A Place Between the Past and the Future

Analysing the impact of the Dutch asylum system on life and identity of asylum seekers

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Introduction

Migration has been part of human life for thousands of years. Yet, in the past century improved means of transportation and progressing technology has greatly contributed to large-scale movement of people, material and ideas. The effects of globalization can be noted in many aspects of everyday life. One of the leading bodies to deal with the mass movements of peoples and goods are governments, directing migration through institutions and migration policy. But what effects do these institutions and related policies have on a micro-level? How do they affect the migrant’s life? This is one of the key questions around which this thesis is structured.

The connection between globalization and the state has been explored by Jean Francois Bayart in his work *Global Subjects* (2007). He discards existing definitions of the state as too narrowly institutional and pleas for perceiving the ‘event’ of the modern state as a product of the ‘event’ of globalization. The interconnection between state definition and globalization is clearly reflected in the Dutch case. A growing number of immigrants resulted in debates on how to deal with the effects of globalization, in terms of policy but also in terms of redefining Dutch identity.

One policy measure was the introduction of the asylum seeker center (asielzoekerscentrum, AZC). The first AZC was opened in 1987. Throughout the 1990s it became the main reception location in the Netherlands for people who apply for asylum: asylum seekers. The AZC can be perceived as a measure to order society, to get a grip on the complex side-effects of globalization by means of systemizing and categorizing people through rules and institutions. Thus, it was a reaction of the state to a globalizing society. To explore the effects of the new policy implementation a case study is made here of the Dutch asylum system, mainly directed towards the experiences in the AZC.

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has delved further into the topic of the state and its borders in *State of Exception* (2005). Traditionally, the protection of individual freedoms was perceived to be the foundation of the modern state. However, Agamben argues that modern states’ authority is not in the first place based on protection, but rather on the possibility to create ‘a state of exception’. That is, the state is provided with authority because it can deny individuals the right to citizenship and political rights. So it is in the act of founding and practicing the border, that the state exerts power and that it becomes meaningful. In that way, the power to in- or exclude forms a core axis around which the state is

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2 The Opvancentrum, OC (Reception Center), Regeling Opvang Asielzoekers, ROA location (Regulation Asylum Seeker Care)) and Aanvullende Opvangaccommodatie, AVO (Complementary Reception Location) are also reception locations that are part of the asylum period. These locations will also be taken into account. Yet, asylum seekers commonly spend most of their asylum period in the AZC. Therefore, the AZC features as the primary object of research in this thesis. A list of abbreviations can be found on page 103.
constructed. Therefore, the regulation of these matters – which are normally perceived as largely ‘formal’ procedures – can be perceived as a vital means to materialize a state’s identity. This underscores once more the importance of researching such border processes.

Yet it is not the identity of the state but of the migrant that is central to this thesis. Migration research is inextricably bound up with liminal identity. The concept of liminality originates from the term *limen*, as it features in ethnological work of Arnold van Gennep to describe rites of passage. The *limen* forms the margin or the separation that characterizes these rites. Anthropologist Victor Turner afterwards introduced ‘liminality’ as a way to label the ambiguous, disoriented stage of transition when one is suspended between the old and the new, that occurs in the middle of a rite of passage – a concept which can also be applied to larger scale cultural, social or political processes.\(^4\) Being a decisive authority on in- and exclusion, states are involved in governing the ‘liminal’ experience of migrants. Bayart has argued that state policy bureaucratizes the liminal experience of the migrant in various ways. This is likewise the case for the asylum seekers that enter the Netherlands, whose lives are initially shaped by the asylum location and the bureaucracy of requesting a residence permit.\(^5\)

Therefore, in this thesis I will particularly focus on how liminal identity is governed, by posing the question: What impact did the Dutch asylum policy from the 1990s to 2007 have on the former asylum seekers’ life and identity? The 1990s were characterized by a rise of the AZC, followed by a decline after 2000 when many were shut down. In 2007/8 the asylum policy was changed significantly and therefore the period of research closes here. The structure of this thesis is as following. Chapter One serves as an outline of institutional and societal contextualization of the AZC. The remaining three Chapters focus on the other side of the implemented policy: the socio-cultural impact of systemization on the level of individual identity of asylum seekers. In this part I deal with theory, method and results of the research. I give a brief outline of these Chapters below.

Chapter Two introduces a theoretical framework of identity formation. First there is the fact that the highly regulated asylum system seems in contrast with the liminal stage of psychological transition that the immigrant goes through upon entering a new country. Secondly, past memory and future plans constitute the basis for present identity construction. Yet asylum seekers fled their past and the asylum period implies looking at an insecure future.\(^6\) What kind of identity construction takes place within this particular place? How is that identity influenced by the social context and what role does the aspect of time play in shaping identity? These questions are addressed by employing the concepts of space,

\(^4\) Bayart, *Global Subjects*, 278.
\(^5\) Ibid., *Global Subjects*, 283.
relationality and time as directional concepts along which the asylum experience and related identity construction can be analyzed.

Chapter Three deals with translating identity theory into the method of oral history. The theoretical framework described above stems from sociological and anthropological research concerned with models and structures of behavior. However, identity is not only found in behavior, but even more in the meaning of behavior. Meaning can be given and expressed through narrative. The method of oral history provided a very suitable method to collect such oral narratives. In order to investigate how the AZC experience influences identity I have interviewed twelve former asylum seekers on their experiences in the AZC. However, utilizing oral history also raises methodological issues of representativeness, distorted memory and interpretation. Taking these subjective, individual memory accounts as the main source of research requires methodological justification. This will be given in Chapter Three which addresses oral history and both the possibilities and the restrictions of the method chosen. I explore the relation between the individual experiences and their social context, and what or whom they may represent. Also, I investigate how to deal with the inherent subjectivity of memory, and related issues of truthfulness. Lastly, the role of the interviewer in terms of interviewing and interpretation is addressed. This Chapter may seem to stand somewhat apart from Chapter Two, since it is more concerned with how to interpret the individual stories than with conceptualizing identity. Nevertheless, both approaches are reconnected in the last Chapter and this integration serves as the framework for Chapter Four.

After having explored the historical context, theory and methodology in the first part, Chapter Four deals with the final interview analysis. Considering the abundant research on asylum seekers it is striking how little the accounts of asylum seekers themselves have been explored. I argue that in order to understand the effects of asylum policy on identity, asylum seekers’ voices need to be understood or at the very least, heard. For structuring purposes the analysis is divided according to the three main stages of the former asylum seekers’ stay in the Netherlands: Entering the Netherlands, the asylum period, and lastly, the aftermath. For each of these stages issues related to place, relationality and time are addressed. This analysis serves to explore the question of what impact the asylum period had on the lives and identities of former asylum seekers. On a broader level, the exploration intends to contribute to understanding the influence of institutional macro-level regulation on the contingent reality of the individual on a micro-level.

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7 The interview group resided in an AZC for various periods ranging from four months to thirteen years between 1992 and 2007, or in an additional reception location such as Regeling Opvang Asielzoekers (Regulation Asylum Seeker Care; ROA) house; A list of abbreviations can be found on page ...
1. Immigration in the Netherlands

The Chapter below serves as the opening Chapter of the research by providing an overview of the developments within and around the Dutch asylum system, both on a policy and a societal level. It offers an institutional contextualization of the asylum seekers, which is needed for a better understanding of the actual research: the reflections of immigrants on their stay in an AZC and connected reception locations. To analyze their narrated memories, the system first has to be explored. I start with a short illustration of the societal debate on immigrants. After this I will describe in what ways the Dutch government has managed immigration in the past, what this policy entailed in practice for asylum seekers, and how policy and practice are connected to societal perspectives and debates on immigration.

1.1 Is it only words?

‘The term autochthony has acquired new momentum.’

From an etymological angle, changing perspectives on immigration can be illustrated by the changing meaning of the word *allochtoon*. The term originally derives from the Greek *allochthon* as opposed to the *autochthon*, which literally means ‘from the same region, or soil’. The English adjective allochthonous is most commonly used for geologic phenomena, whereas in Dutch the term also applies to people. It became a constituent for both the adjective foreign as for the noun foreigner. This meaning of the word has developed in the course of debates around immigrants in the Netherlands in the past decades. Both terms were already in use before the 1970s, but they were introduced in a broader societal discussion in 1971 by the Dutch sociologist Hilda Verwey-Jonker in a report for the Dutch ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Welfare. It was mainly coined here to serve as rather neutral term, to replace the more commonly used term *immigrant* or *gastarbeider* (foreign guest worker).

According to social anthropologist Peter Geschiere, the common idea of the Netherlands as a country of emigration was one of the reasons why a new term was thought necessary. Up until the 1960s a steady outflow of Dutch people had persisted, mainly to Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, stimulated by the Dutch government. A general image had emerged of the Netherlands as too densely populated, with an economy that could not sustain its inhabitants. Consequently, employment prospects were perceived to be better elsewhere. Gradually the Netherlands developed into a country of

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immigration as the amount of immigrants came to outnumber the amount of emigrants. Yet, the general view that emigration ought to be favored above immigration never quite disappeared, and as a consequence, immigration remained associated with a fear of overcrowding. Likewise, in 1971 Verwey-Jonker deemed it necessary to introduce the term *allochtoon* as a neutral substitute for other immigrant terms, which were associated with negative imagery around immigration.\(^\text{10}\)

In the decades that followed, the term has successfully integrated into the debate on immigration. Yet, due to a changing societal atmosphere the word *allochtoon* ended up as a distinctively un-neutral term and it came to receive a negative connotation. To illustrate, forty years later in February 2013 the council of Amsterdam announced that its administration should abandon the use of the words *allochtonen* and *autochtonen*.\(^\text{11}\)

Having explored the etymological background, the important question that follows from the example above is: what had happened during this period? This question will be explored on the level of government policy, the asylum seeker life, and on the position of the immigrant in societal debate.

1.2 Dutch immigration policy

1960-1980: decolonization and ‘gastarbeiders’

The term ‘allochtoon’ appeared in the 1970s among others as a response to developments in migration during the decades before. Because of the (partial) autonomy granted to former colonies most of the Western European countries had to deal with repatriates in the 1950s. In the Dutch case, this meant the return of many Dutch Indonesians to the Netherlands. As well as this, in order to catch up with fast economic growth in the 1960s, so-called *gastarbeiders* (foreign guest workers) were invited to work in the Netherlands. This led to the invitation of employees from Southern and Eastern European countries to work in the Netherlands, afterwards followed by Moroccan and Turkish *gastarbeiders* as well. At first sight the newcomers were perceived as temporary migrants, but in the following decade it gradually became clear that the foreign workers were here to stay notwithstanding the economic downfall. Hence, family reunion became a large scale practice among these groups until deep into the 1980s. Suriname’s independence of 1975 further contributed to the immigration to the Netherlands as a large number of expatriates returned before the official independence.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{10}\) Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging*, 139.


In this period, the rather generous Dutch welfare system allowed fairly easy access. Immigrants were also eligible to the welfare of the system and hence, the Netherlands appeared as an attractive destination where one could live and stay relatively easily. This system changed markedly in the end of the 1980s and the 1990s. To cope with economic stagnation, access to social welfare measures was restricted. On the one hand, the Dutch welfare system was reformed by increasing free market ideology, less regulation, and more privatization. On the other hand, new immigration policy was characterized by increasing regulation, management and ongoing European cooperation. Among the most important measures of the new ‘immigration infrastructure’ was the introduction of a new system of asylum seeker centers. Below will be examined what this new system entailed.

1980s-1990s: new regulations and the introduction of asylum seeker centers

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s European countries started to harmonize asylum migration policy on a European level, in order to equalize the standards and avoid people traveling from one country to another to request asylum. Although the uniform protection policy that was aimed for in 1993 never became law, the Schengen Treaty of 1995 was more successful. This agreement provided for abolition of internal border controls, yet stricter border control on the European borders, and a common visa policy. Simultaneously, this period was characterized by growing refugee concerns due to large scale internal ethnic and religious conflict in postcolonial areas such as Rwanda and Congo. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) increasingly provided support to large refugee camps in the area of origin but a steady flow of refugees also found its way into other continents, including Europe.

Meanwhile, in the early 1980s the Netherlands tried to deal with a large group of Sri Lankan refugees, mainly Tamils, which led to a shortage of reception locations. As a result of the growing number of asylum seekers, particularly experienced in the larger cities, the Dutch House of Representatives wanted a clearer asylum policy. Up until that period, the reception of asylum seekers had not been coordinated centrally and asylum seekers, usually assisted by volunteers, took care for their own housing. The increasing number of asylum seekers began to overwhelm the relatively unregulated system, until care for asylum seekers became chaotic and complex. The *Regeling Opvang Asielzoekers* (Regulation Asylum Seeker Care; ROA) was brought in 1987 to halt these developments. Municipalities were now responsible in the first place for taking care of incoming asylum seekers and providing for housing. They received compensation to accommodate the asylum seekers in so-called ROA-houses. In

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addition to this, the first AZCs were founded in this period to host asylum seekers, as a temporary solution to the shortage of available ROA housing. The centers provided for the most basic living conditions such as a bed and food. Yet, this temporary emergency solution gradually turned into a standard procedure for asylum seekers, since there rapidly appeared to be insufficient ROA houses, and the intended temporary stay of a few months frequently turned into a stay of years. Establishing new centers was often contested in towns and villages leading to many ‘not in my backyard’-discussions. Nevertheless, the number of AZCs did grow rapidly in the 1990s coinciding with a continuing rise of the number of refugees, among others due to manifold conflicts in the Balkans.

In order to get a better grip on the asylum seekers the Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers Act (Central Body reception Asylum seekers, COA) was introduced in 1994. The changing character of the asylum seeker policy is well illustrated by the movement of responsibility for the system from the ministry of Health, Well-being and Sports to the ministry of Security and Justice. From then on the COA formed the central institution which regulated the placement of incoming asylum seekers in the different locations spread across the country. In addition, the Regeling Verstrekkingen Asiel (Regulation Provision of Asylum) served to decide who would receive access to the provisions of the COA. Currently, the COA is still the head body responsible for the basic care such as housing of asylum seekers who have not been provided legal status yet. In 1997 the ROA houses were also abolished and the AZC officially became the normal form of housing asylum seekers. Only in a few exceptional cases ROA houses remained in use.

Whereas protection of the asylum seekers had been one of the main aims in the 1980s, regulation and limitation became the key words in the second half of the 1990s and onward. The new policy aimed to discourage asylum seekers from coming to the Netherlands by setting up a stricter procedure. The system was made more uniform by providing new guidelines and regulation. This aimed to enhance controllability and avoid the chaotic situations from the 1980s. Throughout the process of institutionalization and the regulation of the asylum system, restrictions on the life and choices of asylum seekers grew. ‘Sober yet humane’ was the slogan that summarized the new policy. As a result, for instance, working was no longer allowed since the introduction of the ROA regulation in 1987, intending to reduce attachment to society, and discourage people from coming to the Netherlands. In addition to this, a job would make people eligible to the Dutch social service, which was the strain of budget cuts in that time. There were some exceptions, as voluntary work remained legal. But over the years it has proven

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16 www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/node/227759, [website VluchtelingenWerk Nederland (VWN), [Dutch refugee organization] (consulted on 2nd of April, 2013).
17 Both Musa and Namdar lived for a limited time in a ROA house after 1997.
that the incentive to perform an unpaid job is rather low. Seasonal work became allowed again in 1998, but only provided that it consisted of less than twelve weeks a year.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{Since 2000: increasing restriction}

On the policy level, the main strategy of regulation and limitation for the reception locations has increased over the last decade. The slogan ‘sober yet humane’ remained the primary working vision of the COA. Simultaneously, the increasing number of asylum seekers had arisen as a controversial issue on the political agenda which contributed to the restrictions in policy.\textsuperscript{19} The number of asylum seekers in reception was decreased from 84.000 in 2002 to 24.000 in 2012. In 2011 there were 45 active centers compared to 28 in November 2012.\textsuperscript{20} This large-scale closure resulted in a frequent moving and diminished place attachment as it will appear in the interview analysis in Chapter Four. Overall, the strategy of discouragement is assumed to have been successful. The number of asylum requests also dwindled in this period. In 1994 it was 50.000. This fell to 20.000 in 2001 and a number varying between 10.000 and 15.000 in the following years. These fluctuations are partly explained by a changing level of violence, but what without doubt also contributed the decrease in requests was the new \textit{Vreemdelingenwet} (Foreigners Law) of 2000 which was implemented in 2001. In short, this law prescribed a quicker and stricter asylum procedure which presumably had a rebutting effect on people considering searching for refuge in the Netherlands. Finally, changing asylum policy in neighboring countries may have added to the fluctuating Dutch number of asylum requests.\textsuperscript{21}

Corresponding with the new strategy, asylum procedures had – and still do have – a stronger emphasis on the possibility of return.\textsuperscript{22} This was another means to implement the strategy of discouragement and limit the attachment to the Dutch society to the minimum. In order to make the life in asylum locations even more uniform the exact minimum norms for living have been defined more precisely in the \textit{Opvangrichtlijnen} (reception guidelines), which are to be officially applied to all the asylum seekers who legally reside on Dutch soil and are awaiting the outcome of their asylum request. The guidelines include material support, such as food, housing and clothing, as well as immaterial support, including medical care and education.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Van Dooijeweert, ‘Zinvolle tijdsbesteding’, 129-130.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} In paragraph 1.5 I will return to the controversion on a political level.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Adviescommissie voor Vreemdelingenzaken, \textit{Verloren Tijd. Advies over Dagbesteding in de Opvang voor Vreemdelingen} (The Hague 2013) 25, 28 (note that in this is the number of asylum seekers in general, not only in AZCs. Nevertheless it clearly shows the effect of the new immigration policy).
  \item \textsuperscript{21} F. Ten Holder, \textit{Kleine stappen van grote betekenis. Een nieuw perspectief op humane opvang van asielzoekers} (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2012) 12.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} In Dutch all of the judiciary actions involved with the asylum request are simply referred to as ‘the procedure’, a term that I will also utilize throughout this thesis to address this.
\end{itemize}
Below I examine what the policy introduced after the AZC in 1987 means on a practical level for the asylum seekers, by looking at the entry requirements, the procedure and the living conditions in the AZC. The period that the interviewees in this research lived in an AZC extends from 1987 to 2007. The most important changes that have occurred throughout this period, such as the introduction of the Vreemdelingenwet (Foreigners Law) in 2000 will be addressed, yet minor formal issues like the adjustment of the exact number of days before between first and second hearings are not included in the overview below, since they are not deemed as crucial to the experience of an asylum period.

1.3 To be or not to be: an asylum seeker

Foreigners who want to apply for asylum arriving by land or sea first need to report to the Centrale Ontvangstlocatie (Central Reception Location, COL) in Ter Apel. Afterwards they are sent to one of the Aanmeldcentra (Application Centers, AC) in Ter Apel, Zevenaar or Den Bosch. Those who arrive by flight are treated by a separate Opvangcentrum (Reception Center, OC) at Schiphol.

During the stay at Schiphol luggage is checked to find documentation travel or identification documents, border security employees are permitted to search bodies or clothes, and afterwards, identification pictures and fingerprints are taken. If needed the asylum seeker can be sent to a Tijdelijke Noodvoorziening (Temporary Destitution Placement) before moving to an AC. The AC is a guarded and locked place which the asylum seeker can only leave on special request and people sleep in dorms. The stay in the AC maximally takes 48 process hours, always excluding the hours between 22.00 and 8.00. The procedure starts with the first hearing by the Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst (Immigration and Naturalisation Service, IND) to determine the identity, nationality and traveling route. Within 48 hours a selection is made between those who are rejected in the first round, and those who need to be further researched and might be rewarded a permit. The latter go to a reception location to wait for the further procedure. The former get at least six days of rest before starting the second hearing during which the motives for flight have to be explained. In July 2010 this procedure has been changed into a clearer and more efficient system to ensure a quicker procedure.

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24 The major policy change is that the 48 hours has been expanded to eight days. Therefore, there is more room for legal assistance. For example, after the first hearing a personal advocate can be consulted and one can prepare for the second hearing. Afterwards the client can consult the advocate again to discuss the hearing and complement the story if considered necessary. Moreover, during the eight days there is more time to settle some
A residence permit can be rewarded on different grounds: when the person risks persecution because of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or one’s social group; in the case of risk of inhuman or humiliating treatment or punishment, such as torture; when departure from their country has been driven by strong humanitarian reasons (in particular traumas following precedent persecution); or when the minister of Foreign Affairs and Integration deems the overall situation in the country of origin as too insecure.25

If extra research is perceived as needed after the eight first procedure days an extended asylum procedure is started, in which case the person moves to an AZC. 26 Officially, this extended period is intended to take six months at a maximum. Afterwards the decision can be appealed in court, which has extended many stays in the AZC in the past into years as it will appear throughout the interviews. In the system before 2000 different resident permits could be awarded: A-status for acceptance as a refugee, C-status for acceptance on humanitarian grounds, and since 1994 a conditional permit of one to maximally three years. The system was reformed by the Vreemdelingenwet of 2000 which awarded only one type of status, a temporary permit with duration of five years. After this period the person can apply for a definitive permit.27

However, as long as no permit has been granted asylum seekers stay in an AZC. Life here is highly influenced by the asylum policy regulations, not only on the level of housing but also in education, work, and other daily activities. Under-aged asylum seekers have a right to education three months after their asylum request. Education for adults is allowed, but has to be financed by the asylum seekers themselves and can therefore be realized in very few cases. Also, the language and non-recognition of previously obtained degrees or other certificates can be barriers. Apart from some courses to learn the basics, language training in the AZC is only provided to those who have received a positive disposition concerning their asylum status.28

As explained above, working options have been very much restricted since the 1990s. After an asylum procedure of at least six months persons can work, with a maximum of 24 weeks a year. The employer then needs to obtain a working permission which can only be acquired with a declaration of consent from the COA. For short working periods special permits can be applied for. Any work has to be reported and the wages are settled with the costs of housing and living provided by the COA and a

26 Ten Holder, Kleine stappen van grote betekenis, 11-12.
27 Doornbos, De Papiere Asielzoeker, 52.
maximum amount of income is set.\textsuperscript{29} There is also the possibility of doing small jobs, like cutting a tree, in the AZC in exchange for a small fee. In addition, asylum seekers have right to recreational activity such as joining a sports team, although one has to pay for this. The asylum seekers are in this case dependent form the facilities in the area, which vary greatly per location.\textsuperscript{30}

One of the main duties for the inhabitants of the center is their visit to the \textit{Vreemdelingenpolitie} (Foreigners Police) and the COA. These weekly accounts serve to monitor whether the asylum seeker is actually present in the center. Every asylum seeker also receives weekly pocket money, amounts which are legally fixed in the Regulation Provision of Asylum.\textsuperscript{31}

An additional measure that strongly influenced the lives of the interview group for this case-study is the \textit{Generaal Pardon} issued in 2007. This was a measure that granted a residence permit to asylum seekers who had resided in the Netherlands for a considerable time, although their requests had been rejected in the past. Cases were not treated individually here, but a permit was rewarded to a large collective of asylum seekers who complied with a number of criteria, like the exact asylum length. Half of the interviewees in this research received their status as a cause of this \textit{Generaal Pardon}.

The design of and support for the Dutch asylum system has been influenced in the passing decades by debates on the themes of migration, religious fundamentalism, tolerance, and the various challenges to the idea of a ‘multi-cultural society’. The cause for these societal concerns will be briefly highlighted below.

1.4 Images of immigrants

\textit{Societal debates}

The stricter asylum policy after 2000 was not only a consequence of a desire to regulate the system. Two other important events in Dutch politics contributed to these changes. Firstly, there was the sudden rise of Pim Fortuyn, the leader of the populist political party \textit{Lijst Pim Fortuyn} (LPF). Fortuyn expressed critical viewpoints on immigrants in the Netherlands. Such opinions had latently been present among a part of the Dutch people but they had not been articulated so openly in the open political debate. As a politician Fortuyn directly addressed the popular fear for criminality among \textit{allochtonen} and the issue of Islamic fundamentalism. In opinion polls he was predicted to gain 40% of the national vote, but shortly before the elections he was shot by an environmental activist. Nevertheless, Fortuyn’s impact on immigration matters was still strongly present in the years after. A second round of agitation was caused by the murder

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29}Currently for example set at €183 per month.
\item \textsuperscript{30}Ten Holder, \textit{Kleine stappen van grote betekenis}, 14-16.
\item \textsuperscript{31}At this point the foreigner is not yet an asylum seeker but he is officially recognized as such when the asylum request has been submitted.
\end{itemize}
of Theo van Gogh by an Islamic fundamentalist. Van Gogh was a filmmaker who among others had made the film *Submission* with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a film that portrayed the Islam as a repressive religion towards women.

