



 **Opin vísindi**

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Author(s)/Höf.: Guðbjört Guðjónsdóttir & Kristín Loftsdóttir

Title/Titill: Being a desirable migrant: Perception and racialisation of Icelandic migrants in Norway

Year/Útgáfuár: 2017

Version/Útgáfa: Pre-print / óritrýnt handrit

**Please cite the original version:**

**Vinsamlega vísið til útgefnu greinarinnar:**

Guðjónsdóttir, G., & Loftsdóttir, K. (2017). Being a desirable migrant: perception and racialisation of Icelandic migrants in Norway. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(5), 791-808. doi:10.1080/1369183X.2016.1199268

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[Published in 2017 in Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, vol 43, issue 5, pages 791-808.]

## **Being a desirable migrant: Perception and racialisation of Icelandic migrants in Norway**

Guðbjört Guðjónsdóttir & Kristín Loftsdóttir

*Department of Anthropology, University of Iceland, Reykjavík, Iceland*

### **Abstract**

In the aftermath of the financial crisis that hit Iceland in October 2008, increased numbers of Icelanders migrated to Norway to seek employment due to difficult economic circumstances in Iceland. Using critical perspectives from postcolonial studies and critical whiteness studies, the paper explores how these Icelandic migrants in Norway make sense of their new position as economic migrants within a global economy characterised by a growing sense of precariousness, while past inequalities and racism continue to matter. We also examine how these migrants are perceived in Norwegian media, and how social discourses of Icelandic migrants reflect larger Norwegian debates on racism, desirability and cultural belonging. Media discourses in Norway and interviews with Icelandic migrants reveal a hierarchy of acceptability of migrants. Icelanders are positioned as highly desirable compared to other migrant groups due to the intersection of perceived racial belonging, nationality and class. Our discussion contributes, furthermore, towards a critical analysis of the category migrant, by exploring how the term immigrant (*innvandrer/innflytjandi*) is used in narratives of Icelandic migrants in Norway and in Norwegian media discussions, showing the negative and racialised connotations of the term immigrant and how its understanding is linked with vulnerable positions and discrimination.

Keywords: Economic migrants; racialisation; class; migrant desirability; Norway

### **Introduction**

Europe's recent economic crisis has brought the subject of mobility even more strongly to the surface of contemporary debates, including questions of who is welcome and who

is not into what has been called ‘fortress Europe’ (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Ponzanesi and Blaagaard 2011). Mobility features alongside contemporary discussions about potential risks to the nation state, where asylum seekers and refugees are often placed at the centre, alongside concerns with Muslims and migrants from Eastern Europe (Fassin 2011, 216).

This paper discusses migration of Icelanders to Norway in the aftermath of the financial crisis that hit Iceland in October 2008. Scholars have used the economic crisis to draw out some of the hidden transcripts of Europe’s colonial and racialised past and how it operates in the present (Loftsdóttir 2013), which affirms how contemporary migration has to be critically contextualised in past inequalities and racialisation in Europe (Ponzanesi 2002). Our discussion explores how Icelandic migrants in Norway make sense of their new position as economic migrants. While mobility constitutes an important economic strategy for many (Olwig and Sørensen 2002), migration studies are often criticised for being preoccupied with people moving from poorer countries to the more affluent, thereby creating a narrow idea of who migrants are (Fechter and Walsh 2010, 1198). Responding to scholarly emphasis on paying better attention to more diverse groups of migrants (Benson and O’Reilly 2009; Castles 2010; Croucher 2012; Fechter and Walsh 2010; Leonard 2010; Lundström 2014), the paper also asks critically what kinds of migrants are seen as ‘desirable’ within a larger geopolitical context. The discussion examines in that regard how Norwegian social discourses of Icelandic migrants reveal larger Norwegian debates on racism, desirability and cultural belonging.

Drawing attention to the different positionality of migrants, our discussion benefits from critical perspectives offered by postcolonial studies and critical whiteness studies. Postcolonial studies critically engage with the creation of Europe within racist

and imperialistic historical processes (Gilroy 1993), where whiteness is one important feature of ongoing racialisation. Racialisation, argued by Garner, refers to the process of race becoming meaningful in a particular context (2010, 19), and thus, where individuals learn to recognise their status within an unequal global system of discrimination. As Simon-Kumar (2015) argues in her discussion of ‘the desirable migrant’ in New Zealand, racialisation intersects with class in the current neoliberal economy, where migrants’ desirability and compatibility with a particular nation state has also been strongly shaped by their class position (see also Ford, Morrell, and Heath 2012).

