



# Every Room Is Its Own Culture

Since 2015, around 1.4 million refugees have applied for asylum in Germany. They would like to find sanctuary or a new home here. How firm a foothold they gain in their new life depends on a number of factors. Researchers at the **Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity** in Göttingen are taking a closer look at what needs and goals the refugees have – and whether these can be fulfilled.



TEXT **TIM SCHRÖDER**

**M**any people will remember 2015 for a long time to come. In the course of just a few months, Germany and many other European nations experienced a refugee influx unlike any seen since the Second World War. In Germany alone, the number of asylum applications that year approached 500,000 – from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries. That's 500,000 cherished dreams of a better future; 500,000 men, women and children, each with their very own

personal life story, each with their very own dreams for the future.

The course of their future life in Germany began taking shape with the first shelter they were placed in. Many refugees lived in large halls in which sleeping quarters were separated from one another only by simple partitions. Sometimes more than ten people had to share living space. There was constant noise because the separate compartments weren't allowed to have ceilings. Other refugees were sheltered in apartments, providing greater privacy.

Difficult conditions: Refugees who are housed in factory buildings on the outskirts of the city are at a disadvantage in many ways. Not only is there a lack of quiet and privacy, but often also of shopping opportunities, medical services and volunteer helpers.

“Overall, Germany did a good job finding shelter for all these people within a short period of time – everyone had food to eat and a roof over their head,” says Shahd Wari at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen. “The numerous initiatives of administrative

» The feeling of arbitrariness and powerlessness is one of the biggest problems for many asylum seekers.

bodies and of the many volunteers achieved a great deal.” However, the researcher and her colleagues at the Institute are interested in the details. Above all, they want to understand how the asylum seekers themselves perceived their situation.

In a study financed by the Volkswagen Foundation, the researchers investigated what needs and goals the refugees have – as well as what their initial conditions were upon arriving in Germany. Research was initially carried out in Göttingen – both the city and the surrounding district, which together have taken in around 1,500 refugees in

the past two years. The researchers accompanied asylum seekers in their day-to-day life and interviewed them. They spoke with the operators of refugee accommodations and with experts from government agencies and the administration, as well as with social workers and independent volunteers.

#### THE AUTHORITIES ACKNOWLEDGE ONLY FIVE CATEGORIES

“Our results are both simple and extremely complex: unlike what media reports suggest, it became clear that there isn’t just *one kind of* refugee,” says

Shahd Wari. “The personal backgrounds of the people differ greatly. This means that there can be no one-size-fits-all solution if we want to help asylum seekers establish a firm foothold in Germany.”

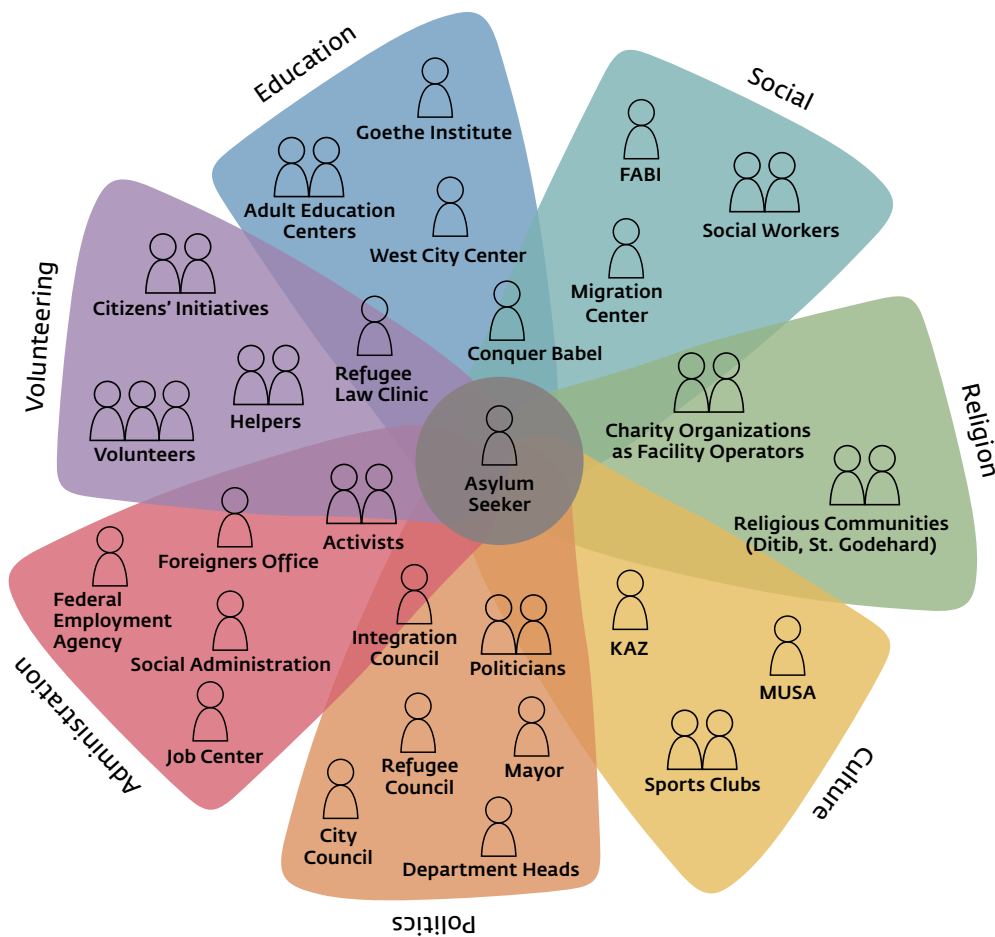
This insight seems almost trivial – after all, it is well known that people differ from one another. Yet the individuality of asylum seekers is often given little consideration in day-to-day life. It begins with authorities simplistically assigning asylum seekers to one of five categories based on nationality, gender, age, health and legal status. These categories are also often used when placing asylum seekers in refugee accommodations. Such a basis for classification is extremely crude and can give rise to conflict.

