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Life on Hold

The Impact of Time on Young Asylum Seekers Waiting for a Decision

Jan-Paul Brekke



Jan-Paul Brekke

Abstract

Asylum seekers coming to European countries often end up waiting for months and even years for a final decision. For the past 20 years there has been agreement among receiving states that shorter processing times should be a goal (cf. *SOU* 1988). However, complicated cases along with the wish to safeguard the applicants' rights to fair treatment continue to produce prolonged case handling. Under these conditions it is imperative to understand how the waiting process is experienced by the asylum seekers themselves. In this article I ask in what ways the waiting challenges the individual. The article is based on auto-photography and qualitative interviews with 14 asylum seekers aged 16 to 26 in Sweden. The empirical material points to a series of time-related factors challenging the waiting asylum seekers. Concepts are introduced that capture these: relative waiting, non-sequential processing, directionless time, holding on – letting go, as well as dis-integrated time. In other words, the answers given by the asylum seekers commented on the structure of time in the waiting process. In the final section, mental health theory is used to discuss the challenges reported by the asylum seekers regarding sense of coherence and self.

Keywords: Youth, asylum seekers, identity

Leben in der Warteschleife – Die Auswirkungen von Zeit auf junge auf eine Entscheidung wartende Asylbewerber

Zusammenfassung

Nach Europa kommende Asylbewerber müssen oft Monate und Jahre bis zur endgültigen Asylantragsentscheidung warten. In den letzten 20 Jahren existierte zwischen den Aufnahmestaaten Einverständnis darüber, dass eine Verkürzung der Bearbeitungszeit ein Ziel sein sollte (vgl. *SOU* 1988). Komplizierte Fälle mit dem Wunsch, das Recht der Bewerber auf gerechte Behandlung zu schützen, führen zu ausgedehnten Fallbearbeitungszeiten. Unter diesen Voraussetzungen ist es zwingend erforderlich zu verstehen, wie die jungen Asylbewerber selbst diesen Warteprozess erleben und erfahren. Der Artikel geht der Frage nach, auf welche Weise dieses Warten das Individuum herausfordert bzw. belastet. Er basiert auf Foto-Selbstportraits und qualitativen Interviews mit 14 Asylbewerbern zwischen 16 und 26 Jahren in Schweden. Das empirische Material deutet auf eine Reihe von zeitbezogenen Faktoren hin, die die wartenden Asylbewerber belasten: relatives Warten, nicht reihenfolgegerechte Bearbeitung, richtungslose Zeit, Festhalten-Loslassen, sowie zerronnene Zeit. Anders ausgedrückt: die Antworten der Asylbewerber beschreiben die Struktur der Zeit im Warteprozess. Im letzten Abschnitt wird die Theorie der psychischen Gesundheit angewandt, um die Belastungen, die die Asylbewerber erfahren, hinsichtlich ihrer Auswirkungen auf Kohärenzerleben und Selbstbild der Asylbewerber zu diskutieren.

Stichworte: Jugendliche, Asylbewerber, Identität

1 Introduction

Even in a prison they operate with a time limit! “This is when you are going to be free”, they’ll tell you. But here they only tell you to wait, just wait... (Unaccompanied Afghan, 17 years old, after 10 months of waiting).

When a person applies for asylum, she does not know whether she will be granted permission to stay or will eventually have to leave the country. Neither do the authorities. This uncertainty permeates the situation for the asylum seeker, as well as for the authorities organizing the process (cf. *Norström* 2004). Seen from the perspective of the asylum seeker, the authorities of the exile country can give shelter from prosecution or not choose not to believe or accept her story and turn her down. Ambivalence also marks the situation for the receiving state; for the authorities the asylum seeker is either someone who is to be shut out and returned to their country of origin, or he is a potential new citizen. Until a decision is taken and given effect, both parties have to cope with a situation of ambivalence and uncertainty.

This article focuses on the situation for the individual and asks: How do asylum seekers experience waiting for the outcome of their cases? Often negative impact of prolonged waiting is taken for granted. A point is made in this article that although this is not necessarily true, there is reason to look into structural sides of the waiting period that may have this effect and how these can be alleviated.

