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A narrative position analysis of asylum seekers' stories about waiting for their permit permission in Norway

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This research aims to understand more about the consequences that living for many years without a residence permit in Norway can have for asylum seekers. As a narrative inquiry study, the research puzzle is asylum seekers in Norway without a resident permit. This article focuses on one family. The data material is collected with different methods, such as field talks, interviews, pictures, and messages on Messenger. The study uses narrative position analysis, and it analyses the narrated story on three different levels. The main results shows that the parents of the family tend to position themselves differently according to whether they are talking about the time before they fled, the time while fleeing or after the fled. When talking about the decision to flee, they present themselves as active subjects with high agency. They have the ability to take active decisions and play an essential role for the family's life. The analyses reveal three different master narratives; being a parent, being a citizen of a community and being an asylum seeker. I conclude with thoughts about the waiting period as an asylum seeker, and I ask whether Norway respects and ensures human rights. Is the situation of long-term asylum seekers and the condition of the waiting period in different reception centers a form of national abuse of power?

KEYWORDS

asylum seekers, residence permit, narrative research, narrative positioning analysis, asylum seekers and education

1 Introduction

Through a narrative research project, I have followed a number of families who came to Norway as refugees in 2015. One family of four are Kurds from Iraq. They have two children who have been attending school since they arrived in Norway. The parents focus on giving their children the best conditions as possible in which to grow up. The oldest son was 9 years old when he came to Norway in 2015. A few months later, he started in 4th grade. In the school year 2021/22, the boy started in 9th grade at a new school. It is the 7th school he has been enrolled in since he started attending school in Norway. He moved to a different school twice in the middle of the year because the asylum reception centers had been closed. He has difficulty keeping up with school, struggles academically and struggles to make new friends. In the years since my first meeting with the family, the parents have expressed a growing concern for him, and his reaction to the constant relocations as well as changes of schools and local communities. In 2021, the family had still not received a residence permit and had been moving around the country as the asylum reception center was closed.

When working on this article, I started out with an analysis of the boy's life story as a refugee in Norway. After working with the analysis for a while, I understood that his and his family's story changed depending on the position from which I examined the material. By changing the analysis to a narrative positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997), I learned that the analyses of the different positions revealed different levels of the story.

The aim of this article is to give insight into the situation of a refugee family that has lived for many years waiting for permission to stay in Norway. What consequences are there for a young boy and his family living in such unsecure conditions? By analyzing the family's narrative with a position analysis (Bamberg, 1997), the different positions can highlight the responsibilities that the national government and international community have for people forced to flee from their home country.

2 Background and context

According to The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), you are deemed an asylum seeker if you apply for protection (asylum) in Norway and the application has not been accepted or rejected yet (UDI, 2024). If you receive a positive answer, you are granted a residence permit as a refugee or on humanitarian grounds. The persons in this article are asylum seekers who fled from Iraq as Kurds and who seek a residence permit as refugees. They waited from 2015 to 2021 to receive a positive answer. Before that, they received two negative answers on their appealed applications.

Norway is home to around 5.5 million citizens. Between 2015 and 2020, the number of asylum seekers dropped dramatically. In 2015, there were about 31,000 asylum seekers in Norway; in 2016, this number was about 16,000. By 2020, there were 2,500 (UDI, 2021a). When asylum seekers arrive in Norway, they are housed in asylum reception centers. In the space of 5 years, 230 reception centers closed, and in 2021, there was a total of 20 asylum reception centers left in Norway (NRK, 2021).

The UDI is responsible for offering people seeking asylum a place to live. The municipalities are responsible for the conditions and welfare of everyone who stays in the municipalities, including asylum seekers and refugees. In a letter sent from the Directorate of Health, the Directorate of Education and the Directorate of Children, Youth and Families to all the country's municipalities and county municipalities in October 2015, it is pointed out that the directorates emphasize the right of all children to a safe everyday life that will help them grow and develop as people (Bufdir, 2015).

On the UDI's website, we find articles relating to setting up and closing asylum reception centers. The need for reception centers is influenced by several factors: The number of asylum seekers arriving in the country; the time it takes to process the applications on resident permission; the number of people who are settled in the municipalities and the deportation of people with a final refusal. The UDI closes reception centers when the need decreases. An overall assessment is made of which centers it is most appropriate to keep. Such an assessment includes, among other things, the costs of reception operations and the quality of the work done by the center and the location. According to the article, the individual needs of residents are not the basis when an overall assessment is made (UDI, 2021b).

