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'Their lives are even more on hold now': migrants' experiences of waiting and immobility during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Several recent studies have examined experiences of waiting and spatial and temporal immobility among refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. This paper investigates recent migrants' experiences of waiting and (spatial and temporal) immobility in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns, and against the background of pandemic isolation and boredom. It asks how public health measures affected 'recently' arrived migrants' and how these migrants experienced waiting and immobility differently before and during the pandemic. We argue that differences in recent migrants' status and housing situations shape how they experience immobility during and beyond the pandemic. This paper contributes to research on immobility in migration by highlighting the importance of diverse emotional geographies of loneliness and frustration; it concludes that immobility is situated along an isolation-to-agitation continuum.

« Leurs vies sont encore plus en parenthèses maintenant »: les expériences des migrants avec l'attente et l'immobilité pendant la pandémie de COVID-19

RÉSUMÉ

Plusieurs études récentes se sont penchées sur les expériences d'attente et d'immobilités spatiales et temporelles parmi les réfugiés, les demandeurs d'asile et les migrants sans-papiers. Cet article se penche sur les récentes expériences d'attente et d'immobilité (spatiales et temporelles) des migrants dans le cadre des confinements dus à la pandémie de COVID-19, et avec le climat d'isolation et d'ennui que cette dernière a causé. Il questionne la façon dont les mesures de santé publique ont touché les migrants arrivés « depuis peu » et comment ceux-ci ont vécu l'attente et

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l'immobilité différemment avant et pendant la pandémie. Nous soutenons que les différences dans les statuts et les situations d'hébergement des migrants récents façonnent la manière dont ils vivent l'immobilité pendant la pandémie et au-delà de celle-ci. Cet article apporte sa contribution à la recherche sur l'immobilité dans la migration en soulignant l'importance de diverses géographies des émotions concernant la solitude et la déception; il conclut que l'immobilité se situe au long d'un continuum isolation-à-agitation.

'Sus vidas están aún más en espera ahora': las experiencias de espera e inmovilidad de los migrantes durante la pandemia del COVID-19

RESUMEN

Varios estudios recientes han examinado las experiencias de espera e inmovilidad espacial y temporal entre refugiados, solicitantes de asilo y migrantes indocumentados. Este artículo investiga las experiencias de espera e inmovilidad (espacial y temporal) de los migrantes recientes en el contexto de los confinamientos a casusa del COVID-19, y contra el trasfondo del aislamiento y el aburrimiento pandémicos. El artículo pregunta cómo las medidas de salud pública afectaron a los migrantes 'recién llegados' y cómo estos migrantes experimentaron la espera y la inmovilidad de manera diferente antes y durante la pandemia. Argumentamos que las diferencias en el estatus de los migrantes recientes y sus situaciones de vivienda dan forma a cómo experimentan la inmovilidad durante y después de la pandemia. Este artículo contribuye a la investigación sobre la inmovilidad en la migración al resaltar la importancia de las diversas geografías emocionales de la soledad y la frustración; concluye que la inmovilidad se sitúa a lo largo de un continuo de aislamiento a agitación.

1. Introduction

In recent years, several studies have examined precarious newcomers' experiences of waiting and spatial and temporal immobility. The literature notes that waiting and immobility can be harmful but may also be associated with opportunities, security, and social contact. This paper investigates recent migrants' experiences of waiting and (spatial and temporal) immobility in the context of the COVID-19 lockdowns and against the background of pandemic isolation and boredom. Since isolation and immobility are more difficult to bear in precarious situations, one might imagine that the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic would exacerbate negative and harmful experiences for migrants. This paper questions whether this was really and always the case.

We account for how migrants experienced immobility during the pandemic, particularly when compared to their experiences before the pandemic. To do this, we draw on fieldwork conducted from 2019 to 2022 with recently arrived migrants (refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants) and the professionals working with these groups in Newcastle upon Tyne, Amsterdam, Leipzig, and Brussels. We look beyond the 'exceptionality' of the pandemic to position these experiences within their structural contexts.

Indeed, experiences of waiting and immobility collide at the intersection of politically imposed structural conditions and the messiness or complexity of individual, ordinary human lives (Vaughn et al., 2020). In this regard, *time* is 1) an experience among migrants and 2) a tool to manage migration through what Andersson (2014, p. 806) calls the 'complex landscape of time' jointly created by migrants and border guards. The relational comparison of migrants' experiences through time highlights the importance of practical, material factors (e.g., status, housing) and reveals the extent to which immobility is interwoven with emotional geographies of loneliness and agitation.

