

Good versus Evil:  
Moral Narratives and Division  
Around Immigration



Anna Alma van Vree

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Anna Alma van Vree  
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# Preface

This report summarizes my PhD dissertation, *Good versus Evil: Moral Narratives and Division around Immigration*, which consists of the present summary report and the four empirical studies listed below. The summary report presents the main theoretical arguments, methodological approach, and core findings of the four empirical studies. The individual papers and analytical chapter contain a more detailed account of the relevant theory, methods, data, and analyses. The dissertation consists of four empirical studies: two solo-authored papers, one co-authored paper, and one analytical chapter. I use the shorthand, Paper A, Paper B, Chapter 5, and Paper C to refer to these studies throughout the summary report.

**Paper A:**

Moral archetypes in Political Communication: The Construction of Heroes, Villains, Victims, and Cowards in Immigration Discourse. Solo-authored.

**Paper B:**

Visualizing Morality: Postcolonial Repertoires in Geert Wilders' Anti-Immigration Party Posts on Social Media. Solo-authored.

**Chapter 5:**

Citizens as moral narrators: Archetypes in citizen deliberation. Solo-authored.

**Paper C:**

Moralized Division in Citizens' Deliberations about Immigration. Co-Authored with Kristina Bakkær Simonsen.



# Chapter 1: Introduction

Across the world, people are fleeing from war and persecution [...] That is why we battle for a humane and just asylum and migration policy (Party manifesto, Green Left, 2021).

When did the Dutch people vote to let in all these Jew-haters with sticks and beards? In which party manifesto was this written? Why do we let them destroy the Netherlands? (Geert Wilders, Party for Freedom leader, Facebook post, May 7, 2024).

From persecution and protection to threat and destruction, immigration politics can be narrated as a battle between good and evil. In these moral stories, immigrants, nations, politicians, and citizens are cast as heroes or villains, victims or cowards. These are moral narratives: stories that make political conflict morally legible by assigning roles and guiding judgment.

As I will argue in this dissertation, what is so powerful about these narratives is that they place actors into already familiar boxes in our minds. Because those boxes are so easily recognizable, they help us decide what is happening, what needs to be done, and who deserves sympathy, blame, or support. In the hands of politicians, these stories can be used to portray themselves as responsible and brave, while their opponents appear cruel, weak, or complicit. In one story, people on the move are cast as vulnerable human beings fleeing horror, and the party telling the story becomes the one willing to protect them. In another, immigrants are cast as a threat, the nation as the one under attack, and political leaders as either courageous defenders or cowardly enablers.

But these narratives do not belong to politicians alone. Citizens also draw on them: good and evil, heroes and villains, victims and cowards are building blocks in our minds that we use to make sense of politics and the social world more broadly. Citizens use them to judge politicians, social groups, themselves, and, importantly, each other: the same moral logic also surfaces in how citizens speak to and about one another.

Sometimes, I've also turned it around, against them, saying: "No, actually, I'm not. It's you, you're a racist toward me," because I feel like, it's just such an easy card to play. (Focus group participant).

When political disagreement is morally narrated, conflict can harden into black-and-white judgments about people. Others are no longer just seen as

holding different views. They can come to appear selfish, threatening, naive, racist, or fundamentally bad. Division, then, does not stay at the level of issue disagreement but becomes part of how people make sense of who they, and others, are. Immigration is a particularly revealing case for studying these dynamics, because it is a politically central issue that is routinely framed in moral terms and around which citizens are often sharply divided.

This raises the central question of this dissertation: How do moral narratives around immigration function in elite communication and citizen deliberation, and with what implications for division in society?

In what follows, I situate that question in existing research on moralization, political communication, and division, and show the gap this dissertation addresses.

Previous research has provided a strong overview of morality in politics and linked it to division in society. A growing body of work shows that moral appeals are widespread in elite communication, which is not confined to one country, one period, or one ideological camp but appears across political contexts and traditions (Bos & Minihold, 2022; Clifford et al., 2015; Hackenburg et al., 2023; Simonsen & Widmann, 2025; Wang & Inbar, 2021). These moral appeals frame politics in terms of right and wrong rather than mere preference, and in doing so they can shape political judgment, persuasion, and engagement (Feinberg & Willer, 2015; Jung, 2020; Skitka & Morgan, 2014, p. 201). Research also shows that moralization is associated with greater social distance and hostility toward political outgroups, making compromise less attractive and opponents less socially legitimate (Garrett & Bankert, 2020; Ryan, 2017; Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2022). The stakes are therefore not only electoral: moral polarization can erode trust, increase openness to authoritarian leaders, and make democratic publics more vulnerable to misinformation and conspiratorial narratives (Crimston et al., 2022; Rapp, 2016).

At the same time, much of this research remains more abstract and more attentive to the presence and consequences of moral appeals than to how they are actually constructed in communication. Thus, while this literature has delivered important insights on the extent of moral communication, we know much less about *who* features in this communication, how they are made tangible and recognizable for audiences, and how citizens draw meaning from them. In short, we still miss insights into the type of moral narratives that opened this chapter.

To understand the functions of moral narratives, we need to get closer to how they are built up, employed, and negotiated among politicians and citizens. What is more, because politics deals in abstract actors, collective harms, and imagined futures, moral narratives require rhetorical work to translate from the abstract to something that feels concrete and morally meaningful.

They therefore need to be built in ways that make it seem clear who is good, who is bad, who is under threat, and who should act. To address this gap, I adopt a qualitative, theory-driven, and systematic approach that combines insights from moral psychology, cognitive linguistics, and sociology. This allows me to examine how actors are cast into recognizable moral roles, how those roles are made communicable and legible across elite communication and citizen deliberation, and how citizens themselves understand moralized disagreement.

## 1.1 Core arguments

Across the dissertation, I argue that moralization is organized through moral narratives that assign moral archetypes – heroes, villains, victims, and cowards – and allocate moral standing. Political actors and citizens make sense of contested issues by casting people and groups into culturally legible archetypes: villains, victims, heroes, and cowards, and by positioning themselves and others accordingly. These are not only stories that are told and listened to: they are stories in which narrators and listeners themselves inhabit and assign archetypal roles. Within the theoretical framework of the dissertation, these role assignments are anchored in a dyadic understanding of moral judgment: archetypes stabilize attributions of agency and experience in ways that make heroes, villains, victims, and cowards available as recurring templates for interpreting moral conflict (Gray et al., 2012; Gray & Wegner, 2009).

In sum, my core argument is that (i) moral archetypes operate as a culturally available repertoire of role positions through which actors claim, contest, and impose moral standing; (ii) these role configurations are made recognizable and arguable across elite communication and citizen deliberation through distinct semiotic and interactional resources; and (iii) moralization connects to division in citizen deliberation through moral boundary-drawing, where participants put one another's moral standing into question.

Focusing on the first element of this argument, I theorize moral archetypes as culturally legible role positions that stabilize interpretations of agency and experience while simultaneously offering actors a way to present themselves as morally credible. Anchoring the framework in dyadic harm, I make explicit that agency can be oriented toward causing harm or preventing it, and I include the coward archetype to capture condemnation of culpable inaction (Gray et al., 2012; Gray & Wegner, 2009). Because the hero-role is built into the archetypal repertoire, archetype assignments are also always claims about moral standing: parties, leaders, and citizens can position themselves as the ones who see what is at stake and are willing to act, while portraying opponents as villains who cause harm or as cowards who fail to protect. Likewise, victimhood works as an inhabited position of felt harm or unfair targeting that

can orient blame toward a perceived source of harm and, crucially, provide a warrant for morally justified agency.

Second, I argue that moral archetypes are psychologically sturdy schemas, yet applying them to complex actors (social groups, political leaders, “the nation”) and to collective, indirect, or future-oriented harms is comparatively unsteady and therefore demands translation work to become communicable. I theorize that abstract claims about harm and protection are made graspable through devices such as metaphor and metonymy, multimodality, and historically sedimented cultural repertoires. At the same time, because these translations remain arguable, the same role configuration can be reinforced in relatively static elite communication but become visibly contestable in citizen deliberation, where archetypal role assignments are introduced as proposals and then challenged, qualified, or revised.

Third, I argue that the dissertation’s link between moralization and division is best conceptualized through moral boundary-drawing: the process through which moralized interpretations harden into repeatable distinctions that categorize and evaluate people and groups (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Moral boundaries are especially consequential boundaries because they concern basic worth: they differentiate between those treated as decent and those cast as morally suspect. This is also why moral boundary-drawing provides a conceptual bridge between attitudinal and affective polarization: division becomes socially “sticky” when political positions are treated as signals of moral standing, such that holding the “wrong” view can be read as a lowering of someone’s moral worth.

## 1.2 Empirical strategy

To pursue these claims, I use a qualitative, modular research design that identifies moral narratives across two discourse arenas – elite communication and citizen deliberation – while keeping a shared analytical logic that makes key concepts comparable across different types of material. My methodological approach treats moralization and division as situated meaning-making: something that is constructed in communication and negotiated in context, rather than a stable individual disposition. The empirical material comes from the Netherlands and Denmark, which provide bounded contexts for tracing how broadly available archetypal templates take on locally specific content across arenas, without offering a systematic cross-national test or estimating causal effects.

I use immigration as a case to answer my research question. Immigration is a particularly revealing case for studying moral narratives because it is routinely framed through antagonistic moral contrasts across ideological camps (Helbling, 2014; Simonsen & Widmann, 2025), which makes it an especially

fertile arena for observing how moral meanings are built and contested in public argument. Immigration is also an issue around which some parties build a recognizable political identity, often treating it as a signature issue, such as the PVV in the Netherlands, the Danish People’s Party, the Sweden Democrats, and AfD in Germany (Ivarsflaten, 2008; Mudde, 2013). This gives moral storytelling unusually high strategic value for self-presentation and opponent critique, because the issue is tightly tied to partisan reputation and credibility.

Paper A examines immigration in Dutch party manifestos using critical metaphor analysis to trace how implied and metaphorical language translates abstract harms into morally legible narratives, and how parties claim moral standing by presenting themselves as protectors while casting immigrants, the nation, and political opponents into archetypal roles. Paper B shifts the focus to the multimodal and personalized format of social media, analysing Dutch anti-immigration party leader Wilders’ Facebook posts with social-semiotic multimodal analysis to show how images and text jointly cue archetypal readings through historical references and enable leader-centred moral self-presentation within the communication setting of a single post.

Chapter 5 provides the summary report’s independent empirical contribution by shifting the focus to citizen deliberation. In the chapter, I study the interactional component of moral archetypes in mixed-group deliberation – moments where archetypal framings are proposed, challenged, and qualified as participants make sense of harm, responsibility, and deservingness. Paper C draws on Danish focus-group discussions to analyse how citizens deliberate about immigration in attitudinally diverse settings, and how moral boundary drawing becomes part of disagreement: how participants evaluate “people who disagree” and negotiate what kinds of persons different immigration positions imply.

Together, these components operationalize the same theoretical argument across different settings. They allow me to trace how moral narratives are built through archetypal role assignments and self-presentations, how those narratives are communicated not only in text but also visually and interactionally, and how this moralization can spill over into moral boundary drawing between citizens who disagree. A full overview of papers, data, and analytical modules is provided in Table 3.1.

### 1.3 Roadmap

The dissertation consists of four empirical studies and a summary report: three papers (Paper A, Paper B, Paper C) and an analytical chapter (Chapter 5), which are brought together in the summary through a shared theoretical and methodological framework. Chapter 2 develops the dissertation’s theoretical framework by linking moralization and division as connected forms of

meaning-making: it grounds moral judgment in dyadic harm through moral archetypes (heroes, villains, victims, and cowards), specifies how these roles become available in political discourse through metaphorical and multimodal cueing and historically sedimented repertoires, and introduces moral boundary-drawing as the mechanism through which moralized disagreement can harden into durable distinctions in social division. Chapter 3 outlines the empirical strategy and the modular qualitative approach that lets me trace the same analytical logic across elite communication and citizen deliberation. Chapter 4 synthesizes the dissertation's elite-communication analyses by showing how moral archetypes are constructed through metaphor and metonymy in party manifestos (Paper A) and through multimodal cueing in Wilders' Facebook posts (Paper B). Chapter 5 then turns to citizen deliberation as an analytical chapter, conceptualizing moral archetypes as interactional proposals that can be introduced, contested, and qualified in talk. Chapter 6 connects moralization to division by presenting Paper C's analysis of moral boundary-drawing in focus-group discussions. Chapter 7 zooms in on victimhood as an archetypal position that links moral standing, agency, and contestation across the dissertation's arenas. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses the dissertation's contributions, scope conditions, and implications.

## Chapter 2: Moral narratives and division: archetypes and boundary drawing

In this chapter, I integrate moral psychology (dyadic harm), cognitive linguistics (metaphor/metonymy), multimodal scholarship (text-image meaning-making), and sociological boundary work to theorize how moral narratives become communicable and socially durable. This integration is my contribution: it turns a psychological template into an analytical framework that can travel across elite communication and citizen deliberation. This framework runs across the dissertation's papers and empirical chapters, providing a shared vocabulary for how moral claims are constructed, communicated, and taken up across different arenas. I first ground moral judgment in dyadic harm and show how political actors become morally legible through archetypal role assignments (villains, victims, heroes, and cowards), then build the bridges that explain how these roles become available in political discourse through metaphorical language, visual and multimodal representation, and moral cuing via historically sedimented repertoires. I then turn to the strategic dimension of moral self-presentation, where personalization enables actors to claim moral standing while casting opponents as morally suspect. Finally, I shift from how moral claims are narratively structured to how they are socially stabilized by introducing moral boundary drawing as the mechanism through which moralized disagreement can harden into durable "us/them" distinctions.

### 2.1 Morality and moralization in politics

Before I can say anything meaningful about moral appeals in political communication, I need to clarify what makes an issue moralized in the first place. Moralization can be understood as the process through which political topics are communicated as and come to be treated as moral concerns. In more classic approaches, morality research often assumed that certain domains were inherently moral, while others belonged to a more pragmatic, interest-based register (Haidt, 2013). Contemporary work instead foregrounds moralization as a dynamic attribution. Rather than asking whether an issue is inherently moral, the focus becomes how and when an issue becomes communicated by politicians and *experienced* by voters as a question of right and wrong (Rhee et al., 2019; Ryan, 2014).

This understanding builds on work on moral conviction: attitudes experienced as moral truths rather than contingent judgments. What distinguishes

a moral conviction is its felt objectivity and universal scope: I experience the stance as true in a way that should hold beyond my own preferences, and beyond a particular context (Skitka, 2010). For example, a non-moral conviction can be that one should take one's shoes off in the home, but a person might accept that this can vary per culture. Conversely, when something is a moral conviction, such as believing in a woman's right to vote, the absence of it would feel *wrong* regardless of whether it concerns a different culture. Moral convictions therefore carry an implicit ought and ought not, and this "rightness" is tightly intertwined with affect. Emotions such as anger, disgust, guilt, and pride do not merely accompany moral conviction – they help give it its distinctive force.

How we explain the cognitive building blocks of morality, however, differs across theories. Moral foundations theory proposes several distinct moral foundations, such as harm/care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity, treating them as separate psychological "channels" through which moral concerns can be activated (Graham et al., 2013). Dyadic morality theory, in contrast, treats perceived harm as a more general template: moral judgments are organized around representations of someone causing (or risking) harm to someone else (Gray et al., 2012; Schein & Gray, 2018). These accounts similarly differ in the question whether political conflict reflects fundamentally different moral "minds" across ideological groups. Moral foundations theory argues that liberals and conservatives rely on partly different constellations of moral foundations: liberals prioritize individualizing foundations (harm/care and fairness), while conservatives more strongly draw on additional binding foundations (loyalty, authority, purity) (Graham et al., 2009). In the context in which this literature developed – largely the US two-party system – this mapping of moral emphasis onto a conservative-liberal divide has been productive. At the same time, it travels less straightforwardly to multiparty settings where coalition politics and party competition produce more fragmented moral landscapes.

Much of the political science work that engages morality in politics has taken moral foundations theory as its primary entry point, not least because it offers a ready-made way to map moral concerns onto ideological differences. In this dissertation, I deviate from that default by anchoring the framework in dyadic harm. I do so for three reasons. First, dyadic harm fits my dissertation's core aim of tracing *how* moral claims are constructed and communicated across elite communication and citizen deliberation: it conceptualizes moralization as a relational interpretation and thereby makes role-based moral evaluation analytically tractable. Second, dyadic harm provides a unifying interpretive logic for connecting otherwise diverse moral claims in political conflict. Even when moral concerns appear to centre on purity, authority, or

loyalty, they are often made persuasive through harm-based meanings – who is endangered, treated unfairly, degraded, or betrayed (Gray et al., 2012, 2014)? This implies a harm-pluralist understanding of harm: harm can be physical, emotional, symbolic, spiritual, cultural, or anticipated as threat, and it is fundamentally perceived rather than objective (Schein & Gray, 2018). Third, dyadic harm travels better across the contexts I study because it does not presuppose stable ideological “moral profiles”: it offers a shared vocabulary for how harms and responsibilities are attributed in multiparty settings and across different communication arenas. Finally, I do not treat dyadic harm as a monopoly claim that all morality reduces to harm; rather, I use it as the most analytically productive starting point for theorizing how moral convictions become communicable and politically consequential in the materials I study.

This choice also shapes how I conceptualize moralized politics in the dissertation. Dyadic harm theory treats moralized conflict as disagreement over how harm is perceived and assigned – who is vulnerable, what counts as harm, and who is seen as capable of inflicting it – rather than as disagreement over which moral values matter most (Gray et al., 2012; Schein & Gray, 2018). This gives me leverage on how moralization works in political life: it directs attention to the concrete moral relationships through which issues are made compelling, to the archetypal roles political actors occupy when they present themselves and their opponents, and to the positions audiences are invited to take up in response. In other words, dyadic harm helps me theorize moralization not only as a difference in moral priorities, but as an interpretive process that populates political conflict with recognizable moral actors and moral stakes. The next section therefore lays out dyadic harm theory in depth and introduces its associated moral archetypes.

## 2.2 Moral archetypes

This section lays out the dyadic harm framework that anchors my theory chapter. I first introduce dyadic harm theory and the moral archetypes it implies, then develop my extensions to the framework, and finally show how moral typecasting links moral archetypes to stereotypes.

### 2.2.1 Dyadic harm theory

As discussed in the previous section, dyadic harm theory begins from the claim that moral judgment is anchored in perceived harm (Gray & Wegner, 2012). A situation becomes morally meaningful when it can be cognitively represented as a dyad: an entity doing harm and an entity suffering as a result. In this account, moral interpretation is structured around three interlocking elements:

harm, an intentional moral agent, and a moral patient (Gray et al., 2012). This is why accidents and natural disasters can be devastating yet not straightforwardly immoral: without an agent whose behaviour can be interpreted as intentional, the event lacks the mind-related structure that typically triggers moral condemnation (Schein & Gray, 2018).

A central claim in the theory is to treat morality as a special case of mind perception. Gray and colleagues argue that people perceive minds along two broad dimensions: agency and experience. Experience concerns sentience and vulnerability: being seen as capable of feeling pain, suffering, or emotional states. Agency concerns the capacity for goal-directed action: being seen as able to choose, intend, and act in ways that can ground responsibility attribution. Dyadic harm links these mind perceptions to moral interpretation: the more an entity is perceived as agentic, the more it becomes a plausible source of moral action; the more an entity is perceived as experiential, the more it becomes a plausible target of moral concern (Gray et al., 2012). Importantly, these are not objective properties “in the world” but perceptions through which observers make moral sense of events.

While Gray’s broader mind-perception framework often associates agency with higher cognitive functions, I adopt a slightly different emphasis: I treat agency primarily as goal-directed activity rather than potency, intelligence, or strength. This move is consistent with evidence that harmful actors are not necessarily perceived as “smarter” or “stronger” but as more active, as doing something purposeful in the situation (Piazza et al., 2014). Tipler and Ruscher (2014) make a similar point via the parasite metaphor: a creature can be represented as a morally relevant agent of harm despite low cognitive sophistication, because what matters for moral interpretation is purposeful, harmful activity. In other words, for the dyadic structure to become morally salient, agency needs to be sufficient for intentional action and responsibility, not for high-level intellect.

Crucially, dyadic harm does not restrict moral agents and patients to individual persons. Anything that can be represented as having intentions can be construed as an agent, and anything that can be represented as vulnerable can be construed as a patient (Schein & Gray, 2018). That means that groups, institutions, governments, communities, and future generations can be morally positioned within a dyad when they are imagined as capable of acting or capable of suffering. This flexibility matters for studying moralized politics, because many political conflicts revolve around collective entities, and moral judgments are routinely extended to “actors” that are not singular individuals.

From these ingredients – agency and experience – dyadic harm theory yields moral archetypes – heroes, villains, victims, and cowards. When an agent is linked to harmful action, the agent is cast as a villain; when an entity

is construed as suffering harm, it is cast as a victim; and when an actor is represented as preventing harm or shielding the vulnerable, it is cast as a hero (Gray & Wegner, 2012). Table 2.1 summarizes how the archetypes follow from underlying attributions (agency and experience), and it anticipates two refinements that I develop in the following subsections: distinguishing the direction of agency (whether it is oriented toward causing or stopping harm) and introducing the coward archetype.

Table 2.1: Moral archetypes and their corresponding attributes

	<b>Victim</b>	<b>Villain</b>	<b>Hero</b>	<b>Coward</b>
Experience	High	Low	Low	Low
Agency	Low	High	High	Low
<b>→ Intent</b>	-	Negative	Positive	-

Finally, dyadic harm theory helps explain why moral interpretation often proceeds from partial information. The theory treats moral situations as a cognitive template (or schema): a structured mental representation that supports rapid inference (Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Schein & Gray, 2016). Once a situation contains a few cues that imply an intentional agent and a suffering patient, observers tend to infer the rest of the moral scenario. Gray, Schein, and Ward (2014) describe this as dyadic completion: people fill in missing elements of a moral dyad based on fragmentary cues because the moral template is cognitively available. Schein and Gray (2018) illustrate the mechanism with the “gish” example: “The man intentionally gished the little girl, who cried.” Even without knowing what gish means, intentionality plus suffering is enough to make the event read as harm. The broader implication is that moral evaluations tend to cohere around an agent-patient structure: once harm is cued, observers intuitively organize responsibility and vulnerability in ways that make the situation feel morally legible (Gray et al., 2012; Gray & Wegner, 2012)

### 2.2.2 The direction of harm

The previous section laid out how dyadic harm builds moral interpretation from perceived agency and experience, and how this yields an agent-patient structure. What it leaves less explicit, however, is how we distinguish between different kinds of agents once agency is already attributed. Both heroes and villains are attributed high agency and low experience; the difference lies in how their agency is understood in relation to harm.

This is where I extend the framework. Dyadic harm has been criticized for overlooking a third dimension that shapes moral judgment: harmfulness

(Piazza et al., 2014). The point is that once an actor is perceived as agentic, moral evaluation hinges on whether that agency is construed as producing harm or preventing it. In response to this critique, I make this distinction explicit by treating the direction of agency as theoretically and analytically necessary in distinguishing between archetypes. When agency is oriented toward causing or enabling harm, the actor is cast as a villain; when it is oriented toward stopping harm or protecting the vulnerable, the actor is cast as a hero. Making this distinction explicit strengthens dyadic harm as a framework for explaining how moral narratives draw sharp contrasts between protectors and perpetrators even when both are portrayed as active and intentional.

### 2.2.3 The coward

Alongside the hero, villain, and victim archetypes that follow most directly from dyadic harm, I argue for the inclusion of a fourth moral archetype: the coward. While hero-villain-victim configurations are central to how harm is morally interpreted, they do not capture a recurring kind of moral judgment: condemnation of inaction. In many everyday moral intuitions, people are not only judged for what they do but also for what they fail to do when they have the capacity and responsibility to intervene. The coward archetype captures precisely this moral logic: a figure who is positioned close enough to harm to be morally implicated, yet who does not act.

The coward has deep roots in narrative structure. In classic work on folktales, Propp (1968) treats moral stories as organized around recurring roles that invite identification and evaluation. The coward is one such role: not the direct source of harm but the figure whose failure to protect becomes a moral failing in itself. In dramatized storytelling, the coward often appears alongside an enemy, a victim, and a hero-protector, functioning as a negative mirror for the audience's self-understanding (Clément et al., 2017). The point is not only to establish who is good and bad but to stage a moral choice about whether one acts when confronted with harm.

Within dyadic harm theory, I conceptualize the coward as a specific kind of agentic positioning. The coward is not defined by high experience (like the victim) or by harmful agency (like the villain). Instead, the coward is defined by failing to be a hero: the actor is perceived as able to intervene, and the situation is perceived as calling for intervention, yet the actor remains passive. A simple example clarifies the structure. Person A sees Person B about to harm Person C, who is unable to protect themselves. Person B is the villain, and Person C the victim. Yet Person A – because they could have warned, interrupted, or helped – also becomes morally legible. If Person A intervenes, they can be cast as hero; if they do not, they are condemned as coward. The moral

judgment attaches to the omission: allowing harm to occur despite the perceived capacity to prevent it.

Adding the coward matters, because it captures a politically consequential way of moralizing without relying on direct villainization. This can be strategically useful: while casting opponents as villains may strengthen a speaker's self-presentation as morally righteous, it also grants the opposition a form of narrative power by attributing them high agency as purposeful perpetrators. The coward archetype avoids this side effect by condemning the opposition for inaction or evasiveness, portraying them as unwilling to assume responsibility rather than as powerful architects of harm. The coward archetype also does persuasive work by shaping identification: it mobilizes the same action-versus-inaction logic described above but places it in a political register by turning support, alignment, or intervention into the morally strong choice and passivity into a stigmatized identity. In this way, the coward provides a bridge between harm-centred moral judgment and political self-presentation and mobilization, showing how moral pressure can operate through accusations of weakness as much as through accusations of wrongdoing.

#### 2.2.4 Typecasting and stereotypes

Dyadic harm theory implies that once a situation is perceived as moral, observers do not simply note who acted and who suffered, they tend to stabilize actors into moral categories. Moral typecasting theory argues that people typically perceive actors as either moral agents or moral patients, and rarely as both at once (Gray & Wegner, 2009, 2011). Typecasting creates a structured asymmetry in moral judgment; agents are understood as doers of good or evil; patients as recipients of good or evil. Casting someone as a patient foregrounds vulnerability and suffering, but it also makes it harder to see that actor as capable of intentional wrongdoing or decisive action. Casting someone as an agent foregrounds intent and responsibility, but it also makes it harder to see that actor as vulnerable or deserving of the moral protections afforded to patients.

Importantly, this is not merely a momentary perception. Typecasting can persist across time and across events: prior role assignments continue to shape how subsequent behaviour is interpreted (Gray & Wegner, 2011). For example, previous victimhood can reduce later blame, whereas prior heroic action can increase later blame because the former cements a patient-like lens and the latter an agent-like lens. This demonstrates how perceptions of agency and experience not only shape moral judgments in the moment but also exert a structuring effect over time.