These occurrences – reinforced by the events of 9/11 – strongly contributed to negative imagery around *allochtonen* in the Netherlands, both of asylum seekers and those already settled for some time. Correspondingly, the developments created a broad support among Dutch voters for a stricter asylum system which aimed at limiting the number of asylum seekers. The Dutch political right-wing party *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom, PVV) led by Geert Wilders had continued this tradition.

The image of immigrants as a danger of society, a source of trouble and cost had already existed, yet it had not before been articulated so clearly in public debate, and more importantly, been accepted. Triggered by the violent events the position of immigrants in society was broadly discussed in the media and the term ‘polarization’ featured in many debates. Some critics pronounced more anthropologically informed views, arguing that in times of economic decline feelings of insecurity are often projected on the ‘other’, an inevitable scapegoat to blame for the insufficiencies of a society. Furthermore it was argued that insecurity might be fuelled by rapid technological and social changes, which increased a need for a cohesive ‘us’ against an opposite ‘them’ – first- and second generation immigrants in this case. On the other hand, those on the opposite spectrum referred to empirical statistics, which proved for example that youth criminality rates were highest amongst some immigrant communities. They emphasized that in several neighborhoods tensions between ‘autochtonen’ and ‘allochtonen’ were not just imaginary, but truly existed, resulting in conflict.

Neither the anthropological theories, nor statistical evidence, either offer an exclusive explanation for imagery around immigrant in debates. Rather, they are part of a reinforcing process. In recent research, it has been stated that it is the organization of the Dutch society and its regulated character, which has also contributed to a negative image of immigrants. This institutional approach will be further examined below.

*Helplessness or agency?*

Refugees are commonly associated with an image of helplessness or vulnerability. They are often dependent on governments and organizations and may therefore be perceived as a burden to their host

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societies. Halleh Ghorashi argues that the image of helplessness is established even stronger in highly regulated welfare states like the Netherlands, where ‘the strictly defined roles of refugees can have disastrous effects’. The increasing regulation of the asylum system during the past two decades has strongly contributed to the hierarchal relationship between the state as giver and the immigrant as receiver. Before the introduction of the AZC in 1987 the newcomers had to provide for their own housing and they were entitled to work and unemployment benefits equal to Dutch inhabitants. Afterwards, asylum seekers were provided housing by the COA, their rent was paid, they received pocket money and employment chances were gradually restricted to almost none. Moreover, whereas the AZC location had intentionally been a temporary place to stay, this became the place where people would often live for years. Years in which they were dependent of the state for housing, food, education, health care, et cetera, leaving very little opportunity for agency on their own behalf.

To a great extent responsibility of their own life was removed, which contrasts the often conscious sense of agency that an immigrant needs to possess before giving up his or her life and moving to another country. In his article Barry N. Stein he describes the stages that refugees encounter during their flight. Although an asylum seeker is not synonymous with a refugee, the description of stages can still be helpful to emphasize the agency involved in migration. Yet, for clarity’s sake I will explain the official differences. The term refugee is used for people who meet the conditions of the International Refugee Treaty as prescribed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The term asylum seeker is used for those who have actually applied for asylum in a foreign state. However, the reason for these people to apply for asylum is often because of flight from violence or other unfavorable conditions such as repression or deprivation. Stein distinguishes between the following stages in the flight of a refugee: perception of a threat; decision to flee; the period of extreme danger and flight; reaching safety; camp behavior; repatriation, settlement or resettlement; the early and late stages of resettlement; adjustment and acculturation; residual states and changes in behavior caused by the refugee experience.

As the description of stages above illustrates, the asylum seekers that the Dutch government deals with are already in the fifth stage of their journey towards a new life. Up until that stage, the person was the leading actor, responsible for his or her own deeds. Even though one may be forced to flee due to circumstances outside of one’s power, and may not be active agent in the flight afterwards, ultimately it is

a decision made by the actor to actually flee. The difference with the situation when entering the Netherlands is striking. From the moment that one signs up at one of the Application Centers the agent becomes subject of the asylum system.

In the research of Ghorashi she conducts a series of interviews with Iranian women who entered the Netherlands before 1987 – and hence before the introduction of the AZC. It becomes clear that these women had lived under considerable emotional burdens. They had been saved, where others had died or stayed behind. This urge to give life new meaning and fulfillment strongly contradicts to the living in AZCs, in most cases characterized by passivity and long waiting. ‘I always fight against becoming a burden’, one of the interviewees explains.\(^{38}\) Yet, Ghorashi argues that becoming a burden is inevitable from the moment you step into the AZC. She states that the living conditions here are disastrous for three main reasons. Firstly, asylum seekers are left alone with their memories which are often traumatic, while opportunities to escape such memory are few in the restricted space of movement. In addition, the insecure years spent in the AZC may unintentionally and unnecessary render past memory more vivid and make people live in the past emotionally and psychologically. Moreover, lacking the possibility to construct a new life reinforces the burden of the past and feelings of guilt. A ‘loss of self-image as independent and active people’ is the effect.\(^{39}\) In the interview analysis for this thesis it will appear that these results were not always reflected in the cases for this study.

It has to be noted here as well that Ghorashi aimed at quite a limited group. That is, well-educated Iranian women who often had performed an active role during the revolution in their home country. Therefore, feelings of guilt and ‘burden-ship’, frustration about the impossibility of education or work, may not be felt in exactly the same degree by all refugees. Also, a shortcoming of her research is that she only interviewed women, who came before 1987. Yet she does make comparison to the present asylum system; not on the basis of interviews, but on the basis of literature and presumptions, which leaves her comparison rather eschew.

Nevertheless, considering the high rate of psychological, and often coinciding physical problems asylum seekers experience, the AZC does not appear to be an ideal place to deal with such problems. The sense of ‘throwing away years of your life’ has likewise been ventured in predominantly juridical and medical literature.\(^{40}\) The long wait and lack of possibility to give life new meaning, seems to result in enhanced psychological problems, during as well as after the procedure, which brings along a higher demand of Dutch social care. This reinforces the image of immigrants as a source of cost. Also, boredom

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\(^{38}\) Quoted in Ghorashi, ‘Agents of Change or Passive Victims’, 189.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 190-191.

may lead to vandalism or violence, again perpetuating the negative imagery. Thirdly, a long procedure, which allows for minimal options of integration, impedes quick integration after a status has been granted. This result was indeed echoed in various interviews for this research. Similar effects of a welfare state system on migration policy, and the consequences on the dependency of asylum seekers, have been found in a Finnish context.\textsuperscript{41}

The research of Ghorashi offers insight into the impact of the asylum system on the self-esteem and agency of immigrants, but she insufficiently considers how images of the helpless asylum seeker connect to the image of the asylum seeker as a possible danger. In the latter view, the asylum seeker is the opposite of helpless and passive; he or she is pictured as a possible active agent of danger. This paradox is not fully explored by Ghorashi, as she seems to assume beforehand that the forced passivity leads to only negative consequences afterwards. However, the forced passivity may also result in a greater desire to actively be involved in society afterwards. The regained agency after an asylum procedure, the feeling that one is allowed to act on his or her own account again does not automatically lead to negative agency, but can also fuel an urge to achieve something prestigious. Such an urge was also reflected in several of the conducted interviews for this research.

1.5 Gaps in literature

In the introduction the asylum seeker center was addressed as a result of the modern welfare society in a globalizing world. Being a decisive authority on in- and exclusion, states are involved in governing the liminal conditions of migrants. The state involvement also implies that the liminal experience of the migrant is influenced and bureaucratized in various ways as we have seen above.

At the other side of the medal of this bureaucracy there is the socio-cultural impact of systemization on a micro-level. Hence, after the institutional and societal contextualization of the AZC it is time to move to the other side of the system: the asylum seekers. To understand their situation, the system first had to be addressed. Yet, to understand the effects of the system, their voices also need to be understood. Ample research has been conducted on the topic of asylum seekers, varying from discourse analysis on immigrant debates to policy related research. Considering the abundant interest in the topic, the voice of asylum seekers themselves has been researched relatively little.

Nevertheless, some studies have given space to the experience of asylum seekers or former asylum seekers. From a management perspective, the organization of an AZC has been investigated,

considering the relation among and viewed by inhabitants (clients), staff and management. From a juridical perspective research has been performed, for example into the rights and experiences of children. Similarly, a number of medical studies have been produced which occasionally included the perspective of the asylum seekers. In response to debates around the poor living conditions in detention centers, experiences of people living in these centers have been recorded. In addition, the popular media and political discourse on integration has contributed to studies concerning the degrees of integration and experiences in society afterwards.

Yet research into immigrants who look back on their period and experiences in an AZC is limited. Apparently, ‘customer satisfaction surveys’, as they would be expected in any service delivery company, are not deemed as crucial in evaluating the implemented asylum policy. In medical research it was found for example that a longer asylum period results in higher risk of PTTS and symptoms of fear or depression, in comparison with refugees without asylum experience (respectively PTTS: 28 versus 11%; depression/fear: 68 versus 39%). These are interesting statistics and they demand further research. What do these figures mean on the level of experience? What happens to lives in an AZC and why does an asylum period have such a strong impact on people?

This leads me to the second purpose of this research. The last paragraph of the Chapter above has proven how the asylum procedure is also inextricably bound up to the formation of identity. In leaving his or her home, the emigrant also leaves the place that shaped one’s identity. In entering a new country, this former identity may be constituted by something different, reinforced because of the differences with the new society, or a combination of both. As Ghorashi emphasized – especially when active participation in the new society is prohibited once one has entered the AZC – ‘living in the past’ may become more pervasive. Yet, simultaneously this past is a past that one has tried to flee from. Likewise, identity

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47 For a more extensive literature review the following article can be consulted: F. Ten Holder, Kleine stappen van grote betekenis. Een nieuw perspectief op humane opvang van asielzoekers (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2012).
48 Apart from the medical study of Kramer, ‘Zorg voor asielzoekers met psychische problemen’, (2010), the only source I found in which immigrants tell about their experiences in an AZC, is a series of interviews with eight these ‘ex-asylum seekers’ in Ten Holder, Kleine stappen van grote betekenis.
49 Laban, ‘Asielzoekers: ziek door trauma’s van ver weg of juist van heel dichtbij?’ 133.
construction is influenced by a very insecure future perspective. In short, one is caught up in a state of liminality. Since past memory and plans for the future constitute the basis for present identity construction, identity formation of asylum seekers in AZCs provides a valuable case-study.\textsuperscript{50}

The same line of thought has been articulated more than 60 years ago by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs \textit{The Collective Memory}.\textsuperscript{51} He introduces the example of a child who has been separated from his family and brought up in a different country, arguing that this child will probably retain little from his former culture since he can no longer connect his memories to the social or cultural framework he grew up in. By that, Halbwachs addresses how memory research into extremities like enforced uprooting may help unpacking the processes of memorialization through social frames.\textsuperscript{52}

Such social frames are important contributors to constructing identity. They are determined by relations, places and time. In this research I investigate memories through interviews with former asylum seekers. The narratives they shared serve as my main source to explore the impact of an asylum period in identity formation. But before moving on to the analysis of the interviews, a theoretical framework is needed which defines identity and elucidates the link between narrated memory and identity. Therefore, in the Chapter below I further examine identity as a narrative, guided by the concepts of relationality, place and time.

\begin{thebibliography}{100}
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2. Identity Theory: Relationality, Place and Time

‘Stories, Leslie Marmon explains, are the tools we need not just to survive, but to overcome. They are a protection that allows us to save ourselves, but also active instruments for changing the world – because there is power in words. They are made of air but leave their mark on material reality.’

2.1 Identity as narrative

Before delving into the process of identity formation I will first explain how identity is defined and conceptualized in this study. Constructing identity is a complex phenomenon and the term identity is therefore not easily defined. Merely the notion of having an identity appears misleading, since different identities can be held at the same time. Moreover, identity is not fixed, nor closed as a given. It continuously changes through time and interacts with other identities and the environment in which the identity is performed. Indeed, the notion of performing – as opposed to having – an identity may better reflect the adaptive and interactive character of identity. It is stabilized or changed by interaction with its environment.

The way through which identity can be performed is of course through a person’s actions. However, certain actions may also be perceived as discrepant from one’s identity. The perception, or the meaning that is given to the performed action, can therefore be of greater importance than the actual action. It is in the personal narrative that one constructs, where this meaning becomes visible. Insight into the meaning that is given to performed actions provides us with understanding of the identity that is continuously being constructed. Therefore, the understanding of identity as a narrative, as articulated by Anthony Giddens will form the basis for the exploration of identity in this Chapter:

‘A person’s identity is not to be found in behavior, nor — important though this is — in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self.’

As Giddens points out, identity lies in the capacity to keep one’s narrative going. It is the basis for operating in and interacting with the external world. At the same time, Giddens states that personal identity comes into being through integrating parts of events from the outer world. I will elaborate on the connections between individual identity and society in the next paragraph. For now, it is enough to note

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that identity is expressed through personal narrative because that is where past events receive meaning. For this reason, I take the narratives recorded in the interviews as the main source of my research.

Since a variety of studies and theories have appeared in social sciences on identity and social agency, I will introduce some of these in the paragraphs below. However, in social sciences there has been a tendency to conceptualize identity into rather static ‘essentialist’ singular categories such as race, gender, or sex. Taking a narrative approach on identity may help to avoid this type of fixed conceptualization: for it is in a narrative that the meaning of narrated concepts is determined and it may change throughout the narrative itself. For a long time the study of narrative was deemed irrelevant, or at least too un-theoretical, to be integrated in the sphere of social sciences. Narrative was first and foremost seen as a mode of representation that is hardly quantifiable, lacking the theoretical basis and structured methodology that social sciences adhere to. This changed in the 1960s and 1970s when practitioners of disciplines other than history, such as social psychology, political theory, and feminist theory began to ‘appropriating and re-conceptualizing the narrative concept.’ This changed in the 1960s and 1970s when practitioners of disciplines other than history, such as social psychology, political theory, and feminist theory began to ‘appropriating and re-conceptualizing the narrative concept.’ This meant that it was no longer discarded as a phenomenon on the side, a mere discursive form of representation. It was acknowledged that narratives perform an epistemological and an ontological function in society. Epistemologically, we can understand and make sense of the world through narrative. Simultaneously, from an ontological perspective we constitute our social identities through narrativity.

Expanding on this development, sociologist Margaret R. Somers proposes a way to ‘appropriate’ the narrative approach for identity study by taking into account time, space and relationality.

‘The hazards of rigidifying aspects of identity into a misleading categorical entity is to incorporate into the core conception of identity the categorically destabilizing dimensions of time, space, and relationality.’ Categorical divisions such as race and gender may divert the view of the researcher from the fluent character of the assumed categories. A ‘traditional’ sociological categorical approach of identity presupposes a certain stability of categories in identity. That is, the actions of an entity from a certain category are presumed uniform and predictable under certain conditions. But the understanding of identity as a narrative contextualizes the actor within relations and stories that change over time and space. This ‘precludes categorical stability in action.’ Therefore, Somers suggests using the ‘destabilizing dimensions’ of time, space, and relationality, as a means to integrate the continuously changing character

57 Ibid., 621.
of identity into the analysis. Simultaneously, these concepts offer a frame by which the broad notion of identity can be divided into 'manageable' pieces.

Although not noted by Somers, a second advantage of the narrative approach over a traditional categorical approach is that it is also a means to evaluate the cohesional and interactional structure of different parts of identity. Through narrative examination one can trace in what way for example race and gender relate to each other, which may result in a fuller understanding of the narrated identity. A third important advantage of deploying these three concepts here, is that this research deals with experiences of people in a liminal stage. Working along ‘traditional’ identity categories would do no justice to exploring the changes the fluent character that liminality implies.

Following Somers' theoretical frame I employ a narrative approach of identity, guided by the concepts of relationality, space, and time. These serve as the 'identifiers' of identity in this study. The connections between these three concepts is realized by the causal emplotment, or indeed, the way the narrative is structured in the interviews. The issue of causal emplotment will return in the third Chapter. Yet, in the paragraphs below identity formation is discussed from the three different perspectives of relationality, time and space.

2.2 Defining identity: Relationships

‘Identity is based on the relationship with ‘other’’. Relations are an important factor in the AZC experience. Asylum seekers arrive in a new, diverse community with its own social structure. They deal with both former and new relationships, such as family, AZC residents and staff, which help shaping identity. Therefore, the connection between the individual and his or her surrounding community as a source of identity has to be addressed.

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58 While Sommers terms categories like gender and race as categories that ‘preclude categorical stability in action’, they are still usable in analysis. Yet, by applying a narrative approach their changing meaning can be integrated into research as well.

59 Simultaneously it should of course be remarked that in speaking of asylum seekers as one group of people I strongly work with categorization in this research myself. However, throughout the interview analysis I have attempted to do right to the individual experiences and characteristics of the former asylum seekers, thereby valuating their individual differences as individual people who happen to be in the same situation, but cope with it in very diverse as well as similar ways.


62 Ristid et alia, ‘Cultural Identity’, 60.
The central concept around which individual identity evolves is the ‘self’ or the ‘I’. Yet, the awareness of the ‘self’ only exists as a distinct from, and hence related to, some notion of ‘other’. The perspective of the ‘I’, the personal identity, is therefore constructed through the environment and through the groups we belong to. From that perspective, the process of identity formation has both a subjective, individual element and an objective, social or relational element. Subsequently, relationality is the first important concept to be discussed when studying identity. I discuss relationality by exploring the connections between the individual and society through the framework of structural symbolic interaction, complemented by an emphasis on the relational sources of identity and identity change.

The connections between the, seemingly, personal narrative and the social environment has been emphasized in the narrative approach of Somers. She argues that ‘all of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making.’ The question that automatically arises here then is: how ‘I centered’, or personal, is identity if it is constructed in interaction with others and our environment? Two initial points are to be made here.

First of all, it should be emphasized that identity is not only based on the relationship with other, that is, the whole society – ‘socio-genic’ as sociologists Ristid et alia term it – which makes it appear to develop from the outside in. Identity is at the same time ‘socio-productive’. It does arise through interaction with the other, but this interaction is undergirded by a social structure. Social structures are the patterned social arrangements and expectations which determine society, but likewise emerge through that society. Hence, a social structure does not exist beyond the individual identities, which constitute it through their actions. The seemingly ‘outside’ social structure is in-existent without the ‘inside’ individual identities, and is only constructed through these individuals. From this perspective, we may say that the self is not only ‘socio-genic’ but also ‘socio-productive’. Taking into account likewise the socio-productivity is an important element in exploring the asylum seeker identity, since the social structure in the asylum community is in the first place produced by the individual asylum seekers. It is less determined by the socio-genesis of long term traditions and habits as in a ‘normal’ society.

The second point that should be addressed is the fact that two persons from the same group, interacting with the same people within the same environment, can still have very different identities. This demonstrates how identity is not only dependent of the social structure in which it interacts, but also on personal traits, how a certain interaction takes place, and the character of the relationship, influenced

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63 Ibid., 58-60.
65 Ristid et alia, ‘Cultural Identity’, 60.
66 Ibid.
67 The topic of socio-genesis and production is further elaborated in Chapter Four.
by time and place. The impact of social structures, culture, and historical processes only materializes through individual lives, in very different manners. The individual interviews conducted for this research testify to the diverse ways of coping with the asylum period.

The connection between personal identity and the surrounding social environment is therefore not as straightforward as it may seem at first sight. They are inextricably intertwined and the lines in between are blurry. The patterns of collective arrangement such as social structure or culture will only appear through individuals and it is therefore on the connection between individual identity and society that I will focus here, rather than the separation. A way to explore this connection and understand how we act through our identities in society is by using the theory of ‘structural symbolic interaction’, a term first coined by Sheldon Stryker. The use of symbols and their meanings is central to this theory.

‘(B)e(havior) is premised on a named or classified world. The names or class terms attached to aspects of the environment, both physical and social, carry meaning in the form of shared behavioral expectations that grow out of social interaction. From interaction with others, one learns how to classify objects one comes into contact with, and in that process also learns how one is expected to behave with reference to those objects. Stryker emphasizes that meaning is attached to both physical and social aspects through social interaction.

This meaning is inherent in the names and categories we establish for these aspects, which are understood as symbols by Stryker. By interaction we know how to respond to these symbols, and thereby we generate shared meanings for the objects and categories. These shared meanings also lie at the basis of expectations for behavior of others and in that way, patterns of behavior and a social structure are created.

The term symbolic interaction refers to the fact that it is not so much about the behavior, but rather about the meaning conveyed in the symbol with which we categorize the behavior. Since these meanings are dependent on structures in society we speak of ‘structural symbolic interaction’.

In this way, we learn the meaning of symbols and how to ‘classify, divide, and name the world’ through social interaction. The higher the degree of shared meaning conveyed to symbols the more they will reinforce each other. The positions people hold in society that are inherent in a social structure can also be understood as symbols with meaning. Equally, we learn to name positions, and how to respond to these social positions, by the patterns of interaction. Stryker argues that for each position in society we hold, we have a corresponding identity, like the position of spouse will provide the identity of a spouse. These positions or roles are integrated into personal identity while at the same time they constitute social structure, because the positions are defined in relation to others and their meanings mutually support each

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other. Thus, they serve as connections between the individual and society. Yet, in an AZC a shared history as the main, natural source of creating shared meaning lacks, which may lead to change and possible clash.

In the book *Identity Theory* (2009) sociologists Peter Burke and Jan E. Stets build on this framework of structural symbolic interaction. The changes and sources of identity which are crucial to my case-study receive a greater emphasis here. They underline that social agents commonly not wholly agree on the meanings of symbols, either behavioral or positional, and hence, these meanings are constantly renegotiated and shift over time. Subsequently, a low consensus means that the structure becomes more fluid and more disposable for change.\(^\text{73}\)

In accordance with Stryker, Burke and Stets confirm that through classifying, dividing and naming, objects and behavior receive meaning. They distinguish three different sources of learning new meanings: social learning, direct socialization and reflected appraisal. Social learning is the type of learning that unconsciously takes place in a culture through observation and modeling. It is structured along the lines of reinforcement, or stimulation, and punishment. Direct socialization is the formal and informal instruction societies teach to their participants, in order for them to fulfill their position in society. And the third source of meaning is created by the reflected appraisals, that is, how a person thinks others would define him or her.\(^\text{74}\) The meanings we establish hereby create expectations of behavior, by others and by the self in certain positions. For example, a child learns how others respond to his actions and thereby understand the meaning of the action. Thereby, by taking the role of the other a child incorporates shared meaning of behavior, which provides a set of standards to assess its own behavior. The incorporation of such standards helps establishing individual identity, while simultaneously a mutual verification context is being created. Others’ identities are verified as well as our own.\(^\text{75}\) These three types of learning are used in the interview analysis.

However, as mentioned above, the meaning agents convey to certain behavior differs and is constantly renegotiated. Behavior may also occur which is deemed at odds with one’s identity. When such identity discrepancy Burke and Stets distinguish two consequences. Firstly, one may try to counteract the discrepancy by acting in a way that better reflects the identity. Yet secondly, as it has appeared in several sociologist surveys, an identity can slowly evolve into a direction which better fits the discrepant situation. Whenever major discrepancy takes place – a severe identity non-verification – this

\(^{73}\) Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, 17.  
\(^{74}\) Ibid., 194-195.  
\(^{75}\) Ibid., 186.
may lead to negative emotions. In a nutshell, this is how identities may change over time, according to Burke and Stets.

Relating the theory to this study, we see that immigrants encountering a new culture always have to deal with non-verification to a certain extent. However, the degree of non-verification is very much dependent on the new social encounters, since it is through interaction that identity may be verified or not. In order to minimize the non-verification context many immigrants tend to group in small communities of their own country or ethnicity, often in the larger cities. For the asylum seeker the experienced encounters are to a great extent determined by the asylum seeker center they are sent to, and the possibilities they receive here. For instance, from the three sources of learning meaning listed above – social learning, direct socialization and reflected appraisal – the chance of direct socialization for 18 year and older is already restricted in an AZC since educational opportunities are little for this group. New meanings will have to be established in any center, but how this process of creating new meanings is structured in an AZC has been little examined so far. Reflected appraisal, or its lack, proved to be an important source of a changing self-image during the interviews.

Burke and Stets emphasize in their theory the way identities negotiate and create their position, or role, while at the same time they act and maintain themselves through ‘the display of self-validating meanings’, in other words, their role. However, an identity is not only generated by one’s role. While the symbolic interaction theory maintains that identity is created by the position one holds in society, such as spouse, parent or employee, Burke and Stets argue that there are also other bases that generate identity. Apart from roles, they distinguish group and personal identity: ‘An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person.’ Our role identity we acquire by our social structural position in society; group identity follows from an individual’s membership in certain groups, such as Protestant, Democrat or Dutchman; personal identity is based on the qualities or characteristics that the individual has internalized as their own, such as being optimistic, ethical, controlling, et cetera. The distinction and interaction between these different types of identity performance will be utilized as well for the interview analysis.