Our discussion contributes, furthermore, towards a critical analysis of the category migrant, by exploring how the term immigrant (*innflytjandi* in Icelandic, *innvandrер* in Norwegian) is used in both Norwegian media discussion and in the narratives of Icelandic migrants in Norway. As scholars have pointed out the term immigrant is usually applied to people migrating from poorer countries to the more affluent. In the European context, ‘the immigrant’ is frequently visualised as ‘non-white’, non-Western and low-skilled (Castles 2010; Fortier 2003; Gullestad 2002, 2005; Leinonen 2012; Lundström 2014). When relatively affluent ‘white’ migrants from the West come into focus of public and academic debate they are, however, often not referred to as ‘immigrants’ but rather as expatriates, mobile professionals or simply as Europeans or North Americans (Croucher 2012; Fechter and Walsh 2010; Leinonen 2012; Loftsdóttir 2016; Lundström 2014; Myrdahl 2010). The assumption is, furthermore, often that ‘Western’ or ‘European’ is a synonym for ‘white’ (Fechter and Walsh 2010), whereas ‘non-white’ European nationals are assumed to be ‘asylum seekers’ or ‘illegal immigrants’ (Garner 2007). With regard to border crossing, Ahmed (2007, 162) has highlighted that racialisation shapes the ideas of which (transnationally

mobile) bodies are perceived as ‘strangers’ and which ones are deemed to be more ‘at home’. Mobility thus becomes racialised and is strongly interlinked with colonial legacies (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Loftsdóttir 2016; Ponzanesi 2002). Our contribution also takes account of increased interest in understanding the Nordic countries better within a postcolonial context (Keskinen et al. 2009; Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012b), and how they are often seen as standing outside colonialism and racialisation (Gullestad 2005; Loftsdóttir 2012). In what follows, we first introduce the data and main methods used and then explain the background to the Icelandic migration to Norway. The final three sections focus on how Icelandic migrants in Norway are portrayed in the Norwegian media as well as how the Icelandic migrants experience and classify themselves in Norway, as both shaped by discussion in Norwegian society but also the Icelandic context where people from Poland had recently become the largest community associated with migration.

### **Methods and data**

The discussion is based on the first author’s fieldwork in Norway in 2012 and 2013, and the second author’s long involvement with analysing whiteness and racialisation in Icelandic context (see, e.g. Loftsdóttir 2013, 2015). In total, 40 in-depth interviews were conducted with Icelanders living in Norway, consisting of 21 men and 19 women, who were all socially positioned as ‘white’ and between the ages of 19 and 75. Most of the participants lived in or near the capital Oslo or the city Bergen and most (32 individuals of 40) had migrated to Norway after the financial crash, mainly due to better work opportunities. The participants had different levels of education and worked in various occupational fields, for instance, as carpenters, nurses, engineers, kindergarten assistants and manual labourers.

To contextualise the interviews and ethnographic materials more strongly in contemporary Norwegian discourses on immigration, news articles addressing Icelandic migration to Norway were also analysed. We searched for news articles published the first few years after the crash, between October 2008 and October 2011, on major Norwegian online news websites. In the paper, we focus on 28 articles from seven websites: ABC Nyheter, Aftenposten, Dagbladet, DN, E24, NRK and TV2. In addition to the articles, we also analysed the readers' comments which, as research has shown, have become the most popular form of readers' engagement with online news coverage (Weber 2014, 942). Only eight of the articles had readers' comments, a total of 308 comments.<sup>1</sup> News forums where readers can comment anonymously have been criticised for being a platform for extreme views, while others have pointed out that anonymity can increase the range of views being expressed (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2012). The Norwegian news websites we analysed allowed readers to comment anonymously but on all these websites it was stated that they would moderate or remove comments that were inappropriate or offensive. Analyses of anonymous readers' comments can be limited, as they are more likely than non-anonymous comments to be offensive or hateful (Santana 2014). Combined with other material like we do here, they can, however, provide deeper insights into particular issues.

## **Background**

Our brief contextualisation of the migration of Icelanders to Norway intends to give a sense of the social and cultural environment in Iceland and historical connections between Iceland and Norway, that shape both media discussion about the Icelandic migration to Norway and the Icelanders' perceptions of themselves as migrants. Earliest written accounts describe how Iceland was to a large extent settled by Norwegians at

the end of the ninth century. While genetic research suggests that 60% of the female settlers came from the British Isles and 20% of the men (Helgason 2004), what matters here are not biological facts of ancestry but the general conceptions of Icelanders as descendants of Norwegians. Iceland was independent until 1262 when it became politically united with Norway and in 1380 both countries came under Danish rule. Norway left the union with Denmark in 1814 while Iceland remained under Danish rule until 1944. Today Iceland and Norway take part in various forms of Nordic cooperation, which includes a common Nordic labour market since 1954 (Brochmann and Hagelund 2012, 8). Modern day Icelandic and Norwegian societies are in many ways comparable with similar welfare systems, a Lutheran state church and related languages, that originate in a common Nordic language but have over the past 1000 years developed into distinct languages.

The liberalisation of Iceland's economy in the 1990s meant short lived high levels of economic prosperity (Sigurjonsson and Mixa 2011). During the boom period, migration to Iceland increased dramatically, from being less than 2% in 1996 to 8% in 2008, with migrants not mainly arriving from the other Nordic countries as had been the case previously, but from more diverse locations (Statistics Iceland 2009). The largest group of migrants during the boom period came from Poland, primarily drawn to the ample work opportunities and often accepting low paying jobs in the service and building industry (Skaptadóttir 2004; Wojtynska, Skaptadóttir, and Ólafsson 2011). The Polish (male) migrant became in some ways the symbol of the migrant worker in Iceland, working in less desirable occupations for low salaries and even accepting difficult conditions in terms of housing and long hours to increase the earnings to take back home. In Iceland the popular assumption was that these migrants would return home after the economic crash but many Polish migrants in fact settled with their

families, investing emotionally and financially in their lives in Iceland (Wojtynska, Skaptadóttir, and Ólafs 2011).

