Waiting as engaged activity: the case of asylum seekers stuck in the UK asylum process

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This paper explores the indefinite, metaphysical waiting of asylum applicants in the UK, for Refugee Status and the ‘normal’ life that it symbolises. People’s reflections on this period and the methods by which they filled time indicate that waiting is not such a passive, idle state as we might think.

Introduction

Waiting is a universal condition which punctuates everyday life at all stages of the life course. However, waiting events have proliferated with the complexity and interdependency of modernity, where the individual plays a small part and exercises limited control (Giddens 1990; Vanstone 1982). When we think of waiting, we often think of “quotidian waiting events” – waiting for transport, test results, services – which are part of everyday corporeal experience (Bissell 2007). This paper is concerned with a rather different kind of waiting: what might be termed long-term, metaphysical waiting for a ‘normal’, secure life. It provides an ethnographic account of a group of asylum seekers who sought protection in the UK and waited 2-9 years for an ultimate decision of either refusal and deportation to a precarious existence in the country of origin, or the chance for a relatively secure life in the UK.

Waiting time is normally conceived of as useless, wasted time (Schweizer 2008). Caught between the unfolding present and the awaited future event, and with reduced capacity to change this situation, the individual who waits is thought to be rendered passive. As Vincent Crapanzano (1986: 45) writes, waiting is a kind of holding action – a lingering. (In extreme forms, waiting can lead to paralysis.) In waiting, the present loses its focus in the now. The world in its immediacy slips away; it is derealized. It is without élan, vitality, creative force. It is numb, muted, dead. Its only meaning lies in the future – in the arrival or the non-arrival of the object of waiting.
Indeed, this conceptualisation is articulated in accounts of the asylum seekers involved in this research. Living under restrictive policies, excluded from productive activities such as work, and with limited ability to effect a change in their circumstances, they articulated a sense of passivity, ‘lost time’, stagnation and being out of sync with social rhythms.

However, they also pursued multifarious methods for filling time, such as socialising, praying, immersing themselves in daily routines, gathering information about the asylum process, and eliciting support from peers, which challenges the notion of waiting time as inactive and ‘empty’. Although painfully uncertain, the waiting period was sometimes retrospectively understood as ‘preparatory’ for the future. This indicates that more may be taking place during seemingly uneventful periods than meets the eye; they may offer possibilities for reflection, creativity and change.

I argue that waiting should be understood as an engaged activity in two senses. First, it may be seen as a kind of amplified anticipation and desire. The promise of the event-to-come is what produces the experience of waiting (Bissell 2007: 282), and the intentionality of this act derives from the presence of some degree of caring (one cannot be indifferent to something and wait for it). Hence, the experience of waiting is the experience of the world as in some sense mattering, and offers people a heightened awareness of their needs (Vanstone 1982: 103-107).

Second, and more specifically to the present case, waiting should be understood as engaged activity in the sense that people can fill waiting time with a range of relatively productive activities. Indeed, for the asylum seekers involved in this research, waiting (and being denied that which they waited for) served as an impetus to pursue a range of actions to secure ‘the papers’, a ‘normal life’, safety and security. Thus, waiting is negotiated and incorporated into everyday lives and life projects. It is not something that takes place in suspended time or outside of ‘doing’ things, but is an active and intentional process, integral to constructions of subjectivity (Gray 2011).

The anthropological literature is full of references to people who wait or see themselves as waiting - slum dwellers, the unemployed, the rural poor, asylum seekers and refugees - and their associated feelings of boredom and lost time (Bayart 2007; Jeffrey 2010: 4). However, few studies treat waiting as an event, experience or object worthy of analysis in its own right. Giovanni Gasparini (1995: 29)
argues that waiting time deserves specific analysis because of the wealth of meanings which can be attributed to it from the actor’s point of view and because of its importance within social systems. In this vein, I examine a case of waiting in the asylum process which is a function of bureaucratic systems and the product of power relations (Bourdieu 1999), but is also infused with meaning acted upon in ways which challenge common conceptualisations.

