"I am not a case, I'm a person," Refugees and belonging in the Netherlands

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Abstract

"I am not a case but a person", this quote is from a young Syrian status refugee in our research, expressing his disappointment on his stay in the Netherlands. He acknowledges that he is now happy to live in a safe place and to possess a residence permit to stay temporarily in the country. After his long fled from Syria to the Netherlands he is willing to start his life by studying and by meeting Dutch natives. However, as he experienced daily, this goal seems to be too ambitious, as he is confronted with numerous obstacles (e.g. language and discrimination). This article presents the findings of a qualitative research among mostly Syrian refugees who recently settled down in the Netherlands and who are trying to build a sense of belonging in their new country. Safety is an indispensable condition for refugees' sense of belonging, but then they want to start their life. In this social process of belonging they face many obstacles, it seems that special gatherings organised for refugees and social contacts in little towns support them most in their sense of belonging.

Key terms
Refugees, Belonging, The Netherlands, Emotional Attachment.

Introduction
"I am not a case but a person", this quote is from a young Syrian refugee, expressing his disappointment on his stay in the Netherlands (Timmerman, 2016). He acknowledges that he is lucky to live in a safe place and to possess a residence permit to stay for five years in the country. However, after fleeing from Syria he was eager to start a new life by studying and by meeting Dutch natives. However, his daily experience of being confronted with obstacle after obstacle had taught him that this goal was far too ambitious. It is not easy to start studying, or find a job or meet Dutch citizens. It seems that only eleven percent of the Syrian refugees with a residence permit had found work after two and half years of settlement, 85 percent of this group subsisted on social security (CBS, 2019). Without the cooperation of Dutch citizens, represented by Dutch education institutions, employees or neighbours, refugees will not succeed. The willingness to integrate must come from both sides, but in the public debate on integration the role of refugees is mostly underscored (Kloosterman & Duyvendak, 2015; Pijnaker, 2016).

Between January 2013 and October 2015, 28305 asylum seekers arrived In the Netherlands, 42 % from Syria and 21% from Eritrea. Half of this group of asylum seekers was made up of males between 18 and 34 years old, and only a minority was

female (CBS, 2019). They all asked for asylum in the Netherlands. A large proportion of them finally received a temporary residence permit for five years (Dagevos and Miltenburg, 2018). After being granted a residence permit, the next step is to find suitable housing. To support this, the national government asked local councils and housing associations across the country to accommodate a certain number of refugees in their city. This prompted the Rochdale Housing Association to approach the VU university and ask the Anthropology Department to conduct a research project among this group of refugees, with the aim to learn more about the process of feeling at home in a new neighbourhood.

We accepted this request and, with a group of two supervisors and six students, we conducted an anthropological research project of 41 refugees, 13 experts and 20 native residents in Amsterdam and its surroundings (Pijnaker, 2016; Roefs, 2016; Ten Hoopen, 2016; Timmerman, 2016; Van Muijden, 2016 and Weijers, 2016). This article is a report of the qualitative research conducted among refugees, mostly from Syria, who were trying to build a life in their new country. Our research question was, how do refugees, who recently arrived in the Netherlands, construct a sense of belonging and what problems do they face during this process?

Belonging is a popular concept these days and a large number of studies have been conducted on this phenomenon (e.g. Antonsich, 2010; Fozdar and Hartely, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Lähdesmäki et al, 2016; Miellet and Van Liempt, 2017; Wessendorf, 2019). Belonging, as Antonsich (2010) states, is considered a multidimensional term as it includes different dimensions of attachments to place, space, neighbourhood or citizenship. It can vary from a more personal attachment to home, the place where one feels at home, feels safe, to a more formal public dimension, referring to a formal citizenship. For our research we will focus more on the personal or social relation of our informants to a new place or neighbourhood (Fozdar & Harteley, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Wessendorf (2019) found an important difference in terms of belonging whether migrants live in ethnic white dominated or in ethnic mixed areas, they seem to feel more at home in an ethnic mixed neighbourhood than in a dominated white area. She relates this sense of belonging to structures of power, implying that migrants must feel accepted or included by local residents. We will demonstrate that in our research refugees had different experiences with the inhabitants in ethnic mixed areas. This article further elaborates the concept of belonging, describes the methods and the background of the informants and presents the findings of the research.

