near the main train station. I tried to get in, but security wouldn't let me in. I know, because I'm a foreigner. I bought a beer and drank it alone at home. That's good for me. I listened to a little music. It's okay.” (WI 3, 57-58). Here, too, Hakim attributes his inability to get into the club to being perceived as a foreigner. This denial leads to segregation, to lost opportunities to develop a sense of belonging. For Hakim, this means long-term isolation and loneliness if no other spaces offer him the opportunity to connect with people. Hakim tries not to be discouraged by the experience. He buys a beer and listens to music at home. In doing so, he gives himself a piece

of what was denied him. This denial of access, in this case to a club, is a denial of access to a community. This seemingly unbridgeable, yet fragile, differentiation represents the second form of racism. During our walking interview with Umran, we pass a community garden run by a Diakonie organisation with residents from Bieblach. Umran shows me the garden and adds: “What you see here is the Diakonie garden. They built it so that German and foreign families could come together and talk. But there are no German families. They have their own gardens. But there are a few German volunteers.” (WI 3, 32-33) This differentiation is there. It does take a material form, in that there are no encounters between German and newly arrived families, as intended by the Diakonie. At the same time, this differentiation is also fragile, since “a few German volunteers” are involved in the garden. By stating that the Germans have their own gardens, he mentions the possibility of leasing an allotment in Gera or the surrounding area. The differentiation is also fragile because Mahdi – reflecting on his experience in looking for an apartment – came to the conclusion: “There is no difference between Arab and German people.” (WI 1, 1.15).

The analysis has shown that experiences of racism determine the development of neighbourhoods and extend beyond the spatial aspect. In summary, it can be said that these three experiential patterns – the experience of war, the experience of a completely new beginning, and the experience of racism – relate to processes of power and, in some cases, violence. These three experiences form a framework for the interviewed refugees’ understandings of belonging.

Refugees’ concepts of belonging in the context of the neighbourhood

The refugees develop their own ideas of belonging. From the interviews, I identified four concepts of belonging: belonging as living in safety, belonging as not being able to forget, belonging as not feeling like a stranger, and belonging as a zone free from racist prejudice.

Belonging as a life in security

Belonging is conceptualised as living in security. Zayd describes it as follows:

“We came from the place that it’s not safe. Belonging to means: safety. I’m feeling safe in Germany. I can walk free. I can talk to anyone freely. That word means it: It’s not the place. For me, it’s not the place, it’s the safety. How to be, how to keep your family safe. Why I’m here in Germany. It’s like the other side of why I’m here. I did not just only come here for Europe. I had a job in my country. We came here because of the war. We are runaways from the killing. So when I feel safe here in Gera, I belong to this place. The place doesn’t matter. Here is the law over all, and you have to respect me, and that’s good for me. There is the law. It’s for Germans and foreigners. I’m on the safe side. This is belonging to. I think most of the people came here because of the safety. They want to be safe

with the family". (WI 14, 26-32)

For Zayd, belonging means a life of security. He feels safe in Germany. He defines belonging not in terms of a place – “It’s not the place” – but in terms of security. War, violence, and terror are cited as reasons for fleeing. These all lead to a loss of security. The killing in his country and the resulting need to find protection for his family were his reasons for fleeing. In Germany, he can carry out everyday activities such as going for a walk or engaging in everyday conversation. He cites the laws in Germany as a basis for his feeling of security, as they emphasise respect for people. Location plays no role in this conception. To reinforce his understanding, he refers to the belief that other people also fled to Germany because they were no longer safe in their home countries.

A characteristic of this understanding of belonging is that it is conceptualised independently of a place: “The place doesn’t matter.” There must simply be no danger of the place becoming unsafe. Security becomes this transformative and transcendent moment in which belonging is restored when it has been lost somewhere else. The experience of security is based on the existence of legal foundations that guarantee respect for people and on security being experienced in everyday life. This is the case when everyday life can be lived without fear. Another characteristic of this understanding of belonging is the role of the family. The family is thought of as the one responsible for bringing them to safety. Belonging is viewed positively insofar as it is connoted with something desirable, such as security.

Belonging as not being able to forget

The second concept of belonging can be described as the inability to forget. Laith explains this as follows:

“I belong to Iraq. Now I’ve forgotten a lot about my country. [...] I have to belong here because of my family and my children. You can’t do something without belonging. That’s a foundation. A house can’t stand without a foundation. [...] My children belong to Germany. I can’t say that about myself because I was born in my country and had many advantages. I had many disadvantages, but I also had advantages. I lived there for 40 years. I can’t forget all that. That’s terrible. [...] A person must not forget who they are. I am an Arab man.” (WI 1, 24-33)

Laith defines his belonging through his place of birth and the country, Iraq, where he grew up and spent 40 years. For Laith, belonging also includes the experiences he had in Iraq. He speaks of the disadvantages and advantages he experienced. Although he emphasises that there were many, the disadvantages do not deter him from longing for his country. For Laith, belonging is like a foundation and a condition for future action. For him, his children belong to Germany. He, on the other hand, wrestles with belonging, which moves between the experience in his homeland and the responsibility for his family. Laith describes the fact that he

cannot forget all this as terrible. At the same time, this inability to forget represents a value for him, as he says that one cannot forget who one is.

