

RESEARCH

How to be a 'Good Asylum Seeker'? The Subjectification of Young Men Seeking Asylum

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This research focuses on the subjectification of young asylum-seeking men. By subjectification, we mean the effort an individual invests in detecting, negotiating, meeting and contesting the surrounding discursive expectations. The underlying question is: if someone wants to fulfil the position ascribed to them, that is be a 'good asylum seeker' and respond to the surrounding demands as much as possible, what would then, in fact, be a 'good asylum seeker'? The data consists of interviews and ethnographic hanging out with nine young asylum-seeking men throughout their asylum process. Based on their reflections on the discourses of the surrounding society, a 'good asylum seeker' is patient, active, positive and grateful; he normalises racism he faces and accepts prejudice towards himself. A 'good asylum seeker' also accepts the position of a less worthy human being, acknowledging that in an ideal situation he would be entirely away, out of sight or in another subject position. Our findings showcase the sheer impossibility of successfully filling the asylum seeker subject position, as the requirements are contradictory and unrealistic. Paradoxically, it could be said that a 'good asylum seeker' is no longer an asylum seeker.

Keywords: Asylum seeker; Subjectification; Subject position; Nomadic research

Introduction

'You should like your life, even if it's bad. You should fight. Life is not easy. You should put the stress outside, and the bad people, the bad words, and bad [asylum] decisions. You should put it all away. You should continue and be nice. You can be the best when you do that. There are so many things in my mind, in my heart, but I'm still fighting life, living, having a nice time with my friends, going outside, hanging around, going to Helsinki, working' (Fathi¹).

Being an asylum seeker requires managing multiple overlapping and contradicting expectations, simultaneously. Not only are the circumstances of departing one's country of origin

¹ Names are self-chosen pseudonyms of the participants.

challenging, possibly inhumane and traumatising, the host country presents its own challenges: the access to asylum is increasingly difficult and possibly unfair (Hambly & Gill 2020), access to the national health systems is complicated (Tuomisto et al. 2019) and the right to education and employment may be denied (Dunwoodie et al. 2020; Lambrechts 2020). Moreover, media, public discussion and political discourses tend to present asylum seekers negatively as threats or a burden to the receiving societies, or alternatively, as victims (Smets et al. 2019). Furthermore, having survived more or less unbearable situations and taken control of their own lives, being treated as helpless victims without opportunities to control their own lives feels contradictory (Petäjänieniemi, Kaukko & Lanas 2020). These life circumstances, external possibilities and common representations prefigure who an asylum seeker can be. Power relations constitute human beings within discursive formations with very real material effects (St. Pierre 2013) that limit how a life as an asylum seeker should unfold and how the subjectivities of asylum seekers become formed (see also Kurki, Brunila & Lahelma 2019; Masoud, Holm & Brunila 2019).

The subject formation of refugees and asylum seekers has been theorised in research in various ways, making visible how individuals of forced mobility navigate the social and societal conditions and possibilities they experience in their everyday lives. For example, in her research, Olivius (2014: 44) makes visible how in refugee camps participation can be seen as constituting a 'technology of government that works through the construction of certain forms of refugee subjectivities'. According to her, such activity does not seek to change power relations or redistribute decision-making power – rather, it aims to create active refugees who will govern themselves in accordance with norms and rules, and makes them feel involved while actually lacking power. Similarly, Ilcan and Rygiel (2015: 342) argue that life in refugee camps may provide the experiences through which refugees are supposed to refashion themselves as resilient, entrepreneurial, neoliberal subjects who learn to develop different set of skills and virtues such as a positive outlook on life by making 'the most of their difficult situation' and accepting the reality of their confinement in the camp. As Evans and Reid (2013: 3) state, 'the resilient subject is a subject which must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world, and not a subject which can conceive of changing the world, its structure and conditions of possibility'. According to Methmann (2014), here 'resilience' does not aim for structural change but simply redefines the refugee from a passive victim into an active agent of its fate. Along the same lines, Feldman (2015) shows that the perceptions of a refugee as the apolitical victim and the improving subject paradoxically lead to the idea that the right way to be a refugee is to be always preparing not to be a refugee.

