

Foreigner, migrant, or refugee? How laypeople label those who cross borders

Ivana Rapoš Božič, Radka Klvaňová, and Bernadette Nadya Jaworsk

Abstract:

In this article, we explore the symbolic boundary work that sustains laypeople's understanding and use of three commonly used migration labels: foreigner, migrant, and refugee. We do so through a qualitative, cultural sociological investigation of migration attitudes in Czechia. We find that the boundary work sustaining the labeling practices of laypeople often departs from established institutional understandings of the three labels. Not only do laypeople draw upon labels as institutionalized entities in different legal provisions and administrative practices, they also engage in their own forms of categorization, refining these labels based on available cultural repertoires. While their boundary work related to the label foreigner calls upon legal and cultural criteria, their boundary work concerning the labels migrant and refugee involves moral criteria. Based on our findings, we argue that researchers must exercise reflexivity not only about the labels they use but also about how these are used by research participants.

Keywords: labeling practices, categorization, symbolic boundaries, reflexivity

In my opinion, a refugee is someone who is really fighting for their life. A migrant is someone who goes to pursue economic... to improve their economic side of life and a foreigner is, in my opinion, a tourist, a general concept, that... that means nothing to me.
(Ivana, 43, municipal officer)

Ivana, a research participant in our study, expresses clear opinions in defining people that cross borders. She responds to our query about how she makes sense of the three labels commonly used in public and institutional parlance definitively, using moral categories to draw boundaries among them. While a refugee is “really” fighting for life, a migrant moves for reasons of self-interest. And a foreigner represents a “general concept,” one that ostensibly “means nothing.” Yet each of these labels is fraught with meaning in the multiple arenas of social life touched by migration. Later in the interview, Ivana’s use of the three labels reveals a more nuanced differentiation, by attributes such as types of clothing, skin color, or national origin; she also uses the labels migrant and refugee interchangeably.

In this article, we seek to exercise reflexivity in migration research by looking at the symbolic boundary work that sustains laypeople’s understanding and use of specific labels. We do so through a qualitative, cultural sociological investigation of migration attitudes in Czechia. We explore the labels foreigner (*cizinec*), migrant (*migrant*) and refugee (*uprchlik*), the three most commonly used labels in Czech migration discourse. Our research question is thus: Which grounds for boundary work do laypeople rely upon when using the labels foreigner, migrant and refugee?

Understanding the labels laypeople attribute to people who cross borders is crucial because such practices have real-world consequences such as stereotyping, prejudice, and even xenophobia (Sajjad 2018; Sigona 2018). Yet existing scholarly literature on labeling practices focuses primarily on media and state institutions (see, among others Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Goodman, Sirriyeh and McMahon 2017; Lee and Nerghes 2018; O’Doherty and Lecouteur 2007; Sajjad 2018). Within this body of work, the labeling practices of ordinary citizens remain largely unexplored (for exceptions, see De Coninck 2020; Janky 2019). We aim to fill this gap by showing that laypeople engage in labeling practices actively and creatively and their understanding and use of specific labels depends on available cultural repertoires.

Our study, which departs from institutional understandings of people on the move to explore the meanings laypeople attribute to them, addresses three major shortcomings in migration studies. First, the opinions of laypeople influence public policies and approaches to migration (Facchini and Mayda 2008; Glynn et al. 2015), yet in-depth qualitative studies of migration attitudes are scarce (Rétiová et al. 2021). Second, even though migration attitudes affect the “warmth of the welcome” (Fussell 2014), shaping the character of the receiving context for people who cross borders, the imaginations people have when hearing labels remains understudied. Finally, we heed the call for a “reflexive turn” in migration studies (Dahinden 2016; Dahinden, Fischer and Menet 2021; Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014), arguing that researchers must remain reflexive, not only about labels they use, but also how such labels are used by research participants. This perspective on reflexivity is largely underexplored. It is not simply a matter of abandoning certain terms, but rather exercising vigilance and reflexivity about the ways in which people refer to those that cross borders (Hamlin 2021).

The Czech context offers a compelling case through which to explore our findings. Similar to other post-socialist countries, prior to 1989, emigration was primarily the norm in Czechia, and immigration was highly restricted. After the fall of communism, there was a trickle of immigration, but it was not until after the accession of the country into the EU in 2004 did migration flows begin to increase notably. As of 2021, foreign state nationals residing in Czechia constituted approximately 5.5 percent of the population (CSO 2021). Although in comparison with the rest of the EU this percentage is still relatively low (see comparative graphs in Eurostat 2020), the issue of “migration” remains high on the political and public agendas (Jaworsky 2021; Naxera and Krčál 2018). Surveys measuring migration-related attitudes in the country reveal that a strong majority of the Czech public is opposed to accepting refugees and sees non-nationals as a problem. At the height of the European “migrant crisis” of 2015-2016, almost 90% of Czech respondents perceived refugees as a threat to Europe, while approximately 80% identified refugees as a threat specifically to Czechia (Hanzlová 2018). The low level of exposure to settled non-nationals on the one hand and strong “anti-immigrant” sentiments measured by surveys on the other present a compelling paradox, raising the question of what laypeople in Czechia imagine when hearing the labels foreigners, migrants, and refugees.

