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More than employment: Belonging and boundary construction among immigrants in rural Finland

Rural communities frame immigrants' belonging experiences in various ways. In this article, I examine: 1) how do immigrants produce belonging in their speech through symbolic boundaries in rural areas, and 2) what kinds of belonging do those boundary constructions create? This study contributes to the discussion about belonging in rural areas by highlighting immigrants' own voices in the process. The empirical data is based on twenty-three semi-structured interviews of immigrants living in rural areas in Finland. As a conclusion, the interviewees created belonging in relation to the safety and stagnancy of rural places, the experience of being (not) understood, and within religion and value systems. Within these three frames, the interviewees highlighted the meaning of employment, language, and social relations with Finnish people as aspects that promoted their sense of belonging. However, rural areas' structural order offers different opportunities for these three elements of belonging to materialise.

Keywords: belonging, boundaries, immigrants, rural areas

I t is argued that rural areas are changing entities, places where mobility encounters stability when people who move to and through rural areas interact with those who stay (Bell & Osti 2010; Milbourne & Kitchen 2014; Aure et al. 2018). International immigration illustrates this interaction between people when social order is re-organised and negotiated in changing rural areas. As Halfacree and Rivera (2012) state, immigration does not end when someone moves from one country to another, but the process continues after that. One crucial aspect in this process for individual immigrants as well as rural communities is how immigrants can experience membership in rural areas. This experience of being part of something – namely, belonging – does not come into existence by itself but is created through multiple negotiations and struggles. In these processes, immigrants are not passive bystanders but build their lives in multiple encounters between people and institutions in local rural communities. Immigrants change those places they are connected to, but at the same time, various local economic and institutional practices create limitations and opportunities for immigrants (Woods 2016).

Rural communities influence immigrants' lives in various ways. They provide a positive environment, acknowledging immigrants as individuals and fostering connections through shared values (Stenbacka 2012; Sireni 2022). Conversely, social order in small rural settings can be negative, leading to social control, perceiving immigrants as "other", and challenges in assimilating into tightly knit social networks (Haugen & Villa 2006; Stenbacka 2012; Hayfield & Schug 2019; Välimaa 2021). Immigrants must often adapt to local expectations, influencing the course of their lives (Larsen 2011; Zahl-Thanem & Haugen 2019; Haselbacher & Segarra 2022). Beyond these dynamics, immigrants are seen as vital for local survival, assisting communities in tackling population decline and labour shortages (Søholt et al. 2018; Hudson & Sandberg 2021). However, if immigrants are solely seen as solutions to local challenges, their personal aspirations may be neglected. This instrumental perspective can create a misalignment between external expectations and immigrants' desires and sense of belonging in rural areas. Recognising these complexities is crucial for understanding the relationship between immigrants and rural communities.

In this article, my aim is to focus on immigrants' experiences of belonging: I examine how immigrants themselves try to create belonging in rural areas. Belonging is one of the main driving forces in human life, and we

all strive towards it (Allardt 1993; Allen et al. 2021). In this process, different symbolic boundaries play an important role by means of which people and practices are defined (Lamont & Molnár 2002). Through these boundaries, social actors make a distinction between "us" and "them" and struggle how belonging is understood. Previous studies have widely examined different ethnic boundaries and attitudes towards immigrants from the majority's perspective. Boundaries can be based on religion or race (Alba 2005), as well as stereotyping (Rosbrook-Thompson & Armstrong 2022). Also, different countries can emphasise ethnic boundaries differently (Bail 2008). However, less attention has been placed on immigrants' perspectives in boundary work (Rétiová et al. 2021), although a few studies have contributed to filling this research gap (see, e.g., Essers & Benschop 2009; Purser 2009; Klvaňová 2019; Vandevoordt & Verschraegen 2019; Papadantonakis 2020). Even less attention has been paid to immigrants' boundary work in rural contexts (for an exception, see de Lima 2012). For this reason, there is a need to focus on immigrants' subjectivities concerning boundaries and belonging, to include immigrants' perspectives in these discussions (Basok & George 2020; Arora-Jonsson & Larsson 2021; Rétiová et al. 2021). In this study, I contribute to addressing this research gap.

My research questions are: 1) how do immigrants produce belonging in their speech through symbolic boundaries in rural areas, and 2) what kinds of belonging do those boundary constructions create? By highlighting immigrants' perspective and meaning-making in the belonging process, my study contributes to the discussion of belonging in rural areas. Furthermore, my study brings a complementary perspective to the integration discussion in rural areas by focusing on the concept of belonging. I am interested in those various social and structural elements that promote or prevent immigrants' sense of belonging in the local communities. I suggest that by using the concepts of belonging and boundaries, I can grasp the complex nature of personal meaning-making and institutional order. In addition, this study shows immigrants' opportunities and limitations in building personal experiences of belonging in rural areas.

Theoretical framework: Belonging and boundaries

A sense of belonging has several positive benefits for health and wellbeing (Kitchen et al. 2012; Berry & Hou 2017), which makes belonging a crucial experience for an individual. In this study, I understand belonging as a personal feeling of being at home, as a sense of comfort (Yuval-Davis 2006; Antonsich 2010), and as an experience of being safe and understood (Ignatieff 1995). Belonging is experienced when a person feels at "ease with oneself and one's surroundings" (May 2011, 368), when one is able to be relaxed and when "things go without saying" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020, 125). A crucial aspect of belonging is commonality, which is created when people share something in common: for example, values, norms and practices, language, lifestyle, and purpose (Hagerty et al. 1992; Anthias 2006; Riukulehto & Rinne-Koski 2016; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020). However, commonality does not mean sameness, as forms and requirements of belonging can also change (Jones & Krzyżanowski 2011; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020). This happens when rural communities accept people with different lifestyles and backgrounds. In this study, I examine belonging from these above-mentioned perspectives, that is, as a feeling of being at home and ease, which requires shared commonality and being understood.