Häkli, Pascucci and Kallio (2017) provide a slightly alternative perspective to refugee subject formation. In their view, refugeeness as a subjectivity is not about technologies of governmentality or internalised identities, but rather, precisely the condition of possibility for political agency. They view 'refugee' not as a subject position that asylum seekers have to adapt to 'fit in' with the policies providing them assistance and support, but as an empowering performative, which provides them opportunities for meaningful identity building and political agency in circumstances that they can do little about. Similarly, Bendixsen (2017) shows how as a part of the non-citizen struggle within a nation-state, migrants adopt the content of who is viewed as a good citizen, accepting that certain types of behaviour mark who should be included and who should be excluded. The studies on migrants' mobilisations offer perspectives on the potentiality of the non-citizen as political subjects (e.g. Bendixsen 2016; Bloemraad, Sarabia & Fillingim 2017; Swerts 2017).

In the research presented in this article, we seek to contribute to the theoretical discussion about the subject formation of asylum seekers. Building on poststructural theorisations of subjectivity, especially feminist approaches (e.g., Butler 1995; Braidotti 2011; Davies 2004; 2008; Jackson & Mazzei 2012), we focus on how subjectivities become formed as one reads and

interprets surrounding discourses and one's own possibilities in them – and how one's readings and interpretations further produce surrounding discourses. By the discourses, we mean the bodies of ideas that emerge within and that reflect specific power relations; the discourses also render some things as common sense and others as non-sense (Youdell 2006). We focus on young asylum-seeking men in Finland, asking if one would like to respond to the surrounding demands – to be a 'good asylum seeker', so to speak – what would then, in fact, be a 'good asylum seeker'?

We have carried out a three-year research based on nomadic hanging out in a temporary shelter, homes of the research participants and the first author, and different places in the city, in addition to in-depth interviews with nine young asylum-seeking men. We listened to their experiences of the conditions and possibilities of what they can and should be and become.

We will begin the article by defining subjectification and subject position as they are seen in feminist-informed poststructural theories. After this, we will describe the nomadic research method. The findings show how everyday encounters and experiences continuously produce the asylum seeker subject; we see the subject formation of asylum seekers as an ongoing process whereby one is placed and takes place in the discourses of asylum seeking. Throughout these discourses, people become speaking subjects while being subjected by the constitutive force of the discourses (see also Laws & Davies 2000; Brunila & Siivonen 2014).

Subjectifying within the Position of an Asylum Seeker

We follow the feminist poststructuralist understanding of the subject formation where a subject is constituted through discursive practices; that is, the meanings through which the world and the self are made knowable and known (Foucault 1977). The process through which one becomes a subject – a process that Butler (1995) describes in terms of simultaneous mastery and submission – is called subjectification. 'Being' an asylum seeker is here understood as socially constructed in the discourses of migration and asylum seeking; throughout these discourses, people become 'subjected, categorised, classified, hierarchised, and normalised' as asylum seekers (Foucault 1977; Kurki 2019: 20). There is never freedom from the discursive constitution of self or autonomy in the sense of being an individual standing outside social structure and process, but there is a capacity to recognise such constitution and to resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted (Davies 2004). Thus, when thinking about the 'making of the subject' and 'becoming a subject' simultaneously, it becomes clear that one cannot resist subjectification, but it can be troubled, remade and reformulated (Kurki 2019).

Whereas subjectivity is a 'socially mediated process of relations and negotiations with multiple others and with multilayered social structures' (Braidotti 2011: 4), subjectification can be seen as positioning, shaping and reshaping of self in relation to others and social structures (Davies et al. 2001; Green & Reid 2008; Jackson & Mazzei 2012; Lenz Taguchi 2005; Youdell 2006). Although an individual detects, negotiates, meets and contests the surrounding expectations, subjectification arises not so much from the individual but from the condition of possibility (Butler 1995) – the discourses that prescribe not only what is a desirable form of subjectivity but also what is recognisable as an acceptable form of subjectivity (Davies et al. 2001).