In short, the importance of relationality within the narrative has been highlighted above, by exploring the connections between the individual and society through the framework of symbolic structural interaction, and examining the relational sources of establishing meaning and changing identity.

76 Ibid., 190-200.
78 Burke and Stets, Identity Theory, 18.
79 Ibid., 4.
which are inherent to the asylum seeker situation. This theoretical frame and the distinction between three different levels of identity will serve as a tool of analysis of interviewed asylum seeker narratives in Chapter Four. Since relationality changes over place and time, below a further exploration of these concepts follows.

2.3 Defining identity: places in space

‘The feeling we experience towards certain places and to the communities that the places help to define and that are themselves defined by the places (…) certainly has a strong positive effect in defining our identity, in filling our life with meaning, in enriching it with values, goals and significance.’

The second concept that will be utilized in this research as an identifier of identity – as Ristid et alia termed it – is the concept of place. Place is one of the seedbeds around which identity is continuously being constructed. This is true to a very large extent for asylum seekers, since their place of living, the AZC and additionally AVO or ROA house, also defines them as a separate category in society which defines their possibilities and limitations, and hence contributes to who they are. To explore the dimension of place in identity, I will first define place and address the processes of territorialization and the related place attachment. Secondly, I examine how this place attachment is fostered by experience-in-place and how this contributes to the understanding of the self, one’s self-esteem, and identity. Lastly, the notion of home is explored as an important bearer of place identity.

In the openings quote above, Giuliani explains how place is an important factor for defining our identity and giving meaning to our lives. Before analyzing the processes related to the factor of place it should first be defined. Places are commonly understood as distinct from the larger, undifferentiated space. They are marked, to some extent demarcated, units in space, which have been conveyed meaning.\(^{81}\)

In case of migration important space/place-related processes are de-territorialization and re-territorialization. The first term was coined originally in discussions on globalization. In the late 1990s the concept of a future borderless or ‘de-territorialized’ world was introduced, as a response to the ongoing globalization, fuelled by progressing communication technology and expanding cross-border networks. Paradoxically, this idea of a borderless world aroused new critical visions in the field of territorial studies. Scholars argued that the fading of some borders was constantly followed by the creation and reforming of others. The internet, one of the exemplary spaces where the perceived de-territorialized or borderless


space would be manifested, turned out to be subject to infinite construction of new borders. Within virtual space all sorts of communities and places were established quickly, repeatedly effectuating the principles of in- and exclusion, as well as search engines that had to systemize and thereby border, or order the uncontrolled, so-called ‘borderless’ space.\textsuperscript{82} This proves how the demarcation in space, or turning space into place by giving it meaning, is still a salient practice, even in a globalizing world.

As opposed to de-territorialization, re-territorialization can be understood as the rooting of people in other places. Migrants, the group of people who are inevitably bound up with these processes of territorialization and bordering, have only grown in number through globalization. By leaving their home country a certain de-territorialization takes place and re-territorialization may occur in the country they move to. Ristid et alia pick out geographical territory as one of the main identifiers of identity, as it is ‘a way to operationalize identity by translating it into empirically ascertainable facts’.\textsuperscript{83} Yet, although geographical territory is certainly an important, ascertainable fact, the greater importance is the meaning with which these places are inscribed, in much the same way that it is not behavior but the meaning given to behavior which is important for identity.\textsuperscript{84}

But what meanings can be given to places? The feelings and bonds people experience in relation to a place has been termed \textit{place attachment} by social psychologist Irwin Altman and anthropologist Setha Low.\textsuperscript{85} They distinguish between two kinds of place attachment, arguing that it is constituted by both the physical aspects of a place and the social aspects. For instance, people can experience their environment positively because facilities as shops and a hospital are near, which indicates a functional attachment. In addition to this, some places offer space for social activity, such as meeting other people. In that case the interaction with others leads to place attachment through psychological and emotional means, which can result in place identity.\textsuperscript{86} For example, in a study of environmental psychologist Clare Twigger-Ross et alia it is described how people derive a sense of self-esteem from place belonging and group membership.\textsuperscript{87} Places can function as anchor points in a changing world which provides a sense of security, and ‘losing’ a place may therefore significantly affect mental wellbeing. In the article by

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Ristid2006} Ristid et alia, ‘Cultural Identity’, 60.
\bibitem{Burke2009} As explained above, see also: P. Burke and J.E. Stets, \textit{Identity Theory} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 17.
\end{thebibliography}
Twigger-Ross this is even compared to the emotions involved in losing a beloved one.\(^8\) The role of place in self-esteem, belonging, and a sense of security will be further elaborated in the interview analysis. For now, it is important to note that the concept of place attachment introduces both physical and social meanings that are attached to places.

The next issue to address is how these meanings come into being. Previous research on the relation between place and identity performed by geographic sociologist Lynne C. Manzo has shown how it is not the place an sich, but rather the ‘experience-in-place’ that creates meaning.\(^9\) Manzo bases her conclusions on a series of in depth interviews with 40 people from the New York metropolitan area. Although very different in background than the interview category central to this study, some of her more general findings may be helpful for the analyzing the connection between place and identity. Formerly, place research had usually dealt with classification of physical space. Yet, echoing Altman and Low, Manzo discards this type of examination as inadequate, and takes both the physical location and the nature of the experience as the fundamental unit of analysis.\(^9\) This type of data is less easily ‘ascertainable’ – as Ristid et alia termed geographical territory – but it can still be discerned through narrative analysis, which will indeed be done with the interviews in Chapter Four.

From the conducted interviews Manzo infers that relationships to places are for many a way of defining their identity in the world. Places tend to make people who they are and their relationship with a place can change their understanding of themselves. According to the research, the three primary reasons why particular places become meaningful for people are because they offer space for introspection and reflection; because they have marked their lives in a new or unique way; and because they connect a whole array of experiences and feelings in the past and the present. For some people, new places offered linkages to the past and formed emotional and psychological bridges, which contributed to create a sense of continuity and wholeness of one’s life. A fourth outcome was that people from socially marginalized groups turned out to attach meaning to a place especially because of safety.\(^9\) This sense of safety has a strong connection to the sense of self, as had been argued similarly by Twigger-Ross \textit{et alia}.\(^9\)

These findings may also be applicable to the interview group of former asylum seekers. Time for introspection is largely available in the AZC, yet within the AZC space this is not always experienced as positive in these conditions.\(^9\) Research on a group of older Dutch Antillean migrants suggests that the retreat to unsupervised space was especially important for them, since they had to ‘conduct a lot of

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\(^8\) Twigger-Ross, et alia, ‘Identity Theories and Environmental Psychology’.
\(^9\) Manzo, ‘For Better or Worse’, 74.
\(^9\) Manzo, ‘For Better or Worse’, 76-79.
\(^9\) Twigger-Ross, Bonaiuto, and Breakwell, ‘Identity Theories and Environmental Psychology’.
identity work’ in their community to demonstrate that they were either Antillean, Dutch or both. To what extent this was important for the former asylum seekers is to be addressed in the interviews.

Continuing to compare Manzo’s research outcomes with this research, it seems that coming to the Netherlands has marked the immigrants’ life in a unique way, but in different degrees this was experienced both positively and negatively from the very beginning and in the longer run. Having reflected on the period in an AZC with the interviewees, I will try to answer whether a sense of continuity could be traced, or rather discontinuity, throughout their place-making in retrospection, and how a feeling of safety in places has influenced self-esteem and identity as Twigger-Ross et alia argued.

Finally, a special notion of place is ascribed to the place we call ‘home’. The extent to which place attachment occurs in a certain space also determines whether or not a place may be called home. Sense of belonging, familiarity and safety are all indicators attached to the notion of home. Since home is the central setting from which perspective important milestones in life are experienced, home has been termed as a key location for developing a self-image. Different processes are attached to a home. First of all, it contains important moments and many objects in the home represent these memories. The personal history endorsed in the environment induces a feeling of familiarity, usually in a positive, secure way, although negative experiences may also evoke negative feelings. Furthermore, a home gives the owner(s) a feeling of control: they decide upon access, they act as a host(ess) in the space where their rules of conduct are established. In that way, places are inscribed with both material and non-material culture.

The notion of home becomes complex in the case of immigrants. The research on a group of older Dutch migrants from the Antilleans showed that while they were attached to the new places in the Netherlands, they also remained to some degree embedded in their former homes. In addition to this, having a home provided the immigrants with a sense of independence and control as the place could be furnished with one’s own rules and custom. This is also strongly connected to the relational aspect of identity: the possibility to show others that they were in charge – the reflected appraisal as it was labeled by Burke and Stets – indeed increased their own self-esteem. The presence of care providers in one’s home was perceived as an intrusion into their autonomy and privacy, which resulted in negative sentiment of dependence. Feelings of dependency were also noted in several studies on inhabitants of the AZC.

95 Lager, Van Hoven, and Meijering, ‘Places that Matter’, 82.
98 Ibid., 83-84.
In Chapter Four I examine how the interviewees coped with this, during the stay in the AZC and afterwards, and in what ways this affected their self-esteem and subsequently, their identity.

Above, the dimension of place in identity has been explored. Summing this up, we see that place attachment occurs through both physical and social ties. Research has shown that place is an important source of identity formation as a basis of action and introspection, and places can serve as markers of discontinuity, or rather continuity, which influences images of the self and hence the identity. Feelings of home, belonging and safety are important carriers of a positive self-image.

However, place attachment and constructing homes are processes that develop over time and places come to have different meanings through changes in life course. Therefore, the third important dimension of identity to be explored is time.

2.4 Defining identity: times

‘You can’t go back, can get in trouble. You can’t go forwards. You [are] stuck in the middle.’

During the often long wait in the AZC, the understanding of time comes to have a different notion. As time passes, often very little happens on the action level, while much happens on an emotional plane. At the same time, the two biggest entities or categories of time, that is, past and future, may be perceived hostile and insecure. Therefore, time is not only an important concept within identity formation in general, but especially in the case of asylum seekers.

Time is commonly understood as a line, a continuum with the present as a small dot moving on that line from the beginning to the end, which is neatly subdivided by years, months, days, hours, etcetera. However, from the perspective of human experience this neat subdivision is much less straightforward, as certain expressions in language clearly reveal. Time may slip by, or stand still, and it is always divided into meaningful parts, for instance lunch time, evenings or honeymoon periods. As Alessandro Portelli states that ‘time is divided horizontally into periods and eras, and ‘hung’ on key events which operate as partitions and as interpreters of the meaning of each period.’

Humans tend to periodize their imagined time lines into somewhat separated units when they reflect on their own pasts, and this periodization gives meaning to their experiences. The lines that demarcate these units may

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100 East Timorese interviewee, [original statement without spelling correction has been used, in order not to lose the double signification of being in between in linguistic terms too] quoted from H. Haugen Askland, ‘Habitus, Practice and Agency of Young East Timorese Asylum Seekers in Australia’, The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology 8 (2007) 3, 235-249, 238.
101 A. Portelli (...)
change over time, depending on the present. Anthropologist Elizabeth Tonkin refers to this phenomenon as different ‘wave-lengths’ of time in history, which can also be traced in the narratives of people.\(^{102}\) Traditionally, the integration of interviews into historical research was predominantly focused on the acquiring knowledge about new facts and events around a certain subject. In French Annales School vocabulary we may say that the value of using oral history methods was perceived to lie more on the level of ‘histoire événementielle’, rather than the level of the ‘longue durée’. Tonkin, echoing Portelli, argues however that both of these wave-lengths are present in an oral account. There is no such a thing as a ‘duration-less event or an event-less duration’.\(^{103}\)

Both Portelli and Tonkin argue that it is useful to scrutinize the means by which aspects of time have been integrated into an oral account. This type of examination shows how a narrative structures and orders duration and change, which can reveal aspects of present identity. For example, the way in which the notion of ‘now’ is separated by a ‘then’ may already expose what meaning is given to everything that lies before the ‘now’.\(^{104}\) The question that inevitably follows is why a particular event or moment, out of the long line of moments, is picked out to function as a watershed. The answer to the question of how one has structured his or her narrative is then automatically an indication to what happenings have become meaningful of one’s life and therefore for one’s identity.

Periodization seems quite a straightforward element of the asylum seeker narrative, since the asylum period has a clear end and beginning. However, Chapter Four will show that the perceived continuity or discontinuity of life within this period is an essential part of how experiences are evaluated. Age and asylum length are additional elements of time to be explored in the interview analysis.

Yet, the influence of time perception on identity does not only involve retrospection. Undoubtedly, it also involves looking forward. As became apparent in the identity theory of Burke and Stets, expectations of the future are likewise incorporated into present identity. These expectations may be expectations of what will never be. In that perspective, they go unnoticed by the more traditionally oriented ‘factual’ history. Yet, we base our visions of the future on our current state and subsequently, future expectations – even if they never materialize – are decisive for current actions and identity. In fact, although the present is often envisioned as the link between future and past, it may be argued that the future links the past to the present. On the basis of the past, we can think about our future, which guide our actions in the present. The interpretation of the past as something ‘ahead of us’ is well illustrated in a linguistic example that anthropologist Tonkin utilizes in her work on oral history. Tonkin describes the


Cumbal Indians of Colombia who refer to a past action by saying ‘adelante’, which literally means ‘further on’, or ‘ahead’. Cumbales explain this usage by emphasizing that:

‘(A)lthough events occurred in the past, we live their consequences today and must act upon them now. For this reason, what already occurred is in front of the observer, because that is where it can be corrected. History is, therefore, most relevant to the present and is of the present.’\(^{105}\)

In other words, the past is in the future since we act upon the past in the future, and naturally these future ideas shape our present. Hence, the past and the present are linked in the future and through this future, meaning can be given to the past. Especially in the case of a ruptured past it is important to reinterpret the past in the light of the new future, in order to restore a sense of wholeness in one’s identity.\(^{106}\)

This notion becomes all the more salient in research on experience in asylum seeker centers, since futures are insecure in an AZC. As long as no residence permit has been obtained, the asylum seekers do not know whether they can stay in the Netherlands. No long term plans can be made. Additionally, short term plans are made with more difficulty as one is less familiar with the foreign institutional structures and customs. From a more theoretical level, we might say that one is unable to make sense of the past in the present, through the lens of the future. Identity discrepancies may occur if a person can no longer live up to the self-image one entertains, an image that is constructed by the future expectations one holds, based on past experiences. Subsequently, the processes of identity formation are impeded and problematized. I will elaborate on the consequences of this in Chapter Four.

After this introduction of the dimensions of relationality, space and time in identity formation, it is literally time to divert our view from the theoretical framework, towards the methodology that will be utilized. The term oral history has already been referred to occasionally in the Chapter above, yet it is important to further define the term and justify its use both as a theory and as a method, before it can be implemented. This is done in the Chapter below.


Chapter Three deals with translating identity theory into a method. Firstly, I will explain why I chose this method, followed by an outline of the chapter. The method used to explore the asylum seeker experience is oral history, because meaning is given to experiences in an oral account. The narratives thus created are a means of constructing and expressing identity. At first sight, the chapter below may seem to stand somewhat apart from Chapter Two. The chapter above dealt with conceptualizing identity. In doing so, theories were discussed which are not commonly linked to the theory and method of oral history, as they originate from different disciplines of study. In this research, aim to start bridging this gap, since an interdisciplinary approach may prove fruitful. Therefore, I now move on to how to how identity is conveyed in narrated experiences and how to interpret such narratives.

However, the method of oral history also involves methodological issues of representativeness, distorted memory and interpretation. Taking individual memory accounts as the main source of research requires methodological justification. An interview can be perceived as a highly individual account of personal memories which is hardly verifiable. Chapter Three will elucidate why oral history may prove valuable in complementing theory and historical sources, and particularly, in studying identity. To do so, both advantages and restrictions of the applied method are to be explored, starting with a short return to the roots of oral history. Afterwards, four main topics relevant to the final interview analysis are addressed. Firstly, I investigate how individual experiences can be related and can become meaningful in connection to a greater collectivity, and how this affects interpretation. Next, the inherent subjectivity of the memories narrated in interviews, and the related issues around truthfulness, are dealt with. Following this, since I have interviewed only twelve people, the issue of representativeness is addressed once more. I explore the value of not only dealing with memorized facts, but also with the ‘horizons of possibilities’. Lastly, I consider the dialogic character of an interview and the role of the interviewer in the recorded interview and following interpretation.

3.1 A history of oral history

Oral history may be defined as ‘the interviewing of eyewitness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction.’ In order to explain why oral history is used as a method for this thesis, it is useful to reflect on how and why it became a discipline in academic research.

The interviewing of eyewitnesses for historical goals became in vogue again in Europe in the late 1950s and 1960s, after decades of favoring written records strongly over oral sources. It became established as a discipline characterized by two main objectives. First, oral history served to make ‘more history’, that is, oral accounts helped exposing facts from the past that were unavailable through delivered, written sources. Secondly, it served a strongly social purpose in creating a sort of ‘anti-history’ that challenged orthodox, academic history-writing, by presenting itself as the ‘real history by communicating with it directly’. During the 1960s and 1970s oral history was utilized in social history and historical sociology, as a means of integrating the ‘ordinary lives’ of working classes into public and academic discourse. Gradually, the focus expanded onto any group neglected in conventional history, with oral history becoming a socio-politically-directed means to give for example women, gay people, or ethnic minorities, a voice.

One of the leading figures in the oral history field, Paul Thompson, wrote: ‘History becomes, to put it simply, more democratic … (B)rakes through the barriers between the chroniclers and their audience; between the educational institution and the outside world.’ Congruently, the first oral history projects were mostly organized outside, or in the margins, of the academic disciplines. One of the primary objections against the use of memories as historical evidence, was the distortion that personal memory inevitably entails, being remodeled by nostalgia, bias, and collective versions of the past. The subjectivity inherent in individual memory created a great initial skepticism to using oral history as a serious method of writing academic history.

From the 1980s and on, other academics started to challenge these objections. They argued that the ‘distortions’ of memory that allegedly turned oral history into an unreliable source, should not to be perceived as a weakness but rather as a strength for analyzing historical interpretation and reconstruction. One of the first to do so was Luisa Passerini in her study of working-class Italians who had experienced Mussolini’s inter-war Fascist regime. Passerini did not perceive the recorded inconsistencies and silences as signs of unreliable, distorted sources, but they contributed to her analysis of how personal life had become inextricably bound up with the Fascist regime, and the impediments on remembering such a regime. Passerini’s study made clear that if oral history is to be used in an optimal way, then the oral historian should consider in depth how and why certain memory stories are told. That means taking into account both the cultural environment of the memory, when it happened, as well as the remembering.

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112 Abrams, Oral History Theory, 7.
This shift contributed to a greater appreciation and likewise, practice of oral history as part of academic studies. By now, it has established as an interdisciplinary method, not only used for purposes of historical research but also for anthropology, sociology, psychology, and health-care studies. However, the disciplinary variety it borrows from and is practiced in, also provides for a variety of different disciplinary approaches. Therefore, there is not one particular overarching theory or one a clear set of guidelines for doing oral history, even though some have attempted to formulate one.  

What renders it even more complicated is that oral history is both referred to as a research methodology, and as a result of that research process. It is the process of conducting and recording interviews with people about their past, as well as the narrative account that is produced, and the interpretation by the interviewer. The interpretation involved demands theorization and therefore oral history may be understood as ‘a practice that leads to theoretical innovation.’ Yet it appears useless and even unproductive to try to separate these different stages of research. For example, the setting in which an interview has been recorded inevitably influences the account, and likewise, the interpretation and the applied theory. Implementing the method and interpreting, the practice and the theory, are constantly entwined.

In this research I use oral history for analyzing identity construction of former asylum seekers and the paragraphs below are therefore not intended to be all-inclusive critiques of the theory and method of oral history, but they are mainly directed to consider oral history in terms of its service for analyzing identity. From this perspective, I will elaborate below on the possibilities and restrictions of using oral history in academic research, and what the practical implications this may have for employing it as a method.

3.2 Individual versus collective?

‘Talk about events is much more than data for the derivation of history: it is also a cultural production in its own right, a mode of communicating, a surfacing of meaningfulness that binds past and present together.’

In social sciences, and also in some branches of history, the main focus often lies with discerning patterns within a society, by concentrating on large scale developments within groups. Within oral history however, the focus is explicitly put in the individual and the idiosyncratic. How are we authorized to

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113 For example L. Abrams, Oral History Theory (New York: Routledge, 2010).
114 Ibid., 1.
believe that the individual story might represent anything beyond itself?\textsuperscript{116} By some oral historians this may have been perceived – particularly in the 1960s and 1970s influenced by the socialist school of thought – as a question of little importance. They were mainly concerned with giving a voice to those who usually did not receive a voice in history books, that is, the ‘ordinary’ men and women. Their representations of the past were viewed as especially authentic, a means to communicate with ‘real history’. Representativeness was not so much an issue, since every life was valued as important for its own sake.

However, even these accounts that carried the alleged imprint of ‘authentic’ are enmeshed with ideological representations.\textsuperscript{117} The fact that culture, social structures and historical processes are always visible in personal accounts should not be deemed as a loss of the real, or ‘authenticity’, but rather as a source to study how the larger patterns and processes come to be reflected in individual lives.

As literary critic Frederic Jameson wrote, the strength of oral history lies ‘where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collectivity itself.’\textsuperscript{118} In fact, it might be questioned why in most social sciences and humanities for so long it was favored to unequivocally detach collective patterns and processes from their subjects, indeed, those who actually experienced and constituted the very process. As ventured in the Chapter Two on identity formation, the individual account does not come into being in a social void. It is shaped and influenced by the cultural and social environment the person lives in, and has lived in. Our self-reflection is not merely a subjective, private act but we evaluate ourselves and the world from a socio-cultural context.\textsuperscript{119}

Elizabeth Tonkin has argued that the distinction between the individual and society is a perception that is strongly established within Western thought. In order to break through this dichotomization she argues for ‘a view of representing pastness that makes it active and socially constitutive.’\textsuperscript{120} To do so, she examines to what extent a person is to be considered as a product of social forces, and to what extent one may be perceived as ‘active subject.’ As in the previous Chapter, Tonkin emphasizes the issues of socio-genesis and socio-production, yet now from the angle of oral history. Throughout the 19\textsuperscript{th} century a person’s volition was disregarded as one of the primary causal factors in the behavior of people, by some of the main social scientists. Explanations were rather believed to be found in theories on a larger scale, in groups, classes, or even biological structures. Illustrative is Claude

\textsuperscript{116} A. Portelli, \textit{The Battle of the Valle Giulia} (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998) ...


\textsuperscript{120} Tonkin, \textit{Narrating our Pasts}, 97.
Levi Strauss’ notion that ‘there is no choice, only a matter of chance.’

These types of explanation have been attacked in the passing of time, among others by social anthropologist Tim Ingold. In *Evolution and Social Life* (1986) he argues that we are indeed active subjects that simultaneously constitute social relations and become conscious through this activity of social relations. Ingold emphasizes that because we constantly form a certain perception of ourselves and act on the grounds of this consciousness, we are not merely agents of social forces. What is termed as ‘consciousness’ by Ingold, approaches what has been termed ‘human experience’ by E.P. Thompson. In his attack on Marxist views held by Louis Althusser, who wrote that the motor of history is class struggle, and that history is a process without a subject, Thompson argues that the missing term is experience. Humans experience their determinate situations and relations, deal with it in their consciousness and culture in very complex ways, and subsequently act upon it. Thus, Thompson concludes that experience gives humans active agency in history.

Returning to the method of oral history theory then, we see that being an active subject is realized in the oral account, even though one may be powerless. The telling is always a social action, either maintaining, and reproducing social structure, modifying or overthrowing such a structure. Having redefined individuals as active subjects, constituting social structure and acting within it, rather than dichotomizing the individual and society, brings us to the following stage. As has been argued above, it is not only the distance between the individual and society that should be explored, but equally the bond and interaction between the two. A symbolic structural interaction perspective has been applied to study this connection. Now, the method to investigate and interpret this connection is elaborated upon: oral history. It is in an oral narrative that the individual is connected to society. Narrating memories and ordering them into a narrative, is where the individual experience is bound to its social context, because that is how memories receive meaning. The social context determines what is remembered and what is not, and in which way it is framed. This makes oral history a particularly suitable means to explore the bond between individuals and society. As Portelli wrote in *Battle of Valle Giulia*:

‘The task and theme of oral history- an art dealing with the individual in social and historical context- is to explore this distance and this bond, to search out the memories in the private, enclosed space of houses and kitchens and- without violating that space, without cracking the uniqueness of each spore with an arrogant need to scrutinize, to know, and to classify- to connect then with ‘history’ and in turn force history to listen to them.’