This paper asks the following questions: 1) how did public health measures during the pandemic affect recently arrived migrants' experiences of immobility, and 2) how did migrants experience this waiting and immobility relative to before the pandemic? Our study population includes three groups of 'outsiders of citizenship' – refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants (Nyamnjoh, 2006). Refugees fled their countries to seek protection from persecution and serious human rights violations and have been granted formal refugee protection and recognition in their destination countries. Asylum seekers fled for similar reasons but have not (yet) been formally recognised as refugees or granted protection. Finally, undocumented migrants, or migrants without a valid authorisation to reside in a country's territory, include destitute asylum seekers, visa overstayers, and labour migrants working in the informal economy (among others). Despite differences in legal status and access to housing, labour markets, and social services, these three groups were all forced to leave their home countries. They also all face the exclusionary logics of European migration systems in their destination countries. Many of our interviewees had recently arrived in their destination country, though some had been stuck in a 'situation of arrival' for several years.

2. Temporal management and experiences of immobility

Migration and displacement have long been positioned as primarily spatial phenomena, leaving their temporal dimensions under-examined (Griffiths, 2014; Griffiths et al., 2013). Migration scholars have only recently begun to consider temporality within displacement (El-Shaarawi, 2015). Migration is not just about space and spatial movements; it is also about time and temporalities – the ways in which refugees encounter particular moments of time as they move along their migration journeys (Tefera, 2021, p. 1). Importantly, such an analysis of time and migration is rooted in the power dynamics of temporal governance, a disciplining strategy to control migrants through time (Reneman & Stronks, 2021, p. 303). As Bourdieu (2000, 228) notes, 'the art of making people wait, (...) of delaying without destroying hope, of adjourning without totally disappointing (...) is an integral part of the exercise of power.'

Arguably, one of De Certeau's (1984) most important contributions to urban theory was to tie spatial usage and ownership to power – people in power control space, while the relatively powerless are also relatively placeless. A similar analysis also applies to the relationship between time and power. Powerful people can better plan, organise, and predict their lives and 'mak[e] others wait or rush,' while the less powerful 'experience a lack of temporal sovereignty – [the] impossibility of deciding how to allocate time—and pervasive uncertainty of even their most immediate future' (Gil Everaert, 2020, p. 4). In a broader sense, the acknowledgement of citizenship and building a home outside one's

country of origin are interwoven with temporal dynamics (Cwerner, 2001, p. 10), as is withholding citizenship from 'unauthorised' migrants (Kox et al., 2020). The very category of 'asylum seeker' refers to the temporary nature of a person's relationship to a nation-state and the liminality of their status (Tryggvadottir & Skaptadottir, 2018).

There is a 'strong relationship between power, the state and management of time' (Griffiths et al., 2013, 30). Waiting becomes an endurance test, standing in as a proxy for refugees' deservingness and reinforcing the notion that their time is less valuable (Fee, 2021). Temporal domination imposes waiting and uncertainty to discourage future planning and divert migratory trajectories. As Vaughn et al. (2020) explain, temporal power in migration is exercised through the political, legal, and bureaucratic procedures of categorising migrants and the related procedures of entry, residence, and work. This power often *takes place* in institutional zones of waiting, holding, and interruption including camps and deportation facilities (Aliverti, Milivojevic and Weber, 2019, p. 246), or the customs area of international airports (Maillet et al., 2018).

The uncertainty of asylum procedures is literally violent in that it negatively impacts asylum seekers' health (Grace et al., 2018). Menjívar and Abrego (2012) frame the consequences of immigration laws and policies as 'legal violence'. According to Phillimore and Cheung (2021), policies of uncertainty directly and indirectly harm individuals' health via detention, public degradation, and poor healthcare services. They found that female refugees are more likely to report poor emotional and physical health and that longer asylum waiting times are associated with poorer health. El-Shaarawi (2015) examined more subtle workings of long-term uncertainty, confirming that living in a temporary situation for an unexpectedly long period negatively affects refugees' wellbeing. Waiting also negatively impacts refugees' professional opportunities, social, and career mobility (Cangia et al., 2021).

Temporary limbo is often accompanied by legal liminality (Arriola Vega, 2020). Rather than ensuring access to anyone who might need it, European asylum policies aim to reduce the number of people allowed to apply for asylum (Schuster, 2011). Asylum applicants are not entitled to any support (other than urgent medical treatment) while awaiting negotiations between European countries to determine whether the Dublin II criteria apply to their case. In some countries, state policies and procedures require asylum seekers to 'wait patiently, surviving without recourse to public funds, without being visible' (Schuster, 2011: 402). Globalisation's time-space compression also contributes to/reinforces immobility. The temporality of the refugee and asylum seeker contrasts with (privileged) citizens. For asylum seekers and deportable migrants, time becomes an oppressive source of anxiety (Tryggvadottir & Skaptadottir, 2018). Andersson (2014) conjures the image of a fence with vulnerable migrants on one side and a high-speed rail connection on the other: 'ever-higher speeds and connectivity ... create a migratory experience characterised by slowness and stasis' (p. 800).