The right to education is enshrined in four of the conventions, included in the Human Rights Act. The main features of the convention are that all children have the right and duty to primary school education, and the state must ensure that this education is free. When it is likely that the child will be in Norway for more than 3 months, the child has the right and obligation to attend primary school education [Education Act 2–1(2)] (Lovdata, 2018). This education aims to maximize each child's abilities and opportunities so they can fully participate responsibly in a free society (Lile, 2012, p. 508). For asylum seekers over the age of 18, the right to education is waived. In Norway, they must attend the introductory program at the asylum center, but they have no right afforded to them to attend courses to learn Norwegian, maintain their education or work in the host country (Lovdata, 2015).

In the Immigration Act of 2008, the rights of asylum-seeking children were strengthened in line with the fact that a child who is a refugee is vulnerable based on experiences of war and conflict. This is compatible with the national guidelines and ensures that the national guidelines are in line with both the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Human Rights Act and the Constitution (Lidén, 2019). At the same time, this is being debated by political leaders in Norway. The protection of children in Norway is constantly being weakened. This has led to a decrease in the number of refugees who receive residence permits, as Lidén (2019) claims:

In the granting of residence permits on humanitarian grounds, the child's best interests are a primary consideration. The Immigration Act expresses the best-interests principle in Section 38, but unlike Section 28 on asylum, the assessment under Section 38 also provides for the consideration of other factors in order to control and/or limit immigration, prevent illegal actions and safeguard society at large. In such cases, the child's best interests are a primary, but not the exclusive or decisive, consideration. The principle of the child's best interests should be balanced with the need for immigration control (p. 343).

International conventions state that asylum seekers have the right to protection from persecution (Olwig, 2023, p. 53). However, this is not the same as living in a new country as fellow citizens in another country (Olwig, 2023, p. 53). Researchers are beginning to talk about "the new normal" (Olwig, 2023, p. 53). "The new normal" refers to a narrative that focuses on a situation where asylum seekers have fled to a new country hoping to begin their new life. Instead, they are placed in a situation waiting for their residence permit, where waiting and uncertainty severely negatively affect their wellbeing (Olwig, 2023, p. 53). People live in extended exile where they do not get the opportunity to lead fulfilling lives or settle into their new country. They spend their time waiting for permission to stay (Hyndman and Giles, 2016; Olwig, 2023).

Being in the asylum seeker system is like living in limbo (Olwig, 2023, p. 53). They are fleeing an unsustainable situation in their home country, and many are threatened with being killed. In the recipient country, the waiting period comes with hope for the future and a better life. Many asylum seekers arrive with trauma, but for young people in the asylum seeker system, it is not always the traumatic memories that are the most distressing, but rather the uncertainty of their situation (Michelsen and Berg, 2015, p. 122).

The situation for asylum seekers living in reception centers can be critical. A review of international research shows that long-term asylum seekers have a higher risk of struggling with mental health issues than other parts of the population (Kjærgård and Jensen, 2018). The review indicates that there is a connection between the risk factors after immigration, the number of places they have lived, the length of their stay and the mental health of the asylum seekers (Kjærgård and Jensen, 2018, p. 268). A living condition report from Norway (Berg and Tronstad, 2015) confirms this in its surveys, which show that 2/3 of asylum-seeking children worry about the future and that children who are awaiting a response from the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) or the Immigration Appeals Board (UNE) or who have had their application refused worry far more than children who have been granted asylum and who are waiting for settlement (Tronstad, 2015, p. 45). An international review also found in two out of three articles that there is a connection between the number of relocations in the receiving country and poor mental health among children who are asylum seekers (Kjærgård and Jensen, 2018, p. 268).

3 Methods

This study is a part of a larger longitudinal study of asylum seekers in Norway where I follow several families that arrived in Norway in 2015. The other families (from Syria) obtained their residence permit relatively quickly in Norway (1–2 years after they arrived) and are not relevant to the focus of the present study. When starting a narrative inquiry study, the researcher operates with a research puzzle, an interest, but not a focused research question (Clandinin, 2022). When following this particular family, the story was interesting to analyse in order to learn more from the situation of living a life as asylum seekers over many years in Norway.

3.1 Data collection

The data in this project consists of notes and transcripts of informal conversational meetings, messaging by mobile phone and two longer unstructured interviews with conversations focusing on education from their home country, their experience while fleeing and schooling in Norway. The interviews were conducted in July 2017 and February 2020 at the family's home at a reception center. The parents had to decide whether the children should participate in the interview. For the first interview, they chose to have the interview when the children were at school. The children were there the second time but they did not participate in the interview. In the interviews, I had an interpreter who translated the conversations. The first interview was recorded on tape, while the second was mistakenly not recorded, and so I wrote down my field notes directly after the interview. The reason why I did not record the second interview can be understood by my fieldnotes from the meeting with the employees and the interpreter when I came to the reception center:

Vibekes fieldnotes: I approach the reception, where I am met by 2–3 employees who ask who I am and seem suspicious. One lady asks why I am there. She asks which university I am from and about the subject of my project.