Concepts of Belonging

Antonsich (2010) identified five dimensions of belonging that are very useful for our study: auto-biographical, relational, cultural, economic and legal. Auto-

biographical refers to where a person was born, the memories to this place, which is crucial for a person's life. Relational or social relations to others are very important for a sense of belonging, but only long standing, emotional ties with family or friends are part of a strong feeling, not the weak, superficial daily encounters with neighbours. However, this weak social part of belonging is still relevant, one needs a feeling of welcome by the citizens in the country of residence to feel at home or included. The cultural dimension is about language, sharing the same meanings to a form of belonging, but it also refers to cultural habits or religion. Economic embeddedness, to pursue a professional career and the legal component, having a residence permit, are generally seen as vital dimensions of belonging. This encounter is, as Wessendorf (2019) also stressed, part of a power relation between those who claim belonging, to stay and to work, and the ones who have the power to allow that belonging or inclusion.

Fozdar and Harteley (2014) conducted a research among refugees in Australia, framing belonging in terms of their relationship to the nation-state and its people. They differentiated between two types of belonging, civic belonging, which refers to rights and services, and ethno-national belonging which relates to a person's emotional connection to the nation state. This is only possible for the refugees, if they feel accepted by mainstream society, structural and social inclusion are a great support to refugees in their process of belonging. Fozdar and Heartely (2014) concluded that refugees needed to feel an emotional ethno-cultural connection to the nation state, a sense of belonging beyond the purely technical. In the reality of everyday life, however, refugees felt excluded, treated as outsiders (136). This emotional connectedness to the wider population is considered a particularly important part of belonging, which we will take over for our research.

Wessendorf (2019) studied recent migrants and their sense of belonging in two different neighbourhoods in the cities of Birmingham and East London. As stated above, the ethnic diversity of an area is an important factor in these processes of belonging, as well as the background of migrants and their former experiences of diversity. Wessendorf (2019) focused her research on the social interactions of pioneer migrants with the local residents in different neighbourhoods, where their co-ethnics are not living. She also raised the importance of visible difference, related to race, religion, gender or lifestyle, the bigger the visible difference the lesser the chance migrants feel at home. A female migrant with a headscarf, for instance, felt less comfortable in a white dominated quarter, while she felt accepted in a religiously diverse area.

We will build on these theories of belonging, focusing most on the emotional and social dimension of this process, experienced and expressed by the refugees from our study.

Methodology and Background

The research was undertaken between April and July 2016 (Pijnaker, 2016; Roefs, 2016; Ten Hoopen, 2016; Timmerman, 2016; Van Muijden, 2016 and Wijers, 2016). We conducted interviews with forty-one refugees, 13 experts who either work in a professional capacity or as volunteers with refugees and twenty native Dutch residents in a diverse neighbourhood in Amsterdam. Most of the refugee informants lived in Amsterdam, a few had found housing in a small town near the city. Participant observation was carried out in many different locations by joining several "eat and meet" gatherings with refugees in Amsterdam. These events were organised by refugee organisations who wanted to stimulate informal encounters between native Dutch citizens and refugees, by sharing a Syrian meal together and by listening to Syrian music. We spoke with the refugees in their houses, at informal meetings, at public places or at special meetings for refugees. The spoken language was mostly English, but a few refugees had mastered Dutch quite well. Calls were posted on Facebook, for instance, *Refugee Start Force*, to ask for participation in the research and several refugees responded positively to our request. In the table below, we present the countries of origin of our male and female informants.

Table 1: Origin of the refugees

Origin	Male	Female	Total
Syria	27	5	32
Eritrea	4		4
Iraq	1	1	2
Yemen	1		1
Iran		1	1
Sudan		1	1
Total	*33*	*8*	*41*

The 41 refugees consisted of 33 men and 8 women. Most of them were from Syria (33), the others from Eritrea, Iraq, Yemen, Iran and Sudan. The majority of the refugees were in their twenties, between 18 and 30 years. Three Eritrean men and one Iranian woman are in their forties. Most of the refugees arrived in the Netherlands around two years ago, ten between seven months and a year and a few four years ago. The informants from Eritrea have lived twenty to thirty years in the Netherlands. Twenty-three refugees, mostly from Syria, travelled alone. All women, except the one from Iran, arrived with their family in the Netherlands, young girls with their mother or siblings and married women with their husband and children. They were all highly educated (e.g. dentists, accountants or teachers) and the younger refugees were still students, for instance, in medicine, architecture, business or English literature. In that

sense, we deal with a specific group of highly educated informants. Most of them were attending Dutch language classes at the moment of our research. We changed the names of the refugees presented in this article, in order to guarantee their anonymity.