For many refugees and asylum seekers, flight from conflict creates immediate, short-term uncertainty, while the experience of becoming and being a refugee induces long-term, 'protracted' uncertainty (El-Shaarawi, 2015). As Arriola Vega (2020) argues, migration is experienced as a fluid pattern in which asylum procedures introduce a pause, an intermission that interrupts planned continued mobility – an interlude during which new strategies are developed even as plans remain uncertain and flexible. For refused asylum seekers, time is a metaphor used to describe instability and powerlessness within

the immigration system; temporal uncertainty and discord mark points of tension within the system (Griffiths, 2014, p. 1992). Griffiths distinguishes the long, slowing time of waiting (sticky time), which can decelerate into complete stagnation (suspended time) from fast time rushing out of control (frenzied time) that tears into people's imagined time frames (temporal ruptures). For migrants forced to flee their 'home' country but unable to end their flight with the right to settle in another country, waiting can develop into a situation of rightless 'permanent temporariness' characterised by uncertainty, stasis and meaninglessness (Olwig, 2021).

However, waiting is not always an entirely negative experience. Rather than simply constituting dead time, waiting can create a productive, reflective and social space (Conlon, 2011; Griffiths, 2014). As Khosravi notes, '[w]aiting can be an act too, a strategy of defiance by the migrants' (Khosravi, 2014, p. 74). For instance, young asylum seekers describe their time in a Finnish temporary shelter as both physical, punitive confinement and as warm and social time (Petäjaniemi et al., 2021). As Biner and Biner (2021) argue, refugees in waiting may exercise forms of patience that keep their future expectations alive as an act of resistance. According to these authors, waiting is neither a fully-fledged process of production nor a process of emptiness or immobility. Rather, waiting is a transformative process that prompts spontaneous practices of production and destruction of human will, agency, and desire. Waiting is affective, involving an anticipated future and reflections about desired and dreaded outcomes. It is also active – structured and filled with routines, activities and projects – and productive, as waiting time can be transformed into capital (Rotter, 2016). Refugees anticipate the future, weigh possibilities, and imagine alternative scenarios, events and states of being. By 'filling waiting time with social time', rejected asylum seekers make their time 'seem productive and momentarily meaningful' (Bendixsen & Eriksen, 2018, p. 107). They 'actively encounter, incorporate, and resist waiting in everyday spaces' (Conlon, 2011, p. 353).

3. Methodology

This paper builds on the EYRASPS research project (Everyday encounters of young refugees and asylum seekers in public spaces) which took place in Newcastle upon Tyne, Amsterdam, Leipzig, and Brussels between 2019 and 2022. It draws on interviews with migrants (refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants) and frontline practitioners working with these groups, many hours of ethnographic observations, and informal conversations conducted before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were undertaken in Brussels (25 migrants and 32 professionals), Amsterdam (18 migrants and 33 professionals), Leipzig (20 migrants and 18 professionals) and Newcastle upon Tyne (28 migrants and 20 professionals). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

We adopted a relational comparative approach (Mcfarlane, 2010; Ward, 2010) to integrate data from the four different sites. This choice recognises Steinmetz's (2004) criticism of the positivist bias in traditional comparative research which overlooks underlying structural forces, and Schnegg's (2014) observation that cases which appear similar (and are therefore objects of comparative analysis) may be interrelated. We distance ourselves from traditional analytic comparison which aspires to scientific rigour on the

basis of preconceived, discrete bounded units, while the relationships between units or cases 'are abstracted from their time/place setting' (Hart, 2018; McMichael, 1990, p. 389).

Conceiving comparison as 'learning' across sites and data (McFarlane, 2010, p. 733) first allowed us to become aware of and discuss the differences in how asylum systems are organised and how the everyday is experienced in each of the four cities. Secondly, we developed an analysis to dialogically and relationally explore how European asylum infrastructures – under conditions of pandemic – unravelled, as witnessed 'from below.' Findings from one case stimulated interrogations, critical reflections, and further exploration into the others. This sparked debate on the structural patterns of migration and public health management affecting migrants' precarity and marginalisation 'from above'. As Ward (2010, p. 480) states, 'different cities are implicated in each other's past, present and future. [This] moves us away from searching for similarities and differences between two mutually exclusive contexts and instead toward relational comparisons that uses different cities to pose questions of one another.' Rather than comparing everyday experiences, asylum infrastructures, and public health policies across four cities, we used a dialogical analytic to carve out their relations to one another and to a larger whole (Hart, 2002, p. 14).

