JYS
Journal of Youth Studies

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Youth Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjys20

Young refugees’ feelings of belonging? Encounters with rural Denmark and northern Norway

Lise Herslund & Gry Paulgaard

To cite this article: Lise Herslund & Gry Paulgaard (07 May 2024): Young refugees’ feelings of belonging? Encounters with rural Denmark and northern Norway, Journal of Youth Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2024.2347980

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2347980

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 07 May 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 216

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=cjys20

JOURNAL OF YOUTH STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2347980

OPEN ACCESS

Young refugees' feelings of belonging? Encounters with rural Denmark and northern Norway

Lise Herslund[a] and Gry Paulgaard[b]

[a]Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, University of Copenhagen, Frederiksberg, Denmark; [b]Department of Education, The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway

ABSTRACT
This paper investigates how young refugees settled in rural Norway and Denmark experience their new places of residence. We find inspiration in the idea of 'contradictions of space' (Kinkaid [2020]. "Re-encountering Lefebvre: Toward a Critical Phenomenology of Social Space." *Society and Space* 38 (1): 167–186.) in exploring how young refugees navigate issues in rural life from housing, education, work and social life to their material surroundings, including the weather. Which experiences result in feelings of meaning and orientation, and which spur feelings of disorientation and contradiction? The empirical material is based on fieldwork and qualitative interviews with young refugees and local volunteers in rural Norway and Denmark. Despite several differences between rural areas in the two countries, young refugees' experiences from within show many similarities and common experiences between them. The harsh weather, empty streets, lack of familiarity with the more formal community life in rural areas, long distances from sites of education, etc. create feelings of disorientation and contradiction, while socializing with other refugees provides feelings of community and belonging. Taken together, the two aspects drive their decisions to stay in or leave the rural area.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 6 March 2023
Accepted 22 April 2024

KEYWORDS
Young refugees; rural Norway and Denmark; belonging; contradiction of space; harsh weather

Introduction

This paper explores the lives of young people with refugee backgrounds living in rural municipalities in northern Norway and western Denmark. Research on young refugees has mainly focused on urban settings. This is in line with youth research in general, which has been criticized for its unacknowledged 'metrocentricity' by universalizing a focus on metropolitan young people 'as globally emblematic of young people as a whole' (Farrugia 2014, 2016, 4). There is a discursive distinction between rural and urban life that defines urban life in the cities as sophisticated and as being for young people, thereby preventing their counterparts in rural areas from taking up subjectivities as young people (Pless and Sørensen 2015). A metrocentric approach also tends to

CONTACT Lise Herslund ✉ lihe@ign.ku.dk Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, University of Copenhagen, Rolighedsvej 23, 1958 Frederiksberg, Denmark

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

overlook the importance of how place and geography can represent changeable and contingent conditions in young people's lives (Farrugia 2014). This paper will explore this approach with a focus on the rural.

The number of international newcomers has increased in rural areas in the Nordic countries, where rural populations are even more diverse than the EU average (Nørregaard 2018). Refugees have been settled in rural areas for some decades in these countries (Larsen 2011; Søholt, Stenbacka, and Nørgaard 2018). However, refugees who first settled in rural areas have tended to move to city areas after the first years of settlement more than other migrant groups (Andersen 2015; Ordemann 2017). There is a debate in both the academic literature and among politicians in European countries on whether refugees should be settled in rural areas at all. Arguments for doing so often make reference to their supposed ability to repopulate otherwise dwindling communities (Brandt 2015; Nørregaard 2018). Others disagree with refugees being used to promote rural development when peripheral areas have scarcities in jobs and in the services that should provide for refugees' needs (Aure, Førde, and Magnussen 2018; McAreavey and Argent 2018; Søholt, Stenbacka, and Nørgaard 2018; Woods 2018). Farrugia (2014, 839) points out that rural places generally lacks the various service economies 'that structure the (increasingly precarious) transitions of urban youth'.

Denmark and Norway both have dispersal strategies to settle refugees across the country, including in rural areas. In Norway, this initiative comes from the central government, which has asked municipalities across the country to accept refugees for settlement. Municipalities that agree to do so receive economic support for the first five years and must provide the refugee's first housing, an obligatory two-year introductory programme and a work programme (IMDI 2019; Mathiesen 2020). Denmark also disperses refugees to all its municipalities. Like Norway, it is the municipality in which the refugees are settled that caters for them for a period of three years by offering language classes and later job-training. It is also the responsibility of the municipality to find housing and to financially support the refugees during their schooling and introductory programmes (Larsen 2011).

In our quest to understand the role of rural places of residence for young refugees, we find inspiration in Kinkaid's (2020, 180) notion of 'contradictions of space', referring to moments occurring within the experience of a subject when he or she struggles to practice space and suffers disorientation. We investigate the lived practices of young refugees, namely how they navigate in and experience rural life, from housing, education, work and social life to the more 'physical' aspects of rural life and their material surroundings, including the natural environment. This will enable us to answer the research question: What role do new rural places of residence play in the young refugees' lives and feelings of belonging, and what are the driving forces behind their staying in or leaving the rural area?