Experiences of belonging include temporality (May 2016): belonging is where past, present, and future intertwine (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020). It is interesting how Savage et al. (2010) state that how a person sees the future in a certain place illustrates what kind of relationship a person has with that particular place. Or, put differently, belonging requires that someone is an accepted member not only in the present but also in the future (Anthias 2006). Thus, if immigration is meant to be a sustainable long-term solution in rural areas, it requires that immigrants consider rural areas to be desirable places to live not only in the present but also in the future. Rural areas have to be appealing options for immigrants to plan their lives also in the long run. Nevertheless, what is noteworthy is that population decline in rural areas is caused partly by youth moving to urban areas because of education and employment opportunities (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson 2006; Thissen et al. 2010); in other words, it is based on a lack of future opportunities in rural areas. This entails that immigrants are, paradoxically, supposed to build belonging in a context where different social and structural patterns are causing population decline.

What all the above means is that belonging cannot be experienced alone or unilaterally: it is a social process that requires other people to accept someone to be belonging with them (May 2013; Fathi 2022). Nevertheless, the sociality of belonging cuts through those various aspects of belonging: feeling at home, experiences of being safe and understood, and sharing something in common. Thus, other people and things are integral part of the personal process of belonging when they "dynamically interact with the individual's character, experiences, culture, identity, and perceptions" (Allen et al. 2021, 88).

Closely associated with belonging is the concept of identity. Identity and its popularity in the present Western world reflect the centrality of individuality in our societies (Bauman 2001): life has become a personal project that includes various choices and ongoing identity building. However, in many studies, the concepts of belonging and identity are used in parallel, sometimes without making a clear distinction between them (Lähdesmäki et al. 2016). Identity can be understood as the ways that people define themselves "in relation to themselves, their social environment and culture" (Saastamoinen 2006, 172). Identity means an answer to the question "Who am I?" To be able to answer this question, I need to belong somewhere with someone. Thus, identity and belonging are closely intertwined, but as May (2013) states, depending on who we belong with, we understand who we are. Identity is created on the basis of difference and sameness (Kehily 2009), whereas belonging does not necessarily require a sharp distinction between people; it is possible to experience some sense of belonging with "another" as well (Jones & Krzyżanowski 2011). Thus, belonging plays a decisive role in how an individual sees themselves in relation to other people and the surrounding world, and how and where an individual identifies him/herself.

Finally, while belonging is a process, it is not a linear one. It is about negotiation and becoming, not about accomplishment or a stable state (Baak 2016; Moris 2021). Similarly, belonging requires reflexivity (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020). Ralph and Staeheli (2011) note how language constructs belonging easily as an either/or state, which ignores the reality where belonging is produced as a complex mixture between sameness and difference. Belonging can vary between different situations and places, while these experiences can also contradict each other (May 2013). Thus, belonging requires negotiation and confirmation over and over again, between individuals and groups (Kraus 2006; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020).

Due to the negotiated nature of belonging, there is potential for existing boundaries of belonging to be stretched at some point (Wernesjö 2015). Although context shapes our behaviour and opportunities for belonging, individuals also shape social patterns, which can bring social change (May 2013). Jones and Krzyżanowski (2011) point out how belonging is not comprehensively defined outside the person, being at least partially elective and made by choice. For example, in order to resist stigmatisation, immigrants can reinforce belonging by speaking the local language, confronting stereotypes and racism, or defining what is considered moral behaviour (Wessendorf 2020).

In this article, I examine belonging by using the concept of symbolic boundaries. A different categorisation is needed, so that creating boundaries become possible (Van Eijk 2011). Symbolic boundaries "are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality" (Lamont & Molnár 2002, 168). These boundaries include symbolism, rituals, gestures, and discourse (Furseth 2011), by means of which inclusion and exclusion are produced. Moreover, these distinctions can include "cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes" (Lamont et al. 2015, 850). Boundary formation intertwines between several dimensions – for instance, ethnicity, national origin, religion, language, culture, norms, traditions, and gender (Bail 2008; Korteweg & Yurdakul 2009) – and depends on the context (May 2013). On the other hand, the concept of symbolic boundaries allows us to take into account that ethnic and cultural minorities are not necessarily defined either by themselves or others based on ethnic or cultural markers alone, but that those definitions can include, for instance, religious or class-related markers (Albeda et al. 2018).

Concerning ethnic boundary making, Wimmer (2008a; 2008b) has defined different strategies for how boundaries can be created. First, boundaries can be shifted, which means expanding or limiting the area of inclusion. The second strategy is to modify existing boundaries by changing one's own position within the boundary system. This is made possible by boundary crossing, where an individual adapts to the majority's lifestyle and conduct. Another strategy to modify boundaries is blurring, where an individual can emphasise, for instance, non-ethnic categorisation or universal humanity, and in this way create more inclusive

boundaries. Boundaries are blurred when an individual's position relative to a boundary is ambiguous; a person may be seen as part of groups on both sides of the boundary, or their membership can repeatedly change within the boundary system (Alba 2005). Importantly, the interpretation of symbolic boundaries depends on the situation. Different societies and contexts differ in how strictly or flexibly groups are defined, and how easily individuals are able to move between groups (Albeda et al. 2018). In this article, my aim is to concentrate on symbolic boundaries; simultaneously, I utilise Wimmer's above-mentioned theory of different boundary strategies. By examining symbolic boundaries, I seek to grasp what kinds of belonging immigrants are building, and how different boundaries frame those efforts to belong.