I argue that this durability is one of the reasons why moral archetypes are closely connected to stereotypes. If archetypal positions stick, then the social

material that makes some positions easier to assign in the first place becomes theoretically important. This is where stereotypes enter: they supply culturally shared expectations about who is likely to act, who is likely to suffer, and who is likely to protect, expectations that make some archetypal readings feel immediately plausible and others less so.

I use stereotypes here in a classic social-psychological sense: shared beliefs about the characteristics and typical behaviours of social groups (Hilton & Hippel, 1996, p. 240). Such beliefs combine description and evaluation. They carry assumptions about intent, capacity, and character, and often imply whether a group is cooperative or threatening, competent or inept, trustworthy or untrustworthy (Fiske et al., 2007). In dyadic harm terms, these are expectations about agency and experience: which actors are likely to be read as heroes, villains, victims, or cowards before an event is even fully specified.

I argue that moral archetypes are socially patterned because the attributions that make them up are socially patterned. Dyadic harm is a productive bridge between universal cognitive templates and stereotypes or historical repertoires for four reasons:

First, the key dimensions of dyadic harm are attributions, not objective properties. Agency and experience are perceptions of minds, intentions, and vulnerability; stereotypes operate precisely by shaping what kinds of minds, motives, and sensitivities are seen as plausible for different social actors (Fiske et al., 2007; Hilton & Hippel, 1996). This means the framework is already pitched at the same level as stereotyping: what matters is not what groups “are,” but how they are read as capable of acting or suffering.

Second, these attributions apply beyond individuals. Dyadic harm allows entire collectives to be treated as moral agents or moral patients when they are imagined as intentional or vulnerable (Schein & Gray, 2018). This matches the basic operation of stereotypes, which work by generalizing expectations across category members and treating groups as carrying stable dispositions. Third, the typecasting dynamic described above implies that once moral roles are assigned, they can persist across contexts (Gray & Wegner, 2009, 2011). My argument is that stereotypes help account for why this persistence becomes patterned at the group level: when a role assignment fits culturally available expectations, it becomes easier to reproduce and harder to unsettle.

Finally, moral roles are structured as a cognitive template that can be activated from fragmentary cues (Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Gray et al., 2014). This cognitive efficiency is precisely what makes dyadic harm a powerful bridge to stereotypes and historical repertoires: when category cues are already culturally meaningful, they allow observers to complete an archetypal narrative quickly and with confidence, even when the moral situation is only partially specified.

Gender stereotypes clearly illustrate how this works. Across Western contexts, agentic traits such as decisiveness and assertiveness are culturally coded as masculine, while communal and emotional traits are coded as feminine (Abele, 2003). In the stereotype content tradition, groups are often evaluated along warmth and competence, and gendered stereotypes frequently align femininity with warmth/communality and masculinity with competence/agency (Connor & Fiske, 2018; Fiske et al., 2007). Related work similarly shows that emotionality is more strongly associated with women, while intellect and cultural authority are more strongly associated with men (Brody & Hall, 2000; Plant et al., 2000). In dyadic harm terms, these patterned expectations shape the likelihood that women will be read as high in experience and lower in agency, while men are more readily read as high in agency.

These priors align closely with victim positioning and help explain why benevolent sexism often casts women as dependent and in need of protection (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Research on representation resonates with this structure: Van Zoonen (2000) finds that men are more often framed as heroes or villains, while women are disproportionately framed as victims. In gendered morality policy domains, Vossen, de Pooter, and Meier (2022) likewise show how abortion discourse draws on gendered expectations about agency and vulnerability to structure moral interpretation.

The broader point for my dissertation is that moral archetypes are psychologically general templates, but they are filled through socially available expectations – a connection that moral psychology often leaves underdeveloped when it treats moral cognition primarily as a universal tendency rather than as something filtered through shared repertoires. In the next section, I build on this by showing how political actors can cue, sustain, and strategically mobilize such expectations.

## 2.3 Moral archetypes in political communication

Having established moral archetypes as harm-based cognitive templates that become socially patterned through shared expectations, I now turn from psychological mechanism to discursive practice. Here I develop my central theoretical move: translating dyadic harm and moral archetypes from moral psychology into a framework that can be studied in discourse, whether that discourse takes the form of elite communication, multimodal images, or citizen deliberation.

### 2.3.1 Moral narratives in political communication

If I translate dyadic harm and moral archetypes into the study of political discourse, then moral archetypes in discourse are, by definition, moral

narratives. At its most basic, a narrative is a sequence – something happened, then something else followed, and the ordering itself invites a causal and evaluative reading (Bruner, 1991). Narratives are seductive: in the telling, they temporarily narrow the range of plausible interpretations by foregrounding some elements while backgrounding others, offering moral and political clarity in contexts that are often complex and contested (Bruner, 1991, p. 9; Forchtner, 2021). Narratives do not only organize events; they also organize people. As Somers (1994, pp. 606-607) argues, it is through narratives that we come to understand the social world and constitute social identities: who “we” are, who “they” are, and what kinds of actors we each can be.

A narrative becomes moral when it frames the sequence of events as implicating right and wrong, and when it assigns moral meaning to actors through role-based evaluation. In the harm-centred register developed above, this moralization is not only about stating that an outcome is bad; it is about narratively positioning who is suffering, who is responsible, and who should protect. What I focus on in this dissertation is therefore not morality as a general value orientation, but morality as a narrative logic of good and evil: a way of making political conflict legible by casting actors into recognizable roles and inviting audiences to identify accordingly.

Although it is distinctive to my dissertation to theorize and study dyadic harm-based moral archetypes in political communication, the broader idea that politics uses moralized narratives with heroes, villains, and victims has been researched. Narrative approaches in social and political analysis have emphasized that political language resonates when it supplies compelling characters and plotlines rather than isolated claims (Bergstrand & Jasper, 2018). Work on heroes, villains, and victims shows that these roles carry persuasive power because they compress complexity into moral contrast and direct emotion and judgment toward specific actors (Allison & Goethals, 2014; Van Zoonen, 2000). Anker (2005) captures this dynamic through the idea of melodramatic narratives, where political discourse borrows cultural templates to produce unambiguous distinctions between good and evil through clear designations of victimization, heroism, and villainy, often with the additional effect of shaping collective identities around vulnerability and protection. Related research shows how such configurations can be mobilized to justify extraordinary measures, including force and violence, by narrating political action as necessary protection against harm (Clément et al., 2017; Homolar, 2022; Lakoff, 2009).

### 2.3.2 Moral archetypes in political communication

Translating dyadic harm-based moral archetypes into political communication requires a bridge between a psychological template and the practical

realities of political meaning-making. Section 2.3.2 outlines how I build that bridge in my dissertation by showing the different discursive resources through which moral archetypes can be made present, especially when harms are abstract and actors are collective, and by explaining why political communication often relies on implication rather than explicit role labels.

### 2.3.2.1 Archetypes in metaphor and metonymy

The first bridge I build between dyadic harm and political communication is metaphorical representation. When I translate dyadic harm-based moral archetypes into discourse, a basic challenge is that many political issues – such as migration, the empirical case in my dissertation – rarely present harm in the “classic” form of visible, physical injury between clearly individuated actors. In political discourse, harms are often indirect, cumulative, symbolic, or anticipatory, and the relevant actors are frequently collective (a “nation,” “the welfare state,” “communities,” “immigrants”). My argument is that metaphorical language is one of the key discursive resources that makes such abstract harm relations morally legible: it translates diffuse or intangible concerns into embodied, perceptible scenarios that an audience can feel and evaluate, thereby making archetypal positioning possible without requiring explicit role labels.

But the point is not only that metaphors make abstract harms rhetorically tangible and morally understandable. It goes further than that: conceptual metaphor theory holds that metaphors structure cognition, not just language (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). People routinely understand abstract domains through mappings from concrete, embodied experience. A classic example is TIME AS SPACE – we talk about the future as in front of us and the past as behind us, as if temporal relations were navigable movement (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008, pp. 43–45). The same embodied logic underpins political-economic metaphors. When strain is framed as PRESSURE, it organizes what the situation implies: something that can build, weigh down, burst, or require release. Metaphors therefore function as cognitive scaffolding: they shape how audiences interpret events, how they carve up causal responsibility, and how they understand what kind of situation they are in (Casasanto & Boroditsky, 2008; Cienki, 2010). A key concept here is attribute transfer across domains: when concept A is understood in terms of concept B, characteristics of B are mapped onto A, while aspects of A that do not fit B are distorted or pushed aside, which is precisely the kind of selective packaging that makes archetypal positioning possible.

Linking these two theories also helps me answer a critique that follows dyadic harm theory. Because dyadic harm holds a deliberately broad understanding of what can count as harm and who can count as a moral agent or

moral patient, it has been criticized for being too expansive in its typology of harms and moral actors (Bauman et al., 2012). I address this by arguing that this breadth is not arbitrary: it reflects the metaphorical ways in which harm and moral agents and patients are routinely constructed in language and, in turn, in cognition. Metaphors can give collective entities bodies, boundaries, and sensations, making them plausible moral patients that can be wounded, depleted, or violated. A long tradition in political metaphor research shows how nation-states are personified as people and bodies that can be attacked, bleed, or require protection (Lakoff, 2009, p. 199; Lakoff & Johnson, 2008, pp. 32–35; Musolff, 2017; Smith et al., 1981). Once “the nation” is narratable as a body under threat, it becomes easier to cast it as a victim in need of protection, and to cast other actors as protectors or perpetrators. Likewise, when governmental spending on integration or refugee asylum is framed as migrants hitting the welfare state or attacking the nation, an abstract policy dispute is refigured as tangible moral violation: harm is tied to a bodily sensation, and agency and experience become attributable.

Importantly, this bridging work is not done only by the most explicit metaphors. Deliberate metaphors are overtly marked as metaphorical, whereas conventional and indirect metaphors are more routine and less explicitly signposted (Steen, 2008). Deliberate metaphors draw explicit links between source and target domains – calling immigrants parasites or describing migration as a tsunami. Conventional and indirect metaphors are more accepted in daily language and can be embedded in verbs, predicates, or routine personifications – suggesting, for example, that groups swarm, or that a country suffers. For my dissertation, including each matters because moral archetypes can be constructed through both: deliberate metaphors can foreground a harm-based frame more extremely, but they can also provoke resistance when recipients perceive the comparison as morally excessive (Hart, 2021). Conventional and indirect metaphors, in turn, can build archetypal meaning more implicitly, without requiring actors to name moral roles directly.

A closely related bridge is metonymy. In cognitive linguistics, metonymy is treated as a cognitive operation rather than merely a naming practice (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008, pp. 35–41; Radden & Kövecses, 1999). Whereas metaphors map across domains, metonymy works through association and reduction: a whole is referred to through a part, a feature, or a linked category. In political discourse this can mean reducing a diverse group to a single subset: invoking “mothers and children” to make a heterogeneous population legible through care and vulnerability, or “young men” to make the same population legible through physicality, risk, and potential threat. It can also mean naming people through one administratively or morally loaded attribute –

“the undocumented” or “illegals” – so that a legal status becomes the defining feature through which intentions and responsibilities are inferred.

I argue that metonymy is particularly important for translating dyadic harm into discourse because it can carve out a moral agent or moral patient from a larger collective, for instance, letting “the nation” be represented through a particular citizen who can be depicted as suffering, so that a part stands in for the whole and makes victimhood easier to perceive. At the same time, metonymy reductions foreground particular moral attributes that cue archetypal positioning: a metonymy of children standing in for a diverse group of migrants signals vulnerability, dependency, and thereby high experience and low agency, whereas a metonymy of young men for that same group of migrants foregrounds, comparatively, agency and threat.

Finally, the broader metaphor literature supports why this bridge is politically important: metaphors can influence judgments and preferences beyond stylistic appeal, guiding what solutions feel natural or justified (Ottatti et al., 2014; Scherer et al., 2015; Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011), and metaphors have been found to outperform literal framings in shaping opinions (Brugman et al., 2019; Van Stee, 2018). Taken together, this suggests that when archetypal positioning is built through metaphors and metonymy, it can shape political judgments not only by adding moral charge but by structuring how audiences perceive harm relations and the actors within them.

### 2.3.2.2 Archetypes in image

A second bridge I build between dyadic harm and political communication is visual and multimodal representation. I argue that much like metaphorical language in text, images can translate abstract claims about harm, threat, and responsibility into concrete, emotionally grounded scenes in which role attributions feel immediate. Like metaphors, images can turn abstract harms into concrete scenes by giving them spatial form, movement, and bodily consequence. And like metonymy, they can make collective entities morally legible through stand-ins: a single depicted figure or moment can be read as representing a broader category. A photographed young man with a stick, a crying child, or a smiling person wearing traditional garb can come to stand in for immigrants or the nation, inviting attribute transfer from the depicted individual and the circumstances in which they are pictured to the collective category. This is one of the central ways visual communication can help constitute moral archetypes in discourse: it supplies a vivid anchor for attributions of vulnerability, agency, and intent.

This is a contribution to a literature that has historically been relatively text-centric in how it studies moral appeals and moral narratives in party communication. That bias persists even as political visual communication is both

prevalent and persuasive (Fahmy et al., 2014; Grabe & Bucy, 2009), and even as scholars call for closer attention to visual political messaging and its distinctive effects (Lilleker, Veneti, & Jackson, 2019; Farkas & Bene, 2021). One reason images matter is that they address audiences through the senses. They mobilize recognition and association, often eliciting affective and embodied reactions before reflective interpretation is fully articulated (Barry, 1997, pp. 18, 41–42; Bock, 2020; Zelizer, 2010). Experimental work suggests that visual framing can heighten attention and recall, especially when messages involve threat, risk, and urgency (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, pp. 16–18; Lee & Ho, 2018). These qualities make images particularly potent for moral communication: where text can explain why something is wrong, images can make moral meaning felt, prompting rapid judgments about harm, protection, and wrongdoing that appear intuitive.

In dyadic-harm terms, images are well suited to cue the basic ingredients of moral interpretation because they can make suffering and threat visible. A frightened child, a person staring menacingly into the camera, or a close-up of a hand holding a weapon invite a moral reading that is immediate and triggers affective response. Images can therefore function as moral propositions, inviting indignation, responsibility, or protective concern and shaping how others should be interpreted (Awad et al., 2022; Doerr, 2021; Mortensen & Trenz, 2016; Olesen, 2013; Zelizer, 2010). At the same time, images carry an evidential quality that can disguise their ideological work. Photographs and visual “proof” often appear to show reality rather than construct it, which can make the moral interpretation seem natural, self-evident, and beyond dispute, even though selection, framing, and repetition guide what is seen as the relevant harm, and who is seen as responsible for it (Cloud, 2004).

Having established why visual representation is central for conveying moral meaning, I now turn to how images and text work together. My argument is that moral archetypes are often most clearly stabilized through text-image coordination, because each mode contributes different resources to archetypal positioning. Social-semiotic approaches emphasize that meaning emerges through the orchestration of modes rather than the contribution of any single one, as each mode offers different affordances that become meaningful in relation to one another (Kress, 2009). In practice, captions, headlines, and text overlays do more than anchor what an image is “about”: they perform the generalization and attribution work that turns a depicted instance into a claim about broader actor categories, by naming who the scene should stand for, supplying intent and causal responsibility, and extending the moral reading from an individual figure to a collective. Conversely, the image gives those verbal attributions evidential and affective force by making agency and experience perceptible through concrete cues of threat and vulnerability, so

that the implied harm relation can be seen and felt rather than only asserted. This is also what multimodal work on far-right visual politics shows: text can remain strategically vague or deniable, while the image sharpens the contrast between in-group and out-group and carries ideological meanings that are not fully stated in words (Doerr, 2021; Richardson & Wodak, 2009). Experimental work points in the same direction: when images and text are presented together, text frames can guide interpretive evaluations, whereas image frames can shape behavioural intentions (Powell et al., 2015).

Taken together, visuals and text-visual pairings offer a second bridge for translating dyadic harm into political discourse: they render abstract harms concrete, stabilize collective actors through stand-ins, and coordinate affective, interpretive, and evidential cues so that archetypal positioning becomes both legible and hard to contest.

### 2.3.2.3 Cuing moral archetypes with historical repertoires

In Section 2.2.4, I argued that moral archetypes are psychologically general templates, but that archetypal positioning in political life is socially patterned because attributions of agency, experience, and intent are filtered through shared stereotypes. This section builds directly on that claim but shifts the focus from cognitive structuring to discursive activation. My argument here is that moral archetypes can be cued in political communication by activating historically sedimented associations attached to social categories – such as ethnicity, gender, and religion – which guide audiences toward particular archetypal readings.

I use historical repertoires to capture this mechanism: durable patterns of representation that have circulated across time and media, and that still make certain groups easier to imagine as heroes, villains, victims, or cowards. In my dissertation, I approach these repertoires through a postcolonial and intersectional lens, because the historically available “common sense” in relation to immigration and the nation about who can act, who can suffer, and who can protect has been distributed along racialized, gendered, and religious lines. A central entry point is Orientalism (Said, 1977), which shows how Western identity has repeatedly been constituted through the production of an Eastern Other – exotic, backward, and threatening – and how these constructions become culturally available shortcuts for moral interpretation.

In dyadic-harm terms, the power of Orientalism is that it does not merely describe an outgroup; it pre-structures moral perception. The “Eastern man” is repeatedly rendered as the inverse of the rational Western Self: irrational, sexually excessive, and dangerous (Said, 1977). Later postcolonial work traces the durability of this figure across contexts, including depictions of Black and Middle Eastern men as incapable of self-governance and morally suspect

(Machery, 2021). These descriptions map onto the moral attributes that dyadic harm treats as archetype-building blocks: the “barbaric” or “untamed” figure is made legible as high in agency directed toward harm, and low in experience, an actor whose suffering is discounted and whose inner life is flattened. In other words, the repertoire does not just stigmatize; it pre-configures villainy by making certain attributions feel obvious.

A postcolonial, intersectional perspective is crucial here because these repertoires are not only racialized; they are also gendered in ways that distribute moral roles unevenly. Representations of Muslim women, for instance, have long oscillated between extreme poles: women as suffering victims in need of rescue, or as embodiments of cultural backwardness and moral danger (Ayotte & Husain, 2005; Korteweg, 2008; Sakai & Yasmeen, 2016). Spivak famously captures the colonial structure of this trope as “white men saving brown women from brown men,” showing how gendered suffering becomes a moral pretext for domination (Spivak, 1996). Mutua formalizes the same narrative logic as the savage-victim-saviour triad (Mutua, 2001). In dyadic-harm terms, the “female Other” is often made legible through high experience and low agency: an archetypal victim position that invites protection. Yet that victim position is unstable: when women are framed as refusing emancipation, reproducing tradition, or “choosing” oppression, the repertoire can flip, recasting them as complicit agents rather than pure patients (Korteweg, 2008).

These repertoires also imply a heroic counterpart. The saviour trope is not just an add-on to the story; it is the mechanism through which intervention becomes morally authorized. In both Spivak’s critique and Mutua’s triad, Western masculinity is cast as protective agency: high agency framed as benevolent, necessary, and morally upright (Spivak, 1996; Mutua, 2001). In dyadic-harm terms, this is the hero configuration: agency oriented toward stopping harm, paired with a claim to speak and act on behalf of the vulnerable. I argue that this matters for political communication, because it offers a ready-made role for political actors to inhabit. By activating repertoires in which a vulnerable “victim” and a threatening “villain” are already culturally legible, politicians can position themselves as the morally necessary protector, claiming not only policy competence but moral righteousness through protective action. I return to this strategic use of hero positioning in Section 2.3.3, where I examine more directly how archetypal self-presentation operates in political communication.

Colonial and gendered templates remain culturally available because they are reproduced across media, education, and popular culture, and because they offer cognitively efficient shortcuts for turning complex social issues into legible moral situations (Cockbain & Tufail, 2020; Dagistanli & Grewal, 2012; Farris, 2017). This cultural availability is what makes moral cuing possible:

markers can activate a larger repertoire of agency, experience, and intent that audiences already recognize.

#### 2.3.2.4 Moral cuing with visuals and metaphors

Building on the preceding sections, I bring the three bridges together by specifying how the same mechanisms that make moral archetypes discursively available also make them easy to cue through historically sedimented repertoires. My argument is that metaphorical and visual shorthand can activate stereotype- and history-laden expectations about agency, experience, and intent, so that audiences arrive at archetypal readings with minimal explicit moral labelling.

In language, this happens when figurative frames and reductions “pre-load” a category with a moral profile. Dehumanizing mappings, most clearly animal and child metaphors, do not only stigmatize; they can reorganize perceived agency and experience in ways that make villain or victim casting feel more immediate (Saminaden et al., 2010). Likewise, metonymic labels such as “young men” or “illegals” collapse heterogeneity into a single salient feature, steering which attributes are foregrounded in the first place (Lakoff & Ferguson, 2006).

Visually, historically patterned repertoires can be activated through recurring iconography and typification, where familiar signs become visual common sense through repetition (Goffman, 1979). Because images often appear evidential, the resulting generalizations can look self-evident rather than culturally learned, masking the interpretive work that makes certain harms and responsibilities “obvious” (Cloud, 2004). Visual research on political conflict also emphasizes that images are a universe of culturally shared meaning: they draw on a complex stock of cultural knowledge and experiences, frames and identifications, and are interpreted, framed, and re-framed by political actors (Awad et al., 2022; Doerr, 2017; Richardson & Wodak, 2009). This helps explain why visual symbols can function as dense repositories of shared frames, making positions and stakes recognizable even without extensive verbal explanation. Taken together, these visual and metaphorical cues can function as shortcuts into larger moral stories, guiding dyadic completion toward familiar role assignments.

#### 2.3.3 Moral self-presentation in political communication

So far, I have shown how dyadic harm-based moral archetypes can be translated into political discourse through figurative language, multimodal representation, and historical repertoires. This section turns to what these archetypes enable for political actors: a distinctive form of moral self-presentation, where speakers use harm-centred narratives to position themselves as

protectors and to position others as morally suspect – most often as villains or, more subtly, as cowards. I develop this argument by linking moral archetypes to the literature on moral grandstanding and to research on personalization, which together help explain why archetypal self-positioning has become such a potent resource in contemporary political communication.

### 2.3.3.1 Moral grandstanding

Moral self-presentation in politics can be understood through the lens of moral grandstanding: participating in moral discourse in ways that are motivated, at least in part, by the desire to be seen as morally admirable (Tosi & Warmke, 2016). In electoral competition, where legitimacy depends on being perceived as principled as well as competent, moral claims can function as reputational signals. Recent research in psychology operationalizes moral grandstanding as status-seeking in moral talk and distinguishes two motives: prestige (seeking admiration) and dominance (seeking to shame or silence others) that can be empirically separated (Grubbs et al., 2020). This perspective is consistent with how parties use moral language on immigration. In a cross-national study of parliamentary immigration debates, Simonsen and Widmann (2025) show that moral language use increases with elite polarization on immigration, and their qualitative analysis indicates that moral language is used overwhelmingly to attack political opponents.

Dyadic harm-based moral archetypes help specify how grandstanding is accomplished in political communication. Archetypal narratives offer ready-made moral positions: once an issue is framed as harm to a vulnerable patient, audiences are invited to infer who is responsible and to expect protection. This creates a performative opening for the speaker to inhabit the role of protector, while positioning opponents as perpetrators, enablers, or morally weak bystanders. Because audiences tend to complete partially cued moral scenarios, speakers can claim moral standing without ever stating “I am the hero”: the narrative structure does that work for them.

### 2.3.3.2 Personalization

I argue that moral self-presentation is a distinct mechanism of personalization: leaders personalize politics not only by becoming more visible and intimate, but by positioning themselves as the moral protagonist in harm-centred narratives. Personalization is typically understood as a structural shift in contemporary politics in which leaders increasingly serve as the embodied focal point of party communication, and political messaging is routed through recognizable personas rather than an impersonal party voice (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; McAllister, 2007; Pedersen & Rahat, 2021; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007). This shift is visible across contemporary leader branding, where parties become

closely tied to individual figures such as Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Geert Wilders (Farkas & Bene, 2021). A large share of this leader-centred communication unfolds on social media, where images, captions, and short textual cues support a personalized style that mixes political messaging with emotion, humour, and selective glimpses of private life (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Geise et al., 2025; Metz et al., 2020; Novelli, 2019; Russmann et al., 2019).

My contribution to this literature is to specify that personalization is not only about style or proximity, but also about moral personhood. Harm-centred moral narratives require a legible mind that can intend, judge, and act. When a leader is repeatedly present as the narrator and evaluator of events, audiences can more easily attribute stable intentions and responsibilities across communicative episodes, allowing the leader to accumulate a coherent moral identity over time. This continuity matters for dyadic completion: once a harm situation is cued, the remaining moral role is inferable, and a personalized channel makes it easier for the speaker to occupy that open position as the consistent protector. In this way, personalization strengthens the conditions for moral grandstanding and moral self-presentation, because it supplies a recurring protagonist through whom archetypal roles – especially the hero role – can be inhabited.

## 2.4 Moralization and division

So far, I have focused on how political issues become moralized through dyadic harm and moral archetypes – how actors and events are made legible as victims, villains, heroes, and cowards. In this section, I turn to what happens next: how moralization relates to division in society, and why moralized disagreement is especially likely to harden “us-them” boundaries rather than remain a matter of legitimate political difference.

### 2.4.1 Polarization/division as an outcome of moralization

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, moralization is closely tied to moral conviction: when attitudes are experienced as objectively true and universally binding, disagreement becomes harder to treat as legitimate pluralism (Skitka, 2014). This matters for division because moralized attitudes tend to invite black-and-white evaluation, a stronger “ought/ought not,” and lower tolerance for compromise – dynamics that map onto what the polarization literature calls affective polarization: dislike and distrust toward ideological outgroups. Consistent with this, research finds that moral conviction about collective causes is associated with increased hostility toward opponents (Brandt et al., 2019; Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2022), and that moralized issues are

especially prone to interpersonal and intergroup friction (Skitka & Morgan, 2014).

Moralization also scales through communication environments. Brady et al. (2023) show that people overperceive moral outrage in online networks, which inflates beliefs about how hostile and extreme other groups are – perceptions that can further harden partisan animosity. Finally, the relationship is plausibly reciprocal: polarized contexts can themselves encourage moralization of issues and identities (D’Amore et al., 2021), suggesting a feedback loop in which moral conviction and division mutually reinforce one another.

I argue that moral archetypes are especially divisive because they turn political disagreement into stable moral role assignments that are hard to unsettle once they “click.” Once an issue is cast in archetypal terms, the audience is offered a morally organized interpretation of their affiliated party, themselves, and attitudinal others. In particular, casting political opponents as villains turns disagreement into a judgment about character and intent: the opponent is framed as the kind of actor who knowingly causes harm, and this readily spills over onto those who support them, who can then be treated as complicit in the wrongdoing. Just as importantly, archetypal narratives often widen the target beyond “the villain” by moralizing non-alignment. When inaction is framed through the coward archetype, citizens who compromise or simply prioritize other considerations can be positioned as morally weak – cowardly. The polarizing consequence is that division runs through moral self-understandings, stabilizes a “right side” of heroes and a “wrong side” of villains and cowards.