All people occupy various subject positions in their lives. The people who occupy the position of an asylum seeker have also occupied and continue to occupy positions from an unlimited list of possibilities, for instance, fathers, mothers, wives, husbands, employees, students, Christians, Muslims, queers, heterosexuals, politicians, activists, and so on. The different subject positions that an individual holds in life may also be in conflict with each other. For example, one may be a Christian and homosexual in a context in which the two are politically constructed as mutually exclusive (Mikulak 2019; Young, Trothen & Shipley 2015). As people exist at the points of intersection of multiple discursive practices, that is, subject positions,

the individual is not fixed at any one of these points or locations; not only does the individual shift locations or positions but also what each location or position might mean shifts over space and time and contexts, and thus the individual might exist as much at the intersecting point as it does on the curved line of movement between them (Davies 2004). In other words, subject positions are fluctuant and processual, overlapping social categories of self-perception and societal structures (Davies 2008) that provide us with the content of our subjectivity, with a particular, limited set of 'concepts, images, metaphors, ways of speaking and self-narratives that we adopt as our own to make us ontologically secure as social-beings-in-the-world' (Dagg & Haugaard 2016: 401).

An asylum seeker is rarely a sought-after subject position, whereas subject positions of relative power, for example, a teacher or a company owner, may be actively sought; people become asylum seekers by necessity, by force. At the same time, this position limits an individual's access to positions with relative power. Individuals tend to enter the position of an asylum seeker only when the other plausible positions have even less power or an even more negative impact on their life (e.g. a victim of violence). People in limiting subject positions, such as those seeking asylum, may be particularly creative in finding avenues for their own agency, despite the circumstances they encounter (Brun 2015; Vitus 2010).

Producing Data Nomadically

The research reported in this article can be described as nomadic. When doing research nomadically, the knowledge is seen to be constructed rhizomatically within the movement between different times and places (Deleuze & Guattari 1988). This research began in a temporary shelter in Northern Finland in 2015, in which the first author was volunteering. The research followed the lives of nine young asylum-seeking men throughout a period of three years. In addition to the movement in time, the research moved also between places, as the shelter closed in the summer of 2016, after which the participants moved to rental apartments, in which the research continued.

The nomadic research at hand is grounded in 'ethnographic hanging out' but does not follow all the ethnographic principles. Like feminist ethnography, this research aims to embrace the everyday experiences of people, especially those forced to live on the margins, as being epistemologically valid (Davis 2013), simultaneously challenging representations that are too easy or simplifying (Hohti 2016). However, the primary purpose of hanging out was to build a foundation for trustworthy relationships, rather than to produce research material. The hanging out did not entail any schedules or structure (see also Pyry 2015). The ethnographic 'field' was not a place for the researcher to enter and leave; rather, it was considered in nomadic terms. It was built organically together with the participants, and it was constantly in motion. In line with nomadic theory (Braidotti 2011), the approach shifted the subject from static *being* to dynamically *becoming* in relation to the world. The hanging out enabled us to formulate the research so that it was open to the unexpected and could follow the fluid and changing realities that occurred while the participants were waiting for their asylum decisions.

In practice, hanging out meant that the first author spent time with the participants at their homes as well as in public places. The researcher became a part of the field, and she did not seek to leave the field after the 'research-period' was over (for ethics of leaving, see e.g. Duncombe & Jessop 2002). The positions of the people involved in this kind of research are continually rethought (Cole 2013) because a research relationship is not something established once; it is something constantly 'done' (Lanas & Rautio 2014). The second and third authors took part in analysing and theorising the data, but they were not involved in the field.

As a part of the broader hanging out, the first author conducted in-depth interviews with the nine participants. Initially, four interviews were conducted in 2016. In 2018, the data

were complemented by six more interviews with young asylum-seeking men in similar situations. Two of the interviewed men had been interviewed previously in 2016. Interviewing at two points in time was a deliberate choice, as it shed light on the impact of passing time and the act of waiting in the lives of these young men. One of the participants returned to his country of origin in 2017. Each of the interviews lasted from 40 minutes to 1 hour and 40 minutes; they were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. In this article, we discuss the experiences of Saleh, Navid, Mahammed, Kokab, Ali, Yusuf, Zain, Fathi and Emad. Navid and Saleh chose to be interviewed together at their home; others were interviewed separately at the home of the first author. The interviews were conducted in English, in which all the participants were fluent.² The interviews were thematic, loosely structured and open. Although some supporting questions were asked, the participants were encouraged to talk about anything that felt important to them. The purpose of the research was to produce new, qualitative in-depth knowledge with regard to the time asylum-seeking men wait for their asylum decisions in their everyday lives. More specific research questions were driven by the data.