The extensive Icelandic migration to Norway was due to a massive economic crisis starting with the collapse of Iceland's three major banks in October 2008. The crisis led to a great decline of the Icelandic currency, cut in living standard and a considerable rise in unemployment (Ólafsson 2011). The largest group of Icelandic nationals that emigrated went to Norway, one of few countries in Europe where the global financial crisis had little impact and unemployment levels were low (Garðarsdóttir 2012, 24–25). The number of Icelanders living in Norway consequently more than doubled, rising from 3849 in 2008 to 9218 in 2015 (Statistics Norway n.d.). These numbers need to be understood in relation to the small size of the Icelandic population of approximately 330,000 people in 2015, which means that the number of Icelanders living in Norway has risen from around 1.2% of the total Icelandic population in 2008 to 2.8% in 2015.

### **Media voices welcoming Icelanders**

There is a long history of economic migration to Norway, seen as starting in the 1960s and 1970s when there were demands for 'inexpensive' labour in many of the Nordic countries. More recently, increasing numbers of asylum seekers and refugees have sought entry in Norway – also following the same pattern as elsewhere (Knudsen 1997; Olwig 2011). In 2012, the largest migrant groups in Norway came from Poland, Sweden, Pakistan, Somalia and Iraq (Østby, Hødahl, and Rustad 2013, 47). Racism has historically not been acknowledged as part of Norwegian society, and for a long time not a subject seriously engaged with by scholars focusing on Norway (Gullestad 2004). To some extent, this can be explained as part of a persistent internal and external image of the Nordic region, characterised as existing outside of the historical context of

colonialism and thus by definition racism (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012a). Norwegian identity in the past revolved largely around defining itself as different from its Nordic neighbours, but is in the present, more and more understood as a ‘white’ identity (Gullestad 2004). Discussions are, furthermore, characterised by anxieties of who belongs and who does not belong in Norway (McIntosh 2015). While the official discourse emphasises Norway as a supporter of human rights, many Norwegians are sceptical of foreigners and public discourse depicts migrants and refugees as exploiting the welfare system (Olwig 2011, 184). Both Iceland and Norway maintain a self-perception as being ethnically and culturally homogeneous (Gullestad 2006, 41; McIntosh 2015, 312; Skaptadóttir and Loftsdóttir 2009, 205). In Iceland, there is also a strong sense of innocence regarding racism, which conveniently ignores Icelanders’ history of racial categorisation (Loftsdóttir 2013). Iceland’s history as under Danish rule also resulted in Icelandic intellectuals struggling to define themselves in the early twentieth century as belonging with ‘white’ civilised Europe, rather than as a colonised country (Loftsdóttir 2012).

In our analysis of these news articles and the readers’ comments three intertwined themes stand out, characterising Icelanders as: brothers coming home, ‘proper’ migrants and hard-working people. The three themes reflect both a shared sense of intimacy and the distinction of migrants as ‘more desirable’ or ‘less desirable’. Here below we discuss and give examples of each of these themes before continuing towards the voices of the Icelandic migrants.

### ***Brothers returning home***

The first theme of ‘returning home’ is articulated in several ways in the sources analysed, and then dominantly as a way of assessing positively the Icelandic migrants. Some of the news articles imply that Icelanders are returning to Norway after having

emigrated in the ninth century. One news article on *Aftenposten* on 3 December 2008 for instance states: ‘when the crossing to Iceland began 1100 years ago, [king] Harald Fairhair feared Norway would become unpopulated. After the financial crisis, he might get his people back’.<sup>2</sup> This construction of Icelanders as in some sense original Norwegians is prevalent in the readers’ comments, in which Icelanders are frequently welcomed to Norway as ‘brothers’ or ‘family’. Numerous comments resemble the following from *Dagbladet* on 31 October 2008: ‘they are just returning home to their motherland after a thousand year visit to the volcano island’. A comment from *ABC Nyheter* on 7 July 2011 similarly states: ‘Welcome Icelanders! The brother nation in the northwest has much that we need and we have a lot that they need. Culturally we are alike and we have a lot in common.’ Gullestad (2002, 46–47) has shown how sameness (*likhet*) is a greatly valued feature in Norway and thus it is seen as problematic when others are conceived as ‘too different’. She describes how those regarded as ‘too different’ are avoided while differences from those who are perceived as compatible are downplayed. What is seen as closeness of Icelanders to ideal Norwegian society is emphasised in the media discussions through reference to sameness and shared history, ancestry, kinship and culture.

