Analyzing "Threat" in Asylum Reception: Context, Materiality and Institutional Texts in High-Stakes Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: Traditional theories of intercultural communication often overlook the multiplicity of interpretations and the influence of power, materiality, and institutional structures on everyday interactions. In high-stakes environments such as asylum reception, communication is shaped by broader political, economic, and social systems that structure both professional practices and interpersonal relations. This study examines how intercultural communication unfolds within a Finnish asylum centre (AC), focusing on how "threat" and "threatening" are constructed, interpreted, and managed by practitioners. It also demonstrates how Institutional Ethnography (IE) can serve as a theoretical and methodological tool for analysing the institutional and material conditions that shape communication in such settings. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork (2017–2020), the study analyses Reports from Reception, ethnographic fieldnotes, and institutional texts using IE to trace how power, material conditions, and bureaucratic discourse shape meaning-making around "threat." Professional communication in the AC is profoundly influenced by institutional frameworks, limited resources, and spatial confinement. Material scarcity and emotional strain often trigger situations interpreted as "threats," which are then circulated through institutional reporting systems, reinforcing control-oriented discourses and overshadowing their structural origins. Institutional Ethnography reveals that professional practices are mediated through textual and institutional power relations rather than purely cultural differences. The study calls for context-sensitive, socially just models of intercultural competence that foreground power, materiality, and institutional constraints to promote more humane and equitable professional practices in asylum reception.

Keywords: Professional Practice, Asylum Centre, Critical Intercultural Communication, Institutional Ethnography, Materiality, Threat

1. Introduction

The context of asylum seeking and refugee reception has attracted limited attention in intercultural competence or intercultural communication research, despite being inherently intercultural and representing a globally significant movement of people. For this reason, I argue that the often generic and normative theories of intercultural communication (IC) and intercultural competence fail to capture the realities of such contexts, neither from the perspective of people forced to move nor from that of practitioners working with them. This research is motivated by the need to identify more suitable theoretical and methodological tools to explore IC in high-stakes professional settings such as asylum reception. To address this gap, the paper adopts a critical analytical approach that foregrounds institutional, societal, and material contexts, as well as the workings of power. Following the theorization of critical intercultural communication, the study emphasizes social justice and argues that research should both critique systems of oppression and provide conceptual and professional tools for building equity. Furthermore, this paper introduces Institutional Ethnography (IE) as a methodological approach through which the institutional arrangements of professional practice in asylum reception can be revealed and critically examined.

IE is employed here as both a theoretical and analytical tool to offer a critical, in-depth analysis that attends closely to institutional and societal contexts, power relations (or "ruling relations," in IE terms), and material environments, and to examine how these factors shape intercultural communication. Although communication occurs within the asylum centre (AC), it is profoundly shaped by external structures. Drawing from extensive ethnographic data, I analyse the professional practices of practitioners as they navigate situations where residents' behaviour is interpreted as involving "threat" or "threatening." During my fieldwork, I was struck by the harsh interpretations of "threat" applied to emotional reactions that, from an outsider's perspective, appeared quite natural. By situating the analysis of "threat" within the complexities of daily professional interactions, this study not only advances theoretical understandings of intercultural communication but also provides practical insights relevant to asylum-sector work. In doing so, it bridges the traditional divide between academic theory and applied practice, demonstrating how abstract models can be grounded in, and informed by, real-world professional contexts. Examining how "threat" and "threatening" are constructed in professional communication highlights dimensions often overlooked by traditional IC models, particularly institutional context, materiality, and the role of institutional texts. If the aim is to develop more socially just professional practices, it is essential to understand not only grassroots interactions but also how these three dimensions shape communication.

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Asylum reception represents a high-stakes research context. ACs function both as institutions and as material spaces that enact national asylum policy (Szczepanikova, 2012). They are also socio-cultural formations that facilitate processes of governance and bordering through the everyday lives they structure (Fontanari, 2015; Nettelbladt & Boano, 2019). Although practitioners in ACs do not directly determine whether residents are permitted to remain in the country, they interact daily with individuals awaiting decisions that will define whether they, and their families, can stay in Finland and begin rebuilding their lives. This environment, therefore, constitutes an important intercultural context deserving of research in its own right. It also plays a crucial role in broader political and societal discourses, where migrants, particularly refugees and people seeking asylum, are frequently scapegoated in populist rhetoric as responsible for various societal problems. Moreover, within anti-migration discourse, asylum seekers are often negatively labelled as fortune hunters, threats to women, or even risks to national security (e.g., Fields et al., 2021; Palander & Pellander, 2019, p. 188). Such framings strongly influence how people seeking asylum are perceived and treated by society at large. Consequently, intercultural communication research should challenge these narratives and systems of domination by offering nuanced analyses of the contexts from which such discourses emerge, presenting alternative perspectives, and promoting professional practices that prioritise social justice.

Seeking to enrich intercultural communication research, this article employs institutional ethnography to account for the contextual, material, and ruling relations that influence professional practice, particularly in understudied, high-stakes environments like asylum reception. In what follows, I first describe the Finnish asylum reception system and the AC as a research site. Subsequently, I present the data and outline the analytical steps undertaken. The analysis then proceeds through three distinct perspectives related to "threat". First, I examine the socio-cultural negotiation of "threat", as well as how power relations influence their consideration in professional practice. Second, I explore the material conditions of asylum reception, and particularly the everyday realities faced by people seeking asylum, to demonstrate their significant impact on interpersonal and professional communication within the AC. Third, I delve into the broader institutional context by contemplating the alignment between institutional texts and professional practice in asylum reception. These three perspectives serve as analytical tools aimed at illuminating the (intercultural) contexts in which professional practices occur, thereby shedding light on the meaning-making processes and the stakes involved for the participants in these encounters. Finally, I discuss the theoretical and practical implications for professional practices in high-stakes contexts and evaluate the usefulness of IE.

2. Literature Review

This chapter introduces the theoretical frameworks that guide the analysis of asylum reception as a site of intercultural communication. I sought a framework that integrates everyday interactions with the material environment and the broader institutional and societal contexts in which they unfold. The first section examines the blind spots within mainstream intercultural communication, particularly its insufficient attention to power, as well as social, political, and institutional contexts and their implications for communication, gaps that become especially visible in the context of asylum seeking and reception. The knowledge claims of intercultural communication (IC) are also situated within their historical development. Building on this critique, the chapter turns to Critical Intercultural Communication (CIC) and considers how it addresses these omissions by foregrounding issues of inequality and structural constraint. To operationalize these insights, Speech Act Theory on threats is applied to examine the micro-level enactment of power in institutional settings, while Institutional Ethnography (IE) is introduced as a methodological approach for tracing how power is organized and activated within institutional environments. Finally, these theoretical and methodological perspectives are brought together to frame asylum reception as a high-stakes professional environment, where practitioners navigate complex and materially constrained conditions.

2.1. Normative, Universalistic Frameworks of Intercultural Competence and Intercultural Communication

Mainstream theories of intercultural communication (IC) and intercultural competence have long been critiqued for their insufficient engagement with historical, political, societal, and professional contexts. Instead, they often promote normative and universalistic frameworks that conceptualize intercultural encounters in abstraction from their structural foundations. This limitation becomes particularly apparent when examining IC in asylum centres (ACs), where interactions are shaped not only by political and societal forces but also by institutional and legal regulations, as well as by practices of surveillance and control.