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Consequently, exploring the distance and the bond will be continued below, by delving into the topics of subjectivity, memory and truth in oral history.

3.3 Subjectivity, memory and truth

Dealing with the term experience, new challenges are to be overcome. For some time, both in social sciences and in history it was shunned as a source of examination due to the inaccessibility of other inners’ selves. Experience is a subjective factor which is not easily measured, let alone falsified by someone else. Therefore, only the accessible was accepted as proper evidence. However, measurable or not, experience and its subjective character are a fact, and both lie at the very heart of this research into identity.

The subjective nature of experience in an oral account on past events is even more troubled by the fact that we do not know to what extent such an account can be considered ‘truthful’. The memories expressed may have been distorted, or perhaps better phrased, remodeled by either nostalgia or horror of old times, while some things that happened may be forgotten, other un-happened things may be remembered to serve present convenience. This renders memory as a historical source problematic. The Australian historian Patrick O’Farrell for example argued in response to the emergence of oral history as a discipline, that it dealt with ‘a world of image, selective memory, later overlays and utter subjectivity (…)’ And where will it lead us? Not into history, but into myth. ¹²⁵ O’Farrell seemed to entertain an idea of the historian as objectively studying his or her object from the past, to find out about the truth of that past. However, he does not take into account that any source, be it a human’s memory or a written document, is only a selective part from that past, and there are always later overlays from the historians that interpret the source through the lens of the present.

The postmodern view that we will never have real access to the past and therefore never know ‘the truth’ of course clashes with the traditional historian’s commitment to uncovering what ‘really happened’. Yet, perceiving history as always dealing with a certain subjectivity involved in source material, does not mean that we necessarily need to get caught up in ‘the postmodern euphoria of dissolving the materiality and referentiality of the external world into the dizzying possibilities of immaterial discourse.’ ¹²⁶ Subjectivity and narrative imagination are there on the one side to explore, but on the other side, ascertainable facts should be utilized to guide this exploration. Meaning can be found as

¹²⁶ Portelli, The Battle of the Valle Giulia, viii.
well in the archival document as in an unreliable oral account, and the one does not exclude the other, but rather they may be understood as complementary. That is one of the reasons why this thesis on asylum seekers’ experience starts with a ‘traditionally factual’ investigation of the asylum procedure throughout the past three decades. But what exactly does interview analysis add to this investigation?

Portelli’s concept of ‘different credibility’ elucidates the issue, since it explains how there may still a different truth in stories that are ‘factually’ deemed untrue. For example, Portelli recorded how inhabitants of the small factory town of Terni remembered the death year of factory worker Luigi Trastulli wrongly. Trastulli had died in 1949 during a small demonstration against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), whereas in the interviewees’ memory he had died during a large, catastrophic strike in 1953 which had resulted in the end of work security and a defeat of the union. Trastulli had acquired the status of a symbol, a martyr for the working class in this memorization. Hence, the ‘distorted’ memory provides understanding of the meaning that these events had for the working class community. This understanding of oral history differs from the more ‘socialist’ view – even though Portelli is also still notably affected by this – holding that the introduction of oral history methods means history becomes more authentic, more concerned with the ‘real life’, and hence more ‘truthful’ than the ‘ivory tower’ history. Different credibility does not claim these stories to be more truthful, but rather, truthful in a different way.

From that perspective, memory as a medium, including its distortions, may be valued as a source of knowledge, rather than a barrier to obtaining knowledge. This thought is also ventured by Michael Frisch in his work A Shared Authority in which he explores the benefits of oral methods for public history (1990). Frisch argues that the gains of oral history are not primarily found in either the ‘more history’ or the ‘anti-history’ styles. The memory that is central to oral history, serves as the key element for understanding the links between the individual and history. Frisch theorizes on what happens to experience on its way to becoming memory, and subsequently becoming history. Oral history can function as a tool to understand the nature of these processes, since it deals with how people ‘make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them.’ It would be far

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131 Frisch, A Shared Authority, 188.
too pretentious and beyond my scope to state that with this case-study I can theorize how past becomes part of the present, but it does put a finger tip on how people use the past to interpret the world around them.

Memory might not only be understood as a means then, but likewise as a message.132 By exploring how the past is interpreted to understand the world around you, inevitably the topic of identity formation is touched. Memory is indeed constitutive of identity, no matter the truthfulness that a memory expresses; the present identity is the ‘truth’, or the fact that counts. Yet to understand this identity and its basis, it is important to retrospect on that past, as it is done in oral history. Through comparison with other sources, oral or written, identity can be contextualized, as the working class identity was elucidated in Terni from remembering the death of Luigi Trastulli.

However, expanding on the example of the inhabitants of Terni: imagine that three of the demonstrators of 1953 were caught up by the police, according to official police documents. What is the meaning of such a fact? The fact can be interpreted and utilized for research in different ways. If it would be used from a more ‘traditional’ social science approach, one might argue that three out of the large number of strike participants is an insignificant number. Hence, the arrest may be merely mentioned in the margins. Yet, oral history does not only deal with the factual happenings as they occurred, but equally with what the people thought would happen, or wanted to happen. In that sense, oral history deals with the ‘horizon of possibilities’.133 The world of possibility is very much present in everyday life, yet it usually disappears from historical accounts as a great number of possibilities often do not actually happen. Approaching the arrest from this perspective, it may have been meaningful to all of the demonstrators, since the possibility to be arrested was very much part of their horizon of possibility and expectation.

Through oral history, parts of these horizons can be reconstructed. It is also in this perspective, that truth receives a different understanding. If the three hypothetically arrested men had been arrested, whereas the other people had not expected this at all, they may remember it more vehemently with a greater number of arrests, presumably reinforced by the fuss about it afterwards. This may be ‘misremembering’ in a way, yet it also proves the impact of the arrest, as a very ‘fact’ upon which this memory was constructed. This kind of subjectivity is hard to measure, yet, the subjectivity itself is a fact that oral history tries to deal with.

Examining the issues around subjectivity – a key concept in oral history – I have explored how memory and different kinds of truth can serve as tool of historical analysis. However, subjectivity also

132 E. Tonkin, Narrating our Pasts, 112.
inadvertently brings us back to the notion of representativeness. The concept of horizon of expectation contains another clue to view this, as will be explained below.

3.4 Representativeness

Representativeness has already featured in this study as an important matter in studying identity. The concept of the horizon of possibility and expectation forms a second solution to the problems that surround representativeness. If one person is interviewed and we accept that his or her story is subjective, then how are we supposed to believe that it represents anything beyond itself? This question was posed in the former paragraph, and answered by the fact that any personal story is to some extent shaped by a collectivity. Yet, what collectivities are we speaking of? Is the group of arrested people a different collectivity than the group of non-arrested demonstrators? In interviews, one will always encounter the fact that people have experienced different events and it is not always easy to prove that one story may be representative for a group. However, the horizon of shared possibility elucidates how people do not need to have experienced the same action, in this case arrest or not arrested, to be able to represent more than only one personal story. Oral history is not about the most average story, in order to represent the biggest group. Averages may be useful for large scale analysis, but they do not count in real life. Hence, in oral history it is both the ‘normal’ and the unique features of a story that count in the analysis.

No guarantees can be made that certain ‘quality narrators’ are left out, yet, this is inherent in the method of oral history: It is never complete. The memory of one person is already virtually in-exhaustive, so all memories of a group could impossibly ever be recorded. Therefore, oral history always has the character of work in progress.\(^{134}\) This is also the case in this research. By talking to twelve people I by no means claim to describe a complete image of the asylum seeker experience. It may serve as a starting sample for more research. Nevertheless, on the basis of these twelve cases I do will try to uncover some ‘truths’ that go beyond the personal stories.

So far, I have focused on the role of the interviewee and the implications of their memory and subjectivity. However, oral history is not unilateral: there are always two persons involved. Subsequently, below I will address the dialogical character of oral history and the possible consequences.

3.5 Dialogue and interpretation

‘The researcher helps create the conditions for an extra-ordinary discourse, which might never have been spoken, but which was already there, merely awaiting the conditions for its actualization.’

In *The Weight of the World* Paul Bourdieu envisions the interview as a ‘spiritual exercise’. He notes that ordinary everyday discourse is permeated by a lack of real understanding. We continuously try to fit the unique drama into our own perceptual categories, the ‘personal to the impersonal’, which enables us to ‘economize on thought, on emotion, in short on understanding’. Hence, we have created a routinized attention which is often unable to break through clichés, impeding real understanding of the other. Bourdieu therefore pleads for a ‘forgetfulness of self’ in order to convert the way we look at the other in everyday life, which he denominates as some kind of spiritual exercise. The interview should therefore offer to the interviewee a space which is redeemed from the usual constraints in ordinary interaction, such as time.

However, some critical notes should be made here. The ‘forgetfulness of the self’ seems a noble aspiration, yet fairly unachievable. Before the interviewer starts an interview he or she will always be subject to certain expectations, influenced by his or her own knowledge on the subject, social background, the aim of the research, et cetera. In a way, Bourdieu seems to be still clinging on to the dichotomized view of subject and object, that is, the researcher who enters the interview blankly and is therefore able to study his object in the most objective, and consequently most valuable way. The same vision resounds in the notion that this ‘extra-ordinary discourse’ – the interview – was already there, merely waiting for actualization, as articulated in the quote above. It depicts the interviewer as some sort of explorer on the way to discovering unknown treasures that just lay there for him or her to be revealed.

This perspective on an interview does not sufficiently consider the interactional character of the dialogue and the value of subjectivity inherent in interviewing. First of all, true forgetfulness of the self appears impossible, and equally undesirable, since it is only through the perspective of the self that one can understand the other. Meaning – and subsequently understanding – is only created if given in some sort of context. In the case of an interview, the interviewer’s own knowledge, experience and opinions are part of the context through which understanding can take place. If not, the narration would be meaningless. There is always interpretation involved, from both sides. Secondly, dialogue is interaction. The story of the interviewee does not just lay inside the person waiting for its revelation. It is created at the very moment that the interviewer starts asking questions. The experiences may ‘lie’ there in memory, but they are reordered and remodeled at that particular moment to answer that particular question. The

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interviewer thus intervenes in the narrator’s life ‘asking them to crystallize themselves at this chance moment in time.’

The crystallization as it occurs through the narrative told, can be perceived as an event in itself. It is connected to that experienced past, yet simultaneously standing loose from these as it is part of the present and created by the present conditions. Apart from the past experiences, also the interviewers’ formulation of questions, his or her background, appearance, et cetera all make part of these present conditions. Likewise are the needs and future expectations of the interviewee parts of the conditions in which the narrators crystallize themselves. In that way, although ‘an event lived is finished, bound within experience’ it may be argued that ‘an event remembered is boundless, because it is the key to all that happened before and after it.’

The boundlessness of the remembered event involves subjectivity, and subsequent interpretation on different levels: on the level of the narrator, as we have seen in the paragraphs above; on the level of the researcher; and finally, on the level of the reader. The interpretation by the researcher means that we do not perceive the interviewer as an objective explorer, but as a subject who partly shapes the conditions of the interview and shapes the outcome of the research. Accordingly, it is important not to absent his or her voice from the final product. The ‘forgetfulness of the self’ is then reversed into an awareness of the self, necessitated by the inevitable interpretation involved in interviewing. Notwithstanding, interpretation and thus an acceptance of perspective plurality, does not imply an ‘anything goes’ license. It gives the researcher the responsibility of choice. He or she gets to choose what topics are addressed and what material is left out in the final analysis. Rather than Bourdieu’s explorer we may visualize the oral historian as, drawing on Portelli’s analogies, the stage director of the interview.

As bearer of the responsibility to choose, the oral historian consequently bears responsibility of justifying his choice for this particular kind of interpretation, and the choice for this particular person as interviewee. Both will be done in Chapter Four. To enable such justification, context, theory, and method is needed for interpreting a narrative as have been introduced in the chapters above. After this introduction, we may now turn to the actual research: the interview analysis.

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4. Narrating the asylum experience

4.1 Identity in interview

In this chapter the interviews with twelve asylum seekers are analyzed. The central question around which the analysis evolves is what impact the Dutch asylum policy has had on the lives and identity of immigrants, as expressed in the narrated memories. This question approaches the relationship between the collective and the individual from two different, yet complementary angles. Firstly, it addresses the way in which a collective institutional policy materializes in the life of an individual. It explores the effect of an institutional policy as it structures a person’s life. Secondly, By analyzing the impact of the asylum policy in individual lives, I simultaneously intend to explore how to untangle, or possibly tangle even further, the connection between the individual and a collective in the field of identity. Asylum seekers enter a space in which they psychologically float between the collective frameworks of the socio-cultural structures of their former roots and the possible future country, while simultaneously they are physically in a very restricted community and place, the asylum seeker center. How does individual identity construction find place in this paradoxical environment?

To operationalize the main question about identities in the AZC a key concept is memory. Memories help shaping our identities, while simultaneously our identities shape the construction and meaning of our memories. I use oral memory accounts to conduct research on two levels: the actual experiences in the asylum center, as well as the interactional relation between these narrated memories and the interviewee’s construction of identity.

Identity is a broad all-pervasive concept that can be located anywhere in a life story, but I focus for this research on the experiences during the time of the asylum request and the impact afterwards. Mostly, these experiences take place in the AZC, in some cases in a ROA or AVO location and of course their homes after the asylum period. Since space, or more specifically, place is the overarching ‘property’ all interviewees have in common, this is the first concept to be discussed. As has been emphasized before, the memories embedded in places become meaningful by their social context. Thus, the second angle
from which identity is to be studied is relationality. Another significant factor in the experience of the asylum period and its aftermath is time, which is the third and final directional concept of analysis.

In the previous Chapter it was stressed that choice of material should be justified when using oral history. Consequently, before starting the analysis it is important to consider some implications of the applied method and inherent selectivity of the method. These can be divided in two areas: the implications of how I selected the interviewees, and those of structure, setting and subject of the interviews.

4.2 Methodological matters

Selection in time and place

The selection of interviewees was strongly restricted by time, place and language. In order to find former asylum seekers I have been cooperating with a number of refugee and immigrant organizations. Specifically, I contacted interviewees through Stichting VluchtelingenWerk Nederland (VWN) in the municipalities of Dongeradeel and Delfzijl, Humanitas Groningen and Stichting Werkgroep Vluchtelingen Vrij. I have interviewed former asylum seekers who have resided in an AZC and additionally AVO or ROA housing from the period 1992 to 2007. This period was chosen because it is from the early 1990s that asylum seekers started to live for longer periods in the AZCs. In order for interviewees to be able to reflect and retrospectively evaluate the impact of their asylum period in their lives with some distance, the research was limited to people who had finished their asylum period at least five years ago. This time span gave them the opportunity to settle somewhat in society, which featured as an important element of how interviewees constructed memories about the asylum seeker center. It additionally meant that six out of twelve had ended their asylum period due to the Generaal Pardon of 2007. This allowed insight into the possible impact of a very concrete political decision.

Concerning the place, the people interviewed were from the north of the Netherlands and mainly living in villages or small towns. I expected the construction of new identity to be the most clearly traceable in these smaller places, since in the larger cities larger ethnic communities are present. In smaller towns this is less or not the case and therefore the asylum seekers are more dependent on their own community building. There is a greater need to cope with the new social structure, adopting the new meanings that are constitutive for developing an identity. In these cases the asylum period experience may be expected to have greater influence on the individual’s life afterwards. From the twelve interviewees eight lived in villages or small towns in the north of Groningen and Friesland. Three lived in the outskirts of Groningen and one lived fairly close to the city center of Groningen. Furthermore, there was also a
practical aspect since my research time was restricted and I happen to live in the north of the Netherlands. Also, I had some contacts with VluchtingenWerk through family and friends in the municipality of Dongeradeel.

These contacts proved crucial as it soon became clear that people were much more inclined to cooperate if I had contacts with some person they were acquainted with. Even then however, there were rejections and no one seemed to be especially eager to talk about the asylum experience. This is a limitation of the sources. The rejections I received were mostly explained by being too busy, or by fact that they did not want to dwell on that period again.  

Language was another selection criterion. For practical and content related reasons, as the presence of a translator may disturb the personal setting, I preferred to do the interviews without translator and in Dutch or English. As a result, I only interviewed people who had integrated into Dutch society to some extent, at least to the extent of language, which also affected the outcomes. However, throughout the interviews I have dealt with different levels of Dutch – none preferred to speak in English – varying from almost fluent to rather limited. On the basis of this small sample I could not infer a clear relation between language level and reflection on asylum experiences. Secondly, I should add on the matter of language that due to the limited level of Dutch in some cases I could not reach the reflective level that I aimed for. Language was a partial barrier for people to express nuances in their feelings, or simply to understand the questions posed.

A third matter of selection was the country of origin, gender and age. I did not want to stick to one nationality because this is a research about experiences in the Netherlands and not about origin – even though these experiences were of course affected by origin as well. By the same token, I wanted some diversity in age and gender balance. These aims were fulfilled quite satisfactory, as the final interview group included people from Iran, Angola, Liberia, Croatia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq, Russia, Congo, and Guinea. The age at arrival ranged from 13 to 35. Concerning gender, five of the participants were female and seven were male.

Below I expand on the choice to use a semi-structured interviewing method and what the implications of this choice are.

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142 After a number of rejections by phone or e-mail I adjusted my research explanation, describing it more in terms of a research on the experiences of an immigrant in the Netherlands, with the AZC as one of the aspects inherent to this experience. This was helpful to find more willing interviewees. Also, I discovered I had to refrain from using the word interview, since this word was too strongly associated with the interviews the IND had conducted during their asylum procedure. Such procedural knowledge may be useful if people would want to do new research on this topic.

143 In the interviews with Mohammad and Olivier we were for example very much limited to the terms of good, better, bad and worse. Nevertheless, these interviews did add other features to my analysis of the AZC experience.
To reach my goal of analyzing identity through narrative I used the method of semi-structured interviewing. Perceiving narrative as a source of identity prevented me from coming up with a structured list of questions for the interviewee to answer. Every interview started with the question ‘when and where were you born’, but the succeeding questions were dependent on what the interviewee would tell. In order to match my theoretical approach I tried to encourage the interviewee to take the lead in the interview, yet this approach did not always work. In reality, some people are natural narrators, others are less so. Some needed more direction to talk. Another obstacle was that, although I intended to let people talk freely, I did need some basic facts. I needed an idea of the chronology of their life events to be able to reconstruct their lives afterwards. Hence, some interviews are marked by tensions between wanting to know certain details or chronological sequence, and wanting to give the person space to construct his or her story.

Even though I had only one fixed starting question to ask beforehand, I did carefully pay attention to ensure that the interview would address the main topics:

- the period before flight (family background, education, reason and age of flight);
- the actual flight (transport, expectations, entrance to The Netherlands);
- the asylum period (location and period of AZC, daily activity, receiving residence permit);
- the life after (job, education, daily activity, retrospection on AZC).

Along with the more factual accounts of these four periods I have tried to uncover or reconstruct the horizons of possibility, expectations and feelings of the interviewee. The concepts of space, relationality and time as important sources of identity, were recurring themes during the interviews. Also, I specifically asked interviewees to reflect on their asylum period, and to what extent it may have changed them. All in all, this led to twelve semi-structured interviews.\(^\text{144}\)

Skimming through the interviews readers may wonder why so much attention was paid to the pre-asylum period. The answer is that, in order to examine what an asylum seeker center does to identity construction it is essential to know something about the identity and experiences before arrival. For example, the reason why someone decided to flee affects the expectations one has of the future, and consequently it is a factor of influence in the perceptions on the asylum seeker center. Therefore, I started every interview by gaining some more background information before gradually turning to the stay in the Netherlands.\(^\text{145}\) The information on family and childhood also served me as interviewer with an

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\(^{144}\) Transcripts of the interviews can be found in the attachment.

\(^{145}\) This initial question simultaneously served as an introduction to make the interviewee at ease and forget about the more formal elements such as the voice recorder. Talking about childhood is usually a comfortable area, which
understanding of how someone talks, for instance in an enthusiastic, slow, or bombastic tone, in order to give a more nuanced interpretation of certain statements in the latter part of the story.

By the same token, readers may also ask why the post asylum period has been treated so extensively in some cases. One explanation lies in the fact that any identity change is to be materialized in the post-AZC life. Secondly, as has been emphasized in Chapter Three, the interviews are not about a persons’ fixed memories, but rather about a person who *remembers*. Memory is active and may be best understood as a verb. Memories are always perceived through the lens of the present and therefore it is of great importance to be aware of the present position one speaks from. A first step to knowing through what lenses the stories were told was to conduct the interviews in people’s homes. Apart from making the interviewee feel comfortable and ‘in charge’ of the conversation, it also provided the opportunity to see in what kind of house and neighborhood they resided, and to what extent their cultural background and former nationalities were still part of their homes.

As addressed before, taking remembering people as the primary source of my research can be perceived as a severe barrier to meaningful conclusions. Apart from the knowledge I had about the asylum procedure through policy accounts, and some visits to the AZC Delfzijl to experience the building and atmosphere myself, I was dependent of the subjective stories of my interviewees. This can be seen as a disadvantage. Yet, it is not my goal to establish the exact veracity of the story told. My purpose was to analyze how the liminal experience of the AZC influences lives and identity of people and that is what I have been doing with these narratives, even though they may differ at some points from the ‘factual’ perspectives. I have tried to give possible explanations for such discrepancies but honesty requires to admit that I simply did not always have the means and sources to detect where stories differed from ‘facts’. Therefore, a great deal of my research depends on the integrity of my interviewees. I have ensured every participant that no names will be used in the eventual thesis and that I operate as an independent researcher, not related to any government or asylum institution. For that reason, I believe that participants had little substantial reason to tell me anything else than that what they perceived as truth at that moment in time.

The stories collected and arranged through interviews are of course also highly dependent on the interviewer. As mentioned before I tried to establish a setting of trust, but the fact remains that I am an outsider. In almost every story, the Dutch featured as ‘the other’. I am a young Dutch student and my people are willing to tell about in an open and uncomplicated manner. This was less the case when it concerned the flight stories and experiences afterwards since sometimes traumatized memory was involved; some space of trust was needed to be built before we could enter those memories. Even though it can be questioned how much confidence one can build within two hours, childhood memories did give interviewees the confidence to talk. On the other hand, when asking about the flight story I often needed to be cautious not to ask for too much detail as I could notice people were sometimes cautious and reluctant to do so, most probably as it reminded them of IND interviews.
childhood in a welfare state may have been perceived as an obstruction to openness. On the other hand, as I was a stranger and often perceived by interviewees as an ignorant person in these matters, they were inclined to be more explanatory. Thus, both advantages and disadvantages reside in my position as an outsider. Additionally, my university education may have be a reason for most to strongly emphasize their own educational level throughout the accounts, as some of the interviewees did.

Having considered these methodological implications, I now turn to the actual interview analysis guided by the directions of space, relationality and time. Throughout the interviews it became apparent that these three concepts are strongly overlapping and intertwined, yet each of them offers a different angle on the narrated memories in the different stages the asylum seeker goes through. For structuring purposes the asylum experience has been divided into three main stages: the period of coming to the Netherlands and in the OC (first reception location), the asylum period and finally, the period after having received a residence permit. Just as with the concepts to be discussed, these stages are very much intertwined. This means for the analysis that the division by concepts and stages is taken as a directional, yet by no means absolute division, underscoring their strong interconnectedness in narrative.

Considering the fact that place is the overarching communal factor in this interview group, the concept of place experience is taken as a point of departure for analyzing the asylum stages, followed by relationality and time.

4.3 Entering the Netherlands

‘You are just looking for safety somewhere … And you hope to meet good people, who won’t treat you bad.’

4.3.1 Place

Place has been defined above as distinct from the larger, undifferentiated space. Places are to some extent demarcated units in space, which have been provided with meaning. From this perspective, the reception locations where asylum seekers first arrive may be rather understood as space than place. The locations are still largely unknown to them and hence undefined by them. None of the interviewees indicated having had a clear expectation of the Netherlands before they arrived, and four intended to go to England or America before coming here. Yet, even when places were unknown, the interviews proved that they had already been assigned certain expectations, and hence meaning. The interviewees primarily expressed

146 Transcript interview Karim (June 3, 2013) 9; Any quotes used were translated from Dutch to English by myself. For that reason, in addition to the fact that the Dutch level was not always very high, some quotes were slightly adjusted to make them legible in English. Yet, I have tried to adhere to the initial structure and content as much as possible.
the need for a safe place to stay as a reason for coming to the Netherlands. Considering this stated ‘horizon of expectation’, that is, the fact that they predominantly search for safety in their new living area, we might expect this expectation to be fulfilled rather easily. The Netherlands is a fairly secure place to stay. However, in entering the Netherlands most describe their entrance and encounter with the new society as negative. Only one woman from Iraq emphatically emphasized the positive features of the newly entered society, which will be elaborated upon in the paragraph below.