After a presentation of the design and methods, some relevant studies on the waiting period, time and mental health are presented. The interview-material is then presented and analysed inspired by the introduced concepts and theories. In the final section a list of findings are presented and discussed.

2 Concepts and theory

Earlier studies on the situation for asylum seekers during their case processing cover a wide range of relevant topics. In these contributions time has mostly been treated implicitly and not explicitly. A few concepts and contributions shall be mentioned here as background to the later discussion.

Within the field of psychology there are a series of studies done on the effects of pre-flight conditions compared to the post-flight experiences for the wellbeing of asylum seekers (cf. *Ekblad/Abazari/Eriksson* 1999; *Sundqvist et al.* 2000; *Hermansson/Timpka* 1999; *Ekblad. et al* 1994). *Sundqvist et al.* (2000) found support for earlier studies that saw greater negative effects from stress during the asylum period than events that happened before the asylum seekers came into exile.

A group of Danish social psychologists summed up their experiences from working with refugees in a book called “The Psychological Crisis of Refugees” (cf. *Arenas et al.* 1987). Here they use the term *trauma of return* to describe one such crisis. For the persons suffering from this state, the hope and expectation of one day returning home overshadows the wish and ability to integrate. This trauma paralyzes the refugee and keeps him from doing things that in his opinion are contradictory to returning. He lives with his suitcases packed and with his mind closed off to the outside world. This book does not

explicitly deal with asylum seekers. In their precarious situation one could perhaps extrapolate and state that they are forced to live in a trauma of return.

In connection with the mass outflow from the former Yugoslavia in 1991-1993, a series of sociological and other studies were conducted in the Nordic countries (cf. Berg 1998; Schwartz 1998; Ålund 1998). A key triangle of concepts that structured the waiting period for the Bosnian refugees were found to be: time, integration and return (cf. Brekke 2001).

In the interviews for the current study the question of *identity* came up. One take in sociology of the relation between time and identity states that in order to do identity-work, the individual needs some sense of a future self (cf. Johansen 1984). The limited time-horizon offered to for example asylum seekers make the (re)formation of identity difficult.

Another key concept in this context is *liminality* (cf. Bunar 1998). Stemming from social anthropology it points to the position in-between two statuses.

In the 1970s the sociologist Aaron Antonovsky developed the concept of *sense of coherence* (cf. SOC 1987). The aim was to identify elements that produce mental health. Antonovsky (1987) found three elements that together gave the overarching sense of coherence. These were *comprehensibility* (understanding your surroundings gives predictability); *manageability* (having sufficient resources to manipulate these surroundings); and finally *meaningfulness* (does the world “make sense”). The concept of SOC seems relevant for the understanding of asylum seekers’ situation. Although there is an element of time built into the term, one could add Anthony Giddens concept of *ontological security* to put emphasis on the importance of predictability (cf. Giddens 1984; Slavnic 1998). To Giddens this is one important component of a very basic experience of feeling safe in the everyday situation. Having some idea of what and where one will be in the near future is essential to the experience of the present.

Finally I will introduce the concept of *awareness contexts*. In a study from 1967 the American sociologists Glaser/Strauss looked at how signs of a positive or negative development were given and interpreted by seriously ill patients. They described the patients and their families heightened sensitivity to signs from doctors, nurses, the allocation of treatment etc. The more uncertain the situation, the more sensitive were the actors involved. The asylum seekers presented in this material could be said to be in a similar situation of *heightened awareness*.

3 Design and methods

The 14 interviews that form the basis of this study were conducted in the Swedish towns of Gothenburg and Uppsala in 2004. Later interviews with asylum seekers waiting in Norwegian reception centers have supported the findings from the initial study (cf. Brekke 2005; Brekke/Aarset 2009).

The names of the informants have been changed or left out data in order to secure their anonymity in the study. The interviews were designed to be flexible and open. This was necessary in the complex and sensitive interview situation including the informant, the researcher and an interpreter.