The term 'young people' is used very broadly in this paper. It covers young people from 14 to 20 years of age who have been settled in rural areas with their families (the Norwegian case), but it also covers young adults from 17 to 25 who have arrived on their own (the Danish case) and been settled in rural areas.

Theoretical approach

Scholars point to a shift in research on children and young people with migrant and refugee backgrounds, from viewing them as agents of integration to a focus on them as ‘transnational actors’ (Liden, Seberg, and Engebrigtsen 2011; Mathiesen 2020, 28; Olwig 2003). Olwig (2003) has studied migrants’ children’s experiences and point out that ‘children’s making of places of belonging does not refer primarily to a geographical or ethnic identity associated with their ancestral place of origin’ (2023, 219). She describes how children’s belonging is connected with the various spheres of life that they encounter in their everyday lives and they can have a ‘social place of relevance’ wherever they are. Yuval-Davis (2006) finds that the sense of belonging among migrants is connected with various practices and activities in their everyday lives that occur in different contexts and areas. The term ‘differentiated embedding’ (Ryan 2018) also highlights that belonging and attachments in migrants’ lives are dynamic and constantly negotiated across scales and various places. The rural area is thus one place among others in the young refugees’ lives. In this paper, we explore how young people experience this place and what role it plays in their feelings of belonging? In order to analyse young persons’ experiences and encounters in new and often unfamiliar contexts, we find inspiration in Simonsen’s (2005; 2013) ‘phenomenology of practice’. Drawing on this, we aim to explore how encounters in their surroundings and their relations to human and non-human factors in these surroundings constitute experiences, including sensuous experiences. The focus is on the situated body and the body as lived experience. Here the practical, embodied consciousness takes place ‘in an interworld’ where meaning and materiality are inseparable (Simonsen 2013, 15), acknowledging the interdependence between the cultural, social and material contexts of practice. Simonsen (2013) and Kinkaid (2020) have both studied migrant experiences and belonging with a starting point in the situated body of migrants. Both Kinkaid (2020) and Simonsen (2005; 2013) focus on how the schemes and habits of migrants acquired somewhere else are used to position their new world around themselves in their daily spatial and social practice.

The term ‘contradictions of space’ (Kinkaid 2020) refers to a moment occurring within the experience of a subject (migrant) when he or she does not, or cannot, practice space properly. Kinkaid (2020, 180) explains it as follows: ‘the normative meanings and practices they know from home cannot be used’. Such experiences can result in both spatial and social disorientation. In situations where the relationship between the subject and his or her environment fails to cohere, then the general background of perception and understanding, the acquired and embodied knowledge and competence, can be called into question: ‘Space becomes contradictory rather than synthetic, [and] the body becomes alienated, an object in space’ (Kinkaid 2020, 180). Kinkaid (2020, 169) points out that ‘Difference is not located in space itself or in essential characteristics of bodies or things; rather, “differences” are formed through lived practice [and] sedimentation of experience’. In Grønseth’s (2006) studies of Tamil refugees in northern Norway, she finds that it is not just the traumatic events that led to them flee that can explain their feelings of poor health and well-being, but very much also their many everyday experiences of difference in their new country.

Like Kinkaid’s (2020) ‘contradiction of space’, Simonsen (2013) writes about ‘moments of disorientation’. Orientation and familiarity are connected to where the phenomenological body gains the capacity to orient itself in one way or another. Orientation is both about ‘finding our way’ and ‘feeling at home’. Familiarity is neither delimited nor static; Simonsen (2013) draws attention to the dynamic aspect of familiarity, which is continuously in formation. Orientation also involves moments of disorientation that might turn the world upside down. According to Simonsen (2013), such moments can be seen as destabilizing and undermining, but they can also be seen as productive moments leading to new hopes and new directions.

Examining everyday bodily and sensuous experiences more closely seems even more relevant because the refugees' new rural places of residence are so different from those from which they come, particularly with respect to nature and climate. Not much has been written about how nature and the weather influences the everyday encounters and experiences of newcomers, people and bodies. We find inspiration from Ingold (2010) in his focus on how the natural environment and weather feel and are experienced. He points out how the experience of the natural environment and the weather can actually turn one's world upside down: 'Indeed a strong wind can so overwhelm the senses as virtually to drown our perception of contact with the ground' (Ingold 2010, 131).

This paper aims to come closer to what everyday experiences of difference can appear to young refugees settled in rural areas in Denmark and Norway, as well as what role the new rural place of residence also plays in their 'social place of relevance' (Olwig 2003) and feelings of belonging or difference. As everyday places and contexts have changed for the young people, we explore what happens when they move through the world and rural areas with the schemes and habits, they have brought with them from home. We investigate how they experience their everyday lives and surroundings in rural contexts, which experiences result in feelings of familiarity, community and belonging, and which experiences are sedimented into feelings of difference, disorientation and contradiction.