Methods and data analysis

There is variation in how immigrants are defined statistically in Finland, whether it is done by language, country of birth, or based on foreign background. Nevertheless, the number of people who can be considered as immigrants is approximately 500,000 persons, or 8–9% of the Finnish population (Tilastokeskus 2022). The majority of immigrants live in urban areas, and approximately 11% of the population with a foreign background live in rural areas (Juopperi 2019). For this study I have interviewed people who have moved to Finland from abroad and whose mother tongue is not Finnish or Swedish (Finland's official languages). In this article, I call this group of people "immigrants". Also, when I speak about "country of origin", I mean the countries that the interviewees mentioned as the places they were coming from. Typically, people move to Finland because of family, work, and studies, whereas a smaller number immigrate due to humanitarian reasons (Maahanmuuttovirasto 2021).

The empirical data of my study is based on twenty-three semi-structured interviews of immigrants living in rural areas in five regions in Finland and twelve municipalities. Rural areas in this study are defined according to the Finnish national urban–rural classification, which covers the whole country. In this classification, four out of seven classes are recognised as rural areas. Those four are defined as rural heartland areas, sparsely populated rural areas, local centres in rural areas, and rural areas close to urban areas (Finland's Environmental Administration 2019). For this study, my first criterion when looking for interviewees was that the person

was living in one of those four area types at the time of the interview, and second, that the person had come to Finland from some other country with the intention of staying for a long time or permanently.

I conducted the interviews between spring 2021 and autumn 2023. I found the interviewees through the community sector by contacting teachers in adult education centres, through immigration organisations, or through personal contacts and friends. Two teachers also helped me to arrange interviews (for instance, by offering a suitable place to conduct them in their school facilities). Excluding those people I met at a school, the interviewees chose a place where they felt comfortable for the interviews; this included homes, a library, a local park, and a lunch place or café. Six of the interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The interviews lasted for approximately an hour and were conducted in Finnish or English, depending on which language the person spoke more fluently. Before the interview I explained the purpose of my research, that participation was voluntary, and that the interview could be discontinued at any time without any consequences.

The interviewees were not a homogenous group, but their lives, family situations, and length of stay varied (from seven months to fifteen years of living in Finland), as did their educational background and stage of life. The majority of the interviewees lived in an urban area before moving to Finland, but a few also mentioned living in a smaller town or village. The interviewees were either working, studying for a profession, in work training, or integration training. Some were working and studying simultaneously. Their reasons for moving to Finland also varied. In total, I interviewed twelve individuals who came because of humanitarian reasons: eight arrived as asylum seekers, and four came as part of UNCHR's (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) quota of refugees. In addition, four interviewees were work-related immigrants, three came because of a relationship, and four arrived for studies. All of the interviewees were adults of working age, ranging from their 20s to 40s, and consisted of ten men and thirteen women. Some wanted to come explicitly to Finland and had been able to influence their destination, but a few people did not know where they would arrive. Those who came because of a Finnish spouse, studies or a particular workplace had more agency in the process.

In the end, however, it is very difficult to draw a line where volunteering ends and forcing migration begins (Bakewell 2021; Erdal & Oeppen 2018),

because although a person might not be under a threat of violence or death, prevailing living conditions can force them to seek better options from other countries (Bakewell 2021). Because I was interested in how the interviewees understood belonging at the time of the interviewee, I have summarised in Table 1 those factors I consider the most relevant for analysis. Those are sex, year of immigration (because belonging changes in nature during the years spent in the new country), and the labour market situation (because it frames daily life and directs future opportunities). When I included direct quotes in the result section, in brackets I used the time that an interviewee had spent in Finland at the time of the interview. This is because I conducted interviews in different years, and now the reader is able to see immediately how long each person has been in Finland at the time of the interviewee. This, however, can slightly vary comparing to information offered in table 1.

The countries that the interviewees identified as their countries of origin were Bangladesh, Brazil, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Georgia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Moldova, Nigeria, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Syria, Ukraine, and Vietnam. Eighteen of the interviewees had residence permits at the time of the interview, five of the interviewees were awaiting their permit decision. While all of these above-mentioned differences obviously influence belonging and how it is produced, the aim of this study is not to make generalisations about immigrants' belonging experiences in rural Finland. Rather, my focus is on how immigrants produce belonging in a particular moment in their life while living in rural areas.

The interview questions dealt with, for example, the rural area as a place, social relations, feelings of belonging or not belonging, strange or familiar practices in the new country of residence, job opportunities, and aspects of cultural conduct, such as religion, customs, and food. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in Finnish or in English. When the interview was conducted in English, and if I included these quotes in the results section, I have not edited the grammar but included them as is.

I analysed my data by means of qualitative content analysis and examined how immigrants (re)produced belonging through symbolic boundaries. With qualitative methods, I was able to understand the meanings that interviewees gave to belonging in rural areas (see, e.g., Patton 2002). As mentioned above, categorisation is needed for boundary construction (Van Eijk 2011), and through these distinctions social actors define and

Table 1. Summary of interviewees at the time of the interview.

The number of the interview	Sex	Year of immigration	Current labour market status
1	Male	2019	Integration training
2	Male	2019	Integration training
3	Female	2020	Integration training
4	Male	2020	Integration training
5	Male	2019	Integration training
6	Female	2018	Studying
7	Male	2020	Integration training
8	Female	2017	Studying, work training
9	Male	2019	Work training
10	Male	2017	Work training
11	Female	2017	Recently graduated from vocational school
12	Male	2015	Working
13	Female	2014	Integration training
14	Male	2008	Studying for a new profession and working
15	Female	2022	Studying and working
16	Female	2022	Studying and working
17	Female	2012	Working
18	Female	2008	Working
19	Male	2012	Looking for a new job
20	Female	2018, several years in seasonal work before that	Working
21	Female	2018	Studying
22	Female	2010	Working
23	Female	2013	Working

give meaning to the reality around them (Lamont & Molnár 2002). Even though boundaries can include, for instance, rituals, gestures, and discourses (Furseth 2011), in this study I focus on symbolic boundaries produced by immigrants when they speak about their lives in rural areas and the meaning of belonging.