Viewing IC through the lens of the AC context reveals how such models frequently detach interpersonal encounters from their broader sociopolitical and institutional settings. The historical and theoretical development of major intercultural frameworks is itself context-dependent, shaped by particular aims and situated perspectives, which limit their relevance for asylum-related contexts. Three influential models serve as focal points for critical reflection: Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1986, 1993), Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997, 2009), and Deardorff's Process and Pyramid Models of Intercultural Competence (2006, 2009). Bennett's model, rooted in intercultural training contexts, emerged from fifteen years of teaching and theoretical engagement with diverse groups (Bennett, 1986). It describes how individuals' relationships to cultural difference evolve through three ethnocentric and three ethnorelative stages toward integration. The model is widely applied in education, international business, and public administration. It is also been commercialized and adapted for assessment and consulting purposes (see IDR Institute; IDI Inventory).

Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997) is grounded in foreign language teaching (FLT) and was developed specifically for language educators. Central to the model is a cluster of skills, including critical cultural awareness, interpretation, and discovery, which, together with linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competences, form intercultural communicative competence. Byram acknowledges that the relative importance of these components may vary depending on who is learning which language. He frames his model as a set of guiding principles with illustrative examples rather than as a direct communication model. Its main objective is to provide practical learning outcomes for classroom-based language education.

Deardorff's models of Intercultural Competence (2006, 2009) were developed to assess and evaluate students' intercultural development as an outcome of internationalization efforts in higher education. They emerged from an expert consensus among internationally recognized intercultural scholars and were subsequently validated by higher education administrators. Like the previous frameworks, Deardorff's models emphasize attitudes, knowledge, and skills. They move from the individual to the interpersonal level (as depicted in the "pyramid model") and emphasize process orientation and continuous development (in the "process model"), highlighting the incremental nature of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2009).

From a historical perspective, it is significant that the most frequently cited theories and models of IC emerged within domains of training, language learning, and teaching, contexts that were central to the formation of the field itself. The discipline's origins can be traced to the practical needs of U.S. foreign service diplomats, who found existing anthropological concepts too abstract for real-world application. In response, Edward T. Hall redirected the field's focus from analysing individual cultures to studying interactions between members of different cultures, foregrounding micro-level phenomena such as time orientation and spatial relationships (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1999). This pragmatic, difference-oriented, and micro-analytic foundation remains evident throughout the major models discussed above. Nevertheless, while these frameworks have been widely applied across diverse contexts (see, e.g., Peng, Zhu, & Wu, 2020), their explanatory power is limited, particularly in environments such as asylum reception, where structural, sociopolitical, and institutional complexities fundamentally shape intercultural encounters.

2.2. Assumptions of Shared (National) Culture and Free, Equal Individual

The concept of culture underlying these models has two main characteristics. First, culture is viewed as something shared by a particular group, often defined as a "nation" in the examples used to describe and apply these models, although other categorizations are occasionally acknowledged (e.g., Hoof, 2020). Second, culture is treated as a fixed entity to which individuals should "adapt," "integrate," or "become competent." However, studying everyday life in asylum centres (ACs) reveals that neither the broad category of "people seeking asylum" nor nation-based classifications adequately explain interactions. While national categories are used by both residents and practitioners in ACs, differences are also constructed and interpreted through intersectional categories such as gender, age, marital status, and social class. Moreover, one might question what exactly residents are expected to integrate into. Integration into "Finnish society and culture" is an abstract notion given the peripheral location of ACs and the limited opportunities for contact with local populations. Within the AC, practitioners and officials involved in the asylum process effectively act as both representatives and mediators of Finnish society. Consequently, residents primarily adapt to a life of waiting and living within confined institutional spaces.

This "*methodological nationalism*" (Wimmer & Glick-Schiller, 2002) presumes that the nation-state is both the natural and most relevant unit for defining culture, often without sufficient reflection on the empirical context or the authors' positionalities on which such frameworks are based. This perspective also traces back to the historical foundations of IC (see Halualani et al., 2009; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990, 2010). Although Bennett's model has been applied to domestic cultural diversity, he acknowledges that "people who have been oppressed for reasons of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation" follow different developmental paths (Bennett, 1993, pp. 27–28). This acknowledgment reveals the ethnocentric, nation-based starting point of the model: it is primarily constructed for individuals from dominant cultural groups who travel or sojourn outside their "original" nation-based culture.

Furthermore, these models place the responsibility for learning, adapting, and integrating squarely on the individual, positioning "the individual at the centre of the world" (Hoff, 2020, p. 65). Learning objectives are described largely as personal traits such as openness and curiosity (Deardorff, 2009; Byram, 2009), thereby perpetuating the legacy of the "wartime anthropologists" who merged anthropological and psychological perspectives, later described under the concept of "culture and personality" (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2010). Deardorff herself observes that all participating scholars in her study represented Western and predominantly U.S.-centric viewpoints, which may explain the conceptualization of intercultural competence as an individual attribute. She notes that in many Asian contexts (though this is admittedly a generalization), the unit of analysis tends to be the group or interpersonal relationships (Deardorff, 2006, p. 245). Byram (2009) likewise acknowledges the European perspective embedded in his model. Yet, despite these recognitions, none of the models assign meaningful relevance to communities, organizations, or institutions, even though these are the very contexts where communication occurs and where participation opportunities and expectations are structured. Historical, political, and societal contexts represent yet another, and often overlooked, layer that profoundly influences intercultural competence dynamics.

Theoretical frameworks of Cultural Competence have also been developed within social work and health care research. Lau and Rodgers (2021), in their scoping review of cultural competence in refugee service settings, synthesize various approaches. These frameworks share individual-level themes such as self-awareness and respect, paralleling earlier IC models. However, cultural competence frameworks also incorporate organizational-level themes, thereby moving beyond an exclusively individual focus.

2.3. The Question of Power Dynamics in Intercultural Encounters

The lack of contextual awareness in traditional IC models results in an insufficient analysis of how power operates in intercultural encounters, sometimes even assuming a power-neutral environment. The assumption of a "race-less, gender-less, and class-absent individualism" (Halualani et al., 2009, p. 20) within IC, where equality and mutual respect are presumed, is rarely made explicit. Taking power seriously requires acknowledging the researcher's embodied positionality, the often invisible, unspoken "centre" that grounds their socially and politically situated perspective and influences how they construct models and conduct analyses. While the models discussed above seldom move beyond "privileged Anglo-masculine analyses of culture, social structures, and behaviour" (González & Peterson, 1993, p. 251), there remains a pressing need to engage explicitly with perspectives and knowledge production from individuals occupying alternative positionalities. Power is also exercised when these models are represented and used as universal and normative, despite their specific cultural and historical origins.

Byram's revised model (2009) highlights criticality and power differentials and, drawing from global citizenship theory, adopts a somewhat political orientation. He envisions language learners as potential "ethnographers or political activists" capable of promoting "intercultural citizenship." However, in practice, power remains a discrete component within the model rather than a principle permeating all its dimensions. Existing frameworks frequently treat intercultural encounters as though they occur in a vacuum, neglecting their historical, societal, and institutional construction, as well as the significance of physical and material environments that shape communication.