Methodological approach

The paper is a compilation of two independent studies in Denmark and Norway respectively. Both were motivated by the large number of refugees who arrived in Europe in 2015 after the start of the Syrian civil war. As both studies were longitudinal and had focused on the experiences of refugees settled in rural areas, we decided to combine forces in order to acquire a deeper understanding of young refugees settled in the Nordic rural areas and their experiences. Our empirical material consists of both young refugees arriving on their own (the Danish case) and young refugees arriving as part of a family (the Norwegian case) (Paulgaard and Herslund, 2021).

The Danish case is part of a larger study on refugees who have been resettled in four rural municipalities. For this paper, the focus is on an abandoned nursing home (old folks' home) where more than thirty single refugee men and two married couples were settled after they had been granted asylum. A local builder had bought the nursing home to fix it up and rent rooms out. The nursing home is in a town in Western Jutland in Denmark with 1300 inhabitants. The town has a school, a railway station, a small grocery store, a mattress factory and various sports clubs. Western Jutland is generally seen as a peripheral part of Denmark, as there are no larger cities in easy commuting distance, though it is also in a part of the country with much industry.

In 2016, two focus-group interviews were conducted with ten and four young refugees at the nursing home respectively. The refugees were Syrians (10) and Eritreans (4), all between 17 and 25 years of age. They were all male except for one female married to one of the males. The two focus-group interviews took respectively three and two hours and were conducted in English. In 2017, three respondents who took part in the focus-group interviews (two males, one Eritrean and one Syrian, and a female Syrian) were re-interviewed, and the female Syrian was interviewed again in 2020. All interviews (also focus-group) were recorded and transcribed and centred around their use and perceptions of the nursing home, the town they had been settled in, their everyday lives, including their social lives, and their plans and wishes for the future.

In 2016, five local volunteers who were engaged in activities to welcome the refugees to the town were interviewed together regarding their various activities and how they perceived and engaged with the young refugees. One of these volunteers was also interviewed in 2017, 2020 and 2023. to follow up what went on in the nursing home and whether the refugees had stayed or left and why. All the interviews took 1–1.5 h, and they were recorded and transcribed.

The Norwegian case takes its starting point in a situation that occurred in the autumn of 2015, when, in just a few months, more than 5500 migrants from 35 nations – mostly from Syria (40%), Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran – crossed the Russian-Norwegian border into eastern Finnmark, the northernmost county in Norway (Paulgaard and Soleim 2023). In 2016, at a refugee camp near the Russian border, twelve families with both mothers and fathers who were applying for asylum status in Norway were interviewed.

Many of those who came through this Arctic migration route were settled in small rural settlements in the north of Norway. Northern Norway can be characterized by high out-migration, lower educational levels and higher drop-out rates from upper secondary education than many other areas in Norway. Limited educational provision in small settlements and large geographical distances makes it necessary for many young people to leave home at an early age. Historically, this area has been the most culturally diverse in Norway, as it is the domicile of the Sámi Indigenous people and the national minority, the Kven, as well as ethnic Norwegians,

Three of the twelve families initially interviewed were settled in a coastal area after being granted asylum, an area characterized by fishing and farming, together with occupations within the municipality and public service. The area in question consists of small towns, with from 1000 to around 5000 inhabitants. The researcher was introduced to five other families also settled within this area The families had from three to nine children at ages from infants to 17 years old. These eight families were then followed from 2017 until todayentailing interviews and participant observation. The researcher participated in voluntary work with other volunteers working with refugees in the local area which made it possible to meet the families at different stages in the settlement process and in different contexts, both at home with the families and in more public places such as cafes and other public arenas. It was often the mother and older children (15–20 years of age) who took an active part in the interviews. At all interviews’, detailed notes were taken. The interviews centred on how they experienced their new places, possibilities for education and work, and everyday lives. The researcher also had conversations with teachers in primary and secondary school and in the introductory programme, as well as employees in the municipal refugee service, and a number of local volunteers setting up language cafés, arranging sport for the children, hosting food-exchange meetings for young people and adults etc.

Analysis of the interviews first took place independently as part of each research study. During the preparation of the article in hand the transcripts and detailed notes were re-examined to identify important themes in relation to the young groups and how they experienced their place of residence and the rural area. The themes and points the young people made were compared and discussed, and common topics as well as differences were identified across the two cases.

Both projects have passed through formal ethical review processes by the data protection services for research in Denmark and Norway.