To give just one specific example from Göttingen: four women live together in a room in a collective accommodation. Two of them fall into the same five categories of the classification system, but their needs for privacy are very different. One of them would like to take off her headscarf when she is in her room, but she’s afraid of being seen through the window. The operator therefore placed a privacy film over the window so no one can see into the room. The other person, in contrast, perceives the privacy film, not as something that protects her privacy, but as something that limits her ability to look out the window, and therefore feels like she is in a prison.

“The goal of our study initially was to understand the needs and aspirations of asylum seekers. After all, we are conducting basic research,” explains Shahd Wari. “On the other hand, our in-depth insight has led to the development of some ideas as to how conditions could be improved.” For example,

Basic knowledge: Only those who learn German can gain a foothold here. However, asylum seekers aren’t eligible for a paid German course as long as their asylum procedure is still pending – which can take months.





Confusing complexity: Asylum seekers are confronted with numerous different contacts. The Göttingen-based research project clearly showed just how difficult it is for them to understand who is responsible for what.

it would make sense to look beyond the five main categories when providing accommodation.

In this regard, it would help if agency employees were to learn more about the various social and political backgrounds in the countries of origin – and not just with regard to differences between traditional and modern ways of life. It’s also important to consider various social strata and ethnicities that have conflicts in their country of origin, as can be the case with Kurds and Arabs in Iraq. This would reduce the potential for conflict in the accommodations.

In many cases it is a question of profoundly human characteristics – individual desires that are rarely taken into consideration in daily life, says Shahd Wari. For example, in some accommodations, many people must share one kitchen and one set of washing facilities – people with very different habits and needs when it comes to order and cleanliness. “It is precisely in collective

accommodations that more conflicts are reported, which is perfectly understandable in light of human nature,” says Shahd Wari. In one building, there were disputes relating to a television that had been donated. There was constant commotion in the hallway where the television had been installed. People came from other parts of the building at all hours of the day and night, so those who wanted to go to bed early could hardly get any rest.

### **BOTH SUBJECTIVE IMPRESSIONS AND FACTS ARE IMPORTANT**

What’s special about the study of the researchers in Göttingen is that it’s one of the first of its kind to use scientific interview methods to systematically investigate the situation of asylum seekers. “At the peak of the refugee crisis, many decisions were made on an ad hoc basis without undertaking a precise analysis of the situation of the asylum

seekers. And perhaps there was no other way to go about it,” says Wari. The study the researchers now present is a sort of well-paced status quo report.

In expert interviews with operators and representatives of government agencies, the researchers inquired about the financing and organization of the accommodations. Focus group discussions, in turn, provided the researchers with more information about the needs of the asylum seekers: in these groups, several asylum seekers met to discuss their family situation, their concern for those left behind, and other topics such as daily life in Germany. The interviewers refrained from asking too many questions and let the conversation take its course.

“We also spent a great deal of time with individual asylum seekers, went on excursions with them or accompanied them on visits to the doctor or appointments with the authorities,” says Shahd Wari. In the terminology of social sci-



tists, this is known as the hanging-out method – spending time together to learn more about the needs and viewpoints of others. “Now, when I walk through Göttingen, I often meet people who greet me and ask if I can help with this or that, for example translating a letter from the authorities.”