**Ethnographic context**

This paper is based on doctoral research which explored asylum seekers’ experiences of waiting in the UK asylum process. Fieldwork was conducted over 12 months in 2007 and 2008 with around sixty asylum seekers, as well as their legal representatives, other migrant and non-migrant residents, and the staff of voluntary sector organisations in Glasgow, Scotland. It involved participant observation with individuals in their daily routines; attending meetings with legal representatives; observing asylum appeal hearings; and participating at local community projects, meetings and events. Asylum seekers’ narratives were elicited through life history interviews. The individuals involved came from over twenty-four countries in the Maghreb, the Caucasus, West and East Africa, South-Eastern Europe, the Middle East and South Asia. Around three-quarters were women. The majority lived with their spouse and children, but there was a high proportion of single women with children, and some single men. They had fled their countries of origin after being subjected to intimidation, oppression, and in some cases, torture, by the government, government-sponsored militias or non-state actors. Most had been targeted on the basis of their (or family members’) political activities, religious practices, or ethnic identities.

The social, national and policy context within which waiting takes place is of crucial importance to the experiences of, and responses to, waiting that were observed. People who lodge a claim for asylum with the Home Office, the UK government department responsible for immigration affairs, are granted temporary leave to enter the UK while their case is being determined. They must then wait, both for a series of events within the process – interviews, transfer to accommodation, the arrangement of welfare payments, the dispatch of a decision on the asylum claim, meetings with solicitors, and so forth – and for a final end to the process. In most cases, the initial decision is a refusal (Home Office 2000, 2006) and the applicant has a right of appeal to an immigration tribunal. Lodging an appeal instigates another process with its own waited-upon actions carried out by a host

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1. With contact and visits throughout 2008 and in subsequent years.
of actors including bureaucrats, legal adjudicators and solicitors. If the appeal is allowed, the case is returned to the Home Office and Refugee Status or a form of humanitarian protection may be granted; if dismissed, the individual may request a reconsideration hearing, or appeal further to higher courts.\(^2\)

The waiting of the individuals involved in this research arose due to what was, at the time, a lengthy bureaucratic-legal process, as well as delays in the system caused by a range of factors including problems arranging interviews, the need for medical referrals, investigations into the possible return of the applicant to a safe country, reconsideration of decisions by the Home Office, suspension of processing of applications from some nationalities pending adjournment of appeals, no apparent reason (National Audit Office 2004: 24-35), and perhaps also the Home Office exploiting opportunities for delay, such as by seeking multiple adjournments on appeals (Asylum Aid 1999: 10).

While waiting, applicants are banned from engaging in paid employment. They are eligible for financial support\(^3\) from the government and are then dispersed to housing on a no-choice basis in a regional city of the UK. Consequently, most live in the wider community, albeit in often marginalised and deprived areas. Although they are permitted to travel freely within the UK, they cannot leave the country and are required by law to report regularly to the Home Office. Since devolution in 1998, the Scottish government has had responsibility for certain areas of governance directly affecting asylum seekers living in Scotland: integration and social inclusion, policing, legal services, education, and health care. The Scottish government has tended to take a favourable approach to asylum seekers. It has classified asylum-seeking school leavers as Scottish students, which makes them eligible for free undergraduate education at Scottish universities\(^4\). Adult asylum seekers can access free, part-time\(^5\) education. They are entitled to free primary and secondary healthcare. The Scottish Government has also developed and/or funded a range of services designed specifically for asylum seekers, delivered by statutory and voluntary sector organisations, including befriending and advocacy schemes, volunteering programmes, women’s groups, exercise classes, dance, drama and writing groups, information and legal advice services, and drop-ins where people can socialise and obtain free clothing and household goods. This means that while their lives are highly controlled and

\(^2\) The High Court or the Court of Session in Scotland.

\(^3\) At the time of the research, welfare payments were set at a rate of 70% of mainstream welfare benefits, which amounted to £39 per week for single adults; £91 for a couple with a child; and £30 for every additional child.

\(^4\) Students who have attended 3 years of high school in Scotland.

\(^5\) Part-time is classified as up to 16 hours per week.
regulated, asylum seekers living in Scotland generally have access to a variety of services and resources.

Existing research has tended to focus on the content of ‘events’ (the interview, the appeal hearing) in the asylum process. However, the ordinary ‘non-events’ or everyday life of waiting *between* these events have been less a subject of interest, perhaps because it is perceived that nothing happens – or at least nothing of interest – during these periods. As this paper will show, these periods are sources of reflection and action in which people may experience a greater awareness of their desires and future possibilities. In this sense, they may be crucially important preparatory events which deserve attention.