Results

Initial contradictions: busy with no say

In both the Danish and Norwegian cases, the refugees had had little or no influence on where they were settled. Almost all respondents across both the Danish and Norwegian groups said that they would have preferred to be placed in cities for easier access to education and jobs and being closer to social contacts from their home country or people whom they had met in the asylum centre. They felt that no one had listened to them, which initially seemed to give them moments of disorientation. Compared to the refugee group in general, the young group, especially those who had arrived on their own were more outspoken and frustrated about being placed in rural areas. Especially the young Syrian refugees, who in most cases were from urban areas, felt that being placed in a rural area was intimidating and would leave them with fewer options to achieve the sort of life they were hoping for. One young 23 year old Syrian man settled in the nursing home said: *To live far away from the city means that you have no possibilities to find a good job and no one to help you. It feels empty here*. The young Syrian woman also in her early twenties who was also settled in the nursing home added: *It was such a contrast to Damascus, and I felt there were no people anywhere*.

The young people living at home with their families and the young adults in the nursing home live very different everyday lives. The younger boys and girls in Norway who lived at home with their parents attended primary and lower secondary school in the same place in which they lived and therefore spent most of their time in the rural area. Conversely, the young adults in Denmark did not spend much time in the town where they were settled. They went to the train station or took the bus in the morning. They rarely shopped in the local store, as it was too expensive. The young adult refugees had busy everyday lives with long hours spent commuting, as language classes and later high school or vocational training were all in the municipal centre or even further away. This meant that much time was spent on public transport, as none of the young refugees could afford a car, nor did they have a driving license that was legally accepted unless they took expensive extra driving lessons and courses, which most of them could not afford. However, in the Norwegian case, as the distances were longer, the young refugees who were more than 18 or 19 years old had to move to larger settlements to attend school because there were no alternatives for formal education after upper secondary school within commuting distance. Even some of those who attended upper secondary school had to leave home because the subjects they wanted to study were not available where they lived, so they had to live in a bed-sit in a larger town during weekdays.

How to practice local space?

The rural context was initially different from the places, the young refugees were used to, and the respondents therefore spend much of their time indoors. The oldest young refugees in both Denmark and Norway spent much time away from their homes in their everyday lives. When they were at home, they often stayed indoors due to both the weather, as well as being unsure how to ‘read’ and behave in the towns they lived in. Several mentioned that they felt out of place when walking around outside, especially if they were in larger groups. *People look at us when we hang out in the streets*, a young 25 year old man from the nursing home said. They were unsure where they could just ‘hang out’, as there were no parks or squares. They compared the empty streets to the lively streets of their home cities. *At home I just go outside my door and all my friends are there*, an 18-year-old in Norway said. *I miss the sounds and smells of my street* said the young Syrian woman in Denmark. They also felt unfamiliar with the new way of socializing by meeting in sports clubs and associations, in contrast to their more informal way of socializing in the streets and squares back home. A Danish volunteer from the town with the nursing home said:

> We have tried to start a looser football team just for the young refugee men so they don’t have to play in teams with much younger boys … they can play without all the rules like offside and show up when they want. It works but they do not meet many locals this way.

The younger group living with their families, both boys and girls, participated in organized leisure activities like football after school, which was easier, as the schools helped initiate and welcome them. However, a mother in the Norwegian case explained that she had been unsure whether to send her daughter to handball, as it seemed unfamiliar: *It is just when we eat dinner and she has to do homework … Why can’t they just play in the street instead when we have eaten dinner. Hopefully there are other girls there.*

Even though some of the younger group attended sports, many in both countries still described the places they had been settled in as boring, where *there was nothing happening* and *there was nothing to do*, as they did not see many people out and about in their new neighbourhoods.

The weather had made an impression on our young informants, both in the north of Norway and in western Denmark. This was brought up in interviews, even though it was not a question to start with.

The young refugees, both the older and younger groups, mentioned the weather and described it quite vividly. The young adults in Denmark described the weather in their home country as bright and soft and their streets as welcoming and lively, whereas here there was *a grey coat of clouds hanging over you* and the wind could *cut your skin*. The younger informants in Norway also talked about the cold, windy and unfamiliar weather. Parents told us that, when children had to walk from home to school, in the early mornings in wind and darkness, it was very frightening for both the children and the parents. Even though many of the parents had driving licenses from their homeland, they had to take new driving lessons to have new licenses accepted. This was expensive, and it took some time to obtain them. The first years in their new homeland, the children had to walk often long distances in bad weather. In the north of Norway there are no trains, and buses do not run very often, as in western Denmark or in cities. Thus, the children had to walk to school and back home. A mother said that she doubted whether they had done the right thing in going to Norway. She often thought that maybe they should have stayed despite the war and troubles because the weather could frighten her.

Housing: feeling different but also safe

In both the Norwegian and Danish towns, there was not much rental housing in which to settle refugees. Young people with families were accommodated in houses and apartments owned by the municipality. Most of the dwellings and residences were not of the same standard as the privately owned houses and apartments that most Norwegians and Danes lived in. Even though the families were grateful for the municipality offering them a place to live, the lower standard of housing accentuated the difference between the refugee families and local families. As well as already looking different, they now also lived differently and *caused attention* when they just wanted to blend in. In some cases, another problem was that the local authorities did not maintain the houses and flats, some of which were cold, particularly during the winter. The residences were often not built for families with many children, which meant that the children and young people did not have much space to have friends over and felt embarrassed inviting friends' home from school. However, they welcomed both young people and parents from other refugee families into their homes as they *were in the same boat*, and they spent much time together.