In the concept of belonging as the inability to forget, belonging is viewed as something fundamental. It is like a foundation upon which everything else stands. What that might be next is open: perhaps getting up anew every day and going to work, or perhaps experiencing joy in everyday life, or perhaps neither. This inability to forget describes belonging as an ambivalent pendulum movement between a place of birth, the experiences made there, and the question of identity. Belonging is the painful experience of memory and, at the same time, an anchor of stability and orientation. In this understanding of belonging, the family becomes the driving force behind being able to master these pendulum movements in everyday life.

Belonging as a zone free from racist prejudice

The topic of racism is a central point in the third conception of belonging. This concerns the absence of racist prejudices. Belal explains: “Belonging is simply remaining human and not having these racist prejudices.” (WI 4, 15-22). For Belal, belonging represents a human characteristic. It consists of a person approaching others without racist prejudices.

The refugees report experiencing racist prejudices at school (WI 5), in clubs (WI 4), or on the street (WI 6). These prejudices are experienced “directly” (WI 4, 18).

In this understanding of belonging, two levels can be identified through which belonging takes place: a legal level and a relational level. The legal level concerns place of birth and nationality, while the relational level concerns experiences in everyday interactions. Belonging is understood as a relationship in which racist prejudices have no place, in which “you simply understand that you can just let go of where this other person comes from, that you are simply friends.” (WI 25, 21-22). The relationship – here in the form of friendship – is given more importance than place of birth. It is through the relationship that belonging is established in everyday interactions.

Belonging as not feeling foreign

Not feeling like a stranger constitutes the fourth conception of belonging. Inaya presents this as follows: “It means not feeling like a stranger, talking to people. When there are events, when there are problems, people can meet and talk together, discuss things, for example, and find a solution.” (WI 10, 12-16)

Inaya describes how she doesn’t feel like a stranger when people talk to each other. She describes events as a place where a neighbourhood community can come together, where problems can be discussed, and solutions sought. Inaya sees organised meeting formats such as events as an opportunity to bring people closer together.

In this understanding of belonging, belonging is linked to a community. The sense of belonging is fostered through shared activities and by discussing a topic/problem together. Everyday interactions between people lead to a sense of togetherness on equal terms. Belonging is defined as the absence of a sense of alienation. Racism emerges as an experience that creates a sense of alienation.

In summary, it can be said that belonging is only conditionally conceptualised with a place. In the first concept, place is marked as an insecure place, which then allows belonging to be redefined, namely through the concept of security. The second concept links place of birth with identity. Place of birth is linked to nationality in the third concept of belonging and is viewed as a level of belonging. Belonging represents something fundamental (in the second and third concepts). Responsibility for the family becomes an indispensable part of the conceptualisation of belonging (the first and second concepts). Belonging implies the absence of racism (the third and fourth concepts). The third and fourth concepts highlight the relationships and everyday interactions between people as a distinctive feature of belonging. All concepts of belonging have two aspects in common: belonging is viewed as something positive. It can be experienced and felt in everyday life.

Conclusion: Belonging as entering a neighbourly community?

It can be seen that various experiences shape refugees' understandings of belonging in the context of their neighbourhood in East Germany. These are the experience of war, the experience of starting over, and the experience of racism. Refugees' understandings of belonging were identified as four concepts: belonging as living in safety, belonging as not being able to forget, belonging as not feeling like a stranger, and belonging as the experience of a zone free from racist prejudice.

A neighbourhood community I don't understand it as a more or less closed group to which refugees may or may not have access. I understand a neighbourhood community in the sense of a "third space" (Bhaba 2010), in which refugees possess sufficient political rights to negotiate what constitutes a neighbourhood community.

Racism prevents the development of a neighbourhood community. This goes hand in hand with the racialisation of identity. This fixation partially vanishes when, in neighbourly interaction, the fixation on only one facet of identity dissolves, thus allowing for other facets of identity, for example, as a mother, as a friend, or as a neighbour. From the perspective of refugees, the feeling of not being a stranger and the experience of a zone free from racist prejudice constitute a sense of belonging. The neighbourhood infrastructure consists of various state-run institutions such as kindergartens and schools and non-state-run institutions such as housing associations and nightclubs. The analysis shows that access to state-run institutions is significantly easier than to non-state-run ones. Here, too, racism acts as a gatekeeper. Access, or the lack of access, configures belonging insofar as it enables or prevents

refugees from entering into relationships with other people. Entering a neighbourly community would mean feeling at home in one's neighbourhood. Not having to fear being denied access to a new apartment or to pursue dancing or other hobbies.

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