In the remainder of the article, we focus on the findings of our qualitative, interview-based study. Before doing so, we elaborate our theoretical and methodological premises. Our theoretical goal is to place theories about the labeling and categorization of people who cross borders into conversation with cultural sociological theories on boundary work. We demonstrate that the theoretical perspective of symbolic boundaries and boundary work provide potent analytical tools for studying labeling practices. We further suggest that we must understand the wider cultural repertoires of meaning within which labels are constructed and refined. In short, our argument is that research participants rely on available cultural repertoires and different grounds for boundary work when characterizing foreigners, migrants, and refugees. Our analysis reveals that laypeople often contrast “foreigners” to “nationals” and “migrants” to “refugees.” While boundary work related to the label foreigner calls upon legal and cultural criteria, the boundary work concerning the other two labels - migrant and refugee - involves moral criteria. We find that the boundary work sustaining the labeling practices of laypeople often departs from legal definitions and commonly established institutional understandings of the three labels - not only do they draw upon labels as institutionalized entities in different legal provisions and administrative practices, but they also engage in their own forms of categorization and refine such labels based on available cultural repertoires.

Literature and Theoretical Framework

There exists considerable debate about the terminology used to label people that cross nation-state borders. Although much of this debate has emerged in the aftermath of the 2015-16 European “migration crisis,” Zetter had already theorized the processes and consequences of labeling in the early 1990s. In his seminal work, Zetter focuses on the institutional arena, how bureaucratic interests and procedures determine and “(mis)conceive” labels such as “refugee,” asserting, “Labelling matters so fundamentally because it is an inescapable part of public policy making and its language: a non-labelled way out cannot exist” (1991:46, 59; cf. Crawley and

Skleparis 2018). A quarter century later, Zetter (2007:174) reiterates the continuing importance of the refugee label, despite profound changes in the refugee regime, such as the shift in its locus to the Global North, and to how refugee status is actually distributed and distinguished from other categories of “migrants.”

While Zetter had specifically talked about the refugee label, later work has weighed in on the debates about migrants vs. refugees, often framed in a dichotomy of economic vs. political or illegal vs. legal. The importance of such conversations cannot be overstated; indeed, as Sigona (2018:457) states, there are “life and death implications”:

How we describe and categorize those who cross the Mediterranean on unseaworthy boats has enormous implications on the kind of legal and moral obligations receiving states and societies feel towards them. The dominant, but not uncontested, discursive construction of boat migrants crossing via the Central Mediterranean route as disguised economic migrants and therefore “illegal”, for example, is central to Europe’s increasingly tougher response to crossings from Libya and attempt to exercise stricter controls on humanitarian NGOs carrying out “search and rescue” (SAR) operations at sea.

It is not just the labeling practices of state actors or bureaucratic institutions that have consequences. Media are also important players in this field, for instance, when labeling migration as a “crisis.” Goodman et al (2017) conduct a discourse analysis of UK media that charts the evolution of crisis labeling from 2015 to mid-2016. They find that the first label, “Mediterranean migrant crisis,” framed “migrants” as individuals that should not be allowed to reach Europe. The second, a “Calais migrant crisis,” presented migrants as a specific threat to UK security, which then became the “European migrant crisis,” representing an ongoing threat to Europe. The photo of the drowned 3-year-old, Aylan Kurdi, precipitated a change to a “refugee crisis” that promoted humane and sympathetic responses. Finally, after the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015, “refugees” again became “migrants.” Crawley and Skleparis (2018) interrogate such shifts and challenge what Apostolova (2015) calls “categorical fetishism” which, “despite significant academic critique, continues to treat the categories ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’ as if they simply exist, out there, as empty vessels into which people can be placed in some neutral ordering process” (Crawley and Skleparis 2018:49). Through interviews with people crossing into Greece in 2015, they show how the decisions to leave home and to make their way to Europe are far more complex than portrayed by politicians, policy-makers, or the media.