To sum up, our informants have heterogeneous backgrounds in terms of gender, age, family situation, education, length of journey and of stay in the Netherlands. Their responses to the issues raised during the interviews are, therefore, very diverse.

Findings: The Process of Belonging

Safety first

Belonging is about the emotional attachment to feel safe, which was very important for our informants. Most of the refugees came from a dictatorial country, or a country in war, one from which they had to flee for their lives. They did not travel to the Netherlands immediately but had to stay temporarily in another country. Turkey is a such a country where Syrians first arrived. Bilal, 20 years old, from Syria:

> We lived for about two years in Turkey and we didn't like living there actually because it's really hard. You want to work so hard to live, just to live you know. So we stayed for like two years and after that we decided to move to Europe.

Zahid, 29 years old*:* "but then I had to leave because there was no future in Turkey, I would be forever a refugee there" *(*Van Muijden, 2016). When the refugees finally arrived in the Netherlands, at first they were very worried about their own safety and that of their family. It was sometimes hard for them to believe that they were really safe in the Netherlands. Aisha, a 40 years old woman, said that, in Iran, she was obliged to wear a veil because of her fear of the authorities. In the Netherlands, she decided to take it off, but she still remained fearful:

> When I came here the first time, I saw for example the police. I wasn't wearing a head scarf. I don't know why, but I'm afraid of them. [...] All people in my country are afraid, afraid of the police. The police will come and they will say like why is your hair out, and I don't think it's okay. I had this problem [of fear] for a week. But no, it is not like this in the Netherlands (Weijers, 2016).

Salma, 33 years old, from Syria:

> To feel at home, now we are so relaxed that we are not in Syria anymore and the war is gone, this is the biggest blessing. That now we are living here, no matter what kind of house and where the house is, the most important thing for me now, and when I came first to Netherlands, that I can sleep well. I know that my child is safe, that my children are safe (Van Muijden, 2016).

Amir, 29 years old, was also worried about his family whom he had left behind:

I am here in body, but my mind is always thinking about Syria, about my family. Are they safe, are they not safe? Do they have enough money? And I cannot send money to Syria. I am always thinking about my family (Van Muijden, 2016).

Family ties in Syria, and in the other countries of origin, were very close and the absence of their family in the Netherlands made their stay much harder, despite being able to maintain social contact with their family via social media (Weijers, 2016). Everyone – also parents and grandparents – now acknowledged the importance of social media, as the informants made clear. As one respondent said: "You can lose your mobile, but not your Facebook" (Weijers, 2016). The older generation of refugees in particular had found it hard to learn how to use *Whatsapp* (see also Miellet & Van Liempt, 2017).

Following Antonsich (2010) and Yuval Davis (2006) we conclude that feeling safe was an indispensable condition for refugees' sense of belonging. This emotional feeling was also perfectly expressed by Michael Ignatieff, 'where you belong is where you are safe; and where you are safe is where you belong' (quoted in Antonsich, 2010).

Obstacles

When the refugees finally felt safe in the Netherlands, when they had received a permit of residence and were settled in a city, they were ready to start building their lives. In the words of Antonsich (2010), the legal dimension of belonging was already present when we met the refugees, but they were in the middle of the social and cultural process of belonging, which they experienced as very difficult. A crucial part of this process of belonging is to learn the Dutch language, attend classes, but more importantly, to practice their language skills. Although some refugees were not very interested in meeting their Dutch locals, most of them did try to engage. They wanted to meet "real Dutch people," as they called them, but were immediately confronted with problems. Zaid, 29 years old, expressed his experience as follows:

I literally say that learning Dutch here is like learning Dutch in Syria, because you don't see freaking Dutch people (Weijers, 2016).