I greet the translator as he arrives. He seems calm and gentle. I get a sense of great scepticism from the lady while she gives us directions on where to go. As the translator and I walk up a small hill, he tells me that the way he was greeted by the staff made him quite uncomfortable. He has never experienced being greeted as a translator this way before. There were several people who had stood around him and got upset that they had no information about my arrival. He had become quite angry, he said. However, he is a translator, he stated, and could, therefore, not show his anger, so he remained calm.

It made me upset to be greeted like this, but when I met the parents at their room, I had to act calmly and concentratedly. Because of this, I was too unfocused to turn on the recorder correctly and follow my routine.

During the interviews, I did not use an interview guide, but started in the first interview by talking about my research project and sharing the informational letter, written in Arabic, that the parent's signed. In the first interview, I asked the parents to tell me about their own schooling, without having a template or checkpoints to follow. I wanted to let the conversation flow as freely as possible, without any prior guidance other than talking about education. The interview lasted 2 h, and the parents themselves chose to tell me about their concerns for their son. In the second interview, I took up the thread on schooling in Norway as well as what it is like living in different asylum reception centers and moving around so many times. We discussed various issues related to this, which I had noted in advance based on the previous interview and conversations with the parents. Both parents thought it was good that I was researching this topic, and they were happy to share their experiences, views and reflections on this.

Over the years, the mother and I have communicated over Messenger on our phones. The content of the messages was about their everyday life, about the school or about the reception centers. The messages also contain photos from documents with the rejections, reasons and statements from a lawyer. She also documents the various reception centers through photos and describes the conditions that they are living in. At times, it has been difficult to understand the content of the message since she translates from Arabic to Norwegian with Google Translate. Gradually, I have become better at asking quite directly what she means in order to confirm that I have understood her correctly.

3.2 Ethics statement

The Norwegian Center for Research Data (Sikt.no, 2024) approved the handling of the participant's privacy in 2017, and the participants were assured confidentiality. All the interviews were conducted in Arabic and orally translated by a translator into Norwegian. At the start of both interviews, the parents talked directly to the translator who then translated it to me. When I talked, I talked directly to the parents. After a while, we got used to the three-way communication, and the parents talked directly to me. It was interesting to sense the rhythm of the conversation. It naturally moves more slowly because of the translation, and we could naturally stay longer in the more emotional aspects because of the pauses in the conversation.

Periodically, there were some challenging ethical aspects to the project. One of these was my relationship to the mother. She sometimes mentioned their difficult finances and lack of resources. I have occasionally collected used clothes and household items, mostly for the children when their finances have been particularly tight. I have also written a letter of support about my acquaintanceship with the family over many years, which is used by the authorities to assess applications for a residence permit. My certificate was one of many others. Otherwise, I have been a listening partner when needed. I have not felt that the mother or the family have misused their contact with me or asked me for services I cannot provide due to the project. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that it is the parents who talk about their son's life situation, not the son himself.

3.3 Analysis

Michael Bamberg offers the possibility of studying narrative interaction as positioning in order to focus on how people tell their stories and what the content of their stories are (Blix, 2017, p. 111).

Positioning analysis allow us to empirically deal with how people accomplish situated identities because positions are tied to the social actions by which they are made relevant (Deppermann, 2015, p. 370). This means that: "Positioning theory does not locate identity in some abstract, integrated structure "behind" discursive practice, but in what people observable do (Deppermann, 2015, p. 370).

The narrative activity can be analysed on three different levels (Bamberg, 1997). The level 1 position focuses on the "what" of the story and how the story characters are positioned in relation to each other. The level 2 position focuses on the "how" of the story, as the interactions between the actors in the actual situation where the stories are told. How does the storyteller position themselves in relation to the audience, and how does the storyteller address the question "Who are you?" The level 3 position focuses on how the storyteller positions themselves in relation to a wider discourse, and to social and cultural processes in the situation of interactions (Bamberg, 1997).

4 The narrative

The narrative is created based on different data materials described in the methods. The narrative will be presented chronologically. Because of the missing record from the interview the second time, the presentation will be based on my fieldnotes in section 4.4. This first level of the analysis started with transcriptions of the interviews in Norwegian before I organized all the data material chronologically. The subtitles of the narrative indicates step one of the analysis, as interpreted by me. This also indicate level 2 of the position analysis; this is my interpretation of the story told by the parents in the different settings in which I met them (interviews and interactions by Messenger and photos).