**A typology of waiting**

There are distinctly different kinds of waiting which engender varying content, meaning, outcomes and moods (Gasparini 1995: 38). It is useful to foreground the substantive discussion with an overview of the kind/s dealt with in the present case. First, waiting can be classified according to its *object*, which may be the arrival of an actual physical object, the commencement of an event, the achievement of a particular state or way of being, a change of circumstance, and so on. At one end of the continuum is an active kind of waiting for something particular, known and tangible. We might call this *instrumental* (Crapanzano 1986) or *situational* waiting (Hage 2009). Here, people wait for specific, clearly defined objects: the arrival of a train, an appointment with the doctor, the birth of a child. At the other end is waiting for *something, anything* (Crapanzano 1986) or *existential* waiting (Hage 2009), in which case the object is not known, is hidden, or is unknowable but is regularly given a symbolic object, often expressed in abstract terms: war, the end of the world, death and eternal peace (Crapanzano 1986: 47). Here we might place the waiting of Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett’s (1969) *Waiting for Godot*, who do not really know why they are waiting. When Estragon asks what Godot will do for them when he arrives, Vladimir responds vaguely, “Oh...nothing very definite” (*ibid.*: 18). Godot represents for the men something that will make life better. In this sense, their waiting is not waiting for something that would validate, cancel or fulfil waiting; it is the kind of waiting we fear that waiting might amount to – just waiting (Schweizer 2008). There will be other positions along the continuum, with at least partially formed notions of the thing/s for which people wait.
Crapanzano (1986) observes that instrumental waiting has two modalities; the positive, which is infused with desire because it is directed at something that is longed for; and the negative, which is directed towards something that is dreaded. The possibilities or outcomes associated with the object for which one waits to a large extent determine the modalities available.

Finally, waiting has its own temporality, in terms of both how long one expects to wait and how long one actually waits. In expecting something, information is readily available and can be used to develop an idea of what will come and when it will come. The ability to anticipate in expectation gives the actor some degree of control over the situation, through knowledge and the power to influence the course of events (Gasparini 1995).

From the asylum seekers’ accounts of their arrival and application for asylum in the UK, it is clear that at the outset, their waiting was directed primarily at one object: the initial decision. The common expectation of being granted the right to remain was disappointed when the refusal letter arrived. Almost all appealed the refusal, and by the time I began my fieldwork many had passed through several appeals and subsequent dismissals from the appeals tribunal. Consequently, they were dispersed across different stages of the asylum process, each associated with slightly different immediate objects. Generally speaking, the long-term waiting of individuals with active appeals was punctuated by instances of short-term waiting for immediate objects, such as a meeting with their solicitor; a letter confirming the date of an appeal hearing; or the delivery of the appeal decision. Their waiting could be fulfilled by due process. The waiting of individuals who had exhausted all appeal rights and were at risk of deportation was attuned to the receipt of a deportation order and/or the prospect of being able to build a fresh claim. A few such individuals ‘opted out’ of waiting altogether by subverting deportation and going underground. In contrast, a larger category of individuals whose appeal rights had been exhausted but who could not be returned to their country of origin for various reasons, experienced long-term waiting for a change in policy, such as a government amnesty. For all, waiting was tangible; directed in its positive modality to the specific, clearly discerned goal of attaining Refugee Status (or some other form of Leave to Remain). This, however, also took on a symbolic value; it was widely felt that the granting of the right to remain would deliver a ‘normal’, ‘free’ and inclusive existence in the host society, and that life will be able to ‘move forward’ (cf. Brekke 2004; Lacroix 2004; Stewart 2005). Some individuals also positively waited for reunion with estranged family members and a transformation of the political situation in the country of origin which would enable safe return. The negative modality was a final refusal.
leading to deportation to the country of origin where they expected to face imprisonment, threats to safety and well-being, or possibly death. Their waiting also had a particular content in that it involved fluctuating forms of hope and despair. Hope oriented people to the positive modality of their waiting. This kind of waiting involved limited expectation because little was known about when decisions would be delivered and when the overall process would reach a conclusion. In this sense, it was indefinite waiting. In terms of its actual duration, it may be regarded as long-term waiting, as it lasted between two and nine years. In summary, this as a case of long-term, instrumental and metaphysical waiting - directed at a specific immigration decision and a specific kind of existence imagined to follow from it.