What links many of these scholarly accounts is an emphasis on the moral dimension of categorization and labeling practices, especially as they pertain to the attitudes of laypeople towards those who cross borders to settle in another country. In an article that asks the question “Good refugees, bad migrants?” Wyszynski et al (2020) use an experimental study to look at how group labels (migrants, economic migrants, refugees) affect helping intentions (dependency vs. autonomy-oriented) toward “displaced people” in Germany. They find that “refugees” are subject to paternalistic stereotypes, eliciting higher support for dependency oriented help, while “economic migrants” evoke envious stereotypes and don’t engender helping behavior (Wyszynski et al 2020, p. 616). Goodman et al (2017) suggest that refugee is a moral category, people who need and deserve safety because they are worthy and vulnerable, while other

categories are immoral, representing people out to unfairly gain benefits from European countries (p. 106). In a similar vein, De Coninck's (2020) study of data from a 2017 online survey in Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Sweden reveals that "people make a genuine distinction between immigrants and refugees, as attitudes towards refugees are generally more positive than attitudes towards immigrants" (p. 1679). Based on a study of attitudes in Slovakia, Findor et al (2021) find just the opposite: their young adult respondents evaluate "refugees" least favorably, "foreigners" most favorably, and "migrants" fall somewhere in the middle.

In this article, we adopt a cultural sociological perspective and study labeling practices by utilizing the theories of symbolic boundaries and boundary work. Together with Lamont and Molnar (2002:168-69), we understand symbolic boundaries as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" that provide "tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality." Once symbolic boundaries become widely agreed upon, they can objectify into social boundaries, manifesting themselves by "unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities" (ibid.). The boundaries are never static; they are subject to an ongoing process of boundary work that entails shifting, crossing, blurring, maintenance, and solidification (Jaworsky 2016; Schwalbe et al. 2000; Zolberg and Woon 1999). Although boundary work is performed by individuals, it is inherently social; it is aided by available cultural repertoires that are collectively shared and unequally available in different cultural environments and social settings (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Thévenot 2000). The perspective of symbolic boundaries and boundary work thus allows us to illuminate the processual nature of labeling practices, revealing the meaning-making processes that are attached to each label and that aid their (re)negotiation.

Methodology

Our findings are part of a three-year (2020-2022) research project "The thirteenth immigrant? An in-depth exploration of the public perception of migration in the Czech Republic." The analysis builds on 50 qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted from autumn 2020 through summer 2021 in three localities: Brno, the second largest city in Czechia and the capital of the South Moravian Region, Vyšší Brod, a town located in the South Bohemian Region at the border with Austria, and a village¹ located in the rural area of the Highlands Region. These localities are diverse in terms of population size, economic and political power, and local histories of cross border movement. In each locality, we recruited research participants by a combination of personal referrals from our wider social circles, the snowball method, and public advertisements posted in spatially-defined social media pages, such as residential or job advertising groups. We strived to keep the sample diverse by adopting principles of the purposeful sampling method (Patton 2002; Rapley 2014): from all the people interested in taking part in the research, we selected those who complemented the sample in terms of their gender, age, and self-reported social class. We combined face-to-face with online interviewing, relying on the principles of the "comprehensive interview" (Ferreira 2014) and encouraging research participants to develop rich narratives about migration. Besides following a pre-prepared

¹ To ensure the privacy of our research participants, we have decided not to disclose the name of the village.

interview scenario, we encouraged research participants to develop their narratives by posing additional questions. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. We obtained written informed consent from each research participant, as mandated by the ethics approval committee at Masaryk University, Approval No. EKV 2019-05.

In order to explore how laypeople in Czechia make sense of different labels used in the public migration discourse and how they themselves actively use those labels when talking about people who cross borders, we developed a three-step methodology. In the opening part of each interview, we asked the research participants to elaborate their understanding of the labels migrant (*migrant*), foreigner (*cizinec*), and refugee (*uprchlík*). This query allowed us to gain insight into what images and emotions they associate with each label and what criteria for boundary work they rely upon when deciding who should be labeled as a migrant/foreigner/refugee. Second, during the interview, we prompted the research participants to develop rich narratives conveying their views and personal experiences with migration and people who cross borders. This line of questioning allowed us to observe more spontaneous and unguarded practices of labeling that took place once the research participants started to describe different migration-related situations and people featured in them. Third, at the end of each interview, we presented the research participants with four photographs portraying migration, previously published by Czech media.² We asked them to briefly comment on each photograph and describe both the depicted situation and the people involved in it. The photo elicitation allowed us to study practices of labeling in a more controlled environment, using the photographs as a common visual reference point for all research participants. With the exception of the opening questions in which we asked about labels explicitly, we strived to use descriptive and value neutral terms such as “people who cross borders” (inspired by Hamlin 2021) and “people who have come to live in Czechia from abroad,” in order to maintain distance from the labels whose meaning and usage we wanted to explore. These are also the two terms we use in the interpretive part of our analysis.