Interviewing, in addition to hanging out, was an ethical choice. It helped to separate research data from what the first author anecdotally knew about the lives of the participants. The interviews allowed focused questions and enabled the participants to decide which parts of their stories could be used for research. However, the voices, narratives or identities, even when treated as 'data', are not assumed to be unitary or authentic (see also Hohti & Karlsson 2014), as the material is filtered and shaped by the encounter with the listener, the discourses available and the social and political context in which they are told (Wernesjö 2019). The findings address subjectification as it is described to a young, white, Finnish female. Different discourses could have been drawn from, had the interviewer or the participants been of different ethnic origin, age or gender. It is ethically crucial that asylum seekers participate in the knowledge production concerning their own lives, regardless of who is being told the stories.

Analysis of Discourses

As an analytical tool, we used the concept of discourse not only as embedded in language but also as a productive and regulative practice that has real material effects (Foucault 1977). When analysing the interview data, we looked for descriptions of explicit or implicit *expectations* the participants felt they were faced with as asylum seekers. We extracted all such descriptions as long quotes that included not only the content of what was told but also how the content was told. We also focused on the descriptions of the participants, such as their own actions, emotions and thoughts. For example, being called 'a racist slur' was described as a mundane everyday occurrence, accompanied by comments, such as 'but there is racism everywhere', and 'I am thankful to be here'. Thus, overall, we looked at the data by asking: What kind of asylum seeker subjectivity emerges in the telling of these stories and in the way are they told?

The narratives of the participants covered their experiences in Finland and of what an asylum seeker could be and should be. In the narrations we were able to identify 12 different desirable characteristics of an asylum seeker: grateful, positive, patient, active, willing to integrate, okay with the past and ready to move forward, accepting of prejudice, downplaying of racism, 'Finnish-looking', less worthy and away. These will be elaborated upon in the following sections.

² The nature of the study (unscheduled hanging out) excluded the possibility of working with interpreters. The first author invited nine men, all of whom spoke good English, to join the research. We, therefore, acknowledge that the participant sample is neither representative of 'all asylum-seeking young men' nor could it ever be. The findings are partial, as always.

A 'Good Asylum Seeker' Is...

Our analysis shows how the participants in this study viewed their own positions, and how they shaped and reshaped themselves in relation to the external conditions to detect, negotiate, contest or meet the expectations placed on them from the surrounding Finnish society.

Patient and Active

The asylum-seeking process is a part of the multilayered institutional and social structure through which one becomes an asylum seeker. The asylum system and its particular temporality produce subjects required of patience as well as action. The participants described the need to avoid passivity by all means to maintain their personal well-being, to build a positive reputation and to avoid thinking about the past. There is nothing asylum seekers can do to speed the process. Any expressions of frustration, no matter how justified, achieve nothing. 'Wait and don't be in a hurry. Stay quiet and stay strong' (Mahammed).

When asked what would be important to share with people who are considering becoming asylum seekers, Mahammed answered that the process requires patience and keeping busy:

'Be patient. That is the most important thing in this country. If you don't be patient in this country, maybe you're gonna be mad and you're gonna be stressed and you're gonna do some bad things. But if you stay cool and happy and unstressed and make friends and do something like... Most times when I get stressed, I go to the gym, I train. If you make peace for yourself, then maybe you can come over all this and you can be happy'.

In addition to the patience required by the asylum-seeking process, living in a temporary shelter required everyday patience. Zain described his days as: 'Just sleeping and thinking, nothing else'. This can passivate people, especially combined with a lack of decision-making power, as Mahammed stated: 'I cannot do anything. At the moment I'm an asylum seeker who lives in a camp'.

In addition to patience, the asylum process requires abrupt activity. The waiting is pierced by sudden bursts of action when the asylum seekers are required for interviews with little warning. Another burst of action occurs when a negative decision arrives. When this happens, the time to file a complaint is short, and a help of a lawyer, or at least someone who speaks Finnish, is required. The waiting is circular, sometimes progressing slowly, sometimes accelerating with asylum application activities. In the following interview excerpt, Navid aptly describes the sudden burst of action:

'I was sleeping here in this home and the police call me and they said we want to see you today at nine o'clock in the morning. They call me at eight o'clock. I just take my clothes, I go to that police station and they do that small interview with me and they said for me that we believe everything you said at Immigration and we believe your story but you can go back to [country of origin] and you can continue your life in [country of origin]'.