### A GOOD START DEPENDS ON CHANCE

The researchers spent an entire year on the study and also attended many public events on the topic of asylum seekers. During this time, they learned that the desires of many asylum seekers – a job, a place in a kindergarten, an apartment – are, of course, the same as those shared by many Germans.

In addition, asylum seekers have problems that few Germans have first-hand experience with – primarily as regards the enormous uncertainty involved, such as the long-term perspec-

tive. Asylum seekers have different chances of being recognized and allowed to stay in Germany depending on their country of origin. “The situation is also difficult because the refugees must sometimes wait several months for a hearing with the federal authorities,” says Shahd Wari. “During this time, they aren’t allowed to take German courses. It’s difficult to make one’s way in a foreign country without sufficient knowledge of the local language.”

Another point of concern for many asylum seekers is the feeling that they aren’t in control of their lives and are more or less governed by outside forces. “To a great extent, a good start in Germany depends on chance,” the researcher says.

There are a variety of reasons for this: for one, the regulations vary from one German state to the next, and sometimes even from one city to the next. In some federal states, for instance, official asylum seekers are obli-

gated to remain in the location to which they were originally assigned. Lower Saxony imposes no such residency requirement. Moreover, many new rules have been added since 2015, in part due to new statutes. As a result, asylum seekers can be treated differently depending on which set of rules is being applied. “It leads to frustration and uncertainty when one asylum seeker is placed in a worse position than another although they are both in the same situation or live in the same accommodation,” says Shahd Wari.

For example, in some cases, asylum seekers had different amounts of money allotted to them each month: “We know families for whom this makes it difficult to plan a monthly budget for food or clothing.” Those affected are bothered primarily by the fact that they can’t comprehend the reasons for it. The basis for calculation is often not clear. In other cases, detailed explanations are available only in German.

**Left** Human needs: The researchers in Göttingen categorize what each individual views as important. Some desires are rather personal, but many are fundamental and easy for everyone to understand.

**Right** Different perspectives: As an architect and urban planner, Shahd Wari (left) concentrates on spatial conditions and needs, while ethnologist Annett Fleischer (right) investigates living conditions.



There are also differences in accommodations. Some asylum seekers have the good fortune to quickly be allotted their own apartment – others live in a collective accommodation for more than a year. “This feeling of arbitrariness, of powerlessness is one of the greatest problems for many of the asylum seekers we spoke with,” says the Max Planck researcher.

Shahd Wari herself is from Palestine and speaks Arabic. “I was easily able to hold conversations with asylum seekers from Syria or Iraq. This helped enormously to establish trust.” Nevertheless, many asylum seekers are hesitant about opening up to others – because they experienced so many terrible things in the course of their flight, but also because so many institutions are involved. Government authorities, charitable institutions, translators from official offices and private individuals. Who can be trusted? Who has a say? Who is merely offering good

advice? Many were afraid of saying something wrong, of uttering something that would endanger their chances of receiving asylum, says Shahd Wari. “As a result, some don’t trust the official translators in the government offices. Under these circumstances, it would help if the asylum seekers could bring along a trusted person who could help with translation.”

#### THE RESEARCHERS WERE ABLE TO ESTABLISH TRUST

Shahd Wari came to the team as an architect and urban planner, so she is especially interested in the spatial needs of the asylum applicants and in architectural aspects of the accommodations. Sociologist Susanne Becker and ethnologist Annett Fleischer also worked with the team and generally devoted themselves to the living conditions of the asylum seekers. The study is currently entering its second phase.

Cultural anthropologist Simona Pagano is new to the team. “One insight we arrived at during the first study is that many asylum seekers who are housed in different types of refugee accommodations have differing degrees of success in gaining a foothold in daily life,” she says. “We want to understand more precisely just which factors are crucial here.” During the second phase, Pagano would especially like to investigate whether there are differences between different accommodations and locations – even when the operator is the same. She will work on this project not only in Göttingen, but also in Wolfsburg, to enable better comparisons.

There are already initial indications of why various accommodations do, in fact, offer differing starting conditions. Location can play a role. Housing on the outskirts of the city, for instance, has the disadvantage of poor accessibility. Buses run less often, it takes longer to reach the city, and likewise to travel

to appointments with authorities and doctors – or even to informational events at which asylum seekers can receive important tips on day-to-day life or exchange views with one another. “But that’s just one factor,” says Simona Pagano. “We want to gain a clearer understanding of why one refugee accommodation is more successful than another.” More successful in that asylum seekers there quickly adapt to daily life.

### MIGRANTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE IN DAILY LIFE

Simona Pagano doesn’t like to use the word “integration.” She prefers to speak of participation. “Social scientists and migration researchers regard the concept of integration as too nebulous, as it is very vague about what it takes for people to gain a foothold in a society.” Moreover, it is often conflated with the concept of assimilation – which describes how people adopt customs, traditions and rules of a society in order to blend in.