My data analysis was based on an abductive approach, being an iterative process between theoretical discussion on belonging and boundaries and empirical data (see Dubois & Gadde 2002). In the beginning of the data analysis, I read all the interviews and coded the data with the help of software (Atlas.ti) for qualitative analysis. When I read the data the first time, I concentrated on distinctions that the interviewees produced: what they brought forth as elements of sameness and otherness, and "us" and "them". I started with this because such categorisation is a fundamental part of the belonging process (Yuval-Davis 2006). The coded topics that were repeated most often included "social relations", "language", "rural place", "employment", "cultural differences", and "country of origin". Within these codes the interviewees positioned themselves and other people in a way that created distinctions between "us" and "them". At the same time, they located themselves as included or excluded people depending on the context in which they were speaking. My aim was to examine those situations and aspects of their lives where the interviewees brought up the sense of belonging. Next, I analysed the data thoroughly from the perspective of boundaries and scrutinised how the interviewees constructed boundaries: for instance, by modifying and expanding them (Alba 2005; Wimmer 2008a). My intention was no longer to concentrate merely on distinctions but instead examine what kind of various boundary work the interviewees made and how they produced belonging through this boundary work. When I finished coding, I collected similar codes into categories (Kleinheksel et al. 2020) in order to better recognise the connections that the different codes have. Lastly, I formed themes where the meaning of belonging was summarised in relation to rural areas' safety and stagnancy, immigrants' experiences of being understood, and religion and value systems.

Rural as a place of ease, safety, and stagnancy

The interviewees highlighted Finnish rural areas as secure places, especially for children and families. Especially the interviewees with refugee background spoke often about the safety of rural areas and its importance in their present life. Boundary work was made between the present life in Finnish rural areas and the previous life in the country of origin. One interviewee illustrated this by saying that where he lives now, it is not necessary to lock the doors, and police or soldiers are not on the streets (Int. 2). An absence of police was associated with security, because for the

interviewee their presence implied a threat and the restless political situation in the past. In this way, safety and trust in the people of the local community intertwined.

Boundary work was also made by comparing present life in rural areas to life in the past in bigger cities. When doing this, the interviewees connected different geographical places and temporality. In these descriptions, Finnish rural areas were defined by terms such as "safe", "natural" and "peaceful". Previous studies have observed the same: the peacefulness and closeness to nature in Finnish rural areas are appreciated by immigrants (Sjöblom-Immala 2012). Familiarity with and knowing the place made every day navigating easy, whereas busy city life was described being out of control. As May (2011, 370) states, we belong somewhere when we can go through "our everyday lives without having to pay much attention to how we do it". The manageability of rural areas was connected to an ease of life and the ability to live daily life without paying too much attention to it. Fitting in with the prevailing phase of life created a sense of belonging:

> Why I am here, I have a job, and everything is familiar here. I know this place, it is safe, natural, everybody is nice, there is no hurry. It is a difference, when there is such a hurry in the city. In the countryside there is not, it is quiet, it is the difference. […] For now, I haven't thought to leave anywhere, because everything is here. (Int. 12, male, six years in Finland, working)

However, the reverse of peacefulness can cause a sense of not belonging. Some interviewees described rural areas with terms such as "boring", "nowhere to go and spend time", or "too peaceful". Boringness was also connected to possibilities to spend leisure time and the general atmosphere of the area. Again, comparisons were made with cities, but in these descriptions rural areas were seen negatively. Cities were described as lively, whereas rural areas were boring. Especially a lack of one's own car complicated experiences of autonomy and the ability to consume. This kind of structural boundary, the inability to move, was perceived as immovable and characteristic in rural areas. Obtaining independent mobility required a personal positional move to become a car owner, because the structural transportation environment did not change:

> […] we [name of the country of origin], we don't have all we need here in [name of the municipality]. But we have to go out from here to get what we want. […] If there is lot of shops here, then we draw lot of people to stay here in this place. If

> you ask people who are moving out from here "oh, why do you move out?"
> There are no shops, there is nothing to do here. When you are going from here
> to here, there is no buses to take you. (Int. 13, female, seven years in Finland,
> integration training)

One interesting aspect is how stagnancy was also present when the interviewees talked about job and study opportunities in rural areas. In public and political discussions, immigrants as a workforce is the perspective that receives the most attention. Except for a few interviewees, mainly people who had stayed in Finland a shorter time and had a refugee background had not yet worked. On the other hand, people who came for work, a relationship, or studies, or had stayed for several years, were more often employed or had experiences of Finnish work life. A common factor was that work was considered a vital part of belonging and a meaningful life. Work was considered something by means of which a person participates in society and fills a prevailing norm, whereas unemployment was a boundary that created a sense of not belonging.

Moreover, work life appeared differently for the interviewees, depending on their labour market position. Those who were employed had crossed a boundary that strengthened their sense of belonging, compared to those who were unemployed. Also, those who had not yet worked in Finland were more uncertain about employment opportunities in rural areas. Furthermore, employment was used as a boundary to distinguish people. Some of those interviewees who were employed highlighted their hard work to reach the position where they were now. In other words, the responsibility to make a positional move from unemployed to employed was located with immigrant individuals. In a similar tone, some interviewees suggested that in the beginning, immigrants should be willing to take jobs that do not correspond to their education level. However, the interviewees resisted the idea that immigrants should remain for the rest of their lives working in the fields or in a low-paid job that did not correspond to their education level.