A survey of sanitary measures adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic in the four cities reveals more similarities than differences, despite some local and national variations.¹ Our data suggest that differences between the four countries' sanitary measures did not have considerably different effects on migrant groups. However, the different ways in which migration is managed, as well as the four cities' different positions within their country's migration management, did (and continue to) have an impact. Firstly, differences in migration management shaped feelings of immobility both before and during the pandemic. For example, in some countries, asylum seekers do not have the right to work or enrol in language courses, while others (such as Belgium) allow it.² These activities fill the days, can help with asylum claims, and ensure that asylum seekers feel less affected by immobility. Secondly, each city's position within its country's migration system also had an effect. As capital cities, Amsterdam and Brussels were spaces of initial arrival, whereas Newcastle and Leipzig are 'dispersal' zones for asylum seekers. Therefore, the data from Brussels and Amsterdam contain more references to arrival-specific experiences during the first days of the initial national lockdown.

Particularly during a global epidemic, the content and consequences of politics in one place are dynamically interconnected with content and consequences in another (Ward, 2010, p. 482). A relational comparative approach questions the degree to which theories about places (and about social groups in them) can be universalized (Robinson, 2002) and whether they can be 'compared' in the traditional understanding of the word. The relational comparative analysis highlights the multi-scalar transformations of relations of power across time and space that reconstitute urban life within changing historical conjunctures (Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2021, p. 206). The following sections present data from four case studies and use the relational comparative perspective to bring greater analytical depth to on-the-ground observations in each of these cities.

4. Waiting during a lockdown: findings from four European cities

The experience of waiting and immobility is a frequent, sometimes permanent, everyday reality for refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. This experience was

seriously affected by the pandemic, which ‘put [migrant lives] even longer on hold’, as one Amsterdam professional put it. This section first considers how sanitary measures differently affected refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. After that, we explore how these groups experienced periods of waiting, isolation, and immobility and how such experiences differed from before the pandemic.

Asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants during the crisis

During the lockdown, life in asylum centres became more complicated, with residents having more time to spend but nothing to do. All activities were stopped, volunteers were not allowed to organise language classes, and residents had less contact with their case managers. There were also fewer opportunities to move out of the asylum centres during this initial period. In Belgium, the centres were almost entirely full at the start of the pandemic, says Fien, a centre employee: ‘in some centres, the occupancy rate is 100 per cent or more. Everything has already been raised to the maximum because we were already in a reception crisis.’ Her colleague Roseanne explains that this put pressure on the residents’ wellbeing: ‘given the saturation of the network, we actually have few resources and . . . opportunities here to give people a safe place, they didn’t have it, and they don’t have it now either.’ Yet, as Marie, another asylum centre employee explains, ‘we always have incidents in the centres, yes, many young people who don’t get along. We cannot say that the atmosphere is more tense now.’ In all observed centres, conditions did not allow for distancing or prescribed isolation. As one resident in a Leipzig centre explains: ‘Last week, I was told I would have [to] transfer, so I went in isolation. What I’m really experiencing here does not really signify isolation. Why? There are too many people in this place, in what is called [the] isolation centre. At the moment, we are three in the room!’

Some refugees’ experiences with lockdown seemed to resemble those of wider society, as illustrated by Amare in Leipzig:

Before the pandemic, I used to be very active. I was out and about from eight in the morning till ten at night, busy with work and school. And at work we used to have events and meetings and so I was in contact with many different people. And now, since Corona, we are not allowed to go outside anymore in order to stay healthy. And I have been at home all the time.

Peter, a Belgian social worker, reminds us that to be granted asylum and experience a certain sense of security and stability does not protect refugees from the negative effects of the pandemic. He recalls ‘the stories of unaccompanied minors (. . .) who are sitting alone in their rooms languishing.’ Rianne, a social worker, adds: ‘we do have some Afghan youth who are here on their own, who came here as minors. I fear that they feel lonely and trapped.’ Apart from the lack of social contact, other impacts include uncertainty about reintegration requirements, the loss of temporary jobs, and difficulties for minor refugees around homeschooling. As Rina, the director of a Belgian basic education centre, explains: ‘what is clear is that our lessons provide structure for the students and are important because of the social contact, and that is now disappearing.’ Nadim, a refugee in Leipzig stated, ‘I am out of the game now, even the job centre doesn’t know what to do. Since Corona, everything is going so slowly.’ A Syrian woman in Amsterdam explains that she used to go to a sport school and community centre to stay in touch with other people;

however, this was impossible during the strict lockdowns: 'I am looking for friends (...) I come here [community centre], I go to a sport school, talk to my neighbours. (...) But now, it's corona, so I don't have any contacts.'