Quite a lot of the refugees in our study lived in a multi-ethnic quarter of the city where many families from Moroccan or Turkish background had settled. In Wessendorf's (2019) research, migrants in East London felt at home in those mixed areas, they felt included as they were not very visible, however, this was not the case in our study. The refugees criticized these neighbourhoods harshly; in their opinion, it was "dirty on the streets" and they thought that the Moroccan and Turkish families were "not very integrated". They considered these groups to be isolating themselves from society and were surprised to see this. Their critical attitude complies with the general opinion

in Dutch media and other Western countries, where this so-called segregation is perceived as a negative factor for their process of integration (Slootman & Duyvendak, 2015). In response, the refugees wanted to distinguish themselves from these communities, as they felt different as highly educated young men. They wanted to change the stereotype image of the segregated migrant by being more socially active and to prove the opposite. They said:

> We must show that we are not like Turks or Moroccans, that we want to integrate, we want to do it better.

They also noted that Syrians were presented negatively in the media. Ghalib, 26 years old: "I think some media don't like refugees or they don't like Arab people." Therefore, they felt excluded by the negative label of refugee, Hamid explains:

> I could not imagine how to be a refugee. I'm still the same person here, but for other people I am a refugee, so it is different, it is like yes. They smile, they are good, but they don't consider you as a friend (Weijers, 2016).

Another Syrian young man recounted his experience of meeting people, saying that they:

> don't want to talk to me when I tell them I am a refugee from Syria. Sometimes I say I am an alien, then I don't get questions anymore (Weijers, 2016).

Another refugee commented: "I'm forced to be a refugee on paper, but I'm not going to be a refugee in real life." Rimi, 19 years old from Syria, reported feeling "awkward" when people asked her where she came from, as she assumed that the questioner was judging her (Pijnaker, 2016). The refugees in the research of Fozdar and Hartely (2014) also mentioned these experiences of exclusion; when questioned in this way, it felt like the person was suggesting that they did not belong to their new country. Dutch native neighbours did not always seem very open to social contact with foreigners either, as Bilal said:

> A few weeks ago we made pasta, and I said to my brother we have to start making contact with Dutch people to learn language, culture and stuff. Let's give them a bit from the pasta. And actually that is what we did. But we couldn't have contact with them, just 'hello, please' and we thought after this they are going to maybe ask us something about us, but nothing happened. Maybe I can try it again or try other ways (Van Muijden, 2016).

Bilal and his brother's attempt to meet their neighbours was unsuccessful as there was no response to Bilal's effort. Another frequent problem was the tendency of Dutch people, (especially those in cities), to switch to English the minute the refugee spoke to them (Weyers, 2016, 12). Yet, another difficulty was faced when the refugees tried to get in touch with Dutch people. Mimoun aged 30 years said: "they are always busy

with work. Only in the morning they have time to say 'Hello, hello'." (Weijers 2016). Dutch people are so busy that they have no time for friendship, as the refugees experienced in their daily life, but making a personal connection for the refugees was very important if they were ever going to feel at home (see also Wessendorf, 2019). Bilal explained when he feels at home:

> Actually, just being with people, like all people. And here I sometimes feel that, but sometimes I don't. I am not sure if I can describe exactly this idea but you know we are from different countries, from different religion, everything is different. Our faces are different, so when people look at us sometimes, you know you are different. They don't say it of course, but you can see it (Van Muijden, 2016).

The feeling of not being at home can be very subtle, as Bilal above tried to make clear. Like Amir, Bilal lives in a small town, near Amsterdam. Amir:

> All the people here are nice. But they don't like foreigners, no not foreigners but outsiders. Even if you are Dutch, they have to wait one or two years. They know each other here in town, if you ask about someone, 'yes I know him, I know his father, his mother' (Van Muijden, 2016).

Mastering Dutch language is very important for refugees who want to continue their studies, but the recognition of their diplomas becomes a big obstacle. Soumia explains why she became depressed:

> When I first came here, I was doing an international preparatory year for minors who wanted to learn Dutch. There they told me 'okay you did not bring a diploma from your country'. I couldn't do that from Iraq, it was too dangerous for me, I fled after my exams. 'you have to start at MBO (lower professional education)'. I thought, come on people, I am good at everything, I had an average score of 9.2. 'No you have no diploma, then that is what you have to do'. I had so little information so I got really depressed (Van Muijden, 2016).