Cultural competence frameworks in refugee service settings (Lau & Rodgers, 2021) examine organizational commitments to diversity, the integration of clients' language and culture into services, and the removal of access barriers. They also address societal engagement, emphasizing how partnerships with refugee communities can build trust and reduce barriers to service

access. While these themes provide valuable insights for intercultural communication, they face similar limitations: most studies are conducted in high-income countries, especially the United States, and rely heavily on professionals' self-reports rather than the active participation of refugees themselves. Additionally, these frameworks often list relevant factors but lack analytical tools to explore their interconnections, which this study seeks to address. Scholars have called for greater recognition of structural barriers and more in-depth research into the unique challenges faced by refugees (Lau & Rodgers, 2021).

2.4. Identification of Research Gaps

The main gap in intercultural communication (IC) research lies in its insufficient attention to historical, political, and societal contexts. These contexts shape both participant and researcher positionalities, as well as the possibilities for interaction. There is also a limited analysis of how institutional settings and material conditions reveal and reproduce power dynamics. Most importantly, future research should examine how broader political, societal, and institutional factors are intertwined with everyday interactions. In this article, I focus particularly on how institutional frameworks and power relations manifest in daily intercultural encounters.

2.5. Introducing the Approaches of Critical Intercultural Communication

Critical Intercultural Communication (CIC) scholarship, which emerged in response to these shortcomings, foregrounds the pervasive role of power, structural constraints, and researcher positionality (Halualani & Nakayama, 2024). Drawing on this critique, CIC scholars redefine culture, not as a neutral or unified space of difference, but as a site of ongoing struggle where dominant interests compete to shape meanings and boundaries (Moon, 2024; Collier, 2002; Hall, 1980, 1985). Culture is thus understood as a politicized system of meaning-making in which struggles over ideology and vested interests are enacted through interaction (Halualani et al., 2009, p. 23).

Adopting this understanding of culture as an analytical lens implies that "culture" cannot be captured by a single, definitive description. Instead, it acknowledges the multiplicity of cultural interpretations, framings, senses of belonging, and practices that participants within a given professional environment may hold. Furthermore, this approach invites reflection on why certain interpretations become established as *professional norms*, how alternative interpretations are treated, and what consequences these dynamics have for the various parties involved. This perspective makes visible the negotiations of meaning, or the absence thereof, that occur in intercultural interactions. It also requires close attention to the multiple contexts that influence these meaning-making processes.

Speech Act Theory is employed here to emphasize the importance of context and intention in understanding meaning. Words cannot be fully interpreted through their literal or locutionary meaning alone; rather, they must be situated within social and situational contexts to uncover the speaker's intended meaning, that is, the *illocutionary act* (Austin, 1962). Taking power seriously also means situating cultural groups and relationships within their historical and sociopolitical contexts (Asante, 1980). A critical approach must examine how relationships are shaped by institutional and political discourses and social norms that often remain invisible to certain groups (Collier, 2002). In asylum settings, colonial legacies are particularly salient, influencing both theoretical constructions and lived experiences (Jubany & Mayblin, 2024). This influence can also be traced in the development of IC theory itself, as Moon (2010, p. 35) poignantly observes:

> *"I came to see that intercultural communication developed in the midst of World War II as a tool of imperialism and that much of its foundations were infused with a colonial perspective. More seriously, I did not see that social justice and equity were of great import to intercultural scholarship."*

Crucially, CIC scholarship distinguishes itself not only through its critique of mainstream assumptions and attention to power but also through its explicit commitment to social justice and equity. As Martin and Nakayama (1999, p. 8) emphasize, CIC seeks "to understand the role of power and contextual constraints on communication in order ultimately to achieve a more equitable society." This commitment underpins the present study's analytical approach, foregrounding both the ethical stakes and the transformative potential of interrogating intercultural practice within contexts shaped by systemic inequality.

2.6. Institutional ethnography

Institutional Ethnography (IE) is employed here as both a theoretical and analytical tool to conduct a critical, in-depth analysis that attends closely to context, power relations, referred to in IE as *ruling relations*, and the material environments that structure IC. IE provides tools for studying how social relations and work processes are coordinated beyond a single workplace or organization through *institutional texts*. These texts, defined by Smith (2005) as "reproducible written and graphic materials that play a central role in coordinating social relationships and shaping everyday practices," function as material components of social organization. They have the capacity to replicate concepts and language across settings, linking local actors with others elsewhere, and exert what Smith terms *ruling power*. Institutional texts and ruling relations can simultaneously constrain and enable individual agency (Giddens, 1986) and may present ambiguous or even contradictory directives that practitioners must navigate.

In IE, the *standpoint* from which data are examined refers to a group of people who share a particular position within the field and therefore similar relations to the phenomena under study (Smith, 2005, p. 157). During my fieldwork, I closely followed practitioners in the AC and engaged with their experiences and perspectives, joining meetings, working behind the information desk, and participating in informal conversations over coffee or lentil soup. Importantly, practitioners enact policy in practice, thereby transforming institutional laws and guidelines into the lived realities of the AC. For this reason, I adopt their standpoint, tracing their embodied and situated experiences. Materiality is central to IE, as it directs attention to the concrete, tangible facets of social life that both shape and are shaped by institutional processes. To examine these material dynamics, I employ the *layered confinement framework* developed by Kivijärvi and Myllylä (2022), which distinguishes between spatial, service-based, and communicative layers of confinement. They define confinement broadly as "a set of norms and practices regulating the mobility and choices of asylum seekers in often implicit ways" (Kivijärvi & Myllylä, 2022, p. 805). Their analysis, based on interviews with people seeking asylum who had lived in Finnish Red Cross (FRC)–managed ACs during the same period as my fieldwork, captures well the spectrum of triggers for situations perceived as "threats" or "threatening."

Crucially, this analysis is not intended to expose shortcomings of individual practitioners or organizational deficiencies. Rather, it seeks to reveal, and potentially transform, the institutional structures that produce those practices. In this sense, the research concerns both *knowledge and power,* examining how concepts, interpretations, ideologies, and knowledge itself function as socially organized and organizing practices. The objective is to expand people's "everyday and every night actualities" to encompass the ruling relations that shape them (Smith, 2005, p. 49). I draw on Smith's concept of the ideological circle (Smith, 1974, 2004; Smith & Griffith, 2022) to illustrate how institutional language frames reality: institutional texts introduce categories that practitioners subsequently activate in practice, interpret through those categories, and reinforce by reporting incidents, thereby building and sustaining institutional understanding. As Smith and Turner (2014, p. 8) describe, "texts only become alive, active, or 'occur' as people bring them into place in institutional sequences of action."

2.7. Asylum reception as a high-stakes professional environment

In this article, asylum reception is presented as a paradigmatic example of a high-stakes professional environment due to its involvement in decisions that have profound and long-term consequences for individuals' lives. Although practitioners working in asylum centres (ACs) do not directly decide whether residents can remain in the country, they share daily life with people seeking asylum and are therefore intimately engaged with the precarious and unstable conditions these individuals face. Practitioners in these settings are routinely exposed to residents' traumatic experiences and must navigate these challenges with limited resources. This work exacts a considerable emotional and psychological toll and requires complex ethical judgements that balance legal obligations with humanitarian needs. Wirth et al. (2019), in their scoping review, found that professionals working with refugees (including people seeking asylum) experience the particular strain of encountering others' suffering while being unable to provide adequate assistance. The discrepancy between people's needs and their restricted access to welfare services, bureaucratic limitations, and generally poor financial resources represents a continuous challenge. Workers described exposure to stories of suffering and trauma as a defining and demanding aspect of their professional lives.