In the following sections, I present the contrasting themes which can be observed in the narratives and everyday practices of my asylum-seeking research participants, and the ways in which these cohere with and challenge notions of waiting as an idle, empty, non-event.

**Waiting as passive, empty time in which ‘nothing happens’**

Waiting is commonly conceptualised as a passive state in which people lack agency. According to Ghassan Hage (2009: 2), waiting involve[s] a large degree of passivity: things are beyond our control, out of our hands, and we can ‘only wait’ for what we wish to happen, as opposed to actively doing something or another to make it happen.

The customary phrase ‘to sit and wait and hope for the best’ readily encapsulates this sense. Although waiting is an essential feature of everyday life, it is also commonly thought of as ‘wasted time’ (Sellerberg 2008; Schwartz 1974) and even associated with indolence. It is reduced to the mere passing of time, time which cannot be spent doing anything more useful (Moran 2005: 7). W.H. Vanstone (1982) suggests that states of dependency and passivity are now commonplace because modernity is characterised by a complex system of inter-dependent relations in which the individual plays only a small part, which forces him/her to wait upon others to perform their roles in the system. Frustrations easily arise “because one has no alternative to waiting, no personal action or initiative to which one can resort in lieu of that which the system, in its own time, delivers” (Vanstone 1982: 19). According to Vanstone, this frustration reveals a widespread belief that
dependency is a diminution of our true function and status, and an insult to our dignity, which in turn has produced a language and practice of ‘enablement’, advocating independence but also, inadvertently, devaluing those who cannot be so. He sees the modern Western avoidance of dependency and inactivity as rooted in the value placed by the capitalist system on productive labour, itself derived from the Calvinist movement (Weber 1930). As Thompson (1967) has deftly shown, the growth of capitalism and church reform saw the introduction of a ‘time-discipline’, which was congruent with both the objectives of efficiency in the labour force, and the Christian Puritan aversion to idleness. Time came to be seen as relatively abstract and quantifiable, and split into leisure time (the worker’s own time) and labour time (which the employer must use efficiently). Time thus became currency and was ‘spent’ rather than ‘passed’ (Thompson 1967: 61). The enduring result of this shift is that waiting, in Western contexts, is seen as undesirable, unproductive and wasteful (Bissell 2007; Schwartz 1974; Schweizer 2008).

Passivity is also a defining feature of ‘the refugee’. Spaces designed to contain and manage people on the move are spaces of waiting: the refugee camp, the transit centre, the asylum accommodation centre, the detention centre, and as many scholars and practitioners have noted, these are, quintessentially, spaces characterised by enforced dependency, confinement and boredom (Agier 2008; Chan and Loveridge 1987; Hyndman 2000). In the UK as in many other countries, asylum policies serve to enforce idleness. As already noted, people cannot work, must depend on welfare handouts and are subject to restrictions on mobility. They must wait patiently for a decision and ‘present themselves as passive victims, grateful for being granted whatever minimal tolerance they are shown’ (Schuster 2011: 402).

The accounts of the asylum seekers involved in this research tended to describe their waiting in ways that were consistent with the dominant view of waiting as passive, empty, ‘devalued’ time in which nothing happens. Two aspects of their accounts are presented here – those associated with activity and movement in time.

‘Doing nothing’

Karim is an activist, businessman and devout Muslim from Darfur. We regularly met and spoke about world politics, the situation in Sudan, religion and philosophy. One day I asked him why he spoke
spontaneously and fervently on all manner of topics but rarely mentioned his asylum case, unless prompted by me. He replied:

*It’s very difficult Rebecca... I don’t talk about [my case] as there is nothing to do for my case... Now it’s a matter of time, I’m just waiting now. What am I to do? You want me to go to the Home Office and demand Status? I came for protection and now I’m waiting two years and four months. Til now my case is hanging. That is shameful for me and for the British government. If you want to accept people, it’s better to let things go easy. Why put people here for two years – some people five years – and they don’t know what is happening? Rebecca, imagine you are waiting two years! The feeling is very bad for me. But two years and a half cut from my life – I am not allowed to work or to study, I am just waiting for a weekly bursary [welfare payment] or going to college to learn part-time. This is not my ambition. My ambition is more than that. Returning would be very bad – I am facing death! I don’t worry for myself but our people there will lose. When I am here, if I get Refugee Status, I will do many things for the people there – speak out for the people there, go to discussions with the government. Now there are discussions in Libya and I can’t go there. People are calling to talk two hours on the phone to discuss and to plan with me. When I am sitting here, I’m doing nothing.*

Karim’s focus is on the restraint of the waiting period: his inability to realise his potential in terms of study and employment, and to engage in political work towards the resolution of the political situation in Sudan. He describes waiting as ‘sitting’ and ‘doing nothing’. In asking ‘what am I to do?’ he points to his inability to bring about a change in this situation because, as Crapanzano (1986) notes, the object of waiting may be sought but essentially, its arrival or non-arrival is beyond the individual’s control.

Sevda and her husband Maksim, a couple in their thirties, arranged to leave Azerbaijan with their children after Maksim was violently attacked for being recognised as an ethnic minority. I sat with them in the living room of their high rise flat one summer’s day, eating salted apples and sipping black tea. The conversation turned to my research, and both said, in sync, “we can tell you what it’s like to wait!” Sevda specified: “It is like your life has stopped. When you’re waiting you’re just sitting at home like couch potatoes. There is nothing to do”. Maksim added “it’s very difficult... I want to work but I’m not allowed to”. Sevda pointed to the other activities that they were prevented from
undertaking - choosing where they would like to live and decorating their flat - and spoke of her fears of what would happen to her and her family in the future.

Sevda’s perception that life has stopped and that ‘nothing happens’ relates to restrictions on the individual’s capacity while in the asylum process. Like Karim’s account, it points to the passivity, subordination and dependency of waiting (Bourdieu 1999; Crapanzano 1986; Schwartz 1974).

These accounts must be viewed in light of the cultural and historical contexts from which these individuals came, and in which they presently lived. All of the men and many of the women had been the principal providers for their families prior to their exile. Almost all had come from societies in which state welfare was non-existent and working for one’s livelihood was a necessity. In such settings, work carried a primary social value. The disempowering and pacifying experiences of persecution that many had endured in the lead-up to their flight were also crucial. In this context, one way of re-constructing their lives in the UK was to reclaim their ability to exercise choice and to act purposively. Furthermore, it is evident that their waiting involves an intertwining of aspects of the condition of waiting as such and policy-induced circumstances in which the individual must relinquish his/her “dignity for handouts and leftovers, entering a relationship of individual submission to authority” (Fuglerud 1999: 124). The comments presented make explicit the perceptual contiguity between the passivity of waiting and the inactivity caused by exclusion from employment and enforced welfare dependency.

**Restricted movement in time**

The idea that ‘nothing happens’ when waiting may also relate to a sense of the suspension of movement in time rather than a restriction of movement in space. As previously noted, temporal specificity – the presence or absence of a deadline as a promise of action – is an important aspect of waiting. A deadline may act as a point in the imagined future to which an individual may orient himself/herself, which engenders a certain degree of expectation of an outcome in temporal terms. In forms of waiting where a deadline is specified, the time between the present and that perceptible point in the future can be transformed into graduating stages which enable the individual to locate themselves in relation to the end point. Such stages may be identified through ‘time-reckoning’ or a calculation of ‘clock’ duration with reference to inferential schemes (Gell 1993). In the kind of waiting experienced by my participants, deadlines were not provided by the Home Office or appeals
tribunal for major events (decisions or outcomes of appeals). The essential object for which the asylum seekers were waiting presented itself at an unidentifiable point in the unfolding future, giving their waiting an “open-endedness” (Brekke 2004: 23), which is perhaps “punitive sanctioning of the most extreme kind” (Schwartz 1974: 862). Deprived of a specific end-point and hence a system of graduating stages, the asylum seekers were unable to determine at what rate – if at any rate at all – they were moving towards the object of waiting. This is perhaps why, when asked about what it was like to wait, an Algerian mother and activist named Manal replied “Ohhh my goodness. Our life was put on pause for 6 years and a half.”