An explanation for the discrepancy between reality and expectation can be found in the fact that some interviewees were simply ill-prepared to arrive here. Most of them were forced to flee within a short period of time and for this reason there was little time to elaborately contemplate the possible consequences. Yet, others, who had been able to think in advance about a possible flight also display disappointment after having arrived in the new country. In some cases the negative feelings featured even stronger here than in the stories of interviewees who had fled quite unexpectedly.

The impact of such highly risen expectations can be observed very clearly in the story of Azekel and Valentina, a couple from the former Soviet Union who fled because of discrimination on the basis of Azekel’s skin colour. Azekel was born in Angola but he was sent to Russia as a teenager for an education during the Cold War. The initial purpose was to be educated as a pilot, but when his father realized that Azekel would be destined to fight in the civil war for the Russians afterwards, he managed to get Azekel into a car mechanics education. In his student town Rostov, Azekel met the Russian Valentina and they fell in love with one another. Yet, in the communist era relationships between black and white people was highly unusual and in general not accepted. Valentina explained that her parents, as a prominent doctor and high agrarian functionary, had a reputation to live up to, which left no room for a black son-in-law. It would make people ‘talk’. Nevertheless the young couple decided to stay together and they had a child. But the obstacles encountered due to their relationship began to accumulate: they had started running out of Azekel’s studying grant, they had difficulty getting a job, and they found out that their child would probably not be accepted in school. With the arrival of the perestroika era in the 1990s travelling abroad became easier and they decided to flee. Or, as Valentina stated: “Azekel decided to go somewhere … and we had to come along, because he wanted to, and we wanted to.” To what extent this was a joint decision remains unclear. Yet, as the interview continued it seemed that Valentina had more trouble with the flight and the asylum period than Azekel did.

What features implicitly yet strongly throughout both of their accounts is that they had not only expected to find a safe place in the Netherlands, but they held a particular image of their new life in a welfare country. Of all the interviews they talk the most extensively on their first entrance experiences, in

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147 Transcript interview Azekel and Valentina (17 April 2013), 6.
148 Transcript interview Azekel and Valentina (17 April 2013), 7.
a negative way. About the first days in the Reception Center Valentina vividly remembers the bad food and the ethnic diversity:

“We did not feel at ease there, we did not belong to these people, because they all looked differently. And also, yeah, the behavior, well perhaps from some sort of, er, lower level of people. You can see that from the start, how people act, if they spit, or whatever they do.”

Among these different people they felt unsafe, especially as they had to sleep separately, in a crowded women’s and men’s dorm. The feeling of insecurity was reinforced by the fact that they still had no clue what would happen to them and feared to be sent back to Russia.

This example illustrates that since spaces are permeated with social relations, place experience is closely related to the social encounters that take place, and the envisioned future. The feeling of Dutch society treating them below their level features at several other moments in this interview, as well as in several other interviews. Azekel and Valentina both had followed higher education and they came from fairly wealthy families. This social background contributed to certain expectations of the Netherlands, which were by no means realized in the first Dutch reception location. It can be related to Burke and Stets’ emphasis on role, group and personal identity. Azekel and Valentina entertained an idea of the position they should hold in society and the social groups they belong to, which differs from the place and community they had entered, that is, the asylum seeker community.

I will expand on the concept of community and relationality below.

4.3.2 Relationality

Social background and horizons of expectation
For the newly arrived asylum seeker relationality is largely constituted by former relational positions, that is, their social background. This will be dealt with below, in addition to asylum seekers’ reactions to first encounters with other asylum seekers, Dutch institutions and the relation with family.

Former social positions can contribute to diverging expectations and realities. For example in the case of the Iranian Namdar from Teheran, whose story is characterized by bitterness and disillusion. Namdar came to the Netherlands in 1994 after a number of attempts to flee from the Iranian regime under Khomeini and settle abroad. He lived for some time in Japan, Cyprus and Russia before arriving in the Netherlands. About his first impression of the asylum seeker center he tells:

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149 Transcript interview Azekel and Valentina (17 April 2013), 9.
“When we came to the center I was just shocked ... I don’t come from a really poor family, although we were neither rich. But what I saw there were poor people, children on the table and crowded, crowded, crowded. All sorts of people. I had not expected that. I had a very different image of European countries in my head.”

Repeatedly, the assumption resounds of the Netherlands as a rich, developed country which matched Namdar’s own social background. Social background contributed to a certain self-image and the consequent horizon of expectation that was built upon the self-image. This horizon influenced the experiences in the asylum seeker center. Very different for example was the story of Mohammad, son of a farmer from a mountain village in Iran. He did not mention any problems with having to live with other ‘levels’ of people and seems to take this for granted. His social position in Iran appeared to contribute to this, in addition to his group identity and personality. Mohammad explained he belonged to the Hazara people of Iran and he described them as those who were not involved in power or politics, but as a class of workers. Complaints did not seem to fit into the Hazara culture. Even when he no longer lived there, Mohammad still appeared to be influenced by his social background as Hazara, which was confirmed in his sober, factual story.

It shows that even when interviewees only stated the expectation of finding safety in the Netherlands, other more implicit assumptions of the new country also play a role. Although some had fled their countries quite unexpectedly, they all had formed hopeful images of life in a welfare state – an image which was clung on to even stronger due to the troubles experienced in their home country. These often implicit, yet subconsciously high expectations frequently clashed with the reality they encountered in their first days. The clash was felt especially by those who had come from more educated families. Such discrepancy led to negative evaluations of the first days. Therefore, former role and group identity played an important role in arrival experiences.

However, neither the wish for safety was fulfilled immediately. As described above, Azekel and Valentina still felt very unsafe in their new environment with all of these new and different people. In the first days they also risked being sent back to Russia and this contributed even more to their distrust towards everyone around them. Distrust also strongly featured in the story of Musa, although it had a different impact on him. He was a very positive narrator but the further the interview wore on the more troubled sides came to the fore. Musa was born in Liberia, but the outburst of the civil war made him decide to flee to his brother in America. During the first years, he conceived of the Netherlands as a pit stop on his way to America. Instead of distrusting the Dutch or the other asylum seekers he specifically described his trouble with Dutch distrusting him. He felt being treated as a criminal when he had to tell his story to the police and later on to the IND.

150 Transcript interview Namdar, 7.
“But I think, I feel as if I’m in prison, I have never done this in all of my life [being involved with the police] and at the police for example. I have nothing to do with the police, and the interview. And I feel, I feel myself in a war region. (...) You get the feeling like, am I a criminal? Or what? I came here for peace, yet it is completely the other way around. They get you, they have to check you, they have to investigate you. And then you feel, truly, you feel very sad.”

It frustrated Musa that he felt so distrusted as a person, merely as a result of being an asylum seeker. Or in his terms, being seen as a ‘second rate citizen’, rather than being evaluated for the person he was. This feeling was a returning aspect in Musa’s account and it shows how important reflected appraisal – that is, the way he thought others might define him – was part of his identity. Other interviewees less explicitly addressed the topic of distrust, but most did mention their frustration of why some asylum seekers were just trusted and got a status, whereas others were not.

Apart from the strangers one encounters and the way you are encountered, a third major component of relationality is family. On the one hand, arriving with family members gave interviewees a greater responsibility and related worries for their families’ future. On the other hand taking your family diminished initial loneliness. Having your family around lessened the urge to make new contacts in the first period, yet in the longer term it provided a strong incentive to build up new life. This paradoxical effect will be elaborated upon in the paragraph below on the asylum period. But first I turn to the aspect of time, and to issues related to age for those arriving the Netherlands.

4.3.3 Time

The issue of time becomes more significant in the two following stages of the asylum period, but some remarks on age may already be posed here.

The fact that only one interviewee narrated a vividly positive memory of her first account may be partly explained by her age. The Iranian Farrah came here with her family when she was only thirteen years old and she remembered the tidiness and tranquility that she experienced in her first days. She was the youngest of my interviewees when she entered the Netherlands and her story reveals the significance of age. From her child perspective she conceived of the flight as a rather adventurous undertaking, not sharing in the worries that her parents went through. Yet these worries were certainly there as becomes clear when Farrah tells that her mother had to deal with psychological problems during the asylum center period. In that time she cared for her children ‘without feeling like it’, Farrah

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151 Transcript interview Musa, 14.
152 The other interviewees were 17 or older. The relation between age and asylum experiences will be expanded on in the next paragraph.
narrated. The fact that her mother experienced a lot more psychological trouble during the asylum period, confirms the hypothesis of age as a significant factor. However, age is not all decisive for the first impressions, especially when having passed adolescence. Interviewees who came here at the age of 25 did not necessarily have better impressions than those who arrived at 35.

As addressed above, the preparation time sometimes did seem to influence the eventual asylum experience. The longer people had planned to flee, the higher future hopes could rise and hence the greater disillusion was felt when things turned out to be different. Yet, the matter of time and identity is to be analyzed more thoroughly in the in the next paragraph.

In short, the accounts on arriving in the Netherlands show that place expectation, partly based on social background, is a significant component of place experience. The first contacts and relations within the new places, with other immigrants, IND, the police and family contributed to this experience. From a time perspective we see that age is also a factor in the arrival experience. All of these aspects will be further elaborated in the paragraph below which will deal with the actual asylum period.

4.4 The asylum period

4.4.1 Place

*The living environment*

Although every interviewee had stayed in different asylum centers there are quite a few recurring topics in the accounts. The first one to consider when addressing the topic of place is the new living environment, that is, the asylum seeker center. Usually families lived with one or two other families, up to eight persons, in a small apartment sharing bathroom, kitchen and a living room. Policy prescribes that families are ideally to live with families, and people who come without family are ideally to live with other individuals. The interviews proved that this was not always the case in practice. The reactions to the quite restricted living space were fairly diverse.

Having a kitchen emerged as an important living standard in most female accounts. In some AZCs, residents had no kitchens but they could line up in the morning for food coupons to get a meal in the evening. The different Dutch food featured as an important feeling of not-belonging. Food also functioned as one of the most concrete examples in which the sentiments of dependence and unease with the new place of residence were materialized. The use of food coupons meant no longer being in charge of your own food provision and also an inability to maintain one’s own tradition and culture through

Transcript interview Farrah, 6.
food. In Chapter Two a sense of control and being in charge were addressed as important factors of why a home is so important. The discomfort with not preparing your own food illustrates the importance of wanting to be in charge, in order to call a place a home.

Yet, there were also two interviewees who acknowledged the food issue, but emphasized that you just needed to adapt to this. Among them are Mohammad, whom I introduced above with his factual, non-plaintive narration style, and Jelena. The latter stated: “Yes, first you have to get used to it and then you know about it. That it is your duty to do so and that you have to do it. So then you do it.”\textsuperscript{154} Jelena is a Croatian woman who came to the Netherlands with her husband, while pregnant with her first son. In some parts of her account she displayed the same non-plaintive, sober mentality as Mohammad. What may have contributed to her attitude was her history in Croatia. Jelena was eleven when in 1991 the Yugoslavian war broke out. Her family used to live in the Serb part of Croatia, and she was the daughter of a Serb father and Croatian mother. Therefore, her family had to flee several times, either to Russia, Serbia or back to Croatia. When new bombardments started in 1999 her husband and she decided to flee abroad. This turbulent youth seemed to have given Jelena the awareness that any new place would acquire a period of adaptation.

However, Jelena and Mohammad are exceptions. In most accounts it was emphasized how different the new living space was, how aspects of home were missed and that it was, and still is, not easy to adapt.

\textit{Moving space: physical and psychological}

The asylum seeker center as a living environment was also perceived as restrictive in physical movement. Some even literally described the asylum center as a prison. For Namdar, the feeling of being imprisoned not only referred to the actual moving space, but also to the psychological space he moved in. Concerning his asylum period, he told that in the beginning things were quite alright in Luttelgeest, where he met some nice Iranian people. In this small town a large OC is based with more than 700 residents. Yet, after a few months Namdar was sent to AZC Zuidlaren. In Zuidlaren he shared rooms among others with Iraqi. These were people who he had fought for two years during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988. “It was logical that it went wrong sometimes.”\textsuperscript{155} Namdar describes the asylum center as a jungle, a center of psychologically troubled people who try to cope with trauma, war, rape, death, as well as coping with each other. Therefore, he sometimes left the center on the weekends to visit friends in Groningen, whom he had met in Luttelgeest. Yet, money was always an issue during these weekends. He underlined that even when you were outside the walls of the AZC you were still psychologically inside, dealing with the

\textsuperscript{154} Transcript interview Jelena, 9.
\textsuperscript{155} Transcript interview Namdar, 8.
insecurity, and still restricted in your space of movement as there was little money to be spent. Another impediment for movement was the lack of purpose for going outside. Tina, the wife of Olivier, whom I spoken to shortly during an interview addressed the fact that they had no acquaintances outside of the AZC. Thus there was little reason to go out for a trip and have some distraction.

The lack of distraction, the almost complete absence of meaningful activity within the limited space, was one of the basic topics that emerged in almost every interview. Different ways of coping with it were attempted: some needed activity in town, others preferred the tranquility of nature. In particular three men, Karim, Azekel and Musa, mentioned their search for peace and rest. Karim is an Iranian guy who came to the Netherlands on his own in 1994 at the age of 25, as a result of his activities in an anti-Iranian regime socialist student organization. He found a way to escape the AZC space by going fishing in Zeeland. Azekel often went fishing on Ameland and Musa found tranquility in the small coast village of Holwerd. All three had experienced war in their former countries, yet they refer to this in various ways. In Karim’s account the references to the war are manifold, whereas for Azekel I only discovered it through background research. Nevertheless, the impact that the war had had, added by the xenophobic reactions he had encountered in Russia, were revealed in Valentina’s confession that Azekel had much trouble with sleeping. He was unable to learn Dutch in the first months due to concentration problems. Musa had also seen the civil war in his home country but he only talks about it in a purely politically and factual manner.

These different ways of recounting experiences illustrate how dependent the interviewer is, not only on the content of the memories told, but also on what kind of memories an interviewee may be willing to tell. Karim was open, Azekel less so, Musa narrated rather in an institutional level on the topic of war at the start, yet became more personal throughout the interview. This makes comparison complex, but all the more challenging when trying to find answers to where and why they diverge or converge. Yet, one to one relations cannot be substantiated from this small sample. It cannot be stated that war experience prompted a search for rest in the AZC. There is no one to one relation, but a multitude of factors play a role, like the individual character and custom.

More important to note here though, is that these three persons were actively search of places of introspection. Above, Manzo’s study was addressed in which she concluded that places may function as a space of introspection and reflection, and that they contribute to understanding oneself. On the one hand, Azekel, Karim and Musa searched for this space outside the walls of the AZC. On the other hand, the long waiting in the AZC offered a superfluous amount of time for intro-, and retrospection. This was not always welcomed. Therefore, the three men simultaneously actively sought for activities. Most narratives

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156 Transcript interview Namdar, 8.
157 Olivier will be introduced more elaborately in the paragraph below.
include such a search for activity within the center, like translating, cleaning or recreational assistance. As Mohammad stated: “You had to lose [kwijtmaken] your time somehow.”158 Like Mohammad, some interviewees indicated they rather went into town to have their mind distracted, and also found it easier to live close to larger towns. In that sense, a physical attachment was established, appreciating the vicinity of facilities nearby. Yet, this was for no interviewee the primary issue when evaluating their asylum experience. Most importance was assigned to the social aspects. Usually, small scale reception was more valued than large scaled centers, since it implied more personal contact and a sense of membership, an important factor of identity as it will appear in the paragraph on relationality.

Notwithstanding the quests for distraction, answers to questions about daily life usually contained the word ‘nothing’, along with watching television. During visits to AZC Delfzijl this was a central element of the living rooms: a television switched on, usually at high volume. It struck me again when visiting the interviewees, since in more than half of the cases I found a usually big and prominent television switched on. The television was a different answer to spending days in the AZC. It may be perceived as an ironic metaphor of asylum life: watching the world literally while remaining inactive yourself.

This type of apathetic attitude emerged throughout the interviews as another way to respond to the empty day schedules. At several points, interviewees described how they tried to keep active as opposed to their surrounding environment, characterizing it as a place where people did little but hanging around, sitting together and drinking, smoking, discussing which sometimes resulted in fighting. Some interviewees particularly stressed their distance from these people. Twigger-Ross et alia had considered place and the related membership as a source of self-esteem. A source of self-esteem was found in being different from the ‘couch hanging’ group through finding other activities. Yet, simultaneously it appeared that inactivity was simply part of their asylum life.

Overall, being constantly together in relatively little space, in combination with the stressful situation, featured in most stories as unpleasant sides of the AZC. Only in the interviews with the two youngest participants – that is, at the time of arriving in the Netherlands – the lack of activity is not mentioned as a big struggle in the AZC. The case of Farrah was already introduced above. She actually narrated a rather positive image of AZC Kollum, where she stayed for three months out of the total five months of her asylum period. They had a caravan of their own and she had a lot of friends; she was never alone. Although Farrah did not mention it specifically, a significant difference for her asylum experience was that she could go to school together with the other asylum children, leaving her parents at home. This change of environment, the structure and purpose it gave to life had major influence on her perceptions.

158 Transcript interview Mohammad, 12.
Life seemed to move on, instead of standing still. Also, Farrah’s later experiences with loneliness color her memories of the asylum time, a topic that is further expanded in the last paragraph.

Hadi, the other youngster interviewee who came as a seventeen year old boy from the Republic of Guinea after his parents had died in political conflict, narrated how he reflected with his friends on the asylum period. In retrospect, they saw there had been good times, along with bad times. The negative aspects concerned some place related issues like having to live with others in one room from diverse backgrounds with diverse habits, whom might “slam doors, phone loudly, or shout”. However, Hadi was lucky to get an individual room after a few weeks and in retrospect, he actually appreciated the communal feeling of living together. “Back then, we had that unity … You lived with the people around you.”

Waiting for the bus to arrive together, attending classes, the trip back ‘home’, dinner time and then, soccer. Playing soccer featured as an important component of his whole asylum period. Even though he reflected back on the school going as positive, Hadi also admitted that he was unmotivated to study and learn the language at first. He discovered that he had to start all over again in language, even missing the very basics to undertake simple activities. He realized that he would not achieve a considerable level of Dutch for at least the next couple of years and during the first weeks he wanted to go somewhere else, where he could use his French. Yet, this mentality changed as he stayed longer in the Netherlands, when the first signs of attachment and integration appeared.

Hadi’s attachment was strongly connected to the relations he built up. Yet, most asylum seekers move around relatively often during their asylum period, which complicates such place attachment through relations. Samira was the only one who lived in only one asylum seeker center for seven years. Mohammad, one of the most extreme examples, moved six times in seven years. It is striking to see how the word ‘tijdelijk’ (temporary), although a rather ‘complicated’ word comparing it to the rest of his Dutch vocabulary, was repeated over and over in his account.

The amount of transfers that characterized most of the interviews was an immediate consequence of the implemented policy after 2000. As the asylum policy became stricter AZCs were closed down on a large scale, resulting in many forced relocations. Olivier and his family for example, had to transfer four times in seven years. His daughter emphasized the difficulty of building up friendships with other while moving so often. Olivier had arrived in the Netherlands in 1999 to obtain a master’s degree in water technology. When his political activities became dangerous because of a regime change, his wife and children travelled to the Netherlands in order to ask for asylum here. Oliviers’ daughter narrated proudly that she had not given up trying to make new friends during all of these transfers. Yet, it could also result in demotivation to put effort in getting to know the people around you.

159 Transcript interview Hadi, 15.
In short, residency during an asylum period is inherently temporary. This rendered place attachment difficult. The limited opportunity for activity made strong place attachment even less probable. Place attachment has been described above as an important factor of defining yourself, defining a self-image and being able to act in the world. As attachment through activity largely lacks in an AZC and hence, it may be expected that relations become all the more important to construct identity. Below relationality will be considered, divided by the categories of co-residents, friends and family, the neighborhood, and institutional staff.\textsuperscript{160}

4.4.2 Relationality

Co-residents: creating (in)safety

From the interviews it can be inferred that the contacts built up during the asylum period played a vital role in evaluating that period. Some gave positive accounts of their relations, like Jelena, who really valued the fact that she lived with many other Yugoslavians in an AVO in Berlikum. An AVO is a reception location for up to 150 people and the relatively small scale of the center was valued strongly by Jelena; she knew all the people and described it as a ‘cozy’ environment. As a consequence, she experienced it as a safe place to stay. However, most accounts tended to be rather negative on the people they encounter. Above it was addressed that safety was not immediately found due to the forced living together with others. Were interviewees willing to share their past troubles with other AZC residents? Most people replied that they did not talk about difficult and personal subjects with co-residents. The latter were conceived as ‘strangers’. Iranians emphasized additionally that there was always the possibility of having secret agents of the Iranian regime among them. Feelings of insecurity were also expressed by the Iranian Karim who had been beaten up by a group of Iranians in AZC Goes:

“Yes, yes, I did [talk about his past with others], but not all. No especially after what had happened in Goes, the trust is gone. Very much gone. No, you wouldn’t want that, you know. Because the more you tell, the more vulnerable you become. You know, really, you shouldn’t do that. There are things that I learned during these years through hard lessons. The hard way, as the Americans use to say. I learned it the hard way.”\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{160} The divisions between these categories are not waterproof as overlap is strongly present for example between friends, family and co-residents. However, the categories help to structure the large amount of different experiences in the field of relationality.

\textsuperscript{161} Transcript interview Karim, 31.
**Friends and family**

Nevertheless, relations did tend to be extremely valuable for those who had positive experiences. Hadi repeated several times that he found it hard to build up everything from scratch, but simultaneously one of the first things he told about his asylum period is Dutch football friends he had made. He narrates in a proud manner on his football career at VV Omlandia: “I was number 10, the captain of the A1 team, so for that reason I experienced a lot. Every Saturday we had a match, in almost every part of the Netherlands.”

Being member of this team gave Hadi the opportunity to make new friends quickly, and to travel outside of the AZC. But it implied a sense of attachment on a more profound level as well. The sense of being part of a team, being member of something bigger and playing games seemed to have provided for direction and purpose in Hadi’s life. A purpose that he had lost out of sight somewhat when he first entered the Netherlands, when he was unmotivated to learn the language and build life back up from the ground. Showing the importance of group membership, again the link to Stets and Burke’s identity theory can be made. When arriving in the Netherlands, Hadi’s role identity as a son of his parents and as a future Law student could no longer actively be performed. This may partly explain why he all the more clung to his new group membership in the football team.

The fact that Hadi came here as a teenager on his own, also may have given him an subconscious ‘need’ to remodel his identity and build up new contacts in order to survive this period. His success as a team player contributed to rebuilding confidence. The appraisal helped him to construct a novel, positive self-image. His new contacts were also maintained after having received the residence permit and friends from Ten Boer assisted Hadi to get a nice place in Groningen quickly.

The other interviewee who came here as a teenager, Farrah, did come here with her family and went through a different type of experience. As mentioned above, she described the period in the AZC Kollum as quite a happy one as there were many friends in the AZC. Yet, she did not mention Dutch friends. Also in her later school experiences a certain barrier between the Dutch kids and her remained. After her family had received a resident permit Farrah and her sister moved to a special international school, the ISK School, which Farrah describes as ‘very multicultural, so that was fun.’ However, the year after she had to attend a school with predominantly Dutch children. As a girl of fifteen wearing a head scarf she felt lonely, being afraid of what others might think of her, even though she also mentioned that they did not treat her badly. This is a form of reflected appraisal which negatively influenced her confidence. She thought other would see her as different and this fueled her insecurity. In the long run, it even affected her health, as she endured heavy epilepsy attacks. Her sister shared these feelings. She

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162 Transcript interview Hadi, 3.
163 Transcript interview Farrah, 11.
fainted in class repeatedly and refused to go to school any longer, only wanting to go back to the ISK school.

Clearly, Hadi and Farrah went through very different asylum experiences with very different consequences for the post asylum period. Although the topic of the post asylum period will be elaborated upon more thoroughly in the last paragraph, a short note is to be made here. Hadi quickly integrated with Dutch teenagers, whereas Farrah strongly held on to immigrant friends. Hadi’s quick integration was of course partly caused by his football team. Yet, another motive could be found in the fact that through her family Farrah remained more within her own culture and there was less need to look outside for help. Also, as can be inferred from her later experiences with arranged marriages and a strong family control, Farrah grew up in a very traditional Afghan environment. In contrast, due to circumstances Hadi had been cut off in an abrupt and complete manner of his former youth. As a consequence he was more or less forced to step out of his ‘comfort zone’ and this appears to have facilitated his integration into society.