In this similar tone, one Ukrainian interviewee made a distinction between herself, having lived in rural Finland for years, and recently arrived Ukrainians. For her, the country of origin (Ukraine) had less meaning in terms of sameness; being hard-working and earning one's place in the present local community were what made the distinction between people. The interviewee highlights hard work, enduring difficulties, and individual responsibility, where the right to belong is earned through

personal efforts and sacrifices. Thus, the norm itself does not change, but an individual has to adapt their behaviour to the prevailing structures:

> [...] when Ukrainians start to come here [because of the war in 2022] they were like: "Well, I am a sophisticated architect, I am so intelligent, my intelligence is not allowing me to go to work on the dairy farm." I was like: "I wasn't eating, I wasn't drinking, I wasn't sleeping and I was screaming all the time and I had to work. I have also Master's degree. [...] It doesn't mean that I don't have any education. I have education. But I had to work at that time, because I didn't have any other option. [...] Those people who come now, they don't have no language at all, not any. Not English, no Finnish. They don't have skills but they want the highest paid job here." (Int. 17, female, eleven years in Finland, working)

Another interesting aspect is how work life and employment intertwined with temporality, the work life in the past in the country of origin, and work opportunities in Finnish rural areas in the future. For example, several interviewees with an asylum-seeker background who were highly educated saw work opportunities in rural areas as uncertain. These interviewees described goals that they had for the future, but in those visions rural areas did not appear as an appealing option. Many mentioned intentions to study or desires to work in the fields that fit with their education. In the next quote, one interviewee illustrates this struggle between a comfortable rural area and his ambition to find an interesting job for himself and his wife. In his description, being professionally valued and a needed member of the community are more important than physical safety. Although the rural place is considered safe, it does not satisfy the highly educated interviewee's sense of belonging, and instead creates a sense of not belonging:

> First, we were looking for [a job] here. We are used to this region, especially me, my wife little bit less. I have been used to [name of the municipality]. I like this area. It is a very difficult decision for us, because here we have lot of friends. [...] We have a life, good life, it is difficult. But the work is the priority for us. (Int. 2, male, two years in Finland, integration training)

Put differently, the structural nature of rural areas regarding work opportunities for highly educated people appears in the above-mentioned quote to be unchangeable. Thus, if the person is not willing to adapt to the local expectations – and, for instance, work in the place that does not match one's education – the most attractive option is to move somewhere else, where opportunities are more flexible. It is noteworthy that work itself does not automatically create a sense of belonging. Rather, meaningful

work does. The significance of meaning is especially expressed in the quote below, where the interviewee produces a boundary between the current, motionless life in a rural place compared to the speedy and exciting life of the past. One element of belonging is a feeling of being needed and valued (Mahar et al. 2013), but the interviewee explains how her safe but stagnant life with no stimulating work does not offer that experience. Thus, the quote highlights importance of meaningful work in the process of belonging:

> Every day the same two trees are looking at me from the window. I don't have anything here, nothing to do, only home, work. And that's boring for me. Because I had such a job in Ukraine that I travelled a lot. [...] I had a really speedy life, lot of things to do, and I talked a lot and I managed, and I knew myself and I felt I am alive. And now everything has stopped. (Int. 8, female, four years in Finland, studying and work training)

In this section, ease of life, safety, and stagnancy in rural areas intertwined when the interviewees built boundaries between the present, past, and future, and between rural areas and cities. The safety of Finnish rural areas and the manageability of rural places were highlighted and considered positively. Paradoxically, safety and easiness were transformed in a negative sense to indicate stagnancy and being bored when the rural pace of life was seen as too slow. Furthermore, although public discussion highlights labour shortages in rural areas, the interviewees brought up that employment itself is not enough for belonging, but instead work has to be personally meaningful.

Rural areas as a place of being (not)understood

To experience a sense of belonging, one needs to feel understood (Ignatieff 1995). One crucial tool to develop common understanding and sharing is language. By means of language we connect with other people and build a sense of belonging and understanding of who we are (May 2013). The interviewees repeated over and over again the importance of Finnish language as a gateway to social relations with Finnish people and society as a whole. Learning Finnish was presented as a normal path that immigrants have to follow to become familiar with the new country and its people and practices. Language was also connected to economic autonomy, because Finnish language was seen as pivotal for employment. Because the boundary related to language was regarded as unmovable, an

individual has to be willing to change his/her position from an illiterate outsider to a fluent insider.

A lack of Finnish proficiency was described to cause many difficulties. One interviewee explained that when she moved to one Finnish rural municipality years ago, it was very difficult to receive information or services from local institutions in any other language than Finnish. In her description, the lack of Finnish proficiency marked her as "a foreigner", which led to services being withheld from her. However, she continued that learning Finnish helped her to connect with Finnish people, which, according to her, created a positive circle to learn more. The language boundary did not change, but the interviewee herself became skilled in such a way that Finnish enabled her to step from an outsider role to an insider:

> Before it was hard because you don't speak Finnish. Before that moment it was hard. But then, when I tried to talk Finnish, Finns are "woah" at least one word she knows, well, then they are interested to teach you some new words. (Int. 17, female, eleven years in Finland, working)

Learning language requires practice, and many interviewees mentioned the importance of being able to talk with a native Finnish speaker. One interviewee described overcoming the language barrier as a turning point for her. She credited her competent Finnish teacher in the process, but she also mentioned a local bus driver with whom she was able to practise Finnish while travelling to her Finnish language course. This illustrates the importance of casual everyday encounters and weak ties, which can have long-term positive consequences. Again, the language boundary did not change, but belonging was promoted with the help of a bus driver:

> For me, the outsider who helped me talk was the bus driver. I feel unwell if I sit at the back seat of the bus. I always had to sit in the front seat. And the bus driver talked and asked me where you're from and all that. From there I started to talk with an outsider, I wasn't afraid no longer [of speaking in Finnish]. [...] I think the language barrier was broken at the very beginning, it gave good opportunities. (Int. 18, female, fifteen years in Finland, working)

Opportunities to use language were also connected with urban and rural areas, and temporality. The next interviewee divides people who speak his mother tongue into cities and rural areas, where, according to him, a person has to speak Finnish. In this description, an urban area appears as a place where immigrants interact as an isolated group with their own

language, which he consideres negative. In rural areas, however, the social order is different, and one is forced to communicate in Finnish. This is classified positively. This way of being understood in one's own mother tongue today is categorised as a less desirable option, because in the future it will cause a sense of not belonging:

> That is also one of the reasons why I want to be here, because, for example, in Helsinki or Vantaa, I have friends there, too, but they speak our own language. [...] And for me, if I move there, I will speak my mother tongue everyday, and I think my Finnish language skills will not develop as well as here. (Int. 5, male, 1.5 years in Finland, integration training)

A common language enables being understood, which is experienced in different social relations. In belonging, different supportive local social relations and personal contacts are important (Grip 2020; Moris 2021). Without other people it is impossible to be understood, because they operate as mirrors by means of which the experience of being understood (or not) is created. In Finnish rural areas, where the number of people is small, it is not necessarily always easy to find people "of the same spirit" or those who share similar life experiences or mutual interests. The interviewees described Finnish people as generally friendly; at the same time, however, many of the interviewees told of difficulties to become close friends with them. There seemed to be a boundary between immigrants and Finns on a deeper friendship level.

The next quote illustrates this, as well as the interviewee's search for friendships. First, the interviewee describes her inability to find friends in her small local municipality. The given reason for that is the boundary between her cultural background and Finnish social order and culture, and how closeness is understood. This causes an experience of exclusion and loneliness. Then, she continues by describing social isolation as an unmovable boundary between her and the rest of the community. Her perception is that because she could not change her position and cross the boundary to join local adult friendship circles, the interviewee turned inward towards her family, and especially her baby daughter:

> [...] we [the name of the country], we like going close to people, it is like our culture. But when you contact [Finnish people], no one wants to come close to you. It is hard for me. [...] So, I and the baby, we were in this municipality, so I needed friends. But there was no friends. So, I just have to make my daughter my friend. (Int. 13, female, seven years in Finland, integration training)

In some cases, the most comfortable social network was created with people who had the same country of origin, comprising an entangled Finnish local community. The next interviewee establishes a boundary between Finland and the local municipality in which he lives, but he continues how it is his own ethnic group within the local community that brings a feeling of comfort. Although on the surface a rural place appears flexible by allowing different lifestyles, that paradoxically also indicates isolation from the rest of the local community:

> I belong now to [name of the municipality], not Finland. Because this place is different than other parts of Finland. [Many] Turkish families are living here now, and this, how can I say, this is a mixing situation. Sometimes we are living in a Turkish way, sometimes we are living in Finland. I think I am part of [name of the municipality] now. But if I am in Finland for a while, probably I feel I belong in Finland. (Int. 1, male, two years in Finland, integration training)

Although close relationships are necessary for an experience of being understood, there are many other social relationships that are also part of belonging. As May (2013) remarks, not all social relations are equally deep and strong; weak ties for example, with acquaintances, are important for belonging, too. Everyday encounters can happen in different places: at school, at the workplace, during hobbies, in one's neighbourhood, and so on. The next quote expresses the importance of everyday encounters and detachment from social relations with people, even if they came from the same country. The interviewee explains how her mood changed for the positive after she became involved in a comfortable work community where she was able to spend time with Finnish co-workers, compared to the time when she lived with fellow Ukrainians who had recently escaped the war. This illustrates the meaning and influence of social relations, even casual ones, on wellbeing:

> I think when I started to work and especially work with Finnish people, […] there was openness and smiles […] but when we lived all together with Ukrainians […] I felt depressed. […] But now I have other feeling, when they [Finnish] are talking and just smiling, you also feel positive and sharing their feeling. (Int. 20, female, a seasonal worker for several years, since stayed in Finland for two years, working)

In my data, personal experiences of being understood varied. Language was considered a crucial tool to share thoughts, create mutual understanding, and become known by other people. Thus, the importance of Finnish proficiency was highlighted. Furthermore, various social relations are the basis where being understood and the sense of belonging are

developed. Although everyday encounters with acquaintances enable a sense of security and familiarity, the lack of sharing things on a deeper level created a sense of not belonging.

Rural as place of common religion and value systems

Belonging requires shared values, religion, lifestyle, practices, and experiences (Anthias 2006; Berghuijs 2017). All these are elements that create a sense of commonality, which is pivotal for belonging (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020). Commonality comes close to being understood, because similar beliefs and values make people see the world through similar lenses, which creates a reciprocal experience of commonality. However, there is a difference between being understood in everyday encounters or because of having a common language, for example, whereas a shared value system, like religion, creates a sense of belonging in a deep and fundamental way.