In the Danish town, the respondents all initially liked living in the nursing home because they were among their peers, but they also mentioned that everybody else in the town lived in houses. During the first half-year, several young men had already left the nursing home because they had been reunited with their families and had had to move to a larger town, as there was no rental accommodation where they were that could house a family. One local Danish volunteer said: *Our old nursing home has become a ghetto for young refugees who cannot afford to move on. Families find it easier to integrate into our small community, but we have no housing for them*. If you chose to leave the housing you had been settled in by the municipality, you had to find it yourself and pay the deposit yourself. However, if you were re-united with your family, the municipality was obliged to help find other accommodation and pay the deposit, etc. In the Danish case, the young refugees described the nursing home as a *safe haven*. It was a *place where you are among friends*; *You always have people to talk to*; *We can be ourselves here*; *Everything is new and strange, but here you can relax* were all statements made by the nursing home's refugees. The nursing home had also become a meeting place for many more young refugees than merely those who lived there. Young single men who had been placed in other villages or even in the main town of the municipality also 'hung out' in the nursing home several times a week, and they often spent the night there, as they felt lonely in their new places of residence.

Supporting cultural competences and social norms?

In both the Danish and Norwegian cases, local volunteers arranged different activities to welcome refugees. They arranged collections of clothes, furniture and other necessities, which the newcomers could then come and pick up for free. After a while, these kinds of activities developed into events like shared dinners and recurring activities like language or homework cafes. A large part of the young adult refugee group mentioned that they were too busy to attend the social activities set up by the local volunteers. Many of the young refugees had other preferences, such as being with friends their own age, that is, other refugees either locally or online. The young adults found that, after their long days of school or work and commuting, they most of all felt like spending their time talking to family and friends back home or in other European countries over the internet, and then socializing with the other refugees. On the question of who they talked to about their future and who they went to for help, the answer was family and friends whether abroad, in other places in the country or their friends in the town. Only a few mentioned local volunteers.

As the single men from the nursing home did not attend the activities, a volunteer started to come around every week to talk to them, and he sometimes got other locals to join him.

> It is much easier to mobilize people for collections and casual social activities than to be the contact person for a single young man … With the young men, local social gatherings are not the answer. It is more companionship and practical help with life they prefer.

The local social activities set up for the refugees were important arenas for encounters and cross-cultural learning between newcomers and locals. However, most of those who participated in these activities were the parents and children. When we asked younger persons why they did not attend in both the Danish and Norwegian cases, they said that the volunteers were nice, but they were much older than themselves, even older than their parents. *Awkward* and *embarrassed* were words often used when the young refugees described their meetings with the local rural communities at shared dinners and homework cafes. Even though they thought the idea of the locals had been very kind in setting up activities for them, such activities also made them feel awkward. *I feel uncomfortable having to talk to mainly older ladies; I feel embarrassed that I cannot look after myself and need old people to help me;* and *I speak bad English and hardly any Danish, and therefore I hide out in the nursing home* were statements we heard.

The language issue was also important to the younger group. Some of the young boys said that it was embarrassing that they could not speak Norwegian properly, even when their parents and teachers encouraged them and told them that they were not expected to speak the language fluently after a short time in Norway. Nonetheless, being a young person, wanting to *blend in* and feeling that they were not mastering the Norwegian language created experiences of discomfort and sometimes shame. Some of the lower secondary pupils felt it so strongly that they refused to go to school or to the social functions laid on for refugees. Their parents grew worried at this and had to put in a lot of effort to support, persuade and convince them to go to school and to join in the social activities set up for them. Resources for first language teaching seemed limited in the small rural municipalities we have studied, which meant that the young refugees in such places did not have the same educational possibilities as their counterparts in cities and larger places.

Staying or going

More than five years have passed since most of the refugees in question arrived in their new rural residences, which many young refugees have since left. Education has played a key role in this process, especially in the Norwegian case. Upon reaching a certain age, many had to move to other, larger settlements to start in upper secondary education or higher education. Others chose to move because their older siblings or their parents had to do so. Many of the Syrian parents had had higher education at home that was not fully accepted in Norway, and they had to take courses at vocational schools or universities away from where they were settled. In such cases this often ended in the whole family leaving. In the Danish case, as in Norway, Syrians especially have moved to the cities for education. However, at least half the young adult refugees initially settled at the nursing home are still in the municipality, most in the larger towns, and three still in the nursing home. According to a male volunteer (DI4+), those still living in the municipality have found jobs in industry. The volunteer knew all this because he had found jobs for three of the young men in the mattress factory where he worked himself. They had told the volunteer that most of the young adults from the nursing home had stayed in touch, helped each other out and met up in the nursing home on occasion.