It appears that having family around resulted in two divergent responses in dealing with Dutch people. On the one hand it could lead to less contact and less urge to integrate and hence later to a stronger feeling of being, and being perceived and treated as different. This increased the barrier for incorporating elements of Dutch identity. On the other hand, having family nearby also provided a safe haven, a sense of belonging in whatever place you might be and hence an automatic identity source – a sort of safety net which made the ‘plunge’ into new society somewhat less steep.

All of the interviewees kept in touch with family from their home country, yet in various degrees. Valentina for example did not do so from the outset, because her family had strongly condemned her relationship with Azekel. However, they restored contact and by now she had returned several times to visit her family. Apart from calling, the internet and media like Facebook and Skype, have become important means to keep in touch for the asylum seekers. On the other hand, it also induced people to stay inside all day behind a computer, waiting for messages from friends and family, rather than moving outside and becoming active in the new community they now lived in. Hence, these media appear to facilitate as well as diminish social interaction in a similar way as the physical presence of family may do.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{164} A remarkable fact was that some interviewees indicated not to tell their family in too much detail about their asylum situation. They did not want to worry their family at home, as they had enough problems of their own, it was argued. A second explanation, although not explicitly stated as such, might be that some also felt ashamed of their current situation – as if they had failed in bringing their flight to a positive ending. Again, the feeling of failure is closely related to unfulfilled expectations and the self-image that someone would want to present of him- or herself. Living as an asylum seeker was not the desired self-image and hence a different image was presented to family and friends. Yet, this is a more speculative note on the side.
The effect of having family on the asylum experience will be reflected upon more expansively in the post-asylum period section. Yet beforehand I address the experiences with the local neighborhood and the staff.

_The neighborhood: source of safety or discrimination?_

The surrounding community can serve as source of a sense of safety and security. The asylum community may not always provide this sense of safety. But what about the broader surrounding community, the Dutch neighborhood in which asylum seekers reside? More often than safety a sense of discrimination resounded in the narratives studied here.

From the interviews it can be concluded that it was not in the first place family-related whether interviewees felt discriminated as an asylum seeker. Both people coming individually and people arriving with family expressed this feeling. Only Mohammad and Vithiya, farmer’s children with no higher education, did not mention something similar. Concerning Mohammad, reasons for this may be partly found in his factual manner of narrating and inability to articulate specific nuance in Dutch, but also in his Hazara background, which was perceived in Iran as a lower classed part of the population. Vithiya is more a normative narrator and expressed many times how hard the asylum period was, but discrimination was not part of her story. Particularly the higher educated interviewees articulated their frustration about feeling encountered as ‘lower leveled’ people by many Dutch. They felt perceived as ignorant because of their language difficulties. They stressed that indeed their language capacity might fail at some points, but their intellectual capacities did not. Additionally, Manzo’s research outcome particularly socially marginalized groups value safety in a place or home, was confirmed here. In the interviews conducted for this research it appeared that indeed those who felt socially marginalized most often mentioned feelings of insecurity in their living environment.

Samira, an Iranian interviewee who fled her country with her husband and two children due to political troubles in 2000, developed a rather extreme image of the Dutch throughout her asylum experience. During a group talk with some other immigrant women in women’s center De Boei in Lewenborg (Groningen) she mentioned that the Netherlands is not a democracy ‘but a discrimination’. Samira repeated this line in the interview afterwards. A crucial experience upon which this thought was based seems took place in the beginning of her stay at AZC Oude Pekela.

“The start was good, but yeah, Oude Pekela really has asocial inhabitants. Truly, they come to the asylum seekers in search of fight. And then the police arrives, in 2001 the police arrives, they unleash the police dogs on the people, on the asylum seekers. That is why I say that Dutch people are really discriminating, not democratic. The fault lies with

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165 Transcript interview Samira (26 June 2013), 3.
the people from outside the AZC, all mistakes are made by people from outside the AZC, really. We were outside, well the Dutch spit here (points to her shoulder) on my husband, those guys. But it is so strange, the police says, no you [the asylum community] should really pay attention to these people [inhabitants of Oude Pekela]. Yeah, how should we pay attention? Why are those Dutch people allowed to say anything against foreigners, dirty foreigners this, foreigners that. But we always have to keep our mouth shut. Because we are from abroad, fleeing to come here."166

A more nuanced account of these events can be found in several newspaper articles.167 However, the negative encounter with the police favoring the inhabitants of Oude Pekela – as Samira perceived it – strongly influenced her further relations with Dutch. She recurrently referred to other incidents of discrimination and through this lens of experience she was inclined to interpret many setbacks as acts of discrimination, even when they may have been unrelated. For instance, she mentioned that her daughter was told to ‘shut up’ [bek houden, a very rude way to ask for silence in Dutch] merely because of her different background. Also, when her son did not make it to the A1 football team for FC Groningen Samira interpreted this as a result of ethnic judgment, instead judging capability.168 Where most interviewees accounted of frequent quarrels within the AZC, Samira initially stated that there were only fights with people from outside. When I repeated the question she admitted:

“Yes, perhaps other people had quarrels, other houses, I don't know. (…) But none of the families. Yet, for example one house with only men, eight men living there, yeah then they could discuss, quarrel, that is logical, but I don’t know.”169

Samira’s story is one of the most extreme examples in this interview group. However, several other interviewees accounted of discrimination in their living environment.

One other striking feature of Samira’s story was that she tended to blame misfortune to the Dutch or Dutch system, whereas for fortune she thanked God. This leads us to the next relational aspect to be addressed: religion.

Religion as a relation

Like some other interviewees Samira addressed her relation with God as one of the factors to get through the asylum period, yet in Samira’s account it featured in quite a remarkable way. She was a Muslim when

166 Transcript interview Samira, 3-4.
168 Transcript interview Samira, 4, 7.
169 Transcript interview Samira, 6.
she arrived in the Netherlands. In 2006, after a suicide attempt, she converted to the Christian faith, just as her brother had done before her and the rest of her family would follow afterwards. Samira declared that the Islam had never given her answers, nor rest. When she learned about Jesus and the bible, her prayers were finally heard. She perceived the Generaal Pardon of 2007 as a gift of God, as well as the fact that her family received a new house and loan very easily, without having a BSN number.

The other three interviews in which the relationship with God was specifically emphasized were those of Vithiya, Musa and Hadi.¹⁷⁰ For all three the membership of a religious community was a source of identity to build on. Vithiya’s house was decorated with hopeful Christian texts on every wall. She mainly drew strength from the church as an institution, a central point in her life which formed an important means to meet new people and keep in touch with her culture. Musa and Hadi expressed their religion as a task in life, a philosophy to live by. Musa specifically underlined that his whole refugee experience was part of the destiny God had envisioned for him:

“Everything is destiny, it is not coincidence (…) Look good at what is in the bible, and okay, you will see that it is not for nothing, you did not come here for no reason. So we should not complain too much (…) Life is like a wave and there are always ups and downs. (…) But when you are a refugee, you are more religious than normal people, because of all the trouble, your only hope is faith, your only support is God.”¹⁷¹

It shows that Musa found purpose in faith. His relation with God gave his life meaning and direction, even in hard times, and remained a strong basis for his identity. It gave him courage and strength to remain positive and rebuild his life. A similar response was expressed by Hadi, who likewise believed God brought him here and that he should make the best out of it. Yet, he also mentioned that at first, he was demotivated and he had not seen a future in the Netherlands. “I was not the one to decide, He above decides, so I would see [what was to come of it] (…) But I had friends.”¹⁷² This proves that although Hadi put strength from his believe in God on his travel to the Netherlands, he also perceived the role of his new friends as essential for being able to rebuild his life here.

Institutional staff

After having considered the role of friends, family, the neighborhood and God as elements of relationality that influence identity in the asylum period, a last group of contacts in the AZC has to be taken into account, which is the institutional staff. Contrary to my initial expectations rather little

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¹⁷⁰ Olivier talked about about his faith and his believe that God brought him here with a purpose after the interview, during the car ride to the station. This will be readdressed in the paragraph on the post asylum period.
¹⁷¹ Transcript interview Musa, 22.
¹⁷² Transcript interview Hadi, 14.
comments were made on the staff, except for when I specifically asked for it. Azekel and Valentina answered that there was very little guidance by staff in AZC Schalkhaar. The immigrants themselves formed cooking- and cleaning teams, while COA and VWN staff were mostly busy maintaining order and preventing quarrels from escalating. Very characteristic for his sober style, Mohammad stated: “Yeah, everyone is different. Sometimes it was good, sometimes it wasn’t. Sometimes they were strict, very precise, it has to be like this. Sometimes they would say, ok, it doesn’t matter.”

He acknowledged his fortune to have built very good relations with a Dutch teacher, who assisted him actively to enhance his chances for getting a residence permit.

Only one interviewee specifically addressed his contacts with the volunteers at the AZC, Karim. The first year he spent in an asylum center in Goes where he was active as a translator. Karim emphasized that he learnt every day from living in an international environment but his relationship with former compatriots was rather problematic. Consequently, he was quite negative about the division of AZC residents along national lines. He stressed the differences in culture, believe and language between Iranians: “I discovered, better be with other nationalities than your own.”

Further on in the interview, it appears that this discovery was strongly affected by his later experiences. Due to his problematized relation with Iranians, Karim did not want to participate in the drinking, smoking and hanging around of the Iranian community. This active ‘non-membership’ may have been one of the reasons why he sought for contact among the staff. In contrast to other interviewees, Karim did not mention any awareness that Dutch people might think lower of him because of his ‘asylum seeker identity’. He was eager to narrate about his staff contacts in Goes and his Dutch girlfriend. He appeared to derive a certain sense from status by mixing with supervisors. However, a nightly attack by a group of Iranian men who beat him up, led Karim to ask for a transfer. When I asked about the reason, Karim answers that he thinks others felt threatened by Karims good relations with the staff.

He suspected that to be the reason why they accused him of being an Iranian spy. After a year in Goes he was sent to Dokkum where he became actively involved again organizing AZC activities.

The example displays some insight into the social structure that emerges in an asylum seeker center, involving ranking and positionality. Yet, the fact that only one interviewee addressed this topic spontaneously suggests that perhaps its importance should not be overstated.

The other parties asylum seekers deal with such as the IND, lawyers and in some cases also the Foreigners Police were more frequently mentioned. Contact with the IND featured as a very one-sided relationship, often triggering frustration about the forced dependency of the closed, impersonal and non-

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173 Transcript interview Mohammad, 13.
174 Transcript interview Karim, 10.
175 Transcript interview Karim, 12.
transparent institution. Particularly the fact that interviewees had no insight whatsoever on what basis the decision of staying or leaving was made, or why some decisions took so long, whereas the simple yes or no had major impact on their futures, led to question marks and dissatisfaction. Vithiya fled with her husband and two children from Sri Lanka in 1995 due to political strife. She narrated of her frustration about a family from Sri Lanka she had met during her stay in the AZC who received a status after only three months, whereas her family had to wait for 13 years, to be only saved finally by the Generaal Pardon in 2007/8. 176 “I don’t know in what way the IND looks at all those stories, I still have a question mark. How do they look? I still have a question mark. But the IND just does everything.” 177 Two interviewees also pointed to the problems with translators. Karim did an interview three times and only the third time, when he gave an account of his story without the interference of a translator, he was granted a residence permit. He now blames the translators for the previous rejections. Namdar explained how he had felt uncomfortable with telling his personal story in front of the translators: one translator laughed during his account, and there was always a possibility that translators were accomplices of the Iranian regime.

Namdar also emphasized the dependency on many different parties one encounters as an asylum seeker. He had no idea what the translator told his lawyer, who then fought the case in front of the judge, who subsequently depended on the governmental policy. This shows a long line of dependence. Several interviewees indicated to have felt like a plaything of a process into which they had little insight, nor influence. Only Musa openly admitted to have been provided with advice of how to conduct his interview. Nevertheless, he was frustrated by this advice as he argued that an interview should be honest and not ‘embellished’ in order to have a better chance on a residence permit.

“What is a good interview? You have to let people free to say what they have to say. Do not force them to do so. (…) No, if you say it this way, then you have more chance to get a permit, they’d tell you that kind of things. Terrible. (…) You really had to show that you had been beaten, well I said, I did go through misery, but certain things you mention, like being beaten, I did not have them! And I should have said so! But I do was in misery.” 178

Musa’s account reveals his trouble with proving he had been in a miserable situation even though physically he may not had been a ‘real’ victim of the terror. The quote pinpoints that Musa’s horizon of possibility, the constant feeling of insecurity, made him flee, rather than the actual facts. However, the

176 Most asylum seekers eligible for the Generaal Pardon received a residence permit in 2007, after 15th of June when the Pardon was issued. Yet, the group of extra-procedure asylum seekers had to wait until 31st of January 2008. Vithiya was among the last but remembers immediately both the dates of 15th of June and the 31st of January. This precise remembrance of dates underlines the impact of the Generaal Pardon in her life.
177 Transcript interview Vithiya, 13.
178 Transcript interview Musa, 24.
asylum system asks for facts that prove you have a right to stay here. This frustrated Musa and he perceived of it as ‘a system created for the ones who shout loudest’, whereas the weaker people had little chance.

The feeling of dependence was a factor inherent in the relation between asylum seekers and institutional staff. The former were dependent of the latter for material support like housing, money, and food. Moreover, they were dependent on less material aspects, like getting a lawyer, the procedure, et cetera. Illuminative is how Azekel and Valentina described their relation with their contact person:

“We didn’t know anything (…) It’s like, you could have been our contact person, if you say: “Azekel, start walking on one foot,” then I would start walking on one foot. That is how it is! Because I don’t know about what it means.”

Ghorashi had noted a similar feeling of dependence as particularly problematic for the women she had interviewed. The interviewees of this research underlined that the dependency was increased by the fact that one could be told to return constantly. The Foreigners Police (Vreemdelingenpolitie) would then arrive at your door with the message to leave the AZC within a determined period of time. Vithiya told this was the worst moment in her asylum period. The tickets were already settled she remembers. It scared her children. They had to pack everything for leaving, even though she knew they still had trouble in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, Karim narrated how he himself had been applying for a job at the Foreigners Police after his job as a city guard. Yet, Karim had no personal experience with being told to pack his bags and return. Once again this shows how present responses might be influenced by past experiences.

In general, it can be concluded that the long lines of dependence on others, the lack of insight into the procedure, the constant waiting and insecurity yet little opportunity to act against it, produced an overall fatigue. Yet, the character of relations with others appeared a significant factor in how people were able to cope with that fatigue. Furthermore, the longer the asylum period, the stronger a feeling of exhaustion would grow. Therefore it is the aspect of time that will be addressed in the paragraph below.

4.4.3 Time

“Someone is in the middle of the sea
He cannot swim.

179 Transcript interview Azekel and Valentina, 25.
He calls for help, you are in the boat, he almost drowns, he almost wants to die.
You start to interview, how did you get here? He needs to give all the good answers to be saved. Before you are finished he is dead (…)
He is tired, he cannot swim, he cannot save himself. He asks you for help, and you say I want to help, but how did you get here? And he is tired, weak, he could just, he will die, done.
No interviews anymore.
You did not help him.”

In the interviews people gave accounts of different ways of perceiving and coping with the waiting during the asylum period. Some managed to keep active, others less so. I will now delve further into some time-related matters which influenced the reaction towards the passing by of time. I address the importance of the asylum seekers’ age during their stay in in the AZC, the length of the asylum period, the perception of time of the interviewees themselves, and the idea of a future perspective.

The two youngest persons, Farrah and Hadi, stayed for approximately five months in the AZC. It has been argued that age is an important factor in how you experience entering a new society. The young Farrah initially perceived it as one big adventure full of new sights to explore. This attitude may have helped her during the rest of her stay in the AZC. For both Hadi and Farrah I have also stressed the importance of daily activity for a positive reflection, as they both for instance attended school. Likewise, the benefit of their relationality, easily making friends with other young people, has been discussed. A third factor to add to the manner in which their memories and experiences were framed, is the amount of time they actually spent in the AZC. For both this period was fairly short. Presumably, that is also an element in explaining their partially positive accounts, contrasting with the other ten more negative inclined interviews. In addition, Samira, Namdar and Olivier all noted that in the beginning of their asylum period things were not too bad.

Logically, the question that follows is whether there is a connection between the type of experiences that are narrated and the length of the asylum period. This will be discussed in the last paragraph on the post-asylum period. What is important to note for now, is how diverse the perceptions could be of time as continuing or standing still during the asylum period. This may be illustrated by Valentina’s comment:

“Some people said to us, why will you have a baby, you don’t know how it will be. Why are you pregnant, isn’t that wrong? We said, let it be the way it will be, we won’t wait until we can stay or not stay. We will just go on living. (…) Otherwise, so many years will pass and then it may be too late to have children, or do an education, or whatever. But you hear that a lot from people, they set the time still. You’re not allowed to do anything. As if you

180 Transcript interview Musa, 25.
are screened of time. Well, and then when you finally get out, well you are ill because you have lived in stress for so long, and you were not allowed to do anything (…) And that is, yeah, that is actually pretty heavy. Those years, you perceive them as lost from your life. (…) They should not belong to people.”

Significant events in life may function as a watershed to all that was before, and all that came after. To some extent, the asylum period seemed to function like this in the narratives of all the interviewees. For some this watershed took a few months, for others a decade. Even though it was a life changing period for all, simultaneously continuity in time was sought for in various ways. Continuity was for example materialized by activities, as Mohammad kept on doing small tailor tasks, Samira and her husband took up recreational activities, and Vithiya went to church. Continuity also took the form of continuing building a family, like Azekel and Valentina did. Yet, at the same time Valentina stated to feel as if she had lost two years of her life. These contradictive statements display the paradox inherent to asylum life between wanting to go on on the one hand, whereas on other feeling unable to move on.

The quote above proves that having a child before receiving residence permit provoked diverse reactions. It could provide a sense of continuity, but it was also regarded as an unusual and even improper action during the asylum period. Namdar was the interviewee who spoke most ardently of perceiving his asylum years as lost years, during which time stood still. Vithiya, who endured nine asylum years and another four years out of procedure, also described these years as a lost period.

Both are extreme examples of long asylum periods, but one time-related matter counts for all asylum seekers: the lack of a clear future perspective. This seemed to influence the period itself, and the life after for every interview participant. No interviewee stated having had concrete plans for the period after having received a status. Karim described:

“You don’t know what will be, the only thing you can plan is what to do if you are sent back. What should I do then, that is the only thing you think of. (…) You have to be realistic in this period, many people are sent back. So you have to be realistic and not keep on walking around with your dreams.”

Again a paradox appears: on the one hand Karim tried to abandon dreaming, whereas on the other hand several interviews show that subconsciously high hopes of the ‘afterlife’ were created. Even though life in the AZC had been limited, it also involved a certain clarity. There was no other primary goal than obtaining a status. Yet, once obtained that goal vanished and had to be replaced by other aims. An initial sense of disorientation during the post-asylum period proved that it was not always easy to formulate and fulfil these aims, but the effects of this are topic of the last section.

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181 Transcript interview Azekel and Valentina, 35.
182 Transcript interview Karim, 19.
The impact of a lacking future perspective and unrealizable expectations can be linked to the theory of Chapter Two. Here, it was argued how the past and present can be linked in the future. That is, the past can be perceived being present in the future since we create our future prospects on what we have experienced in the past, and naturally the foundations for these future plans are to be realized in the present. Hence, the past and the present are linked in the future and through this future, meaning can be given to the past. Particularly in case of a ruptured past it is important to reinterpret the past in the light of the new future, in order to restore a sense of wholeness in one’s identity.

One of the reasons why the insecurity during the asylum period led to great frustration, negative feelings, and sometimes even to psychological damage, appears to be because it does not allow the past and present to be linked in a meaningful future. The future vision is very restricted and that makes it hard to give meaning to the present, as there is constant doubt about whether or not the current living and waiting in the AZC will actually contribute to a brighter future. Moreover, the present becomes meaningful in the perspective of working for a purpose that can be achieved in the future. In that sense, working on your future is a source of creating identity. Now there is of course a strong purpose during the asylum period: to obtain a status. Yet, that goal cannot be achieved by working hard, but only by waiting. This contributes to a sense of meaninglessness, which may lead to demotivation. Such demotivation was mentioned at some points during the conducted interviews. Yet, more often the demotivation of other asylum seekers was addressed, in order for interviewees to underline their own perseverance. Whether they had indeed acted in such a persistent way is hardly verifiable, but presumably this was at least a form of self-representation which they preferred to a story of demotivation. Olivier’s daughter accounted for instance that many asylum children around her were unmotivated to attend school due to their insecure positions. But she would not give up learning.

The inability to work for future goals did not provide a sense of satisfaction. The possible meaninglessness of the asylum period problematized it as a source of building a meaningful identity. In theory, the past may then feature as a more important source of identity to rely on, but in a geographical sense people were ‘cut off’ that past. Simultaneously that past often contained traumatized memory, along with families that were missed, which reinforced generally frustrations about the present.

In short, we may say that time is an influential factor in how the asylum period was experienced. The younger asylum seekers tended to be more flexible in dealing with the period, whereas the elderly were less successful. Different responses sprang from the interviews, either of apathy and sense of standing still, or search for activity to continue ‘normal’ life. The insecure future made it difficult to perceive of the period as meaningful to identity.

But what is the impact of these different ways of coping? In search of an answer to this question I now move on to the post asylum period.
4.5 Aftermath: Identities in flux?

“But it is tough to survive such a procedure, an asylum request.
To survive normally
It is mentally very heavy
And then, yeah, you are just broken
And it does not surprise me that so many foreigners who get a status don’t go to work, doesn’t surprise me at all.
They have nothing left, no health, nothing.
Everything has been taken from them in those years that they were waiting, they have been pressed so hard, they have been cut so small, that, when they finally have [a residence permit] they ask, what for?
Good that I’m here, and this is all I know.”

4.5.1 Measuring experience

This is the final section about the lives which the interviewees built, or did not build, after their asylum periods. In the first chapter I referred to medical research which stated that a longer asylum period results in higher risk of PTTS and symptoms of fear or depression, in comparison to refugees without asylum experience (respectively PTTS: 28 versus 11%; depression/fear: 68 versus 39%). It was argued that the asylum experience posed a greater risk of traumatized memory, than the refugees’ experiences in their home country. Intriguing statistics and results, but the questions that follow are: what do these figures mean on the level of experience? What happens to lives and identities in an AZC and why does an asylum period have such a strong impact on people?

These are central questions for this last section. It is in the period after the asylum period that can be ‘measured’ what impact this had on the interviewees. Yet, the term ‘measured’ should not be interpreted as wanting to put experiences in a line on the ‘experience measuring scaler’ from one to ten. Rather, with measuring I mean trying to tease open the knot of threads that run through a human’s life, mediated through the interviews, full of cause and consequence. Life is no mathematics: straight lines run astray and exact causes are hard to distinguish. Every cause is always simultaneously a consequence of another cause. Hence, measuring the impact of an asylum period is an ambitious and precarious undertaking; the impact is not there to be found as such, as a bare fact. Every impact that I found may

183 Transcript interview Valentina, 36.
184 Laban, ‘Asielzoekers: ziek door trauma’s van ver weg of juist van heel dichtbij?’ 133.
have been likewise influenced by someone’s pre-asylum history, their personality, or even their mood while telling me the story. Yet, that does not mean that nothing can be concluded. Impact can be measured in a broader sense. By applying the combined theoretical and methodological framework from the earlier Chapters the stories can be contextualized and interpreted. In Ginzburg’s terms, the stories contain ‘clues’ of impact which become meaningful through framing them within the utilized theory.

For the section below it is not my purpose to describe every activity the interviewees have undertaken after the AZC stay. Rather, I aim to analyze how effects of the asylum period may be traced in the life afterwards, especially concerning their identity construction. However, it will appear that doing so does require certain background information of the ways interviewees have built up their lives during the ‘aftermath’. The present frames memories as well as the past, so this knowledge is crucial to better understand the manner in which AZC periods were narrated. Hence, I will elaborate on parts of these ‘after-histories’ throughout the paragraph below.

For the third and final time, the themes of place, relationality and time in connection to identity construction are addressed. Yet, this time it is not the experience an sich, but the influence of the experiences that are subject of analysis. All interviewees went their separate paths after the asylum period. I aim to connect the diverse and personal paths through tracing meaningful connections, but also detect and attempt to explain the differences.