In some cases, the writers of the online comments find it important to emphasise the (assumed) sameness of Icelanders and Norwegians by stating that they are not strangers (*fremmede*) or immigrants (*innvandrere*). Such comments further highlight the politics of mobility, that is, ‘the politics of who gets to be at home’ and who is recognised as ‘the stranger’ (Ahmed 2007, 162). One comment from *NRK* on 30 June 2010 for instance states: ‘Icelanders are not strangers they are relatives.’ Another person writes on *DN* on 25 April 2011: ‘We do not see Swedes and Danes as immigrants. And certainly not Icelanders. In reality they all have Norwegian genes. You are all

welcome!’ In this light, Icelanders become ‘Nordic brothers’ – with the same ‘genes’ – and as such compatible with Norwegian society, where it is implied, or becomes evident from the other comments referred to below, that certain migrants are not. These scattered and occasional references to ‘genes’ also remind us of how the Nordic countries have a history of interest in Eugenics, especially prior to the second world war (see, e.g. discussion in Blaagaard and Andreassen 2012).

### **The preferable migrants**

Although some comment writers did not want to categorise Icelanders as ‘immigrants’, others celebrated them as the ‘proper’ or ‘right kind of immigrants’. A comment written on *DN* on 25 April 2011 states: ‘Educated people who perfectly fit the Norwegian culture are exactly the type of immigrants that should be granted residence in Norway.’ In some cases, people use the Icelandic migrants directly to reflect on other migrant groups considered undesirable, especially Muslims and asylum seekers. One person commented on *NRK* on 30 June 2010: ‘Finally we get some proper immigrants, not the trash that has racist, violent and backward culture/ideology. Think brain-gain!’ Another comment on the same thread states: ‘A good counterbalance to all Muslim immigration!!! Thanks for that!!!’ Attached to a different news story, a person wrote in a sarcastic tone on *Dagbladet* on 1 November 2008: ‘This is wrong!! Accepting white, Christian, educated people!! [People] who do not need social assistance?! We should rather try to receive more people from Africa and elsewhere in the world that are sick and avoid working.’ In the same comment thread in *Dagbladet*, a similarly sarcastic comment is framed as an advice to Icelanders planning to migrate to Norway:

Remember to take a few extra hours in a solarium and throw away your passport and other ID and show up at Gardermoen [the Norwegian international airport] and

apply for political asylum. Then you are guaranteed housing, clothing and food for some years here in Norway.

While these more openly racist and anti-immigrant comments were sometimes criticised by other readers, the comments on Icelanders as brothers and good people were rarely questioned. Such comments seem to be seen as non-racialised and thus acceptable in line with what scholars have shown in relation to ‘culture’ as one of the code words for race (Back and Solomos 2000; Gullestad 2006). The muslimification of racism, reported elsewhere in Europe, has also been identified in Norway (Bangstad 2014; Eriksen 2012; Mårtensson 2014; Vassenden and Andersson 2011), with concern about Islamophobic and racist online comments in Norwegian media (Andersson 2012). The comments furthermore depict refugees as undesirable, where the asylum seeker is constructed as ‘a parasite upon the host nation and its welfare state’ (Gibson 2006, 697). The seemingly warm welcome of Icelanders has to be analysed in context with the dominant discourse on migrants in general and, as can be seen in the online discussions, some writers warmly welcome Icelanders at the same time as they direct hate speech towards other migrants, in particular Muslims and asylum seekers. The reception of Icelanders can thus be understood to be a part of ‘the politics of belonging’, where boundaries are actively maintained by demarcating ‘us’ and ‘them’, as well as defining what membership in each category involves (Yuval-Davis 2006, 204–205).

### ***The hard-working and useful migrants***

In the media discussions, Icelanders are also welcomed as hard-working and useful people for Norwegian society. In a news article on *TV2* on 21 November 2008, an employer is quoted saying: ‘We see Icelanders as people with a very high work ethic.’ An employment adviser is also quoted in *DN* on 25 April 2011 as saying: ‘Icelanders are known for being hard-working and talented, and they fit well into the Norwegian

culture.’ The readers’ comments similarly highlight Icelanders as hard workers; a comment on *NRK* on 30 June 2010 states: ‘Welcome! Bring with you as many as you can. Icelanders are hard-working and very nice people.’

In news articles Icelanders are sometimes contrasted with Norwegians, and employers are said to ‘prefer Icelanders’ to Norwegians. An article on *E24* on 9 December 2008 quotes a representative from a Norwegian employment agency as saying: ‘Many Norwegian employers are more interested in Icelanders than Norwegians because Icelanders are hard-working and are seldom on sick leave.’ In the readers’ comments, this notion of Norwegians being more frequently ill and less hard-working can also be found. However, Icelanders’ assumed ‘hard-working nature’ was more commonly contrasted to other migrants than to Norwegians. In *Dagbladet* on 1 November 2008 a comment states: ‘We need more employable people, so we can afford to take in work-avoiding persons from Africa.’ Some comments tie together all the themes we identified, as this comment on *NRK* on 30 June 2010:

We really need this type of immigration, among other things to counterbalance some of the other immigration that does not bring anything good with it. Icelanders are of Nordic origin and have maybe developed and managed their cultural and genetic heritage better than we Norwegians have. In addition they are smart and hard-working. Welcome Icelandic brothers and sisters!