4.1 Before the escape

Until 2003–2004, there was a good situation where they lived. However, then came the bombs and the occupation. The parents

were youngsters then, Ania aged 16, and Mohammad aged 19, just when they were to go to school. Just then, everything became chaotic.

Vibeke: But can't you say a little more about the situation, you say it became unsafe to go to school and live there?

Mohammad: Up until 2003 and 2004, the situation was very good. But after that, when we were youngsters, Baghdad was bombed, and the regime became... and the Americans came and occupied our country. The president was postponed and... (Mother, father and interpreter talk at each other's mouths).

Vibeke: How old were you then?

Both: 19 and 16. And it was just at that time that we needed to learn and go to school and stuff. And it became chaotic at that moment.

Anina: So at the time, the Americans went in, there wasn't a state in that sense. It became an occupation. It was just the mafia.

Mohammad: I finished school, I went one year later, but I saw that there was nothing I could pick up there.

Their parents were highly educated. Mohammad's father was a religious leader in a mosque and was killed. They killed those with good education, doctors, imams and teachers. Ania and Mohammad were threatened because the father was the oldest one left in the family. They used Mohammad's father's phone and called and threatened him. They told him to leave, or he and the family would be killed. Therefore, they fled to Egypt.

Mohammad: We were told in 2014 that we had to leave Iraq for me and my family's life, and then we had to leave in 2014.

Anina: We got married in 2005. And we had children in 2006. Our boy. Just in the first years when I had children, we were threatened. There was a war between the Sunni and Shia, which are two sects among Muslims.

Vibeke: And you are?

Anina: We are Sunni; we are the minority. The father was kidnapped. Mohammad's father. And he was killed. Then, we got threats, were threatened time and time again through the phone. They called from Mohammad's father's phone to say that if you don't leave and get out, we will kill you and the children.

Vibeke: Why did they want you to leave?

Anina: They didn't want us because we are Sunni Muslims.

4.2 The escape

The escape was challenging and risky. Mohammad had to decide for the family to go across the sea. The future was dangerous for the family. Mohammad was terrified for himself and the family. Therefore, he had to take that risk and travel to Europe.

Mohammad: It was really very difficult and risky. Because I had to take the risk for me and my family across the sea. I couldn't continue living in Egypt. The future was dangerous for me and my children. I couldn't go back to Iraq. I was terrified for me and my family. Therefore, I had to take that risk and travel to Greece.

Anina: To travel across the sea, it was not easy to decide. It was really dangerous and difficult. For a whole month, we couldn't sleep. We cried around the clock, and we didn't know what to do. We were the ones who needed to decide this there, and we were dependent on Mohammad. So we had to travel together so that we would keep the whole family together.

Vibeke: Yes, it's brave.

Mohammad: I really wanted to get my children safely to another country so that they have a good future and to go to school. Otherwise, beyond that, there is a risk that we will be killed there, if we are to continue living there.

Anina: To date, my dream is to go to university and complete my education. Therefore, I do not like that my children should experience the same situation that I have been through when it comes to education and not being able to finish.

Mohammad wanted to get the children safely to another country so that they could have a future and go to school. They took the boat on 13/10/2015 and arrived in Norway on 7 November.

4.3 After the escape

As parents, they could not go to school without a residence permit.

Vibeke: How is this for you now? Can you take any Norwegian courses?

Anina: No, we are not allowed to be at school. We do not have a residence permit, and so we are not allowed to work or go to school. So we just stay at home and sit and drink tea. It's just that life.

Mohammad: We would like to get a job.

Anina: Otherwise, we feel abnormal.

Vibeke: But when you first came to Norway and were in the emergency department, what kind of services did you receive there? Did you receive any training?

Mohammad: Mostly about habits and traditions here in Norway. Laws and things like that.

Vibeke: Was it very different?

Mohammad: Yes. I remember we wrote and noted what kind of professions each had. It was like signing up as a volunteer worker or participating in various events. The only thing I was offered was to work in a garden, sweep the street or clear away various things. This

has nothing to do with my background. And then we moved. So nothing happened.

Khalid was in 1st and 2nd grade in his home country and 3rd grade in Egypt. When they came to Norway, he started in 4th grade in their first city. Then, they had to move when the shelter was closed, and he started 5th grade in a new place. The son enjoyed himself there and made many friends. They lived there for 4 months. He did not want to leave and started crying when they had to leave. He made many friends there and received a medal and diploma. Other parents kept coming to the house and taking Khalid to play football. He liked that.