We analyzed the data with the help of the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti, subjecting them to several rounds of open, focused, and theoretical coding (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014). Our main analytical goal was to identify patterns of boundary work that sustain the research participants labeling practices and to reveal perceived demographic characteristics (e.g. gender, age, country of origin), personal features (e.g. willingness to work, adaptability), and migration motivations associated with each label. Although we focused our analysis on the labels migrant, foreigner, and refugee, we identified also a range of other, more contextual labels (e.g. tourist, expat, or low-skilled worker) and explored their connections with the three labels we studied. Our analysis was informed by the interpretive meaning-centered approach of cultural sociology that understands meanings to be constitutive of social action (Alexander and Smith 2003; Reed 2011). We believe that the reconstruction of meaning-making that sustains the

² The first photograph depicted Vietnamese women in a small Czech town sewing masks during the Covid-19 pandemic, the second photograph captured a rescue mission on the Mediterranean Sea, the third photograph featured a young man looking through a fence at the Hungarian-Serbian border, and the fourth photograph showed a group of labor migrants from Ukraine waiting at a bus station in Czechia.

labeling practices of laypeople is necessary if we want to deepen our understanding of public migration attitudes and cultivate a more reflexive approach to migration research.

Analysis

The research participants generally had distinct imaginations of foreigners, migrants, and refugees and relied on different grounds for boundary work when characterizing them. We found that the label foreigner is used to separate foreigners from nationals, often applying also to naturalized citizens and people with a migratory background who were either born in the country or have lived there long-term. Although, the label foreigner is sometimes contrasted to migrant (for instance when discussing work performance) most often, the dichotomies consisted of foreigner vs. national and migrant vs. refugee. While the main tension in the boundary work related to the label foreigner arises between legal and cultural criteria, the main tension between the other two labels - migrant and refugee - involves moral criteria. In the following analytical sections, we present our findings by discussing a number of surprising cases that problematize common institutional understandings of the labels.

Foreigner or National?

In Czech migration discourse, foreigner (*cizinec*) represents a well-established label used by experts and laypeople alike to designate a foreign state national.³ In common parlance, however, this label can also be used to designate someone who does not fully belong and is perceived as a “stranger” (cf. Simmel 1950). While the former use of this label is sustained by the boundary work based on a clearly defined legal criterion of citizenship, its latter use is sustained by boundary work based on the criteria of perceived cultural closeness, which are necessarily more evasive. In our research, we found that the labeling practices of laypeople are informed by both types of boundary work—the legal and the cultural—and often reflect their mutual tensions. Although most research participants recognize citizenship as a meaningful criterion when deciding whom to label as a foreigner, they often find the cultural criteria more important. As several research participants explain, in day-to-day situations, citizenship status is invisible, and they can never be sure what citizenship a person possesses. Therefore, they tend to rely on publicly perceptible cultural cues, such as the person’s ability to speak Czech, the perceived extent of their cultural closeness, or their ability to blend into the local cultural environment.

What is the definition of a foreigner? So that's what you asked me, but I don't really know... are they those people who have foreign citizenship? But I [usually] don't ask about that citizenship... so of course I can't know who... if Mrs. Bubílková⁴ already has Czech citizenship or not - I just don't know. I may know, depending on how they speak, or how they speak in case they haven't learned Czech perfectly. (Pavlína, 59, entrepreneur)

³ One of the major immigration laws in Czechia is called Act on the Residence of Foreigners (*Zákon o pobytu cizinců*).

⁴ Zuzana Bubílková is a popular moderator of political satire who grew up in Slovakia.

Relying on cultural rather than legal criteria for boundary work makes the symbolic boundaries delineating the label foreigner significantly more blurred. On the one hand, this can lead to an inclusive redefinition of the membership in the imagined national community, as present in the extension of membership to foreign state nationals who have sufficiently mastered some of the key cultural competences such as learning the language or have “blended into” the local community by actively partaking in the local social life.

When I think of the man, who came to [the village] from Great Britain, from England, he attends social events, he goes to the pond with the local fishermen, and I dare to say, that he is perceived as a local – after some three years that he has been living here. (Ivo, 30, consultant)

The extent to which the symbolic boundaries delineating the label foreigner become blurred when cultural instead of legal criteria for boundary work are applied is best documented by the relative reluctance of our research participants to categorize Slovaks residing in Czechia as foreigners. Slovaks constitute the second largest group of foreign state nationals living in Czechia⁵ and are generally perceived as the culturally closest nation (Graf et al. 2015). The perception of cultural closeness has its roots in the notion of Czechoslovakism—an idea that Czechs and Slovaks represent one nation—that was influential at the beginning of the 20th century and facilitated the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918 (Uherek 2011). The vital social, cultural, political, and economic exchange that marked the almost seven decades of coexistence of Czechs and Slovaks in one state further substantiated the perception of mutual cultural closeness. Although this coexistence had never been entirely idyllic and was marked by several periods of political polarization and ethnic secessionism, public attitudes concerning the dissolution of the country remain mixed on both sides of the border until today, more than three decades after the “Velvet Divorce” in 1992 (Tabery and Bútorová 2017). The legacy of Czechoslovakia thus represents an influential cultural repertoire that facilitates boundary *blurring*, making some Czechs reluctant to label Slovaks as foreigners on the pretext of perceived cultural closeness, intelligibility of languages, and shared history.⁶ While some of our research participants engaged in this pattern of boundary *blurring* rather implicitly, typically by forgetting to mention Slovaks when talking about other foreigners living in their city and later reflecting on the reasons for this omission, others deliberately excluded Slovaks from the debate on immigration, sometimes openly expressing their amusement about the thought of considering them foreigners.