In the Finnish context, social workers have expressed uncertainty regarding the adequacy of their expertise in addressing the complex needs of individuals and families with forced migration backgrounds. Many reported challenges in establishing trusting relationships with clients, alongside confusion about how best to foster such trust. They also recognized numerous structural constraints, such as rigid, nationally defined practices and limitations inherent in the welfare service system, that are largely beyond the capacity of individual practitioners to resolve. These systemic factors were perceived as restricting the ability of Finnish welfare services to effectively meet the needs of forced migrants living in vulnerable circumstances.

To provide support that is both appropriate and professional, social workers identified the need for several distinct areas of knowledge. They emphasized the importance of understanding the broader context of forced migration in order to ask relevant questions, recognize instances of racism, and actively engage in anti-racist practices. Additionally, a solid grasp of asylum and refugee processes, as well as national and European asylum law, was considered essential for providing accurate guidance and advocacy. Social workers voiced concern about the marginalization of vulnerable migrant groups and minorities, reflecting critically on both societal racism and prejudiced attitudes within their workplaces. Importantly, they positioned social work itself as "a human rights profession" (Anis & Turtiainen, 2021, p. 14), grounding their reflections in a commitment to social justice (Anis & Turtiainen, 2021). Restrictive policies, discourses of racism and exclusion, and pathologizing or deficit-based practices are common experiences among practitioners working with people seeking asylum (Field et al., 2021). Such high-stakes conditions shape the nature of intercultural professional communication, as practitioners' interactions with asylum seekers are embedded in relational power dynamics, institutional constraints, and emotionally charged encounters. The profound impact of practitioners' work on residents' well-being underscores the critical importance of understanding these professional environments in depth.

2.8. Asylum Centre as a Research Site

Asylum seeking is a field thoroughly shaped and defined by legislation and international agreements that establish both the right of individuals to seek international protection and the responsibility of states to receive those seeking such protection. These legislative texts form an interlocking chain that specifies the aims, means, and relationships between actors, structures, procedural frameworks, and sets the general vocabulary for discourse on international protection. A clear intertextual hierarchy exists: international agreements and Finnish legislation are interdependent but arranged in a layered order.

The foundational texts are international agreements, most notably the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Originally adopted as a post–Second World War instrument, the Convention aimed to protect people displaced by the war, focusing primarily on Europe and covering "persons fleeing events occurring before 1 January 1951." At that historical moment, refugees were predominantly regarded as a military concern; displaced persons were sometimes perceived as enemies or bearers of dangerous ideologies that could threaten national reconstruction efforts. Consequently, refugees were often "stored" in locations distant from populated areas. This historical framing continues to influence contemporary approaches to refugees, who are frequently housed separately from local populations. Only later did refugees come to be viewed increasingly through social and developmental lenses (Malkki, 1995).

The intertextual chain governing Finnish asylum reception begins with the Act on the Reception of Persons Applying for International Protection (HE 266/2010 vp), which establishes the general framework for asylum reception in Finland. Institutionally, asylum reception is primarily framed as a matter of national security, with responsibility resting in the Ministry of the Interior, styled as the "Ministry for Internal Security" on its official website (Ministry of the Interior, 2025). This framing introduces a notable contradiction: persons applying for international protection are simultaneously positioned as potential threats to internal security.

At the organizational level, the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) serves as the primary interpreter of legal texts within this hierarchy. Migri functions as the central administrative and operational decision-making authority regarding asylum, refugee status, and the reception system as a whole. Its role is twofold: it reports to the Ministry of the Interior on the functioning of the asylum reception system and translates legislation into operational practice. In this capacity, Migri outsources the management of ACs to various actors while guiding, monitoring, and evaluating their performance. The management of the AC in this research is outsourced to the Finnish Red Cross (FRC), as was the case for most ACs in Finland during the data collection period. The FRC, one of the largest humanitarian organizations in Finland, has historically played a major role in

developing asylum reception services. It operates under a cooperation agreement with Migri, supporting the authorities and maintaining preparedness for immigration-related tasks. Consequently, the FRC played a central role in responding to the record number of asylum seekers who arrived in 2015.

The fieldwork for this research was conducted in an AC that was one of several newly established centres founded in Finland and elsewhere in Europe during 2015–2016, a period marked by an exceptionally high number of people seeking asylum in Europe. At the beginning of 2017, the FRC managed 52 ACs housing over 9,100 residents; by the end of 2018, this number had gradually decreased to 23 ACs with approximately 3,170 inhabitants (Finnish Red Cross [SPR], 2018, p. 15; 2019, p. 9). ACs function as institutional housing for people seeking asylum during the often lengthy waiting periods for decisions on their applications, which in many cases extend over several years. Most residents in the AC studied for this research had arrived in 2015, and for many, this was their second or third AC. Nationally, during the latter half of 2017, 80% of AC residents had received a negative asylum decision, and 74% of them were in the process of appealing, either to the Administrative Court or the Supreme Administrative Court (Finnish Immigration Service [Migri], 2018a). For those appealing their first negative decision, the average duration of stay in an AC was 1,123 days, more than three years. This was true for the overwhelming majority of residents in the specific AC examined in this study. Most had arrived in Finland in 2015 and were still awaiting decisions during the fieldwork period (2017–2018).

3.   Methodological Framework

In this section, I present the data used in this research and explain the analytical methods applied in the analysis. Finally, I reflect on positionality and the ethical considerations that emerged during the research process.

3.1. Presenting the Data

The analysis in this article is based on year-long ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2018, with several follow-ups during 2019–2020, in one asylum centre (AC) and related institutional settings such as a doctor's surgery, legal aid office, police station, the Finnish Immigration Service, and various NGOs supporting people seeking asylum. My research began with traditional ethnographic fieldwork as a participant observer, focusing on intercultural communication and professional practices within the AC.

I wrote detailed fieldnotes (marked in the excerpts as *FN_date*), capturing everyday work routines, discussions, and interactions involving both practitioners and residents. Lengthy informal conversations were common, with notes recorded promptly afterward. Photographs documenting the AC's physical environment also served as visual data, illustrating how spatial arrangements shaped daily life. To understand how local practices connect to broader institutional structures, I collected institutional documents that trace the textual trajectories of professional work. These documents, collectively analyzed as policy discourses on asylum reception, include:

1. Finnish legislation related to asylum reception, along with preparatory materials such as bills, statements, and parliamentary minutes, is to be mapped to the legal framework guiding professional practices in ACs.

2. Documentation from the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri), illustrating how legislation is interpreted and operationalized within the reception system.

3. National-level policies and guidelines from the Finnish Red Cross (FRC), define regulations and principles for AC operations.

4. Documents regulating daily life in ACs, including staff meeting agendas, reports, and training materials.

A central data source consists of the so-called *"respan rapsat"* [reports from the reception] (marked in the excerpts as *RR_date*), which, alongside meetings, function as key communication channels among practitioners. These reports reveal detailed aspects of everyday work, highlighting professional priorities and areas of concern. This diverse dataset enables the examination of professional practices within their political and institutional contexts, allowing for a critical engagement with ruling relations and institutional inequalities. The data used to illuminate how practitioners navigate "threats" and "threatening" behaviours come primarily from fieldnotes and *respan rapsat* (RRs). The original data were collected in Finnish, and all translations were made by the author with AI assistance. In this article, I use the term *"people/person seeking asylum"* to emphasize that seeking asylum is an action constituting only one aspect of an individual's identity (see e.g., Elfving & Kärkkäinen, 2018). However, because the study focuses on the AC and its everyday life, I predominantly refer to people seeking asylum as *"residents."* Quoted expressions preserve the original terminology used by speakers.