In addition to this method, the asylum seekers were asked to use single-use cameras to document their situation, their “waiting” (cf. Staunes 1998; Clausen 2003). Two sets of

copies were developed and brought to the interview. The photos then served as a structuring tool in the interview situation. Using cameras had several positive effects. In short it made preparing for the interviews easier for both parties, it increased the quality of the actual face-to-face meeting, and it also made it easier to analyze and pass on the content of the interviews.

The informants were people that lived in self-organized housing and in reception centers. Most of the participants had come to Sweden on their own. Three were daughters that lived with their families. The asylum seekers had limited educational background. Only a few came from families where the parents had some sort of higher education. Five of the fourteen were girls. They were selected among the participants of so-called Development Partnerships under the EU Equal Program that aimed at spreading good practice of asylum reception in Europe. The study does obviously not seek to be representative in the traditional sense. By doing in-depth interviews, however, this study can describe and analyze some of the ways of managing the asylum-period that are definitely represented in the asylum seeker population in Sweden, and probably elsewhere. By describing and analyzing their characteristics, common traits can be distinguished from the individual idiosyncrasies. These will be pieces in the puzzle of understanding asylum waiting.

4 Results

Three key elements expected to be central to the phenomenon of asylum waiting were identified in the above sections – time, return and integration (stay). Here some aspects of how the asylum seekers experienced time under the possibility of a negative (return) or a positive (stay) decision will be described.

4.1 Open ended waiting

The quote at the start of this article can be seen as an entrance to the highly complicated field of how time influenced the asylum seekers' experience of waiting. In the quote, the boy pointed to an element of their situation that the asylum seekers found stressful, namely that the waiting was *open-ended*. He was echoed by a fellow Afghan national.

For how long can a person wait for the residence permit. We have no life apart from thinking about this residence permit. Whoever you ask, you get nowhere. They just tell you to wait. But for one more day? One more month? One more year? How much longer must I wait to know what my destiny is? (Boy 18, unaccompanied minor, Afghan)

The uncertainty about how long they were going to have to wait before a result of their cases were ready, came in addition to the lack of certainty about the actual outcome of their cases.

Many of my informants claimed to have been promised by government employees or others that their cases would be decided within four, six or ten months. Despite the possibility of they having misunderstood the communication with the representatives of the Swedish authorities, the disappointments these points in time elicited when they passed without a decision being taken points to the extreme importance of time.

The first day we got here, they gave us a booklet in Dari and English. It said that it would take maximum six months before an answer would be given in a case involving an underaged applicant. I thought it would take around three to four months, but now eleven months have passed (Afghan 16 years old).

A girl from the Ukraine said that she had been promised a deadline when she first contacted the Migration Board. Their failure to live up to this point in time had become a mantra of deceit for this asylum seeker.

They (the Swedish Migration Board) said that we would receive an answer within six months! (...) First they said it would take six months. They said it would take six months! Every day when I go to get the mail I think – maybe today. You just wait for something, something that is empty, which does not exist. Goddammit! It must come! They are making people disappointed! (18 years old, 40 months of waiting).

This girl illustrates a point that has been documented earlier; many asylum seekers will not count negative decisions as valid (cf. Berg 1998; Brekke 2001).

4.2 Jumping the queue

One side to the time aspect of the waiting period that my informants reacted strongly to was that the timing of the decisions seemed to be random. This contributed to the feeling of not being in control of their situation. It also made the system appear as unjust. The decisions were not taken in succession in a way that the asylum seekers could understand. It meant that someone that arrived to Sweden after you would in many cases get their decision before you got yours.

The worst thing is when someone jumps the queue and is given their residence permit ahead of my family (17 year old girl from Africa).

In some cases this treatment was experienced as particularly unjust. This was when the persons that jumped the queue had comparable background, came from the same country, had similar stories to tell etc.