In the Norwegian case, not all of the young refugees moved permanently. Some of those who spent the school year somewhere larger came back to the rural settlement during the holidays. They talked about their experiences of going to school and getting to know other young people in the larger cities. *It is OK to attend school there, but you Norwegians party a lot … .It feels a bit uncomfortable at times*, one 19 year old young woman refugee said. Several described young Norwegians as very independent of their parents, as less disciplined and as young people who wanted to have fun and party a lot. This often spurred a feeling of familiarity and belonging to the rural settlement where their parents and other refugee families and friends still lived. However, they were also sure that they would not be able to find the kinds of job they were educating themselves for in the rural area.

In the Danish case, the nursing home still has some of the original young male refugees living there today because it is still a cheaper option for them than moving to larger towns and cities. However, as the nursing home is not full of refugees anymore, the local builder who rented it out to the municipality and refugees now also rents rooms to Ukrainian refugees and young ethnic Danes who would like to stay in the local area but not live with their parents. There are no other rooms for rent in the town. The male volunteer describes the nursing home as a very diverse and lively spot in their town.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper, based on empirical data gathered in two different projects, has explored refugees settled in rural areas in the north of Norway and in western Denmark. Inspired by critics of so-called metrocentricity in youth research in general and the fact that much research on young refugees has mainly focused on urban settings, we have focused on young people with a refugee background settled in rural areas. We have explored the experiences of young refugees arriving in the rural North and discussed how they experience and navigate rural social life with respect to housing, education and work, as well as the more ‘physical’ aspects of rural life.

Our examples illuminate how the experience of difference can be formed through lived practice and everyday encounters and result in both spatial and social disorientation, as well as moments of familiarity and safety in rural Norway and Denmark. The new rural places of residence and the everyday lives of young refugees in Denmark and Norway are very different from the places and lives they come from and are used to, and their new lived experiences can be challenging, involving several moments of disorientation and 'contradictions of space' (Kinkaid 2020). The new countries and places of residence do offer safety, but the lived experiences are at times tough and unfamiliar. The way they formerly practised their local spaces and neighbourhoods were very different from living in and moving around small Nordic rural towns. The residents and social life are also different, as is the natural environment.

Thus, the young refugees feel out of place when walking the streets. They find that public spaces are lacking, or at least it is not clear where there are meeting places, which are often mainly in the more hidden and half-private clubhouses and sports halls. In youth research, youth-friendly neighbourhoods and public spaces are pointed out as important for young peoples' identity building and social lives (e.g. Laughlin and Johnson 2011). However, rural areas often lack clear public spaces. This is unfamiliar to our often more urban young refugees. They are used to more informal urban lives than the formalized associational lives of Denmark and Norway. The dwellings they live in are also different from those of the other residents of the rural area, and they are in a situation where many daily matters are in the hands of others, such as where they should be settled and where they should go to language classes etc. All this creates disorientation in the first years after their arrival.

Even though climate and weather conditions differ greatly between the north of Norway and Denmark, both adults and young people talk about the cold weather, the cold wind, the lack of sunshine and the darkness. In these kinds of cases, with frustrated and frightened children and young people, both the latter and their parents experience moments of disorientation where 'The world was almost turned upside down' (Simonsen 2013). Studies of refugees and migrants have not paid much attention to how the natural environment and weather conditions are experienced and might affect their daily lives and experiences. Experiencing nature, going out in all kinds of weather, taking walks and getting fresh air play an important part in the 'good life' of the Nordic countries. However, coming to small places in northern Europe from urban areas in the Middle East with heat and sun represents a great change. In northern Norway, there are only a couple of months when the sun is above the horizon. The polar night and the winter can be hard, even for people who have lived there all their lives. For refugees who are already feeling unfamiliar with small-town living, the weather conditions seem to add further disorientation on top of that caused by empty streets, feeling out of place, being different or causing too much attention.

What could create moments of belonging and orientation in the unfamiliar rural places are communities within the local contexts. Research on the role of local communities in integrating migrants in rural areas suggests that places that are active and welcoming and that create activities and platforms for interaction are important to make newcomers feel at home (Herslund 2021; Skaptadóttir and Wojtynska 2008; Woods 2018). Whether refugees should be settled in rural areas has been debated because rural areas cannot offer a critical mass of services and jobs. Active local communities can to some extent make up for the lack of services by arranging homework cafés and social activities (Herslund 2021; Paulgaard and Herslund, 2021). The goal of dispersal policies was also to bring refugees closer to the host communities and away from other migrants in urban ghettos (Larsen 2011). However, the young adults did not have much to do with the rural local community, as they did not take part in arranged activities like the homework café and sports clubs and only did so reluctantly. In both cases, the local communities have all been quite active, but it can be difficult for both the young refugees and the elderly volunteers to connect due to differences of age, language, interests etc. Our study indicates that interactions between locals and newcomers might be easier for adults and young children than for most of the young people, who can feel uncomfortable taking part in more formalized activities with mainly elderly people. One can say that it is not the young people who are the 'agents of integration' in the rural setting, but rather the parents and families with younger children, but they are not easy to find dwellings for. Studies of unaccompanied young refugees in Sweden and Norway have shown that interaction between them and locals can be difficult to establish and that this limited interaction can lead to a lack of commitment to the new place of residence among young refugees (Brekke 2015; Wernesjö 2015). Our study also shows that first language classes in particular, as well as further education, are important for the young refugees, as is street life rather than the more formalized sport and social activities. These are all things that are not in abundance in rural areas and which the local communities cannot offer.