⁵ As of June 30, 2021, 126,720 Slovak nationals resided in Czechia either temporarily or permanently. This represents 18.9% of all foreign state nationals residing in the country at the time (MVCR 2021).

⁶ Nonetheless, the capacity of this cultural repertoire to facilitate boundary blurring was somewhat generation specific and most typical for research participants who have been socialized during the period of Czechoslovakia. Research participants born after the separation of Czechoslovakia were less ready to blur the boundaries between Czechs and Slovaks and, in some cases, even openly criticized what they perceived to be a preferential treatment of Slovaks—for instance the fact that Slovak students are allowed to speak Slovak when they study at Czech universities.

I almost completely forgot that there are also lots of Slovaks living in Brno, are they not? I completely forgot, because [amused tone] Slovaks are almost completely as if they were ours, so I do not perceive them as foreigners at all.
(Gabriela, 59, lawyer)

On the other hand, relying on cultural rather than legal criteria for boundary work can also lead to a more exclusive notion of membership in the imagined national community, for instance when people who moved to Czechia from abroad continue to be labeled as foreigners even after they underwent the process of naturalization or were even born in Czechia.

A foreigner can be of different nationalities, like Vietnamese or Russian, Ukrainian, Slovak... and even those who are born in the [Czech] republic, I would also say that they are foreigners, even if they obtain Czech citizenship, I think that they are still foreigners, that it is simply not as if [they were] directly... um, a native Czech.
(Mary, 28, interpreter)

Even more crucially, this type of boundary work can facilitate exclusion from the imagined national community also in relation to Czech citizens without a substantial migratory experience. Such exclusion became most apparent in relation to Czech Roma. Even though most Romani families living in Czechia have a history of post-Second World War labor migration from Eastern Slovakia (Sidiropulu Janků 2013), their migration was at the time considered domestic and not international. What is more, after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, most Roma living in the Czech territory acquired Czech citizenship.⁷ In legal terms, Roma are therefore not foreigners but Czech citizens with the official status of a national minority.⁸ The frequency with which the research participants mentioned Roma when we asked them to reflect on their understanding of the label foreigner or when they talked about foreigners living in their city was, therefore, rather surprising. Relying on cultural rather than legal criteria for boundary work, research participants readily labeled Roma as foreigners based on their perceived cultural difference and inability to “blend in.”

RP: A foreigner is probably someone who has not fully blended into the culture and the nation, who is completely from somewhere else, from a different culture. That you can see at first glance – that he stands out or is behaving differently than most other people.

I: Could you please provide an example?

RP: I don't know many people like that, but like Roma, ... You can see when they are for instance in a tram that they are used to something else, that they behave differently in general. Not everyone, of course, but you can notice it about them sometimes. Of course, sometimes I do not even notice it, some of them are just fine,

⁷ For a discussion about legal challenges and discriminatory practices that marked the attempts of Roma to acquire Czech citizenship see Šiklová and Miklušáková (1998).

⁸ This status grants Czech Roma certain language and cultural rights, including a right to develop their culture.

of course [smile], and they have been living here for a long time, but many times it is noticeable. (Bronislav, 17, high school student)

Moreover, we found that the research participants associated the label foreigner with a specific type of international migration, motivated primarily by one's ambition to come to Czechia to seek better employment and educational perspectives or, alternatively, to engage in recreation and sightseeing. They often used this label alongside other labels, such as low- or high-skilled worker, foreign student, or tourist. This type of migration was perceived as unproblematic or even positive, beneficial for Czech society. With respect to the countries of origin, the research participants used this label somewhat selectively, referring mostly to people coming from other European countries and especially from post-socialist countries of Ukraine, Russia, and, to some extent, also from Slovakia. This selective use of the label foreigner likely reflects the fact that nationals of other post-socialist countries still constitute the largest proportion of people who come to Czechia to pursue education or employment (CSO 2020) and thus arguably shape the imagination of foreigners.

One important exception from the above-described pattern concerns people coming from Vietnam. Although Vietnamese constitute the third largest group of foreign nationals living in Czechia and are known for their entrepreneurial activities as vendors and shop-owners, the research participants only rarely labeled them as foreigners. Instead, they consistently referred to them as a "Vietnamese community," and they did so regardless of the length of their residency in Czechia or their citizenship status. We suggest that this labeling practice needs to be understood in the context of the long history of Vietnamese migration to Czechia since 1950s (Freidingerová 2014), due to which there are several generations of Vietnamese nationals and their descendants living in the country. Czech nationals of Vietnamese origin have even been officially recognized as a national minority in 2013, acquiring the same legal status as Roma and other autochthonous ethnic minorities. The practice of labeling Vietnamese and their descendants as a "community" can thus be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it certainly signals some extent of normalization of their presence in Czechia. Especially in relation to the first generation, this labeling practice represents boundary *blurring*. On the other hand, research participants often used this label to signal a lasting perception of their cultural otherness. In relation to Vietnamese descendants, who were already born and socialized in Czechia, this labeling practice thus *solidifies* the boundaries and results in their ongoing exclusion from the category of national.