4.5.2 Place

Processes of de-territorialization and re-territorialization are important factors of the immigrant experience. In all of the interviews the de-territorialization, or the flight, took place under forced conditions to some extent, generally without much preparation, nor clear ideas of where one would end up. In the AZC a type of re-territorialization took place, yet with a temporary character and again under forced conditions. Asylum seekers do not often get to choose their own locations. This changed after having received a status, when people could finally move into a house of their own. The permit seemed to function as a key to ‘real’ re-territorialization. Most interviewees still remembered exact dates and moments of receiving the status, which confirmed the importance of this specific event.

Notably, several interviewees account proudly how they worked day after day to turn their new houses into neat, proper homes. Hence, an immediate psychological place attachment was narrated that seemed to be fairly inexistennt during the asylum period. Twigger-Ross et alia described developing self-

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185 Although some exceptions are made if asylum seekers specifically ask for a transfer and have a good reason to do so. This was for example the case for Karim, after he had been beaten up in AZC Goes.
esteem as a significant function that places can have for identity. For the interviewees self-esteem appeared to mount indeed after having received a place of their own.

Being in the AZC not only means living in a specific place, but also being categorized as a specific person, that is, an asylum seeker. Some stressed that they did not want to belong to this type of group. Musa felt treated as a second-rate citizen, whereas he strongly desired to be seen as a normal person: “I come from a good country, I don’t have to be a second-rate citizen, do I?” Azekel and Valentina felt they did not belong to their new ‘community’ of asylum seekers and were frustrated that they had been treated as such. They felt discriminated, whereas discrimination had been exactly the thing they had tried to flee from. Karim, Olivier and Namdar also mentioned that they did not feel as if they belonged to the asylum seekers. Their experiences with being categorized as such commonly meant that they felt being perceived as ‘lower leveled’ people.

Obviously, self-esteem is hard to derive from a place you do not want to live in and a community you do not want to belong to. This involves an identity discrepancy in the desired self-perception and reality. Leaving the AZC gave the opportunity to counteract this discrepancy.

The remaining interviewees did not specifically address a sense of unwanted categorization in their accounts. It seemed to be less of an issue for this group. Reasons may be that Hadi, Farrah and Jelena were partly positive about their contacts in the AZC and therefore they had fewer problems with being categorized as a member of that community. In addition, Hadi and Farrah only stayed for a short time in the AZC and they arrived at a young age. Yet, a sense of categorization was also visible in the story of Farrah and her difficulty with attending a ‘Dutch’ school. Possibly, Vithiya and Mohammad’s lower education lessened their expectations of how people might categorize them.

The freedom to move out of the AZC and have a place for their own was important for every interviewee. However, for the first group it was also a very important means to re-establish their self-esteem as a non-asylum seeker, and having the sense of participating as a ‘normal’ citizen. The house that they owned afterwards, or at least rented, contributed to rebuilding this self-esteem. Twigger-Ross et alia mentioned group membership as a factor of identity which places can add to. In this case, the non-group membership of the asylum community indeed appeared to be a definer of identity.

Place attachment is an important denominator of whether or not a place may be called a home. Transforming the new houses into neat places contributed to a sense making it your own place, a home. A striking factor in the interview group was that almost every interviewee found a house close to their former AZC. Reasons for this were that they did not want to move again, as they had done so often. It

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186 Of course, those who did move to other cities were no longer here to interview. In that sense, I had a very limited interview group. To find out to what extent place attachment really takes place a bigger interview group is needed and their movements have to be followed over a longer time span.
shows that the first seeds of place attachment had already started growing during the asylum period. Another sign of place attachment was that almost all of the interviewees remained in the initial towns after having moved into their new homes; only some moved to a different house, yet in the same area. Some accounted that the several transfers during the asylum period had made them realize the value of staying in one place.

The only exception was Farrah, who did move several times afterwards. Yet not by personal choice; these relocations were caused by her tumultuous ‘love life’. Two days after her arranged marriage, which she had opposed, she and her husband moved to Germany. She remembered that her days were filled with sleeping and watching television and quickly feelings of loneliness crept in. Every two months, she returned to the Netherlands to visit her family. She explained she became pregnant shortly after having arrived in Germany, in order to fill the gap she felt in her new life with a husband in a foreign place: “Yeah, I was alone, so… I missed everyone, so I said, no, I want to have a baby.” This was one of the most clear examples how relations are crucial to making oneself at home.

Yet, before moving on to the topic of relationality, one last comment on place identity should be made. Along with having a new home and rebuilding self-esteem arrived a crucial fellow traveler: expectation. Living in the asylum seeker center meant that physical and psychological moving space was limited. A job was not allowed and travelling far outside was unusual because of lack of money. Psychologically the spectrum was limited since life mostly pivoted around getting a status, or not getting one. Moving to a new place of one’s own did not only mean a change of environment, but also strongly, an opening of a future perspective. A residence permit was no longer the primary goal. Once this had been achieved, other goals could be established. Some interviewees stressed that for self-protecting reasons, during the asylum period no plans were made for the life after. However, even though perhaps without being conscious of it, simultaneously dreams about the ‘normal life’ in a ‘normal house’ did grow. Many expectations interviewees had held about life in the Netherlands, could not be met in the AZC. As a result, these hopes were projected in a reinvigorated way onto the post-asylum period. It involved a job, family, friends, participation; a sense of belonging. Yet, it soon appeared that having received a status by no means automatically led to achieving all of these other factors. From the interviews it can be inferred that the match or mismatch that was hence created strongly depended on the relational situation. This will be discussed in the paragraph below.

4.5.2 Relationality

187 Transcript interview Musa, 8.
188 Transcript interview Farrah, 27.
Living on your own

Different types of relationality have been considered, including co-residents, family, friends, neighborhood, staff and religion. These different kinds of relations will be readdressed below, with particular emphasis on the role of these relations on identity construction.

To start with the former, a crucial aspect about moving out of the AZC was that people no longer had to live together with co-residents. Most interviewees addressed this as a positive aspect. Karim stated: “You finally had the feeling again that you could do your own stuff again (...) You didn’t have to be in one room anymore with people you really didn’t like.”

Family life suffered also from the intruded privacy. The daughter of Olivier addressed how she valued the fact of being able to discuss things again within your own family, talk about private matters without having to share them with others, or being afraid of who would be in the kitchen.

However, the restored privacy also included a sense of loneliness in the new neighborhood. Farrah described the first months in her new house in Zuidhorn as boring. She really had to get used to no longer having other AZC children around her to play with all day long. She told about her parents who insisted that she and her and her sisters would only speak with a soft voice after six o’clock. They were afraid to disturb the neighbors until another immigrant couple told them how exaggerated their behavior was. This shows how focused the family was to act according to the rules and not cause any trouble, almost as if they still felt not allowed to be living there. As has been discussed, Farrah also experienced loneliness when she was sent to school with only Dutch children and afterwards after moving to Germany.

In almost every interview a sense of isolation was mentioned after finally having arrived in Dutch society. Namdar came here without his family and still experiences trouble to make new contacts. After having narrated on his former relationship which ended due to cheating, he stated:

“I trusted too quickly and that is my weakest point. But that is, I think it is logical. If you don’t have anyone, then you start looking for people. Then you search for people, then you search for someone to talk to. Sometimes, I sit at home for three or four days at home without talking to someone you know. And then you just need people to talk to, whom you don’t have. But when you encounter someone, you are like a child who, yes how should I say this. You just search for a connection, you search for someone. There is a fragment of Pink Floyd, The Wall. There is a boy in the parc, he lost his father. Then he sees another boy who grabs the hand of his father. And he [the lonely boy in the

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189 In the former paragraph, staff has been interpreted as the institutional staff that asylum seekers encounter, like COA, VWN or IND staff. Yet, as this is less the case in the post asylum seeker period, in this paragraph it is rather interpreted as the relations they encounter through having a job.

190 Transcript interview Karim, 16.
[parc] runs to that father and grabs the other hand of the father, and the man looks at him for a second and dismisses him with a small hand gesture. Move, move. Sometimes, I see myself that way you know. Just that, I search for people too, I want to have contact, but on the other hand I’m still afraid here. Afraid of the things that I simply have missed out, social skills. Afraid of my history here.” 191

Clearly, Namdar did not merely address a sense of loneliness. He also ascribed this loneliness to his fear of lacking necessary social skills. He related this lack to his long asylum period, in which he had not actively taken part in society. It resulted in a feeling of ‘leaping behind’ on a social level which made him fearful of encountering others. At the same time he stressed how strongly he needed human contact in his life.

Yet, dealing with loneliness could also lead to different responses than fear. Jelena for example often returned to the AZC in Dokkum to meet her old friends, whereas Namdar emphasized not wanting to be in groups of asylum seekers anymore. However, Jelena similarly accounted that life after the asylum period did not go the way she had expected. Her husband immediately found a job and was gone for the whole day, her children attended school, whilst she remained at home. Jelena arrived here at the age of 20 and she did not finish her university in Croatia. After having received a status seven years later in 2007 she had expected to restart an education. It took until 2012, after having divorced, that she finally arranged the municipality to pay for her education. Probably Jelena and her husband had been unable to pay for education themselves. Yet, in the interview it also seemed as if Jelena had taken it for granted that the municipality would help her. She had been dependent of asylum institutions for years during her asylum period and afterwards the sense of agency in her attitude had largely decreased. A similar response can be found in the account of Namdar. He stated that he would need a lot of help to re-function properly again in society. When I asked from whom this help should come he answered: “From the government, from society you know.” 192

This confirms the loss of agency that Ghorashi had traced during her interviews on former asylum seekers. Nevertheless, in my case study a sense of agency featured much stronger than a lack of agency in the post-asylum period. This can be illustrated most clearly by the fact that six out of twelve founded their own company or organization. Even though this was done most frequently because no other job could be found, it does proved that an asylum period did not necessarily takes away motivation to work hard and achieve something. As Musa hypothesized, it may have even reinforced it.

Moreover, it should be noted that generally it were the people who quickly found work after having been granted a status, who seemed to be least troubled by solitude. As will be shown below,

191 Transcript interview Namdar, 24-25.
192 Transcript interview Musa, 8.
throughout the interviews work and family turned out be fertile grounds for a restoring a meaningful identity.

**Role identity: job and family**

Role identity can be derived from the social structural position one fulfills, like being an employee or a parent. The role of entering the Netherlands with or without family has already shortly been addressed in the cases of Farrah and Hadi. Yet, we see that family is also a significant factor in the narratives of those who arrived after the age of twenty. Besides Hadi, three other interviewees came individually: Musa, Karim and Namdar. They responded in different manners to their flight as an individual, yet it applied to all that work and subsequent contacts had been an important source of identity.

During Musa’s stay in the AZC he mainly mentioned Liberian contacts he made. From the outset of his ROA period in Holwerd he increasingly started to intermingle with other Dutch people. After his language courses he insisted on getting a job, in order to work for his money instead of being dependent and just receiving it. He was fortunate to get a Melkert job, including a short technical education which gave him the opportunity to get into contact with several people outside of the ROA house. This provided him with a fulfilling role identity, even though it was not a ‘real job’. At several moments in his account Musa pointed to the fact that as an immigrant you should adjust to the new culture and abide the new laws. Yet, to adjust takes strength. We need a strong motive for why we would want to adjust to a new society. His job at the technical service and later on in an upholstery helped Musa in this matter. I have addressed in the previous section how football became a vital means for Hadi’s integration. In much the same way having a job helped Musa to integrate into society. He explicitly addressed the value of work for his life. It enabled him to cope with the distrust he felt displayed towards him by Dutch society:

“You feel that they don’t trust you. And you always remain proving yourself. It is psychological you know (…) The rest of your life it will be in your head, truly. (…) Every project I get [he currently runs his own shipping upholstery], honestly I think of it every day. People do trust me now, but it just goes automatically. Therefore, at my work I do it different than any other upholstery, I always exaggerate to prove myself, always I try to prove, prove, prove. You do it endlessly and you are addicted to proving. It goes automatically, it motivates, it is not about the material [the material result], it is about your own achievement (…) That is the secret of refugees all over the world. That is why you notice that refugees are more successful than normal citizens, because they think in a complete opposite way.”

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193 Melkert jobs were special, subsidized working places introduced in the 1990s for those who had difficulty with finding a job. The measure owes its name to Ad Melkert, the former minister of Social Affairs and Employment at that time who introduced the Melkert jobs.

194 Transcript interview Musa, 22, 26.
This short excerpt sharply indicates how Musa’s reflected appraisal, that is, the way he had felt mistrusted in the beginning by the Dutch, had resulted in a constant drive to prove himself; to refute the doubts he felt his environment held about him and reconfirm his self-image through his new role identity as employee. In this case, the reflected negative appraisal functioned as a motivation to disprove it. Currently, concrete appraisal is still very important in his job. Since Musa came as an individual there was no other source, such as family, to compensate for and take away the doubts and mistrust he experienced. He could only do this on his own, and he succeeded to do so. He found new sources of identity through his education and job, his role as a student, employee, friend, and later on also as husband and father. All of this helped him to construct a life that would fit to his desired self-image.

A different, yet in some ways similar response to role identity and reflected appraisal can be traced in the account of Karim. It has been noted that Karim asked for a transfer from AZC Goes after a night-time attack by an Iranian group. The psychological impact of the attack resulted in the decision to take up wrestling again. Karim wanted to be able to defend himself, and wrestling was a means for him to undo the reflected appraisal and re-establish his self-image as a strong person. Still, this was not a solution to all problems. When Karim started a new relationship with a Dutch woman during his asylum period, he strongly sensed inequality between them. Again his self-image got a knock. This contrasted to former Dutch relationships he had narrated of.

K: “Look, if you come in a certain situation to someone, it is the hard pieces of the facts, of the reality which will always work their way to the surface.”

A: “What do you mean?”

K: “That someone thinks, you just live in an asylum seeker center you know. I was not really equal to her in her thoughts. (…) She really felt better than me (…) But you just fall in love with someone, later on you find out. That’s how you learn. (…) People have to be equal, respect.”\(^{195}\)

This shows that Karim also encountered the distrust others displayed towards asylum seekers. He experienced discrimination, but at first sight this did not actively seem to strike him. In the beginning of the interview he only mentioned it implicitly or on the side, as if it were a matter of course, unnecessary to address in particular. Re-reading the interview made me realize that it may have also been a topic that Karim initially, as a womanizer, might have been reluctant to explain overtly in front of a woman. Yet, as

\(^{195}\) Transcript interview Karim, 15-16.
the interview wore on more instances of discrimination appeared. During his job as city guard after
having received his status Karim encountered neonazi youth. Karim argued that they acted very
disrespectful to the elderly by using swastika’s and making Hitler’s gestures. When I ask whether they
also treated him disrespectfully he plainly answered:

K: “To me? Yes of course, but that was normal. But also towards colleagues, they just didn’t show any respect.”

A: “What do you mean with ‘normal towards you’?”

K: “Well, because this kind of people, of course they have a certain effect towards the people who have different
origins. A bit dark, even if they’d be born here, but they’re dark. Or for example, yes they look at you very
differently of course, you just know that. And well, maybe it never happened to you, but I know how that works. So
I take it in a very different way.”196

Later on, Karim recounted that he had also experienced these kind of encounters before he got his job as
city guard. His boss ate the factory used to call him ‘zwartkop’ (black head). Ironically, he dealt with
these reactions as reactions from people who were on a ‘different kind of level’, whereas these people
perceived Karim as someone on a different level. His implicit references to discrimination show that it is
a subject he rather not mentions in his self-representation. The choice of representation is strongly
connected to how we want others to perceive ourselves, as well as to how we define ourselves and our
identity. Concerning Karim, it seemed that he was still working on disguising his ‘otherness’ to the rest of
the world. The fight in AZC Goes seemed to have contributed to his drive to actively act in new Dutch, or
at least non-Iranian, networks.

Azekel and Valentina also perceived of discriminative responses as reactions from people who
were simply below their level. Nevertheless, discriminative reactions seemed to have had their effects on
Azekel, Valentina and Karim. Unlike the former two, Karim did not have a family to step back on. This
may partly explain why his job as a city guard was all the more valuable to Karim’s life. He narrated
proudly of his work as a city guard which he held for ten years. Working in a uniform re-provided him
with a sense of prestige and respect. Everywhere in Dokkum people recognized him and he was part of a
team. This positive self-image had decreased during his asylum period, and his subsequent jobless period.
He had little activity then, only few contacts, and little money to spend on his girlfriends. Yet, Karim was
able to derive a new role position through his job as city guard.197

196 Interview interview Farid, 8.
197 Even though later on in the interview it appeared that there were also multiple problems with his colleagues in
this job.
Hadi’s story displayed the same type of active outlook, a drive to prove himself, and positive attitude as Musa entertained. Hadi started an education in business administration, did courses in installation technique to enhance his chances in the labor market and currently has his own trading company in car parts trading with Guinea, while also being active in a variety of intercultural platforms. Again, the lost sense of agency due to the asylum period that Ghorashi addressed, absolutely lacks in Hadi’s narrative. It should be noted though that he had only lived in an AZC for half a year. Hadi was able to quickly enlarge his network through a manifold of activities. He stressed the importance of having good friends, cooperating and building on a vision together. He accounted that this attitude originated from the asylum period, when he talked a lot with other, usually older people from whom he learned a lot. He now had a strong vision of how to build his life: “Wherever I go, my goal is always to mean something for society, for the future.”

As well as the accounts of people who arrived without family, the urge to work was similarly visible in accounts of those who arrived with their family members. A drive to prove oneself was a recurring topic in several interviews. For instance, Valentina mentioned it in addressing her courses as social worker: “It cost me double energy because actually, well, I didn’t want to be worse than the [Dutch] others.” With the double effort Valentina put into it to be on one level with the Dutch students, she once again tried to fight of the image she felt ascribed to her: The image of being an uneducated asylum seeker. Mohammad, who had always been used to working hard on the farm, was also very motivated to work after six years of waiting. He had been taught some tailor skills by his mother. Once he discovered that there were no tailors or cloth repairing companies in Dokkum, he decided to start a company of his own. With pride he narrated to be house tailor of the most popular fashion shops of Dokkum and that costumors never complained.

However, the effects of not finding a job and not having family around, in other words, missing sources of role identity in two major ways, proved destructive for the self-image. This may be illustrated by the case of Namdar. He was a striking example of how an asylum period not only made people more motivated to get a job, but it could also leave them behind in a sense of apathy. This resulted for instance in a lack of motivation to learn the language. With thirteen years, Namdar went through the longest asylum period within this interview group. The first period he spent in an AZC and afterwards, he moved to a ROA house in Groningen. Because of the insecurity during the asylum period, Namdar did not actively start learning Dutch until he received a status. It was only at that point that he would put in the effort, realizing that he would never be able to rebuild a new life without knowing the language. His own slow pace of learning frustrated him, as it did not match his initial expectations. He had had thirteen years

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198 Transcript interview Hadi, ??
199 Transcript interview Valentina, 31.
of time to build expectations for the period afterwards, but by then he understood that a status was no guarantee for a life without problems. “The start was good, but then you do see that there are problems.”

During his asylum period he was fortunate to get an unofficial internship for some hours per week in OOG TV and radio, a local Groninger news station. Yet, shortly after he had got his status he quit his job due to problems with colleagues. He started doing courses in ICT but his level of Dutch resulted in continuous miscommunication and he quit again. Apart from missing formal education, Namdar stressed the sense of lacking a part of social education caused by his long asylum period:

“I entered a society that had continued over time. I leapt behind, I was, there was so much information, there were so many things I was not allowed to learn, which I did not know, which I still do not know. So all the time I just lack something. You know, communication, that is the most important thing. (…) But it is not just learning a language, there are many other things for which you just need to know the language. I wanted to work, but I didn’t know the language, so had to learn the language first. But I was fed up with waiting and not working. Of the nineteen years that I was here I only had an official job contract for one year. Apart from this, it was only volunteering, and it was not as if I was working every day at OOG TV either. Other than that, you are just watching television, zapping, lying on the couch, or walking from this room to the other, to the kitchen and back again. You know, it maddens you like crazy, really, it is unbearable. And then, then you get ill psychologically, you just want to be in society, you want to have contacts, make friends, but because you lack social skills or did not learn them sufficiently, you constantly encounter trouble.”

Namdar felt as if his life had been put on a halt for the time of his asylum period. When this ended, he realized it was hard to catch up with society again. The long waiting, the ‘aquarium feeling’ of watching a society instead of being part of it, was not solved by a residence permit. He still felt and feels like an outsider. Language was a first barrier, but Namdar also understood he missed the social skills which others had learnt. He lacked the social learning which Burke and Stets had addressed as an important factor in constructing identity. But why could this social learning not take place during the asylum period? Namdar primarily described the AZC as an isolated place, a centre of ‘psychological problems’, full of trauma which had nothing to do with normal life. A strong feeling of non-participation was continued during his ROA period. Namdar argued that not-participating in ‘normal life’ had prevented him from doing the necessary social learning, and gaining the confidence he needed in order to act in society. Afterwards, it was hard for him to rebuild this social self-confidence. He repeatedly felt like leaping behind and could not participate.

200 Transcript interview Namdar, 20.
201 Transcript interview Namdar, 21.
Even though Namdar retained negative memories on his quitting at OOG radio, at that time it did seem to function as an important part of his self-esteem. He was proud of his program’s popularity and recounted that other Iranians were even jealous of him. He also appeared in television as spokesman of a group of asylum seekers. In asking how he evaluated the significance of this appearance in the media, Namdar answered:

“It was important for me to dare. That was the most important for me. I was afraid, I left [Iran] with terrible images in my head. And when I came here it got worse. I was afraid to bike, I was afraid to walk on the Grote Markt. I was just frightened all the time. I really had days, in the winter, cold and dark, that I was shaking like a madman. I did not have a normal life, I know that for sure.”

It shows that Namdar’s activities in the media took away some of the fear he had experienced and re-established something of the ‘normalcy’ he longed for in life. Losing his job was another setback to that imagined life he could have had, a blow to his self-esteem. Apart from some volunteering he did not get into a professional job until now, but he is currently doing a camera education and he also started up his own business as freelance cameraman.

The same feeling of ‘having lost life’ during the asylum period was mirrored in Vithiya’s story. Yet, contrasting to Namdar, Vithiya came here with her family. Vithiya arrived in 1995 with her husband and two children. In 2004 her procedure was ended, but she and her family were hosted afterwards in several locations by Stichting Van Harte Pardon. This is an organization that assisted refugees after their procedure, until they got a status in 2008 thanks to the Generaal Pardon. Vithiya explained that she had really tried to rebuild her life afterwards, but that it was hard without having a job. Yet, throughout the interview it became clear that she derived a role identity from a different source, that is, as a mother of her children. Her family role provided a sense of continuity and a natural source of motivation which lacked for Namdar. A similar pattern can be traced in the story of Samira. She was unable to start an education or find a job after having received a status and she held an extremely negative view about Dutch people and society. Although Samira mentioned that she had little hope left for her own life, she did strongly cling on to a sense of self-esteem and had a clear purpose in life: her children. At several instances, she mentioned that fortunately her children could go to school.

M: “Yeah, I do have hope for my children, but I have nothing and nothing left here. I have nothing, I’m just here for my children.”

202 Transcript interview Namdar, 23.
A: “Not for yourself?”

M: “Yeah, I also have peace here. But not always (...) I have peace here because I don’t have to worry about the future of my children anymore. My children are studying well here, fortunately. I’m happy for them, that is why I have peace.”

The quote shows that Samira derived a sense of fulfilment and purpose from her children. Summing this up, the examples above displayed that the fulfilment of role identity through family or work can contribute to a more positive self-image.

Yet, role identity also creates the patterned lines from which expectations arise. The consequences of such expectations if not reached, have been detailed in the cases above. The interview with Olivier similarly displayed difficulty in dealing with expectations that diverged from reality. His former role identity as and great ambitions as a high politician reinforced this. In 1999, Olivier obtained a master’s degree in water technology at the University of Enschede. He wanted to become vice minister of Agriculture after his return, but when a new regime was installed in Congo his political party membership became a danger to him and his family. Hence, his wife and children travelled to the Netherlands in order to ask for asylum here. Olivier had expected the asylum request to last for no longer than two or three years, but eventually it took seven years, until the Generaal Pardon was issued in 2007. During the asylum years Olivier managed to keep himself busy; he immediately started to learn Dutch and through the UAF he got into a HBO education in water technology. Once granted a status, Olivier wanted to get a job as soon as possible. Yet, the economic recession made it hard to find a job. Currently, he has an unpaid participation job while maintaining dole and he has founded his own organization IMRA. This organization aims to build water facilities in Africa, while simultaneously trying to bring together Africans and Dutch in the Netherlands. Olivier’s former high position had created high standards of expectation. It resulted in great frustration when he was unable to work during and after the asylum period. “It is like capital destruction. People can help in society. I help in society now, but if there had not been a Generaal Pardon, I would have still been there lying on the couch with my knowledge.” Yet, even though frustrated, he did not give up. Along with his foundation IMRA, he currently volunteers in the Project Mankracht (Man power) which aims to encourage immigrants to ‘get of their couches’ and become actively involved in society. The attempt to help asylum seekers and immigrants proves how the

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203 Transcript interview Samira, 4.
204 UAF is a foundation for higher educated refugees and asylum seekers. It supports these groups in studies and work.
205 Transcript interview Olivier, 8.
asylum period still plays a role in Olivier’s current life. It motivated him to help others in the same situation.