In both cases, the important social relations our respondents engage in are often virtual relations with family and friends settled in other countries and places around the world. This recalls Olwig's (2003) findings on the 'social place of relevance' of migrants also being made up of transnational relations. Furthermore, the daily practices of adult young people especially are not only rural. One common factor in the lives of the young people who are settled in both Norway and Denmark is the busy nature of their everyday lives. They commute to school and language classes and later on may move to larger towns for school and jobs. Consequently, the rural area is just one area making up their spatial practice. For many of the young refugees, the first rural place of residence has become one of several places in their 'social places of relevance' and lives in their new country.

In line with other studies, we have also seen that relationships with and proximity to other migrants can be important in the feeling of belonging (Larsen 2011). Especially the young adults, but also the families and children, seek safe havens in meeting other refugees because outside of these contexts they experience being different and somehow incompetent because of the different acquired schemes and habits and their lack of language competencies.

Despite great differences in geography and climate across the two cases, the informants in our studies encounter many of the same challenges to do with the rural environment. Thus, they describe the long distances and limited public transport, the few meeting places, the different behavioural norms, the unfamiliar and harsh weather conditions, the more formal social interactions, etc. This shows, according to Kinkaid (2020, 169), that 'difference is not located to space itself', but experienced and 'formed through lived practice; sedimentation of experience'. Thus, being settled in Nordic rural areas has produced moments of contradictions and disorientation, situations of not knowing how to navigate, but also feelings of meaning and belonging, mainly spurred by socializing, especially with other refugees in the same situation. Even the young refugees have struggled to navigate and to feel at ease in the rural towns during the first years after their arrival, yet they have not all moved or wish to move to the cities. A few have stayed in the towns where they were first settled mainly due to social relations with other refugees and family. More have moved closer to educational opportunities like most young Danish and Norwegian people also do. They are pushed to move by the same structural factors, such as a lack of rental accommodation and the limited transport and education possibilities. However, their experiences of disorientation and unfamiliarity and of not being able to practice rural space and social life properly seem to strengthen this push and their experience of being bored, embarrassed and different. This recalls Grønseth's study (2006) of Tamil refugees in northern Norway, whose everyday experiences of being different accentuated their feelings of poor health and well-being. Not only do young people from a refugee background describe their rural home areas as boring and depressing, but the challenges of the young refugees in mastering the language and the social and cultural codes, as well as getting used to the harsh weather, seem to heighten these feelings of unfamiliarity and contradictions and the push away from rural areas.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Lise Herslund http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6085-3094

References

Andersen, S. 2015. Indvandring, integration og etnisk segregation – udvikling i indvandrernes bosætning siden 1985. Statens Byggeforskningsinstitut SBI 2015:01 (2015).

Aure, M., A. Førde, and T. Magnussen. 2018. "Will Migrant Workers Rescue Rural Regions? Challenges of Creating Stability Through Mobility." *Journal of Rural Studies* 60 (2018): 52–59. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.03.005

Brandt, T. 2015. Flygtninge arbejder for udkantsområderne. Internet article from 2nd of Juni, 2015 from DR Regioner. https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/regionale/sjaelland/flygtninge-arbejder-udkantsomraaderne.

Brekke, M. 2015. Samtidig, men midlertidig: En Etnografisk Studie Av Unge Med Flyktningbakgrunn i Tromsø. PhD Dissertation, The Arctic University of Norway, UIT (2015).

Farrugia, D. 2014. "Towards a Spatialised Youth Sociology: The Rural and the Urban in Times of Change." *Journal of Youth Studies* 17 (3): 293–307. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.830700

Farrugia, D. 2016. "The Mobility Imperative for Rural Youth: The Structural, Symbolic and non-Representational Dimensions Rural Youth Mobilities." *Journal of Youth Studies* 19 (6): 836–851. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1112886

Grønseth, A. S. 2006. "Experiences of Tensions in Re-Orienting Selves: Tamil Refugees in Northern Norway Seeking Medical Advice." *Anthropology & Medicine* 13 (1): 77–98. DOI: 10.1080/13648470500516303.