Finally, when using the label foreigner, research participants did not draw any boundaries based on age or gender, which were the two important criteria for boundary work in relation to the other two labels we studied, migrant and refugee. We discuss the boundary-work related to these two labels together in the next section, as we found that they are often constructed in relation to each other when the research participants either draw clear distinctions between them or they use them interchangeably.

Migrant or Refugee?

Migrant (*migrant*) is a relatively new label in Czech public discourse. Prior to 2015, it was rather a neutral term used mainly by academics and NGOs. With the European "migration crisis," it gradually dominated the discussion on migration from the Middle East and Africa in Czech

media and politics, gaining an unfavorable undertone (Pospěch and Jurečková 2019:13). This tendency was also strongly reflected by our research participants, who often linked the image of migrants with the media. The label refugee (*uprchlík*) has been much more settled in the public discourse. It has been an important legal category in international law since the 1951 Refugee Convention. Szczepaniková (2008) has shown how the refugee label has undergone a significant transformation from a rather broad and inclusive label that served also to confirm the democratic identity of post-communist Czechoslovakia/Czechia establishing a new asylum regime in the 1990s, to a more restrictive use that developed with the gradual accession of Czechia to the European Union, when the idea of “genuine” refugees proliferated.

In the interviews, the research participants often used both migrant and refugee interchangeably to refer to people escaping threatening life conditions in African and Muslim countries of Asia and illegally crossing borders to seek a better life in Europe, thus *blurring* the boundaries between these labels. However, a more detailed look into how these labels were employed reveals different criteria that serve to draw moral boundaries between migrants and refugees, confirming the findings of Goodman et al. (2017) that refugee is a moral category. The conditions of leaving the country, especially the degree of suffering as well as the motivations for migration were among the primary distinctions that helped *solidify* the boundaries between migrants and refugees in the accounts of the research participants. The research participants associated refugees with suffering due to war and state violence, recognized as legitimate reasons for needing help from societies outside of the borders of their nation states. Moreover, the label refugee was also associated with the urgent conditions in leaving the country of origin, reflected in the observation that refugees often carried little baggage, dressed modestly, and lacked hi-tech equipment. A neat appearance, associated in particular with fashionable clothes and the latest mobile phones, cast doubt on refugee neediness, shifting them closer to the label migrant.

I: So the migrant is a person associated with...

RP: With escape, escape from home for some reason. And the reason is either a threat to life, health, political views and so on, or profit when he tries to get out of, well, eh, in de-facto well-functioning state. For example, I don't know, I will not say that these are in reality well-functioning states but often they are not unwell because often you can see the clothes, equipment, and everything, including the mobiles and all this stuff, so they could not have been such wretches.

The research participant first provides a rather wide range of reasons that qualify a person as a migrant but later in the interview, when commenting on a picture of people on the move in a boat, he *solidifies* the boundaries by differentiating “classical” refugees from the “groups of men” seeking “social support” in Europe.

I: What caught your interest in this picture?

RP: Hm, that they are all men, of course, again. So they are not the classical, eh, refugees, but it is rather such a group that wants to get by any means to Europe and make it here, if possible, to Germany, France, the West, of course, because the social support is substantially different than here... (Michal, 61, retired police officer)

Thus, although both possibly threatened and suffering, the boundary between the migrant and the “classical refugees” is defined by uncertainty about the background and motivations of people who cross borders. The research participants expressed uncertainties related, on the one hand, to the decision of the people who cross borders to leave the country of origin and undertake the strenuous journey to Europe and, on the other hand, to the motivations and expectations of the migrants towards the host countries. In both cases, migrant rationality was questioned; they were eventually seen as naïve and potentially manipulated and exploited by the smugglers and coming to Europe with unrealistic expectations regarding their future life.

RP: They should realize, these migrants, that life is pretty much the same wherever you go. It is not that easy here. And I saw the picture, it is insane, on the boat, the risk. (Beata, 72, retired factory worker)

The label migrant invoked questions and concerns about whether people who cross borders to Europe are willing to work and integrate and not just expecting welfare support. Here, the cultural repertoire of Western vs. Eastern Europe that positions Eastern Europe as the “backward” and less developed Other of Western Europe helps to locate both migrants and refugees, as they are seen as heading toward Western European countries. In contrast, Czechia is perceived by the research participants as a country that does not attract and welcome migrants and refugees, regardless of whether the research participant approves or disapproves this situation.⁹ This finding echoes the study of Jurečková and Pospěch (2019) who assert that Czech media report about migrants and refugees predominantly in the external context, accentuating especially the situation in the Mediterranean and migration-related problems in other European countries, especially Germany.