3.2. Describing the Analysis

The analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis guided by inductive reasoning. The first step involved reading through the data (RRs and FNs) to identify instances in which practitioners engaged with residents in situations they described as "threatening" or involving "threat." Relevant discussions, background information, contextual factors, and the consequences of these situations were extracted. In the second phase, it became evident that situations labeled as "threatening" or involving "threat" were frequently associated with emotions such as *anger*, *crossness*, *frustration*, or other emotionally charged behaviours linked to various forms of confinement. Consequently, a broader range of situations in which such emotions appeared was collected, compared, and categorized. At this stage, the analysis was narrowed to focus exclusively on cases where expressions such as "threat," "threatening," "anger," or "crossness" were directed toward practitioners or the AC's material environment, excluding disputes occurring solely among residents or between residents and other refugees. The third phase involved examining institutional texts to trace the trajectories of "threat" and "threatening," analyzing how these texts were mobilized within professional practices and, conversely, how they named, captured, and responded to information gathered from ACs.

In this research context, multiple layers of power inequality shape interactions and understandings. As a Finnish citizen, I share important social and cultural advantages with local practitioners, such as familiarity with Finnish society and access to local networks, that are not afforded to asylum seekers. While neither I nor the practitioners possess authority over asylum or refugee status decisions, such status differences may not always be apparent to participants. These distinctions were therefore explicitly communicated in the information sheet and consent forms, along with assurances of voluntary participation and the

right to withdraw at any time. All cases discussed here are anonymized and presented in a manner that prevents identification of individuals. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity on 21 September 2017.

4. Analysis and Findings

In the following sections, three theoretical perspectives informed by Institutional Ethnography (IE) are employed to analyze professional practices navigating situations interpreted as "threat" or "threatening" within the asylum centre (AC) context. First, the analysis examines how "threat" and "threatening" are interpreted in different situations, whose interpretations acquire normative status, and to what extent various participants are able to have their interpretations heard. Second, using the concept of materiality, it explores persistent material conditions that trigger many of the communicative situations analyzed. Finally, it considers how institutional texts are reflected in, or enacted through, everyday practices.

4.1. Interpreting "Threat": Power, Practice, and Unspoken Assumptions

In this section, I analyze situations that practitioners identified as involving "threat", a label carrying serious implications, as all threats were expected to be reported to the police. Typically, such reports concerned physical threats, often verbal and occasionally involving reference to a knife. The normative understanding appeared to be that any threat following a *conditional pattern*, "If you do (or do not) X, I will do harm", required police notification.

As one practitioner described:

> *The client posed a threat that I have two options. Either I organize right away a flight to his earlier country of residence or arrange for him a workplace and normal life, or something 'bad' happens.* [RR_29.12]

This illustrates the assumption that threats demand action: they trigger reporting but also surface the pressures practitioners face in high-stakes interactions. Practitioners emphasized that such talk was not permitted and had to be reported:

> *"I always tell them this kind of talk isn't allowed and that I have to report it."* [FN]

This statement reflects the normative institutional understanding of "threat" within the AC.

However, the data reveal a more complex picture. Practitioners acknowledged, or assumed, that residents sometimes used threats as a form of *blackmail*. In line with the rule that threats are not tolerated, such behaviour was strongly condemned in staff discussions. Staff viewed blackmail as undermining their work, increasing emotional strain, and shifting control of situations from staff to residents, thus challenging professional boundaries and authority. As one senior practitioner explained:

> *"Nothing will come out of it if they get the feeling that by threatening, they can achieve their goals. That feeling we need to avoid."* [FN_3.11]

Informal conversations among staff reinforced this stance. One practitioner, during a heated coffee-room discussion, described a family who insisted on specific services and falsely claimed meetings that had never been arranged:

> *"That's exactly what they do, make up meetings and then threaten when these don't happen... With such threatening one should not get anything! We can't give in!"* [FN_3.11]

These conversations highlight the everyday reality in which practitioners must routinely manage emotionally charged and confrontational interactions as an integral part of their professional responsibilities. Within the AC, practitioners engaged in continuous negotiation to establish common ground and find mutually acceptable solutions. When "threats" were interpreted as *blackmail*, such interpretations often functioned as *boundary markers*, signalling the limits of acceptable behaviour. In these instances, although practitioners recognized a "threat," the police were not contacted. Instead, practitioners often vented their frustrations informally among colleagues.

There is also evidence that residents sometimes used "threatening" language to express frustration, worry, anger, or emotional distress rather than to intimidate. They frequently apologized afterward, clarifying that they did not intend harm or cause stress:

> *"Client told that he did not mean to threaten anyone and thus apologizes."* [RR_7.11]

Sometimes apologies were also reported back to the police:

> *"I told him [the police] that the client had not repeated his threat and had apologized for what he had said."* [RR_5.12]

Practitioners recognized numerous cases in which strong emotions such as frustration, anger, or crossness, sometimes even expressed physically, for example, through fist bumps, were not labeled as "threats," but instead prompted clarifying conversations.

The case of Suleiman illustrates how practitioners responded when threats were *self-directed*:

> *Suleiman raised his voice and said, "If we do not give a single room in one week, he will kill himself or do something to himself." ... He showed a razor blade, which he handed over when requested. ... We suggested he talk to a doctor, but he refused, saying "he is afraid of being sent to a mental hospital." I suggested he speak with Annu [the social worker] tomorrow, but after this, he left the room, slamming the doors. ... I called the doctor, who advised monitoring his condition.* [RR_18.12]

In this case, the practitioner sought support from a colleague, discussed Suleiman's distress, suggested several ways to assist, and ultimately involved a medical professional. Although Suleiman refused to see the doctor out of fear of hospitalization, his condition was monitored carefully. This response contrasts with the normative expectation of police reporting in other threat cases and demonstrates the practitioners' care-oriented approach.

Interestingly, despite significant differences in how practitioners interpreted and managed situations labeled as "threat" or "threatening", including whether police involvement occurred, there was no open discussion or reflection on these discrepancies. The only exceptions were cases in which the police explicitly instructed that "threats" made by certain

individuals must always be reported due to their known histories of violence. In general, however, the concept of "threat" remained naturalized as a universally understood notion. In practice, "threat" encompassed a variety of meanings and contexts, yet these complexities were neither articulated nor debated among practitioners. Residents were often surprised by sudden police involvement following what they considered non-threatening remarks. Alternative interpretations or opportunities for negotiation were rarely sought. This lack of interpretive dialogue underscores the power asymmetry in the AC: practitioners' definitions of "threat" carry institutional authority and cannot easily be challenged by residents. When practitioners interpreted a situation as a "threat," it automatically triggered formal procedures, sometimes exacerbating residents' distress, frustration, and sense of not being heard or understood.