During these bursts of action, it is expected that asylum seekers are able to act quickly and deliberately. They need to revisit their pasts, even when painful, to convince the interviewers of their need to stay. Asylum seekers are rarely offered help for dealing with their experiences. Instead, they are required to make their trauma as clear, visible and strong as possible, to prove their 'deservingness' as asylum seekers and to gain the permission to live in peace. Producing the necessary level of detail of a prior traumatic event is additionally challenging because disturbing details tend to be forgotten (Brewin 2018; McVane 2020).

In addition to the activity expected as a part of the asylum processes, the participants also described more voluntary forms of activity. They talked about how they want to find some kind of work³ and try to 'become integrated' during the time of waiting, even though they know they do not need to.

In Finnish society, working is commonly considered to be a way to earn income, or alternatively, as a way to pursue personal ambitions and passions. The participants described work as a survival strategy for enduring the long waiting and avoiding focusing on the past; they also viewed it as being important for integrating into society and for feeling useful. These reasons to work were so important that the participants commonly took work outside their own fields of expertise or education. Some also worked for free and illegally, as Emad did: 'Because for me, I don't like sitting at home'. For Kokab, work served as a way to not dwell on the past:

'But you know, like, busy life now. Especially for me, maybe if I am not busy, or maybe if I am at home or something, of course I will just like cry and miss everything in the past. But because I'm working, this gives me a way, like focusing not on the past things'.

If asylum seekers wish to build a life in Finland and to gain positive content in their lives, they must be active in their own integration, even though their efforts to integrate will not provide them with any power over whether they can ultimately stay in the country. This also creates the risk of exploitation, as people are willing to work for free or take on undesired work, just to avoid passivity or to fulfil the need or the expectation to 'integrate'. The participants also expressed that, as asylum seekers, they must be grateful for any work they are given, which paradoxically makes them express gratitude for the possible exploitation. 'Of course, I'm thankful for the company, my company took me', said Kokab, with a higher education background, now working in a plastic factory floor. Asylum seekers also are told that work is a privilege that does not necessarily belong to them:

'They [Immigration Service] said if there is Finnish people who don't have work, they should take them to the work and then us' (Fathi).

The ideal subjectivity of an asylum seeker as patient and active ties in with Olivius' (2014) notion about established rules for which kind of activity is approved and how asylum seekers are expected to participate when told to do so in ways defined by others. At the same time, the participants see working (even with unfair conditions) as empowering, not simply oppressive.

Positive and Grateful

Many of the participants described difficult living conditions and the pain of missing their family. However, such statements were often followed by positivity, comments like 'life is good', as Mahammed notifies in the following quote. Zain starts by describing how he has no control over his own life in the temporary shelter but ends with a statement that Finland is the place where he can make his dreams come true. These sentiments were common in the interview responses.

'Yeah, my living situation is a bit difficult... Do you know when someone doesn't live with his family, especially when you have kids or you have parents or you have brothers and sisters and you're leaving and you cannot go to see them, that's very difficult. That is the situation I am in, every day, that I think for my family and it's a bit difficult

³ Asylum seekers are allowed to work three months after their arrival in Finland if they have presented a valid passport or other travel document. They can start working six months after their arrival without documentation.

to stop that from my mind because I didn't see them for maybe quite a long time and, I don't know when I'm going to see them. So that's the situation I have here in this country. But life is good, life goes on, yeah' (Mahammed).

Zain: Because in this country, I'm nothing here. I don't have an ID; I don't have anything in this country. I'm not from this country. I'm coming here and you'll give me... You know, a safe place.

Researcher: Mm.

Zain: For example, what time I wash my clothes, what time I cook, what time I talk with a nurse, what time the office is open.

Researcher: So, you mean it is all decided for you; the time you cook, the time you wash your clothes...

Zain: Yeah.

Researcher: Yeah. Well... Do you think it could be better somehow?

Zain: I don't know.

Researcher: Do you think there is anything you can choose for yourself?

Zain: Just when I go to the toilet.

[...]

Zain: I can just make my dreams come true here. I feel like Finland is my country. I know I have my own country, and I love it. But here I feel that people are very good, everything here is very nice. I love this country (Zain).