The moral boundaries between refugee and migrant are also constructed through gender and age. Women, children and, eventually, families are seen as refugees, as opposed to single young men, who represent a most contentious category of people on the move, associated with the label migrant. The boundary work separating migrants and refugees through the category of gender draw from a cultural repertoire we call *moral nationalism* - the perceived moral obligations towards one’s nation of origin that situate men and women into different positions in relation to the nation (see, for example, Thomson 2020). When asked about association with the label refugee, a 48-year-old carpenter replied to the female interviewer:

Refugee? It depends who is a refugee. (...) So “refugee” for me, it’s you and your children. But it is not a healthy man who does not defend the motherland. (...) Women, of course, with children, they need to be protected. But a man must perform the role that he protects the motherland. (Emil, 48, carpenter)

This interviewee raises the omnipresent question of the legitimacy of leaving one’s country and looking for help outside of the borders of one’s nation state. The decision by young, adult,

⁹ The number of asylum seekers and recognized refugees in Czechia has been extremely low in recent years. In 2019, 1,922 people (mostly coming from Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine) sought asylum in Czechia and only 61 were granted international protection in the same year (CSO 2021).

healthy men to leave the unfavorable conditions in their home countries were questioned on the grounds that men should fight for their countries and help improve the life conditions and built their countries rather than “simply” escaping. This cultural repertoire was also heavily mobilized during the migration crisis when the Czech state representatives strongly advocated for helping in the regions of origin against accepting refugees in Czechia (Horký-Hlucháň 2016). Single able-bodied males, who, according to the research participants, could have participated in building their countries instead of facing an uncertain future in European countries, were also perceived as a security threat (see also Maneri 2021).

In short, the research participants employed the labels migrant and refugee in complex ways to draw symbolic boundaries between “us” and the people moving across borders as well as to differentiate between different types of people moving across borders. The boundaries between a migrant and a refugee, often labeled a “wretch,” were often *blurred* when both labels were associated with escape from threatening life conditions and seeking a better life, a darker skin color and originating in Africa or the Middle East, illegality and not arriving to Czechia but heading towards Western countries. The research participants *solidified* boundaries between these two labels when it came to gender, age, appearance, the intensity of their suffering, and needing help. Moreover, the label migrant, unlike the label refugee evoked boundaries related to the contribution of newcomers to the receiving society, their willingness and ability to follow “our” rules and integrate into “our” society and importantly willingness to work and working performance.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we have highlighted the active role of laypeople in labeling practices, which have thus far been studied predominantly from the perspective of the state and the media. Through an in-depth cultural sociological analysis of the public perception of migration in Czechia, we have shown how laypeople actively and creatively participate in labeling practices using the labels foreigner, migrant, and refugee. Our analysis reveals that their understanding and use of these labels often departs from the legal definitions and common institutionalized conceptualizations of these labels. Table 1 summarizes the imagined characteristics of foreigners, migrants, and refugees and the associated grounds for boundary work. The label foreigner is associated predominantly with the legal arrival of white Europeans to Czechia for the purpose of work, study, or tourism. Foreigners represent contributors to Czech society and their cultural difference manifests primarily through speaking a foreign language or accented Czech, or having a non-Czech ethnic background. The labels migrant and refugee evoke imaginaries of people with non-white skin color illegally crossing borders from Asia and Africa to (Western) Europe to improve their life conditions. However, while the label refugee invokes images of poor and vulnerable women and children, or the elderly, who need help, the label migrant is linked with healthy, abled-bodied, well-equipped young men whose willingness to work and contribute to the receiving society is called into question and rather constitutes a threat.

Table 1
Grounds for boundary work in relation to the labels foreigner, migrant, and refugee

Grounds for boundary work	Foreigner	Migrant	Refugee
<i>Motivation for migration</i>	Coming to study, work, or visit the country	To improve life, questionable	To save life
<i>Legality</i>	Legal	Illegal	Illegal
<i>Work performance</i>	Willing to work, different levels of expertise	Not willing to work, cheap labor	Not discussed
<i>Contribution to society</i>	Representing a contribution	Taking from society, a threat	Need help
<i>Visual/auditory cues</i>	Linguistic ability or presence of accent	Able-bodied, healthy, well-dressed, well-equipped	Vulnerable, disheveled, poor
<i>Skin color/race</i>	Predominantly white	Non-white	Non-white
<i>Gender</i>	Any gender	Men	Women
<i>Age</i>	Any age	Young adult	Children, elderly
<i>Country of origin</i>	Europe, post-socialist countries, ethnic Roma	Africa, Asia, Muslim countries, Ukraine	Africa, Asia, Muslim countries, Balkan countries
<i>Location/heading towards</i>	Not discussed	West	West