This is a difficult period marked by uncertainty and lack of fairness. People that arrived after me are allowed to stay. I thought that I was the first one that was going to be granted a residence permit of our small group. I was the first to start the course and the first to be given a part time position at a trainee at a workplace. Now there are only two more in addition to myself that have not received permanent residency (Man, Arab).

A lack of understanding of the case processing reinforced the asylum seekers uncertainty and feeling of being lost in time. Their personal waiting was compared to others in the same situation or with the same time of arrival. One could call this *relative waiting*.

4.3 Subjective time

So far I have described the asylum seeker's experience of time directly linked to deadlines and the passing of weeks and months. But, time can also be seen from a stricter subjective side (cf. Bergson 1990). From this perspective the focus is not the chronological sequential time, but rather how the individuals experience and relate to their own past, present and future.

In line with this thought I was confronted with the concept of *holding on* by one of my informants. She said that one had to hold on to the present and remain active – keep working. She shared this attitude with some of the informants. After her interview I noticed that some of the other informants were about to revert to the other side of the metaphor – they appeared to be *letting go*. Their reaction to not having control over their lives – their futures – was to stop caring.

One way of describing the situation for the waiting asylum seekers is to say that they experienced *directionless time*. The concept is a combination of time and space and characterizes the unclear future for the asylum seekers (cf. Brekke 2001). Situated between past and a future, their present does not point in a specific direction. Although they hoped that they would be allowed to stay in Sweden, they did not know. Without a future to steer towards, the person was not given any clues on how to act in the present. They did not know what came after the waiting.

Many of the questions I asked were difficult to answer for the respondents without using illustrations and metaphors. The feeling of being outside time was one of these topics.

The waiting is like being in the middle of an ocean and not knowing whether you will survive or not. You don't know what your destiny will be. Maybe you can't get out and drown. (Boy, 18, Afghan)

This particular informant had a tough time waiting. One could add to his illustration that he was treading water while he waited to be saved – i.e. receive a positive answer, and after 12 months he was getting tired of doing so.

Several of my informants stated that the waiting was particularly hard for them because of their young age. Each week, month and year should rather have been used to get an education, a partner or to just be young and have fun, they stated. The uncertainty regarding whether they would get to stay in the country also obstructed their direct interaction with other young people, Swedes and foreigners alike. The lack of a certain future in Sweden made them less attractive as friends and partners, according to my informants.

4.4 Physical manifestations of disintegrated time

In the interviews I asked the asylum seekers what they did during a normal day and on weekends.

During the day I am at school. I live only 100 meters from it. After school I go back to my room. Then the thoughts come back. I stand in front of the window and look out. Then I remember where I am. You can really feel the pressure on your nerves (Boy, 17, Afghan)

Several of my informants told me about near catatonic ways of spending their time. One boy told me that he used to spend time in front of the mirror in his room. He also took a picture that shows him standing in that position, thinking:

Now I am here – what happened? What will happen to me in the future? Three years have passed since I last saw my family. No one knows where they are. When I look in the mirror I think – what will it be like? What will happen? The days are extremely long. They never end! (Boy, 17, Afghan).

They reported everything from having problems falling asleep at night to a disturbed sleep-pattern and dependence on medication. For some the disturbed sleep was accompanied by physical symptoms.

I have waited for twelve months. I am tired and very nervous. I didn't use to tremble, but now my hands shake. And I can't sleep (Boy, Russian, 17).

5 Discussions and findings

The empirical material presented in this article points to a series of time related factors challenging the waiting asylum seekers. Concepts were introduced that captured these: *Relative waiting, non-sequential processing, directionless time, holding on – letting go, physical manifestations of time*. All the quotations also pointed to the *heightened awareness* that was caused by the importance of the outcome of their cases.

The uncertain *future* of the asylum seekers cast a shadow over their *present*. One version of this was the challenge this represented to their identity. In order to know "who one is", one needs to now "who one will be" (cf. *Johansen* 1984). To do identity-work, the individual needs some sense of a future self. For young people that do not have a stable identity connected to a position in society, a degree, status as parent, partner or other, this mechanism may have an increased effect.