In all four cities, there was particular concern about the pandemic's impacts on undocumented migrants. Facilities for undocumented migrants closed, leaving them with nowhere to go. With state-supported infrastructures often excluding the undocumented from support, many frontline practitioners considered them most vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic. Destitute asylum seekers often have no support network and are reliant on emergency aid and assistance from various frontline organisations (Kox & Staring, 2020). Therefore, the closure of such services presented significant challenges. Sarah, an employee of an Amsterdam community centre, reflects on this experience: 'the first days, we were mainly occupied with the consequences. (...) For those undocumented, it is very important to have a physical place to go to and this is one of the only places they could go to.'

Similar detrimental impacts can be seen in housing issues. In the Netherlands and Belgium, the authorities decided to close day and night shelters. Amsterdam only offered night shelter at the beginning of the crisis because the local health service (GGD) feared contamination in 24-hour shelters. At that time, about 75 undocumented migrants were sleeping on camp beds in a gymnasium and had to leave during the day. One professional exclaimed: 'we could not justify opening our doors,' adding that they had limited hygiene tools and that their building was simply too small to facilitate social distancing. As a result, many undocumented migrants preferred to stay in squats with limited access to public toilets and bathrooms. Mieke, a Brussels professional, explained the situation outside his facility: 'two years ago, we had 30 young people coming on a Wednesday morning, now we easily have 150 to 200 people. Saturday there were 350 people. We now also have people who come to sleep here, an improvised camp developed.' Some of these professionals continued to provide help in the improvised camps, even if this violated official regulations (De Backer, [in press](#)).

Experiences of waiting

Temporal immobility is often accompanied by spatial immobility – waiting often involves isolation and being stuck in certain places. Accordingly, migrants' mobility across the urban landscape was seriously limited. In every city, many services closed their physical spaces and cancelled face-to-face provisions, further consolidating the immobility of asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants. Migrants were stuck in certain urban spaces and excluded from others. Becky, a coordinator for a student-led service in Newcastle upon Tyne explained: 'I think they will be missing out on the social interaction, making connections, making support networks because they don't get that space to do that. (...) In the classes, they had that time to be together and meet new people.' Losing access to physical spaces exacerbated feelings of isolation, boredom, and loneliness. For example, Ayan, a young refugee living in Leipzig, explained that he missed attending a cooking association and struggled with online learning. He states: 'I miss the cooking group now. We were so funny with one another. It was always so much fun, I miss that now. (...) I don't like it that much here at home, that is so stressful, complicated.'

Limiting access to public spaces can also translate into minimizing people's voices. As one Leipzig asylum seeker explains: 'you can't go out, you can't go to public places, you know. There is no public car, train. You can't hold events. Because even at the moment I was even thinking, "maybe we can do a little kind of peaceful protest (. . .), to speak about our situation.'" For others, (the policing of) the lockdown, including the curfew and spatial restrictions, resulted in feelings of bewilderment:

I would say with the epidemic thing life is becoming harder because we have to be at home every day, going nowhere. Whereas normally we should be at work and moving up and down a little bit so that we can feel free, but now it's like, your home is like a prison.

Interviewees complained about the loss of social contact, with one asylum seeker in Leipzig stating: 'I know that if it wasn't for Corona, (. . .) I would have also tried to meet with some persons. But, because of Corona, I still find it difficult to meet with, you know, people.' Alaa, another asylum seeker in Leipzig, adds:

before the pandemic, I met up with other people regularly, once a month. We used to speak German with each other and if I had a problem or questions, they would help me. That was really good for me. Because I arrived in Germany on my own and I need social contacts, people who can help me. But now, because of Corona, I just stay at home and that really makes me go crazy and I feel very depressed.

However, as Poorpilu, an asylum seeker in Brussels notes, being in an asylum centre with many people can also induce 'too much' social contact:

. . . sometimes I can just listen, listen, listen and then you look at the clock. You see you spent two hours just sitting like that with people talking about life or something and I'm like, "OK it's cool", like, "I heard you, I understood you." But the thing is I didn't have *my* time, you know, and no one will give it to me. So, I have like to look for it—that's why I go over to the bus stop, to the park or something but like now *my* space is something I really miss.

Nicole, a professional in a Belgian asylum centre, adds that being locked in, without much to do causes frustration: 'we are running on minimum staffing levels, which also leads to frustration because the staff cannot answer all the questions, although they want to.'

The first weeks of the pandemic resulted in uncertainty and loneliness. As one frontline worker in Newcastle explains: 'people who were waiting or who had appointments, it has all been cancelled. That is on hold at the minute for all of them and for all of us actually, even who have got leave to remain, because they can't accept appointments now.' Christian from Belgium summarised the situation for the young people he works with: 'above all, it is loneliness that takes its toll.' Nelly, a social worker in Brussels, adds:

I am afraid for those who, for one reason or another, cannot find their way to us and who live on the streets, that they feel very lonely, feel more excluded than usual, and at the moment have a life where they roam around and are chased away from everything.