Taken together, the media discussions, especially the readers’ comments, reflect how some Norwegians understand the issue of ‘belonging’ in Norwegian society as depending on ‘race’ and nationality, which also intersects with class. In some cases ‘genes’ become like a code word for ‘race’, automatically demonstrating Icelanders’ compatibility with Norwegian society and evoking the shared history of Nordic countries’ engagement with Eugenics in the beginning of the twentieth century (see, e.g. Blaagaard and Andreassen 2012). The ‘smart’, ‘talented’ and ‘highly educated’

migrants, who ‘work hard’ and do not need social assistance, are particularly welcome. The media discussions analysed here therefore establish a ‘hierarchy of suitability and appropriateness’ of migrants (McDowell 2009, 34). The anonymous online comments discussed in this section are often extreme and we do not claim that they are representative for Norwegians in general. Nonetheless, these themes have also appeared in the interviews and informal discussion, to which we turn in the next two sections.

### **Being ‘the Nordic brother’**

The narratives in the interviews with the Icelandic migrants often mirrored the Norwegian media discussions, as the participants emphasised sameness and assumed shared ancestry, explaining that as Icelanders they were greeted ‘with open arms’ in Norway and seen as ‘family returning home’ (see Guðjónsdóttir 2014). While the Icelanders do occasionally, as the Norwegians emphasise shared ‘genes’, the Icelanders more commonly refer to historical connections between Iceland and Norway, especially that the original settlement of Iceland was to a large extent done by Norwegians. In this section we focus on how the Icelanders interviewed distanced themselves from the migrant category but were also at times unsure of how to position themselves with regard to the migrant category. First, we discuss how the term immigrant (*innflytjandi*) was constructed in the interviews and then we explain how some participants found the term foreigner (*útlendingur*) not to be appropriate for Icelanders. The final section, however, shows how the participants struggled with the terms immigrant and foreigner, finding the terms applicable to themselves in some contexts.

### ***Not immigrants***

The term *innflytjandi* (immigrant) is in Icelandic public discourse most commonly used for people from Eastern Europe and the Global South, but less commonly applied to

migrants from Western Europe and particularly not the other Nordic countries.

Discussing the position of Icelanders in Norway in relation to the immigrant term, Ingvi, a man in his late forties, stated: ‘we’re not immigrants, we’ve just returned home’.<sup>3</sup> The interviewees also explained that Norwegians did not categorise Icelanders as ‘immigrants’ and would even correct Icelanders if they referred to themselves as ‘immigrants’. Talking about how Norwegians see Icelanders, Heiðrún, a woman in her mid-thirties, said:

I’m really happy about Norway and Norwegians, they are good people, they don’t see you as some kind of a foreign object here, we’re always told: ‘you’re Icelanders, you’re so hard-working and our cousins’. I said to someone that I was an *innvandrer* here [and he replied] ‘no you’re not immigrants, you’re just our little cousin visiting.’

Heiðrún’s comments reflect the Norwegian media discussions in which Icelanders are portrayed not only as ‘kin’, as opposed to ‘strangers’ (Ahmed 2007), but also as particularly hard working. When describing the categorisation of Icelanders in Norway, Þuríður, a woman in her early forties, said:

I’m sure Norwegians don’t see us as, you know, this typical immigrant. Yes, you’re an Icelandic, but you’re not this foreign foreigner you see. You know, it can for instance not be seen from your appearance that you come from somewhere else and there are a lot of the same social norms in the society as at home.

Similar to Þuríður, Dagný, a woman in her late forties, said about the position of Icelanders in Norway: ‘We’re not immigrants, not *innvandrere* as they say.’ When asked who were then considered ‘immigrants’ in Norway Dagný answered:

I think they’re talking about people from [ ... ] underdeveloped countries, a lot of course from Africa and North Africa, you’re talking about [...] Pakistan and those surrounding countries [...] So we’re not at all [immigrants], but those are

*innvandrere* as they call it, people who come from those underdeveloped countries with little education. I don't think skin colour matters so much, apart from the fact that they all have a different skin colour, but they're from that environment. We Icelanders are absolutely not in that group, not Norwegians, not Germans, none of that Western world. And not Italians or Spaniards I think (hesitating), that-, I-, no. So *innvandrere* for Norwegians are, I would think, from underdeveloped countries.

Dagný's and Þuríður's understanding of the term immigrant is consistent with what Gullestad has pointed out: in Norway, the term immigrant is racialised and in everyday use it applies to people who are or have "Third world" origin, different values from the majority, "dark skin", working class' (2002, 50; see also Berg 2008; Myrdahl 2010).

It is noteworthy that Dagný contradictorily claims that skin colour does not matter, while she also cannot close her eyes to the evident racialisation of the use of the term. Thus, she fails to see the racism involved while still acknowledging that the term is used for groups historically racialised as 'non-white'. Racism is thus reduced into recognition of different skin colour, which is then judged as not relevant. By explaining that 'immigrants' are 'from underdeveloped countries with little education', Dagný might want to highlight that this categorisation is rather about class than 'race', but as a number of scholars have pointed out, class and 'race' often intersect so these social locations cannot be easily divided (Crenshaw 1994; Hartigan 1997). While both Þuríður and Dagný assume that Icelanders and Norwegians are 'white' and 'immigrants' are not, the participants' narratives also reflect presumed hierarchies within the 'white' category, as scholars have discussed in other contexts (Leinonen 2012; Lundström 2014; McDowell 2009). Dagný, for instance, hesitates when determining whether Italians and Spaniards count as 'non-immigrants' and other participants indicate that being Nordic is ranked higher than being Eastern European (see Guðjónsdóttir 2014, 181). Daukšas (2013, 61) work on Lithuanians in Norway more precisely points out that

although being classified as ‘white’ and European is an advantage in Norway, it does not automatically eliminate being labelled as ‘the migrant’.