Furthermore, changes that did occur in individuals’ cases, such as a refusal at an appeal hearing, did not indicate whether success or failure was imminent. When one waits for the birth of a baby, one usually not only knows approximately how long until the birth but also witnesses or feels viscerally this movement in the form of the baby’s growth and associated changes in the mother’s body. There is a kind of linear movement. Asylum cases, however, did not seem to move in a linear fashion, but rather more like a game of Snakes and Ladders. Waiting involved a series of attempts; of trying, failing and starting again. It was difficult to determine the point at which one was positioned because even if one appeared to be close to the end-point – for example, when preparing for an appeal hearing about which the solicitor felt very confident – there was no certainty that they would not end up being refused again. These factors converged to produce a sense of paralysis or restricted, non-linear movement in time.

I now consider two contrasting interpretations of waiting, which also derive from the asylum seekers’ narratives of waiting and participant observation in their everyday lives. These suggest that for the people in question, waiting constituted not merely an ‘empty interlude’ (Chan & Loveridge 1987) in the migratory experience but a kind of engaged activity which refined their awareness of what they wanted (the future) and acted as a trigger for various actions (in the present).

**Waiting as intentional: anticipation and desire**

As outlined above, the waiting of the asylum seekers involved in this research was instrumental, as it was directed at events in the asylum process and ultimately, the immigration decision. In waiting, people were focused on their (uncertain) futures, actively anticipating possibilities that may eventuate. Many conversations were observed in which asylum seekers asked others, who were still
waiting or had already been granted Refugee Status, about the experiences they had had in the process, in an effort to develop ideas of the paths their own cases could take. People talked a lot about how they did not know what would happen to them in the future but they were active in anticipating what could happen; what Dewey (1930) labelled ‘dramatic rehearsal in imagination’. In anticipation, the hypothetical possibility is regarded as of instrumental value, in coming to terms with the real, rather than of intrinsic interest (Casey 1976). Anticipation can be separated into two forms: expressive, which entails visualising how things will be in terms of one’s emotional state, and practical, which is more geared towards planning what to do (ibid.). I interviewed a young Zimbabwean woman, Mudiwa, who at the time of fieldwork was preparing for her second appeal hearing. I asked her how she felt about the progress of her case. Her reflections highlight both the expressive and practical aspects of anticipation:

...you end up asking yourself ‘Why me?’ and ‘Is it going to work out? Is it not going to work out?’ Yeah, so it’s kind of depressing (...) I’ve tried just to occupy my thoughts with stuff like books or writing or whatever. But then you know, the thing is if something is really in your mind... you can’t control it. I might be talking to you but I might be thinking: What’s going to happen to me? (...) You can try to sleep but you don’t, you stay awake coz you’re thinking about what is going to happen. So no matter how much you try, you try to play with your child, you can’t...There was this time when I couldn’t even play with [my son]. He would come to me and I didn’t have any energy at all to play with him coz my mind was just too busy thinking about the possibilities and what’s going to happen and how I’m going to...

Mudiwa’s anticipations are similar to those expressed by others, in that they are a kind of preparation for the possibility of the negative modality of waiting being realised. People often laboured over questions such as: what will I do if immigration comes to get me? Who will I contact? Will I be separated from my family if they detain me? What will happen if I am deported? What will happen when I arrive at the airport? How will I survive? The cognitive pull of constantly being oriented to the future in waiting is also revealed by the account of Asad, a middle-aged African father of four who temporarily ‘opted out’ of the UK asylum process by going to Ireland:

...Believe me, they give us nineteen euro a week, per person. Nineteen euro is ten pounds. And I’m happy. Not [because of the] money. I’m happy that I’m not stressing. I’m happy not waiting for any letter coming. I’m happy not to see the postman, not to worry, not to deport
me. So I feel free (...) Like a new start. You understand like I said to you - no letters, no Home Office, no deportation, nothing coming. I know there's something gonna come but for the time being I'm resting.

This extract suggests that in withdrawing from the asylum system, Asad could take respite from the constant strain of anticipating the next event and/or obstacle – he was ‘resting’ and ‘not stressing’ because there was ‘nothing coming’.