One of the contributors to not losing his self-esteem seems to have been his formal education, as Olivier immediately proudly presented his master’s degree certificate before starting the interview. Yet simultaneously, the same certificate had shaped unanswered hopes. Additionally, Olivier’s role as a father was significant to his identity; one of the first things he mentioned when I phoned him to arrange a date for an interview was that he had children, and he accounted proudly of his daughters’ education. It was striking that he did not mention his mentally disabled son during the phone call. During the interview, Olivier blamed the asylum period for the disability. It appeared to be a part of his life that he still found difficult to accept. In general however, a sense of pride towards their children featured all of the other parents’ accounts, providing them with a strong role identity.

Above, I addressed the identity that is constructed through interaction with a social world and the relations established by it, that is, construed role identity through a job or family. Yet, role identity is not the only type of identity that emerges through interaction. Group membership and individual character are also sources of identity. Individual character traits have been mentioned throughout this whole research, but the role of group identity is still to be addressed more thoroughly below.

Belonging to groups: religion, nationality and the asylum seeker community

The group memberships that were introduced during the interviews were mainly arranged along religious and national lines. As discussed, some mentioned their faith as an important source of strength to get them through the asylum seeker period. Hadi, Musa, and Olivier also underscored that they believed God had brought them here with a purpose. They argued that feeling to be part of a bigger plan and community made setbacks easier to handle and was an inspiration to not give up and rebuild life. Indeed, it seemed that for the religious interviewees their faith often functioned as something sure to hold on to, even in this new and very different culture. In that sense, it provided a continuity in identity. Religion was a means to instill new houses with a part of home culture, sometimes in a very concrete manner. In Farrah’s house I found a page of the Quran hanging on the wall, Jelena had decorated her living room with an orthodox Christian candle. Mohammad told about praying during his working hours and Vithiya still attends Christian messes in Hindi language with her family to transmit her culture to her children. Apart from providing continuity, did the asylum period also change this group identity? In two interviews it was reckoned that it did. Samira had converted from Islam to Christianity during her asylum period.

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206 The interview transcript with Olivier does not cover this part, but he told about his Christian faith afterwards during the car drive to the train station, when the recorder had already been packed again.
which helped her coping with her troubles. Musa stated that the refugee experience had made him a more religious Christian.  

Karim and Namdar had both experienced such cruel behavior in the name of religion in Iran and Iraq, that they had turned against religion of any kind. For them, this was also a means of defining themselves as they defined their identity explicitly against the lines of the irrational and cruel ‘Other’. For both this self-definition sometimes instigated quarrels in the AZC, but this only seemed to strengthen them in their atheism. Yet, a sense of ‘anti-religion’ was less a source of hope, nor did it bring along the community feeling which was important for the religious interviewees. From that perspective, although important for identity, it less functioned as a base of strength and consolation to get through the asylum period.

Another important group identity could be derived from nationality. Karim was the only one to mention that he rather had as little contact as possible with his fellow countrymen in the AZC. All of the others maintained contacts with people from their own nationality or region during their asylum period. However, these contacts did not prove crucial in their further life. The interviewees all stayed in the north after their asylum period, whilst they might as well have opted for a life in the south western part of the Netherlands where the largest immigrant communities are situated. Some remained active in the immigrant field, as they still derived a sense of belonging from this group and felt that they had a role to fulfill here. For instance, Hadi is currently member of a multitude of intercultural organizations, mainly directed towards African people. As a colleague of Olivier, who is active in this field as well, Hadi volunteers for Project Mankracht. Vithiya and Samira volunteer as hosts at Women’s Center De Boei, a multicultural center which is mainly visited by immigrant women. In addition, Farrah recently started to volunteer at VluchtelingenWerk Nederland

Farrah accounted she still identifies with immigrant groups, which is a great contrast with Namdar, who repeatedly mentioned he did not want to part of the community of asylum seekers anymore. As discussed above, Farrah had disliked attending school with only Dutch children. She felt like a loner here. When I asked Namdar whether he felt like an outsider during his classes with Dutch people, he responded:

“That’s the case anyway. But then you are just happy you can participate, you don’t feel like the loser anymore. Yeah, you can, it depends on the person of course, but if you want to you just feel, you just feel better. It is a very different atmosphere, very different people, then you are no longer talking about war, or whatever, rapes or this or that, you know. Then you talk with people about holidays in Italy, Spain, America and girlfriends, friends, you

\[207\] Transcript interview Musa, 22.
The good things, the things I had to miss for twenty years of my life. Then you hear about them and then, yeah, you really enjoy it.”

The difference in response has multiple causes, but motives can certainly be found in the fact that Namdar had been in the asylum seeker center at the age of thirty. He arrived without family, but with the belief to have finally reached a place where he could rebuild his life. This belief gradually crumbled during the asylum request that took thirteen years. Whereas Farrah arrived at the age of with with her family, yet without too many expectations. From her four month lasting asylum period she remembered stress, but most vividly she remembered the amount of friends she had to play with. Farrah’s worst memories stem from the troubled period after having received a status.

The impact of asylum length and age have been shortly discussed above as another decisive factor in experiencing the asylum period. Below I will further expand on how this time-experience was also influential on the period after the AZC. I will discuss the impact of feeling to have lost a part of life, the effect of not having a future perspective,

4.5.3 Time

Medical studies posed that particularly a long asylum period resulted in problems for immigrants during their life after the asylum period. The asylum period length featured as crucial in existing literature. What about the impact of time on this research group? The impact of length of time in the asylum seeker center is considered below. I continue by investigating the consequences of the asylum period on the construction of new future perspectives for the life after.

The small sample of interviewees for this case study can be divided into three different categories based on the length of their asylum period: less than a year (Farrah and Hadi), 1-5 years (Musa, Valentina, Azekel, Karim), 5-13 years (Mohammad, Olivier, Jelena, Samira, Namdar, Vithiya). Both in the second and latter group a long asylum period, the waiting, and the insecure situation were specifically addressed as sources of trouble. Only Karim never mentioned the long waiting, he mostly spoke about his relations and activities as translator and organizer of activities. It is striking to see that a distinctive factor of the third category – the interviewees whose asylum period lasted for more than five years – is that they almost all talked about psychological and physical problems they have endured or endure due to the asylum period. Even though it cannot be guaranteed that these problems really originate from this period, it is important to note since they did perceive it this way themselves. Mohammad argued that his son’s

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208 Transcript interview Namdar, 20.
difficulty to study in school was caused by the hectic AZC period in which they moved around so often. Olivier has a mentally disabled son and he believed this was caused by the stressful situation that his wife went through during her pregnancy in the asylum center. Samira was put on anti-depressives and once tried to kill herself, while her daughter was treated by the GGZ for her psychological problems. Namdar described the increasing fear he experienced of going out in the streets and blamed the long-time insecurity for this. Vithiya argued that her husband’s diabetes originated from this period, as well as her own frequent illness. Only Jelena did not account of any psychological or physical problems due to the AZC period. Yet, Jelena was one of the few who narrated a partly positive asylum period, at least during her time in AVO Berlikum.

Another possible element of explanation was that she was only twenty when she came here. The others had all passed their adolescence. It was addressed before that young age seemed to enhance resilience in coping with the new situation. Relating this to the concept of identity it should be noted that coming here as a teenager or young adult meant that one was still in a period of active identity construction. This identity becomes more and more set through life and experiences over the years. Identity discrepancies may become harder to deal with as one turns older. Such discrepancy was visible during the asylum stay, but also in the time afterwards. Yet, the first thing asylum seekers needed to do after having obtained a status, was getting used to the recovery of their long term future perspective.

Above, we have seen that no concrete future plans were made during the asylum period. Consciously limiting the future no further than getting a status resulted in an initial disorientation for Karim, after he first received his residence permit. A new horizon of possibility had appeared, which made him feel somewhat lost. He did not know what he wanted; whether he would want to go back to school or where he would like to work. Mohammad also recounted he had not thought about work before having a status. Illustrative, Jelena mentioned that the status for the first time gave her the possibility to look a bit further again. The ability to look beyond implied a long desired freedom, the freedom to build and dream. Yet, for the ones without occupation, it implied looking at a sort of emptiness. An emptiness which they had not expected and which they had wanted to see filled with a job, friends, family; life. Yet, these new aims belonging to the new future perspective required renewed patience, as well as a sense of agency and courage. These properties had not always survived the long waiting and insecurity of the asylum period, as Namdar’s story revealed. He stated:

“I’m busy making something of it. [But] you need a network, you need love, you just need a normal life for that. You cannot sit still for so long and just say, ok go, no you are, now you have a residence permit right, what are you waiting for?” 209

209 Transcript interview Namdar, 24.
Impatience was also reflected in Olivier’s interview, who quit his HBO studies after having received a status in order to immediately look for a job. Another sign of impatience was the frustration about the slow pace of learning Dutch, which was mentioned in several interviews. The longer the asylum period took, the more unsatisfied years had passed by and often unconsciously, the bigger the expectations grew for that long desired life after having received a status. The years between 25 and 40 may be the years in which one normally expects to have work and start a family, living a ‘normal’ life, but many could not fulfill this during the asylum period. Nor were they always able to do so afterwards. Some interviewees had seemed to imagine the residence permit as some kind of magical key that would solve all of their problems. Yet, they found out that the new horizon of possibility did not immediately mean that these possibilities would be realized. Namdar was the person who most ardently expressed the desire of having a normal life. He described his feeling as living in an aquarium for all of these years. This influenced the way he perceived of the world after his asylum period.

“I feel myself as a fish in the big ocean. Yet, in an aquarium. (...) You are in the ocean you know, but you cannot enjoy it; you are still between the refugees with all their troubles. You are not really in the Netherlands (...) Many people think, come on, you are in the Netherlands, so you should feel good right? (...) You watch how people enjoy their lives here, you watch how people, how students go to university, go to school, you watch children with their parents, you watch people getting married, people going for holidays, driving cars. Everything. But you only watch. And nothing else, that, that makes it even harder you know. That you cannot participate in normal life.”

Namdar felt as if he had lived in an aquarium for thirteen years and that his life had stood still. Yet, it was not time that stood still; society had moved on quickly in the period that he stood still. Namdar realized this in the post asylum period. As a consequence, he also viewed of the years afterwards as lost. The non-participation in society for thirteen years had constructed not only a linguistic, educational but also a subsequent psychological and social barrier to participating again.

In summary, we see that asylum length and age of arrival not only affect the asylum experience, but also the way people are able to rebuild their lives afterwards. The new horizon of possibility after leaving the AZC involved a new freedom, a new responsibility for building up life. Responses to coping with this diverged from great activity to fear and apathy.

4.6 Integrating the asylum period into identity

210 Transcript interview Namdar, 11.
Could the ruptured past, a period that was hard to render meaningful, be reinterpreted in the light of the interviewees’ new future? Did they attempt to restore a sense of wholeness in their identity? As mentioned above, many interviewees perceive of the asylum period as a lost period which ‘should not belong to people’, as Valentina stated.\textsuperscript{211} Yet, some interviewees do were able to integrate this period as being meaningful into their life narrative, as was the case for Musa, Azekel, Valentina, Karim and Hadi. Musa perceived the darker moments as part of life, which only made him stronger and provided him with a drive to prove himself:

“But in life there are always ups and downs. A human’s life is like a wave, but you should always think of the positive side. You will only grow, continue, and when the negative side comes, you should acknowledge that that is also part of life.”\textsuperscript{212}

Even though Azekel and Valentina narrated many negative memories about the asylum period, Azekel finishes the interview with mentioning something very similar to Musa, and Valentina agreed. “All of the negative things, you learn from it. But the positive, that gives you emotion, the power to keep going. That is how I live.”\textsuperscript{213} Likewise, Karim mentions that he only got stronger, less naïve and harder in a way through his experiences during this period. He often addressed that he learnt a lot, about other cultures, about how to live with other people and how to deal with them. In that sense, the interviewees above seemed to have been able to give it a place in their lives and they have reinterpreted these periods to make sense of, or meaning to it, in order to integrate these experiences into their identities. As noted above, Hadi also perceives of his asylum period as a period of learning.

Burke and Stets argued that identity discrepancy might lead to negative feelings, which can be traced clearly throughout the interviews, but they also mentioned two ways to deal with it: Trying to counteract such discrepancy by behaving in accordance with the desired identity, or either identities might evolve to better fit the situation. Counteracting an unwanted identity as dependent asylum seeker could be actively and successfully achieved by having a job after the asylum period, and building up family life, or, for instance in case of Karim, having multiple girlfriends and become member of sports groups. Yet, it seems that the identities of the interviewees mentioned above also slightly evolved to better match the situation of having lived for at least some time as an asylum seeker. Or at least, they integrated this period as a meaningful part of their life by perceiving the lessons learnt; they utilize the asylum period to explain

\textsuperscript{211} Transcript Azekel and Valentina, 35.
\textsuperscript{212} Transcript interview Musa, 22.
\textsuperscript{213} Transcript interview Azekel and Valentina, 39.
the persons they have become by now. Hence, they were are able to give it a meaningful place in their lives.

Yet, even for this group these claims should be made only with caution. Musa indicated that he certainly did not participate in any interview, but he was willing to do so because my father had helped him in the past. Azekel and Valentina were neither too eager to participate initially. Azekel even stated during the interview that he got nervous by looking back too much and that he had learnt to look forward as much as he could. It was indeed Valentina who did most of the talking, for her the talking seemed to be rather releasing. Karim displayed a similar eagerness to talk. He is currently also working on a book to narrate his life experiences, among others on his childhood during the war, to which he referred manifold times throughout the interview. This seemed to function as another means for him to ‘get things out, things going on in my head’. Additionally, the rejections I received in asking people for interviews also proves it is still a difficult subject to talk about for many. One woman responded she would have really liked to help, but that the thought of it already made her anxious and that her hands were shaking; she replied to be just unable to talk.

Notably, all of the people who did not mention how they encapsulated the asylum period in their lives, Vithiya, Samira, Jelena, Namdar, Olivier and Mohammad were the ones who received their status later than the first group, namely, after the Generaal Pardon in 2007/8. The fact that most of them see the asylum period as lost years could have multiple causes. Yet one element in the explanation may be that less time has passed since their asylum period, which makes it harder to restore this period with a more positive meaning, and evaluate it as part of their current identity. They had less time to rebuild their lives, to get settled, and moreover, they had more trouble with this rebuilding as the economic crisis made job opportunities scarcer. The current frustrations about joblessness appeared to make it problematic to look in a more accepting manner towards the asylum period, as the first group did. Jelena reflected that, in retrospection of all that she had been through, she probably would not have chosen for this option again. Namdar blamed the asylum period for his current problems with normal functioning in a social environment. Samira seemed to be eager to finish the interview as quickly as possible and mentioned that she did not want to look back anymore as it was a period of depression. Vithiya, having waited for thirteen years on a residence permit, stated:

“In my country and here as well, my life is lost. Yeah, that’s what I actually wanted to say. In the AZC we had nothing; just volunteering in sewing once a week. Other than that, nothing. Cooking, eating, sleeping; that is why we

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214 Transcript interview Karim, 30.
have, yeah, actually our life is lost. (...) I cannot rebuild it again. I’ve tried but it is hard. I try it every day, but it’s hard.”

Even though rebuilding is hard, the interviewees did state to keep on trying. Some were very successful over time. Others less so, but they have not given up.

Conclusion

Having journeyed through the history and construction of the Dutch asylum system, the theory of identity, the method of oral history and the stories of former asylum seekers for more than seventy pages, it is time to evaluate the trip. In other words, conclusions are to be made. Let us return to the primary research question around which this thesis resolves:

*What impact did the Dutch asylum policy from the 1990s to 2007 have on the former asylum seekers’ life and identity?*

Asylum seekers can be conceived as people undergoing a liminal stage in their lives. They move from one culture into another, finding themselves in a disoriented period of transition, suspended between the old and the new. Starting in the late 1980s, the liminal stage for Dutch asylum seekers was increasingly characterized by systemization and bureaucratization. From then on, the Dutch asylum system was coordinated on a central level by the COA. One of the centralizing measures was to institutionalize a new infrastructure of reception locations. The AZC became the main reception location to accommodate asylum seekers and provide them with basic living needs. From an administrative perspective the system was increasingly standardized. Minimum norms for living were strictly defined in reception guidelines. This meant among other things not allowing asylum seekers to hold jobs or to follow an education after the age of 18, until they received a residence permit. In order to discourage new immigrants from coming to the Netherlands, the slogan of the COA became ‘sober yet humane’. Simultaneously, events such as 9/11 and the murder on Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh fostered a political and societal atmosphere that allowed for implementation of further restrictions in immigration policy.

215 Transcript interview Vithiya, 12; It is hard to analyze Mohammad’s story in this way, as Mohammad is not much of a reflectional narrator and his level of Dutch rendered this even harder.
The liminal stage of psychological transition that the immigrant goes through in entering a new country stands in sharp contrast with the highly regulated asylum life. This thesis has explored how such asylum policy materialized in the life of asylum seekers and their identity. The motivation to explore this question derives from findings in medical literature, which signaled that long asylum periods resulted in an increased chance of post asylum stress syndromes. Yet, although abundant research has appeared on issues around asylum seekers, the voice of the asylum seekers’ themselves has been heard surprisingly little. I used the method of oral history – interviewing a group of twelve asylum seekers – to reflect with them on their asylum experiences. The asylum seekers resided in an AZC or additional reception location during various periods, ranging from four months to thirteen years between 1992 and 2007. Although the group was small in number and geographically limited, their stories may be seen as more than only individual memories. They addressed the broader social landscape and reconstructed horizons of possibility that applied to a much wider group.

In this research, identity has been interpreted as narrative. This is based on the presumption that identity does not rely in the first place on actions, but in the meaning that we give to actions. Through narratives experiences can be connected into coherent stories, which consequently give meaning to the individual experiences. This interpretation of identity is therefore highly compatible with the method of oral history, which deals with the oral memories of individuals. The more successful one is in arranging experiences into a coherent, meaningful story, the more this will reinforce his or her identity.

To analyze the asylum experience the concepts of place, relationality and time served as the directional concepts. Overall, life in the AZC restricted people both in a physical and psychological way. Combined with the limited privacy of that the AZC provides life here was evaluated negatively by most interviewees. Negative feelings were reinforced by high expectations of life in the Netherlands, which did not match the life in asylum seeker center. Younger people tended to narrate their experiences in a more positive manner. Some remembered fondly the communal feeling in the AZC. All in all however, due to the lack of activity and future perspective it was hard to interpret life as meaningful in that period. Different ways of coping with this sense of futility were mentioned: some tried to keep active to continue ‘normal’ life as much as possible, others felt as if their life was put on hold and simply waited until they could continue again.

Relationality featured as vital to both the asylum period, as well as the aftermath. Interaction with others, like family, other asylum seekers, the neighborhood and staff, was crucial to constructing one’s own role, group and individual identity. Two main sources of gaining role identity and thus give meaning to life, proved to be family and a job. Working opportunities were very limited during the asylum period and this resulted in a gap between desired identity and the actual situation. Interviewees sought to overcome such discrepancy by searching for small activities, although this was often insufficient to fill
the gap. After having received a status, many felt great impatience to obtain a job and fulfill the related role identity of active employee. Therefore, having a job became one of the crucial factors of a successful aftermath. In contrast with other literature which emphasized a lack of agency, the asylum period produced an urge to be active during as well as in the post asylum period for most interviewees. Yet, this urge resulted in even greater frustration when finding a job proved hard. The other important carrier of role identity, the role in the family, proved to be a cause of worry, but even more a source of continuity in identity and a natural source of motivation.

A sense of identity was also established through group identity, primarily through the asylum community, nationality and religion. Commonly, being member of the asylum community was an unwanted identity categorization. For some, counteracting such categorization became a primary motivation to prove themselves in life after the asylum period. Yet, for those who had appreciated the membership of the asylum community, it could also function as a positive source of identity. Although nationality was valued by most interviewees, it did not lead them move to larger ethnic communities in the Netherlands; place attachment was prioritized in that sense. Religious membership frequently served as a source of strength and continuity both during and after the asylum period.

Along with the relations built, and the role and group identity springing from acting in a social world, time was a decisive factor in the asylum experience. Entering the Netherlands at a young age appeared to enhance resilience for coping with the asylum period. Going to school and easily making new friends additionally explained why younger interviewees evaluated their asylum period more positively. Moreover, the longer the asylum period lasted, the greater difficulties people had with rebuilding life afterwards and the more psychological troubles were mentioned. Different ways of coping with the asylum period likewise contributed to different afterlives. Those who had mainly perceived of time as standing still, now realized that in the meantime society had moved on. It made catching up harder. All forms of continuing ‘normal’ life, like having a family and an education, became important sources to leave behind the asylum experience.

A longer asylum period affected the asylum seeker’s identity in two primary ways. Firstly, having had a limited future perspective for a long time had unconsciously fostered high hopes for the life after. This resulted in identity discrepancy afterwards, between desired identity and possibilities to realize it in the present. People had regained a new horizon of possibility, but realization of the new aims again took time, patience, some luck, and agency. At several instances, this resulted in feelings of frustration, isolation and emptiness. It appeared harder than expected to rebuild life and thus, re-instill life with meaning. Secondly, during the asylum period it was unsure whether present activity would prove meaningful for the future. As a result, it was difficult to derive meaningful identity from activity during this period. Many perceived of it as ‘lost years’ and this made it problematic to reflect upon the period as
a meaningful part of life afterwards. Yet, the more time had passed by since the asylum period, the more often interviewees had been able to integrate those months or years into their life narratives, and thus into their identities.

In conclusion, it can be said that the asylum system of the past three decades directed the liminal stage of immigrants in such a way, that the gap widened between expectation and the possibility to realize this. Instead of adjusting liminal identity from the old to the new situation, mainly identity discrepancy occurred. Oral history proved to be a useful tool to research the significant impact of horizons of expectation on the (post) asylum experience. Normally, people try to counteract discrepancy through acting in a way that better fits one’s identity. Yet, the sources for counteraction are limited in the highly regulated asylum life. For the group that had received their residence permit most recently, it proved harder to restore the asylum period with some meaning, and evaluate it as part of their current identity. Presumably, this was reinforced by the fact that these interviewees had endured the longest asylum periods. Simultaneously, they were the least successful in performing new role and group identities in their lives, among other factors due to the economic crisis. Therefore, the connection cannot wholly be substantiated from this small sample. This once more stresses the need for further research into the relation between identity construction during and after the asylum period.

Yet for now, I can conclude that place, relations, and time are crucial to understand how asylum experiences are evaluated and what place this period is given in lives and identities. It takes time to lay roots socially, it takes time to grow individually.

“It is like a tree without roots,
if you want to grow up somewhere, you need some root
if you do not have that root, you will fall easily.
I will just keep on trying
(…)
To grow and to keep standing.”

216 Transcript interview Namdar, 24.
**List of abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AC</td>
<td>Application Center (Aanmeldcentrum), center in Ter Apel, Zevenaar or Den Bosch where asylum seekers apply for a residence permit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AVO</td>
<td>Complementary Reception Location (Aanvullende Opvangaccommodatie), a small scale reception location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AZC</td>
<td>Asylum seeker center (asielzoekerscentrum).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COA</td>
<td>Central Body reception Asylum seekers, (Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COL</td>
<td>Central Reception Location, center in Ter Apel where asylum seekers who came arrived over land or sea are received when arriving in The Netherlands in (Centrale Ontvangstlocatie).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IND</td>
<td>Immigration and Naturalisation Service (Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OC</td>
<td>Reception Center (Opvangcentrum), large scale reception center where asylum seekers reside before moving to an AZC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROA</td>
<td>Regulation Asylum Seeker Care (Regeling Opvang Asielzoekers), reception location in a house provided by the municipality for a few asylum seekers. Use of ROA houses abolished after 1997 apart from for some exceptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VWN</td>
<td>Refugee Work Netherlands (VluchtelingenWerkNederland), Dutch refugee organization that aims to assist asylum seekers.</td>
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