Finally, it is interesting that some of the participants, as Dagný and Heiðrún, choose to use the Norwegian word ‘innvandrер’, indicating that they see the term as carrying specific Norwegian meaning. This can be seen as reflecting their interpellation within Norwegian immigration discourses and may indicate that they understand the Norwegian term as more clearly racialised than the Icelandic term. By using the Norwegian term, they can also possibly be attempting to distance themselves from the migrant category.

### *Not foreigners*

As with the immigrant term, there were participants who questioned that the term foreigner was applicable to Icelanders in Norway. Örn, a man in his early forties, described a situation he had been very unhappy with: ‘My child was put in an immigrant class with Somalis and Arabs and those kind, that was one of the things I couldn’t stand.’ When explaining why his child had been put in that class Örn said:

That was of course a kind of a misunderstanding, we had of course just arrived and I spoke English to the people at the office so I was in fact labelled right away. If you start speaking English you’re just labelled.

When asked what he had been labelled as, Örn replied with a single word: ‘a foreigner’. Örn felt that this ‘label’ did not fit him, and that it was reserved for other people – people that Örn did not want him or his child to be associated with.

Although Örn felt he had been categorised as ‘a foreigner’ (wrongly in his view) other participants said that Norwegians did generally neither use the term foreigner or immigrant for Icelanders. For example, Þóra, a woman in her mid-twenties said that

Norwegians had told her, ‘you [Icelanders] are not foreigners, we’re the same people’.

Furthermore, Hrefna, a woman in her mid-fifties who migrated prior to 2008 stated:

I don’t feel like a foreigner and I’ve never done. When I talk about us I’m talking about us as Icelanders, not as foreigners [...] For Norwegians we’re not foreigners, we’re Icelanders. It’s a status to be an Icelandic [...] We have a good reputation for being decent, honest people that work. So I don’t think we’re foreigners here in Norway. We’re Icelanders.

Here Hrefna explains that Icelanders are defined by their nationality and not as foreigners. As scholars have pointed out this is often the privilege of Western migrants: to be referred to by their nationality rather than as migrants (Lundström 2014; see also Leinonen 2012). Similar to the Norwegian media discussion, Hrefna tries to justify that Icelanders are also not identified as foreigners because they have a high status and are honest and hard-working people. The image of certain populations as hard-working people has, however, not prevented their racialisation or exclusion historically. Hrefna’s implication that ‘real’ foreigners are a burden on society, reflects how migrants and refugees are frequently described in the media and in public discourse in Europe as parasites that do not contribute to society (Gibson 2006; Hervik 2004), which is also the case in Norway (Olwig 2011). Her emphasis on being hard working, as a justification for not being perceived as ‘a foreigner’, therefore builds on a discourse that assumes that migrants do not work and are dependent on welfare (Olwig 2011, 184).

### ***Struggling with the concepts***

As the previous two sections demonstrate, many of the participants stated that they were not ‘immigrants’ or ‘foreigners’ in Norway. However, people struggled with these terms and how to position themselves. In certain contexts, people identified with the category ‘immigrant’ or, more commonly, ‘foreigner’, or felt they were placed in these

categories. When talking about whether and in what circumstances the participants felt like ‘foreigners’ or ‘immigrants’, language knowledge was a prominent theme.

Icelanders are often assumed to learn Norwegian easily because of how closely related the languages are; however, some noted that it had been more difficult to learn Norwegian than they had expected. According to Dagný, cited in the previous section, Icelanders are not perceived as ‘immigrants’ in Norway because they are part of ‘the Western world’. For Dagný the categories ‘immigrant’ and ‘foreigner’ were not the same and during the interview Dagný said:

I’m a foreigner here, [...] I think it has something to do with the language [...] I still find it difficult not being able to express myself the way I want to. [...] I think you’ll always consider yourself a foreigner as long as that’s the case [...] I wonder if you’ll ever become anything other than a foreigner.

Another participant, Árni, a man in his early thirties, also connected his lack of Norwegian skills to feeling like he did not belong. Árni said that because of how similar he found Icelanders and Norwegians to be, ‘I have a really hard time seeing myself as an immigrant.’ Árni however continued by saying: ‘but of course I’m an immigrant, I see myself in that way, you feel it especially through the language [...] If you haven’t gotten a grasp of it [the language] then you’re a bit on the outside’. Similar to our findings Leinonen (2012) observes that ‘white’ Americans in Finland were reluctant to label themselves as ‘immigrants’; however, when they did it was in connection to not being able to speak Finnish fluently.