Some interviewees reported that the pandemic impacted their access to courses and training, which they consider important for their asylum procedure. As one asylum seeker argues: 'the pandemic situation, it is a setback. It deprived me from going to physical [language] classes, you know . . . I really don't learn more through the internet.' Indeed, waiting is strongly linked to a lack of social mobility – if getting on with one's life is the

core of existential mobility, waiting only offers existential (im)mobility (Vaughn et al., 2020, p. 190).

The pandemic also ended many temporary jobs for recently arrived migrants. A Pakistani refugee in Newcastle upon Tyne relayed: 'it was a really, really hard time, you know, really hard time. Before I had a job, I lost my job . . . and now the restaurant is permanently closed.' The loss of work due to the pandemic dealt a significant financial and psychological blow. One Sudanese interviewee in Amsterdam explained, 'they kill your dreams'. He felt like he had wasted important years of his life in extended waiting, a fact exacerbated by COVID-induced complications in his job search.

On the other hand, the pause in asylum management also created opportunities for some. In Leipzig, (rejected) asylum seekers expressed relief at the halting of certain government procedures. In particular, the temporary suspension of deportations offered short-term relief for those under threat of deportation. Bouba in Brussels explained that the pandemic had suspended his deportation and given him time to appeal the decision. Some viewed this extension of waiting as a welcomed relief, not a prolonged harm. Yet, the many male asylum seekers in Amsterdam lamented how their wives and children were stuck in their home countries without the ability to travel or claim asylum.

Reflecting on immobility before and during the pandemic

This section considers migrants' perceptions of waiting and immobility *before* and *during* the pandemic. Some asylum seekers stressed that much of their lives before the pandemic consisted of waiting and immobility due to drawn-out legal procedures to claim asylum, contest asylum decisions, and receive advice about migration laws. Max, in Newcastle, explained that he has been in the city for 5.5 years, but authorities keep refusing him status even as he brings evidence: 'they have more excuses about why it's not enough. They play games. If you're lucky you get your papers quickly, if not it can take a long time.' This obviously has an impact on these migrants' wellbeing, as one interviewee in Amsterdam says: 'the problem is, I'm not happy. I am only temporary happy. (...) I've lost everything, that is really hard. I have to start a new life, learn a new language. I've grown older but have to start all over again.' Amina in Brussels adds: 'I'm not happy because of the residence permit. I'm waiting still. I'm waiting for the response. Uh, because of that, I'm not happy.' Another asylum seeker in Leipzig commented on the fear of deportation during periods of waiting:

You know, I've been in that situation . . . I know what it means to be in that situation, that you don't sleep at night. When you hear the voice of a car, you have to [stand] up and watch from your window—"which guy is that"—is it the police car? (...) Sometimes you have to leave your room and go to the toilet and stay for a while (...) how long are you going to live under fear?

An asylum seeker in Newcastle upon Tyne further explained:

Yes, when I was in Greece, I was talking to my friends who applied for asylum in the UK, they were talking to me like this process was supposed to take only three months, maybe four months at most, but now it's been more than one year, and I haven't had my interview yet. Nobody knows how long it will take this time.

He wonders, 'maybe it's a method for the government, for stopping asylum seekers coming to the UK.' This echoes Pijpers (2011, p. 432) who asks whether 'waiting [is] *just* a by-product of state institutions and bureaucracies or might it be a tactic, a management technique that is not outside but fully part of the state?' Schwartz (1975) agrees that waiting becomes punitive when there is no end in sight. Read this way, current migration control policies are the state's attempt to punish (unauthorized) migrants (Kox et al., 2020).

Several interviewees casually remarked that 'their lives were already in lockdown' before the pandemic. Maaravi, a young asylum seeker in Brussels, describes how he felt in the months after arrival: 'I was actually kind of in my corner and I wasn't talking to anyone.' Others mention the lack of opportunities to work or learn the language while awaiting their legalisation procedure, and the general feeling of uncertainty and anxiety related to seemingly endless bureaucratic procedures. One asylum seeker in Leipzig comments:

... every time I had to collect paperwork from my boss, from the employment office, from the immigration office, from there, from the flat. Sometimes, yes, I have to say honestly, it's not that much work, but for me it's just sometimes three or four days of work.

A male Turkish asylum seeker in Newcastle upon Tyne adds:

Normally, this process [asylum claims] finishes within six months, but it's been more than nine months but still I haven't taken my interview. I don't know how long it will take to take this interview in the future, I don't know still. It's really very difficult.

A young Syrian man in Amsterdam further explained, 'if you want something like papers, you have to wait really long!' He added that there was nothing to do in the asylum centre: 'this camp was really hard (...) there were too many people in a too small room. (...) I didn't have close friends. I had one friend, but they left after a month or so and someone else came. (...) I went downstairs to the kitchen. I stayed there, drinking coffee, the entire day. Just that. Look a bit on the internet. You cannot do anything.'