According to Moulin (2012), ungrateful asylum seekers are in host societies perceived as undeserving, unwelcomed others who are not entitled to 'climb the steps toward properly authorised citizenship status'. Thus, asylum seekers become attentive to the need to perform in specific ways, for instance by employing certain narratives (Häkli et al. 2017). From time to time, the participants' positivity was perhaps expressed as a declaration, at that moment targeted to the Finnish researcher, but in general, to the Finnish society as a whole. In the narratives, the participants even expressed gratitude for having the permission to wait – despite the fact that the waiting was painful and meant living under oppressive conditions. In migration research, this has been discussed as the 'grid of immigration' (Back 2003: 351), where migrants feel obliged to express gratitude for the countries that have 'welcomed' them, given them 'the gift of protection'.

'I'm thankful, even though I didn't get the permit yet, but I'm thankful that they accepted me and I'm here because my country didn't make that for me. So, I'm thankful for Finland; it's better than my country' (Fathi).

Regardless of the fact that Fathi might have fulfilled a discursive expectation when expressing gratitude, his utterance cannot be labelled as 'insincere'. The fundamental idea in feminist poststructuralist theories is that submitting to discourse is sincere, for that it becomes a part of the subject, the combination of the mastery and submission. Whereas Fathi wanted to express his gratitude to Finland during the interview, Kokab felt no need for that. However, as he apologised for his words, it could be assumed that he was aware of the discursive expectation of being grateful: 'Even though I get the permission... To be honest, I hate this country. I'm sorry'.

Accepting of Prejudice and Normalising of Racism

Prejudice and racism were common elements in the lives of the participants. Although they acknowledged they should not tolerate these forms of injustice, they also described having no choice but to accept the racism they encountered and even downplay it. They repeatedly

stated that racism is normal everywhere, not just Finland, and emphasised that there are also 'good people' in Finland.

'Yeah, here in this city maybe I've faced [racism], but it was not like something important, it was two or three times. Someone tells you that you're black and you need to go back to your place but... That's a normal thing with everybody, who got that experience before, but it's normal for me that someone makes fun of the way you look and why you live in this place. That makes you sad but it's normal, yeah' (Mahammed).

The men gave multiple examples of situations in which they had experienced racism and in which they had to remain calm and accept prejudice to stay safe. In this way, the threat of violence or verbal abuse forced them to participate in the discourse of normalised racism. This is noted by Saleh and Navid in the following interview excerpt:

Saleh: One day we were in the marketplace. And one man came and he asked Navid 'What is in your bag, you have a bomb?'

Navid: Really yeah, I had that bag because it's like stuff for my gym, I had it in the bag and he just asked me. And he wasn't drunk or something; he was just doing some sports, he was running. And he was not like a crazy man, he looked like a good man, he had done university or something because he spoke English very well. And he asked me if I have a bomb or something dangerous in my bag. I just opened my bag and I just showed him that... The stuff for my gym.

Gendered racism portrays young minority men as aggressive and out of control (Keskinen 2018), even as terrorists. Feeling that he did not have a better option, Navid opened his bag and showed its content. By submitting to street harassment based on his looks, he admitted to the unjust power relation. Yet the situation allowed him with limited choices, merely between bad options. The more the participants looked 'Finnish', with what they explained as meaning white-skinned, the safer they were in public places, according to Ali. In the following excerpt, he describes not feeling any pressure to change how he looks.

Ali: I did hear bad things from racist people, but no one attacked me.

Researcher: Physically?

Ali: Yes.

Researcher: Have they yelled at you, or?

Ali: Yeah, well kind of. But you know why... Because I'm looking different from Arabic guys. So that's my reason [why he has not been attacked physically].

Researcher: So, when you look more like, maybe...

Ali: European, or...

Researcher: Yeah.

Ali: Yeah, I know. But they were just attacking my friends, because they have beard and black hair... Or different skin or something.

The concept of 'passing' is a powerful tool in misidentifying and distancing oneself from the subject position one occupies (Krivonos 2020). It refers to 'making oneself readable as privileged from a discriminated positioning' (Tudor 2017: 21). Whereas Ali visibly passed as white and escaped racialised violence, Kokab and Emad, with their dark beards, did not. The social construction of race (e.g. Frankenberg 1993) produced the participants of this research as racialised subjects, which as a part of their subjectification, forced them to negotiate on how

to deal with violent racist attacks and degrading treatment. Kokab for example, regardless of the pressure to change his looks by shaving his beard or head, refused to do so but instead decided not to spend so much time in the city center, where the problems often emerged.