While the main tension in the boundary work related to the label foreigner arises between legal and cultural criteria, where the cultural criteria predominate in the perception of who is a foreigner and who is a national, the main tension that exists in the boundary work related to the perception of migrant and refugee revolves around moral criteria. The relative salience of cultural as opposed to legal criteria for boundary work when drawing boundaries between foreigners and nationals can be possibly explained by the ethnic conception of nationhood that is dominant both in Czechia as well as in Central and Eastern Europe at large (Brubaker 2017). Moreover, the relatively short-term exposure to immigration characteristic for post-socialist Czechia, where migration is perceived as primarily a Western European phenomenon, feeds into distinguishing different types of people who cross borders. The foreigner, a label familiar to the Czech context, differs significantly from the migrant or the refugee, seen as more distant Others. The views underlying these two labels are based primarily on media representations rather than actual experiences with people on the move. Furthermore, distant Others are racialized: migrants and refugees are the ultimate Others associated with non-white skin color, while "our" foreigners are predominantly white.

Our findings show that the labeling practices of laypeople do not take place in a vacuum but are informed by available cultural repertoires. While some of these repertoires help to reproduce the already established legal and institutional meanings of labels—such as national citizenship in the case of the legal definition of foreigner—others provide tools for their creative redefinition by introducing additional criteria for boundary work that are meaningful to social actors. Moreover, the production of labels is time- and culture-specific. As our findings document, some of the cultural repertoires that sustain boundary work are country-specific, for instance when the legacy of Czechoslovakia facilitates the exclusion of Slovaks from the label foreigner. But they can also be more generally available, such as the cultural repertoire of moral nationalism, whose cultural roots reach back to the Western experience of modernity and which has facilitated the exclusion of young healthy men from the label refugee on the pretext of their moral obligation to fight for their country. The historical dimension of distinctions between refugees and migrants stressed by Jones (2020) is well documented by the proliferation of the label migrant into the Czech public discourse, rarely used before the "European migration crisis."

With our study, we offer three distinct recommendations. First, we find the study of laypeople's labeling practices significant because symbolic boundaries often transform into social boundaries as discriminatory practices or in public policies, put forward and approved by politicians who care about public opinion especially in controversial and highly politicized issues such as migration. Thus, it is crucial that researchers conducting public opinion polls, by far the most popular form of research of public attitudes, are well aware of the meanings people associate with different labels related to people on the move. Here, an intersectional perspective (see, for example, Anthias 2012; Robertson 2019) is highly relevant. Our perspective dovetails with Robertson (2019:219), who proposes that people who cross borders are "classified, quantified, coded and placed into hierarchies that are politically and socially determined and have embodied and material effects."

Second, we highlight the importance of studying laypeople's labeling practices because migration attitudes shape the character of the receiving context for people who cross borders. Our findings confirm the substantial role of media in shaping how laypeople make sense of migration labels, hardly a surprising finding given their wide public appeal. We find the largest influence of media in relation to the label migrant, which the research participants often openly associated with the media representation of the recent "European migrant crisis," effectively narrowing their understanding of this label to a highly specific regionally and racially defined category of people crossing borders. Even research participants who exercised some extent of reflexivity during the interview, and expressed their doubts about the accuracy of this imagination, acknowledge that their understanding of the label migrant was significantly influenced by media. One possible avenue of future research thus entails a more nuanced exploration of the impact of the media representation of migration on the labeling practices of laypeople and their overall migration attitudes.

Finally, with our findings we aim to join the recent "reflexive turn in migration research" (Dahinden 2016; Dahinden, Fischer and Menet 2021; Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014). We strongly side with the proposal of Dahinden et al (2021) that the perspectives of research participants should be included in reflexive knowledge production. In our research, we have

approached this task by making the meaning-making that sustains the labeling practices of research participants the central focus of our analysis. By asking them to reflect on their understanding of the three commonly used migration labels and by studying how they used these labels in the course of the interview, we have acknowledged their own perspectives on migration. Our use of descriptive and value neutral terms such as “people crossing borders” and “people who moved to Czechia from abroad” both during the interviews and in the process of writing assists in our analytical goal, as it allows us to gain distance from the labels we studied. Yet we do not want to propose that migration researchers should depart from using the established migration labels altogether (cf. Hamlin 2021). Our findings show that labeling is constitutive to how people make sense of migration and, in order to be able to communicate with them and learn more about their migration attitudes, we need to acknowledge the images and emotions that different labels produce. Therefore, we call for a different sensitivity that brings the meaning-making of research participants into dialogue with the reflexivity of researchers. Acknowledging that labels are not “things in the world” (Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004) but are products of specific discourses and migration regimes, we encourage researchers to explore different patterns of boundary work that sustain the production of labels in specific times and places, paying attention also to the active role of laypeople in this process.

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