An asylum seeker in Leipzig made a similar observation:

During that time there was a complete focus on the papers ... So, you were always, you were always afraid whether I would get it or not. So, all the time you were just waiting for the post, the DHL post, this yellow post to come and say, "These are your papers. Yes, okay, now you can stay here or now you can't stay here." So, during that time you were always in stress ... because you can't do anything, so you can't learn a language, so you can't report to a school to learn, so you can't go away yet.

Even though they had experienced immobility before the pandemic, some migrants stressed that it had definitely worsened their situation. Before the pandemic, they could engage in cultural or social activities; however, as Julie in Leipzig describes, containment in the asylum centre during the lockdown was 'boring':

in the morning I have a language course until 1 PM. After that, I stay at home. Usually, before the pandemic, I would have gone to a cultural club or something to practice my German or to meet people. Now, everyone is just at home.

A Brussels asylum seeker argues that even a dull job could break the feelings of monotony and isolation: 'especially in this period of a pandemic, if you have an opportunity, you just

go.' Fortunately, Poorpilu in Brussels could still meet friends outdoors: 'now with the Corona it is forbidden [to see friends indoors] so like, either we stay outside, and we drink beers or something or either like we stayed in a friend's apartment.' He adds that with or without a pandemic, life in an asylum centre is extremely monotonous and predictable: 'I know that every Monday I'm gonna eat pastas at 12 . . . I'm not even surprised anymore, like, just try to surprise me so I can feel better.' As an African asylum seeker summarises, 'every day is the same' (see, also Griffiths, 2014, p. 1997).

Discussion

This paper asked 1) how do public health measures affect 'recently' arrived migrants' (refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants) experiences of immobility, and 2) how do these migrants reflect on the (different) experiences of waiting and immobility before and during the pandemic.

Immobility was experienced both temporally and spatially, particularly during the strict initial lockdowns of March 2020. Most interviewees foregrounded the loss of access to housing, food, and legal advice, particularly for asylum seekers who had just arrived and undocumented migrants whose support services closed. Asylum seekers in reception centres suffered from living in close quarters with large numbers of strangers and without any activities. Other refugees and asylum seekers experienced lockdown in solitude, living in individual apartments, without social contact with friends or acquaintances. They also experienced uncertainty regarding their seriously delayed asylum or reintegration requirements. Finally, they could not access courses, training, and economic activity, which they considered a setback. Rejected asylum seekers, on the other hand, experienced the lockdown as an opportunity to appeal their decision.

Almost every interviewee mentioned the loss of social contact, which sometimes resulted in feelings of depression and frustration. Others felt that their situations were mostly unchanged, as their lives were in a lockdown before the pandemic. However, the pandemic made most situations worse, especially regarding the monotony and predictability of their lives. However, it is difficult to adequately *compare* experiences before and during the pandemic since access to data is (or was) different in both periods. Particularly in the first weeks of the pandemic, several migrant groups were hard to reach, and professionals could only make educated guesses about how they were dealing with isolation and immobility. Furthermore, comparing research subjects' experiences of two periods in time is challenging given the processual and experiential aspects of time. As Tefera (2021, p. 10) reminds us, at the time of the interviews, participants were still making sense of what had happened. Their experiences should be treated as one ongoing, constantly remembered, and re-lived set of experiences, not as separate, discrete past encounters.

The main findings of this paper can be structured into two juxtapositions: 1) feeling emotionally isolated versus feeling socially overwhelmed in an overcrowded asylum centre and 2) the experience of being locked in an asylum centre versus the experience of being 'locked out' of public facilities. The first reflects the 'slow violence' (Mayblin et al., 2020) of spatial immobility in a situation of containment. It connects the injustice of being incarcerated (for the 'crime' of applying for asylum) to the injustice of the underfinanced asylum infrastructure, resulting in overcrowded facilities with limited or no privacy. This

precarious situation was pushed to the limit when an unexpected pandemic short-circuited the peripheral activities and possibilities for temporary escape. As one Leipzig asylum seeker explains:

what is our fate? That we're living at this same floor with these people? We use the same toilet, the same shower[. . .] really don't understand how they are treating human beings. [. . .] In a situation like this, in a world where the pandemic is going on. You still put people together to live together?

The second juxtaposition reveals the importance of a migrant's status and housing situation in experiencing immobility. As one professional observed, 'homeless and undocumented people are tired of being in motion all the time, because the police do not allow them to sit on a bench.' Yet, others do not dare to go outside because 'the police are everywhere', or they are afraid of the virus or have no social network. Young refugees feel trapped in empty apartments while asylum seekers are stuck in overcrowded centres. Meanwhile, undocumented migrants suffer from a total lack of access to support and housing – they roam the streets, sleeping rough in squats.