#### 2.4.2 Moral boundary drawing

Having argued that archetypal moralization can be divisive because it encourages audiences to sort political actors (and often their supporters) into morally charged roles, I now shift registers. The question is no longer how a particular message “works” as a narrative, but how these morally organized readings travel outward and become socially durable. In other words: how does conflict over an issue like immigration turn into a shared sense that “people like us” and “people like them” – understood as attitudinal others – are fundamentally different, and that the difference matters beyond the attitudinal?

A useful next step is therefore to move from divisiveness as a narrative effect to division as a socially sustained form. Cleavage approaches help with that move because they treat division as more than a distribution of issue positions. When a divide hardens into a cleavage, it becomes anchored in broader “us” and “them” distinctions that shape how people understand who they are, who they oppose, and what kinds of relations across the divide are possible (Bornschieer et al., 2021; Tilley & Hobolt, 2023; Westheuser &

Zollinger, 2025; Zollinger, 2024). In this sense, cleavage formation is an account of how political conflict travels outward: from opinions in the political arena into identity-laden group distinctions that matter in everyday social life.

Recent work on contemporary cleavage identities underscores that moral evaluation is often part of this process. When voters describe political camps in their own words, they frequently reach for character language rather than policy language. For example, Swiss open-ended survey responses show that voters articulate antagonistic identity pairings in strong moral evaluative terms: self-described “socially minded, tolerant cosmopolitans” contrast themselves with “selfish xenophobes,” while “hard-working Swiss citizens” distance themselves from “lazy people and non-conformists” (Zollinger, 2024). The point is not the specific labels but the evaluative move: the outgroup is cast as a certain kind of person, and the ingroup’s self-understanding is stabilized against that moralized contrast. Likewise, interview-based accounts of radical-right and liberal-left supporters show that people frequently rely on moral comparisons when they describe the people on the “other side,” evaluating them in terms of what kind of persons they are and what kinds of conduct they embody (Damhuis & Westheuser, 2024).

To theorize this generalization as a social process, we draw on boundary work. Boundaries are the lines people (and institutions) use to sort the social world into categories – insiders and outsiders, “people like us” and “people like them” – and to attach meaning to those separations (Barth, 1969; Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). In this view, durable division is not simply the presence of disagreement; it is the repeated production of distinctions that become familiar, shareable, and consequential. A central conceptual distinction here is between symbolic and social boundaries. Symbolic boundaries are the conceptual distinctions people use to categorize and evaluate what counts as respectable, responsible, civilized, dangerous, or disgusting. Social boundaries describe the more objectified consequences of such distinctions: durable patterns of separation, unequal access, and exclusion that can become institutionalized in organizations, networks, and everyday interaction (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). This distinction matters because it clarifies how division and cleavages form: cleavage identities are built when symbolic distinctions become widely shared, repeatedly invoked, and socially consequential: when they begin to structure actual relations, moving out of the purely political context.

Within this framework, moral boundaries are especially consequential symbolic boundaries because they concern basic worth. When the line between groups is drawn in moral terms, the outgroup is evaluated as lacking the traits that define a decent person, and the ingroup’s identity becomes bound up with moral standing (Edgell et al., 2006; Lamont, 1992; Lamont &

Molnár, 2002). This helps explain why cleavage formation is such a plausible downstream consequence of moralized disagreement: once a position on immigration is read as evidence of integrity or depravity, the conflict has been generalized into an evaluative classification of persons and groups, shaping social comfort, perceived threat, and willingness to associate with outgroup members.

This is also where the boundary perspective adds something that is easy to miss if we stay at the level of attitudes. Boundaries resonate when they draw on culturally available vocabularies of virtue and vice: shared repertoires that make distinctions intelligible and communicable (Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Because resonance is socially produced, boundaries are stabilized through repetition and re-articulation in public discourse and everyday interaction; they become durable when people recognize them, use them, and experience them as socially meaningful (Alba, 2005; Wimmer, 2013). For my purposes, this is the bridge we need between moralization and division: moral boundary drawing names the process through which moralized interpretations become shareable and repeatable social distinctions.

#### 2.4.2.1 Moral boundary drawing as a bridge between polarization types

Boundary work helps explain how moralized disagreement can become socially durable. The next step is to sharpen that claim by using moral boundary drawing to connect a standard distinction in polarization research: attitudinal polarization (distance in policy views) versus affective polarization (social dislike and distrust across camps). Although these dimensions are analytically and empirically distinct, the pathway from one to the other is not automatic: people can disagree sharply without necessarily treating the other side as socially illegitimate. Here, we use moral boundary drawing to connect these two: as mentioned above, policy disagreement becomes translated into evaluative distinctions about people. When positions on immigration are read as signals of decency, responsibility, or humanity, the political divide is no longer confined to opinions; it starts to structure who feels socially acceptable, trustworthy, or “like us” (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

This helps explain why some disagreements remain politically sharp while still socially manageable, whereas other conflicts “spill over” into everyday relations. People can often live with persistent disagreement when the other side is still seen as morally legitimate, someone with whom one can disagree without questioning their basic character (Mason, 2015). But in issue domains that increasingly organize contemporary conflict, immigration prominently among them, differences are more likely to be moralized into judgments about integrity and worth, which makes affective distance a more expected outcome

(Finkel et al., 2020; Jung & Clifford, 2025). In that sense, moral boundary drawing captures the step where a policy divide becomes a socially durable line: the kind of division that people carry across contexts, reproduce in interaction, and use to justify avoidance, exclusion, or contempt.

## 2.5 Conclusion

In sum, Chapter 2 specifies the theoretical lens I use to analyse how moral narratives become persuasive and divisive. I conceptualize moralization as the intensification of moral conviction in political conflict, and I ground moral judgment in dyadic harm: events and groups become morally legible through role assignments that bundle agency, experience, and intent. This yields the framework of moral archetypes – villains, victims, heroes, and cowards – where the coward captures culpable inaction and clarifies how compromise and non-alignment can themselves be morally judged. I also show why these role assignments “stick”: typecasting, stereotypes, and historically sedimented repertoires prime archetypal readings and stabilize assumptions about character and moral standing.

Building on this, the chapter develops a discourse account of how archetypes are cued in elite communication: through metaphor and metonymy, multimodal and visual cueing, and historically available symbols, alongside modes of moral self-presentation such as grandstanding and personalization. Finally, I link moralization to division through moral boundary drawing: when policy conflict is generalized into evaluations of people, disagreement becomes a repeatable “us/them” distinction that can travel beyond the political arena and harden into socially durable lines.



## Chapter 3: On qualitative and multimodal methods

This chapter sets out the dissertation's methodological strategy. The dissertation's central puzzle is how moral narratives are constructed and made persuasive across elite communication and citizen deliberation, and how such moralization becomes connected to lived experiences of division. I address this broader puzzle through the case of immigration. To do so, I use a qualitative, modular research design that follows moral narratives across different types of material while keeping a shared analytical logic that makes my key concepts comparable. The chapter therefore specifies the methodological approach and the analytical frameworks that render morality, harm, moral archetypes, and moral boundary-drawing analytically transparent across text, image-text posts, and interaction.

To give an overview of the dissertation's empirical design, Table 3.1 shows how each empirical output of the dissertation draws on a specific data type and how I connect that material to a shared analytical logic. Table 3.1 links Paper A, Paper B, Chapter 5, and Paper C to their country context, the data they use, and the analytical framework that structures the analysis.

Table 3.1: Mapping the dissertation's empirical design (outputs, data, analytical frameworks and research questions)

<b>Output</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Data type</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>Analytical framework</b>	<b>Research question</b>
Paper A	Netherlands	Elite/party text	30 party manifestos (2017 and 2021; 17 parties)	Moral archetypes + critical metaphor analysis	How do political actors construct moral archetypes through metaphorical language in communication on immigration?
Paper B	Netherlands	Social media (multimodal)	104 Wilders Facebook posts (image + caption), Apr 2022–Apr 2025	Moral archetypes + social-semiotic multimodal analysis	How do far-right political actors use multimodal communication on social media to construct moral narratives around immigration?
Chapter 5	Denmark	Citizen deliberation (focus groups)	11 focus groups (mixed, 41 participants)	Moral archetypes in deliberation (archetype events)	How do citizens employ, negotiate, and adapt moral archetypes when they deliberate about immigration in attitudinally diverse settings?
Paper C	Denmark	Citizen deliberation (focus groups)	27 focus groups (88 participants; 9 anti / 7 pro / 11 mixed)	Moral boundary-drawing	How does the moralized character of political conflict over immigration resonate with how citizens understand division and relate to those with whom they disagree?

The chapter proceeds as follows. I present the case of the dissertation in Section 3.1. In Section 3.2, I show my overarching methodological approach, the methodological gaps it addresses, and what I add. Section 3.3 specifies the analytical frameworks that structure the dissertation: moral archetypes (operationalized across elite discourse and citizen deliberation) and moral boundary-drawing. Section 3.4 describes the data and data collection, including ethics and data handling.

## 3.1 Case selection

This dissertation examines moral narratives in the context of immigration, with empirical material drawn from two national settings: Denmark and the Netherlands. Table 3.1 shows which paper is set in which country. I first discuss immigration as a case for studying moral narratives, and then Denmark and the Netherlands as case contexts, outlining how each pertains to immigration and its moralization and how they are similar and different, with scope conditions outlined in both sections.

### 3.1.1 Immigration as a case

Immigration is the empirical case through which I study moral narratives because it is a politically central issue that is routinely evaluated in moral terms, centres on a social group that is framed in opposite terms across the political spectrum, and is an important topic for party competition, indicating that moral self-representation is important when communicating about immigration.

In contemporary Western democracies, immigration conflict is often articulated as more than disagreement about policy design: it is framed as a struggle over what is right and wrong, who deserves protection, and who poses a threat (Helbling, 2014; Schwörer & and Fernández-García, 2021; Simonsen & Widmann, 2025). In general, research on immigration in political communication shows that news and elite communication shape both the salience of immigration and the interpretive frames through which it is publicly understood, reproducing recurring frames around threat, legality, and humanitarian concern, and that these framings can travel across arenas through media-politics feedback dynamics (Bos et al., 2016; Dunaway et al., 2010; Eberl et al., 2018; Vliegenthart & Roggeband, 2007). Evidence further suggests that opinion effects are often modest, yet that threat cues and salient group markers can reliably activate restrictive preferences, and that sustained attention to immigration can create electoral opportunities for anti-immigration parties (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Brader et al., 2008; Simons et al., 2026; Van Klingeren et al., 2015). Specific to *moral* political communication about

immigration, research shows that moralized messages tend to raise the perceived stakes of positions and intensify social distance toward attitudinal opponents even when baseline policy views shift less (Garrett & Bankert, 2020; Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2022).

Precisely because immigration is repeatedly framed through evaluative criteria like threat, legality, and humanitarian concern, it is a strong case for analysing moral archetypes in particular, because it centres on a socially marked out-group whose moral standing is contested and strategically re-described across the political spectrum (Bos et al., 2016; Helbling, 2014). This enables sharply opposed archetypal constructions in which immigrants can be cast as moral agents of wrongdoing and threat (villain framings) or as exposed and harmed patients in need of protection (victim framings). The same conflict also invites archetypal positioning of collective actors – nations, governments, parties, and “the people” – who can be constructed as protectors (hero), complicit enablers or negligent bystanders (coward), or even as victims of harm within the narrative logic. Immigration debates often involve diffuse, indirect, or future-oriented harms and collective identities, which creates incentives to translate complexity into morally legible role configurations that make blame, threat, and protection feel intuitive to audiences (Lakoff & Ferguson, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 2008; Musolff, 2017).

In addition, immigration has become a high-salience domain of party competition, where parties use the issue to signal identity and differentiate themselves, and where immigration-focused challengers have achieved notable electoral success (Green-Pedersen & Otjes, 2019; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020; Hutter & Kriesi, 2022). This makes immigration a particularly relevant case for studying moral narratives in practice: when an issue functions as a marker of party identity and political conflict, actors have strong incentives to frame their positions in morally charged ways that confer righteousness on the self and blameworthiness on opponents. Under these conditions, archetypal role assignments are likely to be especially visible and strategically consequential, and the moralization of immigration is more likely to be encountered by citizens as a public vocabulary for interpreting disagreement – one that can render attitudinal difference socially meaningful as distance and division.

A limitation of immigration as a case is precisely its high baseline moralization and long-standing entrenchment. Because it is so tightly tied to party identity and issue entrepreneurship, the patterns I observe, especially around moralized positioning and personalization, may appear more pronounced than in issue arenas where moral conflict is less institutionalized. At the same time, the analytic logic travels. In debates over transgender rights, rival camps often compete over whether transgender people are cast as vulnerable targets

requiring protection or as a threatening out-group endangering others (Baeth & Goorevich, 2022). Comparable archetypal contests can also be found in public contestation around Israel/Palestine, in climate politics, in urban-rural conflict, and around welfare recipients and social support, illustrating how many contemporary controversies hinge on contests over who counts as victim and who counts as villain, and who can plausibly claim the hero role of protection.

### 3.1.2 Denmark and the Netherlands

I selected Denmark and the Netherlands as comparably positioned European democracies that allow me to keep several background conditions stable while placing the analyses in two distinct national contexts. Both are affluent Northern European welfare states, EU members, and long-running parliamentary democracies with proportional representation and coalition politics, where immigration has been a politically salient issue, and where parties have formed with immigration at the centre of their platforms. At the same time, they differ in the structure of party competition, the historical repertoires that shape ideas of the national self and “the other,” and the longer trajectories – and histories – through which immigration became politicized. This fits the dissertation’s broader goal: I treat moral archetypes as psychologically general templates for moral evaluation, while expecting the ways these archetypes are filled and made persuasive to be filtered through nationally available repertoires and political opportunity structures, without treating Denmark and the Netherlands as a single comparative design with shared outcomes to explain.

Choosing two countries therefore does not imply that my dissertation is organized as a cross-national comparison in which one arena explains another. Instead, the cases map onto the dissertation’s architecture. The Netherlands anchors the elite-communication and multimodal analyses (party manifestos and far-right social media), where I trace archetypal constructions in strategic settings oriented toward persuasion and mobilization. Denmark anchors the deliberation analyses, where I examine how citizens negotiate archetypal claims in interaction, and how citizens with different opinions on immigration draw moral boundaries towards each other.

The Netherlands serves as the main setting for my elite-communication and multimodal analyses (Papers A and B). At the elite level, it offers an unusually pluralistic and competitive party landscape, which is analytically valuable for tracing how moral archetypes are deployed across ideological lines in party-produced texts. In a context where party competition is fragmented, immigration becomes a site where parties not only disagree on policy but also construct sharply different moral interpretations of who deserves protection, who is blamed, and who is cast as a threat. This makes party manifestos a

useful corpus for examining how moral archetypes are used to represent social groups and political opponents in a controlled and comparable genre.

The Dutch case is also substantively relevant, because immigration has been politically salient across multiple decades and migration histories, including post-1960s labour migration and postcolonial migration linked to Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean, which contributed to a broader shift toward recognizing the Netherlands as a permanent immigration society (Van Meeteren et al., 2013). Denmark, by contrast, also experienced labour migration earlier on, but immigration became a dominant and consistently electorally consequential issue later, especially from the late 1990s onward, making the trajectories of politicization different even where the broader “welfare-state immigration society” baseline is shared (Heinze, 2018). Against this background, immigration has repeatedly been tied to questions of belonging and national identity, and public debate has been shaped by moments of intensified conflict around Islam, security, and multiculturalism (Mouritsen & Olsen, 2013). For my multimodal analysis (Paper B), the Netherlands is further strategically useful because colonial legacies have left durable racialized and gendered repertoires available for political actors to mobilize (Ames, 2008; Baum, 2006). This matters for my theoretical framework, because it clarifies why archetypal cues – especially around threat, vulnerability, agency, and victimhood – can be activated not only through language but also through visual form and leader self-presentation. Within this repertoire environment, Geert Wilders and the PVV provide an analytically distinct instance of far-right communication where personalization is institutionally and organizationally central (Pas et al., 2013), making it possible to examine how archetypal meaning is assembled through interaction between captions, images, and the moral staging of the political self.

Denmark anchors the deliberative component of the dissertation (Chapter 5 and Paper C), where my focus shifts from strategic elite messaging to how ordinary citizens negotiate archetypal claims in interaction. Denmark is a particularly informative setting for this, because it combines a longer trajectory in which immigration was highly politicized and morally charged in elite politics with a later period in which day-to-day contestation around the issue became less visible. In other words, it allows me to study deliberation in a context where participants are not simply responding to a highly activated campaign environment but nevertheless have access to familiar moral scripts about immigration, integration, deservingness, and national community. This makes Denmark well suited for examining archetypes as an interactional resource: how participants affirm, resist, nuance, or reconfigure archetypal attributions in real time, and how disagreements are managed when the moral stakes are present but not necessarily foregrounded by immediate partisan

conflict. Paper C contributes to the case justification by specifying the broader Danish political trajectory that forms the backdrop of the deliberation setting, which helps me interpret citizen talk in relation to the repertoire environment in which it becomes meaningful. Importantly, this is not used to claim that citizens reproduce elite discourse but to specify the scope condition that moral repertoires can remain available beyond moments of acute elite polarization. In this way, Denmark provides a setting that is analytically complementary to the Dutch case: it allows me to examine whether and how archetypal reasoning persists, travels, and is negotiated in interaction when the issue is less continuously “hot” in everyday political debate.

In addition to their analytical fit, these cases are practically well suited to my research design: the relevant party and social-media materials are publicly accessible and comparable across contexts, and Denmark provides feasible access to in-person citizen deliberation data collection.

Overall, selecting Denmark and the Netherlands allows me to examine archetypal reasoning across elite communication and citizen deliberation. I treat moral archetypes as psychologically general templates for moral evaluation, while taking the ways archetypes are filled, cued, and made persuasive to be shaped by nationally available repertoires and political opportunity structures. This also sets clear scope conditions and limitations: the dissertation is not designed to estimate causal effects across countries or to trace discourse transmission from elites to citizens, and it does not offer a systematic comparative test of Denmark versus the Netherlands. Rather, the two cases provide bounded contexts in which to illustrate how universal archetypal templates take on locally specific content and resonance across communicative arenas. The point is therefore analytical generalization: the framework is built to travel to other moralized issues and settings, but it does so by specifying what to look for (role attributions, cueing practices, and boundary dynamics) rather than by claiming that the same empirical patterns will appear unchanged across contexts.

## 3.2 Methodological approach

Building on Chapter 2’s argument that moralization becomes politically legible through harm-centred role configurations (moral archetypes) with consequences for moral boundary-drawing, my methodological approach treats moralization and division as situated meaning-making. Accordingly, I analyse them as something that is constructed in communication and negotiated in context, rather than as a stable individual disposition. Capturing these dynamics requires qualitative methods, because qualitative analysis allows me to follow how moral attributions are produced, assembled across modes, and taken up in concrete communicative situations. The remainder of this section

motivates that choice by identifying the main limitations of text-centric and individual-level approaches and showing how my three empirical components address them.

This methodological emphasis responds to a set of connected gaps across research on moralized political communication, multimodal campaigning, and polarization. Moral communication has predominantly been studied in modern political science literature by using large-scale quantitative analysis. Dictionary-based and computational approaches have been instrumental in documenting the prevalence and patterns of moral language (e.g., Graham et al. 2013; Clifford et al. 2015), but they primarily capture explicit lexical signals and are less well suited for identifying implied, ambiguous, or metaphorical moral claims. This limitation becomes even more consequential in contemporary party communication, where moral meaning is frequently carried by visuals and by the interaction between modes rather than by explicitly moral vocabulary. Crucially, quantitative text-based methods also struggle to retain the cultural, contextual, and relational aspects of moral rhetoric, especially the dynamic interplay between (a) how social groups are morally framed and (b) how political actors establish their own moral standing through self-presentation.

I address these limitations by following moral meaning in context across two forms of elite communication, using qualitative modules tailored to the kinds of moral claims each setting makes possible. In the party manifestos, I use critical metaphor analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004) to trace how implied and metaphorical language translates abstract harms into tangible, morally legible narratives. In Wilders' Facebook posts, I use a qualitative multimodal analysis in a social-semiotic tradition (Kress, 2009) to examine how image and text interact to produce harm-centred moral narratives situated in historically available repertoires, and how personalization enables a leader-centred inhabitation of moral archetypes within the format of a single post.

A second set of gaps concerns citizens' talk about immigration and about attitudinal others. Moral psychology shows that people readily perceive harm relations and typecast actors into agent/patient roles, but we still know comparatively little about how such role attributions are mobilized in real political interaction: how they enter talk, how they are challenged or qualified, and what happens to them once they are on the table. Likewise, polarization research often conceptualizes division through individual-level measures that can be aggregated to group or population levels, yet this offers limited insight into how citizens put division into words: how they evaluate attitudinal others, what moral vocabularies they draw on, and how boundary accounts become collectively meaningful (or are toned down) in interaction.

To address these limitations, I use focus-group discussions because they let me observe moralization and division as interactional practices rather than as private attitudes inferred from scales or word counts. This makes it possible to analyse, on the one hand, how citizens articulate and negotiate boundary accounts of attitudinal others in conversation, and, on the other, how archetypal framings enter deliberation and are taken up, resisted, qualified, or revised by co-participants over the course of an exchange.

In this dissertation, I take a deliberately theory-driven approach to qualitative analysis in order to make my coding and interpretive decisions systematic across materials. Rather than relying on inductive thematic coding alone, I use structured analytical frameworks rooted in moral psychology, cognitive linguistics, and cultural sociology to specify what I look for (e.g., agency/experience attributions, archetypal role configurations, interactional negotiation, and boundary logics). This supports analytical transparency and transferability: I interpret meaning through clearly defined constructs that can travel across modes (text/image) and across levels (elite discourse/citizen deliberation), while remaining sensitive to cultural context and the situated work that moral language and imagery perform in political life.

### 3.3 Analytical frameworks

In this section, I lay out the analytical frameworks that structure the dissertation and explain why these particular lenses are necessary for answering my research questions. I develop and work with two complementary frameworks. The first, moral archetypes, captures how moral narratives make actors and groups intelligible through patterned role assignments. The second, moral boundary-drawing, captures how moral narratives become implicated in division by moralizing disagreement and negotiating judgments of standing in talk. Taken together, these frameworks enable me to analyse both the content of moral narratives and the relational work these narratives can do when people argue about immigration. I begin with the moral archetypes framework.

#### 3.3.1 Analytical framework I: moral archetypes

Building on dyadic harm theory (outlined in Chapter 2), I created an analytical framework in Paper A for identifying how moral narratives assign patterned roles to actors and groups in political communication. I operationalize moral archetypes through three attributes that can be traced in discourse: agency (depictions of capacity for action and responsibility), experience (depictions of vulnerability and capacity to suffer), and intent/harm orientation (whether agency is framed as causing harm or preventing it). The first two attributes are based on dyadic harm theory, but the third is my extension, as it allows me to

distinguish not only who can act but what that action is oriented toward in moral terms.

Together, these attributes specify a typology that guides the analysis across materials. Victims are constructed through high experience and low agency. Villains are constructed through high agency, harmful intent, and low experience, while heroes are constructed through high agency, protective intent, and low experience. Low experience is therefore required for both hero and villain codings, but how this requirement is identified depends on the unit of analysis and mode. In Paper A, where the unit of analysis is the paragraph, the archetype is only completed when experience is explicitly lowered, for example through objectifying or animalizing metaphors and metonymies that reduce the target's felt inner life. Because the paragraph is a longer unit, it offers greater opportunity for experience to be articulated; its absence therefore cannot simply be assumed and must be established through explicit cues that actively downplay or deny inner life. In Paper B and Chapter 5, where the unit of analysis is shorter – image, caption, or participant speaking turn – the absence of experience is sufficient: the actor is not presented as having emotions, suffering, or an inner world. Explicit lowering of experience is nevertheless still treated as analytically important across materials, because when present it strengthens the archetypal construction. The coward – my second contribution to the framework – is treated as a distinct archetypal configuration that is not captured by low agency alone: it requires (1) the presence of harm, (2) an actor positioned as responsible and capable of acting (e.g., a government, party, or nation), and (3) a portrayal of failure to act, where inaction becomes morally blameworthy rather than merely passive.

Because archetypes are expressed through the way attributes are assembled into roles, the analytical task is to trace how these configurations are rendered in portrayals of social groups, nations, and political actors. The following sections therefore outline how I identify archetypal constructions in metaphor, in multimodal image-text communication, and in citizen deliberation.

### 3.3.1.1 Operationalizing archetypes: critical metaphor analysis

I argue that in elite discourse, metaphor is a key vehicle for expressing moral archetypes, because it allows political communication to attribute individual-like moral qualities to collective actors and abstract processes. In Paper A, I therefore developed an analytical framework incorporating dyadic harm theory with critical metaphor analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004) to identify how metaphorical and metonymic language assigns agency, experience, and intent to core entities in immigration narratives. Analytically, I treat four recurring entities as the main carriers of archetypal positioning: immigrants, the host country, the in-party, and out-parties; distinctions between “types” of immi-

grants are analysed as part of the argument rather than treated as separate entities. Using CMA’s stages of identification, interpretation, and explanation, I code rhetorical imagery that heightens or lowers agency and signals experience, and, where agency is present, its harm orientation (positive or negative), see Table 3.2. In the identification stage, I treat metaphorical language broadly, including overt and covert metaphors as well as metonymies; in the interpretation and explanation stages, I link these cues to the argumentative and ideological work through which entities are morally positioned. Archetype constructions are then traced at the level of the argument: by combining coded attributes across the entities invoked in a passage, I identify how narratives distribute moral roles and how these role configurations structure the moral logic of the immigration claim.

Table 3.2: Attributes that make up moral archetypes and their definitions as well as examples taken from actual data

Attribute	Definition	Example (metaphor/metonymy)	Example (visual)
<b>Experience</b>	Referencing feelings, emotions, or psychological states	<b>High:</b> hurt, children, vulnerable	<b>High:</b> sad expression, facial close-up, individual
		<b>Low:</b> streams, beast, amounts	<b>Low:</b> group, backgrounded, face covered
<b>Agency</b>	Referencing action or decision-making, or the capability of it	<b>High:</b> swarm, fortune seekers, goal	<b>High:</b> adult, active pose, in movement
		<b>Low:</b> hunted, displaced, oppressed	<b>Low:</b> child, sitting/laying
<b>Intent</b>	A (potential) action or decision either causes harm, or prevents/mitigates harm	<b>Positive:</b> help, duty, saving	<b>Positive:</b> holding out hand, handing out aid
		<b>Negative:</b> steal, aggressive, terrorist	<b>Negative:</b> dangerous object (knife), aggressive gesture

### 3.3.1.2 Operationalizing archetypes: multimodal analysis

I argue that images, similar to metaphors, are a key way to depict moral archetypes because they translate abstract moral claims into visible harm and threat. I also argue that the interaction of image and text enables a form of attribute transfer from individuals (in image) to groups (in text) that resembles metonymic reduction: a depicted figure carrying moral attributes transfers to a social group or nation. To analyse this process, I developed a multimodal extension of my moral archetypes framework in Paper B by combining dyadic harm theory’s attribute logic (agency, experience, and harm-oriented

intent) with social-semiotic multimodal analysis (Kress, 2009) to trace agency, experience, and intent as they are constructed through the coordination of image and text. Coding followed a theory-driven, deductive design while remaining open to additional multimodal indicators that emerged during analysis. I identify and classify cues of agency and experience (and their direction) in both the textual layer (captions, text overlays, hashtags) and the visual layer. For the textual layer, I draw on the same indicators of action, responsibility, vulnerability, and evaluation as in Section 3.3.1.1; for the visual layer, I trace agency and experience through embodied and compositional cues such as facial expression, gesture, and spatial placement, as well as through objects and symbols that cue harm (see Table 3.2 for examples). I then combine a small set of entity markers, namely gender, majority/minority positioning, religion, and political group belonging, into analytically meaningful actor categories (e.g. minority man/woman, majority Dutch man/woman, opposition politician) and link these categories to the coded multimodal cues to derive archetype role assignments. Finally, I use comparative matrices to map recurring archetype configurations and to address intermodal relations, including cases where image and text reinforce or complement one another as well as where they complicate or contradict each other.