This raises critical questions: were these "threats" meant literally, or were practitioners focusing only on the *locutionary meaning*, the literal words, without sufficiently engaging with the speaker's *intention* or context? Based on numerous conversations with residents, it seems likely that many such expressions represented profound frustration, helplessness, or pleas for help. Practitioners, however, often operated under expectations of direct, literal communication, what Wilkins (1999, 2005) calls *asiapuhe* ("matter-of-fact talk"), a communicative norm common in Finnish institutional contexts. Here, as intercultural competence models suggest, *skills of interpretation and discovery* would have been essential. Yet, the "top-down" interpretive framework shaped practitioners' meaning-making and guided their practices. There was an implicit assumption of a shared understanding of terms like "threat" and "threatening," with limited opportunity for residents to express their own perspectives or explain the circumstances that prompted their words. This dynamic reflects the hierarchical power relations within the asylum centre, where practitioners, and, by extension, the police, possess institutional authority to define the parameters of acceptable behaviour and communication. Consequently, it should also be recognized as the practitioners' responsibility to create spaces for dialogue about meaning. However, doing so requires awareness of the ambiguous nature of one's position as a meaning-maker, where power is simultaneously exercised and contested. This position highlights the high-stakes nature of practitioners' work: their reports of "illegal threats" to the police become part of residents' criminal records and may have serious long-term consequences for the individuals involved.

4.2. Materiality

A review of instances in which the terms "threat" and "threatening" were invoked reveals that such perceptions frequently arose from the material conditions and restrictive environment of the asylum centre (AC). Meaning-making processes are deeply grounded in materiality. One of the main sources of stress for residents was the accommodation conditions, which were at times expressed as "threats":

- *[...] They [two friends] have threatened both Annu, Milla, and Mikael [three practitioners] that they will break common areas if they cannot live there [in the room they had occupied without permission].* [FN_3.11]

- *The client wishes for their own room as the others in the room snore and are noisy at night anyway. The client said he will go crazy and do something bad if he cannot get his own room. It is our fault then. I promised to add his wish to the list (do we have a list somewhere?).* [RR_7.3]

Having to share a room with up to seven other people, whose rhythms, hygiene, and habits may differ greatly, combined with a lack of privacy and the general uncleanliness of the premises, was frequently mentioned as a trigger for "threats."

A pictorial examination of the AC illustrates its material conditions. Individual rooms line long corridors (see Figure 1), with residents along each corridor sharing kitchens, living rooms, toilets, and bathrooms. Furnishings consist largely of collected and donated items, resulting in a mix of styles and visible signs of wear. Kitchen spaces are basic, with the largest exhibiting an industrial character (see Figure 1). Materials and surfaces throughout the building are aged, visibly worn, and difficult to maintain, especially in heavily used kitchens and bathrooms (see Figure 1). Common areas such as living rooms (see Figure 1) and "the club" (see Figure 1) are intended for socializing. A notable feature of the AC is surveillance: all spaces, except private rooms and toilets, are monitored by cameras, and residents are aware that practitioners in the reception office continuously observe these areas (see Figure 1). While the rooms offer the greatest degree of privacy, occupancy is almost always shared, making the bed the only truly personal space. Occasionally, residents create private enclaves by enclosing their beds with a sheet (see Figure 1), which can be seen as a subtle form of resistance to the denial of privacy (see also Maculan, 2021). Residents frequently expressed frustration and exhaustion due to cramped conditions, cleanliness issues, difficulty sleeping, and general challenges in maintaining a sense of normalcy in daily life.
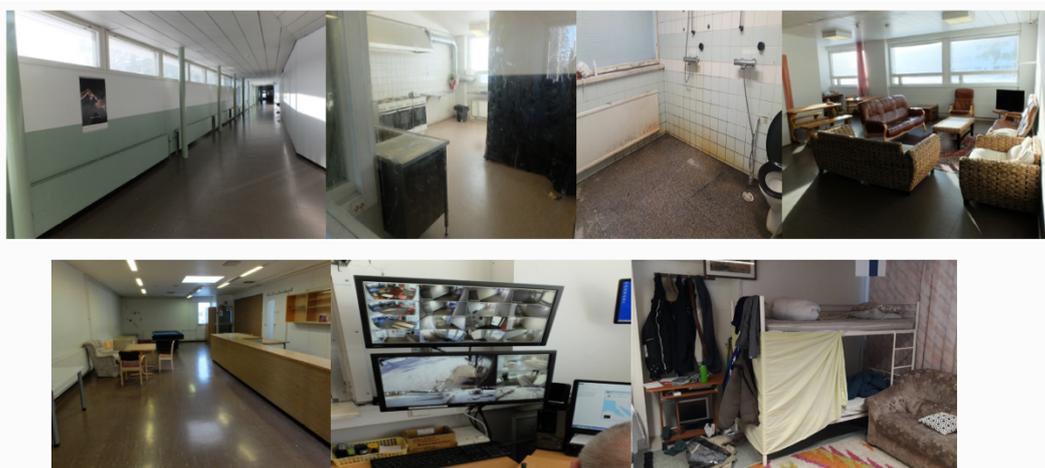

Figure 1: Spatial and Material Environment of the Asylum Centre
Source: By the Author

This spatial layer of confinement (Kivijärvi & Myllylä, 2022) also includes the AC's peripheral location in deteriorated housing. It reflects a broader pattern of situating people seeking asylum in facilities repurposed from old hospitals, military barracks, or similar buildings, often located far from urban centres with limited and costly transportation options. The issues described above resulted in continuous, emotionally charged negotiations, not only about room allocations but also about sharing kitchens, toilets, and showers with dozens of people, or about who could receive a bus ticket or a seat in a car to shop at *Lidl* (a grocery chain). It is telling that both residents and practitioners frequently invoked the metaphor of a "prison" to describe the AC environment.

In addition to spatial confinement, Kivijärvi and Myllylä (2022) identify service-based and communicative layers of confinement. Service-based confinement was also observed as a trigger for "threats":

- *The client called from Helsinki wanting to talk with Seela [social worker], and when I responded that she would call tomorrow, he started shouting and threatening, among others, to come to the AC and set the whole centre on fire. I told him in a friendly way that if he once more poses any kind of threats, we will report him to the police, and the authorities will take the necessary measures. The issue was about trips and a bus pass related to his internship, for which he says he has not received any money, and his calls have not been answered.* [RR_3.4]

Not getting appointments with social workers or nurses, being required to do excessive cleaning (in Finnish ACs, "work and study duties" are defined as *services*, see Isotalus, forthcoming), or receiving inadequate interpretation were also reported as triggers.