Anina: There, the children enjoyed themselves a lot. And our son started crying, asking why we had to move.

Vibeke: He didn't want to leave?

Anina: No, he didn't want to leave. He made so many friends there. He received medals and diplomas and ... Other parents kept coming to our home and taking our son to play football and to training. And he liked exactly this. That's why he cried.

Vibeke: But you lived there for about a year.

Anina: No, 4 months. However, he was out playing football every day. And he went to various birthday celebrations.

Then, they came to a new place. He attended the rest of the 5th grade in the new town. When the 5th grade ended, this facility was closed, and in 6th grade, he entered yet another new school in a new location. It was hard. Eventually, it got better. They made friends, Khalid started football and wanted to go out and play with friends. After a few years, the reception center was closed, and they again had to move far from where they lived and had begun to put down roots. The son started 7th grade in the new place and became quiet and sullen. He could not bear to make new friends because there was no point; he'd just have to move again. In 8th grade, they again had to move, and he began at a new school in a different part of the country. In summer 2021, they had to move again, and he started in 10th grade in a new place and school.

Anina: The children are most affected by constant moves from one place to another. From the very first day in Norway, we have not been settled in a specific place. Not peace and quiet. We are constantly on the move. From one place to the other.

Mohammad: Moving constantly affects our son. It's hard to have friends, and even harder to lose friends.

Anina: When we hear that the reception center is going to be closed soon, we are anxious about how we will tell our son. Why and where we are going next. And that's why we're so afraid to tell our son this.

In summer 2021, the parents said they no longer cared. Reception centers are closed, and they must move. They have financial trouble and need more money to spend on their children. Khalid needs a new phone, and so it is a crisis. They do not know how it is with him; he is

just quiet and sad. Ania tells him not to get a girlfriend, but it is too late. He tells her, “Mama, I have not been told not to date anyone before we get the residence permit.”

4.4 Living in an asylum reception center

At the most recent center, the family of four lived in one room. There was a narrow double bed and a bunk bed. Kahlid slept at the top. In the middle was a dining table that was only there sometimes. There was a couch there. They had to choose between a sofa and a table. They tend to eat on the floor but made an exception when they received visitors.

The parents are exasperated with the last centers they stayed in. The current center is the worst shelter they have ever stayed at. They have not thrived here, largely due to lack of space. They have repeatedly asked for another room but they were only told that they could choose to leave if they wished (This is not an option for the family. They can leave the center, but they will lose all their rights as an asylum seeker). They can wash their clothes once a week, and they share a kitchen with two other families. The room is worn, with paint flakes on the walls, and visible pipes along the walls. They let employees know if they needed to replace a light bulb or repair something. It could take many weeks for it to be fixed. The reception itself was deserted.

The latest move had significant consequences for the family, especially since the facilities and conditions were so poor there. The children had to take a bus to school, and the parents got to ride the bus once a week. Khalid had difficulty keeping up with school because of worries at home. Anina said that the only reason they stayed there and were keeping their spirits up was that it was safe in Norway. A sense of safety gave them the motivation to keep going.

5 A three-level positioning analysis

In the following, the three different levels of the narrative positioning analysis will be presented.

5.1 Level one: positioning of characters in the narratives

The focus of level one in the narrative position analysis focuses on the “what.” What is the story about and how do the characters of the story position themselves?

The parents position themselves differently according to whether they are talking about the time before they fled, the time while fleeing or their situation in Norway. When analyzing how the parents navigate through what Bamberg (2022) calls the realm of identity construction, it is interesting to look more closely at some dilemmatic spaces to understand how the parents position themselves in position level one. The specific dilemmatic space to examine more closely is what is termed agency, how the self has agency in its own life (Bamberg, 2022, p. 204).

In the level one position, the family talks about a change in life with the war that was going on where they lived. As youngsters, they experienced chaos, and attending school became difficult. When Mohammad's father, who was a religious leader in a mosque, was

killed, they had to make a decision that would have a significant impact on their lives. The killing of the father and the insecure future changed their agency and allowed them to make this significant decision to leave their home. When they talk about fleeing from their country, they position themselves as agentic self-constructors (Bamberg, 2012a, p. 9).

Mohammad: It was really very difficult and risky. Because I had to take the risk for me and my family to traverse the sea. I couldn't continue to live in Egypt. The future was dangerous for me and the children. I couldn't go back to Iraq. I was terrified for me and my family. Therefore, I had to take that risk and travel to Greece.

Anina: To travel across the sea, it was not easy to decide. It was really dangerous and difficult. For a whole month we couldn't sleep. We cried around the clock, and we didn't know what to do. We were the ones who needed to decide this there, and we were dependent on Mohammad. So we had to travel together so that we would keep the whole family together.