The refugees have to deal with bureaucracy in order to start their lives, but bureaucracies take a long time to respond to their requests, therefore, they lost a lot of time waiting. O'Reilly (2018), who studied asylum seekers in liminal spaces, examined how this long waiting period, full of insecurity, manifested itself in the panic, sadness and boredom suffered by asylum seekers. Bilal reports:

> You know the problem that I find in the Netherlands is that everything is slow. I mean you have to process everything really long term. So, we find it a little bit hard you know, I said, I spent more than a year in refugee camps and this is like the same, 'come on I just want to start my life' (Van Muijden, 2016).

Although the refugees in our study were eager to meet Dutch native people, practice their language skills and learn about the country, they faced a lot of obstacles in their social and cultural process of belonging. This part of belonging, not feeling welcome, does not generally receive much attention in the public debate on integration, it is always the migrant or refugee who must adapt. The role of the natives in this unequal power relation is often neglected, the lack of inclusion is not often discussed.

Belonging

This is more than just a negative story of refugees who faced barriers in their process of belonging. A few informants did make Dutch friends, they did find their way in the city, and they did felt at home. They met friends during their studies or special events, organized by refugee organisations, with the goal of bringing locals and refugees together. At these events refugees spoke informally with Dutch people, they were very positive about these gatherings. Hamid commented:

> "so they are really, really open, so people that go to that event, they are open. So it's easy to contact them" (Weijers, 2016).

Yaman explains why it is so important to meet Dutch people: "We want to know how you guys are living, to live like you". They acknowledged that it would be easy to form a Syrian community, but they are afraid that that would make it more difficult to integrate in Dutch society. Therefore, they are looking for different ways to meet Dutch people, for instance, Sameer, who decided for that reason to do volunteer work:

> So why? Because I have a lot of free time when I just came to my house. I didn't know what to do, because I didn't like have connections in Amsterdam, I didn't have my own network (Weijers, 2016).

Some of them even approached people on public transport or on the street, just to create the opportunity to talk to Dutch people (Weijers, 2016). Social media were also used to look for local Dutch people. On one of the Facebook pages, aimed at supporting refugees, they tried to build a social network. They asked volunteers to help them learn Dutch and to welcome new refugees when they arrived at the central station of the city (Weijers, 2016).

Refugees living in small cities miss the special meetings with locals which are organized in Amsterdam, but the few who live in small towns have some positive experiences. Rahma said:

> We didn't know that in the Netherlands you are supposed to go to your neighbours first and say 'oh, we are here'. We thought that they would come to us and say welcome in our country or something like that, but no one came in

the first week. In the second week, we asked our contact person, 'why are people not coming to us, and they are staring at us like hey you are new, but you didn't say anything'. But actually, we didn't have that information that you are supposed to go to your neighbours or send a card or something like that, we didn't have that.

After this Rahma and her family made the first step, they invited their neighbours for a tea party, and the contact became much better. Four years later, they still have coffee with neighbours from time to time (Van Muijden, 2016).

Conclusion

This article explored the question: how do refugees construct a feeling of belonging and what problems do they face during this process. We understood that this is a long process, and that we focused our research on a group who had not been staying in the Netherlands for long and were still in the middle of this process. The legal dimension of belonging, becoming a refugee with a residence permit, which is a very important dimension of belonging, as Antonsich (2010) stated, had already been granted to them. Another crucial aspect of belonging is the need to feel safe, as stressed by Antonsich (2010) and Yuval Davis (2006), not only for themselves but also for their close kin who are left behind. When they feel safe, the refugees then want to start their lives and the cultural, social and economic dimension of belonging become relevant. They want to learn the language, they want to study, find a job, they want to meet Dutch people, in other words, they are in a hurry, they do not want to waste any time. For the refugees this social process goes too slow, which is also echoed by O'Reilly (2018). In most studies on belonging of migrants, the relationship with the neighbourhood has been found to be a vital element in this sense of belonging. For instance, Wessendorf (2019) demonstrated the importance of the ethnic mixed neighbourhood in this process. For our research group of young refugees this was not the case, this did not seem that important to them. They found it hard to meet Dutch neighbours in their area and had only superficial ties with them. An exception to this was found in small towns, where some refugee families are based; here they appear to have made more intensive contacts. Finally, our informants rejected the label 'refugee', as they had negative experiences in their day to day lives and wanted, instead, to be treated as people… as individuals.

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