How does this translate into the framework of *Antonovsky* (1989) and his concept of *sense of coherence (SOC)*. The general impression was that the informants' orientation in life was weakened and that their level of coherence was low.

The first component under the *SOC* umbrella was *comprehensibility*. We are now in a position to ask whether the surroundings and challenges that met the asylum seekers appeared as random and chaotic or well ordered and understandable. The *open-endedness* of their waiting contributed to the sense of the process being guided by an element of randomness. The absence of information contributed to reducing the already scarce understanding of the premises, policies and law-basis that were relevant in the decision making process.

The next component of the *SOC* was *manageability*. Did the asylum seekers feel they had the sufficient resources within themselves and their network to solve the difficulties they were confronted with? Finding a solution and moving on, was problematic for my informants. The everyday life was also a source of low manageability.

The third component of *Antonovsky's* concept (1987) was *meaningfulness*. If his litmus test question was put to the asylum seekers, the outcome would not be certain. He asks "Are the challenges you meet in life worthy of your engagement and energy?" (p. 18). Did their efforts make sense to them? Here the answer has to be divided into two.

On the one hand the basis of their situation, the flight and following existence in exile was highly meaningful. They presented their stories as if they had little or no choice but to flee. Getting away from their homeland and seeking protection and residency in Sweden was absolutely a meaningful project. This made the potential for a strong motivation to cope with their situation and integrate in Sweden. However, for many it seemed to remain a potential due to the prevailing uncertainty.

A negative decision would drain the meaningfulness of their project. This is the other side to the answer. They were uncertain whether they had done the right thing or not. There was a lot at stake. Some felt their lives were threatened if they were forced to return. For all it would be an emotional but also economic disaster.

In their everyday lives my informants struggled to find a meaning. What I described as the experience of *time without direction*. If their efforts are to make sense, they needed a direction.

So where does this leave the asylum seekers in this study as far sense of coherence goes? As we have seen they would score low on all three of the elements. As I have argued, though, the basis may be sound. *Antonovsky* (1987) discussed different mixes between the three components of the *SOC*. He found that low scores on comprehensibility and manageability but high on meaningfulness would mean that there was an inherent *pressure to move up*. When a solution to the question of residency is found, comprehension and manageability will follow.

A critical comment is needed to put the low *SOC* score of the informants in this study into perspective. It is important to note that the three indicators of health were not developed especially for refugees or migrants. My point is that any *stranger* to a social system would be at risk of getting a “low” score. Asylum seekers are however in a special situation compared to immigrants or to other people that are new to a society. Having been forced to migrate and having to wait in uncertainty for a residence permit are among the relevant differences here.

Another comment regards variations in how the individual asylum seekers handle their waiting. In this article the experience of waiting has been discussed as if it was a unitary experience. This is of course a simplification. The *SOC* standard itself indicates for example a relationship between class and health. *Antonovsky* (1987) points to this connection when he discusses what causes some people to have a high *SOC*, while others have low. Together with gender, history, genes and idiosyncratic fortune, social class is listed as important. Differences in family and educational background have not traditionally been used as an explanatory variable in Scandinavian research on refugees and immigrants. In my material however, the educated informants, and perhaps even more importantly those with educated parents, seemed to handle the situation better. According to some social scientists, this should come as no surprise (cf. *Sundquist* 1995). Strong and resourceful individuals will always have the best starting point to tackle new and demanding situations (cf. *Brochmann* 1995).

So how can the waiting period be organized in order to reduce the strain on the individual asylum seeker? One obvious solution has been repeated over and over: The call for shorter waiting time. As early as 1988 a White Paper was issued on this topic in Sweden (cf. *SOU* 1988). The issue has since been discussed widely across Europe. The list of reasons why this has not been achieved is long. It includes variations in number of arrivals, legal considerations, securing fair treatment and bureaucratic hindrances.

This study indicates that setting certain dates or intervals for the various phases of the asylum procedure could be as important as making the total period shorter. Such *temporal waypoints* would insert a sense of predictability, coherence and a more comprehensive waiting period.

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