Mohammad argues about why he had to take the risk to escape, and when Ania is talking about this decision, she, as a narrator, leans toward a direction of person-to-world fit (Bamberg, 2012a, p.107). When they are talking about making this decision, they come across as vital, as self-determined, and that can play an essential role for them and their family's life (Bamberg, 2012a, p. 109). The parents present themselves as active subjects with high agency, deciding on a safe and better life for the family.

The family came to Norway with hope for their future life in a safe environment. When talking about their experiences in Norway, the narrative device shifts toward the world-to-person direction of fit (Bamberg, 2012b, p. 206). When discussing the parents' situation, they view themselves as recipients with no possibility of attending work or education.

Mohammad: Yes. I remember we wrote and noted what kind of professions each had. It was like signing up as a volunteer worker or participating in various events. The only thing I was offered was work in a garden, sweep the street or clear away various things. This has nothing to do with my background. And then we moved. So nothing happened.

Life is just about waiting at home and drinking tea. This results in low agency, where the parents put themselves in a less influential and powerful position than when talking about fleeing their country and what led to it.

Ania said that the only reason they stayed there and were keeping their spirits up was that it was safe in Norway. A sense of safety gave them the motivation to keep going.

The low-agency positioning is even more vital when talking about their experiences with moving around from one center to another and changing schools, homes, local environments, and friends. The victim's role is very apparent when the mother talks about the last time they had to move. Their despair over the situation is evident, as is their knowledge about how powerless they are as

parents to create the best life for their son. This is also very clear when the father makes this statement

Our son was wetting the bed and didn't want to make any new friends. This constant movement around is affecting our son. It is hard to make friends; it is even harder to lose friends. We are apprehensive about our son.

5.2 Level 2: positioning in the interactive setting

This step of the analysis focuses on the “how” of the story, the interactions between the actors in the actual situations. As described, the data material contains different sources. The analysis shows how the positions are continuously changing and created.

I met the family twice to conduct the interviews, although I had several meetings with them before the first interview. Both interviews were conducted at the reception center where they lived. I hired a translator to translate the conversations (a different one in each interview). They both had experience with translators for refugees, but this was in other settings and not with a researcher. The parents knew me from different social meetings where the first reception center arranged different activities for the local community and the refugees at the center. They were aware that I am a middle-aged white woman from Norway who is interested in learning more about their history and experiences as well as quite curious about the topic of asylum seekers and education.

In the first meeting, we sat in the living room. In the beginning, the parents were unsure of their position regarding me as a researcher and the translator. The translator himself said he was unsure of his role in this assignment. What was my agenda as a researcher? He was used to translating in meetings with, for instance, the reception center to provide information to the refugees. After a short while, the parents understood their role and position in the conversation, and so did the translator, whose task was to translate the parents' story to me more so than translating the information from me to the parents.

In the first meeting, the parents told me their story of fleeing their country and about their decision to flee. They positioned themselves as people who had a story to tell as active subjects with high agency. When talking about why the father had to make the decision to take the risk of leaving with his family on a little boat over to Greece, risking his and their lives, he sat up and was active and emotive in his body language. I, as a listener, mainly was quiet but had to ask several questions to understand this complex story. The mother started to talk and explain the story at the same time as the father, and the translator had a hard time translating it all correctly into Norwegian. When they told me about the suspicion of the Norwegian government regarding their story of fleeing their country, the father yelled loudly out into the room when looking at me:

Do you really think I would risk my own children's lives if it were not to save our lives in our home country? Who do they think I am?

At the end of the interview, the parents told me about their concerns about their son. They sat on the sofa. The father's voice was low, and he shook his head.

Two and a half years later, I met them at a new reception center for the second time. To understand the context of the position at level 2 and why the parents described it in this way under these circumstances, it is important to note the context of this meeting when the reception

center was suspicious of me as a researcher. I will present some of my field notes of the visit before presenting the analysis of how the parents positioned themselves to me and how the translator positioned himself.

In the middle of the conversation, there is a knock on the door. A suspicious lady asks to speak to me. She says that the general manager would like to talk to me, and I say I will visit him when we are done. Before four, I say. Ok, thank you she says.

Afterwards, the parents are pretty upset. They say that this is the worst reception center they have ever stayed at, and they have stayed at five different ones.

It is four o'clock, and I take a break from the interview and go up to the general manager, who has an office in a separate building. When I go in, a meeting of the board for the reception center ends. I am waiting outside when about 12 white men pass me. Everyone looks directly at me and smiles. I experience them as condescending, but I decide to be confident in meeting the manager.