'I don't know, it's like... Many problems there [in the city centre], and many things and last time, you know, when we met, I had like problem there. So, I hate to be there, because people act racist or something. And I really don't want to change my looks' (Kokab).

'They are saying "you have an ugly beard, you have an ugly hair, you have ugly eyes". I'm not believing that, no. I'm smiling at them: "Thank you!" Because this is normal' (Emad).

Being aware of what one should *not be* was as important as being aware of what one *should be*, as many of the stories of the participants show. This is an example of a dangerous and dismal situation in which people end up solely because they are asylum seekers. Yet, there is no other option than to act as if the situation is okay, normal and acceptable. Any other behaviour would put the health of the asylum seeker at risk, as Saleh notes:

Saleh: One time also we were at the park – – And they came about eleven guys, they who have that black jacket, Od... I don't know...

Researcher and Navid: Soldiers of Odin (SOO).

Saleh: Then they came to sit near me and they asked me 'Do you want a banana?' You know what I mean?

Researcher: Mm.

Saleh: We said no thank you. And then they start to ask 'Where are you from?' and something like that. Of course, I didn't say I'm from [country of origin], because they don't like, it's a problem. Yeah so, they asked me 'Why are you here?' I said 'I'm studying here for two years, then I go back to my country'. And they asked me: 'What are you studying?' I said, 'to be nurse'. Then they... Until they asked me that question, 'Are you a Muslim or a Christian?' We were three, me and my two friends. We said, 'We are Christian'. Then they said, 'Okay, we are sorry and have a nice day'. Then they leave.

Saleh is not in Finland for education. Also, unlike he claimed, he is not a Christian. Framing himself as a desirable migrant was a strategy to avoid violent racist attacks. The story of Saleh makes many discursive issues visible. Firstly, by stating that he and his two friends were faced with 11 people, Saleh indicated towards the 'end result' if the situation were to turn violent. Clearly, that was not an option for him and his friends. Therefore, he accepted the insult with which the discussion was initiated. In this brief encounter, SOO interrogated Saleh for his country of origin, reason for being in Finland, plans to stay and his religion. Saleh was familiar with the anti-refugee societal discourses and knew that, in such interrogations, there were certain right and wrong answers. The first question, 'Where are you from?' is central to the process of racialisation, where bodies are recognised as being out of place (Creece 2019). Thus, being from a country of war, being an asylum seeker and hoping to stay in Finland would be the wrong answers. Being from a safe country, studying, planning to leave soon and being Christian are the right answers. Second, the field of study also carries weight. As a feminine, non-dangerous field, Saleh felt that nursing may trigger less racism than mentioning a masculine field. It was an apt interpretation, as SOO's actions stem from the 'anxieties from the diminishing status of white heterosexual masculinities' (Aharoni & Féron 2019).

The men expressed that it was important not to 'complain' about the negative experiences they faced. Thus, accepting prejudice and racism is linked to the previously discussed expectations of being positive and grateful, despite the circumstances they encounter.

Less Worthy, Preferably Away

As the earlier quotes show, being an asylum seeker is the basis for prejudice, social and institutionalised othering, degrading treatment, discrimination, racism and violence. These experiences are created by the immigration system (Petäjänieniemi et al. 2020) as well as, for example, by experiencing and hearing stories of being stabbed at the mall (local Finnish newspaper Kaleva 2017). The experience of being invisible and irrelevant in the eyes of others felt dehumanising to Zain, and a specific passport had become a concrete marker of being 'less worthy' for Saleh:

'I feel like no-one sees me, never. I feel. I don't. I'm not important to anyone. Just for my mother in my country. Nothing else. I don't feel anything. Sometimes I feel I'm not a human' (Zain).

'Until you get citizenship. And you are really... You feel that you are a Finnish human. Or you are a human because you have a really strong passport' (Saleh).

Being an asylum seeker means that one is both legally present *and* deportable; one is simultaneously a citizen-in-waiting and a deportee-in-waiting (Haas 2017). Ali described that even though his journey to Finland had been dangerous and painful, and he had lost friends during his journey, the double position and uncertainty in Finland were more difficult.

'So, this is my most... problem, asylum seekers' [problem]. You are just waiting for a paper to prove you're from this country. Just to make sure you are here and you have a basis to stand on this life' (Ali).