Both juxtapositions show how spatial and temporal immobility has different impacts on various recent arrivals. This is shaped by their status and housing situations, differences often glossed over by scholars researching time in migration experiences and policies. Therefore, this paper contributes to research on immobility in migration by highlighting the important diverse emotional geographies of loneliness and frustration. Immobility is positioned along a continuum from isolation to agitation. People in individual isolation lose social contact and feel loneliness. Others who are locked in with a group of strangers suffer from agitation and the loss of privacy and intimacy inherent to their housing situation. This paper presents a fine-grained emotional geography of such loneliness and frustration, isolation and agitation resulting from migrants' immobilities. Furthermore, it contributes to debates in social and cultural geography, particularly on the centrality of place and everyday practices in the study of migration and arrival (Brown & Gilmartin, 2020), and comments on questions of power, politics, and enforcement practices (Maillet et al., 2018). Lastly, the paper intervenes in the growing body of work on the relational comparative approach, which has been developed and adopted over the last decade in geography through theoretical and reflexive insights but needs further empirical grounding.

In this paper, we consider the passing of time (waiting and immobility) as 1) an experience among migrants and 2) a tool to manage the pandemic and migration generally. These aspects are already *relational*. One cannot analyse experiences without understanding the policies and structural conditions surrounding them and, in many cases, causing them. Furthermore, relational comparisons of migrants' experiences of waiting during the lockdown *must* be intricately interwoven with the general management of migration. This comparison is relational because it compares data from four cities in the relatively homogeneous legislative European territory (where the Dublin II legislation produces similar patterns of waiting, isolation and immobility). EU sanitary measures during the pandemic also reflected similarities, not major differences.

Conclusion

This paper highlighted the importance of temporality in migration research, including the temporal management of migration and migrants' experiences of time, immobility and waiting. It focused on a very specific time: before and during the 2020 lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Experiences of immobility were generally exacerbated for refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants during the lockdown. Yet, these groups were differently affected, particularly due to their status and housing situations, which corresponded to different geographies of loneliness and frustration, publicness and intimacy. The data offer insights into the experience of being locked up, or at least having one's freedom of movement severely restricted. This resonated with the experiences of nearly all citizens at the time, though most could bridge this awkward period in a house with sufficient comfort and privacy, the privilege to seek social contact or avoid it, and the ability to enjoy good company or the intimacy of a private room.

In retrospect, even though policymakers framed the pandemic as an *exceptional* crisis, one can argue that the difficulties experienced by refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants (and other underprivileged groups) were caused by *structural* factors. Western European governments' inadequate response to the preceding reception crisis (De Backer & Mazzola, 2021; Mazzola & De Backer, 2021) filled asylum centres to the brim, while day and night shelters for undocumented migrants proliferated. The exceptionality of the pandemic exacerbated this unresolved crisis, seriously affecting those most in need of support. Migrant groups experienced a perfect storm of overlapping and intersecting delays across sectors (housing, food, naturalisation, medical and legal support). Such delays were the result of previous political choices. Thus, this paper's findings reflect a continuation and worsening of pre-existing inequalities and discrimination.

Notes

1. The policy measures put in place to reduce the impact of the pandemic, of course, differed over time and across countries (e.g., major lockdowns versus more or less strict measures). In March 2020, the four countries involved in our study (UK, Netherlands, Belgium and Germany) declared a strict national lockdown, which was gradually lifted in May and June 2020. It involved the closure of schools and of all non-essential economic activity. After a decline in COVID-19 cases during the summer, infections increased again in all four countries in November 2020 (in Belgium the wave began in September). This led to a second round of national lockdowns, which varied in duration and severity, but were generally less strict (with schools and economic activities being kept open). From that point, new COVID-19 waves triggered new public health measures; however, these generally amounted to partial (termed 'light' or 'clever') lockdowns (with the exception of the Netherlands, which returned to a strict national lockdown in December 2021).
2. In the UK, asylum seekers are barred from working while their cases are being decided. Additionally, they can only access 'official' language classes after 6 months from claiming asylum – an example of enforced waiting. The same applied to the Netherlands (even before the pandemic). This policy has been repeatedly criticized as it wastes asylum seekers' precious time. In Belgium, asylum seekers have access to the labour market after 4 months of waiting for the procedures. Access to certain vocational training programmes is linked to access to the labour market. While asylum seekers can no longer access the civic integration programme, access to education and other training is possible without a waiting period. In Germany, asylum seekers live in initial reception centres (first part of the procedure) and are not allowed to work (officially) or admitted to language classes. Only asylum seekers who are likely to be approved are allowed to take part in integration classes.

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