Herslund, L. 2021. "Everyday Life as a Refugee in a Rural Setting – What Determines a Sense of Belonging and What Role Can the Local Community Play in Generating it?" *Journal of Rural Studies* 82: 233–241. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.01.031

IMDI - Integrerings- og mangfoldsdirektoratet. 2019. Tall og statistikk over integreringen I 645 Norge. https://www.imdi.no/tall-og-statistikk/.

Ingold, T. 2010. "Footprints Through the Weather-World: Walking, Breathing, Knowing." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological institute* 16 (1): 121–139.

Kinkaid, E. 2020. "Re-encountering Lefebvre: Toward a Critical Phenomenology of Social Space." *Society and Space* 38 (1): 167–186.

Larsen, B. R. 2011. "Becoming Part of Welfare Scandinavia: Integration Through the Spatial Dispersal of Newly Arrived Refugees in Denmark." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37 (2): 333–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2011.521337

Laughlin, D. L., and L. C. Johnson. 2011. "Defining and Exploring Public Space: Perspectives of Young People from Regent Park, Toronto." *Children's Geographies* 9 (3-4): 439–456. DOI: 10.1080/14733285.2011.590703.

Liden, H., M. L. Seberg, and A. Engebrigtsen. 2011. Medfølgende barn i asylmottak – livssituasjon, mestring, tiltak. Institutt for samfunnsforskning. Rapport no. 1. ISBN 978-82-7763-354-1.

Mathiesen, T. 2020. "«Vi er med hverandre fordi vi er utlendinger»: Om (re)produksjon av kategoriene «utlending» og «norsk» i skolen." *Nordisk idsskrift for ngdomsforskning* 1 (2): 124–141. https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2535-8162-2020-02-03

McAreavey, R., and N. Argent. 2018. "Migrant Integration in Rural New Immigration Destinations: An Institutional and Triangular Perspective." *Journal of Rural Studies* 64: 267–275. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.08.001

Nørregaard, H. 2018. Hvorfor vælger indvandrere at bosætte sig på landet, hvordan oplever de at bo der, og bidrager de til udviklingen i en kommune med demografiske udfordringer? Et casestudie fra Hjørring Kommune. G.L.H. Svendsen, J.F.L. Sørensen, E. Noe (Eds.), *Vækst Og Vilkår På Landet: Viden, Visioner Og Virkemidler*, University Press of Southern Denmark, Odense.

Olwig, K. F. 2003. "Children's Places of Belonging in Immigrant Families of Caribbean Background." In *Children's Places, Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, edited by K. F. Olwig, and E. Gulløy, 217–235. London & New York: Routledge.

Ordemann. 2017. Monitor for Sekundærflytting: Sekundærflytting Blant Personer Med Flykningebakgrunn Bosatt I Norge 2005–2014. Oslo - Kongsvinger: Statistics Norway.

Paulgaard, G., and L. Herslund. 2021. "Refugees' Encounters With Nordic Rural Areas: Darkness, Wind and 'Hygge'." *Frontiers in Sociology, Migration and Society* 6: 1–11. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc2021.623686.

Paulgaard, G., and M. Soleim. 2023. "The Arctic Migration Route: Local Consequences of Global Choices." *Journal of Peace Education* 20 (2): 196–216. https://doi.org/10.1080/1740021.2022.2159794

Pless, M., and N. U. Sørensen. 2015. "'I Don't Hate Living Here, But … ' Paper Presented at the 'Contemporary Youth, Contemporary Risk'", Copenhagen, March 30-April 1.

Ryan, L. 2018. "Differentiated Embedding: Polish Migrants in London Negotiating Belonging Over Time." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44 (2): 233–251. DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1341710.

Simonsen, K. 2005. Byens mange ansigter – konstruksjon av byen i praksis og fortælling. Roskilde Universitetsforlag.

Simonsen, K. 2013. "In Quest of a New Humanism." *Progress in Human Geography* 37 (1): 10–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512467573

Skaptadóttir, U., and A. Wojtynska. 2008. "Labour Migrants Negotiating Places and Engagements." In *Mobility and Place: Enacting Northern European Peripheries*, edited by J.O. Bærenholdt, and B. Granås, 115–126. Farnham, United Kingdom: Ashgate.

Søholt, S., S. Stenbacka, and H. Nørgaard. 2018. "Conditioned Receptiveness: Nordic Rural Elite Perceptions of Immigrant Contributions to Local Resilience." *Journal of Rural Studies* 64: 220–229. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.05.004

Wernesjö, U. 2015. "Landing in a Rural Village: Home and Belonging from the Perspectives of Unaccompanied Young Refugees." *Identities* 22 (4): 451–467. https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2014.962028

Woods, M. 2018. "Precarious Rural Cosmopolitanism: Negotiating Globalization, Migration and Diversity in Irish Small Towns." *Journal of Rural Studies* 64: 164–176. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.03.014

Yuval-Davis, N. 2006. "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging." *Patterns of Prejudice* 40 (3): 197–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331