Anticipation was also evident with regard to the positive modality of waiting. In continuously waiting, people dwelled deeply on what it was that they were actually waiting for, that is, what ‘the papers’ represented. Built into the cognitive structure of waiting in its positive modality is an awareness of what is desired. As Bourdieu writes, waiting involves “the interested aiming at something greatly desired durably” (1999: 228). A person can be durably ‘held’ only insofar as s/he possesses illusio, is invested in the game (ibid.). Thus desire for, and investment in, the attainment of certain objects or outcomes, are integral to this kind of waiting. The experience of waiting is thus the experience of things being of significance to us and can actually direct our attention to our desires and needs (Vanstone 1982). When I asked Mudiwa how she imagined life would be if she was granted Refugee Status, she replied:

I think, for me, that would be the greatest thing ever. Coz after four years I would finally have something that I’m really, really happy about, like something positive in my life, coz I’ve just had so many, like, you know, negative things happening in my life. That would be a huge step, not only for me but for my [child] as well coz I know I will start making a life for my [child], something I really wanted my [child] to have. And I will have a life as well. I’ll go to school. You know, all those things I’ve dreamt of doing I think I’ll do them...And I’ll just feel like I’m independent. You know? No one is looking over my shoulder and seeing what I’m doing and what I’m up to. Like someone owns me. Someone controls me...That would be a good thing...a major boost in my life.

On another occasion she told me: “I just imagine I had my status, a job, a house – I think about all the details.” Other participants made strikingly similar comments, specifying that once they had been granted the right to remain, they would be able to work; enrol in full-time studies; contribute
to society; choose where to live; marry; be reunited with family members; drive a car; travel abroad on holidays; and overcome the stagnation and exclusion which characterised the waiting period. In the excerpt above, Mudiwa also refers to an expected change in her own demeanour, from feeling subordinate and constrained to happy and independent, which is specifically linked to her relationship to the state. It was also commonly imagined that attaining a secure immigration status would deliver the ability to predict and determine the future, and a release from constant fears and worries about deportation. Finally, many people expressed a belief that their suffering would be drastically diminished and that the illnesses afflicting them would disappear. These imagined states were, I suggest, constructed in the context of waiting.

I have argued thus far that waiting is an active state in terms its intentional structures and the cognitive and emotional resources its calls forth. In the final section I will show that this argument also holds in terms of the pragmatic fields of everyday life.

**Waiting as activity**

I was initially surprised, given that UK-based studies of asylum seekers I had consulted prior to fieldwork reported experiences of boredom and idleness (Sigona & Torre 2005; Stewart 2005), to find that my research participants filled their days with a variety and high volume of activities. They socialised, prayed, studied, shopped, undertook domestic work, gathered information about the asylum process, and elicited support from peers. If in waiting, the ability to act depends upon the particular resources available to the waiter such as the technologies at hand and the spaces in which waiting is done (Hage 2009), in this case, the policies of the Scottish government, and the variety of services and spaces created specifically for asylum seekers, deserve mention as factors which empowered people to act.

Many people had developed enduring daily routines; a typical day in the life of a woman would entail making breakfast for the family and preparing the children for the day ahead, escorting the children to school, travelling to college to attend a class, returning to school to collect the children, travelling to a local meeting of asylum seekers, advocates and service providers, and returning home to prepare the evening meal and put the children to bed. Enrolment in part-time education and a strong commitment to developing English or gaining vocational qualifications in computing, accounting, business or social care, were widespread. Some individuals also regularly volunteered
for community organisations or initiatives. These activities had specific goals (organising an event, completing an assignment, attaining a qualification) and temporalities (the working week, the college semester, the academic year), which produced for those engaged in them a sense of progress in time.