Moreover, religion operates in the spheres of traditions, the meaning of life, and the sacred and profane, and it can reach beyond the present world to the supernatural. In Finland, despite deep secularisation and decreasing church membership, the Evangelical Lutheran Church and its traditions have a long and significant position in Finnish society (Pesonen & Vesala 2007; Ketola et al. 2017). The Church is still important, especially in rural communities, where attendance is higher than in urban areas (Pesonen & Vesala 2007). At the same time, this means that there is little religious variation in rural areas, and because of that, finding belonging within the sphere of religion can become a complex task. These complexities and different boundaries concerning belief systems become visible in local encounters where there are limited places to practise religion. One interviewee recalled one such encounter with the pastor of a local Lutheran church, describing a terrorist attack by Muslims where Christians were killed:

> We joined Sunday mass and after the mass we met the priest there and we offered our condolences. We sat side by side, I apologised to him on behalf of those misguided Muslims. I apologised on behalf of Islam, I apologised on behalf of other Muslims and I am very, very sad and sorry that many innocent people were murdered by these terrorists. This is how we share our sorrows. No religion in the world doesn't order to kill, to murder any innocent people in the world. This is God we are talking about. (Int. 4, male, one year in Finland, integration training)

The interviewee first categorised the boundary between Christianity and Islam, but right after that he shifted the boundary to become more inclusive. When the interviewee distanced himself from "misguided Muslims" and "terrorists", he simultaneously blurred the religious boundary between Islam and Christianity. In other words, the interviewee created an alternative representation of himself as a Muslim and built a common ground with the majority (Korteweg & Yurdakul 2009). Instead of emphasising the differences, he created a common element between himself and the local pastor that was based on faith in one God, and expanded on that same idea to generally include religions that do not order their followers to kill. This expansion of boundaries made belonging possible, at least on some level.

Similarly, another interviewee drew a boundary between Islam and the local religious landscape by explaining how practising Islam in a small Finnish place requires flexibility. It was not possible to practise Islam today in the same way as in the past; instead, in the new environment the interviewee needed to adapt to the local practices. He did not try to change a boundary but instead adapted to the prevailing situation. His approach was to accept that although there is no mosque in such a small place, it is something "that has to be understood", and the responsibility of being flexible rests with the immigrant individual:

> In Helsinki, Turku, and Vantaa, there are mosques. If there is not a mosque, well, you have to get used to that, because Finland is not, official religion is not Islam, that has to be understood. I don't have any problems to pray at home or somewhere I want, it is not a problem. (Int. 5, male, 1.5 years in Finland, integration training)

Boundaries can also be found among Christians. In a small and religiously homogenous place, opportunities to practise different streams of Christianity are limited. However, despite doctrinal differences, a church can become a place of shared commonality and belonging. The next interviewee describes growing up as a Catholic, but in the rural municipality where he now lives he found his way to a local Pentecostal church. Although there is a boundary between different streams of Christianity, he stretched the religious boundary to include Christians generally. The local church became a meeting place and created a sense of belonging:

> I used to be a Catholic, I am a Catholic because I was baptised there, but now when I reached here I said, it is not because here is not any Catholic church

that means I have to stay home, let me just participate [in the local Pentecostal church], they are one who is near me. They are also Christians. So I used to meet them every Sunday. (Int. 7, male, seven months in Finland, integration training)

Similarly, a value system does not need to be bound to a rural place or one religion; it can exceed local limitations and become universal. In this way, the local interacts with the global, and these universal human values can be found in a rural community. In the next quote, the emphasis is not on a specific religion or belief system but on an individual's behaviour, based on which a moral judgement can be made. A boundary is established between good and bad behaviour based on a universal respect for shared humanity. All people who accept this loose definition of respect are part of "us". Similarly, it can be seen how the interviewee justifies her presence in a small place while de-emphasising strict religious commitments, instead turning towards universal values that are more easily accepted and shared, whatever the geographical place:

I am always respectful for other countries' religion, culture, traditions, and other things. In our country, I was thinking like this also. Everybody has, is deserved to be respected. Whatever is religion, whatever is believing, it is not interesting to me. I am interested in if it is a good person or not, behaviour. Universal, global rules, not religion. I am always respectful to other opinions and views. (Int. 3, female, eight months in Finland, integration training)

A local community is a place where people with different belief and value systems and lifestyles meet each other. As Anthias (2016) argues, shared values are not an automatic precondition for belonging, as values can be shared in various ways. This creative aspect of boundary work was seen when the interviewees modified boundaries in different ways. The prominent role of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and its traditions in rural areas (Pesonen & Vesala 2007; Ketola et al. 2017) frames opportunities to practise various forms of different religions. However, the interviewees approached these boundaries by highlighting flexibility and understanding, and by expanding their personal boundaries in a way that de-emphasised differences and instead created similarities. For this reason, and despite fundamental differences in core values, belonging became possible, at least in some sense.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, I examined how immigrants produced symbolic boundaries in rural areas and what kinds of belonging those boundary constructions created. By focusing on immigrants' perspectives, my aim was to bring a complementary view to rural areas' intercultural relations and integration discussions by focusing on how belonging in rural areas is built. The results show that belonging in rural places was constructed in relation to safety and stagnancy, the experience of being (not) understood, and beliefs and value systems. In addition, different intercultural encounters and structural aspects were perceived to affect the individual's sense of belonging (Radford 2017; Weidinger & Kordel 2020; Herslund 2021). Those structural limitations framed the ability of immigrants to build belonging, but at the same time the interviewees creatively utilised different strategies to negotiate a sense of belonging.