Although the participants sometimes connected being ‘labelled’ (by others or self) as ‘a foreigner’ or ‘an immigrant’ with lack of language skills, this was not always the case. Þuríður, referred to above, spoke Norwegian fluently and said she did ‘not identify with the typical immigrant from the Middle East and Africa’. In spite of good qualifications, Þuríður was, however, unable to find a new job, which she attributed to

labour market discrimination against foreigners. She cited Norwegian research that had shown that people with ‘Norwegian names’ were more likely to be invited for job interviews than people with ‘foreign names’. Þuríður said:

Of course I feel like a foreigner and, you know, I think I’ve felt more like that after I started to look for another job, [...] that surprised me [...], it had never crossed my mind that it mattered whether I was a Norwegian or an Icelander when looking for a job.

Through encountering what Þuríður identified as discrimination in the labour market, Þuríður started to identify more as ‘a foreigner’, which highlights how the migrant category is often seen as inherently linked with discrimination (Lundström 2014), and how contextual the experience of feeling as ‘a foreigner’ can be. These comments and reflections of the terms immigrant and foreigner reflect how the Icelandic migrants struggle with explaining why some groups should be justifiably classified as ‘immigrants’ or ‘foreigners’ while others should not, as well as their resistance to being categorised in that way.

### **Making sense of migration in crisis**

As specified earlier, the economic boom and institutional changes in Iceland led to unprecedented numbers of people migrating to Iceland in the new millennium. With Polish people constituting the largest migrant group (Júlíusdóttir, Skaptadóttir, and Karlsdóttir 2013), the Polish person working in low-wage occupations became the embodiment of the economic migrant in Iceland during the boom years. In this section, we explore how this background shapes the way in which the Icelandic participants perceive and understand their own position in Norway. This means that ongoing discussions in Norway do not only shape the Icelanders’ perceptions of themselves as migrants but also the social context ‘back home’.

Thus when evaluating Icelanders' position in Norway, the situation of and attitudes towards migrants in Iceland became a recurrent reference point, either in general sense or more often as compared to Polish migrants in Iceland prior to the crash. Comparing his own position in Norway to the previous situation in Iceland, Valdimar, a man in his early thirties, said:

Now I'm exactly on the other side of the table compared to how it was at home, where the foreigners were blamed for everything. You know like in my case, I'm a carpenter and I had a company at home with foreigners working for me, but now I'm this—, now I've become the foreigner (laughs).

Tinna, a woman in her late twenties, explained her experience more specifically by referring to Polish migrants in Iceland before the crash:

At first I got a shock (laughs), I just felt like some Pole. This sounds really racist and ridiculous and all that, you know, but, you know, I'm not meaning I was some kind of a racist or something when home in Iceland, but I still didn't want to be a foreigner. It's never pleasant to be a foreigner I think. Or I feel, maybe it's okay, but then you need to speak English and be a foreigner. [...] I guess you just have to accept that you'll be a foreigner as long as you live here (laughs).

While the participants' comparison of Icelanders to 'Poles' was often said sarcastically or as accompanied by awkward laughter, it carried a serious undertone as finding oneself in the same vulnerable category as the migrants in Iceland before the financial crisis. Baldur, a man in his mid-twenties, stated:

I was told not long ago that I should go back home, that we [Icelanders] were taking up all their [Norwegians'] work here, that we were like Poles, [he] called us the new Poles. [...] But I have to admit that I feel—, we are of course just the Poles of today (laughs), we're nothing but migrant workers and they were exactly that before us.

A hostile comment like this one of telling Baldur to 'go back home' was very much an

exception and majority of the participants explained that it was an advantage to be Icelandic in Norway (see Guðjónsdóttir 2014).

Örn, cited above, explained that when he believed that his employer was unlawfully terminating his work contract, Örn told the employer, ‘I’m not a Pole, you can’t treat me this way.’ Örn’s words indicate that he associates discrimination with being Polish. Just as in the case of Baldur, Örn sees ‘the Pole’ as the reference point, a figure that both find relevant to compare themselves with or distance themselves from. Their different labour market position and class position can be an important factor in how differently the two men position themselves with regard to the iconic figure of ‘the Pole’. Baldur, in his mid-twenties, had finished compulsory education and worked as a manual labourer whereas Örn, in his early forties, held a university degree and worked as a professional. While the comparison to the figure of the Polish migrant worker rings true to an Icelander that has worked in same or similar sector as Polish men in Iceland (Júlíusdóttir, Skaptadóttir, and Karlsdóttir 2013) and Norway (Friberg 2012), for the professional man, a comparison to Polish people was out of the question. Embodying ‘the desirable skilled migrant’, Örn may therefore more easily avoid the migrant category, and its inherently negative connotations.

Some of the other participants felt a need to emphasise, like Örn, that Icelanders and Polish people were in a different position in Norway. Even though as in Iceland, Polish people have become the largest migrant group in Norway recently (Østby, Hødahl, and Rustad 2013, 47), many interviewees stated that it were Icelanders, and not Norwegians, who compared Icelanders to ‘Poles’. Talking about how Norwegians see Icelanders compared to other migrants, Þorsteinn, a man in his early sixties, noted, ‘I don’t think they classify us like Poles or, or Arabs or people of less related nations.’ Friðrik, a man in his late forties, who worked with both Norwegian and Polish men, also

highlighted the perceived hierarchy of migrants and distinctions within the ‘white’ category, saying:

The Norwegian carpenters that I’ve worked with, they make a clear distinction between Icelanders and Poles. They see us a little more like cousins and they’ve heard that we’re hard-working and that we know how to do the job, so they trust us much more.