Participation is more accurate. What form this participation takes can vary from one person to the next, says Pagano. For one person, money and work are important, and for another, social contacts or privacy. “In principle, the key is to be able to participate as much as possible in all aspects of normal daily life.”

In interviews for radio stations and newspapers, the researchers in Göttingen have often been asked what constitutes “successful integration.” “If only it were that simple,” says Wari. “For me, the first step is to understand that there isn’t just one kind of refugee.” The circumstances are different for every refugee – in terms of their background as well as the living con-

ditions in the refugee accommodations or the city in which they live.

Steven Vertovec, Director at the Max Planck Institute in Göttingen, emphasizes that migrants have highly diverse social skills and backgrounds that, from the outset, make it easier or more difficult for them to find their way in Germany: “Some asylum seekers are able to develop cordial relationships with the local population even if they don’t have good language skills. Others learn German well, find a job, and still have hardly any social contacts.”

All of these differences accumulate in the accommodations. “One refugee summarized the situation quite eloquently to my colleague Susanne Becker,” says Shahd Wari: “In his opinion, every room is its own culture. That hits the nail on the head.” The researchers have also noticed this based on how incredibly difficult it sometimes is to find a suitable translator. “There are many who can help with Arabic, but for a refugee from a mountain region in Iran, from Balochistan, one could look for months and still not find a translator, making a hearing with the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees impossible.” And even if a transla-

tor is available, it is often difficult to establish a good rapport with the refugee, because very private matters surface very quickly.

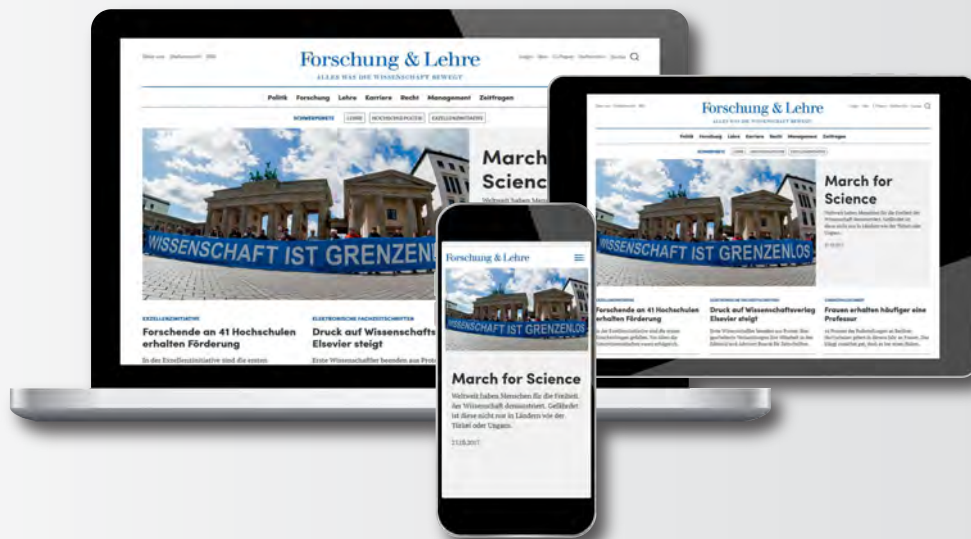
For many asylum seekers, the road to self-determination and a secure daily life in Germany is long. Above all, the initial steps are difficult. Simona Pagano, Shahd Wari and Susanne Becker now want to find further answers to the question of how this road can be made less rocky in the future. The researchers have since become friends with many asylum seekers. “We spend a lot of time together, even completely independently of our working hours,” says Wari.

During the year of the study, she particularly enjoyed one meeting place – a cafe in Göttingen where locals and asylum seekers could easily meet and chat. What was special about it was that only one of two drinks ordered had to be paid for. The one for the asylum seeker was on the house or paid for by other guests. Any places where people can forge contacts are very important to Shahd Wari – group hobby courses, group breakfasts. “There are numerous options. What’s important, in the end, is that solidarity and cooperation are established between refugees and locals.” ◀

#### TO THE POINT

- Researchers conducted a detailed investigation into the situation of asylum seekers in refugee accommodations in Göttingen in order to learn their needs and goals, as well as their subjective perspective of the situation.
- This work made clear how diverse the group of refugees is.
- It is hoped that the results of the study will help make it easier for refugees to gain a foothold in Germany right from the start.
- For instance, they should be informed clearly and transparently from the outset of their rights and duties, and of the steps involved in the asylum procedure.
- In addition, those responsible for the refugees should make greater efforts to take their basic needs into account.

# Forschung & Lehre



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