Communicative layers of confinement, or *information precarity*, refer to the instability refugees experience in accessing news and personal information, leaving them vulnerable to misinformation, stereotyping, and rumours that can affect their social and economic capital (Wall et al., 2017). Residents often found themselves in situations where they had not received, or had misunderstood, information or guidance. Such instances commonly arose from language barriers and the absence of adequate communication tools. For example, the following excerpt describes confusion during "money day," when monthly living allowances were distributed. In Finnish ACs, if residents fail to meet certain obligations, most commonly, their weekly work duties, their living allowance is reduced for three months:

- *The client got nervous about the cut in living allowance, but finally agreed to take his money. Clarified the situation and said that warnings are valid for three months at a time. He had understood that if he had not received any warnings this or last month, it would not have been possible to cut. But he was already calmer by the end of the conversation.* [RR_3.10]

There were also situations where residents lacked more general information about how organizations or administrative bodies function in Finland. In the following example, a resident demonstrates a lack of understanding about the time frame and procedures involved in police investigations:

- *I tried to explain to Mahmud that because the criminal report has been filed, he just has to wait. Didn't really want to understand the matter. Told that if we want problems, today at 9 pm, he will arrange them. After we talked for a while, Mahmud calmed down and left the reception in a good mood.* [RR_25.4]

The asylum process itself, with its numerous stages, officials, and long waiting times, is complex and difficult to comprehend, generating frustration and uncertainty. These examples illustrate the extent to which the material environment imposes constraints on residents' personal lives, directly contributing to their psychological distress and ill-being. Practitioners themselves acknowledged this reality:

"I think we should not have families here. This is really not a place for families." [FN]

During my induction, the manager responded to my question about residents' mental health by saying:

"If they did not have PTSD or other mental illnesses when they arrived here, here at the latest, they will get them." [FN]

These reflections raise two critical questions. First, what alternative strategies or forms of resistance are available to residents in response to such constraints? Second, given that practitioners recognize the severe impact of material conditions on residents' well-being, what role should they play in balancing limited resources with residents' right to a decent standard of living? These questions highlight the high-stakes context faced by both practitioners and residents, where decisions and actions have profound implications for well-being and justice. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that the production of meaning is inseparable from its material context, and that intercultural communication in asylum reception cannot, and should not, be understood without accounting for these material conditions.

4.3. Interpreting "Threat" in Institutional Texts: Circulation, Categorization, and Consequences

In this chapter, I examine how the concepts of "threat" and "threatening" are circulated, categorized, and operationalized in institutional texts, shaping professional practice in the asylum centre (AC). To clarify this process, I first show where and how practitioners report observations of "threat," and then how these reporting practices shape institutional understanding and documentation of such incidents.

Practitioners are expected to report incidents in several locations:

- Report from Reception (RR): to inform colleagues within the AC.

- Migri's virtual platform (Event Notification / *tapahtumailmoitus*): fulfilling the centre's formal reporting obligation.

- Police Reports: for incidents categorized as "illegal threats."

This responsibility is reinforced in staff meetings. During one manager's tenure, practitioners were encouraged not only to report threats but also to routinely ask themselves, *"Could I write this to Migri?"* [FN]. This practice broadened the scope of event notifications beyond clear-cut cases. Reports to the police are often referenced in RRs, demonstrating their integration into daily reporting routines.

The role of the police in the AC is particularly distinctive. They are regarded almost as colleagues in matters of safety, and staff are actively encouraged to call police patrols for any concerns related to threats or security, often citing their own lack of training or resources to manage violent or potentially violent situations. Police patrols visit the AC frequently, sometimes merely to "peek in" informally. Additionally, this AC has its own designated "godpolice" (*kummipoliisi*), an assigned officer who visits regularly and serves as a contact point for both staff and residents regarding police matters, immigration paperwork, or other official issues. Patrolling officers also regularly remind practitioners to report all incidents involving "threats" or aggressive behaviour.

In this way, the routine circulation of "threats" within institutional texts is reinforced not through formal written guidelines alone, but through the everyday presence, reminders, and relationships with the police, further institutionalizing and normalizing these reporting practices. The Migri-guided self-monitoring plan was prominently posted on the office bulletin board in the AC's coffee room, serving as a visible and constant reminder of institutional expectations. It functions as a key coordination tool for monitoring the AC's operations across several thematic areas, including "risk management and legality control." Within this framework, practitioners are expected to discuss, agree upon, and implement procedures related to identifying and managing risks such as "threats."

Based on the self-monitoring plan displayed in the AC and practitioners' accounts, locally agreed practices distinguish between two main procedures: incidents involving threats toward other persons or property are generally reported to the police, whereas threats of self-harm lead to consultation with medical personnel. Specific instructions also apply to individuals previously flagged for violent behaviour: *"Even the smallest threat should be reported to police or emergency services."* [FN] The presence of a regular *kummipoliisi* supplements this system, with some residents monitored jointly by practitioners and the police. However, this division of practice does not appear rigid or explicitly detailed in the posted plan. Thus, while these procedures reflect Migri's overarching institutional guidelines, their actual interpretation and enactment depend on local negotiation, professional judgment, and situational context.

Institutionally, these notifications feed into national information systems managed by Migri and the police, both of which introduced systematic tracking mechanisms after 2015 (Finnish Immigration Service [Migri], 2016). For instance, the police implemented code TUPA2 to categorize incidents involving asylum seekers (Mansikkamäki et al., 2018). Migri's guidelines and self-monitoring plan frame institutional texts as mechanisms for coordinating "uniform operating practices" and for "identifying and responding to risks" (Finnish Immigration Service [Migri], 2018b), operating as what Smith (2005) calls a *"boss text."* Under these regulations, practitioners are required to define and document risks and to agree on shared methods of reporting and discussion across agencies. The goals are clearly articulated:

> *"The reception centre is a safe place to live and work. Safety considerations are integrated into all aspects of the centre's operations. Potential threats and problems are anticipated in advance, and established procedures are in place for responding to them."* (Finnish Immigration Service [Migri], 2018b)

Reports from institutions both reflect and reinforce this interpretive framework. After the introduction of TUPA2, the police were able, for the first time, to quantify "illegal threats," which became the third most commonly reported crime involving asylum seekers in 2016. However, institutional reports noted that most such incidents *"remained at the level of talk"* (Mansikkamäki et al., 2018, pp. 54–55), and the categories used did not distinguish between perpetrators and victims. The official report explicitly describes the "typical case of suspected crime in a reception centre" as one in which staff are threatened, usually as a reaction to disciplinary measures or as an act of protest by residents who feel unheard or treated unfairly (Mansikkamäki et al., 2018, pp. 54–55).

This institutional framing is then echoed in media coverage, reinforcing broader public discourses. Media reports, for example, often reproduce the narrative that crimes committed by asylum seekers are concentrated in reception centres and frequently involve violence or threats, attributing such behaviour to "cultural and religious disagreements" or "dissatisfaction with living conditions" (Iltalehti, 2016). Notably, this discourse constructs "dissatisfaction" as a personal shortcoming or excessive demand rather than as a response to structural constraints. Through this process, the circulation of "threat" as an institutional category extends beyond professional practice. It is amplified by national media, reinforcing anti-migrant narratives and framing asylum seekers' grievances and struggles as social threats, rather than as expressions of systemic strain or a lack of legitimate channels for communication. The ideological circle thus connects institutional reporting, public knowledge, and political debate, shaping both attitudes and policy in ways that obscure the real stakes and lived realities of asylum seekers. The institutional solution proposed to this "problem" is framed as "increasing asylum seekers' social awareness," with instructions that "aggressive behaviour is absolutely wrong and forbidden." Yet little attention is paid to the structural or material conditions that prompt such tensions (Mansikkamäki et al., 2018, p. 63). Responsibility is thus shifted onto asylum seekers, and implicitly onto practitioners as enforcers.