### 3.3.1.3 Operationalizing archetypes in interaction

In citizen deliberation, moral archetypes are identified through the same attribute logic as in elite communication: agency, experience, and intent, but traced in the unfolding of talk rather than in standalone texts. Because archetypal framings are introduced into interaction, I argue it is not enough to identify their construction; it is equally important to observe how they are taken up, contested, or revised by co-participants and what they do to the conversation as it develops. To capture this interactional dimension, I developed an event-based coding framework in Chapter 5 in which the initial proposal of an archetypal framing is treated as an archetype event, and I code the sequence of responses it generates. This includes whether others accept, resist, or qualify the framing; reject the archetype itself; reattribute agency or experience; or shift the entity to which the role is assigned. The analysis focuses primarily on archetypal positioning of immigrants and the nation, and entities are grounded in participants' own categorizations (e.g., refugees vs. labour migrants). In relation to the metaphor-based operationalization, archetypal attributions to social groups and the nation are often expressed through compressed, generalizing formulations that resemble metaphor or metonymic reduction, whereas references to specific individuals and lived experiences tend to support more direct coding of attributes without figurative inference.

### 3.3.2 Analytical framework II: moral boundary-drawing

To analyse division as it is experienced and negotiated in talk, it is necessary to move beyond measuring attitudinal distance and instead examine how disagreement is made socially meaningful through evaluative accounts of who is respectable, reasonable, and “one of us.” Building on the theoretical framework, moral boundary-drawing was operationalized in Paper C as the situated practice through which participants make attitudinal disagreement socially meaningful by issuing moral judgments that delineate who belongs within a shared moral community, and who is positioned outside it (Edgell et al., 2006; Lamont, 1992). In coding terms, an instance counts as moral boundary-drawing when a participant’s judgment positions attitudinal others or politicians as morally suspect. The analysis follows a two-stage qualitative coding process (Deterding & Waters, 2021). An initial exploratory round, conducted on a subset of transcripts, mapped how participants talked about attitudinal others, and surfaced recurring patterns of moral condemnation, which then guided a second, focused round of coding across the material. In the focused coding round, we identify boundary-drawing by locating moments where participants turn disagreement into moral assessments of character and standing, for example by condemning others as hypocritical or self-righteous (“holier-than-thou”) or, conversely, as racist/othering and morally degrading toward immigrants. In addition to identifying such judgments, we code when participants qualify, soften, apologize for, or explicitly downplay moral condemnation (whether their own or others’). Alongside outward-directed judgments, we also code instances where participants position themselves (or people like them) as objects of moral boundary-drawing by others, that is, as being placed outside an imagined moral community through condemnation. These accounts are treated as boundary phenomena in their own right, because they articulate division from the receiving end of boundary work: experiencing oneself as morally disqualified and excluded rather than drawing the boundary onto others.

## 3.4 Data and data collection

### 3.4.1 Party manifestos (Paper A)

Paper A analyses immigration-related communication in 30 party manifestos from 17 Dutch parties across the 2017 and 2021 parliamentary elections. I include all parties with at least one seat in 2017 (13) as well as parties formed after 2017 that held seats by 2022 (4). The unit of analysis is manifesto text referring to immigration: I extract and code passages from sections explicitly labelled “immigration” as well as from introductions, conclusions, and other

sections where immigration-related themes appear. Immigration-related content is identified using the validated issue codebook by Lehmann and Zobel (2018), and the resulting corpus serves as the elite-text dataset for tracing moral archetype constructions.

### 3.4.2 Social media posts (Paper B)

Paper B analyses 104 immigration-relevant Facebook posts published by Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) between April 2022 and April 2025. I manually collected the posts from Wilders' public Facebook page and stored each item with its publication date. Facebook is selected because it combines captions and images in a standardized, publicly accessible format that facilitates systematic multimodal analysis and provides a stable archive of posts. To check that observed patterns are not platform specific, I cross-checked posts against Wilders' parallel X account, where the same images and captions were reposted. Posts were included if they had explicit mentions of immigration, asylum, border control, or integration; symbolic or visual depictions of immigrants or immigration-related themes; and posts referencing Islam when these were connected to the Netherlands or to claimed effects on the Netherlands. Posts that were personal or focused on unrelated political topics were excluded, as were posts about protests unless they were explicitly linked to immigration or immigrants.

### 3.4.3 Focus group interviews (Chapter 5 and Paper C)

Chapter 5 and Paper C draw on a dataset comprising 27 focus group discussions in Denmark (April 2024–February 2025). Project research assistants recruited participants and moderated all sessions following a common guide. To reach variation in immigration attitudes and, secondarily, social background, recruitment combined (1) outreach in locality-based Facebook groups, producing groups of strangers, and (2) in-person recruitment at trade schools, business schools, and university campuses, producing groups of peers who were already acquainted. Prior to participation, all participants completed a short pre-survey; Facebook recruits filled it in via a weblink ahead of time and were grouped into broadly pro- or anti-immigration discussions, while campus recruits completed the survey just before the session (paper/online) and were not pre-sorted, resulting in some attitudinally mixed groups. In total, the dataset includes nine anti-immigration groups, seven pro-immigration groups, and 11 mixed groups (27 groups; 88 participants). Groups were small (2-4 participants, typically 3-4) and discussions lasted 60-90 minutes, allowing time for all participants to speak and for positions to be negotiated in interaction. Sessions were held in meeting rooms or classrooms on participants'

campuses, and all discussions were conducted in Danish (Appendix provides recruitment details, the pre-survey, and group composition).

The discussions followed a semi-structured moderator guide organized into a small set of prompts designed to elicit participants' own reasoning in ordinary language. After brief introductions, participants were first asked to write down and then discuss the reasons for their answer to the presurvey (whether immigration should increase or decrease) and to reflect on integration and integration policy. The guide then moved explicitly to attitudinal others: participants were asked what they think about people, as well as political parties, who hold opposing views. Importantly, moderators never asked about morality or "moral boundaries" as such; questions were phrased as neutrally and simply as possible to avoid priming moral language and to let moral evaluations, condemnation, and boundary work emerge (or not) through participants' own interactional framing (see Appendix for the full guide).

### 3.4.4 Reflection on data and ethics

Taken together, the three datasets let me track moral narratives across programmatic elite communication, leader-centred multimodal campaigning, and citizen deliberation, while also foregrounding that each arena makes morality visible in different ways. Manifestos are useful because they condense party positions into coherent, explicitly argumentative texts, but they are also strategic documents that present an "official" moral stance rather than the full range of everyday rhetoric. Social media posts, by contrast, capture fast-moving, attention-oriented moral cues, but the empirical scope of Paper B is intentionally narrow, and the interpretive claims are inseparable from Dutch historical and cultural repertoires, even if the analytical framework is transferable. Focus groups add an interactional setting where moral judgments and boundaries are not only stated but negotiated in real time; however, they are also shaped by group dynamics and social desirability. Because immigration is a sensitive topic, participants may soften exclusionary positions, avoid overt condemnation, or calibrate claims to what feels acceptable in the room. Analytically, I therefore treat what is sayable, and how participants manage agreement, discomfort, and accountability, as part of the phenomenon, rather than treating focus group talk as a direct window into private attitudes.

Because the datasets differ in both format and analytic possibilities, research quality in this dissertation depends on keeping the analysis systematic across them while making interpretive decisions visible to the reader. Across the dissertation, coding is theory-driven and organized around the same core analytical building blocks which provide a consistent basis for identifying moral archetypes across different kinds of material, even though these attributes are traced through different modes and interactional forms. This shared

analytical logic helps ensure that interpretations are not assigned impressionistically but are grounded in a systematic coding process that is documented through codebooks, appendix material, and coding procedures. At the same time, credibility is strengthened through close analysis in the papers and the summary report, where broader claims are developed through excerpts, images, and interactional sequences that are analysed in depth in the findings sections rather than presented as self-evident. I also do not only follow cases that stabilize into clear archetypes or moral judgments, but attend to cases where role assignments remain partial, are qualified or challenged in interaction, or are complicated across modes, since these are part of what shows both how the framework works and where its limits lie.

Most ethical considerations concern the focus groups, because they asked participants to discuss immigration, an issue that can activate stigma, anxiety, and interpersonal conflict, and that can shape how people see each other afterwards. The study received ethical approval from the Aarhus University IRB (27 November 2023). Participants provided informed consent and were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could pause, skip questions, or withdraw at any time. We took particular care with the social risks that can arise in group settings. When participants were strangers, the main concern was discomfort in voicing contentious views in front of unfamiliar others, which is why homogeneous attitude groups were chosen. When participants were acquaintances or classmates, an additional concern was that disagreement could spill over into relationships beyond the session. To mitigate this, moderators established clear ground rules (including respect and confidentiality), monitored group dynamics, and were trained to recognize and de-escalate discomfort. Group composition (homogeneous groups or groups among acquaintances) was used to reduce the likelihood of confrontational dynamics, and the study took place in a period that was not marked by an acute “flashpoint” moment of hyper-polarization, which reduced the risk that participation would feel socially exposing or unsafe. The interview guide was designed to elicit participants’ own sense-making rather than to impose normative judgments, and moderators were trained to avoid signalling approval or disapproval while facilitating discussion. Discussions were anonymized prior to analysis, data were stored securely, and participants were debriefed and given PI contact details.

Beyond participant protection, the project raises a broader ethical question about representation: analysing party manifestos, Facebook posts, and focus group talk may reproduce harmful framings, even when the purpose is critical analysis. Where material is potentially harmful, I provide analytic context and focus on unpacking how moral narratives and role assignments work and why they can have corrosive effects, either for the social groups targeted

by the narratives or for the audience reading them. This discomfort is, in part, unavoidable: understanding how moralizations operate requires making them visible as objects of analysis. My aim is to dissect these narratives and show their functioning, not to legitimize or circulate them.



## Chapter 4: Constructing moral archetypes: metaphors and visuals in elite communication

Across the dissertation, I ask: How do moral narratives around immigration function in elite communication and citizen deliberation, and with what implications for division in society? This chapter answers the first part of that question by synthesizing findings from Paper A and Paper B to show how political elites construct harm-centred moral narratives about immigration by positioning immigrants, the nation, and political actors within moral archetypes – villains, victims, heroes, and cowards – and using these role configurations as argumentative resources. I integrate evidence from Dutch party manifestos (Paper A) and Dutch party leader Geert Wilders’ Facebook posts (Paper B): the manifestos let me trace how different parties assemble archetypal roles to justify competing immigration arguments, while the Facebook posts show how the same archetypes are condensed in multimodal scenes in a more personalized, leader-centred setting. Building on this, I first trace how immigrants and the nation are cast as villains or victims and then show how these constructions enable elite self-presentation as morally credible protectors while positioning political opponents as culpable – either as secondary villains or as cowards who fail to protect.

Because my framework locates archetypal meaning in how agency, intent, and experience are cued, this findings chapter adopts a deliberately transparent analytic style. This means that I include excerpts, including quotes and images, and my analysis of them in this chapter in order to stay close to metaphors, metonymies, and multimodal cues. This is not only to substantiate my interpretations, but because the construction itself is a central finding: it is through these textual and visual devices that archetypal roles become recognizable, and that harm can be presented as self-evident. The quotes and images used here include both examples also discussed in Paper A and Paper B, as well as additional examples drawn from the same corpora analysed in those papers.

Throughout the chapter, I provide “soft” quantification, expressed in proportions, to give the reader a sense of how recurrent a pattern is in the material. Because archetypal constructions vary in severity and explicitness, and because the archetypes become meaningful in relation to each other, the

quantification is meant only to support the close analytical work: it helps situate the examples I discuss, without substituting for interpretation.

## 4.1 Immigrants and the nation as villains and victims

Across the party manifestos analysed in Paper A, I find that the moral archetypes that immigrants get assigned work as an argumentative resource rather than a fixed label. Parties assign immigrants to opposing roles, most centrally victim and villain, in ways that make a particular policy claim appear morally warranted. I trace this by reading arguments for how metaphorical and metonymic language cues agency (capacity for action and responsibility), experience (vulnerability and capacity to suffer), and, where agency is present, its harm-oriented intent, and then asking what archetypal configuration those attributes produce.

In the manifestos, immigrant victimhood is present in pro-immigration arguments, while it appears only in a small minority of anti-immigration arguments; and when anti-immigration arguments do cast immigrants as victims, virtually all cases cluster in a narrow set of restriction-justifying frames (all but one of the 23 instances): “false hope,” “regional protection,” and exploitation (including trafficking/brain drain). This is where mainstream anti-immigration parties become analytically interesting: they are the least stable in role assignment, because the same actor category can be positioned as harmed and acted upon in one argument, and as blameworthy agents in another. A clear illustration is VVD’s – a mainstream right-wing party with anti-immigration stances – discussion of municipal shelter: “Shelter provided by the municipality removes the incentive to leave and sends out a confusing signal. It is not fair to give these people false hope” (2017). The phrasing “removes the incentive” frames migrants’ behaviour as governed by an external lever rather than autonomous choice, lowering attributed agency in a distinctly metaphorical way, while “confusing signal” and “false hope” foreground experience by cueing the psychological states the policy allegedly produces. In that victim configuration, the withdrawal of shelter can be narrated as harm-prevention rather than punishment. VVD’s most typical immigrant portrayal foregrounds agency and responsibility and backgrounds experience, such as passages that hinge on conditional moral accountability (“you behave yourself ... if you don’t ... you are not welcome”). The contrast shows how one party can toggle archetypal templates to legitimate different moral conclusions.

Pro-immigration parties are far more consistent in assigning immigrants a victim role. By cueing harm and positioning immigrants as unable to prevent it, these passages activate the dyadic template: once an experiencing victim and a harmful situation are sufficiently legible, readers can “complete” the

moral situation and infer what a morally appropriate response looks like. Green Left's formulation is an example: "Across the world, people are fleeing from war and persecution. Because of horrific circumstances they have no other choice than to leave home, family, friends, career and dreams behind and to search for protection in a different place" (2021). Here, "fleeing" and "no other choice" constrain agency, while the losses invoked and the search for protection foreground experience and dependence – producing a victim archetype that invites responsibility to protect. The same argumentative move appears in metonymic formulations across the manifestos, where a part stands in for the whole to make vulnerability instantly readable: "vulnerable underage children from the camps in Lesbos" (Christian Union 2021) or claims that policies have made life "unacceptably difficult ... particularly [for] children and families" (BIJ1 2021). These linguistic reductions do moral work by selecting cues that make the victim configuration feel self-evident.

The key difference between mainstream and extreme anti-immigration discourse is that villainy moves from being one available configuration to becoming the default. In mainstream anti-immigration arguments, immigrants are cast as villains in around one in ten references; in extreme anti-immigration arguments, immigrants are cast as villains close to half the time. In my framework, that villain archetype is produced when high agency is oriented toward causing harm (high agency in a negative direction) and paired with low experience. In the manifestos, this profile is cued through metaphorical action verbs that compress an entire harm scenario into a single action word (terrorize, repress, steal, abuse), thereby bundling agency, harmful intent, and an implied victim.

This is visible in the Party for Freedom's formulation: "Immigrant street-terrorists, often Moroccan, terrorize Dutch people everywhere. In the suburbs, on the beaches, in the malls – everywhere Dutch coziness is repressed by Moroccan aggression. The established parties have imported masses of people that have nothing to do [with] the Netherlands" (2021). The villain configuration is built through a tight cluster of metaphors and metonymies: agency and intent are foregrounded through the before-mentioned harm, which scripts purposeful violation. At the same time, the nominalization "street-terrorists" collapses actor into act – an instance of metonymic reduction where a single attribute (violent threat) stands in for the whole person. At the same time, experience is backgrounded by this metonymic reduction. The final clause – "imported masses" – adds a second reduction of experience, stripping individuality through an object-metaphoric framing.

Crucially, the quote does not just vilify; it simultaneously constructs a victim, because harm language invites dyadic completion: if someone "terrorizes," someone must be terrorized. Here, the harmed party is not only "Dutch

people,” but “Dutch coziness”, which functions metonymically as an idealized national way of life turned into a unified moral object that can be violated. The Netherlands as a victim is present across the manifestos: around one in five that the nation is referenced overall, and in anti-immigration arguments specifically it is framed as a victim around half the time, also referencing the host country about twice as much as pro-immigration and mixed arguments. One way this victimhood is made concrete is by turning the nation into a body or system that can be pressured, emptied out, weakened, and made unsafe – e.g., “the nation is naked against immigration” (FvD 2017) or “our country feels the consequences” (VVD 2017). Another is possessive moral inclusion: the repeated “our” ties institutions and vulnerabilities to the reader (“those who abuse our hospitality”, JA21 2021) so national victimhood becomes personally shareable rather than abstract.

The same villain-victim dyad that structures extreme anti-immigration claims in party manifestos also organizes Wilders’ Facebook posts. As I show in Paper B, however, in these posts it is compressed into a single multimodal unit. Where manifestos primarily work through abstract categories (“immigrants,” “asylum seekers”), Facebook posts work through bodies, symbols, and scenes, so the gendered and racialized content of villainy becomes analytically visible in a way the manifesto genre rarely permits. This is why I use the category “Other” in this section: the posts visually cue a broader repertoire (immigrant/Muslim/non-Western) than the policy labels alone, drawing directly on postcolonial templates in which the threatening male Other is prefigured as agentic and morally suspect. Across posts depicting male Others, threat is cued through a recurring visual repertoire – weapons (knives, guns), crowd scenes of young men, covered faces, and objects held or directed in ways that imply potential violence. In the dataset, male Others are assigned negative high agency in a clear majority of the relevant posts; cues of low experience appear in around half; and in about two thirds of cases, these cues co-occur, which is enough to stabilize a recognizable villain archetype across posts.

A Facebook post from May 7, 2024, illustrates how this archetype is constructed through the coordination of image and caption. Although the original image is not reproduced here, the post depicts a bearded adult man moving toward the camera, holding a stick and meeting the viewer’s gaze. Compositionally, this foregrounds agency: he is positioned as an actor in motion, close to the viewer, with an object that can be read as a potential weapon. The image does not, by itself, specify intent or a full harm scenario, but it offers a concrete, threat-compatible cue that makes the caption’s moral reading feel visually grounded. The caption then performs the decisive attribution work: “When did the Dutch people vote to let in all these jew-haters with sticks and beards? In which party manifesto was this written? Why do we let them

destroy the Netherlands?” It generalizes from the depicted individual to a category (“all these”), supplies malice (“jew-haters”) and destructive intent (“destroy the Netherlands”), and simultaneously installs the victim position (“the Dutch people,” “the Netherlands”). What the image shows becomes a “proof token” for what the caption claims, enabling a transfer from individual to group that resembles metonymic reduction.

National victimhood is harder to depict directly, because the Self, the national identity, is an abstract collective rather than a visible body. In Wilders’ Facebook posts, it is therefore visualized indirectly: either by positioning the audience as the threatened target (through direct gaze, forward motion, or objects oriented toward the camera, as in the May 7, 2024 post), or by presenting emblematic victims who stand in metonymically for the nation. Strikingly, when the posts depict “ordinary Dutch” figures as the innocent in-group worth protecting, these figures – mostly women and children – are presented almost entirely through AI-generated imagery rather than photographs. The national victim, in other words, is not only represented as vulnerable; it is also curated as an idealized moral object through synthetic visuals: bright, oversaturated light, marked by blonde hair and blue eyes.

This gendered distribution of who can be a villain and who can be a victim matters for how the dyad is assembled. Female Others appear far less frequently than male Others, and their posts split between victim, hero, and villain classifications rather than consolidating into one stable archetype. When women are framed as victims, the caption typically assigns high experience and constrained agency (“oppressed,” “in danger”). Yet this victimhood is rarely an end in itself. It serves mostly to intensify the male villain by positioning the woman as his victim, keeping the broader harm structure intact: his agency produces her suffering, and the Dutch self is invited into the role of the righteous protector.

## 4.2 Parties and leaders as heroes, cowards and villains

Once harm is made legible – someone who suffers and someone that causes suffering – dyadic harm completion creates a ready-made slot for a third figure: the agent who can stop the harm. The victim-villain configuration does not only identify what is wrong; it also invites completion of what a morally appropriate response should look like. That is where the hero enters: an actor with high agency oriented toward protection and harm-prevention. Across the party manifestos, parties repeatedly step into this hero position after establishing harm elsewhere in the narrative. While the specific casting of victims and villains varies across the party spectrum, the structural move is consistent: policy is narrated as protective intervention – and the party or party leader is the one who limits harm and signals moral strength.

In the party manifestos, heroic self-positioning appears in around one in four instances where immigrants are positioned as victims: the narrative does not stop at suffering but is rounded out by an in-party cast as the protective responder. In pro-immigration arguments, this hero logic is built through a protective lexical repertoire – protecting, bringing to safety, offering shelter – and through duty-and-care formulations such as “moral duty,” “warm heart,” and not leaving people “to their fate.” These formulations do double work. They construct immigrants as harmed and vulnerable, and they simultaneously make it straightforward for parties to cast themselves as the actor who intervenes, an advantageous position because it signals both moral standing and political competence. A formulation by DENK – a centre-left party with pro-immigration stances – captures this self-presentation succinctly: “We are not facing the challenge of managing migration on the basis of fear, but on the basis of strength” (2021). Here, the party’s agency is articulated through courage, so that intervention reads as the morally upright and leader-like response the narrative calls for.

For anti-immigration parties, the hero role appears at roughly the same rate, but it is anchored to a different victim: the host country rather than immigrants. At the more extreme end of the party spectrum, this heroism also becomes more explicit and more personalized. Party for Freedom (PVV) is a telling example, because the manifesto voice collapses party and leader into a single “I,” producing a direct hero narrative anchored in endurance and combat metaphors (“I will keep fighting ... With my head held high ...”). The “I” matters, because it relocates the source of protective agency from a collective programme to a recognizable person: the hero is not “the party” in the abstract but a narrator who claims the burden of action. The combat register matters, because it frames politics as confrontation with an adversary, which helps turn policy into a matter of resolve and defiance and makes leadership legible as the capacity to stand firm on behalf of the harmed national community. Wilders’ Facebook posts intensify this personalization further: once a villain-victim scene is made visually legible, heroism can be added with minimal text. Short captions like “that’s why PVV” are common and complete the moral construction by assigning Wilders the protector role, letting the multimodal construction of harm do the heavy lifting.

Once parties (or leaders) position themselves as the agentic responder who can prevent harm, they also need to explain why harm exists and why it has not been stopped already. That is where political opponents become archetypally useful. Opponents can be cast either as villains, when their agency is portrayed as oriented toward causing or enabling harm, or as cowards, when they are portrayed as having the responsibility and capacity to intervene yet failing to do so. The distinction matters, because these roles do different argument-

ative work. Villain framing concentrates blame by attributing intent and harmful direction to rival elites, turning immigration conflict into a story about betrayal or purposeful damage to the national community. Coward framing, by contrast, is a moral judgment of omission: it frames harm as preventable and condemns inaction as weakness or fear, while leaving the narrator – implicitly or explicitly – as the only actor willing to intervene. Strategically, villain framing grants opponents’ narratives power by depicting them as purposeful agents that need to be defeated, whereas coward framing can stigmatize rivals without fully upgrading them into powerful perpetrators.

As I show in Paper B, Wilders’ Facebook posts show how this opposition framing can be performed in a single multimodal unit, where the image makes harm feel evidential, and the overlaid text assigns responsibility. A Facebook post from January 17, 2022, is one example. The photograph centres a covered male Other holding a gun and looking directly into the camera. The translated overlaid text reads: “Thanks to the VVD your neighbour,” alongside the headline: “Local safety chief of Islamic State arrested in Arkel.” Visually, this foregrounds negative agency through threat proximity and implied capacity for violence, while facial obscurity limits individuating cues that would invite experience attribution. The caption then uses the image to stage a harm scenario: by addressing the audience as “you” and naming the armed man “your neighbour,” it positions the viewer as the victim by making harm intimate and proximate. This harm dyad is then used to assign blame to a rival party: “Thanks to the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy your neighbour.” The post thus stabilizes a multi-actor moral construction in one unit: a villain, the audience as victim, opposition as secondary villains, and importantly – through the narrator’s stance as the one identifying and condemning the linkage, and the personalized medium – a hero.

From Paper A, a clear manifesto example shows how opponents can be granted both villain and coward status. The extreme anti-immigration party Forum for Democracy states: “Projects that are signed by virtually all established parties. They are the projects of oikophobia that attack the nation state and undermine our prosperity, identity, and democracy” (2021). Here, opponents are constructed as villains through high-agency harm language: “attack” and “undermine” attribute intentional destructive capacity, and they metaphorically turn “prosperity,” “identity,” and “democracy” into objects that can be damaged. At the same time, “oikophobia” frames the same actors through a weakness register – fear of the home – that reads as a failure of protective responsibility, so that opponents appear simultaneously as agents of damage and as elites too fearful or self-rejecting to defend the national community. The collectivization (“virtually all established parties”) then scales this culp-

ability up to the political mainstream, allowing FvD to claim the contrasting position of lone defender against a morally corrupted establishment.

From the pro-immigration side, a similar opponent logic appears but with the harm relation reversed: opponents can be positioned as morally culpable toward immigrant victims, either by deliberately intensifying negativity or by failing to act responsibly. This is where the DENK example from the previous section does additional work beyond heroism. When DENK says migration is “purposefully portrayed as negative” and contrasts “fear” with “strength,” it first attributes intent to rivals (villain attribution) and later frames their stance as weakness (coward attribution), while positioning its own approach as the alternative form of responsible agency (hero attribution).

On social media, political attacks can be made personal in a way that party manifestos rarely allow: instead of blaming “the opposition” as an abstract actor, responsibility and moral character can be pinned to named individuals. When blame is person-specific, the target’s social identity can also become part of the archetypal positioning – this is where the gender dimension becomes visible in the material. Wilders’ Facebook posts are well suited for showing this. In the corpus, Wilders names female opposition politicians nearly three times as frequently as male politicians, repeatedly framing them as either cowards or villains. A recurring pattern is that he mobilizes the hero archetype for Iranian women only as a contrast device: praise for “brave” Iranian women is exclusively paired with an added jab at Dutch female politicians and journalists, who are depicted as lacking courage because they are not anti-Islam.