People attended a variety of leisure activities run by Glasgow-based organisations. For example, every Monday afternoon, a group of women gathered at a local integration project to socialise with other migrants and long-term residents, listen to a guest speaker, and work on an arts & craft project. The women took it in turns to prepare lunch for the remainder of the group. Most men and women had made friends outside of these projects; with neighbours, classmates and members of an extended community from the country of origin. Those belonging to the larger communities from Sudan, Eritrea and the Congo attended large gatherings to celebrate national or religious days. People regularly hosted and made visits to the homes of their friends, sometimes spending many hours preparing extensive meals and catering to the needs of their guests. Women told me that they found release from the cognitive pull and emotional strain of waiting by carrying out tasks and activities. Activity could produce complete immersion in immediate sensation, freeing them temporarily from anxiety about the future (Lynch 1972). As a woman from the Maghreb said: “you just can’t think about [the papers] because it drives you crazy. Thinking about it doesn’t change anything, it just makes you feel worse. You got to find other things to do.” One woman told me that although having three children was difficult while an asylum seeker, children were the best distraction: “when I had a baby, I didn’t think about my case at all”.

Practising Christians frequented Catholic or Pentecostal services, Muslims performed prayer at home and in public when appropriate facilities were available, and Muslim men attended mosque on Fridays. Religious faith and practice was both a source of comfort and a cause for action. This was explained by Manal in the following way:

(...) if you worked hard for the thing you may get it and you may not. At this stage, it would be the will of the God. At this stage, because you’ve worked hard for it...As Mohammed Sallahu Wasallam peace onto him said, make the cause. Make the cause. That means try to do the thing and you will get it...Prayer is 3% of what God asks you to do. 97% has to be done in your life, in conjunction. That’s why Islam helps me in the asylum process.
One local initiative, in which Manal played a key role, aimed to provide a platform for addressing issues faced by asylum seekers, such as asylum policy, destitution, community safety, housing, and negative press coverage. At its regular meetings, information was disseminated about bureaucratic procedures, timescales, documentation, requirements and others’ first hand experiences, which in turn gave people an idea of the actions they could take towards securing a positive outcome. Many were also extremely active in lobbying and garnering public support for their right to remain in the UK: speaking vociferously at events attended by government officials, policy makers and members of the public; attending public demonstrations; and contributing to submissions to the Home Office, and formal enquiries into the asylum process and conditions for asylum seekers. A couple of individuals explicitly stated that this kind of community involvement was important while waiting, as it put them in the public spotlight, secured an extended network of advocates who could help them if detention was immanent and thus enhanced their safety. Large numbers of people stopped attending local services or actively lobbying once they received Leave to Remain. It is evident, then, that many activities were pursued as a direct response to not having ‘the papers’ and not knowing whether or when one would receive them. In other words, waiting was the impetus for activity. It was not the case that in waiting, this group did nothing or had nothing to do. On the contrary, they were engaged in multifarious activities while waiting, often in an effort to manage, alleviate or subvert the negative effects of waiting and to realise the desired future.

Conclusion

Waiting is commonly understood as a passifying condition because it entails a loss of agency. Modern understandings of time as quantified and commoditised render waiting wasted, fruitless and devalued time. The people who were the focus of this research expressed a contiguous sense of waiting time as empty and inactive. I have suggested that this primarily relates to a number of conditions which characterised their waiting: exclusion from a number of domains and (productive) activities, inability to change present circumstances, and the denial of knowledge about when and what would happen, which in turn produced a feeling of stasis.

I have also attempted to show that despite this, their waiting can be understood as a form of engaged activity. It was a cognitively demanding experience in that it called into play an active anticipation. Clearly, it was extremely painful, frustrating, disempowering and exhausting for the people in question to be held in a protracted state of animation and ignorance, and particularly, to
consider the negative modality of their waiting. However, in anticipating, they also reflected on what they desired and valued (and, it follows, what was lacking in the present). In focusing on the positive modality they constructed an idyllic future, and on the negative modality, prepared for the worst case scenario. They also made use of the available resources and time, actively pursuing various activities. If anticipation brought awareness of what people did and did not desire and value, the action they pursued released them from the cognitive burden and helped them to feel that they were progressing in time, towards specific goals. Far from empty, useless and banal interludes, people may turn periods of waiting into times of reflection, creativity and possibility, through anticipation and pragmatic action.

The case explicated here is one of long-term, instrumental waiting due to bureaucratic delay, among individuals who were brought together by virtue of their immigration status, in a specific historical, social and cultural setting. Comparative exploration and analysis of other types and settings of waiting, other groups and individuals of waiters, and other modes and moods by which they waited, would yield further insights and challenges to taken-for-granted conceptualisations of what is a universal, yet unjustly overlooked, condition.
Bibliography