Migri's own monitoring reports address threats only indirectly, referring instead to staff exhaustion, complex service needs, and incidents of violence and self-harm. Their standard response is formulaic:

"Migri contacted the ACs when necessary and provided instructions and support for challenging situations." (Finnish Immigration Service [Migri], 2017, p. 15)

One rare instance where broader causes are acknowledged appears in a section addressing the physical environment:

> *"With a few exceptions, the general appearance of the reception centres was rather shabby… Centres were reminded that comprehensive attention should be paid to the well-being of clients, especially children, and the comfort of the client spaces. This will also increase the security of the reception centre." (Finnish Immigration Service [Migri], 2018, p. 11)*

This brief statement, linking the material environment with the risk of "threats", represents the only official recognition of the systemic triggers for such incidents. It stands in stark contrast to the dominant focus on individual behaviour and reporting compliance. To summarize: institutional texts and reporting routines transform "threat" into a routinized, *"alive"* category, circulating through reports, guidelines, and risk management systems, while rarely questioning the broader conditions or contested meanings underlying these events. Practitioners are positioned primarily as reporters and enforcers, while causes rooted in material and social realities are largely sidelined. Interestingly, this ideological circle, linking "threats" and

institutional responses, recurs in practitioners' own discourse. Similar word choices and framings often appear in their comments: for example, that one must make clear that "threats are not tolerated at all" [RR]; or that residents should simply walk away when situations become argumentative [RR].

Yet even within official conclusions, the persistence of fatigue and frustration is acknowledged:

> *"The increased fatigue, frustration, and disappointment among clients regarding the outcome of their asylum application was also reflected in the reports received by the reception units about various incidents of violence and self-harm, as well as in the overall safety environment of the centres." (Finnish Immigration Service [Migri], 2017, p. 15)*

This remains the only official instance where multiple potential triggers for "threats", almost all related to the material and institutional environment, are discussed in detail, with explicit recommendations for improvement. This observation prompts a critical question: why is this the sole section in which any meaningful consideration is given to whether, or how, material conditions might be changed?

5. Discussion

I began this analysis with two main questions in mind. First, I wondered how the field of intercultural communication and competence could be meaningfully applied within the high-stakes, politicized, and institutionalized context of asylum reception. This led me to search for stronger theoretical and methodological tools to explore intercultural communication (IC) in such settings. Second, reflecting on the earlier discussion of "threat" in the asylum centre (AC), I realized that these moments might represent the only situations where interpretative theories of IC could open space for alternative understandings. Yet, it soon became evident that "threats" demand deeper analysis beyond surface-level interpretations. This paper examines intercultural communication within the understudied context of asylum reception. The first theme that emerged from this research is emotions as a site of struggle. Following the theme of "threat" led me to consider residents' negative emotions, which were frequently triggered by various forms of confinement within the AC. Practitioners often sought to regulate these emotions, at times even criminalizing them by reporting "illegal threats" to the police.

Similar processes of intercultural, extrinsic emotion regulation have been observed by Sereke and Drzewiecka (2025) in forced migration contexts in Switzerland, where they examined Zoom meetings among Eritrean peer groups discussing adaptation. In their study, emotion regulation served as a strategy to modify others' feelings to align more closely with the expectations of the Swiss context, thereby functioning as a mechanism to mitigate structural racism. Emotion regulation thus emerged as a site of conflict and persuasion, underpinned by ideological struggles. In my research, I identified an ideological circle that promotes the interpretation of emotional expressions as "illegal threats." These findings highlight how exploring emotions, their triggers, purposes, and regulation can provide critical insights into the societal and historical contexts that frame intercultural encounters.

The importance of materiality surfaced as the second key theme. Material scarcity and spatial confinement significantly contribute to the prevalence and intensity of emotionally charged negative communication, leading to ongoing negotiations and disputes over scarce resources. These findings resonate with the substantial body of research documenting the hardships faced by people seeking asylum (e.g., Kivijärvi & Myllylä, 2022; Grønseth & Thorshaug, 2022; Brekke, 2004). However, a considerable portion of scholarship also highlights the political and economic intentionality behind material scarcity, portraying asylum centres as embodiments of broader asylum and immigration policies (e.g., Szczepanikova, 2012; Vianelli, 2022; Maculan, 2021). This underlines the need for research that both exposes these concealed economic and political interests and provides narratives of alternative arrangements, using research itself as a form of social action aligned with the principles of social justice (Sorrells & Sekimoto, 2025; Zhu, 2020).

The third area of discussion to which this research contributes is the theorization of critical intercultural competence in asylum reception. Rather than adhering to universal or normative models, I argue for the development of localized, context-specific frameworks that clearly specify their intended audiences and environments, political, societal, cultural, and institutional, so that their applicability and adaptability remain transparent and meaningful. Based on the findings, such models should be grounded in both the "everyday and everynight" interactions of practitioners and residents, and in the institutional textual pathways that trace the discourses shaping experience, as demonstrated in this study. They should also remain attentive to historical, political, and societal framings (e.g., Asante, 1980; Szczepanikova, 2012). This inherently interdisciplinary endeavour requires a synthesis of historical insight and macro-social perspectives. Institutional Ethnography (IE) contributes critical depth by tracing texts, practices, and social relations, thereby situating interpersonal communication within its broader institutional and political-economic contexts. The insights presented in this study are necessarily limited. I fully acknowledge the importance of centring the voices of people seeking asylum from diverse regions and circumstances, whose perspectives would undoubtedly enrich theoretical development. However, such broader engagement extends beyond the scope of this article. A vital question for future research is how to integrate social justice perspectives more explicitly into the theorization of intercultural communication and competence. It is essential to make visible, and critically examine how both practitioners and participants can actively address, mitigate, or transform existing power imbalances and unjust conditions within asylum contexts.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have examined a specific professional practice: the understanding and management of "threat" within the high-stakes context of asylum reception, using Institutional Ethnography (IE) as a methodological and analytical lens. I have argued that IE offers valuable tools for exploring the institutional and societal contexts in which intercultural communication occurs. It reveals that professional practices are not merely individual or cultural phenomena; rather, culture itself is mediated, organized, and distributed through textual and institutional power structures. This methodological approach not only deepens understanding of intercultural communication in high-stakes environments but also has the potential to inform policy and improve professional practice by uncovering inconsistencies, silences, and the effects of institutional power on communication dynamics.

The analysis presented in this article highlights that the prevailing focus on "threats," rather than on their underlying causes, is not the only possible approach. It is concerning that no stakeholder appears to have critically examined whether, and

by what means, the material environment could be altered, nor whether alternative arrangements for accommodating asylum seekers might be feasible. The assumption that current models of housing and living arrangements for asylum seekers are immutable has become normalized and largely unquestioned. This situation is partly attributable to economic considerations: asylum centres (ACs) are outsourced and selected through procurement processes in which cost minimization serves as the primary evaluation criterion. Nevertheless, a broader discussion of alternative arrangements, such as independent living or community hosting, is warranted, especially given the significant influence of the material environment on residents' well-being.

Moreover, current conditions may fail to meet the standards of a dignified life as stipulated in the international agreements to which Finland is a signatory. Institutional actors may also face political pressure to restrict reception conditions to a minimum, thereby producing a deterrent effect. Maryns (2021), for instance, poses a pertinent question: to what extent are the very practices that stakeholders seek to reform actually components of deliberate and coordinated strategies? Such perspectives reveal the critical position of practitioners, who operate between people seeking asylum, often in highly vulnerable circumstances, and the politically and economically constrained institutional environment. For this reason, practitioners occupy a liminal space between care and control, exercising what Sotkasiira (2018) and Elfving and Kärkkäinen (2018) term an *"expertise-in-struggle."* This form of expertise not only enables the management of day-to-day challenges but also holds transformative potential to reshape institutional practices toward more just and humane conditions.

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