This gendered opponent framing draws on a postcolonial repertoire in which women are delegitimized by being positioned as deferential to the threatening male Other. In Wilders’ posts, that repertoire exploits the familiar double construction of “Other women” as both victims of a patriarchal culture and complicit reproducers of it – only here it is projected not only onto Muslim Dutch women, but also onto majority Dutch women in politics and media whose immigration stances are recast as a form of cultural betrayal. When Wilders writes that Sigrid Kaag, a Dutch minister, “loves to submissively bow” to “the ayatollahs” and is “betraying all brave Iranian women,” the insult is assembled as cowardice (yielding, deferential agency). The accompanying visual – Kaag wearing a headscarf, facing an Iranian official – is presented as evidence of this: not because she is literally bowing, but because it activates a recognizable postcolonial script in which proximity to the male Other and the wearing of a headscarf are read as moral failure.

### 4.3 Conclusion

This chapter answers the dissertation's overarching question – how moral narratives function in elite communication and citizen deliberation, and with what implications for division in society – by specifying what moral narratives look like in elite communication, and what they make possible. The chapter shows that elites construct moral meaning by assembling recognizable archetypal configurations – villains, victims, heroes, and cowards – through the coordinated attribution of agency, intent, and experience. Across party manifestos and Facebook posts, these configurations structure how immigration is narrated by positioning immigrants and the nation within harm-centred stories that make suffering, threat, and responsibility legible. They also moralize political competition: once harm is established, rival elites can be positioned as culpable, either as secondary villains or as cowards, and one's own party can be presented as heroic. The same constructions also begin to invite citizens into the narrative by addressing them first as victims and then offering them a hero's journey, which I develop more fully in Chapter 7 through moral victimhood and martyrdom. But first, Chapter 5 turns to citizen deliberation to show how moral archetypes are proposed, taken up, resisted, and nuanced in interaction.



## Chapter 5: Citizens as moral narrators: archetypes in citizen deliberation

To answer the dissertation's core question – how moral narratives function in elite communication and citizen deliberation, and with what implications for division in society – this chapter asks: How do citizens employ, negotiate, and adapt moral archetypes when they deliberate about immigration in attitudinally diverse settings? This is a necessary question for several reasons. First, it completes the dissertation's two-arena design by focusing on citizen deliberation, showing how citizens justify their immigration views through moral archetypes: victims, villains, heroes, and cowards. Second, it shows what happens to archetypal interpretations once they are voiced in front of others: moral archetypes become interactional objects – claims that are taken up, confirmed, questioned, softened, resisted, or reformulated in response to co-participants. Third, this interactional perspective is necessary to understand moralization's relation to division, and to examine the moment-to-moment handling of moral judgments in deliberation: how participants manage moral disagreement in real time, and specifically what role moral archetype proposals play in that management. Aside from adding to the overall dissertation, the chapter makes broader theoretical, methodological, and societal contributions.

Theoretically, this chapter contributes to scholarship on moralized politics by shifting the focus from moral language as a top-down strategic resource or an individual-level conviction to moralization as something that is made and managed in interaction. Much of the evidence we have about moralization in politics comes from studies of elite messaging of moral language and its correlates and consequences (e.g., Clifford et al., 2015; Wang & Inbar, 2021; Bos & Minihold, 2022; Simonsen & Widmann, 2025). At the citizen level, we have far fewer fine-grained accounts of how moral claims are voiced to peers and become publicly accountable in deliberation, where they can meet hesitation, qualification, and pushback in real time. Within the dyadic-harm framework that anchors this dissertation (Gray et al., 2012), the interactional dimension remains similarly underexplored: moral archetypes are typically treated as cognitive templates that exist in individual minds rather than as conversational moves that are proposed, made arguable, and revised in response to others. This chapter addresses that gap by analysing how harm-centred

archetypal framings are assembled in argument-making and then negotiated in real time as participants respond to one another.

Methodologically, my contribution is to make the moral-archetype framework interaction-ready. I use focus groups because they generate naturally occurring moments of justification and disagreement, letting me study how participants make claims intelligible to one another and manage what is socially sayable in the room, precisely the kind of group discussion that has long been treated as a window into how citizens “work up” political meanings in talk (Gamson, 1992). Focus-group methodology has become increasingly recognized in political science as a tool for tracing mechanisms and reasoning in a way surveys cannot capture (Cyr, 2019). Finally, to analyse interaction systematically rather than impressionistically, I operationalize negotiation through archetype events and apply a transparent, systematic coding strategy that treats sequences of uptake and revision as the analytic object.

Societally, this chapter speaks to a basic democratic problem: citizens have to live together across disagreement, and immigration is one of the issues where disagreement might be experienced as morally charged. As mentioned, moralization has been linked to outcomes such as reduced willingness to compromise and stronger hostility toward opponents (Finkel et al., 2020; Garrett & Bankert, 2020; Ryan, 2017; Skitka & Morgan, 2014). The democratic stake, then, is not only what elites say, or what individuals privately believe but what happens in the everyday talk through which citizens sustain (or strain) coexistence across difference. Deliberative theory grounds democratic legitimacy in the possibility of public justification under persistent moral disagreement (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004), and work on deliberative systems emphasizes that such justification is not confined to formal arenas but also unfolds through citizens’ everyday conversations (Mansbridge, 1999). Against that backdrop, this chapter’s societal contribution is to show, empirically and in detail, how morally loaded judgments become publicly accountable in interaction, and how archetypal framings in particular can be qualified, resisted, or recalibrated, as participants try to navigate moral disagreement without foreclosing continued dialogue.

Unlike the preceding and upcoming results chapters, which synthesize findings from one or more articles, this chapter presents a new, fully-fledged stand-alone analysis of focus group deliberation designed specifically to examine how moral archetypes are negotiated in interaction. The chapter proceeds as follows. I first briefly outline the theoretical basis for this chapter. Second, I discuss the methodological approach and explain how a subset of the focus group material is analysed to capture moral reasoning in attitudinally diverse deliberative settings, focusing specifically on mixed groups – composed of individuals with differing immigration opinions – to capture the

dynamics at play under conditions of disagreement. I then present the analysis, examining how participants rely on attributions of agency and experience to make sense of their opinions, to distinguish between types of immigrants, and how moral archetypes are mobilized and adapted in interaction. The final section draws out the implications of these findings.

## 5.1 Theoretical basis

This chapter applies the dyadic-harm framework from Chapter 2 to citizen deliberation, treating moral archetypes as role-based harm interpretations that can be introduced and negotiated in talk. In this perspective, moral judgments are structured through perceived relations of harm and protection and become legible via attributions of agency and experience (and where agency is present, its direction), which can be bundled into recognizable roles such as villain, victim, hero, and coward.

This approach contributes to prior research, which has examined how citizens construct migrants as more or less morally entitled in discussion. Nielsen, Frederiksen, and Larsen's (2020) focus-group study of migrant (un)deservingness shows how participants actively specify "the migrant" by fusing control and need into two familiar figures: "the economic migrant" (choice, control, low need) versus "the refugee" (low control, high need), and use these attributions both to construct target-group images and as normative yardsticks in the discussion. A discursive focus-group study by Seu (2008) similarly illustrates how asylum seekers are evaluated through interactional work that hinges on contested accounts of motivation and need. Read through the dyadic-harm lens, control and motivation closely correspond to agency, while need closely corresponds to experience, and together these studies suggest that citizens repeatedly reason through a logic where targets are positioned as either agentic *or* vulnerable, in a way that closely resembles moral typecasting, even when the labels differ. Adding to this line of work, I deliver two advances: first, I apply my dyadic-harm/archetype lens to show how these attributions organize into moral archetypes; second, I treat moral archetypes as an interactional object in its own right, focusing not only on explaining why participants hold particular immigration views, but on how moral claims are proposed, dissected, and negotiated once they are voiced in conversation.

Treating moral archetypes as an interactional object follows directly from moral psychology's claim that moral judgment is not simply generated and held in private but is socially shaped and often stabilized through social exchange. In the social intuitionist model, moral evaluations arise quickly, and reasoning commonly functions less as solitary truth-seeking than as a way of making one's judgments intelligible, defensible, and persuasive to others, so that moral positions are affirmed, softened, or redirected through inter-

personal influence and conversational feedback (Haidt, 2001; Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008). If moral judgment is partly produced and regulated in this social way, then it is analytically important to study moral claims where they are exposed to response: in interaction, where others can accept them, question them, demand justification, or push back. Empirically, this responsiveness is visible even in tightly controlled settings: moral decisions in dilemma tasks show conformity effects under peer pressure (Kundu & Cummins, 2013; Paruzel-Czachura et al., 2024). Taken together, this motivates the move I make in this chapter: to analyse moral archetypes not only as role configurations people hold, but as proposals in talk whose meaning and force depend on how they are taken up, challenged, qualified, or revised as deliberation unfolds.

In addition to examining how moral judgments are socially shaped, this chapter also examines an implication of my framework for the stability of moral archetypes in citizen deliberation: that casting social groups and the nation into archetypal roles requires translations that make abstract claims about harm and protection graspable. As I theorize in Chapter 2 – and show in Chapter 4 – these translations are accomplished through devices such as metaphor and metonymy, as well as multimodal cueing, which can personify collectives, distribute agency and experience, and make harm tangible. Precisely because such translations compress diffuse harms and heterogeneous collectives into seemingly singular moral agents and patients, their plausibility can be tested in deliberation: once a role configuration is introduced as a proposal in talk, co-participants may contest not only whether harm and responsibility are attributable, but also whether the group or the nation can coherently be treated as having uniform intentions and vulnerabilities.

A final note concerns how I understand the relationship between elite communication and citizen deliberation. Chapter 4 showed how political elites rely on moral archetypes to make immigration morally legible, drawing on recurring figures of villains, victims, heroes, and cowards to structure arguments and claim moral standing. In this chapter, I do not assume that citizens simply reproduce elite moral narratives, nor is my purpose to trace political rhetoric in a transmission sense. Instead, I approach citizen deliberation as a site where moral understandings are actively assembled in interaction, drawing on culturally available repertoires shaped by political communication, media discourse, and everyday local debate but also evaluated and negotiated among peers. Research on everyday political talk similarly emphasizes that citizens do not passively “receive” elite messages; they draw on available vocabularies to test and refine political meanings in discussion (Gamson, 1992). The purpose of examining citizen deliberation, then, is to assess what my analytical toolkit reveals when applied to interaction: the extent to which citizens

draw on archetypal building blocks, and what happens to archetypal framings once they are voiced under the conversational constraints of disagreement.

## 5.2 Methodology

### 5.2.1 Data and rationale

The empirical basis for this chapter consists of 11 focus groups composed of 3 or 4 participants with differing views on immigration (41 participants in total). Participants' general immigration attitudes were assessed through a brief pre-survey conducted prior to the focus group discussions. This pre-survey provides the basis for characterizing groups as attitudinally mixed and for situating participants' positions in the analysis. The groups were recruited among students in the Aarhus area, and participants typically knew one another as classmates. Further details on recruitment, group composition, and the broader focus group design are provided in Chapter 3 and in the appendix to this chapter.

Because the analytical interest of the chapter lies in how moral framings are negotiated, mixed groups provide the most appropriate empirical setting. As a consequence, the homogeneous pro- and anti-immigration groups, which form part of the larger data collection as described in Chapter 3, are excluded from the present analysis in order to foreground interaction across attitudinal differences. It is in these heterogeneous discussions that moral archetypal framings must be articulated in ways that are intelligible and defensible to others who do not necessarily share the same starting positions, and participants must navigate how to express moral judgments without foreclosing dialogue. The fact that groups were often composed of classmates also reflects a deliberative context that resembles everyday situations in which citizens encounter disagreement, including the social risk management that such situations entail. Accordingly, the chapter's claims are intended to generalize to similar everyday contexts of disagreement, rather than to citizen deliberation in all forms.

The discussions followed a semi-structured interview guide (see Chapter 3 and Appendix). The analysis centres on the first block of questions, which invited participants to explain their reasons for their views on immigration and to reflect on how immigration and integration are currently functioning in Denmark. Importantly, these prompts were designed to set deliberation in motion without introducing morally loaded language: moderators did not ask about morality or moral character but invited participants to articulate and justify their views in their own terms. This makes the first block analytically well suited for examining whether and how participants spontaneously introduce and contest moral evaluations, how they attribute agency and experi-

ence, and how archetypal framings emerge and become negotiable in deliberation.

### 5.2.2 Analytical framework

The analytical framework used to identify moral archetypes and their underlying attributes is the same as the one developed for Paper A and described in detail in Chapter 3. Using the same framework here allows me to examine whether citizens draw on a moral logic that is recognizably similar to the one I trace in elite communication, while keeping “moral archetypes” conceptually stable across the dissertation’s different arenas. At the same time, the framework is particularly well suited to citizen deliberation because it defines archetypes as bundles of traceable attributions – agency, experience, and (where agency is present) its direction – which makes the dismantling of archetypal role assignments visible in interaction. In practice, this provides a systematic handle on how participants propose archetypal framings and how co-participants can accept them, qualify them, or contest specific elements of the bundle as the conversation unfolds.

To capture the interactional negotiation of archetypes, I extend the framework with an event-based unit of analysis. I define an archetype event as an interactional sequence initiated when one participant proposes an archetypal role assignment or configuration, and in which co-participants respond to that proposal across the ensuing sequence. This allows me to analyse archetypes as interactional proposals rather than static representations: role assignments that can be responded to in real time.

For each event, I code whether co-participants agree with the proposed archetype or reject it, and I specify rejection in three ways. First, by revising one or more of its attributes, for example by rejecting a victim framing through the addition of agency (“but they also have to try harder”). Second, by adding an attribute that disrupts the role configuration, for example by rejecting a villain framing by introducing experience (“they’ve had a hard life”). Third, by rejecting the unity of the entity through rejecting generalization, for example by contesting a victim framing with “not all immigrants have had a hard life.” Coding continues until the sequence initiated by the initial proposal is resolved, making it possible to trace how archetypal framings are sustained, qualified, or dismantled as participants respond to one another (see appendix for coding definitions and procedures). I report simple counts of archetype invocations and event outcomes as an indication of recurrence and treat qualitative interpretation of how archetypes are built and handled in talk as the primary basis for analysis.

In this chapter, the primary entities under analysis are immigrants and the nation, reflecting how participants orient to immigration as a question about

groups and collective actors in deliberation. Where participants themselves differentiate within the category of “immigrants” (for example, refugees versus labour migrants), I code the specified subgroup; where they do not, references are coded as “immigrant (unspecified).” This keeps the analysis grounded in participants’ own categorizations and makes it possible to track how archetypal framings are attached to different targets without imposing analytic – and potentially morally loaded – distinctions from outside the conversation.

## 5.3 Findings

To answer the chapter’s question – how citizens employ, negotiate, and adapt moral archetypes when they deliberate about immigration in attitudinally diverse settings – I analyse the discussions in two steps. First, I show how participants employ archetypal framings to build arguments: by attributing agency, experience, and (where agency is present) its direction to migrants and to Denmark, they make particular role assignments available to argue for their opinions.

Second, I trace how these framings are negotiated and adapted once they are voiced in front of others. Treating archetypes as interactional proposals, I identify “archetype events” in which co-participants accept, qualify, or reject a role claim by contesting its underlying attributes or its generalization.

Taken together, these steps answer the research question by showing both (i) what archetypes do as practical argumentative resources in deliberation, and (ii) how their moral implications are sustained, softened, or dismantled through interaction.

### 5.3.1 Archetypes in building arguments

In what follows, I structure the analysis around (i) instances where migrants are cast as victims through attributions of constrained agency and heightened experience, (ii) how the introduction of agency as choice loosens that victim casting by decoupling hardship from moral claim-making, (iii) instances where migrants are cast as villains through attributions of agency that make blame and suspicion salient, and (iv) the archetype configurations that emerge when these migrant role assignments are linked to Denmark being cast as either an obligated helper or an exposed/affected party.

#### 5.3.1.1 The “either/or” of agency and experience: sorting migrants

When participants are asked why Denmark should accept more, fewer, or the same number of migrants, and how they think integration is going, their explanations repeatedly revolve around the attributional dimensions that

underpin my archetype framework: who is perceived as able to act and be held responsible (agency), who is perceived as affected and capable of suffering (experience), and whether action is framed as protective or harmful (direction of agency). Table 5.1 shows how these attributes cluster across the entities that recur in the discussions.

Table 5.1: For each entity (number of references across groups), the most common agency attribution, the most common direction of that agency, the most common experience attribution, the first and second most common archetype attribution, in brackets: (number of instances)

<b>Entity</b>	<b>Agency</b>	<b>Agency direction</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Archetype(s)</b>
<b>Immigrant, no specifications (76)</b>	High (59)	Negative (30)	High (25)	Villain (21) Victim (15)
<b>Refugee (39)</b>	Low (35)	N/A	High (34)	Victim (29) Villain (2)
<b>Muslim migrant (15)</b>	High (13)	Negative (9)	Low (4)	Villain (4) Victim (1)
<b>Ukrainian migrant (11)</b>	Low (5)	N/A	High (5)	Victim (5)
<b>Work migrant (9)</b>	High (6)	Positive/negative (2)	Low (2)	Villain (2)
<b>Denmark/citizens (0)</b>	High (43)	Positive (21)	High (22)	Hero (21) Victim (19)

Across my coding of agency and experience attributions in the focus-group corpus, a clear pattern emerges: participants tend to treat agency and experience as an either/or pair when they talk about migrants. One out of four times there is high agency, this goes paired with low experience. Conversely, when suffering is foregrounded, less agency is perceived (five out of six times). Participants rarely combine strong experience attributions with strong agency attributions in the same breath (one out of ten). Rather than layering “high agency” and “high experience” into a complex portrayal of the same person, participants more often sort migrants by foregrounding one attribute in ways that background the other. This pattern is in line with the prototype theory logic I outline in Chapter 2: once one core attribute becomes salient, the corresponding role becomes easier to infer, while incompatible attributes are backgrounded. It also resonates with findings from prior research discussed in Section 5.2 showing that participants often specify “the migrant” by contrasting control/motivation and need (Nielsen, Frederiksen, & Larsen, 2020; Seu, 2008).

A first place where this either/or structure becomes visible is in how participants distinguish between “refugees” and “immigrants.” In eight of the

eleven mixed groups, participants explicitly underline the importance of separating these categories, and in several discussions, they hesitate to take a stance before the group has clarified what counts as which. Crucially, they justify the distinction through the same attributional dimensions as above: refugees are typically cast through high experience and low agency, while immigrants are more often cast through high agency (sometimes negatively directed) and low experience. Table 5.1 summarizes these recurring attributional bundles.

In the discussions, one recurring way of stabilizing the refugee category is therefore to minimize agency. For refugees, migration is described as something that happens to them rather than something they actively choose, with emphasis placed on the absence of viable alternatives. One participant formulates this logic succinctly: “When you’re a refugee, you didn’t choose it” (FG20). In the following passage, one participant foregrounds high experience as exposure to danger, loss, and hardship, and another participant adds a lack of choice, making a victim casting readily available:

M1: The story they told me, or what they’ve been through [...] all sorts of things. Lost family along the way.

K1: So the family gets split up because it is the only option that they have. And then you just have to see if you will ever see each other again (FG27).

By contrast, when migrants are positioned as having chosen to move, agency grounds expectations about contribution, adaptation, and conduct in Danish society. One participant formulates this logic succinctly: “It is an active choice, and therefore you should maybe also actively take part in what you come into” (FG20). In this mode of reasoning, the moral focus shifts away from what migrants have been through and toward what they choose to do once they arrive: whether they “participate,” take responsibility, and reciprocate what the receiving society offers. This is where the either/or structure becomes especially visible: when agency is foregrounded as choice, experience becomes easier to downplay or deny, as exemplified by this participant: “They wanted to emigrate; it’s not necessarily someone who suffered” (FG6).

The same either/or logic helps clarify why the discussions shift when the topic changes from admission to integration, and crucially, this shift occurs within the same groups. When integration is on the agenda, migrants are repeatedly cast as high in agency in a very specific sense: as people who are given opportunities – language courses, welfare support, job pathways, “chances.” Once this attribution is in place, non-integration is less easily explained through constraints or hardship, because participants treat the relevant conditions as already provided. In this logic, experience is therefore downgraded: difficulties are not primarily read as effects of circumstance, trauma, or

structural barriers but as outcomes of insufficient willingness. This is why “not wanting” becomes the key hinge in these same discussions. Around a quarter of all arguments on immigration across the focus groups is the perception that migrants are not willing or not trying to integrate (see Appendix Table 1), exemplified by two participants from two different groups: “[W]hen they come here, they don’t even want to work or anything, and they don’t accept the help they get” (FG24). “They don’t really accept the opportunities they get. So they probably don’t want it enough” (FG22).

### 5.3.1.2 From agency to harm: how migrants become villains

Once migrants are cast as having agency in migration – that is, as having had a choice – participants also treat them as morally exposable: if someone could have acted otherwise, they can also be imagined as acting for questionable reasons. This is one route through which villain castings become available. As these participants put it, juxtaposing refugees with other migrants:

M2: Refugees don’t have any other choice than to flee. Whereas immigrants, it can also be someone who tries to take advantage of the Danish system.

M1: I think making that difference makes sense (FG14).

The shift from agency to harmful agency, such as shown above, can be voiced as suspicion rather than as a fully asserted accusation. The same participant captures this in reflexive doubt:

M1: Sometimes you can sit there with that little devil on your shoulder and think, well, are they just coming to, like ... to take advantage, to put it bluntly (FG14).

Here, the combination of high agency, negatively directed intention, and low experience forms the villain archetype. Importantly, the “little devil on your shoulder” formulation frames suspicion as a temptation the speaker notices and manages, rather than as a settled claim. This is characteristic of how villain castings are often introduced in these mixed discussions: participants frequently signal uncertainty, hedge, or mark the risk of overgeneralizing. I return to these interactional features in Section 5.3.2.

When participants move from suspicion to a more grounded villain casting, they often do so by specifying the kinds of harms they associate with (some) migrant groups. Rather than remaining at the level of abstract cultural incompatibility, they translate “values” into concrete forms of interpersonal wrongdoing – most prominently sexism and the treatment of women, domestic violence, homophobia, and physical violence. These harm claims do crucial attributional work: they supply the negative direction that turns agency into harmful agency, and they position migrants not merely as different, but as potential sources of harm to others.

### 5.3.1.3 Archetype configurations: Denmark as helper or harmed

The either/or logic traced in Sections 5.3.1.1–5.3.1.2 has consequences beyond how migrants are sorted. Because role assignments are relational, the same attributional moves that cast migrants as victims or villains simultaneously make Denmark morally legible in corresponding positions. When migrants are cast as victims through constrained agency and heightened experience, Denmark becomes legible as a potential helper; when migrants are cast as villains through agentic wrongdoing and low experience, Denmark becomes legible as exposed to harm.

This dynamic reflects the dyadic-harm logic outlined in Chapter 2: once a harmful agent is identified, it becomes easier to infer a harmed recipient, and once a victim is identified, it becomes easier to infer a potential helper. In the focus-group discussions, configurations therefore emerge through a process of completion: casting migrants in a role tends to “pull” Denmark into a complementary role position, such as in this conversation, where the agency-based distinction between refugees and immigrants shapes a victim casting that activates obligation from Denmark:

K2: Well, they are fleeing from another country because there is war.

M1: Yes. From a situation where they haven’t had a choice. And that is probably what also makes the difference between immigrants and refugees. Because refugees simply ... did not have a choice.

K2: They need to have the possibility to come ... where they can feel safe (FG24).

Conversely, if immigrants *are* seen to have high agency and low experience, this has consequences for the position of Denmark, as exemplified by this participant:

Yes, I would say we have a greater moral obligation toward some people the worse they have it [M1: “agree”]. So if you come ... if you’ve, uh, immigrated to Denmark because you’re starving, then I would also say we have a moral obligation toward them. If you come to Denmark because you’d like one more trip to Mallorca a year, then we don’t have a moral obligation toward them (FG6).

When these high agency-low experience configurations are paired with negative intent, Denmark, around one out of three times, becomes the victim. A villain casting such as “taking advantage” does not only attribute harmful agency to migrants; it also positions Denmark as the party that can be exploited or harmed.

Arguments about migrants’ responsibility, and particularly about whether migrants want to integrate, are, as mentioned, a central part of how participants justify their views. In the same groups where moral duty arguments can position Denmark as a potential hero, Denmark’s hero status is consistently

articulated through the idea that “we give them chances,” but it becomes conditional on migrants’ willingness to take those chances. Participants repeatedly emphasize that integration is not primarily about immediate cultural sameness but about motivation and effort. As one participant puts it: “Sometimes they succeed, but it depends on how ... The ball is somewhat with those who come. We give them all the chances, you could say,” and another follows up: “We give them the chances they have to take” (FG13).

In the quotes above, Denmark remains positioned as the actor that gives chances, but migrants are no longer held in place as victims who warrant that help once they are seen as regaining agency in Denmark. Because of this regained agency through Denmark’s help, the problem becomes intention: they don’t *want* to. In some cases, this unwillingness attribution is further intensified by attaching negative intent to migrants’ newly foregrounded agency, shifting the configuration toward a villain framing and positioning Denmark as the affected party. In FG11, for instance, one participant argues that “it’s actually just money out of the state treasury, which my parents and working Danes pay for,” and continues that migrants either draw on welfare or undercut wages in manual trades, making “locals here in Denmark less competitive” (FG11).

### 5.3.2 Moral archetypes in deliberation: negotiation and qualification in interaction

Across the 11 attitudinally mixed focus groups, I identified 48 what I call archetype events. An archetype event occurs when a participant introduces an archetypal framing (for example, immigrants cast as villains) or a broader archetypal configuration (for example, immigrants cast as villains and Denmark cast as a victim), and at least one other participant responds by verbally accepting or contesting the role assignment, either in full or by taking up some elements while revising others. This event-based approach is analytically useful because it captures moral archetypes as interactional moves: rather than treating archetypes as stable representations, it traces what happens when role assignments are made publicly accountable in conversations where disagreement is expected given the groups’ attitudinal heterogeneity.

Table 5.2 shows that across the 48 archetype events, explicit responses were more often contesting than affirming. At the same time, confirmatory uptake was common: participants frequently endorsed, repeated, or elaborated an initiated role assignment, sometimes before introducing qualifications. Where participants did reject an archetypal proposal, rejection most commonly took the form of attribute-level work – either denying a proposed attribute or adding an attribute that complicated the initial casting – while

further instances consisted of resisting the generalization implied by the archetypal claim.