In this study, one important aspect concerning belonging was how the interviewees described rural areas as places of ease, safety, and stagnancy. One crucial aspect of belonging is an experience of safety, the ability to feel at ease, and being relaxed in the surrounding environment (Ignatieff 1995; May 2011; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020). In this data, safety intertwined with temporality when the interviewees saw rural areas as safe places in their present life, which strongly promoted a sense of belonging. Together with safety, manageability of rural areas was considered positively. Thus, such a structural order in rural areas did not require adaptation in a negative sense. However, when intersecting with the future, safety – and, more specifically, economic security – appeared more uncertain. Several interviewees saw employment opportunities in rural areas and especially opportunities for meaningful work to be limited. It is noteworthy that work itself does not guarantee a sense of belonging (Caxaj & Diaz 2018; Basok & George 2020; Scott & Visser 2021), and for instance, temporary work can position immigrants at a remove from the local community and full membership (Scott & Visser 2021). Similarly, agency is important here. The ability to make even limited choices concerning job opportunities is crucial for a person's self-worth (Purser 2009). In other words, immigrants' sense of belonging is not resolved if the only employment opportunities in rural areas are those with the labour shortage. This notion is important, because belonging requires that one is needed and valued, and that the person is complementing the system or environment (Hagerty et al. 1992). If such an experience of agency is lacking, it also

affects the sense of belonging and how immigrants see their future in rural communities.

Thus, despite political intentions of immigrants being supposed to alleviate rural areas' labour shortages in specific fields, this did not necessarily fit with individuals' personal aspirations. If immigrants are positioned only instrumentally to benefit local thriving, space for belonging remains fixed and limited. If shifting and modifying boundaries (Wimmer 2008a; 2008b) become difficult, and immigrants are not able to find a meaningful life in rural areas, it is more likely that they will look for opportunities elsewhere. Although in political discussions immigrants are seen as reducing the labour shortage of rural areas, it does not mean that immigrants see their role similarly. For example, the interviewees did not describe themselves as people with some specific mission to fill vacancies, for instance, in the healthcare sector. Obviously, these contradicting views between political visions and an individual's opportunities challenge experiences of belonging.

Other elements of belonging that I want to emphasise here are the meaning of Finnish language proficiency and social relations. Both aspects are closely connected to feeling as if one is understood, which is significant for belonging (Ignatieff 1995). Through common language we reach out to other people, share our thoughts, and make ourselves understood. Language is also a tool by means of which we familiarise ourselves with the context where we are living, as we become part of the community. The interviewees repeated regularly how language was a key for social relations, employment, and society as a whole. The question related to language is how immigrants can learn language in rural areas and participate in language courses, including those people who are working. In this data, language was defined as an unquestioned boundary that was not expected to change; instead, it was seen that immigrants have to cross that boundary in order to gain membership. However, belonging is always an end result of social interaction, which means that people whose mother tongue is Finnish are part of the process and can do their part to extend the circle of belonging and make boundaries more flexible. Here, when different relationships entangle with language, the social relations become crucial. Various everyday encounters and also weak ties play a part, where it is possible to practise Finnish and create social networks and friendships. However, as the interviewees explained, the boundary related to social relations was not easily overcome. This is unfortunate, because the

interviewees emphasised the meaning and importance of social relations with Finnish people. Relationships with Finns can vary, depending on whether they are a spouse, a local immigration coordinator, an employer, or someone else, but this notwithstanding, they are crucial for a sense of belonging.

As I have shown, belonging did not consist exclusively of having a job, instead being a multifaceted and ambivalent process (May 2013; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020). Noteworthy is that belonging is an ongoing process, not a straightforward journey from start to finish (May 2011; Lähdesmäki et al. 2016; Moris 2021), and can take different forms even though people may have similar situations or backgrounds (Jones & Krzyżanowski 2011). However, a subjective sense of belonging cannot be created in a vacuum but through interaction with other people and the surrounding environment. As Wimmer (2009) argues, boundaries can be implemented differently depending on the context, when immigrants try to signal full membership and achieve acceptance. This highlights the meaning of institutional order in the process. According to Saukkonen (2013), immigrants try to adapt to different, unwritten social rules in order to successfully manage in society, and in doing so they have to accept or reject different behavioural patterns. Similarly, Pfaff-Czarnecka (2020, 121) states how power relations institutionalise social interaction in a way that set limits on social practices and equal opportunities, which means that "belonging often comes at the price of subjugation vis-à-vis norms guiding and guarding the collective life". Immigrants' boundary strategies depend on the institutional landscape and power structures; boundary production is driven by institutional stimuli, and individuals have to choose how they interpret existing boundaries (Wimmer 2008b). People signal their moral behaviour, thereby trying to convince other people of their belonging (May 2013). This means that belonging is hard work, demanding that relations are maintained and loyalty and commitment displayed (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020).

The results of my study are in line with these observations, where the individual immigrant's need for flexibility and understanding in order to belong to the local lifestyle was emphasised. Nevertheless, immigrants can also use different strategies when they categorise boundaries and create belonging, for instance, by emphasising their own moral worth and cultural competence (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen 2019), or by ignoring stigmatisation (Wessendorf 2020). According to Alba (2005), in the

European context the burden of adaptation is mainly placed upon the individual immigrant; this is implemented by boundary crossing. The same tendency was also clearly seen in this study. Simultaneously, however, the interviewees did not uncritically produce belonging as something that demands comprehensive adaptation, but instead negotiated their own values alongside the local values. Nevertheless, problems appear when boundaries of rural areas remain inflexible in a way that require adaptation only from the immigrants' side. This way belonging remain inadequate.

There are limitations in this research. My data is not a complete representation of all immigrants living in rural Finland. I interviewed immigrants who were studying, working, or participating in integration training. Each one of them, at least on some level, was already part of the local community and its everyday life. The boundaries and belonging might have been described differently if I had interviewed, for instance, unemployed immigrants, mothers with small children, or those who fall outside of local services and social settings. Thus, further research could examine how people in different life stages build belonging in rural areas or examine how belonging and wellbeing are connected in immigrants' lives. In this study, however, I wanted to emphasise the processual nature of belonging and highlight that belonging requires more than employment, a factor which should be taken more into account in rural policies.

Statements and declarations

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