Here Friðrik refers to kinship, ‘hard-working nature’ and expertise of Icelanders – a recurrent theme both in the interviews and in the media analysis – as setting them apart from other ‘white’ economic migrants. As other studies have shown, it is common for migrants to present themselves as hard working compared to other migrant groups (Datta et al. 2009; Daukšas 2013). Like Icelanders, Polish people have also been constructed as particularly hard-working migrants in Norwegian public debate (Friberg 2012). Although some participants acknowledged Polish migrants as hard workers they distinguished Icelanders from Polish workers by stating that Icelanders were more valued as employees in Norway because they were more skilled, more ‘culturally’ similar and better able to speak Norwegian. The narratives thus emphasise ‘Poles’ as ‘different’, while also recognising a degree of sameness.

This perception of Polish people as ‘different’ importantly engages with a historical memory where Polish people, as well as other Eastern Europeans, have been presented as Europe’s internal other, as being ‘uncivilised’ and lacking in many respects compared to Western Europeans (Buchowski 2006; Kuus 2004). This historical perception continues to operate and shapes how Polish migrants are currently received in Western Europe, facing racialisation and discrimination (Garner 2012; McDowell 2008; van Riemsdijk 2013). In Norway, for example, van Riemsdijk (2010, 2013) shows that within the health care sector, Norwegians see Polish nurses as lower class, ‘uncivilised’ and having less-valuable education because of their Polish origin. van

Riemsdijk (2013, 383) relates these assumptions about Polish nurses to the historical perception of Polish people as ‘backward others’, while these assumptions also stem from the employment of Polish people in Norway for several decades in low-skilled jobs. Such conceptions of Polish people do not seem to have a long history in Iceland as indicated by Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir’s research in the early 2000s (Skaptadóttir 2004, 142). The growing numbers of Polish people in Iceland, however, seem to mean that Icelanders have increasingly engaged with this social memory of the Polish and locate Polish people as inferior to other Europeans in some sense (see discussion in Loftsdóttir 2015).

## **Conclusions**

After the economic crash in 2008, many Icelandic nationals migrated to Norway due to better work opportunities in Norway and worsening conditions of living at home, similar to economic migrants elsewhere. As we have shown here, their position in Norwegian society differs from many other migrants revealing the racism that persists towards many migrants. The interviews, furthermore, vividly reflect how the Icelandic migrants try to make sense of their experiences by engaging with current notions of race and diversity, taking into account current discourses about migrants in both Iceland and Norway. Both media discussion and interviews reveal a ‘hierarchy of acceptability’ of migrants (McDowell 2009), positioning Icelanders as highly desirable compared to other migrant groups due to the intersection of perceived racial belonging and nationality. This desirability is also established by referring to ‘cultural’ closeness of Icelanders and Norwegians that occasionally takes the form of references to a common gene pool. The acceptance of Icelanders, furthermore, intersects with class, as Icelanders are regarded as desirable because they are presumed to be ‘hard working’ and ‘skilled’. The desirability of Icelanders is therefore also linked to economic

reasoning and neoliberal focus on the needs of the labour market (Simon-Kumar 2015) – where economic migrants are more valued than asylum seekers (McDowell 2009, 34) and skilled migrants have become ‘the least controversial form of international relocation in Europe’ (Scott 2006, 1106; see also Ford, Morrell, and Heath 2012).

In these accounts, our participants try to understand what an ‘immigrant’ is, but their discussion also reflects how contextual the migrant category is (Leinonen 2012; Lundström 2014), and in certain contexts the participants position themselves within that category by referring to themselves as ‘immigrants’, ‘foreigners’ or ‘Poles’. In the Icelanders’ use, these terms usually have negative connotations and the participants typically ascribe these categories to themselves in reference to situations where they feel marginalised or discriminated against. The Icelanders’ ongoing struggle with the migrant category thus further underscores the negative and racialised connotations of the term immigrant and how it is understood as inherently linked with a vulnerable position and discrimination.

## Notes

1. Some articles that were originally collected in 2011 had readers’ comments, but when our more thorough search took place in 2014 these articles did no longer have the readers’ comments attached. One possible explanation for the small number of articles that had readers’ comment is therefore that some of the media websites did not archive readers’ comments, which is a common practice elsewhere (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2012). At least two of the news websites changed their commenting system in 2011, which may have resulted in older comments being deleted. After these changes, readers were no longer allowed to comment anonymously.
2. All quotes from Norwegian media were written in Norwegian and are translated to English by us.
3. The interviews were in Icelandic and we have translated the quotes to English. The names of the participants have been changed. When not specified, the interviewees being referred to migrated to Norway after the onset of the financial crisis.

## Funding

The research received a doctoral grant from the University of Iceland Research fund and a grant from the Memorial fund of Eðvarð Sigurðsson. The study is a part of the research project Icelandic Identity in Crisis funded by the Icelandic Centre for Research (Rannís) [grant number 130426-051], and the University of Iceland Research Fund.

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