The context of where the interview was carried out impacts how the parents position themselves in relation to me. In this situation, they are not able to be active agents in their own life, but rather objects with low agency. They have asked the manager at the reception center for better facilities for the family, and only to get the answer they were free to move from the center to elsewhere in Norway. In this context, the parents are in a vulnerable situation with a lot of frustration to express. They want to express their frustration to the manager but are afraid of the consequences. When I positioned myself as someone who is able to visit this family in front of the manager of the center, they placed my presence in the foreground for their battle with the management at the center. When I am calm and firm in front of challenges, I am no longer simply the researcher who wants to listen to their story. The translator also positioned himself when meeting the parents and expressed sympathy with their situation. During the meeting, he gave them his personal telephone number in case they needed help in the future.

When talking about their situation, the parents express that they are tired. The strong willingness to fight for the best interests of the family is gone, and they are resigned.

In position level 2, the analysis can show us the effect a narrative interview can have on the relationship between the participant and the researcher. Bamberg and Andrews (2004, p. 355) point out that the interaction can bring “out” not only what happened, but also a sense of the person who does the telling. It is the interview and meeting with me as a researcher, that make the parents able to position themselves as active agents in a setting in the reception center where they are reduced to objects with low agency.

5.3 Level three: positioning with reference to cultural and social master narratives

At level 3, I analyse the parent's story with references to broader master narratives and to broader discourses (Blix et al., 2013, p. 171). Three different master narratives are identified in the analyses.

The first master narrative is about being a parent, which is an undertone during conversations. The parenthood is the motivation for fleeing.

Mohammad: I really wanted to get my children safely to another country so that they would have a better future and could go to school. Otherwise, beyond that, there is a risk that we will be killed there if we are to continue living there.

Anina: To date, my dream is to go to university and complete my education. Therefore, I do not like that my children should experience the same situation that I have been through when it comes to teaching and not be able to finish.

Parentship is also the reason for their concerns in Norway.

Anina: No, he didn't want to leave. He made so many friends there. He received medals and diplomas and ... Other parents kept coming to our home and taking our son to play football and for training. And he liked exactly this. That's why he cried.

Anina: The children are most affected by the constant moves from one place to another. From the very first day in Norway, we have not been settled in a specific place. No peace and quiet. We are constantly on the move. From one place to the other.

Mohammad: Moving constantly affects our son. It's hard to have friends, and even harder to lose friends.

Anina: When we hear that the reception center is going to be closed soon, we are anxious about how we will tell our son. Why and where we are going next. And that's why we're so afraid to tell our son this.

The second master narrative is about being a citizen of the community, with all the rights and possibilities that come with citizenship. Bamberg and Andrews (2004) describe characters in the narratives as “becoming,” pointing out the undergoing processes of transformation when changing the location and time coordinate of one's life, for instance when refugees flee to a new country and give them a new start in their lives (p. 357). In this case, the shift from citizenship to living in a new country without permanent permission transforms the parents from active agents to inactive agents.

Vibeke: But when you first came to Norway and were in the first reception center, what kind of services did you receive there? Did you receive any training?

Mohammad: Mostly about habits and traditions here in Norway. Laws and things like that.

Vibeke: Was it very different?

Mohammad: Yes. I remember we wrote and noted what kind of professions each had. It was like signing up as a volunteer worker or participating in various events. The only thing I was offered was work in a garden, sweep the street and clear away various things. This has nothing to do with my background. And then we moved. So nothing happened.

In summer 2021, the parents said they no longer cared. Reception centers are closed, and they must move. They have financial trouble and need more money to spend on their children.

In the analyses of the parents' story with references to broader mastery narratives, we find that regulations and decisions on residence permits in the country are of great importance. I call this third master narrative of being an asylum seeker. The regulations and rules on residence permits in Norway have a big impact on the family and their life in Norway.

Vibeke: How is this for you now? Can you take any Norwegian courses?

Anina: No, we are not allowed to be at school. We do not have a residence permit and so we are not allowed to work or go to school. So we just stay at home and sit and drink tea. It's just that life.

Mohammad: We would like to get a job.

Anina: Otherwise, we feel abnormal.

They have no impact on where they live and must constantly move when the centers are closed, and the children suffer as a result of this.

Anina: The children are most affected by the constant moves from one place to another. From the very first day in Norway, we have not been settled in a specific place. No peace and quiet. We are constantly on the move. From one place to the other.