Ali's experience provides an understanding of the present moment, and the asylum process more specifically, as the primary source of agony. This challenges the dominant legal and psychological discourses, which continue to privilege past suffering (Haas 2017). Asylum seekers must demonstrate past or potential future persecution as a cause of their trauma to secure a positive outcome for their application albeit, paradoxically, the circumstances leading to forced migration are not viewed as the primary cause of the suffering of the asylum seekers (Hall & Olf 2016; Shannon et al. 2014). Although the participants in this research did not deny the severity of their past experiences, they still saw the asylum system, itself, as being responsible for the new forms of profound distress.

The messages from society indicate that asylum seekers are expected to settle into the 'less worthy' subject position while waiting. Furthermore, the cumulating messages from the host society suggest that there is a place for asylum seekers, and such a place is 'away', as Fathi described:

'The bad things... You know: 'You should go home'. 'Why are you here?' 'We don't need you...' And like this. Yeah, those are racist people. But there are everywhere racists, not just in Finland'.

Asylum seekers are not yet accepted in their country of asylum, but there is no 'back' or 'home' to which they could return. The discourse of 'being in the wrong place', combined with the

paradox that there is no right place, is so strong that many asylum seekers are ashamed of being asylum seekers, as Kokab describes:

'And like, people here, if they really don't want you... I'm always feeling shame because I'm here. This is an important point, because I should be there in my country, and building my country. And do something for my family or my friend or my government or anything. But I didn't have any choice than to be here. So it's hard. And when you travel, you think here everything: humanity, and people are lovely and warm and they will say welcome... But it's not always like that. If I had a choice, I would go back. But I can't' (Kokab).

Even though Kokab fills the requirement of being active while waiting, actively working for his money by having a job is not enough. The best solution would be being active somewhere else, preferably being active in his country of origin. The requirement of being 'away' is fundamentally contradictory and does not contain the possibility of submitting to it.

Concluding Discussion

Becoming an asylum seeker brings along subjectification within a narrow position with limited space to move. Regardless of other fluid and overlapping positions the participants fill in their lives, the position of an asylum seeker is a paradox. Our findings suggest that, as an asylum seeker, subjectification happens structurally in relation to the requirements of different institutions and their official processes, and, interpersonally, in mundane encounters with other people. The latter can be based on natural, reciprocal interpretations with, for example, friends and family, or violent and forced encounters with anti-immigrant, white supremacist groups such as SOO.

Our findings also suggest that encountering racism makes visible how asylum seekers, in becoming part of their own subjection, are not helpless victims but can shape even the unreasonable situations and gain relational power – as was shown by Saleh's encounter with the racist group. In poststructuralist theories, agency is not simply a product of the individual will or intention. Rather, agency lies in the condition of possibility that provokes new thought (Badiou in Davies 2010). For Saleh, the condition of possibility was to simultaneously submit and master the discursive expectations in that particular moment at the park, so that he was able to control the situation in which he was subordinated and avoid physical violence. The findings of our research thus suggest that for a young man seeking an asylum, agency and subordination are not an either–or question but, as many feminist theorists (e.g., Laws and Davies 2000, see also de Vries 2016) argue, a both–and question: one is simultaneously subjected and at the same time can become an agentic, speaking subject precisely through such subjection.

Finally, our findings showcase the sheer impossibility of successfully filling the asylum seeker subject position. There seems to be no good or safe way of being an asylum seeker. If one aims to respond to all of the contradictory requirements (being simultaneously patient, active, positive and grateful, as well as being ready to accept prejudices, racism and being viewed as a less worthy human being), the last unfulfilled requirement would be to eventually 'go away' and stop being an asylum seeker. Curiously, asylum seekers and their critics share the same goal; asylum seekers would also like to discontinue being the seekers of a safe place and start building their lives as the holders of their safe places. Paradoxically, it could be said that a 'good asylum seeker' is no longer an asylum seeker. Yet, at worst, because of the prolonged asylum-seeking process, people may be confined to that subject position for years.

In this article, we have described some of the challenges of being positioned as an asylum seeker. Our findings show that the people who fill the position of an asylum seeker are well aware of the unjust discursive norms, expectations and requirements that they are expected

to carry out in their everyday lives, and they are very capable of navigating them. Thus, the purpose of this study is to verbalise what already is intuitively clear for many of the people who actually fill the position. As Ali incisively stated: 'I know what it means to be an asylum seeker'.

Competing Interests

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