Table 5.2: most common reactions from other participants after an archetype is initiated, in occurrences across 48 events

<b>Reaction</b>	<b>Occurrence</b>
Agreeing with archetype	41
Rejecting archetype	50
Denying attribute	14
Adding attribute	22
Rejecting generalization	18

Note: Because a single archetype event can involve more than one type of response (e.g., both adding and denying attributes across turns), the reaction counts are not mutually exclusive and exceed the total number of events

Agreement in these discussions is only observable when it becomes explicit in talk. I therefore code agreement as verbal uptake of an archetypal proposal: statements such as “I agree,” affirmative interjections (e.g., “yes,” appreciative hums), repetitions of the same role assignment, or expansions that build on the initial casting. I cannot capture silent agreement, except in the few cases where the moderator explicitly notes that others are nodding along. Importantly, agreement does not only occur with fully proposed archetypes; it can also appear as the incremental strengthening of an archetypal construction, where a relatively cautious claim is taken up and sharpened by others. In one focus group, for example, one participant first proposes a relatively familiar responsibility claim – that immigrants do not want to integrate. Another participant then intensifies this into a villain casting by describing immigrants as “parasites.” The first participant responds with explicit uptake and elaboration, shifting the explanation toward culture and the need for stronger demands: “It might be something in the culture, mixed with the fact that they don’t feel the need to engage with it. So there is definitely something one can go in and tinker with there, in relation to setting slightly greater demands for this integration” (FG11).

By rejecting an archetypal proposal, I mean any response that disturbs the initial role assignment or configuration, rather than simply disagreeing with an immigration position. Because archetypes are bundles of attributed agency, experience, and (where relevant) the direction of agency, rejection can target one or multiple elements: participants may deny a proposed attribute (e.g., contesting negative intent), add an attribute that complicates the role (reintroducing experience), or limit the scope of the claim by rejecting its collective

entity (“not all immigrants ...”). Participants may also reject a proposal by shifting the attributional logic to a different entity – for example, relocating harmful agency away from immigrants and toward media or politicians. The remainder of this section therefore traces rejection as a set of interactional moves that either (i) nuance archetypes stepwise at the attribute level, (ii) resist generalizing role claims (including resisting distinctions between migrant categories), and (iii) reallocate agency, responsibility, and harm across actors

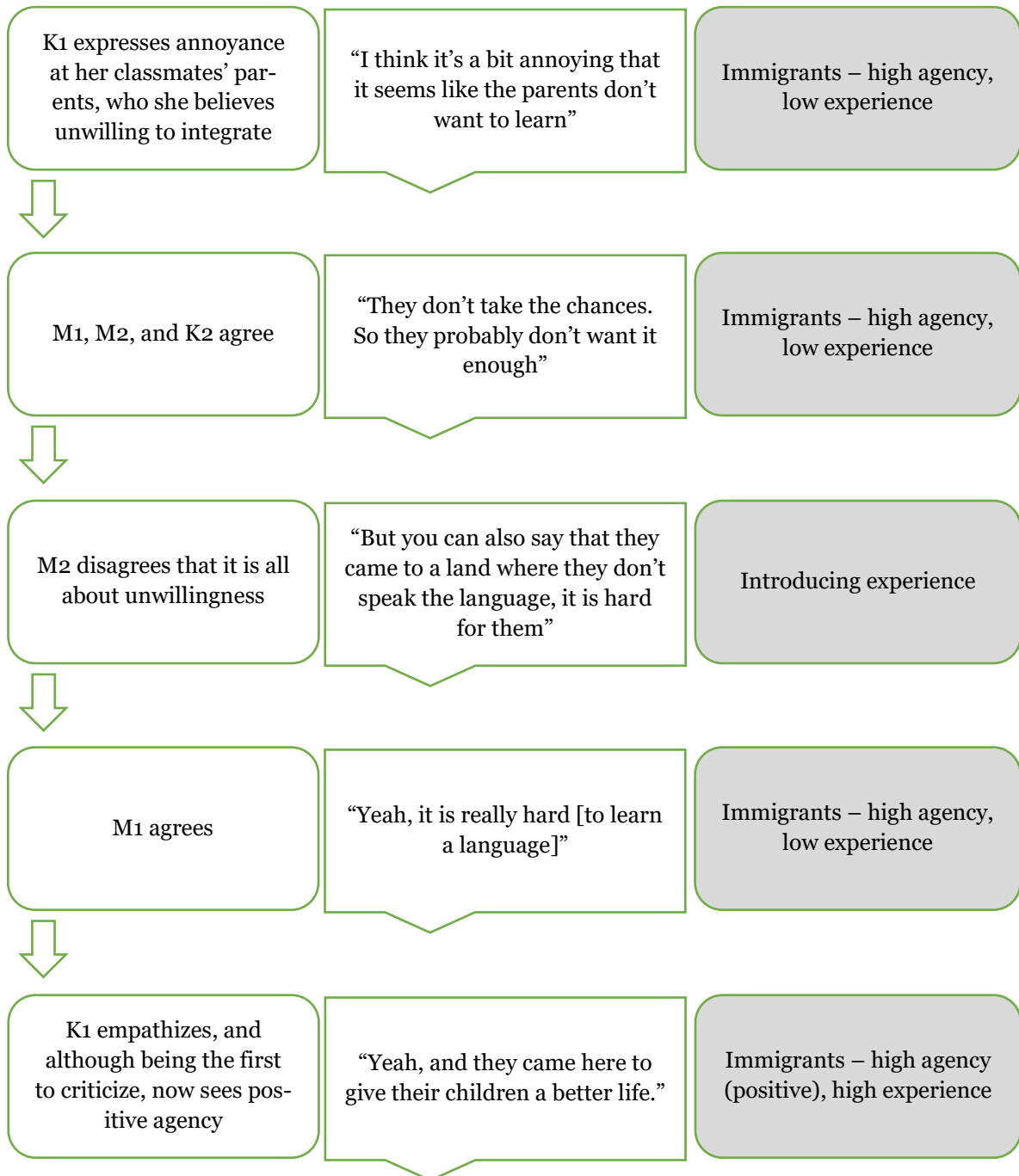
### 5.3.2.1 Stepwise nuancing archetypes through introducing or taking away attributes

A first recurring form of contestation in the archetype events is stepwise nuancing. Rather than rejecting a role assignment or configuration outright, participants often modify it by revising one attributional element at a time. Because archetypes are built from attributed agency, experience, and – when agency is present – its direction, co-participants can accept parts of an initiated moral construction and change others that are necessary for the full archetype. Interactionally, this produces sequences of partial uptake and selective revision: “yes” to one component, paired with a “but” that targets another. In some case, this can lead to a different moral archetype assignment, but often, it leads to a breakdown of the archetype structure, as I will exemplify in this section.

In one focus group, for example, one participant proposes an immigrant-as-villain / Denmark-as-victim configuration anchored in everyday discomfort and avoidance (FG13). The response is not a direct reversal (“you’re wrong”) but a gradual reshaping of the attributional profile: negative direction is softened (“this is not meant maliciously”), agency is rebalanced by locating part of the tension in Danish behaviour as well, and experience is introduced as an alternative interpretation of the same situation (“it must be hard to live in an unfamiliar culture”). The interactional result is therefore not necessarily a reversal of stance but a reworked proposal that no longer sustains a coherent moral archetype and instead offers a more complex account of the situation that others in the room can more readily accept.

The flowchart below captures a similar sequential logic: each turn leaves part of the initial moral story intact while changing *one* of the premises that makes the archetypal inference feel obvious. What emerges is not a clean switch from one archetype to another, but a more complex and interactionally defensible construction that participants can continue to talk with.

Figure 5.1: Flowchart outlining the interaction within an archetype event in focus group 17, including quotes from the conversation and analytical labels



Similar to that is the conversation described in the flowchart. What is analytically striking in this event is not only that experience is introduced as a counterweight to an initial unwillingness claim but that this experience attribution functions as a perspective-taking prompt. When M2 foregrounds what it is like to arrive “in a land where you don’t speak the language,” the discussion shifts from judging migrants’ motivation to imaginatively inhabiting their situation. This shift enables K1, who initially voices the most condemning reading, to

recalibrate her position without simply retracting it: the same agency that was first interpreted as stubbornness is gradually re-read as purposeful action and ultimately as positively directed agency (migrating to give one's children a better life). In other words, experience does not merely "soften" a villain-leaning casting; it can open a pathway to re-casting agency itself, moving the conversation from suspicion toward a more sympathetic interpretation, breaking the either-or pattern of agency and experience outlined in the previous section.

Stepwise nuancing can also work through selective concession: when challenged, a participant may accept changing one attribute corresponding with their initiated archetype without relinquishing the broader construction. In one focus group, this unfolds when immigrants are framed as struggling to integrate, and the discussion turns to how rhetoric and treatment shape that struggle (FG11). M1, who initiates a villain casting, concedes that anti-immigration rhetoric can harm immigrants' ability to feel at home in Denmark and accepts a stronger experience attribution and a more empathic reading of what it is like to hear negative political rhetoric about oneself. Yet this concession does not translate into abandoning agency and accepting a victim archetype for immigrants. Instead, M1 maintains that migrants also have obligations in how they speak about Danes and Denmark, which the rest of the group can agree with.

Stepwise nuancing has an important analytical consequence: it often moves the discussion out of archetypal legibility rather than simply shifting it from one archetype to another. Across the examples above, participants re-work agency and experience in ways that make a clear role assignment harder to sustain. This is especially visible because, as seen in Table 5.2, contestation somewhat more often takes the form of adding attributes than of taking them away. As participants introduce experience into agency-heavy framings, or reintroduce agency into more one-sided victim readings, the either/or structure that underpins stable moral archetypes begins to break down. The result is a more complex account that no longer fits neatly into archetypal form: even when participants continue to disagree about immigration, they often end up "humanizing" the target in a minimal sense by making room for both doing and feeling: both agency and experience.

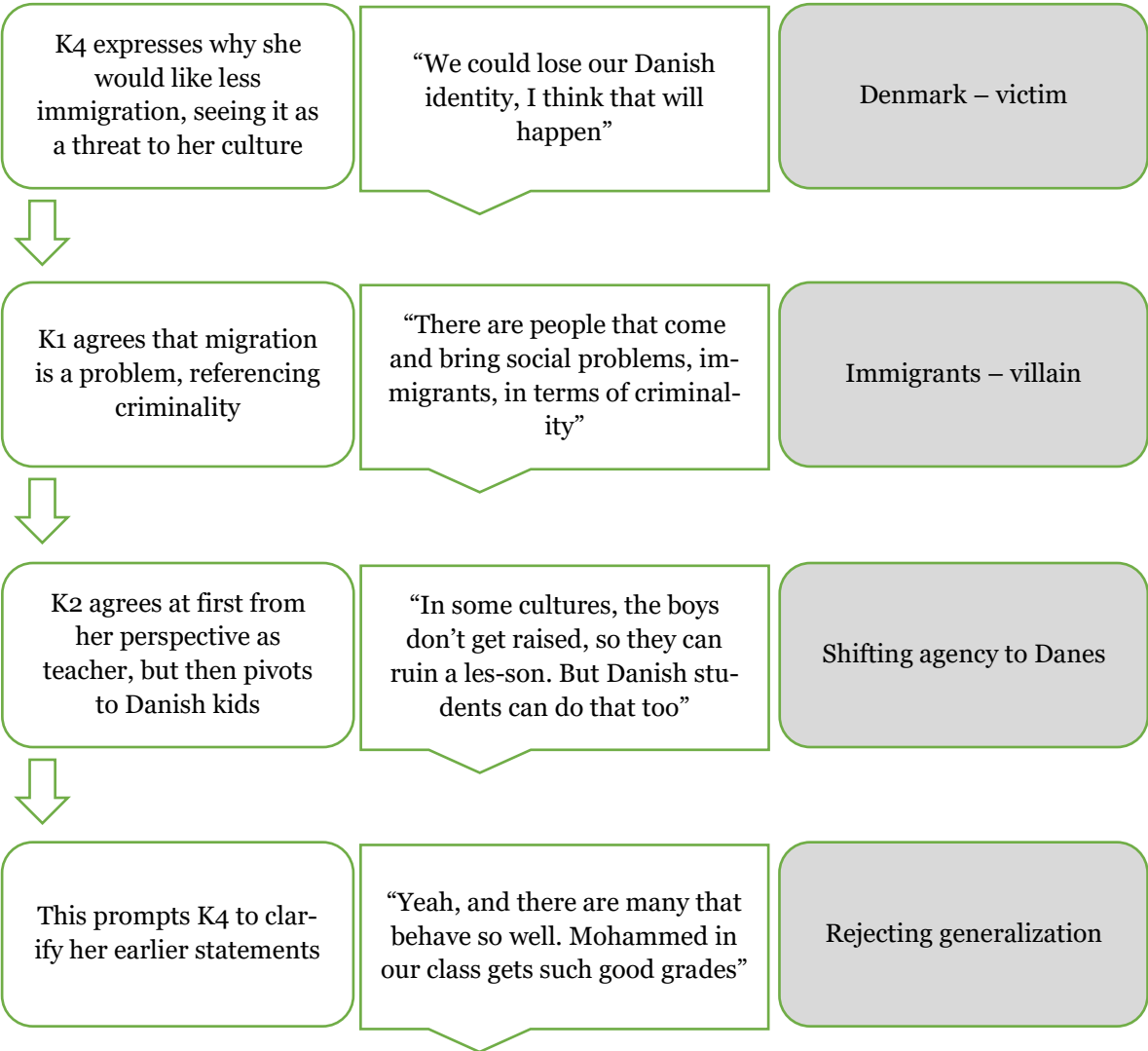
Another version of rejecting an archetype can occur when participants accept some archetypes in a larger moral construction, but not all. For example, when a participant proposes a configuration in which migrants are cast as victims, and Denmark is cast as the hero. In FG24 and FG6, co-participants can accept the victim casting – taking up the relevance of constrained agency and hardship – while contesting the hero archetype and its implied distribution of responsibility by redirecting obligation to other actors (for example, neighbouring countries or other EU states). What is rejected here is not the moral

intelligibility of victimhood but the completion of the configuration as with Denmark in the hero role, with other countries being put in that hero role instead.

### 5.3.2.2 Rejecting generalizations

A second recurring way participants contest archetypal proposals is by refusing the generalization that role-casting can carry with it. Even when a speaker's worry is taken seriously (e.g., discomfort in public space, frustration with integration, concerns about crime), co-participants often interrupt the slide from a concrete observation to a group-level moral characterization. This resistance takes several forms: explicitly limiting scope ("it's far from everyone"), adding counterexamples from personal experience, or introducing similarity claims that weaken the implication that the behaviour is specific to an out-group ("people born and raised in Denmark can also do those things"). What is being negotiated here is whether the archetype indeed captures a collective entity, such as in the example outlined in the flowchart:

Figure 5.2: flowchart outlining the interaction within an archetype event in focus group 17, including quotes from the conversation and analytical labels



All three ways to reject generalization occur in the conversation. First, K2 resists the move from a concern to a group-level casting by reframing the behaviour as non-specific, i.e., as something that “Danes can do too,” which blocks the inference that the issue is inherently tied to immigrants. This prompts K4 to reject a collective entity directly by making explicit that it is not all immigrants and introducing an internal counterexample (“Mohammed in our class ...”), making an all-encompassing villain casting harder to sustain.

Generalization resistance also appears as resistance to distinctions between migrant categories. The Ukrainian versus “Middle East” comparisons illustrate this. Here, some participants articulate a preference for Ukrainians, while others mark that preference as morally troubling. This conversation between two participants shows this tension:

M1: Personally I would be more open to Ukrainian refugees. Than refugees from the Middle East. That sounds a bit rough, maybe, because people are people, but there are just different values and ideas,

M3: Well, I understand what you are saying. Um ... I think it is morally wrong, [...] Ethically and morally, I think it is wrong, because I feel you shouldn't distinguish between refugees like that (FG10).

In another interview, the Ukrainian case becomes a clear site where participants make – and then have to defend – the attributional inferences that support a “true victim” casting. The participant who initiates the archetype frames Putin's invasion as an unambiguous act of taking, which makes the harm relation easy to complete: a clear perpetrator is identified, and Ukrainians are positioned as having had little choice.

K1: It is unfair that someone just comes and says that we want your country. Everyone in Denmark can probably see that, so, it is a completely surreal situation. Where in the Middle East, their wars are based a lot on religion, I can imagine. [...] Where in Ukraine, they couldn't really do anything. So you can relate better there, like: Okay. Of course you have to help them, they didn't really have ... well, he just came and wanted it. So it is a different war than the other wars.

K2: Yes. But you can also say that in the Middle East, they haven't chosen the war either.

K1: No. No, no, of course not (FG22).

Analytically, the key move is how the initial account relies on an implied contrast in agency: Ukraine is framed as “they couldn't really do anything,” whereas “the Middle East” is portrayed as more complex and therefore less straightforwardly victimized. K2's intervention targets precisely that inference by reasserting constrained agency on the “Middle East” side (“they haven't chosen the war either”), and K1 immediately concedes. What this brief exchange shows is not simply disagreement about refugees, but the interactional accountability of archetypal completion: once a victim/perpetrator construction is voiced, co-participants can challenge the attribute assumptions that make it feel obvious, forcing the speaker to qualify the contrast.

In another focus group, generalization is similarly rejected, with a consequence for the other archetypes in the construction:

M1: I have just experienced that you can hardly go to some places without there being a group of people there who are a bit, I call it a bit “Perkersprog”-like [term for street jargon Danish associated with immigrants], with the way they talk. I just get that feeling there, how can you call it ...

K1: Uncomfortable?

M1: Yes, uncomfortable. You kind of avoid them.

K1: I think you can feel that they, when it's a group like that, that they're trying to take over, or something like that.

K2: Yes. It might sound a bit aggressive, the way they talk.

In this opening sequence, the participants collaboratively build an immigrant-as-villain / Danish-citizen-as-victim configuration. M1 initiates the construction through discomfort and avoidance, K1 strengthens it by inferring hostile intent ("trying to take over"), and K2 aligns with that reading by describing the speech style as aggressive. The result is a villain-leaning archetype in which immigrants are attributed negatively directed agency, while Danish citizens are positioned as those who feel intimidated and therefore occupy the experiential side of the dyad. At this stage, there is no rejection of the archetypal logic. On the contrary, the participants initially agree on the relevance of the casting and jointly elaborate it.

Only after this shared construction is in place does K2 move to limit the generalization, supported by M1, which then gives K1 the opportunity to redirect the source of the problem toward representation:

K2: But it's far from everyone. Well, it's just some, there's also ... There's also ...

M1: Because I went to elementary school myself, where we had ... And they were super nice and everything like that.

K1: I also think something that makes you like ... Think ... So because people who were born and raised in Denmark can also do those things, but ... But the media only brings it up ... Other ethnic ... and such ... So that ... It's not like ... So those are the ones you hear about the most.

What is analytically interesting here is that the rejection of generalization is hesitant and interactionally delicate. K2 does not deliver a clear counterclaim but gropes toward one ("there's also ..."), and M1 picks up that opening by offering a counterexample from personal experience. K1 then extends the qualification by rejecting generalization of immigrants and acknowledging that Danish people can also be responsible for crime. So while the participants do take up the opportunity to resist the group-level villain casting, they do so somewhat insecurely, as if feeling their way toward a less sweeping formulation rather than directly overturning the initial account.

This shift nevertheless matters, because the rejection of generalization changes what can be said next. Once heterogeneity is reintroduced, the conversation moves from a group-level characterization to a more delimited claim about "some," which makes space for counterexamples and for reframing. At that point, immigrants can no longer be straightforwardly cast uniformly as

villains, and Danish citizens can no longer be positioned as their obvious collective victims. K1 uses this opening to redirect the origin of the problem toward representation, which leads the group into a conversation about media and politicians exaggerating immigrant crime for their own benefit, shifting the negative high-agency attribution away from immigration and introducing an alternative villain.

### 5.3.2.3 But *who* is doing the harm

A third pattern in the archetype events concerns how participants locate harmful agency once “integration problems” are on the table. Across the material, participants often agree that something is going wrong and that this has consequences for society. Yet the implied question – who is doing the harm? – remains negotiable. In six groups, participants explicitly discuss how news coverage and political elite discourse circulate a simplified immigrant-as-villain template. In these sequences, resisting a blanket villain casting becomes a way to contest that template without necessarily abandoning concern about integration. Participants attribute the un-nuanced villain story to exaggerated portrayals (e.g., “reshaping numbers” or inflating criminality) and counter it with personal or hypothetical contrasts – why the news highlights criminals but not “Thomas in Højbjerg who plays football.”

Relocation of harmful agency becomes especially visible in a discussion where one participant raises “ghettos” as evidence that integration is harmful for society. Rather than denying the problem, another participant redirects the causal story by introducing experience and difficulty as a premise for why integration is hard and would also be for “us” if we were the ones moving:

M2: If we went somewhere else with different values. We wouldn't change in terms of values. [...]. And yes ... and then rhetoric has at times created problems.

This reframing opens space for another participant to shift harmful agency away from immigrants and toward political and media rhetoric, similar to the example discussed in the previous section:

M3: Yes. Now I'll just quote – I can't quite remember the last thing I said – but today I heard that it was the Minister of Justice who stood there talking about some immigrants who came to rob and rape and kill and such things. Yes. So I also think the rhetoric in the media has a lot to say ... What we experience is not what we hear in the media. If you only sit at home and watch the news, you hear him standing there saying that there are some immigrants who come and yes. And then I think you become very influenced by how the media talks about immigrants, compared to the experiences you might have yourself with people who come as immigrants or are immigrants. They don't do that – the ones we know.

What matters analytically is that once “integration problems” are treated as harm, the interaction does not simply dispute whether harm exists: it negotiates who can be cast as the agent behind it. In this event, participants arrive at common ground by reworking the attributional basis of harm: experience is introduced to complicate a one-sided immigrant-villain inference, and harmful agency is partially relocated to political and media rhetoric, which is cast as shaping perceptions and actively undermining integration.

Taken together, this suggests that mixed-group deliberation expands the attribute profile of an archetypal claim rather than simply reversing it. When participants nuance one another, they typically do so by bringing in an attribute that had been backgrounded, adding experience to an agency-heavy framing or reintroducing agency where a victim framing risks becoming total. What emerges is a conversational norm that even while participants rely on archetypal reasoning to make arguments, resist fixating any single group, whether immigrants or Danes, in a singular moral role for long, either through rejecting generalization or by introducing backgrounded attributes.

## 5.4 Conclusion and implications

This chapter asked how citizens employ, negotiate, and adapt moral archetypes when they deliberate about immigration in attitudinally mixed settings. The analysis shows that participants do rely on the same dyadic-harm building blocks as in the dissertation’s broader framework – attributions of agency, experience, and the direction of agency – to make immigration morally intelligible to one another. At the same time, the chapter’s core contribution is to show what happens to these role assignments once they are voiced in front of peers: archetypes become interactional objects that are made publicly accountable and can therefore be sustained, softened, or dismantled through response.

The findings can be summarized in two claims. First, moral archetypes function as practical resources for sorting migrants and for positioning Denmark in complementary roles, producing recognizable configurations of helper, victim, and villain through relational completion. Second, these constructions are not simply reproduced; they are routinely worked on in real time. Across the 48 archetype events identified in the 11 groups, explicit responses were more often contesting than affirming, and contestation typically proceeded by revising the attributional premises of a role claim (denying a proposed attribute, adding a complicating attribute, or resisting a generalization). In other words, disagreement most often took the form of nuancing rather than outright dismissal. Importantly, this nuancing more often added attributes than it took them away. What emerges is therefore often not a clean switch from one archetype to another but a more complex portrayal of social groups that becomes less archetypally legible – precisely because it re-

assembles both doing and feeling in ways that are harder to compress into a single role.

Taken together, these findings support the chapter's theoretical and methodological contributions. Theoretically, they show why it is not sufficient to treat moral archetypes as stable representations or purely cognitive schemas: in deliberation, archetypal interpretations are proposed under conditions of expected disagreement and therefore become open to scrutiny, repair, and recalibration. Methodologically, the event-based approach makes the framework "interaction-ready" by treating sequences of uptake and revision as the analytic object, rather than treating archetypal coding as an endpoint.

The broader implication is twofold. On the one hand, the analysis underlines how available and tempting archetypal reasoning is for making sense of immigration: even when participants hedge, qualify, or resist generalization, they repeatedly return to the same role-building dimensions as practical criteria for evaluation. On the other hand, the chapter shows that deliberation can place limits on archetypal simplification. In these mixed-group discussions, participants often find ways to keep moral evaluation discussable without letting any single role assignment fully harden by adding backgrounded attributes, narrowing scope, or shifting from categorical condemnation to more complex portrayals that remain arguable in the room.

A final scope note follows directly from the chapter's design and from the Danish context of the material. Denmark is analytically informative here, not only because immigration has been politically consequential over time, but also because it is a high-trust, consensus-oriented democracy with strong norms of civil, cooperative dialogue in everyday settings. In that sense, the findings are likely to travel best to similar North/West European contexts, where disagreement is typically managed through norms of moderation and reason-giving, and where immigration is a recurring moralized issue, even when it is not constantly foregrounded in day-to-day debate. Additionally, the mixed groups analysed here were composed of classmates in trade-school, business-school, and university settings, which means the chapter speaks most directly to relatively everyday face-to-face contexts of disagreement among peers. In that sense, the findings may travel across different educational settings, since the material includes participants from multiple educational tracks, but they should be generalized more cautiously across age groups, as the participants in these mixed groups are predominantly young. Just as importantly, these are settings of relatively high interpersonal accountability: participants are speaking in front of people they know, and that likely increases pressure to appear fair-minded, avoid racism-coded statements, and soften generalizations. The chapter may therefore underestimate how sticky and unchallenged villain or victim castings can be in lower-accountability

settings, especially on social media and other anonymous or semi-anonymous platforms, where categorical claims can be voiced with fewer interpersonal consequences.

# Chapter 6: Moral division: boundary-drawing between citizens

Chapters 4 and 5 showed that immigration is moralized through opposing moral narratives built from moral archetype assignments, thereby answering the first part of the dissertation's main research question. In elite communication, different actors claim moral standing by presenting themselves as the ones who protect what matters – either immigrants in need or the nation under threat – while casting opponents as morally suspect through the archetypal roles of villain and coward. In Chapter 5, I showed that similar moral templates also structure citizen deliberation: participants draw on archetypal framings to explain their own views, interpret others, and contest the moral meaning of immigration in discussion.

If immigration is moralized in this way – such that positions are narrated as moral heroism, and opposing stances are rendered villainous or cowardly – the next question, corresponding to the second part of the dissertation's main research question, is what the implications of this are for the relations between citizens who have these different stances. Chapter 6 presents results from Paper C on how division over immigration is experienced as persistent, and how moral boundary-drawing between citizens helps sustain it, because disagreements are repeatedly framed as reflecting fundamental differences of moral character.

## 6.1 Sticky division as a shared frame

This chapter begins with a shared premise that structures the rest of the analysis: as we find in Paper C, participants across groups treat division over immigration as both real and undesirable, which becomes the backdrop against which moral boundary-drawing nevertheless unfolds. Participants repeatedly described immigration as an issue that divides society and makes disagreement socially risky, even without being directly prompted by the moderator to evaluate polarization or the broader climate. What is notable is how this sense of division is voiced as a collective frame rather than as a series of personal anecdotes. Participants often speak as if the topic comes with an ambient expectation of conflict: immigration is understood as something taboo, which can quickly “ruin the mood,” change the tone of a conversation, or produce awkwardness that lingers beyond the discussion itself. This is also why the

issue is repeatedly described as difficult to address openly. As one participant puts it, immigration feels “a little dangerous to talk about.”