When talking about fleeing and the reason they fled, their analysis of the situation is that the society they lived in posed a danger to their lives. In Norway, they have a great desire to live in a safe and stable environment where they can get an education and work as well as where their children can live, go to school, get friends and be safe. They want to be good and responsible parents, but life without a residence permit makes the situation unpredictable. They have no right to decide where to live, where to go to school or when to move (reception centers are closed and they must move). As asylum seekers, the kids have the right to attend school, and the parents narrate where and when the kids went to school. In the Human Rights Act and the Education Act, we find enshrined that the right to and duty of providing primary school education with the spotlight put on the individual's needs and talents as well as the development of the individual's abilities. At the same time, many asylum reception centers have closed, which means that the residents must move. All these provisions have a direct impact on this family's position in Norwegian society.

6 Discussion and conclusion

The period described in this article, when refugees are arriving in their new host country and applying for a permanent residence permit, is recognized as a waiting period.

Irregular migrants in Norway wait for an answer to their appeal to UNE, for changes in politics or policy, for documentation strengthening their case, for a call from their lawyer or for something unspecified to happen. What they have in common is a hope for a permanent residence permit, which can be seen as a condensed symbol of their striving, hope and anticipation (Bendixsen and Eriksen, 2018, p. 93).

The waiting period is linked to the residence permit, and their acceptance of the conditions in an asylum center is based on the hopes for a new future in their new host countries, as the family in this article shows us. However, the capacity to live in the waiting process, in an asylum center, and the limitations of living without a permanent residence permit are closely related to time. How many years is it likely that they will retain hope for a better future, for a new start with all the possibilities that come with a safe environment, when waiting for the Norwegian government to make their decision?

The position analysis in the article focuses on the narrative agency and how the self has an agency in its own life (Bamberg, 2012a, p. 109). As seen in the analyses, the parents present themselves as active subjects with high agency making the decision to flee from their home country. When the parents are talking about their experiences in Norway, they put themselves in a low agency position and as less influential and powerful than when talking about fleeing their country. This is related to their experience of waiting for a long period for the permanent residence permit and having to move around in Norway. Is it possible to understand the narrative agency for refugees in terms of the concept of waiting and hope? In the article “Time and the Other: Waiting and Hope among Irregular Migrants,” Bendixsen and Eriksen (2018) describe and discuss the concepts of waiting and hope among irregular migrants in Norway. They wonder if the waiting time not only has to be regarded as a waste of time, a hopeless time, but rather an active kind of time (p. 89). An irregular migrant implies that you do not have legal residence in the country. The migrants in this case are not irregular. They have received two rejections to their application for a permanent residence permit, but they have appealed the decision. However, the parents have no rights to get an education or to work.

The analysis shows that when the parents narrate about how they actively made the decision to flee, they lean toward a person-to-world direction of fit (Bamberg, 2012b, p. 206), and the opposite when talking about the waiting period in Norway and constantly moving around. Gasparini (1995) (in Bendixsen and Eriksen, 2018, p. 91) describes the waiting time as the empty gap that appears at the intersection between events, but Eriksen points out the possibility as being a prerequisite for creativity during the waiting time. The analysis shows that the waiting time plays a role for the parents in order to express their hopes for their future. In the first interview, they are worried about the situation and the consequences for their children from a changing environment when moving around. However, there is still hope. In the last interview, they were resigned; the last thing they have is patience. They do not have the possibility to be active in their own lives, and as the narrator they navigate from person-to-world direction (Bamberg, 2012b, p. 205).

The Human Rights Act is a universal declaration to ensure and inspire all countries to work to ensure all people can gain freedom, equality and dignity. In Norway, as in many other Western countries, we have a [Norwegian National Human Rights Institution \(2024\)](#).¹ On their website, they claim that, in Norway, compared to many other countries, the Norwegian government respects and ensures human rights to a large extent. However, human rights are still violated in Norway.¹

One of the core values of human rights is the protection of the individual against potential abuses of power (see text footnote 1, respectively). When looking at the “new normal,” where refugees are

living in extended exile with no right to live with a modicum of normalcy (Olwig, 2023), you can ask if the situation of long-term asylum seekers and the condition of the waiting period in different reception centers is a form of national abuse of power. The analysis in this article shows that the regulations and rules on residence permits, the right to education and the consequences of municipal decisions have a major effect on the family’s life in Norway.

Who is responsible for human development and fate? This issue can be navigated through the lens of personal responsibility and society’s support and responsibility for the development of humans and identity (Bamberg, 2012b, p. 205).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Kjersti Haugstvedt and Hildur Thorarensen, Sikt (NSD). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants’ legal guardians/next of kin. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s), and minor(s)’ legal guardian/next of kin, for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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¹ www.nhri.no

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