

Not everyone who worries about immigrants is a bigot – they're just in a moral bind

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St Anton, Austria: living together isn't always easy. Credit: the_junes/Flickr, CC BY-NC

Immigration and integration rate among [the public's top concerns](#) in most Western nations. Across Europe, [support has grown](#) for right-wing political parties that lobby for tighter border controls and tougher restrictions on migrants. The [popularity of UKIP](#) in the UK's most recent

election is just one example.

When examining this development, critics and commentators tend to focus on the broad brushstrokes: they [rail against](#) the ideological problems of racism, xenophobia, and religious intolerance. Of course, these kinds of abhorrent ideologies do still exist in societies across the globe. But the media tends to overlook the nuances of how Joe Bloggs and Jane Doe actually make sense of their relationships with the immigrants living nearby.

As a result, locals can feel ignored and misunderstood – like they've been put in a box marked "racist". Governments and mainstream [political parties](#) could do more to address and reduce these people's small, everyday fears about sharing spaces and experiences with immigrants. But as it stands, it's more likely that these voters will be wooed by parties that express those fears, and demand more radical solutions.

Making sense

As an academic, I seek to understand how local people make sense of their relationship with immigrants. To this end, I have spent seven years studying how citizens interpret the way immigrants consume goods and services in their local communities.

My research – which [appears in](#) the June issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* – took place in a small town in rural Austria, located somewhere between the iconic ski resorts Sölden, St. Anton, and Garmisch-Partenkirchen. Here, my aim was to examine how the locals responded when the Turkish guest workers who arrived in the 1960s became Austrian citizens, and began to consume local brands, shop in local supermarkets and settle in local neighbourhoods.

Over this period, I interviewed local and immigrant consumers, observed

their interactions, and collected relevant media reports. By analysing these materials with reference to [the work of](#) American sociologist Alan Fiske, I formed an understanding of how and why locals have struggled to reconfigure their relationship with Turkish immigrants, from the 1960s to today.

A tale of two ethnicities

In the 1960s, when the Turkish guest workers first came to town, their relationship with the local Austrians was essentially based on a market exchange. Because the guest workers came to work and earn money, rather than becoming part of the Austrian society, local citizens felt no need to adjust their way of life. Instead, they met the Turkish men with some curiosity, provided them with the (often overpriced) resources they needed to do their job, and otherwise the two groups left each other alone.

But after [the economic crises](#) in the mid 1970s, reforms to immigration laws meant that guest workers were able to stay longer, and eventually become proper Austrian citizens. As the immigrants spent more in the local economy – instead of saving or sending their earnings back to Turkey – the locals no longer thought about their relationships with immigrants solely as a mutually beneficial market exchange. The way they relate to immigrants was also influenced by the changes they perceived to their community, their structures of authority, and their equality as citizens.

As the relationships between locals and immigrants became more complex, tensions rose. Immigrants became formally equal citizens, and a part of Austrian life. They began to open their own businesses, buy luxury cars and local houses, send their children to local schools, live out their religious faith more overtly, and vote according to their own interests.

Local knowledge?

The locals formed four key interpretations of these developments, and their role in them. First, locals regarded some of their dealings with the Turkish immigrants to be "selling out", at the expense of the local community. For example, even though neighbours often urged each other to sell their houses to other local buyers, many would nevertheless sell their houses to Turkish buyers, who would pay higher prices.

When locals saw Turkish immigrants establishing themselves in the community, they felt their own authority was being eroded. When locals saw Turkish immigrants drive luxury cars – a globally recognised symbol of social and economic status – they felt obliged to rebuild the hierarchy by discrediting the Turkish practice of a "shared family" car. Turkish families would collect the income from all family members to buy one premium brand car. In contrast, locals opted for individual vehicles, characterising the Turkish immigrants' practice as inferior, on the basis that it did not afford them the same amount of freedom and independence.

Locals were also concerned with issues of fairness. They perceived immigrants to be exploiting the welfare state by claiming benefits for adopted children living in Turkey and violating local cultural norms, for example, by regularly barbecuing in a typically unused shared courtyard. Immigrants were seen to do this with the support of local authorities, and this made locals feel as though they were being treated unfairly. As a consequence, locals felt it was legitimate to disadvantage and discredit immigrants where they could, for example, denying them access to market resources, having them wait longer at the local doctors, and letting them feel their disregard in their everyday interactions.

Finally – and perhaps most importantly – locals felt they were caught in an inescapable bind between local and global morals. As Europeans, the

Austrian locals firmly stood by the humanist ideals of equality, freedom, and democracy, which have contributed to the peace and affluence of their country after World War II. But these ideals also require that locals and immigrants are treated as equals, without any special privileges afforded to either group on the basis of their ethnicity.

In contrast, in their roles as community members, locals tended to defend their privileges as longstanding customers of the local supermarket, inhabitants of local neighbourhoods, and voters who decide the fate of their society and culture. They felt they had earned these privileges, by having inhabited, defended, culturally shaped and economically developed their town for decades, or even centuries.

From this perspective, inequalities in the local community were seen as a natural outcome of prior achievements. Locals believed that immigrants need to earn their place at the table, and prove their loyalty to the local community.

As a consequence of these perceptions, locals who generally admire Turkish culture and people, and who disagree with racist ideologies, end up discriminating against Turkish immigrant consumers. They did this as a way of trying to protect an (outdated) relationship in which Austrians were the benevolent hosts, and Turkish immigrants the hard-working, undemanding guests.

A moral conflict

Clearly, these demands are incompatible. But it seems that locals have not yet figured out a way to reconcile the conflicting perspectives. Often, locals even realise that their discriminatory practices are morally wrong on a global scale, but have not found suitable ways to deal with these contradictions. This is the kind of challenge facing citizens of Western democracies around the globe.

But even recognising these contradictions can take us some way toward finding a solution. Local citizens can reflect on the many ways their expectations about market exchanges, community, authority and equality can result in discrimination against immigrants. If locals are willing to adjust their expectations about the privileges they're entitled to, and empathise with immigrants who are often being deprived of the opportunity to grow and prosper, then many of these tensions may dissipate.

In particular, depriving immigrants of opportunities for upward social mobility (rather than encouraging them to thrive) produces exactly those problems that locals don't want; namely, status anxiety and competition between [ethnic groups](#) and discrimination. Because in the UK poorer people [tend to have more children](#) than richer people, poor immigrant groups tend to grow faster. This then creates further anxieties among locals – who are bearing fewer children – about being "taken over".

In turn, politicians can keep an eye on the changing relationships between their constituents, to better understand which ethnic groups interpret their relationships with other ethnic groups as misaligned, and why. By thinking about tensions between ethnic groups as a result of complex changes to the ways they interact, instead of simplistic racist ideologies, politicians would be able to use more effective measures to address these problems.

If immigrants and locals are to form cohesive, cooperative societies, they must be able to come together and define the boundaries for cultural change in their [local community](#). By identifying which cultural elements locals and [immigrants](#) wish to protect, and which are open to change, and by creating rules about equal treatment in government and in the marketplace, we could encourage interactions that enhance mutual respect, rather than just tolerance.

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