These reflections were normatively charged. Participants who described immigration as divisive saw this as regrettable and socially harmful, at odds with ideals of coexistence, mutual respect, and democratic room for disagreement. For example, one participant states: “Denmark is a democracy, and in a democracy, you need to have room for different opinions,” exemplifying how division is framed as clashing with democratic coexistence. Crucially, both the view of immigration as a source of polarization, and the problematization of this, was present for participants across positions.

## 6.2 Solidification through moral boundary-drawing toward attitudinal others

Building on the shared framing of immigration as divisive and hard to talk about, I now turn to how participants speak about attitudinal others and draw moral boundaries toward them. We find in Paper C that when participants are invited to reflect on “people with different opinions,” their talk often begins with hesitation or with explicit statements of restraint, as if they first need to mark that judging other citizens is not something they take lightly. Participants frequently frame themselves as tolerant in principle – someone who does not want to think “evil” of others, or who believes people are allowed to hold different views – and this is voiced through pauses, qualifiers, and small self-corrections that signal caution. Yet these openings rarely remain at the level of principled nonjudgment: they are quickly followed by a pivot in which participants acknowledge that they do evaluate others based on their immigration views, even if they present this almost apologetically (“to be honest,” “actually”). This recurring movement from restraint to evaluation sets up the boundary work that follows.

We find in Paper C that once participants make this move from reluctance to condemnation, they draw on recognizable repertoires of moral judgment that mark attitudinal others as outside a shared moral community. In pro-immigration groups, condemnation is most often anchored in accusations of racism, othering, and dehumanization – judgments that the other side treats immigrants as less than fully human or less entitled to moral concern. One participant, for instance, links anti-immigration attitudes directly to “moral character,” suggesting that it involves “seeing some people as not real people ... or less worthy people.” In this repertoire, the moral breach is a failure of humanity: the other side is condemned for denying equal worth and for downgrading immigrants in ways that are experienced as cruel or discriminatory.

In anti-immigration groups, condemnation more often targets a different kind of perceived transgression: not the treatment of immigrants, but the moral posture of the pro-immigration side. Here, attitudinal others are portrayed as “do-gooders” who place themselves above others and police what can be said. The critique is frequently expressed by participants as people who “rub it in your face” – and through descriptions attitudinal others as preachy, intolerant of disagreement, and quick to play “moral trump cards” against those who dissent. Although these judgments differ in content, they converge in an important way: both repertoires frame the opposing side as engaging in moral hierarchization and upholding hierarchization: either by treating immigrants as less worthy of equal concern, or by positioning oneself as morally superior to fellow citizens.

We argue in Paper C that they are sustained through an interactional dynamic centred on moral standing. Because participants also present themselves as tolerant and reasonable people, condemnation of attitudinal others tends to be delivered with explanations that defend the speaker’s own character: boundary-drawing is framed as something one is forced into because the other side has crossed a moral line or positioned themselves above others. At the same time, boundary-drawing invites resistance. Especially among anti-immigration participants, being treated as morally suspect is described as destabilizing because it turns an immigration stance into a verdict on whether one is a “decent person.” Rather than accepting that verdict, participants often challenge the legitimacy of the boundary imposed on them and redirect moral scrutiny back toward those they perceive as condemning them, portraying accusations such as racism as “an easy card to play,” and recasting the real moral wrong as moral denigration, hypocrisy, or “holier-than-thou” posturing.

This back-and-forth also becomes collective: group members reassure each other not to adopt the other side’s moral vocabulary (for instance, not to apologize for their view) and encourage speaking up against what is experienced as a narrowing of what can be said. For example, when one participant says that his opinion might be perceived as discriminatory, another intervenes: “the moment we use words like ‘discriminatory’... we’ve already anchored ourselves in what we think might be the most morally ‘correct’ position,” exemplifying a collective effort to resist internalizing condemnation. In this way, boundary-drawing works as both defence and reproduction: it protects individual and group moral standing in the moment while also reinforcing the sense that disagreement over immigration is a stable social divide. As we argue in Paper C, this helps explain why division becomes “sticky” in social life. Once immigration disagreement is moralized and grounded in common-sense judgments of moral character, it travels beyond the immediate political moment and becomes an intersubjective frame for what the issue is, and what

it says about people. This is reinforced by the taboo-like quality participants describe: people refrain from discussing immigration because it feels socially risky, which can prevent them from revising their assumptions about how divided society is and makes distance self-fulfilling. When the topic does surface, boundary-drawing functions as a protective mechanism for moral standing and invites counter-boundaries, so perceived moral condemnation becomes a recurring driver that keeps the divide socially alive even in periods of lower salience and muted elite conflict.

### 6.3 Nuanced or uncompromising boundaries: citizens vs politicians

Because the focus groups capture participants responding to one another in real time, we show in Paper C that moral boundary-drawing toward other citizens is not always delivered as a fixed verdict. Especially when participants talk about attitudinal others as people they might meet in everyday life, strong moral judgments can be followed by small interactional repairs that soften the boundary's edge. These repairs include distinguishing between "extreme" stances and ordinary people, adding contextual explanations, or briefly shifting into perspective-taking. The effect is not that moral evaluation disappears, but that it is managed: participants balance moral condemnation with the shared premise established earlier in the chapter, namely that division is undesirable and risky to reproduce in the room.

One clear illustration comes from a pro-immigration group discussion. Here, a participant, when asked her opinion on those with opposing opinions on immigration, starts with a denunciation, prefacing it with "Okay, I know it's not very academic but fuck them," and another participant initially aligns with the stance ("Well, I have contempt"). Yet a third participant interrupts the judgment by reframing the target through a different lens, suggesting that "people are very scared, I think." The sequence then ends not with a retraction of the original condemnation, but with a shift in how the other side is characterized, as the original speaker concedes: "it must be hard to be so angry and scared all the time." In this interaction, moral distance is still voiced, but it is briefly reworked into a form that reopens the possibility of coexistence by recasting the opponent as driven by fear rather than simply as morally wrong. This nuancing shows that participants balance moral evaluation with an effort to avoid making citizen–citizen division even sharper in the room.

When the target shifts to politicians, the tone changes. Paper C shows that boundaries toward political elites are typically far more uncompromising: judgments are stated more directly and are not met with the same kinds of softening moves. Across groups, a particularly common condemnation is that

politicians are opportunistic and instrumentalize immigration, being seen as insincere, hypocritical, and willing to keep the issue alive because it serves electoral goals or helps them remain in power. For example, one participant describes elites as motivated by office rather than principle: “they just want to stay glued to a stool ... and I simply can’t get over that hypocrisy,” exemplifying the judgment that immigration is used instrumentally for power.

Condemning politicians can also relieve some of the tension that comes with condemning fellow citizens, because it relocates responsibility upward and offers a safer common target for frustration. It supports a clear assignment of responsibility for polarization: participants describe elites as amplifying conflict and pulling citizens into opposing corners through populist signalling and strategic posturing. The payoff is that the same moral logic is doing different work depending on who it targets: citizen-directed judgments invite negotiation, whereas condemning politicians is safer and can become a point of agreement that relocates blame away from relationships between citizens.

## 6.4 Conclusion

Chapter 6 has shown the implications of the moralization of immigration on division in society. This division is experienced by citizens as persistent, and this stickiness is sustained in citizen deliberation through moral boundary-drawing. When participants talk about attitudinal others, differences in views are repeatedly generalized into judgments about moral standing and moral character, which helps explain why the immigration divide is described as difficult to escape in social life. In this way, moral boundary-drawing is the bridge from attitudinal polarization to affective polarization, because disagreement over immigration is translated into social distance and judgments about who is decent, trustworthy, and worth engaging. At the same time, we show in Paper C that this boundary work is not uniform: judgments about fellow citizens are sometimes negotiated and softened in interaction, whereas condemnation of politicians is more direct and uncompromising. This contrast matters because it shows how participants manage the social risk of condemning peers, and how shifting attention toward political elites can momentarily relieve that tension by relocating blame away from relationships between citizens. Chapter 7 zooms in on the victimhood and “political pariahs” strand of this dynamic: how felt moral condemnation is narrated and responded to, and how these experiences connect across the dissertation’s materials.



## Chapter 7: Victimhood and regaining agency

This chapter zooms in on a recurring pattern across the dissertation, further answering the dissertation's research question about how moral narratives function across elite communication and citizen deliberation: how immigration conflict becomes organized around felt victimhood in anti-immigration discourse, across these two arenas. Crucially, this victim position is made possible by the archetypal configurations traced in the preceding chapters: once immigration is narrated through recognizable dyads of harm, the victim role can be stepped into. Victimhood is therefore treated here as an archetypal position that can be inhabited and negotiated: an experience of being harmed or morally disqualified and of having oneself and/or one's in-group cast as the harmed party. Across the materials, this positioning is articulated through different perceived sources of harm, including immigrants, political elites and the media, and attitudinal others.

To analyse this, I bring together evidence from Paper A (Dutch party manifestos), Paper B (Wilders' Facebook posts), Chapter 5 (Danish focus-group deliberations on immigration), and Paper C (Danish focus-group deliberations analysed through division and moral boundary-drawing). Across these arenas, I identify how victimhood is made recognizable and persuasive through different forms of communication: text-based constructions of national vulnerability in manifestos; multimodal scenes that create immediacy and proximity on social media, where victimhood is staged both for the nation and the viewer and, at times, through Wilders' own self-positioning as a targeted figure; and interactional, first-person accounts in deliberation where participants describe what immigration conflict does to their everyday sense of legitimacy and voice. Reading these materials together allows me to track a shared archetypal logic of felt victimhood and the ways it can invite a pathway from suffering to morally justified agency, including heroism and citizen efforts to reclaim voice and legitimacy.

### 7.1 The nation and audience as victim

As discussed in Chapter 4, anti-immigration elite communication repeatedly builds harm-centred narratives by establishing the nation as a victim. In the party manifestos (Paper A), this victim is made morally legible through metaphor and metonymy. The Netherlands is described as a collective entity that can be weakened, pressured, or left exposed, for instance through formula-

tions like “the nation is naked against immigration” and “our country feels the consequences.” Alongside these bodily and experiential metaphors, victimhood is also condensed into culturally loaded stand-ins for the nation. One example I discussed in Chapter 4 is “Dutch coziness” (*gezelligheid*), which functions metonymically as an idealized national way of life that can be violated. These constructions rely heavily on collective language, where “the Netherlands,” “Dutch people,” and the possessive “our” tie vulnerability to a shared moral community and make national harm feel personally owned.

Wilders’ Facebook posts (Paper B) use a different communicative form to do related victim work. Posts stage victimhood in compact multimodal scenes that make threat feel close. As I noted in Chapter 4, the audience is positioned as the threatened target through compositional cues such as direct gaze, forward motion, or objects oriented toward the camera, and captions then anchor the harm scenario by addressing “you” and naming proximity explicitly, for example through phrases like “your neighbor.” In other cases, the nation is represented through emblematic victims that stand in for “ordinary” Dutch people, again supported by collective language that constructs a bounded “we.” Across both the manifestos and the posts, the victim position is therefore not only assigned to “the Netherlands” as an abstract collective but also routed toward the reader or viewer as someone who is placed inside the threatened in-group.

## 7.2 The victim to hero narrative

Building on the victimization of the nation and the audience described in the previous section, I now trace how elite communication also offers a route out of that vulnerability by turning victimhood into a platform for heroism. In Wilders’ Facebook posts (Paper B), this shift is not presented as a gradual transformation from one role into another. Instead, victimhood and heroism are fused into a single personalized figure, where Wilders’ own body and public persona become the site where harm is made concrete and where moral agency is staged as the answer to that harm.

Paper B shows that Wilders’ martyr strand is built through the way he circulates and frames threats directed at him. In a share of the posts, he shares screenshots of messages sent to him, with images that visualize violence against his body, including edits that depict him as shot, wounded, or held at knifepoint. The captions often come in two contrasting registers. Some amplify vulnerability with graphic phrasing such as “slaughter me,” “cut my throat,” or “let me die like a dog.” In several posts, he even juxtaposes extreme imagery with a casual “good morning,” which normalizes danger as part of everyday political life. Others pivot to resolve, using defiant lines like “nothing will stop me” and “I never surrender.”

This is how multimodality allows victimhood and heroism to be compressed into one scene. The image establishes exposure and danger, while the caption restores control by presenting endurance and refusal as the morally correct response to being targeted. The result is a self-positioning in which being threatened becomes proof of righteousness, and defiance becomes the appropriate completion of the narrative. That fusion helps explain why these posts can move so quickly from harm to agency: the victim role is already bound up with a heroic stance, and the viewer is primed to read persistence as both personal courage and political legitimacy.

Building on the findings in Paper B, I argue that personalization then becomes the bridge to collective identification. Even when the post centres Wilders' own targeting, the pronouns and possessive language repeatedly widen the frame into an imagined "we": the threatened party is not only the leader but a broader in-group who is invited to recognize themselves in the same moral predicament. This is where the victim-to-hero logic becomes scalable. The audience is positioned to move with him. If "we" are under threat, then "we" are also entitled to respond. Calls to action can therefore be extremely minimal, because the moral arc has already been built. Short slogans such as "taking back our country" function as pivot points that turn the post from diagnosis to resolution, inserting the party as the vehicle through which the heroic response becomes available.

The same invitation structure is visible in party manifestos (Paper A), even though the format is less personalized and less immediate. A clear example comes from Forum for Democracy, a radical-right Dutch party, which explicitly offers supporters an agentic role in responding to national decline and vulnerability: "Support Forum for Democracy. Help us realize the changes. For you, for our country: for our children, and their children" (2017). Here, after the audience has been presented with the nation in the victim-role throughout the manifesto, they are offered a morally elevated role at the end. Voting for Forum for Democracy becomes a moral duty, framed as heroism on behalf of new victim: the especially vulnerable figure of children.

Taken together, Paper B and Paper A show a shared narrative architecture: victimhood is made credible and close, then converted into a pathway where protective action is positioned as the morally right response. In Wilders' Facebook posts, that pathway is intensified by personalization and multimodal staging, including moments where Wilders portrays himself as both target and resister, and where the audience is invited to see their own stance as part of the same victim-to-hero trajectory.

### 7.3 Victimhood as lived accounts

The previous sections traced how elite communication constructs victimhood as a persuasive position for the nation, the audience, and, in Wilders' case, the leader himself, and how this positioning can be tied to an invitation to act. The next step is to examine victimhood on the citizen side, not as a rhetorical offer, but as a lived account voiced in deliberation. I do not treat this as a question of whether citizens take up elite messaging. Instead, I ask whether anti-immigration participants describe themselves and their in-groups as harmed or unfairly targeted, and what follows from that self-positioning in the interaction. Drawing on Chapter 5 and Paper C, the section shows that felt victimhood appears in multiple registers, including experiences of threat and loss connected to immigration, and experiences of moral condemnation and illegitimacy linked to speaking about immigration. In both cases, victimhood functions as more than a description of suffering: it shapes what participants feel entitled to say and do, and it helps explain why moralized conflict over immigration can remain socially consequential in citizen deliberation.

In Chapter 5, I discussed how anti-immigration participants in citizen deliberation construct harm-centred accounts where immigration is experienced as damaging to the nation and to "ordinary people." I return to that material here to read it through the victim archetype that structures this chapter, highlighting how the victim position is made credible through both collective, national framing and embodied, situational descriptions. Participants describe immigrants as "tak[ing] advantage of the Danish system" and even "just money out of the state treasury, which my parents and working Danes pay for," while also saying migrants can undercut wages and make "locals here in Denmark less competitive."

At the same time, this victim position is not only articulated at the collective level of the nation, but through ordinary encounters in which participants cast themselves as exposed and unsettled. In one group, for instance, a participant describes feeling "uncomfortable" with large groups of migrants, with participants describing avoiding such groups and characterizing the way they speak as sounding "aggressive," which casts anti-immigration participants as people who must navigate public space defensively and who experience themselves as the intimidated party in the encounter. Another participant then adds that it can feel like "they're trying to take over," blending a lived sense of unease with a broader story of collective exposure. In this chapter's terms, these moments show how abstract claims of harm and felt threat can operate in parallel to anchor a victim position.

In Paper C, we show a second register of felt victimhood that becomes especially salient for anti-immigration participants: the experience of being

morally condemned by attitudinal others. Participants describe immigration as socially risky to talk about, and they frame this risk less as ordinary disagreement than as the sense that certain positions are treated as morally illegitimate. The consequence they repeatedly name is a felt lack of space in everyday talk, where expressing an anti-immigration stance is anticipated to trigger moral judgment and social discomfort. We show in Paper C that this sense of being morally judged is linked not only to concrete encounters with attitudinal others, but also to statements by politicians that participants experience as communicating that their view is simply wrong. In one group, a participant captures this shift from opinion to moral verdict by describing how the message they receive is effectively: “because you have these opinions ... you’re not a decent person.” In this pariah-like framing, victimhood is tied to moral status. We show in Paper C that this self-understanding can persist even in a context where anti-immigration views have become politically normalized, which underlines how strong the victimhood position can be when the conflict is experienced as a matter of moral status.

At the same time, Paper C shows that this victim position does not remain passive. Feeling condemned becomes a prompt for defensive agency and moral boundary-drawing in return, as participants challenge the legitimacy of the judgment and redirect blame toward those they experience as condemning them. In one group, a participant describes how being called “racist” provoked her to reverse the accusation – “you’re a fucking racist!” – and dismiss it as “such an easy card to play,” turning condemnation itself into the moral wrong. This kind of reversal works both as self-protection and as counter-attack, and it reproduces the boundary dynamic Chapter 6 traced, now grounded in lived experiences of moral stigmatization. We also show how this register of victimhood can invite a citizen version of the victim-to-hero arc: in a focus group discussion about how immigration has become something “we can’t talk about,” where those who speak out risk being “shut down,” one participant answers the question of how to get past this by saying, “one way is for people like me to speak up once in a while.”

## 7.4 Conclusion

Chapter 7 has shown a further way moral narratives function across elite communication and citizen deliberation: how felt victimhood functions as a recurring archetypal position in anti-immigration discourse across both elite communication and citizen deliberation. In elite communication, victimhood is made credible for the nation and the audience, and in Paper B it is further condensed into a personalized victim-to-hero narrative in which Wilders’ self-positioning as a targeted figure becomes the bridge to collective identification and action. In citizen deliberation, the same victim position appears as a lived

account, both through embodied and nationalized experiences of threat and through experiences of moral condemnation and social illegitimacy. Across these arenas, victimhood does not remain a description of harm; it also provides a moral warrant for agency, including protective heroism against perceived immigrant villainy and counter-condemnation towards attitudinal others. In this way, Chapter 7 also clarifies the dissertation's broader argument about division: felt victimhood can help sustain immigration conflict by turning experiences of harm and disqualification into morally justified action, self-legitimation, and renewed contestation.

# Chapter 8:

## Discussion and conclusions

This dissertation sets out to answer the question: How do moral narratives around immigration function in elite communication and citizen deliberation, and with what implications for division in society? I have addressed this question through three papers and an analytical chapter, tracing how moral narratives that organize actors into archetypal positions stimulate role-taking and become persuasive in elite communication, how similar archetypal logics are voiced, negotiated, and revised in citizen deliberation, and how division is sustained in social life through moral boundary-drawing in conversations between citizens about attitudinal others and political elites. In this concluding chapter, I first synthesize what the findings jointly show across elite communication and citizen deliberation, then specify the dissertation's theoretical and methodological contributions, clarify scope conditions and limitations while outlining directions for further research, and finally draw out the broader societal implications of moralized immigration conflict for mobilization, citizen to citizen relations, and the moral standing of social groups.

### 8.1 Summarized findings across the dissertation

Across the dissertation, I show that moral narratives are a central mechanism through which immigration conflict becomes persuasive in elite communication and meaningful in citizen deliberation – and that this matters for division, because moral narratives turn political positions into judgments about harm, responsibility, and moral standing. Rather than treating moralization as something that is only visible in explicit moral language, I trace how moral meaning is assembled through dyadic-harm logic and stabilized through recognizable moral archetypes.

Focusing on elite communication, Paper A and Paper B show that immigration is repeatedly organized through dyadic-harm logic, where actors are positioned in moral archetypes (villains, victims, heroes, and cowards), and these archetypal positions function as argumentative resources. A core finding is how elites build morally legible configurations in which immigrants and/or the nation are cast as victims or villains. Across these configurations, the argumentative payoff is the same: once roles are stabilized, responsibility and “what should be done” become easier to infer and defend.

At the level of *how* these elite narratives become persuasive, I show that archetypal claims are made to feel evidential and tangible through translations

that turn abstract harm into experientially “readable” scenes. In Paper A, this happens through metaphor and metonymy that translate collective harms (to “the nation,” “ordinary people,” or valued ways of life) into physically grounded scenarios: harm is condensed into action verbs that imply agency and intent, vulnerability is made readable through embodied language, and metonymic stand-ins allow complex collectives to appear as unified moral patients that can be violated, weakened, exposed, or protected. In Paper B, the same work is intensified through multimodality, with captions and images co-producing evidentiality: visuals can supply concrete, threat-compatible cues that make the caption’s moral attribution feel visually grounded, compositional choices can place the viewer inside the threatened in-group, and recurring visual motifs can cue entire harm scenarios with minimal explanation. Importantly, Paper B shows that these cues are not culturally neutral: they draw on historical repertoires, postcolonial and gendered templates of who is presumed agentic, threatening, submissive, innocent, or vulnerable, which makes particular archetypal assignments immediately intelligible.

A further set of findings concerns what moral narratives do for moral self-presentation and contestation within elite communication. Paper A shows how manifestos use archetypal configurations not only to justify policy but to claim moral standing and cast rivals as morally suspect: parties present themselves as responsible protectors while positioning alternative stances as morally weak, complicit, or actively harmful within the same dyadic-harm narrative. Paper B shows how social media affords an even more personalized version of this struggle: Wilders’ self-positioning fuses vulnerability and resolve into a martyr-hero narrative in which being threatened becomes a warrant for righteousness, and defiance becomes the morally appropriate completion of the story. Here, historical repertoires also matter for how political contestation is staged: gendered portrayals of opponents are integral to the representational logic through which weakness, courage, and disloyalty are cued to enable moral legitimacy to be claimed through contrast and denigration.

Turning to citizen deliberation, the analytical chapter (Chapter 5) shows that citizens reason in harm-centred, archetypal terms, but that moral narratives are negotiated – and sometimes transformed – when they meet hesitation, pushback, and the interpersonal demands of deliberation. Participants use these moral archetypes intuitively when they justify their opinions on migrants, responsibility, and deservedness, but in deliberation, archetypal framings take on a different status than in elite communication: they function as interactional proposals rather than settled labels. Because moral claims about migrants have to be voiced to peers and become publicly accountable, participants do not only accept and build on proposed framings, they also resist their generalizing force, reintroduce experience to villains that previous speakers

have bracketed out, contest attributed agency and intent, redirect responsibility to other actors (institutions, politicians, media), and recalibrate what kind of moral judgment is socially permissible in the room.

The dissertation's most direct answer to the "implications for division" part of the research question comes through Paper C, which examines what happens when immigration conflict is experienced and managed as a matter of moral standing between groups in society. The paper shows how disagreement becomes persistent when it is translated into moral boundary-drawing. When participants talk about attitudinal others, they repeatedly treat differences in views as evidence of deficient moral character, condemning the other side for cruelty, racism, or dehumanization on the one hand, and for moral policing, hypocrisy, or superiority on the other. Boundaries are sometimes softened through everyday civility and perspective-taking, but they can also harden, especially when directed at political elites, who are treated as less legitimate interlocutors than fellow citizens. When disagreement takes this moral form, immigration becomes difficult to compartmentalize: the topic remains "sticky" because it is tied to who others are taken to be, and whether they are seen as decent and compatible members of the moral community.

Finally, across the dissertation, I show how immigration conflict becomes organized around felt victimhood in anti-immigration discourse, across both elite communication and citizen deliberation – a pathway that shows how moral narratives work by offering a morally intelligible position from which responsibility, blame, and warranted agency become easier to infer, and that can feed moral boundary-drawing, when disagreement becomes tied to moral standing. In elite communication, victimhood is made credible for the nation and the audience through metaphor and metonymy in manifestos and through multimodal scenes on social media that route threat to the viewer. In Paper B, it is further condensed into a personalized victim-to-hero narrative, where Wilders' targeting bridges to collective identification and action. In citizen deliberation, anti-immigration participants voice victimhood both as felt threat and as pariah-like experiences of moral condemnation and illegitimacy, prompting defensive agency, counter-condemnation, and boundary-drawing. Across arenas, harm is brought close and then converted into a morally warranted heroic response: protecting, pushing back, and "speaking up."

## 8.2 Core contributions of the dissertation

My core theoretical contribution is an integrated framework for explaining how immigration can become moralized across elite communication and citizen deliberation, and how it can harden into division. I develop this framework by combining moral psychology, cognitive linguistics, and theories from sociology (postcolonial and intersectional representation theory, and bound-

ary-drawing theory). Going beyond existing operationalizations of morality as specific moral values or moral words (Clifford et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2009, 2013; Hackenburg et al., 2023; Wang & Inbar, 2021), I build on dyadic harm theory to conceptualize moral narratives as interpretations of who is harmed, who is responsible, and what responses become expected (Gray et al., 2012; Schein & Gray, 2018). Drawing on moral typecasting, I theorize moral archetypes – villain, victim, hero, and coward – as culturally legible role positions that stabilize agency and experience attributions in political conflict (Gray & Wegner, 2009). What is analytically distinctive about a moral narrative approach is that it treats morality as something that is organized through roles and relations – so that blame and credit, obligation and legitimacy follow from how actors are positioned – rather than as a matter of isolated values or standalone moral claims.

I also propose a theory for how archetypal role assignments become communicable when harms are collective and indirect as they often are with abstract political topics like immigration. Integrating moral archetypes with conceptual metaphor theory (Charteris-Black, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 2008), I show how metaphor and metonymy translate stakes into harm scenarios and stabilize collective actors through stand-ins that cue vulnerability and responsibility, building on a broader body of work showing that figurative framing can shape political interpretation and persuasion (Brugman et al., 2019; Lakoff, 2001, 2010; Ottatti et al., 2014; Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011; Van Stee, 2018). Extending this bridge to multimodality, I theorize images as a route through which harm gains evidential and tactile force, as visuals and captions coordinate attribution and affect (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Kress, 2009; Richardson & Wodak, 2009). Finally, I build cultural history into the mechanism: integrating postcolonial and intersectional representation theory (Mutua, 2001; Said, 1977; Spivak, 1996), and on scholarship that has traced how immigration and “the Other” are mobilized and translated through visuals in political communication (Awad et al., 2022; Cloud, 2004; Doerr, 2021). Incorporating dyadic harm and moral archetypes into these literatures, I show how historically sedimented repertoires structure who is readily read as threatening, innocent, submissive, or deserving, shaping which archetypes become immediately intelligible in anti-immigration communication.

Third, I extend dyadic harm to capture political self-presentation. I add the coward archetype to theorize condemnation of culpable inaction – a moral judgment that the classic hero-villain-victim configuration does not fully capture (Gray & Wegner, 2011; Propp, 1968). This addition clarifies how elites can attack rivals for failing to protect and how citizens can be positioned inside the same narrative as potential heroes or as the cowards they are invited to reject. I link dyadic archetypal positioning to moral grandstanding (Grubbs et al.,

2020; Simonsen & Widmann, 2025; Tosi & Warmke, 2016) and personalization (McAllister, 2007; Pedersen & Rahat, 2021) to show how leaders can accumulate moral standing by narrating harm, occupying the protector role, and casting opponents as villains or cowards.

Finally, the dissertation proposes moral boundary-drawing as the mechanism that links moral narratives to affective polarization. Drawing on boundary work, we conceptualize division as repeated symbolic distinctions of worth that become consequential (Barth, 1969; Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). This perspective complements research on moral conviction and hostility (Brandt et al., 2019; Skitka & Morgan, 2014) and specifies why moralized issues become “sticky”: once harm-based role assignments and boundary work take hold, immigration disagreement becomes an evaluative classification of people, shaping who is seen as socially legitimate and compatible in everyday life (Damhuis & Westheuser, 2024; Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason, 2015).

Overall, the dissertation’s development of moral narratives, moral archetypes, and moral boundary-drawing offers an account of how moral status, blame, and judgment become organized around immigration across elite communication and citizen deliberation – and of how those same mechanisms can spill into citizen-to-citizen relations as division.

Methodologically, I contribute a novel framework for the systematic qualitative analysis of moral narratives across political and social discourse. The framework moves beyond treating moralization as a matter of using specific moral words (see also the approaches above) by making moralization traceable as relational role-making. Specifically, it details how communication attributes agency and experience, so that actors become readable as villains, victims, heroes, and cowards (Gray et al., 2012; Schein & Gray, 2018). This directly addresses a blind spot in approaches that map explicit moral language well but may miss implied, figurative, and multimodally assembled moral claims.

Each empirical component of the dissertation develops a distinct analytic module while keeping a shared role-based logic that enables comparison. In Paper A, I show how to trace archetypal positioning in programmatic elite texts by using metaphor and metonymy as methodological entry points for how collectives are constituted as moral patients, and how blame and obligation are anchored (Charteris-Black, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). In Paper B, I extend the same framework to multimodal campaigning by treating each post as a single meaning-making unit in which text and image jointly construct moral roles; this captures how visuals lend evidential force to harm claims, and how historically sedimented repertoires shape role legibility (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Kress, 2009; Richardson & Wodak, 2009).

A further methodological contribution is how I use focus groups to study moralization as a social process rather than an individual attitude. Political conflict, whether that be moralization or polarization, is often analyzed through elite texts or survey measures; focus groups make it possible to observe how moral narratives are made accountable, negotiated, and socially sanctioned when people have to justify claims in front of peers who disagree (Cyr, 2019; Maes et al., 2024). Chapter 5 builds on this by treating moral narratives as interactional proposals. Paper C complements this with an empirically grounded approach to division through moral boundary-drawing: instead of inferring polarization from survey affect, we analyze how participants load disagreement with judgments of decency, and how experiences of moral condemnation become socially consequential (Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

### 8.3 Scope conditions, limitations, and further research

I scope the dissertation to make moral narratives traceable across elite communication and citizen deliberation, so I can follow how immigration conflict is made morally legible, and how it can harden into division. I study moral narratives in immigration, because it is a politically central issue where moral standing is contested, and I examine how those narratives function across both elite communication and citizen deliberation. I therefore work with a bounded set of materials – party manifestos, Wilders’ Facebook posts, and focus groups – in Denmark and the Netherlands, where I have the contextual knowledge needed to interpret how moral role assignments become intelligible. These scope conditions allow me to track the same role-based logic from the construction of moral archetypes in elite communication to their negotiation in deliberation, and to show how moral role-making connects to moral boundary-drawing in talk about attitudinal others and political elites.

I study moral narratives through immigration, because it is a central issue that is routinely evaluated in moral terms (Helbling, 2014; Schwörer & Fernández-García, 2021; Simonsen & Widmann, 2025), making it a revealing case for tracing how moral meaning is constructed, and how it becomes socially consequential. Immigration is not the only domain where moral conflict is present – many political issues are argued in moral terms – but it is an especially strong case, because it reliably activates questions of threat, protection, deservingness, and blame.

Second, the dissertation is scoped to two national contexts – Denmark and the Netherlands – chosen for analytic complementarity and capacity for contextual depth, not for causal cross-national comparison. I make this choice, because interpreting how moral narratives work in these materials requires contextual knowledge close to the discourse: how immigration has been

politicized, and which historical repertoires are available. The Netherlands provides variation in immigration stances across elite actors and a communication environment where historically available racialized and gendered repertoires are especially salient for understanding how archetypal cues become legible in multimodal communication. Denmark anchors the deliberative component, offering a setting where citizens can draw on familiar immigration repertoires established over decades of intense politicization. With data collection set outside an intensely activated campaign moment, I am able to examine how moral meaning is negotiated among citizens in interaction, and how division is voiced and managed among peers. While I do not claim representativeness, the two cases share features with other North/West European democracies (stable parliamentary systems and long-standing divisive immigration politics), which matters for how the framework can travel. The results are bounded by these empirical contexts: as a first step, I see the strongest transferability to other Western democracies with similarly institutionalized immigration conflict and comparable communication settings. The analytical framework is designed to be transferable: it specifies what to look for in moral role-making (agency, experience, intent) and how figurative and multimodal cueing can make role assignments communicable. At the same time, extending the framework beyond Western (WEIRD) contexts will require careful work on how agency and experience are culturally organized, and on which historical, sociological, and political conditions shape what kinds of role assignments become readily intelligible.

These scope conditions also clarify the dissertation's main limitations. The project maps the construction and negotiation of moral meaning, but it does not directly observe audience uptake of elite communication. I therefore do not make direct claims about causal effects, persuasion, or elite-to-citizen transmission; instead, I show which moral role cues and boundary accounts are made available in key communication settings, and how moral meanings are worked up in interaction. Second, each empirical piece of material captures a particular communication setting with its own constraints: manifestos are authored and programmatic, the social media analysis is bounded to one party leader and one platform, and focus groups foreground peer accountability. The same accountability dynamics that make deliberation analytically valuable can also mute some forms of extreme talk and shape what "division" looks like in the room, and focus groups cannot settle whether apparent convergence reflects genuine persuasion or interactional accommodation. Finally, while the framework is built to travel, applying it beyond Denmark and the Netherlands, and beyond immigration, the analysis will require careful attention to local and topic-specific historical, sociological, and political

conditions, as reflected, for instance, in Paper B, which highlights the availability of historical, cultural repertoires for moral role assignment.

Reflecting on the dissertation's scope conditions, a clear next step is reception-oriented research that examines what the moral narratives identified here do for audiences: how archetypal narratives proposed by political elites are recognized, accepted, contested, or reworked, and with what consequences for mobilization, felt victimhood, moral self-presentation, and the uptake of role claims such as immigrants as villains or the nation as under threat. Interviews, digital ethnography, and comment-thread analyses are especially well suited for tracing how these proposed moral readings travel beyond elite texts into everyday talk and online interaction. Mixed-method extensions are also promising: experiments could test expectations generated by the qualitative analyses (for example, when moral self-presentation or victim-to-hero invitations induce political support, mobilization, and negative affect towards attitudinal others, shaping interpretations and willingness to endorse boundary claim). A second direction is expanding the multimodal component to video-first campaigning and short-form platforms such as TikTok, where sequencing, audio, editing, and embodied performance may intensify moral narratives and broaden who is recruited into them. Third, the rise of AI-generated political imagery calls for focused study of how synthetic realism may make moral narratives easier to stage, personalize, and scale, while changing what counts as credible "evidence" of harm. Finally, comparative applications to additional countries and other moralized topics – such as climate transition, welfare deservingness, Israel/Palestine, and gender and LGBTQ+ politics – can specify where moral role-making and moral boundary-drawing are most likely to make conflicts socially sticky. Lastly, my analytical framework forms a transferable toolkit for studying other moralized controversies (e.g., climate, welfare, gender, security) across other platforms and formats (speeches, TikTok, televised debates, comment threads), while retaining a common analytical spine.

## 8.4 Societal implications

In the remainder of this section, I draw out three strands of societal implications: (1) mobilization through moral role invitations; (2) moralized division between citizens through moral grandstanding and boundary-drawing; and (3) moral exclusion and dehumanization through role constructions that narrow which forms of agency and experience are recognized.

### 8.4.1 Mobilization through moral role invitations

A first societal implication concerns mobilization. Based on what this dissertation shows about elite communication, moral narratives are appealing to parties and party leaders not only because they justify policies, but because they enable moral self-presentation: actors can narrate harm in ways that position themselves as responsible protectors, cast opponents as culpable, and invite audiences into role relations that make some responses feel morally required rather than optional.

Existing research shows that moral conviction is a core motivator for collective action (Skitka & Morgan, 2014; Täuber & Van Zomeren, 2013; Van Zomeren et al., 2013). It also shows that moralization is associated with greater acceptance of forceful responses in some contexts and can increase support for violent protest or vigilante justice under certain conditions (Skitka & Houston, 2001; Zaal et al., 2011), and that moralized discourse becomes especially salient around contentious and sometimes violent political moments (Mooijman et al., 2018). What is less understood is *why* moral communication can make political disagreement feel action-demanding; my dissertation speaks to this by showing how mobilization might be prompted through moral role invitations. Moral narratives do not merely evaluate immigration; they recruit audiences into a moral story with positions to be stepped into – victims, villains, heroes, and cowards – and with implied choices. These choices are exceptionally difficult to refuse if one wants to maintain a positive moral standing in the narrative: the story suggests both what to avoid being (complicit, weak, cowardly) and what to become (protective, brave, the one who “does something”), so that political stances and actions can be experienced as role-consistent ways of maintaining moral standing.

The mobilizing potential is particularly clear in the anti-immigration victim-to-hero pathway that runs through the dissertation. Research suggests that collective victimhood can be linked to radicalization, Islamophobia, and increased support for political violence (Fritsche, 2022; Marcks & Pawelz, 2022; Obaidi et al., 2021), and related work argues that hero-protector narratives can legitimate force by coupling compassion for an innocent victim with anger toward an illegitimate aggressor, while presenting action as the morally honourable alternative to cowardice (Clément et al., 2017). My contribution is to show how such links might be made plausible through narrative structure. In anti-immigration narratives, collective victimhood is staged as a call to agency: harm is framed as immediate, and the morally appropriate completion becomes some form of protective action, whether that is protesting the arrival of asylum centres, voting for the party, or holding anti-immigrant attitudes without room for compromise. In that sense, the dissertation clarifies a

mechanism-level pathway through which victimhood can be converted into morally warranted agency: once harm is brought close, action can be narrated as responsibility rather than escalation.

Finally, Paper C shows why mobilization cannot be separated from moral standing: we show how feeling morally condemned can be experienced as an attack on decency and self-worth, making the restoration of moral standing a strong action motive (Hochschild, 2016; Lamont et al., 2017). Because moral boundaries put the worth of people and groups into question (Edgell et al., 2006), moral self-victimization can become a mobilizable resource: one that invites defensiveness and risks locking conflict into escalating cycles of boundary-drawing.

### 8.4.2 Moralized division between citizens

A second societal implication concerns moralized division between citizens. Research suggests that people across political camps are increasingly less willing to engage with opponents and carry stronger negative emotions toward them (Boxell et al., 2020; Garrett & Bankert, 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). In this context, my dissertation shows how moral narratives might contribute to polarization by turning immigration disagreement into judgments of moral standing. When conflict is narrated through protectors and perpetrators, blame and cowardice, it becomes easier to treat opponents as morally suspect and, by extension, to view those who agree with them as complicit.

An implication is that the moral grandstanding visible in elite competition, as shown in Paper A and Paper B, can be reproduced in citizen-to-citizen talk even when people are not explicitly echoing elite messages: moralized role assignments provide a ready-made grammar for sorting others into worthy and unworthy. This is supported by the citizen deliberation findings in Paper C: we show how disagreement about immigration can become experienced through moral boundary-drawing, including how feeling morally condemned can motivate defensive counter-condemnation. We also show that immigration can take on a taboo-like quality in everyday interaction: participants describe it as uncomfortable to raise, easy to “misstep” on, and socially risky. The risk of moral condemnation helps explain this avoidance: if speaking about immigration is experienced as exposing one’s decency and moral standing to evaluation, opting out of the conversation becomes an understandable strategy for managing social risk.

Polarization has broader consequences for democratic life: it is linked to erosion of trust (Rapp, 2016), greater openness to authoritarian leaders (Crimston et al., 2022), and increased vulnerability to misinformation and conspiratorial narratives (Van Bavel et al., 2024). At the same time, Chapter 5 nuances the picture by showing that these dynamics are not inevitable. In

deliberation, participants can be skilled at qualifying moral claims, reintroducing context and experience, and revising responsibility attributions in response to pushback – suggesting that face-to-face accountability can sometimes soften moralized division, even as the very risk of social sanction helps explain why many people prefer to avoid these conversations in everyday life.

### 8.4.3 Dehumanization and moral exclusion

A third societal implication is that moral role constructions do not only affect the citizens who are mobilized or divided; they also shape the moral standing of the group being talked about – here, immigrants. Work in moral psychology suggests that moral standing is tightly linked to perceived agency and experience, and that dehumanization often takes the form of denying one of these (Machery, 2021). In related terms, moral exclusion describes how denying full humanness places people outside the boundaries of moral concern (Opatow, 1990), and this can happen not only through overt slurs but through everyday discursive and visual reductions that narrow what kinds of mind, pain, and intent are publicly imaginable (Bastian et al., 2011).

In this light, the dissertation implies a double-edged risk in how immigrants' agency and experience are made publicly imaginable. Paper A makes clear that dehumanization is not only a feature of hostile, anti-immigration rhetoric: even pro-immigration portrayals can narrow moral standing by constructing immigrants primarily through suffering and dependency. While victim framings can mobilize responsibility, repeatedly foregrounding experience while simultaneously stripping agency can also invite paternalism: a stance of care that simultaneously implies incompetence, a “less than full human” status, and legitimizes asymmetrical control (Reeves et al., 2022). This matters because it can produce a saviour–saved hierarchy in which immigrants' moral standing is conditional on remaining “ideal” victims, and it can generate resentment or backlash when agency later becomes visible or when expectations of gratitude and compliance are not met (Ghazal Aswad, 2019). At the other pole, anti-immigration narratives can heighten negative agency while withholding experience, which aligns with the logic of moral exclusion: if a group is cast as intentionally harmful rather than as capable of pain, restrictive treatment can appear more morally acceptable (Opatow, 1990; Schein & Gray, 2014). Paper B reinforces the implication that these dynamics are amplified by multimodal othering: historically sedimented repertoires can make narrowed role readings feel immediate and self-evident rather than argued, which is consequential given evidence that dehumanizing framings are linked to harsher attitudes and support for restrictive policy and to reduced moral qualms about harm (Monroe & Plant, 2019; Utych, 2018).

At the same time, Chapter 5 offers a partial counterpoint that also points to a democratic implication. In deliberation, participants can and do challenge archetypal generalizations by reintroducing complexity in agency and experience – questioning whether a proposed villain/victim reading is warranted and pushing back against blanket moral judgments. This matters because it highlights a core democratic function of discussion in moralized conflicts: it can reopen assumed moral role claims about social groups as something that is argued over rather than assumed, and it can make space for recognizing outgroups as full moral subjects. Moral exclusion is therefore not inevitable, but the dissertation also implies that the social conditions under which immigration is discussed are crucial. When the topic becomes taboo or socially risky to talk about, opportunities for this kind of correction shrink, and the simplified role assignments that enable moral exclusion are more likely to remain uncontested.

## 8.5 Concluding remarks

Moralization and division have become central concerns both in public debate and in scholarly work on polarization, political hostility, and the social consequences of moral conflict. Yet while it is widely acknowledged that moralized conflict can be mobilizing and socially corrosive, we still know less about how moral meaning is practically produced, stabilized, and made consequential across different arenas of political life. This dissertation responds to that gap by tracing how immigration conflict is made morally legible across elite communication and citizen deliberation, and by showing how division is sustained when moralized disagreement is translated into moral boundary-drawing in citizens' talk about attitudinal others and political elites.

I address this by approaching moralization as narrative role-making rather than as an isolated feature of moral vocabulary or specific attitudes. Drawing together moral psychology, cognitive linguistics, multimodal analysis, and cultural sociology, I develop an integrated framework for tracing how moral conflict becomes communicable through moral archetypes, and how role claims become actionable when they invite identification, justify condemnation, and organize evaluations of who counts as decent and socially legitimate. Across the three papers and the analytical chapter, I show how dyadic-harm logic organizes immigration into moral archetypes in party manifestos and Wilders' Facebook posts, how figurative and multimodal cueing – drawing on historically available postcolonial and gendered repertoires – makes those role assignments persuasive and useful for moral self-presentation, how similar archetypal framings become publicly accountable and negotiable in deliberation, and how division takes shape when disagreement becomes a question of moral standing through moral boundary-drawing.

My hope is that this framework provides a transferable vocabulary and set of analytical tools for studying moralized conflict beyond immigration and beyond the specific materials used here, while keeping interpretation anchored in the social, historical, and interactional conditions that make particular role claims intelligible, persuasive, and consequential.



# English Summary

Immigration is a political issue that can be easily narrated as a struggle between good and evil. In public debate, people on the move may be portrayed as vulnerable human beings in need of protection, or as dangerous outsiders who threaten the nation. Politicians can present themselves as brave defenders, while their opponents appear cruel, weak, or complicit. My dissertation examines how these moral narratives are built, how they travel across different arenas of political communication, and what they mean for division between citizens.

Research has shown that morality matters in politics, but we know less about how moral meaning is actually constructed in communication. We know that political actors use moral language and that moralized conflict can deepen hostility. But we know less about how people and groups become recognizable as “good” or “bad,” “deserving” or “dangerous,” and how these judgments are made persuasive. To address this, I develop a framework for studying moral narratives through moral archetypes: heroes, villains, victims, and cowards. These are familiar moral roles that help people make sense of politics by assigning blame, sympathy, responsibility, and worth.

I study immigration because it is a particularly revealing case. Across Europe, immigration is repeatedly communicated through sharp moral contrasts. It is also an issue around which both politicians and citizens are often deeply divided. Empirically, I examine how immigration is narrated in Dutch party manifestos, in Dutch anti-immigration party leader Geert Wilders’ social media posts, and in Danish focus-group discussions among citizens. Taken together, these materials make it possible to trace how moral narratives work in both elite communication and citizen deliberation.

Across the dissertation, I show that immigration conflict is organized through stories in which actors are cast into morally legible roles. In one recurring pattern, immigrants are presented as victims fleeing danger, while the politicians present themselves as the ones that want to help – becoming heroes – and those who resist are cast as villains or cowards. In another, the nation or “ordinary people” are portrayed as the victims, immigrants as the threat, and politicians present themselves as the only actors willing to protect. These narratives are powerful because they simplify political conflict into recognizable moral scenes. They make it easier to see who is supposedly harmed, who is responsible, and what response appears justified.

A central finding is that these roles need translation to work in political communication. They are built through language, images, and culturally

familiar ways of representing social groups. In party texts, metaphor and other figurative devices help translate abstract political questions into concrete and emotionally legible moral situations. On social media, text and image work together to make those roles feel immediate and self-evident. In anti-immigration communication in particular, such representations often draw on older racialized and gendered repertoires that shape who is easily read as threatening, innocent, submissive, or deserving. Moral narratives therefore do not just describe immigration; they actively organize how immigration is seen and felt.

The dissertation also shows that these narratives matter beyond elite communication. Citizens, too, draw on moral archetypes when they talk about immigration. In discussion, people position themselves and others through stories about harm, blame, and responsibility. But here the narratives become more unstable. In face-to-face interaction, participants can challenge one another's role assignments, question who really counts as the victim or villain, and resist simplified judgments. This makes citizen deliberation an important site for seeing both the force and the fragility of moral narratives.

At the same time, the dissertation shows how moralization of immigration can contribute to social division. Disagreement over immigration does not remain confined to policy preferences when people begin to interpret opposing views as signs of moral character. Citizens come to see others not just as people who disagree, but as naive, racist, cruel, hypocritical, or morally self-righteous. In this way, political disagreement is translated into moral boundary-drawing: distinctions between who counts as decent, trustworthy, and socially acceptable, and who does not. This is one reason immigration conflict can feel so persistent and emotionally charged.

Overall, the dissertation argues that moral narratives are central to understanding both the persuasive force of immigration politics and the durability of division around it. They make political conflict morally legible by casting actors into familiar roles, and they shape how citizens judge not only immigration itself, but also one another. At the same time, the dissertation shows that these narratives are not entirely fixed. When people are forced to account for their judgments in interaction, moral role assignments can be challenged, qualified, and reopened. This matters democratically, because it suggests that even highly moralized conflicts are not beyond discussion, and that the stories through which we divide the world into good and evil can still be scrutinized and contested.

# Dansk Resumé

Immigration er et politisk spørgsmål, der let kan fremstilles som en kamp mellem det gode og det onde. I den offentlige debat kan mennesker, der flygter eller migrerer, blive portrætteret som sårbare mennesker med behov for beskyttelse eller som farlige udefrakommende, der truer nationen. Politikere kan fremstille sig selv som modige beskyttere, mens deres modstandere fremstår som grusomme, svage eller medskyldige. Min afhandling undersøger, hvordan disse moralske fortællinger opbygges, hvordan de bevæger sig på tværs af forskellige arenaer for politisk kommunikation, og hvad de betyder for splittelse mellem borgere.

Forskning har vist, at moral spiller en vigtig rolle i politik, men vi ved mindre om, hvordan moralsk mening faktisk konstrueres i kommunikation. Vi ved, at politiske aktører bruger moralsk sprog, og at moraliseret konflikt kan forstærke fjendtlighed. Men vi ved mindre om, hvordan personer og grupper bliver genkendelige som “gode” eller “onde”, “værdige” eller “farlige”, og hvordan disse vurderinger gøres overbevisende. For at undersøge dette udvikler jeg en ramme til at analysere moralske fortællinger gennem moralske arketyper: helte, skurke, ofre og kujoner. Det er velkendte moralske roller, som hjælper mennesker med at forstå politik ved at tildele skyld, sympati, ansvar og værdi.

Jeg undersøger immigration, fordi det er en særligt afslørende case. På tværs af Europa bliver immigration igen og igen kommunikeret gennem skarpe moralske modsætninger. Det er også et spørgsmål, som både politikere og borgere ofte er dybt uenige om. Empirisk undersøger jeg, hvordan immigration fremstilles i hollandske partiprogrammer, i sociale medieopslag fra den hollandske anti-immigrationsleder Geert Wilders og i danske fokusgruppediskussioner blandt borgere. Tilsammen gør disse materialer det muligt at følge, hvordan moralske fortællinger fungerer både i elitekommunikation og i borgeres deliberation.

På tværs af afhandlingen viser jeg, at immigrationskonflikt organiseres gennem fortællinger, hvor aktører placeres i moralsk genkendelige roller. I ét tilbagevendende mønster fremstilles immigranter som ofre på flugt fra fare, mens politikere fremstiller sig selv som dem, der vil hjælpe, og dermed bliver helte, og dem, der gør modstand, fremstilles som skurke eller kujoner. I et andet mønster fremstilles nationen eller “almindelige mennesker” som ofrene, immigranter som truslen, og politikere fremstiller sig selv som de eneste aktører, der er villige til at beskytte. Disse fortællinger er stærke, fordi de forenkler politisk konflikt til genkendelige moralske scener. De gør det lettere at se,

hvem der angiveligt lider skade, hvem der bærer ansvaret, og hvilken reaktion der fremstår berettiget.

Et centralt fund er, at disse roller kræver oversættelse for at kunne fungere i politisk kommunikation. De opbygges gennem sprog, billeder og kulturelt velkendte måder at fremstille sociale grupper på. I partitekster hjælper metaforer og andre figurative greb med at oversætte abstrakte politiske spørgsmål til konkrete og følelsesmæssigt læselige moralske situationer. På sociale medier arbejder tekst og billede sammen om at få disse roller til at fremstå umiddelbare og selvindlysende. Særligt i anti-immigrationskommunikation trækker sådanne fremstillinger ofte på ældre racialiserede og kønnede repertoarer, som former, hvem der let læses som truende, uskyldig, underdanig eller værdig. Moralske fortællinger beskriver derfor ikke blot immigration; de er med til aktivt at organisere, hvordan immigration ses og opleves.

Afhandlingen viser også, at disse fortællinger rækker ud over elitekommunikation. Også borgere trækker på moralske arketyper, når de taler om immigration. I diskussion positionerer mennesker sig selv og andre gennem fortællinger om skade, skyld og ansvar. Men her bliver fortællingerne mere ustabile. I ansigt-til-ansigt-interaktion kan deltagerne udfordre hinandens rolletildelinger, stille spørgsmål ved, hvem der egentlig er offer eller skurk, og gøre modstand mod forenkede vurderinger. Det gør borgeres deliberation til et vigtigt sted for at se både styrken og skrøbeligheden i moralske fortællinger.

Samtidig viser afhandlingen, hvordan moralisering af immigration kan bidrage til social splittelse. Uenighed om immigration forbliver ikke begrænset til politiske præferencer, når mennesker begynder at fortolke modsatrettede synspunkter som tegn på moralsk karakter. Borgere kommer ikke blot til at se andre som mennesker, de er uenige med, men som naive, racistiske, grusomme, hykleriske eller moralsk selvretfærdige. På den måde oversættes politisk uenighed til moralsk grænsedragning: skel mellem, hvem der opfattes som ordentlig, troværdig og socialt acceptabel, og hvem der ikke gør. Det er en af grundene til, at immigrationskonflikt kan føles så vedvarende og følelsesmæssigt ladet.

Samlet argumenterer afhandlingen for, at moralske fortællinger er centrale for at forstå både den overbevisende kraft i immigrationspolitik og den vedvarende splittelse omkring den. De gør politisk konflikt moralsk læselig ved at placere aktører i velkendte roller, og de former, hvordan borgere bedømmer ikke kun immigration i sig selv, men også hinanden. Samtidig viser afhandlingen, at disse fortællinger ikke er helt fastlåste. Når mennesker bliver tvunget til at redegøre for deres vurderinger i interaktion, kan moralske rolletildelinger udfordres, kvalificeres og genåbnes. Det er demokratisk vigtigt, fordi det peger på, at selv stærkt moraliserede konflikter ikke ligger uden for

diskussion, og at de fortællinger, hvorigennem vi deler verden op i godt og ondt, stadig kan granskes og bestrides.



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